

# Why does Taiwan Identity decline?

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## Abstract

Since 1992, the percentage of Taiwanese identifying as “Taiwanese only” increased by 50 percent. Literature explains the increase by generation, democratization, and military threat. None of these foresees the decline of Taiwan identity between 2016 and 2018. We argue that the decline can be explained by *issue ownership + hedging*. After DPP won both the presidency and the Congress for the first time in 2016, DPP’s performance was used by voters to evaluate the utility of Taiwan identity. Propensity score matching and regressions on three groups of surveys (TEDS, TISS, and TNSS) support the theory and rule out alternative explanations.

**Keywords:** Taiwan Identity, Issue Ownership, Cross-strait Relationship, Nationalism, Democratization.

**Word count:** 9200

## **Introduction**

The emergence of Taiwan identity has been one of the most critical phenomena in Taiwanese politics since its democratization in 1987 (Chu and Lin 2001). Since then, academic polls have started to ask how Taiwanese citizens identify themselves. Throughout the years, the proportion of respondents identifying as Taiwanese only (instead of Chinese only, or both Taiwanese and Chinese) steadily increased from 18% in 1992 to 67% in 2020. The 49% increase is even faster than the population growth during the past two decades in Taiwan. The shift is also more extensive compared to other nations or regions seeking independence, such as Quebec, Catalonia, or Hong Kong (Wang 2017).

Why did Taiwan identity increase drastically? Previous studies suggest four possible factors. First, the desire for independence and the cross-Strait tensions contribute to the birth of this unique national identity (Chu and Lin 2001, Chen 2013, Wu 2005, Zhong 2016). China's military threats ignite in-group favoritism and out-group hatred, and this psychological mechanism explains the soaring of Taiwan identity since 1996. Second, generational replacement plays an important role since the young generations in Taiwan tend to have a higher proportion of Taiwan identity than the elder generations (Lin 2014, Lin 2017). The tendency became stronger after the Taiwan-centered curriculum was introduced in middle school in 1999 (Huang 2019). Third, even though China implemented both military threats and economic incentives in trying to win the hearts of the Taiwanese people, the effect was waning since the young generations in Taiwan did not experience military conflicts and tended to support post-materialism, such as self-esteem and self-expression (Wang 2017). Fourth, as a result, the definition of Taiwanese also gradually transformed from ethnic nationalism to political nationalism (Chen 2012, Lee and Yang 2016), which expands the potential supporters.

These four factors fail to foresee the possibility that Taiwan identity could also decline. Surprisingly, the trend of Taiwan identity seems to decline between 2014 and 2018 – for the first time in history. According to a long-standing survey conducted by the National Chengchi University (NCCU) as shown in Figure 1, Taiwan identity reached 60.6%, but the number declined consecutively for the next four years, down to 54.5%. Even though we use other surveys to reconfirm and find that the difference between every two years is within the margin of error, the difference between 2016 and 2018 is large enough to claim a statistically significant difference.

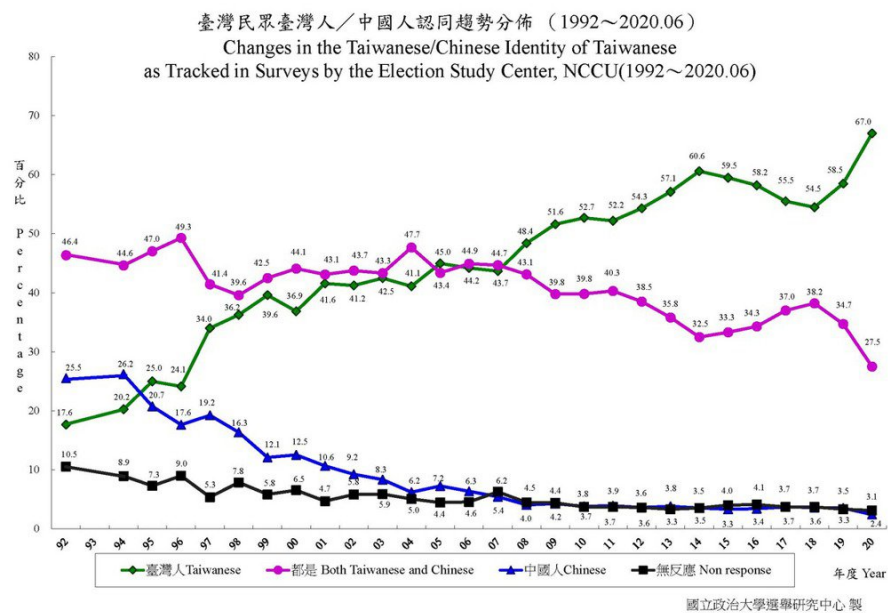


Figure 1. The Change of Taiwan Identity. Source:

<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7804&id=6960> Access: July 9, 2020

The decline cannot be explained by the four factors above. The military spending in China did not decrease during this period,<sup>1</sup> the generational replacement continued, and the major parties

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-chinas-2021-defense-budget>. Access: July 9, 2021.

in Taiwan still used the term “Taiwan” but not “China” in their slogans during elections.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the decline stood in sharp contrast to two key political events commonly known to boost Taiwanese identity. First, the Sunflower Movement, a student-led social movement against a China-Taiwan trade deal and occupied the Parliament for 23 days, took place in 2014. Taiwanese nationalism has been the backbone of strong public support for the movement (Chen and Yen 2017; Wu 2019).

Second, the Democratic Progress Party (DPP hereafter) won the 2016 Presidential election and defeated Kuomintang, the ruling party (KMT hereafter). DPP also won the majority seats in the Parliament and realized its majority government for the first time in history. Since Taiwan independence and Taiwanese identity are the key issue owned by DPP (Dittmer 2004, Batto 2019), we should expect that the electoral success of the DPP should go along with an increase in Taiwan identity. Against all odds, Taiwan identity declined after 2016.

To answer this question, we offer a new explanation for the decline of Taiwanese identity. The theory is composed of two elements: *issue ownership* and *hedging*. Taiwan independence and the pursuit of Taiwanese identity have been DPP’s long-term goal since its establishment in 1986. Hence, the issue of Taiwan independence and Taiwanese identity is “owned” by the DPP in the eye of Taiwanese voters. After the DPP won both the presidency and the majority in the Legislative Yuan for the first time in 2016, Taiwanese people used the performance of the DPP’s governance to calculate their utility of Taiwan identity, as it was the first time in history when the DPP bears the full governing accountability. When DPP’s president Tsai Ing-wen did not perform well, Taiwanese voters perceived a lower utility to identifying themselves as Taiwanese. As a result,

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2016 Presidential Election, KMT candidate Eric Chu’s slogan is “ONE Taiwan,” while DPP candidate and Tsai Ing-wen’s slogan is “Taiwan NEXT.” In the 2020 Presidential Election, KMT candidate Han Guo-yu’s slogan is “Safe Taiwan, Rich people,” while DPP candidate and the incumbent Tsai Ing-wen’s slogan is “Taiwan Let’s Win.”

