The Taiwan Voter

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Taiwan’s recent history is a remarkable saga. During the two decades from 1970 to 1990, Taiwan underwent dramatic economic change, as its gross domestic product grew at an average rate of 9 percent per year. The economic success rapidly propelled Taiwan into the ranks of the newly industrialized countries. Democratization arrived in the late 1980s, too, with robust electoral competition between the two principal parties. The long-ruling, formerly authoritarian party was beaten at the polls in 2000 and handed over power peacefully, only to return in 2008 in an equally peaceful transition when its opponents lost. A third peaceful transition between parties took place in 2016. An impoverished Asian one-party authoritarian state had become in a few decades a prosperous, vibrant democracy.

The Taiwan success story has generated considerable scholarly interest. The initial studies focused on economic growth—the “Taiwan miracle” (e.g., Chan 1988; Clark 1987, 1989; Wang 2000). In the ensuing decades, scholarly research shifted its focus to Taiwan’s political miracle, first the democratization and then the establishment of stable party competition (for example, the chapters collected in Tien 1996). As time has passed, however, Taiwan’s domestic political economy has become a more typical example of the stresses, debates, and achievements of a rich democracy. Economic growth and employment, energy policy, the environment, public works, and many other familiar topics are frequent subjects of debate in Taiwan. However, those concerns are not unique to the island.

Taiwan’s uniqueness lies elsewhere—in its relationship with China. No
other topic or relationship plays so central a role in Taiwan's politics. It structures foreign policy; it structures the political party system; it structures much of how ordinary citizens orient themselves to politics. The fundamental role of “the China factor” will be explicitly or implicitly discussed in many chapters of this book.

In *The Taiwan Voter*, we focus on ordinary citizens’ political preferences, attitudes, and choices since the onset of democratization. To study the causes of voting, we take up the conventional “big three”—party identification, issue orientation, and candidate evaluation—since there is a general consensus in political science literature that they exert influential effects on voting (Jacoby 2010). But to those three, we add a fourth—identity. In particular, we look closely at national identity, since it looms so large in Taiwan voting.

Though our concerns are primarily with citizens rather than with elites and institutions, we take note of institutional features of Taiwan democracy that shape the choices presented to its citizens. One chapter is specifically devoted to the recent change in the electoral rules that seems to have put Taiwan on its way to a classic two-party system.\(^2\)

In this volume, we are reporting on one country, but our focus extends well beyond it. The study of Taiwan politics leads rapidly to interesting, sometimes difficult, theoretical puzzles. Why have citizen identities, usually taken as relatively fixed features of people’s political lives, evolved so rapidly in Taiwan, while simultaneously one particular identity cleavage centered on “the China factor” has become increasingly consolidated as the most important political division in the country’s politics? In the presence of this cleavage, how do Taiwan citizens\(^3\) make their electoral decisions? We intend to go beyond the usual country study to ask questions like these. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, this book suggests comparisons with other countries that share one or another of these unusual features of Taiwan’s politics, such as Japan, Canada, Ireland, and Israel. More generally, our findings have implications for every country in which national identities have large effects in electoral politics. Thus, we attempt to contribute not only to making sense of Taiwan, but more broadly to the theoretical understanding of democratic elections in general.

Using single-country studies to generate theoretical understanding has a long tradition in political science, and in electoral research in particular. The Columbia studies under Paul Lazarsfeld demonstrated the powerful role of group memberships and loyalties in American electoral decisions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Angus Campbell and his Michigan colleagues’ seminal work, *The American Voter*, showed how partisan identity shaped not only the vote but also the
very way that citizens perceive the political world and form their political opinions (Campbell et al. 1960). David Butler and Donald Stokes’s *Political Change in Britain* (1974) traced class conflict in politics, the parental transmission of partisanship, and the importance of local context in determining vote choices. A great many other articles and books, far too numerous to list here, have been devoted to such topics as voter turnout, economic voting, electoral institutions, and strategic voting in particular democratic systems around the world. No one would say of these contributions that they taught us only about the country in which they were carried out.

This point is particularly relevant in East and Southeast Asia, where electoral studies are few and our understanding is thin. It seems to us critically important to build a knowledge base for each democracy of the region. At present, no one could write a competent comparative volume called *The Asian Voter*: when the foundation stones are missing, no structure can be erected.

The problem of too little Asian country knowledge is also visible in some recent important contributions to comparative electoral behavior. For example, Thomassen (2005) compares what is known about electoral behavior across the European democracies. Evans and De Graaf (2013) study how class voting varies across Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries. Carlin, Singer, and Zechmeister (2015) use the Latin American Public Opinion Project data at Vanderbilt University, among other sources, to show how partisanship, ideology, and economic factors have different force in different countries across Latin America. We are impressed by the depth of scholarship amassed by the many contributors to these edited volumes. But we are equally impressed by how often Taiwan fails to fit the conceptual frameworks they put forward. Of course, none of these three books deals with Asia; their agenda lies elsewhere. But even when Taiwan is explicitly included in the set of countries studied, as in Dalton and Anderson’s (2011) comparative investigation of how the institutional and party-system features of each country create a context that shapes how citizens think and act in electoral politics, the fit is odd. Too often, Taiwan is assimilated conceptually to countries with a European-derived culture that it does not share. We go deeper into this topic in chapter 9 and in the concluding chapter 12. For the present, it suffices to say that we make no apologies for focusing on Taiwan. Getting each country right is a prerequisite to reliable comparisons, both within continents and regions and across them.

