Chapter 5

Comparing Consensus on Taiwan Democracy Among the Mass Public and Elites

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The purpose of this chapter is to explore differences in views of democracy between the mass public and the elites in Taiwan. Examining the 2004 Taiwan Democracy Index data, we first describe how the mass public and elites evaluate Taiwan’s democracy and, more importantly, their democratic values. Furthermore, we intend to observe whether ordinary people and elites agree on certain aspects of Taiwan’s democracy. This comparison will not only allow us to understand where the mass public and elites agree concerning the principle of democracy—as well as why—but also to reveal where there are gaps between the mass public and elites. The findings of this study may shed some light on highly partisan Taiwanese politics and the rapidly declining sense of political trust among the mass public.

Introduction: Mass Democracy and Elites

Equality and majority rule are two pillars of democracy. They have, however, both proved to be elusive in modern democratic society (Dahl 1956). According to the pluralistic view of democracy, government is actually run by minorities, which prevent the dictatorship and tyranny of majority from emerging. Therefore, the dominance of the political stratum is inevitable. Early analysis of the political system distinguished elites from the mass public and studied how both groups participate in the decision-making process. For instance, Robert A. Dahl (1961) analyzed political influence in New Haven. His study shows that the ruling elites possess political skills to mobilize voters, coordinate projects, and set up public education. Whereas ordinary citizens merely have interest in politics, elites dominate the policy-making process with a high consensus on the rules of the game. Examining American society, C. Wright Mills (2000, 323–4) pointed out that,

But now, given all those forces that have enlarged and centralized the political order and made modern societies less political and more administrative; given the transformation of the old middle classes into something which perhaps should not even be called middle class; given all the mass communications that do not truly communicate; given all the metropolitan segregation that is not community; given the absence of voluntary associations that really connect the public at large with the centers of power—what is
happening is the decline of a set of publics that is sovereign only in the most formal and rhetorical sense.¹

The elitist view of democracy repeatedly speaks of the important role that elites play in democratic society. Using empirical data, scholars have examined the issues of elites and the mass public, particularly their beliefs in democracy. Prothro and Grigg (1960) found high agreement on democratic principles, but regional and class-related variations on specific applications of the principles. The abstract principles include majority rule, minority rights, and the belief in democracy as the best form of government. McClosky (1964) found that most elites agreed on most items of “rule of the game,” but the general electorate did not have such consensus. Nevertheless, the political class and a large portion of the electorate expressed support for freedom of speech and judicial rights. Furthermore, McClosky, Hoffmann, and O’Hara (1960) compared the attitudes of party leaders and the rank and file members on five issues: public ownership, government regulation of the economy, egalitarianism and human welfare, tax policy, and foreign policy. The sheer magnitude of difference was measured, and the results revealed that leaders and followers differed significantly on nearly every issue. Regarding the specific domain of policy, Oldendick and Bardes (1982) reported the responses of the mass and elite toward several dimensions of foreign policy. They found that elites are much more supportive of an internationalist view than the general public. Turning to developing democracies, Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger (1997) found that there is great affinity between elites and the mass public in freedom of expression, rule of law, and majority rule. Nevertheless, the variation in the conception of democracy across subgroups implies that a shared belief in democracy has not been formed.

Given the social contrast between elites and the general public, consensus between elites and ordinary citizens is particularly crucial to democracy. If elites and ordinary citizens share the same political values, policy-making should be representative of the public interest, especially in a developing democracy where civic groups are not strong enough to monitor policy makers. When elites and ordinary citizens have different ideas about democracy, conflicts between the mass public and elites may take place. For instance, Dahl (1971) has compared the democratic beliefs of activists in several countries and suggested that Argentina’s collapse in the 1920s resulted from elite’s weak beliefs in democracy (135). Although political influentials and the mass public share very few ideas of democracy, McClosky (1964) argued, however, that American democracy is healthy, owing to the absence of active fundamental differences. The purpose of this chapter is to compare elite and the general public’s democratic values and evaluations of governance in Taiwan, which will allow us to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Taiwan democracy.

