



TAIWAN POLICY CENTRE BRIEFING

Taiwan's Presidential Election 2024

A guide to the parties, candidates, and key issues

December 2023

FOREWORD



The upcoming 2024 Presidential elections in Taiwan are perhaps the most important the country has faced since its first fully democratic election in 1996 and the first successful and peaceful transition of leadership in 2000.

During the eight years the current President Tsai Ing-wen has been in office, we have seen a significant shift in the geo-political realities in the region, with the People's Republic of China showing increasing belligerence towards its neighbours, while seeking to tackle growing economic and social challenges at home.

Taiwan finds itself increasingly in the crosshairs and events in Ukraine and, more recently, the Middle East, have clearly illustrated how real the threat of armed conflict can be, and should it break out across the Taiwan Straits the consequences for us here in the UK and around the world would be far more significant than many people dare realise.

The 23 million people of Taiwan therefore go to the polls to choose a new President, a decision which will, as a result of the threat from the PRC, be dominated by international concerns more than domestic ones.

That the Taiwanese people have the right to democratically choose their own leader is a precious freedom and indicator of their sovereign self-determination. It is absolutely vital that the UK does everything in its power to support Taiwan's thriving democratic process and the values that this country represents. Because of Taiwan's unique geopolitical position, it is also vitally important that UK politicians and policymakers familiarise themselves with these elections, the candidates, and what they stand for.

This Taiwan Policy Centre briefing is therefore an important and timely document and I would urge all of my Parliamentary colleagues and any policymakers with an interest in global affairs, to read it closely.

It is too easy to dismiss events around Taiwan as being about a small island on the other side of the world. But Taiwan is much more than that. It is an economic powerhouse that epitomises the values that the UK seeks to espouse around the world.

And the decision taken by the Taiwanese people in January 2024 could have profound consequences for us all.

Judith Cummins MP
Member of Parliament, Bradford South
Co-Chair of Labour Friends Of Taiwan
December 2023

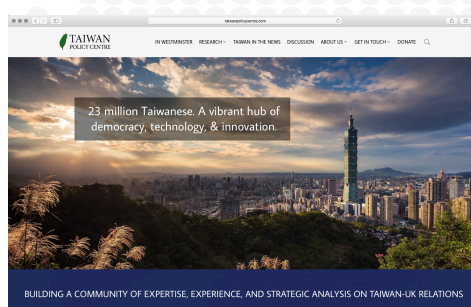


About Us

The Taiwan Policy Centre is a non-partisan organisation dedicated to boosting political, cultural, and trading relations between the UK and Taiwan. We aim to increase the knowledge and understanding that policy-makers, the media, and the British public have about Taiwan through a combination of research, educational events, and outreach.

We further aim to highlight the threats and injustices that Taiwan faces at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party and lobby the UK Government to take a stronger and more proactive stand in support of Taiwan on the global stage.

Too often, media coverage and understanding of Taiwan is shaped by the language and claims of the Chinese Communist Party, a governing authority which does not, and never has, governed Taiwan. The Taiwan Policy Centre aims to correct these misconceptions and ensure that the UK's policies towards Taiwan and media coverage of Taiwanese affairs is rooted in research and law.



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Overview of the Current Situation

1. Current DPP Vice-President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) - William Lai looks set to win by a narrow margin of less than 10% now the race is a face off between three candidates.
2. Lai has chosen Taiwan (ROC) representative to the US Bi-khim Hsiao 蕭美琴 as his running mate. Hsiao is an experienced, disciplined, and talented member of the DPP, and is well respected in Washington for her communication skills and acumen ¹.
3. The KMT's campaign has been hindered by the choice of Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) as their candidate, and disunity in the ranks about this choice. The KMT & TPP tried to negotiate a joint opposition ticket where either Hou or Ko would be the other's running mate but it fell through in the eleventh hour.
4. For the initial period of the election campaign former Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) of the TPP presented the closest challenge to Lai, riding on high discontent with both the DPP and KMT. Ko's inconsistency, his lack of subtlety, and what is perceived as his arrogance and misogyny have undermined his campaign.
5. The Former Foxconn CEO, Kuo Tsai-ming (郭台銘) - Terry Gou, had the finances to run the campaign but he lacked roots or a voter base and withdrew his candidacy after failing to secure enough signatories to run.. His policy suggestions on the PRC certainly 'broke out of the box' but not in a direction that it seems many Taiwanese either trusted or understood.
6. Elections are very fluid in Taiwan. The campaign has been dominated by the issue of the PRC but also sometimes featured obscure lines of attack between the candidates as the pressure has mounted closer to the polls.
7. There will be a new Representative to the UK after the new President is elected. The Taiwan Policy Centre believes this is the ideal moment to set in stone a specific substantive Taiwan Policy as opposed to a policy on the PRC in which Taiwan is just a footnote.
8. **The election will be on January 13th**, and the official 100 day election campaign is now in its final month. A lot can change in that time!

Introduction

In this briefing paper, the Taiwan Policy Centre will examine the forthcoming election for President in Taiwan which will take place in January 2024.

The world has a huge stake in peace being maintained in the Taiwan Strait. The disruptions to supply chains through the COVID-19 years and the war in Ukraine have demonstrated on a smaller scale what would happen if war were to break out over Taiwan. The consequences for the 23 million Taiwanese people would be devastating too.

