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Measuring National Identity with Conjoint Experiments Using the Case of Taiwan

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The problem

“Nationalism is back” (The Economist, 2014) ... and it was never “gone” in East Asia.

Nationalism and national identity are among the most powerful political ideologies of the modern era.

Political identity “suggests first and foremost similarity, and it demands acknowledgment of ... a ‘defining community” (Berezin 1997).

Nationalism “locates the source of individual identity within a ‘people’” (Greenfeld, 1992).

How do national identities define who is inside and outside of the national community?

Common survey measures for the “content” of national identity are problematic.

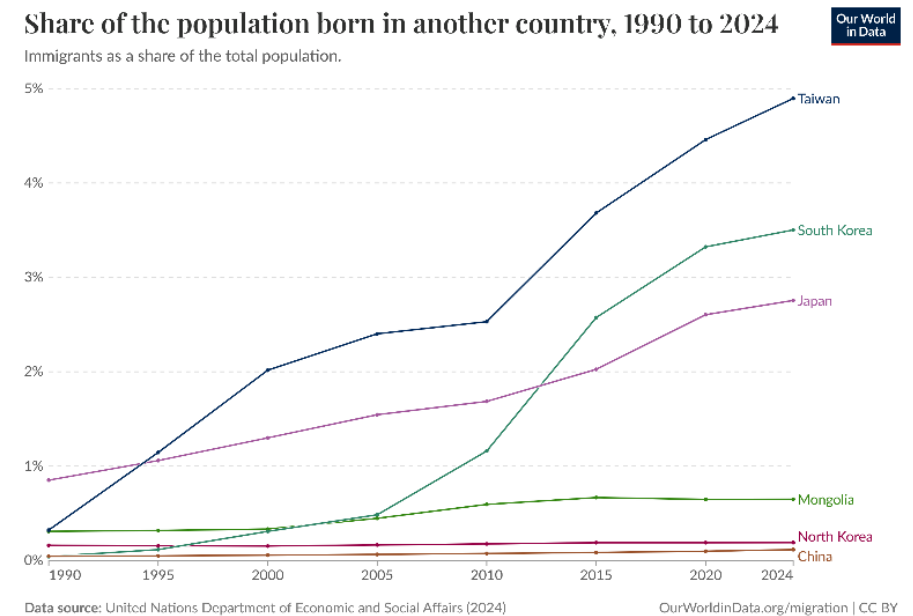
Our approach: a conjoint-based measure that is more realistic, rigorous, and volatile than conventional methods.

The problem

Taiwan as an “outcome case” (Gerring and Cojocaru, 2016).

Taiwanese identity changed dramatically, is highly contested, and highly politically consequential.

Given internal polarization and sovereignty conflicts with China, as well as ultra-low fertility and increasing immigration, how contested, democratic and open is Taiwanese national identity after all?



Dimensions of national identity

What is the content of identity? What determines who is a member of the nation and who is not?

- Civic vs. ethnic nationalism (Kohn, 1944)
- Five elements (Smith, 1991)
- Democratic “constitutional patriotism” (Habermas, 1992)
- Civic, ethnic, cultural (Shulman, 2002)

Our approach (Kymlicka, 2001; Shulman, 2002; Wright, Citrin and Wand, 2012):

- Ascriptive criteria
- Civic criteria
- Voluntarist criteria

Existing approaches and the conjoint solution

Identity choice (e.g. Taiwanese, Chinese, both) or nationalism batteries say nothing or little about identity content.

ISSP National Identity module asks for importance of different personal traits to ascertain if someone “is a true [British, German...].”

Problems:

- Ceiling effects
- No information about trade-offs
- Treats identity as decomposable into independent dimensions

The conjoint approach provides hypothetical profiles and forces respondents to choose.

It eliminates these problems and also mitigates social desirability biases (Markovich and Yamamoto, 2022).

The Case of Taiwan

National identity is a critical variable in political development since 1947.

