

Personnel Control and Local Officials' Attention to Economic Development: Evidence from China

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Abstract

Compared to democracies, our understanding of policy attention in authoritarian governments remains limited. Using data from 612 Chinese municipal party secretaries' official activities, we investigate the structural factors within the authoritarian bureaucratic system influencing new officials' attention for economic issues. The findings reveal that younger officials and those transferred from other regions exhibit a clear preference for economic issues. Moreover, higher economic growth expectations from superior governments are linked to increased attention to urban economic affairs by officials. This study enriches the literature on comparative agenda research by discussing the relationship between policy attention allocation and authoritarian cadre management.

Keywords

policy attention, authoritarian government, cadre management, local officials, China

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According to Jones and Baumgartner's (2005) research, the daily work of governments and bureaucrats involves striking a balance between "what to focus on" and "what not to focus on." Therefore, policy attention has become a crucial topic in the field of public policy literature (Baumgartner et al., 2006; Zahariadis, 2016). However, compared to democratic countries, our understanding of issue attention in authoritarian government remains limited (Or, 2019; Pepinsky, 2014). This is particularly true for one-party states like China, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds sole authority in political operations and public administration, leading to a blurred boundary between politics and administration (Guo, 2019). As a result, the traditional "politics-administration dichotomy" may not apply to comprehending policy attention patterns in contemporary China. Instead, it is crucial to focus on the attention dynamics of the CCP, since all significant and specialized public affairs are under the purview of the party, while administrative and legislative bodies are responsible for implementing the CCP's will. Unfortunately, systematic research on the issue attention of the CCP and its political elites is scarce.

Additionally, since the late 1970s, the CCP shifted its core focus from politics and class struggle to economic development, leading China to achieve rapid economic growth over the past four decades. However, the highly centralized political system persisted even during the economic reforms, and the cadre system, a top-down personnel management mechanism, played a pivotal role in controlling the flow of officials (Zhao, 2010). Moreover, the system effectively shaped the behavior of local governments, making them prioritize economic development (Zhong, 2015). Nonetheless, there remains a lack of sufficient empirical research from a comparative agenda analysis perspective to better understand how cadre management influences local officials' preferences regarding economic issues. Traditional theoretical frameworks based on elections or party competition in democratic countries are inadequate to provide clear answers.

Given these gaps, this study addresses two main questions. Firstly, it seeks to understand the policy attention structure of Chinese local officials. Since the initiation of economic reforms, have local officials developed a discernible preference for economic issues? Moreover, in the one-party system, how does the attention allocation of local officials on economic development relate to the CCP's control over political elites?

To address these questions, we investigate the policy agendas of 612 Municipal Party Secretaries (MPSs) during the early period of their tenure. MPSs are the highest-ranking leaders in China's municipalities, serving as primary agents of the CCP in cities and wielding significant political influence and administrative authority (Yan & Yuan, 2020).

Using text analysis, we measure and present the proportion of policy attention MPSs allocated to economic and other issues upon assuming office. Subsequently, we examine the impact of three crucial cadre management mechanisms in China's bureaucracy – retirement, rotation, and performance evaluation – on MPSs' preferences regarding attention to urban economic development.

The study's core finding is that the cadre system exerts a heterogeneous effect on MPSs' attention to economic issues, providing supporting evidence for the relationship between specific personnel incentive mechanisms and policy attention allocation in an authoritarian system. This indicates that the factors influencing the issue priorities of Chinese politicians are endogenous to the absolute control over local elites exercised by an authoritarian party, unlike the institutional frictions produced by the balance of power in most Western democracies (Froio et al., 2017; Rutledge & Larsen Price, 2014). In the discussion section, we further elucidate the theoretical significance of our findings by comparing them with the literature on comparative agenda analysis and Chinese bureaucratic politics.

A Brief Review of the Literature on Policy Attention Allocation

Thanks to the seminal work of March and Simon (1958), attention has been recognized as a scarce resource, and the allocation of attention has become a central concern in organizational decision-making. In political science and public policy, agenda-setting has remained a crucial research area, as scholars seek to understand the determinants of issue preferences among political entities in democratic countries, such as legislative bodies, governments, and political parties. Existing literature has produced two essential explanatory frameworks. Some studies emphasize the role of structural factors, contending that changes in policy attention are primarily influenced by political systems and organizational structures. These factors include electoral competition (Green-Pedersen, 2007), party strength (Bernick & Myers, 2012), interactions between legislative and executive institutions (Lovett et al., 2015), and incentives within the bureaucratic system (Bark & Bell, 2019). A second line of research posits that attention allocation fundamentally arises from the government's responsiveness to various sources of information. Non-structural factors, such as public opinion (Jennings & John, 2009; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016), media coverage (Walgrave et al., 2017; Yanovitzky, 2002), and decision-makers' perceptions (X. Liu et al., 2010), play vital roles in shaping the issue attention of political entities.

With the deepening of comparative policy research in recent years, many studies have begun to focus on the dynamics of policy agendas in non-democratic countries, and China undoubtedly serves as an important subject of investigation (S. Wang, 2008). As one of the world's major economic powers, China initiated economic reforms in the 1980s and achieved rapid economic development while maintaining stable authoritarian political rule. For such a one-party state, traditional factors explaining the changes in policy attention in democratic countries, such as party competition and checks and balances of power, are challenging to apply in understanding the policy attention of the Chinese government.

