



Understanding China's Whole-Process People's Democracy

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According to Wang Shaoguang, the most significant thing about China’s advocacy of common human values, including democracy, is that it demonstrates that no political system has a monopoly on the interpretation of democracy. China’s development of democracy, according to a white paper issued by the Chinese government, is a whole process based on national conditions. It has distinctive Chinese characteristics and embodies the common pursuit of democracy for all. It has promoted China’s development and revival while enriching the political civilization.

CNS: The two “Summits for Democracy” organized by the Biden administration since 2021 have run into controversy. Even some of the U.S. media have questioned them, calling them undemocratic. What

do you think of the Western democratic tradition and its contemporary practice?

Wang Shaoguang: Ancient Greece is considered to be the birthplace of Western democracy, and Athens is held up as a model of democracy. But the truth is that for most of the fourth century BC, the number of adult male citizens who actually participated in decision-making in Athens was only 15 to 20 percent of the population. This is the kind of democracy which, from ancient Greece to the early twentieth century, was seen as a “bad thing” by the Western elite. Many Western scholars have written books pointing out that “the West has no tradition of democracy.”

The Western emphasis on public participation is typical of formal democracy. This type of democracy is characterized by policymakers waiting for people to participate while assuming that all people have the same ability to participate and have equal influence on politics. However, extensive empirical research by Western scholars has found that this is an unsupported assumption and this political participation is completely unequal.

Let me tell you an ironic story about the true meaning of Western-style democracy. On his death bed, an American farmer was trying to prepare his son to take over the farm after his death. He asked the son, “What would you do if the pigs complain the feed is bad, and the cows complain that the work is too heavy, and the chickens complain that the coop is dirty?” The son answered, “Feed the pigs well, lessen the cows’ work, and clean the coop.” The farmer shook his head. “Don’t do anything,” he advised his son. “Just let them vote to choose who they want to run the farm, you or your wife. It will make them think they are in charge of the farm and they will stop complaining.”

CNS: You have used the term “four-dimensional integration” to summarize the Chinese people’s democracy. How would you define that?

Wang Shaoguang: I borrowed it from the concept of the “four dimensions of representation” by American political theorist Hanna Pitkin.

From the perspective of symbolic representation, Chinese people’s democracy ideologically emphasizes “people first” and “people’s support.” This concept guides the work of the officials, and people evaluate the ability of officials by this measure, so this type of symbolic representation has tremendous binding power.

In terms of descriptive representation, the vast majority of the over 96 million members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) are ordinary workers, so we can see that the CPC can represent people's interest descriptively.

As for formalistic representation, China's system of people's congresses ensures broad representation. It is a system in which first we have the local people's congresses at the grassroots and higher levels, from which members are elected to form the National People's Congress, the national legislature. People's congress deputies at all levels come from ordinary workers, peasants, military personnel, technical workers and general managers. Ordinary workers and peasants make up two-thirds of the people's congress deputies at all levels nationwide.

Western-style democratic theory emphasizes formalistic representation, but the focus of its theory of representative democracy is not "representation" but "representative," which means a person is given the role of "representative" through a formal process. The vast majority of these representatives come from the elite. Since 1789, the U.S. House of Representatives has changed its seats for more than 14,000 times, but its composition has basically remained unchanged. Besides, the median family net worth of the members of the U.S. Congress is more than 10 times that of the median American family net worth. In this sense, this nation appears to be administered by those who are rich.

In terms of substantive representation, the CPC's mass line emphasizes "coming from the masses and going to the masses," thus enabling the wisdom and suggestions of the masses to be incorporated into the decisions of governments at all levels.

In summary, Western-style representative democracy is mono-dimensional, with only one dimension of formalistic representation. China's people's democracy, on the other hand, is an all-embracing representation, bringing together formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive representatives into one, forming a "four-dimensional democracy." It is a model of socialist democracy that covers all aspects of the democratic process and all sectors of society. It is a democracy that covers all fields, aspects and links of national political life, including but not limited to democratic elections, democratic consultation, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision. It is not only a political democracy, but also an economic and social life democracy.

