The Taiwan Voter

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of recent Taiwan elections for readers who may not be familiar with them. The growing importance of the north-south divide in Taiwan's politics is emphasized. The chapter also explores how the supporters of the two party camps differ from each other. In particular, standard variables that are important for differentiating party supporters in many other countries, such as income and occupation, turn out to have only modest effects in Taiwan. Instead, ethnicity plays the most crucial role in shaping the voting and partisan identities of Taiwan citizens, just as the theoretical framework of this book suggests.

Recent Taiwan Presidential Elections

Chapter 1 has given a brief overview of Taiwan’s history that highlights the island country’s political development. In particular, it argued that the pivot of Taiwan politics is the citizens’ political identities, which are both related to their ethnicity and manifested in their partisan affiliation with the Pan-Blue Alliance or the Pan-Green Alliance—the two major political camps that have formed since the late 1990s. Presuming that background, the present chapter begins with an exploration of Taiwan’s general voting patterns as seen in election returns tabulated by the Central Election Commission. The scope of the analysis comprises the five presidential elections since 1996 when the island’s president was first popularly elected, a time span of nearly two decades. Since then, four more presidential elections have been held, with two peaceful transfers of power in 2000 and in 2008.
The rapid democratization on the island culminated in the 1996 presidential election, in which Taiwan voters exercised their political right to popularly elect their national leader for the first time. In the 1996 presidential election, two candidates—Lin Yang-kang and Chen Lu-an—were members of the KMT who only broke away from the party after they failed to secure its nomination. Chen ran as an independent and Lin was supported by the New Party—a KMT split-off strongly advocating Taiwan's unification with the Chinese mainland. Similarly, in the 2000 presidential election, James Soong left the KMT and ran as an independent against Lien Chan, the KMT nominee, and Chen Shui-bian, the DPP-affiliated candidate. Although Soong and Lien together polled nearly 60 percent of the votes, Chen won the election with merely 39.3 percent under the first-past-the-post voting system. After the election, Soong organized the People First Party and has since served as its chair.

Recognizing that a divided KMT would only benefit the opponents, Soong joined Lien as his running mate in the 2004 presidential election. However, a successful DPP campaign and an apparent assassination attempt on Chen's life 24 hours before the polls opened gave Chen the victory. Then, in both the 2008 and 2012 elections, it was the KMT-affiliated Ma Ying-jeou who scored the victory. While the 2008 presidential election was a classic two-party race between the KMT and the DPP, the 2012 election was a three-party race with the PFP-affiliated Soong unsuccessfully attempting a comeback.

Thus, while there are multiple political parties on the island, even the smallest are either allies of the DPP or are KMT splinter groups. Hence the political landscape can generally be characterized by two political alliances—the “Pan-Blue” and the “Pan-Green”—led by the KMT and the DPP, respectively. The current chapter uses those terms for all the elections in the democratic era, even though the terms themselves did not appear until 2000. To simplify the analysis, vote shares of candidates in the five presidential elections are aggregated into those two blocs.

**The Consolidation of Two-Party System**

Figure 2.1 shows the electoral support enjoyed by the two party groups during the five presidential elections Taiwan has conducted since democratization, 1996–2012. A dominant electoral force in the mid-1990s, the Pan-Blue Alliance shrank rapidly during the subsequent decade, only to recover somewhat in the two most recent presidential contests. In recent years, the
partisan divide on the island has been approximately 50–55 percent for the Pan-Blue Alliance and 40–45 percent for the Pan-Green Alliance, with the smaller parties of decreasing importance. It appears that Taiwan’s political landscape has consolidated as a genuine two-party system dominated by the KMT and the DPP.

