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A New Measure of Preferences on the Independence–Unification Issue in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

An accurate and reliable measure of preferences on the independence–unification issue is indispensable to the study of Taiwanese politics. In the foreseeable future the study of Taiwanese politics and the cross-Strait relations will continue to focus on Taiwanese preferences on the independence–unification issue. These preferences, however, are neither readily identifiable nor easily defined. For many people, it might be a simple and a straightforward choice between for or against Taiwan’s independence, but others are less decisive because their preferences are conditional on factors such as China’s military threat, the USA security commitment to Taiwan, and China’s prospects of becoming democratic and prosperous. In this article I devise a new measure of people’s preferences regarding this issue. I show that a large percentage of the people in Taiwan can agree simultaneously to unite with China if China becomes modernized and democratic and to declare independence if China will not use force and peace can be maintained. Because independence and unification are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives, this empirical finding questions the appropriateness of the traditional six-point scale one-dimensional representation of Taiwanese preferences on the independence–unification issue.

Keywords: cross-Strait relations; public opinion; Taiwan independence; Taiwanese politics

The independence–unification issue has been one of the most salient issues in Taiwan’s domestic politics ever since the establishment of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986. It has been consistently shown that voters’ perceptions of parties’ positions on this issue, to a large extent, have influenced their vote choice.¹ Nevertheless, before the 2000 Taiwan presidential election, this issue was only a domestic issue as the pro-independence DPP did not show any real chance of becoming the ruling party in Taiwan. The DPP’s victory in the 2000 presidential election has made the Taiwan independence issue a key factor affecting stability in the Taiwan Strait. China is now uncertain as to Taiwan’s official policy on the Taiwan independence issue and has consistently

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vowed to use military force against Taiwan if it announces formal independence. The future development of this issue in Taiwan's domestic politics thus has the danger of upsetting the delicate security balance in the Taiwan Strait and through it, east-Asian stability as well.

Given the importance of the independence issue on both Taiwan's domestic politics and the security balance in the Taiwan Strait, it is understandable that surveys have been conducted regularly to track shifts in public sentiment on this issue in Taiwan.² The standard approach has generally been to measure the independence–unification variable one-dimensionally with preferences for unification and independence at the extremes and preservation of the status quo representing the centrist position. Another research method abandons the assumption that respondents' positions can be located somewhere along a one-dimensional policy space between independence and unification. Were China to become more open, democratic, and prosperous, unification might be preferred to the status quo but if China were to renounce the use of force against Taiwan, independence might be preferred to the status quo. In other words, it is possible that respondents could have conditional preferences.³ Whereas this research approach reveals how individuals might be persuaded to abandon the status quo position in favor of independence or unification, it stops short of helping us understand what might cause opinion shifts in the other direction. That is, we are left wondering about the conditions under which individuals having a first preference for independence or unification might feel it necessary to abandon their ideal preference and instead choose the status quo because the cost of achieving their first preferences is perceived to be too high.

In this article I devise a new measure of the independence–unification issue to discover the actual composition of the general public's preferences on this issue. The article is presented according to the following outline. The first section provides a review of the previous attempts to measure the independence–unification issue. The second section explores the conditionality of preferences of Taiwanese voters on the independence–unification issue by utilizing an innovative approach to disaggregate and interpret the pro-status quo majority. The third section studies whether the proposed new measure performs better statistically than the old measures. The final section concludes.

Three ways to measure preferences in surveys

In the last decade various methods have been experimented with by researchers in Taiwan attempting to measure Taiwanese preferences on the independence–unification issue. In this section, I introduce three of the commonly used measures.⁴ The first measure asks respondents to pick a point from 0 to 10, with 0 standing for independence as soon as possible and 10 for unification as soon as possible. The wording of the survey question is thus:

(Measure 1) The issue of unification and independence is a much discussed topic in our society. Some people advocate that Taiwan should declare independence at once; some believe that Taiwan should seek unification with China as soon as possible; and there are others standing in between these two positions. Suppose the view that Taiwan should declare independence at once is at one extreme, represented by a score of 0, and the view that Taiwan should seek unification with China as soon as possible is at the other extreme, represented by a score of 10. What is your position on this issue using this scale?