The supply chains that create the technology that powers our modern society and economies are almost entirely reliant on components produced in Taiwan. The economic ramifications worldwide would be catastrophic if an invasion or blockade were to come to pass.

At the same time, Taiwan is a beacon for free and open democracy in Asia and anything that undermined Taiwanese democracy would have ramifications across the region and the free world.

The Taiwanese people have a choice of three potential Presidential candidates, each of which has a very different take on Cross-Strait relations and Taiwan's place in the world. It is vitally important for policymakers in the UK and beyond to have a clear understanding of these Presidential elections and the impact they could have on maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and keeping global supply chains moving.



Image above: Current President, Tsai Ing-wen
[Taiwan \(ROC\) Central Election Commission Website](#)

Part 1:

Background to the elections

After Taiwan's first democratic Presidential elections in 1996, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidency in 2000 and after a peaceful transition of power, won re-election in 2004. Power shifted back to the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) from 2008 to 2016 when current President Tsai Ing-wen was elected for the DPP again. There are two major trends colliding in the upcoming election. Since 2000 the two main parties have served alternating two consecutive terms. If this pattern were to continue, now that the DPP has been in power for two terms, it suggests the KMT would be favoured to win this time.

However, in 2014 a major societal and political shift was sparked by what came to be known as the Sunflower Movement ². The more pro-China KMT had attempted to force a services trade pact through the Legislature Yuan (Taiwan's Parliament) without the normal oversight process. Civil society activists stormed and occupied the legislature to prevent it convening and finalising passage of the pact.

Supporters of the pact touted trade benefits and opportunities for Taiwanese with the PRC. Opponents of the pact feared the PRC would use the opportunity to take control of key sectors of the economy. Among the sectors the pact included were telecommunications, media, publishing, advertising and movie theatres. The public largely agreed with the protestors and flooded the streets for weeks in their tens of thousands.

This led to a shift in perception among the public. The more pro-Taiwan DPP's stances on Chinese and Taiwanese identity became the more mainstream, centrist position politically and the more pro-China positions of the KMT became more marginalised. The trend since 2016 has been for the public to deliver landslide victories to the DPP in national elections, while the KMT have tended to perform better in local elections, where their stance on the PRC is of little relevance. This trend would suggest the DPP would be favoured to win in 2024.

With current Taiwan President, Tsai Ing-wen at the end of her two-term limit, there will be no incumbency boost in this election. Further complicating the race is that there are three candidates polling in double digits in most polls, rather than the normal two main party candidates.

A new political party, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) is running a candidate that is largely supported by centrist voters and voters who lean towards the moderate side of the KMT's political agenda.

Part 2: The Candidates



Vice-President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) - William Lai

Lai Ching-te (賴清德) is the current Vice-President and is representing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Lai holds a master's degree in public health from Harvard University. Since the 1990s he has never lost a public election. He rose to national prominence as the Mayor of Tainan City in southern Taiwan when he stood his ground against corruption in the city council, including by members of his own party. In her first term, President Tsai appointed him Premier (leader of the Taiwan Government). Considered somewhat of an outspoken firebrand early in his career, Lai has progressively softened his rhetoric on Taiwanese independence from the ROC as he has risen in position. He is arguably not as interested in issues of transitional justice as Tsai, preferring to focus on other policy areas.

Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜)

Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) is the Mayor of Taiwan's most populous city, New Taipei City, and is the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) candidate. Hou is a former police officer who came to the public's attention due to his involvement in several high-profile cases, eventually rising to Director-General of the National Police Agency. He was appointed as Deputy Mayor in New Taipei, then was elected Mayor in 2018 and won re-election in a landslide in 2022. His popularity as New Taipei Mayor was a big reason why the KMT chose him as their candidate. His lack of definition on policy issues and preparation for the Presidential race hampers his ability to shape his campaign in contrast to the other candidates.





Ko Wen-je (柯文哲)

Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) represents the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), which was founded in 2019. Ko was an accomplished surgeon who entered politics as an independent candidate for Taipei Mayor, winning in 2014, and again in 2018. Ko is a blunt and direct speaker, which to his supporters is refreshing and honest, but to others often comes across as confrontational and haughty. Ko has had a

number of incidents where his comments have upset Taiwanese, especially those perceived as misogynistic. That's an issue that has risen in salience following discussion of "Me Too" in the context of Taiwan's politics, coming after the release of the TV series 'Wave Makers' which addressed that issue directly. In an interesting twist, the leading female performer in that series has been chosen by Kuo Tsai-ming to be his Vice-President running mate ³.



Part 3: The Parties and their Ideologies

Taiwanese parties are not split along left or right wing, or conservative or liberal lines. The defining split is along national identity lines, views on Taiwan's sovereignty, and relations with the PRC.



The Minjindang 民主進步黨 - Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)

The currently governing DPP was originally formed by activists against martial law and the one-party state in 1986. By the early 1990s pro-Taiwan independence activists dominated the party, advocating for an independent Republic of Taiwan to be declared with a new constitution, new symbols, and a new flag.

This was not attractive at the ballot box as the PRC had declared this would trigger war. By the late 1990s the party shifted position and accepted the existence of the ROC and the constitution, noting that the ROC is already an independent state.