Thus we intend this volume to join the ranks of similar books on political behavior, such as *The Japanese Voter* (Flanagan et al. 1991) and *The Irish Voter* (Marsh et al. 2008). Like them, this book studies one country, but it does
so as part of an international effort to understand electoral behavior in a variety of democratic systems. While we draw primarily on Taiwan’s politics as observed in the multiyear nationwide surveys of the Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study (TEDS) and the Taiwan National Security Survey, we aim to speak to those interested in elections everywhere.

The Relationship to China

Taiwan at its closest point is only a little more than 100 miles from the Chinese mainland. Like any small polity next door to a powerful country, Taiwan necessarily pays careful, even obsessive attention to its neighbor. Indeed, Taiwan’s politics revolves around the relationship with China. For Taiwan’s citizens, the relationship to the mainland is multifaceted. China represents simultaneously a cultural heritage, a security threat, and an economic opportunity.

Cultural Heritage

Taiwan’s cultural inheritance from the Chinese mainland is undeniable. Although its first settlers seem to have come from what is now the Philippines and Indonesia, Taiwan’s modern history can be traced to the mid-seventeenth century, when residents from the coastal areas of China migrated to the island to escape from the war and devastation on the mainland. In that same period, the Portuguese arrived on the island, which they called “Formosa” (“beautiful”). The Dutch and Spanish also founded settlements. In the Tainan area, the oldest inhabited part of Taiwan, a temple still stands, dedicated to two gods with unmistakable white features. By 1684, however, China’s Qing dynasty had driven out the Europeans and established a local government on the island. The Qing maintained at least a nominal administrative relationship with the island for the subsequent two-plus centuries. Like many dynasties before it, the Qing dynasty eventually collapsed under the weight of corruption and administrative failure. During the collapse, and in the wake of the First Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan’s sovereignty was ceded to Japan in 1895, beginning another colonial experience, this one lasting half a century.

Although the initial stage of Japanese rule was marked by the island residents’ armed resistance, insurrection was soon quelled by the colonial authority’s adroit combination of repression, co-optation, and assimilation.
In some respects, the Japanese treated Taiwan as their own province, and they began its modernization. Certainly Taiwan was treated better than most other countries conquered by Japan just before and during World War II. During the colonial period, some Taiwan people adopted Japanese names and became naturalized Japanese citizens. Many young people were drafted and served in the Japanese military during the war.

At the end of the war, Japan unconditionally surrendered to the Allied forces. Taiwan’s sovereignty was returned to China, then led by the Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) government under Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang and two million of his mainland followers retreated to the island in 1949 after being defeated by the Communist troops on the Chinese mainland. To maintain their claim that they remained the sole legitimate rulers of the mainland, KMT leaders preached “recovering the Chinese mainland” as the sacred national mission. The eventual unification of Taiwan and China was taken as a given.

The Chiang regime also took a series of measures to “re-Sinicize” local residents in order to foster a Chinese identity. A China-centered curriculum was established in schools. Maps of the nation showed all of China, including the mainland, Taiwan, and all areas claimed by China, such as Tibet. Schoolchildren were taught in Mandarin, and their use of local dialects was punished. Ethnic television and radio programs were restricted as well. These measures, combined with the shared culture and languages stemming from the ancestral homeland, led many Taiwan citizens to view China as the principal source of their racial and cultural heritage. In some cases, they saw Taiwan and China as a political unity as well. In one or another sense, they identified as “Chinese” (Wang and Liu 2004). This ensemble of affective and historical ties continues for many Taiwan people to the present day, though increasingly in attenuated form.

Security Threat

The Chiang regime generally encountered a warm welcome from island residents after the KMT forces first arrived on Taiwan in 1945. But the initial enthusiasm of many local residents for returning to the ancestral “motherland” was substantially dampened when they saw the mainland troops sent to take control of the island. Impoverished and poorly educated, many of the soldiers were seen as beggars and thieves, less disciplined and capable than the Japanese they replaced. Nationalist officials in turn viewed the islanders with suspicion due to the half century of Japanese colonial rule. By 1947,
the animosity between the KMT government and local residents culminated in the bloody crackdown against Taiwanese elites by Chiang’s troops, a tragic event known as the “2–28 Incident” (Kerr 1965; Lai, Myers, and Wei 1991). This outbreak of hostility solidified the perception, especially in the older generation, of the KMT government as simply a new foreign regime and occupying force, this time from China rather than from Portugal or Japan.

While the Chiang regime actively advanced its claim to be the legitimate ruler of China, Beijing’s leaders made the same claim, and they attempted to forcibly unify Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. During the 1950s and 1960s, several major battles were fought over Kinmen (also known as Quemoy) and Matsu, two small islands near the mainland but occupied by Taiwan. Although the 1970s saw a shift of Beijing’s strategy away from a reliance on the “military liberation” of Taiwan to a wave of “peaceful initiatives,” Chinese leaders have refused to renounce the use of force to resolve cross-Strait disputes. To force Taipei into acceptance of its unification formula, known as “one country, two systems,” Beijing has isolated Taiwan internationally and has backed its claim to the island with the threat of military action.

As China increasingly won the diplomatic battle on the world stage, Taiwan went through a series of political changes toward democratization since the late 1980s. These included lifting martial law, legalizing political parties, ending restrictions on public assembly and freedom of speech, and the popular election of the president. The pace of democratic reform quickened after the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was formed in 1986 and became the island’s first major opposition party. An atmosphere of political tolerance emerged on the island as opinions different from the “one China” principle were permitted. Blaming President Lee Teng-hui for condoning a Taiwan independence movement on the island, Chinese leaders launched several missiles into the seas around Taiwan in an attempt to influence, first, the 1995 Legislative Yuan election, and then Taiwan’s 1996 presidential election. The misguided effort backfired, with most Taiwan observers estimating that Lee’s successful reelection effort was aided by the Chinese saber-rattling (Garver 1997; Cooper 1998, chap. 4).

