The Taiwan Voter

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The left-right ideological dimension is an important conceptual tool for understanding most European democratic countries and their former colonies, such as those in North and South America. Party competition, the electorate’s voting decisions, and governmental policy making can all be described in that framework (for example, Barnes 1971; Bartle 1998; Dalton 2008; Dalton and Tanaka 2007; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Norris 2004, 97–125; Potrafke 2009). In its mathematical form, the “spatial model” of left-right voting has been a favorite of theorists since Hotelling (1929) and before. Of course, citizens in Western countries vary in how well they understand the dimension (Stokes 1962; Converse 1964; Converse and Pierce 1986, 127–29; Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Inglehart 1990; Lewis-Beck and Chlarson 2002). Nevertheless, political elites, scholars, and journalists make ready use of it to describe their national politics.

The ubiquity of “left” and “right” in the elite discourse of their countries has led some Western scholars to imagine that, in some form or another, those terms must be meaningful political concepts in virtually every country. Thus Sigelman and Yough (1978, 356) write that “party systems throughout the world can meaningfully be profiled in terms of polarization along the left-right continuum.” Similarly, Converse and Pierce (1986, 112) say, “This currency of ‘left,’ ‘center,’ and ‘right’ has of course been widely exported, and is a commonplace for politically sophisticated observers around the world.”

This same logic is embedded in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) international surveys, in which every participating country is required to ask the following question:
In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

In Taiwan, however, left-right language is simply not used to describe the current party system—not by ordinary people, not by journalists, not by politicians, and not by Taiwan scholars. Asking them about it is like asking them about sharia law or dancing the flamenco—cultural concepts that are prominent elsewhere but not in Taiwan.

Since they lack the appropriate political context, how do Taiwan citizens answer the CSES question? What do they understand by political “left” and “right”? Scholars have occasionally remarked on anomalies in the use of left-right language in Taiwan (for example, Chen 2003), but no one has focused explicitly and in detail on how Taiwan citizens perceive “left” and “right” in politics. The purpose of this chapter is to do so. We begin by reviewing the use of left-right language in Western democracies. Then we proceed to the Taiwan case.

The Concept of a Left-Right Dimension

The political concepts of left and right originated during the French Revolution two centuries ago, when the more radical supporters of the Revolution sat on the left in the Estates General, with their ideological opponents on the right. Thus, from its beginnings the left-right distinction in the West reflected ideological divisions over tradition and hierarchy in society. “By left we shall mean advocating social change in the direction of greater equality—political, economic, or social; by right we shall mean supporting a traditional more or less hierarchical social order, and opposing change toward greater equality” (Lipset et al. 1954, 1135).

In the modern era, the left-right dimension has referred primarily to differences in the desired degree of government intervention in both society and economy. Thus Laver and Hunt (1992, 12) write that

the left pole has in general become associated with policies designed to bring about the redistribution of resources from those with more to those with less, and with the promotion of social rights that apply to groups of individuals taken as a whole even at the expense of individual members of those groups. The right pole has become associated with the promotion of individual rights, including the right
not to have personal resources expropriated for redistribution by the state, even at the expense of social inequality and of poverty among worse off social groups.

Scholars interested in social class issues in politics often adhere closely to the latter meaning. Thus Jansen, Evans, and De Graaf (2013, 54) say that “we construct a left-right party position based on economic and welfare policy issues,” and they explicitly set aside broader definitions proposed by other scholars.

More loosely, other historical cleavages typical of Western societies (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) have sometimes been subsumed under the left-right rubric when they happened to line up with the views of left and right political parties. Thus debates over divorce laws, abortion, supranational integration, and many other issues are given “left” and “right” interpretations (Dalton 2012; Zechmeister 2006; Zechmeister and Corral 2013). As Inglehart (1990, 292) argues, “The Left-Right image is an oversimplification, but an almost inevitable one, which in the long run tends to assimilate all important issues.” Hence the left-right dimension is sometimes described as a kind of “super-issue,” especially in Europe.

Issues unrelated to governmental intervention in the market or in society have no persistent left-right meaning, however. There is nothing left or right about disputes among ethnic, racial, or religious groups, for instance. Similarly, neither the left nor the right has a monopoly on forceful assertions of nationalism. Across Europe, conservative and socialist parties are found on both sides of the debate over ceding some national sovereignty to the European Union.

Particular leftist parties may adopt certain social views in a particular historical period, of course, as may rightist parties. However, history demonstrates that the issue packages that seem so coherent and inevitable to partisans at the time have often varied dramatically in different times and places. In practice, major party platforms are strategic documents cobbled together to balance party factions and meet short-term electoral needs. They are not ideologically coherent statements of a political vision (see, for example, Bawn et al. 2012).