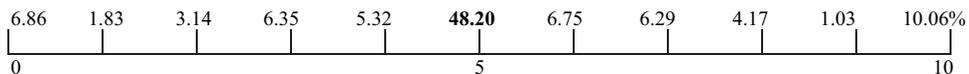
Based on the 2001 survey conducted by the Taiwan Election and Democratization Studies (TEDS), 23.5 percent positioned themselves at 4 or less, 48.2 percent of the respondents chose the middle point 5, and 28.3 percent placed themselves at 6 or higher (see Figure 1).

The second measure tries to represent respondents' preferences on a six-point scale. Respondents are asked to express a preference for independence now; unification now; status quo now, independence later; status quo now, unification later; status quo now, decide later; or status quo indefinitely. The design of this question attempts to separate those in the status quo category who actually have a first preference either for independence or unification but have, for some unspecified reason, reservations about the timing. In the 2001 survey conducted by TEDS, the wording of the question and the distribution of preferences are thus:

(Measure 2) Regarding the relations between Taiwan and mainland China, there are a number of different views presented on this card. Which position best represents your view on this issue?

1. to seek unification with China quickly (3.84%)
2. to seek independence from China quickly (5.32%)
3. to maintain the status quo now and seek unification later (23.42%)
4. to maintain the status quo now and seek independence later (12.73%)
5. to maintain the status quo now while deciding what to do later (42.51%)
6. to maintain the status quo indefinitely (12.18%)

The design of each of the two measures described above is based on the assumption that preferences on the independence–unification issue can be represented



Source: 2001 TEDS.

Figure 1
Taiwan Independence versus Unification on 11-Point Scale

on a unidimensional space. The differences in their designs reflect the different approaches to disaggregating and interpreting the pro-status quo majority. Both measures reveal that most of the respondents are not yet ready to seek a resolution of the independence–unification issue. Instead, they prefer to wait for some of the uncertainties to clear up before deciding whether to seek independence or unification. These two measures are unsatisfactory, however, in that they fail to specify the conditions that might prompt respondents to choose either independence or unification.

Why do people in Taiwan have difficulty deciding between independence and unification? What factors might influence respondents to move away from the status quo and toward either independence or unification? The common sense answer is that, since Taiwan and mainland China have been divided by civil war, the division is only temporary and the two sides should reunite when mainland China becomes more compatible with Taiwan economically, socially, and politically. But after more than five decades of separation, unification with mainland China looks to be an ever more challenging, if not impossible, task. As a result many people are attracted to the idea of Taiwan becoming an independent country, but only if China would not use force to stop that from happening. In brief, for many people, a preference for uniting with mainland China or becoming an independent country is largely dependent on the costs of achieving one goal or the other. If the costs of uniting with mainland China or becoming an independent country are perceived to be low, then these goals are preferred, whereas if they are perceived to be too high then the status quo becomes the more attractive option.

The third measure represents an attempt to make sense of the pro-status quo majority by asking respondents to state the conditions under which they would move away from the status quo and toward either independence or unification.⁵

(Measure 3) If Taiwan can maintain a peaceful relationship with China after it declares independence, then Taiwan should become a new independent country. Do you agree with such a statement?

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----|------------------|
| 1. | strongly agree | 96. | depends |
| 2. | agree | 97. | no opinion |
| 3. | disagree | 98. | don't know |
| 4. | strongly disagree | 99. | refuse to answer |

If mainland China and Taiwan were to become compatible economically, socially, and politically, then the two sides should unite.

