Issues Impacts and Vote choice in Taiwan Elections, 2004-2016

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Taiwan politics enters a new stage of democratic competitions. The 2016 elections redefine not only the party system featuring the two major parties DPP and KMT but also the impact of issues on voters' decision of support. While the 2014 and 2016 elections witnessed public disapproval of KMT's cross-Strait policies (Copper, 2014, 2016), DPP president Tsai Ing-wen's handling of the same issue caused her poor ratings also (W.H. Chen, 2017; also see Hickey and Niou, 2017). In this study, we examine the evolution of issue impacts on vote choices in the last two decades and re-evaluate the issue voting in the Taiwan democracy. Specifically, we amass the longitudinal election data and investigate the issue effects in the party support and vote choice functions. Through an inventory of the long-standing central issues such as national identity, economic evaluations and political alienation, we track the ebb and flow of how issues influence voters' party support and in term voting decisions. Employing Taiwan Election and Democratization Study (TEDS)[i] data from 2004 to 2016, we scrutinize how this change of issue significance sheds light on future directions of Taiwan's electoral developments.

Keywords: national identity, ethnic identity, issue voting, economic voting, party support, vote choice, uncertainty

"There is a lot of *uncertainty* here."

- Richard Bush on Taiwan 2018 elections.

Introduction

After an overwhelming and historic victory in 2016 elections, the governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan delivers another surprise in a bit over two years. Despite its predominant control in both executive and legislative branches, the ruling party was barely able to convert the new support from the voters into popular policies and most importantly electoral votes. In the 2018 mayoral and local elections, the party experienced one of its greatest defeats in decades and lost multiple key electoral strong holds in central and south Taiwan. The Kaohsiung mayoral election in particular illustrated the constituency crisis for DPP party elites who could never imagine how vulnerable the green camp's traditional electoral bases could be in the face of an apparently underdog challenger from Kuomintang (KMT).

The dramatic KMT comeback was déjà vu in many senses. It is reminiscent of DPP's success in last local elections in 2014 after the Sunflower movement. The now opposition party swept 15 out of 21 offices from mayors of special municipalities to local magistrates, compared to DPP's 13 out of 20 then. Unlike 2014, there was not a student movement mobilizing the supporters to "vote out" the unpopular government. In fact, in sharp contrast to its previous campaigns, KMT candidates were primarily stripped of funding support from the party due to the government's new law to freeze the latter's assets. Yet, most campaign activities attracted high turnout notwithstanding the low budget organization focused essentially on social media propaganda.

Observers attributed the electoral "reversal" more to the government's poorly delivered policies than KMT's success in campaigns and regaining popularity from the general public (Bush 2018). These included mostly the domestic policies on energy, civil servant pensions and the much-criticized Transitional Justice Commission's proposed measures with alleged political motivation targeting KMT. Added the loss of diplomatic ties with multiple nations and deteriorated cross-Strait relations due to Tsai's disregard of the "92 consensus", the general doubt of the new president's policies and governance built fast leading to the November 2018 elections (Templeman 2018).

However, the quick erosion of the governing party's mandate could indicate that fundamental changes have commenced in the nature of Taiwan politics, particularly in the partisan balance (Clark, Ho, and Tan, 2016; Hsieh, 2016; Templeman, 2016). One possible driver of this change can be the impact of issues on Taiwan voters' support for political parties that informs their vote choices. Most notably, the country's national identity issue or its future of declaring full independence or unification with the mainland China has been the dominant issue in its politics (Clark and Tan, 2012; Fell, 2005, 2012; Hsieh, 2002, 2016). Another prominent issue is the country's economic performance which has been the major concern for the voters, considering Taiwan's recent slowdown in growth and economic stagnation (Tan, Clark and Ho 2018).

The 2018 election outcomes raise a few questions that motivate this study:

1. Is Taiwan politics becoming more volatile?
2. How much do the issue impacts change from elections to elections?

3. How are issues impacts compared across time and parties?

In 2016, we delivered a paper titled "Impact of Issues on the 2016 Presidential elections in Taiwan" and we found good empirical evidence to support the hypotheses that "concerns about the economy and malfeasance among the political elites had joined the traditionally dominant cross-Strait relations as influential issues." (Clarke, Tan and Ho, 2018, p. 19). In the current study, we extend our agenda and research design to cover all available election study data since 2001 and further explore the evolution of issue voting during Taiwan's two decades of democratization. Additionally, we examine the impact of ethnic identity, that pertains to how voters recognize their local Taiwanese identity compared to the Chinese identity inherited from the post-war generations (Ho and Liu 2002, Chang and Wang 2005, Huang 2005).

