Party Representation: How Does a Single Ruling Party Prove It Represents All the People?

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1. Where the Question Comes From

A party that claims to represent all the people is stating something that needs to be tested, not offering evidence. Whom it represents, who gets to judge, and what happens when the judgment goes against it — those three questions decide whether the claim is true or false.

The Chinese-speaking world offers two sharply different answers to this question. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) states that the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and at the same time states that all power belongs to the people. The Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan), by contrast, took the opposite road: a party that had ruled for decades finally accepted the verdict of elections and handed power to its opponent. This essay first sets out what "representation" means, then measures both answers against it, to see how each stands up to testing.

This is not an abstract question of theory. The systems on both sides of the Taiwan Strait both proclaim to the world that they represent the people, and both have written that claim into their fundamental laws. A claim can be written into a constitution; proof can only come from the system itself: whether the people have a way to grant authorization, a way to withdraw it, and a way to replace office-holders when they do wrong. Without those ways, "representing all the people" is only a slogan.

2. Four Meanings of "Representation"

In 1967, the political scientist Hanna Pitkin pointed out that "representation" is not one thing but four different relationships. First, authorization: the representative's power comes from an explicit grant by those represented, and the grant can be revoked. Second, accountability: the representative must regularly answer to those represented, and can be removed for poor performance. Third, descriptive representation: the representative body resembles the people in miniature, with every stratum and ethnic group present within it. Fourth, substantive representation: the representative's actions genuinely serve the interests of those represented.

These four meanings can be tested separately. A party may look very much like the people in descriptive terms — its representatives drawn from every walk of life — yet be wholly beyond the people's control

on authorization and accountability; or it may win authorization yet betray its voters' interests in substance. That is exactly the problem of the single ruling party: it usually works hardest on descriptive representation and most avoids testing on authorization and accountability.

Elections are the institution that combines authorization and accountability. As Bernard Manin pointed out, a vote does two things at once: it authorizes a government to govern, and it preserves the power to replace that government at the next election. Regular, competitive elections matter not because they guarantee the best people are chosen, but because they give "changing the people in charge" a peaceful, institutionalized form. A system without competitive elections may claim to understand the people's interests, but it gives the people no way to correct it when its judgment is wrong.

3. The PRC's Answer: People's Congresses, the Mass Line, and Consultation

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China answers with a combination of institutions. Article 2 states that all power belongs to the people, and that the organs through which the people exercise state power are the National People's Congress (NPC) and the local people's congresses at all levels. The 14th National People's Congress has 2,977 deputies, among them 497 workers and farmers, 16.69% of the total; 790 women, 26.54%; and 442 members of ethnic minorities, covering all 55 ethnic minority groups. Deputies to people's congresses at the county and township levels are directly elected by voters; deputies to the National People's Congress are indirectly elected by the provincial-level people's congresses.

A second strand is the mass line. On 1 June 1943, Mao Zedong wrote in "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership" that correct leadership must necessarily be "from the masses, to the masses." The line survives in today's language: the Party gathers public opinion through its grassroots organizations and then carries out the views it has distilled. A third strand is consultative democracy. In 2013, Xi Jinping proposed that consultative democracy is a distinctive form and unique advantage of socialist democracy in China, and an important expression of the Party's mass line in the political sphere; the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is "the broadest patriotic united front organization." On 2 November 2019, Xi Jinping put forward the phrase "whole-process people's democracy" while visiting Shanghai; in March 2021, the concept was written into the Organic Law of the National People's Congress; and on 4 December 2021, the State Council issued the white paper "China: Democracy That Works," setting out the claim systematically.

These institutions share a common premise, written into Article 1 of the Constitution: the sentence added in the 2018 amendment — "The leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics." The same Constitution says in Article 2 that all power belongs to the people, and in Article 1 that the Party's leadership is the defining feature; the two stand side by side, and the Party's leadership is not subject to electoral testing. The official election report states in so many words that every newly elected deputy to the National People's Congress supports the leadership of the Party. As of the end of 2023, the Chinese Communist Party had 99.185 million members — less than one-tenth of the total electorate — yet it decides where supreme power rests.

The Party has another account of its own representativeness. The theory of the "Three Represents" holds that the Party represents the development requirements of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people; the theory was written into the Constitution in 2004. The CPPCC, for its part, gathers people from all walks of life by sector and deliberates under the Party's leadership. But whether it is the "Three Represents" or CPPCC consultation, the power to decide who counts as a representative rests with the Party: the Party declares whom and what it represents without needing its claim confirmed by a vote of those represented. That is the structural weakness of a single ruling party's claim to representativeness — the one making the claim and the one judging it are the same party.

4. The ROC's One-Party Era: One Constitution, Two Kinds of Representation

The Constitution of the Republic of China also began by writing down popular sovereignty. Article 2: "The sovereignty of the Republic of China shall reside in the whole body of citizens." Article 17: the people shall have the rights of election, recall, initiative, and referendum; Article 129: elections prescribed by the Constitution shall be held by universal, equal, direct, and secret ballot, except as otherwise provided. The Constitution was adopted on 25 December 1946 and came into force on 25 December 1947.

