

THE PEOPLE'S CONGRESS SYSTEM: AN INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION OF DEMOCRACY BASED ON CHINA'S REALITIES

Zhang Yuan¹

Received:
October 11, 2025

Revised:
November 17, 2025

Accepted:
December 3, 2025

DOI:
10.56289/ijcsrp.203

ABSTRACT

Mainstream Western democratic theories commonly use election and competition as the primary measure of representative legitimacy. However, these theories cannot adequately explain how China's people's congress system simultaneously achieves popular responsiveness, extensive political inclusion, and effective governance. Using a historical-normative analytical framework, this study traces the system's emergence and evolution from China's historical and social backgrounds, revealing how it balances popular sovereignty with effective governance while creating a distinctive legitimacy framework. This study finds that the people's congress system integrates historical legitimacy, substantive representation, and political responsiveness into a new model of democratic governance, which fulfils the formal requirements of electoral democracy for the exercise of rights while also meeting people's expectations for substantive democratic outcomes and governing effectiveness. China's practical experience in developing the people's congress system provides fresh perspectives for the diversity of global democratic theories while offering empirical reference for other countries seeking to balance democratic responsiveness with efficient governance.

Keywords: People's Congress System; Democratic System; People as Masters of the Country; Non-Western Democracy; China's Political System.

INTRODUCTION

The pathways to constructing democratic systems vary widely across the globe; however, the question of which system best balances popular sovereignty and effective governance remains an unresolved issue both academically and practically (Dahl, 1989). From sortition in the Athenian democracy, through the parliamentary system adopted in the 19th century, to the polyarchy and participatory budgeting practices in the 20th century, countries have explored different institutional combinations to grapple with two enduring tensions: On the one hand, a country's political system must remain highly responsive to the preferences of its citizens; on the other hand, it needs to possess sufficient governing capacity to make effective decisions and ensure their implementation. The people's congress system embraced by contemporary China is likewise situated within this framework of balancing responsiveness and effective governance. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, this system has been established as the country's fundamental political system. It has allowed China to achieve whole-process people's democracy without the governance paralysis seen in some Western systems, and at the same time, ensuring rapid economic growth and long-term social stability.

This article seeks to explore the following questions. How has the people's congress system emerged and evolved based on China's historical and cultural conditions? How can a huge

¹ Party School of the CPC Central Committee, China National Academy of Governance, a high-level think tank.
E-mail: jiakangccps2025@163.com.

country with a large population and complex national conditions effectively ensure that its people are truly the masters of the country? How to achieve both proper functioning of a democratic system and effective national governance? And, compared with the election-centred models of democracy in the West, how does the people's congress system expand the horizons and provide fresh insights for the development of democracy worldwide?

LITERATURE REVIEW: Representation, Democratic Legitimacy, and China's Experience

1. The Evolution of Representation Theories: From Electoral Monopoly to Plural Sources of Legitimacy

The "election-centred" paradigm has long dominated research on modern representation. Pitkin (1967) proposed the authorisation-accountability model in *The Concept of Representation*, framing competitive elections as the primary source of representative legitimacy. Manin (1997) further argued that electoral competition is essential for preventing the abuse of power. Yet, this model has been challenged. Mansbridge (2003) contended that it neglects gyroscopic representation and surrogate representation, noting that representatives can also be legitimate through ongoing deliberation and demonstrated policy performance. Saward (2010) conceptualised representation as a symbolic and representative claim in his "representative claim" framework, which weakens the procedural exclusivity of elections, offering a theoretical basis for non-elected representatives. More recently, Urbinati (2019) held that representation operates through mediation, emphasising that representative processes unfold not only at the ballot box but throughout the cycles of legislation, implementation, and public debate. This perspective provides a new path to understand China's whole-process people's democracy, enabling the discourse between these two frameworks.

