January 11, 2024 / Elections everywhere all at once

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Funkyzeit>

NOEL KING (host): 2024. Some (my employer, Vox) are calling it the biggest election year in HISTORY. BILLIONS of people are expected to vote in elections in the next 11 months.

Taiwan on Saturday is among the first. It’s a young democracy. It first held a presidential election in 1996. Something Taiwanese are proud of!

*<CLIP> VOTER: I love the fact that Taiwan has done away with strong man politics. A great nation doesn’t need a strong man cult, but a civil society. That’s what makes a mature society.*

NOEL: As they go to the polls to pick a president, Taiwanese will be choosing between a progressive candidate and a candidate who wants much closer ties to China. The race is close, though voters do agree on one thing:

*<CLIP> THE GUARDIAN CORRESPONDENT AMY HAWKINS: I spoke to lots of people on all sides of the political spectrum who made the point that democracy shouldn't be taken for granted or for me to defend. And whoever they're voting for, they're very excited to have that opportunity.*

NOEL: That’s coming up on *Today Explained*.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Noel King. Amy Hawkins is The Guardian’s senior China correspondent. She’s been covering Taiwan’s Saturday election where three parties are in contention.

AMY HAWKINS (*The Guardian* Sr. China correspondent): Yeah. So there are two main parties, the Democratic Progressive Party – the DPP – which is currently in power, and then the main opposition party, which is the Kuomintang – or the KMT – which have historically ruled Taiwan but haven’t been in power for the past eight years. And then there’s this newcomer party called the Taiwan People's Party or the TPP, which was only founded in 2019 and is disrupting the race a bit. In terms of how to remember them, I mean, the Democratic Progressive Party is the most progressive of the three parties in terms of social affairs. You know, they're the party that oversaw the legalization of gay marriage. They've pushed gender equality. So even though much of this year's election campaign is about China and geopolitical issues, you can think of the DPP as being the Progressive Party. The Koumintang is the party that have historically come from mainland China. It lost to the communists at the end of the Chinese Civil War and then fled to Taiwan. They have this kind of very historic connection to China. And then the Taiwan People's Party is the newest one.

NOEL: Okay. So if we hear DPP, we think D for democracy.

AMY: Yeah.

NOEL: KMT, Kuomintang, committed. Sounds a little like Kuomintang, committed to China. That's how I'm going to remember it.

AMY: <laughs> Ok.

NOEL: And TPP, we don't have to think about them very much. They're new.

AMY: They’re new, they’re new, yeah. <laughs>   
  
NOEL: <laughs> All right. So, um, you've been there. You've been talking to voters. What are the big issues in this election?

AMY: So, a major issue has been the question of how to deal with China, and this is always a theme in Taiwanese politics. It’s especially prominent this time around.

*<CLIP> VOTER: Warships and fighter jets keep coming from China as intimidation. When we have such an aggressive neighbor, we must protect our territory.*

SCORING <Momentum>

AMY: The history goes back to 1949, which was the end of the Chinese civil war in mainland China, where the communists were fighting the nationalists. The nationalists are the KMT.

NOEL: Mhm.

AMY: And so when they lost in the civil war, they fled to Taiwan and declared the Republic of China based in Taipei, while the Communists declared the People's Republic of China – which is the communist country we know today – in Beijing. And ever since then, it's kind of been unfinished business for the communists to kind of defeat that last bit of KMT success. And they've always said they want to unify Taiwan with the mainland. But Xi Jinping, more than any other previous leader since Mao, has made it a really top priority. He seemed to see it as part of his legacy and with his getting older, and he said that this problem, as he described it, can't be passed down from generation to generation. In his New Year's Day speech recently, he said that:

*<CLIP> CHINESE PRESIDENT XI JINPING: The reunification of China is a historical inevitability, and compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should join hands and share the great glory of national rejuvenation.*

AMY: … and he hasn't ruled out the use of force to doing so. And, you know, increasingly, any kind of political cooperation with Taiwan looks less and less likely, so that leaves fewer options that aren’t military force.

