

ORCA SPECIAL REPORT 5

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FOREWORD BY RATISH MEHTA, SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, ORCA



This report, "Chinese Democracy in Theory and Practice: The CPC's Domestic & Foreign Election Narratives" offers an examination of one of the most contested ideas in contemporary political discourse. At a moment when democracy is being debated, defended, and redefined across the world, China's articulation of its own model of democracy, both domestically and internationally, merits careful attention.

The study seeks to make an important contribution by unpacking the Communist Party of China's evolving democracy narrative, situating it within both theoretical debates and practical manifestations. It draws attention to the ways in which the concept is reframed to serve domestic governance objectives and foreign policy positioning. In doing so, it aims to deepen understanding of the interplay between political systems, legitimacy and global order.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on how the Party positions its model in direct contrast to liberal democracies, scrutinizing foreign elections, amplifying narratives of dysfunction, and presenting its own governance approach as a more stable and effective alternative. This strategic reframing has implications not only for China's internal political discourse but also for how democracy is perceived and contested globally.

This project has been over a year in the making, supported by sustained research and collaborative effort. I hope this report serves as a valuable resource for scholars, practitioners and policymakers engaged with the evolving nature of democracy, both in theory and in practice, in the context of China and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been shaped by the generous support, thoughtful guidance, and collegial encouragement I have been fortunate to receive from both my contemporaries and seniors. Any attempt to study governance and society rests on a vast intellectual inheritance, built by thinkers and practitioners who have long grappled with the question of how to govern societies and create political systems that endure. This work is but a small contribution, made possible by the extensive scholarship of my predecessors and strengthened by the insights of colleagues who continue to engage with these debates today.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to the Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA) for providing the institutional space and nurturing environment in which this research could grow. I am especially indebted to ORCA's Director, Ms. Eerishika Pankaj, for her constant guidance and encouragement, and to my colleagues Rahul Karan Reddy, Omkar Bhole, Trishala S., Ophelia Yumlembam whose assistance and willingness to engage across a wide spectrum of ideas (often beyond office hours) enriched this project in countless ways.

I would also like to appreciate the contributions of Hans Deepak and Yuvraj Sindhwani for their assistance during the editing process.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Andy Wong of the Associated Press for the cover image used in this report. While I do not know him personally, his work captures a moment with such clarity, that it sets a fitting stage to begin such an inquiry.





In the cover image, China's paramount leader stands alone at the ballot box, casting a vote beneath the grand ceiling of the Great Hall of the People. The scene could easily be mistaken for a familiar democratic ritual. Yet the moment when Xi Jinping, both the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and President of the People's Republic of China, deposited his ballot during the National People's Congress, was no ordinary exercise of electoral choice. Rather, it marked the constitutional change that abolished presidential term limits, consolidating power in a way that most liberal democracies would see as antithetical to democratic practice.

For the Party, however, this was not a contradiction. It was instead a performance of political legitimacy, both for domestic audiences and increasingly for the world. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the CPC has sharpened and globalized its democracy narrative significantly. What began as a domestic framing, presenting the Party-led system as a Chinese form of democracy, has now expanded into a foreign-facing discourse that challenges the universality of liberal democratic norms.

In 2024, as millions of voters in the United States and India headed to elect their leaders, a different kind of election narrative was unfolding in China. In Chinese media and academic discourse, these elections were analyzed not as exercises of democratic celebration but were instead projected as a reflection of widespread division and inefficiency. For instance, an editorial in a leading state-run media outlet described the U.S. election as a 'chaotic spectacle', while India's electoral process was framed as a logistical marvel overshadowed by systemic inequalities (China Daily, 2024; Guancha, 2024). These projections were not limited to the elections of 2024 alone. For over a decade, Chinese discourse on Democracy has sought to delegitimize the western-liberal concept of democracy while simultaneously seeking greater legitimacy for a uniquely Chinese style of governance.

Since the 1980s, and even more so under the leadership of Xi Jinping, Beijing's global governance discourse has consistently portrayed China as a democratic-state. To external observers, this notion often appears as a contradiction; a concept which is at odds with the country's political reality (Holbig, 2022). Yet, within the country, the Party-State has rigorously presented itself as a system embodying the democratic values of rule of law and elections, a portrayal carefully constructed by its leaders and amplified through its state-controlled media. In practice, however, Chinese-style democracy functions in a manner fundamentally different from liberal democracies and is largely overshadowed by the pervasive and overarching presence of the Party.

Such portrayals, both domestically and internationally, illustrate a deliberate effort by the CPC to shape how the practice of liberal democracy is perceived by its domestic audiences as well as other states that are swinging in and out of democratic practice. These projections have largely sought to juxtapose the Party's own governance model against the perceived shortcomings of other democratic systems, suggesting that its outcome-oriented approach is far more efficient.

Understanding the CPC's narrative projection strategy therefore, both within its borders and in response to foreign democratic processes, is critical for several reasons. Domestically, the Party's strategic reinterpretation of political concepts since its ascendence to power in 1949 has long served as a cornerstone of its political control over and legitimacy within China. From Mao's emphasis on 'mass line democracy' to the reform-era focus on grassroot elections, and more recently, to 'Whole-Process People's Democracy', the Party has regularly shifted its interpretation of Democracy, revealing the complex nature of its relationship with the political concept. Such internal narrative projections have also relied on diverse and often contradictory interpretations, framed in both absolute terms and through specific qualifying adjectives (CGTN, 2021; Wang, 2022).

The shifting nature of these interpretations have also allowed the Party to claim the label of democracy without embracing core liberal values, while at the same time, allowing it to challenge conventional definitions and solidify its ideological control.

Externally, the Party's critical responses to foreign elections provide crucial insights into how it envisions itself as an alternative to liberal political governance systems. For decades, the liberal democratic model has dominated governance discourse as the gold standard. The CPC's counter-narrative, emphasized greatly under Xi Jinping, seeks to dismantle this 'discourse hegemony' by proposing that China's governance model is not merely different but potentially superior in addressing the challenges faced by many countries, particularly those in the Global South (Holbig, 2022; Junru, 2024). By pointing to China's rapid development, poverty alleviation and social stability, this narrative has aimed to appeal to countries looking for alternative pathways of modernization, without having to adopt Western democratic frameworks (Xinhua, 2024; State Council Information Office, 2021; Haiming, 2023).

This carefully constructed discourse thus reveals the Party's intent not only to assert the merits of its Party-State system but also to influence global perceptions of democracy itself. However, this framing is more than a rhetorical exercise, far more, it is a strategic effort to shift the perception on what constitutes as political legitimacy, and as an extension, the path to swifter economic prosperity. Thus, assessing the Party's discourse on democracy has far-reaching implications for how political authority is being framed, both in favor of and against prevailing notions of what constitutes as legitimate political power.

The report, in essence, addresses two fundamental questions:

- How has the CPC's understanding and practice of democracy evolved across different leaderships and what implications does this evolution have on the Party's domestic political narrative on Democracy in China?
- How does the CPC construct and project its vision of democracy in response to major foreign elections, and how does this narrative seek to position China's governance model as an alternative to liberal democracies?