2. The Multidimensional Sources of Democratic Legitimacy

It was argued that legitimacy derives not only from elections but also from governing effectiveness and procedural fairness, which means that a single electoral metric is far from sufficient to provide legitimacy in complex governance systems (Schmitter and Karl, 1991). Dryzek (2009), from a deliberative democracy perspective, demonstrated that policy responsiveness may be a remedy for the shortcomings of electoral competition. Similarly, Easton (1975) proposed in his systems analysis that when a regime consistently delivers public goods at the "output" end, it can accumulate what he terms "diffuse support." These studies underpin a central hypothesis of this study: In contexts where electoral competition is absent, the quality of deliberation and the effectiveness of governance may constitute alternative sources of legitimacy.

3. Comparative Studies on China's State-Representative Relationship: A Deliberation-Performance Perspective

Two researchers introduced the concept of "authoritarian deliberation," noting that China's local-level deliberative mechanisms are playing crucial roles in information aggregation and preference transformation within the policy-making process (He and Warren, 2011). Truex (2016), through quantitative analysis, found that China's National People's Congress has improved policy responsiveness. Yet, he still characterised the system primarily as a mechanism of elite co-optation rather than a pathway toward democratisation. Performance legitimacy was examined within a comparative constitutional framework, suggesting that China has sustained high levels of governance output and systemic stability through rapid economic growth and targeted poverty alleviation (Ginsburg and Huq, 2018).

4. Research on Legislative Information Offices and Deliberative Mechanisms

Javed (2021) noted - in his fieldwork published in *The China Quarterly* - that the legislative outreach points (also known as the legislative information offices) established by the Legislative Affairs Commission of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee enhanced legislative responsiveness. However, participants were largely drawn from local elites and interest groups. Research demonstrated that citizens involved in community-level deliberation reported an 8-12 percent increase in trust in government, with particularly strong effects during policy implementation, though the impact on the distribution of power remained limited (Distelhorst and Hou, 2017).

5. Historical Institutionalism and the Chinese Path

Historical institutionalism emphasises how critical junctures and path dependence shape the evolution of institutions. In a framework featuring critical junctures and path dependence, an institution may reinforce itself through a process of layering once it gains a legitimate narrative at a critical juncture (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Applying this framework to China, Perry (2022) contended that the revolutionary-era mass line and representative assembly are the source of historical legitimacy for the people's congress system in modern China. Koss (2018), drawing on archival research, revealed that China's legislators deliberately embedded classical Chinese terms such as *minben* (people are the foundation of a state) and *gonghe* (collaborative governance) into the 1954 Constitution, aiming to ease people's anxieties over the foreignness of the Soviet model. These studies indicate that the legitimacy of the people's congress system not only stems from governance performance but is also deeply rooted in historical legitimacy.

6. Research Gaps and the Positioning of This Study

Existing literature exhibits the following shortcomings. First, comparative political theories largely rely on an election- and competition-based model to evaluate democracy, lacking normative elaboration on the internal justifications of substantive representative mechanisms. Second, most studies either focus on institutional description or ideological interpretation or merely discuss quantitative performance assessments, without offering a systematic analysis or theoretical account of historical evolution, operational mechanisms, and governance performance. This article seeks to address these gaps by integrating representative theories, deliberative democracy and historical institutionalism, thereby adding a historical-normative dimension to comparative political theories and providing new theoretical resources to facilitate the exchange between China's experience and global democratic theories.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

1. Theoretical Framework

This article frames the analysis around a core mechanism underpinned by historical legitimacy, substantive representation, and political responsiveness. In this context, historical legitimacy is conceived as unveiling how the system has been reinforced through a process of layering from the perspective of historical institutionalism. Conversely, substantive representation is perceived as a concept from representation theories, to explain the origin of responsiveness. Last, political responsiveness is assumed to apply the deliberative democracy lens to examine how the interlinked practices of democratic election, deliberation, decision-making, management, and oversight amplify governance performance.

