



Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation

Special Report:

Taiwanese National Identity and the Shifts in Support for Unification vs. Independence

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Introduction

As 2020 Tokyo Olympics came to an end, Taiwan team (competing under the name “Chinese Taipei”) won two gold medals, four silver, and six bronze with a total of twelve medals. This marked Taiwan’s best ever performance in the Olympics Games. The success galvanized the Taiwanese public, who greatly craved for attention and recognition from the international community and a chance at defeating China on the world stage. The display of pride was such the [BBC](#) referred to it as a watershed moment for Taiwan’s nationalistic “imagined community”.

Taiwanese national identity is among Taiwan’s most sensitive political topics since the end of World War II. For a long time in the past seven decades, the authoritarian rule by the Kuomintang (KMT) imposed a China-centered identity that dominated Taiwan for years, and most Taiwanese identified themselves as “Chinese”. It was only until 1995 when the late former President Lee Teng-hui visited his alma mater Cornell University and gave a speech about “tragedy as a Taiwanese” that the issue of Taiwanese national identity started to be discussed more openly and frequently, and more people began to identify themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese.

Taiwan had its first ever direct, democratic election of the President in 1996. Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) nominated Peng Ming-min, a staunch proponent of Taiwan independence as the candidate. While Kuomintang saw a split between those who supported Lee’s “localization” approach to Taiwan identity, and those who opposed it. At the same time China orchestrated a missile crisis across the strait. All these developments made the first presidential election a monumental moment in the history of Taiwanese identity politics. The issue of identity, and the related unification versus independence debate, became a central part of Taiwanese politics and political divide till today.

In the 1996 book “Public Opinion and Political Change in Taiwan,” Dr. You Yinglung wrote “The Taiwanese versus Chinese identity dispute is an extremely contentious but also the most fundamental question in contemporary Taiwanese politics. How such dispute will evolve in the future shall determine the fate of Taiwan. On the one hand it is an issue of identity among the people of Taiwan, on the other hand it is an issue of political design that’s going to shape Taiwan’s future. Which side will prevail? There are simply too many variables involved, and we can’t make a

projection at this time.”¹

Now that 25 years have passed, we are ready to call the winner of this “race” for the hearts and minds of the people of Taiwan.

How the Survey was Conducted

This special report is partially based on data from Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation’s monthly opinion poll [released](#) in July 2021 (see also [English language excerpt](#)). Due to Taiwan’s ongoing COVID-19 pandemic our July poll report focused primarily on the ruling government’s pandemic handling and vaccine policy. The same poll however also asked several questions regarding Taiwanese identity and future political designs, which allow us to draw a comparison with our past polls.

This survey of 1,072 adults was conducted July 19-21, 2021, by Taiwan’s Focus Survey Research, contracted by Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation. Questionnaire design, analysis, and report were made by Dr You Yinglung. Adults 20 years of age and older residing in Taiwan were interviewed by telephone using live interviewers. Landline telephone numbers were selected through random digit dialing. The samples were weighted to adjust for demographic distribution, age, sex, and education attainment based on the latest statistics published by Taiwan’s Ministry of the Interior. Sampling error is around ± 2.99 percentage points with 95% level of confidence.

Taiwan’s National Identity

Our poll asked: “*Some people in Taiwan see themselves as Chinese (中國人), while some see themselves as Taiwanese (台灣人). Do you see yourself as Taiwanese, Chinese, or other identity?*”² The poll found 76.8% identified themselves as Taiwanese, while 7.5% identified as Chinese, and 11.3% identified as both Taiwanese and Chinese. Other 4.4% said they have no opinion, don’t know, or declined to answer. See Table 1.

¹ 游盈隆. 1996. 民意與臺灣政治變遷：1990年代臺灣民意與選舉政治的解析. 月旦出版社.

² Note that the term *Chinese people* here refers to *Zhongguoren* (中國人) used in our polling question, which literally means “citizens of China”. This is different from *Huaren* (華人), which literally means “of Chinese ethnicity”. The later term is far more widely used by ethnically Chinese people around the world to identify themselves without explicit political connotation to the People’s Republic of China.

