

# Grassroots Elections in Taiwan: Origin, Reform and Its Controversy

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## Abstract

Taiwan's rural grassroots election has been held for more than 50 years, accumulated wealthy experience, not only promoted the transformation of the Kuomintang, but also promoted the local social development in Taiwan. Taiwan's academics focus on the high cost of elections, local factions, black gold politics and parties an political interference which was influenced the grassroots selections. From "Problem-solving" to "Select System" is a good path of reform option sin grassroots selections.

**Keywords:** Taiwan, Grassroots selections in Township, Problem-solving, Select system

Intellectuals in China, for a hundred years of controversy have been discussing about the suitability of democratic politics in China. Nowadays, although most people no longer deny the necessity and feasibility of democracy, there many differences still exist. However, through grassroots democracy to promote democratization of the country has become the consensus among many people. Especially since the reform in last century, with the further development of economic reform, urban and rural grassroots democratization process has been quickened. From Suining City in Sichuan, Paul Stone Town's "Public Election" mayor in May 1998, to March 2004, Suyu District Suqian City elected township party secretary, they have different names that some called "Public Election", "two-vote" system, or "three two-vote" system, also known as "mass elect". In terms of its innovative degree, they can be divided into two categories: one is the reform of operational mechanisms within the system, which mainly focuses on reforming the way to nominate a candidate; one is a reform to overcome institutional barriers, focusing on direct elections. Due to the existing legal framework relating to the cadre and personnel system and other major institutional issues, the difficulty of rural grass-roots electoral reform and limitations are evident, particularly in the system construction, and presentation of the nomination, "the two committees", and many other aspects of village relations where there are many problems and limitations.

Taiwan and the mainland both belong to Chinese cultural circle, due to historical and cultural origins, two sides are experiencing the transformation from traditional to modern, and faced with the same problem which the transformation brought. Whether in theoretical or practical aspects of primary election, they have a lot to learn from each other. Taiwan's democratic development is earlier, who is the first emerged full demarcation from central to local democratic system of government in Chinese society. Taiwan's rural grassroots election has been held for more than 50 years, accumulated wealthy experience, not only promoted the transformation of the Kuomintang, but also promoted the local social development in Taiwan. Whether in the mechanism or the procedures, it had great inspiration on the mainland township grassroots election, and offered references.

## 1. “Miracle” or “chaos”

Known as the authoritarian era, Taiwan is very active in grass-roots elections. These elections were also integral parts in Taiwan’s democratic functioning. Even though some changes happened because of self-rule (1950), the lifting of martial law (1976), provincial constitution (1997), the basic structure of election system has not been changed too much, still applies to the 319 townships territory. After a long stable state, Taiwan’s local political ecology turned into a combination of family and religion, the infiltration of black gold politics instead of the original emotion, individual interests and social relations-oriented local factions. Therefore, Taiwan’s grassroots election is in a stage which democracy, institutionalization and reforms is urging, and filled with many problems such as the institutional framework and operational costs, family and religion, black gold even partisan politics, which make the elections challenged and criticized by the public.

### 1.1 Institutional framework and the social costs

In Taiwan, the election is a cause of “consumption money”. With the development of democratization process, the frequency of election, participation in the elections and the intensity of competition all began to rise, accompanied by increasingly high social costs. Actually, in the composition of the election costs, except normal expenses, the more substantial budget is used for bribery, tied pile, gifts, banquet and providing additional sponsorship or subsidy to the voters.(Zhao,2001) The most critical reason for the rising election costs is the existence of so-called “piles politics” that is “intermediate political”. As for the grassroots voters, who is relatively at a low level of education, and lack of information, the “universal value” of democratic politics is not what they concerned , in general, it will be rational enough to choose those who most closely relate to their own interests, or give them most faces and benefits in the election. (Lou, 2002) Of course, for candidates the more important “payoff” granted by the right brought by political forces, get involved in public works, participation in land sale and speculation, which in particular the engineering tied is the main source of economic benefits of the gangster politicians, social resources are constantly sucking in the big black hole of black gold.

#### Insert Table 1 Here

The main reasons for the high social costs of the election is the design and actual operation of the system failed to adopt supporting measures and relevant preparing system, to ensure a smooth transition of the electoral system and proper use of the social costs. Taiwan’s election bodies (that is “Central Election Committee” and the Local Election Committee) don’t stand in a superior position, the election authority has no legal organization, all of which will affect the independent operation of the electoral bodies.