2. Methodological Design

This study adopts a hermeneutics-oriented qualitative approach, combining three complementary components: (1) Historical narrative: using critical junctures to trace the evolution of the system; (2) Normative interpretation: offering in-depth interpretations of the core discourses around popular sovereignty and democratic responsiveness; and (3) Empirical evidence: selecting embedded cases from media reports, including those about legislative information offices and efforts to address excessive drug prices, to substantiate the effectiveness of the system.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION: A New Political System Rooted in the Chinese Soil

From a historical perspective, China's people's congress system was not created in one go, but rather it was the outcome of incremental layering across multiple critical junctures. Its establishment and development mark a milestone in China's history of democracy. It represents the wisdom of the Chinese people and is a product of their pursuit of a political system suited to the Chinese realities under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The following trajectory illustrates how popular responsiveness and effective governance have emerged synchronously.

During the Great Revolution in the 1920s, the CPC led the worker and peasant movements, establishing strike committees and city councils in urban areas, and peasant associations in rural areas. These efforts came to become the germ of a responsive mechanism and the earliest manifestation of the idea of the people's democracy under the leadership of the CPC. During the Agrarian Revolution (1927-1937), the system of worker, peasant, and soldier congresses was established in the revolutionary base area in the Jinggang Mountains, which laid the foundation of the subsequent people's congress system. During the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-1945), a representative assembly system was implemented in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region as the organisational form of political power that met the needs of the national united front against Japanese aggression. It provided invaluable experience for the establishment of the people's congress system.

This responsiveness and effective governance then reached a provisional equilibrium during the institutional transition that began with the War of Liberation in 1946 and lasted until the founding of the PRC in 1949. During the War of Liberation (1946-1949), representative conferences for people from different sectors were piloted in the steadily expanding liberated areas, taking on the roles and functions similar to those of the people's congress that was later introduced. In September 1949, the first plenary session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) adopted the Common Programme of the CPPCC, which held the status of a provisional constitution. At that meeting, it was solemnly declared that the PRC would implement the people's congress system. However, as the new government had not yet been founded and conditions remained immature, the functions of the people's congress were then performed by the CPPCC and local representative conferences for people from different sectors.

The founding of the PRC in 1949 laid the foundations for both institutional legitimacy and effective governance. To establish a new political system that could broadly represent the will of the Chinese people and meet China's practical needs, the CPC drew on the Soviet Union's congress model while making adaptations and innovations based on national realities. This led to the creation of the people's congress, a system with distinct Chinese characteristics. In 1953, under the leadership of the CPC, China held its first-ever nationwide election, electing

more than 1,200 deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC). In 1954, the first session of the First NPC was held. At the session, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China was adopted, formally establishing the people's congress system as the fundamental political system of the country.

The newly adopted Constitution declared that all power in the country belongs to the people. In the mid-20th century, the new government faced monumental challenges ranging from growing the economy and safeguarding territorial integrity to improving the quality of life of the population, all requiring urgent efforts. At this historic juncture, the people's congress system served as a unique solution by integrating people from all sectors in the country's governance mechanisms. This helped to ensure that people of all social strata, ethnic groups, and regions enjoyed extensive democratic rights and fair participation in discussing and resolving political issues, encouraging them to make their contribution to the development of the nation.

The continuous historical narrative revealed that the evolution of the system consistently revolved around the dual objectives: advancing popular sovereignty while enhancing governing effectiveness. The people's congress system is the product of China's history, culture and contemporary realities, and is deeply rooted in the social context of the nation. It is profoundly associated with the Chinese idea of the people being the foundation of the state, the concept of universal participation in governance, the tradition of collaborative and consultative governance, and the political wisdom of valuing inclusiveness and seeking common ground while shelving differences.

Based on the realities of the nation, the CPC creatively developed a modern democratic political system suited to national conditions, which reflects the state power led by the working class, China's distinctive national and social conditions, and the creativity of its people. Given China's vast territory, large population, wide regional disparities, and complex ethnic and social composition, it was by no means easy to design a democratic system that is both broadly representative and functionally effective. Through the establishment of people's congresses at multiple levels, the system effectively connected the central and local levels of governance, ensuring national unity and legal uniformity while fully accommodating regional disparities, thus embodying the principles of socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics and the rule of law. Reflective of distinctive Chinese characteristics with contemporary relevance, the people's congress system stands as a remarkable political innovation that is deeply rooted in China's national conditions.

