

The Two Major Flaws of the Planned Absentee Voting System

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The government of President Ma Ying-jeou strongly pushes for the implementation of an absentee voting system in time for the presidential election in March next year, a move that has recently triggered some debate. An absentee voting system can actually take various forms: There is postal voting, proxy voting, early voting, voting at designated polling stations, electronic voting, transfer voting and so on. What the Ma government promotes falls into the category of transfer voting. It means that voters, who cannot return to the place of their registered permanent address on voting day, may vote in the electoral district of their current place of work or study if they have applied for the transfer of their vote within the specified period ahead of the respective election.

Based on the draft legislation proposed by the Ministry of the Interior in late January this year, the characteristics of the absentee voting system can be roughly summed up as follows: First, it will be promoted for presidential elections, but there are no plans to also use absentee voting in elections of other public officials or in referendums. Second, absentee voting will only apply to eligible voters who are in Taiwan and who personally cast their votes on voting day at a polling station. Third, absentee voting will also apply to military and police officers, but soldiers will cast their votes outside military camps. Fourth, the ministry has not made a decision whether absentee voting will cover the inmates of correctional facilities and currently still works with two draft versions, while the final decision will be made by the Executive Yuan.

"Convenience voting" is more or less the

main reason why the Ma government is so eager to push for an amendment of election law. To be honest, in Taiwan, which adopts a household registration system, voting is tied to one's registered permanent address. And many people, indeed, feel regret because they are not able to rush back to their registered place of residence to vote. Principally the government is to be applauded for its plans to introduce an absentee voting system to encourage voting. However the author believes that the absentee voting system that the Ministry of the Interior has drawn up is rife with problems in terms of its timing and application, and should therefore not be implemented rashly. Leaving aside the controversy over absentee voting for soldiers living on camp and prison inmates, the planned system has the two following major flaws.

Presidential Election Not Suitable as First Testing Ground

No matter whether we regard Taiwan's political system as a presidential, cabinet, or dual executive system, I am sure that no one will deny that the president is still Taiwan's most important public servant. Therefore, the presidential election is the most important election. Instead of testing the new system gradually and in proper sequence by starting with elections of a smaller scope and less significance such as town mayors, town councilors and neighborhood chiefs or referendums, the Ma government uses the nation's most important and most sensitive election for the trial run. This clearly is an overly rash and impatient approach.

Should the Ministry of the Interior truly want to promote a transfer voting system, then a safer and sounder way would be first introducing the said system in other elections or polls or referendums and using it in presidential elections only after sufficient experience with its operation has been gained.

Furthermore, in terms of necessity, it is the least necessary to introduce the said system for presidential elections in Taiwan. Since the first democratic presidential elections in 1996 voter turnout has always exceeded 75 percent, although Taiwan does not use absentee voting or compulsory voting in which voters are slapped with a fine if failing to vote without a valid and sufficient reason. In 2000 and 2004 voter turnout even topped 80 percent, whereas in the United States, which does provide various kinds of absentee voting, but does not have compulsory voting, voter turnout in presidential elections ranges between only 50 percent and 60 percent at most. In the 2008 U.S. presidential election turnout stood at 64 percent, the highest since 1908, but still a far cry from turnout rates in Taiwanese presidential elections. In other words, there is no urgent need to boost voter turnout in Taiwan given that turnout rates have been exceptionally good in presidential elections, although voting is not compulsory and there is no absentee voting.

2012 Not Right Time for Implementation

The presidential election in early 2012 is quickly drawing closer. However, as of now, February 2011, the draft bill on a transfer voting system that is tied in with the presidential election has just left the Ministry of the Interior, but has not yet been approved by the cabinet. Subsequently there will still be the legislative process involving the bill's deliberation and three readings in the legislature. Even if the Ma

government is stubborn enough to go it alone, using its parliamentary majority to ram through the bill within the shortest time, it must also take into account that the introduction of transfer voting amounts to a major change in the election system and therefore requires a considerable time of education before voters will be able to fully understand and apply the new system. In New Taipei City it took more than two years alone to fully implement pay per bag trash collection fees. How could we be more careless and casual about a reform of the presidential election system, a matter pertaining to our national destiny, than about trash fee collection policy?

On the other hand, even if a presidential election is to be used as test case for transfer voting, it should be the election in 2016 at the earliest. If we use conflict of interest arguments we may come to the same conclusion as well. More precisely, barring any unforeseen circumstances, Ma will win the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) ticket to run in next year's presidential election. On top of that he wields substantial influence over decisions made at the top echelons of the Ministry of the Interior and the Central Election Commission. Meanwhile the presidential election is around the corner. If the Ma government now forces a major change in the rules of the game and insists on implementing them in 2012, such conduct is bound to make people speculate that the incumbent president wants to use his vast political influence to amend the presidential election system to secure his reelection. Even if the Ma government speedily completes the legal amendment process, implementing the new system when the incumbent president runs for a second term in 2012 would therefore be improper. Only if the president who seeks reelection is not able to immediately enjoy the advantages of the reformed system can we thoroughly dispel suspicion that he concurrently serves as player and referee. 