We first examine briefly the issue voting literature, followed by a section introducing the research design. The third reports and elaborates our findings and the last part concludes.

Issues in voting

Issues define representative democracy.   Voters rely on evaluating issues and how elected officials represent and deliver on the public expectation of issues to cast their votes. Studying politics is synonymous to studying political issues and their impacts (Carmine and Stimson 1989). The way issues are debated and promoted motivates the political agenda for governance. How they affect the general citizenry during political decisions? Carmines and Stimson (1989) analogize issues with species in the theory of natural selection in Biology. In particular, they compare the "organic" changes of issues in the political environmental to evolution of species in natural world.   They refer the dynamics of issues or issue evolution to a process in which issues are "capable of altering the political environment within which they originated and evolved." (p.11)

Not all issues prevail in a democracy. Only certain types of issues can persist, survive the "natural selection" and capture prolonged attention. These lasting issues have direct impact on partisan alignments and, in some cases, alter the party system from which they emerged (Carmines and Stimson 1989).   In the American context, the authors single out the issue of race as the defining component in the system: it evolves, stabilizes and divides. As a result, it reshapes the party system, catalyzes party realignment and "transforms the character of the parties themselves" (see also Adams 1997 and Wolbrecht 2000 for other examples of issue evolutions). Comparatively, the main political issue that draws the cleavage in Taiwan is the national identity issue.   The concerns on the country's future status is the most controversial and divisive question in Taiwan politics (Hsieh and Niou 1996). Along with the ethnic Taiwanese identity, the independence/unification has dominated the country's political agenda since the early stage of democratization in Taiwan. They have permeated essentially every aspect of Taiwan politics in almost all political institutions.

Definition, measurement and operationalization of the national identity issues have been major challenges to researchers of Taiwan studies. Apparently, the issue of independence is a notion of "national choice" that pertains to a prospective movement of building a particular nation state (Wu 1993). Opposite to independence is the reunification with China. Adding to the middle to make a continuum is the option of staying status quo.   In contrast, ethnic identity is a recognition of identity with reference to subjective, psychological orientation toward "Chinese" on one hand and "Taiwanese" on the other (Liu 1999, 2002; Wu 1993).

While the national identity issue and Taiwanese identity persist to influence the country's electoral choices, the variables themselves do not endure changes. TEDS principal research organization, the Election Study Center (ESC) at the National Chengchi University, regularly reports the proportions of the general public supporting different options of the future status choices. The trends of supporting independence, unification or status quo vary over time, with most inclined to stay in the status quo (adding both maintaining so temporarily and permanently)[ii]. For instance, since the Tsai administration starting 2016, support for the option "maintaining status quo, moving toward independence" has dropped from over 18 percent to about 15 while the opposite option "status quo then unification" has been on the rise, from 8.5 to 12.8 percent. The other series, the ethnic identity, is also subject to move, primarily between the options of "Taiwanese" (majority) and "both Chinese and Taiwanese". The identity of "Chinese" stays consistently under four percent. The important question to ask is how the variations in these trends would affect election outcomes. In this study, we aim at addressing the questions of issue and identity impacts using a longitudinal design.

Research Design

Our 2016 study focuses on the Taiwan presidential election in that year. Based on the hypothesis that national identity, economic evaluations and political alienations are key factors explaining who voted for Tsai as opposed to Chu or Soong, we found all three have statistically significant impacts while the demographic variables' effects are weak and inconsistent. We examined the effect of party identification variable in a separate model given its strong influence. In this study, we not only extend our analyses to the other three previous elections (2004, 2008 and 2012), but also build upon our previous findings and expand the models to include all key variables including the party identification. Specifically, we intend to investigate how much the issue effects will be attenuated controlling for the party identification.

