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Coordination failures and dominant parties

In this chapter I continue to investigate how coordination failures affect democratic performance, this time considering the role of such failures in sustaining dominant party systems. Dominant parties are those that are uninterruptedly in government, either alone or as the senior partners of a coalition, for a long period of time (say three to five decades). Such parties are problematic for democratic theory in at least two ways.

First, are systems that support dominant parties really democratic or not? If a party is always the sole or senior party of government, then a key feature of democracy – the possibility of peaceful alternation in power – is called into doubt. Is there something in the structure of the system (whether intentionally or unintentionally contrived) that gives the dominant party an unfair electoral advantage? Would the dominant party actually step down were the electorate to vote it out?

Second, even if one believes that a particular dominant party would step down if they ever lost an election, and also believes that the electoral system is basically fair, there is still the worry that a long tenure in power may corrupt. The Italian Christian Democrats and the Japanese Liberal Democrats are two signal examples in this regard. Both parties' long reigns ended recently in part through a series of devastating disclosures about how corrupt each had become. This returns one to the question of how they continued to be elected: Do some systems facilitate corrupt but nonetheless successful politics more than others?

In this chapter I argue that the answer is "yes." I begin with a brief review of relevant theories in comparative politics. One of these theories highlights failure to coordinate at the electoral stage as a key to explaining the existence of dominant parties in developed democracies, while two emphasize failure to coordinate at the government formation stage.

The succeeding three sections explore the Japanese dominant party system (1955-1993) at greater length. I argue that coordination failure did underpin the LDP's long rule but that (1) it was in large part a fail-

ure to coordinate at the electoral stage, rather than at the government formation stage; and (2) such failures by the opposition are probably inherent in the SNTV electoral procedure itself, rather than peculiar to the Japanese case. To put the point another way, the SNTV system seems well-calculated to support machine-style politics in government and divisions in the opposition. Section 13.5 provides some corroborating evidence from Taiwan, the only other democratic country in which SNTV is used at national elections and for which data are available.

13.1 COORDINATION FAILURES AND DOMINANT PARTIES

A survey of the literature reveals that coordination failure, either at the seat-winning or at the portfolio-winning stage, is thought by several scholars to play a key role in sustaining dominant party systems. Consider the following examples:

1. *Riker on India.* Twenty years ago, Riker (1976) sought to explain why India did not obey Duverger's Law, despite having an electoral system that has relied exclusively on single-member districts since 1953. His answer was essentially that the Congress Party, due to its central ideological location, was proof against coalitions of its opponents. These opponents, scattered to the right and left of Congress, would have had to create an ends-against-the-center coalition in most districts in order to unseat Congress MPs, followed by an ends-against-the-center coalition in the *Lok Sabha* to unseat Congress ministers. The difficulty of pulling off this kind of coordination kept Congress in power.[1]
2. *Sartori on polarized pluralism (Chile, Italy, Weimar, France IV).* At about the same time, Sartori (1976) elaborated a model of polarized pluralism part of which was essentially similar to Riker's model of India, although pitched at the national parliamentary rather than at the district level. Sartori emphasized that systems with large center parties facing numerous competitors to the left and right tended to perpetuate the center in government: The left and right could never agree on an alternative to the centrists, as each was further from the other than from the government. Thus, although these center parties did not necessarily govern alone, they did govern continuously, because their competitors could never coordinate on an alternative that excluded them.

[1]Soon after Riker published his article, the ends did manage to combine against the center under the added stimulus of martial law, throwing Congress out of office in 1977. Congress revived its fortunes soon thereafter, however.

