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Presidential elections in Taiwan (13 January 2024)

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1. Introduction

The 2024 Taiwanese presidential election was held on 13 January 2024 and featured three main candidates: the sitting Vice-President William "Lai Ching-te" Lai (DPP – Democratic Progressive Party), the Mayor of New Taipei City, Hou Yu-ih (KMT – Kuomintang), and the former Mayor of Taipei, Ko Wen-je (TPP – Taiwan People's Party). These elections took place in a highly polarised environment, due particularly to differing conceptions of Taiwan's national identity and its relationship with China. This was especially evident given the DPP's continued narrative of democratic resistance against China's increasingly assertive posture. This explains the antagonistic positioning of the two major parties: the ruling DPP and the historically pro-engagement KMT. As an alternative, the TPP's candidate, Ko Wen-je, adopted a pragmatic, even technocratic, stance focused on domestic issues such as employment and housing, with particular appeal among younger voters.

Looking more closely at each candidate, William Lai, or "Lai Ching-te," is a trained physician and senior DPP figure. He began his political career as a legislator, later became Mayor of Tainan, and then served as Premier under Tsai Ing-wen before becoming her Vice-President. Despite challenging Tsai in the 2019 DPP primaries, Lai ultimately positioned himself as a candidate of continuity, framing the election as a "contest between democracy and autocracy" and presenting himself as the sole guarantor of Taiwan's democratic integrity. His platform advocated strengthening Taiwan's defence capabilities, deepening political and economic ties with the United States and other democracies, and reducing economic dependence on China. Contrary to expectations, Lai repeatedly stated he would maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and would not seek formal independence. This moderation – for example, rejecting the "1992 Consensus" and avoiding any suggestion of changing Taiwan's official name – appears aimed at assuaging international concerns and signalling openness to dialogue, albeit without prioritising it.

Hou Yu-ih, a criminology professor, former Director-General of Taiwan's National Police, and current Mayor of New Taipei City, stood as the KMT's candidate. Though highly popular within his municipality, Hou lacked widespread national support and was perceived as inexperienced in international affairs[4]. Nonetheless, his stance combined a willingness to engage with China[5] with a firm rejection of unification under the PRC, and he even called for increased defence spending in Taiwan.

Ko Wen-je, a physician-turned-politician following the early-2000s SARS epidemic, ran as head of the Taiwan People's Party, which he founded. He rose to prominence by coordinating clinical protocols to combat avian flu at National Taiwan University, where he taught medicine. His reputation as a pragmatic technocrat and advocate of government transparency underpinned his appeal. Ko's campaign centred on three core issues: rejection of the 1992 Consensus (without formally advocating *de jure* independence), strengthening Taiwan's defensive capabilities without provoking China, and advocating a parliamentary solution to break the bipartisan deadlock in Taiwanese politics.

This paper aims at analysing Lai's victory, in which he secured approximately 40.0% of the vote – a result that ensured a third consecutive term for the DPP, an unprecedented achievement in Taiwan's democratic history. It will also examine the consequences of this outcome for Taiwan's foreign policy and the legal-electoral framework governing presidential elections in Taiwan.

2. Legal-Electoral Framework of the Taiwanese Presidential Elections

Operating under a Republican constitutional model inspired by the so-called "Lincoln formula"[6], Article 1 of the Constitution of the

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4 *See* Council on Foreign Relations, available [Online] at: https://www.cfr.org/blog/taiwans-2024-presidential-election-analyzing-hou-yu-ihs-foreign-policy-positions (accessed on May 22, 2025).

5 *See* Associated Press, available [Online] at: https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-presidential-elections-china-8eb93b9e13705ecbbdb47d6e6723353b (accessed on May 22, 2025).

6 Regarding that expression, *see* Canotilho, J.J.G., 2011. Direito Constitucional e Teoria da Constituição, 7th Ed. Coimbra: Almedina, p.287

Republic of China (Taiwan) states that it is "*founded upon the Three Principles of the People and shall be a democratic republic of the people, governed by the people, and for the people.*" The institutional framework includes the President (Head of State) and the *five Yuans*: the Legislative Yuan (Parliament), the Executive Yuan (Government), the Control Yuan (similar to a Court of Auditors, with oversight over financial and administrative legality), the Examination Yuan (responsible for civil service entry and career progression), and the Judicial Yuan (which is members operate independently from the Executive and the Presidency).

Under article 35 et seq. the President, as head of State, represents the country externally, commands the armed forces, declares states of emergency and war or peace, issues pardons and decorations, promulgates legislation, and appoints top civil and military officials.

The Vice-President is elected jointly with the President, appearing paired on the ballot, in accordance with Article 58 of the Presidential and Vice-Presidential Election and Recall Act. The Vice-President assumes the presidency in cases of vacancy (Article 49) or temporary incapacity.