Supporters of the DPP usually refer to the country as just “Taiwan.” Current President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), as the constitutional ROC Head Of State uses “Republic of China, Taiwan” in official communications.

There is little feeling of national pride towards the ROC flag and national symbols amongst supporters of the DPP. President Tsai's party has removed or relocated many of the symbols of the authoritarian era such as statues of former KMT dictator Chiang Kai-shek, but it has moved slowly in other areas, preferring to spend her political capital on other issues. Changing the national flag has been discussed but could be challenged constitutionally and would require a referendum to be legal.

Having campaigned against martial law, the DPP initially had suspicions and reservations about the military, and the feelings were mutual. This has changed under President Tsai who has recognised that the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait is now firmly on the PRC's side. She has raised defence spending slowly throughout her seven years in power, and it now approximates 2.5% of GDP.

Special budgets have also been allocated for large arms deals with the US and compulsory military conscription will be increased from the current four months to one year starting in 2024.

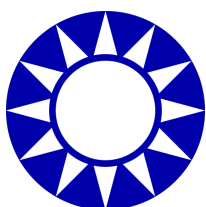
President Tsai and the DPP continue to maintain that the ROC is an already independent state and that it is unnecessary to declare independence.

Some party members would still prefer declaring a Taiwan republic, but they are now in the minority.

The Tsai administration has repeatedly offered talks with their counterparts in Beijing based on a principle of mutual respect and no preconditions.

The DPP rejects the “1992 Consensus” because the party does not view Taiwan as a part of a “One China” and that accepting it is tantamount to allowing the PRC claim sovereignty over Taiwan since the PRC has never accepted the “different interpretations” element. ⁴

A speech by PRC General Secretary Xi Jinping on December 2, 2019, in which he explicitly linked the “one country, two systems” applied to Hong Kong with the “1992 Consensus”, rendered the idea even more unpalatable to the DPP and to wider Taiwanese public. ⁵ For many supporters of the DPP, the fate of Hong Kong is a clear learning point for Taiwanese that PRC promises are hollow and lost sovereignty can’t be regained. The DPP is very pro-US and pro-Japan and works hard to maintain warm relations with both.



The Kuomintang 中國國民黨 - Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)

The Kuomintang (KMT) is the more pro-China party and officially advocates for eventual “reunification” with the PRC at some point in future, though views on the ideal conditions and timeframe of this happening vary within different factions in the party. The KMT is officially supportive of the continued existence of the Republic of China (ROC) and its constitution, though there is a minority in the party interested in working out some sort of unification scenario with the PRC.

The KMT’s stances on the PRC, the US, and Japan have evolved since the party arrived in Taiwan. Initially, the KMT was vehemently opposed to any contact with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or Communist-controlled China. No direct links of any kind were allowed, though in the late 1980s travel was allowed through third-party countries. Until the early 1990s the KMT officially held out hopes of “reclaiming the mainland” from the “Communist bandits.”

The party also worked to maintain strong military capabilities until they lost office in 2000. During those years, Taiwan was a major customer for advanced armaments from the US, maintained a robust military, and enforced compulsory conscription for all men for two or three years, depending on the branch of service. The balance of power in the Taiwan Strait leaned much more in Taiwan’s favour than today, with a stronger air force and navy.

In the early 2000s the party engaged in a major shift in their thinking on how to approach the PRC. The KMT began outreach to the CCP on a party-to-party basis.

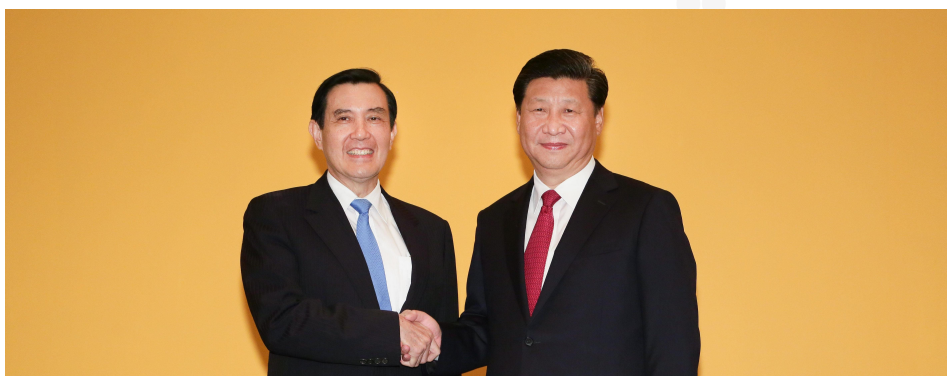
The two parties agreed on a so-called “1992 Consensus” as a basis for negotiations, named after tentative and tense meetings the two sides had that year in Singapore, though no such consensus had actually been reached at the time. The KMT version of the “1992 Consensus” is that there is “one China, each side with a different interpretation.” The CCP has never endorsed the “different interpretation” part of the equation and views the PRC as the sole, legitimate representative of China.

During the presidency of the KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) from 2008 to 2016 moves were arguably made to lay the groundwork for eventual unification. Direct transportation links were opened up, tourists, businesspeople, and students were welcomed into Taiwan from the PRC. Compulsory military conscription was shortened to four months, and military spending dropped to below 2% of GDP in the name of “reducing tensions.” A trade deal was signed for goods between the two sides, but the aforementioned Sunflower Movement stopped the more substantive services trade pact the Ma administration had hoped would have more fully integrated the two economies and societies.

