Information and Heterogeneity in Issue Voting: Evidence from the 2008 Presidential Election in Taiwan

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Abstract

The vast majority of studies of the effects of issues and the economy on vote choice estimate average effects of these variables across the electorate. We posit that different voters may use issues and the economy differently in their vote decisions. Specifically, the effects of issues and the economy may vary by a voter’s general level of political information. We test the effects of information on issue voting and the economy in the 2008 presidential election on Taiwan. Our findings show that the independence versus unification issue was still the most important issue in the 2008 election, and voters with greater levels of political information show a larger effect of the issue on their vote choice. The national economy is also significant as a predictor of vote choice while personal economic conditions are not. Voter information has a slight influence on sociotropic voting, with more informed voters showing a larger effect of the national economy on their vote decisions than less informed voters. The latter finding contradicts recent work on attribution bias in economic voting.

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Do issues affect all voters equally in the voting booth? We know that voters may attach different importance, or salience, to different issues. Several studies of economic voting show that the effects of evaluations of the economy on voter decision-making may vary with a voter’s level of information (Gomez and Wilson 2006). Other studies argue that issues in an election vary in their complexity and cost of information. In particular, issues of foreign affairs may seem to hold less weight than domestic issues or the economy in most elections due to the limited information most voters have about foreign affairs (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989). Few studies have attempted to model directly this heterogeneity in issue voting as a function of voters’ information levels or political sophistication. We set out to test whether issues and the economy have varying effects on vote choice in the case of Taiwan’s 2008 presidential election.

The 2008 presidential election in Taiwan stands as an important event in its own right and as a useful case for comparing the electoral effects of domestic issues, foreign affairs issues, and the economy. Taiwan has long been a one-party regime dominated by the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party, or KMT) until local elections in the late 1990s and the presidential election of 2000 created a shift in power to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). After the DPP’s Chen Shiu-Bian served as president from 2000 to the 2008, Taiwan had another opportunity for a change of party control as the KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou faced off against the DPP’s Frank Hsieh in the March, 2008 election. A declining economy raised the KMT’s prospects of winning back the presidency. Real GDP growth in 2007 was at 4.4 percent, but declining exports due to the global credit crunch moved GDP growth to 0.12% in 2008. Unemployment in 2007 was below 4 percent; in 2008, 5.75%. While these numbers are not significant by global standards, the economic decline was noticeable on Taiwan and fueled fears that its export-led economy would decline significantly. In a post-election survey conducted by the Taiwan Electoral Democracy Study, people who voted in the presidential election were asked “Would you say that over the past year, the state of the
Sixty-five percent of voters believed the economy has worsened, thirty percent believed it has stayed the same, and less than five percent believed it had improved.

Elections in many countries appear to be determined by the economy. The voluminous literature on elections on the US and Europe certainly point to the importance of the economy and other, often-related, domestic issues. But Taiwanese politics has long centered on the national security issues due to its relationship with mainland China. Particularly, national identity debates about whether Taiwan should declare its independence from China or seek unification separate the parties and divide voters. The DPP has promoted proclaiming independence from China; the KMT has opposed independence in favor of maintaining the status quo now and seeking eventual reunification. This national identity issue has been the most salient issue in Taiwanese electoral politics at the outset of Taiwan’s democratization (Hsieh and Niou, 1996).