On one hand, unlike democratic political systems, China has retained a Leninist macro-political structure, establishing a "party-state system" that differs from the traditional separation of politics and administration. This implies that China's legislative, executive, and judicial institutions all operate under the leadership of the CCP (Tian & Christensen, 2023). Therefore, research on the policy attention in China's macro-political system heavily emphasizes the role of the party and its top leaderships. For instance, S. Chen et al. (2019) conducted a systematic analysis of the issue attention of Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, and found that changes in Mao's issue preferences significantly influenced the survival or elimination of central government departments. In 2012, Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the CCP, and his leadership style was considered to bear certain resemblances to Mao Zedong, displaying characteristics of strongman politics (Shirk, 2018). In such a context, research has found that compared to Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao, the policy priorities of the central government under Xi's leadership changed more frequently, as the confidence of a strong leader and efforts to consolidate personal power provided the impetus for more frequent shifts in policy attention (Chan et al., 2021). Moreover, by establishing various new deliberative bodies within the party (e.g., small leading groups), Xi has successfully shifted the leadership of policy agenda-setting for many public affairs from the State Council to the Central Committee of the CCP, affecting the diversity of policy attention in China's macro-political system over the long term (Yan et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the lack of independent media and an immature public opinion are among the most significant differences between China and democratic countries. As the CCP monopolizes all media, many public issues cannot be openly discussed, resulting in the restriction of information and public opinion within certain boundaries and to particular topics. In this regard, Chan and Zhao (2016) found that Chinese local governments generally face disadvantages in information acquisition, which impacts their attention and leads to a more punctuated equilibrium in the government's agenda-setting

compared to democratic countries. The Chinese government, however, attempts to compensate for its information deficits through alternative means. For instance, within government organizations, exists a unique system called “*Neican/Pishi* (internal reference/written directive)” provides officials with timely, confidential, and comprehensive media information, becoming an essential mechanism influencing policy attention among the leadership (Tsai, 2015). Nevertheless, *Neican* and *Pishi* are confidential, making them challenging for scholars to access these materials to capture the agenda dynamics of Chinese local governments.

The Chinese government’s control over the internet has limited citizens from openly criticizing government policies. Yet, the rapid growth of the internet and social media has brought to light the increasing impact of online public opinion on local government agenda-setting (Luo, 2014). Case studies examining Weibo posts during the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed that public sentiment in China serves as a potent political signal, influencing not only the formal policy agenda but also social stability and policy compliance (Dai et al., 2021). Moreover, research sheds light on how Chinese local governments strategically respond to the preferences of their superiors and the public. On one hand, local government officials may adhere to directives from higher authorities concerning economic investments while potentially neglecting social welfare. On the other hand, when public preferences clash with superior priorities, these officials tend to address public opinion in limited yet significant ways (Meng & Su, 2021).

Despite increasing research on the attention allocation of the Chinese government, our understanding remains limited, especially regarding how the structural features of China’s authoritarian political system influence governments’ issue attention. Although previous studies have attempted to provide explanations from perspectives such as dictators, internal information, and internet opinion, they have overlooked complex factors in China’s political structure and bureaucratic organizations. Specifically, China’s political system exhibits a typical omnipotent characteristic, largely attributed to its vertical human resource management system (Cao & Zhang, 2018). Unlike Western democracies, the principal officials of China’s local governments are appointed directly by their superiors or the central government, rather than relying on Western-style elections (Z. Wang, 2017). Moreover, the CCP has established a comprehensive system for managing local officials, covering aspects such as their selection, mobility, and performance assessment, which reflect the structural features of contemporary Chinese bureaucratic system (L. Chen et al., 2015). Existing research, however, has not provided sufficient evidence of the relationship between the cadre management system and the attention allocation of local officials. This study incorporates the cadre

system into an analytical framework of policy attention allocation and conducts empirical tests based on three core hypotheses.

Cadre Management and MPSs' Attention to Economic Development: Core Hypotheses

With the initiation of China's reform and opening-up beginning in the late 1970s, economic development has become the most crucial political objective pursued by local officials, even becoming the central criterion in the so-called "promotion tournament" (H. Li & Zhou, 2005). According to this theory, a promotion competition exists among lower-level government officials, driven by the incentive of receiving rewards and promotions from their principals (i.e., higher-level government). The winners of this competition attain higher positions, and their main performance criterion is their jurisdiction's economic performance, including growth in GDP, tax revenues, and fiscal income (X. Li et al., 2019). As a result, the prospect of maximizing promotion opportunities motivates local officials to prioritize economic development as their primary task, with this emphasis being more pronounced among newly appointed officials. Empirical research has found that such officials are more willing to focus on regional economic development to extract resources from businesses for political gains (Xu et al., 2016).

Although promoting economic development is likely the primary concern of local officials, political elites' attention to key issues still may vary due to various factors. Studies of democratic countries have shown that governments' and officials' attention to public affairs fluctuates based on the structural characteristics of democratic systems (Baumgartner et al., 2006). In China, the party organization tightly controls the careers of local officials. The turnover of officials follows a different logic compared to most Western democracies due to the diverse characteristics of the cadre system (Figure 1). The CCP stipulated a 5-year tenure for local government leaders and a two-term limit after the 1980s. The actual term in office, however, on average is much shorter than 5 years. This is not only because local officials in China are appointed by the next higher administrative level rather than elected but also because the cadre rotation system the CCP established aims to eliminate local nepotism and to develop cadre capability through frequent cross-regional (or inter-departmental) appointments (Wu et al., 2020).