In the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns the KMT candidates pledged to continue Ma’s policies.

The KMT has had, at times, a prickly relationship with the US, and there are many in the party who still dislike and distrust the US for having “abandoned” the ROC by switching diplomatic relations to the PRC. For the most part, however, the KMT has maintained good relations with the Americans for practical reasons. Many KMT politicians were educated in the US, and the economic and military relationship remains valuable.

The KMT has an even more complicated view on Japan. The KMT’s arrival in Taiwan came after an intensely brutal war with Japan, and the relationship was still very hostile. However, at the onset of the Korean War the US encouraged rapprochement between the sides. The KMT maintains practical relations with Japan, but from time-to-time engages in nationalistic verbal conflicts over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, which both sides (and the PRC) claim, but are administered by Japan.



Former KMT President Ma of Taiwan shakes hands with CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping in Singapore in 2015

Taiwan Minzhongdang 台灣民眾黨 - Taiwan People's Party (TPP)



The Taiwan People's Party (TPP) was founded in 2019 by former Mayor of Taipei Ko Wen-je. Ko had won two election for the important role of Mayor of Taipei running as an independent (the first with the tacit backing of the DPP which did not run a candidate against him).

The TPP views itself as being between, and sometimes above, the two main ideologies of the DPP and KMT. Their emphasis is on being pragmatic and avoiding being “too ideological.” Their specific stances are being revealed in the presidential campaign, discussed below. According to Academia Sinica elections researcher Nathan Batto, Ko's base is “disaffected youth who think that both major parties are corrupt and do not represent them”.⁶

He finds that there isn't a cluster of issues that Ko taps into to attract voters aside from reducing Government debt. Instead Batto argues that Ko's supporters are “more motivated by his style. They see him as speaking bluntly and plainly. He sometimes says controversial things, but that is ok because it shows that he is not an ordinary, polished (meaning corrupt) establishment politician.” He sees a problem maintaining momentum for Ko is his lack of positions that can distinguish him from the other candidates.⁷

So far, Ko has a good record on corruption, and this is also one of his main appeals. However, corruption is what we call a valence issue: it is unidirectional. Everyone is against corruption, and everyone wants less of it. Being against corruption is like being for a good economy and praising mothers. Enduring parties are founded on positional issues, not valence issues. Someone else has to enthusiastically take the position that you are standing against. If Ko were just a plain-speaking, honest politician, he wouldn't be very interesting.

Part 4: The candidates' positions on Taiwan-PRC Relations

Vice-President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) - William Lai (DPP)

Lai Ching-te is campaigning on continuing current President Tsai's policies towards the PRC, which have remained consistently popular with the public.

In her national day speech in 2021 Tsai laid out her “four commitments” to the Taiwanese people: “Let us here renew with one another (1) our enduring commitment to a free and democratic constitutional system, (2) our commitment that the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China should not be subordinate to each other, (3) our commitment to resist annexation or encroachment upon our sovereignty, and (4) our commitment that the future of the Republic of China (Taiwan) must be decided in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people.” William Lai concurs with these commitments and has expressed no intent or desire to move from them, in contrast to former more resolute positions on the meaning of independence for Taiwan.

In the Wall Street Journal, Lai stated: “I will never rule out the possibility of dialogue without preconditions, based on the principles of reciprocity and dignity” and added “I will support the cross-strait status quo -- which is in the best interests of both the Republic of China, as Taiwan is formally known, and the international community.”⁸ He has expressed hopes that Taiwan and the PRC could be a “federation of brothers.”

The Tsai administration's policy has been to maintain the status quo from the Taiwanese side, even as the Chinese side has continued to unilaterally change the situation on the ground through grey zone military intimidation and economic ‘sanctions’ such as suddenly announcing bans on the imports of select Taiwanese products.

Lai also takes the same stance as Tsai on the “1992 Consensus.” Since the Chinese side insists no dialogue is possible without accepting the ‘consensus’, Lai would likely not engage in dialogue under those conditions which to him imply the concession of Taiwanese sovereignty.

Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) (KMT)

It had been previously unclear where KMT candidate Hou stood on a lot of issues, but on the PRC, the US and defence Hou clarified many of his positions in a piece in Foreign Affairs published during his recent trip to America.⁹

In it, Hou laid out his “3Ds” vision for “defence,” “dialogue” and “de-escalation.” Hou wants to restore dialogue based on the “1992 Consensus” but “consistent with the constitution,” which lays out ROC sovereignty. He also stated he would reject “any attempt to absorb the country into unification with mainland China under the guise of “one country, two systems.”

He wrote that: “I advocate for both sides to carry out official interactions based on a model of mutual non-recognition of sovereignty and mutual non-denial of jurisdiction.” This is clearer and more conditional than former President Ma’s stance although it is unclear if the Chinese side would accept any of these conditions. Hou has expressed support for more trade and personal interactions and to consider a services pact, though he has implied it would be a newly negotiated one and not the version that proved so unpopular in the Ma era.