In Taiwan, the Presidential elections are governed by the Constitution, the Presidential and Vice-Presidential Election and Recall Act (2000), as well as relevant constitutional amendments enacted during Taiwan's democratic transition (post-1991). The Central Election Commission (CEC) plays a central role in administering and overseeing the process.

Originally, the Constitution, which entered into force on the 25th of January 1947, provided for indirect election by an electoral college. However, following the 1994 amendment, the President (and Vice-President) is now directly elect. As such, according to Article 2 of the 2005 Additional Articles and Article 2 of the Election Act, the President is elected by direct, universal suffrage for a six-year term and may be re-elected once (Articles 47 and 129).

The political and institutional developments of Taiwan resulted in the Election Act, which was first promulgated on 9 August 1995, undergoing multiple amendments, particularly between 2003 and 2009, and more recently in 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, and finally in 2023.

Eligibility to vote (*active suffrage*) is granted to citizens aged 20 or older (Article 130 of the Constitution), while eligibility to run (*passive suffrage*) normally begins at 23. However, presidential candidates must be at least 40 years old (Article 45), must be eligible to vote (Article 20), and must have resided in Taiwan for at least 15 years with six consecutive months of residence immediately prior to the election. Naturalised Nationals from mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macau are excluded from being eligible as President or Vice-President.

Ineligibility also extends to those with criminal convictions, pending appeals, or unresolved execution of sentences; those barred from public office or military service; and, notably, those in violation of Taiwan's recently enhanced National Security Act (Article 26 paragraph 4), which may bar candidates from running for these elections.

While not directly an issue of eligibility, Article 31 of the Election Act requires a NT$15 million deposit per candidacy. This is refundable only if the candidate achieves at least 5% of the vote. Considering Taiwan's average annual income, this obligation effectively restricts candidacy to either those backed by established parties or those with substantial financial means.

For the presidential elections, the Taiwanese territory is comprised of a single national constituency which includes the main island and the outlying archipelagos of Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu, and others (Article 3). The voting system is simple majority with a threshold clause: if no candidate receives more than 50% of valid votes, second round is held within three months. A margin of 0.3% or less between the top two candidates allows the candidate in second place to petition for a recount, specifying the voting districts to be reviewed (Article 63, paragraph 1).

Voting is in-person (Articles 53 et seq.) at designated polling stations in public buildings and schools. These must be accessible, although no provision currently exists for early voting, postal voting, electronic voting, or overseas voting. Ballots and polling procedures must meet strict legal requirements regarding format, secrecy, and ballot invalidation (Article 60).

The CEC oversees all aspects of the electoral process, as established under Article 6 of the Election Act. Its responsibilities (Article 7) include issuing election notices, logistical coordination, candidate registration and eligibility verification (Articles 21 to 24), supervision of campaigns (Articles 36 et seq.), public education, official televised debates, certification of results, and administration of public funding for campaigns.

Nº.	Presidential / Vice-Presidential Candidates	Gender	Votes	% share	Registration by
1	KO, WEN-JEN Wu, Hsin-Ying	M F	3,690,466	26.46%	Taiwan People's Party Recommendation
2	Lai, Ching-Te Hsiao, Bi-khim	M F	5,586,019	40.05%	Democratic Progressive Party Recommendation
3	HOU, YU-IH JAW, SHAU-KONG	M M	4,671,021	33.49%	Kuomintang Recommendation

	Reg. Voters	T. votes cast	Valid votes	Inv. votes	Turnout rate (%)
Total	19,548,531	14,048,311	13,947,506	100,805	71.86

Source: Central Electoral Commission (Taiwan), available at: https://web.cec.gov.tw/english/article/41410

3. Result analysis

Lai's victory – viewed in Beijing as that of a pro-independence candidate – raises tensions across the Strait. Analysts have labelled his administration potentially "the most threatening" to Chinese interests[7].

7 *See* United States Institute for Peace, 2024. Taiwan New President Faces Tensions with China and Domestic Division. Available [Online] at: https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/06/taiwans-new-president-faces-tensions-china-and-domestic-division (accessed on May 25, 2025); RAND Institute, 2024. China isn't giving Taiwan's Lai Ching-te any honeymoon. Available [Online] at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/06/china-isnt-giving-taiwans-lai-ching-te-any-honeymoon.html (accessed on May 25, 2025).

Possible responses from China include intensified military exercises, economic retaliation, and diplomatic pressure. During the campaign, Beijing warned that voters faced a choice between "peace or war", however, Lai won without an absolute majority and lacks a strong legislative mandate which means that most Taiwanese favour maintaining the status quo. Nevertheless, Lai is expected to continue asserting Taiwan's *de facto* sovereignty, a stance likely to sustain Chinese mistrust. The president-elect advocates continuity in U.S.-Taiwan relations, emphasising stronger defence cooperation and deeper ties with other democracies.