Thus we expect that when left-right language is extended beyond its central modern meaning, all sorts of jumbled statistical patterns will result. That is precisely what scholars have found (Fuchs and Klingemann 2009). Zechmeister (2010) even finds some reversed signs for the correlation between economic views and left-right self-descriptions in Latin American surveys.
because “left” and “right” are being used to mean something else in certain countries. “It is indeed a fact,” Zechmeister (2015, 199) writes, “that the political significance of the left-right semantics varies across countries, across time, and even across subgroups of a population.”

All these countries, however odd or broad the meaning they give to left and right, agree in one respect: in their party systems, “left” and “right” are meaningful political terms. The voters may understand them to a greater or lesser degree, but the words themselves are meaningful. What scholars have not discussed much at all, however, are countries in which those words are not used in electoral politics, so that the concepts “left” and “right” have no application to the party system. It is to such a case that we now turn.

Left and Right in Taiwan

Knowledgeable observers (Cheng and Hsu 1996; Rigger 2001, 39–41) are agreed that for good historical reasons, conventional left-right issues do not consistently differentiate the two main Taiwan parties, the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party. According to Sheng and Liao’s longitudinal study (see chapter 5 of this volume), the DPP has often been seen as somewhat more favorable to “environmental protection,” to “reform,” and to “social welfare programs,” leading some foreign observers to think of it as the left party. But in practice, across issues such as pensions and medical care programs, neither of the two parties has been consistently on the left or the right. Early in his term in office, DPP president Chen Shui-bian set aside many of his party’s social welfare promises in favor of promoting economic growth, a typical right-wing choice. As Fell (2012, 199) remarks, “As with environmental issues, welfare is not a core ideological issue for the party, thus could be sacrificed.”

Typically, the two main Taiwan parties are flexible, low intensity, and opportunistic on social welfare policies, differentiating themselves instead along national identity lines instead, as we have seen repeatedly in this book and as previous observers have noted (Cheng and Hsu 1996; Fell 2005b, chap. 4; Fell 2008, 69). Thus, elite politics in Taiwan is organized differently than in most Western countries, and the parties have little incentive to use left-right language in explaining themselves to voters.

Unsurprisingly, then, the left-right dimension does not predict voting in Taiwan. Norris (2004, 110–11) utilized the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems dataset to explore citizens’ voting decisions in a variety of democra-
cies and found that respondents' left-right position was significantly correlated with their voting decision—with the exception of Taiwan and Belarus. All this is quite different from most Western countries, where, in spite of considerable noise and misunderstanding by many in the population, on average the party placements make reasonable sense, and where individual citizens’ self-placements correlate at least fairly well with their voting decisions (for example, on France, see Converse 1966 and Fleury and Lewis-Beck 1993; more generally, Norris 2004, 110–11).

Left-right semantics do not predict the vote in Taiwan because, as we have seen, those words are not used in the political culture to describe party differences. Survey respondents are forced to guess their meaning. Thus, Chen (2003) found that only about half of Taiwan citizens were able to specify their position on a left-right dimension, a much higher failure rate than in most democracies. Moreover, even for those who did place themselves, Chen’s study of their unconventional responses led him to question whether respondents really understood what “left” and “right” meant. In the same way, Jou (2010, 373) encountered very low left-right cognition in his study of Taiwan citizens: fewer than 50% could place themselves on the scale. Taiwan’s left-right placement rate was the lowest among 35 countries in CSES cases studied by Russell Dalton, and the only country under 50 percent (Dalton 2011, 107).

The evidence that Taiwan voters do not understand left and right language is strengthened when one looks at center self-placements by voters—a 5 on the 0–10 point scale. As Converse and Pierce (1986, 128–29) note, respondents who choose the midpoint are often poorly informed and simply trying to appear helpful to the interviewer: center placement “is an obvious selection for a person who is neutral, uncommitted, and even thoroughly indifferent to or ignorant about this generic axis of dispute.” (Similarly, see Lambert 1983 and Ogmundson 1979.) In two different studies, Jou (2010, 373) found very high center placement in Taiwan—among the minority of voters who could place themselves at all, more than half chose the center position. Thus, altogether, more than three quarters of the Taiwan respondents chose either the neutral position or no position at all. The same finding appears in the 2012 TEDS survey: 78 percent of Taiwan respondents were either neutral or uncomprehending when asked the left-right question.

