

# Identity Conformity in Taiwan and South Korea

Why Citizens in Divided Societies Are Pressured to Overstate National Pride

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Where does **public expression** of national pride **diverge from private belief**, and why?

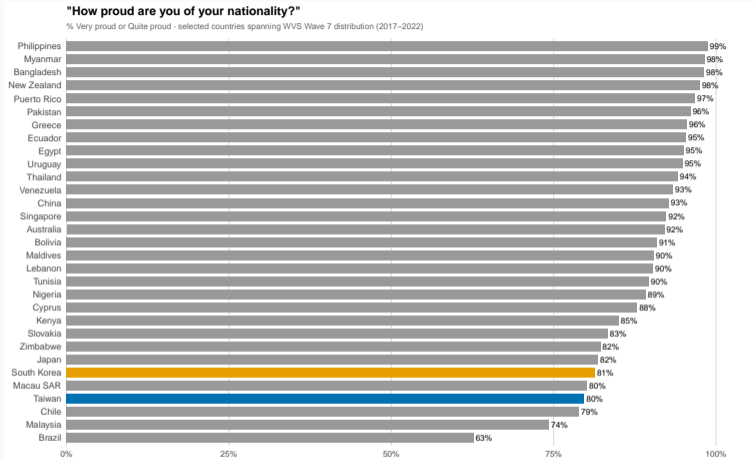
We compare **Taiwan** and **South Korea** — two cases with shared history but divergent post-democratization identity regimes — and look across subgroups defined by identity strength and ascribed group markers.

*Based on Denney, Steinhardt & Bhowmick (2026), Nationalism and Ethnic Politics.*

# Motivation

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# A puzzle about national pride



Across countries, pride is uniformly high.

Are these numbers what people **believe**, or what they **perform**?

These high pride numbers are foundational inputs to a lot of what we think we know:

- Theories of nationalism treat citizens' reports as expressions of underlying identification.
- Cross-national comparisons of pride, legitimacy, and civic attachment rest on the same numbers.
- Trend analyses, cohort studies, and group comparisons assume reports track belief.

If a meaningful share of expressed pride is **performed under social pressure**, the inferences we draw from these numbers are wrong — and the *pattern* of overstatement is itself a substantive finding about how identity is regulated.

Direct survey questions invite **social desirability bias**.

- The bias is largest *exactly where* the theory says it should be largest.
- Self-reports cannot, by themselves, separate genuine pride from performed pride.
- We need an **indirect estimator** — one that lets us measure population-level endorsement *without asking anyone to admit anything*.

# Theory

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# Identity as public performance

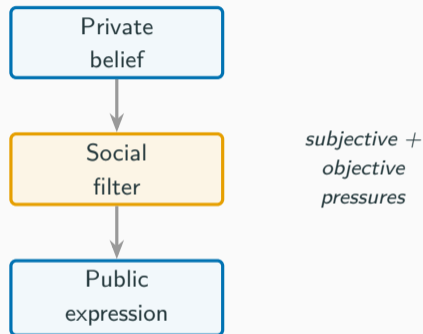
## Identity conformity:

adjusting one's *expressed* national identity to align with prevailing social norms.

Two channels:

- **Subjective:** weak or pluralistic identifiers inflate to fit the dominant norm.
- **Objective:** contested or minority groups inflate under scrutiny.

*Scott (1990); Kuran (1995); Tajfel & Turner (1979);  
Fox & Miller-Idriss (2008).*



## Two general expectations

Our framework yields two expectations.

**Within-case mechanism**, operating through **subjective identity strength**:

In both societies, individuals with **weaker** attachment to the dominant identity will show **wider conformity gaps** than strong identifiers.

**Cross-case magnitude and distribution**, leveraging the MSSD:

For comparable groups, gaps will be **wider in South Korea than in Taiwan**, reflecting the more rigid, state-anchored identity norms.