A millstone for Hou is that the public image of the KMT is of a party which identifies more as Chinese and with the PRC than Taiwanese and Taiwan. Hou's party, which was founded in China at a time when Taiwan was a part of the Japanese Empire, officially views Taiwan as a Chinese territory and a province of China, whether that is ROC or PRC. This is not a popular position with the Taiwanese public in general and only retains minority support¹⁰. Polling consistently shows a solid majority of the public identifies as “Taiwanese,” followed by a minority identifying as “Taiwanese and Chinese” and only low single-digit percentages identifying as “Chinese” only¹¹. Similarly, support for “reunification” with the PRC is low in all polling, and suspicion towards the neighbour across the Taiwan Strait is high. These trends have been growing stronger over years, especially after the aforementioned Sunflower Movement in 2014.

For more information we recommend this summary: <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202308240015>

Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) (TPP)

Ko has characterised the DPP as being unable to communicate with the PRC, and the KMT as being too submissive to Beijing. He has rejected the “1992 Consensus” because it is so unpopular with Taiwanese voters and there “is no market for it” but has expressed hope for coming up with a new formula.

The PRC has made clear they will only engage in dialogue if the “1992 Consensus” is accepted, though it is possible they would accept a new formula, but only if their “One China Principle”, accepting their sovereignty claims to Taiwan, is embedded within it. The “One China Principle” part of the “1992 Consensus” is what Taiwanese voters have rejected, making it unlikely Ko could come up with something acceptable to both sides.

Ko has taken a centrist position on the PRC with his utilisation of the term “One Family”. In contrast to the KMT, he hasn’t vocally signed up for the ‘1992 Consensus’ or the One China policy. Unlike the DPP, he discursively taps into the idea that Taiwan and the PRC are still ‘irrevocably’ connected ¹².

Like the other party-backed candidates, Ko hopes to maintain the status quo. However, as a former doctor, he commented with characteristic bluntness about the challenges presented by the Chinese side: “Maintaining the cross-strait status quo is like [treating] diabetes, you can only care for it, but you cannot cure it.” ¹³ He further noted: “Therefore we need not solve the issue of ‘unification’ or ‘independence’ within three decades. If someone thinks it has to be resolved within this period, then they are not being pragmatic.”

There was considerable public backlash in June when it was leaked that the TPP think tank was considering including reviving the services pact with the PRC in the party’s policy white paper. Ko had supported the Sunflower Movement at the time. He has since distanced himself from that suggestion.

Starting in early December, Ko has stated he intends to continue the foreign policy stances of current President Tsai, but would be friendlier to the PRC. While President Tsai’s domestic policies have often come in for criticism, her foreign policy and handling of relations with the PRC have remained popular with the voting public.

For more information we recommend this summary: <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202309030008>

Part 5: The candidates' positions on Taiwan-USA Relations

Vice-President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) - William Lai (DPP)

In the current atmosphere, relations with Taiwan's primary security partner is an important issue. Taiwanese presidential candidates have traditionally travelled to the US during their campaigns to both reassure Washington that they are a reliable partner and voters that Washington will accept the candidate as their president. Under the Tsai administration ties with the US have significantly improved and deepened on all fronts. William Lai of the DPP benefits politically from this.

Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜)(KMT)

The KMT's Hou politically needs to combat the widespread view that the Americans likely view his party as too close to the PRC and potentially unreliable. In his Foreign Affairs article, Hou expressed gratitude for American support for Taiwan and stated he would work to further deepen ties. To reassure his American hosts that a Hou administration would not be another Ma administration, he wrote at length about strengthening the military and added: "I will not take the United States' security support of Taiwan for granted, and I will also not cause any unnecessary trouble for our friends."

Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) (TPP)

Ko has spoken positively about the relationship with the US. He has indicated that under current circumstances Taiwan has to remain closer to the US than to the PRC and will become more important to the US over time ¹⁴. On a trip to the US in April this year when asked whether the US accepts his position on Taiwan-PRC relations, Ko said that although the US and the PRC are in direct competition, the US Secretary of State has said the US' relationship with the PRC would be "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, adversarial when it must be." and that "if the US takes such a strategy toward the PRC, then Taiwan should also take the same strategy, and not be adversarial when collaboration is possible,". Further, he claimed that the US government is not against Taiwan communicating with the PRC ¹⁵.

Part 6: Positions on national defence

Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) (TPP)

Ko Wen-je of the TPP has spoken in support of the current administration extending conscription to one year, but has criticised the administration for not going far enough to ensure national defence. In comments in September Ko said he intends to raise defence spending to 3% of GDP. Ko has spoken at length about the importance of boosting Taiwan's deterrence capabilities against the PRC and that "the priorities should be cybersecurity, the air force, the navy and then the army, in that order".¹⁶

Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) (KMT)

The KMT's **Hou Yu-ih** wants to reassure the public and foreign backers alike that he is serious about national defence and understands the situation Taiwan is in:

"I have no unrealistic expectations about Beijing's intentions of seeking unification, and if necessary, by force. Taiwan's most important priority should be to strengthen its national defence and deter the use of force by mainland China. To do so, I aim to build a strong military, enhance cooperation with partners and allies, and increase our deterrence capabilities."

He also is proposing something no other candidate has touched on:

"I will initiate structural reforms within the government in order to strengthen the public's awareness of what is needed for all-out defence. I will establish a cabinet-level All-Out Defence Mobilisation Council directly under the executive branch of government, chaired by the vice premier. This body will completely integrate defence mobilisation policy across various ministries and agencies."

