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# How Do Movement Parties Learn Lessons of Defeat in Taiwan? The Case of the Green Party Taiwan

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Received 12 March 2023 | Accepted 30 April 2024 |

Published online 28 May 2024

## Abstract

In this article we examine how Taiwan's oldest movement party, the Green Party Taiwan, dealt with national electoral defeats in 2012, 2016, and 2020. We examine the theme of electoral defeat from three angles. First, we review the dominant post-defeat narratives that emerged to explain what went wrong in the campaigns. Second, we examine how these narratives guided the post-defeat reforms. Third, we consider whether the party can be said to have learned the right lessons of defeat. The analysis relies on a series of interviews with Green Party figures, party political communication material, and participant observation data.

## Keywords

political parties – Taiwan – Green parties – movement parties – small parties – lessons of defeat

## 1 Introduction

Electoral defeat is often viewed as ‘the mother of party change’ (Paczeński, Bachryj-Krzywaźnia & Kaczorowska, 2020: 63). However, cross-national and single-party studies suggest that the way parties respond to electoral setbacks is often complex and is not necessarily transformational. Anna Paczeński et al. instead argue it would be more appropriate to see electoral defeat as playing the ‘less spectacular role of a midwife’ (2020: 76). In a more recent book, they argue that in the aftermath of defeat, ‘what we usually get is a retouch, rather than a makeover’ (Paczeński et al., 2022: 160). The way that parties react to electoral setbacks is often closely tied to their subjective understanding of the campaign in the aftermath of the election. While there tend to be competing post-mortems on the causes of electoral setbacks, the winners of the post-election power struggles tend to be the ones with the power to determine the official narrative on what went wrong. These lessons will then guide the direction of the post-defeat reforms. Studies also reveal that parties do not necessarily learn the right lessons of defeat due to what Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski call ‘selective perception’, whereby political elites only see what corresponds to their existing views and filter out information that does not conform to their political predispositions (Norris & Lovenduski, 2004: 91).

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the literature on how political parties deal with electoral defeat is based on mainstream parties and cases in either Europe or North America (Masket, 2020; Norris & Lovenduski, 2004; Paczeński et al., 2020, 2022). But do all parties react in the same way to defeat? Will small parties or parties in Asian democracies respond to setbacks in the same way as their mainstream European counterparts? This is the focus of our study, which examines the way a movement party, the Green Party Taiwan (GPT), has dealt with electoral defeats. Movement parties are ‘coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organizational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition’ (Kitschelt, 2006: 280). The GPT is a relevant case to examine, as it is one of the oldest movement parties in Taiwan and has electoral experience spanning over two and a half decades (Ho & Huang, 2017). We examine the theme of electoral defeat from three angles. First, we review the dominant post-defeat

narratives that emerged to explain what went wrong in the campaigns. Second, we examine how these narratives guided the post-defeat reforms. Third, we consider whether the party can be said to have learned the right lessons of defeat.

## 2 How Do Parties React to Defeat?

When examining reactions to electoral defeats, a critical starting point is how to conceptualise defeat. Paczeński et al. (2020: 64) propose the key indices of election defeat: falling vote share, quantity of parliamentary representation (falling number of seats/seat share), and whether a party loses or fails to gain government party status. While such measurements are easy to operationalise, they are clearly more applicable to larger mainstream parties that are seeking to gain or hold on to government office. Naturally, whether a movement party is able to increase its vote share or even win seats is a criterion for success or failure, but this can only tell us part of the story. In fact, in the three election case studies (2012, 2016, and 2020) examined in this article, the GPT actually enjoyed record national Legislative Yuan (parliamentary) vote shares or vote totals, but they were still regarded as setbacks.

We instead focus on the party's subjective understanding of the campaign, or what Paczeński et al. (2022: 12) define as 'the perception and interpretation of the election result within the party'. We agree with Bürgin and Oppermann's (2020: 609) argument that much of the writing on learning from setbacks in politics does not 'problematise how actors come to interpret certain experiences as "failure"'. Examining the way the German Greens responded to the electoral setback in 2013, they argue that a 'better understanding of how and what political actors learn from failure requires insights into how such failures are socially constructed in political discourse' (Bürgin & Oppermann, 2020: 622). Like Seth Masket, we are interested in the election narratives of failure, which he describes as 'the stories we concoct about why a complex set of events came out as it did' (2020: 3). Therefore, our first research question examines what the main narratives of GPT party leaders were regarding how they subjectively understand the three electoral setbacks.

Paczeński et al. (2022: 120–121) argue that the subjective understanding of electoral setbacks can be divided into a number of broad categories. For instance, the party leaders may focus the blame on factors internal to the party, such as problems in the party's communication strategies or candidate selection process. Alternatively, the blame may be placed on external factors out of the party's control, such as the electoral system or rival party strategies.

Here, it is important to note that examining party elites' perceptions of electoral defeat 'is not about how things are but how things are seen' (Paczeński et al., 2022: 120).

This then brings us to our second research question: how did these narratives of defeat guide the post-election reforms? A number of studies show that such narratives have implications for the way parties embark on post-election defeat reforms. For instance, Bürgin and Oppermann's (2020) article reveals how the German Greens' construction of their 2013 election as an avoidable defeat was actually not well supported by empirical evidence. Instead, Bürgin and Oppermann (2020) show how the right wing of the party's success in constructing the dominant interpretation of the election was critical in allowing it to push through reforms based on what it saw as the lessons of 2013. Writing on the way the US Democratic Party learned from the presidential election loss to Donald Trump in 2016, Masket reaches a similar conclusion on the power of election narratives. He writes, 'The campaign to win the election is quickly replaced by a contest to define the loss, for whoever can define just *why* the election occurred in a certain way has a great deal of power over what the party will do next. Control the narrative, control the future' (Masket, 2020: 11).

