

Dafydd Fell

Taiwan in 2023: Sandwiched between Local and National Elections

Abstract: This article reviews the key political developments in Taiwan in 2023. Although no elections were held this year, elections dominated the political agenda. Once the candidates were selected, the main parties debated a range of issues, including Taiwan's international relations, the state of the economy, and nuclear power.

Keywords: Taiwan, DPP, KMT, elections, #MeToo

DAFYDD FELL is Professor in Comparative Politics (with special reference to Taiwan) in the Department of Politics and International Studies, and Director of the Centre of Taiwan Studies, at SOAS University of London, UK. Email: <df2@soas.ac.uk>.

AN UNPRECEDENTED END TO A SECOND-TERM PRESIDENCY

Although no elections were held in 2023, elections dominated Taiwan's political agenda. With local elections held in November 2022 and national elections on January 12, 2024, Taiwan was sandwiched between elections.

This was the final full year of the second presidential term of Tsai Ing-wen, of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). However, the state of party politics in 2023 was starkly different from that analyzed in earlier second-term Taiwan year-enders in *Asian Survey* (Chu 2008; Hickey and Niou 2016). They described how in 2007 and again in 2015 a change of ruling party appeared inevitable, as the opposition party had a commanding lead in the polls and the incumbent president had a high dissatisfaction rating. The ruling parties had already suffered devastating local election defeats and would suffer similar landslide victories by the opposition in both 2008 and 2016. Moreover, the final few years of the Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008) and Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016) presidencies both featured large-scale anti-government social movements (Chu, Diamond, and Templeman 2016).

In contrast, Tsai has probably been Taiwan's most popular second-term president since democratization. In surveys, her party, the DPP, has had higher party identification figures than the opposition, and at times the Kuomintang (KMT) has even been challenged by the Taiwan

People's Party (TPP) as the second-most popular party. Rather than looking like a party preparing to return to government office, the KMT was dealt successive landslide national election defeats in 2016 and 2020. There also have not been any large-scale anti-government protest movements in Tsai's second term; they were more common in her first term. The DPP did suffer major setbacks in the 2022 local elections, but these were not as severe as its local election defeats in 2018 (Wang 2023). And despite the 2018 defeats, the party won a landslide victory in the national election of 2020 (Yu 2021). In fact, in 2023 the DPP party was more popular and united than it had been at the outset of the 2020 campaign four years earlier. Though it had already been in power for over seven years, its presidential candidate, Lai Ching-te, led in the vast majority of polls for the 2024 presidency.

A number of factors can help explain the unprecedented second-term popularity of the DPP. Taiwan was one of the world's most successful countries at handling the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed it to avoid the devastating lockdowns seen in so many European countries. Taiwan has also enjoyed relatively strong economic performance, with GDP growth rates of 6.6% in 2021 and 2.6% in 2022, and a predicted rate of 1.4% in 2023 (National Statistics 2023). The opposition KMT has often looked weak and divided, and it has seemingly struggled to learn the lessons of its previous election defeats. Despite conducting limited reforms, the party's positions on relations with China remain largely unchanged from those of the Ma presidency, leaving it some distance from the median voter. The KMT has especially low support among younger voters; one study found only about 3% of its members are under forty (Chen 2022).

TAIWAN'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

There was much more continuity in Taiwan's external relations in 2023 compared to 2022 (Wang 2023). Taiwan has continued to expand its relations with countries with which it does not have formal diplomatic relations. For instance, foreign minister Joseph Wu's visit to Prague for a summit there in June 2023 was described as a diplomatic breakthrough by some. There has been a similar pattern of warming relations with Taiwan's most important diplomatic ally, the United States. While US party politics has become highly polarized, Taiwan is an issue that features bipartisan agreement. This was apparent when Tsai visited the US on the way to and from Central America in the spring of 2023. She met a range of US politicians, including the House speaker, Kevin McCarthy. Although China reacted angrily to this US visit, its military gesturing

was on a smaller scale than that seen in the aftermath of House speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022 (Wang 2023).