Three highly significant questions that current research has not satisfactorily resolved:

Civicness

- Is contemporary Taiwanese national identity primarily civic, voluntarist?
- Qualitative scholarship claims it (Song, 2009; Wong, 2001); survey research provides some indirect, correlational support (Wang and Liu, 2004; Zhong, 2016).
- But discrimination of Mainlanders and South-East Asian immigrants remain common (Cabestan, 2005; Kao and Liu, 2025; Rich et al., 2022).
- How do Taiwanese value ascriptive vs. civic and voluntarist criteria?

Democracy

- Is there a Habermasian “constitutional patriotism” in Taiwan?

The Case of Taiwan

- Democratization: “the most important shared living experience” of the island’s population (Wang and Liu, 2004).
- Some correlational support (Chen, 2024; Qi and Lin, 2021) but understanding of democracy can be substantive rather than procedural (Shi and Lu 2011).
- Can the embrace of democracy make immigrants become accepted as members of the national community?

Contestation

- National identity is frequently portrayed as “the single most important political cleavage on the island” (Achen and Wang 2017)?
- But scholars have also discerned significant consensus (Schubert, 2004; Shen and Wu 2008; Zhong, 2016).
- Is identity content as contested as, or more consensual than, conflict over identity labels and partisanship?

Research Design

Online survey of 2,050 respondents in Taiwan between May and June 2024

ISSP National Identity module

ISSP battery in a conjoint experiment

Taiwan specific conjoint experiment

We opted for the terms “a true national of our country” 我們/ 我國真正的國民 and “more like a national of our country” 更像是我國國民 to describe national identity and the task of evaluating hypothetical profiles.

Research Design

| Attribute | Levels | Rationale |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Ancestry | Han Chinese Non-Han person (ref.) | Captures the basic ethnic distinction in a majority-Han society where "common blood" has historically been central to Chinese national identity claims. |
| Origin | Taiwan (ref.) Mainland China Indonesia USA South Korea | Five birthplace categories with politically distinct valences for Taiwan: Mainland Chinese origin, Indonesia as the largest Southeast Asian source country for marriage migration and labor, the US as the most central strategic benefactor, and South Korea as a regional democratic comparator. |
| Language | Fluent Mandarin Limited proficiency Cannot speak Mandarin (ref.) | Tests whether Mandarin proficiency, the legacy of decades of KMT-imposed language policy, functions as a criterion for national membership. |
| Legal Status | Taiwanese citizen Permanent resident Short-term resident (ref.) | Measures the weight of formal legal membership and depth of legal ties relative to other identity criteria. |
| Residence | Lived most/entire life in Taiwan 21 years 14 years 7 years or less (ref.) | Assesses whether duration of residence serves as a proxy for commitment to and integration into the national community. |
| Sentiment | Identifies as Taiwanese Identifies as both Taiwanese and Chinese Identifies as Chinese Does not identify as Taiwanese or Chinese (ref.) | Tests subjective national identification, including the politically central dual-identity category that characterizes roughly 30% of the population. |
| Politics | Thinks democracy is good despite flaws Strongly opposes communism Thinks democracy is chaotic, prefers one-party rule Has no opinion about politics (ref.) | Four political orientations that separate procedural democratic commitment, anti-communist sentiment, anti-democratic preference for single-party rule, and political apathy. |
| Culture | Thinks one should respect Taiwan's values and traditions Thinks diversity should be embraced Thinks cultural practices and beliefs are personal (ref.) | Distinguishes three orientations toward cultural belonging: traditionalist, pluralist, and culturally non-prescriptive. |
| Civiness | Participates in local politics Helps with community clean-up Stays home or meets friends for coffee (ref.) | Three levels of public engagement: political participation in local campaigns, community-oriented voluntarism, and private socializing. |

Table 1: CBC #2 attributes, levels, and design rationale.

Note: Reference levels are marked "(ref.)."

