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RECEIVED 19 May 2025

REVISED 17 October 2025

ACCEPTED 13 November 2025

PUBLISHED 27 November 2025

CITATION

Chin JJ and Rector S (2025) Taiwan:
democratic David in 21st century east Asia.
Front. Polit. Sci. 7:1631545.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1631545

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Taiwan: democratic David in 21st century east Asia

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Taiwan is not just a victim-in-waiting, damsel in distress, or pawn in a new Cold War. Taiwan stands as an exemplar: the world's first "Chinese democracy" and a democratic David in the shadow of an autocratic Goliath. Taiwan's success in deepening democracy and resisting Chinese sharp power may hold lessons on how to counter the rising global tide of authoritarianism. To elucidate these lessons, we review Taiwan's democratic history and ongoing efforts to defend its hard-won democracy.

KEYWORDS

Taiwan, democratic David, sharp power, east Asian democracy, Asian values

1 Introduction

Globally, democracy is in peril. Publics in every region of the world appear increasingly dissatisfied with democracy (Wike, 2025). Political freedom worldwide has declined each of the last 18 years, according to Freedom House (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe, 2025). According to the Varieties of democracy (V-Dem) project, average (population-weighted) democracy levels globally in 2024 were back to 1985 levels, with 45 countries autocratizing but only 19 democratizing (Nord et al., 2025).

As democrats endeavor to defend democracy in an era of authoritarian sharp power (Walker, 2018; Dobson et al., 2023) and renewed great power competition (Chin et al., 2023), Taiwan is a pivotal frontline state (Erickson et al., 2024). Most recent discourse on Taiwan in the West is (perhaps understandably) focused on deterring Chinese aggression given growing Chinese military power and the rising threat of Chinese invasion (e.g., Kuo et al., 2024b; Robertson, 2024; Lin et al., 2025). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, some fear that Taiwan could be next (e.g., Diamond, 2022, p. 174). This has led to urgency and reinvigorated debate in Washington over U. S. Taiwan policy and how to navigate the "patron's dilemma" vis-à-vis Taiwan (Yarhi-Milo et al., 2016). Whereas some stress Taiwan's strategic importance to the U. S. and call for greater strategic clarity and defense assistance to Taiwan (Kuo, 2023; Kuo et al., 2024a; Byman and Jones, 2025), "restrainers" doubt that Taiwan is a vital U. S. interest and favor greater ambiguity/limits on U. S. commitment (Lai, 2025).

Yet Taiwan is much more than a victim-in-waiting, damsel in distress, or pawn in a new Cold War. No longer an authoritarian U. S. client, Taiwan has become an exemplar: the world's first "Chinese democracy" (Chao and Myers, 1994), a democratic David in the shadow of an autocratic Goliath (Sacks, 2024), and proof that liberal democracy is not incompatible with "Asian values" (Chang et al., 2017). Taiwan's success in deepening democracy and resisting Chinese "sharp power" (Chen, 2022) hold lessons on how to counter rising global authoritarianism. To elucidate these lessons, this article reviews Taiwan's democratic history and ongoing efforts to defend Taiwan's hard-won democracy.

2 From Cold War martial law to Taiwan's post-Cold War democratization

After half a century as a Japanese colony (1895–1945), Taiwan (Formosa) reverted to the sovereignty of the Republic of China (ROC) after Japan's defeat in World War II. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Nationalist Party (KMT) forces fled for Taiwan. Combatants in the Chinese civil war became separated by the Taiwan Strait.

For most of the Cold War, Taiwan was ruled by a personalist single-party (KMT) authoritarian regime led by Chiang Kai-shek until his death in 1975 and then by his son Chiang Ching-kuo until his death in 1988 (Geddes et al., 2014; Wright, 2021). Unlike its mainland communist rival, the KMT pursued capitalist development (with U. S. support) and aligned closely with the U. S. (Lee, 2020). Still, the KMT was a Leninist party that harshly repressed dissent on Taiwan (Dickson, 1993).¹ Mainland Chinese—representing only 14 percent of Taiwan's population after 1949—monopolized government, leaving local Taiwanese—84 percent of the population—powerless (Vogt et al., 2015).

