

## **4 Party Politics, Unexpected Democratization, and Hopeful Consolidation in Mongolia**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Mongolia's transition to democracy in the 1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union and its consolidation of democratic norms and institutions have been considered unexpected, given that it lacked the structural factors that tend to support democratization. Although Mongolia was officially an independent state during the Soviet times, almost all aspects of politics, economy, and the society were fully Sovietized. Economic forces also would have pushed against the tide of democratization—at the time of the transition Mongolia was a lower-middle income country that depended on production of primary goods, such as agriculture and natural resource extraction, as well as on its economic relationship with other Soviet economies. Mongolia's democratization could not benefit from proximity to Western democracies and their influence, as it has been surrounded by authoritarian neighbors, Russia and China. The singularity of Mongolia's democratic choice led it to be called an “oasis of democracy,” in the words of the former U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry.<sup>1</sup>

Mongolia's democracy is not without its challenges, but its democratic status was confirmed most recently in the 2017 and 2021 Presidential and 2016 and 2020 Parliamentary elections. These elections were generally characterized as free and fair and led to peaceful transfers of power. The Mongolian People's Party (MPP) won the parliamentary majority in landslide in 2016 overthrowing a coalition led by the Democratic Party (DP) and succeeded in continuing its dominance in the legislative branch in the 2020 election. The Presidential election in 2017 featured an intense competition among three candidates and brought in a new President, Battulga Khaltmaa, from the DP in place of the previous President, Elbegdorj Tsahia, from the same party. Khurelsukh Ukhnaa from the MPP replaced Battulga in the 2021 Presidential election.

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<sup>1</sup> Yeganeh Torbati. 2016. “Kerry hails Mongolia as ‘oasis of democracy’ in tough neighborhood.” Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mongolia/kerry-hails-mongolia-as-oasis-of-democracy-in-tough-neighborhood-idUSKCN0YR02T> Accessed October 15, 2020.

Mongolia's considerable success in establishing and sustaining itself as a democratic polity is particularly noteworthy (Fish 1998; Fritz 2008) in the current political climate around the world. Democracy has backslid in many countries that were previously considered established democracies. Some deem the leader of the free world, the U.S., to be in process of renouncing its democratic ideals. Three of the developing world's largest democracies, India, Brazil, and the Philippines, are governed by politicians with authoritarian tendencies. Countries that embodied the democratic possibilities after a long-standing totalitarian influence of the Soviet Union similar to Mongolia—Poland and Hungary—have relapsed into partial to full dictatorship.

Mongolia's unanticipated shift and adherence to democratic governance despite structural challenges suggests that social scientists ought to look beyond structural factors to explain variations in democratization around the world. The recent fluctuations in the democratic commitments of formerly democratic polities, despite the relative stability of structural conditions in these countries, highlight the urgency and importance of agency-based theories in the study of democracies. Scholars have already started to take notable steps in this direction, as exemplified in the works of Rustow (1970) and O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) and more recently Bermeo and Yashar (2016).

This chapter builds on the scholarship that emphasizes agency-based analytical approaches and argues that the choices made by political elites and the opposition over time have played an important role in Mongolia's transition to and consolidation of democracy. The main goal of this chapter is to lay out how political parties emerged as the main institution to facilitate democratic competition and argue that this facilitation is one of the factors that made unlikely democracy possible in a landlocked country. In order to achieve this goal, this chapter draws on data from statistical sources, interviews, and secondary documents and argue that political parties emerged as an indispensable institutional mechanism to coordinate actions and policies of the actors that facilitated democratic transition and consolidation. Specifically, political parties have served three main functions. First, it provided organizational avenues, through which to coordinate different preferences. Second, parties allowed political contestants to present policy options to voters coherently. Third, parties became a mechanism to hold those in power accountable. Nonetheless, party competition in Mongolia faces programmatic and organizational challenges that may threaten the quality of democracy.

The next section provides a general overview of political parties in Mongolia and their characterizations and analyzes the ways in which political parties have promoted democratic practices. The third section discusses the challenges political parties, particularly the MPP and the DP, ought to address. The fourth section discusses the policy implications and provides some concluding thoughts.

## **POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY IN MONGOLIA**

Political parties are endemic to democratization and democratic polities. However, Stokes (1999) notes that constitutions of most democracies do not specify their role and that they are not part of theoretical definitions of democracies. Scholarship on the emergence of parties in democratic politics broadly takes two approaches in explaining the emergence of parties. The first approach emphasizes the necessity created by features of a democratic legislature to translate multi-dimensional issues to decisions under majority rule (Aldrich 1995, Schattschneider 1942).

Political parties may also facilitate more effective negotiations between pro-democracy reformers and authoritarian leaders during democratic transitions. This approach can be characterized as a top-to-bottom approach, as it highlights the ways in which members of the parliament solves problems and organically develop parties to make decision-making easier and to attract support from the population to elevate their position within the parliament. The second manner of analysis takes a bottom-up approach, as it concentrates on the natural advantage that parties bring to electoral competition—they may make candidate recognition easier to voters and smoothen the challenge of coordinating resources required for elections.

### **Historical Roles of Parties and Democratic Transition in Mongolia**

The emergence of political parties as the main institutional mechanism of political competition in Mongolia during and after the democratic transition is in some ways not surprising. As nomads, Mongolians lived scattered across a large land, close to that of all of western Europe, and often moved around based on availability of pasture for their stocks even during the Soviet times. The main institution that was prominent in Mongolians' lives for the 70 years as a Soviet satellite state was its communist political party, Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP). Prominent social organization units, such as the herder collectives (*negdels*), professional unions, and youth

organizations, were under the direct control of the MPRP and their membership did not result from individuals' genuine will for association up to 1990. Therefore, as Soviet social and political structure disintegrated in 1990, alternative means of association, preference aggregation, and state-society relations to parties were notably absent in the socio-political space in Mongolia.

In this context, parties were the natural institutional choice to organize political preferences and competition around in Mongolia at and since the time of its democratic transition. As Mongolia adopted and consolidated a democratic form of governance, political parties played three notable roles. First, it provided organizational avenues, through which to coordinate different preferences. Second, parties allowed political contestants to present policy options to voters coherently. Third, parties became a mechanism to hold those in power accountable.