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----|------------------|
| 1. | strongly agree | 96. | depends |
| 2. | agree | 97. | no opinion |
| 3. | disagree | 98. | don't know |
| 4. | strongly disagree | 99. | refuse to answer |

When respondents are given the option of considering the hypothetical cases of, (1), becoming independent while maintaining peaceful relations with China or, (2), unifying with a China that has compatible economic, social, and political conditions, a large percentage of the respondents could actually conditionally accept either independence or unification. To illustrate the respondents' conditional preferences on the independence–unification issue, we use the 2001 TEDS survey data. As can be seen in Table 1, 47.6 percent of the respondents would support independence if peace could be maintained and 43.5 percent of the respondents would support unification if the two sides could become compatible economically and politically. A cross-tabulation analysis of the responses on the conditions under which respondents would agree to independence or unification also revealed that 22.7 percent of the respondents could support unification with China and independence for Taiwan.

Whereas conditional preferences on the independence–unification issue reveal how individuals might be enticed to abandon the status quo position in favor of independence or unification, they stop short of helping us understand what might cause opinion shifts in the other direction. Under what conditions will individuals who have a first preference for independence or unification be willing to abandon their ideal preference and instead choose the status quo? Thus, to arrive at a complete understanding of the conditionality of preferences, we should also ask respondents whether they would support independence if China were to attack Taiwan and whether they would seek unification with China if the two sides were unlikely to become compatible economically, socially, and politically in the foreseeable future.⁶

In the next section, I will use the 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey to analyze the full conditionality of Taiwanese preferences on the independence–unification issue.⁷

Table 1
Conditional Independence and Conditional Unification Supporters

Independence if peace can be maintained	Unification if no disparity			Total
	Agree	Disagree	Other*	
Agree	22.7%	20.3%	4.6%	47.6%
Disagree	18.0%	11.2%	3.1%	32.3%
Other*	2.9%	1.9%	15.4%	20.2%
Total	43.5%	33.4%	23.0%	100.0%

Number of observations: 2022.

*Includes 'depends', 'no opinion', 'don't know', and 'refuse to answer'.

Source: 2001 TEDS.

Conditionality of preferences on independence versus unification

The 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey contains four questions to explore the conditionality of preferences on independence versus unification:

- Q1. If the act of declaring independence will cause mainland China to attack Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan independence?
- Q2. If the act of declaring independence will not cause mainland China to attack Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan independence?
- Q3. If great political, economic, and social disparity exists between mainland China and Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan unifying with China?
- Q4. If only small political, economic, and social disparity exists between mainland China and Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan unifying with China?

About 26.7 percent of the respondents favored independence even if it implied war with China; but 72 percent of the respondents supported independence if China would not attack Taiwan. Based on responses from these two hypothetical questions, we can classify respondents into three categories (see Table 2): (1) supporting independence even under unfavorable conditions (25.8%),⁸ (2) supporting independence only under favorable conditions (46.2%), and (3) not supporting independence at all (27.03%).⁹

Second, following the same procedure, we can classify respondents into the following three categories (see Table 3): (1) supporting unification even under unfavorable conditions (19%), (2) supporting unification only under

Table 2
Preferences on Independence

Independence even if war with China	Independence if no war		
	Agree	Disagree	Total
Agree	25.8%	0.98%	26.7%
Disagree	46.2%	27.03%	73.3%
Total	72.0%	28.0%	100.0%

Number of observations: 1021.

Source: The 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey.

Table 3
Preferences on Unification

Unification even if the two sides are not compatible	Unification if the two sides are compatible		
	Agree	Disagree	Total
Agree	19%	5.3%	24.3%
Disagree	45.2%	30.5%	75.7%
Total	64.2%	35.8%	100.0%

Number of observations: 994.

Source: The 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey.

favorable conditions (45.2%), and (3) not supporting unification under any circumstances (30.5%).

An interesting finding we can infer from Tables 2 and 3 is that a significant portion of the respondents would conditionally accept either independence or unification since a majority of the respondents (72%) could support independence if it does not lead to war, and a majority of the respondents (64.2%) could support unification if the two sides became compatible. A cross-tabulation analysis of preferences on independence and on unification using these two dimensions helps us to identify the percentage of respondents who could accept either independence or unification with conditions. As can be seen in Table 4, in total, 46.38 percent (2.7 + 8.97 + 9.33 + 25.38) of the respondents would conditionally accept either independence or unification as an outcome while about 27 percent would accept independence but not unification and 22 percent would accept only unification.

