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## In America – China’s vital ‘hinterland province’ – the midterm elections are also a vote on the troubled Sino-US relationship

- Tom Plate says the US midterm elections will have implications for Donald Trump, and his China policy
- At the end of the day, modesty may be the best policy for both the US and China

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It is a commonplace that China disdains consequential elections. But, in a sense this is only strictly true in national practice. Whether leaders and people accept it or hate it, globalisation continues and there will be many implications. Chiefly, in a few days, the Chinese will learn that the results of an election they didn't call can affect them significantly; an election which is not taking place in China, and in which no one in China can vote. Effectively, the Chinese are absentee voters whose votes won't ever be tabulated.

This week's string of local and state elections in the United States, of course, are not officially about the US presidency – that psychodrama is two years away – except that they are, really, about Donald Trump. This also means that the midterm elections are, if indirectly, about the troubled China-US relationship.

America waves the flag of “one person, one vote”, almost as a totem of spiritual superiority, but the world understands that our system can yield eerie, erratic results. Incredibly, in two recent US presidential elections, the [candidate with the most votes](#) was denied the top prize. So go ask former vice-president Al Gore and former secretary of state Hillary Clinton about our wonderful US electoral system, and watch how sharply they curb their enthusiasm.

The insistent American argument for the inherent superiority of the two-party system has never inspired me; it seems locked in the solitary confinement of political dogmatism. The health of any multiparty system depends on the vitality and relative integrity of each of the parties involved in the polity, as well as the seriousness and educational level of the citizens. In America today, neither party should be bragging about anything.

At the same time, some serious respect must be shown for China. We in the West must get that into our heads and internalise it considerably more than we have. We cannot hope to have an intelligent relationship with Asia if our approach to China itself is devoid of common sense. But as Singaporean sage Kishore Mahbubani has been reminding us, America in particular looks psychologically unprepared for the brave new world with the seemingly brave new China.

If they so wish, the Chinese could plausibly brag about wisdom of the economic policy of their [one-party system](#), given that it has helped usher in [socialism with Chinese characteristics](#). Even so, a party that is too close-minded, uptight or tyrannical could become, oh, like a certain political party in a multi-party democracy that seems to think it is king of the world.

In such scenarios in the US, people's tendency is to vote against unworthy incumbents, even though the victorious may eventually prove to be duds or would-be dictators. Interestingly enough, democracy per “one person, one vote” is under critical review in America, sometimes by the very same influential public intellectuals who always complain about the Chinese non-vote.

Some in America may be beginning to wonder (very quietly) how they got so lucky! Yes, these days, America is melancholy, but this election may have stirred it to think. As with the endless nagging about [human rights](#), Americans are beginning to feel that America should fret more about its own shortcomings and less about others'. Maybe the vote is not the only route to the good or better life? Gosh forbid.

And maybe modesty is the best policy for the Chinese, as well. "Everything under the heavens": this is the centuries-old Chinese notion of the global edifice, as if it all fits under a huge Chinese umbrella. This historical and arguably provincial scheme of things is something the Chinese have to live with. The glum reality is that Trump is the leader of their most important "hinterland province". And this week, the people of that province – the Americans – will give their table-upending tribune a thumbs up or down.

It's a crucial moment for bilateral superpower dealings. The US and China are nuclear powers and have enormous military-industrial complexes. Right now, absurdly, a portion of the US ground forces are positioned at the [border with Mexico](#) to deter some imagined invasion of migrants, just as a chunk of the Chinese navy has been deployed to deter (at least in part, presumably) some imagined US naval invasion of the South China Sea. Neither will ever happen. Doesn't it seem chancy to rely on either Beijing or Washington to keep order in our world?

The right to blow up the globe – or even just a slice of it – must surely rest with an authority higher than either the Trump or Xi administrations, alone or together. A modesty, a humbler presentation of national interests, should infuse their foreign policy. Trump should taper the tariffs (he has made his point, he meets President Xi Jinping in several weeks), and Xi should forswear further pushes in the South China Sea (he, too, has made his point). All other major issues should be negotiated as if both parties were adults: harmony of all under the heavens is far superior to hell on Earth. So let us all hope America's elections in sum – pluses and minuses, added together – do produce happy returns.

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