Taiwanese voters may switch back to a “both Taiwanese and Chinese” identity to prevent the potential loss of identifying as Taiwanese only. This hedging strategy allows Taiwanese citizens to signal their discontent toward DPP’s government and prevent potential provocation toward China. Similarly, if DPP governs well, Taiwanese people will be much more likely to identify as Taiwanese only. If we borrow Wu (2005)’s analogy, the “love” of Taiwanese identity was realized after 2016, so the amount of “bread decides the quality of marriage.”

In the following sections, we will demonstrate the existence of a decline in Taiwanese identity before 2019. We then marshal evidence to support our theory of issue ownership and hedging. After that, we rule out alternative explanations, including national pride, military threats, and generational replacement. In the end, we will discuss the implications of our results and their contributions to studies of nationalism and cross-Strait relations.

### **Does the decline really exist?**

Some might question the truthfulness of an actual decline in Taiwanese identity. Since each wave of the survey has about a 3% margin of error, it is possible that the decline and resurgence we observed in Figure 1 after 2014 are driven by random errors.

To overcome the problem of random errors, we rely on another group of surveys conducted by NCCU. The surveys, titled “Telephone Interview and Internet Survey of the Presidential Satisfaction” (TISS hereafter)<sup>3</sup>, were implemented in September 2012 and have been conducted every three months since then. Each wave recruited at least 1000 Taiwanese respondents for the telephone survey, but the number of the Internet survey varied. Therefore, we analyzed all TISS surveys from September 2012 to June 2020, resulting in 32 waves with 37437 respondents. In each

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<sup>3</sup> TEDS website labels TISS dataset as TEDS2012PA\_03, 06, 09, 12, TEDS2013PA\_03, 06, 09, etc. Therefore, in Figure 2, 5, and 8, this article still uses “TEDS201XPA” to represent the TISS dataset.

survey, all respondents were asked about the current government's performance and their socio-demographic background, including their national identity. The wording of the question was the same as other surveys conducted by NCCU.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 2 shows the distribution and the change in Taiwanese identity from 2012 to 2020 in TISS. The dots are the percentage of respondents identifying as Taiwanese only, and the brackets denote the 95% confidence intervals, while the horizontal dashed line is the mean value of 0.5625 for all surveys combined. During this period, it is clear that there was an increase from 2012, which reached a local maximum around 2016, followed by a gradual decline between 2016 and 2018 and an increase after 2018. The result in Figure 2 clearly shows that there was a drastic change in Taiwanese identity during this period, reaffirming what we found in Figure 1: Taiwanese identity did decline after DPP won the presidency in 2016.

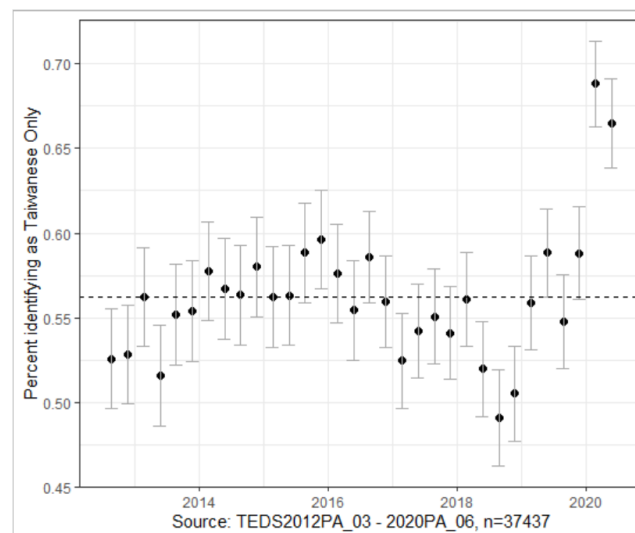


Figure 2. The Change of Taiwan identity in TISS survey, 2012-2020.

<sup>4</sup> The replication file for all tables and figures can be found on the author's website at <http://austinwang.faculty.unlv.edu/publication/> (Access: February 24, 2023) or contact the author at [austin.wang@unlv.edu](mailto:austin.wang@unlv.edu)

Another group of surveys also helps us validate this decline after 2016. Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS hereafter) has been designed and collected by Duke University since 2002 through landlines in Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> This survey is mainly about how Taiwanese people view the cross-strait relationship, but it also includes an item of national identity. The wording of the national identity scale is identical to TISS and TEDS since they are all conducted by NCCU. The distribution of Taiwanese identity across all 12 waves of the survey can be found in Figure 3. In Figure 3, the dots indicate the proportion of Taiwan identifiers in each wave of the survey, and the error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals. Even though the survey is not conducted every year, we could still observe a significant drop after 2016 and an increase in 2020 in Taiwanese identity. The differences between 2016 and 2017, and 2019 are significant.

In sum, the evidence from TEDS, TISS, and TNSS above gives us enough confidence to conclude that Taiwan identity indeed decreased after 2016. The next question is: why?

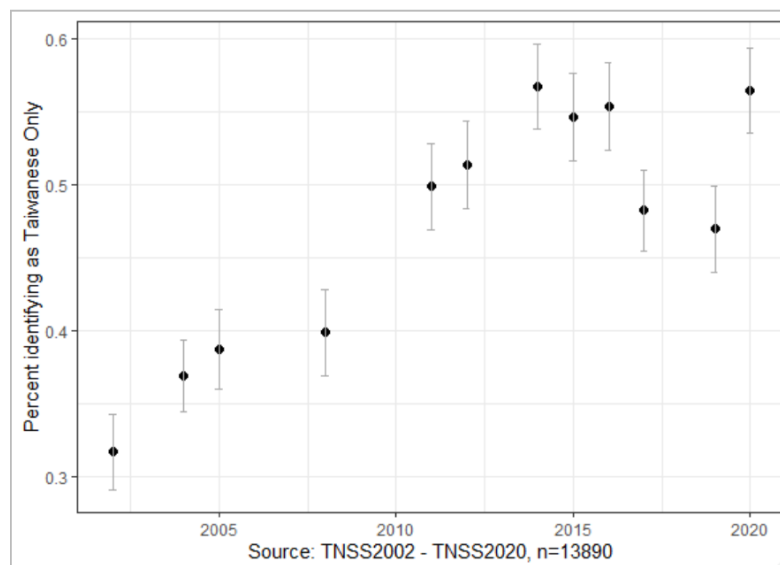


Figure 3. The Change of Taiwan identity in TNSS survey, 2002-2020.

<sup>5</sup> <https://sites.duke.edu/pass/data/>

## Competing Theories

Based on existing studies of Taiwanese identity, we could provide four possible yet competing theories to explain the unexpected decline of Taiwanese identity after 2016. The four competing theories are summarized in Table 1. This section will explain the rationales of these four theories.