在定義國家認同時，人們優先考量不同的價值觀和信念。以下為您呈現兩個在台灣生活的人的簡介，每個人都有獨特的特質和信念。

請查看每份個人資料並選擇您認為是我國國民的人。如果您不確定自己比較想選哪個人，也請務必選擇一個。

| | 人物A | 人物B |
|------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| 國家認同 | 認為自己是台灣人 | 認為自己既是台灣人也是中國人 |
| 在台灣居住的時間 | 21年 | 21年 |
| 種族 | 非漢人 | 非漢人 |
| 公民參與 | 參與當地的政治活動 | 參與當地的政治活動 |
| 對文化和價值觀的看法 | 相信我們的社會因其居民的多元文化、傳統和價值觀而變得豐富，我們應該接納這種多樣性 | 認為人們的文化習俗和信仰是私事，社會不應將特定的價值觀或傳統強加於任何人 |
| 國語能力 | 國語(中文)流利 | 不會說國語(中文) |
| 對政治制度的看法 | 強烈反對共產主義 | 對政治制度沒有意見 |
| 出生國 | 中國大陸 | 南韓 |
| 法律地位 | 臨時居民 | 永久居民 |
| 請選擇哪一個人更像是我國國民。 | 人物A | 人物B |

Findings

The ISSP national identity battery

- Factor analysis confirms that there are three dimensions: ascriptive, civic, voluntarist
- 6 out of 9 items show little variation
- What happens when someone born outside of Taiwan feels Taiwanese?

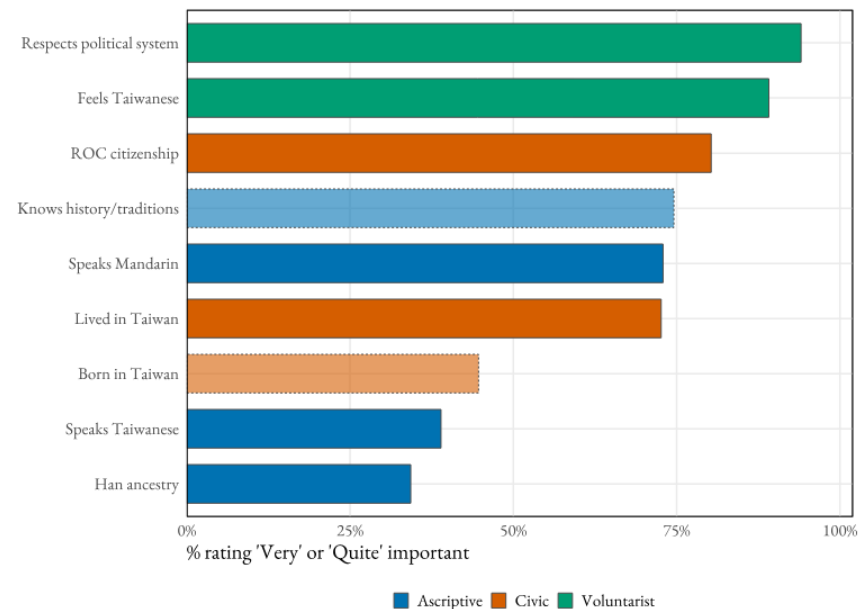


Figure 1: Observational national identity battery, percent rating each criterion as “very” or “quite” important for being a true national.