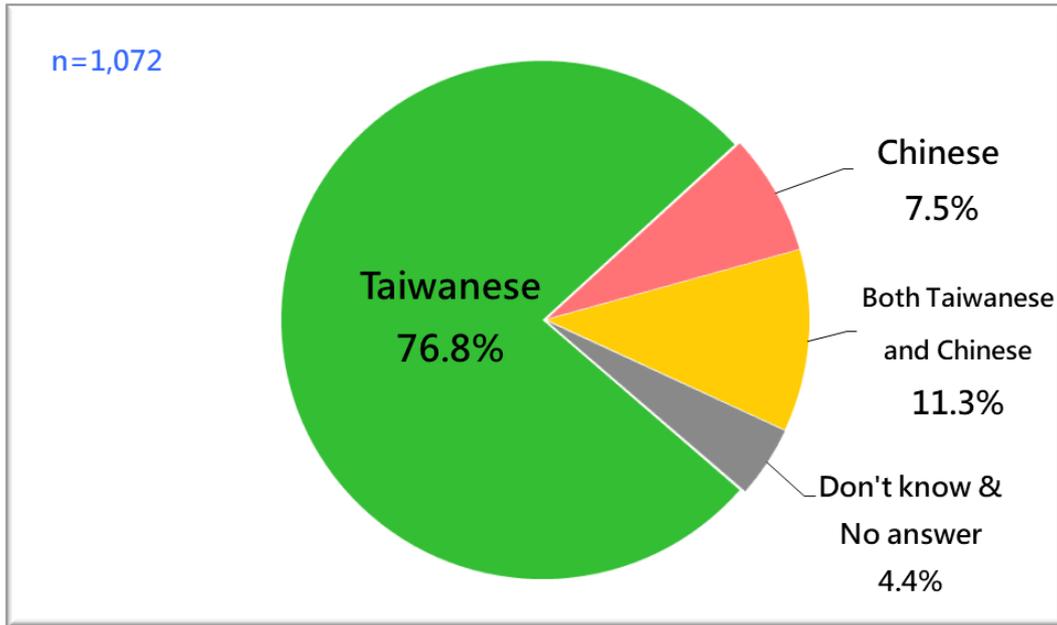


Table 1: Taiwan's National Identity (July 2021)

This means that a full three-quarters of the people of Taiwan now identify themselves *only* as Taiwanese, as opposed to a small minority who still embrace Chinese identity in part or in full. Such super majority is enough to form what we call an “overarching single national identity”, a necessary condition in all the cases of newly emerging nation-states we have observed in recent history.

Compared to our February 2020 poll that asked the same questions, we found that those identified with *exclusive* Taiwanese identity decreased by 6.4%, while those identified with dual Taiwanese-Chinese identity increased by 4.6%, and exclusive Chinese identity increased by 2.2%. But such small shifts can be explained by two factors: First, the February 2020 poll was conducted at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China, when Chinese government’s early mishandling and covering up of the pandemic dominated news headlines at the same time as Taiwan’s successes in containing it were being widely praised. This likely galvanized Taiwanese national pride and therefore support for Taiwanese identity at the time. See Table 2.

Secondly, as Taiwan saw a serious COVID-19 outbreak started in May 2021, the dramatic rises in the number of cases and deaths likely dampened Taiwanese public’s confidence and pride in its pandemic control performance. The Level 3 emergency imposed by the government since May as a result of the outbreak put Taiwan’s economy and society in a state of de facto lockdown. Our recent polls also indicated a majority of Taiwanese public attributed Tsai Ing-wen government’s vaccine policy

and mishandling contributed to Taiwan’s extremely slow vaccine acquisition and rollout compared to *all* other developed nations, despite Tsai government repeatedly blamed (without citing credible evidence) China as having “blocked” Taiwan’s access to Western vaccines.