¹ According to Bachrach (1962), Mills believes in the history-making of the power elites and that only the intellectuals can held the elites responsible for their decisions.
Background of Taiwan Democracy

In 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was formed by a group of activists and assemblymen who had long challenged the Kuomintang's (KMT) monopoly of power. Since the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan has moved rapidly toward full democracy. Elections for important posts in the government have been held regularly, but it was not until 1992 that all of the seats in the Legislative Yuan were opened to popular election. In 1996, the first popular presidential election was held; the public instead of the National Assembly elected the president. In 2000, the DPP took the presidency from the KMT. At the same time, Taiwanese politics saw the emergence of the People First Party (PFP) and Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). In 2004, the KMT again lost its bid for the presidency to the DPP.

Scholars have studied the democratization process extensively from different perspectives and expressed their optimism on the progress. Back in the 1980s, Fu Hu, the foremost student of political science in Taiwan, isolated the dimensions of political culture in Taiwan and analyzed the mass public's attitude toward those dimensions. In Hu and his colleagues' study on the residents of Nei-hu district of Taipei City in 1980, he found that respondents embraced beliefs on equality, autonomy, and checks-and-balances, among other democratic principles (Hu 1997a). In another article, his analysis shows that democratic values varied with the level of education and partisan support, but not with ethnicity (Hu 1997b). Chang (1996) examined people's orientation toward democracy. He reported that support for democratic values has been increasing since 1992 and that the four major ethnic groups share the same beliefs in democracy. Lin (2000) assessed the link between Taiwan's elites and the mass public, emphasizing the affinity of social cleavage and democratic beliefs between both groups. He also pointed out that a stable party system has emerged in the Legislative Yuan from elections, and that the coincidence of class-crossing issues among the elites and the mass public will consolidate Taiwan's democracy.

The path toward support for widespread democratic values coincides with the declining interest in democracy as an issue in elections and the emergence of the national identity issue in the 1990s (Hyu 1996; Sheng 2002; but compare Hsieh and Niou 1996). While scholars found that the highly educated tend to have high support for democratic beliefs, it remains unclear as to whether the elites, who are politically aware and serve in the public and private sectors as high-ranking or elected officials or managers, and the mass public share a consensus on democratic values. If most elites and the general public agree on the principles of democracy and views on governance, the legitimacy of democracy will prevail. If such consensus does not exist, the consequence would be partisan politics and unstable democracy.

Hypotheses

It is our interest to examine the political differences between elites and the mass public. Up until now, we have not described a theory to explain these differences. Therefore, we shall cover not only concepts of democracy, but also political tolerance and views on governance. Undoubtedly, democratic beliefs have been widespread among both
elites and the mass public. Nevertheless, we expect to find that people have different views on political tolerance and governance due to polarized politics. Based on the literature and the history of Taiwan’s democracy, we formulate several hypotheses. First, elites and the mass public agree on most concepts of democracy. Second, elites have higher levels of political tolerance than the mass public because the elites have access to more political information and a wider diversity of information. Lastly, we hypothesize that elites are less satisfied with Taiwan’s democracy than the mass public.

Regarding views on current governance, we assume that ordinary people and the political class share a common discontent with the government’s apathy towards the mass public’s needs. Specifically, both groups believe that the government lacks better judgment, is fiscally irresponsible, and is untrustworthy. We expect, however, both to be satisfied with the execution of electoral rules, since elections have been the engine of democracy in Taiwan. Finally, we hypothesize that elites are more critical of the results of democratic governance, including economic performance and protection of human rights.

Data, Methods, and Results

The Taiwan Study Center and Election Study Center at National Chengchi University, commissioned by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, jointly administered a project entitled “2004 Taiwan Democracy Index.” This project contained two waves of telephone surveys of national multi-stage samples and one wave of mail surveys of randomly drawn samples from “Who's Who in Republic of China, 2003.” The first wave of the telephone survey, which was chosen in this study for its comparable variables with the elite survey, had 1,077 responses, with a sampling error of 2.98 percent. The dataset is weighted by gender, education, region, and age. The mail survey of elites had 450 responses out of 1,215 mailed questionnaires. For the purpose of comparison, we merge the two datasets and compare the responses to identical questions.

We first compare the percentage of responses to items related to political efficacy, political beliefs, and political tolerance among elites and the general public. Using t-tests, the difference in the responses of elites and the general public will be examined statistically. In addition, we will compare the statistical means of satisfaction with Taiwan’s democracy, evaluations of the electoral rules, political trust, and evaluations of various aspects of policy outcomes, all of which are continuous variables. Likewise, t-tests will be used to assess the differences in those measurements.