Another feature of this research design is the consideration of model uncertainty when different specifications are introduced. Often times, adding or removing variables in a regression model can lead to inconsistent and even contrary findings and ambiguous conclusions. Model robustness refers to consistency in effects of candidate predictors by taking into account different specifications and resampling methods (Young and Holsteen 2017, Young 2018). Building on pioneering work on model robustness by Leamer (1983, 1985, 2008), Young and his co-authors proposed a methodology for investigating the robustness of multivariate models by estimating sets of models containing *all possible combinations* of candidate explanatory variables. By summarizing the resulting distributions of key quantities of interest (e.g., values and signs of regression coefficients, t-ratios, fit statistics, marginal effects) this approach reports the extent to which statistical results constitute robust "stylized facts" as opposed to "fragile findings" subject to substantively meaningful changes with minor, seemingly innocuous, variations in model specification, measurement or choice of estimator. After running all combinations of the models, we visualize the results and illustrate the consistency of different predictor effects. We also align the findings over time/elections for comparisons.

To facilitate the comparative study, we replicate our coding scheme in the 2016 and develop standardized dichotomies of the independent variables. This method allows us to not just compare effects across variables but in different models and datasets. Vote dichotomies are created for each party/camp's vote models (e.g. Tsai as 1 versus other candidates in the vote DPP model and Chu as 1 versus other candidates in the vote KMT model)[iii]. For the national identity issue, we focus on the "Independence" and "Unification" options, with two dichotomies coded as 1 using status quo

option as baseline.   The two indicators of economic stress are the perception that Taiwan's national economy had gotten worse (0 = No; 1 = Yes) and the belief that inequality was serious (0 = No; 1 = Yes)[iv]. Finally, political alienation was measured by the perception that government decisions promote public welfare (0 = No; 1 = Yes). Since the question is unavailable in earlier election studies, we replace with a political efficacy question "Public officials do not care much about what people like me think." (0 = No; 1 = Yes) in those models as a surrogate.

For the identity effect, we code 1 for those who self-identify as Taiwanese versus Chinese and both. To augment this variable, we also include the father's ethnicity (Minnan Taiwanese and Mainlander) to form two additional identity dummy variables.

From the previous study, we learn that the demographic variables are not strong predictors when the issue, identity and party identification variable are in the model. We only include the age, education and gender (female) for control in the robustness model stage.

Analysis

In the first stage of analysis, we run a series of logit models on voting support for each party in each election.   Informed by our previous findings, we concentrate on three groups of variables: issues, identity and party identifications. We use standard coding scheme and standard model specification so we can basically compare effects by coefficients. Figure 1 illustrates the coefficient plots of the four series of election models from 2004 to 2016. This visual method of model report effectively and economically displays 16 models in one page.   Statistical significance can be easily identified by scanning the coefficients' distance from the middle red line. In these charts, two sets of KMT and DPP voting models are shown in each chart, with the blue markers indicating the issue plus identity models (nested model) and red markers all three groups of variables (full model).

The findings in 2016 models are highly comparable to our previous study (see Table 1) adding the party effects[v]: for both parties, the party identifications are the most obvious and strongest variables, followed by the support for independence and Taiwanese identity. Noteworthy is the mirror effects of these variables to each party in the two-candidate race. However, these effects are not symmetric. Support for independence, for instance, boosts voting support for Tsai (b=.44 in full model) but the negative effects or reducing likelihood for choosing Chu ticket is much stronger (b=-1.53 in full model). Alternatively, supporters of unification also do not deliver as strong effects to help KMT compared as independence supporters to DPP. The party effect dominance indeed exists with some issue variable coefficients being drawn closer to zero in the full models.   Nevertheless, most of these key variables of interest (i.e. national identity, economic evaluations and ethnic identity) maintain strong effects. Relatively speaking, the negative evaluations of the economy helps the DPP more in the year of 2016 when the party is in opposition. The identity variables including self-alleged Taiwanese and Mainland father are also strong predictors though their effects are in different directions. The political alienation variables are generally close to the border line of statistical zero particularly in the full models (again, party effect!).

Models in earlier elections exhibit very similar patterns of issue and identity effects. One contributing factor explaining the different voting support for each party is whether the party is in power. The governing party is more likely to be subject to closer scrutiny and responsibility attribution. For example, the political alienation variable generally (e.g. for one, government officials don't care about public opinion) hurts voting support for the president's party (DPP in 2008, KMT

in 2012 and 2016). The 2004 election is an anomaly, possibly due to the public's deep-rooted conception of KMT as "government officials".

Another anomalous finding is shown in the economic variables. When the voters perceive the economy as getting worse, the blame usually will be placed on the ruling party, thus a negative and statistical effect in voting support. This occur in the DPP model in 2004 and the KMT models in 2012 and 2016.   In 2008, the economically pessimistic voters however did not punish the Chen administration. Instead, they attributed responsibility to the KMT or the party's candidate Ma Ying-jeou, perhaps showing disapproval of the then KMT-controlled legislature.