Domestically, Lai's administration inherits a host of economic and social pressures. Taiwan's economy remains heavily skewed toward high-tech exports – notably semiconductors – which generates large GDP but offers jobs to only a tiny fraction of workers[8]. In practice this has fostered stark inequality: ordinary wages have stagnated while real estate prices continue to climb. One analysis notes Taiwan now has "some of the world's highest housing prices" alongside prolonged wage stagnation[9], prompting many younger voters to become frustrated and even shift support to third parties. Lai has responded with modest reforms – for example raising the minimum wage to NT$27,470 (though shy of prior DPP pledges) – and has promised expanded social subsidies (such as increased childcare allowances and health-insurance reform) to ease cost-of-living strains[10]. Demographics add to the challenge: Taiwan's population is aging faster than any in East Asia, with a plunging birth rate that will heavily burden pensions and healthcare. Lai's domestic agenda explicitly includes policies to make childcare more affordable and to bolster elder care funding[11]. Even the energy sector poses political difficulty – while the public broadly supports a green-power transition, surveys find significant splits over phasing out nuclear reactors, complicating Lai's commitment to reach net-zero emissions[12].

Politically, Lai now leads an unusually divided government. Although separate from the presidency, in the new Legislative Yuan, the opposition Kuomintang holds a one-seat majority (52 seats to the DPP's 51, with eight seats held by the centrist Taiwan People's Party)[13]. This rare hung parliament (the first in 16 years) forces Lai to negotiate constantly with rival parties on even routine measures and explains the fact that Taiwan has already scheduled recall elections for the 26th of July[14]. Partisan strife has already produced gridlock: for example, a fight over judicial appointments has left Taiwan's Constitutional Court without the nine justices needed for a *quorum*, effectively stalling its ability to rule on legislation[15]. Similarly, the regular process for passing the budget is breaking down amid interparty squabbling[16].

4. Foreign Affairs and political aftermath

The Presidential Elections of Taiwan, scheduled for January 2024, started actually in August 2022. On August 3, 2022, Nancy Pelosi, at that time US House Speaker (constitutionally the 3rd highest ranking in the Federation), set foot on Taipei despite all the warnings coming from Beijing against it. The words of Nancy Pelosi, regarding her travel to Taipei, "*our delegation's visit to Taiwan honors America's unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan's vibrant democracy*[17]" set the tone for the main topic discussed throughout the Presidential election in Taiwan.

It is important to notice beforehand that the Presidential elections in Taiwan were meagre in debates. Public rallies and choreographed street initiatives set the tone of the race that saw only one debate on TV, aired on December 31, 2023. The debate was considered a blend, unappealing moment of political confrontation, with experts agreeing that "*none of the candidates delivered the knockout punch that would move the needle in their direction in the January election*[18]".

Lai Ching-Te, Vice-President of Taiwan and Presidential candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party, stated that "On so-called Taiwan independence, Taiwan's basic position is that Taiwan's sovereignty and independence belong to its 23 million people, not the People's Republic of China[19]" leading to a furious response from Beijing that dubbed the comments made in the TV debate as unnecessarily provocative.

Hou Yu-ih, mayor of New Taipei and presidential candidate of the Kuomintang Party, opted for a different stance claiming that "*If the KMT returns to power, it means the return of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement, the return of large numbers of Chinese students enrolled in schools and taking up jobs*[20]". A more conciliatory tone that pleased Beijing but displeased Washington's allies.

Ko Wen-je, former Mayor of Taipei and presidential candidate from the Taiwan's People Party, attempted to position himself as neither *en route* to confrontation with Beijing, nor on a deep compromise with mainland

8 *See* Brookings Institution, 2025. Taiwan President Lai's three big challenges in 2025. Available [Online] at: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/taiwan-president-lais-three-big-challenges-in-2025/ (accessed on May 25, 2025).

9 Anand, Adhiraaj, Mahima Duggal & David Kuehen (2024). Taiwan's New President: Priorities and Challenges, GIGA Focus Asia, no. 4. Available [Online] at: https://doi.org/10.57671/gfas-24042 (accessed on May 25, 2025).

10 Ibid.

11 Ibidem.

12 Ibid. note 9.

13 *See* the results of the parliamentary elections at the CEC's website, available [Online] at: https://web.cec.gov.tw/english/article/41434 (Accessed June 29, 2025).

14 *See* Reuters, 2025. Taiwan to hold recall election for lawmakers that could reshape parliament. Available [Online] at: https://www.reuters.com/world/china/taiwan-hold-recall-election-lawmakers-that-could-reshape-parliament-2025-06-20 (accessed on June 29, 2025).