Political Efficacy

Political efficacy refers to the extent to which people believe they can influence the government. Abramson (1983, 135) argues, “next to party identification, no political attitudes have been studied more extensively than feelings of political effectiveness.” According to Campbell and his colleagues (1954, 187), political efficacy is “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the
political process, that is, that it is worth while to perform one's civic duties.\textsuperscript{2} Politics might seem remote and complicated to most citizens, but some citizens feel they understand the decision-making process and believe they are able to influence public policies. Therefore, surveys of political efficacy are designed to measure people's levels of understanding of public affairs and subjective political competence.

Scholars continue to explore the effects of political efficacy on citizen's political participation. For example, Campbell and his colleagues (1954, 1960) concluded that, after controlling for the level of education, people's levels of political efficacy are correlated with their political participation. Almond and Verba (1963) demonstrated that people who believe that they can influence political affairs are more active in political activities. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 144–5) also showed that people with higher levels of political efficacy are more likely to vote, to persuade others to vote, and to contribute money to candidates or parties. All of these findings have pointed to a positive correlation between political efficacy and political participation, which in turn, demonstrates the importance of people's sense of political efficacy as a catalyst for political action vital to a democratic government.

As for the measurement of political efficacy, Campbell and his colleagues (1956) believe an index can be constructed on a uni-dimensional scale. Lane (1959, 149) argues, however, there are two components in people's sense of political efficacy—the image of the self and the image of democratic government—that contain the tacit implication that an image of the self as effective is intimately related to the image of democratic government as responsive to the people. Therefore, the feeling of an "effective self" might be considered as internal political efficacy, and the feeling of "responsive government" might be considered as external efficacy (Balch 1974). Abramson (1983) employed longitudinal survey data to demonstrate the trend in political efficacy among the electorate in the United States. The first of his findings was that African-Americans feel less politically empowered than Caucasians. Another important trend is that the level of external political efficacy declined dramatically after the 1960s. Abramson and Aldrich (1982) argued that the decline of external political efficacy contributed to the drop in voter turnout in the United States.

Although few elites are directly involved in policy-making, their voices are heard more loudly than the mass public's. If the political elite control power overwhelmingly and the mass public is politically repressed, the legitimacy of democracy may be jeopardized by not being inclusive of ordinary citizens' concerns.

Table 5.1 shows that ordinary citizens believe they can influence policy making more than do the elites. Moreover, ordinary citizens are less trusting than elites of government officials. On the contrary, the political stratum believes that most decisions made by the government are sound, as indicated by the significantly higher rate of positive responses among elites than the mass public. Both the political class and the general public believe that the government is fiscally irresponsible, though the proportion of the general public who agree with this statement is higher than that of the elites.

\textsuperscript{2} For detail discussion and related literature about political efficacy, please see Abramson (1983) and Reef and Knoke (1993).
Table 5.1  Percentages of Agreeing with the Statements of Political Efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mass Public</th>
<th>Elite</th>
<th>t-test (equal variance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People like me can’t possibly influence government policies</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>7.743**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government officials don’t care about what people like me think</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t believe what government officials say on TV or in newspapers</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>-3.315**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The vast majority of decisions made by the government are correct</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>-4.898**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government officials often waste taxpayers’ money</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>2.756**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***: p<=.001

The result suggests that respondents are skeptical of the government and have shrinking faith in the system, in terms of democratic control. They also believe that the government is wasteful and do not trust government policy-making. In particular, the sample from “Who’s Who” fell short of expressing their faith in democratic control; more than sixty percent of them say that they do not have any influence in the government. However, only 42 percent of ordinary citizens respond that they have no influence in the government. Although, as a whole, Taiwanese citizens may seem skeptical of their ability to influence public policy, democratic success may ultimately rest on the power of the ordinary citizen’s ballot. As long as the people remain confident of their ability to influence government, democracy may still prevail.

Overall, elites and the general public agree on the asymmetrical relationship between the government and citizens. Although elites had much less confidence in their influence on the government, the general public joined them in lamenting weak democratic control. Whether or not the current government’s operation leads them to be skeptical about democratic control will be addressed in the following analysis.