The transition process itself evolved around the organization of political parties, as preferences for open politics started to manifest within the society in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The communist ruling party, MPRP, adapted to these preferences and started to discuss the need to change their approach as early as mid-1980s. In 1984, the long-standing leader of the MPRP, Tsedenbal Yumjaa, who ruled since 1952, was deposed. The new leader, Batmunkh Jamba, was an arguably "less entrenched and more pragmatic" (Fritz 2008, 769) personality. Batmunkh tried to imitate the "openness" and "restructuring" reforms of the Soviet ruler Mihael Gorbachev after 1986 (Atwood 2004). Although Batmunkh was clearly a member of the old communist party and follower of the communist doctrine, he had to be more open-minded for the prospect of democratic Mongolia than he perhaps would have been if he had not tried to follow Russia's attempts to open up. As a result, criticism from within the MPRP of Mongolia's communist history and leadership of Tsedenbal, which would have been an offense worthy of expulsion from the Party before the mid-1980s, became acceptable and commonplace. Reformists, such as the Deputy Premier Byambasuren Dash<sup>2</sup>, began to dominate the internal debates and structures of the MPRP and challenge the existing structure of the party in the following years.

The pro-democracy opposition, which consisted of various groups led by academics, also eventually organized themselves into parties realizing that adjusting to this form of organization

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<sup>2</sup> Byambasuren was later appointed to be the Prime Minister by Mongolia's first democratically elected Parliament and served in office from 1990 to 1992.

would allow them to be competent challengers to incumbents. The early pro-democracy movements formed into three groups—Mongolian Democratic Association (MDA), Democratic Socialist Association (MSA), and the New Progressive Association (NPA). In March 1990, these associations officially became parties, the Mongolian Democratic Party (MDP), the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the National Progress Party (NPP), respectively. The new parties immediately demanded from the MPRP that party and the government be officially separated as soon as possible. In addition to these main pro-democracy movements, public organizations that focus on specific issues started to register as political parties, reflecting the realization that political parties are necessary means to participate in political competition and represent social issues and preferences. For example, the Women’s Association and the Mongolian Revolutionary Youth League registered as political parties (Atwood 2004). Single-issue parties, such as the Mongolian Green Party, also emerged on the political scene.

The legislative elections in 1990 and 1992 crystalized the need for further cohesion among the pro-democracy forces. The main three pro-democracy parties participated in the 1990 election as three separate parties and lost the majority to MPRP— the former communist party won 358 seats in the upper chamber of the parliament whereas the MDP, SDP, and NPP only received 17, 4, and 6 seats, respectively. MDP and NPP joined forces in the 1992 election as Mongolian National Democratic Party (MNDP)<sup>3</sup>, but with similarly dismal results, as they won 4 combined seats against the MPRP’s 70 out of 76 parliamentary seats in 1992. They went into the 1996 election with a decidedly different strategy. They coalesced further as Democratic Union Coalition (DUC) and invested significant amount of time and resources into expanding their parties. They established branches outside of the capital city in the provinces and coordinated their nominations in various electoral districts (Fish 1998). Compared to the earlier two elections, they had more organizational capital, as western entities that promote democracy, such as Germany’s Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the U.S. International Republican Institute, provided indirect support to the opposition leaders (Rossabi 2017). Consequently, the DUC was generously rewarded in the election, as they won 50 out of 76 seats in the Parliament.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the MDP and NPP, the United Party was part of this coalition party.

These initial developments suggest that the processes of transforming social preferences to decisions and of political competition were organized based on political parties as institutions. Instead of remaining as an inflexible and staunch guardian of dictatorship, the MPRP reformed and evolved into a party able to participate in democratic political competition. The liberal opposition also arranged their views and resources around a party platform. In addition, parties provided electorates of the new democracy with visible and distinct policy choices that corresponded to different political and social preferences. Two policy areas from the 1990s are noteworthy.

First, the coalition of pro-democracy reformers offered voters an alternative vision of the nation on the ballot. The antitraditional nature of the Soviet regime gave the democrats an advantage that they took on successfully in the early years of transition. During the decades of socialism, the MPRP aimed to forcibly convert a Buddhist and nomadic society into a secular and industrial one. Choibalsan Khorloo, often said to be Mongolia's Stalin, exterminated the Buddhist clergy in a country-wide purge. In 1954, Choibalsan's successor, Tsedenbal Yumjaa, banned celebration of one of the largest traditional holidays, the Lunar New Year. In 1962, he carried out a purge of his rivals who he accused of nationalism in what became known as the "Chinggis Khan controversy." Despite the efforts of the communist party and its leaders, however, traditional ideas and practices persisted in the lives of most Mongolians. At the time of Mongolia's democratic transition, over two-thirds of Mongolians lived outside of Ulaanbaatar and roughly two-thirds of them made their living as pastoral nomads in a way that predates installment of communism in Mongolia (National Statistical Office of Mongolia 2019). Non-urban Mongolians sustained their customs and kept the symbols of the Mongolian nation alive in oral histories. In the countryside and the city alike, many still practiced Buddhism in private (Topping 1981).

From the first set of demonstrations that demanded democracy in 1989 and 1990, the democrats highlighted that the MPRP attempted to undermine Mongolia's history and heritage for decades and successfully linked the establishment of democracy with protecting the Mongol identity and Mongolia's independence. Symbolic and discursive references to Mongolia's history particularly the Mongol Empire period, shamanistic and Buddhist religious practices, and traditional Mongolian script were as noticeably present in the democrats' words and actions as discussions of freedom, human rights, and rule of law.

The democrats officially put the national identity issue on the ballot, as they promised to get restitution for the wrongs done by the MPRP. When mass graves of Buddhist monks purged in the early Soviet period were unearthed in 1995, the democrats jumped on the case, using a documentary on the findings extensively in their 1996 electoral campaign. Many members of the coalition credited the documentary for their subsequent win at the polls. (Buyandelger 2013).