The cross-Strait stalemate seen since the DPP came to power in 2016 continued in 2023. In other words, despite the continued close economic relations, China refuses any political dialogue with the DPP-led government. China has continued to apply military pressure to Taiwan, with frequent deployment of military aircraft deep into Taiwan's air defense identification zone and military exercises close to Taiwan. One sign of the growing sense of the China threat was Taiwan's decision to extend compulsory male military service from four months to one year, starting in 2024. China also continued to use economic measures to try to punish Taiwan, periodically imposing sanctions on Taiwanese exports, such as certain agricultural products. There were concerns throughout 2023 that China would terminate the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, which had been signed back in 2010.

#METOO ARRIVES IN TAIWAN

Taiwan's feminist movement has had remarkable success in promoting gender equality over the last three decades. According to Taiwan's government statistics, it ranks among the most gender-equal countries in the world. Given its impressive progress in gender-equality legislation and institutions, some scholars have wondered why Taiwan's response to the global #MeToo movement (which started in 2017) was relatively low-key (Chen 2021). Therefore, one of the most important domestic developments of 2023 was the emergence of a new #MeToo movement in Taiwan. The starting point was *Wave Makers*, a popular Taiwanese political TV series on Netflix. The drama features a case of sexual assault within a political party and the attempt to cover it up to avoid a scandal. Soon after it aired, a former DPP party worker revealed on Facebook that she had been a victim of sexual harassment and that party superiors had tried to hush up the story. This was followed by hundreds of similar allegations of sexual harassment in the political, academic, cultural, sports, and business sectors.

Taiwan's political parties reacted quickly. There were apologies from the DPP leadership, and some key party figures resigned for their failure to respond to earlier accusations. In July 2023 cross-party support enabled amendments of the three relevant laws: the Act of Gender Equality in Employment, the Gender Equity Education Act, and the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act.

Some scholars have argued that there are still important loopholes in the legislation and noted the continued generation gap in the way society views sexual harassment (Wu 2023). One study questioned the KMT's sincerity on the issue, noting that it "has chosen to nominate a legislator twice convicted of sexual harassment and has failed to respond to sexual harassment accusations against two KMT politicians" (Wu 2023).

THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES AND POTENTIAL ALLIANCES

The process of selecting presidential candidates for the main parties was starkly different from 2020, when there were competitive primaries for both the KMT and DPP (Yu 2021). For 2024, the DPP had a straightforward nomination process, with vice president Lai Ching-te the only registered candidate. The TPP similarly nominated its founder and chair, Ko Wen-je. There were two main candidates vying for the KMT's nomination: Foxconn founder Terry Gou, who had come second in the 2020 KMT primary, and New Taipei City mayor Hou You-yih. Rather than an open primary, the choice was made purely by the party chair, Eric Chu, in May 2023. After his reelection in November 2022, Hou was the most popular KMT politician, and some polls showed him leading the presidential race in late 2022 and early 2023.

Perhaps the biggest political story of 2023 was about who would be the strongest of the potential opposition candidates. In addition to the KMT's Hou and the TPP's Ko, Terry Gou entered the race after refusing to accept the legitimacy of Hou's nomination. He began preparations to run as an independent. This involved a campaign to gather enough signatures to register as such with the Central Election Commission.

In May 2023 Hou's support rating fell, leading to rumors that he could be replaced by Gou or even the 2020 candidate, Han Kuo-yu. In other words, there was some speculation about a repeat of the KMT's replacement of its official candidate in the 2016 election (Hickey and Niou 2016). But despite significant campaign spending and a successful signature drive, Terry Gou's campaign struggled to take off, with his support peaking in the low teens and falling to about 7% just before the official registration deadline of November 24.

Although the DPP's Lai led the presidential polls for most of 2023, the combined support for the three opposition candidates was generally around 60%. It appeared that a unified opposition candidate ought to be able to defeat the DPP. And on November 15, 2023, such an opposition

alliance looked likely, as former president Ma Ying-jeou helped in negotiations that led to the KMT and TPP signing a six-point agreement on a joint presidential candidate based on telephone surveys. However, the agreement was short-lived, as within days the two sides were in dispute over methodologies and their interpretations of the polling results. A last-minute attempt to save the alliance failed in a bizarre press conference at a luxury Taipei hotel which featured Ko, Hou, Gou, KMT party chair Chu, and Ma. The next day (November 24), Hou and Ko registered separately, while Gou chose to drop his presidential bid.

