Political Theatre and Electoral Fortunes in Taiwan’s Multi-Party Elections.

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1. Introduction: Political Theatre and Electoral Fortunes in Taiwan
After forty years of Martial Law Taiwan held its first full democratic election that had the potential to change the balance of power in 1991. The sweeping away of restrictions on opposition parties and freedom of speech, and the liberalization of Taiwan’s media created a radically new electoral environment, in which politicians would either sink or swim. This was a transformation as great as facing actors adjusting from the stage to screen or from silent to talking motion pictures. Martial Law era politicians now faced a newly demanding electoral audience and an ever-changing media stage to perform on. The first democratic elections were an experiment not only in the policies but also the symbolic campaigning that voters would accept.

Research on Taiwanese electoral politics has tended to focus on either the clientelistic campaigning, known as the organizational battle (___) or the propaganda battle (___). Despite the high symbolic content of Taiwanese campaigns, the propaganda research has concentrated on electoral debate over issues, particularly national identity. In contrast, this paper analyses Taiwanese campaigns through the lens of political theatre, defined by Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom as “symbolic-laden performances whose efficacy lies largely in their power to move specific audiences.” This approach is particularly appropriate for the Taiwanese case as

performing or putting on a show (___) is a common term in the vocabulary of
Taiwanese political analysts, who view this skill as a key requirement for a successful
election candidate.\(^4\) The scope of the term is very broad, and can include candidates’
ability to make speeches, take part in electoral stunts, attend funerals and weddings,
make good TV election ads, hold moving election rallies, debate on politics talk
shows, and even fight.

This paper examines the relationship between candidates’ ability to perform (___) on
the electoral stage and electoral results in Taiwan. Although the skill of putting on a
show does not guarantee electoral victory, it does give a candidate a significant
advantage. In fact media liberalization and the convergence of policy positions has
meant the influence of symbolic campaigning has risen in recent years. I argue that
the electoral success and failure of Taiwan’s parties and candidates has increasingly
been tied to their ability to adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing media stage
and electoral audience. Those politicians able to design the content and style of their
campaign performances to match audience tastes have tended to win election, while
those that have failed to keep up with performance fads have faded from the political
scene.

Following this brief introduction, section two outlines the limited scope for political
theatre, and dominance of the ruling Kuomintang Party’s (KMT____) political
rituals and organizational battle in the Martial Law era. Next section three to five
examine how politicians and parties adjusted their performances in the period of
democratic transition, the first five years of full multi-party elections, and since the
advent of cable news channels. Finally in the conclusion I review the main findings of
the paper and their implications for the state of Taiwan’s democracy.

2. Political Theatre and Ritual in Martial Law Taiwan
Although Taiwan was under Martial Law from 1949 until 1987, it held regular local
elections throughout this period. Opposition parties were not permitted, however,
competition between the ruling KMT’s rival factions ensured these elections were

\(^4\) Chen Zhaoru (___), “Election Rally Shows have taken Taiwan into the Age of Emotional
Politics,” (_________), The Journalist (___), no.545, Available at
intensely fought. Moreover, a limited number of seats in the two national parliaments were opened up for direct election after 1969. Even these early campaigns were colorful and noisy events. Candidates would place campaign flags reminiscent of ancient Chinese battle banners throughout their constituency, set off fire crackers, attend weddings, funeral and religious ceremonies. However, these elections were far short of democratic. Only short campaign periods were permitted, and there were numerous restrictions both on the content of propaganda and the forms of campaign activities. For instance, both large candidate rallies and campaign advertising were banned, and if candidates touched upon politically taboo subjects such as criticizing the president, or advocating independence for Taiwan they were liable to receive long jail sentences. Both the print and electronic media were dominated by the ruling KMT, making it hard for opposition politicians to gain media exposure or propagate alternative political ideals. Therefore there was limited scope for political theatre in Taiwan’s Martial Law era elections. Instead the media was awash with the ruling party’s political ritual. The state ceremonies such as National Day and Retrocession Day were broadcast live on television and presided over solely by KMT politicians. Similarly, at election time the focus of the television and radio news was the activities of KMT government officials and its election candidates, while any news items regarding the opposition would invariably show them in a negative light.