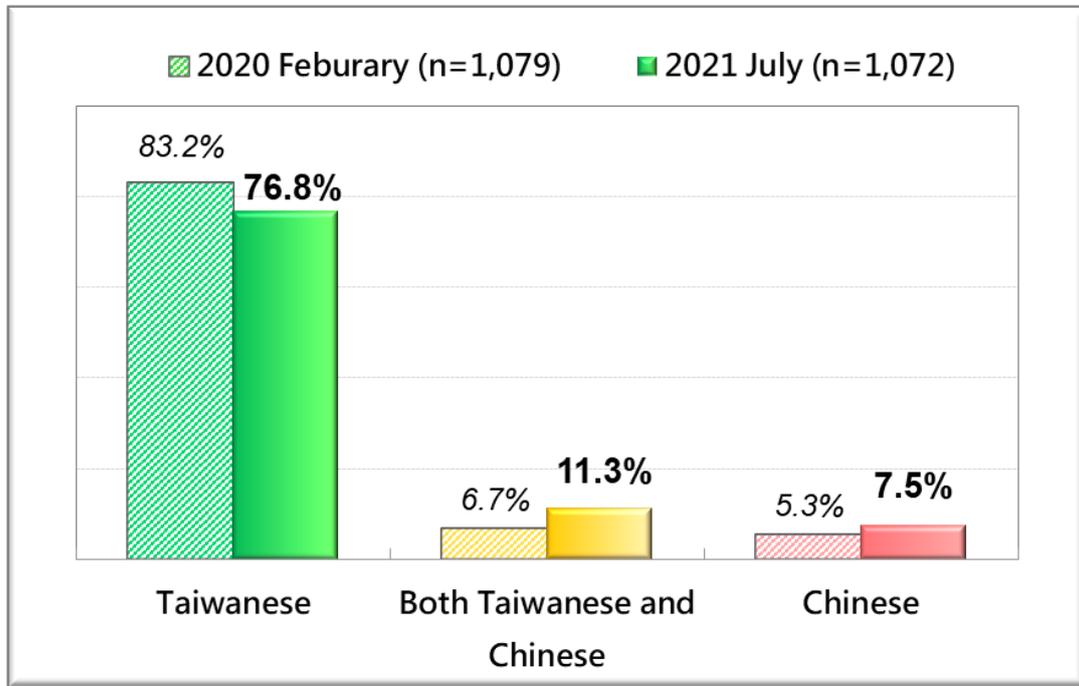


Table 2: Taiwan's National Identity (February 2020 & July 2021)

It should be acknowledged that Taiwanese identity is an extremely complicated issue both politically and psychologically. It involves both *political identity* and *cultural identity*, in addition to being a profoundly important *personal identity*. Since what determines identity is at the whim of a person, we must set out to find not just how a person identifies with a given identity, but also how *strongly* does he or she do so.

Table 3 illustrates a detailed breakdown of Taiwanese people’s identity. Of those surveyed, 56.5% identified strongly as Taiwanese only, 20.3% identified only moderately as Taiwanese, 11.3% identified as both Taiwanese and Chinese, 3.4% identified moderately as Chinese only, while 4.1% identified strongly as Chinese only. In other word, our poll found that more than half of those surveyed identified themselves strongly as Taiwanese only, while only a very small minority identified strongly as Chinese only. We shall bear this in mind when examining how identity influences Taiwan’s politics on a macro scale.

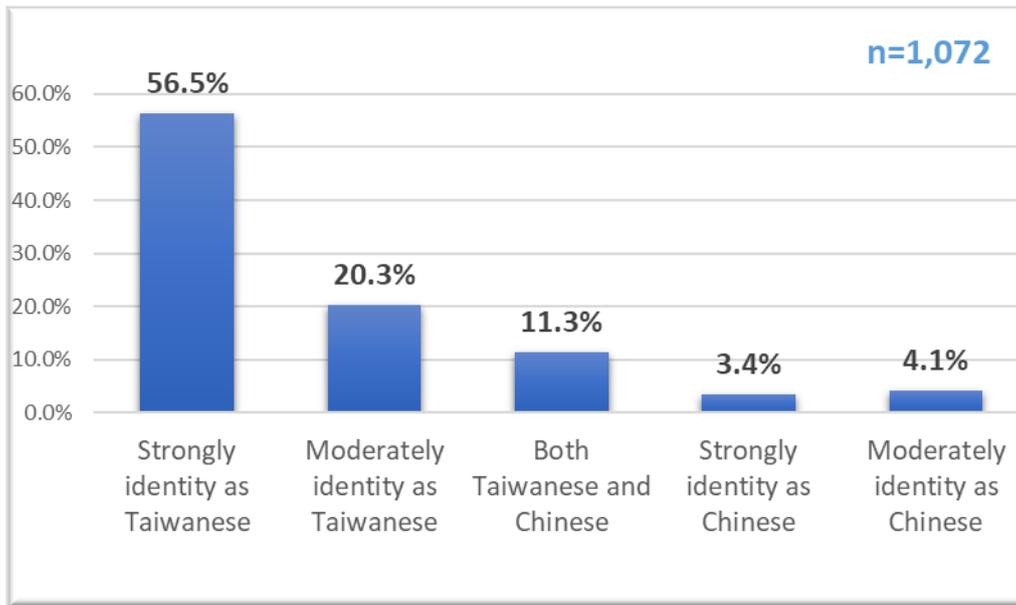


Table 3: Taiwan's National Identity, detailed breakdown (July 2021)

The question of Taiwanese versus Chinese identity is at the core of Taiwan's national identity debate and is critical in examining whether a "Taiwan nation" is just an imagination in the minds of a few, or a de facto reality that most people embrace today. As the late political scientist Benedict Anderson famously described, a nation is "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."³

The "great transformation" in Taiwan's national identity over past three decades is nothing short of extraordinary; that millions of people abandoned the once deeply held Chinese identity and embraced the new Taiwanese identity. Such transformation also happened at the same time as Taiwan's political liberalization, democratization, and "localization" were all taking place. Although numerous disputes, confrontations and even social unrests took place during this period of transformation, Taiwan did not experience any large-scale civil violence or even civil war, which is a miracle in itself when one examines the history of many other nation states. See Table 4.

³ Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

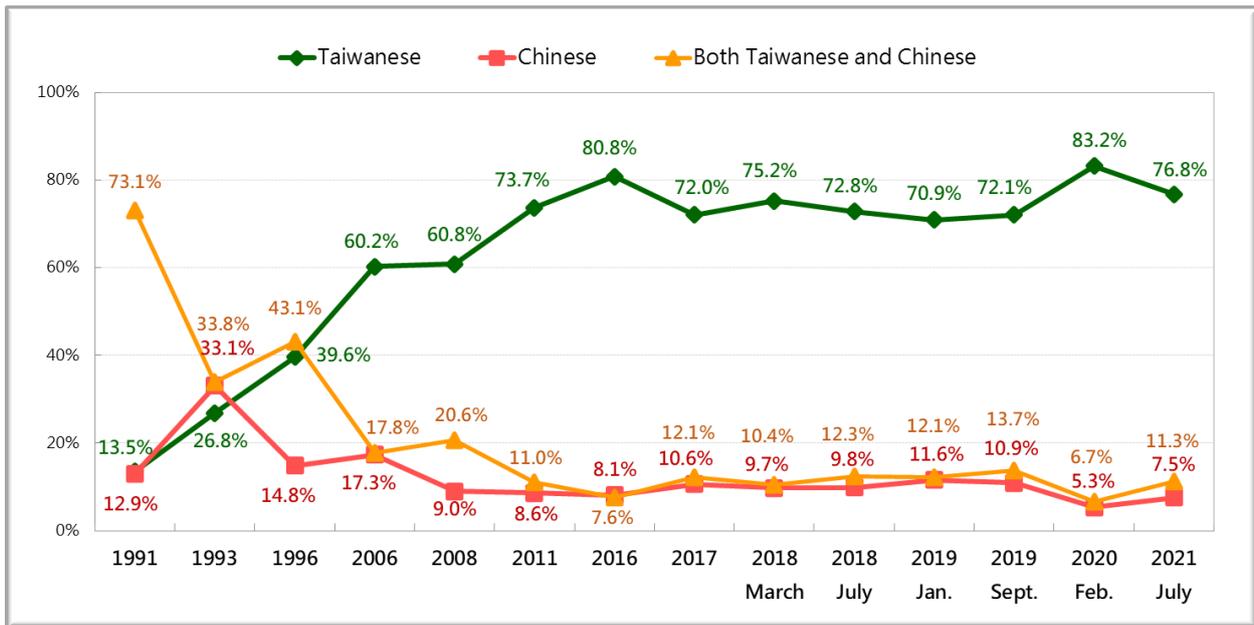


Table 4: Taiwan's National Identity (1991 to July 2021)

But in the grand scheme of things, Taiwan experienced not one but three “miracles” since the end of World War II; there was the miracle of economic growth and prosperity, the miracle of democratization, and the miracle of national identity shift. Although the identity shift is less discussed, it is no doubt just as important to the collective memories of the people of Taiwan as a community of shared destiny.

From Table 4 we can see that Taiwanese national identity gradually increased in the past three decades especially between 1990s to early 2010s and grew from just 13.5% in 1991 to 80.8% in 2016. On the other hand, partial or full Chinese identity gradually declined and bottomed out at around 2016 and has not seen any meaningful rebound since.

Another important finding is that since Tsai Ing-wen-led Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won elections in 2016 and became the ruling party, Taiwanese national identity actually saw two minor yet noticeable periods of “retreat”. One happened in 2017 and lasted for three years, the other began in July 2021.

This brings us to another important conclusion: That whenever DPP becomes Taiwan’s ruling party, the support for Taiwanese identity is closely linked to the perceived performance and approval rating of the DPP government. Which means that shall a ruling DPP government stumbles itself on domestic governance matters, the support for Taiwanese identity is likely to experience setback or even decline.

Unification versus Independence Debate

Taiwan's national identity and the great unification versus independence debate have been among the most controversial issues in Taiwanese politics since 1990s. Not only because they involve two diagonally opposed political designs for Taiwan's future, but also because how Taiwan's people approach and decide these issues will fundamentally define their relations with China – for better or worse.