After three decades of martial law (since 1949), several trends—bottom-up pressures, top-down calculations, and international factors—converged after 1979 to put Taiwan on a path of gradual political liberalization in the 1980s (see Figure 1). Taiwan's human rights record gradually improved after 1980 (Fariss et al., 2020) as did Taiwan's electoral democracy scores after 1985.

Domestically, decades of authoritarian modernization had grown the middle class, empowering civil society and leading to more “bottom up” mass mobilization, social movements, and student activism (Treisman, 2015; So and Hua, 1992; Cheng, 1989; Fan, 2018; Chen, 2020). The number of social protests ballooned from 175 in 1983 to 1,172 in 1988 (Chu, 1993). To manage backlash to repression of the Kaohsiung incident in December 1979, Chiang Ching-kuo agreed to elections in 1980 and 1983 allowing opposition (*dangwai*, “outside the party”) candidates to compete for the first time (Yu, 2004). The *dangwai* coalesced into the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in September 1986. The new party embraced Taiwan identity and courted elements that had been excluded by the KMT.

At the top of the KMT regime, key leaders believed that the party was strong and would fare well under democracy (Copper, 2019; Slater and Wong, 2022). In his final years, Chiang Ching-kuo thus became a cautious advocate of political reform; he lifted martial law in July 1987 (Taylor, 2000, 369–428). The KMT's and Chiang's domestic strength was matched by Taiwan's international weakness.

Internationally, Taiwan's growing diplomatic isolation—from the loss of its UN seat in 1971 to the normalization of US-China relations in 1979—as the third wave of democracy took off and the Cold War thawed added geopolitical incentives for the KMT to democratize. After the US-ROC mutual defense treaty was terminated in 1980, the support of U. S. Congress under the Taiwan Relations Act for continuing arms sales became a security imperative for Taiwan's

leaders. Improving Taiwan's human rights was key to gaining that U. S. congressional support (Bush, 2004). After the overthrow of another autocratic American ally, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, in February 1986, Ching-kuo “saw the handwriting on the wall” and moved quicker to lift martial law (Katsiaficas, 2013, p. 192).

Taiwan continued political liberalization after 1988 under Lee Teng-hui, the first Taiwanese-born president. Mass protests in March 1990—the student-led Wild Lily movement—called for direct presidential elections and new elections for all legislative seats; that month Lee was indirectly elected by the National Assembly, which was full of old, unelected members (Chin and Zheng, 2025).

Given Taiwan's international isolation and reliance on Western linkage and leverage for survival, Lee was unwilling to continue to pay the cost of repression to maintain the KMT's monopoly on power (Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 309–18). In the wake of the Wild Lily Movement, Lee negotiated with the DPP, which paved the way for the National Affairs Conference (summer 1990) and direct elections to the National Assembly in 1991 and Legislative Yuan in 1992 (Chao and Myers, 1994).

In 1996, Lee won the island's first direct presidential elections, buoyed by his nationalist credentials and the electorate's backlash to China's intimidation with missile tests (Hood, 1996; Tien, 1996). Taiwan's democratic transition was completed in 2000, when DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian won presidential elections—ending more than five decades of KMT rule on the island (Hsieh, 2001).

3 Taiwan's democratic deepening in the 21st century

In the twenty-first century, Taiwan has had several more peaceful transfers of power: Ma Ying-jeou took back the presidency for the KMT from 2008 to 2016, but the DPP reclaimed the presidency in 2016, first under Tsai Ing-wen (Taiwan's first female president) and then under Lai Ching-te since 2024. Taiwan's Freedom House score steadily increased from 87 in 2011 to 94 (out of 100) in 2024 (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe, 2025). Taiwan's human rights record has also continued to improve, maintaining globally high levels of human rights protections since the late 2000s (Fariss et al., 2020).

Since 2001, Taiwan's impressive democratic gains are, in part, attributable to curbing “black gold” politics -- political corruption and vote-buying of local politicians with close ties to organized crime and/or corporate interests (Goebel, 2016; Templeman, 2022; Chin, 2003). Though judicial reform is still a work in progress, rule of law has also deepened (Templeman, 2022). Despite recent increasing elite political polarization between the pan-Blue (KMT-led) coalition and the pan-Green (DPP-led) coalition, Taiwan's public is less polarized, with convergence toward a separate Taiwan identity as opposed to Chinese identity, which used to predominate (Clark et al., 2019; Bush, 2021b).