Table 1. Competing Theories to Explain the decline of national identity in Taiwan	
Theory	To explain the decline of Taiwan identity:
<b>Generational replacement:</b> If the young generations have a lower Taiwan identity than the older generations, the generational replacement will cause a decline in Taiwan identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The youngest generation in each wave of the survey should have a consistently lower level of Taiwan identity than the oldest generation during the period of decline.</li> </ul>
<b>(Absent of) threat from China:</b> The out-group threat would enhance the in-group cohesion and in/out-group distinction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The perceived threat from China is associated with Taiwan identity.</li> <li>The decline of perceived threat goes along with the decline of Taiwan identity.</li> </ul>
<b>National Pride:</b> If the government performs well, national identity increases.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decline in Taiwan identity when either Ma or Tsai performed poorly. Increase otherwise.</li> </ul>
<b>Issue Ownership + Hedging (what we argue):</b> If the pro-independence government performed well, national identity increased; if the anti-independence government performed well, national identity decreased.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Taiwan identity declined when Tsai performed poorly or when Ma performed well.</li> <li>Taiwan identity increased when Tsai performed well or when Ma performed poorly.</li> </ul>

**Generational Replacement:** The first explanation is generational replacement. Two driving forces can explain the change in public opinion over time. On the one hand, people may indeed change their opinions over time; on the other hand, the older generation passes away while the new generation joins in. Previous studies suggest that the younger generation in Taiwan tends to have a higher level of Taiwanese identity (Lin 2017; Batto 2018) and a lower level of Chinese identity (Liao et al. 2013). Furthermore, the military threat and the economic benefit from China are ineffective in influencing the younger generation in Taiwan (Wang 2017), and the Taiwan-centered curriculum reform in 1999 significantly shaped subsequent young generations to be pro-



independence (Huang 2019). In short, the literature generally suggests that generational replacement could explain the “natural” increase in Taiwanese identity over time (Lin 2014).

Nevertheless, following the same rationale, if the youngest generation has a lower level of Taiwanese identity than the oldest generation, the generational replacement would cause a decrease in Taiwanese identity. Again, there exists some anecdotal evidence to sustain this claim. For example, an online survey of Taiwanese students showed that many of them used TikTok and The Little Red Book app, both of which are popular in China.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, if young Taiwanese citizens favor information and entertainment from China, they may also identify as Chinese.

Therefore, if the youngest generation in the survey between 2016 and 2018 had a lower level of Taiwanese identity than the oldest generation in the same period, the generational replacement may contribute to the temporal decline we observe.

*(Absence of) Threat from China:* The second theory comes from the opposite logic of threat from China. The conflict between Taiwan and China is believed to cause the emergence of Taiwanese identity because it strengthens the image that the two sides are different, as it is unfavorable to join China’s side (Wu 2005, Zhong 2016). The Qiandao Lake incident in 1994, the third Taiwan strait crisis before the 1996 presidential election, the passage of China’s Anti-Secession Law in 2005, which authorizes using armed force against Taiwan, and the Chou Tzu-yu incident in 2016 (Liu 2019) were all critical events that caused a surge in Taiwanese identity (Wu 2005, Lee and Yang 2016, Zhong 2016).

The psychological underpinning of the threat-identity linkages is based on the theory of intergroup conflict and in-group favoritism (Jackson 2002; Hjern and Schnabel 2010). The

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<sup>6</sup> <https://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E6%8A%96%E9%9F%B3-%E5%B0%8F%E7%B4%85%E6%9B%B8%E9%AD%85%E5%8A%9B%E5%9C%A8%E5%93%AA-%E6%96%B0%E4%B8%96%E4%BB%A3%E7%86%B1%E9%96%80-app-%E5%A4%A7%E6%8F%AD%E5%AF%86-035435266.html> Access: July 10 2021.

perceived intergroup conflicts mobilize and reinforce the group identity and make the boundary salient between groups. The rise of nationalism in the U.S. after the 911 attack serves as the most salient example in recent history (Schildkraut 2002). Following this logic, if Taiwanese people did not perceive the military threat from China, they would be less likely to strengthen the exclusive Taiwanese identity to distinguish themselves from the Chinese identity.

Nevertheless, this psychological mechanism has been challenged empirically under Taiwan's political context. Wang (2017) showed a negative correlation between exclusive Taiwanese identity and the belief that China will attack Taiwan. In other words, those who identified as Taiwanese were less likely to believe that China would attack Taiwan and vice versa. Indeed, it is likely that the national identity drives people's belief in the likelihood of an attack from China, but either contradicts the in-group psychological mechanism mentioned above.

Despite some evidence suggesting that this rationale may not hold, the theory predicts that the absence of threat from China causes the decline of Taiwan identity. Therefore, we expect to see a positive correlation between the absence of (perceived) threat and the decline of identity in the empirical data during this period.

***National pride:*** Literature suggests that Taiwanese identity has transformed from ethnic identity to the “dominance of political nationalism” (Chen 2012). Lee and Yang (2013) exploited the 2013 Taiwan Social Change Study (TSCS hereafter) and showed that the younger generation was much more likely to define the Taiwanese identity by the achievement Taiwanese had done and their residency, while the older generation defined it by historical incidents and ethnicity. In the minds of young Taiwanese citizens, when the country or some members of the country perform well, others will feel proud of the achievement. As a result, others will have a higher sense of identification with the country. For example, good performance by Taiwan's baseball team in the

international arena helps increase nationalism in Taiwan (Hwang 2015). Similarly, people will lower their identification with their country if a country does not perform well in containing COVID-19 (Hiko and Wang 2020).

If national pride steers the change of Taiwan identity, the effect should transcend partisan bias. For example, through a series of survey experiments, Levendusky (2018) showed that priming nationalism successfully reduced polarization. Similarly, if Taiwan identity is not owned by the DPP but by both the DPP and the KMT, a good performance by either party's president should increase the support for an exclusive Taiwanese identity. The mechanism behind the linkage is that a good performance in areas such as the national economy and international affairs (Wang and Cheng 2015) will boost the approval rate, which will lead to a higher level of national pride since the president represents the whole country, ultimately enhancing the appeal of the Taiwanese identity.

Hence, if national pride explains the change of national identity in Figure 1, we should expect the president's approval rate to positively correlate with Taiwan identity for both KMT president Ma Ying-Jeou's term (2008-2016) and DPP president Tsai Ing-Wen's term (2016 – 2024). If either Ma or Tsai performed well, Taiwanese people would increase their level of Taiwanese identity, and vice versa.

One may question the linkage between Taiwanese identity and a KMT president in the context of Taiwanese politics. Previous studies show that the majority of Taiwanese respondents prefer independence since 2002 if China will not attack Taiwan (Niou 2004) and dislike the one-country-two-system proposal from China (Schubert 2004). Among the four presidential elections in 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020, KMT only put the term "Taiwan" into the slogan on the main

campaigning theme but never mentioned the term “China” or even the “Republic of China”<sup>7</sup> (ROC hereafter). Figure 4 illustrates the four main campaigning themes used by the KMT presidential candidates. All four visualizations in this figure only include the term “Taiwan” with a small Taiwan icon, while China or ROC did not appear in the main theme. These figures illustrated the party’s effort to link itself to the image of Taiwan. Hence, if Taiwan identity is owned by both KMT and DPP, the good performance of a KMT president should also increase the level of Taiwan identity through the mechanism of national pride.

