

# Chinese-style democracy: How the world's most populous nation does it

Andy Boreham

Last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden met up for their first meeting since Biden took office earlier this year. The virtual discussion between the leaders of the world's two largest economies was designed as a way to ease tensions between the two countries and get relations back on track after they were hugely derailed under President Trump.

Most of the content of the summit has already been analyzed at length, so I won't address the details here, but I do want to dive deeper into one comment Xi made about democracy in China.

He told Biden: "Democracy is not mass produced with a uniform model or configuration for countries around the world. Whether a country is democratic or not should be left to its own people to decide. Dismissing forms of democracy that are different from one's own is in itself undemocratic."

Basically, what Xi was saying is that China has its own form of democracy, that democracy comes in all shapes and sizes, and that other countries — in this case the United States — should respect that and stop claiming that only their form of democracy is right or correct.

But this raised some huge questions for many: Does China really have democracy? Chinese people can't vote for their president, so how can they claim to have democracy? Today I'll try to explain, in simple terms, China's style of democracy and how it works.

First we need to look at what democracy is. Basically, the word comes from two Greek words: *demos*, which means the people, and *kratos*, which means power. Put together, they form the word we know today, *democracy*, which means people power or rule by the people.

Different governments take that to mean different things, but it's fair to say that for many Westerners it means one thing and one thing only: the right to vote directly for their leader.

So it goes without saying, then, that Westerners will automatically reject the idea that China values democracy without diving deeper, but that's a big mistake.



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with US President Joe Biden via video link in Beijing on November 16. — Xinhua

In most Western nations, including my home country New Zealand, nationwide elections take place every few years which determine who will form the next government. If you find a political party that you like, you can give them your vote and hope that they represent your values when it comes to forming policy and making new laws.

This is called "representative democracy," because you are, in effect, giving your vote to a political party you trust will represent you when it comes to voting on new legislation in parliament, who may or may not vote the way you like on certain issues.

It's worth noting, though, that many Western democracies don't allow citizens to vote directly for their leader. In my home country New Zealand, for example, votes can only be cast for the political party of choice. Who will take the role of leader within the party, and ultimately the leader of the country if that party wins, is decided behind closed doors outside of the public realm.

Apart from voting in the general election every few years, it's literally impossible for every individual to cast a vote on every single issue that comes up in government, hence the term "representative democracy."

While China's democracy features aspects that are representative, and aspects that are based on elections, the type of

democracy practiced in China is referred to as "whole-process democracy" or "deliberative democracy," but it's probably just easier if we call it democracy with Chinese characteristics.

What many people don't realize is that soon after China's reform and opening-up began in 1978, the country also began democratic reforms aimed at gradually building up democratic systems based on the unique characteristics of China's history, geography, population, challenges and so on.

The key of China's style of democracy is that the people are the most important thing. That's why it's called the People's Republic of China; the currency is called Renminbi (人民币), or the people's money; the central bank is called the People's Bank of China; and so on.

China's form of democracy features four main aspects where Chinese people regularly exercise their democratic rights. They are: people's congresses, multiparty cooperation, regional ethnic autonomy and community-level self-governance.

## People's congresses

People's congresses are where deputies are elected from all walks of life, all political backgrounds and all sectors to represent their groups in the political process. These congresses happen at many governmental levels all across the

country, with the largest being the National People's Congress, which consists of members of different political parties, representatives of different organizations, ethnic minorities and other groups for a term of five years.

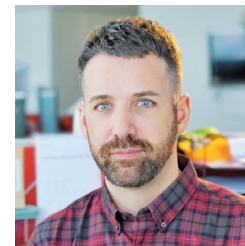
Some quick statistics: Since 2016, 2.5 million people of different groups and minorities from all walks of life have been elected to represent those groups in people's congresses. They were voted in by more than 1 billion registered voters.

## Multiparty cooperation

Many people don't realize that there are currently a total of nine political parties in China which, despite not being affiliated with the Communist Party of China, work alongside them in government affairs. Many members of the other eight political parties hold important posts, such as vice-chair positions of the National People's Congress.

## Regional ethnic autonomy

Regional ethnic autonomy is another important part of democracy with Chinese characteristics, which basically means that in parts of China with large concentrations of ethnic minorities, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, self-governance is practiced under the guidance of the state. This allows them to exercise autonomous power and take care of



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### Editor's note:

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their own affairs. China has five autonomous regions set to offer regional ethnic autonomy, those being Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi and Ningxia.

## Community self-governance

Finally, community-level self-governance is where China employs most of its public electoral systems at the grassroots level. That means that millions of urban and rural citizens can directly vote for the representatives who govern their daily lives, allowing them to help make decisions, discuss policies and engage in democratic supervision which allows the most fundamental level of Chinese society to best reflect the needs and desires of the people. Voting that takes place in village and community elections all across China enjoys up to and over 90 percent turnout, which is much higher than most Western democracies.

There really is no right or wrong way to engage in democracy, as long as it is designed by and for the people it serves, based on the unique conditions those people face.

China's form of democracy today is based on ongoing changes and tweaking since the 1980s, and it will continue to evolve at a speed that is right for China. There's an old Chinese proverb that says 摸着石头过河, and basically translates as "cross a river by feeling the stones." This is a great way to describe China's approach to democratization as it continues to expand and grow.