3. *Laver and Schofield on Italy.* Laver and Schofield (1990:80) have a similar but more clearly articulated story about the dominance of Italy's Christian Democrats. They note (theoretically) that if parties care only about policy, and politics really are unidimensional, then the party that controls the median legislator will be in a dominant bargaining position and always end up in government. They claim (empirically) that the Christian Democrats have often been in something like this position in Italy.
4. *Pempel on dominant party systems.* Finally, a somewhat similar story is told by Pempel (1990). In explaining why the LDP of Japan, the Labour Party of Israel, and the Social Democrats of Sweden, none centrally located, have been able to dominate their respective systems, Pempel points among other things to the opposition's failure to coordinate. *Why* the opposition on the left in Japan, and on the right in Israel and Sweden, should have had difficulty in coordinating is not as clear as in the cases above, where policy incompatibilities separated the opposition. But failure to coordinate is again seen as important to explaining dominance.

The first three of the theories reviewed above assume, with varying degrees of clarity, that political competition is unidimensional and that parties care mostly about policy. Riker and Sartori further postulate the existence of a (large) center party. But in all three models the key is that the left and right cannot put together an ends-against-the-middle coalition, and this coalition failure, which the parties in the model can hardly escape, perpetuates the center party in power.

This model may capture elements of the situation in Italy, Chile, or India. But what of Japan, Israel, and Sweden? In Section 13.2, I consider the case of Japan in more detail, arguing that the LDP's dominance arose not because it had a dominant bargaining position in the government formation process (it typically formed single-party majority governments during its heyday) but rather because of the particular coordination problems posed by SNTV.

13.2 SNTV AND COORDINATION FAILURES[2]

Problems. Under SNTV, parties face two problems of coordination. First, they must decide how many candidates to run in each constituency. A large party in a four-seat district may need to decide whether it has enough support to elect three candidates or should instead stick with just two. A small party may need to decide whether to run a candidate at all

[2]This and the next two sections are based on Cox (N.d).

or instead withdraw in favor of another party's nominee. Decisions of both kinds can lead to coordination failure and consequent seat loss.[3]

A second problem that parties (or alliances of parties) face under SNTV is that of dividing their vote optimally among their nominees. This problem arises whenever a party or alliance runs more than one candidate in a given district. Because candidates are elected in order of the votes that they receive, and each voter casts a single vote, a party that nominates two candidates cannot be confident that both will be elected, even if it has enough followers. For, if all of the party's supporters vote for one of the party's two nominees, then that candidate will win handily while the other loses. In order for both candidates to win, the party's votes must be distributed more or less equally between its nominees.

Solutions. How can parties solve the two problems identified above? First, how can they assure that they nominate the correct number of candidates, avoiding both undernomination (fewer nominees than can win seats) and overnomination (more nominees than can win seats)? The brief answer is: by conducting regular negotiations on a national scale, in which withdrawals in one constituency are compensated either in kind (withdrawals in other constituencies) or in other coin. The LDP's factions have conducted such negotiations through the LDP's Electoral Strategy Committee since the party's inception in 1955 (Cox and Rosenbluth N.d.). The negotiations were probably helped by the availability of other resources – cabinet posts, positions in the Policy Affairs Research Council, and so forth – that could be traded as well. The noncommunist opposition parties have conducted less comprehensive but still regular negotiations over reciprocal withdrawals since 1972 (Christensen N.d.). As they do not have the other resources that the LDP factions have to trade, they are greatly concerned with verifying specific trades, for example: Will a withdrawal by party X from the race in *Shiga* transfer enough votes to party Y so that its candidate wins a seat? Can X guarantee delivery of the votes? Can Y reciprocate in kind in another district?

Once the problem of nomination is resolved, how can votes be equalized across a party's (or alliance's) nominees? Various solutions are theoretically possible (McCubbins and Rosenbluth 1995). If the party can dictate how its supporters vote, then this ability provides an obvious

[3]The LDP often found that its factions were unwilling to leave a particular district to their intraparty competitors, with the result that too many LDP candidates split the conservative vote too thinly, and the party as a whole won fewer seats than it would have, had a smaller number of candidates entered the fray. Similarly, the small parties making up the noncommunist opposition in Japan sometimes failed to coordinate their candidacies, splitting the opposition vote too thinly and giving the LDP more seats than it would otherwise have won. Cf. Cox and Niou (1994).

solution. Absent the ability simply to tell its voters how to vote, however, a party must seek a more decentralized solution.

