

Measuring Taiwanese Public Opinion on Taiwanese Independence*

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ABSTRACT Whether there will be a war between China and Taiwan depends very much upon whether Taiwan will declare independence. And given that Taiwan is a democracy now, public opinion on the issue will certainly affect the political leaders' decision to move one way or the other. Since the early 1990s, several competing methods have been used in surveys to study Taiwanese attitudes on the independence–unification issue. The existence of a large percentage of respondents with conditional preferences makes us realize that the traditional six-point or 11-point scale measures of preferences oversimplify the situation. In this article, we construct a new measure of preferences and show that it clearly outperforms the traditional methods.

The Taiwan Strait is one of the few flash points in the post-Cold War world that has a potential to go to war, involving not only China and Taiwan but possibly the United States and several other countries with interests in the region. One factor which may trigger a war is Taiwan's declaration of permanent independence from China. And since Taiwan is now a democracy, whether it will indeed declare independence depends very much upon the public opinion on the island.

In recent years, a great deal of survey research has been dedicated to probing Taiwanese public opinion on this issue. The standard approach is to measure the independence–unification variable one-dimensionally, with unification and independence at the extremes, and the status quo, which is neither unification nor independence, representing the centrist position, and then to treat it as an independent variable to understand its impact on other variables.¹

Results of most of the surveys on such an issue show that at least a majority, or close to a majority, of the respondents prefer maintaining the status quo to moving towards either independence or unification.² This is

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1. For an overview of the evolution of survey questions on the Taiwan independence issue, see Shelley Rigger, "Social science and national identity: a critique," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (2000), pp. 537–552.

2. A representative set of scholarly work on the issue of Taiwan independence in Taiwan's domestic politics include John Fuh-sheng Hsieh and Emerson M.S. Niou, "Salient issues in Taiwan's electoral politics," *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1996), pp. 219–30; Tse-min Lin, Yun-han Chu and Melvin J. Hinich, "A spatial analysis of political competition in

understandable given the constraints – the likelihood of a war with China if Taiwan declares independence and the undesirability of living under communist rule if unification is realized – imposed upon Taiwan.³ However, it also means that many people support the status quo from merely practical concerns. That is, they may prefer independence or unification, but since neither is feasible, they support the status quo. So there are actually two dimensions here, one referring to the respondents' sincere attitude towards the independence–unification issue, and the other to their strategic concerns regarding the feasibility of various options. It is useful if we can find a way to separate the sincere status quo supporters from those with strategic concerns. This would give a better understanding of the “true” sentiments among the general public in Taiwan.

The purpose of this article is to use the data of the 2001 Taiwan Election and Democratization Studies (TEDS) survey⁴ to analyse the general public's preferences on the issue of independence versus unification. It first evaluates the three competing measures of preferences on the Taiwan independence issue, before presenting a new measure and testing whether it performs better statistically than the others.

Three Competing Measures

To make sense of the pro-status quo majority, one approach, employing a six-point scale of preferences, provides respondents with the options of expressing a preference for independence now; unification now; status

footnote continued

Taiwan,” *World Politics*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (1996), pp. 453–481; Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1999); John Fuh-sheng Hsieh, “Continuity and change in Taiwan’s electoral politics,” in John Fuh-sheng Hsieh and David Newman (eds.), *How Asia Votes* (New York: Chatham House, 2002), pp. 32–49; Robert Marsh, “National identity and ethnicity in Taiwan: some trends in the 1990s,” in Stéphane Corcuff, *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 144–159; and Emerson M. S. Niu and Philip Paolino, “The rise of the opposition party in Taiwan: explaining Chen Shui-bian’s victory in the 2000 presidential election,” *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2003), pp. 721–740. Public opinion data have also been used to study how the independence–unification issue is related to national identity. See Rigger, “Social science and national identity”; Nai-teh Wu, “[copy to come]” (“National identity and party support”), [copy to come] (*Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Publications*), No. 74 (1993), pp. 33–61; Nai-teh Wu, “[copy to come]” (“Liberalism and ethnic identity: searching for the ideological foundation of the Taiwanese nationalism”), [copy to come] (*Taiwanese Political Science Review*), No. 1 (1996), pp. 5–40; and Nai-teh Wu and Shiao-chi Shen, “Ethnic and civic nationalisms: two roads to the formation of a Taiwanese nation,” paper presented at the Conference on the US and Cross-Straits Relations since the Taiwan Election, sponsored by the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, October 2000.