Many democracies in the world show strong regional differences in their voting patterns. Well-known historical examples include the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century “Solid South” in the United States (Archer and Taylor 1981; Tindall 1972), the traditional loyalty to the Labour Party in northern England and Scotland, the east vs. west divide in Korean and Ukrainian politics, and the strong support for the Liberal Party in Quebec, Canada, in the immediate postwar period. Taiwan also has a sharp regional division. Since 2000, the island country’s electoral politics has increasingly displayed a strong north-south divide. In part due to the fact that the national government in Taipei has poured budget money into northern Tai-
Fig. 2.2. Pan-Blue's vote shares in the presidential elections, 1996–2012. Data: Election Study Center.
Taiwan, the disparity between the north and the rest of the country in development and living standard has grown. As cross-Strait relations become increasingly vital to Taiwan’s economic development in the 2000s, voters in northern Taiwan, where high-tech industries, banking businesses, and the service industry gather, are more supportive of the KMT and its policies than those living in southern Taiwan.

The five choropleth maps in figure 2.2 set out the vote shares garnered by Pan-Blue presidential candidates during the five presidential elections. They show the emergence of the north-south divide. In the 1996 presidential election, running as the incumbent and the first native son to be Taiwan’s national leader, the KMT’s nominee, Lee Teng-hui, was widely popular. The Pan-Blue Alliance won at least 70 percent of the votes in every city and county on the island, in both urban and rural areas. In particular, voters in much of north-central Taiwan, including Taoyuan County, Hsinchu City and County, Miaoli County, and eastern Taiwan, were highly supportive of the three Pan-Blue candidates and in particular of Lee. The regional divide was not much in evidence.

As noted above, the 2000 presidential election was a three-way race among Chen Shui-bian, the DPP nominee; James Soong, the party switcher from the KMT to independent; and Lien Chan, the KMT nominee. Using the Jhuoshuei River as the traditional demarcation line between northern and southern Taiwan, figure 2.2 again shows that the regional disparity in electoral support for the two political alliances began to emerge in this election. The two Pan-Blue candidates received a combined vote share of 60 percent to 70 percent in many parts of northern Taiwan, especially in Taoyuan County and in Hsinchu City and County. The Pan-Green candidate Chen ran better in southern Taiwan but had little support in cities and counties in the north. Overall, Chen had less than 40 percent of the national vote. Had the Pan-Blue Alliance not been divided and thus split its electoral support, Chen would not have been able to win the 2000 presidential election.

The regional disparity in electoral support became even clearer in the 2004 election, as figure 2.2 shows. Pan-Blue candidates continued to garner large electoral support in northern Taiwan but were not able to receive more than 40 percent of votes in cities in the south, including Yunlin County, Chiayi City and County, Tainan City and County, Kaohisung City and County, and Pingtung County. Cities and counties in the central part of Taiwan, including Taichung City and Nantou County, Taichung County and Chunhua County, became battleground areas as the Pan-Blue candidates barely secured a majority of votes.

The regional divide between a “Blue North” and a “Green South” ap-
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Annual support appeared to become consolidated in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. In 2008, the Pan-Blue nominee, Ma Ying-jeou, won a landslide victory with a 58.5 percent to 41.5 percent victory. As figure 2 shows, however, while Ma was able to garner 60 percent to 70 percent of the vote in much of northern and eastern Taiwan, the electoral support for him was considerably weaker in southern cities and counties. Although Ma won his reelection bid in 2012, the regional disparity in electoral support continued. The Pan-Blue candidate continued to draw 60–70 percent of the vote in much of northern and eastern Taiwan, while southern Taiwan remained the stronghold of the Pan-Green Alliance.

Regional disparities in party support are due partly to purely regional factors. But northern and southern Taiwan also differ in ethnic composition, income, and occupations, which together account for some of the regional disparity. The remainder of the chapter takes up those forces accounting for the partisan divide.

Demographic Characteristics and Electoral Behavior

As we have seen, the Pan-Blue Alliance has enjoyed a 5–10 percentage point electoral advantage at the national level since 2000. This section will examine where that support comes from.

As chapter 1 pointed out, there are three major ethnic groups on the island—Minnan, Hakka, and the mainlanders. While they were all immigrants from the Chinese mainland, the Minnan and Hakka are the island residents whose ancestors migrated to Taiwan several hundred years ago. Mainlanders were originally largely composed of the followers of Chiang Kai-shek when the KMT government retreated to the island in 1949. Mainlanders now are primarily their descendants. Each ethnic group thus carries a distinct memory of Taiwan’s modern history that may affect their partisan support. The ethnicity of Taiwan voters is closely related to their voting behavior (Wang 1998; Lin 1989; You 1996).