Vice-President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) - William Lai (DPP)

The DPP's Lai Ching-te has also spoken about improving national defence capabilities, but in a context of an evolutionary continuation of the Tsai administration's policies.

Part 7: The Key Domestic Issues

National elections have been primarily decided on the issues above, but some domestic issues could sway some voters. Lacking a left/right and liberal/conservative axis, the candidates are ideologically similar in their approach to government. On issues such as the declining birthrate, housing inaffordability, long-term care for the elderly and youth income stagnation the proposals by the candidates are variations on adding subsidies, incentives and expanding government programs in areas like social housing and childcare facilities.

One issue where there is a difference and is important to the UK is energy policy. The DPP plans to phase out all nuclear power by 2025, while the other two candidates want to extend the life of existing plants, and potentially consider adding new capacity. All the candidates are for expanding renewable energy and phasing out gas and coal. For the UK, either scenario offers potential as both green energy (especially offshore wind) and nuclear decommissioning have been identified as two sectors that offer “particular opportunities” by the British Office in Taipei.

William Lai has also proposed offering subsidies to Taiwanese students to study abroad, and the UK is a popular choice for outbound scholars.

Ko and the TPP have also put forth ideas on moving more towards a cabinet-driven system of government, though some of these proposals would require constitutional changes which is a lengthy and complicated process. Some proposals that would not require constitutional changes that Ko has put forth include restoring the right of the legislature to approve or reject the president’s choice for premier and requiring the president to annually report to the legislature and be subject to questioning. At times during discussions of these ideas the “British system” has sometimes been referenced.

Ko has also stated that if elected president, he would bring in cabinet members from other parties to form a “coalition government”. This, he hopes, would smooth relations with getting legislation passed in the legislature and reduce gridlock. It also would get around the problem that his relatively small party has far fewer highly experienced people to serve in many of those posts. While the TPP and KMT discussed forming a unity opposition presidential ticket the KMT expressed support for these concepts, but since talks broke down acrimoniously, the party has been largely silent on these topics. Lai and the DPP have expressed opposition, saying that these proposals are not how Taiwan’s political system works.

The KMT's Hou is campaigning to restore a previously short-lived Special Investigation Division (SID) to investigate high-level government officials during the former presidency of Ma Ying-jeou to investigate corruption by his predecessor Chen Shui-bian and some of his top officials. Hou alleges that some of the current administration's actions are suspicious and need to be investigated by a revived SID.

Both Ko and Lai oppose plans to revive the SID, as its functions overlapped with that of prosecutors and the Agency Against Corruption (AAC) in the past and note that in past those agencies have successfully prosecuted cases against high-level officials in the past without the need for a separate agency.



A mannequin and a placard reading “Abolish the Special Investigation Division” are displayed in front of the Control Yuan in Taipei on Sept. 16, 2013, during a protest by the Judicial Reform Foundation.

Photo: Liu Hsin-de, Taipei Times ¹⁷

Part 8: Relations with the United Kingdom

Relations between Taiwan and the UK are not a major campaign issue in the Presidential Election race, but all four candidates almost certainly would want to maintain good relations. Taiwanese view the UK very positively.

The big difference between the three is how much effort and attention would be paid to relations. A Lai administration would likely continue the outward-looking approach of the Tsai administration and continue to seek to deepen relationships with fellow democracies including the UK. For example, the Lai campaign team have indicated interest in speaking with British Parliamentarians, demonstrating that support for Taiwan from the UK is considered important.

Other candidates might concentrate more attention and resources on the relationship with the PRC which could, deliberately or otherwise, be to the detriment of UK-Taiwan relations.

All three have expressed interest in joining trade agreements, and all would be hoping for support from the UK in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

The Central European Institute of Asian Affairs makes the point in a recent publication that European capitals, including London, can do more of substance to engage with Taiwan if they wish to exercise influence in the region:

“Nonetheless, the absence of Taiwan-EU relations in the political discourse and the candidates’ decision to not include Brussels or any other European capital with bigger diaspora communities in their travel plans should make EU policymakers reflect their own positions and the extent of their desired influence on geopolitics, the center of which has undoubtedly shifted to the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁸

Part 9: Analysis of the election campaign

Section 1 - Choosing the presidential running teams

There was considerable talk for many weeks about the non-DPP candidates uniting, with Ko Wen-je making an explicit call for a popular members vote to settle who should face off against Lai ¹⁹, but none of the candidates wanted to step down from the top of the ticket ²⁰. Hou's KMT is the largest opposition party, and it is inconceivable that they would back an alternative candidate. However, in a recent dramatic turn of events former KMT President Ma Ying-jeou has publicly supported the TPP's suggested method of choosing which of Hou or Ko should lead a joint opposition ticket ²¹. Following an agreement to use polling to determine which should lead the ticket, Ko walked away from the unity ticket after the result found in favour of Hou, citing differences in the interpretation of the margin of error agreed ^{22 23}.

This can perhaps be explained by Ko Wen-je's need to stay as the presidential candidate to boost the press attention on him and his new party, to bring attention their legislative candidates, and boost their viability. Also considerable discontent with the unity ticket within the TPP brought significant pressure to bear on Ko. Unfortunately Ko's stated reasons for the breakdown in the negotiations and unity ticket as having 'been rolled' but the KMT in negotiations has led to concerns at how Ko would handle relations and negotiations with the PRC were he to become President ²⁴.

