

Taiwan

China, war and tech: how Taiwan's disillusioned youth feel about a pivotal election

Candidates in one of the world's biggest geopolitical flashpoints are trying to get younger voters onside

Kathrin Hille in Taipei 8 HOURS AGO

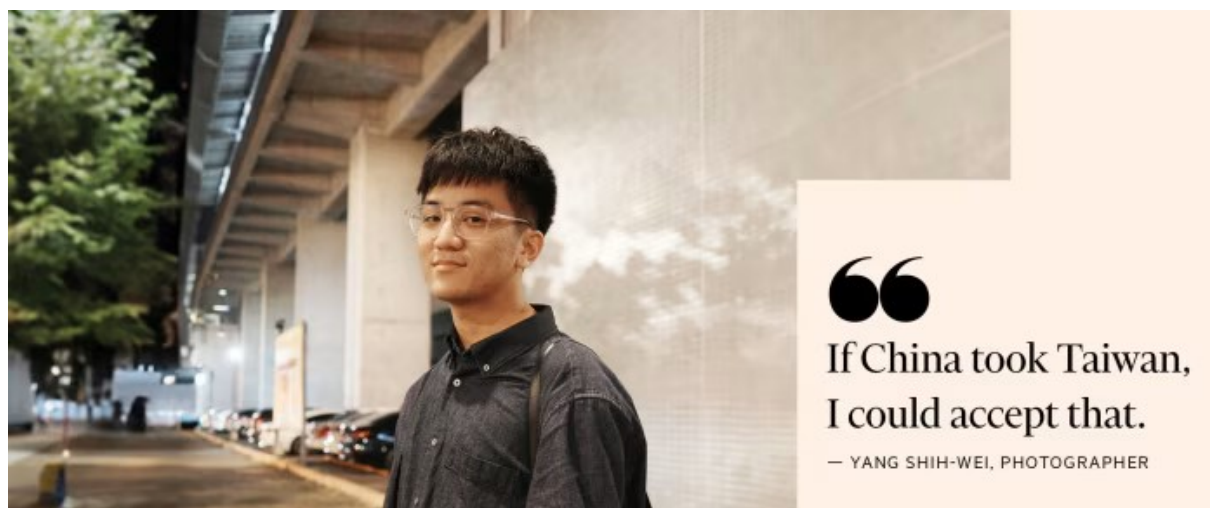
With just three weeks to go until Taiwan's presidential election, emotions are running high in one of the world's biggest geopolitical flashpoints.

The ruling Democratic Progressive party's candidate Lai Ching-te has said the opposition's plans for closer ties with China put the country's sovereignty and democracy at risk. Hou Yu-ih, running for the opposition Kuomintang, has implied that a victory by Lai, the frontrunner, would drag Taiwan into a war with China.

Party policies on [China](#), which claims the island as part of its territory and threatens to subjugate it by force, have been a decisive factor in [Taiwan](#)'s national polls since it first held democratic elections in the 1990s.

Now, as Beijing increases military, political and economic pressure to push Taipei towards unification, the two parties cast their competing visions — the Taiwanese nation to which the DPP is committed and the broader Chinese identity the KMT embraces — as a matter of survival. A third candidate, surgeon-turned-politician Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's party, has disrupted the race by appealing to swing voters tired of a familiar script.

All the candidates are wooing young voters. In Taiwan's rapidly ageing society, those aged 20-29 account for just 16.2 per cent of the voting-age population, but analysts said they could tip the balance in an unpredictable race. Interviews with young Taiwanese people clearly reveal their disillusionment with politics and confusion over how best to deal with China.





© Yang Shih-wei

Yang Shih-wei, a 24-year-old photographer, counts himself as a DPP supporter, but his feelings for the party — historically more popular with younger people than the older generation — have cooled.

“I really wanted to vote for Ko Wen-je,” he said, pointing to the TPP’s promise to tackle high property prices, a particular source of discontent for Taiwanese youth. Despite sharing a flat with a friend, he spends more than a quarter of his salary on rent.

But Ko’s [abortive attempt to forge an alliance](#) with the KMT — in the hope that a united opposition could see off the DPP — disillusioned some of his supporters. “His efforts to co-operate with the KMT turned me off, so now I’ll still vote for the DPP,” Yang said.