Although there is a common assumption that political parties are primarily motivated by the desire to win office and votes, in reality, political parties face a complex balancing act of how they achieve their core party goals. Wolfgang Müller and Kaare Strøm (1999) show how political parties in Western Europe must sometimes make hard choices between prioritising policy, office, or votes. Furthermore, Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda argue that the primary party goal will help to explain their patterns of party change. They define party change as 'any variation, alteration or moderation in how parties are organized, what human and material resources they can draw upon, what they stand for and what they do' (Harmel & Janda, 1994: 275). Movement parties, of which green parties are a subset, are generally viewed as more policy or ideologically oriented than mainstream parties. The Charter of the Global Greens, a document first adopted in 2001, sets out the core green party values of ecological wisdom, social justice, equality, freedom, participatory democracy, non-violence, sustainability, and respect for diversity (Global Greens, 2017). Adherence to the charter means that there is a higher degree of policy commonality to members of the Global Greens than any of the other international party networks. How, then, would the GPT, a member of the Global Greens, react to electoral setbacks?

Political parties tend to be quite conservative organisations that are resistant to radical change, even in the aftermath of major electoral losses. Nevertheless,

Paczeński et al.'s cross-national study of 73 political parties found that the vast majority did engage in corrective action after electoral setbacks (2020: 75). There are also a variety of ways to measure the degree of party change in response to electoral defeats. Paczeński et al. (2020) examined the following five dimensions: (1) change of leadership; (2) party decomposition; (3) change of power balance in the party; (4) programme changes; (5) structural changes. In a later study, they found that the most common change in parties that experience a decline in electoral performance is replacing their leaders (2022: 59).

In this article, we examine how the narratives of defeat affected the patterns of party change in the aftermath of three GPT national election campaigns in 2012, 2016, and 2020. In order to operationalise the analysis of the way the party reacted to the electoral setbacks, we look at the following indicators of post-election change: (1) organisational change; (2) changes in the campaign communication and strategies; (3) change in the alliance strategies; (4) programmatic change; (5) changes in types of candidates selected. These have been selected on the basis of being key reform themes outlined by party leaders in our fieldwork interviews. The analysis relies on a series of interviews with GPT figures over the last ten years, party communication material, and participant observation data to understand how narratives were formed and affected the post-election reforms.

Our third question considers whether the party's post-defeat reforms were successful or not. We address this question by examining whether the reforms introduced in the aftermath of electoral setbacks enhanced the sustainability of the party. In other words, did the reforms result in improved electoral performance and party operation in the next round of elections?<sup>1</sup> We build on Stefanie Beyens, Paul Lucardie, and Kris Deschouwer's (2016) study of the life and death of new political parties. They found that the three most important party characteristics for survival were developing strong party organisations, having roots in civil society, and avoiding party defections. Although the GPT is not a new party per se, we argue that Beyens et al.'s (2016) framework is applicable to it. First, the roots-in-civil-society characteristic makes this indicator relevant for a movement party. Second, throughout the GPT's history, it has collapsed in the aftermath of serious defeats and then re-emerged afterwards as effectively a new party (Fell, 2021). Jae-Jae Spoon (2011) suggests a

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1 Due to limitations of space, we have not considered the dimension of the party's policy impact. It is true some GPT figures have spoken about aiming to influence the DPP's policies and it could be argued that defectors from the GPT that joined the DPP may have contributed to more progressive DPP policies on environmental and gender issues.

further way to consider the sustainability of small parties, even in hostile party systems. She argues that small parties can also be analysed through the lens of their balancing between prioritising their core ideals and maximising their electoral performance. According to Spoon, small parties can only survive if they get the right balance between these dual goals. This corresponds closely with a common discourse within movement parties in Taiwan regarding taking the social movement or election route. We will thus consider whether the GPT's lessons of defeat reforms enhanced these critical characteristics for the party's sustainable operation. Although most party leaders will promise their supporters that they will endeavour to learn the lessons of defeat and embark on bold, transformative reforms, there is no guarantee these will resolve the party's underlying problems. As André Spicer (2019) warns, 'failure can be used as a source of wisdom, but without understanding, it can also be a potent fuel for further failure'.

Lastly, we are also interested in seeing how the GPT's experiences compare with earlier studies of the way other Taiwanese parties dealt with electoral defeat. For instance, a party insider, Cheng-liang Kuo's (1998) book *The Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Painful Transformation* discusses the party's struggles to recover from two landslide defeats in the 1990s. These painful adjustments did contribute to its winning national power in 2000 (Rigger, 2001). In the post-2000 era, academic studies have examined how both Taiwan's mainstream parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the DPP, tried to reform in the aftermath of losing power (Cheng, 2006; Fell, 2009; Fell & Chen, 2014). These included changes in party leadership, organisation, and issue emphasis. However, in both cases, it took a second comprehensive defeat to fully learn the lessons of defeat and return to power. In contrast, Taiwan's first relevant small party, the New Party (NP), responded to a series of defeats in a very different way. It took increasingly extreme positions and thus moved progressively further from mainstream public opinion (Fell, 2006). Would the GPT deal with defeat in a similar reforming way to Taiwan's mainstream parties or prioritise ideological orthodoxy, as seen in the case of the fellow small party, the NP?

### 3 Brief History of the GPT and the Three Election Case Studies (2012, 2016, and 2020)

The GPT was established in January 1996, less than two months before its first election campaign for the National Assembly in March. It was the second green party to be formed in Asia and would later play a key role in the creation

of the Asia-Pacific Greens Federation. Initially, the party was viewed as a threat to the main opposition party at the time, the DPP (Ho, 2006). It ran promising early campaigns, winning a National Assembly seat in 1996 and nominating competitive or semi-competitive candidates in some local council elections in 1998. However, after failing to make election breakthroughs in late 1998, the party collapsed and entered a dormant period in which it was largely absent from elections.

The GPT re-emerged in 2005 and began nominating candidates in local council elections in 2006 and 2010, as well as the Legislative Yuan election in 2008. However, initially, as we can see from Tables 1 and 2, it struggled to match the support levels it had achieved in the 1990s. It was not until 2010 and 2012 that the party appeared on the verge of entering the party system as a competitive player.