On July 4, 2021, former President Chen Shui-bien interviewed Chiou I-jen, a key power broker and functionary of the Democratic Progressive Party in a radio show segment that Chen hosted. During the talk, Chiou uttered some statements that were widely reported in Taiwanese media especially his claim that “now is not an appropriate time” to declare Taiwan independence. Chou further said that “[To declare independence] is not something the people of Taiwan can decide for ourselves... China will attack us... Not to mention I don't think the United States will support us.”

As a matter of fact, Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation has been conducting polls regarding unification versus independence for many years, and Dr. You had conducted some of the first opinion polls on the issues since as early as 1991. Our latest poll conducted in July 2021 also asked these questions. We hope that by presenting Taiwan's public opinion as accurately as it *is*, we can inform Taiwanese society and the international community better as to what policy implications should be regarding the future of Taiwan.

Over the years our polls repeatedly asked this exact question: *“There are debates regarding the future of Taiwan. Some people argue Taiwan should pursue unification with the other side of the [Taiwan] Strait, while others argue Taiwan should pursue its own independence. Do you support Taiwan independence, or unification with the other side?”*

In our latest July poll, we found 46.6% said they support Taiwan independence, 11.1% support unification, 26.4% support maintaining status quo, and the rest 15.8% either did not have an opinion, did not know, or declined to answer.

Even when combining supports for unification and maintaining status quo together they are still 9% behind those support independence option. Therefore, we can conclude that among adults 20 years of age and older, “Taiwan independence” is the clear majority preference of the people of Taiwan. This is especially important given the fact that both Taiwan's pan-blue (KMT) and pan-green (DPP) administrations over the past two decades repeatedly claimed the people of Taiwan

desire “maintaining status quo” forever – which clearly runs contrary to what our polls found. See Table 5.

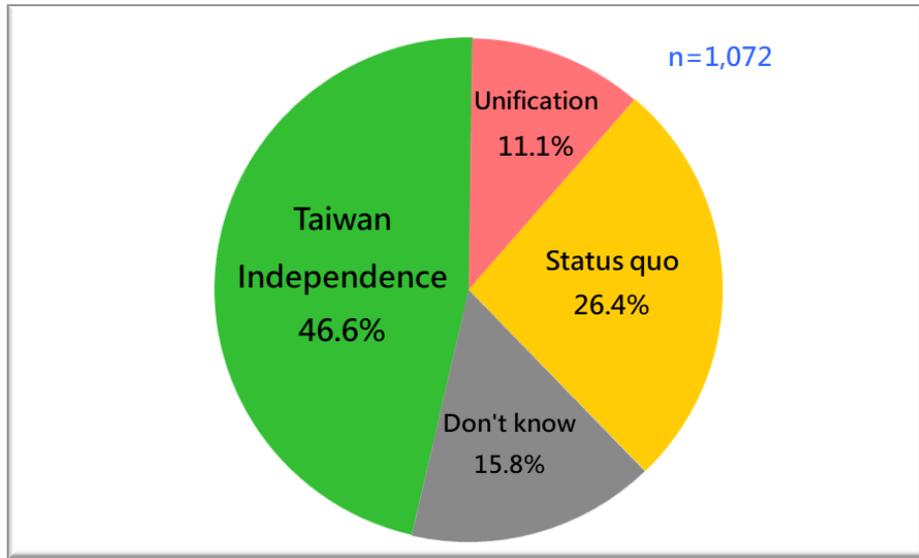


Table 5: Taiwanese Support for Unification vs. Independence (July 2021)

When comparing to our previous January 2021 poll that asked the same question, we found that the percentage of those who support independence actually decreased by a slight 3.6%. While those who support maintaining status quo increased by 1.9%, and those who support unification increased by 3.1%. Overall, Taiwanese preferences for unification vs. independence have not noticeably changed, that a majority of people still prefer independence. See Table 6.

