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Political Parties, Electoral Systems and
Democratic Governance

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of electoral governance across East Asia, and highlights the growing importance of regional models and clusters in understanding political reform in both Northeast and Southeast Asia. It identifies three sub-regional trends – the combination of (semi) presidential government, mixed-member majoritarian electoral systems and nascent two-party politics in the Northeast Asian democracies of Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia; the prevalence of one-party dominant parliamentary models in the mainland Southeast Asian ‘semi-democracies’ of Malaysia and Singapore, and the possible evolution of Thailand and Cambodia along similar lines; and the shift towards more complex elections and more fragmented party systems in the three Southeast Asian democracies of Indonesia, the Philippines and East Timor. It then turns towards examining the impacts of these varying models of electoral governance upon policy outcomes across the region. It argues that despite the increasing variation across the region there is little evidence that East Asian democracy is following trends towards more proportional or consensual politics. Rather, key tenets of the ‘Asian model’ of majoritarian democracy still apply, as evidenced by the ongoing isomorphism in electoral reform and rise of two-bloc party politics across both Northeast and Southeast Asia.

Political Parties, Electoral Systems and Democratic Governance

One of the familiar patterns of democratic political systems around the world is the phenomenon of “clustering” – that is, the pronounced regional concentration of specific forms of democracy in different world regions. Thus, continental Europe is typified by parliamentary government and proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, Latin America is almost entirely presidential-PR, and the Anglosphere is mostly parliamentary (the rather large exception of the United States aside) but also determinedly majoritarian (with the somewhat less large exception of New Zealand). Similarly in East Asia, democratization has seen an appreciable shift towards a distinctive form of majoritarianism in the region’s new and emerging democracies, based around mixed-member electoral systems, restrictions on political parties, and oversized executive governments (Reilly 2006).

A foundational insight of political science is that different institutional formats have very important consequences for the operations of political systems. Thus, majoritarianism in the English-speaking world has historically had the effect of promoting two-party systems formed along a basic left-right political cleavage and making resultant policy appeals (Duverger 1954), while the predominance of PR in continental Europe has allowed for a multiplicity of parties based on other kinds of social cleavages, and much greater minority representation (Lijphart 1984). In Latin America, the “difficult combination” of PR and presidentialism has been blamed for recurring problems of executive-legislative deadlock and weak governments (Mainwaring 1993).

How do these arguments apply to East Asia, which evidences a combination of presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential government? As I have argued previously (Reilly 2006), the transition to democracy in the Asia-Pacific region over the past two decades also spurred a distinctive institutional evolution in many East Asian countries, and the emergence of a characteristic model of electoral governance based around ‘parallel’ mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) electoral systems. Unlike mixed-member systems used in other countries and regions, Asian examples of MMM tend to be structurally highly majoritarian, with an average of three-quarters of all seats chosen by first-past-the-post in single-member districts, and a much smaller proportion from a party list by PR. Electoral outcomes have reflected majoritarian bias, with larger parties of government predominating and, in some cases, nascent two-party systems starting to take root.

In this paper, I further develop these and other arguments for a distinctive ‘Asian model’ of electoral democracy (Reilly 2007). I maintain that recent years have seen a continuation and in some ways a deepening of trends towards a regionally distinctive form of electoral governance in democratic East Asia, despite mediation by different factors – most notably, geographic proximity, regime type, and internal socio-political dynamics – on a sub-regional level. The emergence of identifiable sub-regional clusters of electoral governance between Northeast Asia, mainland Southeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia is the starting point for this analysis.

In Northeast Asia, the clear preference for majority-enhancing electoral governance has continued apace – with the MMM model pioneered by Japan’s 1994 parliamentary reforms having now spread to the semi-presidential systems of Korea, Taiwan and (potentially) Mongolia.¹ The combination of MMM elections with semi-presidential systems of government represents something of a challenge to political science theory, which sees semi-presidential systems as a dubious constitutional choice for new democracies in particular (Reilly 2011). However, other aspects of the Northeast Asian experience are more confirming of democratic theory. Along with Japan, East Asia’s wealthiest country and only longstanding democracy, Korea and Taiwan are the region’s most economically developed states, and thus constitute the East Asian cases most in step with the expectations of the comparative political science literature on democratization, which typically sees democratic change in the context of modernization theory.²