3. See Shelley Rigger, “Maintaining the status quo: what it means, and why the Taiwanese prefer it,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001), pp. 115–123 and John Fuh-sheng Hsieh, “How far can Taiwan go?” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2002), pp. 105–113.

4. This was a nation-wide survey conducted in early 2002 for the parliamentary election of 2001 with a sample size of 2,022. It was a joint effort made by a group of political scientists from various universities in Taiwan, and was funded by Taiwan’s National Science Council.

quo now, independence later; status quo now, unification later; status quo now, deciding later; or status quo indefinitely. The design of this question attempts to tease out those in the status quo category who may have a first preference for either independence or unification but have, for some unspecified reason, reservations about the timing of realizing the preferred option. A similar approach, using an 11-point scale, asks the 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.

Another method, however, abandons the assumption that respondents' positions can be located somewhere along a one-dimensional policy space between independence and unification and includes the possibility that they might be conditional on other factors. More specifically, some questions were included in surveys to separate from the status quo category those respondents whose preferences depend upon their perception of China. Studies show that when respondents are given the option of considering the hypothetical cases of becoming independent while maintaining peaceful relations with China or unifying with a China that has compatible economic, social and political conditions, the percentage of those supporting the preservation of the status quo decreases while the percentages of those supporting independence or unification increases correspondingly.⁵

Although these three competing sets of survey questions have coexisted for more than a decade, no scholarly work has ever been undertaken to evaluate which of the three provides a better or more accurate measure of Taiwanese public opinion on the Taiwan independence issue. Fortunately, in the 2001 TEDS survey, all three types of questions are included, enabling us to compare and evaluate them.

In the survey, question K2 is intended to show respondents' preferences on the independence–unification issue on a six-point scale:

K2. Regarding the relations between Taiwan and mainland China, there are a number of different views presented on this card. Which position better represent your view on this issue?

1. Seeking unification with China speedily
2. Seeking independence from China speedily
3. Maintaining the status quo now, and seeking unification later
4. Maintaining the status quo now, and seeking independence later
5. Maintaining the status quo now, and deciding what to do later
6. Maintaining the status quo indefinitely

The results are shown in Table 1. The six-point scale variable is quite straightforward and is a very popular measure found in scholarly research. But it is difficult to interpret the preferences of those who

5. See Nai-teh Wu, "National identity and party support"; Nai-teh Wu, "Liberalism and ethnic identity"; Wu and Shen, "Ethnic and civic nationalisms"; Marsh, "National identity and ethnicity in Taiwan"; and Brett Benson and Emerson M.S. Niou, "Conditional preferences on Taiwan independence and the security balance in the Taiwan Strait," working paper, Duke University.

Table 1: **Six-point Preference Distribution on the Independence–Unification Issue (%)**

		<i>SQ- Independence</i>	<i>SQ- decide later</i>	<i>SQ- indefinitely</i>	<i>SQ/ unification</i>	<i>Unification</i>
2001	5.9	12.3	43.2	11.5	23.3	3.8

choose “status quo now, deciding later” and “status quo indefinitely.” It is hard to determine which group of respondents is more pro-unification or pro-independence. With the addition of these two options, the measure collapsed from ordinal to nominal scale.