2008 (Taiwan forward, Taiwan win)



2016 (One Taiwan)



2012 (Taiwan Bravo)



2020 (UP: Taiwan safe, people rich)



Figure 4. The four slogans used by KMT in the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential election

**Issue ownership + Hedging:** Issue ownership refers to the perception among voters that one party can handle an issue or policy better than the others or make the issue salient. As a result, people evaluate the party based on the issues it owns. For example, Holian (2006) showed that the

<sup>7</sup> For the 2016 and 2020 election, see footnote 2. In 2008, KMT’s slogan is “Taiwan moving forward, Taiwan will win,” while in 2012 the slogan is “Taiwan Bravo.”

presidential approval rate increased when the president's owned issues were made salient, while the opposite happened when the opponent's issues were salient.

In Taiwanese politics, the cross-Strait relationship serves as the single political cleavage dominating the political domain (Achen and Wang 2017). We contend that the linkage between DPP and Taiwan identity will be especially strong after 2016. Tsai won 56% of the votes in the presidential election, and DPP won 60.25% of the seats in the congressional election. As a result, DPP realized the first straight control of government for the first time. Compared with DPP's first presidency in 2000-2008, voters after 2016 can no longer blame the divided government for any ineffectiveness in governance by DPP. Therefore, voters would see Tsai's governance as the outcome of the realization of Taiwanese identity. When people have higher approval of Tsai's performance, voters will increase their level of Taiwanese identity because the identity brings a higher utility to them, such as well economic development or a positive image in people's minds.

Meanwhile, if the Tsai government did not perform well, voters would realize that the utility brought by Taiwan identity is not lucrative enough. For example, the Tsai government suffered from several policy issues, including the pension reform and the revision of the Labor Law in 2017, which caused considerable conflicts within Taiwan's society. Moreover, the rapid policy change also brought many crises to small businesses. This trend matches perfectly with the decline of Taiwan identity and the increase of dual identity (both Taiwanese and Chinese) between 2016 and 2018. Therefore, their willingness to claim as Taiwanese identifiers may decline.

Even though the motivation for identifying as Taiwanese declines, why would Taiwanese people embrace the dual Chinese-Taiwanese identity instead of simply not identifying as Taiwanese? This article suggests that including the Chinese identity is to serve as a hedging strategy — investors may diversify their stock portfolio to minimize the risk. If Taiwanese identity

fails to bring enough utility to Taiwanese citizens, they may include the Chinese identity into their “identity portfolio” to ensure that the group identities would always positively impact themselves. After all, the main motivation for group identity is to bring a positive utility to oneself (Tajfel 1974; Huddy 2001). By doing so, Taiwanese citizens can also signal their discontent toward the DPP government and send a positive gesture to China.

This hedging strategy also makes the case of Taiwanese identity different from other studies of group identity. People are motivated to identify with a group partly because the group identity brings a positive image or self-esteem to them. Hence, the rational choice approach suggests that people would lower their group identity when they become a minority and cannot bring a positive image (Ethier and Deaux 1994); people may even switch to identify with the mainstream group if possible. Under the context of Taiwanese politics, since the alternative (Chinese identity) is salient and available, people may choose to use the identity portfolio to reduce the risk. In other words, the unique cross-strait context creates the opportunity for Taiwanese people to choose from the identity portfolio.

If the DPP owns Taiwan identity and there is a positive correlation between Taiwan identity and Tsai’s performance after 2016, how about KMT and Ma? Following the issue ownership theory, if Taiwan identity is not an issue owned by KMT, voters may not connect Taiwanese identity to the performance of Ma. Moreover, if Ma performed badly, voters may also want to hedge: voters may think that the issue ignored by Ma, Taiwan identity emphasized by the alternative option, DPP, would be important to improve the country’s performance. Hence, they may increase their Taiwan identity to “invest” in the outcome DPP may bring out after the turnover.

Hence, the major difference between national pride and issue ownership is the linkage between the KMT president’s approval rate and Taiwan identity. National pride theory suggests a

positive correlation between Taiwan identity and the president's approval rate in Ma's and Tsai's presidencies, while the issue ownership + hedging suggests an opposite pattern between Ma and Tsai's terms.

## **Empirical Strategy**

The major challenge to testing the theoretical arguments above is whether national identity could serve as the dependent variable – in reality, group identification influences every step of information processing (Redlawsk 2002, Lodge and Taber 2005). If the national identity serves as the unmoved mover (Johnston 2006) that shapes public opinion in Taiwan, it would be the national identity that drives people's evaluation of the president and the perceived threat from China.

Nevertheless, previous studies show that Taiwanese people's national identity is unstable. Wu (2005) analyzed a 1998-2000 panel survey and showed that only about 60% of Taiwanese respondents gave the same answer within two years, while Lin (2012) found that 70% of them gave the same answer between 2004 and 2008. In Figure 1, at least 49% of Taiwanese respondents changed their national identity since 1992 (18% "Taiwanese only" in 1992 and 67% in 2020); the percentage is clearly faster than the generational replacement. In contrast, the ANES1960 panel showed that 80% of U.S. voters gave the same party identification before and after an election (Dreyer 1973). After the realignment and polarization, a recent study using a 7-point Democrat-Republican scale shows that only 13% of U.S. respondents switch for more than one category within one year (Tucker et al 2019).

To mitigate the challenge of endogeneity, propensity score matching (PSM hereafter) will be used to analyze the effect of presidential approval and perceived threats from China on the change of national identity. Specifically, we used TEDS2012P, a panel survey in Ma's first term,

to estimate the effect of people's approval of Ma and their perceived threat from China on their choice of national identity. Even though Taiwanese respondents with different national identities would have different expectations or prior attitudes toward Ma, propensity score matching would control the influence of other covariates and enable us to estimate the net effect of the treatments on the dependent variable.<sup>8</sup>

In TEDS2012P, 2660 Taiwanese respondents received a face-to-face survey after the 2008 presidential election. Among them, 1510 were successfully interviewed again after the 2012 presidential election. Since the panel survey was implemented during KMT President Ma's first term, it is possible to trace whether people with different national identities changed their national identity after observing Ma's performance.

One potential threat comes from the attrition rate. If different identifiers dropped at different rates within the four years, the tendency might bias any analysis using this panel survey. For example, if the "both" identifiers tend to drop from the panel because of President Ma's poor performance instead of changing their identity, we are not sure if the correlation between the approval rate and the identity is driven by the drop or by the identity change.

Hopefully, the attrition does not relate to the national identity in this dataset. In 2008, 1404 respondents identified as Taiwanese only (52.8%), 1073 (40.3%) as both Taiwanese and Chinese, 128 as Chinese only (4.8%), and 55 with no answer (2.1%). In 2012, 1150 of them dropped in the second wave. Nevertheless, the Chi-squared test showed no significant difference in the aspect of

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<sup>8</sup> Another possible choice is to analyze the panel data in 2016, which is TEDS2016P. However, TEDS2016P was conducted between 2013 and 2016, which the second wave was conducted after the 2016 presidential election. Since there was another presidential turnover in the 2016 election, it may introduce one more variable in the causal inference. As a result, using PSM on TEDS2012P, which was conducted in 2008 (after the 2008 election) and 2012, would eliminate the potential effect of presidential turnover and would focus on the effect from the change of perceived threat from China and the national pride. We appreciate the reviewers for pointing out this limitation.



national identity in 2008 between those who were dropped and those who were not ( $\chi = 5.73$ ,  $p = 0.13$ ). Hence, attrition may not influence the following inference.

