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Political Attention in a Single-Leading-Party State: A Comparative Study of the Policy Agenda in China, 2003–2019

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ABSTRACT This article explores the political attention of an authoritarian regime from a comparative perspective. Data from daily meetings of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council from 2003 to 2019 reveal the punctuated characteristics of China's macropolitical agenda, which is less intensely punctuated than those in democracies. Further, in the absence of party competition and power balance, the authoritarian party uses the “leading group mechanism” to strengthen its leadership's agenda since this mechanism helps expand the party's capacity to address governance challenges. Thus, authoritarian resilience must be considered when using political attention theory to analyze China's agenda-setting pattern.

Keywords: political attention; comparative agenda analysis; punctuated equilibrium; policy venue; China

Introduction

The dynamics of the policy agenda are inextricably linked to the political system. In the US, the president and the Congress are the most important policy venues in the macro-political system, but their capacity for leadership on the agenda still differs. One study shows that the president's attention to the fields of defense, health, environment, macro-economics, law, and international affairs could significantly affect the agenda-setting in Congress (Rutledge and Larsen Price 2014). Additionally, popular presidents have the ability to shift Congress's attention to the topics that the president emphasizes (Lovett et al. 2015). These findings illustrate the president's leadership on the agenda and the responsiveness of Congress. In European parliamentary democracies, the role of parties or party alliances in agenda-setting has received more attention. Political parties often

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influence the policy agenda through competitive elections and various parliamentary activities, but whether a party can translate its policy preferences into a formal agenda is affected by factors such as competitor activities, changes in public appeals, or the stability of multi-party coalitions (Breeman et al. 2009; Vliegenthart et al. 2011; Froio et al. 2017). However, in authoritarian China, the party-state system is the core feature of daily politics (Guo 2001). The State Council (SC) works under the leadership of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCPCC); thus, in the absence of democratic mechanisms, what are the dynamics of political attention in China's macro-political system? How does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) demonstrate its capacity for leadership of the agenda in daily governance? Additionally, how do the interactions among China's macro-policy venues differ from those in liberal democracies?

This article relies on a new dataset based on the daily meetings of the CCPCC and the SC from 2003 to 2019 and presents the structure of the political attention of the CCPCC and the SC. In addition, the longitudinal multi-issue analysis of policy agenda provides new evidence regarding punctuated equilibrium in China's macropolitical system, but we do not find that the punctuated instability in China is higher than that in major democratic states. More importantly, the case study of attention diversity shows that in contrast to parties in liberal democracies that influence the policy agenda through party manifestos or parliamentary activities, the CCP's control over policy agendas reflects the essence of its authoritarian party; thus, the CCP enhances its capacity for leadership of the agenda by establishing "central leading groups" within the party, and this mechanism helps to increase the party's agenda space and to gather resources to address major policy issues.

This article offers two marginal contributions to the existing literature. On the one hand, through a comparative analysis of the dynamics of China's macro-policy agenda, this paper deepens the understanding of the differences in political attention between a single-leading-party state and liberal democracies. In a democratic system, the capacity for leadership of the agenda by parties or executive authorities is often affected by factors such as party competition or coalition, legislative checks and balances, and pressure from public opinion. However, in authoritarian China, due to the absence of democratic mechanisms, the capacity for leadership of the agenda of the CCP seems unquestionable, but under certain circumstances, such as the emergence of a strong party leader or the need to solve specific governance challenges, the CCP further enhances its capacity for leadership of the agenda, and the formulation of many important policy issues is transferred from the government to central leading groups within the party, which could trigger policy changes in certain areas. On the other hand, this paper provides a new perspective enhancing the understanding of authoritarian resilience (Nathan 2003). Recent studies have explored why authoritarian rules can maintain long-term stability in China in terms of the divided state power structure (Cai 2008), media control (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011), inclusive regime (Yan 2011), cadre management system (Tsai and Kou 2015), etc. This article contends that from the perspective of political attention, the leading group mechanism is also an important source of the resilience of communist China. These central leading groups, which are directly managed by the general secretary, perform the function of centralizing political power and administrative resources. Therefore, the leading group mechanism can not only be used to cope with increasing governance difficulties due to long-term rapid development but

also help the top leaders consolidate their core status by enhancing the capacity for leadership of the agenda.