All these Taiwan anomalies raise several questions. Is there any sense of the words “left” and “right,” conventional or not, that has meaning for the voters? What do ordinary Taiwan citizens mean when they are asked the meaning of those words? And how do they place the parties on that dimension?
Taiwan Politics and the Cultural Connotations of “Left” and “Right”

As we have noted, a conventional left-right dimension seems to play little role in the vote choices of Taiwan’s voters. In this respect, the citizenry simply reflect the nature of Taiwan politics. The voters see real differences between the parties on the national identity issue, but few on secondary issues like social welfare (Chu and Lin 1996, 92–95). As Sheng and Liao showed in chapter 5, since the beginning of democratization in the 1980s, citizen preferences on such issues as Taiwan independence vs. reunification with China, environmental protection vs. economic development, social welfare vs. low taxes, and reform vs. social stability have influenced party preferences and voting decisions to some degree (Hsieh, Niou, and Lin 1995; Sheng and Chen 2003; Tsai 2008; Wang 2001; Wang 2003). But the first of these—indpendence vs. reunification—is the most powerful issue, not only in locating the main two parties on the political spectrum, but also in determining voter choice. National identity concerns stemming from “the China factor” have been the main political cleavage to discriminate between the Pan-Blue camp and the Pan-Green camp (as chapter 4 reveals). However, national identity is not itself conventionally left-right in character, and those words are not used to describe the issue in Taiwan.5

Not only does left-right thinking fit Taiwan’s current elite and electoral politics poorly, but in recent history that language was actively employed to characterize something else—Taiwan’s foreign policy disagreements with mainland China. Before democratization in the late 1980s, the Kuomintang Party viewed the “leftist” Chinese Communist Party as the mortal enemy. With its monopoly on political communications, the KMT made every effort to suppress “left” views. Taiwan people were taught that the “left-side” was evil. Expressing sympathy for the left was a form of rebellion. The KMT emphasized that it was the “right” party. An element of negative evaluation still attaches to “left-side” political views in Taiwan.

These connotations of “left” and “right” are enhanced by the two Chinese dialects most used in Taiwan, Taiwanese (spoken by a majority of citizens) and Mandarin (the language of instruction in schools). Just as some respondents in English-speaking countries consider the political “right” to mean “correct” or “in the right,” so also in the Taiwanese dialect the same word “right” is used to mean both “the opposite of left” and also “correct” or “true.” “Left” in Taiwanese connotes “bad” in some way. The heritage from the authoritarian period enhances this identification.
An equally consequential factor for left-right usage in Taiwan is that, apart from all political overtones, “left” in the Mandarin dialect connotes deviousness, unorthodoxy, or heresy. The inference extends even to left-handed people, who are often considered “alternative” or nonmainstream. In everyday Taiwan life, the right side when walking (or the right-hand seat when sitting) is reserved for elders, honored guests, or respected citizens. The implication, then, is that one’s favorite political party should be placed on the right and the disliked party on the left.

Thus we expect that placing Taiwan’s parties on a conventional left-right scale will be difficult for ordinary citizens because that dimension is nearly irrelevant for party choice in Taiwan. When respondents are forced to place the parties or to define “left” and “right,” they will often fall back on other meanings familiar from local culture, such as “Communist” vs. “anti-Communist,” “bad” vs. “good,” or “wrong” vs. “correct.” To assess these propositions, we use both cognitive interviews and public opinion surveys. The cognitive interview data come from a project called “A Study of Major Political Identification Concepts of the Taiwan Public.” In this project, which was carried out in 2001, 50 respondents were asked to define the left-right dimension in politics, and then to place themselves and the major Taiwan political parties on the left-right spectrum. The interviewers gave no examples or cues of how this task was to be done. All the respondents had to define the concept and the positions according to their own understandings.

We also employ opinion survey data collected by Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study after the 2001 legislative election and the 2008 presidential election (hereafter TEDS2001 and TEDS2008P). The sampling population is adult citizens in Taiwan. The number of successful interviews was 2,022 and 1,905, respectively. In TEDS, a 0–10 scale was utilized for the respondents’ placement of themselves and the major parties, as well as for answers to issue questions.

Citizens’ Perceptions of “Left” and “Right”

We begin with a discussion of the cognitive interviews to give a sense of what Taiwan respondents mean by “left” and “right.” In the end, all fifty respondents managed some sort of definition, but the task was not easy for most of them. When asked to give a definition, 18 respondents (36%) began by asking what the question meant. Another five respondents (10%) said that the left-right dimension was politically irrelevant in Taiwan. For example (our translations):
I don’t think the concept of left-right exists in Taiwan. (No. 01)

I just don’t get it . . . basically, I think the concept is meaningless in Taiwan. (No. 41)

Thus nearly half the respondents could not or did not use the left-right distinction in their thinking about Taiwan politics.