Hence, an inevitable question arises: How does this endogenous personnel control within an authoritarian regime influence officials' attention to local economic development? This study specifically focuses on three core cadre management mechanisms—retirement, rotation, and performance evaluation—that

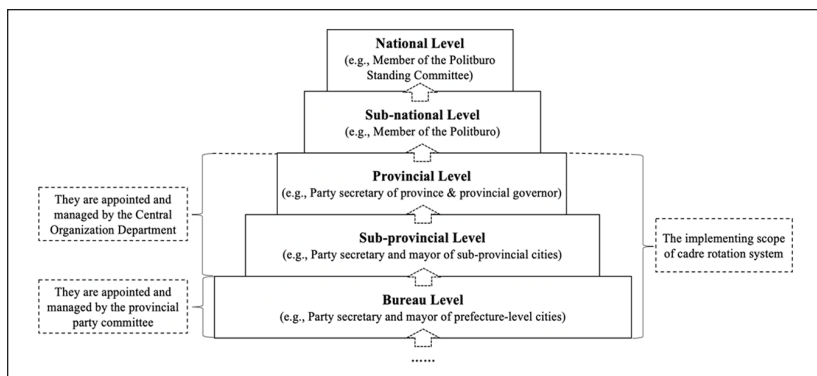


Figure 1. The cadre rank system of the CCP (Bureau-level and above).

emerged in the 1980s. Linking these mechanisms to the attention allocation of newly appointed MPSs, we propose three hypotheses.

In the early 1980s, in order to promote rejuvenation of the cadre ranks, the CCP decided to abolish the lifelong tenure system for leading cadres and introduced a retirement system. This new system aimed to set a relatively clear upper age limit for local officials. When approaching or exceeding this age limit, officials would be either transferred to other “idle positions” or directly retired (Manion, 1992). For instance, when MPSs or mayors approach the age of 60, the higher-level party committee would reassign them to work in institutions with no practical political power, such as subordinate departments of provincial People’s Congresses or the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, until their complete retirement during the next government transition (Landry, 2003). Therefore, the retirement system directly impacts the promotion prospects of local officials: newly appointed officials evaluate their future promotion opportunities based on their distance from the retirement age threshold.

Clearly, those officials appointed as leaders of local party committees or governments at a younger age are more motivated to intervene in the local economy immediately after taking office. This is because they have greater promotion potential compared to officials closer to retirement. As a result, they urgently need impressive economic data to demonstrate their abilities and accomplishments to their superiors, thus accumulating chips for future promotions. Additionally, from the perspective of long-term career mobility, young officials are more willing to excel after taking office, as cadre management emphasizes proactive cultivation of political elites. Hence, if officials are appointed as top leaders of local governments at a younger age, it sends a

signal that the party may appoint them to more important positions in the future, and their current appointment is intended to develop their capabilities and serve as a reference for future promotions (Kou & Tsai, 2014). Consequently, younger officials usually do not want to miss the opportunity to showcase their performance.

Moreover, directing efforts toward attracting investment and promoting economic growth often yield remarkable results compared to other public initiatives such as improving regional environmental quality or social welfare (Q. Liu et al., 2015). Thus, it is likely to become a policy priority for officials after assuming office. However, as officials approach the “glass ceiling” of promotion due to the retirement system, their motivation to prioritize local economic development and accumulate political achievements may diminish. Based on the above discussion, we propose Hypothesis 1:

- Hypothesis 1: Under the constraints of the retirement system, newly appointed local officials who are further from the retirement age limit are more attentive to economic issues than those who are closer to the retirement age limit.

The second hypothesis concerns the rotation system in Chinese bureaucracy. Under this system, newly appointed local officials may come from other regions or institutions because their superiors at the next higher level in the government have a decisive say in their next appointment. Therefore, career mobility in China bureaucracy involves not only vertical promotion (moving from the bottom of the promotion pyramid to the top administrative level) but also cross-regional and cross-departmental lateral transfers (Brødsgaard, 2012). As early as 1990, the CCP institutionalized the rotation of provincial cadres, stipulating that the leaders of local governments can be exchanged with their counterparts at central ministries or in other provinces. In the 21st century, the scope of cadre exchanges has been expanded to the level of the bureau. For example, the party secretary of a prefecture-level city may be promoted directly from the post of city mayor or transferred from another city, a provincial government department, or a central ministry (Figure 2).

Scholars propose that the rotation system is an important mechanism for organization management because cross-regional exchanges can ensure that local officials do not serve too long in the same area and can thus prevent corruption (Edin, 2003). In this study, we contend that the role of official rotation not only strengthens the central government’s monitoring of local agents but also affects local officials’ issue attention to urban economic development. Specifically, officials transferred from other regions or

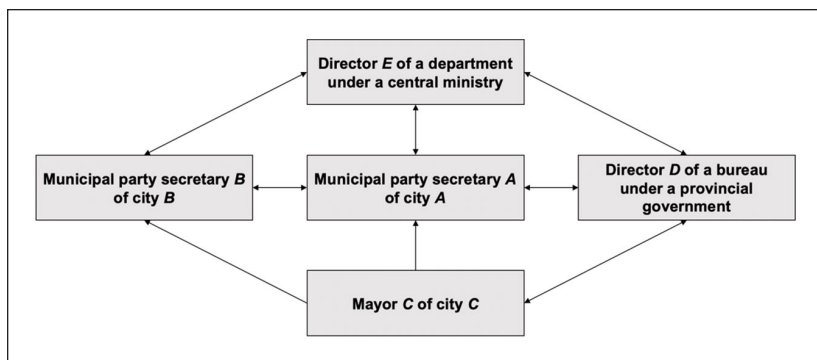


Figure 2. The rotation system of the municipal party secretary.