Another policy issue that the democrats used to distinguish themselves from the MPRP in the early days of democratization is economic reforms. While realizing the need for change in Mongolia's economic model, the MPRP took a statist approach towards the economy in the 1990s. In contrast, democrats pushed for economic liberalism and free markets in their election programs. In 1996, the DUC promised to further push the privatization agenda forward, invest in integrating Mongolia's economy with regional and the world economy better, and establish additional state bodies to handle liberalization efforts. These were welcome promises to the population, who viewed the progress made in the early 1990s by the MPRP too slow and ambivalent.

Parties also have been used to ensure vertical accountability in Mongolian politics and governance. Vertical accountability refers to the ability of a country's population to hold its government accountable and parties play a critical role in it (Lührmann, Marquardt, and Mechkova 2020). Vertical accountability is facilitated through laws, notably constitutions, but the extent of its implementation rests in the hands of citizens and officeholders. In Mongolia, parties served as the main tool to ensure vertical accountability. The most vivid example of this is the fact that the electorate awarded the office of the President and the majority in the Parliament to the two major parties in a balanced manner over the past thirty years. In other words, Mongolians tended to choose a President from a party that occupies the role of minority/opposition party in the incumbent Parliament. This is an implication of a semi-presidential system that is facilitated by strong and institutionalized parties. In the first presidential election, Ochirbat Punsalmaa, a former member of the MPRP who switched to run with the democratic bloc, emerged victorious. Ochirbat initially intended to run from MPRP, but his pro-reform rhetoric and inclination led the MPRP to reject him as a potential candidate and put forward a hardliner Tudev Lodon instead. It is possible that the MPRP incorrectly inferred from its own overwhelming victory in the 1992 parliamentary election that majority of voters aligned with a conservative approach to social and economic problems. Ochirbat's win in 1993 resulted in "a de facto balance of power between a parliament

controlled by Mongolia's dominant party, and a president who stood in moderate opposition to this party." (Fritz 2008, 777). The legislative election of 1996 and the presidential election of 1997 reversed the roles of the parties—the democratic coalition won in the former while the MPRP's candidate, Bagabandi Natsag, dominated in the latter. However, the de facto balance of power continued until the end of the 1990s.

The elections in the early 2000s changed this pattern of balance of power, as the MPRP once again won in a landslide in the 2000 parliamentary election and Bagabandi kept the president's office in the 2001 presidential election. The subsequent elections in 2004 and 2005 maintained the status quo with the MPRP barely winning a majority again in the former and its candidate Enkhbayar Nambar succeeding in the latter. However, at this point democracy has already been established as the "only game in town" and the indispensability of parties to democratic governance (O'Donnell 1998) had become apparent to politicians and citizens alike. The MPRP adapted to this reality and experts had come to characterize the MPRP as a "disciplined, center-left party committed to parliamentary democracy" (Tkacik 2005). While observing the election at the end of the MPRP reign, a New York Times reporter notes that, despite allegations of election fraud and contestation of results, "no one talks of an authoritarian option" (Brooke 2004). The tradition of party alternations in the legislative branch and executive head of the state continued on in the 2008/9 and 2016/7 elections—the MPP won a slight majority again in 2008, though it built a coalition government with the Democratic Party (DP)<sup>4</sup>, and a candidate of the DP and one of the initial democrats, Elbegdorj Tsahia, became the President in 2009. In the 2016 Parliamentary election, the MPP once again won in a landslide winning 65 out of 76 seats. The leader of the MPP, Enkhbold Miyegombo, ran for the Presidency in 2017, but lost to the DP's candidate, Battulga Khaltmaa. The 2021 Presidential election, in which the MPP chairman Khurelsukh Ukhnaa won, manifested a change in this pattern, as currently the MPP holds power in both branches of government.

This critical role that parties played for Mongolia's democratic transitions led some to conclude that political parties practically drove Mongolia's democratization. Fish (1998) writes that "Mongolia's transition demonstrates the enormous potential of political parties to advance democratization... [S]trong parties in Mongolia have been a crucial cause, rather than a mere effect, of regime change. Mongolia's experience highlights the usefulness of sometimes treating parties and party systems as explanatory factors whose strength, magnitude, inclusiveness, and

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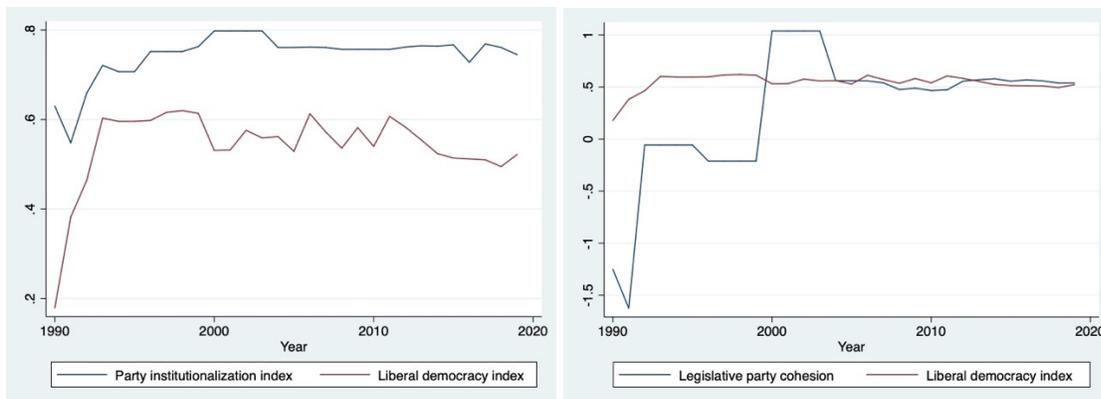
<sup>4</sup> The DUC (MNDP, SDP, United Party) eventually co-founded the Democratic Party in the 2000.

differentiation may crucially shape political outcomes. In this sense, the Mongolian case suggests the value of returning to and building upon some of the classic literature on political development that treated parties as prime movers rather than as effects.” (Fish 1998, 139–140.)

