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GLOBAL

## Chinese Democracy Isn't Inevitable

Can a political system be democratically legitimate without being democratic?



Jerry Lampen / Reuters

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The flaws in China's political system are obvious. The government doesn't even make a pretense of holding national elections and punishes those who openly call for multiparty rule. The press is heavily censored and the Internet is blocked. Top leaders are unconstrained by the rule of law. Even more worrisome, repression has been ramped up since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, suggesting that the regime is increasingly worried about its legitimacy.

Some China experts—most recently [David Shambaugh](#) of George Washington University—interpret these ominous signs as evidence that the Chinese political system is on the verge of collapse. But such an outcome is highly unlikely in the near future. The Communist Party is firmly in power, its top leader is popular, and no political alternative currently claims widespread support. And what would happen if the Party's power did indeed crumble? The most likely result, in my view, would be rule by a populist strongman backed by elements of the country's security and military forces. The new ruler might seek to buttress his legitimacy by launching military adventures abroad. President Xi would look tame by comparison.



A more realistic and, arguably, desirable outcome would involve political change that builds on the advantages of the current system. But what exactly are the good parts of the Chinese political model? And how can they be advanced without repression? I believe the model can be improved in a more open political environment and, eventually, put before the people in a popular referendum.

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Chinese authorities have thus far shown no interest in instituting electoral democracy for top leaders. But that's not the only shape political reform can take. In China, such change over the past three decades has been informed by three principles: the lower the level of government, the more democratic the political system; the optimal space for experimentation with new practices and institutions is in between the lowest and highest levels of government; and the higher the level of government, the more meritocratic the political system.

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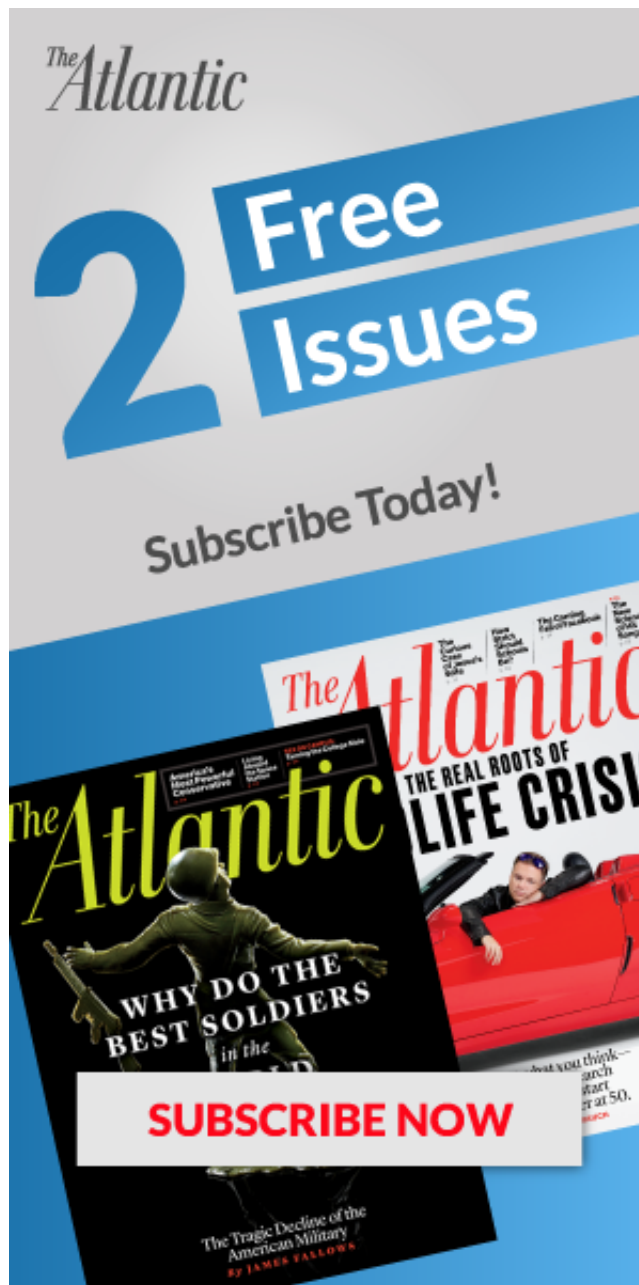
The Chinese government introduced village elections in the late 1980s to maintain social order and combat corruption among local leaders; by 2008, **more than 900 million** Chinese villagers had exercised the right to vote.

Voters don't choose among political parties; instead, they directly nominate candidates and vote by secret ballot for a committee of candidates who serve three-year terms. Turnout has **generally been high**, and the conduct of elections has improved over time.