Note. Double arrow indicates a two-way exchange; single arrow indicates a one-way exchange.

institutions have a greater incentive to secure political achievements in their new posts than those promoted directly and vertically from the local area. This is mainly because the rotation of local cadres is an important way for the CCP to cultivate and identify reserve talent; thus, the transferred cadres are motivated to display their capacity in policy areas where they can obtain results instantly (Eaton & Kostka, 2014). Obviously, since the reform and opening up, a strong economy is the best reflection of the competence of local officials. Especially under a nonfixed tenure system, the transferred officials are more likely to work on the economy, since the results are quick and easily observable by their superiors. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

- Hypothesis 2: Compared with officials promoted directly from the local area, officials transferred from other regions or institutions pay more attention to economic affairs immediately after taking office.

The third hypothesis concerns performance assessment of local officials. In the CCP's cadre management system, cadre evaluation is crucial, and it serves as an essential means to motivate local officials to work according to the requirements of the central and higher-level governments (Qi et al., 2021). CCP cadre evaluation follows a fundamental principle of "selecting the virtuous and capable," where "virtuous" mainly refers to the moral qualities of officials, including their personal integrity and loyalty to the party. However, this part of the assessment is difficult to quantify and often is conducted through field investigations, such as conducting interviews with colleagues

of promoted officials to gather information about their character (Kinkel & Hurst, 2015). Another crucial criterion in cadre evaluation involves assessing officials' capabilities and work performance, which frequently are quantified using various indicators related to the economic and social development of their governing areas. Although recent years have witnessed an increase in the inclusion of indicators related to environmental protection and people's livelihood in performance evaluations, the long-standing measure of cadre performance remains focused on promoting economic growth. This aspect is particularly salient for city or county-level governments as they are tasked with specific responsibilities to increase total economic output and regional fiscal revenue (Gao, 2015).

In China's administrative hierarchy, the provincial government establishes economic growth targets for its regions at the beginning of each year and delegates them to city and county governments. Achievement of these targets by the local governments becomes a pivotal aspect in evaluating the performance of officials. It is important to note that as higher-level governments assess multiple lower-level government officials simultaneously, a noticeable competitive dynamic exists among local officials. In this context, lower-level government officials often strive to surpass the expectations of higher-level government for economic growth, aiming to excel in performance evaluations. This further motivates local officials, upon assuming office, to concentrate more policy attention on economic development. Based on this, we propose the following:

- Hypothesis 3: Higher economic growth expectations from higher-level governments are positively correlated with significant increases in the attention given to economic issues by lower-level government officials after taking office.

Research Design

Data Collection

How can policy attention be measured? Empirical studies in Western democracies often use text datasets from elected bodies, governments, or bureaucrats' speeches (Baumgartner et al., 2011). In the case of China, scholars recently have begun exploring policy attention based on government work reports, written directives, or other policy documents (Chan et al., 2021; S. Chen et al., 2019). In this study, we established a new dataset to better reflect local officials' policy attention shortly after they took office (Table 1). We identified the agendas of the daily official activities of 612 bureaucrats who had

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Attention_economy	0.343	0.0842	0.127	0.662
Retirement	8.534	3.360	2	20
Rotation	0.616	0.487	0	1
GDP_expectation	0.0915	0.0189	0.0550	0.150
Doctorate	0.273	0.446	0	1
Major	0.394	0.489	0	1
Administrative_level	0.178	0.383	0	1
City_revenue	187.1	328.5	2.247	3,332
City_population	438.2	251.0	43.93	1,435
City_income	0.120	0.0429	0.0265	0.385

been newly appointed to the MPS post; looking at those who had taken office within the last 6 months.¹ Their official activities include presiding over daily executive meetings, carrying out on-site investigations, and issuing directives on specific policy issues. Studies consider these activities to be important ways for political elites to express their attention in the Chinese context (Ren et al., 2018; Tsai, 2015).

We obtained 59,796 transcripts of these activities from archives of local government websites. Since these documents record time, theme, and speech points of officials for each activity, we can identify the policy issues that the events focused on through text analysis. The Comparative Agenda Project (CAP) has developed a codebook for text analysis.² Since the codebook is based on Western government’s functions, however, using it directly for analyzing Chinese textual data may introduce coding biases. To address this, we adopted an “inductive” approach by combining topic modeling with text coding for more contextually relevant analysis (Bayerlein et al., 2022). The reason for first using topic modeling instead of direct coding is that we cannot pre-determine the specific policy topics contained in the textual data and the relationships among them. As an unsupervised text analysis method, topic modeling can reveal the underlying structure and semantic features of the text, providing insights into key terms associated with important topics before manual coding (Quinn et al., 2009). We employed a topic model based on non-negative matrix factorization (NMF) to better understand at the outset which policy areas capture MPSs’ attention (Yan et al., 2022). Based on the results of the topic model, we then selected 10% of the sample texts ($N=6,000$) for pre-coding. The pre-coding process involved adjusting the topics generated by the topic

model to optimize the relationships between them and to form sub-topics. Additionally, it further clarified the coding rules and provided examples, aiming to improve coding consistency for the subsequent formal coding process. After precoding, we established a complete coding category system, including 11 major topics and 50 subtopics (Appendix Table A1). This system provides guidelines for measuring the policy attention of officials in their daily governance. Finally, we use this coding system to identify and classify policy topics in all texts and count the coding nodes, thus preparing for hypothesis examination.

