

The Road to the 18th Party Congress

Alice Miller

The recent scheduling of the Chinese Communist Party's 18th National Congress kicks off the long process of preparations for what will bring about a turnover in leadership generations next year. National party congresses are the most important public event in Chinese leadership politics, and their convocation involves long preparations that inevitably heat up the political atmosphere in Beijing more than a year ahead of time. This article lays out the formal processes involved in preparing for next year's congress.

According to the CCP's constitution, party congresses convene every five years. One of the hallmarks of the political reforms pressed by Deng Xiaoping since the beginning of the reform era in 1978 has been the restoration of institutionalized political processes after two decades of erratic observance under the leadership of Mao Zedong. In keeping with Deng's emphasis, this constitutional stipulation has been rigorously observed since the 12th Party Congress in 1982. This regularity in the convocation of party congresses and the consistency of procedures in preparing for them since then make it possible to project the likely course of preparations for convening the 18th Congress in 2012.

The 17th Central Committee's Sixth Plenum, convened in Beijing 15–18 October, adopted a resolution scheduling the party's 18th National Congress "in the latter half of 2012."¹ The timing of this scheduling—one year ahead of the event—is normal, judging past practice, as is the schedule's generality. For example, the 16th Central Committee's Sixth Plenum in October 2006 similarly scheduled the Party's 17th Congress for "the second half of 2007," and the 15th Central Committee's Sixth Plenum in September 2001 scheduled the 16th Congress to convene in "the latter half of 2002."

Presuming that the party leadership continues to follow past procedures, a Politburo meeting in the summer (probably in late August) of 2012 will schedule the 17th Central Committee's Seventh Plenum and will propose a specific date for the 18th Congress. Shortly thereafter the Seventh Plenum will in turn formally set the date for the congress to open.

Why Party Congresses Are Important

Party congresses are important for three reasons. First, they establish the party's line in all major policy sectors. In principle, the party congress is the most authoritative body in the CCP's organizational hierarchy, and so its policy prescriptions reflect the CCP's authoritative line on all issues that the congress addresses. A party congress brings together roughly 2,000 delegates from all levels of the CCP and normally lasts about a week. Over the course of its session, a party congress sets down a consensus evaluation

of the party's work over the five-year period since the preceding congress and an assessment of the party's present situation, and it sets forth general guidelines for the party's priorities, emphases, and tasks for the coming five-year period until the next congress. These supremely authoritative judgments about past work and future tasks are incorporated into a long "political report," normally delivered by the party's top leader, the general secretary, in the name of the outgoing Central Committee. As such, the political report is not a speech by the general secretary reciting his personal views on the issues it addresses; it is a synthetic document that reflects the consensus of the broader party leadership.

Once endorsed by party congress resolution, the political report establishes at the highest authority the party's consensus line on virtually all policy sectors that the party leadership will address in the five years until the next party congress convenes. The party leadership is in principle expected to refer to the congress guidelines as the basis for all subsequent major policy decisions. Once the party congress has closed, its guidelines may be changed by the roughly 200-member body that acts in the name of the congress, the party Central Committee, which, by constitutional stipulation, meets at least once a year.

A second reason that party congresses are important is that they have the authority to revise the party constitution. The current party constitution was adopted at the 12th Congress in 1982, and every party congress since has introduced changes to it. Most recently, among several changes, the 16th Party Congress revised the party constitution's preamble to list the "important thinking of the 'three represents'"—an ideological initiative pioneered by former party chief Jiang Zemin, though not specifically credited to him—along with "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory" as guiding ideology of the CCP. And in 2007, the 17th Party Congress revised the constitution's preamble to incorporate the "scientific development concept" advanced by current party chief Hu Jintao as a further contribution to the party's ideological foundations. Other revisions in the past have included stipulations on membership in top leadership bodies, on party recruitment criteria, and on party procedures. All such revisions are politically significant because they endow the measures with final authority, at least in principle.

