

RESEARCH

Towards “All-round Cadres”: Policy Priorities and Issue Diversity of Local Bureaucrats in China, 2005–19

YANG Zhusong, YAN Yang and XU Haoxiang

How do Chinese local political elites prioritise their attention in the one-party system? This study examines the issue diversity among China's local cadres by analysing the agendas of 707 local Party secretaries during their daily official activities from 2005 to 2019. Findings reveal that political and economic issues significantly dominate the secretaries' attention, overshadowing other niche topics. Yet after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, there has been an increase in the secretaries' focus on Party affairs while there has been a decline in their focus on economic issues, leading to fragmented attention and disproportionate changes. These findings not only highlight the tension between the broader Party reforms and the actual responses of local officials, but also suggest the CPC's efforts to reshape the bureaucratic system by transforming local cadres into “all-rounders” capable of addressing diverse challenges while maintaining strong political leadership and loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

In a world marked by continually emerging public issues and information overload, a focussed attention has remained a scarce resource. Consequently, allocating more focus to one particular issue inevitably comes at the expense of others. The field of “attention-based politics” aims to delve into how political parties, governments, legislatures and politicians make choices and distribute their attention to policy issues

Yang Zhusong (zhusong@tsinghua.edu.cn) is an Associate Professor at the School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University. He obtained his PhD in Public Administration from Tsinghua University. His research focuses on political leadership of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese cadre system.

Yan Yang (yang.yan@fu-berlin.de) is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute for Chinese Studies, Freie Universität Berlin. He obtained his PhD in Management Science and Engineering from Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. His research centres on Chinese politics and policy process theory.

Xu Haoxiang (2022211166@email.cufe.edu.cn) is a master's degree candidate at the School of Economics, Central University of Finance and Economics. His research interests are policy process, corporate behaviour and innovation.

© China: An International Journal

in the context of this scarcity.¹ In Western democracies, political parties and elites often opt to selectively concentrate on a limited number of issues, weighing how spreading their attention across a broader spectrum can be conducive to electoral success. As such, democratic mechanisms, including pressure from opposition parties, interactions with voters and media participation, may influence the priorities of parties and politicians.²

As, in contrast to the United States and Western Europe, contemporary China operates under the exclusive governance of the Communist Party of China (CPC), political elites across diverse settings navigate their attention within distinct institutional contexts. In China's case, this involves a dearth of varied and independent information sources.³ Specifically for local political elites, the top-down cadre management system enforced by the CPC means that officials are appointed rather than elected. Moreover, these appointed officials often do not complete the stipulated legal terms of their office, leading to frequent turnover.⁴ Given these institutional dynamics, how do local officials in China allocate their limited attention? For officials appointed by superiors, what are the issue priorities that have emerged? Research in democratic settings has highlighted that shifts in attention towards specific issues could impact the overall diversity of focus. This occurs as interactions with competitors, voters and the media compel Party elites to strategically adjust the spectrum of the policy issues they emphasise. However, what circumstances have prompted Chinese politicians to exhibit a more (or less) varied set of issue preferences?

To address these research questions, this article examines the structure and dynamics of political attention among local cadres in China, using the local Party secretary as a case study focus. The study leverages textual data (N=61,206) spanning from 2005 to 2019, documenting the daily public activities of 95 provincial Party secretaries and 612 municipal Party secretaries after assuming office. By employing topic modelling and text coding techniques, this study measures the relative allocation of secretaries' attention to various policy issues. An empirical analysis of the issue priorities and attention structure of all local Party secretaries is then conducted. The findings indicate that political and economic matters attract the majority of local Party secretaries' attention, while other policy issues more closely tied to local government functions are relegated to "niche topics". Furthermore, the study highlights that local

¹ Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner, *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

² Shaun Bevan, Peter John and Will Jennings, "Keeping Party Programmes on Track: The Transmission of the Policy Agendas of Executive Speeches to Legislative Outputs in the United Kingdom", *European Political Science Review* 3, no. 3 (2011): 395–417; Will Jennings and Peter John, "The Dynamics of Political Attention: Public Opinion and the Queen's Speech in the United Kingdom", *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 4 (2009): 838–54.

³ Chan Kwan Nok and Zhao Shuang, "Punctuated Equilibrium and the Information Disadvantage of Authoritarianism: Evidence from the People's Republic of China", *Policy Studies Journal* 44, no. 2 (2016): 134–55.

⁴ Wu Jing, Li Hao and Li Keyang, "Local Political Chief Turnover and Economic Growth: Evidence from China", *Economics of Transition and Institutional Change* 28, no. 3 (2020): 445.

Party secretaries' preferences for political and economic affairs have a "crowding-out" effect on other issues, underscoring the influence of China's Party-state regime and the economic prioritisation strategy established from the 1980s on the issue preferences of local cadres. Additionally, heterogeneity analysis reveals that local Party secretaries' preferences for political and economic affairs are influenced by their administrative level and working region. The study also identifies structural adjustments in local Party secretaries' issue priorities during the Xi Jinping era that differ disproportionately from the changes observed in the Hu Jintao era.

This article presents empirical evidence, focusing on political attention, to enhance our understanding of the behaviour of local officials in China. It reveals that although the political attention of Chinese local officials remains relatively consistent with economic and political issues being their primary concerns, their preference, in fact, undergoes subtle changes under different circumstances. These changes are influenced not only by the administrative level and work environment of local officials but also by the succession of top leaders. In contrast to the Hu Jintao era, under the leadership of Xi Jinping local officials notably increased their focus on political issues, resulting in a "crowding-out" effect on economic development issues to which they previously gave greater emphasis. Furthermore, heightened attention towards non-core issues like the environment and technology exacerbates the fragmentation of political attention. These findings indicate that in Xi's "new era", the CPC appears to be actively adjusting the traditional performance evaluation and issue preferences of local officials, which, as noted, were previously centred around economic indicators. Simultaneously, the CPC is consciously strengthening its political leadership capabilities and loyalty. This enables local elites to effectively respond to various unknown risks and challenges encompassing political, economic and social governance aspects.

This study contributes to the literature on political attention and comparative agenda analysis. While previous research aimed at elucidating China's political attention predominantly focused on the macropolitical system and top leaders, offering limited insights into issue selection and attention allocation among local political elites, this article, by constructing a policy topic framework in alignment with China's policy practices, not only systematically examines the issue priorities of provincial and municipal cadres within a hierarchical bureaucracy, but also unveils the crowding-out effect that attention to political and economic affairs exerts on other issues. These empirical findings shed light on the prevalent phenomenon of "attention-based politics" within China's top-down system.