Variables

The dependent variable in this study is the policy attention of the new MPS appointees regarding economic issues. We summed “secretary-themes” and converted them into “secretary-theme” percentages to reflect how much “attention” each MPS allocated to economic issues after taking office.

Based on the hypotheses, the core independent variables included:

Retirement. As mentioned above, the retirement system sets an upper limit on the age of promotion for local officials, which in turn arguably affects their attention. We used the difference between the age at which each MPS took office and the upper limit of retirement age to measure the constraint effect of the retirement system.³ The higher the value of “*Retirement*,” the greater the opportunity for an MPS to advance politically.

Rotation. As Hypothesis 2 aims to investigate the influence of the rotation mechanism on policy attention, the study utilizes dummy variables to indicate whether newly appointed MPSs were directly promoted from the local level. If the MPS was transferred from another city or central department, the variable is recorded as 1; if they were directly promoted from the position of local city mayor, it receives a 0.

GDP_expectation. Hypothesis 3 seeks to examine the impact of the economic growth expectations of higher-levels of government on the economic policy attention of MPSs. To do so, we use expectations of GDP growth rate set by the provincial government at the time of each MPS’s appointment. GDP growth rate long has long been regarded as a key indicator of local government’s economic performance (P. Li et al., 2016). At the beginning of each year, the People’s Congress of each province convenes to propose the annual work plan and announce annual GDP growth rate expectations.

In addition to the three core independent variables, this study includes other variables to control for factors that may influence the MPSs' policy attention. One set of variables reflects the individual characteristics of MPSs: (1) *Undergraduate major*. Previous studies suggested that "technocrats" with science or engineering backgrounds played an important role in accelerating China's economic reform since the 1980s (Zang, 2006). Therefore, we set the dummy variable "*Undergraduate major*" to tap whether the undergraduate major of a new MPS was science or engineering. (2) *Doctoral degree*. Educational level often is regarded as an important factor affecting officials' behavior in the post-Deng era (Zhou, 2001). Since a bachelor's degree has become the lowest threshold for the promotion of bureau-level cadres and a graduate degree frequently can be obtained through study at a party school, we created dummy variables to determine whether having a doctoral degree has any impact on MPSs' attention to economic affairs. (3) *Administrative level*. Unlike newly appointed secretaries from prefecture-level cities, most of those transferred from provincial capitals or cities specifically designated in China's state plan are appointed at the subprovincial administrative level. Therefore, we set a dummy variable to monitor the effects of city level. MPSs appointed at the subprovincial administrative level are coded as 1; otherwise, they are coded as 0.

Another category of control variables captures characteristics of the cities where MPSs are stationed. Different endowments, particularly the level of economic development, may affect the policy preferences of local leaders. For instance, officials in industrially developed regions may prioritize economic growth, while cities with a strong agricultural sector may need to focus more on agricultural and poverty alleviation issues. Additional control variables include the government's fiscal revenue (*City_revenue*), population size (*City_population*), and per capita income growth rate (*City_income*) at the time each MPS assumes office.

Empirical Analysis

Descriptive Analysis of MPS's Policy Attention

We first provide a brief descriptive introduction to the policy attention of newly appointed MPSs. According to the sample average of the share of attention devoted to the various policy topics (Figure 3), the economy is the policy issue that captures the most attention among the MPSs [one-third (34.34%)]. More specifically, the economic issues on which they focus are macroeconomy, industry and enterprise, regional economic planning and cooperation, and reform of the economic system. Table A2 in the Appendix

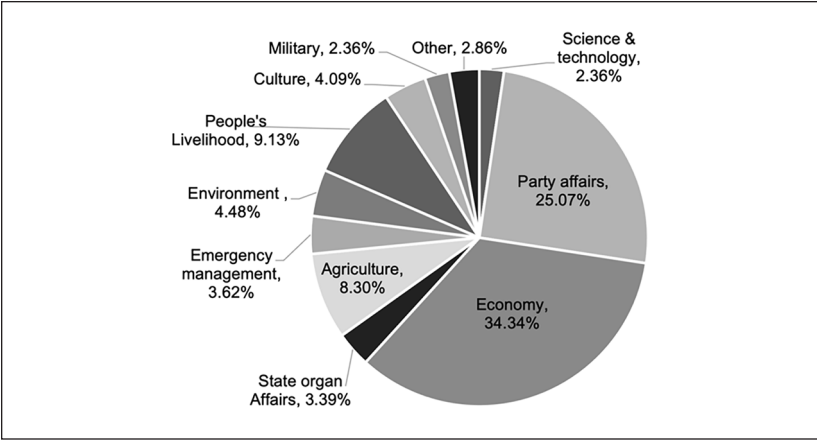


Figure 3. Sample averages of the share of MPSs' attention allocated to policy topics.

provides representative keywords for these sub-topics. These high-frequency words indicate that upon assuming office, MPSs frequently prioritize issues such as investment promotion, industry development and macroeconomic operation in their official activities.