Question J1a in the 2001 TEDS survey tries to represent respondents’ preferences on the independence–unification issue one-dimensionally on an 11-point scale:

J1a. 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 of these two positions. Suppose the view that Taiwan should declare independence at once is at one extreme, represented by a score 0, and the view that Taiwan should see unification with China as soon as possible is at the other extreme, represented by a score 10. What is your position on this issue on this scale?

The 11-point scale question provides unambiguous information with regard to the order of the various positions, and for practical purposes in data analysis, it can be treated as an interval-level variable. Of course, there are no labels attached to various points other than the two extreme positions, so it is a bit more difficult to interpret what each specific point actually means.

One way to determine the relative positions of “status quo now, deciding later” and “status quo indefinitely” under the six-point scale format is to compare them with the results of the question using the 11-point scale. In order to make it easier to visualize, we regroup the 11-point scale data into three categories: independence supporters for those picking the scores from 0 to 4; status quo supporters for those selecting 5; and unification supporters for those choosing 6 to 10. As shown in Table 2, those who prefer “status quo now, deciding later” and “status quo indefinitely” are indeed status quo supporters with the former slightly leaning towards independence and the latter a bit towards unification. But the differences are not very meaningful statistically. Therefore, we are still unable to tell the relative positions between “status quo now, deciding later” and “status quo indefinitely.”

However, either the six-point or the 11-point scale question assumes away the possibility that respondents could agree to both independence and unification under some conditions. In the 2001 TEDS survey, two of

Table 2: Responses to Six-Point Scale and 11-Point Scale Questions

<i>Six-point scale</i>	<i>Independence</i>	<i>11-point scale</i>		<i>Total</i>
		<i>Status quo</i>	<i>Unification</i>	
Independence	79	12	8	99
(Row %)	(79.8%)	(12.1%)	(8.1%)	(100.0%)
Status quo, then	138	62	6	206
independence	(67.0%)	(30.1%)	(2.9%)	(100.0%)
Status quo, deciding	150	441	131	722
later	(20.8%)	(61.1%)	(18.1%)	(100.0%)
Status quo	31	128	33	192
indefinitely	(16.1%)	(66.7%)	(17.2%)	(100.0%)
Status quo, then	12	142	236	390
unification	(3.1%)	(36.4%)	(60.5%)	(100.0%)
Unification	2	8	54	64
	(3.1%)	(12.5%)	(84.4%)	(100.0%)
Total	412	793	468	1673
	(24.6%)	(47.4%)	(28.0%)	(100.0%)

the questions, K3 and K4, allow us to study whether respondents might hold preferences for independence and unification simultaneously.

K3. If Taiwan can maintain a peaceful relation with China after it declares independence, then Taiwan should become a new independent country. Do you agree with such a statement?

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

K4. If mainland China and Taiwan become compatible economically, socially, and politically, then the two sides should unite.

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

When respondents are allowed to express preferences over conditional alternatives, the breakdown of public attitudes changes. When respondents were asked whether Taiwan should seek independence from China

Table 3: Do you Agree that if Peace can be Maintained, Taiwan should be an Independent Country? (%)

	<i>Agree/strongly agree</i>	<i>Disagree/strongly disagree</i>	<i>Other*</i>
2001	47.6	32.2	20.2

Note:

*Includes “depends,” “no opinion,” “don’t know” and “refuse to answer.”

Table 4: If Mainland China and Taiwan Become Politically, Economically and Socially Compatible, Do You Agree that the Two Sides should Unite? (%)

	<i>Agree/strongly agree</i>	<i>Disagree/strongly disagree</i>	<i>Other*</i>
2001	43.5	33.4	23.0

Note:

*Includes “depends,” “no opinion,” “don’t know” and “refuse to answer.”

if peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait could be maintained, 47.6 per cent agreed that Taiwan should be an independent country (see Table 3). This result indicates that although a majority of the respondents prefer the status quo, close to one half of the Taiwan public has also expressed a desire to be independent from China if independence can be attained without provoking China to retaliate militarily.