While the vote choice models deliver important information about the issue and identity effects, our picture of model comparisons are limited to point estimate differences. For example, we can tell generally the party effect is the strongest among the blue camp supporters, especially in 2004 when the blue parties joined forces to run on single ticket. The subtler findings such as the asymmetry of effects across parties and elections could be hard to discern when more models are packed in a table or even a coefplot.

In the next stage, the gear is switched to addressing the robustness of these models.   This method is to exhaust all combinations of predictor and control variables to evaluate the consistency of predictor's parameter estimate.   It removes the concerns of model instability or false positives due to the mediating effect (such as party effect) or multicollinearity. The process starts with an identified model with a set of predictors variables with reasonable model fit.   Then runs the models repeatedly in the number of times of the control variables' all possible combinations. For illustration, to run a series of model testing the robustness of the national identity variable (say, Independence) with three other control variables (e.g. age, education and female), there will be $2^3=8$ models executed, generating all estimates and robustness statistics for examination.

In our case, we estimate two vote choice models in four elections, with concentration of national identity, economic evaluations and Taiwanese identity for scrutiny. To incorporate the full model (one predictor and eight control variables) adding three demographic variables (i.e. age, edu and female), the total number of models per party per election is $2^{(12-1)}=2^{11}=2,048$.

Table 2 reports the descriptives of the predictor coefficients. Among the 16,384 models, none of the parameters switches signs.   The sig. or significance columns indicate the consistency of the predictors. Most return 100% statistical significance (at .05 level in all 2,048 models) except a few cases. To name one, 253 or 87.65% of the KMT Independence models in 2004 data show insignificance, suggesting slight fragility in its effect in that series.   In other words, there could be a chance an independence supporter would cast a vote for the blue party, on certain condition that a special combination of variables is in force. The more obvious example occurs in 2016 KMT economic model, with 59.72% of the models not registering statistical significance. In addition to the low average estimate (-.37) this finding indicates clearly the economy is not the prime culprit that costs the party's drastic downfall.

To effectively visualize the output of the 16,000 plus models, we align the density charts of the key predictors by party in Figure 2 to 4. The overlapped "mountain-shape" plots illustrate the density distributions of 2,048 estimated coefficients in various vote choice models. Figure 2 shows clear trends of the lessening effect of the Independence variable from 2004 to 2012 elections. The wide range (effect size) and multi-modality (cluster of predictor groups) point to the high variances in the

effects of these predictors. The 2016 KMT models are obviously distinct from others, showing in particular the further move to the left or the negative zone (as high as -2.54). This represents independence supporters' strongest disapproval to date of KMT compared to any previous elections! The similar pattern can be observed in the Taiwanese identity series (Figure 3). The trend of decline in effect size was reversed in 2016 again, suggesting signs of polarization attributable to the national identity and ethnic identity variables. In other words, self-declared Taiwanese who support independence at some point in future are becoming more of a die-hard opponent KMT in 2016.

More interesting findings are shown in the economic evaluation series in Figure 4. First, as mentioned earlier in Table 2, the rule of punishing ruling party for bad economy did not apply to DPP as the 2008 models indicate. Second, economic evaluations' impact on voting varies from elections to elections. The 2016 parameter estimates are the closest to normal distribution with a single mode. Yet, the means of effects are also nearest to zero, statistically speaking. This is again especially applicable for the KMT. In other words, in more than four out of ten cases, the economic factors will be disregarded by voters, when other stronger issues or concerns are considered.

Implications

In this study, we update our earlier findings on the impacts of issues in elections by examining additional data with new techniques. We basically incorporate all election data in the TEDS series, covering almost the entire democratization period of Taiwan. The findings are illustrative of the evolution of issue impacts in the last two decades of elections. We identify or reconfirm several findings including:

- Asymmetry of impacts in the national identity continuum prevails. Independence proponents have been showing stronger support for DPP than unification proponents to KMT.
- Taiwanese identity polarizes further the blue and green in 2016.
- More consolidation in the Taiwanese identity especially in the new upcoming generations is likely to add generational divides to the existing rift between the two camps.
- Impacts of national identity related issues will loom large. It may not significantly encourage fast and sizable support for DPP, but it will continue to undermine KMT's electoral base.
- Economic factors may not be the predominant driving forces of future elections, in competition with other identity factors and party effects.
- Independence will remain a viable option for Taiwan voters as long as China is unlikely to be flexible on the unpopular proposal of "one country two systems". Support for

