

**Beyond the Blue-Green Tango:
Social Movement vs. National Security
in the 320 Referendum Dispute**

WU JIEH-MIN*

Direct democracy as a supplement to representative democracy was allowed for in the ROC Constitution written more than half a century ago. However, it was not until the March 20, 2004 referenda that this mechanism was used in Taiwan politics. This first referendum usage has been analyzed from three main perspectives. First, the Referendum Act (公投法) and its legislation have been analyzed in the context of partisan contention between the pan-Green and pan-Blue camps, with much attention having been given to the political implications that the passage of this Act has for the existing political system.¹ A second approach focuses on whether the referenda would tip the subtle balance in the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle, since this form of direct democracy could be wielded either as a tool for Taiwan's "creeping independence" or as a weapon of deterrence against threats from China.² Third, the referendum has been viewed dualistically as "a repertoire of social movement" vs. "an instrument of national security": the former features spontaneous, grass-roots participation in the referendum movement, while the latter merely sees the referenda as manipulated, top-down mobilization by the elite.³ This article emphasizes the third approach, further narrowing the focus to Blue-Green sparring on cross-Strait issues. In particular, three themes will be explored: (1) how national security became a topic for politicking; (2) what significance the referenda have held in the social movement arena; and (3) what have

* **WU JIEH-MIN** (吳介民) is associate professor at the Institute of Sociology and associate director at the Center for Contemporary China, National Tsing-Hua University. The author would like to thank Sun Ming-lin for his excellent research assistance. Dr. Wu can be reached at <wjm@mx.nthu.edu.tw>.

¹ For an excellent review of this Act, see Jih-wen Lin, "Taiwan's Referendum Act and the Stability of the Status Quo," *Issues & Studies* 40, no. 2 (June 2004): 119-53.

² *Ibid.*; and Szu-chien Hsu, "The Strategic Implications of Taiwan's Referendum on the Taiwan-U.S.-China Triangle Relationship" (Paper presented at the conference "A Fluid Triangle: Taiwan-U.S.-China Triangle Relationship in Changing?" Center for Contemporary China, National Tsing-Hua University, Taipei, March 18, 2004).

³ See, for example, Jieh-min Wu, "The Two-Line Struggle Determines the Future of the Referendum Movement," *Xinxinwen zhoubao* (The Journalist Weekly), no. 887 (March 4, 2004): 72-75.

been the critical differences between the social movement and national security discourses on the referenda.

National Security and the Advent of the Referenda

Referendum as a tool of national security has its origins in Taiwan's uncertain international status. No sooner was the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) organized in 1986 than the issue of sovereignty surfaced on Taiwan's political scene. The DPP's founding charter stipulated that "the future of Taiwan should be determined by all residents."⁴ To assert the right of self-determination, the DPP called as early as 1988 for a referendum movement on the question of "whether the Taiwanese people should accept China's rule."⁵ Henceforth, there were waves of demonstrations in support of Taiwan independence. At that time, the "mass line" (群眾路線, *qunzhong luxian*) prevailed over the "election line" (選舉路線, *xuanju luxian*) within the opposition as the ruling Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) still refused to open up the political space.⁶ Facing mounting pressure, the KMT was forced to amend the Constitution in order to conduct the island's first general election in 1992, whereby all the seats of the Legislative Yuan (立法院) were elected by direct, popular vote.

The onset of democratization forced the DPP to adjust its opposition strategy. The party, including its hard-liners, gradually abandoned the mass line while transferring the referendum battle to the Legislative Yuan.⁷ Since then, the use of mass mobilization for political causes—particularly the quest for independence—has lessened for two reasons. For one, the DPP was absorbed into the political establishment and became busily engaged in campaigning. For another, President Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) stole the opposition's thunder by playing a leading role in pushing forward Taiwan's *de facto* sovereignty. During the Lee era, the DPP seemed uninterested in legislating any referendum law.

In 1999, the DPP held closed-door meetings to debate its staunch independence stance. Hoping to capture the "median voters" in the next year's

⁴ The charter was passed by the DPP's First Plenary Session of the First Congress in November 1986.

⁵ *Lianhe bao* (United Daily News), November 22, 1988, [page 2](#).

⁶ Opposition leaders had been divided on strategy: the "mass line" asserted the urgency of popular mobilization, while the "election line" confined itself to mild and limited contention in the legislature. This struggle over strategies continued until the general election in 1992.