Terry Gou, the founder and former CEO of Foxconn, the global electronics manufacturing company, also participated in these talks amid plans to run as an independent candidate. He was already struggling to gain the signatures necessary to qualify as a candidate.” ^{25 26}.

In a tumultuous final day before the November 24th deadline to register for the election with the Central Election Campaign, Ko, Hou, and Gou all appeared at a joint press conference with Ma and Chu ostensibly to conduct final minute negotiations on a joint ticket but the event turned into a rather acrimonious and undignified show down with Ko, Hou, Gou, and their spokespeople all publicly blaming each other for the impasse as detailed by a blow by blow account provided by Voice of America journalist William Yang ^{27 28}. On registration day, Terry Gou dropped out of the race ^{29 30}.



On registration day, the following candidacies were registered:

- **William Lai and Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴)** for the DPP (below right)
- **Hou Yu-ih and Zhao Shao-kang (趙少康)** for the KMT (below top left)
- **Ko Wen-je and Cynthia Wu (吳欣盈)** for the TPP (below bottom left)

The choice of running mates for the Vice-Presidential spot is informative.

Hsiao resigned as the Taiwan (ROC) representative to the United States to stand in the election.

Zhao is a pro-China deep blue pro- KMT former TV host and commentator.

Wu is a daughter of wealthy business magnates who own the Shin Kong department store chain.



Section 2 - The latest polling and the race to election day

As of December 5th, a weighted “poll of polls” compiled by Taiwan News has the DPP’s Lai standing at 34.01%, the KMT’s Hou at 29.54% and Ko of the TPP at 21.84%.

Government subsidies are allocated by votes dedicated to the party list, or non-district, seat allocation in the legislature as well as the presidential race. The TPP needs these subsidies to be able to build out their party to compete with the two larger, more established parties.

Each of the two non-DPP candidates is hoping that voters will strategically back themselves if they can get ahead of the pack in the polls. This is a typical phenomenon in Taiwan politics, but with the opposition split and attracting different demographics, it may not be enough. Of the 12.17% undecided voters, some will go to Lai.

Ko’s problem is that while he could potentially get some of those undecided voters and some of Hou’s, but many of Hou’s voters are diehard KMT supporters who will vote for the party no matter what.

Hou’s problem is that many of Ko’s supporters are young voters and independents that voted for the DPP in the last two landslide national elections, which limits how many would be willing to switch to his side.