This report, in light of the Party's dual-projection on Democracy, both internally and externally, seeks to examine the diverse yet interconnected dynamics through two lenses. First, it traces the evolution of the Party's domestic democracy narrative, examining how successive leaders from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping have adapted and redefined the concept to align with their governance priorities and to respond to socio-political changes within Chinese society and the Party itself. This section also explores internal debates that produced varied interpretations of the concept, as well as the mechanisms of local elections, consultations, and other practices that the Party presents as hallmarks of its 'democratic model'.

Second, the report investigates the CPC's framing of foreign elections through two case studies—the 2024 elections in India and the United States—to analyze how these events are interpreted and strategically embedded within the Party's broader political discourse.

Both its domestic and external narrative projections can be categorized as part of a larger Global Narrative Project, which in many ways informs us of a Party that is engaged in a complex balancing act; asserting the superiority of its system while critiquing others to consolidate its standing at home and abroad. By exploring the unique dual projections, the report seeks to uncover not just what the CPC says about democracy, but why it matters, and what it tells us about the future of the broader contest for political ideas in the 21st century.





China's political system is uniquely different from most other forms of governance, democratic or otherwise. The Party-State, a term used to describe the dual structure of governance, operates predominantly under the directives of the Communist Party, rather than through the independent machinery of the state. This framework has not only ensured the supreme authority of the CPC but has also heavily influenced how political concepts are defined and understood within the ideological boundaries set by the Party in China.

Democracy, in this context, serves as a prime example of how the CPC has shaped and reinterpreted political concepts, framing them in ways that aligns with its ideological principles and justify its political authority, while also differentiating the characterization of its concept from others. These reinterpretations have also drawn upon deep-rooted historical references and ideological continuities that the Party has time and again selectively mobilized to legitimize its present governance system.

This chapter begins by tracing the shifting contours of how the Party has defined and deployed the idea of democracy within its borders. From Mao Zedong's invocation of 'people's democratic dictatorship' to Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic emphasis on stability and development, and finally to Xi Jinping's critical articulation of western-liberal governance through the 'whole-process people's democracy', the Party's democracy narrative has never been static. Instead, it has evolved alongside China's internal transformations absorbing events of ideological variations and social discontent. At each stage, the concept has been recalibrated to serve governance priorities while reaffirming the Party's central role, offering not only a justification for its rule but also a claim to democratic legitimacy on its own terms.

China's Tryst with Democracy

The concept of democracy in China has long been a contested subject. Within the country's modern political landscape, political theorists and Party leaders alike have interpreted, contextualized and implemented the term 'democracy' in diverse ways.

In that sense, democratic principles in China, though often dismissed when viewed through a Western liberal lens (Bradsher, 2021), have never been entirely absent from the country's political history. The concept has instead resurfaced in various ways, ushering into waves of changes that have shaped contemporary Chinese history and left an enduring impression on the

Party's present day governance structure.

However, many of these efforts have also resulted in outcomes that have been marked by setbacks or unfulfilled aspirations of democratizing the country. From the brief existence of Sun Yat-sen's Republic to the intellectual revolution of the May Fourth Movement, and from the Democracy Wall movement in the late 70's to the fateful events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, each represented an important stage in China's complex and evolving relationship with the idea of democracy.

Between the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, intense debates unfolded over the form of governance that would replace the declining Qing Dynasty (Lee, 2009). On one side, constitutionalists advocated for a constitutional monarchy with limited suffrage, believing it would ensure the dynasty's sustainability, while on the other, revolutionaries favoured a republican political system founded on universal suffrage, envisioning a more radical departure from the then existing order.

The Xinhai Revolution ultimately ended the monarchy, resulting in the formation of the Republic of China under revolutionary ideals; albeit with limited success. Between 1912 and 1915, Sun Yat-sen's establishment of the Republic in 1912 marked the first attempt to embed democratic ideals into the governance of a post-imperial China (Yat-Sen, 1923). However, the Republic was short-lived, undone by internal instability and external pressures. The Republic struggled to implement democratic principles amidst the chaos of warlordism, foreign intervention, and in-fighting between different factions. Despite these challenges, the era became a crucible for political thinkers, who began to conceptualize and lay the intellectual groundwork for a distinctly Chinese interpretation of democracy; a vision that continues to evolve to this day.

The Promise of a Party-State with Democratic Characteristics

In the early days of the Communist Party, Mao Zedong offered a vision of democracy that seemed to break from the conventions of authoritarian rule. His concept of 'New Democracy', outlined in the namesake 1940 essay, shaped the evolving discourse by framing democracy as a means to achieve revolutionary ends (Tse-Tung, 1940). Mao adapted Marxist-Leninist principles to China's socio-political conditions, presenting democracy as contextual and instrumental while also framing it in a way that served the Communist Party's goals. He argued that China, as a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, required a democratic revolution to dismantle imperialist domination and feudal landlords, creating conditions for socialism under the Communist Party's leadership. In this framing, democracy served not only as a tool for national liberation but also as a mechanism to legitimize the Party's authority in defining and practicing democratic principles.

Yet, as Mao's leadership evolved, the promises of 'New Democracy' gave way to a regime where power was consolidated in the hands of one-man, turning China into a totalitarian state. The Cultural Revolution further epitomized this transformation, as the initial ideals of collective governance and mass

engagement were overshadowed by political purges and authoritarian control.

With Mao's passing, China stood at a crossroads. Deng Xiaoping, Mao's successor, distinguished himself as a pragmatic reformer and a leader who sought to redefine the Party's relationship with governance and democracy (Zhang, Y, 2007). The ills of the Mao years left an enduring dark spot on the Party's history, necessitating a stark departure from past practices. In that sense, Deng's approach was in many ways different, where he chose to emphasize on political stability and economic development over ideological radicalism. His reforms did not conform to Western democratic ideals but instead sought to decentralize power within the Party, a move considered to be a radical shift from Mao's one-man rule and progressing the Party-State into an era of political and economic reforms (Yiu-Chung, 1997).

Although Deng viewed the principles of liberal democracies as tools of monopolistic capitalism designed to serve capitalist interests, he championed China's 'people's democracy,' reiterating the Party's central role in governance and state related matters (Lee, 2009). Even though Deng's political reforms would be categorically dismissed under the Western liberal framework, his political liberalization aimed to democratize power concentration within the one-party system, and more so, to enable his plans for the liberalization of the economy. The 'opening up' in the political arena for Deng meant a re-crafting of the Party's power projection within the country, which relied greatly on democratizing the Party system rather than State governance (Yiu-Chung, 2007).