When pressed to a definition, respondents’ answers varied widely, and most did not fit the customary meaning of left-right in Western democracies. We have attempted to catalog the respondents’ answers into six different categories, with the “left” answer listed first: liberalism vs. conservatism (4%), doves vs. hawks (18%), Communism vs. democracy (18%), Taiwan independence vs. reunification with China (22%), bad vs. good (18%), and ruling party vs. opposition party (20%). Among the six different definitions, the first category clearly conforms to the definition of left-right in Western democracies, and the second might be generously interpreted to do so as well. But those two groups comprise fewer than 25 percent of the respondents. The remaining four categories reflect confusions of various kinds.

To convey a sense of how the interviewees in the nonstandard categories express themselves, we give a sample of their responses. We begin with the third category of respondents, those who regard all democracies as “right.”

Communism vs. Democracy

Basically I think the left-wingers are closer to socialism, so socialists are counted as left. Closer to democracy and liberty are the right-wingers. From my point of view, in present-day Taiwan, no matter whether it’s DDP, KMT, PFP, or TSU [abbreviations of the Taiwan parties], they are basically on the democracy side, so all the Taiwanese parties belong to the right. (No. 13)

The left reminds me of the Communist Party. . . . the left was referred to as the Communist Party . . . The right is the more democratic party. (No. 29)

I always think Communism vs. democracy. . . . It seems to me that the right side is democracy and the left side is communism. I don’t really get it. (No. 42)
The fourth category reflects the main political cleavage in Taiwan, the orientation toward China’s claim of ownership of Taiwan. As noted above, this policy dimension is not about economics or social class, but is rather a dispute between two versions of national identity. Thus it is not conventionally left-right.

**Reunification vs. Independence**

*I don’t have the concept of the left-right. . . . it is made by [other] people. . . . The left in politics is [Taiwan] independence, and the right is unification [with China].* (No. 06)

*Generally speaking, the definition of the extreme right is strongly supporting unification, while the extreme left is strongly supporting independence. This is how I see it.* (No. 34)

Finally, the last two categories, nearly 40 percent of the interviewees, completely misunderstand left-right categories. The first group takes their cue from the connotation in Mandarin and Taiwanese of “left” as deviant or subpar.

**Good vs. Bad**

*I feel the left seems to be negative . . . and the right is more positive. . . . I feel it is good vs. bad. . . . Because I think the left means heresy in our old saying, that unorthodox ways are “left ways” [in Chinese]. . . . If I use “the left” to describe something bad, then I think the opposite side of it should be something better.* (No. 07)

*Left-right in politics means who does things right. Those who do the right things are the rights, while those who do the wrong things are the lefts.* (No. 31)

The last group of respondents associates “right” with the ruling party, regardless of its ideology.
Ruling Party vs. Opposition Party

The left and the right? I think to say it in a simple way, it is the ruling party and the non-ruling party... I think the left is the non-ruling party and the right is the ruling party. (No. 33)

Ruling party is counted as the right, and generally speaking the left is the opposition party. (No. 08)

Note that at the time of the interviews, the presidency was held by the pro-independence DPP. Categorizing them as “right,” as these respondents do, contradicts the categorization given by those respondents who focused on reunification vs. independence and thereby called the DPP “left.”

In summary, these cognitive interviews display the great range of interpretation of left and right among Taiwan’s citizens. Only a few use European-derived interpretations to structure their dimensional thinking. Some impose idiosyncratic understandings. Many do not make use of the concept at all. Thus imposing Western left-right frameworks on Taiwan respondents violates their understanding of the island’s politics and distorts the analysis of elections there.

Survey Evidence

These conclusions are strengthened when we turn to nationwide opinion survey data. We first explore how citizens locate themselves and the major parties on the left-right dimension and on a variety of policy issues, including Taiwan independence vs. reunification with China, environmental protection vs. economic development, promoting social welfare vs. keeping taxes down, and large-scale reform vs. social stability. The latter three items are conventionally left-right in character, especially the social welfare question, while the first issue concerns competing national identities and has no left-right ideological content, as we have discussed. In each case, the scale runs from 0–10 (question wordings are given in the appendix). These issues were discussed by Sheng and Liao in chapter 5 to validate the importance of Taiwan’s principal political cleavage. Here our purpose is different: we explore the correlations between the left-right dimension and these four policy issue to verify that left-right is an inapplicable instrument for interpreting Taiwan politics. We begin with nonresponse rates.
Figure 9.1 reveals that across a variety of issues, the nonresponse rate for the left-right question is by far the highest. In 2001 and in 2008, about half the citizens could not respond when asked where they placed themselves on the left-right dimension. By comparison, only about 10 percent failed to provide their own opinions on standard Taiwan political issues. Many citizens give middle scores for their position on the ideological spectrum, probably because they are behaving cautiously in a task they did not fully understand, as discussed earlier. Further investigation showed that, as expected, knowledgeable or highly partisan respondents were more often able to give an answer to the left-right question (as in Converse and Valen 1971, 131), while party preference made no difference. Nevertheless, even among those well-informed respondents who answered all five of the political knowledge questions or missed only one, almost 40 percent could not place themselves on a left-right scale in 2001. Failure rates were considerably higher among those with less understanding. Altogether, for half of all Taiwan citizens, there is no interpretation of left-right language that makes enough sense to allow them to place themselves on the scale, and, as we have already noted, the other half often manage the task only with idiosyncratic definitions of “left” and “right.”