Finally, party congresses are important because they change the party's top leadership itself. A congress's main task in this respect is to elect a new Central Committee, which will preside over the party until the next party congress, and a new Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDIC). The day after the party congress closes, the new Central Committee convenes its first plenum, the sole function of which is to appoint a new party leadership. These appointments include a new Politburo and its Standing Committee (the top decision-making bodies), a new Central Military Commission (the top decision-making body in military affairs), a new Secretariat (the body that oversees implementation of Politburo decisions throughout the party apparatus), the presiding CDIC secretary, and the party's top leader, the general secretary. The degree of leadership turnover in these appointments varies from congress to congress.

A congress's three tasks of setting down broad guidelines for the party's upcoming work, revising the party constitution, and changing the party's top leadership are fundamentally intertwined. Judgments about the success or shortcomings of party work over the period since the previous party congress affect the standing and prospects of party leaders in power over that time. In an era in which administrative and substantive expertise in specific policy areas is increasingly important for promotion into the top levels of the party—alongside traditional criteria of political patronage and factional balance of power—policy departures conveyed in the congress political report shape the career prospects of individual leaders. At the same time, policy directions imparted in a congress's political report reflect in some measure the strength of leaders and their allies who advocate that course over other leaders advocating a different policy course.

For all these reasons, preparations for convocation of a party congress are intensely political and heat up the political atmosphere in Beijing more than a year ahead of time. Over this period, appointments to high-level posts in the Central Committee departments, in the State Council ministries, in the PLA's four general departments and China's seven military regions, and in the provinces are made with an eye toward concurrent appointment to the Central Committee. Some appointments—to the post of party chief in provinces such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong, and Tianjin, for example—may involve consideration for concurrent membership on the Politburo itself.

Meanwhile, top leaders debate policy questions with an eye toward authoritative endorsement of their views in the upcoming congress's political report. The party's primary mouthpieces—the newspaper *People's Daily* and the semimonthly journal *Seeking Truth*—publish commentary and opinion pieces that reflect competing positions on issues that the congress's political report will address. As the political atmosphere heats up, the shadows of leadership politicking under way in the party's internal networks may be tantalizingly cast into the open press. At the same time, often contradictory rumors and speculations circulate among mid- and lower-ranking officials and academics in Beijing and make their way into Hong Kong's independent China-watching press and into foreign media. For all these reasons, the long campaign to convene a CCP congress is an intensely political season.

Milestones Ahead

If procedures for convening the 18th Party Congress follow earlier precedents, a number of events will mark milestones along the way.

- In the wake of the Sixth Plenum's scheduling the congress, a preparatory committee has likely been established, almost certainly presided over by party General Secretary Hu Jintao. The preparatory committee will oversee four basic tasks: election of more than 2,000 party delegates to the congress; drafting of the political report that Hu Jintao will deliver at the congress; managing the constitution amendment group; and nomination of a new Central Committee membership, as well as of new top leadership bodies. Each of these tasks will take several months to complete. Over these months, PRC media will give no

publicity to the formation of the preparatory committee for the 18th Party Congress or its activities, though, judging by past practice, Xinhua will provide an account after the congress closes.

- By the end of June 2012, election of the congress's 2,270 delegates will be completed.
- Sometime in the late summer of 2012, when the Politburo proposes a precise date for the 18th Congress to open, it will also approve the lists of delegates, the draft political report, and the slates of leadership nominees for approval at the Central Committee's Seventh Plenum. In the run-up to the plenum, judging by past practice, Hu Jintao and other top party leaders will preview the drafted political report in a series of meetings with party and non-party representatives in Beijing.
- Finally, the plenum, which will likely meet a few days ahead of the party congress, will formally approve the congress documents submitted by the Politburo and authorize the party congress to open.