ISSUE PRIORITY AND DIVERSITY OF POLITICAL ATTENTION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The allocation of political attention resembles a zero-sum game as policy issues consistently "compete" for limited attention resources.⁵ In addition to addressing why

⁵ Zhu Jian-Hua, "Issue Competition and Attention Distraction: A Zero-sum Theory of Agenda-setting", *Journalism Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1992): 825–36.

politicians prioritise certain issues over others, political attention research should explore how the distribution of attention across various policy topics shapes the overall attention structure—a dimension aptly termed “attention diversity”.⁶ Unlike agenda size, which considers solely fluctuations in the number of issues, attention diversity delves into the interrelationships among different issues in political attention. For instance, low diversity implies focused concentration on a singular or a few policy topics, whereas high diversity signals a more equitable distribution of attention across various subjects.⁷

In political science literature, politics involves how political entities present their endorsement of or opposition to an issue, engaging in a “competition” for attention to a particular matter.⁸ Therefore, comprehending the functioning of democratic politics entails an examination of issue selection and diversity. In most democracies, owing to limited (or “bounded”) rationality and resource constraints, parties strategically opt for foregrounding policies on specific public issues rather than committing to resolving them all.⁹ Such a decision-making approach, rooted in the cognitive structure of decision-makers, is known as the “disproportional information processing model” in agenda-setting research literature.¹⁰ Consequently, the distribution of attention by political parties or governments when addressing issues tends to be notably uneven. This results in an excessive focus on a particular problem or consistently favouring a specific solution, fostering decision-makers’ inclination to maintain the status quo.¹¹

Moreover, in the face of electoral competition, political parties claim ownership of an issue only if voters perceive their commitment to dedicating time and resources to it in the long term.¹² Thus, parties also prefer to handle policy issues that they already “own”. However, when parties concentrate on one issue at the expense of others, attention diversity undergoes changes, influencing party competitiveness and election outcomes. Research grounded in developed parliamentary democracies, for example, indicates that adopting a “broad appeal” strategy—where parties broaden the diversity of issues they focus on—does little to secure votes for mainstream-left parties.¹³ Additionally, the status of political parties correlates with their attention

⁶ Amber E. Boydston, Shaun Bevan and Herschel F. Thomas III, “The Importance of Attention Diversity and How to Measure It”, *Policy Studies Journal* 42, no. 2 (2014): 173–96.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Elmer E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

⁹ David F. Damore, “Issue Convergence in Presidential Campaigns”, *Political Behavior* 27, no. 1 (2005): 71–97.

¹⁰ Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner, “From There to Here: Punctuated Equilibrium to the General Punctuation Thesis to a Theory of Government Information Processing”, *Policy Studies Journal*, 40, no. 1 (2012): 1–20.

¹¹ Peter B. Mortensen, “Political Attention and Public Spending in the United States”, *Policy Studies Journal* 37, no. 3 (2009): 435–55.

¹² E.J. Fagan, “Issue Ownership and the Priorities of Party Elites in the United States, 2004–2016”, *Party Politics* 27, no. 1 (2021): 149–60.

¹³ Matthew E. Bergman and Henry Flatt, “Broad-appeal Agendas: Issue Diversity and the Centre-right’s Electoral Success”, *Electoral Studies* 70 (April 2021): 102272.

diversity. Studies reveal that the diversity of policy issues is lower in opposition platforms than in incumbent party platforms. The former concentrate solely on issues most beneficial to their election outcomes, while incumbent parties aim to showcase their governing achievements by emphasising a greater array of issues.¹⁴ Beyond party competition, scholars have also identified that the proportion of administrative professionals in a bureaucracy shapes the issue diversity of the political system.¹⁵

As a comparison to democratic nations, scholars have also turned their focus to the political agenda or priorities of authoritarian states. Research on Turkey reveals that the policy priorities under Kenan Evren's military dictatorship exhibited no significant divergence from those of democratic governments preceding and succeeding Evren's tenure.¹⁶ Furthermore, studies indicate that as the level of authoritarian regime liberalisation increases, attention diversity undergoes an inverted-U change. This is because liberalisation facilitates the release and exchange of information, thereby broadening the spectrum of issues policymakers can address. However, as liberalisation intensifies, the contention among stakeholders becomes more pronounced, inevitably escalating decision-making costs and diminishing attention diversity.¹⁷

In the context of China as a single-party state, the country's political structure diverges from traditional soft authoritarianism or military dictatorship. Recent studies have shifted their focus towards the political attention of China's macropolitical system. For instance, research based on Mao Zedong's written directives elucidates how the attention of supreme political leaders significantly influences the dissolution of central government agencies.¹⁸ Other studies have also delved into structural shifts in attention at the highest political level during Xi's era. For example, a study by Chan, Lam and Chen observes more frequent changes in the policy priorities of the Chinese central government since 2013 compared to the Hu era. Notably, all of these priorities were determined by Xi Jinping.¹⁹ Moreover, an article by Yan, Yang and Yuan has identified that under Xi's robust leadership, the CPC has broadened the scope of its policy foci through the establishment of various central leading groups. The expansion in scope,

¹⁴ Zachary Greene, "Being Heard above the Noise: The Role of Incumbent Issue Diversity in Election Campaigns", *Political Behavior* 42, no. 2 (2020): 487–507; Zachary Greene and Diana Z. O'Brien, "Diverse Parties, Diverse Agendas? Female Politicians and the Parliamentary Party's Role in Platform Formation", *European Journal of Political Research* 55, no. 3 (2016): 435–53.

¹⁵ Martin Baekgaard, Peter B. Mortensen and Henrik Bech Seeberg, "The Bureaucracy and the Policy Agenda", *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 28, no. 2 (2018): 239–53.

¹⁶ Tevfik Murat Yildirim, Alper T. Bulut and Emel Ilter, "Agenda Dynamics and Policy Priorities in Military Regimes", *International Political Science Review* 43, no. 3 (2022): 418–32.

¹⁷ Nick H.K. Or, "How Policy Agendas Change When Autocracies Liberalize: The Case of Hong Kong, 1975–2016", *Public Administration* 97, no. 4 (2016): 926–41.

¹⁸ Chen Sicheng, Tom Christensen and Ma Liang, "Competing for Father's Love? The Politics of Central Government Agency Termination in China", *Governance* 32, no. 4 (2019): 761–77.

¹⁹ Chan Kwan Nok, Lam Wai Fung and Chen Shaowei, "Elite Bargains and Policy Priorities in Authoritarian Regimes: Agenda Setting in China under Xi Jinping and Hu Jintao", *Governance* 34, no. 3 (2021): 837–54.

however, has resulted in decreased attention diversity within the State Council. Many policy issues that were originally under the purview of the State Council were shifted to the Party's leading groups.²⁰

The existing literature presents varied viewpoints on political attention in authoritarian regimes. However, there remains a dearth of research that specifically examines issue preferences and attention structure in the context of China. While current studies on China's political attention focus predominantly on the top leadership, a notable gap exists in comprehending the issue priorities of local officials and their influence on attention diversity. Furthermore, given China's hierarchical bureaucracy marked by top-down control, elucidating the structural shifts in attention allocation among local political elites becomes crucial. This article seeks to bridge these gaps and offer theoretical explanations.

LOCAL PARTY ELITES AND ISSUE DIVERSITY OF POLITICAL ATTENTION: CORE HYPOTHESES

Through cross-national analysis of democratic political systems, it has been observed that an increased emphasis by governments or politicians on core policy issues could lead to a reduction in attention diversity.²¹ This phenomenon arises because core issues tend to receive the highest allocation of "attention resources", thereby limiting the available agenda spaces for non-core issues. Central governments in democratic countries typically address core policy issues aligned with the essential functions of modern governance, encompassing macroeconomics, government operations, national defence, law and judiciary, and international affairs.²² Conversely, local governments predominantly concentrate on citizen welfare which encompasses public services, education, housing, social security and fiscal revenues.²³ However, within China's Party-state system, how do local officials formulate their policy preferences? How does such a formulation impact their attention diversity?

Since the 1980s, economic development has supplanted political struggle as the CPC's core task. Such a shift is particularly conspicuous among local officials, who prioritise fostering regional economic growth upon assuming office, and can be attributed to the CPC's long-standing practice of linking the assessment and promotion

²⁰ Yan Yang, Yang Zhusong and Yuan Chunhui, "Political Attention in a Single-leading-party State: A Comparative Study of the Policy Agenda in China, 2003–2019", *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 24, no. 2 (2022): 138–58.