But the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion, enacted in 1948, froze that system, and in 1949 martial law was imposed in the ROC (Taiwan). During 38 years of martial law, the Kuomintang (KMT) ruled as a single party; the central representatives elected on the mainland in 1947 and 1948 were never re-elected, and Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 31 of 29 January 1954 supplied the basis for their indefinite tenure. In the same period, the White Terror suppressed political dissent in the name of national security, for which President Ma Ying-jeou apologized in July 2008. At the same time, elections at the local level never ceased: in January 1951, Taipei held its first mayoral election, and Wu San-lien won with 65.5% of the vote; from 1969, the central representative bodies began holding regular supplementary elections for a portion of their seats. The Tangwai (outside-the-party) movement grew precisely in the gaps left by these limited elections: in 1977, Tangwai candidates won 21 of 77 seats in the Taiwan Provincial Assembly and 4 of 20 county and city magistrate seats; in the same year, crowds burned down a police station in the Zhongli Incident after ballot-counting fraud. After the Kaohsiung Incident of 10 December 1979, Tangwai leaders were arrested and imprisoned. On 28 September 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was founded while martial law was still in force, and the authorities did not suppress it.

5. The ROC (Taiwan)'s Transition: How Representation Returned to the Voters

The decisive step in the transition came from the judiciary. On 21 June 1990, Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 261 ruled that the first-term central representatives who had never faced re-election must cease exercising their powers no later than 31 December 1991. On 22 April 1991, the first National Assembly abolished the Temporary Provisions; on 31 December of the same year, the senior representatives retired en masse. On 19 December 1992, all 161 seats of the Legislative Yuan were put to election. On 23 March 1996, the ROC (Taiwan) held its first direct presidential election, and Lee Teng-hui won with 54% of the vote. On 18 March 2000, Chen Shui-bian was elected President, ending 55 years of KMT rule; Ma Ying-jeou's election in 2008 made alternation in power routine; Tsai Ing-wen was elected in 2016, becoming the first woman President; and on 13 January 2024, Lai Ching-te was elected with 40.05% of the vote (5,586,019 votes) and a turnout of 71.86%, while the Legislative Yuan election returned 52 seats for the KMT, 51 for the DPP, 8 for the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), and 2 for independents — no party holding a majority.

The recall power in Article 17 of the Constitution is not words on paper either. On 6 June 2020, Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu was recalled by 939,090 votes to 25,051, becoming the first directly elected municipality mayor in the ROC (Taiwan)'s history to be recalled. That authorization can be withdrawn is no longer just a claim — Taiwan now has an actual instance of it.

After the transition, the system kept evolving. The 2005 constitutional amendments abolished the National Assembly, made the Legislative Yuan a single-chamber parliament, and required future constitutional amendments to pass by citizen referendum. In 2019, the ROC (Taiwan) became the first place in Asia to guarantee same-sex marriage in law. The 2024 election showed checks and balances working in practice: the presidency belonged to the DPP while no party held a majority in the Legislative Yuan, so the governing party had to win support within the legislature. No party can guarantee that it will govern forever — that is what it looks like once the power of representation has returned to the voters.

6. Two Answers, Four Tests

Measured against Pitkin's four meanings, the comparison becomes clear.

Authorization: in the ROC (Taiwan), the President, legislators, and county and city heads are directly elected by voters, serve fixed terms, and must face election when those terms expire. In the PRC (Mainland), deputies to the National People's Congress are indirectly elected, direct election reaches only as far as the county and township levels, and the top leader is not chosen through a competitive election.

Accountability: in the ROC (Taiwan), officials can lose elections, and they can be recalled; after the 2024 election, the governing party lost its majority in the Legislative Yuan. In the PRC (Mainland), officials answer only to their superiors. The 2018 constitutional amendment removed the term limit on the President, and the amendment passed by 2,958 votes in favor, 2 against, and 3 abstentions — a margin that itself shows the vote was a confirmation, not a test.

Description: the PRC (Mainland)'s people's congresses are indeed broadly composed, with workers and farmers, women, and ethnic minorities all represented; the ROC (Taiwan)'s Legislative Yuan likewise has reserved seats for Indigenous peoples and party-list seats. But descriptive representation cannot substitute for authorization and accountability: no matter how much a deputy resembles the people, that resemblance cannot remove an unpopular government.

Substance: this is the hardest of the four to test, and the one the two sides dispute most fiercely. The official account is that whole-process people's democracy should be judged by its results — whether government improves people's lives. Independent scholars assess it differently: Jean-Pierre Cabestan of Hong Kong Baptist University argues that whole-process people's democracy has indeed given society more channels to speak, but that participation remains selective and directed by the authorities — "participation without democracy." Freedom House's 2025 report gives a pair of contrasting figures: the ROC (Taiwan), 94 points, rated "Free"; the PRC (Mainland), 9 points, rated "Not Free." The claim of judging by results itself needs a judge: if only the ruling party can declare the results, then "substantive representation" becomes a claim that cannot be falsified.

7. Conclusion: The Burden of Proof

For a single ruling party to prove that it represents all the people, the burden of proof lies with the party itself, not with those who question it. There are four ways to prove it: let the people authorize, let the people hold it accountable, let the institutions resemble the people, and let policy serve the people's interests. The first two are hard tests; the last two are soft evidence.

The ROC (Taiwan)'s experience shows that long one-party rule need not be the end of the story: the same Constitution, the same party, meant a freezing of representation under martial law and a restoration of representation after martial law was lifted. The decisive change was not a new constitution but the restoration of election and recall — giving the people an institutional opportunity to say "no."

The PRC (Mainland)'s answer still lacks that opportunity. Its system can gather public opinion, can consult, and can describe the composition of the people, but it has no procedure by which the people can withdraw their authorization from the ruling party. Until that procedure exists, "representing all the people" remains an untested claim, not a proven fact.

What evidence could change this judgment? The answer is not complicated: one competitive national election, one election the ruling party loses, one recall initiated by voters and carried through. The ROC (Taiwan)'s transition was written by events like these. Any single ruling party that genuinely wants to prove it represents all the people has one most persuasive course open to it: give the people a chance to say "no," and accept what that "no" may bring.

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