Taiwan's civil society has also continued to be a force for democratic consolidation. In 2008, the student-led Wild Strawberry movement used a month-long sit-in to protest the visit to Taiwan of a high-level Chinese diplomat and restrictions on protest (Chin and Zheng, 2025). In 2012, the “Wild Strawberry generation” protested Chinese influence over Taiwan's media (Tsui, 2012). In 2014, the student-led Sunflower movement blocked a KMT-proposed free trade deal with China (Ho, 2019). This subsequent “sunflower generation” determined to protect Taiwan (Davidson, 2024).

¹ Though repression became more discriminate and surveillance-based after 1955, during the “white terror” era Taiwan had similar levels of internal security personnel per capita as East Germany or North Korea today (Greitens, 2016, p. 9).

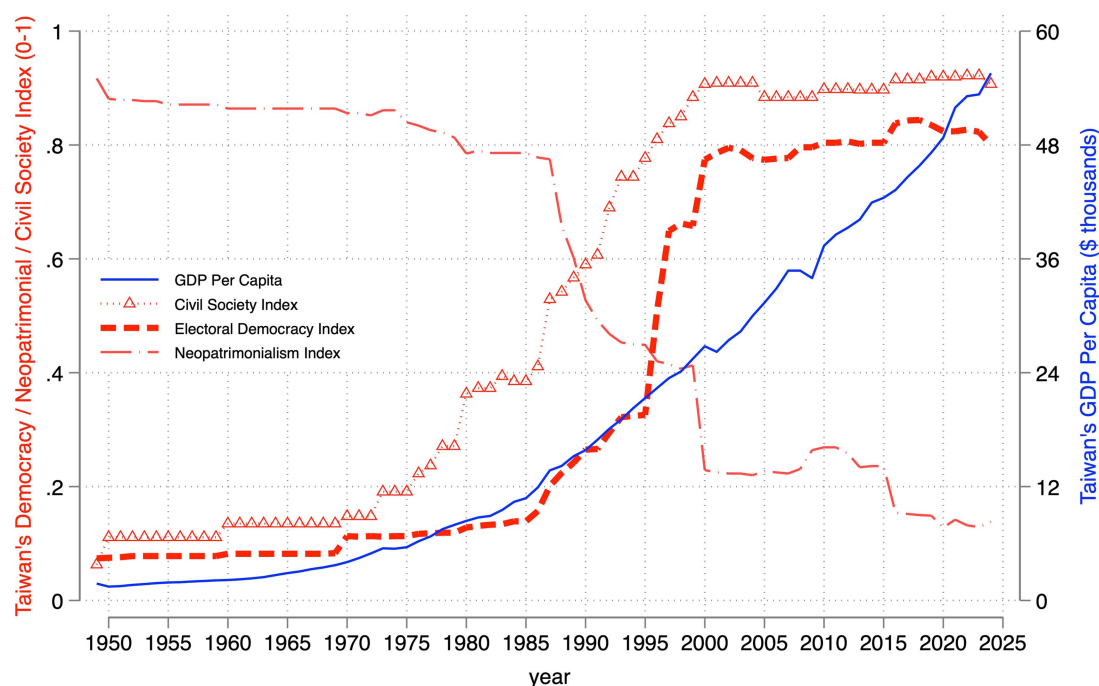


FIGURE 1
Democracy and development levels in Taiwan, 1949–2024.

Mass values in Taiwan overwhelmingly support democracy and human rights (Gubbala and Fetterolf, 2024).² Most Taiwanese say living in a democracy is “absolutely important” (World Values Survey, 2025). In contrast to global trends (Wike, 2025), satisfaction with the way democracy works in Taiwan has increased since 2001 to nearly 80 percent in 2022 (see Figure 2). According to Asian Barometer (2025) surveys, nearly three quarters of Taiwanese say democracy is capable of solving the problems of Taiwan’s society, up more than 15 points since 2018. 80 percent or more of Taiwanese consistently reject authoritarian alternatives (single-party, military, or technocratic rule).

