

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN  
PARTY POLITICS IN JAPAN, TAIWAN,  
AND SOUTH KOREA**

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*EAI Background Brief No. 815*

Date of Publication: 9 May 2013

## **Executive Summary**

1. Incumbent governing parties won in the 2012 Taiwan and South Korea presidential and legislative elections. In Japan, the ruling center-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) lost to the conservative Liberal Democratic Party. A new conservative party, Japan Restoration Party (JRP), captured almost as many seats as the DPJ, a clear rightward shift in Japanese politics.
2. Since 1996, there has been a gradual trend toward two-party competition in Japan. However, the 2012 election deviates from this trend as a result of the disastrous performance of the DPJ and the rise of the JRP.
3. In Taiwan, there had been fragmentation in the party system from the mid-1990s, resulting in a two-camp, multiparty system which was abruptly reversed in 2008. In both 2008 and 2012 elections, a clear two-party system emerged.
4. In the past two decades in South Korea, there is also a trend toward a two-party system, a development which is especially evident in the 2012 election; third parties however remain quite resilient.
5. The emergence of political parties in democracies can be explained by the cleavages (e.g., class, religion, etc.) in society. In Japan, there was once an important, albeit not dominant, class cleavage, but it is no longer the case.
6. The cleavage structure is now more fluid, resulting in the frequent emergence of new parties and the changing political fate of existing parties. The 2012 election signifies a move further to the right and the likelihood of further realignment.
7. In Taiwan, the major cleavage is national identity. As it is a highly emotional issue, and people do not change their attitude frequently, the partisan divide between the two major political camps—despite fragmentation within each

camp from the mid-1990s to 2008—has been quite stable. The 2012 elections reaffirm the existing pattern.

8. Regionalism has played an important role in Korean politics. However, it is doubtful how long it will last. But given the lack of a clear alternative to the old cleavage, it may resemble the situation in Japan in the not too distant future. Small parties may find some niches to emerge and survive.
9. Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea adopt the mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system in which legislative seats are largely elected by the first-past-the post system and the rest by proportional representation. The system thus becomes quite majoritarian (favoring the large, particularly the largest, parties) and leaving little room for small parties.
10. In Japan, the number of parties has declined, but only gradually; the trend seems to have halted in the 2012 election as a result of the fluid cleavage structure. In Taiwan's rigid cleavage structure, the new MMM system which was used in 2008 quickly reverted the country to two-party competition.
11. South Korea has similar experience but with a lot of fluctuations due to the multimodal nature of regionalism which provides room for some small parties with regional basis to survive in the game.