During the 2000 presidential election campaign, Beijing leaders employed the tactic of a “paper missile,” a White Paper on cross-Strait relations that promised military intervention if Taiwan moved toward independence. This attempt to disrupt the momentum of the pro-independence candidate, Chen Shui-bian of the DPP, probably backfired again. Contrary to China’s expectations, these threats provided Chen with a late boost and a narrow margin of victory. Chen’s election was a milestone in Taiwan’s political de-
development, and it illumined the sharp contrast with the mainland’s political system, as political power was peacefully transferred from one political party to the other on the island for the first time and indeed on any territory where ethnic Chinese rule. While Beijing has subsequently moderated its unsophisticated and ineffective attempts at intimidating Taiwan voters (Tung 2005), especially after the China-friendly Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT was elected president in 2008, it has continued to aim more than a thousand short- and medium-range missiles at the island. As many in the older generation saw the authoritarian KMT as an illegitimate Chinese occupation force, younger generations now often see China under Communist Party rule as an authoritarian and less developed country with an aggressive military posture. In consequence, much of the Taiwan population views China as a threat to their economic prosperity and democratic way of life.

**Economic Opportunity**

Perhaps surprisingly, cross-Strait economic exchanges have flourished during the past two and a half decades despite tense political and sometime military relations between Beijing and Taipei. Since the ban on contacts between Taiwan and China was lifted by the Taipei government in 1987, economic exchanges between two sides of the Taiwan Strait have increased dramatically. Cross-Strait trade rose from $3.9 billion in 1989 to $31.2 billion in 2000, and further to $102.3 billion in 2007, despite the restrictive policies imposed by Taiwan’s pro-independence Chen administration from 2000 to 2008. Taiwan investment in the Chinese mainland also increased, from $421 million in 1991–92, to $2.6 billion in 2000, and to about $10 billion in 2007. Along with these investments, many Taiwanese investors have now relocated to the Chinese mainland.

The trade and investment flow seems unlikely to be slowed by political intervention in the near future. Reversing its predecessor, the Taipei administration under Ma relaxed trade restrictions. Since 2008, the Taipei government has reached more than a dozen accords with Beijing and has also signed the landmark trade deal known as the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). Nor is trade liberalization likely to be substantially slowed now that the opposition has again taken power in 2016. The pro-independence DPP has always had concerns about Taiwan’s increasing economic integration with the Chinese mainland, worrying that expanding cross-Strait exchanges would increase the island’s dependence on China and endanger its national security. Yet the DPP leadership increas-
ingly recognizes the importance of the Chinese market to Taiwan’s economic growth and prosperity, as demonstrated by the party’s ambivalent campaign platform on cross-Strait relations during the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections and by the frequent visits to the Chinese mainland by key DPP politicians. Even for the most anti-China politicians and citizens on Taiwan, the trade and investment opportunities across the Strait in the world’s most populous country are too lucrative to ignore. Well-armed, sworn enemies can still do business.

Taiwan thus has a complex and ambivalent relationship with China that is characterized by cultural affinity, security menace, and opportunities for economic prosperity. Precisely because cross-Strait ties are close but unsettled, they have formed the basis of the key political cleavage on the island that has effects on every aspect of Taiwan’s politics. In particular, this multifaceted relationship forces island citizens to decide whether they are Chinese, Taiwanese, or both. It also forces them to take a stand on Taiwan’s future relations with China—the issue of “unification vs. independence”—also known as the tongdu issue. In turn, both these decisions are deeply implicated in voters’ partisan identifications.

The Central Political Cleavage in Taiwan

Taiwan is an immigrant society within the Chinese diaspora. The shared language, culture, and ancestral homeland help shape the identities of Taiwan citizens. For a small number, the Chinese identity may preclude any national identification with Taiwan: they follow the KMT’s traditional one-country view of China, of which Taiwan is a province. For these citizens, “I’m Chinese” means a great deal, including adherence to the position that there is only one China, that Taiwan is part of China, and that Chinese citizens are subject to the authority of the legitimate rulers of China (who are in Taipei). This view is essentially consistent with Beijing’s official position, the sole disagreement being over the location of the legitimate all-China government.

At the other extreme, a Taiwan citizen may say, “I’m Chinese,” meaning no more than an Irish-American does when she says proudly on St. Patrick’s Day, “I’m Irish,” even though her ancestors have been in North America for nearly 200 years and her sole national loyalty is to the United States. She would think it bizarre if Ireland claimed sovereignty over her. In short, among different citizens of immigrant lands like Taiwan or the United States, identification with the country of ancestral origin ranges from deep to superficial, and in some cases may be equivalent to outright rejection.
Indeed, the Allied war on the Axis powers in Europe during World War II was led by a German American, Dwight Eisenhower.

Identities may be central to personality, but even the deepest remain potentially malleable. Unexpected events or changes in an ancestral country’s behavior can transform the complex of emotion and historical memory that constitutes national identity. The transformation can go in either direction, as Taiwan’s history illustrates. A pan-Taiwanese identity first emerged after the Qing government ceded the island’s sovereignty to Japan (Ching 2001). This development was soon impeded by the Japanese colonial authority’s comprehensive assimilation policies (Brown 2004; Chu and Lin 2003). Then, after Taiwan’s “glorious return” to Chinese rule might have provided an opportunity for the consolidation of a Chinese identity, instead the 2–28 Incident created a deep divide, particularly between the resident Minnan and the newly arrived mainlanders, often creating parallel differences in national and political identity.8

As chapter 3 explains, the Minnan/mainlander divide became increasingly blurry with the progression of time. Through politicians’ conscious efforts, social contacts among various ethnic groups, interethnic marriages, and the spread of education, understanding, and respect among the various ethnic groups have been improved and ethnic conflict reduced. As a new generation of islanders has matured into adulthood, many have become relatively indifferent to the historical memories that had divided their communities in the past.

