The Taiwan Voter

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Most countries are politically divided along lines that reflect their internal cleavages. Those cleavages may be religious, linguistic, ethnic/racial, regional, or class-based. Most countries contain several politically relevant divisions. In multiparty systems, particularly those with proportional representation and a low threshold for gaining parliamentary seats, some minor cleavages (farmers, small ethnic or linguistic minorities) may have their own party in the legislature. Larger parties usually represent coalitions. In two-party systems, both parties are large, and in consequence each party will represent a broad combination of groups. Large parties frequently reflect many entirely distinct and unrelated cleavages in the society, sometimes in ways that make common sense, and sometimes not. In the United States, for example, liquor distributors and conservative evangelical Christians, once bitter enemies in the Prohibition era, now find themselves side by side in the Republican Party.

Thus, in most countries the major parties embody many different identities. The voters, too, are often a jumble of identities, some more strongly felt than others, but all of them subject to activation and mobilization under the right circumstances. Studying the role of social identities in politics is typically quite difficult. Different voters will identify with a particular party for very different reasons. Many voters themselves will have more than one identity that drives them toward a particular party, and perhaps some other identities that are in conflict with that party.

As the parties adopt new positions, some voters will feel conflicted. Most
will stay with their partisanship, simply living with the tensions or tuning them out. Others will move toward political independence, perhaps eventually switching to another party with which, again, they are in imperfect agreement. But the result is that at any given time, there is no simple relationship between identity, partisanship, and issue positions. All three are tangled up in not wholly consistent ways.

In consequence, the study of how identities relate to partisanship and political attitudes is very complex in most countries. A small proportion of voters, often discriminated-against minorities, may have one main identity driving their political stances. But for most voters, too many things are affecting too many other things. Voters have too many identities. Even when identities are the main factor driving party choices and issue positions, the catch-all nature of the parties and the complexity of the voters’ own political lives create a vortex of causal arrows, making it extremely difficult to discern why the voters are thinking and choosing as they do. Any attractive theoretical account comes up against mixed empirical support and plausible counterarguments. Put another way, most countries are not very good places to study how social identities connect to political identities, issue preferences, and vote choices.

Taiwan, however, is a happy exception, as this book has demonstrated. Social cleavages are few. Apart from a tiny minority, Taiwan voters do not differ racially. The great majority adhere to a low-intensity, syncretist religious tradition with a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian elements, which has never been a source of political divisions. In the absence of an exploitative industrial revolution and without the associated development of strong employee unions, social class has not been central to Taiwan politics. (Compare the heavy emphasis on class in treatments of European politics—a recent example is Evans and De Graaf 2013.) In Taiwan, the principal division is linguistic and ethnic—whether the language one speaks at home is Mandarin, Hakka, Hokkien (Fujianese), or one of the aboriginal languages. In turn, this cleavage relates to the historical time of arrival on Taiwan from elsewhere, and the associated history and culture of each group.

As we discussed in chapter 1, events of the past 70 years have reinforced those linguistic and cultural divisions and made them politically salient. Other divisions are much weaker. That means that Taiwan has just one central cleavage—a gift to scholars trying to understand how identity operates in politics. Of course, as we have seen, that cleavage has evolved. Once tied more strictly to ethnicity, with a Mandarin-speaking ruling elite enforcing their culture on everyone else, the issue is now more closely related to differing conceptions of national identity.
Ethnicity still matters: only a minority of mainlanders identify as strictly Taiwanese, and extremely few Minnan identify as purely Chinese. But with a more open society, intermarriage, and the passage of time, the categories have blurred. Some Hakka and aboriginal citizens, with their own historical grievances against the Minnan, feel free to line up politically with mainlanders, for example. What matters less and less are the divisions of the 1950s. What matters more and more, regardless of ethnicity, is where one stands on the status of Taiwan. Is China the ancestral homeland of which Taiwan is an integral part, even if currently administered separately? Or is China a different country from Taiwan, home to a fundamentally different people? Debates of this kind are familiar from the history of many countries.¹

In this book, we have addressed the question of how Taiwan voters make their decisions when they go to the polls. We have found that the central political cleavage and its associated social and political identities are central to voters’ thinking. Candidates’ personal traits, the domestic issues of the day, cross-Strait relations, and Taiwan’s institutional arrangements all play a modest role as well. But what shapes politics on the island much more than anything else is “the China factor,” the central dispute over Taiwan’s national identity. Over and over again in this book, we have found that it dominates voters’ decisions. And because left-right language is used to describe that division by almost no one in Taiwan, the conventional Western view that “left” and “right” apply everywhere in one form or another among knowledgeable citizens simply collapses when applied to Taiwan, as chapter 9 showed.

