

In the world

[Asia](#) | Democracy island

Defying China, Taiwan elects William Lai Ching-te as president

It will have to cope with China's anger



image: afp

The Economist, Jan 13th 2024 (Updated Jan 15th 2024) | TAIPEI

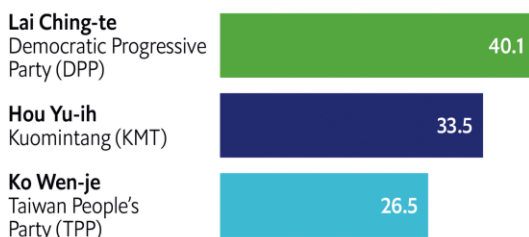
Taiwan's voters chose William Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (dpp) as their new president on January 13th, ushering in an unprecedented third term for the pro-independence ruling party. It was a pivotal election that will determine the democratic island's approach to [Chinese threats](#) over the next four years amid a simmering superpower rivalry between China and America.

"Taiwan is telling the whole world that between democracy and authoritarianism, we choose to stand on the side of democracy," Mr Lai told his victory rally on election night. His victory is a sign that Taiwanese voters want to continue along the path set by the current president, Tsai Ing-wen, of asserting Taiwan's status as a sovereign, democratic country—"the world's Taiwan", as Ms Tsai often says, rather than China's Taiwan. That stance infuriates China, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory. China's ruler, Xi Jinping, recently called unification with Taiwan a "historical inevitability". Chinese officials had tried to intimidate Taiwan's voters by calling this election a choice between "war and peace, prosperity and decline", and denouncing the dpp as separatists.

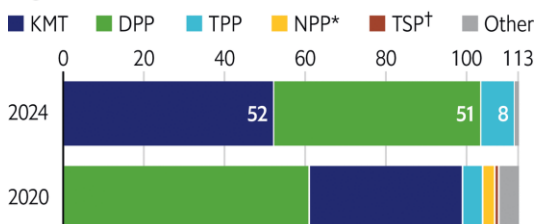
Taiwan general election 2024

Results at 16:20 GMT, January 13th

Presidential election, % of vote



Legislature, number of seats won



*New Power Party †Taiwan Statebuilding Party

Sources: Central Election Commission; press reports

image: the economist

Those threats did not deter Taiwanese voters. [About 70% turned out](#) to cast their votes on a warm, clear Saturday. Most of Taiwan's population supports neither immediate unification nor independence, but the status quo of de facto independence. Yet voters are divided over how best to safeguard that status quo. Mr Lai won with 40% of the vote, promising to continue the dpp's path of deterrence without compromising Taiwan's sovereignty. "On the premise of reciprocity and dignity, I will replace containment with exchanges and confrontation with dialogue," he said in his victory speech. "However, in the face of China's verbal and military threats, I am determined to protect Taiwan."

The opposition Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (kmt), is less trusting of America. It promotes friendly dialogue and trade with China, premised on a shared rejection of Taiwan independence, as a way to lower tensions. Its candidate, Hou Yu-ih, came in second with a third of the vote.

A third-party challenger, Ko Wen-je, of a newcomer, the Taiwan People's Party (tpp), won a substantial 26% of the vote. His platform focused on domestic issues such as housing and wages rather than on China. That was popular with young voters. But Mr Ko also promoted a deferential cross-straits policy similar to the kmt's. His candidacy split off voters from both of the two traditional parties, many of them saying they were fed up with their "ideological" politics.

The dpp also lost its majority in the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament. It is now split between all three parties, with the tpp's legislators as a decisive minority. That could mean gridlock on vital issues such as defence and cross-straits trade. The last time Taiwan had a split assembly and executive was under the dpp's Chen Shui-bian, who was president from 2000 to 2008. The kmt-dominated parliament blocked Mr Chen's proposed military budgets more than 60 times, forcing him to lower defence spending from a proposed \$19.6bn in 2004 to \$320m when his budget was eventually passed in 2007. Opposition lawmakers could also block Mr Lai's military budgets.

China is not happy with Taiwan's choice. Chen Binhua, a spokesman for the government's Taiwan Affairs office, issued a statement saying the election results showed the dpp "does not represent mainstream public opinion", and that China remains set on "national unification".