In conclusion of our 2016 study, we remarked that "Taiwan politics may well be entering a period of uncertainty and instability." The 2018 elections provided good evidence to testify this volatility. Observers may suggest the midterm election effects and swing cycle put the ruling party DPP in check or the punishment model is in force showing the public's disapproval of Tsai administration's poor performance. Compared to the KMT's landslide in 2008 and the following 2010 midterm elections, in which the blue camp managed to keep the two northern municipalities and Taichung, the midterm effect if there is any comes much earlier than expected for the new president. While it

took Ma six years to lose the traditional electoral stronghold (Taipei and Taichung in 2014), for DPP in 2018, this swing cycle is merely a bit over two years. The volatility signs are clear: anything that can happen it will happen. And, it will come faster.

In this study, we track the evolution of issue and identity effects using data from the last four presidential election studies. Our findings lead to more thorough observations about the impacts of issues and identity: they are variable over time, across elections, but growing in different directions. Identity will continue to play important roles in voters' ballot decisions. The economy factor plays out well, but not always. Preference of future status of Taiwan is still a strong governing factor, especially for KMT and its candidates. While the political alienation issue or variable may appear weak in presence of other influential factors, it represents the perceived responsiveness of the government and could add small effect but weigh large in critical or switching elections (e.g. 2008 and 2016).

One more observation can guide our future research in issues and voting, which is the population of abstained voters and party independents. In the voting and party identification questions, respondents can actually have the third choice, which is not to vote and/or not to support any party, respectively. This third choice have been recently termed as "non-partisans" or "colorless" voters. In 50-50 deadlock races or when turnout is low, this population will be decisive to the election and developments of parties or party system. Future study of this third choice will lead us to further understand the increasingly volatile politics of Taiwan.

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Notes:

[i] Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study (TEDS) is a continual large-scale survey research project supported and funded by the Department of Humanities and Social Science(DHSS) of the Ministry of Science and Technology of Taiwan, ROC.

[ii] Election Study Center website (https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/, accessed April 1st, 2019)

[iii] We didn't evaluate the Soong model in 2016. For 2004, we model by blue and green camps. For 2008 and 2012, both were KMT vs. DPP contests.

[iv] This variable is unavailable in earlier elections.

[v] We drop the inequality variable from our 2016 models due to lack of available data in other election data sets. The South and Whitecollar variables were also excluded for their insignificant effects.

Table 1. Binomial Logistic Regression for the Impact of Issues and Demographics on Tsai Vote (Table 6 in Clark, Tan and Ho 2016)

Dependent Variable: Voted for Tsai

Overall Equation

-2 Log Likelihood	988			
Chi Square	336			
Sig.	0.0004			
Nagelkerke Pseudo R2	0.39			

Separate Effects of

Independent Variables	b	St. Er.	Sig	Odds Ratio
Independence	1.79	0.21	0.0004	6.01
Unification	-0.74	0.22	0.001	0.4
Economy Bad	0.83	0.17	0.0004	2.3
Inequality Bad	0.35	0.17	0.035	1.42
Govt Helps Public Welfare	-0.7	0.16	0.0004	0.5
South	0.26	0.17	0.129	1.29
Min-nan Father	0.28	0.22	0.189	1.33
Mainlander Father	-1.2	0.32	0.0004	0.3
Income	0.2	0.17	0.25	1.22
White Collar Occupation	0.1	0.18	0.57	1.11
Education	-0.73	0.23	0.001	0.48
Age	-0.59	0.19	0.001	0.56
Female	-0.24	0.16	0.133	0.79

