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Taiwan's 2024 Elections

A Moving Political Landscape with China Remaining Front and Center

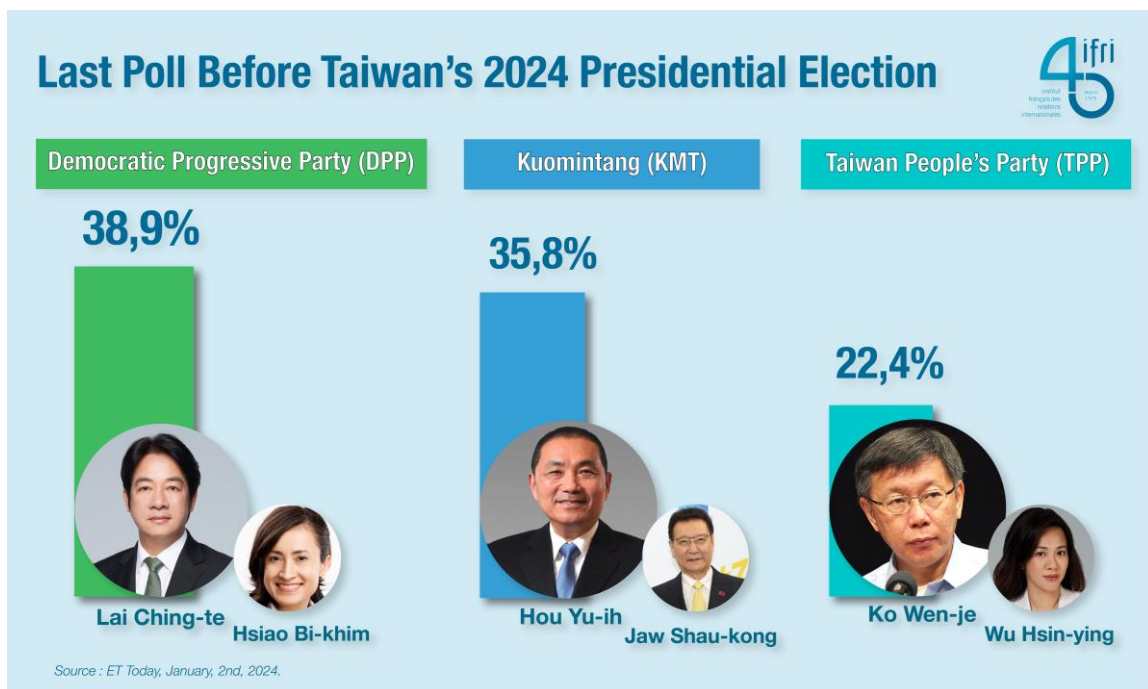
Marc JULIENNE

► Key Takeaways

- On January 13th the young Taiwanese democracy will hold its 8th presidential election since direct universal suffrage began in 1996. The same day, the people of Taiwan will elect a new Parliament – the Legislative Yuan – which will start its term on February 1st. President Tsai Ing-wen's second and final term will come to an end in May.
- This election is unique in many respects as it showcases a moving political landscape and shifting divides. Three duets of president and vice-president candidates are competing.
- The traditional political cleavages between the green and blue camps have faded. The opposition between pro-unification and pro-independence, and between pro-Chinese and pro-Taiwanese identities, no longer holds. New debates have emerged: choosing between war and peace, or between democracy and dictatorship.
- Structural political issues still hold nonetheless, particularly the relationship with Beijing, which remains at the forefront.
- Yet, the legislative ballot reserves even greater surprise and may well open up a four-year sequence wherein a presidential party faces a hung Parliament.

A dynamic political landscape

Throughout the campaign, up to four candidates joined the presidential race, with three tickets for president/vice president ultimately declared registered for the election.¹ The last poll before the pre-election shutdown was released on January 2nd and provided the following snapshot of voters' intentions.



Lai Ching-te (William Lai, 賴清德) and Hsiao Bi-Khim (蕭美琴) represent the incumbent Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The DPP was established clandestinely in 1986 to push for democratic reforms and civil liberties, as Taiwan was still a one-party state under martial law. It became the main opposition party as soon as democratic reforms started in the late 1980s.