Since Ms Tsai came to power eight years ago, China has cut off communication with Taiwan's authorities, blocked independent Chinese travel to Taiwan, and ramped up military pressure on the island. Most memorably, China sent missiles over Taiwan and enacted a mock blockade around the main island in August 2022 after a visit from Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of America's House of Representatives. Chinese warplanes overflow the Taiwan Strait nearly every day, often crossing the median line, a de facto boundary between the two sides. China has also sent balloons flying over the island, and revoked some preferential trade policies for Taiwanese imports in the weeks leading up to the vote.

[Mr Lai is known](#) for having been more outspoken in the past than Ms Tsai on Taiwan independence. But during the campaign he promised to continue down her path of moderation, avoiding sudden moves such as declaring independence (Taiwan is already independent and so has no need to declare it, the dpp's leaders now say). His running mate, Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan's former representative to America and now its vice-president-elect, is also known and trusted in Washington as a firm but careful defender of Taiwan's democracy. That is little reassurance to the Chinese Communist Party. On January 10th Mr Chen said Mr Lai would be sure to push for "separatist activity" and would create a "dangerous situation of high winds and urgent waves" in the Taiwan Strait.

Beyond his statement on election day, China did not immediately respond to the results. But given all the fuss its officials have made over Mr Lai, some kind of symbolic military action is likely. One flashpoint could come soon: America plans to send an unofficial delegation of former senior officials to meet the new president soon after the election. A senior Biden administration official says this is nothing new. The White House has been sending similar post-election delegations to Taiwan since 2000, and their purpose is to help keep cross-strait relations stable. But China could use the visit as an excuse to stir up trouble.

Another potential flashpoint is May 20th, Taiwan's inauguration day. Mr Lai already caused controversy during his campaign when he said he hoped to see a Taiwan president enter the White House one day. American officials will be nervous about whether he might say anything else that strays from precedent in his inauguration speech. Meanwhile China will be keen to make Taiwanese citizens feel that they have entered more dangerous waters by electing Mr Lai. The government in Beijing failed to scare Taiwan's voters into abandoning the dpp. It will now try to make them regret it.

The U.S. primaries

- **Tuesday 24 Understanding the Iowa caucuses and why they're important to the election**

https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2024/iowa-caucus-important/?itid=hp-top-table-main_p001_f002

- **A few quick NY Times videos**

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000009265088/iowa-caucus-election-2024.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000009264556/iowa-caucus-voting-election-2024.html>