One possibility here is to let candidates carve out different policy niches for themselves, advocating different versions of conservatism, for example. The problem with this strategy from the party's perspective is that open differences of opinion between its members will dilute the value of the party label, by making it harder for voters to figure out what the party stands for.

Another decentralized solution to the vote division problem is to let candidates provide particularistic services of various sorts to their constituents. For example, one might facilitate backbench members' efforts at pork-barreling. Alternatively, one might facilitate backbench members' efforts to provide machine-style welfare services and traditional gifts to their constituents.

The LDP followed both of these strategies in its heyday. It facilitated its members' pursuit of pork by creating the Policy Affairs Research Council, an elaborate committee system in which only LDP members participated and which afforded them a position from which to dole out and credibly claim credit for pork.[4] And it supported its members' generous provision of gifts and personal services to their constituents by ensuring that campaign finance laws did not get in the way of the important business of raising money.[5] Of course the two were intimately related: Pork benefited businesses that contributed to LDP members' coffers, thus enabling them to give gifts (and fueling a long series of scandals).

Resources. Having discussed possible solutions to the problems of nomination and vote division, the next question concerns the resources that are necessary to implement the solutions. Two key resources in this regard are access to pork-barrel projects and access to money. Pork and money help solve the problem of nomination by making the market in which national leaders trade withdrawals and endorsements more liquid. They help solve the problem of vote equalization because allowing general access to pork and money, then letting candidates compete in delivering pork and maintaining personal machines, tends to yield roughly equal vote shares (and more predictably equal shares than would competition based on policy differentiation).

Which parties will have access to distributive projects and to money? Generally speaking, governing parties should have better access to pork. And if they are willing to "sell" the pork to high bidders, then they

[4]MPs from the New Liberal Club were also given appointments in the Policy Affairs Research Council in the years just before the party was reabsorbed into the LDP.

[5]The laws predated the LDP but the party did not change them.

should have access to money as well. To the extent that government parties do control pork and money, they should solve the coordination problems posed by SNTV better, hence convert a given level of voting support into seats more efficiently.

Section 13.3 develops this "government advantage argument" by making some of its preconditions more explicit. In particular, one needs to recognize that there are resources other than those that flow from being in government that may help in solving coordination problems – a committed religious membership, for example – and that the difficulty of coordination tasks differs across electoral situations.

13.3 HOW SNTV ADVANTAGES GOVERNING PARTIES

The difficulty of the coordination problem that parties must solve under SNTV increases with the number of candidates they should run. More precisely, under SNTV it is harder for any given party, with a given technology of nomination and vote division, to (1) turn votes enough for n seats into n seats, than to (2) turn votes enough for $n - 1$ seats into $n - 1$ seats.

To unpack this statement a bit, note that it is very easy to turn votes enough for zero seats into zero seats. It does not matter what the party does. It is a bit harder to turn votes enough for one seat into one seat: The party must agree on a single nominee. It is harder still to turn votes enough for two seats into two seats: The party must avoid both undernomination and overnomination, and then allocate the party vote between its nominees equally enough so that they both win. Things get even harder to manage if three, four, or more seats are winnable.

The implication of the observations just made is that a party's **seat loss rate**, defined as the number of seats that a party falls short of the maximum it could have won, expressed as a proportion of the number of winnable seats, should increase with the number of winnable seats.[6] To express this more formally, I shall take a party's seat loss rate (SLR) in a particular district to be a function of (1) the maximum number of seats that the party could, with optimal performance, win in that district, denoted n;[7] (2) the flow of particularistic benefits that the party's

[6]More formally, the seat loss rate equals (MAXSEATS – SEATSWON)/MAXSEATS, where MAXSEATS is the maximum number of seats that the party could have won in the focal district and SEATSWON is the number of seats the party actually won.