Table 1 suggests that the GPT's performance in the 2012 Legislative Yuan elections was its best up to that point. A note of caution needs to be added here, as it should be pointed out that Taiwan revised its national electoral system in 2005, so the results in 1996 are not entirely comparable with those after 2008.<sup>2</sup> However, compared with 2008, the party had almost quadrupled its party list vote in 2012 and had become the fifth most popular party, beating the much better-resourced NP for the first time. Nevertheless, when we

TABLE 1 Green Party election performance in national elections

	1996	1998	2001	2008	2012	2016	2020
District votes	113,942	8,089	1,045	14,767	79,729	203,658	38,224
District vote share	1.1%	0.1%	0%	0.15%	0.61%	1.70%	0.28%
Party list votes				58,473	229,566	308,106	341,465
Party list vote share				0.59%	1.74%	2.52%	2.41%

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION (CEC). NOTES: PRIOR TO 2008, THE CEC DATABASE VOTE SHARE FIGURES WERE ROUNDED UP TO ONE DECIMAL PLACE AND THEN TO TWO PLACES AFTER 2008. THE OFFICIAL PARTY NAME IN 2016 WAS THE GREEN PARTY SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY ALLIANCE (GPT SDP ALLIANCE).

2 A key difference was that prior to the 2005 reform of the national electoral system, voters could only vote for district candidates, while after 2005, voters have two votes, one for the district candidate and one for a political party (party list). Under the new system, smaller parties generally concentrate their campaigning on the party list.

TABLE 2 Green Party performance in local elections (city or county council)

	1998	2002	2006	2009/10	2014	2018	2022
Candidates nominated	8	1	2	6	10	10	5
Elected	0	0	0	0	2	3	1
Total votes	27,995	1,807	5,381	25,493	57,338	49,900	13,901
Total seats up for election	986	1,012	997	906	905	912	910

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM CEC.

conducted fieldwork interviews in late 2012 with party figures, it was clear that the election narrative was that it had been a severe setback. The election had left the party deeply divided, and the vast majority of the 2012 candidates and party activists were no longer actively engaging with the party. In Taipei City District 7, the GPT's most well-known politician, Pan Han-sheng (潘翰聲), had gained 43,449 votes, the highest ever vote total for a GPT candidate. But his collaboration with a mainstream party, the DPP, in that district had led to bitter internal arguments. This collaboration was viewed by many party members as a betrayal of the GPT's core values.

In the aftermath of the 2012 election, a new leadership team led by the environmentalist Lee Ken-cheng (李根政) took control of the GPT and embarked on a series of reforms. The party made its first local election breakthroughs in city and county council elections in 2014, and in 2016, it looked to be on the verge of finally winning national office. The GPT's vote share reached another record high in 2016 with 2.52 percent, but, perhaps even more than in 2012, it was framed as a defeat. There had been higher expectations for the party's prospects in 2016. It had promising poll numbers, it was better organised and funded than ever before, and it was running in alliance with the newly established Social Democratic Party (SDP). However, instead of the GPT, it was another newer movement party, the New Power Party (NPP), that entered the Legislative Yuan.

In the aftermath of the bitter post-election recriminations, many of the team that had led the party into 2016 drifted away, and for the next few years, the most influential figure in the party would be the controversial Taoyuan city councillor Wang Hau-yu (王浩宇). The party adopted very different campaign and alliance strategies in both the 2018 local elections and the 2020 national



campaigns. With even more financial resources than four years earlier and the party's most well-known ever party list candidate, Teng Hui-wen (鄧惠文), the GPT again looked like it had a good chance to cross the critical 5 percent party list threshold to win Legislative Yuan seats in 2020. However, in the end, it again fell short—although its vote share was slightly down on 2016, a higher turnout allowed the party to win its highest ever vote total of 341,465. The election narrative, though, was similar; again, it was framed as a major defeat. This time, in addition to the NPP, another new movement party, the Taiwan Statebuilding Party (TSBP), won national representation. Moreover, immediately after the election, Wang left the party and soon defected to the DPP.

In the next part of the article, we will look at these three case studies to try to answer our three core research questions. In the aftermath of these elections, how did the leadership construct their narratives of the election result as a setback? How did the new leadership attempt to learn the lessons of this constructed loss by reforming the party? Lastly, we consider whether these reforms have been successful in enhancing the sustainability and electoral performance of the party.

#### 4 Out with the Old, in with the New: The GPT after 2012

In the immediate aftermath of the 2012 election, the key focus of the election reviews was to put the blame on Pan Han-sheng and his alliance with the DPP. Then, in early 2013, a new Central Executive Committee was elected, marking the start of an era of radical reforms to the GPT. On the surface, there was some continuity, as Yu Wan-ju (余宛如), one of the co-convenors from the 2012–2013 term, remained. The other co-convenor was the environmentalist Lee Ken-cheng, who, together with a group of allies, would dominate the party's direction until 2016. Lee's learning lessons from defeat narrative could be summarised as attempting to discard the party's past and start afresh. Originally, Lee had wanted to create a brand new party but was persuaded to radically reform the GPT instead. Lee's attitude was clear from this comment by one of the candidates from 2012: 'It is more like that he does not care what happened in the past. He just wants things to be done his way after joining the party.'<sup>3</sup>

One of Lee's main allies trying to reform the party reflected on their view of the old GPT, saying, '[W]e as supporters of the party felt frustrated about

<sup>3</sup> Interview, 18 August 2013.

their ways of running things'.<sup>4</sup> Key areas that Lee was critical of in the previous mode of operation included its relationships with civil society groups, its weak organisation, its political communication strategies, and its candidate nomination practices. Lee's disdain was apparent in a media interview comment in early 2014: '[I]n the past, it [GPT] gave people the impression of rashly and casually looking for candidates' (Lu, 2014). In other words, Lee wanted to move away from the perception that the party nominated candidates of questionable quality at the last minute in campaigns. Bürgin and Oppermann argue that one facet of powerful discourses of failure 'is the attribution of responsibility and blame' (2020: 615). This is relevant to our study as so much of Lee and his allies' critique of the old GPT was a criticism of the methods of the party's former star, Pan Han-sheng. Although the narrative of what had gone wrong in the past acknowledged external challenges such as the electoral system, the main focus of the blame was on the party's internal weaknesses.