As a result, Taiwan has experienced little democratic backsliding recently, and still boasts robust electoral participation, electoral contestation, and constraints on the executive (Boese et al., 2022).

4 Ongoing challenges to Taiwan’s democracy

Despite democratic deepening in the twenty-first century, Taiwan’s democracy faces continuing challenges. According to a leading democratic theorist, modern democracies face two key dangers: polarization and populism (Adam Przeworski [AdamPrzeworski], 2022). Both are rising in Taiwan, though remain moderate compared to some democracies in 2024 per V-Dem data (Nord et al., 2025).

Populism in Taiwan is driven by cultural backlash and economic anxiety over cross-Straits economic dependence (Cheng, 2025), which

has driven discontent with the establishment (Gallina et al., 2025). In 2024, third party/independent voters were a record 26% of voters, leading the populist Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) to win eight seats and become kingmaker in the Legislative Yuan (Shen, 2024).

Polarization has fostered a “no-holds-bar” “politics of paralysis” in Taiwan (Kuo and Kish, 2025; Kuo, 2025). Though the DPP retained the presidency in 2024 with William Lai’s victory, the DPP lost its legislative majority; the KMT edged them out. Divided government, in turn, has led to executive-legislative conflict and legislative gridlock. Lai has accused the opposition of obstruction, while the opposition has accused Lai of seeking an imperial presidency (Hass, 2025). Divisions over China provide the major fuel for polarization. The DPP favors a defense build-up and more assertive approach, while the KMT seeks to maintain cordial/strong ties to the PRC (Nachman and Yen, 2025).

With the help of the TPP, the KMT-controlled legislature passed two controversial bills in December 2024 giving greater power to the legislature at the expense of the executive and judiciary (Chung et al., 2024). One paralyzed the Constitutional Court while the KMT refuses to confirm Lai’s judicial nominees; the other increased voter petition requirements to recall elected officials (Levine, 2025). Meanwhile, the parties waged a budget battle that resulted in the KMT cutting central government spending (including on defense) and shifting spending to local governments (Reuters, 2024).

With Taiwan on the brink of a constitutional crisis (Templeman, 2025b), DPP activists launched a movement to recall what they saw as pro-China KMT legislators. However, after recall elections in July and August 2025, all 31 KMT legislators kept their seats (Hioe, 2025). Divided government is here to stay, for now. During the only prior period of divided government (2000–2008), polarization did not derail Taiwan’s democratic deepening; hope remains it will not derail

² In 2019, Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage (Paulson, 2024).