### 1.2 Family, religion and local factions

The so-called local factions, is a group of people who combines based on family, clan or regional interests. Through the town mayor’s position, they combined with local farmers and fishermen, controlling township representatives and further running for candidates and members of county and city, which became an unbreakable political and economic community of interests, dominated local politics. (Zhao, 2002)

The electoral system’s competition’s focus is political position, it represents that the state has granted corresponding power to him, while regulating his rights and obligations by law. Because Chinese people attached much importance to the relationship between clan and the ancestors, formed many local factions which is divided by clan name and religion. On the one hand, in order to maintain family and religious prestige, different factions within a specific area were required to establish its influence to form family and religious forces; On the other hand, township is entitled to assign local resources, sufficient for the family and religious groups to develop their own team and strength. Therefore, Taiwan’s primary election often is an important field in which family and religious factions struggle.

#### Insert Table 2 Here

Taiwan’s constituency is so small that candidates only need a small amount of votes and there is a strong regional orientation; the key factor in winning the election is election mobilization efforts of the interpersonal networks, families or factions based on specific regions expand outwardly. Therefore, it can be seen often in the primary elections that irrational violent confrontation for election accumulated pains and sorrows and conflicts of interest between local forces, factions and family, resulting in money, violence and gangsters are often seen in the process of grassroots campaign.

On the positive features in terms of the role of local factions, it’s a balance power of local political conflicts, improving the political mobilization, maintaining political stability; the local factions still play a role in fostering political modernization. As for negative functions, the local factions dominate even monopolize the local elections, then control the local political and economic resources, and under the shadow of money politics, local

factions formed by families, religions will become an obstacle for political democratization.

### *1.3 Money politics*

“Taiwan democracy” is touted as a “miracle”, also shows turbulent. In the study of primary election, which scholars’ criticism and concern is money and violence involved in elections, that is “money politics”. The so-called “money politics”, referring to the organized criminal groups (the “Underworld”), intervene in the elections by bribery, illegal campaign contributions and even violence, to affect the entire political process.

“Money politics” is the maladies in the development of “Taiwan democracy”. Gangsters use their own “violence” into every level of Taiwan’s electoral system, eventually resulting in the political situation that prevalence of Taiwan’s gangsters. Kuomintang loses the power because of conniving of “money politics”, the DPP takes power with “Opposition to organized crime”, but involved in the “black gold” immediately. In the 309 townships (cities), the mafia involvement in politics has reached 89%; more than 50% of the councilors come from the underworld. The Township representatives of the public will be even more serious, more than 60%. Gangsters often change their identity by the mayor or representatives elections, to enter politics for spoils of the township and city budgets or project contracting. (Zhao, 1997) According to the poll of “World Magazine 2000”, what the Taiwanese people hate most is “money politics”; almost one in four people think that “money politics” make them not honored.

In recent years, there were several town and township chiefs, preventatives of the president etc, came from underworld or combined with the underworld, forming black-white symbiotic structure, is considered a disaster that difficult to treat. This is because it has already formed a relationship network that power, interests and violence interactive, mainly in positions such as village leaders, township people’s representative etc, who has the right of allocating and intervening budgets and administrative power, to obtain benefits of the lure and exchange.

### *1.4 Party politics*

Party politics is an important way of democracy, but in Taiwan, due to special historical circumstances and background of party, opportunity and space that party politics change from authority to democracy, so as the growth and decline of party politics. In the rural grassroots elections, political parties, though not as the definition of central political operation, there is still some influence, especially in the rural grass-roots.

Involved in local elections, party politics make Taiwan’s rural grassroots elections more complicated. The main reason lies in the party control and distribution of local economic interests, involved in competition among factions to achieve their political interests, so as to long-term monopoly. (Xiao, 1989) Therefore, electoral competition may sometimes be the place that political parties eradication of alien, even with groups or gang violence to achieve its purpose.

## **2. “Deposit” or “waste”**

There was a debate about the reform of rural grassroots election in Taiwan since the 60’s last century. In recent years, some defects of election and self-government actually revived the debate. Because of the special historical circumstances and background, primary elections in Taiwan is complicated with the different values, researchers will have different information and choices, analyze about the data maybe have different even opposite conclusions. There are three views can be summed up: maintenance theory, cancellation theory, and adjustment theory.