Because the two main parties are perceived to take opposite sides on the fundamental cleavage, partisanship embodies the same electoral division. Thus, whether the national identity issue directly shapes some policy dispute, or whether partisanship structures it instead, the result is the same: the dispute will be molded by the underlying cleavage over Taiwan’s national identity. Nothing else matters to the same degree, and certainly not the conventional left-right dimension that gives form to politics in most Western countries.

Repeatedly, therefore, the analyses in the various chapters have identified partisan identification as the most important factor in Taiwan voters’ electoral calculus.² That is, the island citizens’ self-declared partisan affiliations with the Pan-Blue Alliance and the Pan-Green Alliance exert the most significant effects on how and why they support specific candidates. As figure 12.1 shows, partisanship has an extremely powerful effect in Taiwan.³ In the 2012 presidential election, knowing the voter’s partisanship was tantamount to knowing how he or she voted in the vast majority of the cases. Only independents fell toward the middle: everyone else was polarized. In contem-
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In contemporary Taiwan, there simply is not much about the vote left to explain once partisanship is accounted for.

The finding that partisan identification plays an important role in understanding citizens’ political behavior in democratic polities is not new, of course. More than half a century ago, the authors of *The American Voter* convincingly demonstrated “the role of enduring partisan commitments in shaping attitudes toward political objects” (Campbell et al. 1960, 135). They concluded that “the strength and direction of party identification are facts of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior” (121).

What Taiwan voters add to this familiar story is that their partisan identifications largely embody the single most important political cleavage on the island—Taiwan’s future relationship with China, generally characterized as the issue of unification vs. independence. Because this key political cleavage is also intertwined with the island citizens’ psychological attachment to China (or detachment from it), partisan identification mirrors Taiwan voters’ conception of Taiwan’s national identity. The Pan-Green Alliance sees Taiwan’s de jure independence and its permanent separation from China as the ultimate objective, whereas the Pan-Blue Alliance does not preclude the island’s eventual unification as a possible outcome.

In the public’s view, the Pan-Green Alliance is pro-independence while
the Pan-Blue Alliance is pro-unification. As these are two diametrically different positions, the Taiwan voters’ decision to adopt a partisan identification is easier than in many other countries—the choice is clear and unmistakable. Cross-Strait relations and Taiwanese/Chinese identity have always been key campaign issues in presidential elections. All other issues are secondary, as Sheng and Liao’s chapter demonstrates. Subjects related to Taiwan’s relationship with China have been main instruments employed by the two political alliances to energize their supporters. Also, because Taiwan’s party structure reflects the key political cleavage in the society, all other issues, even essentially administrative policy issues such as absentee voting or the adoption of an English translation system, can be formulated as aspects of the main cleavage and debated in partisan terms, as we saw in chapter 1. Of course, the impact of partisanship varies across countries, as hundreds of studies have shown. (The case of Latin America, for example, is discussed in Lupu 2015.) The clarity of choice and the polarization provided by the party system are often thought to enhance the development of partisanship. (The European case is treated in Berglund et al. 2005 and van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005, 177–80; see Zechmeister 2015 for the Latin American counterpart.) Both clarity and polarization apply to Taiwan, and the strength of partisanship there confirms the usual comparative logic of how citizens become partisans. These Taiwan findings handsomely coincide both with Western studies and with Bartels’s conclusion in the American political setting that partisanship is “a pervasive dynamic force shaping citizens’ perceptions of, and reactions to, the political world” (Bartels 2002, 138).