Among the many initiatives he undertook as part of his political reforms within the Party, Deng most importantly replaced Mao's one-man-rule formula with an unwritten but strictly followed norm of collective leadership that would go on to guide the Party's governance-structure for the next three decades. His vision also prioritized democratized central control to ensure stability and progress, articulated famously in his predecessor's unfulfilled concept of 'Democratic Centralism'. For Deng and his handpicked leaders, this was a mechanism to enable internal debate and prevent authoritarian excesses, although the principle itself was deeply rooted in a foundational understanding of Party governance. It was also in the 1945 Party constitution that "democratic centralism" was fully defined as "centralism based on democracy and democracy under centralized leadership"(民主的集中制,即是在民主基础上的集中和在集中领导下 的民主) (Cabestan, 2017). This dual emphasis, democracy as a basis, yet always subordinated to centralized leadership, set the limits of intra-Party plurality. While Deng revived this principle with a renewed focus on stability and institutional reform, it always remained clear that Party leadership could not be challenged by invoking democratic rights. Instead, democracy was framed as functional and internal, shaped and restricted within the broader logic of central authority. His approach to democratic centralism therefore reinforced the idea that legitimacy stemmed from centralization of power, unity and performance, rather than from political competition or public contestation. Conversely, his introduction of term limits in holding important Party positions and the institutionalization of succession of the Party leadership, were pivotal steps that paved the way for a democratized Party system within the boundaries of what the it deemed as legitimate.

Deng's political reforms within the State structure, although limited given his support for the one-Party system, majorly extended to the grassroots, with initiatives like 'village elections/Grassroot Democracy' introduced in the late 1980s (Fan, 2001). These elections, limited as they were, reflected his pragmatic approach to resolving local issues that had the potential of becoming detrimental for China's national economy. The introduction of minimal election-based democracy was also the Party's way of tempering student protests that were calling for greater democratic principles to be instilled within the country throughout the 1980's. Similarly, his 'silent political revolution' sought to curtail bureaucratic overreach, impose checks on power and encourage competition within the state structure (Economics of China, 2024). These changes heralded an era where China's governance model came to be characterized as an autocracy with democratic characteristics; a system that balanced authoritarian control with limited forms of democratization, one that would enhance the country's quest for economic prosperity. These measures, while far from establishing a liberal democracy, created a system with characteristics that, to the least, projected a more participatory and accountable governance structure.

The Cost of Democratizing a Party led State Framework

As part of Deng's efforts to introduce economic and political reforms post the much-criticized Cultural Revolution, Hu Yaobang, under the aegis of Deng himself played an instrumental role in reshaping the Party's internal structure, moving away from the authoritarian excesses of Mao's dictatorship (Chung, 2019). While Deng laid the groundwork for stability and gradual reforms both economically and politically, Hu sought to institutionalize these changes by introducing mechanisms to curtail unchecked power within the Party, including promoting the retirement of Party Elders (Chung, 2019).

Unlike his predecessors, Hu viewed democracy not merely as a rhetorical tool but as a principle with the potential to guide both internal Party reforms and the broader political trajectory of the country. He openly vouched for ideas of transparency, intellectual freedom and accountability, believing that a more democratic Party-State structure would strengthen governance and prevent the excesses of the past (Huang 2019). This was evident during his handling of student protests in the 1980s, where he sympathized with their calls for reform and modernization (Schiavenza, 2014). While he did not endorse full-fledged Western-style democracy, Hu's ideas reflected a belief that China's governance needed to evolve to address the aspirations of its younger and educated population.

Beyond the Party, Hu envisioned gradual political liberalization that could coexist with China's socialist framework, advocating for mechanisms that would make governance more responsive and inclusive. However, Hu's reformist stance and his perceived leniency toward student protests ultimately placed him at a crossroads with the Party elders, including Deng who resisted and prevented the reach of his political reforms.

Accused of being lax in combating 'bourgeois liberalization', Hu's support for intellectual freedom and tolerance for student dissent ultimately led to his

forced resignation as the General Secretary of the Party (Chung, 2019). Despite his political downfall, Hu Yaobang's vision for a more open and democratic China left an enduring legacy, one which continues to worry the CPC even today, reflected in the mass protest that erupted in Tiananmen Square in 1989 in the wake of Hu's death.

Zhao Ziyang, Hu's successor and handpicked by Deng, was a prominent reformist and envisioned a version of Chinese democracy that differed significantly from the approaches of both Mao and Deng while being closer to Hu. His vision emphasized political reform, increased transparency, and a move towards participatory governance, aligning somewhat with elements of Western-style democracy while still operating within a one-party system (Nathan, 2007).

Zhao's reformist vision culminated in his opposition to the use of military force during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which ultimately led to his political downfall and house arrest (Nathan, 2007). The massacre in June 1989, bore a significant cost on both Deng's economic and political reforms, granting conservatives within the Party the opportunity to ride back ideological priorities.

THE EVOLVING CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY IN THE CPC MAO ZEDONG XI JINPING rong centralized Democracy means for Revolutionary mass mobilization ZHAO ZIYANG Whole-process People's Democracy to ensure Party-guided citizen Democracy with Class Political reform to complement Economic reforms, advocated for inter-party Democracy and Public Consultation Struggle focus DENG XIOPING Reformists; lenient to Students Protests, sought accountability within Party OTHER PROMINENT LEADERS democracy to JIANG ZEMIN Attempted to institutionalize olitical reforms by introducing echanisms to curtail unchecked power within the Party **HU YAOBANG** e of White Paper on China' ratic Political Construction i under his leadership, firs ent to clearly articulate th

Figure 1

Both Hu and Zhao's visions for Chinese democracy remain a significant but unrealized chapter in China's political history. Zhao's ideas represented a middle ground, an attempt to reconcile the one-party system with calls for political modernization and citizen engagement. In essence, Zhao's democratic vision was a departure from Mao's revolutionary and ideologically driven governance and Deng's cautious and stability-oriented pragmatism. It was marked by a belief in the need for political reform to sustain China's modernization, a vision that remains relevant in even today in contemporary China.

The years following Zhao's departure saw, Jiang Zemin re-enforce the Party's ideological framing of Democracy. Zemin, who served as China's President and General Secretary of the Party from 1989 to 2002, oversaw a transformative period in China's political and economic history. While Jiang's tenure is primarily associated with economic modernization and opening up, he also made efforts to articulate and refine the CPC's stance on democracy, though strictly within the framework of 'socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics'. This was evidently a product of the Tiananmen Square protests, that had left an undeniable mark on the Party's position on various matters pertaining to social governance. His approach combined limited ideological flexibility with a firm emphasis on maintaining the Party's control.