Democratic Beliefs

One of Madison’s primary democratic principles is checks-and-balances, which entails the diversity of public opinion (Dahl 1956). The implementation of the checks-and-balances principle needs party competition in the government; party government guarantees responsible policies and electoral control. Therefore, people’s belief in the diversity of opinion and party competition is crucial to democracy.

Table 5.2 presents the differing views of democracy among elites and the mass public. Over 50 percent of the general public agrees that the unity of society will be destroyed if there are too many differing opinions. In contrast, only one-fifth of elites
### Table 5.2 Percentages of Agreeing with the Statements of Democratic Beliefs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mass Public</th>
<th>Elite</th>
<th>t-test (equal variance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If people have differing ideas about politics, the solidarity would be ruined</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>13.714**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In order to oversee the government, a powerful opposition party is necessary</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>-3.203**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***: $p<=.001$

agree with this statement. A consensus about the diversity of opinion apparently did not exist.

As for party competition, however, more than eighty percent of both elites and the mass public agree that it is necessary to have a strong opposition party to check the government. Despite the alternation in power in 2000, both political influential and the general electorate emphasized the role of opposition parties.

**Political Tolerance**

Political tolerance, and especially the principle of freedom of speech, is an important cornerstone of democracy. Although human rights became a common ideology after the 1990s, when the process of democratization turned to institutional reform, freedom of speech remains a concern when the issue of national security emerges. Therefore, we measure political tolerance mainly by gauging freedom of speech. We adopt the traditional Guttman scale of freedom of speech—whether people who promote extreme ideology are allowed to speak in public, teach in elementary or high school, and serve in the government—and transform it to a three-point score. Respondents who agree that people who promote either Taiwan’s independence, communism, or “one China two system” formula should be allowed to engage in all of the three activities are scored as a three. Respondents who agree with the activities of public speaking and teaching are scored as a two. The responses that do not follow the ladder structure of the scale, however, are discarded.

Table 5.3 compares elites and the mass public on political tolerance. It is apparent that elites have higher levels of tolerance than the general public, and the difference

### Table 5.3 Political Tolerance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tolerance</th>
<th>Mass Public</th>
<th>Elite</th>
<th>F-test*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–3</td>
<td>.815</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>24.05**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: Bartless’s test for equal variances: $\chi^2=4.9610, p<=.05$

**: $p<=.001$
is statistically significant. On average, the ordinary citizen cannot tolerate activities above the lowest level—public speaking on radical political ideology. Elites, however, can tolerate activities up to the second level—teaching in elementary or high school. The result implies that elites and the general public have not reached a consensus on political tolerance.

**Evaluations of Taiwan’s Democracy by Elites and the Mass Public**

The analysis above shows the limited consensus between elites and the mass public. Drawing from the analysis, people may have differing views of Taiwan’s democracy. In some sense, it is the likely consequence of democratic values; people who are cynical of democracy may view negatively the current working of democracy. Regardless of the reason, people’s satisfaction with Taiwan’s democracy may determine how much support they eventually lend to the political system in the future. If elites and the mass public have distinctive opinions on the functioning of Taiwan’s democracy, they may contribute differently to politics and the policy outcomes would vary with their inputs.

**Table 5.4  Satisfaction with Taiwan Democracy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mass Public</th>
<th>Elite</th>
<th>t-test (equal variance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Here is a scale: 0 means complete dictatorship and 10 means complete democracy. The lower the number is, the more it is a dictatorship. The higher the number is, the more democratic it is.</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>.326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here is a scale: 0 means completely dissatisfied and 10 means completely satisfied. Overall, do you feel satisfied or dissatisfied with the practice of democracy in Taiwan?</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>2.195*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p<=.05

**Satisfaction with Taiwan Democracy**

Before responding to questions about individual institutions, respondents were asked to rate Taiwan’s democracy on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 representing a state of dictatorship and 10 being a total democracy. Table 5.4 shows that both elites and ordinary citizens, on average, placed Taiwan’s democracy at 5, meaning Taiwan is now standing at the crossroads of democracy and dictatorship. While the general public and elites agreed on their rating of Taiwan’s democracy, they appeared to have different levels of satisfaction with current politics. The general public gave the current political situation a five, but elites responded that they were less content
with current politics, giving the situation only a four. In other words, the general public can live with the current political system; although, they did not consider it fully democratic. Elites, however, showed consistent attitude toward Taiwan's democracy; they did not regard Taiwan as a fully developed democracy and showed less satisfaction with the current politics than the general public.