Political analysts talk of Taiwan’s elections being determined by the propaganda and organization battles. While the propaganda battle involves open public and media campaigning, the organizational battle is the private face the campaign. This includes the work of the vote brokers, mobilization of KMT support groups, vote allocation and division of constituencies into responsibility zones. Campaigning restrictions ensured that during the Martial Law era the organizational battle had a far greater impact on electoral success or failure. Election results were often determined months before voting day. Since only the KMT had the finance and organization to coordinate election campaigns, getting nominated as a party candidate virtually guaranteed

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6 National Day is on October 10, and commemorates the outbreak of the rebellion that led to the founding of the Republic of China in 1911. Retrocession Day is on October 25, and commemorates the ending of Japanese rule over Taiwan in 1945.
election victory. For instance, between 1954 and 1989 an average of 85.86% of KMT candidates for the Provincial Assembly were elected.8

During the last decade of Martial Law there was a limited loosening of campaign restrictions and a semi-organized opposition movement began to coalesce around a group of democracy activists. The opposition movement frequently tested the KMT’s limits of toleration in both its issue demands and campaign methods. Dissidents were able to make use of the relative freedom of expression during the short campaign periods, which became known as “democratic holidays.” The formally dull Central Election Commission run policy forums were reinvigorated, as dissidents used them as a stage to get their message across. However, the KMT was still prepared to crack down if the opposition movement grew too strong. When in 1979 the opposition attempted to organize a large-scale human rights march, the KMT rounded up almost the entire opposition leadership and put them on military trial.9

3. Political Theatre during the democratic transition 1987-1991
After almost 40 years Martial Law was finally ended in July 1987, sweeping away many of the pre-existing campaign restrictions. However, though opposition parties were allowed, national elections were still supplementary, with less than a third of seats open for direct election. Opposition politicians’ still struggled to reach their audience, as the electronic media remained KMT dominated. The KMT stayed reliant on its organizational battle and political rituals to win elections. The newly formed Democratic Progressive Party (DPP ____ ) lacked both the financial clout and organizational strengths to compete with the KMT’s organizational battle. Instead it had to rely on the propaganda battle. The principle stages for opposition politicians to perform were street marches, parliaments, campaign rallies and the realm of stunt politics.

Firstly, there was a surge in marches and demonstrations in the late 1980s. This was a critical tool for the DPP in spreading its agenda. During the DPP’s first five years large demonstrations were held calling for full national elections, direct presidential

9 This was known as the Gaoxiong (____ ) or Formosa Incident, and the defendants received sentences of between twelve years and life.
elections, freedom of speech, and application to rejoin the United Nations. Although there were some isolated violent incidents, most DPP politicians were at pains to avoid violence in these events.

The second forum for opposition politicians was the political rallies that became exceedingly common and popular in this period. As political scientist Tien Hung-mao recalled, “it is not unusual to have over twenty thousand people attend, compared to several hundred that show up at rallies for KMT candidates.” Opposition party politicians had to learn to satisfy the new and demanding audience by attacking the KMT and making radical and controversial political demands. They were also expected to make their passionate speeches in the formally suppressed Taiwanese language, rather than Mandarin. This meant that numerous moderate dissidents such as Kang Ningxiang (___) or Mainlanders unable to speak Taiwanese fell from favour among opposition supporters. KMT candidates also organized election rallies and banquets during this period, however, these contrasted sharply with those run by the opposition party. As these tended to have little policy content and were more like variety shows, being hosted by TV stars, and featuring pop stars and scantily dressed singers.

Even though the opposition members only accounted for a small proportion of parliamentarians, the quality of their speeches and their performances made some of them into political stars. Especially renowned were the DPP Legislators Chen Shuibian (___), Xie Changting (___) and Lin Zhengjie (___), who gained the nickname “The Three Musketeers” (___). The newly liberalized print media recorded these politicians’ campaign and parliamentary speeches in their politics columns. A number of DPP politicians also used violence in the parliament to gain

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11 During the Martial Law era the government placed strict limits on the radio and television use of Taiwanese, and at school children would be fined for speaking in Taiwanese.
12 The term Mainlander refers to those Han Chinese that came to Taiwan between 1945 and 1950 and their descendants, this group constitutes approximately 14%. Native Taiwanese are those Han Chinese who already lived in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation and their descendents. They make up about 85% of the population. See John F Copper, *Taiwan: Nation State or Province?* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1996), 10-13.
publicity and also protest against the slow pace of political reforms. Particularly famous was Zhu Gaozheng’s (___) attacks on the Legislative Yuan speaker and Huang Zhaohui (___) overturning tables at the President’s banquet in the March 1990 National Assembly.\(^{14}\) The KMT regularly used the DPP’s political theatre performances in its propaganda to discredit it as radical and violent.\(^{15}\) However, in the late 1980s the only way for DPP figures to get television exposure was by using violence, and such actions gained politicians cult status among the opposition’s hardcore supporters.