Table 1
Communist Party Leaders and their Political Interpretation of Democracy

| LEADERS | CORE CONCEPT | KEY FEATURES |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| MAO ZEDONG (1949-1976) | New Democracy/ Dictatorship of The Proletariat | Democracy for the masses, but under CPC control, emphasis on Class Struggle and Proletarian Dictatorship |
| DENG XIOPONG (1978-1992) | Democratic Centralism | Political Liberalization only so far it assists Economic Reforms; Democratization of the Party through collective leadership; imposed constraints on power concentration within the CPC |
| JIANG ZEMIN (1993–2002) | Three Represents | Democracy is centred around the Party's rule, economic reforms priority over political liberalization |
| HU JINTAO (2003-2012) | Inner Party Democracy | Greater attention to inner-party democracy to help the CPC substantiate its control |
| XI JINPING (2013-Present) | Whole-Process People's Democracy | Means to centralization of power, Nationalistic rhetoric of Democracy to promote Chinese values abroad |

The White Paper on 'Building of Political Democracy in China', published by the State Council in October 2005, was the first of the two definitive White Papers to clearly articulate the Party's vision of 'Socialist Democracy with Chinese characteristics' (China.org, 2005). The leadership of President Hu Jintao, who served as General Secretary of the Party from 2002 to 2012, marked a period of renewed focus in re-interpreting the concept and practicality of building a 'harmonious socialist society'. The white paper re-iterated that democracy in

China was deeply rooted in Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory adapted to the country's historical and cultural context (Lee, 2009). It emphasized the central role of the CPC in guiding democratic development, asserting that the Party's leadership ensures stability and aligns governance with national priorities. Another key feature of the paper was its critique of the Western democratic model for enabling instability while positioning China's system as a more effective and inclusive alternative, particularly for developing nations. Hu Jintao's tenure also saw calls for emphasis on Inner Party Democracy (dangnei minzhu) (Global Times, 2009); this conception relied heavily on merit rather than inner-party elections (Bandurski, 2007). Even though the Wen-Hu years saw abundant attempts to advocate greatly in favor of democratic principles, in practice, very little was achieved to democratize the country's overall governance system.

The Retreat of Democracy with Chinese Characteristics

For a few decades, the well-established model of decentralizing power within the CPC and across the country appeared to sustain the Party's grip on power while offering a semblance of reform and participation. However, this delicate balance began to shift under Xi Jinping, who reversed many of Deng's reforms, centralizing authority and reintroducing a system of concentrated leadership. One could argue, that the ultimate demise of the Deng Xiaoping's reform era, came to a dramatic end with Xi Jinping ascendence to power.

Under Xi Jinping, the remnants of Deng and his subsequent successors' reforms, including term limits and collective leadership have been systematically dismantled. Xi has reversed decades of cautious political experimentation, consolidating power to an extent unseen since Mao Zedong. While previous leaders maintained a consensus-driven leadership, Xi has positioned himself as the unchallenged centre of authority, eliminating rivals and removing institutional checks on his rule. For instance, in 2018, he abolished the presidential term limits enshrined in the Chinese constitution, effectively allowing him to remain as the head of state indefinitely. This move marked a significant departure from Deng Xiaoping's efforts to limit personalistic rule. Xi's consolidation of power has further been solidified by his sweeping anticorruption campaign, which has not only targeted corrupt officials but also served as a means to eliminate political rivals and consolidate his position at the top of the Party hierarchy.

At the same time and interestingly so, Xi Jinping has doubled down on the Party's narrative about democracy by introducing the concept of Whole-process People's Democracy (Xinhua, 2021). Though marketed as a novel governance approach, it is essentially a repackaging of longstanding ideas, now framed with sharper critiques of Western democratic systems. Xi's repackaged vision has intertwined Party leadership, the people's participation and rule of law into a singular framework, asserting long-time Party rhetoric - that democracy can only flourish under the CPC's control.

Having said so, to argue that China has moved away from the democratization process initiated during the Deng era, would be a misjudgment. For the Party,

no alternative source of power can exist that has the potential to challenge its authority. This was evidently outlined by Deng through many such disagreements with his chosen reformist successors, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziang. However, barring this red line, the Party did incorporate elements of basic and universal democratic principles over the past decades. This not only allowed the Party to gain further legitimacy, but also made governance more participatory in practice. With Xi Jinping, nevertheless, this perception has faded.

The Party's Modus Operandi of Reinterpreting Democracy

The rise and fall of 'China's One-Party rule with democratic characteristics' tells us not only the story of the Party's evolving interpretation of democracy but also of the fragile nature of political reforms within an authoritarian framework. The evolution of democratic thought within the CPC also reflects upon a persistent challenge that the Party continues to face: sustaining its political legitimacy by invoking democratic rhetoric while simultaneously managing the practical realities of maintaining absolute control.

The Party's vision of 'Democracy with Chinese Characteristics' has been intricately tied to the socio-economic realities of governing a vast and diverse population. It has served as both a response to the needs of China's unique political situation and a mechanism to maintain centralized control, irrespective of the leader that has claimed power.

Thus, throughout the CPC's tryst with Democracy, both in terms of its self-interested embrace and outright rejection, the Party has maintained consistency in rhetorically using it for greater authoritative control. The Party's narrative has operated on two consistent interconnected levels (Hu, 2008). On one level, state propaganda has instilled the idea of democracy, framed as a universal good, into everyday language and public consciousness, imposing it as an element that has been practiced in China for decades. This version of democracy has largely emphasized collective participation, social stability and economic progress effectively linking the country's national priorities with democratic ideals.

On another level, the CPC has simultaneously bounded the concept of democracy, ensuring that it remains immune from reinterpretation by alternative actors or movements. By rejecting contest-based democracy in practice, such as multi-party competition or free elections at the highest echelons of power, the Party has successfully restricted the definition of democracy in a way that precludes challenges to its authority.

In that manner, the CPC's evolving narrative on democracy has been as much a defensive strategy as it has been an ideological assertion. Through this dual operational approach, the Party has framed democracy as both a principled legacy of Chinese governance and an exclusive domain under its control. This has allowed it to project itself as a democratic entity among its domestic population, all the while deflecting scrutiny over its rejection of procedural and contest-based democratic norms.

In the next chapter, the focus shifts from the Party's broader conceptual framing of democracy to its practical application within China. The section assesses how this narrative takes shape in everyday governance, examining how its governance system, local elections, public consultations and state-controlled media craft a perception of participatory democracy.



CHINA'S PARTY LED DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE

Every year, nearly three thousand delegates convene in Beijing for the National People's Congress (NPC), China's grand legislative gathering. Projected as a constitutional democratic institution, the NPC claims to embody governance by the people on an unparalleled scale. Throughout the proceedings, governance laws are discussed and debated, and economic policies are formed and implemented, all while China's state media portray it as a hallmark of its "Whole-Process People's Democracy", the latest addition to its repertoire of politically loaded phrases. Despite its lack of political and electoral competition, the NPC is projected as the world's largest democratic assembly, surpassing any similar parliamentary body in both scale and participation (CGTN, 2023). However, beneath the surface of this grand assembly and the state-controlled projection of representative governance, lies a carefully orchestrated procedure, one that presents itself as a uniquely Chinese-style democratic system, but is in reality entirely controlled by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

In the previous chapter, we discussed how the concept of Democracy ideologically evolved through the Party's interpretation. This chapter seeks to analyze the Party's representation of democracy beyond its ideological framing, focusing on how practices such as local elections and public consultations are portrayed as democratic exercises. It also examines the crucial role of state media in shaping public perceptions and crafting a narrative that contextualizes democratic ideals as part of the Party's governance philosophy. By understanding these mechanisms, the chapter sheds light on broader implications of the Party's discourse, not merely as a defensive strategy but as a decades-old practice that has consolidated its ideological dominance and redefined what democracy means for its citizens.