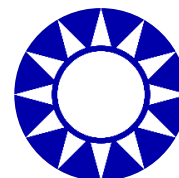
The presidential candidate William Lai has been Vice President of the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) since 2020. Born in 1959, he is the son of a coal miner. After completing medical studies in Taiwan, he obtained a degree in Public Health from Harvard University. He entered politics in the late 1990s, first as a legislator, then as the mayor of Tainan, and then as Premier between 2017 and 2019, during Tsai Ing-wen's first term.

Lai's running mate for vice president, Hsiao Bi-khim, was Taipei's representative to the United States (US) from 2020 until November 2023. She was born in 1971 in Kobe,

1. This situation is similar to the 2000 and 2016 elections, with three nominees from three different parties.

US, where she obtained a graduate degree in political science from Columbia University. Returning to Taiwan in the late 1990s, she made her career within the DPP as director of international affairs, then national security advisor to Taiwan's first president of the DPP, Chen Shui-bian, elected in 2000. Over the past 20 years, she has served four terms in the Legislative Yuan.

Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) and Jaw Shau-kong (趙少康) represent the Kuomintang (KMT). The KMT was established in 1912 in Beijing in the wake of the fall of the imperial Qing dynasty and the proclamation of the new ROC. At that time, Taiwan was governed by imperial Japan until its World War II defeat in 1945. From this time, the island was placed under the control of ROC-ruled mainland China, which was embroiled in a two-decade civil war opposing KMT nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong's communists. By the defeat of the former in 1949, the KMT-led ROC took refuge in Taiwan. The KMT ruled Taiwan continuously for 53 years, including forty years of martial law. After the death of General Chiang Kai-shek in 1975, his son Chiang Ching-kuo took over and initiated political reforms, carried on by his successor, Lee Teng-hui, to the advent of democracy in the 1990s.



Hou Yu-ih is a former police officer born in 1957 from a modest background. He climbed the administrative ladder to become Director-General of the National Police Agency between 2006 and 2008. In 2010, he took his first political position as deputy mayor of New Taipei City before becoming mayor in 2018.

Hou's running mate, Jaw Shau-kong, has the profile of both a politician and an entrepreneur. Born in 1950, he is the oldest candidate. From 1981 to 1996, he was involved in politics, first in the city council of Taipei and then as a KMT legislator. He later cut ties with the KMT to establish a pro-unification party: the "New Party." In 1996, he quit politics and entered the media industry, establishing and acquiring several media groups.

Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) and Wu Hsin-ying (吳欣盈) represent the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). Established only in 2019, the TPP gained five seats in the Legislative Yuan in 2020 and is the outsider in the current presidential race. Throughout the campaign, it emerged as a serious challenger to the two traditional parties, especially the KMT, which it overtook in some polls on several occasions.



Ko Wen-je is a physician and a renowned surgeon (specialized in organ transplants). Born in 1959, he was the mayor of Taipei between 2014 and 2022 and is the chairman and founder of the TPP. He is politically unclassifiable, claiming to be above the KMT-DPP divide. He is often qualified as a populist and criticized for having no ideological backbone. He often says that as a surgeon and politician, his only ideology is the well-being of the people,² which still doesn't explain his method and policy. He is furthermore tricky to

2. TPP's official website: www.tpp.org.tw.

classify because he started his political engagement ten years ago within the green camp (Taiwanese left wing). In 2014, he was strongly anti-unification and an ardent supporter of the Sunflower movement, opposing the economic agreements negotiated with the People's Republic of China (PRC) by President Ma Ying-jeou (KMT). Ko ran for Taipei's mayorship as an independent candidate the same year, although pan-green and with the DPP's support. In the 1990s and 2000s, he was also close to DPP leader and former ROC president Chen Shui-bian. In 2016, he supported the DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen during the presidential election and was close to "deep green" pro-independence figures. However, after 2016, his attitude changed vis-à-vis the PRC. He started using the expression "two sides of the Strait, one family" (兩岸一家親), an expression he still uses today.³ He also developed sister city ties with Shanghai and is very close to conservative blue camp figures.⁴ Last November, he also agreed to form a coalition and present a joint ticket with the KMT candidate, which eventually failed after an almost comical and short-lived negotiation. Yet, Ko still claims he is "deep-green at

The traditional divides between the DPP and the KMT have faded

heart," meaning he is closer to the DPP's ideas on independence and would pursue Tsai Ing-wen's national defense and foreign policy. At the same time, he promotes the development of ties with Beijing and the defense of Taiwan's international status (a no-go for Beijing).⁵ Still, Ko Wen-je made a breakthrough during the campaign and gathered broad support, especially among the youth and from dissatisfied light blue and light green voters.