²¹ Will Jennings et al., "Effects of the Core Functions of Government on the Diversity of Executive Agendas", *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 8 (2011): 1001–30.

²² Ibid.; Jeffrey E. Cohen, *Presidential Responsiveness and Public Policy-making: The Publics and the Policies that Presidents Choose* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

²³ Gerard Breeman, Peter Scholten and Arco Timmermans, "Analysing Local Policy Agendas: How Dutch Municipal Executive Coalitions Allocate Attention", *Local Government Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 20–43.

of local officials to their ability to stimulate economic growth.²⁴ Most top leaders of local governments are inclined to allocate greater attention to “investment promotion” after taking office. In other words, they focus on increasing investments and fiscal revenues in their governing areas to achieve better political accomplishments and advancement opportunities. Therefore, issues related to economic growth, such as industrial policies and investment promotion, are undoubtedly local Party secretaries’ central concern.²⁵

However, the Party-state regime assigns local Party secretaries a dual role in their daily governance.²⁶ Beyond being the core decision-makers for regional public affairs, they also shoulder the primary responsibility as local Party leadership. Local Party secretaries’ dual role is evident in the composition of the Standing Committee of the Provincial (or Municipal) Party Committee.²⁷ This committee comprises typically 12 to 13 members (Figure 1), one of whom would have a background in the military. Among these members, only the provincial governor and the executive deputy provincial governor focus on economic and other public affairs. The other members are responsible for traditional Party issues, covering Party construction, discipline inspection, organisation, propaganda, united front work and the daily operation of the provincial Party committee. Consequently, as the head of the Standing Committee, a local Party secretary inevitably engages in significant matters related to politics or Party leadership in daily decision-making. Crucially, the so-called “rotation system” in the CPC cadre management results in the transfer of a majority of local Party secretaries from other regions or positions.²⁸ In such instances, newly appointed local Party secretaries also need to allocate some of their attention to Party affairs to adapt to their new role instead. This not only helps them to overcome the “succession effect” but also enables them to demonstrate political loyalty and leadership to their superiors.

Hence, “economic development” and “political leadership” have emerged as the two paramount policy domains that Chinese local officials have prioritised since the advent of reform and opening up. In relation to attention allocation, the heightened importance attributed to these core issues in local governance increases the likelihood of a “crowding-out effect” on non-core matters. Despite local officials’ efforts to allocate attention to other policy areas through increased dedication and workload, public decision-making inevitably grapples with the challenge of decision-makers’ “bounded rationality”. As presented in Jones’s research, bounded rationality manifests as

²⁴ Bo Zhiyue, “Economic Performance and Political Mobility: Chinese Provincial Leaders”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 5, no. 12 (1996): 135–54.

²⁵ Xu Chenggang, “The Fundamental Institutions of China’s Reforms and Development”, *Journal of Economic Literature* 49, no. 4 (2011): 1076–151.

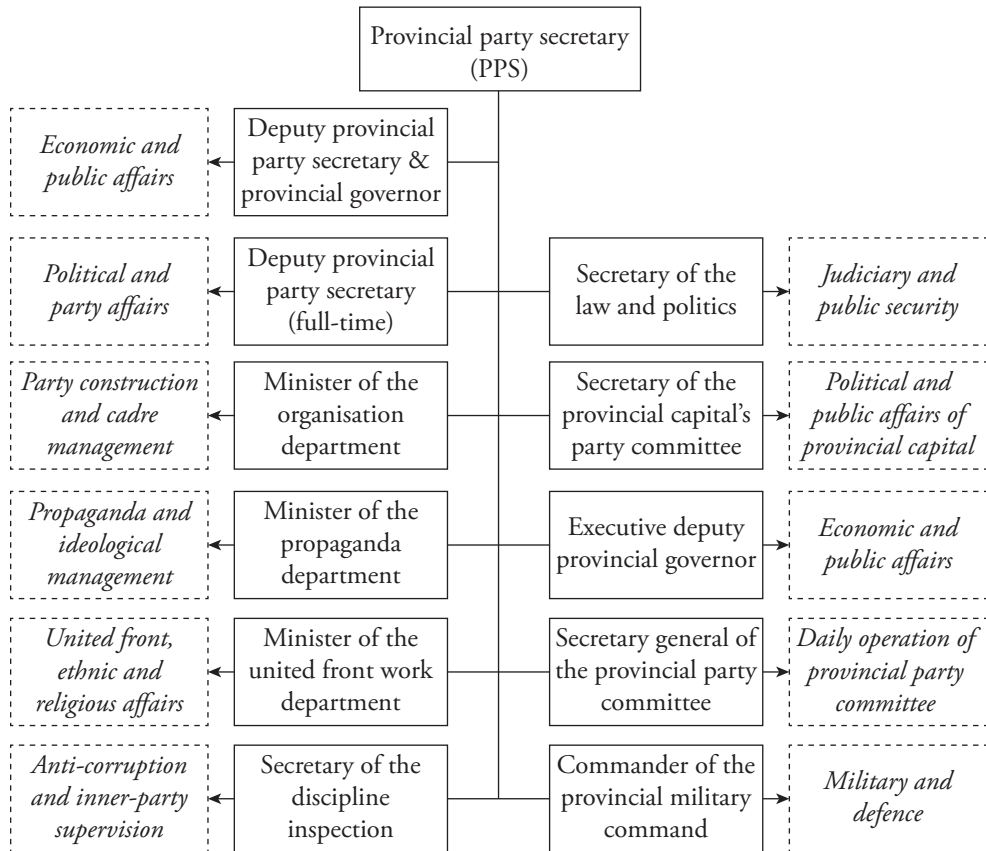
²⁶ Guo Sujian, “The Party-state Relationship in Post-Mao China”, *China Report* 37, no. 3 (2001): 301–15.

²⁷ Yu Minghui, “The Composition of the Provincial Leading Teams: Trends and Implications”, *China: An International Journal* 18, no. 1 (2020): 95–106.

²⁸ Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, “Cadre and Personnel Management in the CPC”, *China: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (2012): 69–83.

asymmetric and fragmented information processing among decision-makers.²⁹ Consequently, when faced with a diverse range of policy topics, decision-makers encounter difficulties in achieving comprehensive coverage.³⁰ The following factor also exacerbates the difficulties: past experiences or incentives tend to shape decision-makers' preferences towards specific issues and prompt them to instinctively concentrate greater attention on their favoured subjects while inadvertently neglecting others.

Figure 1. Composition and Division of Labour of Standing Committee of Provincial Party Committee



Note: The dashed boxes show the division of responsibilities of members of the Standing Committee.

Source: Authors' computation.

²⁹ Bryan D. Jones, "Bounded Rationality and Political Science: Lessons from Public Administration and Public Policy", *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 13, no. 4 (2003): 395–412.

³⁰ Jones and Baumgartner, *The Politics of Attention*.

In the realm of Chinese local officials, the “exclusivity” of economic development as a core issue originates from its capacity to deliver immediate and conspicuous results, setting it apart from other public concerns such as environmental protection, social security and emergency management. Accentuating economic development acts as a strategy for officials to accrue political capital and bolster their prospects for career advancement. In turn, the crowding-out effect of political issues pertaining to other agendas is manifest in two dimensions. Firstly, for the primary representatives of the CPC Central Committee at the local level, prioritising Party-building and political leadership emerges as the optimal pathway to showcase personal political allegiance. Secondly, an examination of the composition of local Party standing committees reveals that political issues tend to garner more spokespersons in this pivotal policy venue, resulting in a higher frequency of their discussions and an increased likelihood of overshadowing non-core matters.