In addition, the policy topic that receives the second-most attention is party affairs (25.07%), over one-quarter of all attention spread among organization management, propaganda, discipline inspection, politics and law, united front work, and mass organization management. This is followed by other public policy issues such as people's livelihoods (9.13%), agriculture (8.30%), the environment (4.48%), and culture (4.09%). We also report the characteristics of MPS attention allocation by age. As Figure 4 shows, if the sample is divided into five groups according to the age of the official at the time of appointment, those who are younger (between 40 and 51) allocate some 36% of their attention to economic issues, compared with 33% of those who are 52 to 59 years old. Furthermore, the older group of MPSs pays relatively more attention to party affairs.

In conclusion, the "economy" undeniably stands out as the core issue in the agenda of MPSs when they assume office. Although there is a slight decrease in the emphasis on economic matters by MPSs after President Xi Jinping took office in 2013, the average proportion remains above 30%, significantly surpassing other topics (Figure 5).

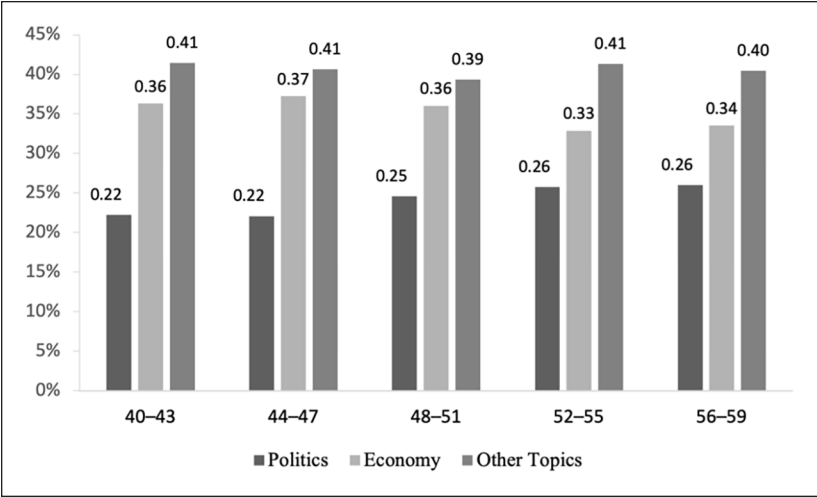


Figure 4. MPSs’ attention allocated to the different policy issues, by age group.

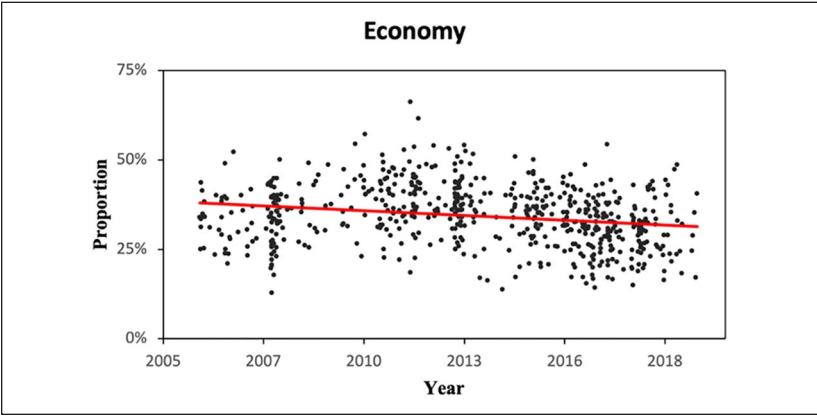


Figure 5. Changes in MPSs’ attention to economic issues over time.

Results of the Regression Model

We tested the hypotheses using multivariate ordinary least square (OLS) regression with provincial fixed effects. (Table 2 presents the results). As Hypothesis 1 predicted, the results consistently show a statistically significant ($p<.01$) positive relationship between the independent variable

Table 2. Regression Estimates: Accounting for Variation in MPS Policy Attention.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Retirement	0.050*** (5.83)			0.035*** (3.92)			0.030*** (3.40)
Rotation		0.021*** (3.00)			0.016** (2.29)		0.023*** (3.42)
GDP_expectation			1.416*** (7.14)			1.334*** (4.91)	1.273*** (4.75)
Doctorate				0.012* (1.65)	0.019** (2.56)	0.019*** (2.74)	0.014** (2.02)
Major				-0.010 (-1.55)	-0.008 (-1.34)	-0.007 (-1.19)	-0.009 (-1.55)
Administrative_level				0.030*** (2.71)	0.038*** (3.48)	0.043*** (4.24)	0.025** (2.30)
City_revenue				0.000 (1.38)	0.000 (0.60)	0.000 (1.04)	0.000** (1.98)
City_population				0.000 (0.35)	0.000 (0.24)	0.000 (0.27)	0.000 (0.39)
City_income				0.413*** (3.65)	0.473*** (4.05)	0.148 (1.07)	0.124 (0.90)
Constant	0.229*** (9.13) Yes	0.322*** (17.13) Yes	0.199*** (8.09) Yes	0.206*** (7.42) Yes	0.263*** (10.90) Yes	0.182*** (7.05) Yes	0.118*** (3.88) Yes
Fixed effects							
Observations	612	612	612	612	612	612	612
R-squared	.180	.137	.202	.244	.228	.264	.293

***p < .01. **p < .05. *p < .1.

“Retirement” and the dependent variable, after controlling for other variables. Officials appointed as MPS at younger ages exhibit stronger motivation to achieve, as this position transfer holds special importance for their career advancement. Younger MPSs can enhance their comparative advantage in the promotion pyramid if they perform well in this position. This incentive effect, however, diminishes as MPSs approach the upper limit of retirement age.