The conclusion is much the same when we examine placement of the
two principal political parties on the same 0–10 scale. For each policy issue, figure 9.2 shows the difference of the mean DPP placement from the mean KMT placement, with positive numbers indicating that the DPP is closer to the first option in each issue choice. For example, on the issue of independence vs. reunification, a positive difference means that the DPP is seen (correctly) as closer to the independence position. As figure 9.1 demonstrated, some respondents could not place the parties on each issue. Hence the comparative placements in figure 9.2 are based solely on those respondents who did so.

As in Sheng and Liao’s results in chapter 5, figure 9.2 shows that in both 2001 and 2008 the DPP is considered closer than the KMT to the positions of “independence,” “environment,” and “reform,” with the party difference by far the largest on independence vs. reunification. Better informed and more partisan respondents perceived somewhat larger party differences (not
shown but available from the authors on request). These findings are completely consistent with contemporary interpretations of party competition and elite political cleavages in Taiwan, as we noted above.

This optimistic view of the respondents is tempered by the one inconsistency between 2001 and 2008, however, which occurs on the clearest and most conventional left-right issue, social welfare vs. keeping taxes down. In 2001, the DPP was considered closer to “promoting social welfare” than the KMT, but this ordering was reversed in 2008. It may be that 2008 respondents were simply expressing their more pessimistic view of the Chen Shui-bian administration after its eight years in office, during which he deemphasized social welfare, as we have seen. In any event, the instability and vanishingly small party differences on this issue reinforce the point that Western notions of “left” and “right” do not distinguish the two principal Taiwan parties.

A second and more striking anomaly is that the respondents give their favorite party a more rightward (higher) score and their disliked party a more leftward (lower) score. Figures 9.3 and 9.4 show this effect for 2001 and 2008, respectively. The effect is visible in both figures, but is particularly dramatic in 2001. In that year, those respondents who liked the DPP (the proenvironment, “proreform” major party) moved its average placement so far to the right that it wound up to the right of the KMT. Here again is evidence that many Taiwan citizens consider their favorite party as “right” and their disliked party as “left,” regardless of its actual policy views.

The argument that “left” and “right” do not have conventional meanings in Taiwan is further strengthened when left-right placement is correlated with issue positions on the four items mentioned above. If “left-right” in Taiwan captured standard Western notions about the role of government in society, the correlations should be strong and positive with the three domestic policy issues, particularly so for the social welfare vs. low taxes issue, but small or zero with the independence-reunification question. However, figure 9.5 reveals that in both survey years, all the correlations are very small—none larger than 0.130. Worse yet, in both years, left-right position is slightly negatively correlated with attitudes toward social welfare, just the reverse of what is required for conventional ideological meaningfulness.\(^2\)

Part of the explanation for the reversed correlation may lie in the survey measurements. In conducting the TEDS questionnaire, interviewers show the respondents cards with a 0–10 scale. The “0” is located the left side, signifying “Taiwan independence,” “environmental protection,” “\textit{lower taxes},” and “large-scale reform.” On the other side, the “10” signifies “reunification with China,” “economic development,” “\textit{promoting social welfare},” and
Fig. 9.3. Placement of the parties on left-right by favorability toward the DPP (2001). *Data Source: TEDS 2001.*

Fig. 9.4. Placement of the parties on left-right by favorability toward the DPP (2008). *Data Source: TEDS 2008P.*
“social stability.” (See figure 9.6) Thus, some respondents who did not understand the meaning of left-right may simply have regarded all the issue positions on the left side of the card as “left,” and all those on the right side as “right.” Since among all four issues, only the “social welfare” question has the “left” answer on the right-hand side of the card and the “right” answer on the left (the bold-faced answers in the list above), this may account for the weak (and slightly negative) correlation between it and the respondent’s left-right position. Once again, this suggests that the left-right dimension is little understood by Taiwan citizens and little related to their policy views.

Hard-core devotees of the conventional wisdom may yet have one final objection. “All right,” they may say, “the left-right orientation is weak in Taiwan. Previous scholars have found that it does not predict voting. But perhaps by 2012, after several decades of democratization, the result is different. Doesn’t everything in politics turn into left-right eventually?”