*State–society linkages framing: Hur (2022).*

## A most-similar-systems comparison

|   | Taiwan           | South Korea               |
|---|------------------|---------------------------|
| Japanese colonial rule  | ✓                | ✓                         |
| Cold-War authoritarianism                                       | ✓                | ✓                         |
| Third-wave democratization                                      | ✓                | ✓                         |
| Confucian heritage  | ✓                | ✓                         |
| Geopolitical tension with a larger neighbor                     | ✓                | ✓                         |
| <b><i>Diverged on identity norms after democratization:</i></b> |                  |                           |
| Post-democratization identity norms                             | <b>Pluralism</b> | <b>Rigidity</b>           |
| State–society linkages  | weak (social)    | strong (social and state) |

If our expectations hold, Taiwan should show a **small** gap; South Korea, a **large** one.

*Case context: Tu (1996); Chu & Lin (2001); Hur (2022); Lee & Misco (2014).*

## Data and methods

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# A way around social desirability bias

The list experiment hides the sensitive item among innocuous ones. Respondents give a single count rather than answering the sensitive item directly.

## Control list

*How many of these apply to you?*

- Hard work is important to success.
- I often spend time with friends.
- I value cooperation in groups.

## Treatment list

*How many of these apply to you?*

- Hard work is important to success.
- I often spend time with friends.
- I value cooperation in groups.
- **I am proud to be Taiwanese.**

# The samples

| Sample                            | N            | What it lets us test                            |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|---|
| Taiwan, native-born               | 2,050        | <b>subjective channel</b> ; ancestry subgroups  |
| South Korea, native-born          | 2,006        | state-enforced norms → larger gap               |
| North Korean migrants in S. Korea | 316          | <b>objective channel</b> : stigmatized minority |
| <b>Total</b>                      | <b>5,267</b> |   |

- Online Qualtrics panels for the native-born samples (Dec 2023 – Jun 2024).
- North Korean migrant sample fielded in partnership with the NGO Woorion.

The sensitive item embedded in the treatment list:

- Taiwan: “I am proud to be Taiwanese.”
- South Korea and NK migrants: “I am proud to be South Korean.”
- NK migrants also: “I am proud to be from North Korea.”

For each (sub)sample we estimate the share who privately endorse the item, and compare it to the share who endorse it directly. The gap is our measure of conformity pressure.

### Strong vs. weak national identification

0–10 self-placement scale. **Strong** = top-box (score 10); **Weak** = below 10. Same cut in both countries.

### Taiwanese-only vs. Taiwanese–Chinese identifiers

Separate 0–10 scales for Taiwanese and Chinese identity.

- **Taiwanese-only**: strong on Taiwanese ( $\geq$  75th pct), weak on Chinese.
- **Taiwanese–Chinese**: strong on *both* (dual identifiers).

*In South Korea, parallel dual-identity items would read as bizarre to respondents and were not asked.*

### **Benshengren vs. Waishengren** (*in Taiwan*)

Paternal origin as an ascriptive identifier.

- **Benshengren**: Hokkien or Hakka father (native-origin majority).
- **Waishengren**: Mainland-origin father (post-1949 arrivals; minority).

### **Native-born vs. North Korean migrants** (*in South Korea*)

NK migrants are a **stigmatized minority** in South Korea, fielded separately via the NGO Woorion. They are asked about pride in both South Korea *and* North Korea.

Before the list experiment, respondents wrote a brief open-text response on what they think about national identity and pride.

The prompt told them their answers would be **aggregated and analyzed**.

The content of those answers isn't what we use — the point is to activate awareness of a **social audience** before the sensitive items. The design therefore captures conformity pressures that a typical anonymous online survey can dampen.

Random assignment gives us two comparable groups:

- The control group reports how many innocuous items apply.
- The treatment group sees the same list, plus the sensitive pride item.
- The extra mean count in treatment is the estimated share who privately endorse the sensitive item.

We estimate this difference with Imai's covariate-adjusted linear list-experiment estimator.

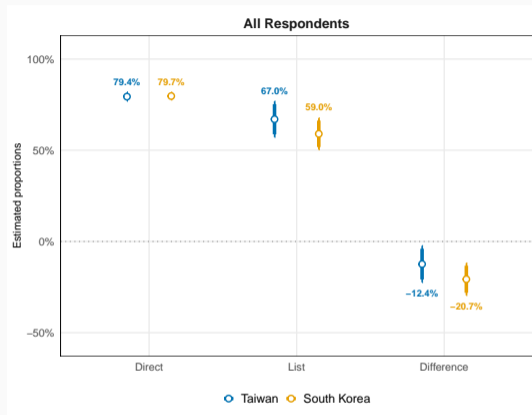
Direct rates use covariate-adjusted logistic regression. Difference = list – direct.