Due to the heightened importance of national security issues related to China in Taiwan’s elections, it stands as an important case for examining the role of heterogeneity in economic voting and the role of national security issues in elections. Traditionally, voters have been thought largely immune to foreign affairs debates. Almond (1950) and Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida (1989), studying elections in the United States, conclude that foreign affairs do matter to voters when those issues have been made salient and the candidates adopt distinct positions. But even in elections in which candidates speak often about foreign affairs and adopt distinct positions, most American voters seem to have little knowledge of foreign affairs (Almond 1950, Rosenau 1961). Thus, if foreign affairs issues seem to have little effect on electoral choice, it may be that the issues do not matter much in voters’ daily lives, that the candidates do not have distinct positions, or that voters lack the information necessary to understand foreign policy issues. Any one of these explanations could be true in countries where foreign affairs issue lack salience or candidates positions are indistinct. By focusing on Taiwan, we can isolate the effect of voter information on foreign affairs-oriented voting since the national security issues are perpetually salient in Taiwanese elections and since the candidates tend to adopt distinct positions. But national security issues
could be important in Taiwan by default during an era of economic health. In 2008, as the economy slowed down, we can assess whether economic issues trumped foreign policy in the voting booth.

Using data from a 2008 post-election survey, we estimate a model of vote choice that includes retrospective evaluations of the economy, voters’ positions on Taiwanese independence versus unification with the mainland China, and three other domestic policy issues: economic growth versus protection of the environment, regime stability versus reform, and the implementation of social welfare programs. We interact each of these with a voter’s level of information about politics to assess whether the 2008 election was about national identity or the economy, and whether the effects of these issues on vote choice varied according to a voter’s level of information. Before turning to the model and data, and we assess debates about heterogeneity in economic voting and the importance of national identity to voters.

Information, the Economy, and Issues

In a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies of voter decision making, Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000) find that “[a]mong the issues on the typical voter's agenda, none is more consistently present, nor generally has a stronger impact, than the economy.” Studies of economic voting distinguish between sociotropic and egocentric concerns. While most early studies of economic voting and most contemporary pundits claim that voters are egocentric—their pocketbooks, or focus on their own financial well-being—most studies find that voters are sociotropic, or care more about national economic conditions. The sociotropic model maintains that the vote is based on evaluations of the nation’s economic wellbeing, or on the wellbeing of groups with which a voter identifies, as opposed to personal financial wellbeing. Studies of election outcomes consistently find that the sociotropic model has a greater impact on the vote than the personal model (Lewis-Beck 1988).

Kinder and Kiewiet (1981:132), who defined sociotropic voting, conclude that “differences between the pocketbook and sociotropic characterizations of citizen politics should be regarded not as one of motivation, but as one of information.” Despite this claim, only a few studies have examined pocketbook and sociotropic voting in the context of voter information. Kinder and Kiewiet conceptualize
information as a threshold voters must overcome in order to vote based on economic conditions. Voters need to have merely some ideas about the economy’s performance, pressing national problems, and the incumbent administration’s “handling” of these issues (p.156). They claim that the information demands of sociotropic models are not reasonable for the average voter. Despite a concerted effort to address the central role of information in the electorate, Kinder and Kiewiet (1981) like many others (Kramer 1971; Markus 1988 and 1992; Tufte 1975) estimate the effect of economic conditions across all voters rather than allowing the effect to vary across different groups of voters.

A few recent studies have examined information’s role in moderating the effects of the economy on vote choice or presidential approval. Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt find that the effect of personal financial situation has a greater effect on presidential approval for less-informed people than for the more informed. Sociotropic evaluations, they find, have a greater effect on presidential approval for more informed people than for the less informed. People who do not have much information about national politics rely on their personal financial status when evaluating the president; people with more information are more sociotropic.

Mutz (1992) examines the effects of mass communication on retrospective sociotropic and pocketbook voting. While the mass media exclusively influences sociotropic concerns, personal experiences with unemployment exclusively influence pocketbook concerns; thus personal experiences have an effect on those of low information (see also Weatherford 1983 and Conover et al 1986). Contrarily, those of high information exhibit a perception consistent with mass media sources.