Classification Analysis

Correct Predictions

Modal Category (Tsai)	63%

Correct Predictions from
Logistic Regression

Chu/Soong	66%
Tsai	82%
TOTAL	76%

Table 2. Model Robustness of Issue and Identity Voting in Taiwan, 2004-2016

	2004					2008					2012					2016				
KMT	Mean	SD	Min	Max	sig.	Mean	SD	Min	Max	sig.	Mean	SD	Min	Max	sig.	Mean	SD	Min	Max	sig.
Economy worse?	0.71	0.20	0.38	1.23	100.00	-0.61	0.19	-1.08	-0.36	100.00	-0.78	0.25	-1.45	-0.37	100.00	-0.37	0.13	-0.73	-0.10	**59.72**
Independence	-0.95	0.40	-2.05	-0.31	**87.65**	-1.11	0.36	-2.00	-0.60	100.00	-0.83	0.34	-1.74	-0.34	**96.68**	-1.71	0.29	-2.54	-1.22	100.00
Taiwanese	-1.46	0.24	-2.13	-1.07	100.00	-0.97	0.29	-1.80	-0.53	100.00	-1.09	0.28	-1.88	-0.64	100.00					
No. of models	2,048					2,048					2,048					2,048				
DPP																				
Economy worse?	-0.64	0.22	-1.19	-0.23	**93.95**	0.97	0.19	0.71	1.40	100.00	0.81	0.25	0.44	1.45	100.00	0.52	0.10	0.34	0.75	100.00
Independence	1.30	0.32	0.74	2.19	100.00	1.40	0.31	0.95	2.19	100.00	0.90	0.34	0.45	1.76	100.00	0.94	0.31	0.40	1.66	100.00
Taiwanese	1.23	0.28	0.76	1.96	100.00	0.95	0.37	0.35	1.93	**99.32**	0.86	0.35	0.33	1.77	**97.66**	1.12	0.25	0.71	1.80	100.00
No. of models	2,048					2,048					2,048					2,048				

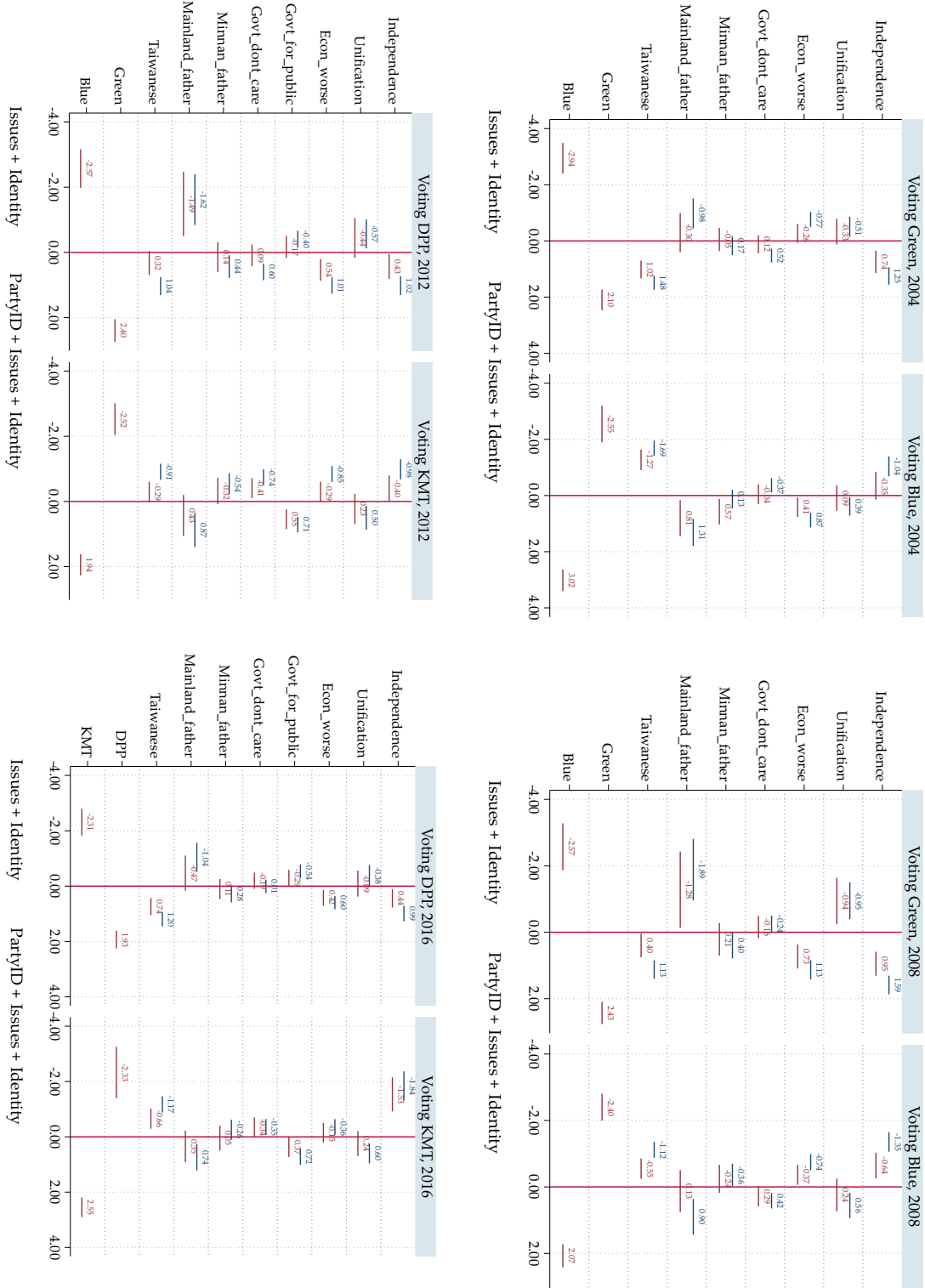Figure 1. Issue and Identity effects in Taiwan elections, 2004-2016