This result partly confirms our expectations: Elites are less content with Taiwan’s democracy than the mass public, holding other attitudes constant. Recall that the analysis of political efficacy shows that elites are less confident of their influence on the government than the ordinary citizens; the result shown here suggests the link between political efficacy and evaluations of the current government. When the general public perceives Taiwan’s democracy positively, their confidence in government responsiveness is concurrently high. As for the political influentials, their political efficacy and evaluations of Taiwan’s democracy are relatively low, which are in stark contrast to the mass public’s. If elites and the mass public lack consensus on the state of Taiwan’s democracy and political efficacy, the gap may not be filled easily because both attitudes that may reinforce each other demand improvement.

Evaluations of the Electoral Rules

To comprehend the reasons behind people’s satisfaction with Taiwan’s democracy, we asked respondents if qualified candidates could be selected in the elections. Elections have been the primary means of democracy in Taiwan, and whether they are perceived to be fair and can ultimately elect competent officials may influence people’s perception of Taiwan democracy.

Table 5.5 shows that the mass public rated the outcomes of elections better than did the political class. The difference is statistically significant. We also find that elites and the mass public agreed on the fairness of elections; the difference,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Mass Public</th>
<th>Elite</th>
<th>t-test (equal variance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Here is a scale: 0 means we can never select what people want and 10 means we absolutely can select what people want from elections.</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.445**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here is a scale: 0 means the current election rules are very unfair to every party or candidate and 10 means they are very fair to every party or candidates.</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**: p<=.001
however, is insignificant at the 0.05 confidence level. The results seem to indicate that a consensus on the electoral rules exists between elites and the mass public, even while elites were less satisfied with the outcomes of elections.

**Political Trust Among Elites and the Mass Public**

Political trust refers to people's faith in the ruling government. When people have faith in the legitimacy of the ruling party, people believe that the ruling government will abide by the law and offer improved social welfare. On the contrary, when people do not have faith in the ruling government, the power granted by the people to the ruling government will be limited to ensuring people's rights. It is the faith in the government that lends necessary support for the regime. From empirical research, there are objects of support and bases of support. As to the objects of support, people will focus on political communities, political regime, political officials, different level of governments, and three branches of central governments. As to the bases of support, people might focus on trustworthiness, fairness, effectiveness, responsiveness, compassion, and integrity of government and/or officials.

However, putting measurement issues aside, the distribution of political trust among American voters declined during the past four decades. As Abramson (1983), Hetherington (1998), and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) showed by employing the American National Election Study (ANES) data, people's levels of political trust declined dramatically between 1958 and 1996. Among Caucasians, the percentage of people who "just about always" trust "the government in Washington to do what is right" was 74 percent in 1958 and increased to 77 percent in 1964. It declined, however, dramatically after 1964 and fell to 25 percent in 1980. Abramson (1983) showed that college educated Caucasian voters had higher level of political trust than those with less education, but African-American voters with higher level of education tended to be less likely to trust the government. Abramson also showed that there was generational difference in the distribution of political trust among voters. Younger citizens tend to have higher level of political trust than the senior generation.

Likewise, Jennings and Niemi (1981) analyzed two-wave "Parent-and-Student" panel studies and showed that students' level of political trust was higher than their parents' level in 1965. However, in 1973, young females' levels of political trust were lower than their fathers', and the overall level of young females' political trust declined, yet was still higher than their parents. As to the gender difference, fathers had higher levels of political trust among parents, but girls had higher levels of political trust among offspring. Jennings and Niemi argued that, compared with females, males were more sensitive to the social environment so were less likely to trust the government.