The MMM model of electoral governance has also been apparent in mainland Southeast Asia, with both Thailand and the Philippines adopting ‘parallel’ electoral system designs in which some 80% of seats are elected from single-member districts and the remainder chosen from a party list. Indeed, Thailand has been arguably been the most enthusiastic exponent of ‘political engineering’ to be found anywhere in Asia. In 1997, the country’s reformist ‘People’s Constitution’ contained so many incentives for cohesive parties and strong government in place that many see it as having helped facilitate the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party.³ The 2006 coup which removed Thaksin from power saw the 1997 Constitution abrogated and the promulgation of a new ‘People’s Charter’ which removed many of these incentives for strong parties and stable government, including electoral laws designed to

¹ At the time of writing, Mongolia’s parliament was still considering whether to adopt a MMM system for future elections.

² The classic work on this subject is Lipset 1960. Przeworski et al 2000 provides a ground-breaking contemporary update.

³ See, for example, Erik Martinez Kuhonta, ‘The Paradox of Thailand’s 1997 ‘People’s Constitution’: Be Careful What You Wish For’, *Asian Survey* 48 (May–June 2008): 373–92.

re-fragment the party system (Hicken 2007). However, in Thailand's latest attempt at institutional tinkering, the 2011 electoral law reverts for the most part to the 1997 MMM model once again.

Elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, strongly majoritarian Westminster-style systems remain on display in Malaysia and Singapore, two of the world's most resilient semi-democracies. Their combination of parliamentary and plurality (or in Singapore's case, party-plurality) models of electoral governance constitute the most overt expression of majoritarianism amongst Asia's quasi-democracies, combining as they do parliamentary supremacy with enduring single-party dominance. Despite using PR, Cambodia has a mean magnitude of just 5.2 seats per district and could at a pinch be considered another member of this majoritarian quasi-democratic club, especially since the ruling Cambodian Peoples Party's revocation of the so-called "2/3 rule" in 2006 abandoned the last vestiges of parliamentary power-sharing and consolidated its single-party rule.⁴ Finally, Burma's highly flawed but nonetheless marginally competitive 2010 parliamentary elections even raises the possibility that it too could in the future develop along similar lines, towards a form of dominant party rule and restricted autocratic government -- although its new constitutional structure is actually quasi-presidential and actually draws more for inspiration on Suharto-era Indonesia than anywhere in contemporary Asia.

By contrast, it is today in *maritime* Southeast Asia that we find Southeast Asia's only genuine democracies: Indonesia, the Philippines and East Timor. This is a surprising development in many ways. The concentration of electoral democracy in these relatively weak states of 'island Asia' is hard to explain in terms of democratic preconditions, with the socio-economic characteristics of these three countries are less than propitious for democracy, being as they are amongst Asia's most diverse and least developed states.⁵ Moreover, maritime Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and the Philippines is also much more threatened by the spread of militant Islam than anywhere else in East Asia (with the exception of Southern Thailand). ASEAN's mainland/maritime democratic divide is also apparent in terms of key ASEAN policy debates such as how to deal with Burma's military junta and the rise of China.

⁴ Benjamin Reilly 2011, 'Political Reform and the Demise of Consociationalism in Southeast Asia' in Aurel Croissant and Marco Bünte (eds), *The Crisis of Democratic Governance in Southeast Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

⁵ For more on the idea of 'island Asia', see Vaughn 2002

Democratization has thus become a wedge issue which helps explain the growing divergence between Southeast Asia's maritime and mainland states (Pongsudhirak 2007).

As in Northeast Asia, it is striking that Southeast Asia's three electoral democracies are also all presidential or semi-presidential systems, despite the warnings from Juan Linz and other scholars about the dangers of such systems for new democracies (Linz 1990; Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996). Moreover, Indonesia and East Timor (Southeast Asia's two highest-ranked democracies by Freedom House) also combine PR with presidentialism, an arrangement that has been identified as especially problematic for effective governance (Mainwaring 1993). All three of these Southeast Asian democracies also have highly fragmented party systems, unlike the dominant one-party models or emerging two-party systems to be found elsewhere in East Asia. One reason for this is the challenge of forging stable party politics in a region of great social diversity and regional disparities – a reality that helps to explain the vigorous efforts at restricting separatism and rewarding aggregative parties by Indonesia, which has taken efforts to build aggregative parties the farthest, essentially banning local parties outside Aceh.⁶