In this period politicians from all parties began to use stunt politics to attract voter attention. One especially noteworthy event was when DPP Legislative Yuan candidate Lu Xiuyi (___) promised his rally in November 1989 would feature the head of the World United Formosans for Independence Guo Peihong (___). Since Guo was a blacklisted political exile that had been smuggled into Taiwan and was on the run from the police, the rally attracted a huge crowd.\(^{16}\) After Guo had made his speech and gave a press conference, the police were ready to arrest him. However, in unison Guo and the whole audience put on identical black masks and the lights were turned out, allowing Guo to escape in the confusion.\(^{17}\) This stunt certainly paid dividends for Lu, who was the highest vote getter in Taibei County that year. Of course not all the stunts paid off electorally. A prime example was the Labour Party candidate, and striptease artist, Xu Xiaodan (___). Xu produced one of the most talked about newspaper ads of the 1989 campaign, which showed a naked Xu breaking through a KMT flag and the slogan, “the breast resists the fist” (______).\(^{18}\) Moreover Xu was able to attract large (mostly male) crowds for her campaign performances. However, Xu failed to win election in 1989, 1992 and 1995.


\(^{15}\) See KMT advertisement in United Daily News (___) November 21, 1994, 25. This ad attacks the DPP’s record of inciting violence, and showed a picture of a DPP campaign truck in a riot.

\(^{16}\) Guo was one among hundreds of Taiwanese on a blacklist that the government banned from returning to Taiwan because of their political activities abroad.

\(^{17}\) Zheng Zilong (___), Campaign Advertisements: Theory, Strategy and Research Cases (___: _____) (Taibei: Chungcheng, 1995), 298.

The new style of political campaigning contributed to the high turnover of parliamentarians during this period, as politicians from both parties that lacked the newly required performing skills failed to win re-election and faded from the political scene. Although KMT candidates could still win election using the organization battle, they were less competitive, as many KMT candidates lacked the qualities for democratic campaigns. Not surprisingly the proportion of KMT Legislative Yuan candidates winning election fell from 96.66% in 1980 to only 63.26% in 1992. The DPP’s performances of the late 1980s were remarkably successful. Despite its media disadvantage it was able to set the political agenda and increase its vote share from 22.17% in 1986 to 28.26% in 1989. However, its radical methods meant it faced a bottleneck in growth by the early 1990s as full democratization made direct action and parliamentary violence hard to justify.

4. Political Theatre in the first five years of full democratic elections

The electoral stage changed considerably in the early 1990s as the pace of democratization increased. The scope of elected offices broadened rapidly, with the first full elections of the National Assembly in 1991, Legislative Yuan in 1992, the Provincial Governor, Taibei and Gaoxiong Mayor in 1994 and the President in 1996.

Although the first television campaign advertisements were broadcast in 1991, these had limited impact on election campaigns in the early 1990s. Instead many opposition figures continued to employ theatrical methods learnt during the 1980s. These included radical demands, some use of violence, the tragic Taiwanese appeals, and a refusal to use Mandarin in election activities. The tragic Taiwanese appeal was common in many DPP campaign ads in the early 1990s and focused on Taiwan’s historical tragedies such as the February 28 Incident and how Taiwanese suffered during the Martial Law White Terror period. In three 1992 DPP TV ads the wives of opposition politicians told heartrending stories of how their families had suffered

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21 Direct elections for Taibei and Gaoxiong Mayor had been held during Martial Law, but were cancelled after 1967 and 1979 respectively. Until 1990 the president had been elected by the National Assembly, which was largely made up of members elected on Mainland China in 1947.
22 The February Incident refers to a Taiwanese uprising in the February and March 1947 and the subsequent massacre of between ten and twenty thousand Taiwanese by KMT government troops.
political persecution under Martial Law. DPP advertising also appealed to anti
Mainlander sentiment by playing the ethnic card. For instance, another series of 1992
DPP TV ads showed an actor impersonating Mainlander Premier Hao Bocun’s
(____) numerous verbal gaffes. One of these reminded voters that Hao had once
said, “I love Taiwan, I love the Mainland (China) even more.”

