



The 2004 Presidential Election in Taiwan

by Christian Schafferer

1. Introduction

On 20 March 2004, thirteen million people went to the polls to elect the president and vice-president of Taiwan. Incumbent President Chen Shui-bian and his running mate Lu Hsiu-lien of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party won the election by a narrow margin of 29,518 votes. The opposition spoke of a rigged election and asked the court to nullify it. As no evidence was produced to substantiate the claims, the High Court dismissed the case. The election was a further setback for the pro-China forces in Taiwan, and a victory for the localization movement led by President Chen Shui-bian and his Democratic Progressive Party.

2. Background

In March 2000, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was elected President of Taiwan. This marked the end of rule by the Kuomintang (KMT) and the beginning of a new era in Taiwan's politics. The KMT candidate, then Vice-President and Premier Lien Chan, had to admit a major defeat. Song Chu-yu, who had left the KMT because of its failure to nominate him as the party's presidential candidate, took second place in the presidential election; and soon after formed his own political party, the People First Party (PFP). Newly elected President Chen Shui-bian faced difficulties in implementing his proposed policies as the parliament was dominated by the 'blue camp,' comprising the KMT, the New Party, and the newly formed PFP.^[1] The government thus hoped to secure a majority in the upcoming parliamentary election of December 2001. Support for the Chen administration came from Lee Teng-hui, the former president. In a speech held several months prior to the election, he announced the formation of a new political party, the Taiwan Solidarity Union, that would support the Chen administration and help the 'green camp' secure a majority in parliament.^[2] Although the green camp could increase its number of seats in the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, after the 2001 national election, it fell short of achieving a majority. The green camp captured 45 percent of the seats at stake, the blue camp 51 percent and independents the remaining seats.

Half a year prior to the March election, President Chen Shui-bian announced that a new constitution would be completed before the end of 2006 and implemented by 2008, with its contents being decided by referendum. Chen's new constitution and the passing of a referendum law dominated most of the election campaign.

3. Electoral system

Prior to constitutional reforms in 1994, the president was elected every six years by the National Assembly, the upper house of parliament. The first such election was held in 1948. After the lifting of martial law in 1987, the DPP on numerous occasions urged the then ruling KMT to amend the constitution allowing for direct presidential elections (Schafferer, 2003). The KMT leadership first expressed its objection to the opposition's call for direct elections, but after several large-scale demonstrations led by incumbent President Chen Shui-bian, the KMT changed its opinion. Subsequent constitutional amendments called for direct presidential elections and shortened the term of office from six to four years. The first direct presidential election was held in March 1996.

Every citizen who has attained the age of 20 years is eligible to vote. Electors have to cast ballots at the place of his or her household registration. The president and vice-president are elected on a single ticket by a plurality vote. Any citizen who has attained the age of 40 years, has resided sequentially in Taiwan for more than six months, and who has previously established a household record of more than fifteen years may register as a candidate for the presidency or vice-presidency. Candidates have either to be recommended by political parties or by joint signatures of joint signers. Unlike previous presidential elections, this time only political parties registered candidates with the Central Election Commission. The ruling DPP nominated incumbent President Chen Shui-bian and Vice President Lu Hsiu-lien. The two major opposition parties, the KMT and the PFP, agreed on putting their leaders on a joint ticket. Although Lien Chan received fewer votes in the previous presidential election than his more charismatic rival Song Chu-yu, he was nominated as the presidential candidate and Song ended up running for vice-presidency. The fact that Song's party received fewer votes and seats in the 2001 parliamentary election than the KMT and performed poorly in the 2002 local elections may explain this awkward situation.[\[3\]](#)

4. Electoral campaign

Taiwan has the most liberal election laws among the region's democracies, with only minor restrictions on campaigning. The law limits the presidential election campaign period to twenty-eight days and allows each ticket to spend up to NT\$ 420 million. Nonetheless, political parties usually find loopholes in the law. Election campaigns usually start months ahead of the official campaign, and involve billions of NT\$ rather than millions. Compared with the previous election there has been a significant decrease in the money spent on canvassing votes due to the weak economy. Most financial resources are still allocated on advertisements in Taiwan's mass media. The total expenditure by the two presidential hopefuls on advertisements accounted for about NT\$ 560 million: The Lien-Song ticket spent slightly more money than the DPP. There was no significant difference in the utilization of different types of media between the two presidential tickets. Ads on cable television still ranked first but dropped by almost 15 percentage points to 53 percent. The overall share of newspaper ads, on the other hand, increased from 13 percent to 28 percent (Schafferer, 2004).

