

Taiwan's January 2016 Elections: A Preview

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Related Authors

- [Susan V. Lawrence](#)
 - [Wayne M. Morrison](#)
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Susan V. Lawrence, Specialist in Asian Affairs (slawrence@crs.loc.gov, 7-2577)

Wayne M. Morrison, Specialist in Asian Trade and Finance (wmorrison@crs.loc.gov, 7-7767)

Introduction

Taiwan voters will go to the polls on January 16, 2016, to elect a new president and all members of Taiwan's legislature, the Legislative Yuan. Tsai Ing-wen, the presidential candidate of Taiwan's largest opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), holds a strong lead in public opinion polls. Her party is in a tight race with the ruling Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist Party) for control of the legislature. The elections may determine whether an eight-year period of relative calm in relations between Taiwan (whose formal name is the Republic of China or ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues, or comes to an end. The United States has interests in supporting Taiwan's democracy, in strong commercial ties with Taiwan, and in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

The Presidential Contest

Limited to two four-year terms, President Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT is scheduled to leave office at the end of his second term in May 2016. The three candidates vying to succeed him are DPP Chair Tsai, 59; KMT Chair Eric Chu (Chu Li-luan), 54; and People's First Party Chair James Soong (Soong Chu-yu), 73.

If Tsai is elected, she would be only the second non-KMT president since the KMT moved the seat of the ROC from mainland China to Taiwan in 1949. Chen Shui-bian of the DPP, who served from 2000 to 2008, was the first non-KMT president. Tsai would also be Taiwan's first female president.

The Legislative Yuan Contest

Voters will be electing all 113 legislators in the Legislative Yuan, 79 representing legislative districts and 34 in at-large seats allotted to parties on a proportional basis. [The KMT currently controls 64 seats to the DPP's 40](#), with other parties holding 8 seats, and one seat vacant. The DPP is hoping to win its first ever outright majority in the Legislative Yuan, or failing that, to join with smaller parties to form a DPP-led majority coalition.

Key Dates

Election day is **January 16, 2016**. Taiwan's Central Election Commission expects to make final results available within

hours of polls closing. The newly elected legislature will be seated on **February 1, 2016**. The new president will take office on **May 20, 2016**.

Issues in the Campaign

Cross-Strait Relations. The PRC claims sovereignty over Taiwan, whose main island is separated from mainland China by the 110 mile-wide Taiwan Strait. Beijing has vowed to unify with Taiwan, peacefully if possible, but by force if necessary. Under President Ma, cross-Strait tensions eased, in part because of his willingness to satisfy Beijing by pledging support for "the 1992 consensus." This formula holds that both sides acknowledge that mainland China and Taiwan are parts of "one China," but they have their own interpretations about what that means politically. The KMT's Chu has committed to continue Ma's cross-Strait policies, including embrace of the "1992 consensus." The DPP's Tsai has pledged to "push for [the peaceful and stable development of cross-Strait relations](#) in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people and the existing ROC constitutional order," and has promised, "[no provocation, no surprises](#)." Unlike Chu, however, she has declined to endorse "the 1992 consensus," which the PRC says is the basis for stable relations. Her party's 1991 charter supported Taiwan's de jure independence from China. The DPP's says it is guided now by its [1999 Resolution on Taiwan's Future](#), which declares Taiwan to be currently "a sovereign and independent country."

The Economy. The DPP has highlighted challenges facing Taiwan's trade-dependent economy. In 2015, Taiwan's global exports and imports fell by 10.6% and 16.5%, respectively, over 2014 levels, largely because of the slowdown in global trade. With the PRC being the destination for nearly 40% of Taiwan's exports, Taiwan has been particularly affected by China's slowing economy. Taiwan's exports to the PRC (including Hong Kong) declined by 12.3% in 2015. Overall, Taiwan's real gross domestic product (GDP) growth slowed from 3.9% in 2014 to 1.1% in 2015. Some in Taiwan see the slowing economy as a consequence of over-dependence on the PRC for economic growth and blame closer cross-Strait economic ties for the relocation of many Taiwan industries to mainland China, with resultant job losses and stagnant wages in Taiwan. Other economic issues include how to implement new structural reforms to jumpstart the economy and how to achieve Taiwan's participation in global free trade agreements (FTAs), such as the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). On the latter issue, the KMT has sought to capitalize on pig farmers' fears that the DPP would lift a ban on imports of U.S. pork containing the leanness-enhancing drug ractopamine.

The U.S. Position

During Tsai's first run for president, in 2011, an unnamed senior Obama Administration official controversially told the *Financial Times* that Tsai "[left us with distinct doubts](#) about whether she is both willing and able to continue the stability in cross-Strait relations the region has enjoyed in recent years." Ahead of the 2016 election, the Obama Administration has emphasized its "[deep and abiding interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait](#)," but has taken no position on the candidates, saying, "[The outcome of Taiwan's election is a matter for the people of Taiwan to decide](#)."

The PRC's Position

In a historic meeting with President Ma in Singapore in November 2015, PRC President Xi Jinping emphasized that peaceful development of cross-Strait relations since 2008 has rested on "the common political foundation" of upholding the "1992 consensus" and opposing Taiwan independence. He said the PRC would be willing to engage with any party in Taiwan that recognizes the "1992 consensus" and identifies itself with its core meaning. Without agreement between the two sides on those issues, however, he warned obliquely that, "[the ship of peaceful development will meet with terrifying waves](#) and even capsize completely." In practical terms, [analysts believe](#) that if the next Taiwan president does not meet Beijing's conditions, among the PRC's first steps may be a suspension of meetings between the semi-official organizations that negotiated 23 cross-Strait economic and functional agreements during President Ma's tenure.