In conclusion, as considered through the theories of bounded rationality and disproportionate information processing, the preference of local Party secretaries for core issues, namely economic and political affairs, is likely to result in a “crowding-out” effect on other topics, thereby impacting the overall diversity of their attention. Based on this, this article puts forth the following hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1: *The heightened emphasis of local Party secretaries on core issues, including economic development and political affairs, is associated with a reduction in attention diversity.*

The hypothesis indicates the overall impact of local Party secretaries’ issue preferences on their attention diversity, but it does not capture the potential heterogeneous effect caused by China’s political and economic environment.

Firstly, China’s multilevel governance structure is often considered a pivotal factor contributing to the differentiated behaviour of local officials.³¹ Studies on the mobility of Chinese local officials propose that economic performance influences the promotion of local cadres at lower administrative levels, such as the prefectural or county level. A positive correlation exists between their promotion and economic performance. However, for higher-level officials like provincial or deputy provincial officials, whose promotion is influenced by more intricate factors, the competition for promotion based on economic growth as a core indicator may not be as prevalent.³² This suggests that local Party secretaries at different administrative levels may harbour varying preferences for policy issues, resulting in diverse impacts of economic issues on attention allocation. China’s “administrative decentralization” approach has transferred economic indicators to lower-level governments. As a result, municipal

³¹ Pierre F. Landry, Lü Xiaobo and Duan Haiyan, “Does Performance Matter? Evaluating Political Selection along the Chinese Administrative Ladder”, *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 8 (2018): 1074–105.

³² Yan Yang and Yuan Chunhui, “City Administrative Level and Municipal Party Secretaries’ Promotion: Understanding the Logic of Shaping Political Elites in China”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 122 (2020): 266–85.

governments have more specific responsibilities in promoting economic growth, including attracting investments and increasing fiscal revenue, compared to provincial governments.³³ Consequently, economic issues are highly likely to feature prominently in the policy agendas of municipal Party secretaries. Moreover, due to the heightened emphasis on economic indicators in the evaluation of lower-level officials, municipal Party secretaries are more inclined to prioritise local economic growth upon assuming office. Their objective is to convey performance to higher authorities to achieve faster promotion. However, the limited rationality of decision-makers often results in a trade-off between their attention preferences and a focus on other niche issues. Following this logic, this article proposes the following:

Hypothesis 2.1: *Compared to provincial Party secretaries, municipal Party secretaries exhibit a stronger crowding-out effect of economic issues with regard to their attention allocation.*

Another factor that may moderate the relationship between the issue preference and attention diversity of local Party secretaries arises from the macropolitical system. In China's top-down bureaucracy, the central–local relationship is always dynamically in flux. The replacement of central leadership, especially top leaders, has significantly affected the behaviour of local cadres that was not only evident in the periods of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping but was also noticeable in the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras.³⁴

In contrast to the relatively decentralised political power structure under Hu, Xi has reintroduced strongman politics. On the one hand, Xi has vigorously championed his reform of domestic politics following the 18th CPC National Congress, explicitly proposing that “the party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavour in every part of the country”.³⁵ In pursuit of this goal, Xi has deepened reforms in various realms of political construction, including organisation, propaganda, discipline inspection, united front work and judicial affairs, to fortify the Party's overall leadership. Notably, a large-scale anti-corruption campaign involving cadres from central to grassroots levels has been executed. Yet Xi's ambitions extend beyond politics. In response to China's economic and social transformation in his “new era”, Xi introduced “high-quality development” (*gaozhiliang fazhan*) and the “new development philosophy” (*xinfazhan linian*). He announced an “all-round and deeper level reform” (*quanmian shenhua gaige*) at the third plenary session of the 18th CPC Central Committee.³⁶ The overarching objective of these new development strategies and reforms is to reshape

³³ Zhou Li-an, “Xingzheng fabao zhi” (Administrative Subconstruct), *Shehui (Society)* 34, no. 6 (2014): 36.

³⁴ Chan, Lam and Chen, “Elite Bargains and Policy Priorities in Authoritarian Regimes”.

³⁵ “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CCP National Congress”, *China Daily*, 3 November 2017, at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thccpnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm> [20 May 2022].

³⁶ “New development philosophy”: vision/concept of innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development.

the long-standing perspective of local officials who traditionally view GDP (gross domestic product) growth as their primary political accomplishment. Specifically, Xi now mandates that local officials address governance issues such as environmental protection, the wealth gap and grassroots governance while concurrently advancing economic development.³⁷

Therefore, the issue selection of local officials in Xi's period follows the following logic: The imperative to strengthen the Party's leadership and political construction has compelled local officials to allocate more attention to political issues. Simultaneously, the implementation of a new development strategy, especially the recalibration of cadres' perspectives on work performance, prompts officials to devote more attention to policy issues besides the economy. Consequently, it is foreseeable that under Xi's leadership, there will be an intensified crowding-out effect of political issues on the political attention of local officials, diminishing that of economic issues. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 2.2: *In the Xi era, compared to the Hu era, there is a weaker crowding-out effect of economic issues and a stronger crowding-out effect of political issues on the local Party secretaries' attention space.*

The final hypothesis concerning heterogeneity is linked to the distinct working environments of local Party secretaries. Research on democracies has indicated that local governments tend to adopt varied attention politics, given their more pragmatic and problem-oriented approach to issue selection.³⁸ In China, the regional macroscopic development environment could also influence the issue priorities of local officials. The eastern region has consistently served as the avant-garde zone for China's reform and opening up. Its geographical advantages and higher economic development level stand in stark contrast to the mostly underdeveloped provinces, major grain-producing areas, or ethnic minority autonomous regions in the central and western regions. Consequently, local officials in central and western provinces, in addition to promoting economic growth, tend to grapple with more complex political and social challenges. These challenges encompass issues of national unity, agriculture and poverty alleviation, presenting a distinct set of concerns compared to their counterparts in the east.

From the perspective of attention diversity, officials in the central and western regions are more likely to face "distractions" in their attention, potentially mitigating the crowding-out effect caused by economic issues. This leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2.3: *Compared to provinces in the central and western regions, eastern provinces exhibit a stronger crowding-out effect of economic issues on the secretaries' attention space.*

³⁷ Yan, Yang and Yuan, "Political Attention in a Single-leading-party State".

³⁸ Breeman, Scholten and Timmermans, "Analysing Local Policy Agendas".

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data and Methods

Scholars traditionally utilise data from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) to gauge the policy agenda of democratic governments.³⁹ However, the CAP database currently lacks data from the Chinese government. In response to this void, this study has endeavoured to construct a novel data set aimed at tracking the political attention of local Party secretaries. Concretely, the authors amassed text records detailing the daily public activities of 707 local Party secretaries across 31 provinces and 235 prefecture-level cities from 2005 to 2019 post-assumption of office. The transcripts were sourced through a combination of manual searches and web crawlers targeting local government websites. To ensure completeness of data, archived requests were also employed. The resultant data set encompasses 61,206 texts that document the timing, topics and primary content of each activity. The data set comprehensively covers three distinct categories of activities in which local officials partake: daily government meetings, local visits and inspections, and written directives (*pishi*). As a result, the data set promises a more objective and thorough depiction of the attention allocation of local officials.