Selection of Congress Delegates

Election of party congress delegates takes place among "electoral units" designated by the Politburo. In preparation for the 1997 15th Party Congress, delegate elections were held among 36 electoral blocs (选举单位)—one for each of the PRC's 31 provinces and Taiwan, one for Hong Kong and Macao, and one each for central party organs, national state institutions, and the PLA. For the 2002 16th Congress, two new units were added—one for centrally directed state-owned enterprises and another for central banking and finance institutions. For the 18th Party Congress, two more electoral units—one for units involved in "social management" (社会管理) and the other for the public service sector—have been added, bringing the total to 40.

Election of delegates follows party congresses convened in party units at various levels among the 40 electoral blocs. Among China's 31 provinces, party congresses in ascending sequence at four subnational levels of party hierarchy—township (乡), county (县), city (市), and province (省). Party congresses at the township and county levels began in January 2011 and were completed by the end of June, and city congresses were completed by the end of September. A first wave of party congresses in 14 provinces began in October and will be completed in December; the remainder will be convened in April–June 2012. Concurrent party congresses have been under way among the eight other electoral blocs and will be completed by the end of June 2012.

According to a 1 November Xinhua account, a Party Central Committee circular specified the election of 2,270 delegates to the 18th Congress, an increase of 50 over those elected to attend the 17th Congress, in part to reflect the party's growth of 10 million new members since 2007. It also stipulated that 68 percent of the delegates come from the ranks of officials—a decrease of 2 percent—and that 32 percent draw from grassroots

party units. Finally, 10 percent of all congress delegates must be workers drawn from both public and private enterprises.²

Drafting Hu's Political Report

The drafting of the political report that Hu will present to the 18th Party Congress—his last—will follow an elaborate process of review and revision. According to Xinhua, the political report that General Secretary Jiang Zemin presented to the 16th Congress in 2002 went through four drafts on its way to the congress.³ Over that drafting process, which Xinhua states took nearly 13 months, the Politburo Standing Committee reviewed four successive drafts and the full Politburo two. A draft was circulated as an internal party document “to solicit opinions” from more than 3,100 people among 178 party units throughout China. It was further reviewed by party and state officials in the capital and by representatives of non-party constituencies over a 19-day period in August and September 2002, introducing some 600 changes in the text. Finally, the 15th Central Committee's Seventh Plenum, convened five days before the party congress opened, introduced further amendments.

The process of composing Hu Jintao's report to the 17th Congress in 2007 was even more extensive.⁴ Over the 10-month drafting period, the Politburo Standing Committee reviewed drafts six times and the full Politburo twice. Drafts of the report were circulated internally among 5,560 party members in central party and government bodies, in the PLA, and in provincial leadership organs, among various united front parties, mass organizations, and non-party persons, and among “some old comrades in the party.” These efforts resulted in nearly two thousand proposals for changes and nearly a thousand changes in the draft report. A final review by the Politburo and then by the 16th Central Committee's Seventh Plenum produced further changes, producing the sixth and final draft that was delivered by Hu at the opening day of the 17th Congress.

The process of drafting and review of the 17th Congress political report included the following steps:

- In early October 2006, even before the formation of the 17th Party Congress preparatory committee, the Politburo designated research in 20 key issue areas that would figure into the political report and authorized the formation of 36 research groups. These groups convened some 1,523 forums attended by more than twenty thousand people and produced a total of 62 investigation reports. Hu Jintao personally presided over 12 meetings to review the investigation reports.
- In early December, the Politburo authorized the creation of the drafting group under Hu Jintao's direction and prescribed several “guiding principles” for the report's drafting. Politburo members Liu Yunshan and Zeng Peiyan were appointed as Hu's deputies. On 11 December, the drafting group held its first meeting. Over the ensuing 10 months, nine more full meetings of the drafting team convened.