Among those 1510 who were interviewed in both 2008 and 2012, 618 respondents self-identified with Taiwanese only (40.9%), 209 shifted from others to Taiwanese only (13.9%), 168 shifted from Taiwanese only to others (11.1%), and 515 did not identify as Taiwanese only in both waves (34.1%). Overall, around 70.8% of respondents who completed both waves of the survey rendered the same answer; the percentage is similar to previous studies exploiting panel data in Taiwan (Wu 2005, Lin 2012). In short, TEDS2012P will be analyzed through PSM to examine the last three theories.

To juxtapose the theories of national pride and issue ownership, the 32-wave TISS between 2012 and 2020 will be pooled and analyzed at both individual and country-year levels. If there is a significant interaction between the turnover in 2016 and the presidential approval, it will imply that Taiwanese voters connect the Taiwan identity to the two major parties differently, which is predicted by the issue ownership theory; if the interaction does not exist, the evidence will support the national pride theory.

The 32-wave TISS will also be used to falsify the generational replacement theory. TISS's systematic data collection between 2012 and 2020 enables us to monitor whether the youngest generation in the survey has a lower level of Taiwan identity than the oldest generation. If the generational replacement theory is supported, we should observe that the gap between the oldest and youngest generation would be the largest during the decline.

In the end, TNSS will be used to analyze the effect of China's military threats on Taiwanese identity at the individual- and country-year levels. The 32-wave TISS did not include the item measuring the perception of China's military threats, but such items exist in TNSS. Unfortunately,

TNSS was only implemented at most once a year. If the perception of threats from China positively correlates with exclusive Taiwan identity, we can then examine whether the decline of Taiwan identity correlates with the decline in the perceived threat during the same period. To summarize, the empirical strategy this article is about to implement is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Competing Theories and Empirical Strategies

Theory	Empirical test and method
<b>Generational replacement:</b> If the young generations have a lower Taiwan identity than the older generations, the generational replacement will cause a decline in Taiwan identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>TISS 2012-2020:</b> comparing the Taiwan identity between the youngest and oldest generations during the decline.</li> </ul>
<b>(Absent of) threat from China:</b> The out-group threat would enhance the in-group cohesion and in/out-group distinction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>TEDS2012P:</b> PSM + panel to estimate the effect of threat on the change of identity.</li> <li>• <b>TNSS2002-2020:</b> regression analysis on the correlation between threat and Taiwan identity.</li> </ul>
<b>National Pride:</b> If the government performs well, national identity increases.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>TEDS2012P:</b> PSM + panel to estimate the effect of presidential approval on the change of identity</li> <li>• <b>TISS2012-2020:</b> regression analysis on the correlation between presidential approval and Taiwan identity, especially its interaction with the 2016 turnover.</li> </ul>
<b>Issue Ownership + Hedging (what we argue):</b> If the pro-independence government performed well, national identity increased; if the anti-independence government performed well, national identity decreased.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>TEDS2012P:</b> PSM + panel to estimate the effect of presidential approval on the change of identity</li> <li>• <b>TISS2012-2020:</b> regression analysis on the correlation between presidential approval and Taiwan identity, especially its interaction with the 2016 turnover.</li> </ul>

## Result

### *Generational Replacement – Not supported*

In the 32-wave TISS survey, 10% of respondents were younger than 27 years old, while another 10% were older than 67.<sup>9</sup> Figure 5 shows the percentage of these two generations choosing “Taiwanese only” in the national identity question in each wave of the TISS survey, while all other

<sup>9</sup> The 10% range is chosen because the number of cases would be too few in each generation if we selected a smaller range. The pattern remains the same if the range is set at 5% or 3%.

answers (including no answers) were coded as zero. The error bars are the 95% confidence interval of the mean value.<sup>10</sup>

During this period, the youngest generation had a higher level of Taiwan identity than the oldest generation in 31 of 32 waves, except for the first wave, in which the difference is indistinguishable. Between 2016 and 2017, Taiwan identity declined in both generations, but the proportion of Taiwanese-only identifiers in the youngest generation was still higher than the oldest generation.

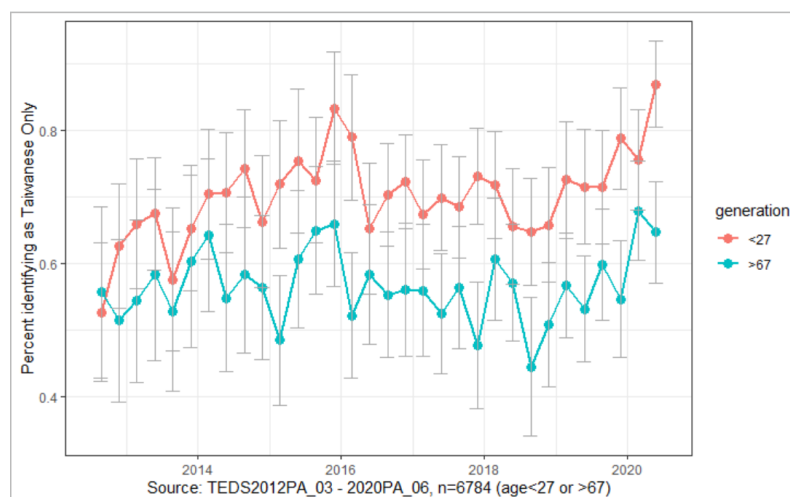


Figure 5. Generation and Taiwan Identity, TISS2012-2020

Hence, the generational replacement was not the main reason for the decline of Taiwan identity during this period. The decline was not driven by the change in population composition but by the change of attitude within the population. Instead, since the younger generation had a consistently higher percentage of Taiwan identifiers, we should expect that the number of Taiwan

<sup>10</sup> Since the generational replacement is an aggregate-level phenomenon, we did not conduct an individual-level analysis in this section.

identifiers would increase during this period due to generational replacement. In the following analysis testing the remaining hypotheses, this generational effect would be controlled.

***(Absence of ) Threat from China – Mostly not supported***

TEDS2012P allows us to test the causal relationship between the external threat and the change in national identity. In this survey, all subjects were asked in 2012 if they were “...worried with China’s recent military development and the military threat to Taiwan in the recent two years”. Even though the perception would be influenced by the national identity in the first wave (2008), we can still use propensity score matching to see how the perceived threat influenced people to change their national identity within the four years. All subjects were also asked about their national identity in March 2008 and 2012. Following the second theory, those who perceived the threat from China should be much more likely to stick to the Taiwanese-only identity or switch from other identities to Taiwanese only because of out-group hate. However, if the rational choice logic prevails (Wang 2017), we should observe those worried about China’s military threat to be much more likely to switch to other identities than staying as Taiwanese only.