[7]There are two ways to define the maximum number of seats that a party can win in a district (cf. Cox and Niou 1994). First, one might take the actual vote totals garnered by all candidates as fixed, and calculate how many seats a given party could have won had its candidates, and its candidates alone, been able to trade votes so as to maximize the party's seat total. Second, one might take the actual vote totals and allow all parties to optimize the allocation of votes among their candidates. The first

candidates running in the district enjoy, denoted b; and (3) other factors, denoted z. These other factors might reflect, for example, the innate organizational strength of the party. In terms of the notation just introduced the claim about SNTV made above can be restated as follows:

> (P0) Under SNTV, a party's seat loss rate is, *ceteris paribus,* an increasing function of n, the number of seats it could have won with optimal performance. More formally, if $n_1 < n_2$, then $SLR(n_1,b,z) < SLR(n_2,b,z)$.

In words, the greater difficulty of turning votes enough for n seats into n seats, as n increases, should mean that seat loss rates increase with the number of winnable seats.

Given assumption (P0), the major premises of a general argument about SNTV's effects can be stated as follows:

> (P1) Under SNTV, a party's seat loss rate is, *ceteris paribus,* a decreasing function of b, the flow of particularistic benefits to which the party's candidates have access. More formally, if $b_1 < b_2$, then $SLR(n,b_1,z) > SLR(n,b_2,z)$.
>
> (P2) Governing parties have superior access to particularistic benefits.

From (P0), (P1) and (P2), I conclude:

> (C) Under SNTV, governing parties typically have lower seat loss rates, difficulty of task (i.e., n) held constant, than do opposition parties.

The logic behind the conclusion runs as follows. Holding the difficulty of the task (i.e., n) constant, the seat loss rate is a function of b and z. Governing parties enjoy a systematically larger flow of particularistic benefits (b), by postulate (P2). Hence, if one takes z as random, with no systematic bias in favor of either government or opposition, the conclusion follows from (P1): Typically, governing parties will have lower seat loss rates, n held constant.

allow all parties to optimize the allocation of votes among their candidates. The first definition takes the view that parties should be able to exploit the errors of their opponents; the second that parties should assume optimal behavior by their adversaries. In what follows, I adopt the first definition of what the maximum number of winnable seats is. If one adopts the second definition, one finds that sometimes the conservative camp wins more than the "maximum number of winnable seats"!

13.4 EVIDENCE FROM JAPAN

Having clarified the logic of the government advantage argument, I can turn now to some evidence from Japan. I shall focus on the electoral efficiency of two broad camps in the Japanese party system: The conservative camp, composed of the LDP, LDP-affiliated independents, and the NLC; and the noncommunist opposition camp, composed of the JSP, DSP, and CGP. Similar analyses can be conducted of the electoral efficiency of more narrowly defined groups – just the LDP, for example – and they show similar results.

To assess the task-held-constant success of the conservative and noncommunist camps, Table 13.1 displays the average number of seats that each camp won when it faced each possible task (winning 0 seats, winning 1 seat, and so on).[8] As can be seen, the conservative camp did better than the noncommunist opposition at any given task. When both camps had votes enough for two seats, for example, the conservatives won on average 1.80 seats while the noncommunist opposition won only 1.60 seats. Had the noncommunist opposition performed as efficiently at each task as the conservatives did, they would have won 169 more seats over the 1958–1990 period than they actually did, or about 14 more per election.[9] Looked at from the other way around, had the conservatives performed as efficiently at each task as the noncommunist opposition did, they would have won 198 *fewer* seats over the 1958–90 period than they actually did, or about 16.5 fewer per election.