These three electoral democracies have also engaged in a great degree of political experimentation in recent years, much of it unwise. Indonesia, for instance, has adopted an 'open' party list for DPR elections -- which in theory promotes greater accountability but in practice weakens political cohesion by encouraging members of the same party to compete directly with each other for votes. Indonesia's 2009 election, in sharp contrast to 1999 and 2004, was thus very much a contest between candidate rather than party brands, resulting in (predictably) high levels of intra-party contestation as victory was dependent on personal rather than party vote totals. This move, the result of a constitutional court decision, increased internal party fissures and undermines incentives for stronger national parties in Indonesia (see Aspinall and Meitzner 2010). In the Philippines, party list seats representing "sectoral interests" and marginalized groups such as youth, labour, the urban poor, farmers, fishermen and women were introduced at the 1998 election. However, the party list seats have not worked as intended, in part because of a restriction limiting each group to no more than three seats in Congress. The effects of this limitation (in 1998, only 14 of the 52 party-list seats were filled, 20 in 2001, and 23 in 2004) prompted an expansion of party list seats at the 2010 elections, although the whole concept of sectoral

⁶ See Ben Hillman, *Political Parties and Post-Conflict Transition: the Results and Implications of the 2009 Parliamentary Elections in Aceh*, Centre for Democratic Institutions Policy Paper 1/10, Canberra, 2010.

representation remains highly controversial. Finally, in East Timor, regional representation has been abolished all together, and the country now elects its entire parliament from one national constituency – a curious move for an agrarian society where demands for constituency service and local representation are paramount (Barkan 1995).

The common thread in all of these reforms is that they are likely to have the effect of weakening mainstream political parties and fragmenting, rather than consolidating, electoral politics in the immediate future. To the extent that this undermines the possibility of stable, nationally-focussed government, they also represent a departure from the ‘Asian model’ of more consolidated electoral and party systems that has taken hold in much of East Asia over the past decade (Reilly 2007). It also reinforces the divergence between Southeast Asia and the increasingly majoritarian political systems of the Northeast Asian democracies.

Table 1 summarises these recent changes in electoral systems in Southeast Asia’s democracies.

Table 1: Electoral Systems Changes in Southeast Asia

Country	Former Electoral System	New Electoral System
East Timor	Mixed PR-Plurality (2001)	Closed List PR (2006)
Indonesia	Closed List PR (1999)	Open List PR (2004)
Philippines	Plurality/Block (1986)	Mixed Plurality-PR (1998)
Thailand	Mixed Plurality-PR (1997)	Mixed Block-PR (2007), Mixed Plurality-PR (2011)

To summarise: East Asia’s divergent institutional reforms has resulted in sub-regional “clusters” of electoral democracies which to a significant extent match the region’s basic geographic divisions – a striking and in some ways surprising outcome. While advocacy of stronger parties, majority-enhancing elections and stable governments remains common, actual institutional choices display significant divergence - most obviously in the distinction between presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential government, as well as more recent electoral system reforms. Indeed, when we look at

the region through a system-of-government lens, there is less cross-regional convergence and more sub-regional clustering around the broad geographic categories of Northeast Asia, mainland Southeast Asia, maritime Southeast Asia (see Table Two). In combination with regime type, this divergence is likely to translate into very different political outcomes across the region.

Table 2: Geographic clusters and regime type in East Asia

Cluster 1 – Northeast Asia	Cluster 2 – mainland	Cluster 3 – maritime
Presidential or semi-presidential democracy <i>Taiwan, Korea, Mongolia</i>	Southeast Asia Parliamentary semi-democracy <i>Singapore, Malaysia,</i> <i>Cambodia, Thailand</i>	Southeast Asia Presidential or semi-presidential democracy <i>Indonesia, Philippines, East</i> <i>Timor</i>

What explains this pattern of regionalization in terms of institutional choices? I think there are several processes at work here.

First, historical legacies are clearly a factor, particularly in terms of meta-constitutional system-of-government choices. Just as the former British colonies have tended to replicate the form if not the substance of Westminster, the colonial influence of the United States in the Philippines, the Dutch in Indonesia, and the Japanese in Taiwan and Korea is still apparent in areas such as constitutional and electoral choices, although again the link is often more one of form than substance. The nature of electoral authoritarianism in post-war Southeast Asia has also had a crucial impact on the development of the region’s political systems (Slater 2009). For example, Hicken and Kuhonta (2011) have shown how the immediate post-war period was the crucible from which institutionalized party systems in Asia developed.