The answer, for the record, is no. As we have seen, a great many Taiwan respondents have to be discarded to assess the relationship of left-right position to the Pan-Blue vs. Pan-Green vote because they have no idea what the left-right question means. But even in that heavily truncated sample, no trace of causal importance appears. To give left-right orientation every chance, we did not load up the explanatory equations with many different noisy measures of related opinions, a tactic sure to reduce them all to statistical insignificance. Nor did we control for Michigan-style party identification questions, which have an overwhelmingly powerful impact in Taiwan (see
But even with all these biases in its favor, the left-right position failed to show much sign of explanatory life. With the scale set to a range of 0–1 and controlling only for dummy variables indicating the respondent’s party preference, the probit coefficient was just .1 and far from statistical significance. Taken at face value, that coefficient would imply at best a 3 percentage point impact on a little more than half the sample (the remaining group having zero impact because they do not recognize the terms “left” and “right”). But even a very modest effect of that size is far from reliable statistically.

Some indication of why the left-right variable fails is given by a close look at the party identifiers.\(^\text{13}\) Just 17 percent of KMT supporters placed themselves on the far right (a score of 10). But fully 14 percent of supporters of the more radical DPP respondents placed themselves there. Indeed, 58 percent of the DPP sample placed themselves at one or another position on “the right” (scores 6–10). More dramatically, there were just three supporters of the strongly pro-independence TSU party in the sample, but they all placed themselves on the right. Overall, 77 percent of the sample placed themselves on the right.

As we have seen in Taiwan, “right” often means “correct.” No wonder, then, that the left-right variable adds almost nothing to explaining vote choices once partisanship is controlled. Once we know which parties the respondents belong to, knowing that most of them also consider themselves “correct” adds no new information.

**Conclusion**

Some readers of early versions of this chapter felt that our central point was already well known, since many scholars have shown that the meanings of
“left” and “right” differ across countries. Hence they felt that the Taiwan case brings nothing new. In the light of how the topic is treated in much previous literature, such a misconception is entirely understandable. But it misses our point entirely.

In the conventional view, the left-right dimension is a cultural near-universal. Whatever its meaning, every country should exhibit some form of left vs. right in politics. When a party system fails, scholars often blame the parties: too much clientelism, too little policy clarity, too little polarization, too little time for the voters to learn—all these are put forward as causes when left-right meanings are confused or impotent in voting decisions. (The European case is treated in van der Eijk et al. 2005, 177–80 and Berglund et al. 2005, 116–22; see Zechmeister 2015 for the Latin American counterpart.) If these party failures were corrected, the argument goes, a strong left-right effect would make an appearance. In Europe and Latin America and some other parts of the world where that argument has been made, it is probably accurate. But to suppose without close study that it applies everywhere would be reminiscent of those American tourists in the 1950s who imagined that if only they spoke English slowly and loudly enough, anyone around the world could understand them.

Our point is rather that research using left-right concepts may go seriously wrong if the left-right dimension essentially does not exist in some countries. For example, the idiosyncrasies of left-right language in Taiwan explain why Dalton and Tanaka (2007) measured low party polarization in Taiwan, a result that would surprise knowledgeable observers of Taiwan politics. As we have seen, in Taiwan a majority of citizens cannot place either themselves or the major parties on a left-right ideological spectrum. Even among those who can do so, many appear to be guessing or using idiosyncratic definitions of “left” and “right.” As we have also seen, many Taiwan citizens identify their favorite party as “right” and consider the disliked party “left,” corresponding to the Taiwanese or Mandarin connotations of “left” as “bad,” “devious,” or “heretical.”

Now if many respondents favoring one major party put it on the right (“the right side”) and the other party on the left (“the bad side”), while many respondents favoring the other party do the reverse, the rights and lefts will tend to average out in the mean placement of each party. Average party placements will be pushed toward the center, making a highly polarized party system appear convergent and consensual. But “low polarization” is simply mistaken. As we have seen repeatedly in this volume, cross-Strait relations help shape citizens’ national identity (chapter 3), determine people’s party identification (chapter 4), set the core political cleavage for party
competition (chapter 5) and the party system (chapter 10), and thus are the critical factor for vote choice (chapters 7, 9, and 12). In particular, the issue of Taiwan independence has led to serious political conflicts and unusually bitter party divisions since Taiwan’s democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including fistfights on the floor of the national legislature.\textsuperscript{14} Taiwan’s parties are not ideologically similar, and polarization is not low. But the CSES survey imposes left-right language on countries that do not use it, and scholars thereby may be led astray.

