自由中国运动 · Free China Movement

T048 | If People Can Vote at the Grassroots, Does That Prove National Authorization Is Settled?

Myths T048 · v1.0 | 2026-11-22

© 2026 Free China Movement

https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/myths-t048-grassroots-vote-national-mandate/

contact@freechina.live

Core answer

No. The grassroots vote is real, and it matters: it is, by the white paper's own account, the most extensive and dynamic form of democracy in China, reaching every village and urban community. But a vote authorizes only what it was given to authorize. A villagers committee election decides who manages the village's public affairs and public services; it does not decide who holds national power, makes national law, or appoints the premier. The white paper itself draws this line: it places community-level self-governance in one institutional box and the people's congress system — "China's fundamental political system" — in another. To say the grassroots vote settles national authorization is to take a mandate given for the village and spend it in Beijing.

1. The opposing argument, stated fairly

The strongest version runs like this: grassroots elections in China are not token or rare; they are the largest layer of the system. "Elections at the grassroots level are the most extensive and dynamic form of democracy in China." Coverage is total: "As of the end of 2020, all the 503,000

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

administrative villages in China had established villagers committees, and all the 112,000 urban communities in the country had established residents committees." Participation is high: "Since the initiation of reform and opening up, China has held 12 direct elections to people's congresses at the township level and 11 direct elections to those at the county level, with a current participation rate of about 90 percent." The system is continuous from bottom to top: "By exercising their right to vote in elections, the people elect those who represent their will to hold and exercise power," and the annual people's congresses "are first held from the grassroots upwards at township, county, city, and provincial levels and then at the highest national level, to take full cognizance of the people's aspirations and report them to upper levels."

On this reading, the people vote, their representatives carry their will upward, and national power therefore rests on the people's vote. The question is whether connection equals authorization — whether a vote cast at the bottom travels intact to the top. That further step does not follow.

2. What a grassroots vote actually authorizes

Start with the object of the vote: "China applies a system of community-level self-governance represented by villagers autonomy, urban residents autonomy, and employees congresses. Under the leadership and support of community-level Party organizations, local residents directly exercise the democratic right to manage their own affairs by serving the community, undertaking self-education, and exercising public scrutiny." The practices that follow spell it out: residents "hold democratic elections in which they elect villagers and residents committees," and "practice democratic decision-making in handling community public affairs and public services through committee meetings and congresses."

The boundary repeats: "their own affairs," "community public affairs and public services," "in residential areas to which they belong." A villagers

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

committee cannot pass national law, levy a national tax, set foreign policy, or appoint a minister. Its decisions bind the village, not the country. That is not a defect — it is the design. A mandate is bounded by its object, and the object here is the community. Electing a residents committee is a genuine exercise of democratic rights, and a different act from authorizing national power, as choosing a building manager differs from choosing a mayor. The paper never says the grassroots vote authorizes the state — only that it authorizes residents to handle their own residential areas. To read a national mandate into a village ballot is to ignore the warrant the ballot itself carries.

3. The indirect chain to national power

National power runs through a different institution and procedure. Only the lowest rungs are directly elected: "deputies to people's congresses at the township and county levels are elected directly by the public. Deputies to people's congresses at the city, provincial and national levels are elected by people's congresses at the next level below." A citizen votes directly for township and county deputies; the county congress elects city deputies, the city congress provincial deputies, and the provincial congress deputies to the National People's Congress. The citizen's ballot is three removes from the national legislature; each link is a fresh election by a different electorate — a congress, not the citizen.

Each link can also filter the mandate. The white paper is candid that the congress system serves a further purpose: "It enables the Party to turn its proposals into state policies, and to place the candidates recommended by Party organizations into positions as state leaders through statutory procedures." A chain of delegation is not direct authorization, and a chain with several links is not a chain with one. The pyramid's shape makes the point: "At the end of 2020, 2.62 million people were serving as deputies to people's congresses at all levels nationwide. Among them,

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

those at county and township levels accounted for 94.5 percent of the total." The base is broad and directly elected; the apex is small.

Nor does upward reporting close the gap. That congresses meet "from the grassroots upwards" to "take full cognizance of the people's aspirations and report them to upper levels" describes consultation: wishes travel upward and are heard. But reporting a wish is not choosing the decider, and being heard is not authorizing.