The 1991 National Assembly election was a critical election for the DPP. The DPP
suffered a humiliating defeat, in which its vote share dropped sharply and some of its
most extremist candidates such as Lin Zhuoshui (___) were defeated. The election
led the party to try to change its image and adopt new campaign methods. For the
KMT, on the other hand, the conclusion was that organizational battle and the political
rituals would still be enough to win elections, with only limited attention to the
propaganda battle.

Three years later, however, the Taibei Mayoral elections showed organizational
advantage no longer guaranteed victory and that the ability of politicians to adjust
their performances was critical on the new electoral stage. In Taibei the DPP’s Chen
Shuibian attempted to use a completely new style of campaign. Chen rejected the old
tragic Taiwanese image, instead this Chen adopted a youth orientated style with the
slogan “Happiness, Hope, Chen Shuibian” (__,__,__). During the 1980s
Chen had been a radical political figure, however, in this election Chen was at pains to
show his moderation.

This election also featured the newly formed New Party (NP__). Just as student
protestors in Beijing had usurped Hu Yaobang’s (____) state funeral in April 1989,
the NP attempted to stake claim to Republic of China’s nationalist rituals. The party
held its own more “orthodox” national ceremonies, such as at the Yang Mingshan
Revolutionary Martyrs Shrine. Similarly, its rallies featured national anthem singing,
flag waving and condemning both mainstream parties their lack of patriotism. Such
symbolic appeals enabled the NP to attract many disaffected KMT supporters and
became a significant electoral force in the mid 1990s.

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23 Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “Acting Out Democracy: Political Theatre in Modern
The 1994 Taibei mayoral contest also featured a new stage for politicians to perform on, Taiwan’s first live televised debate. The DPP’s Chen Shuibian was scathing in his criticism of the incumbent KMT mayor, but also attempted to show his own government competence. The NP’s Zhao Shaokang gave by far the most theatrical performance, opening with the statement, “Taiwan is going to be destroyed! Destroyed in the Nazi Fascist hands of the DPP!” In a later exchange Zhao challenged Chen, “I shout ‘long live the Republic of China,’ do you dare to shout ‘long live the Republic of China, long live the Republic of China, long live the Republic of China!’” Pundits concluded that the winners of the debate had been the NP’s Zhao and the DPP’s Chen. While all agreed that the KMT’s Huang Dazhou had performed very poorly. This was not surprising considering that Huang had been a government appointed mayor and never stood for any elected offices before. In contrast, both Chen and Zhao had been star legislators since the late 1980s. The candidates’ debate performances were reflected in the actual election results, in which the DPP’s Chen won, while the NP’s Zhao came second.

During the late 1980s many Taiwanese viewed limited political violence as tolerable in the light of the unfair political system. However, by the mid 1990s audience tastes had shifted, and violence appeared no longer justifiable. In fact, most opposition politicians had dropped direct action by this point. The price for DPP legislators such as Stella Chen, Huang Zhaohui and Chen Sansi that still used direct action was defeat in the December 1995 Legislative Yuan elections. In the words of the Far Eastern Economic Review’s Julian Baum, Stella Chen “had exhausted the patience of voters with her violent tactics in parliament.”

The 1996 presidential election again showed what was required for politicians in terms of political theatre and adaptability. The election pitted the KMT incumbent Li Denghui, against the DPP’s Peng Mingmin and the NP backed Lin Yanggang. Both opposition campaigns were badly run and featured candidates unequipped with the necessary performance skills. Peng ignored the DPP party headquarters’ call for more inclusive appeals, reverting a style similar to the late 1980s and 1991, employing themes such as radical Taiwan independence and the

tragedy of being Taiwanese. One Peng rally I attended in Gaoxiong in February 1996 had a funeral atmosphere, with a mix of somber music and tragic tales of Taiwanese suffering. Though such appeals may have won votes in the 1980s, they had become ineffective and even counter productive by 1996. Lin Yanggang’s campaign was also a disaster, as his vice presidential running mate Hao Bocun recalled of their TV ads, “They were not professional, and they had no money and no preparations.” This was the first time Peng, Lin and Hao had stood for election, and all had communication problems. Although Peng is a fine orator in Taiwanese, he appeared uncomfortable using Mandarin. Similarly neither Lin nor Hao were rousing speakers, in addition Hao’s appeal was limited by his inability to speak Taiwanese. Moreover after living in exile in the United States for twenty five years Peng appeared out of touch with Taiwanese audience demands, as the DPP’s Chen Fangming explained, “He is an intellectual, he never said, ‘please give me your vote.’”