In the contemporary era, regional mimeticism has been similarly important. The introduction of MMM electoral systems across East Asia displays a clear pattern of intra-regional borrowing. Japan’s adoption of a mixed-member system influenced Taiwan, and was also cited by Thai reformers during their constitutional debates in

1997.⁷ More recently, Mongolian electoral reformers have looked to the example of Korea, and I imagine (but have no evidence) that East Timor's switch to pure PR was not unrelated to Indonesia's the use of that system in both historical and contemporary manifestations. The "demonstration effect" of neighbors and former colonists is always important.

Another reason majority-enhancing reforms have been popular is because they seem to conform to key aspects of elite and mass opinion in Asian societies. Opinion polls across East Asia find high levels of support for democracy as a normative concept, but often with significantly different meanings attached to the term than in Western environments. Public views on democracy tend to be heavily instrumental, focussing on the ability of the system to deliver economic development rather than more abstract liberal ideals (Chu et al 2009). Survey research from across the region suggests that Asian public opinion is also less open than that of other regions to minority rights guarantees. Opinion polls in seven East Asian nations reported that respondents displayed significantly higher support for majoritarian democracy over more 'pluralist' models which give legal guarantees to minorities. Those countries with the highest support for democracy also had the lowest support for pluralism, prompting the survey's authors to conclude that a distinctive feature of East Asian democracy is the lack of public support for pluralistic values and minority rights instruments.⁸ Asia's electoral majoritarianism thus appear to reflect, at some level, the popular attitudes held by a significant number of its citizens.

A final explanation for East Asia's distinctive reform patterns may lie in the nature of the region's party systems. Asia's semi-democracies tend to rely on dominant political party machines for their ongoing rule – the PAP in Singapore, UMNO in Malaysia, and the CPP in Cambodia being prominent examples. The long-dominant position of such parties in government has enabled them to tilt the electoral playing field in their favor. In the genuinely competitive democracies, by contrast, where competitive multiparty systems are the order of the day, this is more difficult. But nowhere in democratic Southeast Asia do the consolidating two-party (or, more accurately, two-party blocks) systems of Northeast Asia appear to be coming to fruition. Indonesia, despite a sharp drop in overall party numbers, remains a fragmented multiparty legislature, and even East Timor, which began life as a two-party system,

⁷ See Jou, Willy 2009. 'Electoral Reform and Party System Development in Japan and Taiwan: A Comparative Study', *Asian Survey* 49:759-785.

⁸ See Robert Albritton and Thawilwadee Bureekul, 'Social and cultural supports for pluralist democracy across seven Asian nations', paper presented to the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Honolulu (2005).

has become more fragmented over time (see Table 3).

Table 3: Constitutional, electoral and party systems in East Asia

Country	Constitutional system	Electoral system	Party system	Sub-regional cluster
Japan	Parliamentary	MMM	Two-party	Northeast Asia
Korea	Presidential	MMM	Two-party	Northeast Asia
Taiwan	Semi-presidential	MMM	Two-party	Northeast Asia
Mongolia	Semi-presidential	MMM?	Two-party	Northeast Asia
Singapore	Parliamentary	FPTP	One party dom	Mainland SE Asia
Malaysia	Parliamentary	FPTP	One party dom	Mainland SE Asia
Cambodia	Parliamentary	PR	One party dom	Mainland SE Asia
Philippines	Presidential	MMM	Multiparty	Maritime SE Asia
Indonesia	Presidential	PR	Multiparty	Maritime SE Asia
East Timor	Semi-presidential	PR	Multiparty	Maritime SE Asia

Exceptions: Thailand?

So what?

Variations in political constellations across the region are important for several reasons. First, they point towards the difficulties political elites face in building consolidated democratic government in very different kinds of societies. Perhaps more importantly, they highlight the way variations in constitutional, electoral and party systems impact upon government performance – and especially, the question of how such institutional variations impact on public policy, a subject to which I now turn.