⁷ The DPP announced a strategy of "general line of election" (選舉總路線, *xuanju zongluxian*) for the national election in 1992, which was criticized by Linda Arrigo, "From Democratic Movement to Bourgeois Democracy," in *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the Present*, ed. Murray A. Rubinstein (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 145-80.

presidential election, the party adopted a resolution softening the DPP's so-called "Taiwan independence charter." Though leading to criticism from the party's traditional supporters, the revision of the charter seemed to be an effective campaign strategy given that Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) won the election. Right after his inauguration, however, Chen faced increasing pressure to pursue the cause of independence. Demand for the legislation of a referendum law was an outgrowth of such pressure. Meanwhile, environmental groups were also asking for a national referendum. The DPP had long advocated an anti-nuclear power policy, but Chen Shui-bian eventually abandoned this platform and agreed to resume the fourth nuclear power plant project. Chen's decision was read as a betrayal of the DPP's progressive ideals and hence alienated many reform groups that had allied for many years with the party. Clearly, the DPP was not willing to put environmental and other social issues to referendum at this time.

A referendum law became a hot issue once again two years before Chen's reelection. In the summer of 2002, Chen took the initiative in bringing up the issue of sovereignty by asserting that "there is one country on each side" (一邊一國) of the Taiwan Strait and called for a referendum law to ratify this position.⁸ The issue of national security was looming large as the election year approached, but an unexpected episode led to a twist in the referendum drama: the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic that struck Taiwan in the spring of 2003. Despite the widening of the crisis, Taipei found itself unable to obtain sufficient information from the World Health Organization (WHO) in a timely manner. Moreover, Taiwan had over the years sought in vain to obtain membership in the WHO, an affiliate of the United Nations. Chen blamed China for blocking Taiwan's access to the organization—interference that aroused the indignation of the Taiwan people. When Taiwan's application was turned down yet again by the WHO in May, Chen called for the creation of a referendum law to resolve the problem.⁹ SARS thus quickened the pace of legislation. In November, Chen further announced that a new constitution would be approved via a national referendum in 2006.¹⁰ Though both Beijing and Washington were quite concerned by this new development, external interference did not hinder the passage of the Referendum Act. The pan-Blue opposition, with its majority in the legislature, was able to write the Referendum Act in such a way that not only set extremely high hurdles on such citizen initiative but also severely limited the government's power to invoke the law.

⁸ *Lianhe bao*, August 4, 2002, page 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, May 21, 2003, page 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, November 12, 2003, page 1.

To the DPP, the Act was unusable and derided as a **constraining “bird-cage law.”** Paradoxically, Chen was able to find a loophole in Article 17 of the Act, a “defensive clause” which authorizes the President to call for a national referendum when the country faces a threat of sovereignty alternation; Chen thus argued that the hundreds of missiles deployed by China against Taiwan constituted such a threat. Determined to conduct the defensive referendum, President Chen backed off, however, after U.S. President George W. Bush uttered harsh words against Taiwan in a public meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) in late 2003.¹¹ Chen softened his rhetoric by crafting two carefully tailored referendum questions.¹²

The referendum was originally advocated by the opposition in the 1980s as a mass movement in pursuit of national self-determination. Along with the advance of electoral democracy, however, the DPP has adeptly transformed this mass-line strategy into a campaign-linked tactic. The events leading to the March 20 referendum, coupled with the presidential election itself, brought to the fore ethnic and national-identity cleavages on Taiwan. The national security referendum was annulled as only 45 percent of eligible voters cast referendum ballots, short of the 50 percent minimum requirement.

The Referendum as a New Social Movement Repertoire

Apart from national security concerns, there has also been a social movement dimension to the referenda. During Taiwan’s political transition in the 1980s, political rallies organized by the opposition as well as popular protests sprung up in an effort to end KMT authoritarian rule. Such social movements began to ebb in the mid-1990s, however, due to several factors. First, the alliance between the DPP and many social movements were weakened ever since the DPP adopted the “general line of election” strategy.¹³ Many social movement organizers have now moved from the social to the political arena. The DPP’s “Clausewitzian action logic” has thereby resulted in the social movement being short of personnel and resources, thereby arousing collective action difficulties for many reform groups.¹⁴ Second, there was

¹¹ <http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/4/1/5/n442972.htm>.

¹² The first question was: “Should mainland China refuse to withdraw the missiles it has targeted at Taiwan and to openly renounce the use of force against us, would you agree that the government should acquire more advanced antimissile weapons to strengthen Taiwan’s self-defense capabilities?” The second question was: “Would you agree that our government should engage in negotiation with mainland China on the establishment of a ‘peace and stability’ framework for cross-strait integrations in order to build consensus and for the welfare of the peoples on both sides?” See *The New York Times*, January 17, 2004.

¹³ See note 7 above.