In contrast, President Li Denghui (___) showed how a politician could adapt. Though he had a similar government background to Lin, he had become a fiery speaker in both Taiwanese and Mandarin, and had actively campaigned for KMT candidates since 1993. In addition, Li was far more comfortable with showmanship at rallies and in making campaign ads. In fact his election ads were well designed and gave him the image of being not only a statesmen but also approachable. One series of ads showed Li on the world stage, shaking hands with world leaders such as Thatcher and Gorbachev and making his famous speech at Cornell University in June 1995. While another series showed Li in an armchair telling how he quit smoking and how he fell in love with his wife. As in 1994, the best performer won election, with the incumbent Li Denghui winning with over 54% of the vote.

5. Political Theatre in the Cable TV Era
Changes in Taiwan’s media since the mid 1990s again created a new variation in the electoral stage. The most important has been the huge rise in cable TV and particularly the popularity of their 24-hour news channels. By 1996 75.9% of households had cable TV and this continued to rise to 84.3% in 2003. This meant

that the old organizational battle would be less effective, as increasingly TV propaganda would dominate campaigns. Parties and politicians have been forced to adjust their political theatre for the TV stage. Firstly, election rallies and speeches have to be designed to suit the tastes of their armchair audience. Secondly, politicians have to learn to debate in the politics talk shows and televised debates. Thirdly, parties and politicians have had to invest more in television campaign advertising.

By the mid 1990s the old style outdoor political rally had lost its novelty, and voters were no longer so attracted by serious political speeches. Politicians that still persisted with this method such as Zhu Gao-zheng and Lin Zhengjie failed to win elected in both 1998 and 2001. One of the first political figures to adapt to the new media environment was the DPP’s Propaganda Chief from 1995-1997, Chen Wenqian (___). She tried to liven up the DPP’s election rallies to give the party a more modern image that could attract younger voters. Chen designed rallies that would look good on both TV news and also for the rally audience. The most famous of these were the “Spice Girls Campaigning Team (_____ ) rallies of 1997 that combined scantily dressed dancers with pop music, short political speeches and the chance for the audience to directly address questions to party leaders. Of course, Chen was criticized by some party elders as trivializing politics. However, the election results, particularly 1997 when the DPP vote share exceeded that of the KMT for the first time ensured that even after Chen left the DPP the party continued its more youth orientated rallies.

A new phenomenon of political theatre since the late 1990s has been a battle of televised campaign rallies. In the 2000 presidential election there was a clear contest over which party could hold the largest and most passionate rallies. Although at times the KMT was able to muster larger crowds than the DPP or independent candidate Song Chuyu (___) in 2000, on close observation I found that many participants were forced to go by their work units or were being paid to attend. Song Chuyu’s rallies in 2000 showed how well he had adapted his election rally performances. Song is from the Mainlander ethnic community, but he has increased his nationwide appeal by learning Taiwanese. Though not a great orators, Song has the charisma to attract and entertain large crowds. Song Chuyu has responded to the rise in Taiwanese
identity by projecting a more inclusive Taiwanese image in his performances.\textsuperscript{28} For instance, in his 2000 rallies Song would appeal to all ethnic communities by mixing his Mandarin speeches with slogans in Hakka, Taiwanese and even Aboriginal languages.

The 2004 presidential election was even more a battle of rallies than four years earlier. The DPP’s key note political event was a hand in hand human chain linking the far north with the far south of Taiwan that was attended by at least one and a half million people. This event was designed to show Taiwanese unity in the face of the PRC missile threat. In contrast, the KMT held a series of simultaneous anti Chen rallies on March 13 under the slogan of “Change the President, Save Taiwan,” (______) in which up to 3 million people participated.