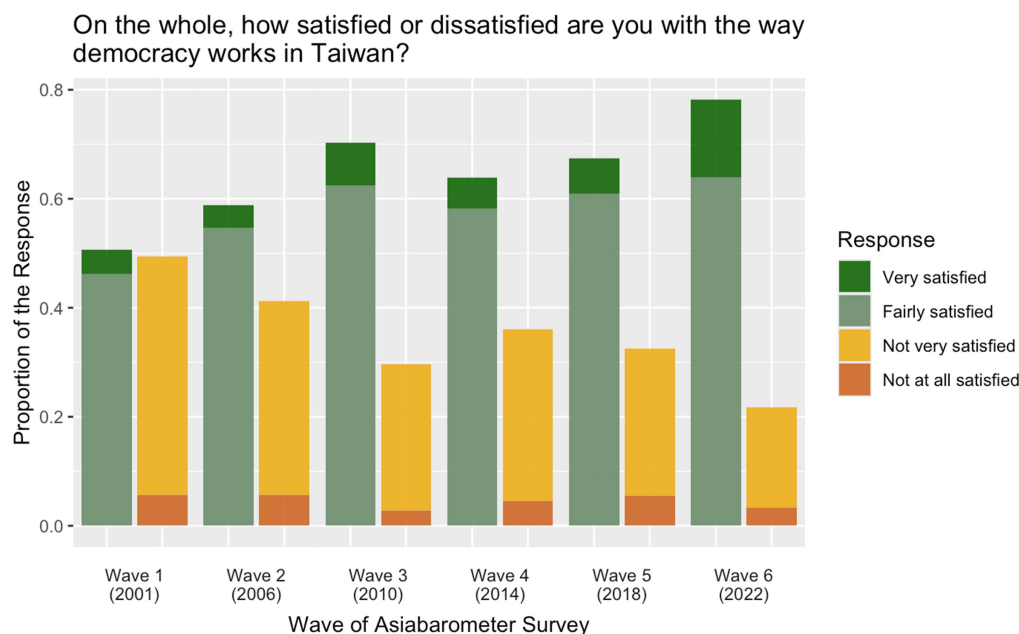


FIGURE 2
Satisfaction with democracy in Taiwan, 2001–2022.

Taiwan's democratic consolidation today, with both sides perhaps now incentivized to compromise (Templeman, 2025a).

Internationally, Taiwan also faces headwinds (Brown, 2025). In addition to mounting pressure from China (see section 5 for Taiwan's efforts to counter this pressure), the Trump administration has posed strategic problems for Taiwan. In August 2025, the U. S. imposed 20% reciprocal tariffs after a trade deal wasn't reached. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is also pushing Taiwan to provide more for its own defense and thus ease problems of "burden-sharing" (Whiton, 2025; Lai, 2025).

Despite these challenges, Taiwan's democracy remains secure and stable for now. And despite polarization, there remains surprising consensus on the big issues. Neither the DPP, KMT, nor TPP favor re-unification with China. "All are pro-democracy and anticommunist, all want to maintain ties with the United States, and none support immediate independence" (Gordon and Hass, 2025).

In his national day speech on October 10, 2025, President Lai presented a hopeful vision, noting this year marks a milestone in Taiwan's democratization, with the time since the end of martial law now surpassing that of the martial law period. Lai promised to continue to promote "whole-of-society" resilience to deter Chinese aggression (Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), 2025). It is to Taiwan's critical efforts to resist China's democratic subversion efforts that we now turn.

5 Taiwan's lessons on resisting Chinese sharp power

U. S. influence capacity in Taiwan has gradually declined since 1980 while Chinese influence capacity has gradually risen since the mid-1980s, per the formal bilateral influence capacity (FBIC) index (Moyer et al., 2024). However, the overall trend masks key variation

across security and economic realms. In Figure 3A, we see that U. S. security influence capacity dropped significantly between 1980 and 1990, but that in 2023 (the last year for which we have data) U. S. influence in security realm on Taiwan remained hegemonic. Figure 3B shows that Chinese influence capacity in Taiwan has risen exclusively in the economic realm, where it overtook the U. S. in the mid-2000s.

In the latest Asian Barometer poll (2022), seven in 10 Taiwanese say U. S. influence is mostly positive. By contrast, four in five Taiwanese say that China's influence is mostly negative, up from 50 to 60 percent in prior surveys. Recent souring on Chinese influence (economic incentives and military threats) is in part tied to the rise of a "Taiwanese only" identity (Wang, 2017). It is also in part a response to the evolution of China's influence operations that has seen a decline in China's "soft power" (e.g., public diplomacy emphasizing cultural affinity and tourism) and the rise of China's "sharp power," which seeks to more directly undermine Taiwan's autonomy, deter moves toward independence, and even actively meddle in democratic elections (Walker, 2018; Wu, 2019).

Two aspects of Chinese sharp power in Taiwan stand out: partisan electoral intervention and (dis)information campaigns. The latter are increasingly used in the pursuit of the former (e.g., Quirk, 2021). Since 1996, China has repeatedly sought to shape the outcome of Taiwan's elections (Barss, 2022), though China's tactics have shifted: "the broad threats of earlier elections have been replaced with narrowly targeted efforts to mobilize Beijing-friendly segments of Taiwan's population" (Wilson, 2022). For example, China has used religious institutions such as urban Mazu temples to mobilize votes for relatively pro-China (e.g., KMT) candidates (Sher et al., 2024). Over time, Taiwan's political parties have adapted to China's repeated meddling in elections (Wilson, 2022).