Further work by Mutz (1993) engages the “role of information in conditioning the politicization of personal economic experience” (p. 483). Utilizing survey data from 1988 and 1989 she shows that the well informed are more likely than the less informed to hold politicians accountable for their personal experiences. Interestingly, less informed voters’ evaluations of the state of the nation’s economy are less likely to be influenced by these same personal experiences, thus avoiding a contrary finding with her prior study (1992). What, then, of the general role of mass communication? In a subsequent study, Mutz (1994) finds that media generally facilitate the effect of personal experiences on political preferences.
across information levels. Across these studies, a clear picture of the role of economic perceptions has not emerged; however, there is ample evidence that economic perceptions depend to some extent on information.

Gomez and Wilson (2001, 2006) study informational heterogeneity and the role of economic evaluations on political behavior. They break with previous scholars by framing the temporal question in terms of attribution: Heterogeneity in the information levels of voters leads to different causal strengths in making political attributions. The ability to associate blame with the person responsible for a given issue depends on the amount of knowledge voters have about it. They hypothesize that it is cognitively easier to blame the President for problems of the nation than for problems of personal finances (2001:901). Voters of low political sophistication should not be able to make the distant link between the President and their pocketbooks; therefore, we should expect pocketbook voting only among the politically sophisticated. Gomez and Wilson (2001) find support for their theory in US presidential elections, while Gomez and Wilson (2006) extends their study to four countries, including Taiwan’s 2001 Legislative Yuan elections.

Studies of foreign affairs or other political issues have not advanced as far as studies of economic voting in assessing voter heterogeneity. No study we have found examines the effects of voter information on different issues. Instead, several studies (e.g., Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde) measure, issue by issue, the percentage of voters in the American National Election Studies who meet all four criteria for issue voting: they place themselves on an issue scale, place both major party candidates on the same scale, see differences between the candidates, and place the candidates in the correct order from left to right. But these studies do not examine whether increasing voter information increases the effect of the issues on vote choice. It could be the case that even when voters meet all four criteria for voting on an issue, the issue has no effect on their choice of candidates, or that the effect of the issue does not vary across voter information levels.
Data and Method

The Taiwan Electoral Democracy Survey (2008) provides data for a test of heterogeneity in issue voting. The survey, conducted after the March presidential election, during July and September of 2008, interviewed 1905 residents of Taiwan, 1440 of whom voted for one of the two major party candidates. To explain vote choice, a binary dependent variable where 1 indicates a vote for KMT candidate Ma and 0 indicates a vote for DPP candidate Hsieh, we include two evaluations of the economy, four key issues in the election, and a set of control variables.

The control variables are dummy variables to represent a voter’s party affiliation and ethnicity. We derive a measure of party identification from the question, “Among the main political parties in our country, including the KMT, DPP, NP, PFP, and TSU, do you think of yourself as leaning toward any particular party?” We code a dummy variable for KMT and DPP, with NP, and TSU, PFP, and no party affiliation as the baseline category. To capture ethnicity, we define dummy variables for Mainlander and Hakka, based on the ethnic group of a respondent’s father. The baseline category includes Min-nan and aboriginal groups.

We measure political information using an index drawn from several questions. Following the interview with a respondent, TEDS interviewers are asked to rate the respondent’s level of political information on a scale from one, “very low,” to four, “very high.” While such a measure is seemingly unconventional in its approach, due primarily to biases that may arise if interviewers give higher scores to respondents who appear to be better informed due to socioeconomic characteristics (race, gender, or income, for instance), Zaller (1985a) has found that no such biases exist. In fact, as a measure of relevant information it works at least as well as direct knowledge tests of 10 to 15 point scales (Zaller 1992 p.338) and about as well as a 27-item NES index (Zaller 1985b). An ideal measure of political information would tell us something about the overall “political belief system” of respondents based on “size”, “range” and “organization” (Luskin 1987). Earlier in the survey, respondents were asked: “Who is the current President of the United States?” “Who is the current premier of our country?” “What institution
has the power to interpret the constitution?” A respondent could answer zero to three of these correctly. Our measure of political information adds the four point interviewer rating and the four point faculty knowledge battery to create a seven-point scale. We rescale the information measure on a -1 to 1 scale to make the results that follow easier to interpret. Responses on the scale are approximately normally distributed with a mean of .04 (see Appendix for variable descriptions).