### **The Political Party System and its Features During Consolidation**

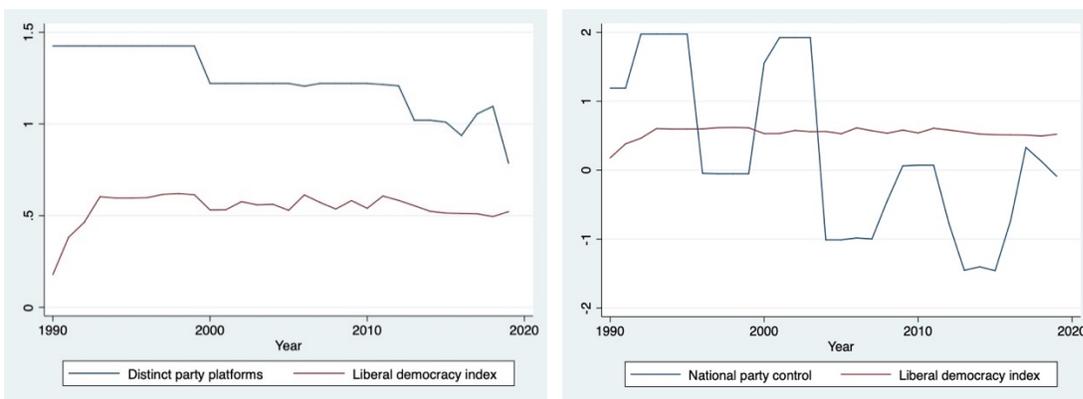
Since the first decade of democratic transition parties remained to be a key political body in Mongolia. The importance of parties for political decisions grew as well as the level of institutionalization of parties. Figure 4.1 depicts Party Institutionalization Index (PII) and Legislative Party Cohesion (LPC) index against the measure of Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), which measures the extent to which various ideals of liberal democracy have been achieved in a country in a given year. All measures come from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. The PII gauges the extent to which parties have established themselves as institutions, whereas the LPC approximates the extent to which members of the Parliament vote with the party.

The first image shows that overall level of party institutionalization in Mongolia during the early years of transition was mediocre, but it improved since 2000, reaching its highest point from 2000 through 2003 when the MPRP controlled both the presidency and the parliament. Institutionalization declined slightly in the following years, but generally remained high in the 2000s and 2010s. The measure of LPC was particularly low between 1990 and 1992, reflecting the chaotic years in which both the MPRP and the democrats were trying to figure out their positions and alignment with various political forces. After the election in 1992, LPC continued to go up, again reaching its peak in 2000. After the 2004 legislative election, which ended up in a practically hung parliament, the level of party-focused voting went down and remained steady so far. Overall, Figure 4.1 suggests that parties as institutions have been strong and steady in democratic Mongolia.



**FIGURE 4.1** Measures of Party Institutionalization and Legislative Party Cohesion Indices against the Liberal Democracy Index in Mongolia Since 1990  
**Source:** Coppedge et al. 2020

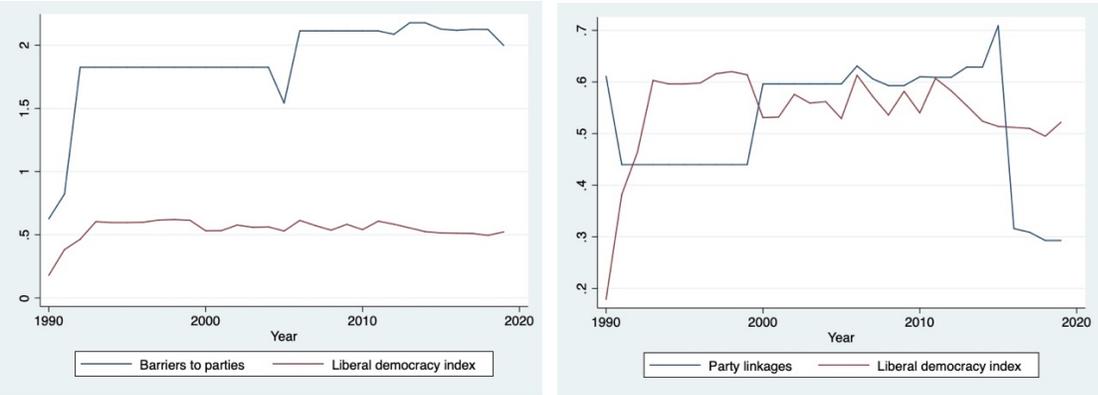
Figure 4.2 shows similar depictions of Distinct Party Platforms (DPP) and National Party Control (NPC) over time. The former measures the number of established political parties with distinguishable party platforms and the latter the extent of party diversity in power and control over the national government. Both measures were rather high in the first half of the time Mongolia has been a democracy. The overall conclusion is that the party platforms became more similar over time and that the national government has been increasingly controlled by various parties.



**FIGURE 4.2** Measures of Distinct Party Platforms and National Party Control indices against the Liberal democracy index in Mongolia since 1990

Lastly, Figure 4.3 shows two additional measures—Barriers to Parties (BP) and Party Linkage (PL). BP assesses how restrictive the barriers are to forming a party, higher numbers indicating lower barrier. PL considers the dominant way in which major parties are linked to their

constituents. Lower number indicates more clientelist connection and higher number stands for more policy-oriented and programmatic link. The first image reflects the fact that establishing a political party has become easier in Mongolia over time. The second image demonstrates that the nature of the relationship between parties and citizens have been volatile during democratic transition and consolidation. When democracy was adopted in Mongolia, parties were linked to its constituents through their policy positions. This link quickly transformed into a more clientelistic relationship in the first decade of transition. The importance of policy and programs for this relationship increased between 2000 and 2016, rapidly deteriorating after the 2016 parliamentary election.



**FIGURE 4.3** Measures of Barriers to Parties (BP) and Party Linkage (PL) indices against the Liberal democracy index in Mongolia since 1990  
**Source:** Coppedge et al. 2020

Another interesting indicator to look at in order to examine the characteristic of parties in democratic Mongolia is the effective number of parties against registered parties and electoral systems. Table 4.1 shows these measures.

**TABLE 4.1** *Electoral Systems and Effective Number of Parties in Mongolia (1992-2020)*

	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
Registered parties				21*		21	24	36
Electoral system	Plurality with 26 multi-member districts	Majoritarian <sup>^</sup> with 76 single-member districts	Majoritarian <sup>^</sup> with 76 single-member districts	Majoritarian <sup>^</sup> with 76 single-member districts	Plurality with 26 multi-member districts	Mixed member proportional system (majoritarian <sup>^</sup> 26 multi-member districts (48 seats) and 28 seats from party lists)	Plurality with 76 single-member districts	Plurality with 29 multi-member districts
ENP (Votes)	2.72	2.58	3.25	2.33	2.26	4.02	3.12	3.65
ENP (Seats)	1.08	1.84	1.11	2.23	2.03	2.95	1.34	1.46

**Sources:** Information on election systems comes from the General Election Commission and Constitutional Court reports, Erdenebileg 2021, and Altankhuyag, 2021.