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese government's dissemination of false information abroad—with Taiwan a primary target—has increased,

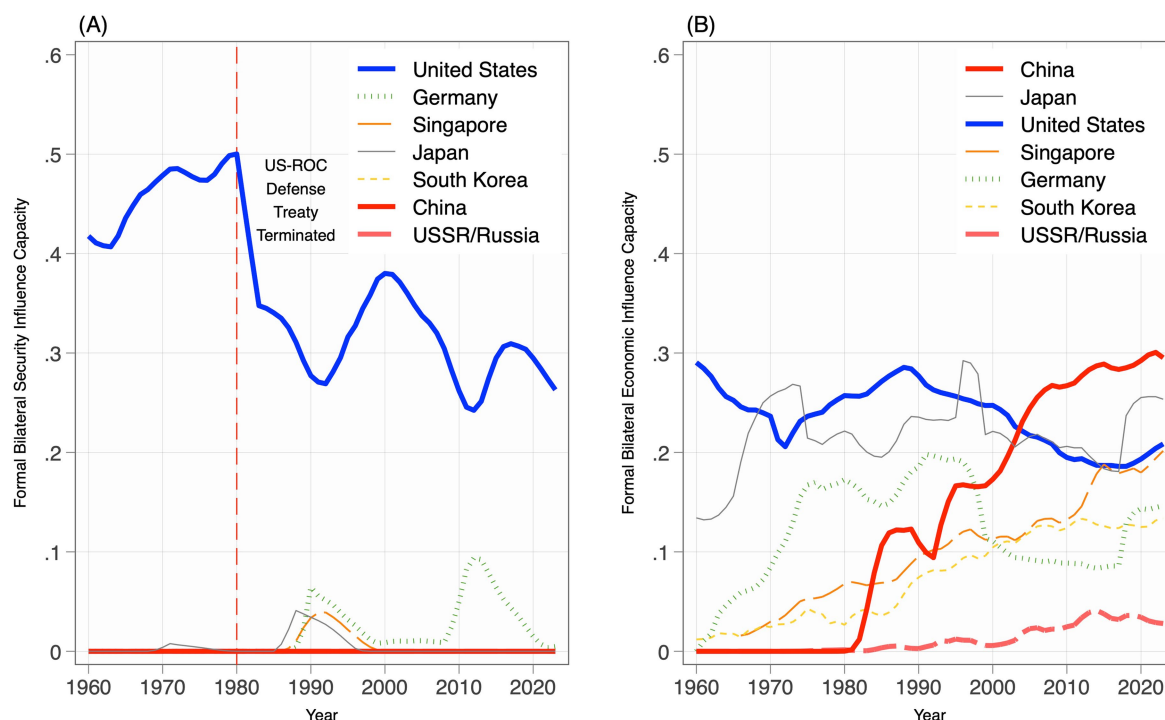


FIGURE 3
Security influence capacity (A) vs. economic influence capacity (B) levels in Taiwan, 1960–2023..

especially since 2018 (Wiebrecht, 2022; Chen, 2022). China has waged an online foreign influence effort in Taiwan since at least 2014 (Martin et al., 2023). For over a decade, Taiwan has been the country most affected by disinformation, per V-Dem data (Mien-chieh and Hetherington, 2024). China's information manipulation operations in Taiwan have four goals: (1) undermine DPP's electoral success, (2) sell the CCP's governance model, (3) induce anxiety about Taiwan's strategic situation to make resistance seem futile, and (4) unravel the fabric of Taiwan's democracy by pushing polarization and undermining trust in institutions (Niven, 2024).

In the runup to Taiwan's 2020 elections, China launched an aggressive disinformation campaign, which failed to block a landslide DPP victory and Tsai Ing-wen's re-election (Kurlantzick, 2019; Templeman, 2020; Huang, 2024). China's propaganda has become more sophisticated since, including more use of local proxies, AI-generated videos, and conspiracy theory narratives that exploit cognitive biases (Chan and Thornton, 2022; Iyengar, 2024; Hsu, 2024). Social media platforms such as TikTok have become key battlegrounds in China's information warfare against Taiwan (Wu, 2025). A 2024 study by Taiwan's National Security Bureau reported a 60% increase in Chinese disinformation (identifying over 28,000 fake accounts), with young Taiwanese as the primary targets (Yan, 2025).