- On 15 December, a Central Committee circular invited opinions from party, government, and PLA organs and from united front institutions, which produced 124 feedback reports.
- In late December, the drafting group divided into seven subgroups and began a series of 51 forums among 13 provinces to investigate specific topics to be addressed in the report. In April 2007, a second round of forums were held in central party and state institutions.
- In March 2007, Hu Jintao presided over the drafting group's fourth full session, at which the report's overarching theme was set.
- On 15 June, the full Politburo reviewed the first draft of the congress report. On the 25th, Hu previewed several themes on the draft in a widely publicized speech at the Central Party School. After soliciting comments from party leaders in central and provincial party bodies, a second draft was produced.
- On 11 July, the Politburo authorized circulation of the second draft widely among 5,560 people in party bodies down through provincial level and among various united front groups. In addition, on 27 July Hu Jintao hosted a forum to solicit opinions from non-party people in Beijing. He also presided over seven more such forums for representatives from various provinces and the PLA. These forums together elicited nearly 2,000 suggestions for revision, leading to nearly a thousand emendations, incorporated into the report's third draft.
- The third draft was reviewed by the Politburo Standing Committee and then on 17 September by the full Politburo, leading to new revisions and a fourth draft. That version was approved for consideration at the Central Committee's Seventh Plenum. The plenum review elicited 239 new proposals for changes, and a fifth draft was produced and finally approved for presentation to the party congress, which opened three days later.
- After Hu delivered the political report at the congress's opening day on 15 October, new suggestions were proposed by the congress delegates. After incorporating these, the final report was approved by congress resolution on 21 October, the day that congress closed.

This elaborate process of consultation, drafting, review, and revision underscores some basic conclusions about a political report presented at a party congress. First, most of the congress delegates will already be thoroughly familiar with its contents, even if some of the later revisions may be new to them. Having reviewed early drafts of the document, they may be forgiven for looking bored during its presentation at the party congress. Second, and more significantly, the process underscores that the political report is a consensus document reflecting compromise and negotiation among competing leaders and party constituencies, presumably worked out through tried and true processes of bargaining, horse-trading, and inventing formulations sufficiently general to allow

differing constituencies to elicit their own preferred interpretations. Although the general secretary has the opportunity to set his own imprint on the political report, it is not solely a presentation of his views. It is delivered in the name of the outgoing Central Committee and reflects a leadership consensus behind it. In that sense, although Hu Jintao delivered the political report to the 17th Congress, it was not a Hu speech.

Although Hu Jintao personally presided over the entire process of drafting the 17th Congress report, he is not likely to do so in the process of drafting the 18th Congress report. Outgoing General Secretary Jiang Zemin presided over the group that drafted the report he delivered to the 2002 16th Party Congress, but Hu Jintao chaired most of the drafting team's meetings. It seems probable that Hu's presumed successor Xi Jinping will chair several of the meetings of the drafting team that will produce the 18th Party Congress political report, while outgoing party chief Hu Jintao formally presides over the process.

Amending the Party Constitution

If the 18th Party Congress amends the party constitution, the proposed changes will be the product of a process of several months' duration. The 17th Party Congress in 2007 introduced 15 changes in the party constitution. These included the incorporation of several new ideological themes promoted by the Hu leadership since 2002 (including the "scientific development concept," the call to build a "socialist harmonious society" and a "harmonious world," and the call to build a "new socialist countryside" and an "innovative nation"), as well as new provisions for "intra-party democracy."

According to a long Xinhua account of the amendment process in 2007, the initiative to revise the party constitution emerged on 10 March 2007 from one of the forums presided over by Hu Jintao to discuss the drafting of the political report to be delivered at the 17th Congress.⁵ Thereafter, the Politburo and its Standing Committee authorized creation of a constitution amendment group chaired by National People's Congress (NPC) Chairman Wu Bangguo. The group held its first meeting on 4 April.

On 24 March, a Central Committee circular invited proposals on specific amendments from party units at various levels. By early April, the amendment group had received 125 reports responding to the circular, offering a total of 1603 suggestions and 116 specific amendments. The group compiled these into a large compendium from which it drafted an amendment plan incorporating 72 substantive amendments. Thereafter, on 10 May and 14 June the Politburo Standing Committee refined these further. On 15 June, the full Politburo approved the revised amendment plan.