National identity issues are often poorly assimilated to left-right categorizations. As Jou (2010, 371) insightfully phrased it, speaking of Taiwan, “One may . . . hypothesize that an entrenched national identity cleavage leads to the paradoxical scenario of greater polarization accompanied by lower left-right identification.” It is precisely that sort of insight that is impossible to grasp unless one breaks out of the notion that some version of left-right applies everywhere.

The Taiwan voters’ difficulties in understanding left-right political concepts are perfectly understandable. This volume’s theme is that party competition in Taiwan is structured by the “China factor,” especially on the “independence vs. reunification with China” issue, but this is clearly not a conventional left-right dimension. Hence even at the political elite level, left-right distinctions are generally irrelevant and a poor guide to sorting out the parties. Little wonder that the voters do not use it.

This finding has important implications, not just for understanding Taiwan, but for the study of other countries around the globe. The challenge of comparative political research is the great diversity of political life and culture in different countries. As electoral research becomes more truly international, some Western concepts and frameworks will inevitably come under challenge and be modified or set aside in many countries outside the West. We have argued that “left-right” is one such example—a framework to be used where it applies, but not elsewhere. Many countries, notably in Africa, have political systems primarily shaped by racial, ethnic, or linguistic divisions, not class conflict. Even in Western countries like Canada, with politics dominated by religious and linguistic divisions, voters struggle with the left-right concept, and some confuse “right” with “correct” (Ogmundson 1979, 800; Lambert 1983; Lambert et al. 1986). In Ireland, too, where divisions stemming from the Civil War have defined the party system for a century, the left-right concept has traditionally differentiated the main parties rather poorly, leaving the voters confused by it as well (Sinnott 1995, 24–33, 74–78, 162; Marsh et al. 2008, 42).\textsuperscript{15} Left and right notions are rarely used in Africa either, apart from South Africa
Taiwan provides an insightful example of how much difference the absence of left-right language may make in all these countries.

The “China factor” is central to understanding Taiwan politics. The parties and the voters divide over this question: How is Taiwan’s nationhood to be understood in light of China’s presence, its growing power, and its claims of sovereignty over Taiwan? It is that political dimension that shapes both Taiwan’s party system and the voters’ understanding of politics. Eurocentric notions of “left” and “right” simply do not apply.

To understand Taiwan, one must stop seeing it through a European lens. Conventional understandings of the importance of “left” and “right” in politics have no claim to universality. Many countries are well described in that way, but many others may not be, particularly in Asia and Africa. Here again, the study of Taiwan rewards the scholar with a deeper understanding of politics in many other places.


Questionnaire Items and Operationalization of the Variables

Left-Right Ideology Question Wording:

In politics, sometimes people talk about the left and the right. This card lists eleven positions from the left (0) to the right (10). Which position do you occupy?

Taiwan Independence vs. Reunification with China Question Wording:

Sometimes people will talk about the question of Taiwan independence or reunification with China. Some people say that Taiwan should declare independence immediately. Other people say that Taiwan and China should unify immediately. Other people have opinions between these two positions. This card lists eleven positions from independence (0) to reunification (10). Which position do you occupy?
Environmental Protection vs. Economic Development Question Wording:

Regarding the question of economic development versus environmental protection, some people in society emphasize environmental protection while others emphasize economic development. On this card, the position that emphasizes environmental protection is at 0 on a scale from 0 to 10, and the position that emphasizes economic development is at 10. About where on this scale does your own view lie?

Promoting Social Welfare vs. Lower Priority for Social Welfare/Increasing Tax Question Wordings:

TEDS2001 On the question of social welfare, some people believe that people should take care of themselves and the government should not get involved while other people believe that the government should actively promote social welfare and take care of all the people. This card lists eleven positions from individuals should take care of themselves and the government should not get involved (0) to the government should actively promote social welfare (10). Which position do you occupy?

TEDS2008P Regarding the question of social welfare, some people believe that the government should merely maintain the current system in order not to increase people's taxes. Other people believe that the government should promote social welfare, even though it will lead to a tax increase. On this card, the position that maintaining the current system is the most important thing is at 0 on a scale from 0 to 10, and the position that promoting social welfare is most important is at 10. About where on this scale does your own view lie?

Large-Scale Reform vs. Social Stability Wording:

Looking at Taiwan's overall development, some people believe that large-scale reform is the most important thing, even if it means sacrificing some social stability. Other people believe that stability is most important and that reform should not be allowed to affect social stability. On this card, the position that large-scale reform is the most important thing is at 0 on a scale from 0 to 10, and the position that social stability is most important is at 10. About where on this scale does your own view lie?
Party Preference Question Wording:

Now we'd like to understand your opinions about each of the political parties. If 0 means you dislike a party very much, and 10 means you like that party very much, what number would you give the KMT? The DPP?

