

## FEATURE

# China's National Congress



## A guide to the Chinese Communist Party's National Congress

In the first of a three-part series examining the global importance of the CCP's 20th National Congress, Yu Jie explains how it makes its big decisions.

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### Why does the CCP National Congress matter?

The world's most populous country and its smallest state have little in common with one exception: how they select their leader. Like the Vatican, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shrouds its leadership selection process in secrecy.

Every five years, a week-long conclave – the Party Congress – is held and at its end a new cohort of leaders is presented that will steer the world's second largest economy for the next five years.

### October's Congress will reveal the depth and breadth of Xi Jinping's power

The congress is the most important date in China's political calendar. It not only selects China's leadership team but acts as a signpost indicating the direction the country will be heading in the near future, with implications for decades to come. It also reveals the breadth and depth of power held by Xi Jinping, the party's general-secretary.

The 20th CCP National Congress, opening on October 16 and expected to last a week, is taking place during unsettling times. While Xi Jinping is expected to embark on his third term as general-secretary of the party after the removal of a two-term limit in February 2018, it is hardly a crowning glory. Xi's China is battling an economic maelstrom at home while juggling fraught foreign relations abroad.

### What does the National Congress do?

Quite simply, the CCP National Congress is the gathering that defines China's political leadership and sets the tone for its relationship with the rest of the world.

It serves to fulfil three primary functions:

First, it sets the party's principal agenda across all policy sectors, from macroeconomics to the price of food. During the week, it draws up a consensus-based evaluation of the party's work over the past five years, which includes a detailed examination of the party's current situation.

Second, it introduces any revisions to the party constitution deemed necessary, for instance on changes to the criteria for leadership recruitment or amendments to the party's 'guiding ideology'.

Third, it selects the leadership team that will steer China for the next five years, a function that attracts the most international attention but is not the sole purpose of the congress.

### How is the party leadership team chosen?

The congress comprises 2,300 delegates representing all levels of the party hierarchy across 34 provinces and regions – from the governors of towns and cities, to Olympic champions, astronauts, and even the odd stand-up comedian to mark the 'inclusiveness' of the party.

### 1 woman sits on the 25-strong Politburo

The votes that decide the next cohort of party leaders come from three committees only: the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, with 205 members and 171 alternate members (alternate members are simply substitutes to replace a member if they die, retire or are dismissed); the Central Committee, with 204 members; and the Politburo, with 25 members, only one of whom is a woman.



Unlike multiparty elections in liberal democracies, neither the full 25 members of the

Politburo nor the seven members of its Standing Committee are nominated by or directly voted for by constituents.

A procedure known as 'democratic recommendation' is essentially a straw poll that includes all congress participants. They are then given a ballot listing the names of around 200 Politburo candidates in stroke order – the Chinese equivalent to alphabetical order. This short-listing process is completed in the run-up to the congress. Some pundits asserted that this process was put on hold after 2017, yet this has not been formally confirmed within the party constitution.

A few senior delegates may express their preferences to their colleagues anonymously during this process. All the shortlisted candidates must meet the criteria for Politburo membership, which means serving at either a ministerial rank or above or in the People's Liberation Army at military region level or above and being younger than 62.

Based on the result of this straw poll, and more importantly on the preferences of current Politburo members, the incumbent Politburo and its Standing Committee will approve the nominees, conclude the Seventh Plenum of the 19th Party Congress and call for the 20th Congress. The delegates at the Party Congress

then ceremonially cast their votes for the Politburo at the Party Congress although the result is pre-agreed, a procedure somewhat similar to the US Electoral College.

### What are the rules for choosing Politburo members?

The Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) consists of between five and nine members, with seven selected at the 19th Congress. It is the supreme decision-making body of the Communist Party as well as the People's Republic of China.

If the 20th Congress follows convention, there are three de-facto rules to be followed:

First, Politburo and Standing Committee members must retire at 68. This age limit is known as ‘Eight down, Seven up’.

Second, new appointments to the PSC are drawn exclusively from regular Politburo members. The only exceptions to this rule have been Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, who were appointed at the 17th Party Congress in 2007.

**Standing Committee members must retire at 68, but it is highly unlikely that 69-year-old Xi Jinping will stand down**

This exception follows the third convention, under which PSC appointees are among the youngest senior party leaders eligible. Potentially three vacancies could arise in 2022, as Xi himself is 69 but it is highly unlikely that he would step down. That would be a radical departure from past precedents.

The extent to which past procedure is applied could act as a signal as to whether Xi

Jinping is consolidating his power, while the size of the standing committee will be scrutinized to assess how much power Xi wields.

If the procedure for leadership appointments at the 20th Congress deviates from these conventions, it could indicate two things. First, the CCP faces a new set of challenges and requires the introduction of new rules to shape the top leadership. Or, second, Xi has gained substantial personal power that allows him to bypass the collective leadership system endorsed by Deng Xiaoping and choose appointees to suit his own taste. There has thus far been little evidence from the official media to reflect on any changes.

Changes in party institutional constraints, however, raise the danger of undermining governance at home and China’s relations abroad.

*The next two parts of our Party Congress trilogy will focus on policy direction and how Xi is speeding up attempts to shape China in his image.*