Ko's running mate is Wu Hsin-ying (Cynthia), a TPP legislator. She was born in the US in 1978 and was educated in the US and the UK. Back in Taiwan, she was vice president of Shin Kong Life Insurance, a subsidiary of Shin Kong Group, a vast conglomerate built by her grandfather. Wu became a member of the Legislative Yuan in November 2022 after the resignation of TPP colleague Tsai Pi-ru.

Although he dropped out of the election race, it is worth mentioning the fourth candidate, Gou Tai-ming (Terry Gou, 郭台銘), famous for being the founder of Foxconn (Hon Hai Precision Industry) in 1974. The company became a mastodon of electronic assembly, working with the likes of Apple, IBM, and HP. He gave up in late November despite collecting enough signatures to be eligible. He likely refrained from splitting the conservative votes further to preserve the conservative camp's chance to win, as his poll numbers remained very low.

3. "Ko Wen-je: Two Sides of the Strait, One Family - Show Goodwill. The Bottom Line Is to Maintain Taiwan's Democracy and Freedom" (柯文哲：兩岸一家親釋善意 底線保有台灣民主自由), CNA, 30 December 2023, available at: www.cna.com.tw.

4. B. Hioe, L. Nachman, "From Green to Blue: The Political History of Ko Wen-je", *The Diplomat*, November 28, 2023, available at: <https://thediplomat.com>.

5. "Ko Wen-je Says That He Is 'Deep-green at Heart'", *Taipei Times*, December 8, 2023, available at: www.taipeitimes.com.

The end of traditional political cleavages?

The second aspect of this election is the shift in political divides between the DPP and the KMT. As counterintuitive as it may sound, the traditional divides between the DPP and the KMT have faded. The first traditional split between pro-independence vs pro-unification no longer holds. For its part, the DPP is no longer advocating the formal declaration of independence because it considers that Taiwan already has all the components of an independent state. As for the KMT, advocating unification with the mainland is no longer realistic either, from an electoral viewpoint, even more so in the context of an expansionist communist China that has seized control over Hong Kong and wants to apply the same “one country, two systems” policy to Taiwan. As a matter of fact, according to the latest survey of the Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University, 87% of Taiwanese want to maintain the status quo (with independence or unification in mind in the short or long term). Those who favor independence or unification as soon as possible are only 4.5% and 1.6%, respectively.⁶ Hence, during a televised debate on December 30th, the three presidential candidates each pledged to maintain the status quo if elected.⁷

The second divide used to be Chinese identity vs Taiwanese identity. According to the same academic institute, 62.8% of the people of Taiwan consider themselves as only Taiwanese, and 30.5% as Taiwanese and Chinese. Only 2.5% consider themselves as only Chinese. The Taiwanese identity is a reality that cannot be denied, and the share of the population that identifies as solely Taiwanese is increasing every year, growing from 24% during the first presidential election in 1996 to 40% in the early 2000s to above 60% today.⁸ Therefore, the Taiwanese identity is no longer an electoral battleground for the DPP or the KMT.

Because these past divides no longer hold, new political cleavages have emerged. The KMT presents itself as the most responsible ruling party that will be able to maintain peace and reopen dialogue with the PRC. In response, the DPP claims that it is the only protector of freedom and democracy against an opposition that is ready to lie down before a dictatorship. In short, the KMT presents the election as a choice between peace and war, while the DPP presents it as a choice between democracy and autocracy.

A choice between
peace and war vs
a choice between
democracy and
autocracy

6. “Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1994/12~2023/06)”, Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University, July 12, 2023, available at: <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw>.

7. “DPP, KMT Candidates Reject Independence, Pro-China Labels at Debate”, Focus Taiwan – CNA English News, December 30, 2023, available at: <https://focustaiwan.tw>.

8. “Taiwanese / Chinese Identity (1992/06~2023/06)”, Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University, July 12, 2023, available at: <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw>.

What would a victory of each candidate mean?

According to each candidate's program, the main topics of divergences are cross-strait relations and nuclear energy.