We include two evaluations of the economy. “National economy” is a three point scale on which a respondent rates the national economy during the past year as better (1), same (0), or worse (-1) than the previous year. “Personal economic condition” uses the same scale to rate the economic situation of the respondent’s household. Both measures are heavily skewed toward “worse,” or negative responses.

We include the four issue scales that appeared on the survey. Each issue presented respondents with a 11-point scale, which we rescale to -1 to 1 for ease of interpretation:

“Sometimes people will talk about the question of Taiwan independence or the unification with China. Some people say that Taiwan should declare independence immediately. Other people say that Taiwan and China should unify immediately. Other people have opinions between these two positions. Which position do you occupy?”

“Regarding the question of economic development versus environmental protection, some people in society emphasize environmental protection while others emphasize economic development. About where on this scale does your own view lie?”

“Regarding the question of social welfare, some people believe that the government should merely maintain the current system in order not to increase people’s tax. Other people believe that the government should promote social welfare, even though it will lead to tax increase. About where on this scale does your own view lie?”

“Looking at Taiwan’s overall development, some people believe that large-scale reform is the most important thing, even if it means sacrificing some social stability. Other people believe that stability is the most important and that reform should not be allowed to affect social stability. About where on this scale does your own view lie?”
Respondents were also asked to place the major parties (KMT and DPP) and presidential candidates (Ma and Hsieh) on each of these issue scales. On the issue of independence, the mean placement of Ma is 7.3, closer to unification, while the mean placement of Hsieh is 2.8, closer to independence. The average voter’s position is 4.6. On the other three issues, the average placements of the candidates are within one point of each other on the ten point scale. On economic development, Ma is at 6.6, Hsieh at 5.5. On social welfare, Ma is 5.9 with Hsieh at 5.5. And on stability versus reform, the mean placement of Ma is 6, and of Hsieh, 4.9.

To measure issue voting, we could define a voter’s position relative to the two candidates using the voter’s placement of the candidates, using the mean placement of the candidates by all voters, or by using simply a voter’s position on the (rescaled) ten point scale. We opt for the latter measurement strategy. Using a voter’s placement of the candidates to define the voter’s spatial distance from each candidate raises the possibility of projection bias, whereby a voter places closer to herself on an issue scale the candidate she prefers for non-policy reasons. Projection bias inflates issue voting, which we wish to avoid. A standard solution to projection bias is to measure the spatial distance from the voter to each candidate using the mean placement of the candidate by all voters. But since the candidates are so close together on three issues, the spatial distance measure produces mainly only two different values for all of the voters: one value for the voters to the left of at least one candidate, and one for the voters to the right of at least one candidate. Only a few voters are positioned between the candidates. Therefore, using relative spatial distance to the candidates as a measure of issue voting is infeasible.

The third approach to measuring issue voting is to use simply the voter’s position on each issue. On each issue a theoretical cut-point exists at the midpoint of the candidate’s positions. To the left of this cut point, voters will vote for one candidate, to the right they will vote for the other candidate. But as a voter moves further to the left (or right) of this cutpoint, their preference for the closer candidate should increase. Voter utility for the closer candidate will be highest at the extreme end of the scale and then decline linearly across the scale. Therefore, using a voter’s position on the issue scale captures the relative utility that a voter receives for the closer candidate.
In addition to the issue positions and economic evaluations, we include in the model an interaction of the information measure and each of the issues and evaluations. The interaction terms will form our test of whether the effect of an issue on vote choice varies by voter information level.

**Results**

Results from the model appear in Table 1, which presents the maximum likelihood estimates from the binary logit model, and in Figure 1, which shows the change in probability of voting for Ma due to a one-unit change in each of the predictors, along with the associated 95 percent confidence intervals. We later present graphs to unpack the substantive effects of our key interactions.