### *2.1 Maintenance theory*

One of the important perspectives of the study on primary elections is the structure and function of grassroots democracy. (Live, 2000, pp53-57) If the primary election is abolished, it will bring a series of negative consequences: the status of the townships in local governance system is unclear, township heads don’t have public opinion because not through the election mechanism, resulted disregarding interests and will of people, the villagers also lost the democratic rights. Therefore, the strategic choice in practical level is the towns should consult in a wider area and strengthen intergovernmental cooperation; in the long-term, towns should cut the size and structure of organization, and streamline the number of jurisdictions in accordance with the overall development planning .

The property rights and authority of the township primary government is also an important factor that affects election. (Ji, 2000, pp32-65) Property rights or authority, the role of the rural grassroots government, turn into seeking central government subsidies. The provisions that township mayors appointed by the county in the new act, will make rural grassroots government be in a passive position. Therefore, we can think about maintaining

the legal status of the township government, the power of unity instead of separation, which the representative will exercise more authority, and town mayor elected in representatives of local self-government.

System design is the core part of primary election. (Shi, 2002) The design of townships self-government congenital defect, election system's reform is urgent. The reason is unreasonable, administrative divisions followed by inadequate revenue, finally responsibility but no power. In case of local factions and gangsters hazard local administration, emphasis that the local self-government framework, introducing better administrative procedures and organizational management, and referendum is an option which changing the system design.

### *2.2 Cancellation theory*

There are three areas of shortcomings in Taiwan township grassroots elections system: First, some system design lack of considerations on overall interest; second is "the election and Recall Law" which restricts candidate's education and experience is an clear violation of real representation, shows in other terms in "the election and Recall Law", lack principle of justice; Third, when implementing complex electoral system, elected in different regions to obtain the proportion of votes, lack of representation. (Yang, 1991, pp99-101)

Polls show that the abolition of township primary election is reasonable. (Chen, 2000, pp44-53) Through the questionnaire survey for the town mayor, county, elected officials, experts, most respondents preferred the town mayor selected, but also have the opinion that townships and cities is the nature of autonomous corporate body and autonomy of the authority. Accordingly, change mayor of the township to township manager, and representatives will have the consent. In addition, to the KMT poll, half of the people continue to support the next election, but there are 60% people think that the election results in money politics and factional politics. (Wen, 2000, pp69-70)

From the perspective of administrative efficiency, abolishes of the township primary government is the trend. (Zhao, 1995, pp101-110) Firstly, urbanization has brought a new personal relationship and economic life, and the insufficient design of autonomy; it should strengthen the alliance between local governments and government operations. Council-manager in America is for reference; it can avoid disputes in parliamentary elections. (Chen, 1998, pp4-14) Unnecessary administrative processes should be reduced properly; it should be suspended from rural self-government, and implement provincial multi-city system. Secondly, representatives of factions in the township elections are very competitive. Of course, the adjustment of administrative regions must be considered human behavior and financial traffic and other factors, to meet local development needs.

### *2.3 Adjustment theory*

Adjust autonomous jurisdiction, and consider suspending sessions of the town mayor elections to foster literacy and adjust the system of democratic norms. Taipei County for example, town mayors and representatives election by control of local factions, political and economic interests behind every election is rather astonishing, and even more important than the County Council. However, in the townships of high urbanization, the candidate of their own image and political factors, are gradually replacing the traditional human relations and interests. In order to correct political environment, could consider adopting elections of the town mayor instead of officials. (Hong, 2001)

Organization cost is a perspective that weighs primary election policies promotion. Townships and county governments is difficult to clarify the responsibilities, making the implementation of three are caused by high costs and residual loss; as the cost of committee, the county government must be timely freezing budgets in order to restrict the town mayor; from the point of oversight costs view, the maintenance of township and city representatives will have to spend a sum of costs. Therefore, the policy should be adjusted appropriately.

Of course, the official's mayor of township should conduct appropriate complementary measures. Democratic politics should be actively developed pipeline to participate, giving community residents more space for public affairs. Once sent to officials, town mayors' best have civil service status, and strengthen horizontal linkages townships. (Jiang, 2000, pp40-42)

## **3. From "problem solving" to "System Selection"**

Nowadays, rural grassroots government is facing change; the government is no longer the sole leader or the servant in local affairs, just a member of the environment network. Therefore, the reform or development of grassroots election can not only based on standard position to adjust or solve the problem, but also restrict its institutional design, and be appropriate to the needs to identifying feasible coping strategies. From the "problem solving" to "institutional choice", can be the path of electoral reform.