Table 3 shows the result of the change in national identity after using propensity score matching. All subjects were matched by their socio-demographic background, including their age, gender, level of education, income, ethnicity (father as Mainlander), and the number of times the respondent visited China in the previous four years. The “treatment” for matching is whether the respondent is “worried” about the Chinese military threat (no answer was dropped). Among those 786 respondents who chose Taiwanese only in 2008, the nearest method without replacement was used for matching; among those 724 who chose other answers in 2008, because the nearest method without replacement did not perform well in the matching, the method changed to replacement.

The matching satisfied the balance test, and the standardized mean differences can be found in Appendix Figure A1.

Table 3 suggests that the perceived threat from China had a negative impact on choosing the Taiwanese-only identity. Regardless of an individual's prior identification, they were less likely to be Taiwanese only if they perceived military threats from China. Chi-squared tests showed that the effect was significant among respondents with a prior identity as Taiwanese or not four years ago. It is worth mentioning that those in the treatment group (perceived threat) and control group (did not perceive threat) shared similar socio-demographic backgrounds and national identity four years ago, so the threat itself should most likely drive identity changes.

Table 3. Panel data between identity and perceived threat 2008- 2012 (after matching)

All 1510 subjects completing both the 2008 and 2012 survey	786 “Taiwanese Only” in 2008	151 perceived threats from China in 2012 (matched)	94 Taiwanese Only (62.3%) in 2012	$\chi=13.8$ , $p<0.001$
			57 Others (37.3%) in 2012	
		151 did not perceive the threat from China in 2012 (matched)	123 Taiwanese Only (81.5%) in 2012	
			28 Others (18.5%) in 2012	
	724 “Others” in 2008	150 perceived threats from China in 2012 (matched)*	35 Taiwanese Only (23.3%) in 2012	$\chi=4.31$ , $p<0.05$
			115 Others (76.7%) in 2012	
		273 did not perceive the threat from China in 2012 (matched)*	90 Taiwanese Only (33.0%) in 2012	
			183 Others (67.0%) in 2012	
* The numbers in the “Others 2008” are different because they use the PSM with replacement method. The background of the two groups is the same after matching.				

A potential issue of this survey is that it did not cover the period of Taiwanese identity decline. It is possible that the relationship between threat and identity reversed during this period. To check for this possibility, we followed Wang's work (2017) to analyze the TNSS from 2012 to 2020 (7 waves,  $n = 7627$ ). In each wave, all respondents' answers in the national identity were binary coded (Taiwanese only = 1, other answers = 0). The independent variable was a five-point

scale from -2 to +2: “Do you think China will attack Taiwan once Taiwan declares independence?”

The control variables included age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, and partisanship.

Full results of the seven logit models can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix. Figure 6 shows the partial coefficient of the independent variable, *China will attack*, in the seven models from 2012 to 2020. Across the seven models, the perception that China will attack had a robust and negative correlation with the Taiwanese-only identity. In other words, those who believed China would attack Taiwan were less likely to have an exclusive Taiwanese identity. The result in the regression model was similar to the analysis of TEDS2012P and Wang’s (2017) previous work. The result suggested that the rational choice calculation influenced how Taiwanese citizens choose their national identity, which confirms previous studies of conditional preference in cross-Strait relations (Niou 2004, Hsieh and Niou 2005).

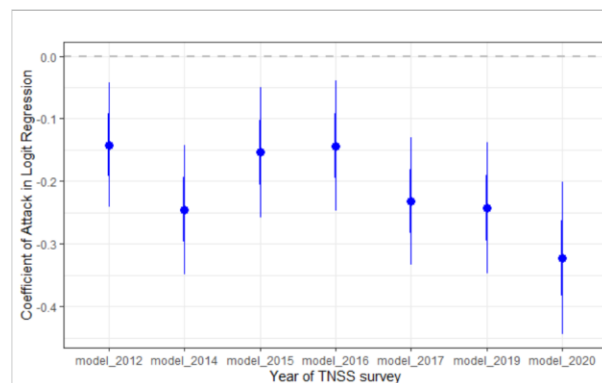


Figure 6. Regression coefficients of China will attack in the logic models explaining Taiwan identity, TNSS 2012-2020

The evidence presented above did not support the in-group/out-group mechanism in explaining the increase/decrease of Taiwan identity. Instead, the rational choice logic was supported. Is the rational choice the reason to explain the decline of Taiwanese identity after 2016?

If yes, we should expect an increase in the perceived threat level after 2016 so that Taiwanese people become less likely to choose the Taiwanese-only identity.

Interestingly, this mechanism is also NOT supported by empirical data. Figure 7 shows the percentage of respondents in TNSS 2002-2020 choosing Taiwanese only (green line) and believing China would attack Taiwan (red line). The dashed line is 2014 when the Sunflower movement took place. When Taiwanese identity declined in 2016 and 2017, Taiwanese people had a *lower* level of perceived threat, which contradicted the rational choice logic suggested before. If the threat from China will negatively impact Taiwanese identity, and people perceived a lower threat between 2016 and 2018, Taiwan identity should *increase* in this period, which is disapproved by Figure 7. Since the aggregate-level and individual-level analyses supported the opposite explanation, the perceived threat theory did not provide enough support to explain the decline of Taiwanese identity.

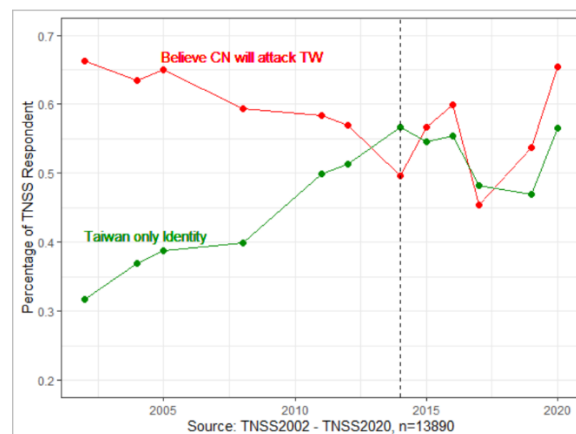


Figure 7. Percentage of Taiwanese respondents choosing Taiwanese Only & Believing China will attack Taiwan, TNSS 2002-2020 (n=13890)

***National Pride – Not supported & Issue Ownership – Mostly supported***

In the 32-wave TISS2012-2020, all respondents were asked to evaluate the president on a four-point scale (approve very much = 3, approve = 2, not approve = 1, not approve very much = 0). The distributions of President Ma's and Tsai's approval rates are shown in Figure 8. In this figure, the dots indicate the mean value in each wave, the error bars are the 95% confidence interval of the mean value, the vertical dash line is the turnover to the DPP in 2016, and the blue and green colors show the Ma and Tsai era, respectively. The figure showed that Ma suffered from a low approval rate throughout his second term until the last few months, while Tsai's approval rate plummeted and soared in her first term.

