

Who Should Lead? Meritocracy, Democracy, and the Case of China

A comparative classroom activity on U.S. federal democracy and China's political meritocracy

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1) Goal of the Activity

This class activity introduces students to Daniel A. Bell's argument about political meritocracy and places it in direct comparison with U.S. federal electoral democracy. The activity asks students to experience two different leadership-selection logics: first, a democratic vote based on open candidate choice; second, a meritocratic filter that restricts who is eligible to govern based on experience and demonstrated policy competence.

The primary goal is for students to identify the institutional trade-offs embedded in each model: political equality versus competence, procedural legitimacy versus performance legitimacy, decentralized checks versus centralized coordination, and short-term electoral responsiveness versus long-term planning.

This activity aligns with an American Government course because it helps students move beyond a purely descriptive understanding of U.S. institutions. By comparing the U.S. model with China's political meritocracy, students are asked to reflect critically on why federalism, elections, checks and balances, activism, and ideological pluralism matter—and what problems they are designed to solve.

2) Prerequisites

This activity is designed for a class period after students have already been introduced to the basic structure of American government, including elections, federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, civil society, and political participation. Students do not need prior expertise in Chinese politics, but they should have enough background to understand how U.S. institutions define legitimacy through participation, representation, and constitutional procedure.

No special technology is required. The instructor should bring printed copies of the student handout or make it available through the course learning-management system. The activity can be completed with paper ballots, a closed-eye hand raise, or an anonymous online poll.

3) Pre-Class Activities

Students should complete a short introductory reading or lecture preparation note on Daniel A. Bell and The China Model before class. The reading should introduce Bell's attempt to "desacralize" electoral democracy, his critique of voter competence and short-termism, and his defense of political meritocracy as a system based on demonstrated ability, moral character, administrative experience, and performance.

Students should also review the basic contrast between U.S. federal democracy and China’s hybrid meritocratic model through a short instructor note, excerpt, or guided pre-class prompt. The pre-class material should introduce the four “tyrannies” of electoral democracy, the logic of meritocratic selection, China’s cadre-promotion system, U.S. checks and balances, and the different roles of activism and accountability in each system.

Instructor preparation: prepare the candidate profiles, one group handout per group, and a board or shared document where the candidates can be listed. The instructor should not introduce the term “meritocracy” before the first vote. The first round should feel like a normal democratic selection process so that the second round can produce a meaningful contrast.

4) In-Class Activities: Democratic Selection and Meritocratic Filtering

Phase 1: Opening Scenario and Group Assignment

The instructor presents the scenario: the country is facing three simultaneous crises—a major economic recession, a public health emergency, and increasing climate disasters. Students must choose one national leader to guide the country for the next ten years.

Students are divided into groups. Each group receives one candidate profile and must prepare a two- to three-minute defense of why that candidate should lead the country. Candidate profiles include: a technocrat economist, a charismatic reformer, an experienced governor, a climate scientist, and a security-oriented leader.

Phase 2: Democratic Vote

Each group presents its candidate. After all groups present, the class votes individually under a democratic rule: one person equals one vote. The instructor records the winner on the board and asks students why they voted the way they did. At this stage, the instructor should avoid analyzing the vote and should allow students to name the qualities they valued: charisma, expertise, experience, crisis management, popularity, or policy depth.

Phase 3: Meritocratic Filter

The instructor then changes the rules. Under the new system, not everyone qualifies to be a candidate. Only candidates who meet both of the following criteria may run: (1) at least ten years of governance or public-administration experience, and (2) demonstrated success managing economic policy.

The class identifies which candidates are eliminated under this filter. Students then vote again, but only among the remaining candidates. The instructor records the second winner and invites students to compare how the two rounds felt.

Phase 4: Debrief and Transition to Bell

The instructor leads a guided discussion using questions such as: Which system felt more fair? Which system felt safer? Did the first round reward charisma? Did the second round feel elitist? Would you accept losing some electoral choice if outcomes improved?

The instructor then connects the activity to Bell’s central argument: liberal democracies tend to treat political equality and competitive elections as morally unquestionable, while political meritocracy asks whether competence, training, and performance should matter more in leadership selection. The goal is not to tell students which system is better, but to help them identify the trade-offs each system institutionalizes.

5) Post-Class Activities and Assessment

No required post-class activity is necessary, but the instructor may assign a short reflection asking students to compare the two votes and explain whether their view of democratic legitimacy changed after the meritocratic filter was introduced.

Formative assessment: each group may submit a short sheet listing group members, the strengths of their assigned candidate, anticipated criticisms, and the reasons they used to defend that candidate.

Summative assessment: the group sheet or short individual reflection can count as participation, low-stakes writing, or extra credit. The assessment should focus on whether students can identify the institutional logic of each model and explain the trade-offs between democratic participation and meritocratic competence.

6) Materials for the Activity

Instructor lecture notes on Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, and the comparison between political meritocracy and U.S. federal electoral democracy.