## 5 How the Post-2013 Narrative Guided Reforms

The realm where Lee and his allies had the most transformative impact was in changing the party's organisational structure. Since Lee had been so critical of past nomination practices, this was a central part of his organisational reforms. For the first time, the GPT introduced an institutionalised nomination system for the 2014 local elections. Candidates were expected to have strong local roots and needed to collect endorsement signatures of 1 percent of voters in their target constituency. The second requirement was to have the endorsement of a local civil society group and to sign a political representative agreement. The process was also started much earlier than in the past, and this allowed candidates much more time to develop their campaigns in the districts.

Lee's team was also very critical of the state of financial management from the previous era from 2008–2012. They thus also put much effort into creating more institutionalised fundraising systems, such as an online system for regular donations. Improved fundraising would also be important for allowing the party to improve the operation of its headquarters. It was thus able to move to a larger office in Taipei and also go from one to five full-time staff members. Lee also talked about the need for the party to put down roots, and a key way to do this was by setting up active and effective local party branches. Branches in places like Kaohsiung and Tainan would play important roles in the party's election campaigns in 2014 and 2016. Better party organisation and funding also allowed it to run its best election campaigns to date.

4 Interview, 4 January 2014.

In the previous period, tensions often existed between civil society groups and the GPT.<sup>5</sup> This was something that Lee tried to put behind the party, making every effort to seek the support of civil society groups. Many of Lee's organisational reforms were designed to enhance the GPT–civil society relationship. This was also why Lee insisted that candidates had societal group endorsement, and GPT administrative staff were expected to have social movement experience and values. In most of the GPT's earlier campaigns, environmental issues had unsurprisingly dominated the party's campaign communication, and many candidates were from environmental groups. With environmentalists at the helm in this period, unsurprisingly, environmental issues did receive a great deal of attention, but the party attempted to broaden its issue appeal in 2014 and 2016. Nominating a leading independent union figure at the top of the 2016 party list was representative of the party giving unprecedented attention to labour affairs. The GPT had been the first party to nominate openly LGBT candidates in 2010. This appeal was strengthened in 2016 as a result of the GPT SDP Alliance nominating some of the most important figures in the LGBT rights movement. These included Victoria Hsu (許秀雯) of the Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights and Jennifer Lu (呂欣潔) from the Taiwan Tongzhi (LGBTQ+) Hotline Association. In short, in this period, the GPT branded itself as the party representative of Taiwan's progressive civil society.

Another realm of significant change compared to 2012 was in the GPT's relations with other parties. Lee ensured there was no repeat of the 2012 Pan case. So even though cooperation on a similar model in which the DPP allowed a GPT candidate to stand against the KMT in two constituencies had looked possible in 2016, such collaboration was ruled out. Instead, the GPT established an electoral alliance with another newly created movement party, the SDP. In other words, for the 2016 national election, the party's candidates stood under the banner of the GPT SDP Alliance.

## 6 Assessing the Effect of the Post-2013 Reforms

On the eve of the 2016 elections the GPT had achieved its best balance between promoting its core party values and the most electorally competitive in its history. Undoubtedly, many of Lee's reforms contributed to the party's improved performances in the 2014 local and 2016 national elections.

5 This had not always been the case. Civil society groups established the GPT in 1996, and in the 1996–1998 campaigns, the party enjoyed good relationship with NGOs.

Benefits were especially visible in the realm of improved party organisation. Better fundraising systems, the development of a number of active local party branches, and a better organised central party administrative team all contributed to the more professional campaigns. For instance, the party was able to run its largest ever campaign rallies in 2016, events that the party has not been able to match since. Some areas of political communication were also much improved, such as the party's website and election advertising. For the first time, the party's constant problem of late nominations was addressed. This was particularly apparent in the way candidates were nominated earlier in the 2014 local election, contributing to almost all the candidates being competitive or at least semi-competitive for the first time. When we consider the key characteristics Beyens et al. (2016) propose for new party survival, then the post-2013 reforms can be said to have enhanced both the GPT's organisational strength and its civil society rootedness.

However, even in the area where Lee's reforms had been most thorough, in party organisation, there were some areas where perhaps he had pushed the lessons of 2012 too far. For some potential candidates, the new nomination system was too complicated for the kinds of political newcomers that Pan Han-sheng and the charismatic young activist Sheng I-che (冼義哲) had been trying to cultivate. They felt the requirements for civil society group endorsement and constituency signature support would put off potential younger candidates. The potential costs of being overly institutionalised were seen in the way nomination was handled for the party list in 2016. While in the past, the nomination had been determined by a small group of party leaders, this time, the party tried to adopt a transparent and democratic procedure. However, the democratic system turned out to be counterproductive. When asked what she would change in the campaign if she could turn back the clock, one Central Executive Committee member commented, 'We should not have had such rigid nomination procedures and committees, which ended up hindering the party's operation. The inflexibility caused so much damage to the party.'<sup>6</sup>

Another realm where the GPT may have learned the wrong lessons from 2012 was in its party alliance strategies. The scars of the Pan Han-sheng alliance with the DPP in 2012 were a factor in why the party rejected the idea of cooperation in certain districts where there was a possibility for the DPP to support a GPT candidate against the KMT. In contrast, the NPP, the GPT's main rival movement party, engaged in an alliance with the DPP. In return for the NPP supporting the DPP's presidential candidate, the DPP gave the NPP three

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6 Interview, 2 January 2017.

Legislative Yuan districts to fight against the KMT. This semi-alliance allowed the NPP to win three district seats in the Legislative Yuan. In the one case where the DPP did support a GPT SDP Alliance candidate, the SDP's founder, Fan Yun (范雲), Fan believes GPT members' criticisms of her limited cooperation with the DPP undermined what was potentially a winnable district campaign.<sup>7</sup>

Among Beyens et al.'s (2016) three characteristics for new party survival, the post-2013 reforms were least successful in the realm of avoiding party defections. In the process of strengthening the party's organisational structure, Lee also wanted to concentrate decision-making power. One consequence of his methods was that this centralisation served to marginalise alternative voices in the party. A number of former party leaders felt they were either marginalised or pushed out of the party.