On 11 July, the draft amendment plan was circulated for comment together with the draft political report among central and provincial party units, the PLA, and united front institutions. In addition, the regional forums that Hu Jintao chaired to review the draft political report also invited comment on the draft amendment plan. Comments from these meetings were summarized in 125 reports, which contributed to the amendment

group's final distillation into a list of 21 amendments. On 30 August, a review by the Politburo Standing Committee called on the group to refine the list further.

Finally, Wu Bangguo presented the draft amendment proposal to the Seventh Plenum on 9 October. The list of amendments was refined further by the plenum before it approved the version presented to the 17th Party Congress.

Nominating the New Party Elite

The party leadership is expected to undergo a sweeping turnover of generations at the 18th Congress. If the party continues to uphold the norm observed at the 16th and 17th Congresses, leaders achieving the age of 68 or older in 2012 will retire from the Politburo and other top party organs. Seven of nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee and seven of 16 regular members of the Politburo will retire. At least seven of 12 members of the Party Central Military Commission will retire; if Hu Jintao retires as chairman, that number would be eight.

As may be seen from table 1, this scale of turnover equals that of the 2002 16th Party Congress, when the so-called third generation of leaders around Jiang Zemin gave way to the fourth generation around Hu Jintao.

Table 1

Turnover of Politburo Leaders at the 16th, 17th, and 18th Party Congresses

	<i>16th Congress (2002)</i>	<i>17th Congress (2007)</i>	<i>18th Congress (2012)</i>
<i>Politburo</i>			
<i>Standing Committee</i>	6 of 7 members	4 of 9 members	7 of 9 members
<i>Regular Politburo</i>			
<i>Members</i>	8 of 15 members	5 of 16 members	7 of 16 members
<i>Politburo Total</i>	14 of 22 members	9 of 25 members	14 of 25 members

The totals projected for the 18th Congress are based solely on the age 68 retirement norm and so are minima. If other Politburo members retire for reasons of health or death or are removed prior to the party congress, the totals could be larger. Prior to the 17th Party Congress, one Politburo Standing Committee member, Huang Ju, died in office, and another, Shanghai party chief Chen Liangyu, was removed on charges of corruption.

Among the anticipated retirees will be General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. As past *CLM* articles have projected, their replacements will be Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, respectively. Who will replace the remainder of retiring Politburo members is, of course, the focus of intensifying competition in China and the object of endless speculation among foreign and domestic observers.⁶

The procedures for nominating leaders to the Politburo have historically been closely guarded. Until 2007, PRC media gave no inkling of the selection processes for Politburo

appointment for any party congress throughout the reform era, either on the way to the congress or in its wake.

In the wake of the 17th Party Congress, however, Xinhua publicized a long report describing new departures in the process that was used to nominate the members of the Politburo endorsed by that congress and appointed by the 17th Central Committee's First Plenum.⁷ On 25 June 2007, Hu Jintao presided over a meeting of more than 400 members of the party elite, including all full and alternate members of the 16th Central Committee and "relevant responsible comrades." The meeting conducted a procedure called "democratic recommendation" (民主推荐)—effectively a straw poll—in which each participant was given a ballot listing the names of nearly 200 candidates in stroke order (the Chinese equivalent of alphabetical order). All of the listed candidates met the prescribed criteria for membership in the Politburo: Officials serving at ministerial rank and above or serving at the level of a military region or above and of age 62 or younger. According to Xinhua, the meeting's program had been the product of repeated meetings of the Politburo and its Standing Committee, which established the criteria for nominations. The final tally of the straw poll was, according to Xinhua, "quite concentrated on some nominees and conformed to the reality of the contingent of cadres."

On the basis of the results of the "democratic recommendation" procedure in June, of opinions solicited outside the Politburo, and the Politburo's own evaluation of candidates' character and integrity and of the "needs" of the Politburo itself, the Politburo and its Standing Committee drew up and approved a slate of proposed nominees on 27 September. The full Politburo endorsed the list on 8 October, and it was submitted to the Seventh Plenum, which approved its submission to the 17th Congress.