Because of the different electoral incentives facing politicians under different party systems, we should expect relatively predictable variations in government policy and performance under different electoral and party systems. To simplify a large and complex literature: in competitive one-party dominant or two-party systems, parties must cultivate and maintain support across a range of social groups, and therefore need to provide benefits to society at large in order to maximize their chances of re-election. In multiparty systems, by contrast, multiple parties compete for office, some of which may need only a small plurality of votes to win seats. These parties may only need to focus on providing sectoral benefits to their supporters, rather than public goods to the electorate as a whole. The differing election incentives mean that vote-seeking politicians in such systems are increasingly pushed to deliver more private goods than would be either necessary or possible under a more consolidated party system. At an extreme, such private goods can include the fruits of nepotism, cronyism and corruption – all long-standing problems in many Asian and the Pacific states.

There is an analogous (indeed, closely related) story to be told in relation to the effects of different electoral systems. The differential policy impacts of majoritarian and proportional systems have received the most systematic attention in the work of Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini, who have shown both theoretically and empirically how changes in the structure of democratic institutions affect economic policies. They begin by demonstrating theoretically that the size of government, welfare programs and fiscal deficits should be smaller under plurality electoral rules and presidential governments than under PR electoral rules and parliamentary governments (Persson and Tabellini 2000). Then, in Persson and Tabellini (2005), they provide empirical support for all three hypotheses, showing that a switch from proportional to majoritarian elections reduces government expenditures as a share of GDP by 5%, welfare spending by 2-3% and fiscal deficits by about 2% on the basis of cross-national regression analysis.

These findings have particular relevance for East Asia, where the quest for more programmatic and majoritarian party politics has been inescapably linked to concerns about economic development. In contrast to Asia's traditional pattern of distributive, patrimonial politics (Horiuchi 2002, Horiuchi and Lee 2008), I have argued that recent institutional reforms have encouraged politicians to appeal to much broad segments of the electorate by providing the public goods and policies necessary to get growth going (Reilly 2006). In part because of both elite and public consensus on the need for "pro-development" politics, there has been an active effort to promote

more limited and nationally-focussed party systems, either by electoral system reform (such as the abandonment of SNTV in Japan in 1994), as part of a new constitution (as in Thailand or the Philippines) or directly via political party laws (as in Indonesia). All of these reforms were motivated in part by a quest for more consolidated and cohesive party politics which could increased political stability, aggregate rather than replicate social cleavages and, in theory, deliver more programmatic governance. In Japan, for example, former LDP Secretary General Ichiro Ozawa argued that a two-party system was necessary for the country's long-term survival (Sakomoto 1999). Similarly, former Indonesian president Megawati and other national leaders argued that limitations on party proliferation were necessary to protect Indonesia's national integrity (Hillman 2010: 2).

One of the most immediate impacts of these reforms across East Asia has been a change in party systems, as smaller parties have been winnowed away and larger parties have predominated. As Duverger's Law would predict, electoral systems dominated by single-member districts have encouraged the development of two-bloc (if not quite two-party) systems, particularly in those countries which adopted the full 'Asian model' of oversized executive leadership, mixed-member majoritarian electoral systems and limits on party fragmentation. In some cases, the outcome of these reforms has been a rapid political realignment. Japan, Taiwan, and Mongolia have all moved from situations of one-party dominance to contemporary party systems that resemble the classic two-party model of the Anglophone world.⁹ Indeed, these three Asian democracies are today purer examples of two-party block systems than those found in classic Westminster democracies such as the United Kingdom (which today has 2.57 effective parliamentary parties), Australia (2.95), Canada (3.15) or New Zealand (2.78).

In Southeast Asia, Thailand and the Philippines have also converged upon something resembling a 'two-bloc' party system at their most recent elections, a result of both deliberate electoral engineering and political calculation. For example, following party bans and realignments, Thailand now effectively has a parliamentary two-party system, with the Democrat Party and Puea Thai commanding almost equal seat shares (36% and 39% respectively) in the legislature. Thai government officials publicly endorsed this development as a natural consequence of Thailand's Westminster-style

⁹ Benjamin Reilly 2007, 'Electoral Systems and Party Systems in East Asia', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, , pp. 185-192.

institutions and moves towards a stable two-party system.¹⁰ As in Japan, the classic ‘Westminster model’ was often cited as a desirable reform outcome, encapsulating several appealing ideas in an Asian context, including responsible parliamentary government and alternating government-and-opposition politics.¹¹

Table Four sets out the current state-of-play for the region’s party systems, comparing the historical average in terms of effective numbers of parliamentary parties with the result as of the most recent election in each country as of 2011.