Simultaneously, many Taiwan citizens have been increasingly frustrated by the international isolation imposed by the Chinese government. Beijing’s international application of its “one China principle” has significantly compressed the island country’s international space. Chinese leaders persistently maintain that the Republic of China, the official name of Taiwan, has lost its legitimacy and that Taipei has no legal right to establish diplomatic relations with foreign governments or to participate in any international organizations with statehood as a membership requirement. The growing importance of China in international affairs has led many countries to break relations with Taipei as a prior condition for establishing official ties with Beijing. The number of nations having official relations with Taiwan dropped significantly in the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout the subsequent two decades, only about 30 countries, most of them small, diplomatically recognized Taiwan, and Taipei had membership in just a handful of international governmental organizations.

Taiwan’s increasing diplomatic isolation coincided with a period of rapid economic growth and democratization on the island, leaving many in Taiwan with the sense that their lack of standing in the world community was
discordant with their economic and political achievements. China was seen not only as a hypothetical military threat but also as a chronic irritant—an alien economic and political force opposed to their interests and self-respect. The Chinese missile tests during 1995–96 and military threats in 2000, both intended to intimidate Taiwan, raised the issue forcefully: Surely, Taiwan people said, no self-respecting country would treat its own citizens that way. Increasingly, the island’s citizens began to question the Chinese aspect of their identities. Were they still Chinese, or had they now become just Taiwan people?

Taiwanese identity rose in parallel with sympathy for Taiwan independence. The two attitudes reinforced each other, with powerful implications for Taiwan’s politics. The previously unquestionable “sacred mission” of unifying Taiwan with the Chinese mainland during the island’s authoritarian era was now reconsidered in the minds of many island citizens. An increasing number of the island residents began to view Taiwan as a separate and independent political entity, not part of China (Wang and Liu 2004). The way was prepared for the pro-independence DPP to become what it had never been previously, a serious contender for political power. The precise causal relationships are not easily sorted out, but the association was clear and powerful: as Taiwan people increasingly abandoned their identity as Chinese, they became ever more likely to support the opposition DPP and the cause of Taiwan independence (Liu and Ho 1999). All these forces, combined with a more moderate DPP campaign platform and a split in the KMT, paved the way for Chen’s victory in the 2000 presidential election (Rigger 2001, chaps. 8 and 9).

During the subsequent eight years, the pro-independence DPP government, like the Chiang regime before it, selectively endorsed some aspects of Taiwan’s historical memories. To reinforce the idea that the island is a political entity separate from China, the “greater China nationalism” promoted by the KMT authoritarian regime came under severe attack during Chen’s administration (Greene 2008). Chen’s de-Sinicization measures, along with Beijing’s tactics of diplomatic isolation, have had substantial effects on citizens’ identity. By the time President Ma took office in 2008, more than half of the island residents were Taiwanese identifiers and very few of them subscribed to the Chinese identity alone. In total, 90 percent of the island residents considered themselves either purely Taiwanese or holders of a dual identity—regarding themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese. In the view of some observers, the combination of Chinese threat and active governmental attempts to reinforce Taiwan consciousness has made inevitable “the ongoing consolidation of the Taiwanese nation” (Schubert 2008, 111).
The Taiwanese/Chinese divide has now gone beyond individuals’ attachment to ethnic groups and has become embedded in different political communities at the national level. The contestation between the two identities is now more than the debate over Taiwan’s sovereignty and has become the key political cleavage of the society, commonly known as the issue of “unification vs. independence.” While this political cleavage involves the debate over Taiwan’s ultimate sovereignty, it also structures opinions about how to interact with a rising China in the meantime. In all these ways, preferences about the island’s relationship with the Chinese mainland have been and continue to be the most important issue of the society, while all other cleavages are distinctly secondary. Consequently, Taiwan can be characterized as a single-issue society, since the main cleavage affects almost all aspects of the island citizens’ political attitudes and behaviors. Most notably, it is reflected in the voters’ partisan identifications.

Indeed, Taiwan’s political landscape has undergone significant change after the formation of the DPP in 1986. During the ensuing process of rapid democratization, the previous authoritarian system dominated by the KMT was transformed with the emergence of multiple minor political parties as spin-offs from the KMT. After Chen Shui-bian of the DPP was elected president in 2000, Taiwan’s multiparty system increasingly moved into two distinctly separate and relatively equal political camps—the Pan-Blue Alliance and the Pan-Green Alliance, with the KMT and the DPP being the two leading parties in each, respectively. The Pan-Blue Alliance consists of the KMT, the People First Party (PFP), the New Party (NP) and the Nonpartisan Solidarity Union (NPSU), while the Pan-Green Alliance includes the currently ruling DPP and the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). Even though none of the political parties advocates the island’s immediate unification with China, Taiwan voters perceive the two political alliances as representing opposite positions on the issue of unification/independence. The Pan-Blue Alliance is perceived as adopting policies that move in a direction toward Taiwan’s eventual unification with China, whereas the Pan-Green Alliance is seen as making plans that would lead to the island’s ultimate independence. Thus, chapter 4 shows that citizens who hold a strong Taiwanese identity tend to espouse the island’s de jure independence and provide electoral support for the Pan-Green Alliance, while those who continue to recognize the Chinese heritage as a part of their identity are more likely to back the Pan-Blue candidates.

As Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) “freezing hypothesis” famously claimed half a century ago, party systems become stabilized when they reflect preexisting cleavage structures in the society. Because Taiwan
citizens’ partisan identifications notably reflect the most important political cleavage in the society, the island’s political landscape has been increasingly molded into two distinctively separate alliances that are led by two major political parties. As chapter 10 explains, the 2005 electoral reform that abandoned the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) electoral rules in favor of the mixed-member majoritarian system (MMM) has further consolidated Taiwan’s two-party system.

While the endogeneity of the key political cleavage and its effects on Taiwan citizens’ political life form a crucial part of our story, we will also pay attention to the ways in which candidates’ personal traits affect electoral behavior. Chapter 8 shows that the importance of candidates’ traits diminished as Taiwan democratized. Because political power was monopolized by the KMT during the authoritarian era, most nominees for elected positions shared the same party label and candidates’ traits were voters’ means of differentiation. As the issue of unification/independence became prominent in a democratic Taiwan, partisan identification increasingly had major effects on the island citizens’ electoral decisions.

In sum, the central issue that dominates Taiwan politics is the debate over the island’s sovereignty and its long-term relationship with China. Individuals’ stands on the unification/independence issue are closely related to their national identities and deeply reflected in their partisan identification. The cleavage is so deep that it has profound impacts on every aspect of the island citizens’ political life. All issues, including such minor policy questions as absentee voting or the adoption of an English translation system, can become entangled in the main cleavage and be examined through a partisan lens.9

Political Cleavage and Politics: Taiwan as a Test Case

Some countries are so consequential in the world that they have legions of outside observers. The United States, China, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and Russia take up space in the sophisticated media of every country. Political life in most small countries, however, is of interest only to their own citizens. Taiwan is a small country, and its domestic politics typically makes international news only as entertainment—when fistfights break out in the parliament, known as the Legislative Yuan. Apart from specialists in East Asian politics, no one outside Taiwan cares very much. Why should readers with an interest in comparative electoral behavior want to read about Taiwan in particular?
In our judgment, there are two good reasons to pay special attention to Taiwan. First, Taiwan is one of the best places to investigate the multifaceted effects of cleavage on politics. With cleavages defined as divisions that separate members of communities into groups (Rae and Taylor 1970), empirical research has variously linked political cleavages to conflict and partisan differences (Bonilla et al. 2011; Dahrendorf 1959; Dunning and Harrison 2010; Tilley, Evans and Mitchell 2008). Yet, cleavages are not all bad, as Lipset (1963, 78–79) argued half a century ago, because “[a] stable democracy requires relatively moderate tension among its contending political forces.” However, if key differences in a society are allowed to accumulate and reinforce each other, cleavages may deepen, conflicts may grow intense, and extreme polarization may be manifested in voting and partisan divisions.

It is often argued that cross-cutting cleavages can mollify the intensity of conflict and reduce polarization. The overlapping cleavages make it difficult to build a coalition as few people are solely associated with any given cleavage. Conversely, this implies that conflict and political polarization are generally the most extreme when there is just one major cleavage in the society (Simmel 1908; Rae and Taylor 1970; Zuckerman 1975).

As we have noted, the current central axis of politics in Taiwan is the issue of unification vs. independence. Citizen’s opinions on that issue are closely tied to their identity—Do they think of themselves as Chinese, as Taiwanese, or as both? Ethnic identity also plays a role: mainlanders are unlikely to define themselves as purely Taiwan citizens, while a majority of Minnan do so, and thus they have different positions on the unification/independence issue. Ethnic identity, national identity, and preferences over how to deal with a rising China are all interrelated and reinforce each other in Taiwan. Political parties on the island necessarily must define themselves in a way that makes sense in this context. They all have distinct and well-differentiated positions on the unification/independence axis, with two small parties (the NP and the TSU, respectively) holding down the extremes. This dominant issue structures party ideology and electoral strategies, while citizen’s party identifications and vote choices map closely onto those issue positions.

The nexus of causal relationships for Taiwan citizens is thus theoretically complicated but empirically simple: ethnic identification, national identification, party identification, and political opinions connect closely to each other and reinforce each other. Each of them connects to vote choice. This set of relationship is relatively tight in Taiwan. To our knowledge, only Israel has a similarly close linkage among ethnic origins (Ashkenazic vs. Sephardic), concepts of the state (Israeli vs. Jewish), the central political
dimension (relationship with the Palestinians), and party choice (Shamir and Arian 1999). Where relationships are strongest, causal patterns are most easily discerned. One can study Taiwan for the same reason Charles Darwin gathered scientific information on the Galapagos Islands: that is where the evidence is clearest.

The second reason for studying Taiwan is its strategic importance. Taiwan is a flashpoint in East Asia, one of the most likely places to set off a general Asian war. Domestic politics in China and Taiwan have perhaps been the central drivers of cross-Strait tensions. In Taiwan, the cross-Strait relationship is the key cleavage that profoundly shapes the interest structure of its electorate. If voting is a means for individuals to make collective decisions, it is crucial to know what Taiwan citizens are asking for and how these demands are manifested in their partisan support and vote choices. Thus, understanding Taiwan voters is important not only in its own right as a key mechanism of a young democratic polity but also for its impact at the collective level in preserving peace in East Asia. Until the last decade or so, even China did not pay close attention. The resulting misjudgments helped cause the missile crisis in 1996, with costly consequences for the mainland (Garver 1997; Cooper 1998, chap. 4).

In this volume, we make no pretense of sorting out the full set of causal relationships among the various kinds of identity and the resulting vote choices. Those relations necessarily differ among individuals: some will come to their partisanship because of their ethnicity, some because of their national identity, and some because of their policy views. Others will inherit a partisanship and let that determine their other identities, while still others will exhibit more complex patterns. We leave to others the full specification of all those causal paths—an important topic, but one that we must set aside.