Thus, partisan identification plays a central role in the Taiwan voter’s electoral calculus, as it does elsewhere. Yet other countries’ voters often give weight to the character of the candidates and the state of economy in making their vote choices. Is that true in Taiwan? The chapter by Wang and Chen (chapter 8) clearly shows that the notion of candidate issue ownership is applicable in Taiwan. That is, voters’ perceptions of candidate traits are closely connected with party labels. In general, the Pan-Blue candidates, or more precisely the KMT candidates, are perceived as more capable of handling issues related to economic development and cross-Strait relations, whereas the Pan-Green, or the DPP, candidates are associated with eliminating corruption and initiating political reforms. Yet the perception of personal traits does not provide substantial advantages or disadvantages to candidates during elections. Citizens’ electoral decisions continue to be conditioned by their partisan affiliations.

As Lewis-Beck (1988) and Paldam (1991) demonstrated, and as many subsequent studies have confirmed, the strength of economic voting varies
dramatically from one country to the next. Powell and Whittren (1993) and Anderson (2007) each argued that context matters: if clarity of responsibility is unclear, for example, or if no credible alternative government exists, economic voting may diminish or disappear. (Gelineau and Singer 2015 review the literature and discuss the Latin American case.) In the case of Taiwan’s essentially two-party system, the president’s responsibility is clear and the opposition is credible. Economic voting should occur. Indeed, the Taiwan public’s assessment of the economy does appear to have an effect on their voting decisions. However, Taiwan voters appear to be rather tolerant of incumbents’ past economic performance. Rather than punishing sitting presidents for a bad economy, they apparently have a tendency to reward candidates that offer a promising economic future. That is, prospective economic voting is more prevalent in Taiwan than retrospective voting, as both the postelection survey data and the aggregate cross-county economic evidence suggest. Nevertheless, as Tsai concludes in chapter 8, Taiwan voters’ “partisanship is a better predictor” of electoral outcomes than their assessment of the state of the economy.

Comparative Strength of the Factors Influencing Vote Choice

In this book, we have reviewed a variety of factors that influence vote choice—ethnicity, national identity, issues, and economic evaluations—and we have compared each with partisanship. Repeatedly, we have found that partisanship was the controlling factor, with an impact much stronger than any of the other single forces at work. However, we have not yet assessed these competing factors jointly. We have seen only that partisanship is dominant, but not which of the remaining influences on the vote are also somewhat consequential. It is to that task that we now turn.

We begin by using all available explanatory variables to account for the presidential vote in 2012. The small vote (2.8%) for James Soong is grouped with that for Ma Ying-jeou to form the Pan-Blue vote; the vote for Tsai Ing-wen is the Pan-Green vote. Logit analysis is employed to model this dichotomous variable. In addition to party identification, the explanatory variables include the three principal ethnicities (with Hakka as the excluded category), and the three types of national identification (“Taiwanese,” “Chinese,” and “Dual”), with “Dual” (i.e., “both Chinese and Taiwanese”) as the excluded identity. We also create a category (“No ethnic identity”) for the small but distinctive group who replied “other,” “don’t know,” or who refused to answer the question. This group is more senior (a large majority older than 49) and less educated (a majority with junior high school or less).
More than 70 percent have no partisanship, but they often retain the one-party KMT voting loyalties of their youth.

Other variables included were measures of opinion on unification/independence, on social welfare expenditures, and on the cross-Strait economic agreement (ECFA). Economic evaluations were also included—first, the county-level change in disposable income per capita, and then also the respondent’s prospective and retrospective evaluations of the national economy. (See chapter 6 for the definitions of these variables.) Preliminary exploration of the data indicated that the only category of occupation with a possible substantial effect on vote choice was being a postsecondary student. Similarly, having a junior high school education or less was the only possibly influential category of education. Dummy variables for each were included in the explanatory model, along with two variables for demographic factors—gender and age. All variables were scaled to 0–1 for easy comparison.

The first column of table 12.1 displays the result of this initial exploratory model. Partisanship is by far the most powerful factor, as expected. The other variables generally take on their expected sign, although not all are statistically significant. Retrospective evaluations in particular fail to be influential, just as one would expect from the results in chapter 8. Age is also neither powerful nor significant, and in most alternate specifications it looked even less influential than it does here. And of course, that is to be expected, especially because the age distribution of ethnicities and identities does not differ in Taiwan: there are young and old in all groups.

