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From the 1950s through the 1980s, American scholars and policy makers easily and appropriately dismissed the “people’s congresses” of elected legislative representatives in mainland China as “rubber stamps.” Yet, in recent years, without challenging the communist party monopoly, the Chinese congresses have become significant political players. They veto government reports, they quiz and dismiss officials, and they reject candidates selected by the communist party for leadership. The liveliest congresses are found not at the center of power in Beijing nor in provincial capitals, but below—in the cities, counties, and townships.

The new assertiveness of local congresses is not a grassroots movement. It was set in motion by rules designed and promoted by authoritarian rulers in Beijing. Understanding what has (and has not) changed in these local congresses is a window on the “officially acceptable” meaning of *representative democracy* in mainland China today.

My argument this morning is that congressional empowerment exemplifies a difficult, risky, strategic, and partly successful communist party effort to strengthen authoritarianism by opening up politics to new players, giving them procedural status in the political game, and accepting losses in particular instances in order to win the bigger prize of authoritarian persistence. It is a *difficult* effort because a legacy of congressional irrelevance cannot be easily erased in the minds of ordinary voters and local party and government officials. It is a *risky* effort because credibility requires that the effort go beyond authoritarian “cheap talk”—but the regime certainly does not want to encourage runaway democratization in the form of new democratic parties or too many “independent candidates.” It is a *strategic* effort in the sense that it is designed not to promote liberal democracy but to strengthen authoritarian rule with more responsive political institutions under the guardianship of a single communist party.

Finally, the effort is only *partly successful*. Local congress representatives see themselves as substantive political players with electoral legitimacy, not the congressional puppets of the Maoist era. This is especially the case in congresses at lower levels. Popularly elected congress representatives speak and act the new language of voting districts, constituents, and constituent interests. They help constituents with private matters and work to provide local public goods. They see this as their most important responsibility. They see their second most important responsibility as electing government leaders, in this quasi-

parliamentary system. In electing government leaders, local congresses are not the simple stooges of local communist party committees, as they were in the past. In nominating candidates for government leadership, communist party committees can no longer treat the congresses as reliable voting machines. When local communist party committees fail to take local interests into account in nominating their candidates for leadership, these party committee candidates can and do lose. Again, this is especially the case in congresses at lower levels.

At the same time and despite official voter turnout figures of over 90 percent, reliable survey evidence indicates that very high proportions of ordinary Chinese know little or nothing about local congress candidates on election day, say they didn't vote in the most recent congress election, and can recall nothing their congress representatives have done in the past term. Most alarmingly for the Chinese authorities, these proportions have increased, not decreased, over the past fifteen years. In short, if local congress representatives now think and act as agents of their constituents, it is not because ordinary Chinese voters see themselves as principals. Put another way, if representative democracy is working, most ordinary Chinese do not yet see it that way.

To understand these different perspectives, it is useful to understand what has and has not changed in the rules.

Let me first summarize a few important *unchanged* features of Chinese representative democracy. First, direct electoral participation by ordinary Chinese is restricted to the lowest congress levels. Only township and county congresses are elected in popular elections. Above the county level, elections only involve congress insiders: each congress is elected by the congress below it. This reflects an elitist notion of guardianship that is both Leninist and traditionally Chinese. Second, congresses are large and unwieldy, they meet infrequently, and most representatives are amateurs with neither the time nor material resources for congressional work. The working congresses are the much smaller standing committees—but not all standing committee members at all levels work full time for the congresses, and there are no standing committees at the lowest congress level. Large amateur congresses reflect a Marxist view that only by continuing to work on the front line at the grassroots can representatives forge a meaningful relationship with their constituents. Finally and not least of all, a single communist party monopolizes political power. Competing political parties are banned, as are inner-party factions. This is important in at least two ways. Communists numerically dominate all Chinese congresses at all levels: they make up about 65 percent of township congresses and about 70 percent of congresses above this level. As a matter of organizational discipline, the communist party should be able to impose its will on all congresses. A second consequence of communist party monopoly has to do with interest representation. Without competitive interest aggregation

along party (or any other) lines, “party” has no meaning as an organizing category for voters. Voters cannot sort out representatives and assign, through votes in popular elections, credit or blame for governance outcomes. Put another way, the communist party monopoly strips representatives of labels that reflect policy orientations. This places a truly impossible information burden on voters.

Let me turn now to what *has* changed. In the interests of time, I focus on the most fundamental set of rules: congressional electoral reform, particularly direct popular elections of congresses at lower levels. In 1979, the first local congress elections of the post-Mao era introduced three new electoral rules: elections must be contested, voting must be by secret ballot, and groups of ordinary voters may nominate candidates. These rules are a radical departure from Maoist-era practices, and they remain the basic organizing principles of congress elections today. These and other electoral rules created new opportunities for ordinary Chinese and new challenges for the authorities.

For example, voter nomination of candidates mobilizes ordinary Chinese to bring them into the electoral process at the very beginning—only to disappoint them, even before election day. Any group of ten voters may nominate a candidate. This is a low threshold of support. One result is a large number of voter-nominated candidates—tens, sometimes even hundreds of candidates for two or three congress seats. Winners in congress elections must win a majority (not plurality) of votes. To produce a decisive election, the rules set a ceiling of no more than twice the number of candidates on the ballot as congress seats. By default, the process of winnowing out many tens of candidates to choose a few candidates for the ballot must eliminate a large number of voter nominees. Most nominees are passive: they do not take the initiative to seek congressional office. Only small proportions of voter nominees are “independent candidates,” who orchestrate their nomination by voters and actively seek office to promote individual or collective goals.

The law permits independent candidates, but there are plenty of ways for election committees to harass them—and this harassment is routine in many localities. In addition, the election committees manage the pivotal winnowing out process, which is much criticized as a “black box.” Election committees are also instructed to induce congresses that satisfy certain electoral quotas—20 percent women, for example. To reduce electoral uncertainty created by contestation, the winnowing out process takes these quotas into consideration. Overall, candidates nominated by the party and party-controlled organizations do better than voter nominees in this process and they also do better in the elections. This creates a credibility problem. In the words of two pre-eminent Chinese congress scholars: “This situation disappoints voters, [especially] voters who nominate candidates, and leads to suspicion about the fairness of the elections.”

From initial nomination of candidates to election day is a mere 15 days. Electoral campaigns are prohibited by law. With little time and without campaigns or competitive party labels, a high proportion of Chinese vote blindly. In the late 1990s, some localities allowed election committees to arrange face-to-face meetings between candidates and voters and organized de facto primary elections. The system did not implode with this modest local tinkering. Indeed, the political center responded: in 2004 the electoral law was revised to include these features.

Let me conclude. I commented earlier that if representative democracy is working, most ordinary Chinese do not yet see it that way. What has and has not changed in the rules that govern congresses and congress elections goes some way toward explaining this.

Representative democracy in mainland China is not authoritarian "cheap talk." At this point in time, however, it remains essentially a game of congress insiders. For them, what is most salient about elections is a new electoral uncertainty: with secret ballots and electoral contestation, they can lose. As winners, then, they have electoral legitimacy. Representatives in popularly elected congresses think and act as agents of their constituents. By contrast, ordinary Chinese pay attention to local congresses once every five years, when they are mobilized to vote in elections that are not yet well structured to generate their interest.