Cross-Strait relations

Regarding cross-strait relations, Lai Ching-te will likely pursue Tsai Ing-wen's policy, as he claimed he would. This means no claim of independence, strengthening economic security through relocation and diversification, rejecting the "1992 consensus" and other notions such as "one China principle" and "one country, two systems", while remaining open to dialogue.

"1992 consensus"

In 1992, two semi-official organizations from China and Taiwan – the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) – held talks and correspondence, through which they agreed on the principle of "one China, but each side attach[ing] a different meaning to it."

The objective was not to solve the unification conflict between the two sides of the strait but to find a broad political compromise to pursue "functional talks" unrelated to political topics.

Interestingly enough, the idea of "one China with different meanings" was proposed by the Taiwanese side. The expression "1992 consensus" was coined in Taiwan only in 2000 by a KMT official named Su Chi.⁹

The "1992 consensus" has always been controversial in Taiwan. Even Lee Teng-hui (of the KMT), President of the ROC throughout the 1990s, did not fully endorse the consensus and advanced the "Two-states Theory" to describe cross-strait relations in 1999.

His successor, Chen Shui-bian of DPP, did not recognize it because he advocated Taiwan's independence. President Ma Ying-jeou (of the KMT) endorsed it, contrary to his successor Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP.

On the other side of the strait, CPC Secretary General Xi Jinping promoted a new approach to the "consensus." In 2019, he started associating the "1992 consensus" with the other notion of "one country, two systems," which was reserved for Hong Kong and Macau until then. "One country, two systems" means one China (i.e., the PRC), one national government, and several administrative sub-systems submitted to the leadership of the PRC government.

While the "1992 consensus" is controversial in Taiwan, "one country, two systems" is unanimously refuted. The association of the two notions by the PRC actually makes it more challenging for the pan-blue camp to support the "1992 consensus" in Taiwan.

As far as Hou Yu-ih is concerned, he claimed he would maintain the status quo and promote the "3Ds strategy": Deterrence (strengthening defense capabilities), Dialogue, and De-escalation (improving cooperation). His position on the "1992 consensus" remains

9. "Su Chi Admits the '1992 Consensus' Was Made Up", *Taipei Times*, February 22, 2006, available at: www.taipeitimes.com.

blurry as he does not oppose it, but he claims it should comply with ROC laws. He opposes “one country, two systems” but supports reopening talks on the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), the framework negotiated by President Ma Ying-jeou, although after enacting an oversight bill.

Ko Wen-je’s cross-strait policy is undoubtedly the most difficult to predict, as he promotes seemingly contradictory proposals. For instance, his agenda for “Taiwan’s Sovereignty and Cross-Strait Peace” is oxymoronic: Taiwan’s sovereignty is in no way acceptable to Beijing; thus, it cannot lead to peace. Or, when he does not reject the “1992 consensus” but proposes to change the name, seemingly implying that the only problem is the wording while avoiding clarity on the issue.

Cross-strait relations policy as proposed by each candidate¹⁰

Lai Ching-te DPP	Hou Yu-ih KMT	Ko Wen-je TPP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No plan and no need to declare independence - Maintain peace through the "Four Pillars": Enhancing deterrence, strengthening economic security, deepening democratic partnerships, and maintaining a pragmatic and principled cross-strait policy - Reject the “1992 consensus”, the “one China” principle, and “one country, two systems” - Communicate with Beijing based on mutual respect - Reducing economic reliance on China; no further extension of the ECFA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain the status quo under the principle of "no unification, no independence, and no use of force" - Maintain peace through the "3Ds" strategy: deterrence, dialogue, de-escalation - Support a version of the “1992 consensus” but in compliance with the ROC Constitution and ROC laws - Oppose "one country, two systems" - Enact an oversight bill of economic cooperation before reopening talks on ECFA - Establish a youth commission under the Presidential Office to take into account the opinions of the youth in cross-strait policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain the status quo - “Taiwan’s Sovereignty and Cross-Strait Peace” - Resume talks by applying five mutual principles: recognition, understanding, respect, cooperation, and consideration of each other’s interests - No rejection of the “1992 consensus”, but propose a change of expression - Enact oversight bill of economic cooperation before reopening talks on ECFA

10. “Taiwan’s 2024 Presidential Candidates: Where They Stand on Key Issues”, Focus Taiwan – CNA English News, December 27, 2023, available at: <https://focustaiwan.tw>.