The second column of table 12.1 therefore drops retrospections and age, and reestimates the model. As expected, very little changes. Thus, if retrospections or age somehow have small effects, we can be comfortable that their exclusion is not distorting the impact of other factors.

The issue that arises next concerns the prospective evaluations. The TEDS survey is conducted after the election. Thus, when voters are asked whether “the state of the economy of Taiwan will get better, stay about the same, or get worse,” they already know who won the election. We have known since The American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960, 397–400) that economic outlooks are powerfully influenced by partisanship: winners are optimistic, losers are pessimistic. Thus, as chapter 8 discussed, some scholars have expressed the concern that the TEDS prospective economic evaluations appear influential only because they are caused by the dependent variable, and not because they have genuine explanatory power on their own. Thus, the impact of prospective evaluations may be substantially inflated in column 2. There is no way to know for certain with the data available.
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<th>(4)</th>
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<td>(.379)</td>
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<td>(.592)</td>
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<td>.435**</td>
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<td>1,203</td>
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*Note:* * significant at .10. ** significant at .05. *** significant at .01. Dependent variable is 1 if the respondent voted for pan-Blue (Ma or Soong); 0 if for DPP (Tsai). Logit parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses).
To allow for this possibility, column 3 of table 12.1 drops prospective evaluations from the statistical model. Partisanship remains as powerful as ever, as do most of the other variables, but the impact of social welfare attitudes drops, and the estimated effects of changes in county disposable income and postsecondary education are cut in half. None of the latter three coefficients is large and none is even close to statistical significance: they may have a modest effect, but there is not enough evidence to support keeping them as explanatory factors.6

Column 4 of table 12.1 then drops these three variables with unprovable effects. The remaining coefficients change little, letting us assess the ethnicity and national identification effects. Column 4 shows that being a mainlander has an important positive impact on voting pan-blue, as expected, but being Minnan has only a small and statistically insignificant effect. That is, the Minnan are not distinguishable from the excluded category (Hakka). And second, being a Taiwanese identifier has a substantial and significant negative effect on voting pan-Blue, again as expected, but the other categories of ethnic identity (“Chinese” and none) have small and statistically insignificant effects; that is, they are indistinguishable from the excluded category (“dual identity”). Thus, within the limits of the available data, there are actually just two dichotomies where ethnicity and national identification are concerned: mainlanders vs. everyone else, and “Taiwanese” identification vs. everything else.7

Table 12.2 uses these two dichotomies to replace the more elaborate coding of table 12.1. All the other remaining variables are retained, generating our final, preferred model. Every variable is now comfortably statistically significant and most coefficients are quite large. Partisanship retains its overwhelming effect, and apart from the demographic factors of being female or having little education, all the other explanatory factors are closely related to the central political cleavage on the island. Being a mainlander and identifying as “Taiwanese” make a difference even after partisanship is controlled, as do opinions on unification/independence and on the cross-Strait economic agreement, ECFA.

Thus again we find that partisanship, ethnicity, national identity, and the main political dimension are more tightly linked in Taiwan than elsewhere. Ethnicity is fixed, but the other three can be chosen. We find that they are causally joined with each other, so that for most politically knowledgeable Taiwan citizens, conceptions of national identity, partisan identification, and position on issues related to China are strongly connected. Other political issues tend to be swept up into this complex of interrelationships: the clarity of that relationship on the island suggests strongly that politics else-
where works the same way, even if the researcher cannot otherwise penetrate the murkiness of most countries’ multiple identities, issues, and parties. In that sense, the bright clarity of Taiwan’s political life helps us see into the shrouded complexity of other countries’ polities. That is what we have tried to help the reader accomplish in this volume.

A New Cleavage?

