Expanding Rights Through Confidence: Electoral Politics and Housing Policy Changes in
Taiwan (1987-2016)

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When do rights become recognized and expanded for newly democratized countries?
Existing accounts on democratization in Asia argue that Asian states choose to democratize
because of strong confidence in authoritarian leaders to win even after democratization (Slater
and Wong, 2022). This paper builds on this account and argues the expansion of social rights in
Asian states also followed a similar logic, and it relied more on building a viable model of rights
protection that can confidently win elections and maintain stability. Following Slater and Wong
(2022), Taiwan, as a prime example of democracy through the strength of the authoritarian KMT
party, is the most likely case for regime confidence to matter in electoral politics. Using data
from governmental documents, meeting minutes, and interviews with key informants of housing
movement activists and governmental officials, I examine how activists were gradually
incorporated into the policy network through democratization and electoral politics, and thus,
they were able to introduce new policy ideas and construct a viable model for housing rights and
social housing policy to be used in election campaigns and later implemented.

I implement historical analysis and process tracing to build the causal relations between
multiple events. Although the initial protests in 1989 addressed widespread grievances against
housing insecurity, they were stuck with the existing pro-market solutions. Moreover, housing
movement activists were excluded from the policy network and did not have a chance to work out

a viable alternative to expand housing rights. Both democratization and electoral politics that let the pro-democratic party (DPP) win their first presidential election in 2000 opened the opportunity for housing movements to enter the policy network and reoriented the policy debate to address housing and social welfare issues. These discussions on social housing were nowhere near being implemented. It was after the DPP lost the election in 2008, and both activists and the DPP formed coalitions, bringing out more viable models and demanding policy reform against KMT, the conservative ruling party at the time, that they could secure the partial policy change in 2010 and 2012. After they had established the initial policy reforms, housing movement activists continuously introduced global experiences of social housing policy. They also brokered other professionals, such as architects and urban planners, to participate in the process. Eventually, housing movement activists became the center of the policy network to create a viable and confident model for both parties to buy into. Moreover, they also continued petitioning for more commitment from politicians in various elections after 2010. The continuous mobilization targeting central and local elections allowed activists to build networks with central and local governments. After the DPP was reelected in 2016, they made a major commitment to building a massive amount of social housing. In short, the inclusion of activists in the policy network in the first DPP term (2000-08) allowed new ideas to emerge, and the viable model of social housing policy emerged before the 2010 and 2012 elections so that political parties were confident to use it in the campaigns and eventually expanded housing rights.

This research speaks to the democratization experience in Asian states, and it can contribute to the discussion of democratization to include mechanisms of social movement consequences, participatory politics, and social rights expansion in newly democratized countries (Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens, 1999; Bermeo and Yashar, 2016).

Reference:

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