Because the level of political trust is closely related to attitudes about the political legitimacy of democratic regimes, many scholars have explored the causes and consequences of the decline of political trust. Feldman (1983) argued that the lower level of political trust indicated that people were not satisfied with the incumbent

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3 The following discussion of this section is based on Citrin and Muste (1993).
officers and institutions in the United States. The lack of trust in Congress was the major cause of the decline of political trust. In contrast, Williams (1985) argued that people's party identification and their evaluation of governmental institutions were major factors in influencing people's level of political trust. Williams contended that Feldman's model overestimated the effect of people's evaluations toward the elected officers because it did not include people's evaluation toward governmental institutions. Williams, however, agreed that people's political trust would affect their evaluation toward incumbent elected officers and government institutions. Hetherington's (1998) research showed that people's evaluation of the President, the Congress, and the macro-economic condition affect their political trust. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001) showed that when people agree with the idea that citizens shall engage in the political process, they were more likely to have positive evaluations of the government. These studies have suggested that political trust is both a cause and an effect. Political mistrust often results from a poor evaluation of governmental performance. At the same time, the lack of political trust further undercuts people's perceptions of government performance.

Whether the decline of political trust affects the operation of democratic regimes is another critical issue. Miller (1974, 951) argued that reduced political trust among citizens might indicate that people are dissatisfied with the policy-making of the government and may endanger the operation of democratic regimes. Citrin (1974),

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 5.6 Political Trust of Elites and the Mass Public</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mass Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much trust do you have in the Legislative Yuan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much trust do you have in the court?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much trust do you have in the president?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much trust do you have in the Executive Yuan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much trust do you have in the mass media?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much trust do you have in the political parties?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much trust do you have in the military?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p<=.05  **: p<=.001
however, argued that the lower level of political trust simply reflected people’s dissatisfaction with the incumbent officers and the policies they make. Citrin and Green (1986) further showed that people’s distrust in the government might, in turn, allow the newly elected officers opportunity to make reforms.

We analyze political trust in institutions as a measure of respondents’ confidence in the government, rather than political figures. Respondents were surveyed on their trust in various public institutions, such as the government branches, the military, and the political parties. We use their level of trust in the media as a reference point. The results convey both consensus and disagreement between elites and the mass public, as shown in Table 5.6.

Our first finding shows that the general public’s trust of the Legislative Yuan was lower than the elites’ sentiments. The Legislative Yuan received an average score of 3.02 from ordinary citizens, compared with an average of 5.15 from members of the political class. The striking difference in the ratings is significant at the 0.05 level. In contrast, the mass public, but not elites, trusted the president. The mass public, on average, rated the president 5.06, but elites only gave him a mean rating of 4.41. Our findings clearly show there was no consensus of opinions of the Legislative Yuan and the president among the elites and the mass public.

Elites and the mass public, however, generally agreed on other institutions, including the court, the Executive Yuan, the military, and political parties. Among all six political institutions, the military received the highest trust from elites and the mass public, at 6.31 and 6.40, respectively. As for the mass media, both elites and the mass public rated it around 4 points, with slightly higher ratings from elites than the public.

In presidential systems, the stalemate between the president and the legislative body often brings turmoil to democracy. Likewise, the difference in opinion between the elites and the mass public regarding political trust in the Legislative Yuan and the presidency may extend to other issues. Nevertheless, the consensus on political trust in the other institutions may benefit the system.

Economy, Human Rights, and Vulnerable Groups

In essence, the performance of a governing body influences the extent to which people continue to support the institution. Although policy-makers are not necessarily held responsible for their decisions, the general electorate tends to evaluate the government retrospectively. Moreover, scholars have identified a pattern of socio-economic voting; voters make their decisions on the basis of national economy instead of their own personal grievances.

In addition to the economy, the protection of human rights of vulnerable groups is a policy on which democratic governments are evaluated. Social welfare measures can address the problems of inequality that are inevitable in most advanced democracies. We anticipate that elites and the mass public will have different views on these policy outcomes, considering that they have different levels of satisfaction with Taiwan’s democracy.

Contrary to our expectations, Table 5.7 shows that elites judged more positively than the general public the state of the economy and the protection of human rights and vulnerable groups. This finding is inconsistent with the previous finding that
elites were less satisfied than the general public with Taiwan’s democracy. Although the magnitude of average difference is around 0.5, this difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5.7 Evaluations on Economy and Protection of Human Rights and Vulnerable Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mass Public</th>
<th>Elite</th>
<th>t-test (equal variance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how would you rate the</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>-3.834**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present state of Taiwan’s economy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how would you rate the</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>-2.818**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protection of human rights in Taiwan?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how would you rate the</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>-4.607**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protection of vulnerable groups in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan?</td>
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</table>