Often Taiwan's vice-presidential candidates play minimal roles in the campaigns, but for 2024 their role seemed more significant. The DPP was the first to nominate, selecting former legislator and representative to the US Hsiao Bi-khim. Hsiao is seen by some as a potential future presidential candidate and performed strongly in the televised vice-presidential debates. Since the KMT and TPP had been in negotiations over a joint presidential ticket until the day before the deadline, their vice-presidential candidates were only revealed on the deadline day. Perhaps the biggest surprise was the KMT's selection of Jaw Shaw-kong. He had been a Taipei city councilor and environmental minister in the early 1990s. He was also a legislator and leader of the KMT's pro-unification splinter party, the New Party. However, he had been absent from party politics for over 20 years, pursuing a media career.

THE CHINA ISSUE IN THE ELECTION

With so much of the campaign focused on the question of the opposition's presidential candidates, some observers complained of the lack of attention to policy discussions. This did change once the candidates registered, and key policy differences were laid out in the televised policy forums and debates. Most political science research on Taiwan argues that the most important factor determining voting behavior is the China factor, including the disputes over national identification and over relations with China (Achen and Wang 2017). Therefore, I will first discuss how the main parties dealt with this topic.

The KMT largely staked out a position similar to that of the Ma presidency, calling for a return to the "1992 consensus" and for reviving the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA), which had sparked the Sunflower Movement in 2014. Once again, the KMT tried to frame China as an opportunity rather than a threat. It argued that it is the best party to handle cross-strait relations and that the DPP's mishandling of cross-strait relations is endangering Taiwan's

security. It frequently framed the election as a choice between war and peace, warning that only the KMT can protect the Republic of China. In the debates, Hou frequently criticized the DPP for its advocacy of independence, challenging the DPP over the Taiwan independence clause in its party charter, and attacked Lai for previously describing himself as a pragmatic worker for Taiwan independence. At the same time, Hou expressed opposition to China's formula of "one country, two systems," stating that the future of Taiwan should be determined by the 23 million Taiwanese.

In contrast, Lai pledged continuity with the way Tsai handled cross-Strait and international relations. Despite his earlier pro-independence reputation, Lai tried to project a moderate image, promising to maintain the status quo and referring to the country as the Republic of China Taiwan. In the debates, Lai concentrated on attacking the KMT for sticking to what he described as out-of-date policies such as the CSSTA and the 1992 consensus, arguing that the latter was equivalent to "one country, two systems." Lai also warned of the dangers of over-reliance on China and the heightened Chinese interference in Taiwan's elections.

Ko and the TPP claimed to offer a moderate and less ideological choice on relations with China. Ko cited his experience of successfully engaging with China when he was the mayor of Taipei. However, his positions tended to be rather vague and changeable, as he tried to appeal to both DPP and KMT voters. For instance, at one point in the campaign the TPP suggested a return to the CSSTA but later backtracked on this. In the televised debate, in response to accusations that he is a pro-China candidate, he said that he had never supported the 1992 consensus and downplayed his earlier use of the slogan that there is "one family on both sides of the Taiwan Strait."

Despite the continued Chinese military threats against Taiwan and its use of social media and disinformation campaigns, the China issue appeared to be less salient than it was four years ago, when China's crackdown on protests in Hong Kong contributed to the DPP's reelection in 2020 (Yu 2021).

OTHER CAMPAIGN ISSUES AND APPEALS

Aside from the China issue, the parties adopted a diverse set of issues and appeals to try to attract the remaining undecided voters. Over the years one of the most influential issues in Taiwanese

elections has been political corruption, and in the 2024 campaign all three major parties tried to deploy it against their rivals. However, as neither the KMT nor the DPP has a clear advantage in this area, it was less prominent than in the elections of 2000 and 2008.