NORMATIVE RECONSTRUCTION: Ensuring the Running of the Country by the People in Procedures, Substance, and Governance

The people's democracy has always been the banner held high by the CPC. The key to the people's congress system's strong vitality and marked strengths is that it is deeply rooted in the people.

From the procedural dimension, the system ensures that electoral democracy fulfils the formal requirements for the exercise of rights. Through democratic elections, the people elect deputies they trust to the organs of state power. The Electoral Law of the National People's Congress and Local People's Congresses of the People's Republic of China stipulates the fundamental principles, procedures, and methods of elections, including universal suffrage, equality, the combination of direct and indirect elections, as well as competitive (multi-candidate) elections and secret ballot, all of which ensure the fairness and legality of the procedure. All citizens of

the PRC who have reached the age of 18 shall have the right to vote and stand for election, regardless of ethnicity, race, sex, occupation, family background, religious belief, education, property status, or length of residence. These regulations ensure that people can vote for those who represent their interests, thus expressing their will through elections.

To guarantee the exercise of these rights, the Electoral Law provides not only procedural safeguards but also fiscal support. For instance, it stipulates that the electoral expenses of the National People's Congress and local people's congresses shall be included in the fiscal budget and shall be borne by the national treasury. This legal provision ensures that the funding necessary for citizens to participate in elections and exercise their electoral rights is supplied by the state. This enables voters to choose the deputies according to their own will, and prevents economic constraints from affecting the constituency, candidates, and elected deputies, thereby avoiding the money-driven politics and elections often seen in the West.

From the substantive dimension, the system broadens the channels for enabling responsiveness, thus catering to people's demand for tangible democratic outcomes. The people's congress system is vital to ensuring the people's status as masters of the country. To improve the institutional framework through which the people run the country, it is important to ensure that the people can participate in various ways in the management of economic, cultural and social affairs of the state in accordance with the law. The improvement and development of the people's congress system includes strengthening its organisational and operational mechanisms and ensuring that the people's congresses exercise their statutory powers of enacting laws, conducting oversight, making decisions, and appointing and removing officials. This allows them to play a more effective role in the country's political affairs, genuinely represent the people's will, and safeguard their rights and interests. Improving this institutional framework also means ensuring that democratic election, consultation, decision-making, management, and oversight are implemented in accordance with the law, fully unleashing people's drive, initiative and creativity, and more effectively reflecting the people's aspirations and demands.

From the dimension of governance, the system forms a feedback loop through community-level democratic practices, thereby meeting public expectations for governance effectiveness. Communities are where people are most concentrated, representing both the social unit most directly connected to people's daily lives and the frontline of national governance. The people's congress system enhances the political participation of diverse social groups, especially in rural areas and at the community level, through elections of deputies at the township, town, county and city levels. These deputies are positioned to convey local public opinion and demands more directly, ensuring that national legislation and policy formulation and implementation are closely aligned with the demands of primary-level governance and effectively address livelihood and social governance challenges. During their terms, primary-level deputies are required to maintain regular contact with the public, gather local people's opinions, and convey them to the people's congresses so that the demands of the general public are reflected in policies.

As of April 2025, the Legislative Affairs Commission of the NPC Standing Committee had established 54 legislative information offices nationwide, while over 6,500 such offices had been established by provincial and city-level people's congresses across China. They have become effective mechanisms for integrating public input into the legislative process. The people's congress system ensures that people are able to exercise their electoral rights in accordance with the law, and that people's congress deputies are elected democratically. Also,

by adopting an array of crucial institutional arrangements and designs, the system sees to it that the people's rights to information, participation, expression, and oversight are fulfilled in all aspects of the work of the people's congresses, and that the people's voices can be heard in every stage of the work of the Party and the state from decision-making to implementation and oversight.