Student handout: “National Leadership Selection Exercise,” including the crisis scenario and five candidate profiles.

Professor guide: “Who Should Lead? Meritocracy vs Democracy Exercise,” including timing, scripts, voting rules, debrief questions, and transition language into Bell.

Optional reading: Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Instructors may assign a short excerpt rather than the full text, depending on course level and available time.

7) Learning Goals

By the end of the activity, students should be able to define political meritocracy and explain why Bell presents it as an institutional alternative to electoral democracy.

Students should be able to compare U.S. federal democracy and China’s political meritocracy across leader selection, accountability, legitimacy, checks and balances, activism, ideology, and policy time horizons.

Students should be able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of democratic and meritocratic systems without reducing the comparison to a simple democracy-versus-dictatorship binary.

Students should be able to articulate the central normative tension of the activity: whether political systems should prioritize equal participation, competent governance, or some institutional balance between the two.

Appendix: Student Handout Candidate Profiles

Scenario: Your country is facing three simultaneous crises: a major economic recession, a public health emergency, and increasing climate disasters. You must choose one leader to guide the country over the next ten years.

Candidate A – The Technocrat Economist

- PhD in Economics from a top university
- 20 years working in public administration
- Known for designing long-term economic reform plans
- Weak public speaker
- Limited social media presence
- Described as “competent but uninspiring”

Candidate B – The Charismatic Reformer

- Extremely strong communicator
- Large public following
- No formal policy training
- Background in media and business
- Promises bold, immediate change
- Strong connection with working-class voters

Candidate C – The Experienced Governor

- Former state governor for 8 years
- Mixed economic record
- Skilled at political negotiation
- Strong party backing
- Known to be highly partisan
- Critics say they prioritize reelection over policy depth

Candidate D – The Climate Scientist

- Internationally recognized climate expert
- No experience holding elected office
- Advocates aggressive environmental reform
- Struggles with coalition-building
- Described as “brilliant but politically rigid”

Candidate E – The Security-Oriented Leader

- Former military general
- Strong crisis-management background
- Emphasizes stability and order
- Limited economic expertise
- Popular among voters concerned about national security
- Critics worry about authoritarian tendencies

Appendix: Professor Guide

“Who Should Lead?” – Meritocracy vs. Democracy Exercise

Total Time: 30 Minutes

Opening Script (3–4 minutes)

- Today we are going to begin with a leadership selection exercise.
- Your country is facing three crises at once: economic recession, a public health emergency, and climate instability.
- You must choose one national leader to guide the country for the next ten years.
- I will divide you into groups. Each group represents one candidate. Your job is to defend why your candidate should lead the country.
- There is no correct answer. The point is to think carefully about what qualities matter in leadership.

Rules – Phase 1: Democratic Selection

- Phase 1 follows a democratic model: one person equals one vote.
- After each group presents its candidate, everyone in the class will vote individually. The candidate with the most votes wins.
- Important instructor note: do not mention meritocracy yet. Let democracy feel normal and unquestioned.

Group Instructions (5–7 minutes)

- Read your candidate’s profile.
- Identify the candidate’s strengths.
- Anticipate criticisms.
- Prepare a short two-minute defense.
- The instructor should walk around, listen, and avoid guiding students toward a “right” answer.

Presentations and First Vote (8–10 minutes total)

- Each group presents for no more than two minutes.
- After all presentations, hold the first vote anonymously using paper ballots, a closed-eye hand raise, or an anonymous poll.
- Write the winning candidate on the board.
- Ask students: Why did you choose this person? What mattered most? What did you overlook?
- Let two or three students respond before moving to the second phase.

Phase 2: Meritocratic Filter

- Now the rules change. We are moving to a different political model.
- Under this system, not everyone qualifies to be a candidate.
- Only candidates who meet both of the following criteria may run: at least ten years of governance or public-administration experience, and demonstrated success managing economic policy.
- Ask the class: Which candidates are eliminated?
- Cross eliminated candidates off the board.
- Hold a second vote only among the remaining candidates and write the new winner on the board.

Immediate Debrief (5–7 minutes)

- Which system felt more fair?

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- Which system felt more safe?
- Did the first round reward charisma?
- Did the second round feel elitist?
- Would you accept losing some electoral choice if outcomes improved?
- Allow silence if needed. This moment is where students begin to feel the tension that Bell's argument raises.

Transition into Bell (2–3 minutes)

- What you just experienced is the central tension Daniel Bell explores in *The China Model*.
- Liberal democracies assume that political equality - one person, one vote - is sacred.
- Bell asks: What if political competence matters more than equal participation?
- Should leadership be chosen the way we choose surgeons - based on training and evaluation - or the way we choose celebrities - based on popularity?
- The United States is built on federal democracy and electoral legitimacy. China, in contrast, claims to operate through political meritocracy.
- Today we will examine whether democracy is really the “least bad” system, or whether meritocracy might outperform it in certain areas.