In line with Hypothesis 2, this study finds that new MPSs transferred from other cities or institutions pay more attention to economic issues after taking office than MPSs who were already local. The coefficient of the *“Rotation”* dummy variable suggests that the relative attention allocation to the economy increases approximately 0.023 when the new MPS is transferred from elsewhere.

The regression results strongly support Hypothesis 3. Table 2 indicates a positive relationship between the provincial government’s expectation of GDP growth and the new MPSs’ policy attention to economic issues. This reaffirms GDP’s significance as a key economic indicator in Chinese local governments, as it has been since the 1980s (Gao, 2015). The results imply that new MPSs are motivated to exceed the economic growth objectives set by their superiors.

The results of the control variables show a positive relationship between holding a doctoral degree and the new MPSs’ attention to economic issues ($p < .1$). This could be attributed to the doctoral degree’s importance as an asset for career advancement (Zhou, 1995). Officials with a doctoral degree are more likely to demonstrate their capabilities immediately after assuming office. Additionally, the pursuit of economic development requires political leaders with specific expertise and competence. Many MPSs with doctoral degrees focus on fields like economics and business administration. Hence, those with advanced doctoral training may be more inclined to utilize and showcase their professional acumen by actively promoting economic growth.

We also find that MPSs in sub-provincial cities allocate more attention to economic affairs than those in prefecture-level cities. This reflects the special status of sub-provincial MPSs in China’s bureaucratic hierarchy. Serving as the head of a sub-provincial city is often seen as a step toward further promotion (Yan & Yuan, 2020). Hence, it is not surprising that sub-provincial MPSs are more motivated to work on promoting the economy immediately after assuming office.

Finally, the estimation results for urban characteristics are not robust. This may suggest that the differences in urban endowments may not have as much of an impact on officials’ preferences for economic issues as originally expected, as economic affairs remain a central focus for all local governments.

Robustness Checks

This study examines whether the results remain robust after excluding certain sub-samples. Officials from the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) often ascend to leadership positions in local governments faster than those who are promoted step by step from grassroots levels, granting MPSs with a CCYL background a significant age advantage (Kou & Tsai, 2014). Consequently, we eliminate those ($N=93$) who were fast-tracked from the CCYL to local government. Furthermore, we exclude MPSs at the sub-provincial administrative level ($N=109$) since they are appointed and managed by the Central authority, not the provincial party committee and may not be representative. Additionally, the CCP holds a National Congress every five years for leadership succession, often resulting in significant reshuffling of local officials. To mitigate any potential interference from these leadership transitions, we also exclude officials who assumed office during the three National Congress years of 2007, 2012, and 2017 ($N=112$). Columns 1–3 of Table 3 contain the estimation results after excluding the three groups. Column 4 of Table 3 shows the regression results after excluding all such MPSs. The regression analysis confirms the robustness of the results from full set of MPSs.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study employs a longitudinal multi-issue research paradigm to examine policy attention allocation of 612 Chinese MPSs at the beginning of their tenures from 2003 to 2019. Descriptive analysis reveals that newly appointed MPSs allocate more attention to urban economic growth compared to other issues. This preference for economic issues evidently is influenced by China's cadre management system. Further regression analysis provides statistical evidence for hypotheses about the impact of three personnel control mechanisms – retirement, rotation, and performance evaluation – on MPSs' attention to economic matters. MPSs who were appointed at ages further away from retirement and those serving under higher-level governments with higher economic growth expectations tended to exhibit stronger preferences for economic issues. Additionally, compared to officials promoted internally from the position of mayor to party secretary within the same city, newly appointed officials through the job rotation mechanism from other cities or departments displayed a more proactive approach toward economic issues.

The findings of this study are critical for better understanding of the dynamics of policy attention in non-democratic political systems. First, the research reveals that the bureaucratic system and its control mechanisms for

Table 3. Regression Estimates with Robustness Checks.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Retirement	0.029*** (2.93)	0.030*** (3.26)	0.032*** (3.21)	0.031** (2.57)
Rotation	0.025*** (3.41)	0.023*** (3.33)	0.021*** (3.01)	0.024*** (2.97)
GDP_expectation	1.325*** (4.27)	1.160*** (4.19)	1.120*** (3.89)	0.956*** (2.74)
Constant	0.123*** (3.50)	0.145*** (4.55)	0.151*** (4.31)	0.196*** (4.73)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	519	503	500	359
R-squared	.267	.244	.295	.232

*** $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$.

political elites contribute to explaining variations in policy attention among local officials in one-party states, particularly their focus on core issues (Chan et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2022). Traditional comparative agenda studies found that in democratic countries, politicians’ issue preferences are related to their expertise or competence in specific policy domains, as ruling parties tend to allocate ministerial positions to party politicians with relevant expertise (Beckman, 2006). Moreover, considering that political elites do not make decisions in a vacuum, their issue attention often is influenced by external information, such as media coverage (Sevenans et al., 2016). In authoritarian states like China, however, officials not only face severe information asymmetry but are also subject to strict party organizational control over their careers, involving appointments, transfers, and performance evaluations. In such a context, this study provides evidence helping account for the heterogeneous impact of these cadre management mechanisms on the economic issue attention of local officials in the reform era. Firstly, due to the constraints of “retirement age” in the appointment of local officials, even if one is appointed the top leader of a local authority, those who assume office at an older age may not be as strongly motivated as younger officials to achieve outstanding economic performance. Instead, newly appointed secretaries who are closer to retirement may exhibit increased attention to political and party affairs, displaying a more conservative issue attention. Secondly, the effectiveness of job rotation lies not only in promoting diffusion of successful governance experiences (Chien, 2008) but also in shaping officials’ issue priorities, as newly appointed officials from other cities display greater interest in driving local economic growth compared to those promoted locally from mayor positions. Lastly, cadre performance evaluations notably shape the issue attention of local officials toward economic

affairs, and China's top-down hierarchical governance structure amplifies this effect, as superiors' higher expectations for economic growth intensify lower-level officials' focus on economic issues.