Given the limited exploration of agenda-setting in local governments in China and the inadequacy of the traditional agenda codebook in accommodating the characteristics of policy issues within China's Party-state system, this article opts for an inductive approach to reconfigure the policy attention of Chinese local governments.⁴⁰ More specifically, a precoding approach is employed, amalgamating topic modelling and text coding techniques to establish a comprehensive categorisation of policy issues. Utilising topic modelling, a statistical model that delineates the latent semantic structure of texts through unsupervised learning, the authors seek to unveil the thematic structure in extensive text corpora. Adhering to established practices in the existing literature regarding the topic modelling of Chinese policy texts,⁴¹ the authors initially applied a topic model grounded in non-negative matrix factorisation. The objective is to unveil the concealed policy topics and their pivotal terms in local bureaucrats' public activities. Based on the outcomes of the topic model, it becomes apparent that the topics addressed in the public activities of local Party secretaries align with the functions of local Party committees within the Party-state system. Notably, there is a discernibly higher frequency of keyword clusters associated with "economic development" and "politics and Party affairs" compared to other topics.

³⁹ The Comparative Policy Agendas Project collects data from various archived sources to trace changes in the national policy agenda and public policy outcomes of various democratic countries. For more information, see <<https://www.comparativeagendas.net/us>>.

⁴⁰ Louisa Bayerlein, Constantin Kaplaner, Christoph Knill and Yves Steinebach, "Singing Together or Apart? Comparing Policy Agenda Dynamics within International Organizations", *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 24, no. 3 (2022): 210–29.

⁴¹ Yan, Yang and Yuan, "Political Attention in a Single-leading-party State".

To facilitate hypothesis testing, necessitating the encoding and enumeration of “agenda points” within the texts of public activities conducted by local officials, the authors further refined a more precise policy topic classification system and elucidated the coding rules derived from topic modelling. Consequently, a 10 per cent random sample of the data (N=6,000) underwent precoding in this research. Precoding serves a dual purpose: (i) enhancing the output results of the topic model and finalising policy topic categories, particularly by aligning them with local government functions and text narratives to mitigate coding bias in formal coding, following the iterative process of “from codes to text and back to codes”;⁴² and (ii) constructing an operational text coding manual through precoding to serve as a guide for subsequent formal coding endeavours by coders.⁴³

After executing the topic modelling and precoding phases, the authors devised a comprehensive set of policy categories and coding rules for formal coding. This framework comprises 11 overarching themes and 50 subtopics, detailed in Appendix I.⁴⁴ These categories meticulously account for the authority and duties of Chinese local Party secretaries, coupled with the narrative style present in the textual data, thereby mitigating coding bias. Subsequently, the refined coding system is deployed to discern and categorise policy topics within all texts, facilitating the tallying of coding nodes to prepare for hypothesis testing.

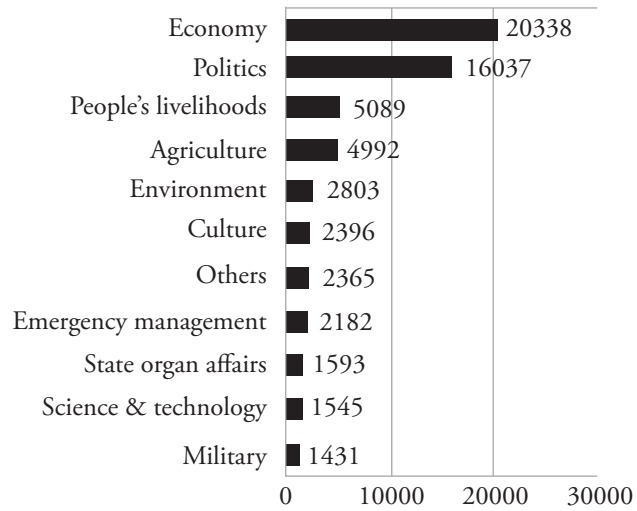
Prior to conducting a formal quantitative analysis, this article offers a succinct overview of the descriptive examination of the coding outcomes from local Party secretaries’ public activity texts. Figure 2 illustrates the frequency ranking of “coding nodes” for 11 policy topics. Notably, both “political” and “economic” topics have over 10,000 coding nodes, a stark contrast to the other themes.⁴⁵ Upon close scrutiny of the relative proportions of each topic (Figure 3), economic and political topics have together dominated more than half of local Party secretaries’ attention space. This preliminary observation reinforces the earlier hypothesis, underscoring that economic and political topics have taken centre stage in local Party secretaries’ focus. Although topics such as livelihoods and agriculture also exhibit over 5,000 coding nodes, their significance pales in comparison to the weight of political and economic concerns.

⁴² Although topic modelling has provided a preliminary category for coding texts, this category is not directly applicable to manual coding, as the relationships between topics still need to be optimised. Specifically, it is necessary to merge or adjust policy topics appropriately through precoding in order to reduce manual coding biases.

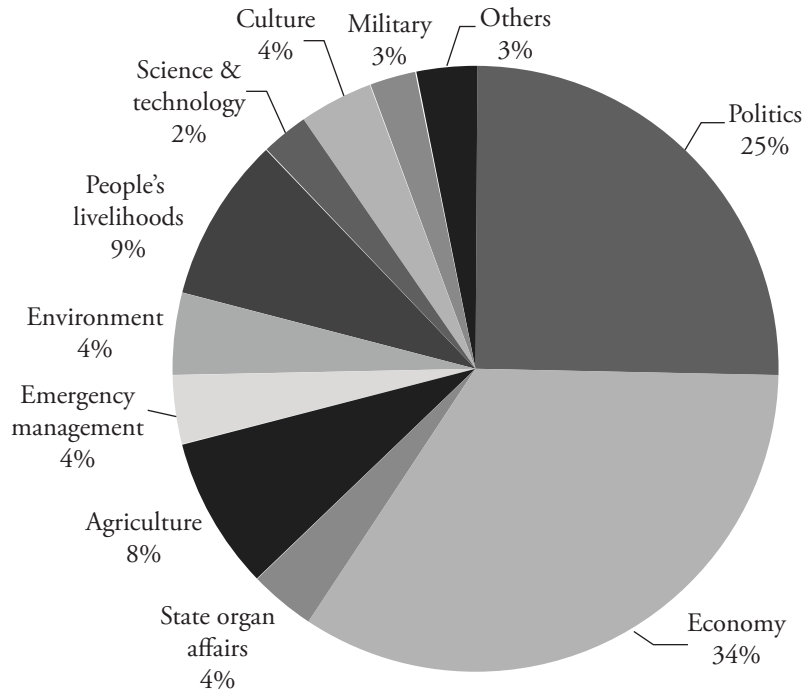
⁴³ The official coding book (in Chinese) can be obtained from the corresponding author upon request.

⁴⁴ The precoding indicates that these 11 themes not only encompass the policy concerns related to the daily governance of local governments but also align with the semantic structure of the textual data. Importantly, this study necessitates striking a balance between the number of themes and coding consistency. Precoding revealed that when the number of themes exceeds 11, coding consistency significantly decreases, resulting in severe coding biases.

⁴⁵ “Politics” includes subtopics such as party construction and organisation, propaganda and ideological work, discipline inspection, politics and law, united front work, and mass organisation management. “Economy” includes subtopics like industry and enterprise, regional economic planning, opening up and economic cooperation and economic system reform. For detailed descriptive statistics, please refer to Table 1.

Figure 2. Frequency of Coding Nodes for the 11 Major Topics

Source: Authors' computation.

Figure 3. Proportion of Each Topic in the Agenda Space

Source: Authors' computation.

