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## China will be driven by 89 million votes this week, but don't call it democracy

Two thousand of the great and the good (and many of the very rich) of China have come together in Beijing to plot the course of the Communist Party of China for the next five years under its supreme leader, Xi Jinping. They're there to attend the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. But you can't buy a ticket to this party. All of the 2,287 delegates to the Congress are people of "remarkable achievement." And they're all elected.

Only Party members get to vote in this election, but with more than 89 million members in the Communist Party, that's still a lot of voting. And vote they do. This year the Party elections recorded a voter turnout rate of 99.2%, probably a new record. That's up from just 98.0% five years ago. Voter turnout rates like these put Western democracies to shame. Australia, the Western turnout champion, manages just a nose over 90%—and that's with compulsory voting.

### Democracy by another name

Of course, in China's Party elections you're only allowed to vote for pre-approved candidates, and even then you can't be sure that your candidate will actually make it to Beijing. This year one-third of the delegates from the western Chinese megacity of Chongqing were unseated by the central Party leadership. Chongqing was formerly the power base of Bo Xilai, a one-time challenger to Xi Jinping who was suspended from office in the run-up to the last Party Congress, in 2012.

Xi will make doubly-sure that this year's Party Congress goes smoothly—for himself. The experts are unanimous on one thing: the 19th Party Congress is all about Xi. He is already General Secretary of the Communist

Party, President of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. What more could he want? Xi's number one agenda item may be progress on the economic reforms he has promised but so far failed to deliver.

Whether it's all about Xi or all about the economy, why bother with all the democratic window dressing? Here Xi may be following in the footsteps of the father of reform-era China, Deng Xiaoping. Deng took power at the 11th Party Congress in 1977 and instituted the practice of holding Party Congresses every five years. At the 12th Party Congress he introduced a landmark practice on China's road to intra-Party democracy, the principle of having more candidates than seats. Baby steps, baby steps.

Moving slowly

Deng never came close to bringing democracy to China: in 1989 he snuffed out China's nascent democracy movement in the infamous Tiananmen Square massacre. But he did understand that "the success of all reforms depends on the reform of the political system." With 2,287 "elected" delegates to answer to, maybe Xi will get that message.

But political reform means moving beyond window dressing democracy to true let-the-voters-decide elections. Xi says he wants to transform China's economy from one dependent on state subsidies into one driven by consumer demand, but he's finding that hard to do. Millions of Party members who feed off state subsidies are loath to give them up. Xi may need some real people power to push through his preferred policies.

Political reform won't come fast, and it won't come easy. But once people get in the habit of voting, even in rigged elections, it's hard to move back. Consumer choice works the same way: you can limit people's online freedom of speech, but you'll never be able to take away their smartphones. So don't hold your breath, but fake Party elections like the ones China held this year may turn out to be one more baby step on China's long march to democracy.

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