Pan Han-sheng had planned to stay in the GPT and work with the new leadership after 2013. However, as he and Sheng I-che believed they were being marginalised, they chose to seek an alternative by creating the Trees Party in 2014. This was extremely damaging for the GPT in a number of ways. It gave the public the impression of a divided environmental movement and was questioned in the Global Greens Congress in 2017. With the Trees Party nominating extensively in Taipei City in 2014, the GPT, for the first time, did not have candidates in its traditionally strongest location and has not regained its presence there since. When the GPT was looking for potential party alliances in the run-up to the 2016 election, Lee had categorically ruled out working with the Trees Party (Fell, 2021: 210). But a price for this was that the Trees Party stood against the GPT in 2016 and won 0.64 percent of the party list vote. Adding that 0.64 percent to the GPT's 2.5, though not enough to cross the 5 percent threshold, would have made the party more competitive.

While it is true that the old GPT was quite disorganised at times, it was quite an inclusive party. In contrast, some activists from the earlier period were not comfortable with Lee's model of party operation. In addition to Pan, other party figures ended up deciding to switch to other parties. For instance, in 2016, the DPP nominated two former GPT co-convenors, including Yu Wan-ju, who had just completed her GPT co-convenor term in early 2015. Similarly, one of the party's top vote winners in local elections since 2010, Wang Chung-ming (王鐘銘), also became increasingly disillusioned with the party's direction and drifted away from the party. In short, despite the impressive organisational achievements after 2013, the party was weakened through the loss of some of its most valuable human resources.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, 5 January 2017.

## 7 Taking the Election Route 2016–2020

While the focus of the initial post-2012 election reviews was on the Pan Han-sheng District, in 2016 the election was constructed as a more comprehensive defeat. The party's two co-convenors, Lee Ken-cheng and Chang Yu-ching (張育憬), both resigned to take responsibility for the defeat. This setback was especially painful as many party leaders really believed they had a good chance of passing the 5 percent threshold to win two seats in the Legislative Yuan. Co-convenor Lee noted after the election how '[p]re-election polls had indicated that we could break through, but in the end, there was a significant gap between our expectations and the election results' (Asia-Pacific Greens, 2016). Although Lee did touch on some areas where the GPT did not perform well, much of his post-election comments match what Anna Pacześniak and Maciej Bachryj-Krzywaźnia (2019: 86) term the 'externalization of blame' ('it is not our fault'). In other words, his attribution of blame was centred on external factors out of the hands of the party. He highlighted the unfair electoral system, which leaves little space for small, less well-resourced parties. He also noted the more competitive party system, particularly the way the DPP had taken advantage of the rise of civil society in recent years. Although not mentioned in Lee's post-election interview, other party figures also highlighted the way the new movement party, the NPP, played a key role in taking away potential GPT votes. Lastly, he noted how the GPT had suffered due to the Chou Tzu-yu incident, in which, on the eve of the election, a Korea-based Taiwanese singer had been forced to apologise to China for holding a Taiwanese flag (Wu, 2016: 35–36). This incident served to bring the China–Taiwan relations issue to the fore of the campaign and overshadowed the kinds of social issues the GPT had been campaigning on. As Lee lamented, 'I think Green Party Taiwan needs to work harder on our China policy. However, given Taiwan's special national situation, even if we strengthen our publicity, the majority of those with a Taiwan consciousness would still choose a party that could strongly confront China' (Asia-Pacific Greens, 2016). Although Lee's comments represented the initial official narrative on why the party failed to enter the Legislative Yuan in 2016, within the party, some placed the bulk of the blame on Lee and his team.

After the 2016 election, the GPT went into a relatively quiet period when there was seemingly a power vacuum, and the party seemed to fall off the media's radar. It was not until early 2018 that a new narrative on what had gone wrong with the GPT fully emerged. Wang Hau-yu, the only GPT city councillor at the time, explained in a media interview that in the past, the GPT had just campaigned on ideals and, in this way, had wasted so many resources. Commenting on the 2018 campaign, he explained that 'this time we are not

just campaigning on ideals, we are campaigning to get elected' (Li, 2018). A sign of the party's new ambition was that it aimed to get enough councillors elected to have party caucuses in Taoyuan and Hsinchu cities. For Wang, the lesson of 2016 was that the party needed to replace the social movement route with an election-oriented approach.

## 8 Putting the New Election Route Narrative into Practice

There were a number of ways that Wang tried to reform and rebrand the GPT after 2017. First, the organisational model was quite different from the Lee era. Like Lee, Wang devoted much effort to fundraising, especially since, by mid-2017, he claimed the party was on the verge of collapse financially (Wang, 2020a). However, while Lee sought funds from civil society, there was a lack of transparency regarding Wang's sources.<sup>8</sup> Wang was also less interested in building party organisation and instead was much more reliant on internet campaigning. A consequence of this was that, in this period, some of the remaining party branches withered away. For instance, two of the most active party branches had developed in Kaohsiung and Tainan and had played an important role in the local election in 2014 and the national election in 2016. However, the two branches faded away after 2016, and instead, these cities became strong bases for rival small parties, the NPP and TSBP.

While Pan Han-sheng had felt marginalised in the aftermath of the 2012 election, Lee and his core supporters gradually withdrew from party affairs after 2016. While some believed that Lee's group had been pushed out of the party after 2017, our interviews suggest that instead many of the core post-2013 leadership chose to return to their original civil society groups or academic careers. This meant that the core party leadership in the run-up to the next round of local elections in 2018 was starkly different from 2016.