Variables and Models

In line with hypothesis 1, this article investigates the impact of local Party secretaries' preferences for "politics", "economy" and other issues on their attention diversity post-assumption of office. Drawing from established empirical research on issue diversity in policy agendas,⁴⁶ this article employs the practice of gauging the "agenda size" of each local Party secretary's engagement with distinct policy issues as the dependent variable. The "agenda size" was computed based on the "coding nodes" assigned to various issues during text coding to signify the extent of attention that the local Party secretary dedicated to diverse policy matters after assuming office. A heightened inclination of a newly appointed local Party secretary towards a specific issue type is anticipated to result in increased policy attention, consequently influencing the corresponding agenda node count.⁴⁷

TABLE 1
A SUMMARY OF ALL VARIABLES

Variable	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
<i>Dependent Variable</i>				
Entropy	1.805	0.136	1.231	2.125
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
Politics	22.68	12.50	0	91
Economy	28.77	13.18	0	102
State organ affairs	2.253	1.934	0	12
Agriculture	7.061	5.082	0	41
Emergency management	3.086	2.840	0	22
Environment	3.965	4.114	0	35
People's livelihoods	7.198	3.882	0	23
Science & technology	2.185	2.378	0	18
Culture	3.389	2.829	0	21
Military	2.024	1.381	0	9
Others	3.345	2.262	0	16
<i>Control variables</i>				
Age	52.93	4.061	41	66
Degree	0.601	0.490	0	1
Major	0.386	0.487	0	1
Rotation	0.605	0.489	0	1
CPC Central	0.146	0.353	0	1
Agenda	85.96	33.45	0	215

Source: Authors' computation.

⁴⁶ Jennings et al., "Effects of the Core Functions of Government on the Diversity of Executive Agendas".

⁴⁷ The study also employs the relative proportion of attention given by local Party secretaries to specific policy issues as an alternative measurement for the independent variable. This value is calculated as the percentage of coding nodes assigned to a particular issue out of the total coding nodes. Due to space constraints, interested readers can request the results from the corresponding author.

Concerning the primary dependent variable, attention diversity, this article employs Shannon's entropy index, widely utilised to gauge the concentration or diffusion of political attention.⁴⁸ The formula for Shannon's H is as follows:

$$\text{Shannon's } H = -\sum_{i=1}^n p(x_i) * \ln p(x_i)$$

where x_i signifies a major topic; $p(x_i)$ denotes the proportion of total attention allocated to the major topic; and $\ln p(x_i)$ represents the natural logarithm of the attention proportion for the major topic. A higher Shannon's H value suggests a more equitable distribution of attention across different issues, while a lower score indicates a focus on a few core topics. Across all 707 secretaries, the Shannon's H scores range from 1.231 to 2.125, with a mean of 1.805. This outcome indicates that the issue priorities and attention structures of local Party secretaries exhibit significant heterogeneity.

Furthermore, this article incorporates essential control variables to account for potential influences on the attention diversity of local Party secretaries. These include the age of each local Party secretary (*age*), the education level of the local Party secretary (whether he or she holds a master's degree [*degree*]), the discipline of the local Party secretary's undergraduate degree (whether it is in science or engineering [*major*]), whether the local Party secretary was transferred from another city or from the central government (*rotation*), and whether the local Party secretary is a member of the CPC Central Committee (*CPC Central*). These variables consider the possible effects of individual characteristics, professional experience and political background on the local Party secretary's attention diversity. Information regarding control variables was sourced from the résumés of local Party secretaries available on government websites. Additionally, the authors introduced the "total agenda size" of policy issues that each local Party secretary engages with upon assuming office as a control variable (*agenda*). This inclusion aims to evaluate whether a more "diligent" approach by local Party secretaries influences their attention diversity. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables.

To test hypothesis 1, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was employed, integrating double-fixed effects for both time and province. Exploring the heterogeneity of hypotheses involved conducting group regression and assessing the significance of differences between groups through a seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) model.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Estimating the "Crowding-out Effect"

Table 2 depicts the marginal effects of local Party secretaries' attention allocation to various policy issues on attention diversity. Columns 1 and 2 reveal that, upon introducing control variables and the fixed effects of time and province, the attention that secretaries dedicated to economic and political issues exhibits a significant negative

⁴⁸ Boydstun, Bevan and Thomas, "The Importance of Attention Diversity and How to Measure It".

correlation with the Shannon's H index. More specifically, a one-percentage-point increase in the agenda size of economic or political affairs in a local Party secretary's agenda space results in a decrease of 0.009 and 0.005 in the Shannon's H score, respectively. This suggests that heightened attention to economic or political affairs by local Party secretaries distinctly crowds out other policy issues, thereby supporting hypothesis 1.⁴⁹

Consistent with hypothesis 1, there is a noticeable uptick in attention diversity when local Party secretaries concentrate more on various public policy issues on assuming office. Columns 3 to 11 in Table 2 illustrate that, despite the specific functions of public issues such as agriculture, people's livelihoods, environment, science and technology, and emergency management being executed at the local level within China's political system's organisational structure (*tiao-kuai*), these subjects do not constitute core issues in the daily political engagements of local Party secretaries. Allocating more attention to any of these issues tends to enhance the "distraction" of officials' attention rather than "concentrating" it. Consequently, diversified public policy affairs, in contrast to economic and political matters, can be considered mere "niche topics" for local Party elites.

Table 2 provides the estimated results of the control variables which reveal a noteworthy positive association between a local Party secretary's age and the entropy score. This suggests that older or mature local Party secretaries are more inclined towards issue diversity, while their younger counterparts tend to concentrate on political or economic matters. However, there is insufficient evidence to support the notion that other control variables exert a significant influence on the attention diversity of local Party secretaries. It is contended that variables related to secretaries' professional experience or political background merely encapsulate their individual characteristics during a specific historical period. For instance, Chinese local officials usually have intricate educational backgrounds, as most of them have a science or engineering bachelor's degree but they specialised in humanities or social sciences, such as economics or management, at the master's or doctoral level. There are also some officials who underwent training in Party schools. Consequently, it is challenging to determine empirically whether a specific stage of professional education has a stable and continuous impact on officials' attention preferences. The same challenge applies to variables associated with political background. Although factors such as transfer to a different region or holding a central committee member portfolio are pivotal in a local Party secretary's career, they represent temporary "impacts" that may not necessarily alter attention preferences cultivated through long-term work experience in local contexts. Another finding to highlight is that the influence of the "total agenda size" on attention diversity is notable only when core issues conspicuously overshadow non-core issues. This suggests that, while local Party secretaries increase their attention to economic

⁴⁹ This study also examines the impact of the agenda nodes for each subtopic under "Politics" and "Economy" on attention diversity. The empirical results provide further evidence of the crowding-out effect of core themes on non-core themes. For detailed results, contact the corresponding author.