<sup>^</sup>Elections in 1996, 2000, and 2004 required the winners to obtain 25%+1 votes, not the typical 50%+1. If no candidate reached the threshold, a second round of voting must take place. In the 2012 election, majoritarian rule was defined as obtaining 28%+1 votes.

Author's calculations based on data on election outcomes using methodology from Laakso and Taagepera (1979). Coalitions are counted as one party in the calculations. The numbers of registered parties come from various sources, including the Supreme Court, [www.ikon.mn](http://www.ikon.mn), and the General Election Commission. Vote and seat share information is collected from various sources, including the General Election Commission, Parliament, and [www.ikon.mn](http://www.ikon.mn). In case of conflicting information, I follow the most official outlet.

\*As of 2005, as documented in Gerelt-Od Erdenebileg (2005). "Democracy in Mongolia and Political Parties." Shine Toli. 52. <http://www.academy.edu.mn/content/монголын-ардчилал-ба-улс-төрийн-намуу/> Accessed October 10, 2020.

Generally, the number of registered parties in Mongolia has been increasing, perhaps reflecting the earlier observation that barrier to creating a political party has been minimal. Effective number of parties in terms of vote share has been following a similar trend overall. Effective number of parties in terms of parliamentary seats, however, is going in the other direction. The numbers suggest that 1-2 parties have been dominating in the legislative branch over the past 30 years. ENP on district level seem to closely mirror the pictures on the national level (See Maskarinec 2017, 152 for ENP on district levels for 1996, 2000, and 2004).

In 2012, the ENP indicators reached its highest values, because the 2012 election produced the widest distribution of votes in terms of parties in the history of democratic Mongolia. The democrats in the DP won a total of 34 seats, whereas the MPP received 26. Justice Coalition, a combination of the MPRP and MNDP, came in the third place capturing 11 seats in the parliament. This is the highest number of seats taken by a third party in Mongolia in the past 30 years. Note that the MPRP and MNDP that constituted the Justice Coalition are not to be confused with parties with the same name mentioned earlier in this paper. The MPRP, the remnant of the communist party, divided into two different parties in 2010, as its former leader Enkhbayar Nambar separated from the party with a splinter group. Enkhbayar's splinter party took the name MPRP following a legal battle and the former MPRP re-named itself as the Mongolian People's Party (MPP). Enkhbayar's new party, MPRP, was a constituent part of the Justice Coalition. The other half of the Coalition, MNDP, is also a new party that was established in 2005 and is different from the MNDP that became a co-founder of the DP.

The main reason behind the higher number of ENP in 2012 is that Mongolia used a mixed system that combined majoritarian multi-member districts with proportionality-based party list. The Justice Coalition received 4 seats from the districts but expanded their seats to 11 in accordance with the proportionality rule. These numbers highlight the intricate relationship between electoral system and the party landscape. The volatility of electoral systems in Mongolia is a challenge for Mongolian parties—through the eight democratic elections, electoral rules changed five times (Sambuu 2020b) suggesting that most of the elections ran under differing rules.

Notably, the last two changes in electoral rules in 2016 and 2020 turned less representative, as they took on a plurality system with either single member or multi-member districts. As a result,

the ENP has been decreasing in the two most recent elections with the MPP winning overwhelming majority in both elections. This is despite the high number of registered as well as running parties—in 2020 the Supreme Court lists 36 registered parties and record-number of 13 parties and four coalitions, in addition to 121 independents, nominated candidates in the 2020 election (Sambuu 2020a). This reflects the broader trend in election outcomes in Mongolia that candidates that are not elected have received more votes than candidates that made it to the Parliament in every election since 2008. Such discrepancy brings up questions about the legitimacy of the Parliament and the electoral systems that have led to these outcomes.

### **The Two Main Parties and their Features**

The effective number of parties on the national level reflects the fact that two parties emerged prominent in Mongolian politics. They are the continuation of the communist-era party, MPP, and the eventual union of the democrats, the DP. Some observers note that the two-party system in Mongolia has been relatively established. In this section, I describe the general features of the two parties, based on secondary sources as well as interviews conducted with researchers and party members.

Do the two main political parties differ in terms of party platforms and policy positions? Generally, researchers characterize the MPP as a social democratic, center-left party and the DP as center-right. Figure 4.2 above suggests that the overall number of parties with distinguishable party platform has been declining over the past three decades. This is consistent with the statements from the interviewees, who criticize both major parties for being unfaithful to and vague about their ideological and policy positions. Particularly when it comes to economic policies the two parties' policies are hard to fit into one category, although in theory the DP differs from the MPP in that it promotes the role of the private sector, business owners, and small and medium businesses, rather than a large state. The commonality is that they both try to appeal to as broad of a base as possible.

However, in regards with political ideologies, some argue that there is a notable difference in the overall approach to governance. An interviewee compared the four years when the DP controlled the Parliament in 2012–2016 versus the years the MPP held majority in 2016–2020.

Parliament under the DP adopted and implemented many laws to increase participation of citizens in the state-society relationship. An example is the General Administrative Law and the Administrative Procedure Law. They established the standards for making administrative decisions and legalized avenues for participation for civil society. As a result of these laws, civil society could sue the bureaucracy, if the latter adopts decisions that violate public interest. They compared these kinds of laws with the fact that one of the first laws the Parliament amended after the MPP's win in 2016 was Law on State Secrets, which allowed the government to define a list of state secrets. As a result, the list of state secrets, which stood at 60 in 2016, grew considerably to 565 within three years (Ikon 2019). They also proposed to amend the General Administrative Law to separate the government from its constituent agencies in the legal sense, so that government agencies would be potentially excluded from being sued by civil society if they violate public interest. The types of laws adopted may highlight the persistence of the MPP's Soviet-style approach to governance in comparison to the more open-minded and participatory approach the DP tries to follow. This may also contribute to what one interviewee describes—the DP and MPP genuinely do compete for votes with each other and appeal to different constituents.