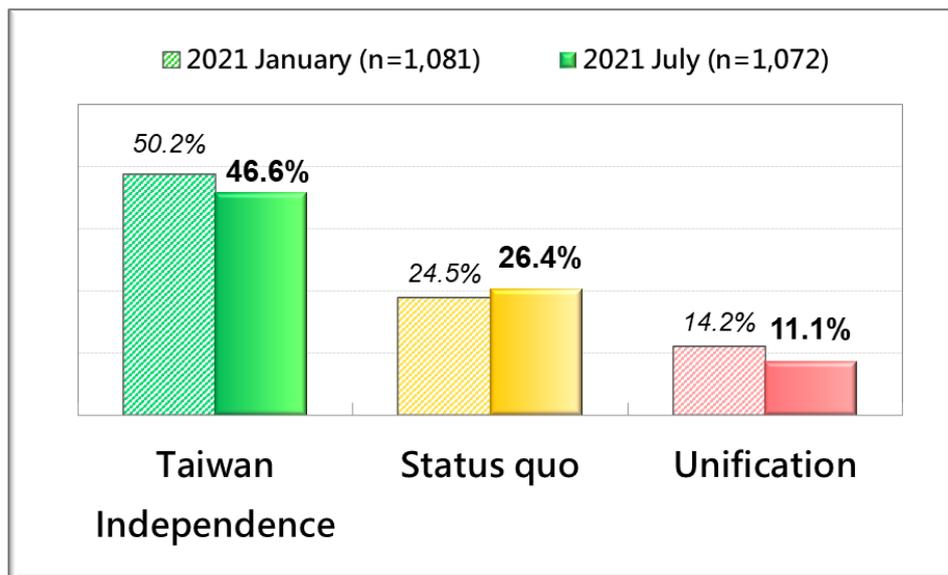


Table 6: Support for Unification vs. Independence (January 2021 & July 2021)

In addition to the unification vs. independence question, we also asked those surveyed in a follow-up question to rate how strongly they hold the expressed preferences. We found that among those that support independence, 47% said they “insist” on independence while the other 53% said they “support but do not insist”. On the other hand, among those that support unification, only 26.3% said they “insist” while the other 73.7% only support but do not insist on it.

Because both pan-blue and pan-green administrations of Taiwan, including current President Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP she leads all championed the official talking point about Taiwanese prefer “status quo”, we suspect its support in the polls might have been artificially inflated somehow due to the fact that the position is explicitly endorsed by the successive governments and thus considered “socially desirable”. We therefore asked another question: *“If status quo is no longer possible to maintain, would you prefer Taiwan independence or unification?”*

We found that when prompted with this line of “immediate decision” question, 47.3% of those that originally said they support maintaining status quo changed to support independence, 20.5% changed to support unification, while another 32.2% insisted on “keeping status quo forever” (the option was still made available). Based on this result, we can recalculate Taiwanese public opinion as 59.1% support eventual independence, 16.5% support eventual unification, and 8.5% support keeping status quo forever. See Table 7.

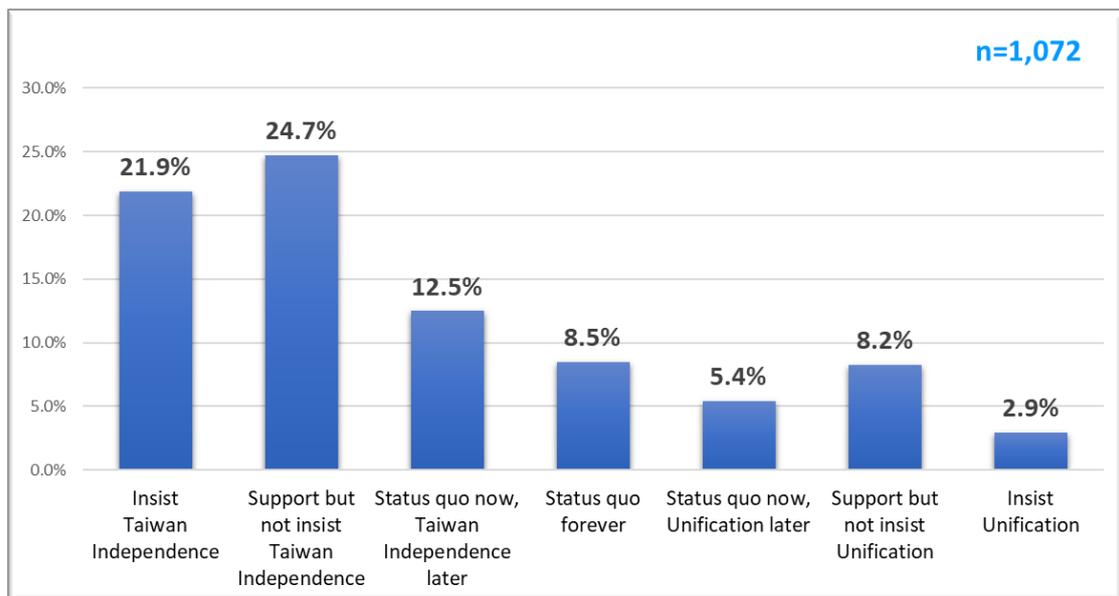


Table 7: Support for Unification vs. Independence, detailed breakdown (July 2021)