Opposition parties tried to bring up issues of concern to younger voters, such as high house prices, stagnant wages, and long working hours. A July 2023 rally on Ketagalan Boulevard, centered on the themes of housing justice and judicial reform, attracted tens of thousands. It featured speakers from the TPP, the KMT, and the New Power Party (NPP), and even Terry Gou. As with political corruption, though, it is unclear whether the housing-justice topic was especially influential, as all the presidential candidates had spoken about their record and goals for expanding social housing in the televised debates.

Though they had largely rejected constitutional reform since the last round (in 2005), in this new campaign both the KMT and TPP proposed moving toward a cabinet system. The DPP challenged this proposal, asking whether the plan was to eliminate direct presidential elections or make the president a purely ceremonial position. However, the prospects for radical constitutional reform, even though the KMT and TPP control Parliament, are limited. The failure of the 2022 attempt to lower the voting age to 18, despite apparent cross-party support, shows how hard it is to change the constitution.

One area of contention throughout the campaign was nuclear energy, a question the KMT and DPP have fought over since the 1980s. The KMT and TPP criticized the DPP for its goal of making Taiwan nuclear-free by 2025, arguing this contributed to power shortages and a continued over-reliance on coal-fired power stations, causing high levels of pollution and thus health problems. They called for extending the operating life of the existing nuclear power stations and putting the mothballed fourth one into operation. The DPP has called such policies outdated, pointing to the lack of nuclear waste storage facilities and to progress in the green energy transition, particularly the rapid expansion of renewable energy under Tsai Ing-wen.

THE OVERLOOKED PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

While most of the media and academic attention was on the presidential election, the parliamentary elections, to be held on the same day, were overlooked. This has been a common occurrence since they began being held on the same day, in 2012.

The 2020 election saw only limited changes in the number of seats, with the DPP holding on to a comfortable majority and the opposition KMT making only limited gains (Yu 2021). In contrast, there were more seat changes in 2024, as the DPP lost its majority and Taiwan has its first hung parliament since 2008. The KMT emerged as the largest parliamentary party with 52 seats, followed by the DPP with 51. The TPP gained seats on the back of the presidential campaign of its party chair, Ko, and now holds the balance of power. The TPP has emerged as the strongest third party since the People First Party in the early 2000s and built on its strong local election performance in 2022. Although Ko and the KMT failed to reach an agreement over a joint presidential candidate and were competing for party list votes, they benefited from limited cooperation in many of the district races.

The social-movement-based parties, such as the NPP and Green Party Taiwan, became more competitive after 2013 but have been losing support since 2020, and in 2024 they failed to win any seats. This was partly due to the strategies of the larger parties. For instance, though the TPP has often taken rather conservative positions, it has tried to paint itself as an alternative to the KMT and DPP. Its superior fundraising and effective political communication have made it popular with the younger voters that had been the core supporters of the movement parties. The DPP and TPP have also undermined the movement parties by poaching some of their best-known leaders. For instance, the DPP has nominated former Green Party Taiwan, NPP, and Social Democratic Party leaders in recent years. And for 2024 the TPP had one of the key Sunflower Movement leaders and NPP founder Huang Kuo-chang on its party list.

PROSPECTS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2024 ELECTIONS

Taiwan's 2024 elections were perhaps the most unpredictable since 2004. This unpredictability was increased by there being three competitive candidates for the first time since 2000; and unlike back then, in 2024 the presidential elections were held on the same day as the parliamentary elections. As the polls predicted, the DPP's Lai won the presidency but there will be a hung parliament, thus Taiwan will enter another period of divided government. It is uncertain whether this would lead to a repeat of the highly polarized state of party politics seen for much of the Chen presidency or a more consensual style of politics, something last seen in the Lee Teng-hui era. Although the KMT has tried to paint the Chen era as eight wasted years, recent research has highlighted many of its important reforms, such as the expansion of the

welfare system, important gender-equality legislation, and radical reforms to the electoral system (Chu, Diamond, and Templeman 2016).

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