The first campaign issues emerged at the beginning of September, when a group of one hundred-fifty thousand people gathered in front of the presidential office urging the president to change the official name of the island-state from Republic of China to

Taiwan. A month later, two hundred thousand people took to the streets of Kaoshiung, Taiwan's second largest city, in support of President Chen Shui-bian's appeal for a new constitution. Chen had repeatedly said that a new constitution would be completed by 2006 and implemented by 2008, with its contents being decided by referendum. The opposition parties opposed Chen's plans. KMT chair and presidential candidate Lien Chan repeatedly called them "silly" and "nonsense." Opinion polls conducted in early November by the China Post, Taiwan's leading daily newspaper, other media outlets, and private pollsters placed President Chen in the lead. Chen's new constitution and referendum law seemed to be more popular among the electorate than the blue camp had assumed. Consequently, the blue camp made a policy U-turn. On 15 November Lien Chan came out with his constitutional plans, and a few days later he even supported a referendum law. At the end of November, the blue camp pushed through their version of the law. The DPP was quite at a loss and had to accept that their issues were taken away by the blue camp. Damage control was necessary and resulted in Chen Shui-bian's idea of holding two national referenda on national security issues coinciding with the presidential election. The opposition—without stating any reasons—declared the referenda illegal and asked the electorate to boycott them.

The election law allows three televised debates between the presidential candidates and one between vice presidential candidates. In previous elections, presidential debates were not held because some of the candidates refused to take part. On 14 February, the first presidential debate in the nation-state's history was held. The second debate followed a week later, and the two vice-presidential hopefuls met on 28 February. Cross-strait relations and the referenda were the main issues of the two presidential debates. Incumbent President Chen emphasized the necessity of Taiwan's sovereignty when dealing with the People's Republic of China. Lien Chan, on the other hand, was of the opinion that sovereignty should be put aside. Moreover, Lien once more urged the electorate to boycott the referenda since they were 'illegal.' Chen questioned Lien's claim and asked him not to obstruct the referenda just because of his personal objection to them. Lien Chan's running mate, Song Chu-yu, highly praised Lien during the televised vice-presidential debate. He described Lien as a true leader who would restore people's confidence in the nation's leader and its future, and Chen as an incompetent president and a liar. Lu Hsiu-lien used her speech to draw a clear picture of the conspicuous contrast in the vice presidential candidates' historical roles in the course of Taiwan's democratization. She said that while she fought for democracy, Song devastated Taiwan's local cultures and suppressed freedom of speech when he served as the chief of the Government Information Office and the KMT's Cultural Affairs Department. About 36 percent of the electorate watched the first presidential debate, and 33 percent the second. Some 62 percent of those having watched the debates considered them useful in better understanding the candidates' position.^[4] Opinion polls taken after the debates showed about 41 to 43 percent of the voters in support of Lien Chan and 35 to 37 percent in favor of incumbent President Chen Shui-bian. According to the polls, Chen lost several percentage points after the debates, whereas Lien gained popular support.^[5]

The scope and nature of election rallies was quite different from previous elections. Over the last few years, fewer election rallies were held and fewer people took part in such activities. In this election, however, the size and number of election rallies were record breaking. In February, Chen Shui-bian and former President Lee Teng-hui came up with the idea of forming a human chain from the very north of Taiwan to the very south of the

island. The human chain should symbolize resistance to China's military threat and be in remembrance of the 2-28 Incident.^[6] Two million people took part in the rally, which surprised the blue camp. Lien Chan and Song Chu-yu, both born in China, accused Chen Shui-bian of creating ethnic division and conflict in Taiwan.^[7] As to counter the success of the green camp, the KMT/PFP planned to stage a rally on 13 March attracting even more participants. In the run-up to the rally, the blue camp started a media war against the President Chen. More than a dozen different ads were placed in Taiwan's leading newspaper and aired by major television stations, most of which were entitled 'Change the President, Save Taiwan,' and contained the message that incumbent President Chen is the scum of the nation. The tone and language used in the opposition's campaign leaflets and ads is without doubt the worst ever found in any election campaign. Newspaper ads even compared President Chen Shui-bian with Adolf Hitler and asked the electorate to end Chen's dictatorship by voting for Lien Chan and Song Chu-yu. A photo of Hitler was added to make the message better understood (see [Hitler ad](#)). In central Taiwan, the KMT campaign headquarters distributed posters showing terrorist Bin Laden expressing his admiration of Taiwan's 'dictator' Chen (see [Bin Laden ad](#)). In another ad, former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein can be seen. Apart from other ridiculous claims, the ad stated that the referenda were illegal since the were to be held concurrently with the presidential election. The KMT referred to Article 17 of the referendum law, which according to the party clearly forbids the holding of referenda on the same day a national election is held. Mysteriously, Article 17 of the law does not mention such a regulation. To put it differently, the KMT deliberately misled the public into believing that the referenda were illegal and that President Chen is above the law: a dictator like Saddam Hussein (see [Saddam Hussein ad](#)). The 3-13 rally attracted four million people around the island, which marked a new record in Taiwan's election history.