While the general preference for conditional Taiwan independence is strong in Taiwan, this does not imply that the people on Taiwan are not willing to consider the option of unification with mainland China. In the 2001 survey, even though 47.6 per cent of the respondents agreed that Taiwan should be an independent country if peace can be maintained, still 43.5 per cent of the respondents agreed that the two sides should be united once the political, economic, and social systems between the two become compatible (see Table 4).

With a large percentage of the respondents simultaneously supporting conditional independence and conditional unification, we discover some interesting overlap in preferences that is not immediately obvious when analysing the data one-dimensionally, strictly in terms of unification versus independence. The overlap suggests that support for independence and unification is not mutually exclusive. When we conduct a cross-tabulation analysis of the responses on the conditions under which respondents agreed to independence or unification, we find that 22.7 per cent of the respondents support both unification with China and Taiwan independence (see Table 5). In Table 6, we classify respondents into five types: those supporting independence only (II), those finding both independence and unification acceptable (I), those supporting unification only

Table 5: **Conditional Independence and Conditional Unification**

<i>Independence if peace can be maintained</i>	<i>Unification if no disparity</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>(Strongly) agree</i>	<i>(Strongly) disagree</i>	<i>Other*</i>	
(Strongly) agree	I 22.7%	II 20.3%	III 4.6%	47.6%
(Strongly) disagree	IV 18.0%	V 11.2%	VI 3.1%	32.3%
Other*	VII 2.9%	VIII 1.9%	IX 15.4%	20.2%
Total	43.5%	33.4%	23.0%	100.0%

Note:

*Includes “depends,” “no opinion,” “don’t know” and “refuse to answer.”

Table 6: **Conditional Preferences on the Independence–Unification Issue (%)**

	<i>Independence only II</i>	<i>Both acceptable I</i>	<i>Unification only IV</i>	<i>Neither acceptable V</i>	<i>Other*</i>
2001	20.3	22.7	18.0	11.2	27.8

Note:

*Includes III, VI, VII, VIII and IX in Table 5.

(IV), those finding both unacceptable (V), and those who do not give answer to either K3 or K4 (III + VI + VII + VIII + IX). Supposedly, the higher the percentage of those who simultaneously support conditional preferences for both unification and independence the less polarization there is in society in regards to this particular issue.

The existence of high percentages of Taiwan’s general public having conditional preferences on the issue of whether or not Taiwan should be independent or unified with China provides convincing evidence that one-dimensional analyses of the independence–unification issue oversimplify the situation, because independence and unification are not necessarily mutually exclusive and the failure to recognize this has prevented us from discovering the conditions that can cause voters to shift between independence, status quo and unification.⁶

6. In recent years, social scientists have made marked progress in understanding how conditionality affects agents’ preferences over alternatives. For more on conditional preferences, see Dean Lacy and Emerson M. S. Niou, “Nonseparable preference and the elections in double-member districts,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1998), pp. 89–110 and “A problem with referendums,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2000), pp. 5–31.

A New Measure

The previous section evaluated each of the three measures designed to represent respondents' preferences on the independence–unification issue. With about a quarter of the total respondents having conditional preferences, neither the six-point nor the 11-point scale one-dimensional variable can accurately represent respondents' preferences. Some respondents may support the status quo because unification or independence seems infeasible under the current circumstances. But once the option they prefer becomes feasible, they may choose to lean towards independence or unification. To illustrate, in Table 7, among those who choose the status quo (respondents whose ideal point is either “status quo now, deciding later” or “status quo indefinitely” on the six-point scale), 18.5 per cent of them would be willing to seek independence if peace can be maintained between Taiwan and mainland China but not willing to be unified with China even if the two sides have similar social, economic and political conditions; and 13.8 per cent would agree to unification but not independence. The comparison of the six-point scale and the conditional preferences variables shows that the measure of conditional preferences can help us further differentiate among those who choose status quo on the six-point scale. The opposite is also true. For example, if a respondent's preference leans towards independence on the six-point scale (those who choose either “independence immediately” or “status quo now, independence later”) and, meanwhile, he or she finds unification and independence both acceptable under the right conditions, we can infer that he or she actually prefers independence to unification when both choices are feasible. In other words, we can use information revealed by these two measures of preferences to construct a new variable