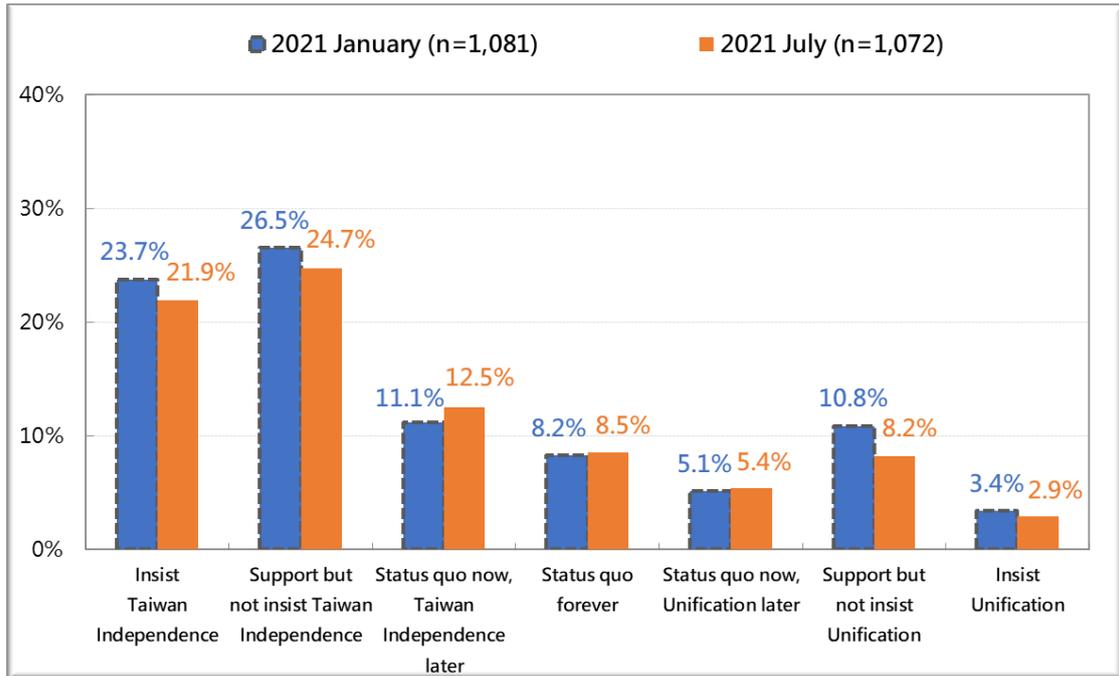


Table 8: Support for Unification vs. Independence, detailed breakdown (January 2021 & July 2021)

Comparing to January 2021, we can see that Taiwanese preferences for unification vs independence remained largely similar, and the slight changes are all within 2%. Our “immediate decision” question did establish that an *absolute majority* of 59.1% Taiwanese public support independence when maintaining status quo is no longer feasible.

It is important to note though that among this absolute majority who support independence, only about a third insist this preference strongly, while others are more hesitant. As for those who support unification, there are even fewer “hardliners”. Overall, we can say that most Taiwanese public are not afraid of voicing preferences for their own political future, but a majority are considered “moderates” in that they do not strongly insist on their expressed preferences.

Discussion

In Taiwan, question about national identity is inevitably linked to the debate about Taiwan’s political future between unification versus independence. As national identity stems from the “imagined community” that a group of people constructed in their minds, what this community *is* naturally decides how a group of people would eventually construct as their political future.

For the people of Taiwan, supporting “Taiwan independence” means having themselves as the masters of their own fate and to uphold Taiwan as a new, sovereign, and independent nation on the world stage. Although it must be noted that among the people of Taiwan who support “independence,” some do see “maintaining status quo forever” as a compromise that they can live with.