SCORING OUT

AMY: And then, of course, like any election, lots of people care about the economy a lot for domestic issues, particularly for young people. Wages have been stagnant for a long time. Housing is increasingly unaffordable. People feel like there aren't enough good jobs. So the kind of issues that would motivate voters in any democracy are also very important in Taiwan.

*<CLIP> VOTER: My personal priority is to have a better life. As for international matters, like relations with China, I feel that they are a little detached from us.*

NOEL: So let's talk through the three parties, especially the big ones, the DPP and the KMT. Where do they stand? Where do they stand on these issues? Where do they stand in particular on China?

AMY: Yeah. So the frontrunner candidate is a man called Lai Ching-te, who is the current vice president to Tsai Ing-wen. They’re from the DPP.

NOEL: Democratic…

AMY: …The Democratic Progressive Party, who are seen as being the most kind of pro-independence. Or: they don't formally support Taiwanese independence, but they are the most in favor of a sovereign Taiwanese identity that's very distant from China. And Lai, more than Tsai, the current president, has a history of promoting Taiwanese independence. He previously described himself as a “pragmatic worker for Taiwanese independence.” He is seen by some as being quite radical.

*<CLIP> TAIWANESE VP LAI CHING-TE: We must abide by the truth, which is what I mean by pragmatism. It is that Taiwan is already a sovereign, independent country, called the Republic of China. It’s not part of the People’s Republic of China.*

AMY: But he massively kind of softened down that rhetoric in this presidential campaign, because he doesn't want to seem like someone who's going to rock the boat…

NOEL: Hmm.

AMY: … and someone who's going to provoke China, and he very much kind of stayed close to Tsai Ing-wen’s rhetoric, which is about, ‘Taiwan doesn't need to formally declare independence because it already effectively is independent.’ And through that strategy, Tsai Ing-wen has won lots of friends in Washington and around the world.

NOEL: What about the KMT: committed to China? What is this candidate saying?

AMY: Yeah. So they KMT candidate, the man called Hou Yu-ih, he's a former police officer…

NOEL: Ah!

AMY: …and quite popular mayor of New Taipei. He has a quite kind of avuncular, everyman persona.

*<CLIP> TAPE OF HOU YU-IH TALKING + KMT RALLY TAPE*

AMY: I was at a rally of his recently, and rather than coming on the stage from behind the scenes, he, like, walked through the crowds and…

NOEL: Hmmm!

AMY: …everyone was, grabbing him and, you know, trying to touch him like some kind of rock star. And he's quite, uh, strategic, clever pick for the KMT because they've historically been seen as kind of more elitist, out of touch party, because they're the party that came from China in 1949 and had ruled Taiwan for most of its history since then. They've typically controlled the government, they've controlled the big companies, and lots of Taiwanese people kind of see them as being the elite. So through picking Hou Yu-ih as their candidate, they've kind of pivoting toward this idea of being the more everyman, looking-out-for-normal-people, like, working-class party.

NOEL: All right. And then there is the TPP. We're not paying them a ton of attention because they are the third party in this. But tell me about who their candidate is and what this person wants.

AMY: Yeah, I mean, the TPP is quite an interesting kind of disrupter to this race…

NOEL: Ooh!

AMY: … because their candidate, Ko Wen-je, who founded the party in 2019 – he has made it really close. He’s actually shown huge levels of support in recent weeks. He had tens of thousands of people coming out to the rallies. And some people do think he's been underestimated.

*<CLIP> NATSOUND TPP RALLY*

AMY: He's a surgeon turned politician. His pitch to voters that he’s a pragmatist, he’s a technocrat. He's not the kind of political ideologue. He's just gonna look for a very practical way forward.

*<CLIP> TPP CANDIDATE KO WEN-JE: A real important principle is: we have to think of a way to have dialogue with China, and not just tell them no. Because after no, there is no other step.*

AMY: He doesn't have a huge amount in terms of concrete policies for dealing with China. He’s focused more on domestic issues, but that has proved really popular, particularly with younger voters. I mean there was polling from a few weeks ago, which showed kind of huge amounts of support among under-40 voters compared to the other two parties.

NOEL: All right. So the stakes for Taiwanese are quite high here. The stakes for China are quite high here. What about this election is so important that much of the rest of the world is glued to the outcome?