Table 7: The Six-Point Scale and the Conditional Preferences on the Independence–Unification Issue

<i>Conditional preferences</i>	<i>Six-point scale</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Independence (Column %)</i>	<i>Status quo (Column %)</i>	<i>Unification (Column %)</i>	
Independence only	① 189 58.9%	② 187 18.5%	?? 27 5.7%	403 22.3%
Both acceptable	② 65 20.2%	③ 248 24.5%	④ 130 27.3%	443 24.5%
Unification only	?? 10 3.1%	④ 140 13.8%	⑤ 209 43.8%	359 19.8%
Neither acceptable	② 19 5.9%	③ 152 15.0%	④ 52 10.9%	223 12.3%
Other	② 38 11.8%	③ 285 28.2%	④ 59 12.4%	382 21.1%
Total	321 100.0%	1012 100.0%	477 100.0%	1810 100.0%

that places respondents on the independence–unification spectrum. In the following, we use information presented in Table 7 to define a new five-point scale variable. A similar task can be done with the 11-point scale variable, but since it produces similar statistical results as the six-point scale variable, to simplify the discussion, we choose only to present the six-point scale and the conditional preference variables.

Those who lean towards independence on the six-point scale and agree that Taiwan should become an independent country if China renounces the use of force against Taiwan, but disagree that Taiwan should be reunited with China even if the latter becomes prosperous and democratic, are clearly strong supporters of Taiwan independence. We assign a value of 1 to them. Likewise, those who lean towards unification and agree that Taiwan and mainland China should be reunified once the latter becomes prosperous and democratic, but reject independence under any conditions, are strong supporters of unification. We assign a value of 5 to them. If they lean towards independence or unification on the six-point scale, but nevertheless accept both hypothetical scenarios, they seem more pragmatic than those in categories 1 and 5. So we assign a value of 2 and 4 to them, respectively. For those who lean towards independence or unification on the six-point scale, but reject or give no responses to both conditional independence and conditional unification, we interpret it to mean they have a preference for independence or unification, but with less intensity than those in categories 1 or 5. So we assign a value 2 and 4 to them, respectively. As for those who prefer status quo on the six-point scale, if they only accept conditional independence but not conditional unification, they are given a value of 2 because they are more likely to lean towards independence if given a choice. For the same reason, if they only accept conditional unification but not conditional independence, they are given a value of 4. But if they accept, reject or give no answers to both conditional independence and conditional unification, they do not show a clear tendency towards either independence or unification. We assign a value of 3 to them. If a respondent indicates that he or she prefers independence (or unification) on the six-point scale but rejects independence (or unification) when the situation is favourable to it, he or she is apparently inconsistent in his or her responses to these questions. Not surprisingly, not many respondents are found like that. Thus the analysis does not consider those cases. The frequency of the new measure is summarized in Table 8.

Table 8: A New Measure of Preferences on the Taiwan Independence Issue (%)

<i>Strong independence supporters</i>	<i>Weak independence supporters</i>	<i>Status quo supporters</i>	<i>Weak unification supporters</i>	<i>Strong unification supporters</i>
10.7	17.4	38.7	21.5	11.8

Quite interestingly, this table shows that the population is fairly equally divided among the three positions: independence, status quo and unification. If public opinion matters in a democratic setting, this means that it is difficult for the politicians to move towards either independence or unification. The status quo will, in all likelihood, remain the median voter position for the Taiwanese voters.