### 3.1 Public participation

Voters are “clients” of local public services, also the important interactive objects that grant legitimacy and supply resources and information to local government. Therefore, no matter what way township primary election conduct, must establish communication, interaction, or participation pipelines with voters, rather than just one-way command.

Today, environmental factors such as the increased self-awareness of voters, the rapid development of cyber politics etc, and positive form such as through the media, make the voters easily make recommendations on the candidates or interact with senior staff by the network. Therefore, the next township primary elections should be more efficient public participation pipeline, construct kinds of involvement of mechanisms, design advices and workflows of handling and response. This is not only more legitimacy and legality, but also more effective in preventing factions, black gold production, and stimulating the enthusiasm of participation of mass.

At the same time, it should be specific position that the functions and responsibilities of rural grass-roots government. For most people, the importance of such issues “What is the status of rural grass-roots government? What authority does it have?” may be far less important than “What they can do for the mass and how to do?” Therefore, explicating the functions and responsibilities of the rural grass-roots government, the leadership to establish clear governance role or status, to fulfill its real impact and effect.

### 3.2 Nomination theory

The candidate is a critical factor in election. In Taiwan, kinds of election essentially implemented by parties, there is a close link between parties and election, nomination and primary results, directly or indirectly impact election result. DPP provides, Township mayor nominated by the county party headquarters; township representatives of the people, the village chief candidates nominated by the township, town, city, district party headquarters. The new party, the People First Party and the “Taiwan Solidarity Union”, although is the main parties, but they didn’t build grass-roots organizations all over Taiwan.

As Academia Sonic, Taiwan, Preparatory Office of Institute of Political Science, Associate professor Chung-Li Wu (2008) said, the ruling and opposition of parties in Taiwan primary system, the voters agree that the impact of the election results, point out that the party identification of voters “it is not only about the key factors in voting choices, but also the stability of the party system or its influence power.” In order to balance the interests of every side in the grassroots elections, parties often need to consider the nominations factions, regional, occupational factors, have also been contained the local factions. Therefore, nomination mechanism that specificity the candidate from the point of system choice, perhaps is an important way to solve local factions play a negative role in the election at the grassroots level . Such as the Shi-Ying Zhang (2005) said, “If the parties nomination is not legalization and don’t establish assorted electoral system, vote-buying will be more serious in future elections.”

### 3.3 Electoral mobilization

Parties respond to public opinion and shape public opinion. Especially in the rural grassroots elections, media is an important tool to obtain more support from the public. There are praised, resentment, blame, and suppress, indicating the impact of media on the election really should not be overlooked the in Taiwan Medias performances in the elections.

The focus of analysis that the Medias’ performance in election should be the cost community has to pay in this massive electoral process. In addition, the media how to play a role in the election and related “media self-regulation” and so on. In this issue, Taiwan’s major media and political tendencies the way that media involved in elections, “law” and “neutrality” issue of the media in the election and the media’s credibility is worth exploring.

Although there are many problems, there is no denying that also had many positive effects. Taking it completely abolished is unrealistic. Nowadays, there is not the same background, the starting point, content and form in Taiwan and mainland township grassroots elections, but both faced with changes and adjustments of the relationship between state and society, faced with bribery, vote buying and other issues. Therefore, both the Taiwanese and elections are facing many difficulties in transition situations, when thinking about the problems, we probably can be problem-oriented, predict future situations may arise, or voters’ expectations to primary election, then assess the appropriateness of the various system options. What role elections should be played to primary management? Which system can meet such expectations? In relation to the limitations and difficulties mainland primary elections faced, perhaps we can find out system design that suit to the meaning of the system, to meet the needs of adapting the environment, to improve the election quality, to deepen of grassroots

democracy. Of course, this needs more reconstruction of political ecology, culture and system, also with the co-development of ability of the government and public, can establish local democracy mature and developed as fast as possible.

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Table 1. Mid-90s 20th century, Taiwan, Yunlin County, the cost of running for office (Zhao, 2001)

position	Yunlin County
village head	500 thousand—1 million (TWD)
Township (city) representatives	1 million—2million
Township (city) head	10 million—20 million
County “councilor”	3 million—80 million
Legislators	50 million—120 million
County head	150 million

Table 2. The severity of the proportion of Taiwan Vicar (Zhao, 2002, p173)

309 townships	Severity	Townships number	Proportion
	Serious	45	14.6%
	Minor	109	35%
	No faction	155	50.1%