The New York Times

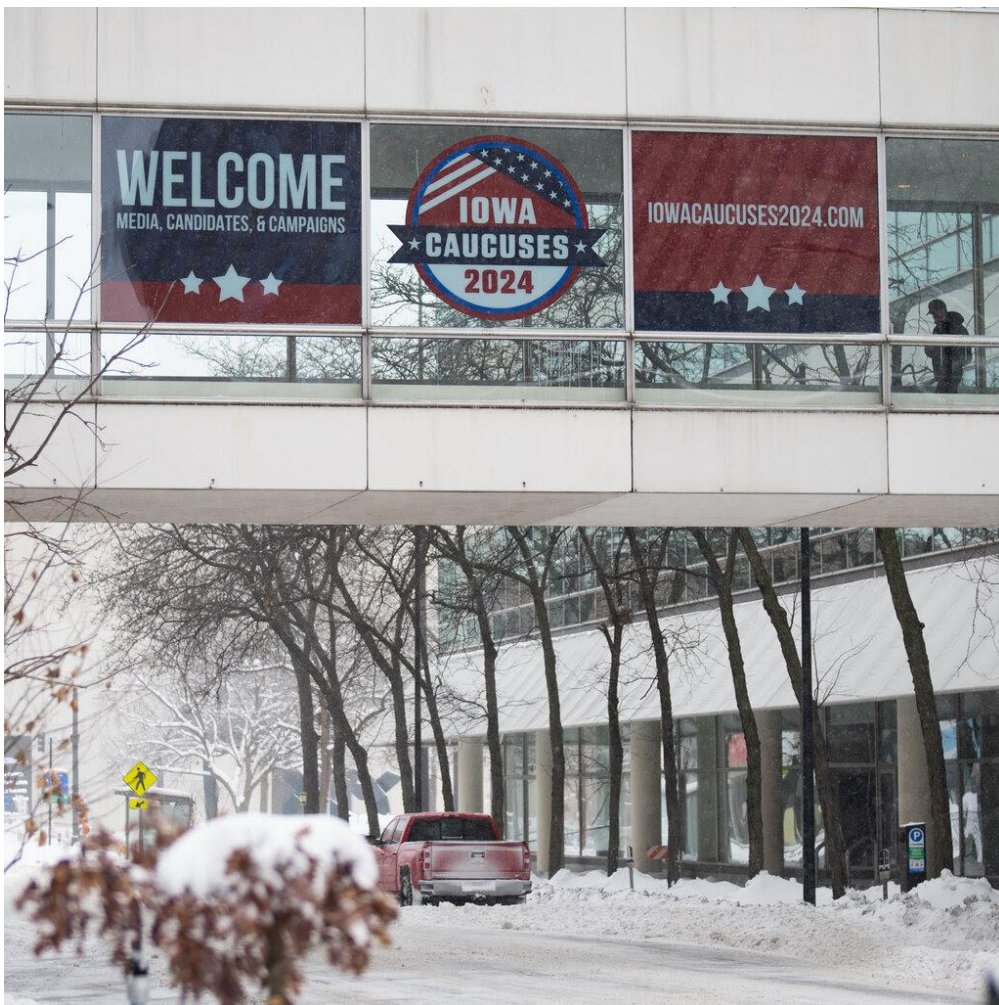
The Morning

January 15, 2024



By [David Leonhardt](#)

Good morning. We're covering tonight's Iowa caucuses — as well as the Middle East, freezing weather and a beluga whale.



Des Moines, Iowa. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

Three questions

So far, the 2024 presidential campaign looks to be the least competitive in decades. The incumbent president is likely to win the Democratic nomination easily, while a former president seems to be running away with the Republican nomination.

Of course, this conclusion is based only on opinion polls, rather than actual voting. By tonight, however, voting will have begun, at least on the Republican side, thanks to the Iowa caucuses. Today's newsletter offers a preview, in the form of three questions.

1. What's the biggest story tonight?

Don't get distracted by secondary issues. The big question is whether Donald Trump wins the landslide victory that polls have forecast. If he does, it will be the clearest sign yet that he is on pace to join Richard Nixon, Franklin D. Roosevelt and only a handful of earlier politicians who won the nomination of a major party [at least three-times](#).

Recent polls have shown Trump receiving [around 50 percent](#) of the Republican vote in Iowa, with Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis both at 20 percent or below. The only other significant candidate remaining is Vivek Ramaswamy, who has been polling below 10 percent.

Even if Trump fares a little worse than polls indicate, a landslide win would suggest he is the overwhelming favorite for the nomination.



Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

2. Who will finish second?

"If the polls are even in the ballpark, the only interesting race might be the one for second place," Nate Cohn, The Times's chief political analyst, [wrote in his latest newsletter](#).

The best outcome for Trump's detractors (short of a shocking upset) would be for either Haley or DeSantis to finish well ahead of the other one. That outcome could allow the second-place finisher to emerge as the clear alternative to Trump, with a chance to consolidate the anti-Trump vote starting in New Hampshire, which holds its primary a week from tomorrow.

In the short term, Haley may be the bigger threat to Trump because she has a better chance to win New Hampshire. It is home to many highly educated and moderate Republicans, who are Haley's base. She also has some support among independents, who can vote in New Hampshire's primaries. As Nate writes:

She had already pulled to within striking distance of Mr. Trump there before Chris Christie withdrew from the race. Historically, primary polling is extremely volatile, and the candidates who surge late often keep surging. Ms. Haley might still need just about everything to go right, and a burst of favorable media coverage after Iowa would only help.

Beyond New Hampshire, these affluent, moderate Republicans make up a smaller portion of the voters. Even if Haley were to surge in Iowa and then win an upset in New Hampshire, she would remain the underdog.

DeSantis, by contrast, now looks weaker than Haley. But if he could somehow revive his campaign with a strong second-place finish tonight, he might be better positioned than Haley in the long term. He can compete for the more conservative, working-class voters that are Trump's base, and they will likely decide the outcome in many primaries that follow New Hampshire.

As Nate notes, Trump's criminal trials inject more uncertainty into this nomination campaign than most campaigns. If Trump is convicted and Republican voters or delegates sour on him this spring or summer, a strong second-place finisher would be the obvious potential replacement. That runner-up could be either Haley or DeSantis.

(Here's [our recent guide to Trump's trials](#), with a focus on their timing.)

3. Why aren't Democrats voting tonight?

For decades, Iowa Republicans and Democrats voted in caucuses on the same night. But Democratic officials recently decided to move back their contest and instead start with South Carolina, Nevada and Michigan. This latter group of states is more diverse, and better reflects the rest of the country, than Iowa and New Hampshire.