The 25 June 2007 meeting was the first time the procedure of "democratic recommendation" had been used for leadership nominations at the top level of the party. "Democratic recommendation" is one of several procedures, along with multi-candidate slates and secret balloting, whose roots trace back into the 1980s and that Hu Jintao has promoted since becoming general secretary in 2002 as part of his effort to expand "intra-party democracy." PRC media have described extensive use of the procedure in the city, county, and township party congress elections that began early in 2011 on the road to the 18th Party Congress, and it is reasonable to presume that it will be used again in the process of nominating the new top party leadership.

In the past two decades, the nomination process has been supervised by a three-man group composed of the general secretary, the executive secretary of the Party Secretariat, and the head of the Party Organization Department. If the leadership continues that practice, the three-man group managing nominations to be presented to the 18th Congress would include General Secretary Hu Jintao, Executive Secretary Xi Jinping, and Organization Department chief Li Yuanchao, a close crony of Hu's.

In any event, PRC media will provide no clue as to who is on the final slate of nominees to be presented to the 2012 party congress. Despite the escalating torrent of rumors that will inevitably swirl through Beijing and make their way into the Hong Kong

and foreign press in the months preceding the party congress, no solid information on the identities of the new leadership will be available until Xinhua publicizes the press communiqué of the 18th Central Committee First Plenum, which will meet the day after the 18th Congress closes. At that point, all that has been hidden shall be revealed.

Notes

¹ The resolution is reported in the press communiqué transmitted by Xinhua on 18 October. Following past precedent, the resolution itself has not been publicized.

² “中共中央发出通知部署党的十八大代表选举工作” (The CCP Central Committee Issues a Notice on Delegate Election Work In Preparation for the 18th Party Congress), Xinhua, 1 November 2011.

³ The following details of the process of drafting the political report presented at the 2002 16th Party Congress are drawn from Xia Lin, Zhang Sutang, and Sun Chengbin, “A Marxist Programmatic Document—An Account of How the Report to the 16th National Party Congress Was Prepared,” Xinhua, 19 November 2002, translated as FBIS document CPP2002112000003. Comparable accounts of the drafting of the political reports to the 1992 14th Congress and the 1997 15th Congress were also carried by Xinhua immediately after each congress closed. See, respectively, the accounts transmitted by Xinhua on 23 October 1992, in FBIS *Daily Report—China*, FBIS-CHI-207, 22–27, and on 25 September 1997, as translated by FBIS as document number FBIS-CHI-97-268.

⁴ The details that follow on the process that produced Hu Jintao’s report to the 17th Party Congress are drawn from Xia Lin 夏林, Sun Chengbin 孙承斌, and Zou Shengwen 邹声文, “发展中国特色社会主义的政治宣言和行动纲领” (A Political Declaration and Action Program for Developing Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—A Record of the Birth of the Report to the 17th CCP National Congress) Xinhua, 27 October 2007, as translated in OSC document no. CPP20071027338002.

⁵ Xu Jinyue 徐京跃, Li Bin 李斌, Li Yajie 李亚杰, Gu Ruizhen 顾瑞珍, “为高扬的党旗增添新的思想光辉” (Adding New Ideological Glory to the High-Flying Party Banner), 28 October 2007. For an OSC translation, see document no. CPP20071028073001.

⁶ For a particularly wonderful assessment, see “The 18th Central Committee Politburo—A Quixotic, Foolhardy, Rashly Speculative, but Nonetheless Ruthlessly Reasoned Projection,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no.33 (Summer 2010).

⁷ Liu Siyang 刘思扬, Sun Chengbin 孙承斌, and Liu Gang 刘刚, “为了党和国家兴旺发达长治久安—党的新一届中央领导机构产生纪实” (For the Sake of the Prosperity, Growth, and Long-Term Stability of the Party and the State—An Account of the Formation of the New Central Leadership Organ of the Party), Xinhua, 23 October 2007 and *People’s Daily* (人民日报), 24 October 2007, p.1. An OSC translation is available as document no. CPP20071023354001.