Recent political developments in Taiwan have led some scholars to speculate that “class politics based on wealth gap has become a new driving force of Taiwan’s party politics” (Wu 2014, 1). That is, the dominant political cleavage has shifted away from the unification-independence issue to the widening gap of economic distribution. Indeed, beginning in the early 2000s, Taiwan’s economy experienced a gradual slowdown, economic inequality worsened, and the rate of unemployment rose as well.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 12.2: The Pan-Blue Presidential Vote in 2012</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainlander</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unification/independence</td>
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<td>ECFA</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Primary education only</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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</table>

Pseudo-$R^2$ .63

N 1,428

Note: * significant at .10. ** significant at .05. *** significant at .01. Dependent variable is 1 if the respondent voted for Pan-Blue (Ma or Soong); 0 if for DPP (Tsai). Logit parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses).
As a remedy for Taiwan’s economic misfortunes, leaders of the Pan-Blue Alliance see the Chinese mainland as an economic opportunity, and they argue that an economic liberalization policy is the means to the island’s economic revival. Access to China’s vast market, however, is contingent on an improved cross-Strait political relationship. Thus, after taking office in 2008 the Ma administration of the KMT implemented a policy of rapprochement toward Beijing. As was explained in chapter 1, cross-Strait tension attenuated after a series of accords were signed between the two governments, including the landmark trade deal known as the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. Unfortunately, the expansion of cross-Strait economic exchanges did not improve Taiwan economic fortunes in the short term, and the island’s unemployment rate and economic inequality continued to worsen. Leaders of the Pan-Green Alliance therefore criticized Ma’s liberalization policy as only allowing the import of cheap Chinese goods, thereby hurting the island’s own industries, widening the gap between have-nots, and worsening the job prospects of the younger generation. Pan-Green leaders also argued that Ma’s rapprochement policy of advancing cross-Strait relationship on the basis of the “1992 Consensus”—or “one China with different interpretations”—is tantamount to surrendering Taiwan’s sovereignty to the Beijing government. These concerns were a prominent feature of the 2012 presidential election, and they constituted the underlying appeal of the 2014 protest known as the Sunflower Movement, led by a group of young people.

But do the recent economic concerns and the disputes over ECFA herald the arrival of a new central dimension in Taiwan political life (Wu 2014)? Or is ECFA just another issue being swept up into the usual partisan cleavage? We have argued throughout this book that on Taiwan, issues are primarily consequences of partisanship and national identity, not causes. Disagreements over ECFA certainly involve differences over trade liberalization vs. autarky, and thus they might represent purely economic disagreements—a new dimension, perhaps even a partisan realignment. But ECFA also requires closer integration with China, and that aspect of the policy might be dominant in people’s thinking in the way that we have seen repeatedly in this volume.

Fortunately, the 2012 TEDS survey permits a test of these alternate explanations. The survey contains a question about conventional left-right attitudes, which we have called the “social welfare” issue:

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 tax. Other people believe that the government should promote social welfare, even though it will lead to a tax increase.

As Wu (2014, 16) notes, this question is not directly about redistribution. However, it is certainly related to it: maintaining the status quo is precisely the means to avoid tax increases of all kinds, including those for reducing inequality through redistribution. Laissez-faire domestic attitudes should predict laissez-faire international trade policy attitudes, at least to some degree, if a new economic dimension is really emerging. Thus, if arguments about ECFA are truly economic arguments, answers to this social welfare question will inevitably be related to attitudes toward ECFA. On the other hand, if ECFA is just another aspect of the main cleavage, then partisanship and attitudes toward unification/independence should be far better predictors of what people think about ECFA.

Table 12.3 shows the result of an ordered logit analysis of ECFA opinions on partisanship, unification/independence, and the social welfare question. As the table shows, the first two factors are powerful and statistically significant predictors of ECFA attitudes. The coefficient on the social welfare item, on the other hand, is not only small and highly statistically insignificant, but

<table>
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<th>TABLE 12.3. Attitudes toward ECFA in 2012</th>
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<td>(1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
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<td>Unification/independence</td>
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<td>Social welfare</td>
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<td>cut 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo-$R^2$</td>
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Note: * significant at .10. ** significant at .05. *** significant at .01. Dependent variable is 1 if the respondent believes that ECFA will make his family better off; 0 if worse off, and .5 if the same or not sure. Ordered logit parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses).
it actually has the wrong sign. Net of partisanship and unification attitudes, laissez-faire attitudes toward social goals have zero effect on what people think about the laissez-faire policies embodied in ECFA. The obvious conclusion is that in the voters’ minds, ECFA was about China, not about economics. Like postal voting, ECFA is yet another policy pulled into the main Taiwan cleavage. Indeed, a survey conducted after the Sunflower Movement confirms the above observation (Yen, Kay, and Chen 2015). Their results indicate that the perceived economic interests of Taiwan citizens do affect their positions on trade policies, but that Taiwanese nationalism and security concerns play a more paramount role in their positions.