Figure 2.3 shows that mainlanders have been highly supportive of the Pan-Blue Alliance. Nearly 90 percent of mainlanders voted for its candidates in every election since 1996. By contrast, support for Pan-Blue candidates from the Minnan group has declined significantly since 1996 when the KMT nominee, Lee Teng-hui, received more than 80 percent of the votes from his fellow Minnan voters. In subsequent elections, the Minnan voters’ electoral support for Pan-Blue candidates has fluctuated between 40 percent and 55 percent. Although the KMT-affiliated Ma won the election
in 2012 with the majority support of the Minnan citizens, the gap between the mainlander and the Minnan voters for the Pan-Blue Alliance remains as large as 40 percentage points.

Last, the Hakka are more centrist. The majority of the Hakka group generally have provided their electoral support to Pan-Blue candidates. However, from 2000 to 2004, President Chen Shui-bian appointed many Hakka politicians as cabinet ministers in his first term. The ministry-level government agency, the Council for Hakka Affairs, and Hakka TV were also established in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Perhaps in consequence, Hakka voters swung to the DPP in 2004. However, the majority returned to the KMT in subsequent elections.

The evidence thus shows that the Pan-Blue Alliance generally has been able to garner majority support from the two minority ethnic groups on the island, the Hakka and the mainlanders, and that mainlanders are its
most loyal supporters.\(^3\) The majority group, the Minnan, leans to the Pan-Green. The Pan-Green alliance receives its electoral support primarily from the Minnan group, with very little backing from the mainlanders. Thus the ethnic cleavage between the mainlanders and the Minnan group is significant. Although mainlanders make up only about 12 percent of the island’s population, their loyal support for the Pan-Blue Alliance and their high turnout rate, together with typically substantial Hakka backing for the KMT, suggest that the ethnic cleavage will continue to play an important role in Taiwan’s politics.

In many countries, the parties are substantially based on income classes because that is a central cleavage in the political system. As we have already suggested in this book and as chapter 9 argues in detail, conventional left-right economic divisions do not describe Taiwan politics well. However, income might still matter to some degree. One of the legacies of the KMT’s authoritarian rule has been Taiwan’s successful economic development in the 1970s. The land reform and the Ten Major Construction Projects, for instance, helped bring rapid economic growth. While most Taiwan citizens have benefited from these economic policies, it has been argued that the well-off and the middle class have benefited most, and thus have generally been the most loyal supporters of the KMT (Winckler 1992). Figure 2.4 confirms this observation to some degree. Citizens of higher income appeared to support the Pan-Blue candidates more than those of lower income by roughly 10 percentage points in the last three presidential elections.

In addition, the figure shows a significant decline of support for the Pan-Blue Alliance by low-income citizens, from about 90 percent in the 1996 election to roughly 40 percent in 2004, and then stabilizing at about 55 percent. The changing partisan support by less affluent voters may appear exaggerated due to the “Lee Teng-hui Complex,” referring to citizens’ emotional attachment to the island country’s first popularly elected president in 1996 (Hsu 1998, 2004). His broad popularity was not likely to be repeated when the KMT returned to mainlander candidates. Nonetheless, it is clear that in recent years, for whatever reasons, less affluent Taiwan voters tend to be less supportive of the Pan-Blue Alliance than their well-off countrymen. Yet as the graph shows, the impact of income is much smaller than that of ethnicity. Taiwan politics is simply not primarily about class conflict.

Another measure of class, closely associated with income, is respondents’ education. Figure 2.5 shows that Taiwan voters with college or graduate school education tend to be more supportive of the Pan-Blue Alliance, while citizens with a lower level of education tend to back Pan-Green candidates. Note that the largest supporting gap among voters with different education
levels appeared in 2004, while partisan support for the Pan-Blue Alliance nearly converged among educational groups in 2012. Again, the effects are very small compared to those of ethnicity, nearly disappearing in the most recent election.