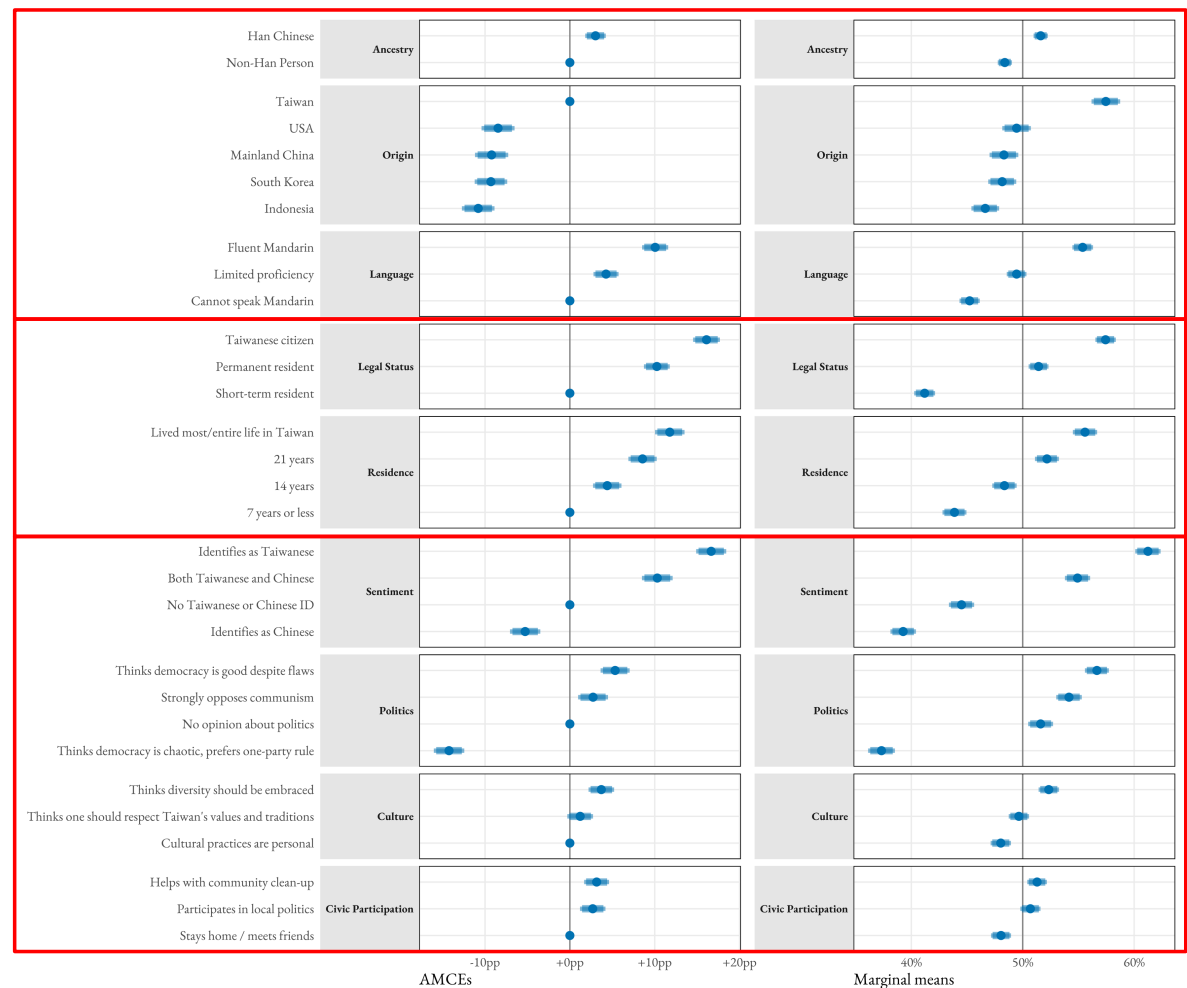
Note: Items are colored by dimension: ascriptive (blue), civic (orange), and voluntarist (green), following the tripartite classification in Shulman (2002) and Wright, Citrin and Wand (2012), validated by our factor analysis (Appendix B). Cross-loading items are shown with lighter shading and dashed borders: “born in Taiwan” cross-loads on both the civic and ascriptive factors, and “knows history/traditions” cross-loads on the ascriptive and voluntarist factors. $n = 2,050$.

Findings

Ascriptive components of ancestry and origin provide a modest advantage, and language proficiency matters.

Civic components matter more.

Voluntarist attributes of self-identification (Taiwanese/both vs. Chinese) and regime support (democracy vs. one-party rule).