Our perspective is rather that the key political cleavage is so powerful that it renders other differences among Taiwan voters secondary or unimportant. When any one component is inconsistent with another, there will be cognitive or psychological pressure to bring them into line. Therefore, the island citizens’ portfolio of identities, their political opinions, and their vote choices are also “co-integrated” in the sense that time series analysts use the term.10 That pressure may be strong or weak, it may be heeded quickly or slowly, it may be set aside, or it may be resisted. In any cross-section, some individuals may ignore their contradictory views or deliberately hold inconsistent views, and some may hold them for a lifetime. But for most individuals in a political system like Taiwan’s, where one central, vivid issue dominates political life, where that issue is closely tied to important ethnic
and national identities, and where the parties’ stances reflect that issue, most individuals will show substantial consistency. We will not find many DPP supporters who have a Chinese identity and support Taiwan’s unification with China, nor many mainlanders favoring immediate independence.

Demonstrating the power of a political cleavage manifested in many forms is a central feature of this book. Indeed, Taiwan is a perfect case for analyzing the effects of political cleavages and personal identities on politics. Many small countries are out of the international fray, and it matters little how their politics and policies evolve. Not Taiwan. Political identities are important in every political system, but often in such variegated or muted form that their effects are difficult to detect. Not in Taiwan. And institutions matter in every country, but changes in them are so rare and glacial that no one can be sure how much difference they make. Not in Taiwan. Succeeding chapters will demonstrate not just how interesting Taiwan politics is in its own right but how much Taiwan can teach us about how politics works in the many countries around the world where ethnic divisions and contested national identities are central to electoral politics.

Plan of the Book

This volume has 12 chapters. To make the volume accessible to both scholars and general audiences, contributors have intentionally avoided complicated statistical analysis. Not until the final chapter do we build a comprehensive statistical model based on the factors that previous chapters have identified.

After this introduction, the book proceeds to a chapter by Chia-hung Tsai, designed to introduce Taiwan electoral politics to those who may have little prior experience with the topic. It explores who Taiwan voters are and how they have voted in presidential elections since the rapid democratization began about two decades ago. Tsai finds that Taiwan’s young democracy has increasingly consolidated into a competitive two-party system formed by the Pan-Blue and the Pan-Green Alliances, which are dominated by the KMT and the DPP, respectively. While the Pan-Blue Alliance has generally enjoyed the electoral advantage during most lower-level elections, the two parties have split the six presidential elections since democratization. The Pan-Green Alliance is increasingly competitive at all levels.

Tsai notes that a regional divide in Taiwan is clearly recognizable, validating the general view that the island consists of “a Blue North and a Green South” (the Pan-Blue Alliance dominates northern Taiwan and the Pan-Green Alliance dominates southern Taiwan.11) Due to the policies im-
implemented by the KMT government during the authoritarian era, Taiwan voters who are mainlanders, well educated, more affluent, government employees, or in their 30s and 40s are more likely to support Pan-Blue candidates. The island citizens who belong to the Minnan ethnic group and who are less educated, less well-off, working in labor and agricultural sectors, or in their 20s tend to identify with the Pan-Green Alliance.

After this first chapter explores who Taiwan voters are, successive chapters take up the “big three”—party identification, issue orientation, and candidate evaluation—and how they affect the island citizens’ political attitudes and behaviors. To these three, we add a fourth—identity, particularly national identity. As previously noted, the preference about Taiwan’s future relationship with China presents a deep dividing line between the island’s citizens. Precisely because the unification/independence issue is the key political cleavage, it closely intertwines with the island citizens’ national identities, their partisan attachments, their issue preferences, and their views of the candidates.

In that spirit, in chapter 3 T. Y. Wang examines the development of political identity in Taiwan. The author shows that the “China factor” has been the essential component of the changing boundaries in group membership that shapes Taiwan voters’ identities. Immediately after the KMT’s retreat to the island, the ethnic divide between local citizens and mainlanders became salient. After democratization and other social changes, the ethnic cleavage was replaced by the contestation between Chinese and Taiwanese identities. As the majority of citizens now hold a Taiwanese identity and few are Chinese identifiers, the boundary of the Chinese/Taiwanese divide has gradually lost its political significance in domestic politics but has moved to a different level. Due to Beijing’s forceful claim on Taiwan’s sovereignty, the term “Taiwan” is no longer a purely geographic designation. Being “Taiwanese” increasingly implies an identity with Taiwan as an independent state. The shadows of both the ethnic cleavage and the Taiwanese/Chinese divide continue to be cast on the island citizens’ partisan identifications.

Following the discussion of identity change on the island, in chapter 4 Ching-hsin Yu takes up the second of the “big four”—partisanship. He explores the trajectory of Taiwan voters’ attachments to parties and how they are intertwined with their positions along the axis of unification/independence. The author traces the development of the island citizens’ partisan identification and concludes that nonpartisan voters during the authoritarian era were not “independent” in its true sense. As the KMT monopolized political power and banned the formation of political parties, those who did not identify with the KMT were treated as “nonpartisan independents” lest they form a cohesive political force. Many of these citizens later became the
loyal supporters of the newly established opposition DPP. Along with their junior partners, the KMT and the DPP later formed the Pan-Blue Alliance and the Pan-Green Alliance. Because each of the two political alliances has a distinctive position on the issue of Taiwan’s future relations with China, which is the most important political cleavage on the island, Taiwan voters have developed a clear partisan attachment in the competitive two-party system. That said, a considerable number of citizens are nonpartisan and they behave differently according to their educational levels. Yu finds that highly educated independents are less interested in politics and less likely to vote but they are also more autonomous and politically moderate than their less educated counterparts.