Table 4: Asia’s New ‘Two-Bloc’ Party Systems

	Historical mean ENP	Current ENP
Japan	3.43	2.1
Korea	2.83	2.9
Philippines	4.90	2.3
Thailand	5.03	2.8
Taiwan	2.56	2.2
Mongolia	1.31	2.0

A combination of electoral reforms that privilege programmatic policy offerings and the related impacts of a shift towards two large parties competing for the middle ground should, in theory, have profound governance implications. As discussed above, economists argue that countries with centralised executives, majoritarian elections and

¹⁰ Thai Government spokesman Panitan Wattanayagorn has argued that Thailand’s Westminster system was naturally moving towards a two-party model in which the Democrats and Puea Thai would compete for government. He also noted that the return to SMDs with a national party list in 2011 was the result of looking at what other countries were doing. (personal communication, 3 February 2011)

¹¹ For more on the idea of responsible government in Asia, see Linda Li, ed. *Towards Responsible Government in East Asia: Trajectories, intentions and meanings*, Routledge, 2009.

limited party systems should economically out-perform those with proportional representation and fragmented executive and party systems. Given the electoral premium that majoritarian institutions place on capturing the political centre and appealing to the median voter, we should therefore begin to see clear policy consequences flowing from these shifts in electoral and party systems. A number of recent case studies of East Asian countries have found this to be occurring, although the impact may be less direct and predictable than economists' models may suggest.

Contemporary studies have found that a move away from particularistic politics and towards more programmatic policy offerings is already occurring in Japan (eg see Greg Noble's article in JEAS)¹², in Taiwan (as demonstrated by the success of the KMT's median voter strategy on the national identity question)¹³ and in Thailand (exemplified by Joel Selway's article on health policy in Thailand).¹⁴ All of these studies lend credence to the theoretical insight that institutional reforms to electoral systems should lead to direct, and predictable, public policy consequences to the extent that incentives for political elites to deliver particularistic politics are supplanted by the need for public goods which appeal to the median voter.

The most comprehensive investigation of this subject to date has been conducted by Michael Rock (2011), who tested the implications for economic growth of Asia's move towards more majoritarian "developmental democratic states" in seven East Asian polities — Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand. Using regression analysis, Rock found that there was no trade-off between growth and democracy for those states which adopted the classic 'East Asian model' of political reform after democratization. To the extent that the strong majoritarian bias of these reforms privileges efficiency and accountability over representativeness – a key argument from Reilly (2006) – Rock found that "growth during periods of majoritarian democratic rule has been as high as it was when developmentally oriented authoritarian governments ushered in East Asia's economic miracles" (Rock 2011:1).

By contrast, Rock found that countries which instead adopted more consensual political models and no such growth boost. East Asian countries that adopted

¹² Gregory W. Noble, 2010, 'The Decline of Particularism in Japanese politics', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 10(2): 239-274.

¹³ John F.S. Hsieh, "The Political Consequences of Electoral Reform in Taiwan," in I. Yuan (ed.), *Cross-Strait at the Turning Point: Institution, Identity and Democracy* (Taipei, Taiwan: Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, 2008), pp. 39-58.

¹⁴ Joel Selway 2011, 'Electoral Reform and Public Policy Outcomes in Thailand', *World Politics* 63(1), 165-202.

majoritarian institutions grew even faster than was the case under authoritarian rule — thus contradicting the often-heard observation about the link between autocratic rule and rapid growth in East Asia. As he summarises, “democratic governments in the East Asian newly industrializing economies have constructed a particular set of democratic institutions—mixed member majoritarian electoral systems, cross ethnic political coalitions, party systems that are less fragmented and polarized than elsewhere, and oversized cabinets—that encourage politicians to appeal to broad groups of the electorate by providing the public goods and policies necessary to get growth going. As a result, the political shift from developmental autocracy to majoritarian democracy in these polities has occurred without a significant slowdown in economic growth.” (Rock 2011: 29)

Critiques

While Rock’s analysis strengthens my arguments for a distinctive ‘Asian model’ of electoral democracy, there have also been some valuable critiques of this idea. These have tended to question three key tenets of the ‘Asian model’ argument – whether Asia’s electoral governance is really as distinctive from other regions as I have suggested; whether the experience of individual countries is sufficiently mimetic to talk about a synoptic model in an region as diverse as East Asia; and whether the idea of Asian institutional convergence really holds up to sustained empirical inquiry. These are all important queries which deserve attention.