Another major consequence of the rise of cable TV has been the proliferation of politics talk shows. While in the UK there are only one or two shows such as “Question Time” per week, in Taiwan there are six or seven each night, in which politicians from the major political parties debate the issues of the day. These shows offer politicians free advertising. As DPP legislator Lai Jinlin (___) explained, “They can increase your exposure and make you better known. As when you’re out electioneering you can only meet a minority of constituents. If you can appear on TV, especially if it’s a channel with high viewing rates many people can see you.”\textsuperscript{29} However, not all politicians are able to cope with the intensity of these shows, as the performance skills required are quite different from the traditional rally speech. There is particular pressure for urban-based politicians to regularly appear on these shows, for instance many of the politicians I interviewed appear on at least four shows a week.

The rise in 24-hour cable news has also had an impact on the speeches that political leaders give. While in the past no more than a few sound bites from a speech would be shown on the TV news, since the late 1990s the cable news channels have broadcast speeches live. This has meant that a different speech is needed for each rally, also the speech must be written to appeal to both the rally and TV audience.

\textsuperscript{28} Surveys show that respondents self-identifying as Taiwanese rose from 16% 1989 to 37.9% in 2001.
\textsuperscript{29} Lai Jinlin, interview by author, Taibei, September 25, 2001.
Within the DPP it is felt that initially the DPP’s star politician Chen Shuibian failed to adjust to this new stage, and this damaged his 1998 mayoral reelection campaign. As the DPP’s Zhang Yishan (___) explained, “Before Chen Shuibian tended to use mainly Taiwanese in his rally speeches, with much Taiwanese slang, he tried to incite the audience. However, this kind of speech came across very differently to a middle class audience, and this gave the other side much ammunition to attack Chen Shuibian.” Therefore following Chen’s 1998 defeat he has used both Mandarin and Taiwanese, stopped making unscripted speeches, and created a professional speech writing team.

The final impact of the rise in cable TV channels has been the rise in importance of TV advertising in election campaigns, which in presidential elections has become the largest campaign spending item. These were of minimal significance when they began in the early 1990s, when parties were allocated free slots on the terrestrial TV channels in proportion to how many candidates they had nominated. In 1991 the KMT was given 149 minutes of advertising time compared to 65 minutes for the DPP. The liberalization of cable channels has meant that Taiwan has adopted a system of election advertising similar to the United States, in which there is a completely free market. The degree of change is apparent from the fact that in 2000 the KMT purchased 16,927 minutes of advertising time compared to the DPP’s 9,310. Therefore, making good election TV ads has become a prerequisite of a successful campaign. Just as in the US the newspapers analyze and compare the quality of the previous days slots and these are also often the subjects of everyday conversation.

The DPP was initially slow to recognize the increased significance of television advertising. Some in the party also saw this as a factor in the party’s loss of the Taipei Mayoral election in 1998. That year the KMT’s Ma Yingjiu (___) performed well in a series of candidate image ads, which showed him jogging, chatting to city residents, and making tough anti corruption speeches. As a DPP campaign manager recalled, “In 1998 we didn’t adjust to media developments, we spent too much money

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on newspaper ads, but ignored two new trends, the TV ads and 24 hour news channels. We had less TV ads than them and ours were of poorer quality.”

By the 2000 presidential election the DPP had improved the quality of its television advertising. This election is viewed as being a battle of TV ads, as the DPP’s Yu Meimei (___) commented, “The only year that the TV ads were really effective was in 2000.” The ads showed clearly the contrasting acting abilities of the three main candidates. The KMT spent more on TV ads than all the other four candidates put together, however, their candidate came third with only 23% of the vote. A critical factor was that Lian was clearly uncomfortable about putting on a show. In fact, a KMT ad even admitted Lian’s lack of showmanship with the slogan, “A Person that can talk can’t always get things done, A Person that can get things done can’t always talk.” While Chen and Song were veteran election campaigners, this was Lian’s first campaign, as he had followed a career of unelected government positions, and it showed. Lian clearly suffered from a lack of charisma, and when he did try to use ads to show his strength, the message was just too far from his public image to be convincing. For instance, in 2001 the KMT ran a TV ad that was a blatant copy of a Nike football boots ad, with Lian (in place of David Beckham and Luis Figo) beating an assortment of monsters at football. In contrast, both the opposition candidates Song Chuyu and Chen Shuibian were far more comfortable at acting in TV ads. For instance, many voters were impressed with Song’s ad showing him trying to help flood victims and then contrasting this with Lian’s apparent indifference at the disaster zone. Once again, the candidates that gave the best political theatre did the best in this campaign, with the DPP’s Chen winning election with 39%, closely followed by the independent Song with 36%, while the KMT’s Lian gained the party’s record low of 23%.