SCORING <The Plot Thickens>

AMY: I think it's because, you know, whoever wins this election, it will set the tone of cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan for years to come.

NOEL: Hmm.

AMY: And it comes at a moment when military and geopolitical tensions are kind of as high as they've ever been. And so if the DPP wins on Saturday, you know, there are many concerns that that could – would really anger Beijing. At the very least, they're likely to respond economically with trade sanctions on Taiwan. And any conflict in Taiwan wouldn't just affect Taiwan, it would affect the global economy, would affect regional security even though it's a very small island democracy, it would have ramifications around the world.

NOEL: That was Amy Hawkins of *The Guardian*. Now, during the break, let’s see how many countries can YOU name that are holding elections this year, in 2024. Tweet your answers to @seanrameswaram.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. Bryan Walsh is an editorial director at *Vox*. Now, he wrote a piece for *Vox* in which he pointed out that it is not just Taiwan going to the polls. People in more than FIFTY countries are gonna vote this year!

BRYAN WALSH (*Vox* editorial director): Presidential elections, legislative elections, governor elections, local elections. It's really a banner year for, if not democracy, at least the act of having elections.

NOEL: <laughs> Can you name all the countries?

BRYAN: I can definitely not name all the countries. I can name a few of them.

NOEL: Name the big ones.

BRYAN: Okay. Some of the big ones are Bangladesh actually, which just had its election, uh, Sunday. Talk about Taiwan, which is going to have its election shortly. Other big ones are Indonesia in February…

*<CLIP> ARIRANG NEWS: With current President Joko Widodo limited to two terms, the country will choose a new leader…*

BRYAN: Pakistan. India, the single biggest democracy, will have its general elections in April. May.

*<CLIP> FRANCE24: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is vying for a third term, and by all estimates he’s going to have a swift win…*

BRYAN: Europe will have its parliamentary elections in June. And of course, you know, we have the United States coming up in November.

*<CLIP> US PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Whether democracy is still America’s sacred cause is the most urgent question of our time. And it’s what the 2024 election is all about.*

NOEL: All right. Let's situate Taiwan within this list that you've given us. What are kind of the stakes in the Taiwanese election, as you see them in this context?

BRYAN: So the Taiwanese election is really interesting. Taiwan was only – became a democracy really, in the 1990s, but now it's really one of the most vibrant, highly-contested, fair and freest democracies in all of Asia. And the real importance here is: almost no matter who wins, you will continue to have these tensions between Taiwan, which views itself as kind of a de facto independent country, even though it's only recognized by a few countries diplomatically around the world. And, of course, China, which views Taiwan, frankly, as a rogue province, that it intends to reunify by peaceful or other means at some point. So that tension will continue. And there's a real concern, both because should, you know, forceful reunification happen, should military action happen, it could potentially wipe out, as I said, one of the best democracies in all of Asia. But also it would obviously have major human cost if the U.S. got involved. It would also have really huge ramifications for the global economy: Most of the semiconductors in the world, the computer chips are, everything from your phone to your car to your microwave are made out of Taiwan. So, uh, it does quite matter who's in charge of that country. It also matters, uh, what's going to happen after it.

NOEL: Okay, so you said something interesting there, which is that in Taiwan there are many issues on the ballot, but democracy itself is also on the ballot. The same thing is happening in our United States – democracy on the ballot, right, 2024.

BRYAN: Mhmm.

NOEL: Is that going on elsewhere?

BRYAN: That's really the story around the world…

NOEL: Oh!

BRYAN: Really, surprisingly few countries where, you know, you feel secure that no matter who wins, you know, democracy will continue. And that's because by almost every standard of international monitor, we've seen real democratic backsliding happening over the last ten years. And what that means is that even as countries continue to have elections, you begin to lose the real quality of democracy, which is free and fair elections, not just elections, period. You begin to sort of see where, you know, people in power will penalize or even criminalize their opponents. We're seeing that in a lot of different countries.