15 Templeman, K. 2025. Taiwan is on the brink of a constitutional crisis. Kharis Templeman [Blog]. Available [Online] at: https://www.kharistempleman.com/blog/taiwan-is-on-the-verge-of-a-constitutional-crisis (accessed on June 29, 2025).

16 Reuters, 2025. Taiwan cabinet to ask parliament to unfreeze $4 bln amid budget standoff. Available [Online] at: https://www.reuters.com/markets/emerging/taiwan-cabinet-ask-parliament-unfreeze-4-bln-amid-budget-standoff-2025-04-22/ (accessed on June 29, 2025).

17 South China Morning Post, 2022. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi arrives in Taiwan, defying Beijing's warnings. Available [Online] at: https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3187478/us-house-speaker-nancy-pelosi-arrives-taiwan-defying-beijings?module=inline&pgtype=article (accessed on June 2, 2025).

18 The Straits Times, 2023. Tears and barbs in Taiwan's only presidential debate. Available [Online] at:: https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/tears-and-barbs-in-taiwan-s-only-presidential-debate (accessed on May 28, 2025).

19 Reuters, 2023. Taiwan's sovereignty belongs to its people, presidential frontrunner says. Available [Online] at: https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwans-sovereignty-belongs-its-people-presidential-frontrunner-says-2023-12-30/ (Accessed on June 3, 2025).

20 Taipei Times, 2023. Candidates clash over China in debates. Available [Online] at: https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2023/12/31/2003811398 (Accessed on May 29, 2025).

China. This balanced approach, that was dismissed by the Democratic Progressive Party and by the Kuomintang Party was able to convince more than ¼ of the electorate and proven that a joint presidential ticket of the Kuomintang Party with the Taiwan's People Party would have dethroned the Democratic People Party candidature.

The Presidential race was marked as well by the shadow of the interference of the People's Republic of China, despite the Anti-Infiltration Act that entered into force in January 2020 giving to the Presidential office and the Legislative body instruments to persecute and arrest those that threaten the political integrity of Taiwan.

However, issues of foreign policy and diplomacy were scarcely debated, mostly focusing on an intense debate about nuclear energy usage. Hou and Ko agreed that a gradual increase in the usage of nuclear energy was positive for the island, however the two candidates disagreed on what that gradual increase meant. Differently, Lai promised to begin a political process to terminate nuclear energy in Taiwan by 2050.

Economic issues, particularly inflation, cost of living, and access to affordable houses, completely dominated the debates throughout the Presidential elections campaign.

The Presidential campaign in the last week (starting from January 6, 2023) gained a two-flavored nature: with Lai Ching-Te supporters opting for a more nationalist approach unable to make concessions regarding Taiwan's sovereignty (at that time recognized by 13 UN Member-States[21]). On the other side, Hou Yu-ih heightened the more "responsible approach" would be close cooperation with Beijing, for the mutual benefit of islanders and mainlanders. Ko Wen-je "mid-way" approach was bulldozered in the final spree of the campaign.

Although the victory of Lai Ching-Te in the Presidential election of January 13, 2024, could make us ponder that the nationalistic infused campaign was a winning shot; the fact the Kuomintang Party narrowly won the legislative elections[22] is a clear sign that the Taiwanese voters were swayed by both strategies in almost equal terms. Post-elections the Kuomintang Party and the Taiwan's People Party formed an alliance to control the legislative body of the island and thereby condition the actions of the Presidency.

In May 2024 a bill proposing increased powers for the Legislative Yuan, controlled by the Kuomintang Party and the Taiwan's People Party, led to the emergence of street and online protests named as *Bluebird Movement*[23] that vehemently opposed the apparent institutional takeover. The Presidential and Parliamentary elections of Taiwan 2024 revealed a deeply fractioned society that leans between idealistic nationalism and pragmatic collaborationism.

21 Three days after the Presidential election in Taiwan, the micro-state of Nauru decided to de-recognize Taiwan's sovereignty as a way to boost diplomatic relations with China. Chanel News Asia, 2024. Why tiny Nauru ditched Taipei for Beijing - and why it matters. Available [Online] at: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/nauru-taiwan-china-diplomatic-cna-explains-4051026 (Accessed on June 4, 2025).

22 Interestingly, the Kuomintang Party won 52 seats with 217.486 less votes than the Democratic People Party that got 51 seats.

23 Global Taiwan Institute, 2024. What's New for the Bluebird Movement? Advancing Asian Democratic Solidarity between Taiwan and Southeast Asia via Digital Technology and Partnership. Available [Online] at: https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/06/whats-new-for-the-bluebird-movement/ (Accessed on June 2, 2025).