Notes

1. The cognitive interview data in this article come from a project entitled “A Study in Major Political Identification Concepts of the Taiwan Public” (NSC89–2414-H-004–022-SSS), whose principal investigator is Professor I-chou Liu of the Political Science Department of National Chengchi University. The survey data analyzed were collected by the Taiwan Election and Democratization Studies, 2001: The Legislative Election (TEDS2001) (NSC 90–2420-H-194–001) and 2008: The Presidential Election (TEDS2008P) (NSC 96–2420-H-004–017). The coordinator of the multiyear project TEDS is Professor Chi Huang (National Chengchi University). Further information is available on the TEDS website (http://www.tedsnet.org). T. J. Cheng gave us helpful comments. We also thank Charles Witke for timely advice about Latin meanings. The authors appreciate the assistance of each of these institutions and individuals. However, the authors alone are responsible for the views expressed here.

2. In the early years of the CSES, no exceptions were allowed. It is now possible to petition to be exempted if the question is meaningless in a particular country.

3. More generally, perhaps, conservatism (the “right”) is the defense of the established order. Historically, this meant a defense of hierarchy and a preference for the status quo rather than for the untried and risky proposals of reformers (Huntington 1957; Beer 1966, chap. 9). By extension, “left” vs. “right” came to include divisions over change vs. custom, reason vs. tradition, and other issues raised by the revolutionary impulses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In practice, conservatives usually defended the interests of those who were successful and privileged within society. In the modern era of widespread democratization, acceptance of capitalism, and rapid scientific innovation, however, aristocratic views of society and defenses of stasis are out of fashion. Contemporary success and privilege in the West derive primarily from economic achievement within the capitalist order, and government intervention is their greatest threat. Hence modern conservatism opposes additional government intervention. Thus, in its central meaning, today’s conservatism lacks the traditional emphasis on social hierarchy and reverence for the past, but it is nevertheless the legitimate descendent of its ideological ancestors.

4. Of course, some respondents may have had a legitimate thoughtful position at the midpoint of the scale. But as the next paragraph shows, many respondents at other scale positions were seriously confused. There is no simple escape from the central finding that the overwhelming majority of Taiwan respondents do not know what “left” and “right” mean in their politics, nor should they.

5. Of course, an outside observer can call any issue “left-right.” Thus Fell (2005a, 112) accurately remarks that “[some] analysts talk of a left and right in Taiwan.” How-
ever, this occurs almost exclusively among foreign scholars doing comparative work across many countries, using cross-national datasets like the CSES that impose the same left-right survey question on every country. It is quite rare for Taiwan scholars themselves to mention the left-right as a description of contemporary politics on the island, except to criticize it (Chen 2003).

6. English inherits a similar relationship from a now-dead language. In Latin, “dexter” means the right side, from which English takes the word “dexterous,” meaning “skillful.” The Latin word for “left” is “sinister,” with overtones of bad omens from fortune tellers. The same word in English has come to mean “evil” or “portending evil.”

7. One of us saw a Taiwan university official insist that a sign directing visitors to a set of university offices be placed on the right-hand wall, even though the offices were on the left side of the building. The reason given was that the right side was “greater.”

8. The project is sponsored by National Science Council (Taiwan). The principal investigator is Professor I-chou Liu at the Political Science Department of National Chengchi University, who generously shared the data.

9. These respondents were chosen to represent both genders and a variety of ages and occupations. Their demographic profiles are available from Su-feng Cheng.


11. Respondents were somewhat more responsive in 2008, raising the possibility that experience with democracy is improving comprehension. Of course, a comparison of two time points can be no more than suggestive. However, similar gains in the coherence of political attitudes over time have been noted in other new democracies (for example, Arian and Shamir 1983, 150).

12. It is clear in figure 9.3 to figure 9.5 that Taiwan citizens locate party positions on the left-right scale mainly on the basis of their party preference, not the four traditional policy issues. This result also has been validated by a multivariable model, but the model cannot be included in the chapter due to space limitations. The model is available from Yi-ching Hsiao on request.

13. Just under 61% of the sample placed themselves at a neutral 5 on the 0–10 scale, yet another reminder of the weak understanding of this variable. Those respondents have been omitted in the percentage calculations that follow.

14. Dalton and Tanaka (2007) recognize that the main axis of Taiwan politics is the independence-reunification issue, not the European versions of “left” and “right,” but they interpret their data as indicating only a little differentiation between the two main parties on the national identity issue.

15. Both Canada and Ireland have a social democratic party, so that conventional left-right language plays some role in party politics. However, both parties typically receive only modest proportions of the vote, finishing well behind the two principal parties. Even in the special circumstances of 2011, the best year ever for both, they finished in second place, well behind the top party.

References


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