If Taiwan’s democracy survives its external threats long enough, then some day, undoubtedly, Taiwan’s internal political divisions will represent something other than disputes over national identity. That day may arrive quickly, or it may not. But as of 2012, the date of the most recent presidential survey data available, such additional considerations had at best only a small impact on the presidential election. We find no credible evidence that the beginnings of a new dimension had emerged in voters’ minds.

Looking to the Future

Now if partisanship in Taiwan is strong and other issues matter relatively little, how stable is Taiwan voters’ electoral behavior? What are the implications of our findings for Taiwan’s future elections? Taiwan’s party system has consolidated into what is effectively a two-party system, as chapter 10 explains. The resulting stability corroborates Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) “freezing hypothesis”: a party system reflecting key political cleavages in the society is expected to be fairly stable. In fact, a 2012 TEDS panel study reinterviewed the 2008 respondents, finding that among those who voted KMT in the 2008 presidential election, 89 percent voted for the KMT again in 2012. The corresponding number for the DPP was precisely the same—89 percent. These stability rates are similar to those in other two-party democracies, such as the United States, and they indicate that Taiwan’s democracy is consolidating its party system and the loyalty of partisans. Whether this stability is due to American-style psychological identification with the parties or to the steady force of other attitudes and identities makes no difference for our purposes.

The analysis in chapter 2 has shown that the Pan-Blue Alliance has enjoyed on average a 5–10 percentage point electoral advantage at the national level since 2000, and yet the DPP has won three of the six presidential
elections since democratization. How is that possible? First of all, as past experience has shown, the Pan-Blue Alliance is notoriously susceptible to internal division. As was discussed in chapter 2, the KMT was severely divided in the 1996, 2000, and 2012 presidential elections. When a number of party members failed to secure the party nomination for the presidency, they ran as independents or became party switchers. Indeed, it was Pan-Blue candidates, Soong and Lien, who divided nearly 60 percent of the electoral support and thereby delivered the victory to the DPP-affiliated Chen in the 2000 presidential election, who won the election with only 39.3 percent of the votes. Even in the absence of Pan-Blue divisions, a properly engineered campaign strategy by the Pan-Green Alliance may secure a win, especially when economic prospects look weak under Pan-Blue control.

Furthermore, even if Taiwan voters’ electoral behavior is largely determined by their partisan affiliations, the vision for the country that a candidate presents continues to play an important role in citizens’ electoral calculus. As chapter 3 shows, the majority of the island citizens consider Taiwan an independent state separate from China, but they are risk-averse and pragmatic on cross-Strait relations. The majority of them are not willing to sacrifice their hard-won democratic way of life and economic prosperity for such radical political changes as declaring de jure independence or unification. Precisely because the island’s future relation with China is the key political cleavage of the society, any presidential hopeful will need to present a realistic and workable vision to the electorate or suffer the consequence of losing the election.

The 2012 presidential election best illustrates this logic. Indeed, observers generally believe that the loss of Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP nominee, in Taiwan’s 2012 presidential election was related to her ambiguous stand on cross-Strait policy. Tsai’s campaign strategy was to de-emphasize cross-Strait issues, a strong suit for the KMT but a major DPP weakness, and to focus more on social issues such as economic growth and inequality. While Ma’s policy had a proven record of engaging China and had been praised by Washington, Tsai’s “Taiwan Consensus” was necessarily short on specifics due to the internal politics of the DPP. On the one hand, the DPP needed to court the backing of its core supporters, who were generally in favor of Taiwan’s de jure independence from China. On the other hand, the DPP also needed to win the support of moderate partisan identifiers from both alliances who did not support unification but wanted to avoid inflammatory rhetoric and policies that could lead to cross-Strait tension. Tsai was thus trapped in the dilemma of needing to mobilize the party’s core supporters by appealing to their political identity, while not alienating the more moderate
centrists. The ambiguity and lack of specificity provided the KMT with ammunition for an attack. It also raised uncertainty about cross-Strait relations should she win the election, with a potential to destabilize Taiwan’s uneasy but carefully managed relationship with the mainland. Ultimately, the election came down to a choice between “1992 Consensus/stability” vs. “Taiwan Consensus/potential instability,” which was a manifestation of Taiwan’s key political cleavage. The incumbent Ma was a vulnerable candidate with many weaknesses, but he managed to win a second term.