The first critique, questioning how distinctive Asia’s electoral governance model really is compared to other world regions, was raised by Matthew Shugart in a review of my book *Democracy and Diversit*.¹⁵ Shugart wrote that “While the basic arguments for the region’s distinctiveness are convincing, at times the book exaggerates that distinctiveness. Reilly’s emphasis on the majoritarian ‘mixed-member’ systems of the region neglects to note how common this model is in the former communist countries.” While this may have been true in the 1990s, when a number of post-communist democracies did adopt MMM systems, today this model prevails in only one post-communist country, Tajikistan. Elsewhere, the Seychelles is the only other electoral democracy to use Asian-style mixed-member majoritarian electoral systems – that is, parallel plurality-PR models in which a majority of seats are chosen from districts rather than a national list, according to the definition in my book (Reilly 2006: 111). In reality, democratic East Asia increasingly stands alone in its adoption of this model, and the region has thus become more, not less, distinctive

¹⁵ Matthew S. Shugart 2008, ‘Book Reviews’, *Democratization* 15:2, 449-451.

in global terms as a result.

A second critique comes from country specialists such as Dirk Tomsa (in relation to Indonesia) and Daniel Lynch (in relation to Thailand), who question how applicable claims of an Asian-wide model is to their particular country cases.¹⁶ Both authors rightly emphasise the distinctiveness of each state's experience, and the reality that domestic political calculations were pre-eminent influences determining institutional choices. Nonetheless, examination of recent reforms in both Indonesia and Thailand offer good examples of the way new electoral institutions have led to distinctively majoritarian outcomes across East Asia. In Indonesia, a government reform team in 1999 following the fall of Suharto proposed a classic 'Asian model' of electoral reform for Indonesia – a mixed system with 420 seats elected from single-member districts by FPTP and 75 from a national list by PR. While not ultimately accepted, the majoritarian impulses behind this proposal have remained clearly in evidence ever since. Indonesian reformers have progressively reduced the proportionality of their PR electoral system at every election by sharply reducing district magnitude (down from over 60 in some cases in 1999 to between 3-10 seats per district at the 2009 elections), and a consequent drop in the number of political parties in the DPR (20>16>9).

Thailand similarly adopted a classic "Asian-style" MMM system, with 80% of the seats elected from single-member districts and 20% from a national list, as part of its 1997 reforms, before reverting to a hybrid form of their old system, with block-voting in three-member districts and a regional rather than national list, following the 2006 coup. This did indeed represent a departure from the Asian model, not just in institutional terms but also more importantly in its effects, which was designed to dilute the voting power of the northern provinces where Thaksin's support was strongest.¹⁷ However, following a series of party bans and opposition splits, the Thais have now effectively re-introduced their 1997 system, this time with a 125/375 seat split (25%/75%), a national list and SMDs. This stands at the mid-point of the mean Asian proportion of such systems, as in Korea (18/82), the Philippines (19/81), Taiwan (30/70) and Japan (37.5/62.5). While further electoral reforms could of course take Thailand in a new direction, for now their experience is a good example of the isomorphic nature of electoral reform in East Asia.

¹⁶ Tomsa XX; Daniel Lynch, 'Democracy, Security and Regionalism in Asia', *Asia Policy*, 10 (July 2010), 189-95.

¹⁷ Thitinan Pongsudhirak, 'Thailand Since the Coup', *Journal of Democracy*, 19:4 (2008), 140-153.

A final and more substantive critique of the ‘Asian model’ idea comes from Croissant and Schächter’s (2010) analysis of institutional patterns in Asia’s young democracies.¹⁸ This article attempts to replicate Arend Lijphart’s (1999) majoritarian-consensus democracy framework in Asia, but finds little support for his global findings of a two-dimensional ‘pattern of democracy’. Rather, by re-calculating what Lijphart called the ‘executive-parties’ and ‘federal-unitary’ dimensions of democracy, their research emphasises the diversity of both institutional forms and outcomes across Asia, a diversity that neither Lijphart’s schema nor my own ‘Asian model’ of democracy can, they contend, adequately capture. However, the very breadth of their research design makes this conclusion less than compelling. Their adoption of Lijphart’s framework takes them well beyond my focus on electoral and party systems to include federalism, judicial review, central banks and interest groups among a host of other variables, while their eclectic collection of Asian democracies similarly goes well beyond East Asia to include Bangladesh and Nepal, while excluding Malaysia, Singapore, and East Timor. Unsurprisingly, different research designs yield different conclusions.