*<CLIP> AJ: It’s not often you see opposition party supporters gathered openly like this and they won’t be allowed to for long. This is an election in name, certainly. But there’s only one political view that matters here – and it isn’t theirs.*

BRYAN: And the concern really is – when we say democracy is on the ballot, should the results of these elections be seen to continue to strengthen those kind of quasi-democratic autocrats, you'll start to see even less real democracy around the world. You might still see campaigns, you might still see elections, but they'll be kind of not real.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: This is an announcement that will surprise no one: Vladimir Putin saying he will run again for president.*

BRYAN: I mean, even a country like Russia – ’bout as autocratic as they come – will have elections this year. No one sees that this free, no one sees that as a real democracy. But you will still have a kind of like the skeleton of democracy, the trappings of it, but not the real quality, not the real free and fairness that we value.

NOEL: Yeah. You know, I want to dig in on that a bit more, because when we say democracy is on the ballot, we don't mean that it's as simple as people go to the polls and they're like, hmm, should I vote for the Democrat or the autocrat? It's like laid out very clearly. What does it actually look like at the polls when you're choosing between the more democratic option and the less democratic option? What are some of the signs that you are <laughing>, that you are, in fact, voting in one of these elections?

BRYAN: Well, I can give you an example of an election that actually just occurred on January 7th, that was Bangladesh…

NOEL: Mm!

BRYAN: … a very big country.

SCORING <Pandemic>

BRYAN: And in that case, the party in power led by Sheikh Hasina, really essentially all but outlawed the opposition such that, they really made it impossible for them to compete on a fair level.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: Zia is under house arrest on corruption charges that she says are politically motivated, and her supporters have been jailed in their thousands after violent protests that began last October.*

*<CLIP> OPPOSITION POLITICIAN: They have already executed the election process weeks ago. // This has been decided not in the ballot box but sitting in the capital in the office of the highest executive in the country.*

BRYAN: The opposition actually decided to boycott the elections altogether. They decided they would not run because they saw it as a farce.

*<CLIP> OPPOSITION POLITICIAN: We are appeal to the people of Bangladesh not to attend the on 7th election. Thank you.*

BRYAN: Which created a bit of a conundrum for the party in power, because even autocrats, even sort of these democratic autocrats, they, they crave campaigns. They crave the authenticity that elections seem to confer. So suddenly this party was faced with a situation where like, ‘Oh, wait, everyone can see that we're running against nobody.’ So they were actually putting some of their own members of their party to run against other members of their party, just to give that sheen of democracy.

NOEL: Huh!

BRYAN: And the end result was, yes, they won, but turnout was quite lower than it had been the past, which I think is another sign that you tend to be in a situation where even the people in the country know that this is not quite real. So when you see the criminalization of opponents, when you see real concerns about the safety and security of elections, of the vote itself, when you start to see, um, the fact that these two parties or multi parties can't compete fairly on, on the same level, when you start to see real worries about misinformation or disinformation spreading on the internet, those are all signs that you may be in an election where, whatever other issues are on the ballot, democracy itself is on the ballot as well.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: There have been um, as you point out in your piece, um, there have been lots of other systems other than democracy. Democracy is not guaranteed. Right? It's not like, ‘Oh, you just get a democracy because you decide that you want one.’ Is that one of the challenges that you see, Bryan? The fact that if you want a democracy, you really do need to vote and to fight to get it, to keep it?

BRYAN: I think absolutely, that's one of the, the challenges. Um, elections are the quickest thing you can do in a democracy. We know how those work, but there are so many other things that need to happen to have a real free and fair, representative government that go beyond an election. You have to have norms about how elections are contested. Actually, you have to have norms about how politicians act in power. Sometimes there are laws around them, more often they're simply social norms. And look, we know very well from the example United States and Donald Trump that even in a democracy that in many ways is the world's oldest continuous democracy, there's no guarantee that continues.

*<CLIP> FORMER US PRESIDENT TRUMP, THE GEORGIA PHONE CALL: So look. All I wanna do is this: I just wanna find 11,780 votes.*

BRYAN: And once those norms are broken, they're really hard to put back together. And I think a last thing here is with these young democracies that often, you initially have that experience, you have a burst of freedom. People really appreciate that. But, you know, just because you have a democracy does not mean your country will be well-run…

NOEL: Hmm.