Our empirical findings show that whereas some people may see the issue of Taiwan independence as a straightforward matter, others do not because their preferences are conditional on factors such as China's military threat, the depth of the US security commitment to Taiwan, Taiwan's willingness to fight, and China's prospects for becoming democratic and prosperous. The existence of a large percentage of the respondents who could accept either independence or unification depending on the circumstances proves that the unidimensional measures discussed above fail to correctly represent respondents' preferences. Instead, preferences on the independence–unification issue should be measured on both the independence and the unification dimensions.

For us to gain confidence in this new measure, in the next section we study whether it performs better statistically than the 6-point scale variable labeled as Measure 2 in the previous section.

Table 4
Conditional Preferences on Independence and Unification

Supporting independence	Supporting unification			
	Unconditionally	Conditionally	Not supporting	Total
Unconditionally	2.7%	8.97%	15.7%	27.4%
Conditionally	9.33%	25.38%	11.33%	46.0%
Not supporting	8.5%	13.58%	4.49%	26.6%
Total	20.5%	47.9%	31.5%	100.0%

Number of observations: 847.

Source: The 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey.

Is the new measure better?

In this section we study whether the new measure proposed in the previous section outperforms the traditional six-point measure discussed in the first

section. The independence–unification question is one of the most salient issues in Taiwan’s electoral politics. Traditionally, those who lean toward independence are more likely to identify themselves with the DPP and those who are for unification have preferred the Kuomintang (KMT) or the People First Party (PFP) to the DPP. So to test which measure works better, we need to see if either of the measures significantly affects the respondents’ party identification, while controlling for demographic variables. It is possible that both measures might prove to be statistically insignificant and in that case neither the new nor the traditional measure helps explain the variation in the dependent variable. If only the new but not the traditional measure is statistically significant, then the new measure helps explain the variation in the dependent variable. In this case, we can conclude that the new measure is better than the traditional measure because it can do everything the traditional measure can, but not vice versa. If both measures are significant, then both can do something that either cannot alone.

In the 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey, respondents were asked only whether they identified themselves with the KMT, the DPP, or the PFP and so we know only which party they identify with, without knowing their preference rankings over the parties. To define the dependent variables of party identification for our study, I compare the supporters of one party with those of another. The first binary comparison is between the KMT and the DPP. For example, if a respondent identified herself with the KMT, they are coded 1; and if a respondent identified himself with the DPP, then they are coded 0. The other two binary comparisons are the KMT versus the PFP and the DPP versus the PFP.

The independent variables for our study include the traditional six-point scale measure, the independence dimension of the new measure (unconditional supporters of independence, coded as 1; conditional supporters of independence, coded as 2; and non-supporters of independence, coded as 3), the unification dimension of the new measure (unconditional supporters of unification, coded as 1; conditional supporters of unification, coded as 2; and non-supporters of unification, coded as 3), ethnic identity, age, education, and the respondent’s ties to China.¹⁰ A respondent’s ethnic identity, either Mainlander, Hakka, or Taiwanese, is determined by his or her father’s ethnic origin, with Taiwanese as the baseline. Respondents are classified into three age groups, 20–35, 36–50, and 51 and above. Education is also divided into three levels: primary, secondary, and college and above. A respondent’s ties to China are defined by whether they have business connections or study experience in China.

Three logit models were run for each dependent variable to see how the coefficients and model fitness changed.¹¹ The first model consists of the demographic variables, the traditional six-point measure, and the independence and the unification variables of the new measure (labeled as Model 1); the second model consists of the demographic variables and the traditional six-point

measure (labeled as Model 2); and the third model consists of the demographic variables and the independence and unification variables of the new measure (labeled as Model 3).