Democracy, as a concept, is inherently diverse in its interpretations; yet at its core lies a universal principle that promotes active participation of citizens in governance and decision-making. In China, the Communist Party has strategically adapted this principle, embedding it within its governance model to present a narrative that showcases it as a system that conducts electoral and consultative mechanisms. These electoral practices, some free and mostly undemocratic, have for long served a dual purpose of balancing the promise of self-governance with the imperative of maintaining centralized control for the Party.

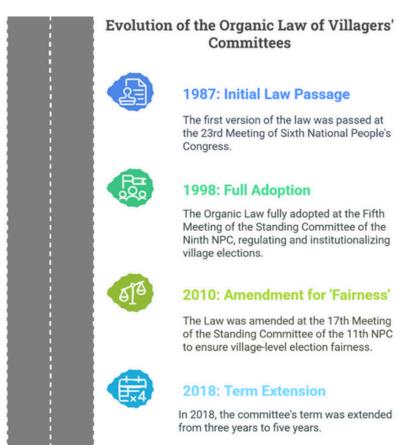
Central to the CPC's claim of democratic governance is its emphasis on consultative democracy (协商民主), positioned as a corrective to the presumed dysfunction of the adversarial multiparty system. Drawing from traditions of collective deliberation, the Party has championed public consultations and policy dialogues as avenues for interest aggregation in an otherwise constrained polity.

These deliberative platforms, such as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and NPC have been presented and promoted as evidence of China's inclusive governance, especially through its state-controlled media, enabling what the Party calls "exhaustive consultations before major decisions are made" (CPPCC, 2024).

The dynamics of presenting itself as a democratic setup is further emphasised through China's local elections, particularly at the village level also known as Grassroot Elections. The introduction of grassroot elections in the 1980's came as a pragmatic response to governance challenges in rural China (He, 2007). With the disbandment of People's Communes following economic reforms, local governance structures were needed to manage public affairs (Liu and Wang, 2008). The 1987 Organic Law of Villagers' Committees sought to formalize this process, and its 1998 revision institutionalized elections, mandating their implementation every three years.

At the bedrock of China's village-level electoral mechanism lies the villagers' committee, the foundational element of local governance designed to address community needs while operating within the broader framework of Party-led democracy.

Figure 2



Villagers' committees are the smallest administrative units of governance, typically composed of 3 to 7 members, including a director and a deputy director (CGTN, 2023). These committees hold a range of responsibilities,

including managing local public affairs, mediating disputes, and representing villagers' concerns to higher administrative levels. Their roles also extend beyond administrative duties, acting as intermediaries between the state and rural communities, ensuring the Party's directives align with local interests. As of 2020, all of China's 503,000 administrative villages had established village committees, as reported by Chinese-state media (CGTN, 2023). The law explicitly barred external interference in committee composition, yet local party officials often found ways to influence outcomes. Reports further revealed widespread irregularities, including candidate manipulation, vote-buying, and restrictions on competitive nominations (Liu, 2024).

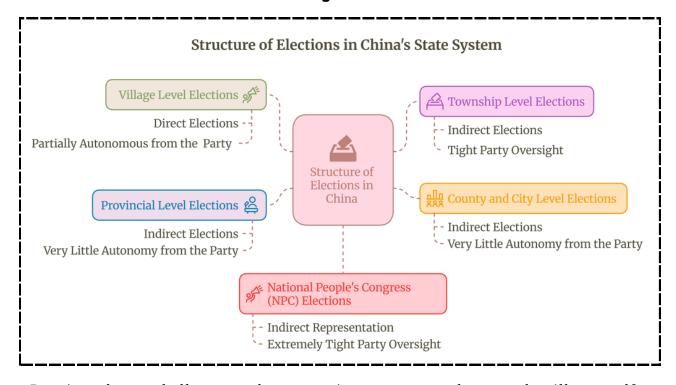
On paper, grassroot elections in China embrace democratic principles, incorporating secret ballots, direct nominations, and transparent vote counting. However, these village-level elections were never introduced to decentralize power completely at the grassroots. Instead, they have been ideated as means to a calculated attempt at maintaining stability, co-opting local elites, and creating a perception of democratic legitimacy (Liu, 2024). Local governance has been allowed to flourish, but always within the overarching framework of Party control. This duality has thus promoted a unique form of grassroots democracy that is neither fully democratic nor entirely autocratic, where the delicate balance between empowering communities and maintaining Party control creates an impression of autonomy within tightly controlled parameters.

Furthermore, the limitations of China's Party-led Democracy becomes even more apparent at the township level. While villages have nominally embraced direct elections, townships remain under tight Party control. China's electoral structure above the village level continues to be strictly hierarchical, with the nature of elections shifting as one ascends the administrative framework. While village committees operate outside the formal party structure and have adopted direct elections to address the governance vacuum left by the dismantling of the commune system, townships, both administratively and politically, function as the lowest tier of state administration, making their leadership selection far more complex and politically contested.

Township officials, classified as state cadres, are appointed and evaluated within an intricate framework of party and state institutions, including the township and county people's congresses and corresponding party committees, which are dominated by Party-appointed representatives (Edin, 2003). Unlike village committees, township leadership falls under the Party's nomenclature system, ensuring that even elected township leaders remain under Party oversight. Given that township elections fall within the purview of the people's congress system rather than the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA), any move toward direct elections would require significant structural and legal changes, directly challenging Party control over local administration (Edin, 2003; Li, 2002). It is therefore unsurprising that both township leaders and the people's congress system have remained unenthusiastic about expanding electoral reforms beyond the village level. The July 12th, 2001 ruling by the Central Committee through Document No.12 that directed township elections as unconstitutional effectively reinforced this system, further constraining grassroots political participation beyond the village level (Li, 2002). The document however did not bring direct township elections to a halt, but restricted and disincentivized further experimentation of direct elections at the township level.

The gap between village and township governance thus showcases the structural ceiling of China's democracy experiment within an autocratic structure. Villagers may elect local representatives, but their influence diminishes as decisions move up the administrative hierarchy. This ceiling has also ensured that local governance remains a tool for managing rural affairs rather than a precursor to broader political reforms. Nevertheless, the evolution of village elections in China has not been without merit. Reforms have introduced important safeguards, such as transparent voter registration and public vote counting. By 2003, some provinces, like Fujian and Liaoning (ACE), had conducted multiple election cycles, with incremental improvements in transparency and competitiveness. At the same time, such progress has also been uneven. Rural-to-urban migration has disenfranchised millions of villagers, while irregularities persist across regions. The lack of uniform election days further complicates oversight, leaving implementation largely dependent on local conditions and party prerogatives.

Figure 3



Despite these challenges, the narrative constructed around village self-governance has aligned well within the Party's framing of Democracy. State media has mostly amplified these portrayals of elections as evidence of grassroots participation, a crucial element in the broader discourse that ties democratic ideals to the Party's leadership (Moretti, 2024; CGTN, 2023). By emphasizing the electoral process, however imperfect, the Party has managed to reinforce its legitimacy, domestically, as both the guardian of stability and the driver of reform within China, with its latest rhetorical offering of 'Whole Process People's Democracy' leading the ideological charge.