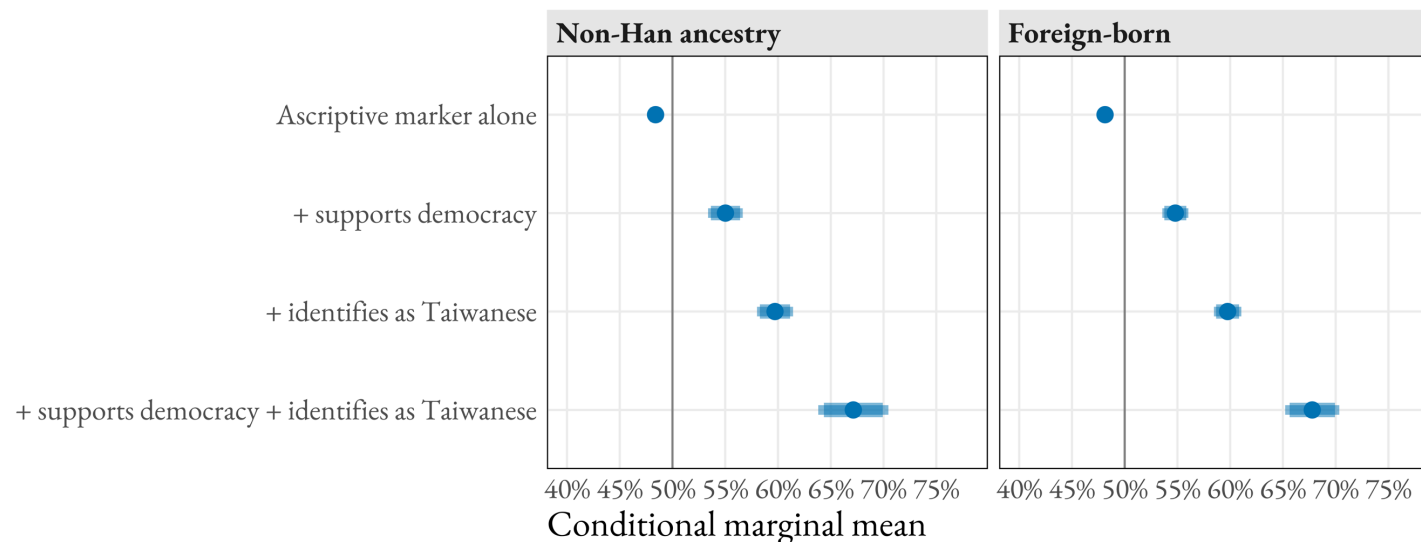


Findings

Can voluntarist attributes overcome disadvantaged ascriptive ones?

They can, by a wide margin.

People with disadvantageous ascriptive criteria (not Han Chinese, foreign born) can become widely accepted (close to 70%) as co-nationals when they support democracy and identify as Taiwanese.



Findings

So, Taiwanese national identity appears quite civic, voluntarist and democratic.

How contested is it across the main lines of political conflict?

Not that much.

Differences across respondents' chosen identity label emerge over origin (China), self-identification, and regime support.

But except for origin, the differences are matters of emphasis rather than principle.



Conclusion

We have introduced a novel approach to operationalize national identity in surveys.

It increases realism by measuring the criteria for national belonging as a combined bundle of a person, instead of artificially decomposing.

It increases rigor and provides theoretically required insights by cleanly disentangling effects of one attribute relative to others and by adjudicating how people trade-off different criteria.

Taiwanese are valuing civic and voluntarist criteria more than ascriptive ones when they define the boundary of the nation.

Citizens have internalized “constitutional patriotism.” Support for democracy is a qualifying criterion for national belonging.

Conclusion

Voluntarist attributes can overcome disadvantaged ethnic and geographic origins.

The criteria for national belonging are more consensual than deep political cleavages over identity labels and partisanship would suggest.

Next questions:

National identity is mostly treated as a condition for regime type. Do regimes also have agency to mold identity?

Could democracy in Taiwan have produced a less ascriptive, more voluntarist and democratic identity?

Has the one-party regime in Mainland China bred an ascriptive identity?
Has it successfully fused national identity with regime support?