Figure 2. Issue effects in Taiwan elections: Support Independence
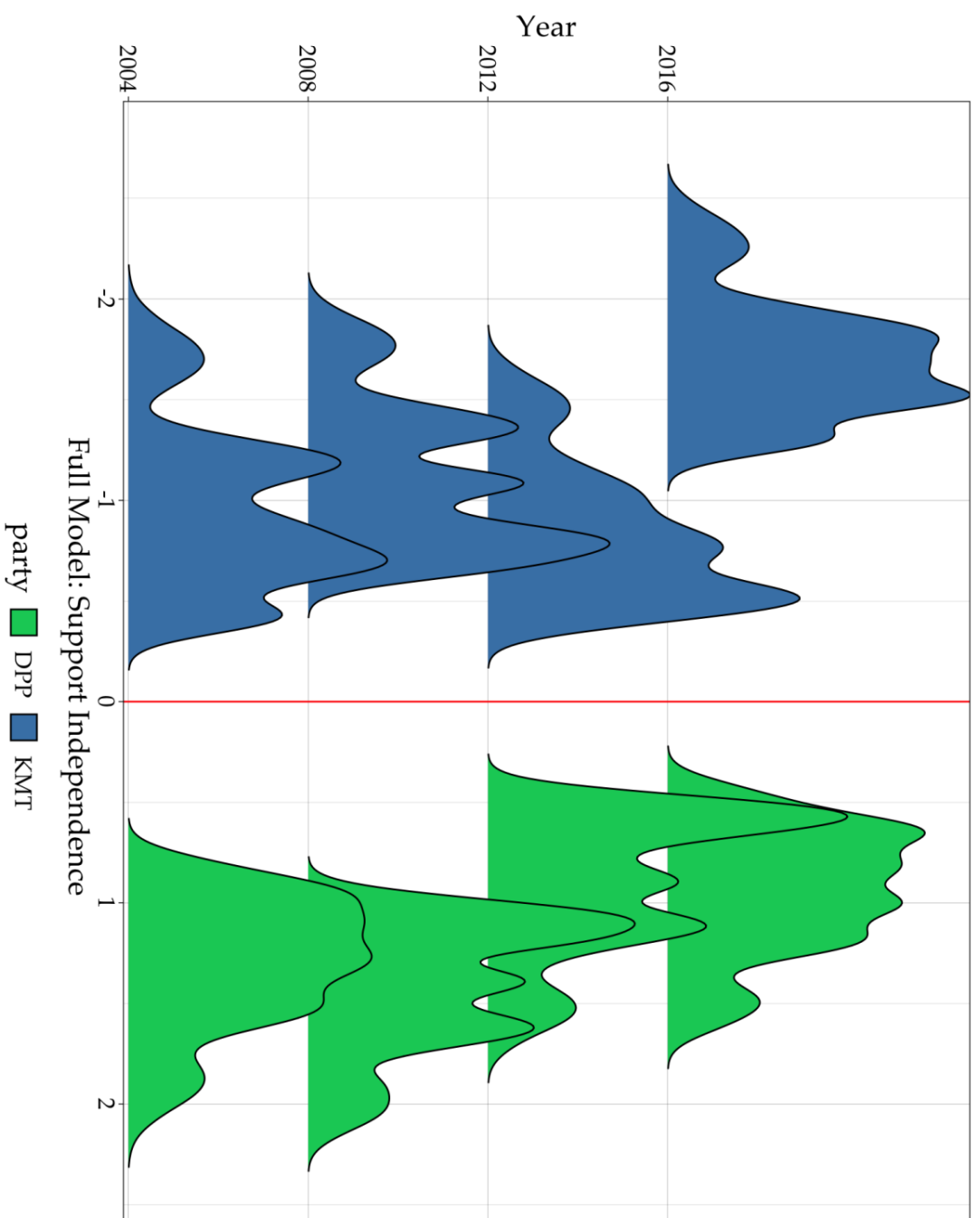
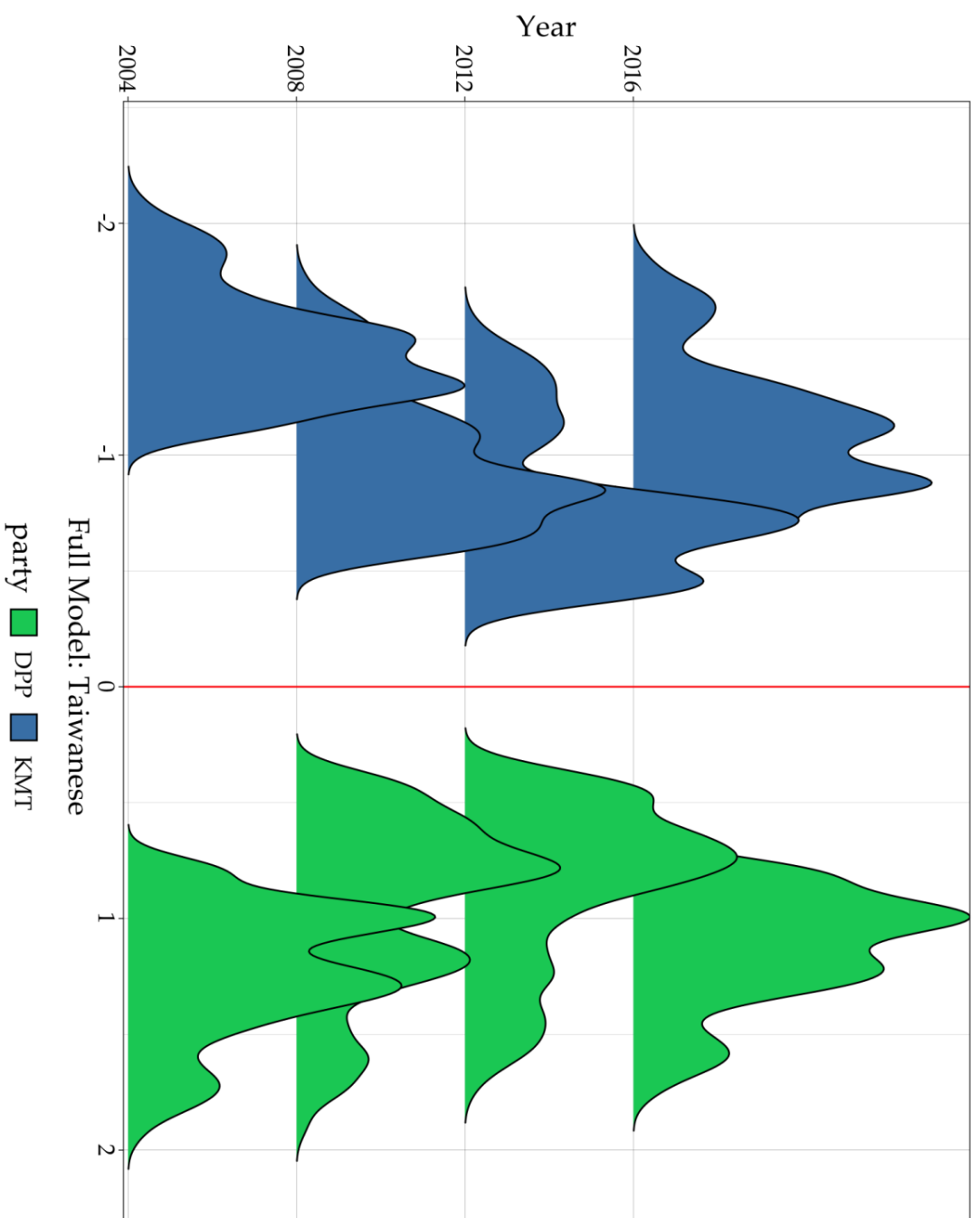Figure 3. Identity effects on Taiwan elections: Taiwanese identity

Figure 4. Issue effects in Taiwan elections: Economic evaluations