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + X_i \gamma + \varepsilon_i$$

## Findings

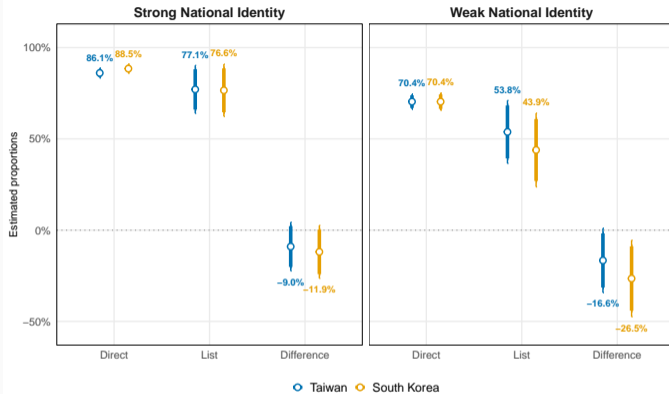
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# The headline gap



Direct – List gap, all respondents: Taiwan **-12.4 pp**; South Korea **-20.7 pp**. Both inflate; South Korea inflates more.

# Weak identifiers inflate more

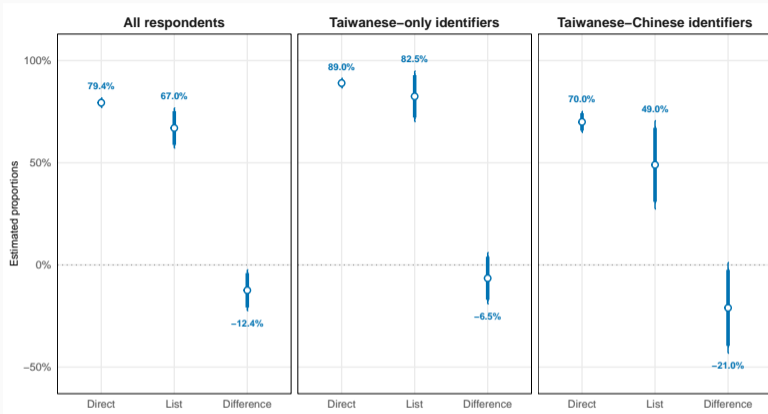


Strong: Taiwan  $-9.0$  pp · South Korea  $-11.9$  pp.

Weak: Taiwan  $-16.6$  pp · South Korea  $-26.5$  pp.

Those least committed to the script are the most likely to perform it.

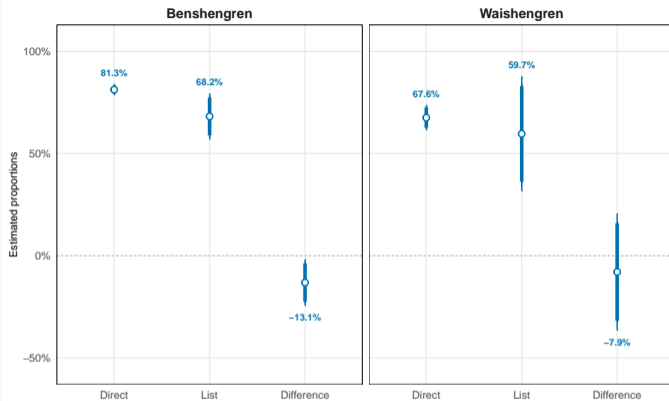
# Taiwan: the subjective channel



Taiwanese-only:  $-6.5$  pp · Dual Taiwanese-Chinese:  $-21.0$  pp

The pressure concentrates on dual identifiers, not on the most committed.