**. p<.001

Explaining how elites appraised the government’s handling of the national economy, human rights, and the protection of the needy requires in-depth analysis. Here we suspect that elites separate the issues of economy, human rights, and social welfare from internal government affairs, while the mass public applies their evaluations on most issues to the government. The political elites control the means to policy-making and judge that the government earns the credit for improving the economy, human rights, and the situation of vulnerable groups. The general public, however, feels that ordinary people’s economic situation, human rights, and social welfare are less under the government’s control, but we leave more vigorous analysis for further research.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the difference in democratic values and evaluations of Taiwan democracy among elites and the mass public. In brief, we find that political influentials and the mass public indeed have different political beliefs and views of Taiwan’s democracy. On the basis of empirical evidence, moreover, we discuss whether there is a consensus or a crisis of democratic values between elites and the mass public. We also present retrospective and prospective evaluation of Taiwan democracy.

Democratic Values: Consensus or Crisis?

Our preliminary analysis shows that elites and the mass public had consensus on most aspects of political efficacy, thereby sharing perceptions of government accountability. The consensus, however, lays in both groups’ weak faith in politics,
in matters such as government responsiveness to the concerns of ordinary citizens, the honesty of government officials, and irresponsible decision-making, particularly with taxpayer money. When both political leaders and followers have such negative impressions of politics, the credibility of the government becomes questionable and the legitimacy of democracy may be uncertain. Although we find that the mass public agreed less than the elites with the statement that people could not possibly influence government policies, low political efficacy remains noteworthy.

It is apparent that elites and the mass public share the idea of democratic control, which entails healthy party politics. Only elites, however, believed in the importance of diversity of opinions. Since political leaders are potential opinion leaders and the center of social networks, we argue that they should be responsible for this phenomenon. Likewise, the politically influential may be held accountable for the mass public's lower level of political tolerance.

Low political efficacy of elites and mass public reflects a crisis of democracy in Taiwan, and the mass public seems to lag behind elites in political tolerance and diversity of opinions. The elite’s high tolerance and faith in diversified opinions may be the cure for the ordinary citizens’ strong cynicism, which in turn may lead to higher participation in politics.

Retrospective Evaluation and Prospect of Taiwan Democracy

Because the performance of the political system directly shapes the popular opinion of democracy, we examine how the mass public and elites evaluate Taiwan’s democracy, political institutions, electoral rules, economy, and social welfare. We find that the general public and elites both placed Taiwan in the middle of the dictatorship-democracy spectrum, but the elites were less content with Taiwan’s democracy (Table 5.4). Elites appeared to have higher standards regarding the practice of democracy in Taiwan, yet at the same time they also evaluated the economy and protection of human rights and vulnerable groups more positively than the mass public (Table 5.7), even though the government is responsible for the economy and social welfare. We suspect that political influentials separated the workings of the political system and the civil society, while the mass public holds the government responsible for the economy and the protection of vulnerable groups.

Electoral rules influence the quality of democratic representation because they translate election outcomes into the distribution of seats. If electoral rules are biased in favor of one party or another, representatives may not be qualified and may fail to meet the expectations of the people. Our findings indicate that the mass public more than elites trusted the electoral process, but both had faith in the fairness of elections (Table 5.5). In the eyes of elites, elections may be manipulatable, while not every candidate is qualified for the office. If the electoral process is, however, fair to every party or candidate, elites’ relatively lower evaluation of electoral rules should be regarded as the application of their higher standard of democracy.

Political trust in government institutions is a crucial part of democracy. We found that elites and the general public agreed in their evaluations of most institutions, such as the court, Executive Yuan, political parties, and the military. They did, however, clash on their trust in the Legislative Yuan and the president (Table 5.6). The result
suggests that the divided government somewhat undermines the consensus of democracy; each branch has its own supporters in party politics and among elites and the mass public. With the consensus on other institutions and democracy in Taiwan, however, the gap should be narrowed either through more frequent alternation of power or change in the schedule of elections.

In terms of significant findings, we find optimistic signs for Taiwan’s democracy, especially the mass public’s trust in institutions and elite’s appraisal of activities in social arenas. Due to the limited data, we cannot, unfortunately, explore the reasons behind the differences between the elites and mass public. With more systematic studies of elites and the ordinary people, the path toward democratic development would be clearer.

References


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