From the perspective of the voters, more weight falls on the DP to be staunch about their values, because arguably the country's current political system was the result of their success in promoting new sets of values. Perhaps as a result of this expectation, the DP is frequently criticized. An interviewee who has been a member of the DP since the early days of transition highlights that until 2000, the party leadership was inspired and guided by their ideological convictions. After that the leaders themselves became confused about the directions of their political beliefs and policies. Their overall commitment to democracy remained, but their interest in power and wealth overshadowed their faith in the importance of liberal values, according to this DP member. The most recent example that attracted widespread condemnation was in March 2020 when the leader of the DP, Erdene Sodnomzundui, questioned the government's decision to allow Mongolians returning from abroad to enter the country during COVID-19 crises. He stated that the policy practically allowed import of COVID-19 virus into the country. Citizens interpreted this statement as a blatant violation of democratic values and talked about it as an example that the DP would do or say anything to score political points before the election in June.

Another interesting issue is the type and level of institutionalization of the parties. Organizationally, the MPP holds an inherent advantage from the Soviet era over the DP. Some Soviet countries took measures to equalize the political landscape by dismantling and taking resources away from the communist party. Mongolia did not go through the same process. Consequently, the MPP kept their properties and physical presence all over the country, including all of Mongolia's 21 provinces. For the current MPP, the main organization is the Great Convention. The Great Convention elects the party leader. It also constitutes the candidates for the Small Convention and an election runs every four years. The Small Convention in turn elects the Secretary General, who leads the work of the executive board. The executive board has offices for legal issues, communication, local affair, and political issues. Then, there are the non-governmental organizations under the party, such as the Association of Social Democratic Youth and Women. The MPP also has its own research organization, Strategy Academy, and publication, The Truth, inherited from the Soviet era. Other parties, including the DP, practically imitated this organizational structure in its entirety—the Great and Small conventions, branches in 21 provinces and 9 districts, and the youth, women's, and elders' organizations. The agenda setting power is mostly the hands of the party leaderships for both parties, though members can propose to include topics in the agenda. Both parties purportedly have anywhere between 180,000–200,000 members, though they seem to be inflated. This mass infrastructure takes up a lot of resources, which both parties compensate for through wealthy backers and candidates. The winning party additionally is accused of using taxpayer money to sustain this system. New relatively successful parties have tried to shift away from this model. For example, the National Labor Party (KHUN) touts itself as a party with no membership.

Aside from organizational structure, the two influential parties differ in a number of aspects. The MPP inherited its personnel policy from the Soviet era, which helped them prepare the next generation of politicians. The MPP is credited to have been preparing leaders in a more systematic manner. The recent appointments of socially influential and educated young individuals to important executive positions (i.e. Vice Minister, Head of an Agency) are seen as a positive step to make a generational shift. The DP's personnel policy and philosophy are difficult to pinpoint and numerous interviewees mentioned it as one of its weaknesses, particularly the conflict, perceived or real, with its younger aspiring leaders.

Another differing point for the DP and MPP is the style of leadership and culture within the parties. Generally, the former is said to have a horizontal leadership structure on the national and provincial level, whereas the latter vertical. The DP's leadership is not concentrated and is frequently contested, and the leadership-member relationship is unorganized. In contrast, the MPP's operation seems to run following an internal party hierarchy and culture. The main reason for the DP's horizontal relationship structure is that the party is formed from an alliance of many parties that emerged in the 1990s. An interviewed member of the DP credits the horizontal structure creating a culture that defies blind obedience to party leadership. However, the transparency that comes with horizontal leadership sometimes harms the party's image, as internal affairs of the party is often well-known to the public. Horizontal leadership also may lead to unclear division of labor and responsibility that, consequently, prevents the party from evolving further. The MPP inherited the Soviet-style hierarchic relationship structure and managed to preserve it until now. One interviewee stated that the former Politburo still lives in the executive board of the MPP. Members aspiring to climb the political ladder know that there is a hierarchy that needs to be respected. Interviewees highlight that the advantage of the vertical system is that it allows the MPP to govern effectively, but the disadvantage is that sometimes it attracts individuals that are not adequately skilled to enter the party and its various levels of leadership.<sup>5</sup>

Internal democracy is another point of comparison for the MPP and the DP. Both parties say it is important for them, but the DP's implementation of this principle appears better than the MPP's. For instance, the two parties elect their party leaders through rather different procedures. The MPP elects its party leader during its convention. The Great Convention, which has 310 members, determines the leader based on simple majority. A party member I interviewed say that there is quite a bit of politics and "framing" that happen before the vote. Usually, the most powerful candidate coordinates the efforts to obtain vote. Some report that leaders of local branches are sometimes tasked with returning a vote result in a certain way. In the DP, candidates running for the party leader's position should present their program to the members of all its branches, including the 21 provinces and 9 districts. Then, members vote. This is a process very similar to

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<sup>5</sup> There is an informal term for those who seek public offices by blindly supporting powerful individuals— "bag holders."

competition for national offices. Party leaders in the provinces are also elected from the entire membership in the given province.

The DP's shift to direct elections for key leadership positions is laudable from the perspective of internal democracy, however, the interviewees pointed out that it also has numerous negative consequences. It amplifies the disagreements within the party, as divided delegates may view the party leader elect as illegitimate. This in turn has contributed to the party's inability to stay united and perform well in national elections. It also wastes considerable resources for the internal races, which could be used for critical national and local elections. The question of resources is particularly critical for the DP, given the much better position of its main opponent MPP. A member of the DP reports that the membership of the DP grew considerably as the party shifted to party-wide election, suggesting that it may have caused institutional distortions for the party as well.

The process of determining the candidates for key national elections seems to be equally centralized and non-transparent for both parties, despite difference in formal guidelines for open competition. For the DP, there are specified procedures for candidates that require the candidates to be active participants in party activities and be up to date on membership dues and donations. For local elections, the DP aims to take a bottom-up approach and the members of a district party branch and the party headquarters must play primary roles in determining who will run for district representative bodies. As for the MPP, the executive board and the party leader make the decision. Nonetheless, informal and ad-hoc rules appear to dominate the nominating procedure, such as to be in good relations with the party leadership and be financially capable of shouldering the expenses incurred during campaigns. As a result, there are often complaints that lower-level party organizations do not have much say in determining candidates, especially for the DP, as members expect wider participation in these processes. It can also lead to a disconnect between a candidate and the voters. As such, some candidates end up running in districts that are not familiar with them and losing the election costing the party.