New Hampshire Democrats have decided to fight the change and will hold a primary next week even though the national party has said the result will not count toward the nomination. As [my colleague Reid Epstein has explained](#), "Iowa Democrats, ashamed by a

2020 fiasco that included a dayslong wait for results that were nonetheless riddled with errors, have meekly accepted their fate as primary season also-rans.”

The candidates for the Democratic nomination, in addition to President Biden, are [Dean Phillips](#) (a member of Congress from Minnesota) and Marianne Williamson (an author who also ran in 2020).

The Republican Party

Opinion

The 2024 campaign has left Republicans in a state of confusion



By [Ramesh Ponnuru](#), Contributing columnist

The Washington Post, January 15, 2024



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump greets attendees after a Fox News town hall on Wednesday in Des Moines. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

During the last debate between Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley before Monday’s Iowa caucuses, they often seemed to be in a contest to see who could be the pettiest. Actual policy arguments came close to emerging, though, over three issues: immigration, aid to Ukraine and Social Security. All three times, the candidates illustrated that the 2024 presidential campaign has done nothing to resolve a long-deferred debate over what it means to be a Republican. Donald Trump has left the party in a state of confusion about what it stands for and, worse, unable to resolve it.

Even on immigration, perhaps his signature issue, Trump has been more flexible than advertised. During the primaries in 2016, Trump said he would deport millions of illegal immigrants; after getting

the Republican presidential nomination, he softened his stance. In 2018, he blocked a deal to fund a wall on the border with Mexico — one of his main campaign promises — in part because he wanted to slash legal immigration. In 2019, he delivered a State of the Union address calling for more legal immigration: “the largest numbers ever.”

On Ukraine, Trump’s record is only slightly less tangled. His administration sent the country aid, although he delayed it. He has said that if elected he would end the Ukraine-Russia war in “24 hours.” By threatening Russian President Vladimir Putin with additional aid to Ukraine and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky with an aid cutoff, he said he would force the countries to make a deal. Many of Trump’s most vocal fans oppose aid; many of his former foreign policy advisers favor it. During his 2016 run, Trump repudiated the previous Republican insistence on reforms to rein in spending on Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. But he then supported legislation to make major changes, and cuts to future spending, in Medicaid. His budgets included less substantial cuts in Medicare. Trump has sometimes suggested, both in public and in private, that he would eventually turn to reining in these programs.

If Trump weren’t dominating the primary contest, maybe Republicans would be arguing these issues out. But instead the distinctions between the leading non-Trump candidates aren’t getting wide attention or close scrutiny.

The DeSantis-Haley undercard has done nothing to get the party out of its muddles. During the debate in Iowa, Haley refused to engage when DeSantis brought up legal immigration. DeSantis dodged when asked whether he would deport every illegal immigrant, neither endorsed nor ruled out changes to Social Security benefits for future retirees and left his options open on Ukraine. The methods that parties normally use to decide and cement their positions on policy aren’t operating. Trump has not really tried to use his political power within the party to impose his views on it, in part because those views are inconstant. In the 2022 elections, he endorsed a Senate candidate — widely seen as an avatar of “Trumpism” — who talked about privatizing Social Security.

People who wish Trump would follow a consistent ideological line are pounding the table in frustration that he won’t rule out Haley as a running mate: She’s too pro-immigration, and too willing to commit U.S. resources to overseas conflicts. All of that, they say, is incompatible with the post-Trump Republican Party, and they have a point — except that it was compatible enough for her to have a major foreign policy role in Trump’s administration, and she hasn’t endorsed any immigration policy he hasn’t.

Republican primary voters do enforce discipline on some issues. Members of Congress can rarely get through the primaries if they favor gun control, or voted to impeach Trump. But the voters aren’t forcing Republican politicians to pick a side on the current divisions. Republicans can win primaries whether they favor Ukraine aid or oppose it.

Trump destroyed the old Republican consensus without creating a new one. It’s different in the Democratic Party. Democrats want to expand Social Security, grant legal status to most illegal immigrants and keep aid to Ukraine flowing. Nowadays it would be unthinkable for a Democratic congressman to suggest reining in Social Security’s growth.

For nearly a decade, the central question of our politics — sometimes it seems like the only question, especially among Republicans — has been: What do you think of Donald Trump? The longer they have fixated on that question, the harder it has become for Republicans to answer other ones.