Table 1 shows that our model is estimates on 1233 of the 1440 voters in our sample. For the remaining 200 voters, we lacked information on one or more variables, primarily issue self-placement. We could impute these values, but imputing non-opinions makes little sense in this case. Instead, we think of the model as capturing the behavior of the 85% or so of voters who have opinions on all issues. For the other 15% of voters who lack opinions on some issues, one would need a different model.

Several results are clear from Figure 1. Party affiliation is a very strong predictor of vote choice. KMT supporters are much more likely to vote for Ma while DPP supporters are much more likely to vote for Hsieh. Voters from Mainland China are more likely to vote for Ma, the KMT candidate, while Min-Nan voters are more likely to vote for Ma, though the effect is not statistically significant.

Among the issues and evaluations of the economy, cross-straits relations clearly dominate. The effect of a voter’s position on unification versus independence is statistically significant and has the largest substantive effect of all of the issues. Pro-unification voters are, as expected, more likely to vote for Ma. The effect of independence continues the dominance of the national identity issue in Taiwan’s elections, which is somewhat surprising given the heightened concern about the economy during the campaigns.
Evaluations of the national economy are significant as a predictor of vote choice. Evaluations of one’s own financial situation are not significant, further confirming the dominance of sociotropic over pocketbook concerns in the voting booth.

None of the other issues are statistically significant. The lack of an effect for what most observers would call “significant” issues in the election is surprising but is probably not due to lack of voter awareness or concern about the issues. The mean placements of the candidates indicates that they were not very different in their positions and probably not very clear in their policy statements, leading voters with no real choice on the issues. If we measure the issues as spatial distances using voters own placements of the candidates—the measure that invites projection bias—then social welfare and reform are both statistically significant, but with substantive effects that are lower than independence or evaluations of the national economy. If the candidates were not clear in their positions, then this measure probably picks up voters’ projecting their own opinions onto the candidate they preferred for other reasons.

The effect of information on issue voting and economic voting can be unpacked from the interaction terms in the model. Figure 2 interprets these effects more clearly. Figure 2 contains six graphs, each of which shows how the issue or economic evaluation of interest affects the probability of voting for Ma as a function of information level, which appears on the x-axis. The y-axis represents the change in the probability of voting for Ma due to a change in the voter’s issue position (or economic evaluation) from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean on the issue scale. The solid line is the estimated change in the probability of voting for Ma due to the issue or evaluation. The dotted lines represent the 95% confidence interval for the effect.

Since all six graphs have the same vertical axis, the heights of the lines are directly comparable.

Consistent with previous research, evaluations of the national economy outweigh personal finances in their effect on vote choice. Personal evaluations of the economy do not induce a statistically significant change in voting behavior at any level of information. This finding appears to contradict Gomez and Wilson’s finding from the 2001 Legislative Yuan election that personal economic conditions
affect the candidate preferences of higher information voters. This result does not necessarily contradict Gomez and Wilson’s findings, though it does contradict their interpretation of their findings. Gomez and Wilson show that at higher information levels the effect of egocentric voting on candidate evaluations is statistically significant (different from 0). But they do not show that the effect of egocentric voting on vote choice is larger for more informed voters than for less informed voters. In fact, their results show that there is no statistical difference between the effect of egocentric economic evaluations on low information and high information voters. To see in the graph whether high information voters differ from low information voters, follow the highest point on the solid line horizontally back to the lowest information level, where the effect remains within the 95% confidence interval for the low information voters. If we were to graph Gomez and Wilson’s results, the graph would have the same general shape and slope as our graph for personal economic situation, but the 95% confidence interval would fall barely above the gray zero line at the highest information level.