The next three chapters turn attention to the third leg of the “big four”—citizens’ issue orientation. Conventionally, political issues have been seen as crucial to the functioning of democracy. Political parties are expected to present policy options to electorates, allowing citizens to select those candidates who correspond most closely to their own ideological positions. The congruence of issue positions and ideology between citizens and political parties has thus become an important topic in electoral studies (e.g., Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu 2011; Lachat 2011; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997; but, for a critique of this framework, see Achen and Bartels 2016).

Do issue preferences play a role in Taiwan citizens’ voting calculus? If so, what are the important issues? How do they relate to the key political cleavage on the island? Chapter 5 by Shing-yuan Sheng and Hsiao-chuan Liao demonstrates the impact of the central political cleavage on Taiwan politics. Examining the evolution of four key political cleavage debates on the island, the authors show that reform vs. stability has become an issue of the past. The second issue, wealth distribution, fails to differentiate political parties because the partisan elites of various political affiliations have converged on the same ideological position and have attempted to outbid each other in order to win electoral support. Third, while environmental protection has the potential of becoming an important political issue after the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear plan in Japan, it is still an issue in the process of development in Taiwan. The most important political issue on the island, then, is and will continue to be Taiwan’s future relationship with China, which is closely tied to the island citizens’ identity as Chinese or Taiwanese.

The salience of Taiwan’s relationship with China does not mean that such issues as the economy are unimportant. Empirical studies on the American presidency have long concluded that the state of the economy is an important contributing factor to electoral decisions. An abundance of literature has demonstrated the linkage between the electoral success of an incumbent
government and its economic performance. The logic is simple. When economic conditions are good, voters are likely to reward the incumbent with their vote. When the economy is bad, voters tend to switch their support to the challenger. Jimmy Carter’s devastating defeat by Ronald Reagan in 1980 and George H. W. Bush’s loss to Bill Clinton in 1992 are testimony to the conventional wisdom that “economics is the fate of politicians” (Norpoth 1985, 167).

Following this reward-punishment model, in chapter 6 Chia-hung Tsai explores the role of the economy in Taiwan citizens’ voting calculus. The author finds mixed evidence for economic voting in the island country’s presidential elections. While prospective economic evaluations are found to be an important determinant of Taiwan voters’ electoral choices, the weight of the economy is overshadowed by, again, citizens’ partisan affiliations. This finding shows that responses to the economy affect Taiwan voters’ electoral calculus, but primarily through the colors of partisan lenses, which are closely aligned with their positions on the key political cleavage in the society.

Chapter 7 by Alexander Tan and Karl Ho examines the complex dynamics of cross-Strait relations, in particular the burgeoning economic exchanges with China after Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT was elected president in 2008. The authors find that island residents exhibit an ambivalent view of Taiwan’s close and intensive interactions with the Chinese mainland since 2008. Following partisan lines, some of them feel that such ties are beneficial to the island’s economy, while others express concerns about the security implications. In the aggregate, Taiwan voters recognize that isolation from China is not viable or even possible, yet getting too close to China also troubles them. This explains why the public changed its mind about the engagement policies of the Ma administration, initially favoring it after the DPP’s isolationist policies during 2000–2008, but then coming to distrust close ties as they seemed to bring few benefits to most ordinary citizens. Thus, cross-Strait relations, or more broadly speaking “the China factor,” affect not only how Taiwan voters see the future but also how they view the current administration.

Following these discussions of the impact of national identities, partisan attachments, and issue orientations on Taiwan voters’ electoral decision, chapter 8 by Hung-chung Wang and Lu-huei Chen examines the last component of the “big four”—citizens’ evaluation of candidates. Assessment of candidates for public office attracts considerable attention in each campaign season. Scholars and pundits analyze and dissect candidates’ backgrounds and characters, and discuss how these personal traits affect voters’ evaluation of candidates and their voting decisions. Citizens’ evaluation of candidates
is important because, it is argued, seeking for and digesting political information is costly. The assessment of candidates offers the public a useful shortcut as it seems to provide a clue as to how they will perform their duties once elected. In particular, given that the president occupies the principal position in the government, presidential traits and characters have important symbolic meaning, which set public standards for all political behaviors (Greene 2001; Kinder 1986; McCurley and Mondak 1995).

Following this line of research, Wang and Chen find that in Taiwan’s presidential elections, KMT candidates tend to be viewed as more capable of dealing with cross-Strait relationships and economic development, while DPP nominees are associated with the issue of eliminating corruption and initiating political reforms. Perhaps surprisingly, the perception of candidates’ personal traits has little effect on the island citizens’ voting behavior. Taiwan voters’ electoral decisions are largely determined by their partisan identifications, which, again, are closely in line with citizens’ positions on the axis of unification/independence and their national identities. Thus, candidate issue ownership is applicable to Taiwan’s parties, but voters’ evaluation of candidates’ personal characteristics and perceived competence are conditioned largely by their partisan affiliations.

In the context of Taiwan’s electoral politics, it should occasion no wonder that Western notions of political “left” and “right” have little relevance in Taiwan, as Yi-ching Hsiao, Su-feng Cheng, and Christopher Achen explain in chapter 9. The left-right scale is irrelevant because the main cleavage in Taiwan is not the degree of government control of the economy, as previous chapters emphasize. Nor are “left” and “right” used to describe other aspects of political debates in Taiwan. Political elites make essentially no use of those words in Taiwan, and ordinary citizens are mystified by references to them. The confusions are exacerbated by particular connotations of “left” and “right” in both Mandarin and the Taiwanese dialect, as the authors explain.