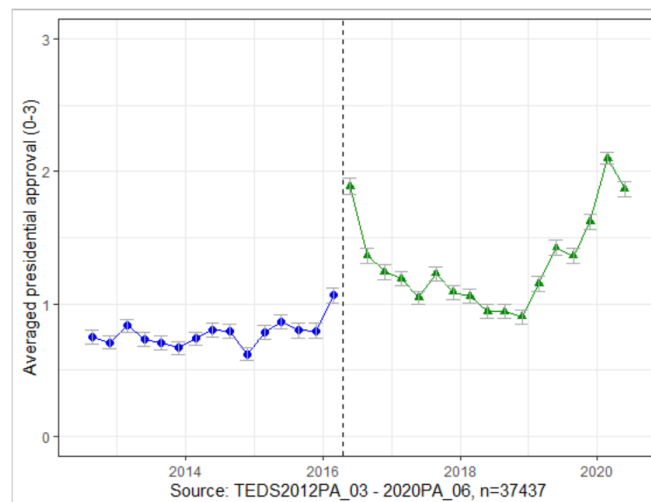


Figure 8. The approval rate of Ma (2012-2016) and Tsai (2016 – 2020), TISS 2012-2020  
(n=37437)

What is the relationship between the approval rate and the Taiwanese identity? National pride theory would suggest that the relationship should remain the same for both Ma and Tsai eras, while the issue ownership theory suggests that the relationship would be flipped over after the turnover in 2016. Table 4 pools 32 waves of TISS and then uses the logit regression to explain the change of national identity. The dependent variable was the binary-coded Taiwanese



identity, while the independent variables included the president's approval rate, a dummy for turnover in 2016, the interaction between the two, and the year for capturing the generational replacement. Model 3 further controlled other socio-demographic background variables. The full regression model can be found in Table A2 in the Appendix.

Table 4. Logit regression explaining the choice of Taiwan identity (n=37437)			
	DV: Taiwanese Only = 1, other answers = 0		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Presidential approval (0-3)	0.289** (0.012)	-0.573** (0.020)	-0.334** (0.022)
Turnover in 2016	-0.405**	-2.010** (0.055)	-1.334*** (0.060)
Year	0.052** (0.009)	0.059** (0.010)	0.051** (0.011)
Approval X Turnover		1.570** (0.028)	1.004** (0.032)
Controls:			Gender, Ethnicity, Age, Education, Partisanship
Constant	-105.6** (18.98)	-118.1** (20.11)	-101.4** (21.56)
n	32500	32500	32007
AIC	43807	40250	36392
% Correct predicted	62.2%	65.1%	71.0%
*p<0.05; **p<0.01			

In Table 4, the interaction between approval and turnover was positively significant, but the coefficient of presidential approval became negative after adding the interaction. This result showed that Taiwanese people indeed link approval and Taiwan identity differently before and after the turnover in 2016.

In interactive regression model, the two regression lines would have different intercepts and it is improper to omit constitutive terms model (Brambor et al 2006), so we use simulation to illustrate the interactive effect between the two key independent variables. Figure 9 shows the simulated interactive effect on the likelihood of choosing the Taiwan identity at the individual level in TISS2012-2020. The simulated results are predicted from Model 3 in Table 4, controlling

all other variables at their mean values. In this figure, the effect of presidential approval reversed before and after the 2016 turnover: in the Ma era, a high approval rate indicates a low level of Taiwan identity, and the opposite in the Tsai era.

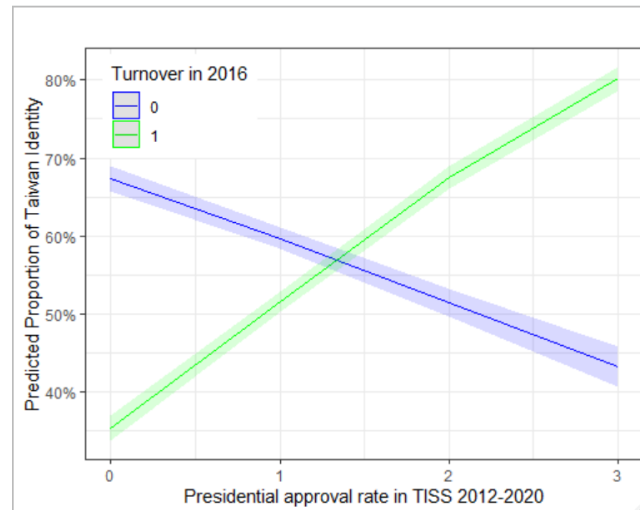


Figure 9. Simulation of the turnover-approval interaction on Taiwan identity, Model 3, Table 4.

One potential weakness of the section is, once again, endogeneity. It could be possible that Taiwanese respondents changed their national identity first, then their approval of the president followed the change of national identity. Even though the national identity in Taiwan might not be as stable as partisanship in the U.S., it is still not easy to manipulate the national identity to establish causal evidence.

To mitigate the issue of endogeneity, we turn to the panel survey TEDS2012P. Considering the following scenario: First, we target a group of respondents who shared a similar national identity and socio-demographic backgrounds in time 1. Second, they had different opinions toward the president. Third, they then changed their national identity in time 2. Other covariates cannot explain their attitude except for the presidential approval rate in such a scenario.

In TEDS2012P, 786 self-identified as Taiwanese only in 2008, and 724 chose other answers in 2008. Many of them approved or disapproved of Ma's performance in the first term in 2012, so we matched those in the same group in 2008 but had different opinions toward Ma based on their socio-demographic background. Propensity score matching with the nearest method without replacement is then used for matching. After the propensity matching, as shown in the standardized mean difference figure in Appendix Figure A2, there is no difference between the treatment (approve Ma's first term performance) group and the control (disapprove Ma's performance) group.

After the propensity score matching, the results between the treatment group and the control group can be compared directly. Table 5 shows that the presidential approval rate indeed influenced the likelihood of switching the national identity. Specifically, if a Taiwanese identifier thought President Ma did a good job, he or she was twice likely to switch from Taiwanese only to others (29.8% vs. 14.5%). However, a similar effect did not appear in those who identified as others in 2008; no matter the performance of Ma, about 30% shifted to Taiwanese only after four years. Overall, the propensity score matching suggested that the performance of the president can influence how citizens stay or switch their national identity; moreover, the direction of the effect is contingent on which party rules.

Table 5. Panel data between identity and presidential approval rate 2008-2012 (after matching)

All 1510 subjects completing both the 2008 and 2012 survey	786 Taiwanese Only in 2008	242 approves Ma in 2012 (matched)	170 Taiwanese Only (70.2%) in 2012	$\chi^2 = 16.4$ , $p < 0.001$
			72 Others (29.8%) in 2012	
		242 not approves Ma in 2012 (matched)	207 Taiwanese Only (85.5%) in 2012	
			35 Others (14.5%) in 2012	
	724 others in 2008	146 approves Ma in 2012 (matched)	39 Taiwanese Only (26.7%) in 2012	$\chi^2 = 1.96$ , $p = 0.16$
			107 Others (73.3%) in 2012	
		146 not approves Ma in 2012 (matched)	50 Taiwanese Only (34.2%) in 2012	
			96 Others (65.8%) in 2012	

## Discussion

This article begins with one simple but widely ignored question: why did Taiwanese identity decline? The literature overwhelmingly focuses on explaining the increase of Taiwan identity because the decline never happened before. This article offers evidence suggesting that the decline of Taiwan identity indeed happened between 2016 and 2018. Four potential explanations were then elaborated on and examined. The issue ownership + hedging theory outperforms all the other three alternatives through propensity score matching and regression analyses. The effect was particularly strong after 2016 – when DPP won the unified government for the first time. To sum up, DPP did not perform well after fully controlling the government, and since Taiwanese identity is an issue owned by DPP, Taiwanese respondents switched from Taiwan identity to others as a hedging strategy. The summary of all empirical findings is listed in Table 6.