The post-2016 GPT's alliance strategies were poles apart from those of earlier GPT periods. Wang did not try to build new civil society relations or maintain those established in the run-up to 2016. Instead, Wang's critical comments on labour and environmental activism served to alienate such groups from the party entirely. One example was the departure of a major union leader in early 2018, who explained, '[I]t was not solely because I could not accept his [Wang's]

8 For example, interviewed party members frequently questioned where the funds came from for the party to commission large numbers of nationwide telephone surveys during the 2020 campaign.



criticism of the labour movement; I also could not see any ideals or ideas.<sup>9</sup> While in the past, experience and endorsement of civil society groups was a prerequisite for standing for the GPT, in the 2018 local elections a number of the candidates appeared not to have any social movement backgrounds. Even though a number of figures with civil society backgrounds were involved in the GPT's 2020 election campaign, they found it hard to convince NGOs that the GPT could serve as their political representative. A former GPT secretary general described the relations with social movements at that time as 'very bad'.<sup>10</sup>

There was a similar pattern of reversing the Lee-era party alliances as well. Wang had been critical of the electoral alliance with the SDP in 2016, and so, unsurprisingly, the alliance quickly ceased to function after the 2016 election. The two parties did not compete against each other in the 2018 local elections and even announced the establishment of the Social Welfare Alliance with the SDP and another movement party. However, this did not lead to any substantive cooperation. Privately, SDP figures told us they found Wang a frustrating and untrustworthy negotiating partner. The alliance formally broke down in 2019 when the issue of whether to revive the GPT SDP Alliance for the 2020 elections was raised. In August 2019, there was a public war of words, with figures from both parties blaming the other for the breakdown in inter-party trust.

In the run-up to the 2020 election, the GPT's cooperation with the DPP went well beyond what was seen in Pan Han-sheng's district race in 2012. For the first time, the GPT publicly endorsed a DPP presidential candidate, Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). In Taoyuan District 5, the two parties coordinated their nomination, so the GPT candidate Ouyang Ting (歐陽霆) dropped out of the race in favour of a DPP politician after surveys showed Ouyang had a lower support rate. The GPT even issued a campaign video showing the DPP's Taoyuan mayor, Cheng Wen-tsan (鄭文燦), praising the GPT for protecting Taiwan's democracy and standing up to China's threats against Taiwan (GPT, 2019).

While in the past, relations with China had been a secondary issue appeal for the GPT, in 2020, it was the party's most stressed topic in its political communication. For the first time since 1996, the GPT was trying to compete with other parties on who was the strongest against Chinese threats. Wang himself argued that '[t]his year the main campaign theme is resist China, protect Taiwan' (Wang, 2019). He believed that this was actually bringing

9 Facebook message to the first author, 5 April 2020.

10 Interview, 14 November 2019. The weaker civil society ties were also partially due to the presence of other progressive parties, which had the advantage of having greater prospects of winning seats than the GPT.



the party back to its founding ideals, noting that at that time, '[a]part from opposing nuclear power, it had a clearer stance on Taiwan's independence and Chinese human rights than the DPP' (Wang 2019).

A final defining characteristic of the Wang-era GPT was the high level of negative political communication. So much of the campaign material that originated from Wang was designed to attack. Key targets included the KMT's presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), the NPP, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), and pro-China figures in the KMT. This clearly hit a nerve as Han Kuo-yu even attacked Wang in one of his presidential rally speeches. Wang thus not only became a hate figure among many in the progressive civil society sector but also among many KMT supporters.

Wang was not as influential in transforming the GPT as Lee had been. Even though he became the best-known politician in the party, he was only co-convenor for a relatively short period compared to Lee. Therefore, there were other components in the GPT 2020 campaign that were not directly related to Wang. For instance, much of the campaigning centred around Teng Hui-wen, a well-known and widely popular psychiatrist who stood as a party list candidate. A number of party figures saw her as the major reason the party was able to win enough new votes to make up for those that had been lost in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

## 9 Assessing the Impact of the Election Route Narrative Reforms

Although the GPT again failed to enter the Legislative Yuan in 2020, the party's record vote total was still an achievement. The party faced an even more competitive party system in 2020 compared to 2016. In addition to the now more experienced NPP, the GPT had to compete against two other new strong challenger parties, the TPP and the TSBP, and all three of these parties won seats. A comparison with other small parties' performances also suggests that the GPT's ability to gain the same vote share in 2020 compared to 2016 was no mean feat. In 2016, the NP achieved over 4 percent, while the TSU (Taiwan Solidarity Union) achieved almost the same percentage as the GPT, with 2.51 percent. In contrast, four years later, the NP collapsed to only 1 percent, and the TSU fell to just 0.3. Moreover, the campaign surveys showed the GPT had some of its highest ever levels of party support, and according to Wang, the GPT had its highest ever media visibility in the 2020 campaign (Fell, 2021: 268).

<sup>11</sup> Interview, 18 July 2020.

Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that much of the post-2018 GPT approach was detrimental to the party's sustainability and election results in 2020. Although there was much higher media and internet visibility of the party in the 2020 campaign, an unprecedented amount of this was negative coverage focused on Wang and the direction he had tried to take the party. This explains why some former party members openly called on voters not to vote GPT, and numerous interviewees believed that the majority of the party's 2016 voters switched to other parties in 2020.

There were many positives to the 2020 GPT campaign, though. The quantity and quality of the party's internet and social media campaigning were undoubtedly higher than ever in 2020. The advisory role played by former secretary general Hung Yu-cheng and founder Kao Cheng-yen standing on the party list also was a sign that the party had not abandoned its movement roots. The masterstroke of the campaign was the nomination of Teng Hui-wen on the party list. The tragedy of 2020 for the GPT was that despite bringing in so many new voters, it had been unable to hold on to its 2016 vote base. Combining the two should have been enough for the GPT to enter the Legislative Yuan in 2020.

When viewed from the perspective of Beyens et al.'s (2016) survival characteristics for new parties, then the verdict for the 2016–2020 GPT lessons of defeat is highly damning. The party largely lost its civil society roots and the organisational structure that had been so painstakingly built up in the previous decade. Moreover, this was also probably the GPT's worst ever period for defections of supporters, activists, and former candidates. Similarly, when we consider Spoon's (2011) balancing framework, then the GPT appeared out of balance to many former supporters.