The national economy shows a larger effect on vote choice than personal economic conditions, and the effect grows with voter information. The upward sloping line indicates that evaluations of the national economy are more closely associated with the vote decisions of high information voters than with the vote decisions of low information voters. Contrary to Gomez and Wilson’s findings, we find that increasingly informed voters weigh the national economy more in their voting decisions, probably because they are more informed about national economic conditions and better able to attribute national economic performance to the ruling party.

Among the issues, independence clearly has the largest substantive effect, and its effect is conditional on voter information. For the least informed voters, independence is barely insignificant as a predictor of vote choice. For the most informed, however, independence is clearly significant and increasing in its effect. This demonstrates that national identity issue tends to have a greater impact on the votes of highly informed voters than on the votes of less informed voters, at least in Taiwan in 2008. Whether this result applies across nations and across time merits further study.
The only other issue showing an information effect is the environment versus economic development. In this case the issue is not statistically significant for any level of information, but the effect does increase with voter information. Theoretically, the graph should be positive for all value of voter information. When the line crosses into negative territory, as happens below the zero point economic development, a voter’s probability of voting for the candidate closer to her on the issue is declining. That means that low information voters in the economic development panel are voting contrary to their issue positions. Again, this result is not statistically significant, but it is interesting. On the issues of social welfare and reform, there is no effect on vote choice for any information level.

Conclusions

In this paper we show first that Taiwan’s elections are still driven by the national identity issue. The independence versus unification issue is still at the heart of Taiwan’s electoral politics, even after it has made the transition to democracy and even during a slowing economy. However, economic conditions still matter in Taiwan as in all electorates. And national economic conditions dominate egocentric concerns in Taiwan, as elsewhere.

We show second that the effects of the national identity issues vary by voter information level while evaluations of the national economy largely do not. The national identity issues have more of an effect on the vote of highly informed voters than less informed voters. This finding supports the proposition that variation in national identity voting across space and time may have much to do with variation in information. Even in Taiwan, where national identity issues are always salient and the party positions always distinct, voter information affects the extent to which voters weigh foreign policy in the voting booth.

We also show that other issues—issues that the candidates spend much time talking about—did not affect voter decision-making in Taiwan. Economic development, stability versus reform, and social welfare did not affect the votes of many voters.
We show finally that it is not the case that higher information voters weigh their own economic condition more heavily than national conditions in the voting booth. The opposite appears to be true: higher information voters use evaluations of the national economy even more than they use evaluations of their personal circumstances and even more than low information voters. Voting sociotropically requires information about the national economy and perhaps also the cognitive ability to attribute blame for the economy. Sociotropic voting may not be an information shortcut, but an information-intensive exercise for many voters.

Voters are heterogeneous in their use of issues in the voting booth. Some voters may weigh some issues more heavily than others in their voting decisions. Some issues may affect some voters more than others. Some voters may know more about some issues than others. And in some countries and political contexts, some issues matter more than others.
References


Appendix

Table A1. Variable Descriptions

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<th></th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
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Table 1. Logit Model of 2008 Presidential Vote

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<td>0.278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP identifier</td>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>0.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSU identifier</td>
<td>-1.018</td>
<td>0.605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>2.205</td>
<td>0.410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of Cases                                | 1233 |
Wald x2 (19)                                    | 293.81|
Pseudo-R2                                       | .70  |

* indicates p<.05, two-tailed
Figure 1. Change in Probability of Vote for Incumbent Due to One Unit Change in Each Predictor. All economic evaluations and issues scaled from -1 to 1.
Figure 2: The Effect of Economic Evaluations and Issues on Vote Choice Depend on Voter’s Information Level

Figure 2: Effect of two types of economic evaluations and four issues on the change in the probability of voting for the incumbent, as a function of voter’s level of political information. Vertical axis represents the change in the probability of voting for Ma due to a change in voter’s position from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean on each economic evaluation or issue scale. Solid line is average change in effect, dotted lines are the 95% confidence interval. Data from TEDS 2008.