Interestingly, during the 2016 presidential election held on the island, the cross-Strait relationship appeared to be a mute issue. If the China factor heats up Taiwan’s dominant political cleavage, as we have argued, why were there no sparks thrown off during the campaign? In our view, this is due to a divided KMT and a moderate stance adopted by the DPP presidential nominee, Tsai Ing-wen. As we noted earlier, the Pan-Blue Alliance is notoriously susceptible to internal division. The 2016 election was no exception. Immediately after Hung Hsiu-chu became the party’s presidential nominee, many KMT elites and local leaders contemplated replacing her with someone else (Peng and Chin 2015). They eventually succeeded, making Eric Chu the KMT nominee. James Soong, formerly of the KMT, also ran as the candidate of the PFP. Meanwhile, realizing that cross-Strait policy is her Achilles’ heel, Tsai moderated her stance by claiming that she would maintain the cross-Strait status quo if elected. Although Tsai’s vague China policy presented the KMT with an opportunity for attack, as it did in the 2012 election, the divided KMT could not launch an effective offensive against Tsai’s stance on cross-Strait relations (Lowther 2015). The unpopularity of the Ma administration and the relatively stagnant economy probably also helped Tsai. In the end, she won easily. Thus the China factor may have played a less explicit role in the 2016 campaign than in past years. But does that mean that the traditional Taiwan political cleavage will be any less influential in voters’ decisions or in the near term?

As the old Danish proverb has it (sometimes attributed to the Danish physicist Niels Bohr or to the American baseball player Yogi Berra), “Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.” We know no reliable fortune teller who could tell us how Taiwan’s politics and international status will evolve. For the medium term, however, we see no prospect that a de facto independent Taiwan will develop another cleavage to replace the powerful role of “the China factor.” China is too near, too antagonistic, and too strong. Each of the two parties may trim, modify, and deemphasize, but inevitably one will represent faster progress toward independence and the other will want to go slow, engage with China, and avoid irreversible decla-
tions that would likely lead to war. Those differences, tied to deep social 
cleavages, will not evaporate any time soon.

Chinese-American relations may have much to do with the outcome that 
prevails. Taiwan is a small country, and its fate is not entirely in its hands. 
But so long as it persists as a democracy, it can talk about the future it wants 
for itself, and it can use elections to put alternate teams in place, teams that 
differ on the right national identity for the island country. As we have shown 
in this book, that is what politics in Taiwan is fundamentally about.

There are many lessons to be taken from the study of Taiwan, and we 
conclude with just one that seems to us the most important. Taiwan illust-
trates in great detail the power of identity in politics. In every country that 
we know, the choice of partisanship is not primarily about issues; it is about 
identity. Election campaigns are not centrally about proper positioning in 
some ideological space; they are primarily about mobilizing identity groups. 
Candidate personalities and the state of the economy matter at the margin, 
but the major effects shaping democratic elections are determined well in 
advance by the balance of partisanship in the electorate. And that balance is 
determined by the complex, interconnected histories of the relevant identity 
groups and their resulting affinities and antagonisms.

Yet there is dispute among scholars. Some believe that 
an understanding of politics has to begin from preferences, and that pref-
ferences are about self-interest, often material self-interest and social class. 
Indeed, in most countries, it can be hard to tell the difference between self-
interest and identity explanations in the welter of competing identities and 
interests. But Taiwan is a place where one can see those forces in undiluted 
form and without the multiple cleavages and countervailing effects present 
in larger countries. Because identity effects are not being obscured in the 
cross-section by equally large and opposite identity effects, as they often 
are elsewhere, Taiwan lets us see just how strong those identity effects are. 
And the answer from Taiwan is: very strong indeed. Just as the Galapagos 
Islands showed Darwin how evolution worked everywhere, but in a clear 
and indisputable way, so also the island of Taiwan demonstrates in a clear 
and indisputable way that identities are where to start in thinking about 
electoral politics.