In order to assess the statistical significance of these figures, I ran a series of simple probit analyses, one for each column in Table 13.1 (that is, one for each task or number of winnable seats). First I created a dummy variable, SHORTFALL_{jct}, equal to 1 if camp c fell short of the maximum number of seats it could have won in district j at election t, equal to 0 otherwise. I then regressed this variable on a constant term and a dummy variable, CAMP_{jct}, equal to 1 when c was the conservative camp, and equal to 0 for the noncommunist opposition (I excluded the communist/other camp from the analysis). The results of these probit analyses (not shown) gibe with what one would think just looking at the averages in Table 13.1: When only one seat is winnable, there is not much difference between the camps in the efficiency with which they

[8]The raw data upon which this analysis is based are available in the Lijphart Elections Archive at http://dodgson.ucsd.edu/lij.

[9]The calculation, crude and first-order, is as follows. In 558 districts, the noncommunists could win at most one seat. Had they won the conservative average (of .97) rather than their actual average (of .94) this would have meant .03×558 = 16.74 more seats. Performing similar calculations for all tasks, one gets .03×558 + .2×555 + .13×291 + .1×35 = 169. There were 12 elections in the period 1958–90, so 169/12 yields about 14 more seats per election.

Table 13.1. Average seats won by conservatives and noncommunist opposition in Japan, 1958–90

	Maximum Number of Seats Winnable											
	0		1		2		3		4		5	
	Con	*Opp*	*Con*	*Opp*	*Con*	*Opp*	*Con*	*Opp*	*Con*	*Opp*	*Con*	*Opp*
Avg. seats won	—	0	.97	.94	1.80	1.60	2.51	2.38	3.19	3.09	3.84	—
N of observations	0	66	149	558	490	555	538	291	258	35	63	0
% of observations	0	4.4	9.9	37.1	32.6	36.9	35.8	19.3	17.1	2.3	4.2	0

Notes: This table aggregates data from all elections 1958–90. It is read as follows: The conservative camp, when faced with a situation in which the most they could have won was 1 seat (of which there were 149 cases, constituting 9.9% of all situations faced by the conservatives) won .97 seats on average.

win, but what difference there is favors the conservatives. The coefficient on CAMP is negative in this case, indicating that the conservatives were less likely to fall short of one seat than the noncommunist opposition, and the *t*-statistic on this coefficient was –1.46. When two or three seats were winnable, the conservative advantage was larger and attained statistical significance (*t*'s of –6.39 and –2.98). Finally, when four seats were winnable (something that happened for the noncommunist camp only 35 times), the conservative advantage was more modest and fell short of conventional levels of significance (t = -1.54).

All told, these results show that the conservative camp was *always* more efficient than the noncommunist opposition, task held constant, and sometimes significantly so.[10] This conclusion, moreover, holds not just for the entire 1958–90 period but also for the subperiods 1958–69 (during which the noncommunist opposition did not normally attempt to cooperate) and 1972–90 (during which they did).[11]

13.5 EVIDENCE FROM TAIWAN

Although the Japanese evidence is supportive, the conclusion (C) articulated above is by no means obviously established as a general proposition about SNTV as an electoral system. Perhaps the conservative camp had a natural advantage in electoral efficiency and the figures reflect this advantage rather than the one asserted to derive from governmental status. Or perhaps there is some other feature of the Japanese case that explains the observed patterns.

From the point of view of analysis, it would be nice if many (and diverse) nations held national elections under SNTV. One could then look at them all with similar methods and see what came of it. Unfortunately for analysis, only four other nations currently hold SNTV elections at the national level: Jordan, Malawi, Taiwan, and Vanuatu. In this section, I investigate the 1992 Legislative *Yuan* elections in Taiwan,

[10]Christensen and Johnson (N.d.) report that the *overall* conservative error rate exceeds the *overall* noncommunist error rate. This is correct and follows because the conservatives more often faced difficult tasks than did the noncommunists (see rows 2 and 3 of Table 13.1). Fully 37.1% of all districts were such that the noncommunists could have won at most one seat, which poses a relatively easy coordination task. In contrast, only 9.9% of all districts fell into the comparable category for the conservatives. On the other end of the scale, 17.1% of all districts were such that the conservatives could have won four seats, while only 2.3% of districts fell into this category for the noncommunists. Thus, the conservatives were more efficient at any given task but they were less efficient overall because they faced a harder mix of tasks as the largest party.