In the comparison between the KMT and the DPP supporters, Table 5 shows that the log likelihood changes from -217.84 in Model 1 to -251.36 after we remove the new measure from the model. This result indicates that the new measure significantly affects the fitness of the model because it can explain some of the variations in the model that the traditional six-point measure cannot. If we remove the traditional measure from the model, there is almost no effect on the log likelihood as it changes from -217.84 to -218.92 , indicating that the traditional measure does not contribute to the fitness of the model. These statistical results imply that the new measure is the better of the two because it can do everything the old measure can, but not vice versa. Furthermore, in Model 2, as anticipated, if a respondent is more pro-unification or less pro-independence, then she is more likely to identify herself with the KMT than the DPP, and both effects are statistically significant.

The results are consistent between DPP and PFP supporters as the log likelihoods are -148.63 , -177.09 , and -149.17 for the three models, respectively. That is, the new measure but not the traditional measure contributes to the fitness of the model.

Table 5
Effects of the New and Old Measures of the Independence–Unification Issue on Party Identification KMT versus DPP Supporters

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Independence	1.49*		1.59*
Dimension	(0.21)		(0.20)
Unification	-0.26		-0.36^*
Dimension	(0.19)		(0.18)
Six-point measure	0.17	0.56^*	
	(0.12)	(0.01)	
Mainlander	1.02^*	1.27^*	1.02^*
	(0.41)	(0.38)	(0.41)
Hakka	-0.01	-0.22	-0.07
	(0.40)	(0.36)	(0.40)
Education	0.03	0.23	-0.00
	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.21)
Age	-0.06	0.08	-0.09
	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.18)
China tie	-0.10	0.29	0.07
	(0.37)	(0.33)	(0.37)
Constant	-2.84^*	-2.88^*	-2.09^*
	(1.02)	(0.75)	(0.86)
Log likelihood	-217.84	-251.36	-218.92

Entries are maximum likelihood coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

Number of cases: 408.

* indicates $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Table 6
Effects of the New and Old Measures of the Independence–Unification Issue on Party Identification DPP versus PFP Supporters

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Independence	-1.46*		-1.55*
Dimension	(0.26)		(0.24)
Unification	0.64*		0.73*
Dimension	(0.24)		(0.22)
Six-point measure	-0.15 (0.15)	-0.64* (0.12)	
Mainlander	-1.69* (0.45)	2.08* (0.42)	-1.65* (0.44)
Hakka	-0.75 (0.41)	-0.74* (0.37)	-0.77 (0.41)
Education	0.17 (0.26)	0.01 (0.24)	0.18 (0.27)
Age	0.22 (0.25)	0.29 (0.22)	0.24 (0.24)
China tie	-0.40 (0.41)	-0.72* (0.36)	-0.38 (0.40)
Constant	2.09 (1.24)	2.81* (0.92)	1.43 (1.06)
Log likelihood	-148.63	-177.09	-149.17

Entries are maximum likelihood coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

Number of cases: 324.

* indicates $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

The same conclusion holds for the comparison between KMT and PFP supporters. The log likelihood changes from -207.85 in Model 1 to -213.56 after we remove the new measure from the model; and from -207.85 to -207.86 after we remove the traditional measure. These statistical results, thus, clearly show that the new measure is a better predictor of party identification than the old measure. One thing to note in Model 2 is that only the unification but not the independence dimension affects respondents' party preferences between the KMT and the PFP; the more a respondent favors unification, the more likely they are to prefer the PFP over the KMT.

Conclusion

In this article I have devised a new measure of people's preferences on the independence–unification issue in Taiwan. An accurate and reliable measure of preferences on this issue is indispensable for the study of Taiwanese politics. Ever since Taiwan became a democracy, the importance of the independence–unification issue to Taiwan's domestic politics and to the stability of the Taiwan Strait has become increasingly self-evident and indisputable. In September 2003 President Chen Shui-bian further heightened the tension in Taiwan's domestic

Table 7
Effects of the New and Old Measures of the Independence–Unification Issue on Party Identification KMT versus PFP Supporters