CNS: Why do you say democracy is closely related to national governance?

Wang Shaoguang: Logically, all political systems are ways of governing, and democracy, by any definition, is closely related to political systems, and therefore to governance. China and the West have different ways of thinking about political issues: the West focuses on “polity” while China emphasizes the “political way.”

When discussing the relationship between democracy and governance in the polity sense, the West presupposes that its own polity is democratic and then emphasizes that only a polity like theirs is democratic. It is a simple, formal and hegemonic way of thinking about the issue.

It is also the same with governance. After the 1990s, Western countries and some international organizations interpreted it as a very specific form, the one advocated by neoliberalism. And they declared neoliberal democracy to be “the least bad form of governance” and “governance” became equated with “democracy.”

But the fact is that American economist Joseph Schumpeter’s “minimal democracy,” a form of government whose sole characteristic is competitive elections, began to show its shortcomings, and some Western countries experienced a host of governance problems that led to widespread discontent among their people. A survey by U.S. think tank Pew Research Center in 2021 found that the vast majority of Americans were deeply disappointed with their country’s political system. Only 17 percent of the respondents believed U.S. democracy was worthy of emulation, while 23 percent believed it had never been a good example.

Western mainstream scholars have also begun to reflect on it. For example, American scholar Francis Fukuyama argues that the inclusion of democracy as an indicator of governance is a conceptual confusion and suggests that the two be separated. It is clear that democracy in the sense of polity is not necessarily the best way to govern.

China, on the other hand, has had a “political way of thinking” from ancient times to the present. It is a philosophy of governance and the highest goal of political pursuit, such as “putting the people at the center.” It also includes a specific way of governance, including institutional arrangements, guidelines, policies, measures and methods. This way of thinking requires that those who govern do not follow outdated rules, or copy blindly, or stick to the old ways, but constantly explore better ways to achieve the highest political pursuit of governing.

China's system may not necessarily meet the standards of democracy in the Western sense, but it is in line with China's realities. Although it may not be able to solve all problems, it has proven to be able to solve a large number of real concerns.

CNS: Compared with Western representative democracy, what is the significance of China's whole-process people's democracy for the development of global democratic politics?

Wang Shaoguang: I call the democracy in Western countries, represented by the United States, "electing the master." Whether it is a democracy or not is a question itself.

The most prominent criterion of Western democracy is competitive election, but from Aristotle to Montesquieu, it is clear that elections are not democracy, but a characteristic of oligarchy. Western-style democracy concerns only the stage of "electing the leader" in the political process. Robert Dahl, an old colleague of mine from Yale University and a former president of the American Political Science Association, summarizes a democracy characterized by multiparty competition as a polyarchy, which is in fact an oligarchy with several competing parties. Dahl said he would reserve the word democracy for a system that was consistently responsive to the needs of the people. By this measure, China's political system is highly responsive, as many Western scholars have concluded in their field studies.

As a result, the Chinese have a very high level of trust in the government. Over the past 30 years, Western scholars have revised questionnaires and conducted countless public surveys in China on their view of the government but the findings are largely consistent.

The Chinese have a higher level of trust in their government than the vast majority have in Western countries, but China has never claimed that its system is the best in the world like some other countries. There is more than one political civilization, and China is one of those that have done a good job. The significance of China's democratic exploration is that it has provided the world with at least one option and one different way of thinking, and proved that there are many ways to achieve democracy than electing a leader.

The most important aspect of universality is diversity. The common values of all humankind are concepts that are acceptable to all nations and peoples, but the specific practices and institutional arrangements used to realize them are diverse. China advocates the common values for all

humanity, including democracy. And its greatest significance is that it shows the world that no single political system has a monopoly on the interpretation of democracy. In this sense, China's whole-process people's democracy has definitely enriched the political civilization.

(Interviewed by An Yingzhao)

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