The Chinese government has good reason to favor democratic elections at the local level. In small communities, people are more knowledgeable about the ability and virtue of the leaders they choose. At the local level relative to the national level, policy issues are more straightforward, generating a sense of community is easier, and mistakes are less costly.

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In cities and provinces, the Chinese government tinkers with economic and social reform and then applies successes to the rest of the country, while detecting problems and making adjustments to policies before they spread elsewhere. This experimentation takes several forms, the most high-profile of which is the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, which **tested** controversial market-oriented policies that were then extended across China. More recently, the government has tested initiatives that defy common assumptions about authoritarian rule, including recruiting non-state groups

to provide healthcare for the elderly and protect the rights of workers. Acutely aware of the costs of its “economic growth above all” development model, the government encourages municipalities to experiment with more diverse indices for assessing the performance of government officials: Hangzhou, for example, prioritizes environmental sustainability, and Chengdu narrowing the income gap between rural and urban residents.

It’s a form of experimentation that is made easier by China’s flexible constitutional system, which doesn’t enshrine a strict division of powers between different levels of government. Political stability at the national level ensures that successful trials can be replicated elsewhere in China. In a democratic system with parties that alternate in power, there is no assurance that promising new ventures will be maintained or expanded, which in turn means less incentive to experiment and innovate in the policy arena.

The top of the China model is characterized by political meritocracy—the idea that high-level officials should be selected and promoted on the basis of ability and virtue. The ideal was institutionalized in imperial China by means of an [elaborate examination system](#) that dates to the Sui dynasty in the sixth and seventh centuries. These examinations were abolished in 1905—precipitating the end of the imperial system as a whole—but they have been reestablished over the last three decades. Aspiring government officials normally must pass public-service examinations—IQ-like tests with some ideological content—with thousands of applicants competing for each entry-level spot. They must perform well at lower levels of government, with more rigorous evaluations at every step, to move further up the chain of political command. Top leaders must also accumulate decades of diverse administrative experience, with only a tiny proportion reaching the commanding heights of government. For example, Xi’s four-decade-long ascent to the presidency involved [16 major promotions](#) through county, city, and province levels, and then the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the

top spot in the Standing Committee of the Politburo, with reviews at each stage to assess his leadership abilities. Arguably, the Chinese political system is the most competitive in the world today.

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Once leaders reach the pinnacle of political power, they can plan for the long term and make decisions that take into account the interests of all relevant stakeholders, including future generations and people living outside the country; leaders serve 10-year terms and assume (and do their best to guarantee) that the same party will be in power decades into the future. Collective leadership, in the form of the Politburo's seven-member Standing Committee, ensures that no one leader with outlandish and uninformed views can set wrongheaded policies (such as the disastrous [Great Leap Forward](#) when Mao, and only Mao, decided on national policies).

China's meritocratic process is best suited for a one-party state. In a multiparty system, there is no assurance that strong performance at lower levels of government will be rewarded at higher levels. There's also less of an incentive to train officials in high-level governance since key personnel change with election cycles. Leaders who need to worry about the next election are more likely to make decisions influenced by short-term political considerations than their counterparts in China. Democratically elected leaders are more vulnerable to the lobbying of powerful special interests, and the interests of non-voters affected by government policies—future generations, for instance—are likely to be sacrificed if they conflict with the interests of voters and campaign funders. Such leaders spend a lot of their time raising money and giving the same campaign speech again and again. In



contrast, meritocratically selected leaders are judged by what they do, not what they say.

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Of course, there remains a large gap between the China model as an ideal and the political reality. Even when village-level elections are free and fair, for instance, access to power does not always (or even usually) translate into the exercise of power; the authority of elected representatives is checked by village Party secretaries and township governments.



Playing cards featuring members of the Communist Party's Politburo (Reuters)

In the case of policy experimentation in cities and provinces, the problem is that central political authorities decide what works and what doesn't, and they often lack the motivation to do political battle on behalf of innovations that threaten powerful groups. Public pressure can neutralize this challenge; pilot programs for rural healthcare reforms beginning in the 1980s were only scaled up nationally after the SARS epidemic in 2003 triggered widespread

criticism. The government could further defuse the issue by tasking an advisory body of independent experts in the social sciences with evaluating politically sensitive experiments in different parts of the country.

Political meritocracy at the top is only desirable if leaders are selected and promoted on the basis of superior ability and virtue. In practice, however, “princelings” often dominate: several of China’s leaders, including the president, are the descendants of prominent and influential Communist officials. Still, the princelings began their rise before the institutionalization of examinations for public officials in the early 1990s, and they were initially elevated not to maintain the status quo, but because of their relatively high levels of education and reformist leanings.