Whole Process People's Democracy

Xi Jinping's campaign of Whole-Process People's Democracy (全过程人民民主) can

be deemed as an ideological assertion from within the Party's governance framework, aiming to redefine the concept of democracy, as both an idea and practice in China. The campaign has aimed to emphasize a comprehensive approach to governance that integrates various forms of democratic participation while maintaining the Party's strict leadership. The narrative around Whole Process People's Democracy (WPPD), claims to involve public participation at all stages of governance, from policy formulation to implementation and oversight, making democracy 'real and effective' by focusing on results rather than procedures (Xinhua, 2025).

Interestingly, the Party's ideological assertion over the political concept has not merely been rhetorical, but has also been composed of deliberate conceptual innovations and institutional practices designed to counter Western liberal democracy. With the idea of WPPD, Party's ideologues have attempted to shift the foundation of democratic legitimacy, moving it away from the traditional yardstick of electoral competition and toward the tangible outcomes of governance (Chen, 2020).

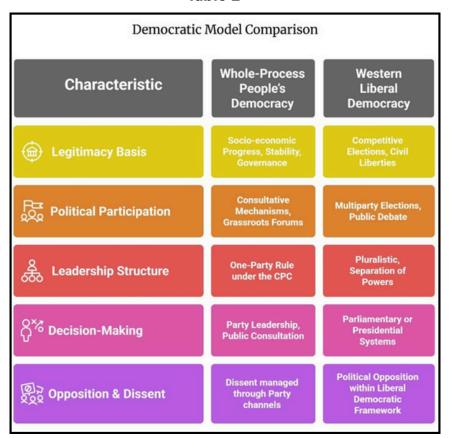
Furthermore, Xi Jinping's emphasis on 'Chinese Democracy' emanating from the WPPD has operated through four interlinked dualities; process versus achievement, procedural versus substantive, direct versus indirect, and people's democracy versus state will, all of which serve to redefine the parameters of democratic legitimacy on the Party's terms and prerogatives (Bertrand 2024; Holbig and Schuhe, 2016). Similarly, the co-existence of grassroots participation with highly centralized representation creates an illusion of inclusivity without relinquishing top-down control. Most notably, the juxtaposition of people's will with the state's vision is not a contradiction in this model but a deliberate integration, where participation is welcomed only so far as it converges with the Party's predetermined political and economic trajectory.

By shifting emphasis from procedural safeguards to governance outcomes, and from institutional checks to performance-based validation, the CPC has aimed to construct a system of governance where the ends justify the means, so long as the ends align with Party-defined national objectives. With this objective in mind, Xi's vision for Democracy has intertwined the Party's leadership, the people's participation and the rule of law into a singular framework, reinforcing a long-standing Party rhetoric: that democracy in China can only flourish under the CPC's control and the sole path to swifter prosperity is through China's unique governance model.

However, while the Party's articulation of WPPD may appear to broaden avenues for swifter and legitimate decision making, its underlying framework presents a carefully choreographed structure of governance that has reinforced, rather than democratized, political authority.

In essence, what emerges from Xi Jinping's Democracy rhetoric is not a dilution of authoritarianism, but its rebranding under the guise of democratic innovation, one that simultaneously critiques liberal democracy's perceived inefficiencies while elevating a model rooted in ideological coherence and centralized control.

Table 2



That said, beneath the Party's claims of stability and efficiency, its model also raises fundamental questions about the nature of accountability in a system where the sole entity/institution (i.e. the Party) serves as both the enforcer and the adjudicator. By internalizing oversight within its own ranks and embedding control in local governance structures, the CPC has ensured that its very own political authority remains unchallenged, even as it presents an illusion of participation at all stages of governance, from policy formulation to implementation and oversight, making democracy 'real and effective' by focusing on results rather than procedures (Xinhua, 2025).

This self-regulated accountability however, while effective in maintaining centralized stability, practically lacks the external checks and balance systems that have defined democratic legitimacy in its broader sense for over two centuries. More critically, this reinterpretation, designed to suit its governance style, reflects not just an adaptation but a strategic attempt to influence the discourse over legitimate political norms. By embedding its model within a broader ideological struggle, the Party's idealogues have positioned its unique governance framework as a direct counter to liberal democratic principles, challenging the long-standing assumption that democracy can be achieved only through a pre-determined path as ascribed by the West.

Such efforts by the Party also do not end at its borders; the Party's reinterpretation of democracy is increasingly moving outward, shaping global perceptions and challenging the West's long-standing discursive hegemony over what it means to govern in the name of the people.

Building on this outward projection, the next chapter examines how the CPC contrasts its governance model with liberal democracies, using the 2024 elections in the United States and India as critical reference points. By critiquing the perceived flaws of electoral democracy, such as polarization, inefficiency, and instability, the Party not only seeks to validate its own system but also to redefine the global discourse on legitimacy and effective governance. Through a close analysis of Chinese narratives surrounding these elections, the next chapter will explore the CPC's evolving efforts to position its model as a viable and superior alternative, and assess the broader implications of this narrative shift for both domestic stability and the viability of China's international democracy discourse.



A CASE STUDY OF FOREIGN ELECTION DISCOURSES

Few political actors today have invested as much strategic energy into redefining global governance norms as much as the CPC has. From exporting governance training models to Africa and West Asia, to promoting the 'China Model' as not only distinct but inherently superior, Beijing has adopted a widerange of methods to materialise this strategic approach (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2023; Sheng et.al, 2021; Shangjin, 2022; Weiwei, 2020). Among its most ambitious undertakings in this endeavor however, has been the Party's global narrative project; an ideological campaign aimed at questioning, redefining and ultimately displacing the long-standing assumption that the liberal democratic framework is the singular path to prosperity and development.

This Narrative Project against liberal democracies, while multifaceted, has also materialized in the form of sustained critique of foreign elections. A cursory read over Chinese media and academic coverage of elections that were held across democracies last year, presents a glaring picture of how deeply embedded this narrative strategy has become. With over fifty countries heading to elections in 2024, media houses and foreign policy analysts in China consistently cautioned against the instability and unpredictability that electoral democracies possessed, especially for countries that struggle with economic unpredictability and developmental concerns (Masterson, 2023; Global Times, 2022). Within this discursive engagement, India and the United States found greater focus as two adversarial powers, as well as representatives of an alternative governance paradigm, that also invariably warranted ideological deconstruction from the Party's propaganda machinery.

Through a systematic articulation of the dysfunctions, polarization, and instability associated with liberal electoral politics, the CPC's machinery sought to advance a counter-claim: that the Party-State model offers a more coherent, efficient and socially stable form of governance (Lee, 2024; Gan and McCarthy, 2024). In this strategic framing, foreign elections in the U.S and India have invariably become discursive contest grounds, avenues through which the Party has contested the universality of liberal democracy and positioned its own system as a preferable alternative.

The prospect of not only challenging but also potentially displacing the liberal democratic order is crucial to Beijing for several reasons. At the normative level, the more states that align with China's governance model or adopt elements of its political values, the more Beijing will be able to reshape global standards in ways that are conducive to its own political interests and preferences. Secondly, this will also enable the Party to reinforce the narrative

that its system is not only viable, but also aspirational. This global recognition thus acts as strategic leverage to counter critiques of authoritarianism at home, positioning China not as an outlier in the international system, but rather at the centre of it in coming years.