The next challenge is to find out whether our new measure performs better statistically than does the six-point scale variable. (Since it is hard to tell whether “status quo now, deciding later” or “status quo indefinitely” is closer to independence or unification, we have to combine the two into one category, rendering it a five- instead of six-point scale variable. However, in order not to be confused with the new five-point scale, it will still be called the six-point scale variable.) Given that the independence–unification issue is the most if not the only salient issue in Taiwan’s electoral politics, one way to conduct the test is to compare which of the measures significantly affects respondents’ preference intensity towards the political parties. In the 2001 TEDS survey, questions K7a to K7e measure respondents’ preference intensity towards political parties on an 11-point scale. Therefore, to compare the two measures, we can regress the respondents’ preference intensity towards a political party, Y , on both the new and old measures, denoted by X_1 and X_2 :

$$Y = a + b_1 X_1 + b_2 X_2 + e.$$

Because X_1 and X_2 must be highly correlated, it is possible that both are statistically insignificant. In that case, the new and old measures are not different. If X_1 is statistically significant but X_2 is not, then we can conclude that the new measure has more variation than the old one, and that additional variation can help explain the variation in Y . That is, the new measure is better than the old one because it can do everything the old measure can, but not vice versa. If both X_1 and X_2 are significant, then both can do something that the other cannot. In this case we can compare b_1 and b_2 to decide which variable has more explanatory power.⁷

Table 9 presents the results of the statistical tests of the model. In four out of five cases, X_1 is statistically significant but X_2 is not, and in the remaining one, both X_1 and X_2 are significant, but b_1 is twice as large as b_2 , showing clearly that the new measure of preferences is a better predictor of party preference intensity than is the old measure.

7. Multicollinearity would be a problem if our goal is to test a theory-driven model to see whether the model is supported empirically. But since we are simply trying to find a better measure, our model is methodologically sound.

Table 9: Effects of Attitudes on the Independence–Unification Issue on Party Preference Intensity

Model:	$Y = a + b_1 X_1 + b_2 X_2 + e$
Results:	$KMT = 3.09^{**} + 0.40^{**} X_1 + 0.17 X_2$ (0.20) (0.08) (0.11) $DPP = 7.73^{**} - 0.59^{**} X_1 - 0.14 X_2$ (0.21) (0.09) (0.12) $PFP = 1.65^{**} + 0.71^{**} X_1 + 0.21 X_2$ (0.23) (0.10) (0.13) $NP = 0.97^{**} + 0.54^{**} X_1 + 0.25^{*} X_2$ (0.23) (0.09) (0.13) $TSU = 6.45^{**} - 0.63^{**} X_1 - 0.23 X_2$ (0.25) (0.10) (0.14)

Notes:

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*Conclusion*

Since the early 1990s, several competing methods have been employed in surveys to study the attitudes of Taiwanese on the independence–unification issue. The finding of the existence of a large percentage of respondents with conditional preferences helps us realize that both the six-point and the 11-point scale measures of preferences oversimplify the situation. The main contribution of this article is that we construct a new measure of preferences and show that it clearly outperforms the traditional methods.

Our analysis in this article is only a first cut. Our new measure of preferences still needs to be fine-tuned because we are yet to have a complete understanding of the conditionality of preferences on the Taiwan independence issue. While conditional preferences reveal how individuals might be enticed to abandon the status quo position in favour of independence or unification, questions K3 and K4 stop 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 who have a first preference for independence or unification will be willing to abandon their ideal preference and instead choose the status quo. Thus, in future surveys, to have a complete understanding of the conditionality of preferences, we should also ask respondents whether they will support independence if China will attack Taiwan and whether they will seek unification with China if the two sides are unlikely to become compatible economically, socially and politically in the foreseeable future.⁸

8. In the survey conducted by the Election Study Centre, National Chengchi University, following the 1996 presidential election, all four questions tapping respondents' conditional preferences under various scenarios were included. Unfortunately, these were follow-up questions to the six-point scale question so that only a portion of respondents were asked about each of these scenarios. It is thus not very useful for our purposes.