In turn, that suggests that the first questions to ask about another coun-
try’s party system are not: What are the main political issues? Or: How are 
the parties positioned from left to right? Both questions may matter for 
governmental policy but have little resonance in the public mind. For the 
average citizen, perceptions of issues and ideologies are primarily derivative 
rather than causal, as this book has repeatedly shown and as other scholars
have demonstrated for other countries (Campbell et al. 1960, chaps. 6, 7; Lenz 2012; Achen and Bartels 2016, chaps. 9, 10).

Thus an implication of this book is that the key questions for understanding voting are not issues and party positions, as so many comparative studies assume. Instead, scholars should ask: What are the principal identity groups? And how are they connected to the political parties? Those are questions that need to be posed everywhere. But we hope that we have convinced the reader that nowhere is their value and power more obvious scientifically than in Taiwan. For that reason, the study of Taiwan, valuable for its own sake, is even more valuable for what it has to teach us about how elections should be understood around the world.

Notes

1. Citizens of Britain and the United States may recall a similar dispute from the 1770s.

2. In Taiwan’s TEDS survey, party identification is measured in the usual international manner, as “leaning to” a political party. That language is quite different from the original American survey item, and it also differs from the wordings in use in some other democracies. Question wording matters substantially where party identification is concerned (for example, Sinnott 1998), and a better understanding of what wording is best for Taiwan now that the party system has consolidated is an important topic for future research. For our purposes, however, it makes no difference whether Taiwan’s partisanship is a meaningful psychological identity or simply a habituated behavioral partisanship. The point is that, either way, it organizes attitudes and votes.

3. Throughout this chapter, partisanship is coded on a seven-point scale, ranging from “very strongly” lean to the DPP to “very strongly” lean to the KMT. The middle category represents those who do not lean to either party.

4. The opinion items and the prospective and retrospective economic evaluations all have three response categories, and they are coded 0, .5, and 1, with upper values indicating more pan-Blue/proincumbent attitudes. Age is coded so that age 20 = 0 and age 100 = 1. Percentage disposable income changes are divided by 20, so that they range approximately from -.5 to +.5. All other explanatory factors are dummy variables coded either 0 or 1. We have not included candidate traits because the list of such factors is very long, and because chapter 8 demonstrated that such evaluations are driven primarily by partisanship. We also excluded left-right orientation because, as chapter 9 showed, that variable is meaningless in Taiwan, and thus the variable was dropped from the 2012 TEDS presidential study. Previous work on the 2008 presidential election showed that left-right positions had only a small, statistically insignificant effect on the vote (Hsiao and Lin, 2013).

5. We found repeatedly that the survey weights made no meaningful difference, and so we have chosen to present unweighted results throughout this chapter.

6. The county-level disposable income figures are quite variable from one year to
the next, especially for the smaller counties, which are difficult to survey adequately in every country. Thus the available measures may represent actual disposable income changes with substantial error. In addition, there have been too few presidential elections to run regressions with national-level data. Our provisional conclusion in this book is that retrospective economic voting is not very consequential in Taiwan, but the topic cries out for additional research.

7. We also tested the coefficients for Chinese identity and no identity to see whether they were jointly significant. However, the Wald test in each of the four columns of table 12.1 was very far from statistical significance, meaning that deleting both variables was justified.

8. The “1992 Consensus” maintains that the notion of “one China” should serve as the basis for cross-Strait interactions. However, the two governments had different interpretations of what “one China” was. This is the tacit understanding presumably reached by Beijing and Taipei in November 1992. See Su and Cheng (2002).

9. The “Sunflower Movement” was a protest against a proposed cross-Strait trade-in-service agreement. It lasted more than 20 days between March 18 and April 10, 2014, during which time student demonstrators occupied the Legislative Yuan and damaged the main government buildings of the Executive Yuan. The movement reflects the public’s concern about Taiwan’s increasingly close economic ties with China. It also led to a massive demonstration against the Ma administration’s cross-Strait policies in front of the presidential office on March 30 (J. R. 2014).

10. For further discussion of the 2012 presidential election, see Romberg (2011) and Paal (2012).

References


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Conclusion