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Independence	–0.07		–0.06
Dimension	(0.19)		(0.18)
Unification	0.62*		0.61*
Dimension	(0.18)		(0.18)
Six-point Measure	0.02	–0.11	
	(0.13)	(0.12)	
Mainlander	–0.56*	–0.65*	–0.56*
	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.28)
Hakka	–1.04*	–1.02*	–1.04*
	(0.37)	(0.36)	(0.37)
Education	0.25	0.22	0.25
	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.23)
Age	0.48*	0.48*	0.48*
	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.19)
China tie	–0.55	–0.61*	–0.56
	(0.32)	(0.30)	(0.31)
Constant	–1.64	–0.03	–1.57
	(1.02)	(0.85)	(0.89)
Log likelihood	–207.85	–213.56	–207.86

Entries are maximum likelihood coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

Number of cases: 338.

* indicates $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

politics and across the Taiwan Strait by calling for the drafting of a new Constitution for Taiwan in 2006. Indeed, for the foreseeable future the study of Taiwanese politics and cross-Strait relations will continue to focus on Taiwanese preferences on the independence–unification issue.

These preferences are neither readily identifiable nor easily defined. For many people, there is no simple choice on this issue because their preferences are conditional on factors such as China's military threat, the USA's security commitment to Taiwan, and China's prospects for becoming democratic and prosperous. It has been shown that a large percentage of the people in Taiwan can simultaneously agree to unite with China, if China becomes modernized and democratic, and to declare independence if China will not use force and peace can be maintained. Because independence or unification are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives for a sizable section of the electorate, this empirical finding questions the appropriateness of the traditional six-point scale, one-dimensional representation of Taiwanese preferences on the independence–unification issue. Indeed, I show that statistically the new measure is a more powerful explanatory variable than the traditional six-point scale variable in predicting party identification.

The existence of high percentages of Taiwan's general public having

conditional preferences on the independence versus unification issue offers ample opportunities for domestic and foreign factors to influence and redefine the independence and unification issue. Analyzing the impact of factors that might cause individuals to move toward or away from independence or unification can produce useful policy implications for all of the decision-makers involved in the dispute between Taiwan and China.¹²

NOTES

1. A representative set of scholarly works on the issue of Taiwan independence in Taiwan's domestic politics include Hsieh and Niou (1996); Lin, Chu and Hinich (1996); Rigger (1999, 1999–2000); and Niou and Paolino (2003).
2. For an overview of the evolution of survey questions on the Taiwan independence issue, see Rigger (1999–2000).
3. For more on conditional preferences, see Lacy and Niou (1998, 2000).
4. These three measures can be found in surveys conducted by the Taiwan Election and Democratization Studies (TEDS) research team, available at: <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/as/survey/srda/english/>
5. This measure can be found in surveys conducted by the Workshop on Political System Change of the National Taiwan University. The earliest attempt to explore the conditions under which respondents would move away from the status quo and toward either independence or unification is made by Naiteh Wu. See Wu (1993, 1996) and Wu and Shen (2000).
6. Without the benefit of having a complete set of questions delineating the conditionality of preferences on the independence–unification issue, Hsieh and Niou (2005) propose an alternative method to measure respondents' preferences on the independence–unification issue by combining measures 2 and 3 from the 2001 TEDS survey data.
7. The 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey was designed by a group of political scientists from Taiwan, sponsored by the Program in Asian Security Studies at Duke University, and conducted by the Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan. The survey was conducted on 27–30 December 2002 with a total sample size of 1225.
8. Not included are those who supported independence even if war might break out between China and Taiwan, but did not support independence if no war were to break out.

9. To simplify presentation, we eliminate respondents who failed to indicate a clear preference on either Q1 or Q2.
10. Income is not included as an independent variable because it would lower the number of observations, but it does not change the conclusions we can draw from the statistical results.
11. Because the traditional six-point measure of the independence–unification issue is not highly correlated with the independence and the unification variables of the new measure, Tau-b equals to 0.36 and 0.39, respectively, the multicollinearity problem is not a serious concern.
12. See Benson and Niou (2005) and Niou (2004) for an analysis of how domestic and foreign factors can affect the voter preferences on the independence-unification issue.

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