¹⁴ The “Clausewitzian action logic” refers to when a social movement is wielded merely as the continuation of political party struggle outside the political establishment. Since the DPP won

a tendency for opposition elites to “shift involvement” from the public to private sphere: many of the public-minded citizens who had enthusiastically taken part in the political democratization began to withdraw back to their private lives.¹⁵ Furthermore, the fact that protest groups were increasingly institutionalized by the establishment and further contained by new techniques of social control may also explain the downturn of the protest cycle.¹⁶

The significance of referendum as a novel repertoire of social movement can also be found in the changing state-society relationship. Since the beginning of Taiwan’s electoral democracy, particularly the peaceful transfer of power in 2000, a simplified dyadic model of state-society confrontation is no longer an accurate prism through which to view trends in social movements. If the DPP has lost its leadership over social movements, who can take the initiative in pushing for social reform? Moreover, as the conventional movement repertoire, including confrontational action, has failed to mobilize those with existing social grievances, what other kind of collective action can perform this task? These questions have been challenging activists in Taiwan. In fact, spontaneous citizen initiative at the grass-roots level emerged as early as 1990.¹⁷ That year, the residents of a village in Kaohsiung (高雄) held a referendum to decide whether they approved of the proposed construction of a major petrochemical plant in their community. Over the next ten years, many localities conducted or proposed referenda on such other issues as ecology, livelihood, gender, education, and civil engineering projects (see Appendix). Despite the fact that these referenda were not legally-binding, grass-roots groups and local authorities have clearly shown enthusiasm in taking the initiative.

Most significant has been the development of the anti-nuclear power

control of the central government in 2000, social issues have to a large extent been excluded from the reform agenda. See Wu Jieh-min, “Clausewitzian Enchantment: Analyzing the Current Problems of Taiwan’s Social Reform Movement,” *Taiwan shehuixue* (Taiwanese Sociology), no. 4 (December 2002): 159-98.

¹⁵ Cf. Albert Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

¹⁶ Ming-sho Ho has argued that the militant contenders became innocuous lobbyists because of the institutionalization of social movements. See Ming-sho Ho, “Political Democratization and Institutionalization of Environmental Movement in Taiwan (1993-1999),” *Taiwan shehui yanjiu jikan* (Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies), no. 50 (2003): 217-75. Ding-tzan Lii and Wen-yuan Lin, in their analysis of environmental protests, take the view that a new form of Foucauldian governmentality as social control techniques has transformed the nature of the social movement. See Ding-tzan Lii and Wen-yuan Lin, “The Transformation of Social Forces: Organizational Techniques in Taiwan’s Environmental Protests,” *ibid.*, no. 52 (2003): 57-120.

¹⁷ In fact, the idea that people vote to decide a public policy dispute had been proposed in 1986 by a Lukang (鹿港) environmental group that fought against a chemical plant project. See Ming-sho Ho, “Public Referenda in Taiwan’s Environmental Movement” (Paper presented at the conference on “Public Referenda in Taiwan,” Taiwan Thinktank, Taipei, February 6, 2004; in Chinese).

movement.¹⁸ Several large-scale rallies for the cause have been held over the last fifteen years. Yet, the movement has had a diminishing impact on both the government and the public for the above-mentioned reasons. Under the current atmosphere of apathy, a few activists have thus been seeking to create new frontiers. In 1994, the anti-nuclear power groups proposed a national referendum to resolve the dispute; Lin Yi-hsiung (林義雄), a spiritual leader of the democracy movement, also organized a month-long around-the-island parade to advocate the “no nuke” ideal.

This trail-blazing collective action paved the way for a public discourse combining the goals of eco-environmental protection on the one hand, and the referendum as a repertoire of social movement on the other. Encouraged by the movement, several local governments ruled by the DPP in the north have held referenda on the dispute of nuclear power policy. The dispute particularly heightened after the DPP came to power. A poll by the KMT in 2000 showed that 78 percent of the respondents would support the holding of a referendum on nuclear policy.¹⁹ In 2002, Lin Yi-hsiung led yet another around-the-island march in order to continue putting pressure on the government. Generally speaking, civil society has, since the beginning of regime change, often moved faster than the political forces in seeking social reform. Societal initiatives in direct democracy have thus added an innovative element to the waning strength of social movements.