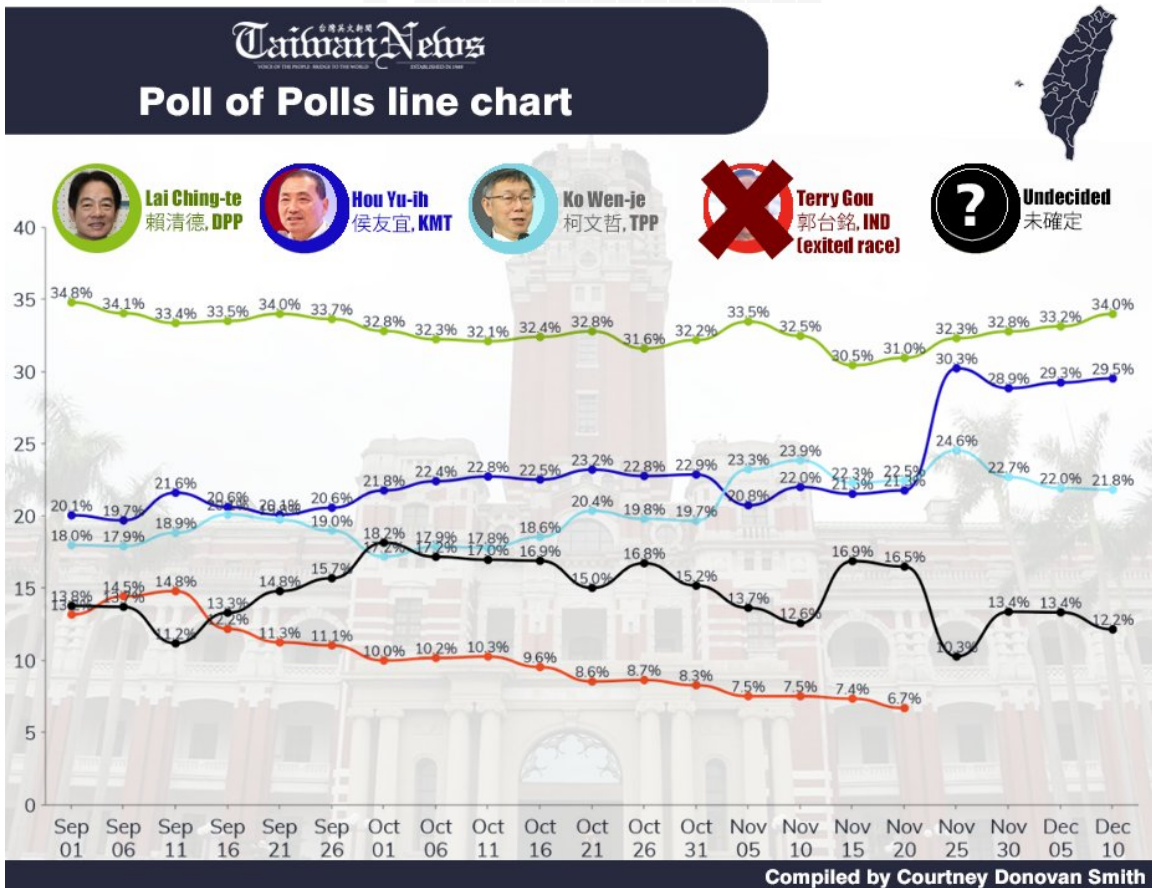
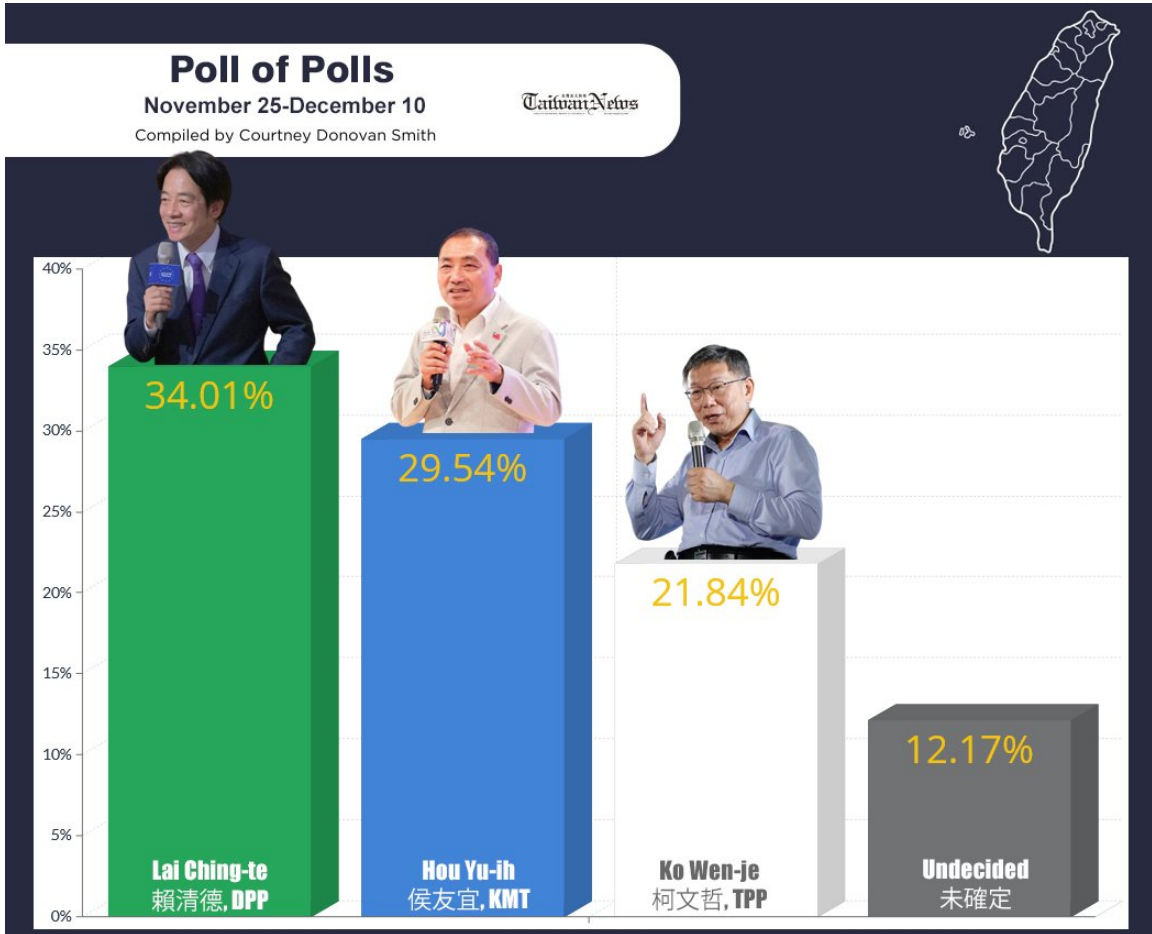
Hou’s problem is that many of Ko’s supporters are young voters and independents that voted for the DPP in the last two landslide national elections, which limits how many would be willing to switch to his side.

Gou was sliding in the polls since he entered the race, so he had an uphill battle to even be considered a possible frontrunner to challenge Lai, and coming from the KMT faced many of the same challenges as Hou in winning over Ko supporters. His choice of a seemingly non-political running mate who recently starred in a popular Netflix Taiwanese TV show was regarded by many as a stunt that has backfired. At least one analyst correctly predicted his campaign was in ‘a death spiral’. ³¹

A lot can happen between now and election day next January, but as things stand now Lai has the advantage to win.



The results of the Central Election Commission candidate number allocation, held in Taipei. CNA graphic Dec. 11, 2023 ³²



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“(Aside: This is precisely my nightmare when I think about President Ko negotiating with China. He will think that he is smarter than everyone else and can handle matters, and he won’t be prepared nearly enough. He’ll end up making important choices on the fly. This is how you make stupid, harmful decisions.)”

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