## 10 Rebuilding Bridges after 2020

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, there was a consensus that the party had suffered a disastrous defeat. This led Wang to state that the party was 'facing an existential crisis' (Chang, 2020). Again, there were competing initial narratives about the defeat. Following the party's latest failure to enter the legislature, much of the blame was placed on the shoulders of Wang Hau-yu. There were a number of things that critics particularly highlighted when attributing blame. Some focused on Wang's negative style of political communication. For instance, a former party secretary general commented that 'some are in their 30s; they use criticising people to gain internet popularity. They can get some

support among youngsters doing this. But this is not right and not enough.<sup>12</sup> Others highlighted the way Wang had alienated former supporters with his attacks on labour and environmental groups, causing such supporters to switch to rival small parties such as the NPP or TSBP. Lastly, many former supporters were critical of the GPT's relationship with the DPP during this period. For instance, a former party member explained how 'many 2016 supporters are disappointed by Wang's right-wing and pro-DPP leadership'.<sup>13</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, there was a heated debate within the GPT over whether to return to the 'social movement route' or continue on the 'election route'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it was a question of whether to return to the party of the Lee era or to continue with a modified version of the post-2016 model, albeit without Wang Hau-yu. Wang himself disputed the narrative that he was to blame for the party's failure to enter the legislature, instead arguing that he was the reason the party had increased its vote total so much (*Liberty Times*, 2020). Moreover, soon after leaving the party, he urged the GPT to maintain its resist-China, protect-Taiwan, progressive party line. He argued that in the past four years, the NPP had absorbed much of the GPT's former vote base and so warned, 'I feel very pessimistic about the idea of returning to the old social movement approach and strongly supervising the DPP' (Wang 2020b). However, since Wang defected to the DPP, the dominant narrative of defeat has been one that calls for a middle ground between the social movement and election routes.

## 11 The Post-2020 Rebalancing

In the aftermath of the 2020 elections, the GPT began a number of adjustments to its mode of operations to implement the rebalancing narrative. A key task was to mend the party's relationships with civil society groups that had been broken in the Wang Hau-yu era. A good example of this new approach was the way the party openly supported social movements even when they were opposing projects supported by the DPP national and local governments. For instance, the GPT joined press conferences in July 2020 in support of protecting the Datan algal reef, which was threatened by a proposed natural gas receiving station (GPT, 2020). Two things made these press conferences representative of the GPT's learning from defeat. First, Wang Hau-yu had been supportive

12 Interview, 14 November 2019.

13 Email communication, 14 July 2020.

14 Interview, 18 July 2020.

of the natural gas receiving station, especially as it was strongly backed by his DPP ally, Taoyuan mayor Cheng Wen-tsan. Second, Wang had long had a hostile relationship with the Datan algal reef protection movement. Third, the press conferences saw the GPT sharing a platform with NPP legislators and environmental movement leaders. Again this was something quite distinct from the Wang era due to his long-term strategy of negative campaigning against the NPP and his attacks against the Lee-era GPT. A more recent example of this new approach was when it took an active part in the 2021 referendum campaign to prevent the fourth nuclear power station from being activated.

In the realm of inter-party relations there have also been significant changes. For instance, there has been an attempt to keep more distance from the DPP compared to before 2020. At times, the party has taken a supervisory and even critical stance towards the DPP administration. In January 2022, it was critical of Tsai Ing-wen's praise of former dictator Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) in a speech opening the Chiang Ching-kuo Memorial Library (GPT, 2022a). It has also ended the open warfare against the NPP seen in the 2020 campaign. In fact, it took a supportive stance when politicians from rival small parties, such as former NPP legislator Freddy Lim (林昶佐) and the TSBP's Chen Po-wei (陳柏惟), were facing recall vote campaigns (GPT, 2022b). One area of continuity is what Wang had referred to as the need to resist China and protect Taiwan. For instance, the GPT took a strong stance in August 2022 against Chinese military drills close to Taiwan following the US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit (GPT, 2022c), and in December 2021, the party called for a boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games (GPT, 2021b).

## 12 Assessing the Success of the Rebalancing Reforms

Writing during the summer of 2023 means it is too early to offer a comprehensive verdict on whether the GPT has learned the right lessons from the 2020 elections. So, our initial assessments for this case are preliminary compared with those of 2012 and 2016.

The departure of Wang Hau-yu right after the 2020 election meant that the high volume of anti-GPT material in the media and social media ceased. This also meant that the GPT's visibility in the media drastically declined after the election. Wang's departure also meant that major funding sources were lost. Despite the controversies Wang created, since 2014, his base in Taoyuan City had been the region with the highest GPT support rates in local and national elections. The impact of the loss of Wang was apparent in the 2022 local elections, as the GPT was only able to nominate a single non-competitive

candidate in Taoyuan. The continued loss of human resources was also seen when one of the GPT's most competitive candidates in Taoyuan's Pingzhen District in 2018, Ouyang Ting, defected to the DPP in 2021. To make matters worse, he decided to stand for election for the DPP in 2022 in one of the GPT's target districts in Hsinchu County.

There have also been some tentative attempts to start rebuilding the organisational structures that were dismantled prior to 2020. For instance, party branches in Tainan and Kaohsiung are gradually being restarted. However, these are far from the levels of activity seen between 2013 and 2016. Party organisation is most active in the greater Taipei region, but here the rebuilding should not be exaggerated. This was revealed in the case of the eight-seat Taipei City Council District 5 in 2022, where the GPT nominated its former secretary general, Zoe Lee (李菁琪). However, she was only able to win 1,704 votes, far short of the lowest winning candidate's 14,518. When we look at the electoral performance nationwide, the picture is also not promising. Table 2 reveals that 2022 was the GPT's worst local election result since 2006.