Conclusion

In part because of the perceived link between “stable” democracy and development, in part due to elite and mass-level suspicion of minority rights and representation, and in part a heightened sensitivity of the problems of particularistic politics, the normative value accorded programmatic party politics in Asia has continued to rise. Where this aim is congruent with the interests of political incumbents, the need for more “stable and aggregative” party systems has become a commonplace aim of political reform, as in Indonesia. Where it is not, it has been abandoned, sometimes by the same elites who previously championed this very outcome, as in Thailand – although only temporarily, as we have seen. Of course, there remains a huge gap between the normative aspirations and preferences of Asian publics and the short-term decisions taken by politicians, as there are in all democracies. Nonetheless, I think the inter-relationship between elite and mass opinion, partisan political calculation and a desire to keep up with regional governance trends can do much to explain of Asia’s recent institutional choices.

Asia’s evolution towards a distinctive regional model of electoral governance is important not just for Asianists, but also for the comparative political science

¹⁸ Aurel Croissant and Teresa Schächter (2010), ‘Institutional Patterns in the New Democracies of Asia: Forms, Origins and Consequences’, *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 11(2) 173-197.

literature. In recent years, a persistent alternative (indeed competing) argument to the isomorphic model of electoral governance advanced in this paper has been put forward by political scientists who argue that models of electoral governance are in fact converging on a *global* basis. Proponents argue that convergence *across* regions in key institutional choices and policy settings are evident. In terms of the academic literature on electoral systems, for instance, Bernard Grofman (2004: xiv) highlights “a well known proposition that the general trend in electoral system change has been in the direction of greater proportionality”. Similarly David Farrell (2001: 19) notes that globally “since the early 1990s, the trend has been away from plurality and towards proportional systems”¹⁹.

Perhaps the most persistent advocate of this line of argument in recent years has been Josep Colomer (2004, 2008), who argues that there is “a general trend towards proportional representation over time” when electoral systems are chosen or reformed (Colomer 2008: 562). Colomer argues that there is an evolutionary tendency towards more inclusive and proportional electoral institutions which support more representative outcomes in all democracies, regardless of region. This ‘invisible hand’, he argues, has seen an evolution from indirect elections to direct elections by majority rule and from these to mixed systems and finally to proportional representation rules:

“More and more countries tend to adopt electoral systems with multi-seat districts and proportional representation rules. As actors' self-interested behavior leads to broadly efficient and satisfactory institutional choices, it seems that a kind of 'invisible hand' in the field can be identified.” (Colomer 2008)

While appealing, this teleological and in some ways Eurocentric model finds little support in the contemporary experience of Asia or the Pacific. In Asia, the replacement of majoritarian SNTV or block vote systems with mixed models in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines all introduced an element of proportionality to elections in the form of party list seats. But because the list seats comprised such a small proportion of each legislature, each of these countries actually experienced a marked *decline* in the proportionality of election outcomes in practice (Reilly 2006: 113-4). As discussed above, the shift towards two-block politics in cases like Japan, Taiwan and Mongolia, as well as increasingly disproportional electoral system reforms in Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand have, if anything, strengthened

¹⁹ See also Sartori, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering*, 69 and Nohlen in Lijphart and Grofman.

this trend.

But while the claim for a teleological progression towards ever-greater proportionality cannot be sustained in Asia, it is also the case that the determinedly majoritarian cast of politics in democratizing East Asia may itself have some unexpected and possibly unwelcome political consequences. While this paper has emphasized the theoretical and empirical *policy* payoffs from more programmatic and policy-focussed parties, these have not necessarily been accompanied by more centrist *political* offerings. In particular, recent elections have also seen in a surge in political polarization and electoral violence in some of Asia's most promising young democracies such as Thailand, Taiwan, and Mongolia. The bitter partisan polarization that both accompanied and reinforced the emergence of two-bloc party systems in each country suggests that some of the classic scholarly critiques of majoritarian democracy – that by concentrating power and limiting representation it is an inherently flawed and dangerous model for plural societies and a poor choice for new democracies in general (see Lijphart 2004) – may still have relevance for Asia.

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