4. Self-governance is not state power

The distinction is structural. Community-level self-governance is one of six systems in Section II; the people's congress system is another, given a different status: "The system of people's congresses, an organizational form of political power compatible with the governing system of the people's democratic dictatorship, is China's fundamental political system, and the ultimate approach and optimal solution to guaranteeing the people's status as masters of the country." State power — legislation, appointing and removing the president, premier, CMC chair, and Supreme People's Court president — belongs to the National People's Congress: "The people exercise state power effectively through people's congresses; people's congresses exercise state power collectively on behalf of the people. The National People's Congress (NPC) is the highest organ of state power." No villagers committee exercises any of them.

The myth collapses two institutions into one because both involve voting, but voting for a residents committee and voting for the body that appoints the premier are different acts with different objects. The same discipline runs through CCE-029, "Should Citizen Loyalty Be to the State, the Government, or the Constitution?": whether loyalty is owed to the state, the government, or the constitution turns on not confusing one level of public power with another — and the same holds for authorization. A mandate given at one level cannot be spent at another without a separate act of authorization.

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

5. The test that would settle it

The preamble supplies the test, to be applied level by level: "The best way to evaluate whether a country's political system is democratic and efficient is to observe whether the succession of its leaders is orderly and in line with the law, whether all the people can manage state and social affairs and economic and cultural undertakings in conformity with legal provisions ..." At the grassroots, yes on the paper's own terms: voters choose and supervise their committees and decide their community's rules. At the national level, the paper's answer is different in kind: leaders are chosen indirectly, through congresses electing congresses, and appointed through statutory procedures. That may be defended on other grounds — scale, stability, representation through deputies — but not by pointing at the village ballot box. The village vote proves the village mandate; it is silent on the national one.

On legitimacy as a matter of mechanisms, not outcomes, see CCE-044, "Demographic Structure and Aging: How Will Demographic Transition Affect Economic Development and Political Legitimacy?". The same test applies: a record of grassroots votes does not by itself answer who decided nationally, by what procedure, and how they can be removed.

Conclusion

Grassroots voting in China is genuine and extensive; the white paper's own figures prove it. But a mandate is bounded by its object, and the paper bounds the grassroots mandate to community affairs, while national power runs through an indirect chain the citizen never votes in directly. The whole-process claim is about coverage — participation at every level — not that a vote at one level authorizes power at another. To prove national authorization is settled, show the national authorization: who chose the national leaders, by what procedure, and how they can be removed. Until then, the village vote settles the village question and leaves the national question where it was.

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

Related CCE123 articles (link-back — cited, not duplicated)

- CCE-029, "Should Citizen Loyalty Be to the State, the Government, or the Constitution?" — not confusing one level of public power with another: https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-029-should-citizen-loyalty-be-to-the-state-the-government-or-the-constitution/
- CCE-044, "Demographic Structure and Aging: How Will Demographic Transition Affect Economic Development and Political Legitimacy?" — legitimacy as a matter of mechanisms, not outcomes: https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-044-demographic-structure-aging/

Sources

1. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, China: Democracy That Works (《中国的民主》), released 2021-12-04. English full text, Sections II (vi) and III (i) (with Section II (ii) and the Preamble for the institutional framework and the evaluation test), verified against the official text as republished by the Chinese Embassy in New Zealand: http://nz.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zxgxs/202112/t20211205_10462557.html (all quotations in this essay checked verbatim against this text).
2. CCE-029, "Should Citizen Loyalty Be to the State, the Government, or the Constitution?", FreeChina.live (EN edition): https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-029-should-citizen-loyalty-be-to-the-state-the-government-or-the-constitution/ — cited for its level-by-level treatment of state, government, and constitution, content not duplicated.
3. CCE-044, "Demographic Structure and Aging: How Will Demographic Transition Affect Economic Development and Political Legitimacy?", FreeChina.live (EN edition): https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-044-demographic-structure-

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

aging/ — cited for its complementary mechanism-based account of legitimacy, content not duplicated.

4. Civic Education 123 hub index consulted for overlap resolution: https://freechina.live/civic-education-100-questions/.

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live