While the “big four” are the most significant factors in voters’ electoral calculus, they do not operate in a political vacuum. Institutional structures set a broad framework for the actions of both political parties and individuals. They set an approximate upper limit to the number of parties, configure the choice menu on the ballot, structure voters’ electoral calculus, and provide incentives or disincentives for citizens to show up at the ballot boxes on election days (e.g., Cox 1997; 1999; Engstrom 2012). Thus chapter 10 by Chi Huang examines the effects of recent electoral system change on Taiwan’s party system. As with the experience of Japan, which also adopted the mixed-member system a decade earlier, Taiwan has witnessed a dramatic change in its party system in the postreform era. The fast convergence to-
ward two-party competition on the island is due in part to the interactions between the powerful presidency and political elites’ ambition of synchronizing presidential and legislative elections. Because the issue of unification vs. independence is the single most important political cleavage on the island, as discussed in the previous chapters, it has played a hidden yet significant role in shaping the postreform party structure toward a “Pan-Blue vs. Pan-Green” system.

Chapter 11 by Chung-li Wu and Tzu-Ping Liu examines Taiwan citizens’ political participation. Similar to the trend in many Western democracies, the path of turnout rates in the island country’s presidential and legislative elections has gone downward since the early 1990s. Three particular factors affect individuals’ turnout and other forms of political participation—age, party identification, and political knowledge. In general, older people, individuals identified with main political parties, and those equipped with more political knowledge tend to have a higher level of political participation. Because this more engaged group generally has higher socioeconomic status, these findings further confirm the conventional wisdom that citizens in the upper and middle classes tend to be more interested and involved in public affairs than individuals in the lower class. The chapter shows that the gap has widened in Taiwan in recent years.

Each of these chapters identifies one or more important aspects of Taiwan politics. The final chapter by Christopher Achen and T. Y. Wang brings together all of them to examine vote choice on the island. We have built a comprehensive statistical model based on the factors that previous chapters have identified and discuss their implications. The central finding is that one key dimension organizes Taiwan citizens’ vote choices—the China factor. Should Taiwan accommodate itself to China’s ever more powerful presence in Asia, or should it forcefully assert its status as a separate country and resist integration with the mainland? The answer to that question largely determines what Taiwan people think about related policy issues, which party they adhere to, and how they vote.

Thus, in contrast to left-right economic disputes, which dominate politics in many Western countries, politics in Taiwan is fundamentally about nationalism and the future of Taiwan’s national identity. In that respect, Taiwan is one of many countries around the world in which similar issues shape domestic politics. In recent years, the world has seen a succession of crises and threats to peace in which national identity was the central issue—Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Ukraine, to list just three examples in which local wars have broken out and the major Western powers have taken an interest in restoring the peace. Taiwan, too, is an international hotspot with a poten-
tial for setting off a major international conflict. Thus far, democracy and peace have prevailed on the island. Hence, Taiwan has much to teach us, and we offer this book as a contribution to the international dialog about how differing conceptions of national identity can be managed peacefully.

Notes


2. As in Japan, factional politics are prevalent in Taiwan. The island country’s two major political parties have employed patron-client relationships for power distribution and voter mobilization. For a discussion of Taiwan’s factional politics, see Batto and Huang (2016).

3. We use “Taiwan citizen” to mean any citizen of Taiwan because the term “Taiwanese” has various political connotations for different people. To some, “Taiwanese” refer to citizens living in the territory effectively governed by the Taiwan government, while to others the term means an ethnic designation opposed to “mainlander.” Because the majority of support for the Pan-Green Alliance led by the Democratic Progressive Party comes from those who self-identify as “Taiwanese,” a “Taiwanese” or a “Taiwanese citizen” thus may have a narrower and potentially partisan meaning in English.

4. One well-known example is former Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui, who freely admitted that he had become a Japanese citizen with a Japanese name during the colonial period. Throughout his life, his Japanese language skills were better than his Mandarin.


7. Greater Tainan mayor William Lai’s visit to Shanghai is one of the most recent high-profile visits by DPP politician (Tsao and Chung 2014).

8. There are four major ethnic groups in Taiwan: Minnan, Hakka, mainlanders, and aborigine. Minnan refers to island residents whose ancestors migrated to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland several hundred years ago. They are the largest ethnic group at 77% of the island’s 23 million people. About 10% of Taiwan’s total population is Hakka, descendants of immigrants who came to the island at roughly the same time as the Minnan from areas in central China. Both Minnan and Hakka are generally grouped together as “Taiwanese” even though they have different customs and habits and speak different dialects. Approximately 12% of the total population are mainlanders, those who arrived from the mainland in the late 1940s after the Chinese civil war, and their descendants. Aborigines, the original settlers, constitute less than 2% of the total population in Taiwan.
9. Taiwan has no system of absentee voting (“postal voting”). One of the main explanations often advanced is that China-based Taiwanese businesspeople and their family members rely on good relations with China and thus are potential KMT supporters. Hence, absentee voting is expected to increase the KMT’s votes, and the DPP opposes it. Similarly, the Ma administration declared more than five years ago that Taiwan would start using the *pinyin* system for English translation, which is the phonetic system used in almost every part of the world, including the UN. Because the *pinyin* system was developed and adopted in the Chinese mainland, however, its usage was resisted by many DPP politicians (Economist 2014).

10. Some of the original applications were to currency exchange rates. Political scientists have studied arms races using the same ideas. In both instances, the complex causal details are much less important than showing that the system constantly attempts, in the midst of continual disturbances, to reach toward an equilibrium, even if it never attains it.

11. For a discussion of Taiwan’s “Blue North and Green South” phenomenon, see Chou 2012.

12. For a concise review of the literature on economic voting, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007.

References