Economically too, such a narrative project benefits China's global ambitions. The prospect of externalizing the China model opens up a plethora of opportunities for Chinese firms to undertake and invest in infrastructure development and all other domains that are critical to the architecture of twenty-first century governance.

Within this broader ideological and strategic context, the Party's discursive engagement with foreign elections serves not merely as a reactionary measure, but as a deliberate effort to reframe global political norms. This chapter, therefore, turns to a focused analysis of the CPC's foreign democracy narrative as constructed through its engagement with the 2024 U.S. and Indian elections. It explores how the leadup to these elections continue to be instrumentalised within Chinese discourse not only to undermine the normative appeal of liberal democracy, but also to affirm the stability and legitimacy of China's political system onto both, its domestic and international audiences (The China Academy, 2024; Yuwen, 2024).

China's Democracy that Works

A major inflection point in the CPC's strategy of contesting Western-liberal democratic norms was in the publication of its 2021 White Paper titled 'China: Democracy That Works'. The document represented an important moment in the Party's ideological articulation where it sought to demarcate liberal democracy as being procedurally democratic but substantively deficient. It also argued that political legitimacy is derived not from competitive electoral cycles but from the state's capacity to deliver tangible outcomes.

By shifting the evaluative criteria of democracy from electoral competition to governance outcomes, the CPC effectively challenged the normative primacy of liberal democratic systems, particularly that of the United States. This normative repositioning can be understood to be deeply tied to the CPC's broader Global Narrative Project, an orchestrated campaign to shape international discourse in a manner favorable to China's political identity. At the heart of this initiative is the strategic imperative to "tell the China story well" (讲好中国故事), a phrase that has come to encapsulate the Party's ambition to project its governance system as legitimate and aspirational.

Through policy documents, state-media, think-tank diplomacy and public diplomacy platforms, the Party has consistently sought to embed a new global vocabulary, one that reinterprets democratic values through a politically specific, results-oriented lens.

The United States and India, with their increasingly polarized political climate during electoral cycles, have become a frequent target within this narrative architecture. Chinese commentary on recent U.S. elections, amplified through state-media outlets have portrayed American democracy as paralyzed by

factionalism, manipulated by interest groups, and fundamentally incapable of delivering on citizens' needs (Meng, 2022; Ming, 2024). These critiques have also been framed as evidence of a broader systemic decay, pointing largely to the political system as the main root of the unfulfilled needs of the citizenry.

Systemic Critiques of U.S. Democracy

Chinese scholars and media commentators have characterized the 2024 U.S. election as emblematic of systemic issues within liberal democracies (Global Times, 2024; Huaxia, 2024). Jin Canrong of Renmin University in an interview highlighted the 'contradiction of identity interest' during the U.S election, suggesting that the transition of US politics from the struggle of interests to a struggle of identities has become much more of an acute issue to resolve, leading to the decline of the country's politics (Canrong and Jing, 2024). Similarly, Wang Yong of Peking University emphasized on the perils of polarization in U.S. politics, where increasing polarization has undermined consensus-building and effective governance (Yong, 2024). These analyses have framed the U.S. electoral process as a spectacle of dysfunction, marked by hyper-partisanship influenced by wealth and lobbyists, thereby questioning the efficacy and legitimacy of liberal democratic systems (Huaxia, 2024; Global Times, 2024).

The intensification of political polarization in the U.S. is a recurring theme in Chinese academic and media commentaries. A leading professor of China Foreign Affairs University contended that American political leaders have increasingly abandoned their foundational faith in democratic principles and the spirit of compromise, an erosion reflected in the tone and content of their electoral campaigns (Global Times, 2024). This breakdown, he argues, has produced a rigid and adversarial political system, one that exacerbates global challenges rather than offering constructive or stable solutions. A similar view was advocated by another scholar of Shanghai International Studies University who commented on the deepening divisions within American society, highlighting how identity politics have led to a scenario where opposing political factions view each other as illegitimate, thereby intensifying polarization. These shifts were interpreted and projected as a sign of democratic erosion, especially within China's domestic audiences, with the assertion that mechanisms of liberal democracy fail to accommodate diverse perspectives and instead exacerbate societal divisions.

Chinese analysts also critiqued the U.S. political system for its perceived inability to deliver effective governance, contending that the growing political rift in the United States reflected a deeper institutional crisis, one where electoral contest devolved into performative spectacles rather than meaningful deliberations on public policy. This critique was also amplified in Chinese media portrayals of the 2024 presidential race, which frequently framed it as an embodiment of 'low-quality democracy', characterized by empty rhetoric and tribal polarization (Sheng, 2025).

Beyond the theatrics, Chinese analysts also drew attention to a conspicuous policy vacuum, noting that both Presidential candidates prioritized mutual attacks over substantive engagement with domestic concerns (Sheng, 2025). One

expert described the race as a competition defined less by vision than by the question of who is worse, framing it as an example of a 'negative election'. Further commentary warned of the broader international implications of such a trajectory, emphasising that the deepening division and uncertainty within a global power like the United States could generate instability far beyond its borders.

Building on these critiques, Chinese scholars also increasingly framed China's political system as a superior alternative to liberal democracies, particularly in terms of governance efficacy and institutional legitimacy (Yongyue, 2021). A paper published on World Socialism Studies, contrasted China's meritocratic governance with the adversarial nature of U.S. politics, arguing that China's model was evidently better equipped to address long-term governance challenges (Jianjun, 2022).

Comparative Analysis of China's Narrative Strategies **Democracy without Policy Vacuum** Delivery Emphasizes the absence of Highlights India's substantive Democratic policy solutions credentials as one that in the lead-up is lacking socioto U.S Elections economic upliftment **Political Gridlock Extreme Polarization** Depicts the legislative Illustrates the paralysis due to Tribalism and Political lack of consensus Polarization in the US in Multi-Party and Indian Elections systems.

Figure 4

The paper also emphasized that China's centralized model has promoted longterm policy implementation and rapid crisis response, contrasting this with what it characterizes as the fragmented and performative nature of U.S. electoral politics. The authors of the paper also highlighted the rising optimism and national pride among Chinese citizens as further evidence of systemic legitimacy (Zhen and Zhang, 2023). In contrast, they cited growing public dissatisfaction in the United States stemming from political division, social unrest, and wealth inequality. Critically, the article calls for a reframing of democratic benchmarks, stating that rather than procedural metrics like elections, democracy should be judged by substantive outcomes such as social stability, economic development, and citizen satisfaction. Within this logic, China's model of "whole-process people's democracy" is positioned as the preferable form of governance. On similar lines, Party idealogues have also long-argued that a well-governed society, where people's needs are efficiently met, is inherently more democratic than a system that tolerates political dysfunction in the name of electoral freedom (Bertrand, 2024). This model has further emphasized consultative mechanisms, where state-sanctioned discussions and advisory processes precede the need for competitive elections and an environment that allows for multiple perspectives to flourish.