One day prior to the election, incumbent President Chen Shui-bian and Vice President Lu Hsiu-lien were both shot while campaigning in southern city of Tainan, in an apparent political assassination attempt. The injuries were not life-threatening, and both Chen and Lu were released from hospital on the same day. Nevertheless, the attack provoked shock and unease among the population. Subsequently, both candidates agreed to

cancel all campaign activities. The election, however, had to take place as scheduled on the following day since the election law only allows for suspension of election upon the death of a candidate. Supporters of Lien Chan and Song Chu-yu doubted the authenticity of the attack and worried that it would influence the outcome of the election. In an attempt to win back sympathy votes, supporters of Lien Chan and Song Chu-yu spread malicious rumors accusing President Chen of having planned the assassination attempt. Legislator Chen Wen-chien, for instance, claimed in her talk show broadcast live on one of Taiwan's most popular TV channels that she would have prove that Chen faked the whole attack. She claims that a nurse working at the hospital Chen and Lu were treated after the attack had called her. During their conversation, the nurse allegedly told the legislator that Chen's wound would not stem from a gunshot and that security police had already arrived in the morning to prepare for the arrival of Chen and Lu. Apart from making such malicious claims, she instructed the viewers to boycott the 'illegal' referenda by yelling at polling station staff: "I refuse to take the ballots for the referenda." During the TV show, other prominent figures, such as author Li Ao, described President Chen as a 'slick trickster.' The claims and insults led to an uproar, especially because of the fact that Chen Wen-chien failed to offer any evidence to substantiate her claims. She tried to escape all the criticism by leaving the country, instead.

The publication of opinion polls during the last ten days of the official campaign period is illegal. Opinion polls released after the election show that Chen had lost support since the beginning of March. Polls conducted during the final days of the election campaign period show that some 38 percent of the electorate said they would vote for Lien Chan and Song Chu-yu, and about 37 percent for the DPP candidates. Two out ten eligible voters were still undecided and about 4 percent said they would not go to the polls.[8]

As to the referenda, according to a China Times survey, 47 percent of the respondents said that they would cast their votes.[9] Some 36 percent said that they would abstain, and 17 percent were undecided.[10]

5. Results and implications

Incumbent President Chen Shui-bian won the election by a slight margin of 29,518 votes. Voter turnout averaged 80.28 percent, two percentage points lower than in the 2000 election. Compared with the previous election, Chen Shui-bian and Lu Hsiu-lien could garner ten percentage points more votes. In the counties of Nantou and Taichung the DPP presidential hopeful could increase his share of votes by fifteen percentage points. Lien Chan and his running mate Song Chu-yu lost support in every of the twenty-four counties and cities. Even in the capital, the alliance's stronghold, the blue camp lost five percentage points (see [Table 1](#)). The assassination attempt and legislator Chen Wen-chien's televised show has obviously influenced the voting behaviour of a significant number of people. A United Daily News poll shows that 94.5 percent of the respondents said that they attack did not influence their voting behaviour. Some 4.2 percent, however, decided to vote instead of being absent from the polls, and 0.8 percent abstained from voting because of the assassination attempt. About 1.3 changed from supporting Chen Shui-bian to voting for Lien Chan, and 2.2 percent in the other direction.[11]