Second, this study also explores policy attention allocation in Chinese local governments from a methodological and data perspective, enriching traditional comparative agenda research (Baumgartner et al., 2019). In terms of research subjects and data, the research for the first time sought to measure political elites' issue attention based on a large-scale dataset of official activities of local cadres, thus presenting a fine-grained portrayal of the daily dynamics of issue attention among Chinese bureaucrats. Methodologically, we examined the potential problems of applying the traditional comparative agenda project framework and its codebook to analyze policy texts in a party-state regime; based on content analysis, we reconstructed a policy classification system and coding rules suitable for the Chinese context. This effort contributes to a better understanding of policy discourse and narratives in China's party-state system, providing methodological references for future comparative studies.

In addition, the findings of this study contribute to ongoing discussion of promotion tournament theory. A core controversy of the tournament hypothesis lies in whether higher-level governments in China primarily use economic performance as the main criterion for determining officials' promotions and whether these local candidates compete based on economic performance (Landry et al., 2018; Su et al., 2012). Although this study does not directly answer these questions, the statistical analysis of policy attention offers new insights into this debate. Economic development is indeed a core issue for local officials, as evidenced by its positioning in decision-makers' attention. Although this enthusiasm for accelerating economic growth has somewhat diminished during Xi Jinping's era, it has not changed the absolute dominance of economic issues in officials' agenda-setting. Thus, despite recent CCP increases in the weight of environmental protection, poverty reduction, and technological innovation in cadre performance evaluations, it does not imply that economic performance has lost importance. The preference of local officials for economic affairs indicates that driving economic growth remains a primary source of legitimacy for the CCP's governance (Huang & Pang, 2022; Zhu, 2011). The focus on development-oriented policies as a priority for local governments is inherently necessary and relatively stable, emphasizing the need for a nuanced interpretation of the promotion tournament theory, steering away from rigid black-and-white understanding.

This study is an initial exploration of policy attention in a nondemocratic system, leaving room for further investigation. Although it examines how cadre management evidently influences local officials’ policy attention, other nonstructural factors, like shifts in real-world problems and public opinion, remain unexplored. Additionally, due to the limited availability of issue attention databases in contemporary China, the dataset used here covers only the early tenure of local officials, which is insufficient. Future research should expand the dataset to encompass officials’ entire tenure, enhancing comparative agenda analysis in one-party countries.

Appendix

Table A1. Policy Topic Codes System.

Major topics	Subtopics
1. Economy	101: General; 102: Industry & enterprise; 103: Economic planning; 104: Economic cooperation; 105: Economic system reform; 106: Other
2. Party affairs	201: General; 202: Party construction & organization; 203: Propaganda & ideology; 204: Discipline inspection; 205: Politics & law; 206: United front work; 207: Mass organization; 208: Other
3. State organ affairs	301: General; 302: Local People’s Congress; 303: Local Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference; 304: “Two sessions”; 305: Other
4. Agriculture	401: General; 402: Agriculture & farmers; 403: Poverty alleviation; 404: Other
5. Emergency management	501: General; 502: Safety production; 503: Disaster response; 504: Other
6. Environment	601: General; 602: Ecological protection & environmental governance; 603: Energy & emission reduction; 604: Natural resource management; 605: Other
7. People’s livelihoods	701: General; 702: Employment & social security; 703: Housing; 704: Education; 705: Health; 706: Urban & community; 707: Other
8. Science and technology	801: General; 802: Scientific & technological innovation; 803: Talents; 804: Other
9. Culture	901: General; 902: Culture; 903: Tourism; 904: Sports; 905: Other
10. Military	1001: Military
11. Other	1101: Other

Table A2. High-frequency Words on Sub-topics of “Economy”.

Subtopics	High-frequency words
I02: Macroeconomy	economy (经济), growth (增长), economic situation (经济形势), industrial economy (工业经济), economic operation (经济运行)
I03: Industry and Enterprise	industry (产业), development (发展), attracting investment (招商引资), enterprises (企业), investment (投资)
I04: Regional economic planning	economic zone (经济区), 13th Five-Year Plan (十三五), 12th Five-Year Plan (十二五), project cooperation (项目合作), planning (规划)
I05: Reform of the economic system	supply-side structural reform (供给侧结构性改革), market economy (市场经济), high-quality development (高质量发展), transformation and upgrading (转型升级), market entities (市场主体)

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Notes

1. The study obtained a list of 1293 MPSs from 2003 to 2019 through local government yearbooks. Textual records of their official activities at the beginning of their tenure were retrieved from local government websites. After excluding samples with significant data gaps and short tenures (less than 6 months), the final dataset comprised 612 MPSs, covering 235 cities in China.

2. More information of the CAP codebook can see <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/us>
3. The upper age limit of most MPSs is 60. Although the actual retirement age of party secretaries in some provincial capitals can be extended by 3 to 5 years, they must also serve in institutions with no real power once they reach the age of 60.

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