Collectively, these narratives cohere with a central theme in the CPC's foreign democracy discourse: that American electoral politics routinely yields unpredictability leading to a systemic decline. The CPC has tactically aimed to leveraged these critiques to advance its Global Narrative Project, which seeks to promote China's "whole-process people's democracy" as a superior alternative to Western models.

The Indian Elections of 2024: Spectacle, Polarization and Decline

Beyond its sustained critique of U.S. democratic dysfunction, the Chinese media and academic establishment has also turned its attention to India's electoral processes (Yongnian, 2024). Even though India's 2024 general elections were treated slightly differently, the ideological intent was similar. While Chinese state media acknowledged the logistical grandeur of conducting elections with over 900 million eligible voters it also questioned its substantive outcomes.

State-affiliated outlets like Xinhua and the Global Times repeatedly highlighted the limitations of India's nationalism-driven policies, noting that despite a decade of economic growth, challenges such as soaring unemployment, growing financial malpractices and heightened religious tensions were undermining domestic cohesion (China Newsweek, 2024; Dingkun, 2024). Commentaries in Chinese media also took stock of the extent of religious polarization that was prevalent in the leadup to the elections as a result of Hindu nationalism discourse (Sina, 2024). These assessments largely aimed to highlight the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, as a political strategy meant to consolidate the Hindu voter base (Yicai, 2024).

Academics from institutions like Fudan University and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations echoed similar sentiments. A senior scholar at Fudan University's Centre for South Asian Studies, emphasized that Modi's Hindu nationalist policies have become mainstream in Indian society and have provoked social division and ethnic inequalities (Minwang, 2024). In an interview given to The Paper, a Chinese state-backed media agency, the director of the South Asia Studies Centre of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, stated that Hindu nationalism, through the BJP has gradually become the mainstream ideology in Indian society, leading to the opposition Indian National Congress also tilting towards Hindu-nationalistic sentiments (Zenhua, 2024). Furthermore, commentaries also focused on the fact that the tilt toward Hindu nationalism in Indian politics reflected in the BJP's foreign policy as well. A senior scholar at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), stated in a paper that the overall ideological influence of Hindu Nationalism visible in the BJP's foreign policy inherently posed challenges for India-China ties (Shida, 2024). The author stated that by deliberately 'ideologicalizing' the contradiction between China and India, the influence of Hindu nationalism in India's foreign policy seeks to capitalize upon bilateral disputes for domestic purposes, including propping up nationalist sentiments during elections at the expense of China.

Similarly, a scholar from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations noted that PM Modi's personal influence has transcended traditional political competition, but this has not translated into effective governance, as

evidenced by the BJP's loss of an outright majority in the 2024 elections (CGTN, 2024).

Scholars have also consistently argued that India's electoral system, while vibrant, faces significant challenges that undermine its effectiveness (Xinhua, 2024). These include the rise of identity politics, religious nationalism, and socioeconomic disparities, which contribute to political polarization and governance inefficiencies.

Taken together, these perspectives signify a prevailing view within Chinese academic and policy circles that while India's democratic system garnered global praise for its scale and efficiency in conducting elections, it continues to be structurally burdened by internal contradictions. The 2024 general elections, in this reading, serve less as a testament to democratic vibrancy and more as an illustration of its limits, where electoral mobilization has rather amplified division. For the Party's Narrative Project, this signaling and amplification reinforces the argument that liberal democracies like India struggle to deliver stable and coherent governance in the face of deep societal divergences. In contrast, China's centralized political model is viewed and projected as more capable of sustaining long-term strategic focus and national development.

THE 21ST CENTURY BATTLE FOR POLITICAL IDEALS

The 2024 elections in the United States and India thus provided the CPC with the strategic opportunity to advance its political narrative on the global stage. In both cases, Chinese media and academic commentaries focused less on the results and more on what the process in its interpretation revealed; political gridlock in Washington, identity-driven fragmentation in New Delhi, and most of all, the seeming inability of multiparty systems to deliver coherent and meaningful governance.

However, at the same time, such critiques are not opportunistic measures; it should be read as part of a deeper historical trajectory that this report has outlined. The CPC's relationship with the idea of democracy has never been static nor dismissive; instead, successive Party leaders have reinterpreted and reshaped it in response to social and political challenges, aligning it with evolving governance and Party objectives. What began as revolutionary mass participation has gradually evolved into a controlled vision of "whole-process people's democracy," carefully adapted to serve the Party's centralizing imperatives.

Internally, this vision has been operationalized through carefully structured mechanisms such as local elections, consultative processes, and tightly controlled public discourse. As the second chapter demonstrated, these institutional forms are then curated through state media and politically charged messaging to construct a global narrative: that democracy is not the sole preserve of the West, and that China offers a viable and maybe even a superior alternative.

It is within this frame that China's critique of liberal democracies gains sharper purpose. In regions where democratic institutions have struggled to deliver

tangible outcomes, and where governance is judged by development rather than multiparty competition, the Chinese model is increasingly appearing attractive. The growing receptiveness to China's economic and political system, particularly in the Global South, must be seen as an alarming signal of how governance legitimacy is slowly yet steadily transforming, and by extension, how the future of democracy as a political concept itself is being rewritten in these regions.

Far more importantly, by presenting its model as a viable and efficient alternative, the CPC is not only legitimizing centralized control but also offering ideological cover to regimes that seek to consolidate power under the banner of stability and development. As this alternative gains' traction, the long-standing discourse over legitimate political power through democracy faces an uphill challenge, not through direct confrontation, but through the gradual normalization of a parallel vision of governance.

However, even though the strategic effectiveness of the CPC's foreign democracy narrative lies in its ability to turn visible democratic dysfunction into political capital, the power of such a strategy is also its vulnerability (Osavul Editorial Team). Leaning too heavily on the shortcoming of others risks exposing the silences around China's own governance limitations. Should the Party's propaganda machinery rely too much on projecting the dysfunctions of others as a rhetorical tool for domestic and international legitimacy, it will inadvertently end up exposing its own vulnerabilities; the absence of visible mechanisms for self-correction and civil liberties, the lack of public introspection, and the dangers inherent in conflating external critique with internal legitimacy.

Nonetheless, for democratic states, the growing sophistication of China's narrative strategy presents a pressing challenge, one that cannot be met solely with policy but must also be addressed at the level of political storytelling and counter narratives. If left uncontested, these narratives may erode confidence in democratic institutions not only abroad, but within democracies themselves. In many parts of the Global South, where developmental needs are urgent and political dissatisfaction is rising, the appeal of China's message lies in its emphasis on order, decisiveness, and performance. In this context, democracies must move beyond reactive posturing and invest more in coherent and compelling narrative strategies of their own.

At stake, therefore, is not only soft power or the international reputation of the liberal democratic political system, but the very political legitimacy of Democracy as a model of governance. The response to such a narrative project demands the telling of better stories; narratives that acknowledge dysfunction, yet situate it within a broader arc of reform, resilience and representation. If China seeks to persuade the world that liberal democracy is a failed experiment, then democracies must be prepared to demonstrate why this model has endured, and why, despite all its flaws, it continues to be the best form of governance.



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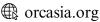
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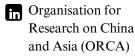
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