TABLE 2
ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES (OLS) REGRESSION ESTIMATES

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
	Economy	Politics	State organ affairs	Agriculture	Emergency management	Environment	People's livelihoods	Science & technology	Culture	Military	Others
Issues	-0.009*** (-11.81)	-0.005*** (-6.36)	0.016*** (5.24)	0.007*** (5.46)	0.013*** (7.70)	0.008*** (4.22)	0.007*** (5.07)	0.006** (2.04)	0.014*** (7.63)	0.026*** (5.99)	0.015*** (4.91)
Agenda	0.003*** (9.79)	0.002*** (5.20)	-0.000 (-1.24)	-0.000 (-1.57)	-0.000 (-0.53)	-0.000 (-1.27)	-0.000 (-1.27)	0.000 (0.06)	-0.000** (-2.22)	-0.000 (-1.56)	-0.000 (-1.43)
Rotation	0.024*** (2.62)	-0.017 (-1.62)	0.004 (0.36)	0.000 (0.03)	0.001 (0.14)	-0.001 (-0.12)	-0.007 (-0.71)	-0.002 (-0.19)	-0.002 (-0.19)	0.002 (0.16)	0.006 (0.61)
Age	0.109 (1.60)	0.308*** (4.43)	0.208*** (2.89)	0.272*** (3.87)	0.193*** (2.78)	0.262*** (3.69)	0.280*** (3.89)	0.230*** (3.13)	0.290*** (4.12)	0.171** (2.37)	0.192*** (2.67)
Degree	0.010 (1.04)	0.004 (0.38)	0.009 (0.82)	0.009 (0.87)	0.004 (0.35)	0.008 (0.78)	0.009 (0.83)	0.002 (0.21)	0.002 (0.24)	-0.002 (-0.14)	0.001 (0.07)
Major	0.013 (1.47)	0.015 (1.63)	0.016 (1.63)	0.017* (1.80)	0.015 (1.61)	0.011 (1.13)	0.015 (1.56)	0.014 (1.43)	0.017* (1.85)	0.015 (1.54)	0.013 (1.41)
CPC Central	-0.009 (-0.70)	0.003 (0.22)	-0.018 (-1.24)	-0.003 (-0.21)	-0.013 (-0.93)	0.002 (0.12)	0.005 (0.37)	-0.006 (-0.42)	0.006 (0.41)	-0.006 (-0.42)	-0.019 (-1.27)
Constant	1.569*** (5.93)	0.808*** (2.98)	1.177*** (4.19)	0.986*** (3.61)	1.196*** (4.44)	1.012*** (3.67)	0.940*** (3.35)	1.130*** (3.94)	0.859*** (3.13)	1.346*** (4.78)	1.235*** (4.39)
Fixed effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	707	707	707	707	707	707	707	707	707	707	707
R-squared	0.356	0.248	0.232	0.233	0.256	0.227	0.227	0.205	0.255	0.247	0.237

Notes: Robust t-statistics in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Source: Authors' computation.

and political issues, expanding the overall volume of issues judiciously could enhance attention diversity.

Estimating the Effect of Heterogeneity

Hypotheses 2.1 to 2.3 are examined using grouping regression analysis. Table 3 presents the results for the independent variable “attention to economic issues” and Table 4 displays the results for the independent variable “attention to political issues”.

TABLE 3
EFFECTS OF HETEROGENEITY (ATTENTION TO ECONOMY AS INDEPENDENT VARIABLE)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Provincial	Municipal	Hu era	Xi era	East	Central & West
Economy	−0.003* (−1.85)	−0.009*** (−13.71)	−0.016*** (−13.91)	−0.006*** (−7.96)	−0.009*** (−8.57)	−0.004*** (−10.06)
Constant	1.778* (1.78)	1.894*** (6.07)	1.456*** (4.26)	2.052*** (5.58)	2.007*** (4.82)	1.646*** (5.06)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chi ² (1)		9.91***		43.88***		6.54**
Prob > chi ²		0.0016		0.0000		0.0201
Observations	95	612	288	419	233	474
R-squared	0.084	0.255	0.149	0.446	0.273	0.208

Notes: Robust t-statistics in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Source: Authors' computation.

In model 1 of Table 3, a one percentage point increase in the economic issue agenda size set by provincial Party secretaries and municipal Party secretaries corresponds to a decrease of 0.003 and 0.009 in the Shannon's H index, respectively. Crucially, the statistically significant difference at the one-per-cent level underscores that municipal Provincial secretaries exhibit a more pronounced crowding-out effect on economic issues, compared to provincial Party secretaries. This discrepancy could be ascribed to prefecture-level cities, as their officials tend to assume more specific responsibilities for economic growth promotion directly than provinces do, and this results in greater exclusivity of economic issues in the attention space of municipal Party secretaries. Moreover, this study observes a five-per-cent significance level indicating that the crowding-out effect of political issues on provincial Party secretaries' agenda space is stronger than that on municipal Party secretaries' (model 4 in Table 4). This finding suggests that the administrative level serves as a significant endogenous factor influencing cadres' divergent behaviour due to disparate incentive conditions at different levels, thereby shaping their issue priorities.

Model 2 in Table 4 reveals that the crowding-out effect of economic issues on other agenda items in the local Party secretaries' space during Xi's tenure (coefficient=−0.006) is markedly lower than that observed in Hu's era (coefficient= −0.016), signifying a statistically significant difference at the one-per-cent level. This finding suggests, to some extent, a decline in the significance of economic affairs in the issue

structure of local Party secretaries since the 18th CPC National Congress. Conversely, the crowding-out effect of political issues among local Party secretaries in Xi's era does not exhibit a significant disparity compared to the Hu era. Therefore, these results partially support hypothesis 2.2. To visually underscore the shifts in local Party secretaries' issue preferences across different periods, Figure 4 illustrates the alteration in local Party secretaries' attention space between the two periods, revealing a substantial increase in the proportion of political issues during the Xi era compared to the Hu era, coupled with varying degrees of reduced attention to economic and other niche issues.

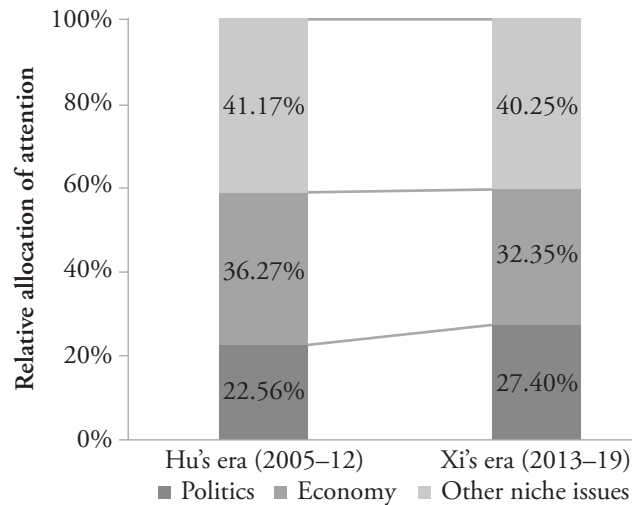
TABLE 4
EFFECTS OF HETEROGENEITY (ATTENTION TO POLITICS AS INDEPENDENT VARIABLE)

	Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Provincial	Municipal	Hu era	Xi era	East	Central & West
Politics	-0.007*** (-5.01)	-0.004*** (-4.24)	-0.004** (-1.99)	-0.005*** (-6.12)	-0.004*** (-2.67)	-0.005*** (-5.47)
Constant	0.091 (0.10)	0.954*** (2.72)	0.553 (1.27)	0.854** (2.25)	0.704 (1.52)	0.579* (1.67)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chi ² (1)		4.20**		0.29		0.52
Prob > chi ²		0.0405		0.5897		0.4697
Observations	95	612	288	419	233	474
R-squared	0.261	0.052	0.077	0.100	0.065	0.094

Notes: Robust t-statistics in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Source: Authors' computation.

Figure 4. Attention Space of Local Party Secretaries in the Periods of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping



Source: Authors' computation.