Generally, internal democracy and transparency are likely to increase after a party loses an election. One interviewee argues that when the times are good, party leadership does not have an incentive to examine the party and improve its connections with their members. Following a

defeat, party leadership is more likely to listen to its members and criticism from challengers, as it is often a period when responsibility is discussed.

## CHALLENGES FACING PARTIES AND PARTY POLITICS IN MONGOLIA

Although parties have played a crucial role for Mongolia’s democracy during transition and consolidation, party politics in Mongolia face several challenges. These are important issues that can threaten the nature of political competition and, subsequently, Mongolia’s democracy. I identify three main challenges to Mongolia’s political parties—notably low public trust in parties, unreliable and unsustainable financing, and potential hegemony of a single party.

One of the most monumental challenges for Mongolian parties is that the public’s confidence in them is not high. The public’s belief in the importance of political parties is closely tied to their belief in the democratic political system. However, the public discourse can be described as being dominated by disdain for the two major parties. One of the interviewees observe that the discourse that parties are unnecessary started to gain some currency in Mongolia.

The Politbarometer surveys from Sant Maral Center provides a temporal view of how confidence in political parties fluctuated over time since the 1990s. I display a sample of years following legislative elections, when available, in Table 2.

**TABLE 4.2** *Measures of Confidence in Political Parties*

	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2018	2019	2020
Very confident	2	3	2	8.5	5.8	4.2	2.9	5.1
Rather confident	25	22	14	27.9	26.8	18.5	20.9	30
Rather not confident	39	36	39	29.7	27.9	32.3	19.4	20.8
Totally not confident	18	20	23	19.5	29.2	40.4	54.3	40.3
No answer/Don’t know	16	19	22	4.8	10.5	4.6	2.4	4

**Source:** Sant Maral Politbarometer

The share of respondents, who expressed high or moderate levels of confidence (Very confident and rather confident), has been almost always lower than those who expressed low confidence in political parties (Rather and totally not confident). This has been true even in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the enthusiasm about multi-party system was rigorous. From the 1990s, the level of confidence in parties have been declining and got a notable boost after the 2008 election. The main reason for this may be the post-election violence in July 2008 that led to several deaths and considerable destruction. This was shocking to a nation, which is proud to have transitioned to democracy in 1990 without breaking “a pane of window.” This tragic event may have led more people to realize the value of democracy and peaceful transition of power, which would be consistent with this jump in 2009. After 2009, the trend is downwards. The share of people who chose “totally not confident” stood at almost half of the respondents in 2019. Interestingly, 2020 witnessed a significant increase in public confidence in parties. It may be because the public associated the then-excellent management of the COVID-19 by the MPP government with the broader concept of parties.

The low confidence in party systems, particularly the two main parties, is also reflected in the fact that in 2020 a record number of independents and third parties ran for the legislative election. In the end, independents and third parties managed to scoop only three seats, but the fact remains that the population views the two main parties as deeply problematic. The main reasons why public trust has been low in parties is multi-fold. First, many view parties as means that elites and bureaucrats use for their own enrichment and power. In the public’s eyes, those in power often maintained their relationship with the party supporters through taxpayer money. Lack of transparency in election finances is another source of suspicion and mistrust in political parties (Open Society Foundation 2018). Citizens also criticize the oligarchization of parties.

The public also accuses parties that their policy differences are not apparent, and their programs are driven by interest in power. The campaign before the 2008 election provides an example. During their campaign, the DP pledged one million tugrugs per person (approximately \$380 in current dollars) in exchange for victory in 2008 parliamentary elections. This was a clear violation of democratic principles. The MPRP initially criticized this pledge, but shortly afterwards promised 1.5 million tugrugs per citizen. Another practice that smears the parties’ reputation is vote-buying. It does not always involve straight trade of money for vote. The processes are often

complicated. The state bureaucracy plays a significant role in this process. The bureaucracy is estimated to employ about 250,000 people. All these people are tasked to recruit their families to vote for a ruling party in elections. During elections, candidates also follow legal means to distribute money with an implicit hope to increase their votes. For instance, candidates hire more canvassers than they actually need in order to legally pay potential voters. Therefore, parties will have to play by cleaner rules in order to re-gain the public's trust.

The second challenge to the political party system is unreliable and opaque party financing. The source of this problem is the provision in the Law on Political Parties that states that parties will operate on the principle of self-financing. At this moment, the DP and MPP are financed through several means. First, it collects membership fees. Both parties charge members 12,000 tugrugs (~\$4) a year, though interviewees note that most regular members do not pay their dues in practice. Elected delegates to the party conventions pay considerably more. They also receive funds from the state—parties with parliamentary seats receive 1,000 tugrugs (~\$0.35) per vote one time after the election. In addition, parties get 10 million tugrugs (~\$3,450) for every seat in the legislature. They may also receive support from international entities. A member of the MPP that was interviewed mentions that the MPP has received monetary and other forms of support from the Communist Party of China, United Russia Party in Russia, and the Ebert Foundation under the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

Although these funds help out in the parties' financial needs, they are not enough to maintain a large physical and social apparatus of either parties. Although party activities are not intense during non-election years, the regular activities, such as celebration of traditional holidays and maintaining relationship with party members in social settings, cost significant amount of money. Therefore, it appears that both parties resort to non-transparent financing practices that are arguably inconsistent with party competition in a democracy. Interviewees almost uniformly agree that both parties look to wealthy businesspeople and sponsors to make up majority of the party budget. Candidature in national elections requires significant amount of wealth from party members. Most deals are stricken behind closed doors, but some financial dealings have become known. For instance, in the 2020 election, the DP officially required its candidates to contribute 100 million tugrugs (~\$35,700) to the party. Given that monthly family income averaged at \$480 in 2019 in Mongolia, this is a significant amount of money. An interviewee says that this is a tip

of an iceberg. Members of the MPP and newspaper accounts also suggest that large amounts of money come into the party from businesses to help out in the election. As a result, the parties and the priorities of the parties become dominated by political players, whose main interest may not be effective and beneficial policies for the society. Corruption inside and outside the party is likely to follow.