BRYAN: …doesn't mean you'll have prosperity. And often people can turn against democracy, turn against those in power when they feel that their needs or before material or otherwise, are not being met. That is very difficult to, to overcome. Just because democracy is – we think that it's the freest system of government does mean it's always gonna be the most efficient. But all those together, like you have not just, I think, a backsliding against democracy, but a backlash against some of the, the aspects of it that make it difficult to run, really. You know, they make it a harder system of government than, than other ones.

NOEL: Right? I mean, this is why authoritarians at times seem very convincing, right? It's like, oh, somebody just takes power and like gets shit done. Fine. We don't we don't have to deal with the democratic process. What is your informed take on what happens if 2024 is simply not a good year for democracy worldwide? What does that look like?

BRYAN: Yeah, I think it's, it's depressing, quite honestly. You know, as I said, we've had years of democratic backsliding. Here in the United States, which, you know, I agree with President Biden when he calls the US a beacon of democracy.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: … the beacon of democracy to the world.*

BRYAN: And that shouldn’t be understood as the, the United States is a perfect democracy. Rather, it is a bellwether. And if we can't keep it functioning here, it's very hard to see it functioning around the world. Honestly, if we continue to see this, we see no arrest to this trend. I do worry quite a lot about the future. I'd love to come up with a more optimistic spin on it. Um, other than to say that, you know, there have been cycles in the past that like sometimes you see, you know, growing autocracy, it then overreaches. You see a sort of civil movement that can push it back. I would hope that happening in this case, and of course, I think it's important to remember that as much as we worry about how fair these elections are going to be around the world, it is really notable that this many people are participating in the democratic process in some way, because that was simply not the case until fairly recently. Uh, you go back to the immediate postwar era. A lot of countries obviously were not Democratic. You had the entire communist sphere as well –

*<CLIP> FORMER US PRESIDENT HARRY S TRUMAN: If we all work together to maintain and strengthen our democratic ideals, communism will never be a serious threat to the American way of life.*

BRYAN: Go back even further, and there's a handful of democracies at best. Even countries like the United States really don't become liberal democracies – meaning democracies where everyone has a chance to participate – until the post-Civil Rights era. So even the opportunity to have democracy in the scale is fairly recent. That makes me feel better, I suppose. But then I look at the more recent trends, and I do get worried.

NOEL: You know, on Today, Explained, we covered the Polish election last year. Poland famously, was backsliding, backsliding, backsliding. Then these elections happen and Poland slides forward…

*<CLIP> POLISH PRIME MINISTER DONALD TUSK: Poland won. Democracy has won. We have removed them from power. This is one of the most beautiful days of Poland’s democracy, and I have no doubt that this day will go down in history as a day that opens a new era and the rebirth of our republic.*

NOEL: That one really shocked me and made me think, we all talk a lot about the death of democracy, but you just never know what people voting are going to want. What they decide is most important to them. And sometimes it seems they decide this bigger ideal of democracy is more important then who can get the roads paved?

BRYAN: That's absolutely true. And you're absolutely right about the Polish elections. That surprised me as well. It heartened me as well. Uh, and I think, you know, what happened there is is kind of characteristic of what could happen in situations where which is you had a party in power that was becoming increasingly autocratic. It begins to overreach. And even people who may not, you know, they're not the people are going to go to the streets to to protest for democracy. But they they don't want to live in a country where they don't feel free. And that can lead to that kind of different backlash, a backlash against that creeping autocracy.

SCORING <Uneasy Street>

BRYAN: And one thing to keep in mind is that, you know, when you look around the world, there was a really interesting survey done by Open Society Foundations last year, 36,000 people across 30 countries, more than 80% of them said they wanted to live in a democracy. And when I look at that, what I, what I take from it is that there is a close-to-universal yearning for democracy. It is seen as the type of government that one should have in the world today, and if they can keep that focus, I mean that that does give me some hope for the future.

NOEL: Bryan Walsh, Vox. Today’s episode was produced by Amanda Lewellyn. Amina al-Sadi is our editor, and David Herman is our engineer. Laura Bullard did God’s work on today’s show. She’s our fact-checker. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained.*

SCORING OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]