A Comparison of the Two Discourses

To sum up, the Blue-Green tango—Chen’s gambit and the pan-Blue’s counteraction—represented a discourse of state-centric elitism that saw the referendum primarily as an extended battlefield of power contention in terms of national security. This is why the March 20 referendum was labeled “populist” and “illegal.”²⁰ From the state-centered perspective, the referendum has been utilized by the new ruling elite in order to achieve their political goals through top-down mobilization. The issues targeted have been constitutional revision, sovereignty, and national identity under a rhetorical imperative of “national security” (see table below). To many critics, the problem is not that the country’s security was not a real concern, but rather the way in which Chen manipulated the issue out of self-interest and

¹⁸ For recent survey of the movement, see *ibid.*; Wei-chieh Lai, “Whose Referenda?” (Mimeo, Taiwan Thinktank, 2003); and Kuo-lung Chang, “Public Referenda and the Anti-Nuclear Movement” (Paper presented at the conference on “Public Referenda in Taiwan,” Taiwan Thinktank, Taipei, February 6, 2004; in Chinese).

¹⁹ *Lianhe bao*, September 27, 2000, [page 4](#).

²⁰ See, for example, Yi-hua Chiang, “Populist Referendum Sets back the Constitutional Development Again,” *Zhongguo shibao* (China Times), February 20, 2004.

brought about unnecessary external crisis.²¹ As argued by Hsu, given the sensitive situation across the Taiwan Strait, referenda on security issues should be used cautiously, more as a “nuclear weapon” to deter China only at a time of imminent threat.²²

By contrast, the social movement discourse has sought to get rid of the security focus and move the debate to the societal level. The significance of the referendum to society can be interpreted as follows. First, the referendum has been seen as a means of grass-roots collective action to supplement representative democracy and to restrain elite from abusing their power. Huang Wu-hsiung (黃武雄), a pioneer in education reform, has argued that a bottom-up referendum movement could help deepen democracy by cultivating a critically-reasoning public, thereby contributing to social solidarity—an argument contrary to the “anti-populist viewpoint.”²³ Therefore, referendum as a form of indirect democracy could help expand the public sphere. If the public is well informed and given plenty of time for deliberation before casting votes, referenda would embody a culture of public discussion. Above all, a typical argument against direct democracy based on elitist democracy theories holds that the people are ignorant.²⁴ Nonetheless, scholars have duly cautioned that referenda might inadvertently lead to illiberal decisions or put the rights of minorities in jeopardy.²⁵

	National Security	Social Movement
Core theme	State-centered discourse, sovereignty, security issues	Society-centered discourse, social reform
Type of mobilization	Top-down, elitist mobilization, linked to election campaigns	Grass-roots mobilization
Collective action	Outward, defensive,	Proactive, social solidarity

²¹ See, for example, Wu Jieh-min, “Taiwanese Passion Has Dissolved on Boring Political Stage,” *Xinxinwen zhoubao*, no. 881/882 (January 20, 2004): 22-23.

²² Hsu, “The Strategic Implications of Taiwan’s Referendum.”

²³ Huang Wu-hsiung, “Don’t Let the Referendum Stigmatized,” *Zhongguo shibao*, February 26, 2004.

²⁴ Kuo-ming Lin and Dong-sheng Chen, “Referendum and Deliberative Democracy” (Paper presented at the conference on “Public Referenda in Taiwan,” Taiwan Thinktank, Taipei, February 6, 2004). See also note 3 above.

²⁵ See, for example, Yong-xiang Chien, “Honestly Face the Choice of Values behind the Referendum Dispute,” *Xinxinwen zhoubao*, no. 889 (March 17, 2004): 40-41. In addition, many were concerned with the local factions that use referendum to seek “parochial interests,” such as the proposal to build a casino in Penghu County (澎湖縣).

dimension	China-oriented	
Targeted issues	Constitutional revision, independence/unification	Environmental, gender, labor, livelihood, community issues
Characteristics of repertoire	Deterrence of external threat	Deepening democracy, citizen participation, public deliberation

In conclusion, the March 20 referendum has indeed opened up a public debate that has gone beyond the horizon of the Blue-Green political spectrum. Taiwan has not witnessed such a wide-ranging debate on both the meaning of public culture and political participation since the tumultuous years of authoritarian transition. Although the articulation of the social movement perspective on the referendum needs further development, it has nevertheless created a new vision for social reform. The ongoing dispute over Taiwan's proposed NT\$600 billion in arms purchases from the United States has prompted many civic groups to initiate a referendum movement that enlists both the pan-Blue and pan-Green constituencies.²⁶ Undoubtedly, this development was not foreseen by anyone who spoke either for or against the March 20 referendum in terms of national security.