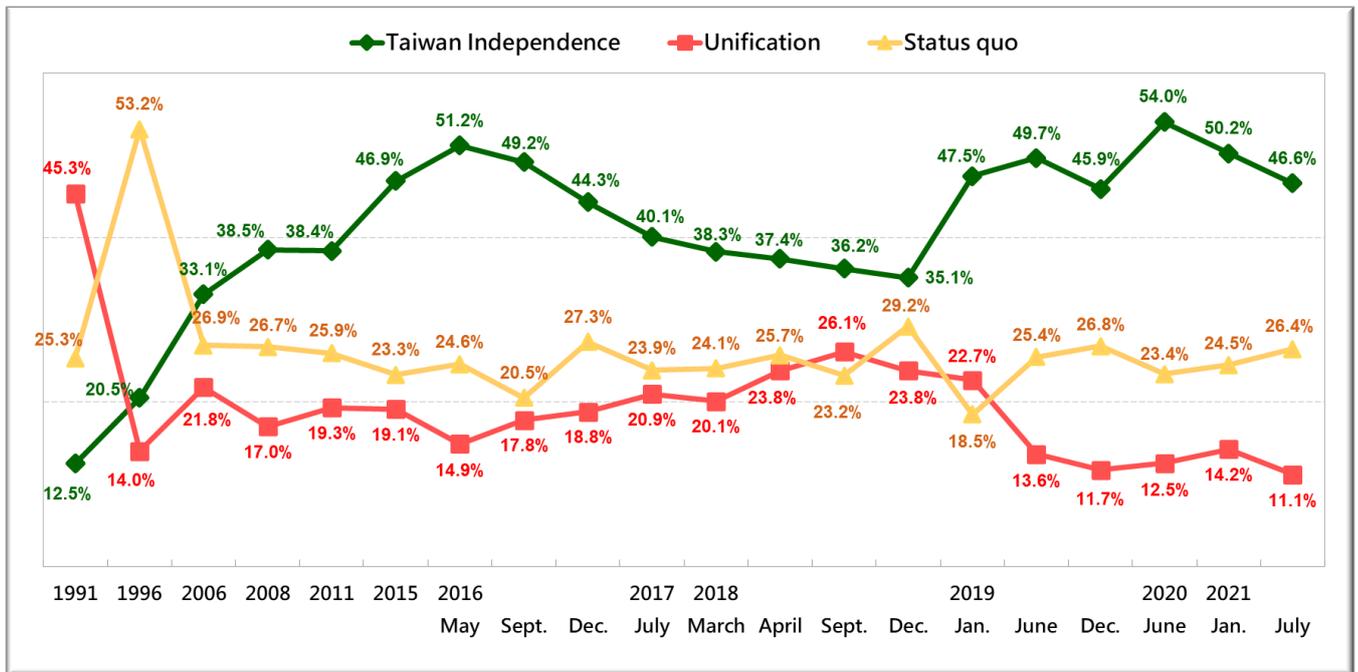


Table 9: Taiwan's Support for Unification vs. Independence (1991 to July 2021)

What is clear from our polls is that national identity is highly correlated to the preferences on unification vs. independence, with correlation coefficient estimated at .611 ($p=0.000$). In other word the stronger a person embraces a singular Taiwanese identity, the more likely that person supports Taiwan independence. Table 9 illustrates the changes in unification vs. independence preferences over the past three decades. From the data, we can make several final observations regarding the Taiwanese public opinion:

1. Support for Taiwan independence saw steady increase from 1991 onward and peaked in 2016 when Tsai Ing-wen was elected to her first term of Presidency. The increase of 38.7% in 25 years elevated Taiwan independence, an idea that was once considered extreme, to something that is now clearly embraced by the majority of the people of Taiwan. However it also saw a noticeable decline of 16% from May 2016 to December 2018, when it finally bottomed and began to recover. From June 2020 to July 2021 another declining trend was

observed. Would it recover once again to reach a higher high? That remains to be seen.

2. Support for unification was recorded at 45.3% in 1991 but suffered a 31.3% decline in just five years time and bottomed at 14% by 1996. Since then the highest support was 26% in September 2018, the lowest was 11.1% recorded just recently in July 2021. In other word, the number of people who support unification is now at its historical low.
3. Support for maintaining status quo briefly peaked at 53.2% in 1996. As support for independence grew, support for status quo was observed to be relatively constant at around 20% until early 2019 when it began to drop again, after Xi Jinping's New Year speech that explicitly coerced Taiwan to accept a "one country, two systems" solution which was perceived extremely negatively by the Taiwanese public.
4. Looking back at Taiwan's political liberalization, political democratization, and the "localization" of identity, it is safe to say that a majority of the people of Taiwan have expressed their preference and desire in moving toward the direction of Taiwan independence. However, current President Tsai's policy of "maintaining status quo" is clearly at odd with if not directly contradicting this majority public opinion. Since almost 59% of the people of Taiwan want their government to pursue independence as an eventual goal, it remains to be seen how Tsai and the ruling DPP party can continue to delay the pursuing of this important aspiration that is held dearly especially by its partisan supporters.
5. We also see how Taiwanese identity and supports for unification vs. independence shifted over the past four presidents from Lee Teng-hui, Chen Shui-bien, Ma Ying-jeou, then Tsai Ing-wen. During the terms of the first three presidents both Taiwanese identity and support for Taiwan independence were constantly growing at an upward trajectory. During the terms of President Tsai however, both key indicators saw fluctuations and even experienced noticeable declining trends twice. While there can be different explanations as to why such happened only under Tsai's presidency, we can say that the "Tsai era" effectively put an end to the decades long growth "boom" in Taiwanese identity and Taiwan independence. Would Taiwanese public opinion starts to embrace a different set of identity and vision for their political future? Only time will tell.