There were some signs that the GPT's attempt to rebuild bridges broken by Wang has had some success. It is hard to imagine the Wang-era GPT sharing a press conference with the NPP or leaders of the algal reef protection movement, both of which had been targets of Wang's negative communication. Relations with some feminist and LGBTQ+ organisations have seen some improvement. However, the bridge-building remains a work in progress. For instance, the alliances that earlier GPT leaders had established with labour and environmental groups have not been formally re-established. During the 2022 local elections, it was announced that the GPT had established an alliance with the TSU. Nevertheless, this alliance did not produce any tangible electoral boost for the GPT, and this initiative has been criticised by some party members as the TSU tends to be more conservative on many social issues. For instance, the TSU has been a strong supporter of the death penalty, a position clearly at odds with core green party values (Global Greens, 2017: 16). In contrast, the GPT has been unable to establish any electoral collaboration with other more progressive parties since 2020.

The referendums held in December 2021 provided a test case for the degree that the GPT had moved on from the Wang era. In three of the four referendums, the GPT chose to side with the ruling DPP's position. The most controversial case was over the proposed natural gas receiving station at Datan that threatened the algal reef. Taiwan's environmental movement was divided over this referendum, and the GPT decided to oppose the referendum calling to move the receiving station, arguing it was important for Taiwan's energy transition away from coal and nuclear, as well as citing the ruling party's

adjustments to the project to minimise damage to the reefs (GPT, 2021a). Unsurprisingly, many environmentalists criticised the decision, and on the party's Facebook page, there were numerous critical comments. One wrote, 'The GPT is no longer the GPT I used to know, it's gone bad' (GPT, 2021a). Another noted, 'I originally signed the petition in support of the algal reef at the GPT party office; it's disgusting, [and] I won't support this party again' (GPT, 2021a). The impact of the GPT's stance could be seen in the case of Lo Yueh-feng (羅岳峰), who had been a competitive GPT candidate in both 2014 and 2018 in Taoyuan but later became closely connected with KMT politicians. Lo had openly supported the algal reef campaign even though this had meant clashing with Wang and his allies in the DPP-run Taoyuan city government. Lo cited the GPT's stance on the referendum as his core reason for leaving the party in December 2021, and he stood as an independent city council candidate in 2022 (Lo, 2021). In other words, the GPT's stance might have cost the party its best chance of winning a seat in Taoyuan.

Overall, it appears that out of our three case studies, there has been the most continuity after 2020. While the main post-election narrative has called for the party to rebalance its priorities, the degree of change has been limited. This, in large part, may be due to the fact that apart from Wang, many of the more influential party figures in the 2020 campaign have stayed with the party since. When we consider the three key characteristics for party survival, then post-2020 progress appears quite limited in the realms of strengthening party organisation, strengthening civil society linkages, and avoiding defections. Even in the realm of electoral performance, the GPT had a disaster, as two of its three incumbent politicians failed to win re-election in 2022.

### 13 Conclusions

In this article, we have examined how a Taiwanese movement party reacted to electoral defeats. Rather than examining electoral defeat in purely objective terms, we focused on party leaders' subjective understandings of the campaign. In fact, in all our three case studies, they could have been constructed as victories. In each of our cases, there were initially contrasting verdicts on what went wrong, but over time, a dominant narrative of defeat emerged. Although party leaders did acknowledge external factors in their electoral setbacks, the main focus of the narratives of defeat was on internal failures. Our study findings supported Paczeński et al.'s conclusion that 'narratives focussing on internal issues and accepting responsibility are conducive to introducing a more profound change' (2022: 155).

Cross-national studies show that political parties are conservative organisations that are resistant to change even after serious electoral defeats. Paczeński et al. note how losing parties ‘often lean towards changes which, from their perspective, are less risky, require less work, yet are clearly noticeable to the external audiences’ (2022: 159). Earlier studies of the way Taiwan’s parties dealt with defeat showed two core trends. Taiwan’s mainstream parties did try to learn from defeat, but their reforms tended to be quite gradual and often painful, while the Chinese nationalist NP appeared to refuse to learn the lessons of defeat. Since the GPT is a movement party with a clear set of policy and ideological principles, it should theoretically have less flexibility to change. However, we showed how the GPT actively tried to learn lessons from defeat. The party reviewed the causes of defeat and embarked on a set of reforms to address the perceived campaign mistakes. These reforms were guided by the dominant narrative of defeat. Rather than being the largely cosmetic type of reforms that dominated in Paczeński et al.’s cross-national study (2022), the GPT adopted a quite radical range of adjustments, which included changes to party organisation, issue appeals, and alliance strategies with other parties and civil society groups. In other words, the GPT responded with more of a makeover than a retouching.

Lastly, we tried to make assessments on the effectiveness of these post-defeat reforms. Did the party learn the right lessons of defeat? Did the reforms enhance the party’s sustainability? We tried to make this judgement with reference to both Beyens et al.’s (2016) key criterion for new party survival and Spoon’s (2011) framework for small parties to achieve a balance between their dual goals of remaining true to their social movement ideals and winning elections. Even though the GPT failed to enter the Legislative Yuan in 2016, the post-2013 reforms represented the best of our three cases in achieving a balance between those dual goals stipulated by Spoon. Nevertheless, we found that in all three cases, the overall degree of learning from setbacks was mixed. There appeared to be what Norris and Lovenduski call ‘selective perception’ in the learning process (2004). Reformers often tried to reject too much from the past, and the party paid the price in the next round of elections. A more inclusive learning from the past could have yielded better results and potentially allowed the party to enter the Legislative Yuan in 2016 or 2020.

Our worst case of learning the wrong lessons was seen in the way Wang Hau-yu attempted to abandon all that Lee’s reforms had achieved, such as active party branches and civil society alliances. Key criteria suggested by Beyens et al. (2016) for new party survival were thus undermined in pursuit of the election route. The case reveals that for a movement party to reject its social movement roots, it is the equivalent of a party selling its soul. In other



words, the party risks becoming unbalanced. As Jae-Jae Spoon warns, 'if a party devotes too much of its efforts to either goal, it will lose its *raison d'être*, and die' (Spoon, 2011: 15).

### Acknowledgements

This work was partly supported by the International Scholars Short-Term Collaborative Research Grant from the College of Management, National Sun Yat-sen University, 2015–2016.

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