

Implications of independence polls

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) 2008 presidential campaign was widely interpreted as evidence of Taiwanese disgust at the alleged corruption of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration and as a wish for better cross-strait ties with Beijing.

Ma's 2012 re-election appeared to affirm that interpretation, at least to the international community and Taiwan's major democratic allies, but only until the pro-unification Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) leaves office.

Some people may have to be reminded that the KMT states in its party charter that it aspires to achieve Chinese "unification."

With that in mind, the results and implications of several public opinion polls on unification and independence conducted in the past year are as interesting as they are confusing.

Nearly 70 percent of Taiwanese identify with the sovereignty concept "one country on each side" (一個國家，兩個制度), according to a poll conducted last year by a National Taiwan University Department of Political Science research team and released this week.

Meanwhile, 71 percent of the respondents in a poll last year by cable television station TVBS said they preferred Taiwanese independence if given only the choices of independence or unification.

According to another poll conducted last year by National Chengchi University's Election Study Center, 83.3 percent of those polled rejected unification with China, while those who supported unification amounted to about 10 percent.

A string of surveys like these showed that Taiwanese identity and the public's aspiration for a truly independent and sovereign country had risen over the past decade, stabilizing somewhere between 60 and 70 percent in recent years, although most would admit that Taiwan does enjoy de facto independence.

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That sparked the question that immediately emerged when the election results appeared to contradict the survey results: Why did the majority of the electorate vote for the KMT rather than the pro-independence DPP?

There could be several reasons behind the inconsistency between voting behaviors and political ideology. Perhaps those who supported independence assumed that it was an unattainable aspiration, or they had simply lied to the pollsters.

Perhaps they assumed that voting for the KMT would be fine because unification is not likely to be a feasible goal and supporting the DPP was too risky, given the party's tendency to antagonize Beijing on most issues. Perhaps the unification-versus-independence issue was the furthest thing from their mind on election day.

There have been few studies conducted by academics and in particular, the DPP, on the implication of the contradiction, a decisive factor in future presidential elections that could be decided by a small percentage of the electorate.

While the DPP never conducted a comprehensive survey to determine why it had lost by about 6 percentage points to Ma in 2012, it concluded that the defeat was the result of its hawkish cross-strait policy.

During the past year, the DPP has been reviewing and debating its China policy. A conclusion has not yet been reached, but there have been various proposals — some of which were bold enough to advise the party to freeze its Taiwan independence clause.

That brings out another question: Which better reflect the “real” public opinion among Taiwanese — public opinion polls or election results?

If it turns out to be the former, in which the younger generation tend to have a stronger Taiwanese identity and more hostility toward Beijing than their predecessors, will the support

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rate for Taiwanese independence increase and will that translate into different election results? The DPP must take a serious look into the implications.

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