



TAIWAN ELECTION RESULTS SHOW NEED FOR COOPERATION

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Taiwan (formally, the Republic of China) held presidential and legislative elections on Jan. 13. Nearly 72% of Taiwan's eligible voters turned out in for a hotly contested three-way race among Vice President Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), former New Taipei City Mayor and super-cop Hou You-yi of the Nationalist Party (KMT), and former mayor of Taipei and surgeon Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). Lai emerged victorious with 40% of the vote, while Hou and Ko garnered 33.5% and 26.5% of the vote, respectively. Although the DPP won the presidency, the party lost its majority in the national legislature. The opposition KMT picked up the most legislative seats, indicating that the China-tolerant party still has some steam. Running Taiwan with divided government is something that Taiwan has not faced in 16 years—under DPP President Chen Shui-bian, the DPP enjoyed a legislative plurality but not a majority—and will require deft maneuvering by Lai.

The road to split government

Contributing to Lai's failure to win a popular majority was the youth vote. The DPP once garnered the youth vote because it was younger and fresher than the KMT, which was established in China early last century. Although the youth vote helped propel Tsai Ing-wen to victory in 2016 and 2020, by 2024 the DPP had become establishment. During the eight years of DPP political control, Taiwan's wages had stagnated, and

housing costs skyrocketed. In 2023, real wages fell for the first time in seven years as wage growth failed to keep up with inflation. The DPP was also rocked by several corruption scandals. Frustrated by the DPP's failure to address domestic problems, young voters defected from the DPP to the TPP's Ko.

The charismatic Ko positioned himself as a third choice between rivals who had made the election more about war and peace with China than managing domestic problems. His campaign messages targeted younger voters by addressing not just low wages and high housing costs but also environmental protection, energy, and marriage and gender equality. Ko's ease in using social media also helped him draw younger voters. Of the three candidates, Ko was by far the most active on social media. To connect with younger voters, Ko used Instagram and YouTube, far more than Lai and at least twice as much as Hou. He was the only one of the three candidates to use TikTok. Social media is an important source of election information in Taiwan. In an early January survey conducted by Taiwan's Doublethink Lab, more than 40% of respondents indicated that they were most influenced by online video content creators and "influencers" on social platforms, far more than the 28.9% who indicated that they were most influenced by pundits or current affairs commentators.

While there is no post-election data analyzing the influence of the youth vote on the January elections, anecdotal evidence and pre-election poll data indicate a preference for Ko. Of the young voters I interviewed in Taiwan before the election, 90% supported Ko. In a December 2023 poll taken by Taiwan's Soochow University, 40% of respondents said they intended to vote for Ko, while 22% indicated support for Lai and only 5% for Hou. In a December 2023 survey conducted by the DPP's Formosa faction, around 40% of those aged 20-29 said they supported Ko, while 31.6% supported Lai, and 19.7% favored Hou.

Their vote was wasted, however, if Taiwan's younger voters wanted to make any kind of a change. In the months before the election, there was talk of a "blue-white" ticket in which the "blue" KMT would join a ticket with the "white" TPP. Pre-election public opinion polls indicated that a "blue-white" ticket would beat a "green" (DPP) ticket in the presidential race. For instance, in a Dec. 15, 2023, survey by DPP associated pollster My Formosa, Lai received 35.7% of support, ahead of Hou's 31.7%, and Ko's 18.6%. If they had cooperated, Hou and Ko would have beaten Lai for the presidency. The deal failed to materialize. In a three-way race, the youth vote took support away

from the DPP, but not enough to defeat it, and gave votes to Ko instead of the KMT, which could have defeated the DPP. As a result, voting for Ko has assured young voters four more years of the same.

Taiwan's divided government

Although the DPP maintained control of the executive branch, the party lost its majority in the 113-seat unicameral legislature. The KMT gained 14 seats for a total of 52. The DPP lost 11 seats, for a total of 51 and the TPP netted three seats for a total of eight. (The remaining two members are independents but align with the KMT, giving the party a de facto majority.) Although the TPP has the fewest seats of the three political parties, it holds the balance of power in Taiwan's legislature. The KMT and DPP will need TPP support to pass legislation on which the other party disagrees. The influence of the legislature's speaker (formally legislative president) is key in this regard. The speaker, who is to remain politically neutral, navigates legislation from committee to floor. The new speaker is former mayor of Kaohsiung and 2020 KMT presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu. The "deep blue" Han, who favors friendly ties with China's government, selected professor and former KMT chairman Johnny Chiang as legislative vice president. Chiang is more cautious in his views of China, and his selection suggests that Han is open to working with political opponents.

Distance from China

Before and after the election, Taiwan observers and the foreign media speculated whether Lai's election would bring Taiwan and China closer to war. Before the elections, China's leader Xi Jinping had warned Taiwan voters not to "split" Taiwan from mainland China and called Lai a "dangerous separatist." In his New Year message, Xi claimed that Taiwan and China are part of the "same family" and pledged to annex Taiwan. Although many people on Taiwan fear aggression from China, Taiwan identity is strong. Taiwan people are increasingly jettisoning Chinese identity for Taiwanese. In a late 2023 survey on political attitudes in Taiwan, NCCU's Election Studies Center found that only 2.4% of respondents identify as Chinese, down from 12.5% in 2000. Thirty-two percent of respondents identify as both Taiwanese and Chinese, down from 44% in 2000. Nearly 62% of respondents identify as Taiwanese, up from 37% at the beginning of the 21st century.

Beijing's reaction to Lai's election was reticent, not wanting to recognize an election in a territory China

claims as its own. However, Beijing is unlikely to restart semi-official talks with Taiwan, which Beijing suspended after Tsai's 2016 inauguration. Beijing has less tolerance for Lai, who once advocated Taiwanese independence. Although Lai as a candidate was more nuanced, indicating Taiwan is already de facto independent of China, Beijing has already turned up the heat. Beijing has intensified military flights near Taiwan and pressured Taiwan's diplomatically Nauru to switch to Beijing.

Looking forward

For the first time in Taiwan's history, a presidential candidate failed to win a popular majority. Perhaps Lai got the message that young people in Taiwan are disaffected and will respond positively. Failing to garner a majority will make it hard for Lai to claim he has a mandate to govern. He will need to seek the cooperation of some TPP legislators if his party deadlocks with the KMT. As kingmaker, the TPP becomes the most influential party in the legislature. Although the presidential inauguration is not until May 2024, Taiwan's newly elected representatives took their seats on Feb. 2. Known for fisticuffs on the legislature floor, the new legislature did not disappoint. On Feb. 20, KMT legislators obstructed Taiwan's premier from giving a government report. Speaker Han had called upon the premier to give his report on a banned hormone found in pork in southern Taiwan. Han had to call a 10-minute recess to settle legislators. The KMT shenanigans over a problem which occurred in a KMT governed city and which the government had already addressed, fails to inspire confidence that Taiwan's legislators will be able to cooperate on larger economic and security-related issues.

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