The audience tastes for political theatre can change swiftly in Taiwan. In the 2001 Legislative Yuan election the NP paid the price for not adjusting its symbolic performances. The party failed to adapt to the huge reduction of Chinese identity in

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34 The ad compared Lian’s modesty, hard work and numerous achievements while premier, with Chen’s big showmanship but lack of policy achievements while Taipei Mayor.
35 Although this was only Song’s second election campaign, he had been a key figure in election planning since 1989 and first appeared on a television campaign slot in 1991.
Taiwan since the mid 1990s. It also refused to cater to the very different audiences outside Taibei, this contributed to its failure to expand its seats outside of northern Taiwan. In 2001 I spent a day as an observer at the NP’s campaign headquarters in Gaoxiong, talking to campaign managers and accompanying the NP chairwoman Xie Qida (___) on the campaign trail. Although Xie was standing for election in Gaoxiong, she was clearly out of her depth in this constituency, unable to speak Taiwanese, and unfamiliar with the city. In the evening I watched Xie organize a traditional Chinese nationalist rally with songs such as “China Must Be Strong” (____) and the “Victory Song” (___). However, such songs have little appeal in the Taiwan orientated southern Taiwan. Moreover from interviewing the NP’s campaigners it was clear they showed a deep distaste for the type of performances popular with many southern voters, such as attending funerals, weddings or holding election banquets. As one NP official explained, “DPP candidates will help their constituents when they get in trouble with the police, they will threaten the police. There is no way the NP would do this.”

In 2001 the NP’s failure to adjust their campaigning style meant that despite a record level of advertising spending, the NP was not only wiped out in Gaoxiong but in the whole of Taiwan.

6. Conclusion

In the light of the violent post election demonstrations in March and April 2004 numerous obituaries have been written for Taiwan’s democracy. That so much of the population suspect the assassination attempt against Chen Shuibian was faked reflects the widespread cynicism with election stunts. Also of concern has been the first serious election violence for almost a decade. Just as in the 1980s the recent violent performances are aimed at winning votes from extremist voters, however, it should be recalled that once the electorate had tired of such antics the direct action politicians were defeated in 1995. It is possible that history will repeat itself.

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36 Surveys show that respondents self-identifying as Chinese dropped from 52% in 1989 to 7.9% in 2001.
38 In 2001 the NP spent more on advertising than the combined total of its previous seven campaigns. The party fell from 11 seats in 1998 to only one in 2001, and this was from the small offshore island of Jinmin (___).
It should also be remembered that the rich political theatre of Taiwanese campaigns has numerous positive sides for its democracy. Compared to the dull campaigns and voter apathy in many Western countries, Taiwan’s colourful campaigns have contributed to the high levels of political interest, political participation and voting rates, even among the younger generation.\(^3^9\) Taking a leaf from Third World campaigns would probably do far more to increase voting rates in the West than the recent proposals in the UK for postal, text or online voting. Moreover such symbolic campaigns offer voters a fun and accessible form of political education. 24 hour exposure to Taiwanese politicians’ countless performances on talk shows, rallies, debates, campaign advertisements and in the parliaments has created a highly knowledgeable and sophisticated electorate that is able to locate parties on core issue spectrums.\(^4^0\)

Institutionalized political parties are an essential ingredient for democratic consolidation. This requires parties to be adaptable and responsive to their political environment. This paper has shown that political theatre in Taiwanese campaigns is not solely a top down process. Parties and candidates have had to adjust their performances to match the changeable tastes of the electoral audience. Those that have adapted well have given themselves a greater chance of winning elections, while those that failed to adjust, such as the NP, have been punished by voters. Although there has been considerable turnover of party politicians since the end of Martial Law, the fact that 17 years later the same two parties still dominate Taiwan’s political landscape reveals the adaptability of Taiwanese parties.

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\(^3^9\) For instance, the voting rates for the last two presidential elections have been over 80%.
\(^4^0\) For instance, in 2000 almost 69.7% of voters could place themselves and the two main parties on the four principle issue spectrums. Data supplied by Dr Sheng Xingyuan (___) from National Chengchi University’s Election Study Center.