Broader foreign policy and defense

Seemingly an admission of Tsai Ing-wen's foreign policy success, all three candidates either explicitly claim to continue her policy or do not say they would broadly diverge from it. Indeed, Lai will continue developing ties with like-minded democratic countries, presenting Taiwan as a constructive partner on the international stage and leveraging Taiwan's core position in the technological global value chain. Ko stated he would pursue Tsai's foreign policy with the caveats mentioned above on cross-strait relations. Hou

announced he would continue to deepen security and economic ties with the US and Japan¹¹ and develop official and unofficial relations worldwide, although foreign policy is not the strongest part of his program.

The three candidates do not strongly oppose each other on defense policy

The three candidates do not strongly oppose each other on defense policy either. They support the gradual increase of defense spending to 2.5-3% of the GDP. No one opposes the

DPP's reform of the military service from 4 to 12 months, although the KMT has cast some doubts. They all support the development of asymmetrical capabilities, as well.

Nuclear energy

Another critical issue for Taiwan's security is energy. Taiwan is highly reliant on external supplies, partly explaining why it is accelerating the development of domestically produced renewable energy. All three candidates share the same assessment and propose to lean toward an energy mix of roughly 45-50% natural gas, 15-20% coal, and 27-30% renewables. But they diverge on one controversial issue: nuclear energy. President Tsai committed to phase out nuclear energy by 2025. As such, two of the three nuclear power plants are being decommissioned, and the third should enter decommissioning in 2024. A fourth plant exists but was never completed. Lai Ching-te stated he would stick to the full phasing out of nuclear (0% in 2025), while Hou wants to inspect and recommission all three power plants and assess the completion of the fourth, with a target of 12% nuclear by 2030. In between, Ko said he would pursue the decommissioning of the first plant, reopen and maintain the second and third, and assess the completion of the fourth as well, targeting 10% nuclear energy by 2030.¹²

An even more uncertain question: Who will take over the Legislative Yuan?

Although Lai Ching-te comes on top in all polls, they can often be contradicted in direct democracies. Even more uncertain is the result of the legislative ballot the same day, which

11. D. Sacks, "Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election: Analyzing Hou Yu-ih's Foreign Policy Positions", Council on Foreign Relations, December 26, 2023, available at: www.cfr.org.

12. "Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Candidates: Where They Stand on Key Issues", *op. cit.*

will renew the 113 members of the Legislative Yuan. Considering a presidential victory of the DPP as a working hypothesis, three scenarios can be drawn for the Legislative Yuan:

- Firstly, the DPP reaches an absolute majority with 57 legislators or more and has free rein to pursue its policy. However, this is the least likely scenario according to several assessments.
- Secondly, no party gains an absolute majority, and, in this case, the more politically fluid TPP becomes the kingmaker to support or oppose DPP and KMT initiatives. Negotiation becomes the critical factor in this scenario.
- Thirdly, the KMT wins an absolute majority and starts a complex balance of power against the hypothetical DPP government. Such a situation would be similar to the two terms of President Chen Shui-bian (DPP) between 2000 and 2008.

According to recent polls, the last two scenarios are the most likely.¹³ If so, the real debate and political struggle for the next four years would have only just begun. Until then, only the actual election will tell.

Marc Julienne is the Head of China Research at the Center for Asian Studies of the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri).

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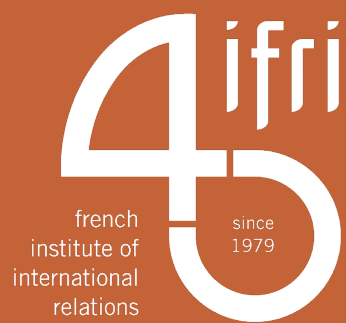
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13. D. Tham, "Taiwan Votes 2024: A Hung Parliament Could Emerge for the First Time since 2008. Here's Why It Matters", CNA (Singapore), January 3, 2024, available at: www.channelnewsasia.com; Z.H. Miao, "DPP and KMT: Who Will Be the Largest Political Party in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan?", *Think China*, January 2, 2024, available at: www.thinkchina.sg.



27 rue de la Procession
75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

Ifri.org