Few doubt the intellectual caliber of China’s most senior officials. The deeper question concerns their virtue: Are they really dedicated to serving the public good? China’s [immense pollution problem](#), for example, raises doubts about their commitment to the long-term interests of those inside and outside the country. But Chinese leaders made a reasonable choice from the late 1970s until recently to prioritize poverty reduction and economic growth in a poor country, and the government now puts more emphasis on environmental sustainability. President Xi and President Obama [recently pledged](#) to cut greenhouse-gas emissions over the next two decades. Who is more likely to stick to that pledge? The United States may set aside its promise if the Republicans win the presidency in 2016. No such worries in China, unless the political system collapses.

The stake in the heart of the China model is corruption. In a meritocratic system, corruption—the abuse of public office for private gain—is particularly toxic because leaders derive their legitimacy in part, if not in full, from being seen as virtuous and public-spirited. In a democracy, it’s primarily up to the people to get rid of corrupt officials, but a meritocracy must rely instead on



such means as independent supervisory institutions, harsh penalties for graft, and higher salaries for public officials. The overall level of corruption in China has exploded over the last three decades, and it has become a more visible political problem in the past few years due to the glare of social media and more conspicuous consumption by political elites. Recognizing this grave threat, Xi has made combating corruption the government's top priority.

If the China model has such promise, what explains the government's need to resort to political repression? The more immediate reason is Xi's [anti-corruption campaign](#), the longest and most systematic in Chinese history. Whatever the abuses and political biases of the campaign, it is necessary to cleanse the system. But those leading the initiative have made real enemies, which in turn has led those leaders to curb civil and political rights more aggressively.

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The other explanation is longer term. The government is fully aware that the kind of economic modernization it has embraced was followed in South Korea and Taiwan by electoral democracy, and recent [pro-democracy protests](#) in Hong Kong only exacerbated worries in official circles that mainland China will be next.

I think these fears are exaggerated. Political meritocracy has deep roots in China, and surveys [consistently show](#) majorities in support of "guardianship discourse," or empowering capable politicians who will assume responsibility for the good of society, over liberal democratic discourse that

privileges procedural arrangements to secure people's rights to participate in politics and choose their leaders. One might respond that such political preferences will change with education, but my own students at Tsinghua University—one of China's most selective universities—usually come out in favor of meritocracy following extensive deliberation about the pros and cons of elections for top leaders versus mechanisms such as examinations and assessments of past performance.

That said, there is an equally **strong demand** in China for “Western” values such as freedom of speech, government transparency, and rule of law, and these demands will only grow stronger as China modernizes. At some point in the future, the government will have to choose between a more open society and Tiananmen Square-style repression to preserve stability. How can the government open up without establishing the kind of electoral democracy that would threaten to wreck its carefully constructed meritocratic system?

One solution is for the government to call a referendum and ask the people to vote “yes” in favor of the China model with more freedoms of speech and association but without the right to vote for top leaders and the freedom to form political parties that explicitly challenge one-party rule. The referendum would have to be carried out freely and fairly to be seen as legitimate, and it could specify a time period—say, 50 years—for the outcome of the vote to be in effect. Should the China model win out, that would be long enough to provide stability for the recruitment and training of meritocratically selected leaders without binding the people to perpetual meritocratic rule.

A victory for the China model would help provide democratic legitimacy to the system. Critics inside and outside the country who allege that the Chinese regime is fundamentally unstable or illegitimate because it lacks

popular support would be silenced by the people, not the government. And the government could do what it's supposed to do: serve the people rather than repress them. Of course, the Communist Party would be taking a major risk by organizing such a referendum; after all, it could lose. The people could vote for electoral democracy and the Communist Party could be transformed into a regular political party, albeit with superior organizational strength. This might not be a disaster for the Party, but it would be bad for political meritocracy. Party members would have to campaign for victory every few years instead of training leaders for the long term.

The Chinese people are proud of partaking in a civilization that stretches back several thousand years. Nobody disputes the idea that China should maintain, and build on, its great cultural achievements in realms ranging from cuisine to martial arts to medicine. So why not build on its great tradition of political meritocracy? That tradition, of course, needs to prove adaptable and viable in the modern world. As I see it, the system has shown real potential and should set the standard for further political reform. But at some point, the model must also be endorsed by the Chinese people.

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*This article has been adapted from Daniel A. Bell's forthcoming book, [The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy](#).*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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