Figure 2.6 gives social class one last chance. It displays vote shares for Pan-Blue candidates according to respondents’ occupation. The differences in partisan support among different occupational groups appear to be rather consistent during the past five presidential elections. Specifically, Taiwan voters employed in the public sector, such as the military, governmental employees, and public school teachers, are highly supportive of the Pan-Blue Alliance, by roughly between 60 percent to 75 percent. This is followed by those in the private sector, with a Pan-Blue support rate between 50 to 60 percent. Citizens who earn their living by farming, fishing, and forestry
are least likely to support Pan-Blue candidates. The difference in support for the Pan-Blue Alliance between government employees and citizens in the agricultural sector are as high as 25 percentage points in the 2008 and 2012 elections. Since state employees are devoted supporters of the KMT, the Pan-Green Alliance relies on backing from voters in the agricultural and labor sectors. Thus there is clearly an occupational difference here, but it is tied in part to traditional mainlander dominance of government and to the reliance on fishing and farming in southern Taiwan, where the population is disproportionately Minnan. This raises the question of whether the effect of occupation is causal or merely correlational. Chapter 12 sorts out whether occupation itself has an impact on vote choice, or whether occupational differences simply proxy for other electoral forces, especially ethnicity and national identity.

Figure 2.7 raises the question of whether Taiwan politics is undergoing generational change. It shows the vote shares for Pan-Blue candidates based
on respondents’ age. In general, the average vote and the over-time trends of all age groups are strikingly similar. Voters in their 30s and 40s tend to be a bit more supportive of the KMT and its political partners in recent years. However, it is noteworthy that the younger generation in its 20s became the age group least supportive of the Pan-Blue Alliance in 2012. While it remains to be seen whether this represents a trend, it may be indicative of a discontented younger generation that leaders of both the Pan-Blue and Pan-Green alliances need to cultivate. In any case, the differences are quite small and inconsistent in comparison with other factors examined in this chapter, and the evidence best fits the notion that Taiwan’s electoral cleavages are relatively stable and generally reproducing themselves in younger generations thus far.

Lastly, one can ask how the ethnic cleavages seen in this chapter manifest themselves in partisanship. Party preferences are crucial: they structure not only presidential choices but also votes for lower-level offices. They
also determine how voters see the political world. Thus it is important to ask how different ethnic groups have evolved in their partisan attachments. For that purpose, annual data are available, not just information from presidential years.

Figure 2.8 show how KMT partisan loyalties of the three main ethnic groups have evolved since 1992. Remarkably, KMT identification is nearly constant among all three groups over a period of 30 years. And the differences among them are very large, amounting to more than 30 percentage points. It is clear that ethnicity is a key determinant of KMT partisanship.

Figure 2.9 gives the same information for DPP partisans. Prior to 2000, many citizens disguised their anti-KMT leanings by calling themselves “independents.” But since Chen Shui-bian’s first presidential race, DPP partisanship, too, has been very stable within each ethnic group. Apart from some disenchantment in the later years of the Chen presidency, the DPP has held the same share of partisans it attracted in its first successful presidential
Fig. 2.8. Partisan identification with the Pan-Blue Alliance by ethnic groups, 1992–2012. Data source: Core Political Attitudes among Taiwanese (Election Study Center, NCCU).

Fig. 2.9. Partisan identification with the Pan-Green Alliance by ethnic groups, 1992–2012. Data source: Core Political Attitudes among Taiwanese (Election Study Center, NCCU).
race. And, again, the differences between Minnan and mainlanders are very large, amounting to nearly 25 percentage points in recent years.

Thus in general, the evidence seems to suggest that Taiwan voters who are in their 30s and 40s, with higher level of education, who are relatively well-off, or are working in the public sector tend to be the most supportive of the Pan-Blue Alliance. Candidates of the Pan-Green Alliance are more appealing to citizens who are in their 20s, have low income, or are employed in the agricultural or labor sectors. None of these factors has effects nearly as large as ethnicity, which has by far the biggest impact on vote choices and on partisanship. However, as it will be shown in chapter 3, with Taiwan’s democracy becoming increasingly consolidated the ethnic cleavage among its citizens has gradually been transformed and cloaked in their partisan attachments.