As disinformation campaigns become more common and covert (Mattis and Yu, 2025), Taiwan has shifted from fining actors for spreading fake news to promoting news literacy and use of fact-checking apps (Aspinwall, 2024; Shu-ling, 2023; Cheung, 2023a). Civil society groups like Doublethink Lab and Taiwan Information Environment Research Center have continuously monitored ongoing PRC information warfare since 2019 (Chen, 2022). Taiwan's approach to combatting information manipulation has been described as the

"POWER" model: purpose-driven, organic, whole-of-society, evolving, and remit-bound (Doublethink Lab, 2024). Taiwan's young techies and entrepreneurs play key roles fighting disinformation; Taiwan AI Labs, for example, has used AI to identify and counter AI-generated deepfake messaging (Feigenbaum and Popova, 2024).

As a result, China's recent election interference in Taiwan has had mixed results at best. China used propaganda, economic statecraft, and military intimidation to try to prevent a DPP victory in the January 2024 elections (Cheung, 2023b; Kuo and Staats, 2024; Kuo, 2024), but Lai managed to prevail (by admittedly a narrow margin, Chong, 2024). DPP authorities have claimed that China also sought to interfere in the 2025 recall elections (Reuters, 2025a), though with what effect is unclear.

The Lai administration is pioneering one of the world's first "whole-of-society resilience" initiatives (Thompson, 2024) to combat rising Chinese sharp power. In March 2025, President Lai declared China a "foreign hostile force" under Taiwan's 2019 "Anti-Infiltration Act" (Bloomberg, 2025), and outlined a series of 17 legal and economic counter-measures to Chinese "infiltration" (Reuters, 2025b). In October 2025, after former Taipei mayor and KMT chairperson candidate claimed that "external cyber forces" sought to influence the party's upcoming chairperson election, DPP lawmakers proposed cooperation with the opposition to tighten national security laws (ANI, 2025).

6 Conclusion

As Taiwan is a testing ground for Chinese sharp power and on the frontlines fighting disinformation (Chen, 2022), understanding the sources of Taiwan's democratic emergence and consolidation provides

insights that may prove important for promoting democratic resilience during the ongoing global third wave of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).

While Taiwan's democratization may not be replicable in mainland China any time soon (Chin, 2018), other countries can still learn valuable lessons from Taiwan's democratic experience. Taiwan demonstrates that an active civil society and responsible leaders—aided by civil resistance and outside pressure from democracies—can forge and keep democracy even in a once-Leninist dictatorship.

Beyond being a “frontline state,” Taiwan plays an active role in the global fight for democracy, as Taiwan's former President Tsai Ing-wen (2016–2024) passionately noted in *Foreign Affairs* in 2021 (Tsai, 2021). In 2003, Taiwan established Asia's first democracy promotion NGO, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, modeled on the U. S. National Endowment for Democracy. It has provided “critical support to Asian pro-democracy civil society groups” (Green and Twining, 2024).

Despite its flaws, Taiwan's democracy and democratic resilience remain inspirational (Hur and Yeo, 2024), and Taiwanese themselves would do well to recall the lessons that secured their democracy in the first place. Even as the DPP and KMT play constitutional hardball, Taiwan's partisan leaders should continue to play by democratic rules—and remember the geopolitical imperative to remain democratic remains strong.³ Taiwan remains a democratic David worth supporting and studying (Khrestin, 2024). After all, Taiwan may just be the democratic light the world desperately needs.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

JC: Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Investigation. SR: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

³ As Bush (2021a, p. 248) puts it, “Uniquely, Taiwan has included its democratic system in its security toolkit.”

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Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

The origins of the present collaboration lie in the “final teaching assignment”—a blog originally titled “Taiwan is the Democratic Light that the World Desperately Needs”—that one of us (Staten) submitted for an introductory *International Relations* course at CMU taught by the other of us (Chin). In expanding that blog idea into a full research report, we ultimately benefitted from the excellent research assistance of two other CMU students: YG Gu (who compiled Asia Barometer data and created Figure 2) and Kevin Zheng (who helped research the Wild Lily movement and the importance of civil society mobilization for Taiwan's democracy).

Conflict of interest

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