DISCUSSION: Validating Responsiveness and Effective Governance

The validation of responsiveness and effective governance is most clearly embodied in the overarching framework underpinned by the unity between the leadership of the CPC, the running of the country by the people, and law-based governance, which forms the core foundation of the socialist political system with Chinese characteristics, and serves as the institutional anchor for the realisation of both political responsiveness and high-efficiency governance. Under the centralised, unified leadership of the CPC, China maintains a clear strategic orientation, policy continuity, and strong implementation capacity. The running of the country by the people reflects the essential nature of socialist democracy. The people's congress system allows the people to participate in the decision-making and oversight at national and local levels by voting for the deputies. This reflects the fact that state power belongs to the people and is subject to their oversight. Law-based governance is the fundamental principle for building a socialist country under the rule of law. The people's congresses enact laws and oversee their enforcement, thus ensuring law-based management of public affairs and fair, just, and orderly state governance.

The people's congress system plays the pivotal role in transforming responsiveness into effective governance. Administrative, supervisory, adjudicatory, and procuratorial organs at all levels are created by people's congresses, accountable to them, and subject to their oversight. With the support of the people's congress system, China's state organisations under the CPC leadership and the national governance system as a whole can better coordinate and cooperate, forming a powerful synergy for governing the country and effectively preventing the mutual constraints and internal frictions common in some Western countries with a separation of powers.

Under the leadership of the CPC, China's state power operates under the principle of democratic centralism, which further validates the dynamic balance between responsiveness and effective governance – enabling efficient decision-making through centralisation while ensuring public input through democratic processes. Functioning as an anti-fragmentation mechanism, democratic centralism stands in stark contrast to the multi-party system of the West where legislative gridlocks are common. On the one hand, it grants substantial autonomy to people's congresses at all levels, ensuring wide democratic participation. On the other hand, it allows for unified administration by governments over the affairs entrusted to them by those congresses, while guaranteeing democratic processes for the people. The strength of democratic centralism is especially evident in the efficiency and uniformity in the legislation of the NPC and the implementation of state policies. Once legislation and resolutions are adopted, relevant government authorities will implement them in a unified manner, ensuring consistent action across all regions and departments in the country, and avoiding disruption from local protectionism and interest barriers across departments. This not only improves the speed and quality of policy implementation but also strengthens the coherence and coordination of national governance through unified laws and institutions, promoting China's rapid growth and maintaining social fairness and justice.

The performance in areas such as fiscal and tax reform, regional coordination, national environmental protection, poverty alleviation, technological innovation, and public security provides observable evidence of both responsiveness and effective governance for the above institutional logic. This fully demonstrates the role of the people's congress system as a major coordinator and its strength in safeguarding centralisation. To give an example: Through the coordination mechanisms of the NPC and the State Council, the CPC Central Committee has advanced the legislation in relevant fields in response to public concern regarding high drug prices and difficult access to critical medications, thus contributing to people's well-being. Facts have proven that the people's congress system effectively maintains national unity and ethnic solidarity, helping forge a mighty force for realising China's rejuvenation.

CONCLUSION AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE: Reshaping the Institutional Components of Effective Democracy

In conclusion, the people's congress system integrates historical legitimacy, substantive representation, and political responsiveness into a new model of democracy, which fulfils the formal requirements of electoral democracy while also meeting people's expectations for substantive democratic outcomes and governing effectiveness. As the fundamental political system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the people's congress system demonstrates great advantages in China's political arena and national governance and also reflects the Chinese people's unique wisdom regarding democracy. The democratic concepts and practices showcased by the people's congress system provide fresh perspectives for the diversity of global democratic theories while offering experiential reference for other countries seeking to balance democratic responsiveness with efficient governance.