²⁶ <http://ec.chinatimes.com/scripts/chinatimes/iscstext.exe?DB=ChinaTimes&Function=ListDoc&From=1&Single=1;>
[http://news.chinatimes.com/Chinatimes/newslist/newslist-content/0,3546,110501+112004092200022,00.html.](http://news.chinatimes.com/Chinatimes/newslist/newslist-content/0,3546,110501+112004092200022,00.html)

Appendix: A Brief Chronology of the Referendum Movement in Taiwan: 1986-2004

- 1986 * DPP is formed.
- # Environmental groups in Lukang (Changhua County 彰化縣) propose people's direct vote to decide on a proposed Du Pont chemical plant.
- 1988 * DPP calls for a referendum movement.
- 1990 * DPP asserts that the constitutional amendment should be approved by a national referendum.
- # Houing (後勁; Kaohsiung City) holds a referendum over a disputed petrochemical plant project.
- * Premier Hao Pei-tsun (郝柏村) makes stern statement against holding any referendum on Taiwan's status.
- * A civic association for the promotion of referendum is formed.
- 1991 * DPP adds an "independence article" to its charter, requiring a referendum on the issue of independence.
- 1992 * DPP organizes a mass rally to advocate Taiwan's UN membership, direct election of the President, and the implementation of referenda.
- 1993 * President Lee expresses support for a referendum law. Legislators of both parties begin to draft related bills.
- # Students at National Taiwan University holds a referendum to abolish military training.
- 1994 # Gongliao (貢寮; Taipei County) holds a referendum on the disputed fourth nuclear power plant.
- # Anti-nuclear power groups advocate a holding of a national referendum to resolve the dispute.
- # Lin Yi-hsiung leads an around-the-island parade to advocate the holding of a referendum on the fourth nuclear power plant.
- # Taipei County government holds a referendum on the fourth nuclear power plant.

- 1995 # Xizhi (汐止; Taipei County) holds a referendum on civil engineering projects.
A community in Taipei City holds a referendum on a park project.
- 1996 # Taipei City government holds a referendum on the fourth nuclear power plant.
- 1997 * Taipei Mayor Chen Shui-bian states that the only chance to hold a national referendum would be if the DPP becomes the ruling party.
- 1998 # Ilan County (宜蘭縣) government holds a referendum on the fourth nuclear power plant.
A community in Taipei holds a referendum on a hospital project.
- 1999 # An organization of “public prostitutes” calls for a referendum to resolve the issue of legalized prostitution.
* DPP passes a resolution on Taiwan’s future status: any change of the status quo must be determined by a national referendum. This resolution subtly changes the DPP’s stance on independence without altering the party’s original charter.
- 2000 * Chen Shui-bian is elected President.
The dispute over the fourth nuclear power plant resurfaces. A poll by the KMT shows that 78 percent of respondents would opt for the use of a referendum to resolve the issue.
- 2001 # DPP government announces the resumption of the fourth nuclear power plant.
KMT opposes holding a referendum on the fourth nuclear power plant.
- 2002 * President Chen articulates his “one country on each side” view of cross-Strait relations and advocates a referendum law to ratify this concept.
Lin Yi-hsiung leads another around-the-island parade to advocate the use of referendum to determine the fate of the fourth nuclear power plant.
Zhubei (Hsinchu County; 新竹縣竹北) holds a referendum on a proposed incinerator.
* President Chen states that Taiwan’s future should be determined by referendum.

- 2003
- * The SARS outbreak strikes. Taiwan reapplies for WHO membership, but is rejected again. President Chen urges a referendum on Taiwan's WHO entry.
 - * American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) informs President Chen that the United States opposes Taiwan's use of the referendum in general.
 - * Pan-Blue leaders give public support to use of referendum to solve public policy disputes.
 - * President Chen promises to hold a referendum on the fourth nuclear power plant sometime during his incumbency.
 - # Pinglin (坪林; Taipei County) holds a referendum on a highway intersection project.
 - # Jiji (Nantou County; 南投縣集集鎮) holds a referendum on a proposed incinerator.
 - * President Chen states that a new constitution will be the subject of a referendum in 2006.
 - * China opposes the legislation of referendum law in Taiwan.
 - * Legislative Yuan passes the Referendum Act. President Chen states he will invoke Article 17 of the Act as the basis on which to hold a "defensive referendum."
 - * U.S. State Department expresses opposition to any unilateral change of the status quo.
 - # Penghu County government holds a referendum on a proposed casino.
- 2004
- * The two "320 peace referenda" questions are announced by President Chen.
 - * Chen Shui-bian is reelected President. The referenda are annulled given that only 45 percent of eligible voters participate.
 - # Civic groups begin to initiate a referendum movement against Taiwan's proposed NT\$600 billion arms purchases from the United States.

Note: * indicates political and national security-related events; # indicates social movement and locally-initiated referenda. Data compiled by the author based on *Lianhe bao* (聯合報, United Daily News) electronic news archives.