The obscurity around party finances is exacerbated by lack of legislative regulation and audit. The election campaigns are audited per law; however, these audits are likely not be reflective of the actual revenues and expenditures of the campaigns for both parties. The official reports perhaps underreport the amount of money flow. In addition, the National Audit Office, tasked with running these audits, is appointed and supervised by the Parliament and, therefore, the winning party usually has a lot of influence over how the audit office runs its business. Parties do not release annual financial reports and the law does not require audit of the party finance; the legal requirements only pertain to election finance and election accounts separate from the party accounts. The two parties have internal formal mechanisms that are supposed to overlook party finances. The MPP has a Supervisory Committee that is meant to oversee the activities of the party, including financial activities. The DP provides a formal audit report to its members at least in case of some provinces. Both mechanisms are easily manipulated by the party apparatus and members assume it as such.

The third challenge is closely related to the second one—the bipolar system of party competition in Mongolia is becoming rather one-sided and the MPP is securing its place as a hegemonic party. Fish and Seeberg characterize Mongolia as a “single party hegemony” (Fish and Seeberg 2017, 141). The MPP has been a dominant party due to its institutional, cultural, and political inheritance from the Soviet era, but its edge over the DP is quickly growing. It won the last two parliamentary elections by considerable margins, which granted them access to the state coffers. As the winning party, they use the state’s resources to distribute patronage and sustain the party. It implies that the MPP has undue advantage over the DP in terms of maintaining a network of supporters, who are financially dependent on them. The financial advantage is obvious just in terms of physical assets. The MPP has a large building for itself in the center of Ulaanbaatar, which some say it built using state resources after the electoral violence in 2008. The DP does not own a building to headquarter in.

In addition to these inherent advantages of the MPP, one of the key reasons that it is close to becoming a hegemonic party is the issues of the DP, particularly its lack of internal cohesion. The fault lines of the different parties that co-founded the DP in 2000 are persistent and cause continuous fractures. The party endured several strong factions, such as the Falcon, Polar Star, and Mongolian Democratic Union factions (Radchenko and Jargalsaikhan 2017). The cleavages that divide and solidify these factions are strong. An example is that in 2012, when a member of the Polar Star faction Altankhuyag Norov became Prime Minister, he gave key positions to his faction members. Interviewees report that this factionalism and division go down to the sub-provincial party systems. To be fair, internal strife is not uncommon within the MPP either. The latest and most scandalous fight was perhaps the removal of its former leader Enkhbold Miyegombo, who led the party to victory in 2016. However, interviewees agree that the culture within the MPP is different from the DP's in that the internal struggles do not often end up on newspapers or social media. There are formal separate groups, such as the Leftist Association, but they are few and far in between. Informal conflicts are often resolved using informal intervention from the party leadership at the relevant level.

Another challenge for the DP is that there are many other small parties that appeal to its constituents. The most recent example is the National Labor Party (KHUN), which managed to command wide support from the educated and the young and score one seat in the most recent parliament. In the past, the Civic Will Green Party also emerged as a notable challenger to the DP, splitting precious votes. The DP will need to figure out how to unite the political forces that constitute the democratic bloc. In contrast, there are not many viable parties competing for the base constituents of the MPP, except for its splinter MPRP. However, in building electoral coalitions, the DP would benefit from more discipline and expression of commitment to their main ideology. It lost a lot of credit with voters, when it entered a coalition with its former nemesis MPRP and the New Party (United Coalition of Fair Citizens) in the local elections after failing to obtain majority in the national legislative election. The policy and ideological platforms of these parties are almost orthogonal to that of the DP's. One interviewee mentioned that if the DP does not re-organize and get their act together, they may lose the election in 2024 and eventually expire as a party.

Finally, the DP must improve its relationship with its new generation of leaders. Conflict with the aspiring leaders was mentioned by several interviewees as a critical problem for the DP. This fracture does not sit well with the voters and it diminishes the political capital of the party. It also prevents renewal of party leadership and direction.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter argues that parties have emerged to be a key institutional mechanism that has played a crucial role in democratic transition and consolidation in Mongolia, based on an examination of the evolution of Mongolia's main parties in the past three decades. Parties as institutions contributed to Mongolia's democratization by providing an institutional mechanisms of preference aggregation, alternative policy choices, and accountability of different institutions. Their role in the early years of transition and features changed in the years afterwards. Parties became more similar to one another, party-constituent link has become clientelistic rather than programmatic, and barriers for party entry have increased, to name a few. The two main parties and broadly the party system in Mongolia face considerable challenges, most notably low public trust in parties, unreliable and opaque financing, and potential hegemony of a single party.

The last of these three challenges—hegemony of the MPP—could pose questions for Mongolia's democracy. Although the MPP is discursively committed to democracy and has received positive feedback for their effective governance, it has many aspects that can turn it into an agent of authoritarianism, some of which are explained earlier. New parties serious enough to challenge the MPP and the DP may be hard to come by, especially in light of the new Constitution that went into effect this year. The Constitution specifies that establishment of a party requires association of citizens no less than 1% of citizens that have the right to vote. Many viewed this as a restrictive step to put barriers up for new political parties, while many others welcomed it as an essential milestone to regulate political competition in future elections. The future remains to be seen.

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## Appendix

### List of interviewees

Interview number	Name of the interviewee (if allowed)	Position
2020_1	Myagmarsuren Dashzevge	Scholar, political consultant
2020_2	Enkhbold Bukhchuluun	Member of the DP, district representative
2020_3	Munkhtur Janlav	Member of the DP
2020_4	Odhoo Sanduijav	Scholar, member of the MPP
2020_5	Munkhjargal Byamba	Member of the NEW Party
2020_6	Anonymous	Member of the DP
2020_7	Batsukh Tumur	Researcher

2020 8	Anonymous	Member of the DP
2020 9	Enkhtsetseg Dagva	Researcher
2020 10	Purevsuren Sandagdorj	Member of the DP