In the conclusive model 3 presented in Table 3, it becomes evident that the crowding-out impact of economic issues within the attention domain of local Party secretaries is more pronounced in eastern provinces compared to their counterparts in central and western provinces, with this intergroup distinction achieving statistical significance at the five-per-cent level. This outcome lends support to hypothesis 2.3. Conversely, as exhibited in model 6 of Table 4, there is no discernible regional heterogeneity in the influence of local Party secretaries' preferences for political issues on attention diversity. The finding suggests that regional disparities in the political attention of local Party secretaries are more intricately linked to their focus on economic or other niche issues rather than their engagement with political affairs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Utilising a unique data set documenting the daily public activities of local Party secretaries in China spanning from 2005 to 2019, this article pioneers a comprehensive analysis of the political attention bestowed by Chinese local Party elites, with a particular emphasis on issue prioritisation and diversity. The empirical findings underscore politics and the economy as focal points monopolising the attention of local Party secretaries, evidenced by their discernible crowding-out effect on other issues. Notably, when local Party secretaries exhibit preferences for political and economic matters, this correlates with diminished attention diversity. The subsequent heterogeneity analysis unveils that municipal Party and local Party secretaries hailing from eastern regions tend to prioritise economic affairs after assuming appointment. Furthermore, amid Xi's leadership and the launch of comprehensive reforms, the attention landscape of local Party secretaries has undergone structural shifts compared to the Hu era. Specifically, the crowding-out impact of economic issues has notably diminished, while the proportion of political issues in their agenda space has experienced an upward trajectory.

These findings constitute empirical contributions to the existing body of research on the configuration of political attention in China. They highlight the dynamic nature of issue preferences among local Party elites within the CPC's hierarchical promotion system, where cadre management offers distinct promotion prospects for individuals at different administrative levels and ages.⁵⁰ The results reveal a nuanced landscape: while the crowding-out effect of political issues is more pronounced in the attention space of provincial Party secretaries than in that of municipal Party secretaries, such a situation is not mirrored in the case of economic issues. This suggests a shift in the "performance signals" cadres aim to convey as they are promoted up the hierarchy. Specifically, as they approach higher echelons, provincial Party secretaries may seek to demonstrate not only competence in driving local economic growth but also robust political leadership and unwavering loyalty to the CPC Central Committee. This aligns with earlier studies contending that economic performance alone inadequately

⁵⁰ Yan and Yuan, "City Administrative Level and Municipal Party Secretaries' Promotion".

explains the political promotion of provincial Party secretaries,⁵¹ thus providing novel micro-level evidence to reinforce this perspective.

Conversely, age has had a moderating influence on the pervasive emphasis on economic growth among local officials in China since the advent of reform and opening up. Notably, this article discerns that older officials exhibit a more diversified distribution of political attention. Such a phenomenon can be attributed to the constrained promotion opportunities dictated by the CPC's established retirement policies. Consequently, older officials adopt a comparatively conservative stance in their issue selection, diverting attention from the economy and prioritising political achievements—a departure from the tendencies observed among their younger counterparts.

While this article refrains from delivering definitive conclusions regarding the regional factors impacting the political attention of local officials, its findings imply a discernible adaptability in issue priorities by local Party secretaries in tandem with the broader macro environment. Notably, within the central and western regions—despite their pronounced imperative for economic development vis-à-vis the eastern region—the allocation of attention to economic affairs by local Party secretaries does not parallel the fervour exhibited by their eastern counterparts. This underscores a nuanced dynamic wherein various pressing policy concerns vie for the limited agenda space among local Party secretaries in central and western China. These insights prompt a re-evaluation of the universality of findings, underlining the imperative of nuanced considerations when probing the conduct and policy emphasis of local authorities.

This article carries significant implications for comprehending elite politics in the Xi Jinping era. Adopting a longitudinal perspective, it posits that the fluctuations in attention diversity among local Party secretaries have formed a novel pattern of interactions within the Chinese bureaucracy since Xi assumed office. Xi's multifaceted reforms, spanning enhanced Party political leadership and the implementation of new policies across the economic, societal, environmental and agricultural domains, aim to transition China from rapid growth to high-quality development. Nevertheless, there is a discernible reduction in local Party secretaries' attention to economic issues alongside a heightened focus on political work. Consequently, the expansion of political issues in the agenda space unmistakably compresses the room available for economic and other niche policy matters (Figure 4). This suggests a certain tension between Xi's overarching reform intentions and the responses of local officials. Despite Xi's call for comprehensive reforms and alignment with the CPC Central Committee's will, local Party elites strategically determine their issue priorities. Evidently, political affairs assume a higher priority than other concerns, possibly influenced by the post-18th Party Congress anti-corruption campaign, coupled with the resurgence of traditional party ideology and Maoist moral norms.⁵² Therefore, excelling “in political

⁵¹ Su Fubing et al., “Local Officials’ Incentives and China’s Economic Growth: Tournament Thesis Reexamined and Alternative Explanatory Framework”, *China & World Economy* 20, no. 4 (2014): 1–18.

⁵² Li Lianjiang, “The Cadre Resignation Tide in the Wake of the 18th Party Congress”, *China: An International Journal* 17, no. 3 (2019): 188–99.

aspects” not only aligns with the current political climate in China but also underscores the local cadres’ unwavering loyalty to General Secretary Xi. Simultaneously, this has resulted in a disproportionate shift between the Hu and Xi eras in the distribution of local Party secretaries’ attention across different issues.

The comprehensive reforms initiated since 2013 have notably exacerbated the dispersion of attention among local cadres. This is because cadres must now navigate through economic, political, environmental and a myriad other policy issues when determining their primary focus. The scattering of political attention is unquestionably linked to the manifold governance challenges emerging in China during this transition period. Crucially, it signifies the CPC’s endeavour to mould local officials into “all-round cadres” capable of tackling diverse risks and challenges. Here, the CPC’s expectations extend beyond the traditional emphasis on the ability to promote economic development or resolve specific policy issues. Instead, local cadres are now expected to enhance the Party’s leadership while navigating and responding to a spectrum of governance challenges. The concept of becoming an “all-round cadre” involves striking a delicate equilibrium between prioritising core policy issues and diversifying political attention. Achieving this equilibrium is no easy feat. This article proposes that current local officials resort to expanding the “agenda size” of different issues to augment attention diversity. In essence, under Xi Jinping’s leadership, local officials are becoming progressively engrossed, compelled to showcase their attention allocation across various issues by setting a greater number of agendas. However, this intensified activity may lead to a “failure” in government attention allocation, where agenda-setting transforms into mere rhetoric without effective translation into concrete actions.

This article has limitations, despite its contributions. Firstly, it excludes other cadre types, such as grassroots government and central ministry leaders, who also hold substantial roles in the CPC’s cadre hierarchy. Secondly, the method employed here, based on topic models and text coding, demands significant time for manual identification of text topics, presenting a high cost. Leveraging machine learning for automatic coding could enhance efficiency and consistency. Thirdly, further refinement of research findings is encouraged through additional data sources, such as local government fiscal expenditures, for a more comprehensive understanding, including the causal identification of factors shaping the policy priorities of local officials.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank all graduate students and research assistants at Tsinghua University who participated in the data collection and processing for this article. They are also grateful to the National Social Sciences Foundation of China (grant no. 21BZZ042) and Tsinghua University Independent Research Program (grant 2022THZWJC26) for providing funding for the research. Special appreciation is also extended to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

APPENDIX I
THE POLICY TOPIC CODES SYSTEM

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

Notes: The reason for categorising "State Organ Affairs" as a separate primary theme rather than including it under "Politics" is primarily due to the political structure of local governance in China. While both the People's Congress (PC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) are under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the daily operations of these two institutions are not typically managed directly by local Party secretaries, nor do they involve membership in the standing committee of the local Party committee. Although in some provinces or cities, the Party secretary concurrently serves as the chairperson of the PC Standing Committee, the specific affairs of the PC are usually managed by an executive vice-chairperson. Furthermore, within China's Party-state system, the affairs of the PC and CPPCC are not considered traditional party affairs.

Source: Compilation by the authors.