

Why have Taiwan's movement parties gone into decline?

Written by Dafydd Fell.

There have been a number of major changes in Taiwan's party system since the November 2022 local elections. The development that has attracted the most attention has been the [rise of the Ko Wen-je](#) led [Taiwan People's Party](#) (TPP). Not only did it win 16 seats in the 2022 local elections, it then became the third-largest party in the Legislative Yuan in January 2024. In the current hung parliament, its eight legislators now hold the balance of power between the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Kuomintang (KMT).

A recent trend that has received less attention has been the decline of the movement parties that emerged out of Taiwan's vibrant civil society. Parties such as the [New Power Party](#) (NPP), [Social Democratic Party](#) (SDP) and [Green Party Taiwan](#) (GPT) had become competitive in the aftermath of the 2014 Sunflower Movement. At its height, it looked like the NPP had the potential to be a major player, winning national seats in 2016 and 2020 and local council seats in 2018. However, the three main movement parties fell to just eight local council seats in 2022 and failed to win any parliamentary seats in 2024.

This development has left Taiwan with a much less diverse party system. While the TPP brands itself as a third force alternative to the two mainstream parties, it has tended to be very vague on policies, and political analyst Brian Hioe argued it '[should not be mistaken for anything but a conservative Pan-Blue party.](#)' In contrast, the movement-based parties have brought greater diversity into Taiwan's party and electoral politics. For example, GPT was the first party in Taiwan to have openly LGBTQ candidates and advocate for LGBTQ rights. In 2024, the GPT nominated Taiwan's first transgender candidate, [Abbygail ET Wu](#) (吳伊婷). From 2014, parties such as the GPT, NPP and SDP gave civil society an autonomous voice first in local councils and then in the national Legislative Yuan.

What then explains the recent decline of these alternative parties? A key focus of academic studies internationally on the fate of small parties is the electoral system. The majority of seats in Taiwan's parliament are determined in single-member districts, and this first-past-the-post electoral system tends to favour large parties. Instead, Taiwan's smaller parties tend to focus their campaigning on the 34 seats determined by proportional representation for the parties that receive more than five per cent of the vote. However, institutional factors cannot tell us the whole story. Under the seemingly unfavourable electoral system in 2016 and 2020, the GPT was competitive, and the NPP won seats in the parliamentary elections. Why did they suddenly lose support and become much less competitive after 2021? Their decline can also be seen from the way the vote share of the alternative parties fell from approximately 10 per cent in 2016 and 2020 to only 4.41 per cent in 2024.

In some respects, the political environment in the run-up to the 2024 elections ought to have offered space for a genuinely alternative party. There is a high degree of dissatisfaction with both Taiwan's mainstream parties, providing a large pool of potential floating voters.

Party system factors are a key part of the answer to the puzzle of the recent decline of the movement parties. Firstly, though it is not a progressive party, the rise of the TPP has damaged the prospects of the movement parties. The TPP has managed to attract many of the types of voters usually targeted by alternative parties, such as younger voters and those dissatisfied with the two mainstream parties. It also has the resource advantage of a political superstar, and Ko has been able to attract strong candidates and financial resources. The TPP has also been the most successful party at marketing itself on social media platforms popular with younger voters, such as [TikTok](#). Although the TPP has tended to be quite ambiguous on policies and has been much more likely to nominate politicians with big business or Pan Blue backgrounds, it has made some significant nominations to give it a facade of being progressive. In 2020, it nominated [Lai Hsiang-ling](#) (賴香伶) as a legislator, someone who had a labour movement background and who had stood for the GPT in 2008. An even more damaging case was when in 2024, the TPP nominated former Sunflower movement leader and the most well-known NPP politician, [Huang Kuo-chang](#) (黃國昌).

The second party systems factor has been the mainstream party strategies which have undermined the movement parties. Since 2016, the DPP has recruited numerous movement party figures. Examples in 2024 included former NPP politician [Huang Jie](#) (黃捷) and [Fan Yun](#) (范雲) from the SDP. Similarly, in 2016, the DPP nominated two former GPT Co-Convenors. Such strategies hollow out the human resources of movement parties. Additionally, the DPP has embraced or stolen many of the issues that movement parties advocate, such as LGBTQ issues. While the DPP had been quite low-key in its advocacy of same-sex marriage in 2016, this was something that featured quite prominently in the DPP's 2024 campaign advertising and rallies. Therefore, alternative parties have lost ownership of some of their core issues to mainstream parties and thus need to seek out new issues to appeal to voters.

However, small parties' fate is not entirely out of their hands. A key conclusion of my book [Taiwan's Green Parties](#) was that failure was never inevitable. With different strategies, they could and should have been more successful.

[Comparative research](#) shows that a key reason for the survival of new parties is whether they can institutionalise and build up strong party organisations. [Lev Nachman's research](#) on the NPP after it entered parliament in 2016 reveals the price it paid for slow institutionalisation. A similar trend is observable in the extended history of the GPT in Taiwan over the past 28 years. Whilst there were multiple efforts to establish party

organisation, these initiatives often proved to be ephemeral, collapsing shortly after the departure of the pivotal leader.

One of the most common problems with movement party campaigns has been nominating too late, and so running very short campaigns. Although the party leaders have long been aware of this problem, it has occurred in almost every election in the GPT's history. Although not as dramatic as the KMT/TPP last-minute presidential nomination, the GPT's party list was not finalised until the final day of candidate registration for the 2024 election.

In the last decade, the market for alternative parties has grown but their impact has been constrained by there being too many similar parties contesting this market. These parties are mostly quite similar ideologically but have generally failed to cooperate. There have been attempts at small-party cooperation negotiations in 2016, 2020 and 2024, but almost all have failed. Often the root cause of these failed cooperation initiatives has been personality clashes, differences over minor strategic questions or placing the interests of individual parties above the cause of progressive politics. In 2024, the market for alternative parties was squeezed, making cooperation a matter of life or death for the movement parties. Although there were some cooperation discussions between the GPT, NPP and [Taiwan Obasang Political Equality Party](#), they ultimately failed again. If we combine the party list vote for these three parties, they would be close to that magic 5 per cent to win parliamentary seats, but the failed negotiations meant none of them were even close to winning seats.

One potential strategy for small parties to survive has been to cooperate with one of the two mainstream parties. This tends to take two formats, both of which pose risks for small parties. There have been numerous cases whereby small party candidates are nominated by one of the mainstream parties. In both 2004 and 2008, the New Party and People First Party negotiated agreements with the KMT for its politicians to stand and be elected for the KMT. However, these cases saw the elected politicians being taken over by **the** KMT. A second model involves the mainstream party not nominating in a single member district and openly supporting a small party candidate against their rival mainstream party. This model was adopted to allow three NPP politicians to be elected with DPP support in 2016. However, this also poses the risk of the movement party gaining the reputation as being no more than a faction of the mainstream party. Secondly, whether and how to cooperate with the DPP has proved to be one of the most damaging and divisive issues for the GPT and the NPP in recent years.

Statistically, the collapse of small parties in 2024 looks similar to their demise in 2008. However, 2008 also marked the start of a period in which alternative movement parties began to become competitive and win the support of voters dissatisfied with mainstream parties. While the rise of the TPP does pose a challenge to the movement parties, the TPP is likely to struggle to institutionalise itself into more than a personal vehicle party for Ko.

Its lack of any core ideology and Ko's goal of winning the presidency in 2028 means the TPP is unlikely to satisfy voters who prioritise civil society demands. There should still be a market for such alternative parties in the next few years, but the key will be whether these parties can learn the lessons of defeat from 2022 to 2024.

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