Conclusion

Drawing on survey data about Taiwan voters’ electoral choices since 1996, this chapter has provided a general characterization of Taiwan voters. It has shown that the partisan preferences of citizens on the island are focused on the Pan-Blue and the Pan-Green alliances. As Taiwan’s democracy has increasingly consolidated into a competitive two-party system, each alliance has become dominated by a single party, the KMT and the DPP, respectively.

The Pan-Blue Alliance has enjoyed a 5–10 percentage point electoral advantage during the past three presidential elections. This electoral gap is not constant across the island. For a variety of economic and historical reasons, Taiwan’s political landscape is divided, with the Pan-Blue Alliance dominating the northern part of the island and the Pan-Green Alliance receiving strong support in the south.

The chapter has also shown that the two electoral alliances are based on different parts of the voting population. At the risk of oversimplification, one may say that citizens who are mainlanders, well-educated, more affluent, government employees, or in their 30s and 40s are more likely to provide electoral support for Pan-Blue candidates. On the other hand, voters 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. But all these differences are dwarfed by the impact of ethnicity, which has very large impacts on both vote choices and on partisan identity.

This description of the support base of each party group raises a host of questions. Why are people in each of these sectors drawn disproportionately to one party rather than another? Are the differences primarily ideological,
while demographic differences are merely incidental? Or do identity differences shape both opinions and partisan loyalties? Or does everything reduce to the economy and pocketbook voting? And why has popular support come to be focused on just two parties? Subsequent chapters take up these questions.
Appendix 2.A1

**Wording and coding of demographic variables**

*Age.* In what year were you born? 20–29 years old=1, 30–39 years old=2, 40–49 years old=3, 50–59 years old=4, 60 years old and above=5.

*Education.* What is the highest degree that you finished? Elementary school and below=1, high school=2, college/graduate school=3.

*Occupation.* What is your current occupation and position?

*Income.* What is your household’s total income? See appendix 2.A2 for classification.

*Ethnicity.* What is your father’s ethnicity? Minnan=1, Hakka=2, mainland-er=3.

*Region.* Where do you live? Taipei City, Taipei County and Keelung City, Taoyuan County, Miaoli County, Hsinchu City, Hsinchu County Taichung City, Taichung County, Chunghwa County, Nantou City Tainan City, Tainan County, Kaohsiung City, Kaohsiung County, Pingtung County, Penghu County, Ilan County, Hwalien County and Taitung County.

Appendix 2.A2

**Classification of Three Income Groups**

According to the yearly family income data published by the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, the monthly family income of the 20th percentile and 80th percentile is calculated. Based on these two numbers, respondent’s income is categorized as low, middle, and high. For example, the 80th percentile of monthly family income was NTD 131,798 and the 20th percentile was NTD 24,680. Respondents who answered “no income,” “below NTD 15,000,” and “between NTD 15,000 and 30,000” fall into the low income group. Respondents who answered “between NTD 100,000 and NTD 200,000” and “more than 200,000” belong to the high income group. Respondents whose income is higher than NTD 30,000 but lower than NTD 100,000 are defined as the middle income group.

In 1998 and 2000, respondents were asked their personal income instead of their household income. Because it is difficult to translate between these two measures, we dropped those years from the tabulation.
Appendix 2.A3

List of Datasets


Notes

1. Prior to 1996, Taiwan’s president was indirectly elected by its now defunct National Assembly.
2. The reality of the assassination attempt is disputed between the parties.
3. Aboriginals also give the KMT majority support, so that the KMT is in many respects a coalition of minorities, while the DPP largely represents the majority sub-ethnic group. Many other countries have a similar party-bloc structure, including the United States, in which the Republicans get heavy support from the white majority while the Democrats are disproportionately a coalition of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.

References