[11]The conservative camp's efficiency advantage was typically larger in the earlier period. See Cox (N.d.).

Table 13.2. Average seats won by KMT and DPP in Taiwan, 1992

	Maximum Number of Seats Winnable													
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	KMT	*DPP*	*KMT*	*DPP*	*KMT*	*DPP*	*KMT*	*DPP*	*KMT*	*DPP*	*KMT*	*DPP*	*KMT*	*DPP*
Avg. seats won	1	.78	1.50	1.83	2.40	2.00	3.50	3.00	4.50	3.00	6.00	3.00	4.00	—
N of observations	7	9	4	6	5	3	4	1	2	1	2	1	1	0
% of observations	28.0	42.9	16.0	28.6	20.0	14.3	16.0	4.8	8.0	4.8	8.0	4.8	4.0	0

Notes: See the notes to Table 13.1 for instructions on how to read this table (which is read analogously).

the first truly general election (all seats being at stake) in which opposition parties could legally compete.[12]

Table 13.2 displays the average number of seats won by the Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), for each number of winnable seats. The data look similar to those from Japan: The KMT was more efficient in converting votes into seats than the DPP in all but one case (when two seats were winnable).

As to the statistical significance of the KMT's apparent task-held-constant advantage in efficiency, I can say the following. If one simply regresses the seat loss rate for a camp on a constant term, the maximum number of winnable seats for that camp, and a dummy variable identifying the KMT, one finds a negative coefficient on the dummy (indicating that the KMT seat loss rate was generally lower, i.e., that it was more efficient) with a t of -1.6 (almost significant at the .05 level in a one-tailed test). There is thus another smidgen of support in the Taiwanese data for the notion that SNTV inherently advantages governing parties.

13.6 CONCLUSION

The argument in this chapter has two parts. First, differences in the ability of political forces to coordinate often contribute to the maintenance of dominant-party systems. From this perspective, ordinary competitive party systems are those in which coordination tends to be symmetric while dominant-party systems are those in which coordination tends to be asymmetric.

Second, the SNTV electoral system seems particularly likely to produce asymmetric coordination, hence one-party dominance. SNTV creates difficult coordination problems that governing parties typically have the resources, access to pork and money, to solve. Opposition parties, on the other hand, must rely on their own innate organizational wherewithal. This is a recipe for a corrupt machine-style governing coalition facing a divided opposition.

For this argument to work it is not necessary to claim that SNTV would produce patron-client relations in a society otherwise devoid of them, or to deny that preexisting social norms may be an important element determining the success of machine-style politics. It may even be that politicians yearning to build personal political machines influenced the creation (doubtful in Japan on my reading of Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1995) or maintenance (plausible) of the electoral system

[12]I thank Emerson Niou for providing the data upon which the analysis to follow is based.

itself. As long as the electoral system has some independent impact once in place, as I think it clearly does, the argument goes through.

The more general argument that this chapter suggests is that the more difficult the coordination problems that an electoral system presents, the more factors other than citizens' preferences matter in determining who wins seats. It may be possible to interpret a pure PR system as a more or less neutral method of translating votes into seats but under SNTV the translation is heavily influenced by the ability to coordinate. I have stressed here that governing parties have this ability due to their access to pork and money. I might just as well have focused on the Clean Government Party's ability to "dictate" how its fundamentalist Buddhist followers vote. Social groups that are already highly cohesive should do better under any electoral system but their relative advantage over unorganized interests should be even greater under SNTV and other systems that pose difficult coordination problems.