China's experience shows that democratic responsiveness and effective governance are the criteria for measuring the substantive effectiveness of democracy. Democracy is neither abstract nor uniform but, rather, concrete and diverse, manifesting in varied political practices across nations and reflecting each people's unique wisdom and creativity rooted in their cultural and historical contexts. When choosing democratic systems, countries must fully consider their historical traditions and national conditions, avoiding indiscriminate replication or importation of foreign models. At the same time, they should ensure the adaptability and sustainability of political reforms. The people's congress system not only embodies the inheritance and influence of fine traditional Chinese culture but also fully reflects China's contemporary political structure and national realities. In particular, it balances the unity necessary for national development with flexibility at the local level, providing institutional guarantees for China's stable development in complex domestic and international environments while also providing reference for other countries to establish democratic models adapted to their own national conditions.

China's people's congress system represents a shift from "procedural" to "substantive" representation, transcending Western electoral democracy's conceptual and institutional limitations and demonstrating democratic principles distinct from Western parliamentary systems. The people's congress system is an important institutional vehicle for realising China's whole-process people's democracy. And whole-process people's democracy integrates electoral democracy and consultative democracy. It is implemented through a combination of democratic election, consultation, decision-making, management, and oversight, and covers the economic, political, cultural, social, environmental, and other sectors.

This is a consistent, comprehensive, and coordinated model of democracy that enables people's regular and extensive participation, thereby ensuring that people's wishes are represented, and their voices are heard in all political and social affairs. In the people's congress system, democracy encompasses not only elections but also consultation, decision-making, management, and supervision, enabling participation throughout the pre-decision, decision-making, and post-decision phases. Evaluating a country's democracy requires understanding objective national conditions, examining practical results, and heeding the people's feedback. As an innovative democratic practice, the people's congress system emphasises democracy's substance and effects, effectively avoiding the limitations of Western electoral democracy. It distinguishes China from the countries where citizens have formal rights but no real power, and where election promises are left unattended after voting.

The people's congress system exemplifies governance efficiency and stability in its operation. Under the leadership of the CPC, it coordinates legislative, administrative, and judicial activities, fostering institutional collaboration while balancing democratic participation with effective governance and equity. This system prevents the situations in some countries where there is deliberation but no decision, or where decisions are made but not implemented, avoiding the policy delays and inconsistent execution common in Western multi-party systems. With centralised legislative power and strong oversight mechanisms that are rarely seen in other countries, the people's congress system effectively manages major political relationships. It maintains national unity, ethnic harmony, and social stability, ensuring China's stability and security over the long term. This highly efficient political mechanism offers valuable insights for other nations addressing complex challenges and pursuing accelerated development.

REFERENCES

- Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Distelhorst, G., and Hou, Y. (2017). Ingroup Bias in Authoritarian Deliberation: Evidence from China. *World Politics*, 69(4), 701-736.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2009). Democratisation as Deliberative Capacity Building. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(11), 1379-1402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009332129>
- Easton, D. (1975). A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support. *British Journal of Political Science*, 5(4), 435-457. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400008309>
- Ginsburg, T., and Huq, A. N. (2018). *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- He, B., and Warren, M. E. (2011). Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development. *Political Theory*, 39(1), 39-63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711000892>
- Javed, B. (2021). Consultation Without Contestation: Local Legislative Outreach Points in China. *The China Quarterly*, 247, 678-701.
- Koss, D. (2018). Where the Law Comes from: Legislative Drafting and Legal Transplantation in the PRC. *Modern China*, 44(4), 373-408.
- Mahoney, J. and Thelen, K. (Eds.). (2010). *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manin, B. (1997). *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Mansbridge, J. (2003). Rethinking Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 97(4), 515-528. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055403000856>
- Perry, E. J. (2022). The Chinese Socialist State as Historical Institution. *Modern China*, 48(2), 113-142.
- Pitkin, H.F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Saward, M. (2010). *The Representative Claim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schmitter, P. C., & Karl, T.L. (1991). What Democracy Is ... and Is Not. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(3), 75-88. 10.1353/jod.1991.0033
- Truex, R. (2016). *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Urbinati, N. (2019). *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.