

Key role for student vote in pivotal Taiwanese presidential poll

Exams rescheduled and special trains laid on to get students home to participate in ballot

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Taiwanese students were heading home early before the Lunar New Year break so they could vote in the 11 January presidential election, seen as a bellwether for the self-governed island's relationship with the rest of the region. The race is between the incumbent, Tsai Ing-wen, a Western-educated lawyer, and Han Kuo-yu, a conservative mayor whose party is closer to the Chinese authorities.

Most major universities have rescheduled exams, as requested several months ago by the Ministry of Education, and some schools are even planning special train services to get students home in time to cast their ballots, [the Taiwan News reported](#).

Young voters make up a powerful demographic. According to a [29 December poll](#) by the TVBS cable station, 63 per cent of those in their twenties preferred Dr Tsai, compared with 24 per cent backing Mr Han. Among the general public, 45 per cent supported Dr Tsai and 29 per cent supported Mr Han.



Source: iStock

Tsai Ing-wen waves to supporters ahead of the 2016 presidential election

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“Democracy cannot be sustained if it does not get the younger generations actively participating,” Steve Tsang, director of the China Institute at [SOAS University of London](#), told *Times Higher Education*. “So making arrangements to enable young people to vote is a sound policy for a democracy.”

“In the case of the Tsai administration, Tsai enjoys much stronger support from the younger generations, and she will have a personal reason to want to see this being done as well. But one should not assume the latter is the reason for young people-friendly measures.”

Dr Tsai has long been a thorn in Beijing's side. After she was elected in 2016, Beijing [halved the quota](#) for the number of mainland Chinese students allowed in Taiwan in 2017. And while the actual number of mainland Chinese students has not fallen very much, the message behind the decision was clear.

“Taiwan being made more isolated diplomatically is a result of the PRC's [People's Republic of China] policy. So is the reduction of mainland Chinese students being allowed to study in Taiwan's universities,” Professor Tsang said. “Both are results of Beijing taking a more aggressive stance towards Taiwan.”

The election comes as Taiwan is trying to increase the number of non-local students and scholars to fill school spaces. A [27 December report](#) said that more than 100 master's and PhD programmes had failed to attract a single local candidate.

The number of non-local students in Taiwan has quadrupled in the past decade, according to [Ministry of Education figures](#). In 2018, there were 126,997 non-local tertiary students, making up about one-tenth of the total student body, including in non-degree and exchange programmes. That is an increase of more than 5,000 from the previous year.

What's notable is that about one-third of them come from nations targeted by Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, launched in 2016 to enhance business and education ties with south-east Asia, south Asia and Australasia.

Syaru Shirley Lin, author of *Taiwan's China Dilemma*, told *THE* that when she taught last year at [National Chengchi University](#) in Taipei, "some of my best students were from south-east Asia".

"We had students from the Philippines, from Indonesia – democracies that are catching up to Taiwan economically. Taiwan is a natural place for them to study," she said.

Professor Lin, who also teaches at the [Chinese University of Hong Kong](#) and the [University of Virginia](#), said Taiwan was facing a demographic problem similar to other high-income economies.

"This is why the New Southbound Policy is important," Professor Lin said. "Taiwan is advanced in education, economic development and women's empowerment, so why not share that with the region?"

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