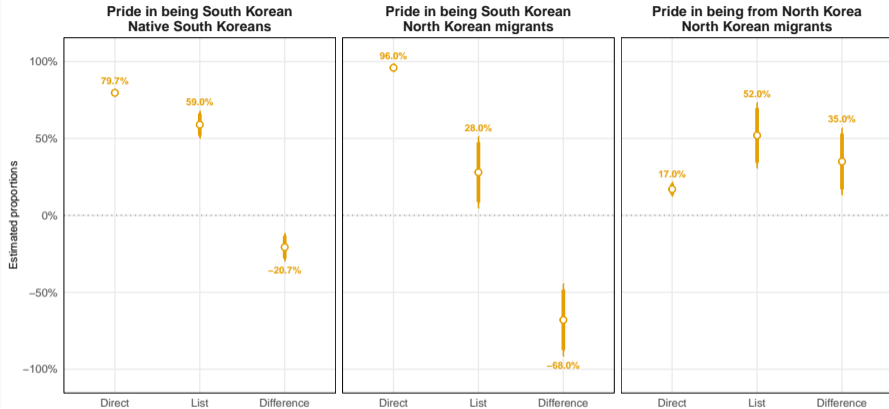
# Taiwan: the objective channel (and a surprise)



Benshengren: **-13.1 pp** · Waishengren: **-7.9 pp**

**The minority inflates less than the majority.**

# North Korean migrants in South Korea



SK pride:  $-68$  pp · NK pride:  $+35$  pp inverted

A gap this wide means much of the public pride is performed under social pressure.

## Identity $\neq$ policy: a robustness check

If pride inflation were just generic social-desirability bias on *any* sensitive question, we would see gaps on other sensitive items too. We ran additional list experiments to check.

| Item tested                     | Gap              | Interpretation                       |
|---------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| TW: declare formal independence | <i>no gap</i>    | policy positions are not performed   |
| TW: pride in being Chinese      | <i>no gap</i>    | non-dominant identity not suppressed |
| SK: support the NSA             | <b>large gap</b> | loyalty norm is actively enforced    |
| SK: oppose reunification        | <i>no gap</i>    | legacy norm no longer enforced       |

The gap is **identity-specific**. It tracks the items where the norm is actively policed — not generic sensitivity.

*TW items from the same sample; SK items from a separate list-experiment sample. Items and estimates in Online Appendix E.*

# What the subgroups tell us together

|  | <b>Strong identifiers</b>                 | <b>Weak or contested identifiers</b>                               |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Taiwan</b><br><i>pluralizing identity norms</i>         | small gap<br>pressure runs intra-majority | dual identifiers: large gap<br>Mainland-origin minority: small gap |
| <b>South Korea</b><br><i>state-anchored identity norms</i> | small gap<br>pressure runs cross-group    | weak identifiers: large gap<br>NK migrants: largest gap of all     |

**Same mechanism, two regimes of enforcement.**

## Discussion

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## Why the difference: who got to retell the nation

Democratization gave **storytelling elites** the institutional resources to reshape national narratives. Outcomes diverged.

|  | Taiwan   | South Korea  |
|--|--|--|
| Master narrative after democratization | “One China” <i>displaced</i> ;<br>pluralist identity rises | “One Korea” <i>entrenched</i> ;<br>ethnic-nationalist<br>consolidation |
| State–society linkages                 | weak; mostly social<br>enforcement                         | strong; legal, security,<br>educational, conscription                  |
| Resulting identity regime              | contested, intra-group<br>pressure                         | dominant, broad cross-group<br>pressure                                |

*Jo (2025), “Storytelling Elites and the Remaking of Nationhood” (CPS); Hur (2022), Narratives of Civic Duty.*

- National identity is **socially regulated** through enforcement.
- Democratization does **not** automatically weaken conformity. South Korea's norms hardened around democratic institutions.
- Surveys **overestimate** national pride. The bias is largest for the people theory cares most about: weak identifiers and stigmatized minorities.

We extend a tradition that treats *expressed* identity as distinct from private belief — Scott (1990), Kuran (1995), and recent list-experiment work on contested identities (Jiang & Yang 2016; Wu & Lin 2024).

The comparative contribution: the **magnitude and pattern** of overstatement is shaped by who got to retell the nation after democratization (Jo 2025), and by how tightly the state and society are linked (Hur 2022).

The upshot: nation-building in democracies is produced as much by **everyday social conformity** as by overt enforcement.

## Three takeaways

- **National pride is partly performed.** Direct reports overstate private endorsement in both cases.
- **The bias is patterned.** It is largest among weak identifiers and stigmatized minorities.
- **Democratic nation-building can still coerce belonging.** South Korea shows how social and institutional pressure make conformity durable.

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