The KMT's warnings that a DPP victory could provoke war do not seem credible to Yang. "They have been saying that ever since before I was born," he said. And yet, China's [unprecedented war games around Taiwan](#) in response to then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island in August 2022 deeply frightened him.

"I think if I had no choice and China took Taiwan, I could accept that," he said. "Accepting it would still be preferable to being put in a concentration camp or killed in battle."



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Lin Ching, 26, and Lin Chih-yen, 29, two friends who work in marketing, feel this election does not offer them any good options.

"The biggest problem is that prices keep rising and salaries just can't keep up with that so, if you don't have family helping out, on average our incomes are not enough. But none of the politicians are addressing this," said Lin Ching.

At an average of 2.1 per cent so far this year, Taiwan's inflation is far lower than the global average, but price rises hurt young people disproportionately due to their lower wages. Recent increases in the basic wage have not helped Lin Ching, whose salary is

higher than the minimum. The real issue, she said, was a work culture in which frequent unpaid overtime is expected.

“At election time, they keep talking about national security and China. They create the feeling that this is more important than economic development, and you don’t know if they are ever going to do anything about all the other problems we’ve had for a long time,” she added.

Lin Ching dismissed talk of the vote as a choice between war and peace. “The one to decide whether or not there will be war is not going to be Taiwan, so we don’t have a say,” she said. In the event of conflict, many would resist Chinese rule and stand up for their democracy, she added.

Given her distrust of both big parties, Lin Ching is not planning to vote for any presidential candidate but intends to cast a vote in the parliamentary election to

bolster Ko's party.

Lin Chih-yen voted for President Tsai Ing-wen four years ago, but she said the DPP's mismanagement of everything from vaccines to consumption vouchers had turned her against the party. "They are really wasting our money," she added.

She is considering voting for Ko or spoiling her ballot to express her dissatisfaction. "The KMT are too old-school and they lean towards unification," she said. "I don't like that. Taiwan is independent and we don't need to be so friendly with China. Things are really tense right now, but a KMT victory would not change that."



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Chou Ping-yi, a bio-mechatronics masters student at National Taiwan University, is excited about his personal future: his ambition is to help modernise Taiwan's agricultural sector. But when it comes to the future of the country, the 23-year-old is less upbeat.

He worries that Taiwan does not have enough renewable energy to meet global climate goals, that the education system fails to spur critical thinking and that corruption is rife.

"Our politicians often support policies that benefit certain interest groups for the sake of votes," he said. "And nobody has taught us how to take an interest in politics, so we don't know how to get involved."

While Chou agrees that Taiwan needs to strengthen its defences, he said the government had done a poor job of explaining its [decision to expand conscription](#) for men from four months to a year starting in 2024.

“It only makes sense if it really enables us to use a gun, not if people just spend the time sweeping floors,” he said. “A good political leader should help our people understand what our values are and that it is glorious to fight for Taiwan.”

Chou remains unsure who to vote for. He thinks the DPP is doing little to benefit the country. Ko's emphasis on public housing and transparency as Taipei mayor appeals to Chou. “But he is too direct sometimes and, if you put him in a position where he had to handle international affairs, that might cause problems,” he said.





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An engineer at a hardware technology company, Tsai Tsung-lin earns more than many of his peers. But the 26-year-old still has concerns about the economy, notably high national health insurance contributions.

“The higher one’s income, the higher the contributions. But what we pay in now is being used by the elderly and the money may run out when it is our turn,” said Tsai. Given the importance of older voters, he doubts politicians will tackle this issue.

But even as Tsai voiced criticism of the DPP's desire to phase out nuclear energy and concern about the air pollution caused by Taipei's reliance on fossil fuels — echoing many young people's worries about climate change — he said the DPP would still get his vote.

“I agree with the KMT on certain policies, but what I care about more is cross-Strait relations and Taiwan values,” he said. “I can't stand pro-China politicians.”

In the event of war, he said he was confident that the world's democracies would support Taiwan. “If we are forced on to the path to war, I am willing to fight. Because this is my land where I was born and raised.”

Additional reporting by Andy Lin in Hong Kong

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