Table 1
Vote share in presidential elections, Taiwan, 2004 and 2000^a

Administrative Area	Chen Shui-bian, Lu Hsiu-lien (DPP)				Lien Chan (KMT), Song Chu-yu (PPF)			
	2004	%	2000	%	2004	%	2000 ^b	%
Taipei City	690,379	43.47	597,465	37.64	897,870	56.53	979,102	61.69
Kaoshiung City	500,304	55.65	597,465	45.79	398,769	44.35	467,567	53.75
Keelung City	90,276	40.56	69,555	30.84	132,289	59.44	154,577	68.53
Hsinchu City	96,818	44.88	69,760	33.79	118,924	55.12	134,646	65.23
Taichung City	267,095	47.34	193,796	36.86	297,098	52.66	328,877	62.56
Chia-yi City	85,702	56.06	70,124	47.01	67,176	43.94	78,443	52.58
Tainan City	251,397	57.77	191,261	46.06	183,786	42.23	221,978	53.46
Taipei County	1,000,265	46.94	741,596	36.73	1,130,615	53.06	1,264,528	62.63
Yilan County	147,848	57.71	123,157	47.03	108,361	42.29	137,631	52.56
Taoyuan County	448,770	44.68	299,120	31.72	555,688	55.32	622,251	65.98
Hsinchu County	92,576	35.94	61,533	24.75	165,027	64.06	179,673	72.27
Miaoli County	123,427	39.25	86,707	26.81	191,059	60.75	232,331	71.84
Taichung County	440,479	51.79	305,219	36.51	410,082	48.21	525,331	62.84
Changhua County	383,296	52.26	298,571	40.05	350,128	47.74	442,995	59.42
Nantou County	146,415	48.75	106,440	34.49	153,913	51.25	200,888	65.09
Yunlin County	243,129	60.32	193,715	46.99	159,906	39.68	216,365	52.48
Chia-yi County	199,466	62.79	157,512	49.49	118,189	37.21	159,299	50.04
Tainan County	421,927	64.79	347,210	53.78	229,284	35.21	295,660	45.80
Kaoshiung County	425,265	58.40	342,553	47.14	302,937	41.60	380,637	52.38
Pingtung County	299,321	58.11	238,572	46.28	215,796	41.89	274,305	53.21
Taitung County	40,203	34.48	28,102	23.2	76,382	65.52	92,572	76.44
Hualien County	53,501	29.80	40,044	21.42	126,041	70.2	146,005	78.09
Penghu County	22,162	49.47	16,487	36.79	22,639	50.53	28,141	62.80
Kinmen County	1,701	6.05	759	3.11	26,433	93.95	23,534	96.31
Lienchiang County	248	5.76	58	1.8	4,060	94.24	3,149	97.74
Total	6,471,970	50.11	5,176,781	39.30	6,442,452	49.89	7,590,485	59.94

^a Compiled by Christian Schafferer based on data provided by the Central Election Commission, Ministry of Interior, Taipei

^b Combined votes of both candidates

As to the referenda, both failed to obtain the necessity number of votes. According to the referendum law, at least 50 percent of the entire electorate have to cast their ballots. The first referendum, which asked voters whether Taiwan should purchase more anti-missile equipment if China does not give up using military threats against Taiwan, had a turnout of 45.17 percent (see [Table 2](#)). The second referendum, which asked voters whether Taiwan should initiate negotiations with China and promote the establishment of a peaceful and stable framework, had a turnout of 45.12 percent. In both cases, nine out of ten people answered the questions in the affirmative (see [Table 2](#)). Compared with the presidential turnout, about 56 percent of those going to presidential polls cast their ballots in the two referenda. The low turnout is one of the results of the blue camp's effort to urge the electorate to boycott the referenda. Although the two referenda failed the DPP spoke

of a success, since it was for the first time that the people of Taiwan had the right to express their views through a referendum.

Table 2
Result of referenda 2004 ^a

	Votes Cast	Turnout	Invalid	Valid Votes	
				Agree	Disagree
First Referendum	7,452,340	45.17	359,711	6,511,216	581,413
			(4.8)	(91.8)	(8.2)
Second Referendum	7,444,148	45.12	578,574	6,319,663	545,911
			(7.8)	(92.1)	(7.9)

Eligible voters: 16,497,746

^a Compiled by Christian Schafferer based on data provided by the Central Election Commission

After the election defeat, Lien Chan made public his intention to file a lawsuit nullifying the election result. He accused the DPP of having staged the assassination attempt as to influence the outcome of the election, and he accused the Central Election Commission of vote rigging. The latter suspicion was based on rumors that the election commission faked ballots and that tens of thousands of invalid votes were actually votes for Lien Chan and Song Chu-yu. There were indeed far more invalid ballots this time. In the previous election, the number of invalid votes accounted for 122,278 but in this election it reached 337,297 ballots. Nevertheless, there are several reasons that are more reasonable than the vote-rigging claim. The most convincing explanation is that the increase is a result of recent changes in the definition of what constitutes a valid vote. In 2003, Chen Ding-nan, the then minister of justice, urged parliament and the Central Election Commission to amend the election law and its enforcement regulations as to reduce the opportunity of election bribery. Vote-buying investigations carried out by the ministry have shown that vote captains would ask voters who accepted bribes to stamp on the candidates' face, names or candidacy number while voting as to prove that they had kept their promise. In the past such votes were considered valid. New regulations passed at the end of October 2003 stipulate that votes are only valid if voters put a mark on the marking column of the ballot. Apart from these changes, a civic group formed a few months prior to the election urged citizens to cast invalid votes to express their dissatisfaction with the presidential candidates. Supporters were asked in newspaper advertisements to spoil their ballots by stamping the photos of the candidates on the mouths.[\[12\]](#)