One rebuttal to this conclusion is its applicability to DPP's first presidency (2000-2008). DPP's first president Chen Shui-bian also suffered from a low approval rate throughout his two terms, and DPP never won the majority in the Legislative Yuan. Nevertheless, Taiwanese identity grew steadily during this period. Our explanation is two-fold. First, because of the divided government, voters may be unable to equate Chen's performance to Taiwan identity; it could also be attributed to the stalemate between the constitutional branches (e.g., Rigger 2002).

Table 6. Competing Theories and Empirical Strategies

Theory	Empirical test and method	
<b>Generational replacement</b> <b>(Absent of) threat from China</b>	1. TISS 2012-2020: Figure 5, Descriptive	<b>Not support</b>
	2. TEDS2012P: Table 3, PSM	<b>Not support</b>
	3. TNSS2002-2020: Figure 6, Logit	<b>Not support</b>
	4. TNSS2002-2020: Figure 7, Descriptive	<b>Conflicted btw levels</b>
<b>National Pride</b>	5. TISS2012-2020: Table 4, Logit	<b>Not support</b>
	6. TEDS2012P: Table 5, PSM	<b>Not support</b>
<b>Issue Ownership + Hedging</b>	7. TISS2012-2020: Table 4, Logit	<b>Support</b>
	8. TEDS2012P: Table 5, PSM	<b>Support</b>

Second, the percentage of Taiwanese identifiers was still low in the 2000s (36.9% in 2000, as shown in Figure 1). Before 2008, Taiwanese people experienced a period of the quest for national identity, so the increase in Taiwan identity happened within each generation and within groups with different ideologies and political affiliations. For example, Figure 10 demonstrates the percentage of “Taiwanese only” among people with conditional preference (Niou 2005) on the left and partisanship on the right. The two dashed lines are the two turnovers in 2008 and 2016. Before 2008, Taiwan identifiers kept increasing within each group with different political preferences and affiliations. The increase of Taiwan identity before 2008 even appeared among the mainlanders (See Appendix Figure A3). After 2016, however, a clear polarization emerged. Taiwanese identity was robust among pro-independences and Pan-Greens but declined among those who support unification, non-partisans, and pan-blue. Lin (2012) used the panel data to show that Taiwanese respondents' unification-independence preference was less stable than the national identity, so Figure 10 may also suffer from the endogeneity problem. However, the two plots in Figure 10 do indicate that there exist different meanings and impacts on the change of Taiwan identity between Chen’s and Tsai’s eras.

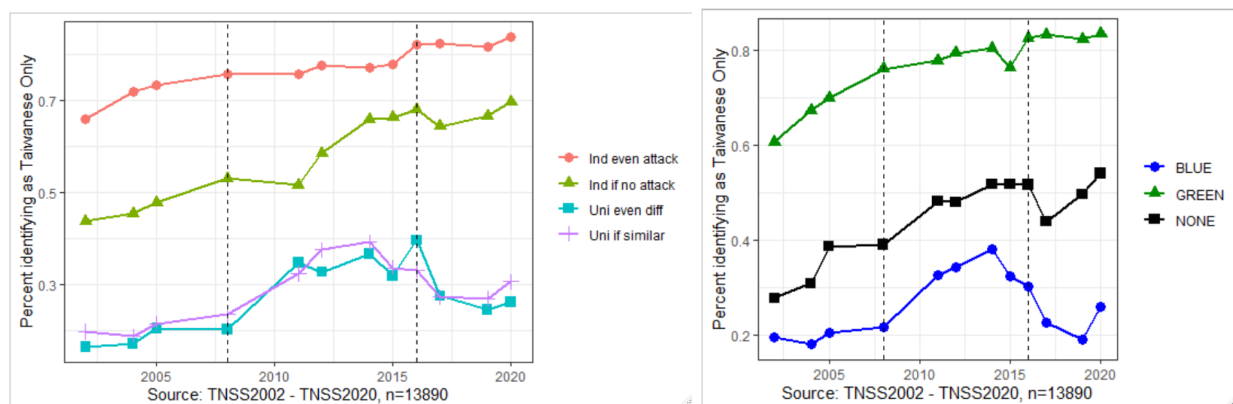


Figure 10. Percentage of “Taiwanese Only” by conditional preference and by partisanship, TNSS 2002-2020

Meanwhile, the right column in Figure 10 also indicates that the change in Taiwan identity appears mostly among the non-partisans and the pan-blue voters, who are more motivated to apply the hedging strategy. In this figure, pan-blue voters lowered their proportion of Taiwan identity after 2014, while non-partisans showed a decline in Taiwan identity after 2016. In comparison, pan-green voters' level of Taiwan identity remains the same during this period.

Our findings generate two important policy implications. First, we demonstrated the linkage between Taiwanese identity and this issue's ownership with the DPP. Thus, whether Taiwanese identity will maintain a steady increase is highly dependent on the Tsai government's performance in the following years (before 2024, as the DPP will maintain the unified government until then). Any turbulence in the government's performance could lead to a regressive impact on the growth of Taiwanese identity. Future research may utilize the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic in Taiwan after May 2021 for validation if the data become available. What is the individual-level mechanism between DPP's issue ownership and change of Taiwanese identity? It is possible that the amount and activities of DPP identifiers may directly and indirectly influenced nonpartisans and other party identifiers on their choice of national identity. Future work may focus on the impact of DPP supporters.

Second, though it was believed that the growing trend of Taiwanese identity is irreversible, our research leads to a different conclusion. If there is a strong correlation between DPP's approval rate and Taiwanese identity, it implies that how people perceive the performance of the DPP incumbent matters. Since Taiwan is seriously influenced by misinformation and disinformation from foreign countries (Mechkova et al. 2020), how Taiwanese people select the information

source and form their opinion toward the government would foretell the change of Taiwanese identity in the long run.

Our findings, though generally robust, may suffer one limitation – external validity. Whether our theory and findings will hold in the context of Taiwan in the future is yet to be examined. We argue that Taiwan serves as a valuable case to examine how the formation and change of national identity may be influenced by the government's performance and the external force. The issue ownership + hedging model may further be examined in other cases experiencing dual identity, conflict, and violence, such as Ukraine (Korostelina 2013) and Catalonia (Hierro and Gallego 2018).

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**Conflicts of Interest declaration**

The authors declare none.



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