Shortly after election, the blue camp, thus, demanded a recount within 48 hours and an 'independent' investigation in the assassination attempt. The blue camp staged several violent protests around the island to put pressure on President Chen. The first demand could not be met since a recount could legally only be carried out on court order and not upon the decision of the president. As to the independent investigation, President Chen agreed to invite US-forensic expert Henry Lee as demanded by the blue camp. Henry Lee and his team could, however, only confirm that the president and vice president were shot. So far, no arrest has been made in connection to the shooting and no evidence has

emerged proving that the government staged the assassination attempt.

As Lien Chan and his lawyers failed to produce enough evidence to prove that the election commission rigged votes, a recount of all the thirteen million ballots was impossible within the current legal framework. President Chen and Vice President Lu Hsiu-lien, nevertheless, agreed to a full recount, which finally took place several days prior to the inauguration ceremony held on 20 May. The recount failed to substantiate the claims of vote rigging, and resulted in minor changes in the number of votes obtained by the two presidential tickets. Noticing their defeat, Lien Chan and Song Chu-yu tried to catch media attention by announcing a possible merger of the KMT, PFP and the New Party. A few days after the recount, however, no further comment was given on that issue. In spite of the negative outcome of the recount, blue camp legislators continued their protests until mid-June, when the Advocates, a local think tank, released an opinion poll revealing that 67.8 percent of the electorate strongly opposed the protests of the blue camp. Moreover, about 60 percent said that they would vote for Chen Shui-bian if elections were held today. The same survey was carried out two days after the election with 52.9 percent opposing the protests.^[13] Thus, the number of people critical of the actions taken by the blue camp increased significantly harming the camp's prospects for an election victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled to take place at the end of the year.

This election was crucial in determining Taiwan's future as an independent state. Chen Shui-bian's victory shows that the localization (Taiwanization) of politics is a process that can neither be stopped by the pro-China leadership of the blue camp nor by threats made by the People's Republic of China.

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[1] The term 'blue camp' derives from the main color in the KMT party flag. The blue camp favors unification with the People's Republic of China.

[2] The term 'green camp' derives from the main color in the DPP party flag. The camp is not interested in Taiwan being unified with the People's Republic of China.

[3] For a detailed description of local and national elections held between 2001 and 2002 see Schafferer, 2004a.

[4] <http://udn.com/PE2004/statistics/udnsurvey/ep9238/ep9238.shtml>. 2 June 2004.

[5] http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/files/osaka/200402/osaka-20040216180916.doc;
http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/files/osaka/200402/osaka-20040221214805.doc;
<http://udn.com/PE2004/statistics/udnsurvey/ep9238/ep9238.shtml>. 2 June 2004.

[6] On 28 February 1947, protests against the KMT government were brutally suppressed and several thousand Taiwanese killed.

[7] Basically, the population can be divided into two groups: those people of Chinese origin who arrived in Taiwan before the end of Second World War and those afterwards. The latter accounts for about 20 percent of the population, and is referred to as the 'mainlanders.'

[8] http://news.eracom.com/prog_pic/survey/145_1.pdf; http://www.fsr.com.tw/case_new.html. 2 June 2004.

[9] Some 4 percent said they would make their ballots invalid (85 percent: blue camp; 8 percent: green camp; 7 percent: unaffiliated voters)

[10] Of these 36 percent 10 percent were of the green camp, 82 percent supporters of the blue camp, and the remaining 8 percent unaffiliated voters.
<http://news.yam.com/chinatimes/focus/news/200402/20040220676628.html>;
http://www.fsr.com.tw/case_new.html. 2 June 2004.

[11] <http://udn.com/PE2004/result/20040302146807980/20040302150522460.shtml>. 1 June 2004.

[12] see official website of the organization: www.nobnog.org.tw

[13] <http://www.advocates.org.tw/article.asp?Class=%A5%C1%B7N%BD%D5%ACd>. 18 June 2004.

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