Political Attention in Liberal Democracies and Authoritarian States

The policy dynamics approach created a new direction for policy agenda research, which is largely related to the discovery of punctuated equilibrium theory. This theory contends that the long-term stability of policies is occasionally interrupted by dramatic changes. These policy changes are the result of interactions between the “policy image” and “policy venue”. Policy change occurs when a new policy image finds acceptable space in a new venue, while the old venue loses control of the issue (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The United States’ decentralized power system provides important institutional frictions for the punctuated equilibrium of political attention, including a policy subsystem consisting of powerful interest groups, a federal system covering 50 states, a competitive congressional body, and an active judicial system (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Other studies of non-US democracies have increasingly focused on the influence of political parties on the policy agenda because scholars speculate whether party manifestos or campaign agendas can translate into government priorities (Froio 2013), but these studies present ambiguous views. Earlier studies argue that parties’ preferences can cause a shift in policy attention because parties can obtain power through competitive elections (Hofferbert and Budge 1992; Klingemann et al. 1994), while other studies highlight the limited role of parties in agenda-setting because the ability of parties to translate their preferences into policy outputs is constrained by a limited cognitive capacity and institutional bottlenecks (Jones and Baumgartner 2012). Nevertheless, although the control of parties over policy agendas may be limited, the role of parties in the policy process cannot be simply ignored since some studies propose that parties can act as policy entrepreneurs or even voting bodies in some Western European democracies (Walgrave and Varone 2008; John and Jennings 2010).

Compared to liberal democracies, Lam and Chan (2015) systematically studied the dynamics of political attention in Hong Kong in the context of colonial paternalism. Based on a longitudinal analysis of diverse documents from Hong Kong’s political system from 1946 to 2007, the authors find that punctuated equilibrium still exists in the authoritarian regime and that policy punctuation becomes more severe when the political system is more centralized. Using a dataset of provincial government spending and labor disputes, Chan and Zhao (2016) find that the “information disadvantage” of officials is an important reason for China’s more intense punctuated equilibrium. Recent studies investigating political attention in authoritarian China extend beyond examining the punctuated characteristics of the policy agenda. Many studies focus on the change and impact of elites’ attention in China. For example, written directives (*pishi*), which are an important mechanism in China’s bureaucracy, are often used to measure the attention of political elites. Tsai and Liao (2017) argue that *pishi* play a signaling role in the authoritarian bureaucracy by enabling lower-level officials to understand the policy issues that higher-level leaders care about. Chen and Meng (2016) present the attention allocation of Mao Zedong based on 2,614 written directives from 1949 to 1976, and a subsequent study further reveals that the attention of political leaders can affect the termination of public agencies and that agencies that received more written directives

from Mao were less likely to have been terminated (Chen et al. 2019). In addition to *pishi*, domestic visits by authoritarian leaders are regarded as a clear signal of their attention preferences, and frequent domestic visits can significantly affect local governments' performance (Ren et al. 2018). However, some studies note that higher political attention is not a necessary condition for better governance performance in China. A study of China's environmental target system suggests that in the absence of political attention, a more centralized institutional context plays a decisive role in improving environmental performance (Mu 2018).

The existing literature presents diversified views regarding political attention in China, but from the perspective of comparative agenda analysis, some puzzles remain unsolved. On the one hand, Baumgartner and Jones's research of the US policy agenda in the context of federalism does not assign particular importance to the role of political parties (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005), but China's "single-leading-party regime" obviously differs from the United States; therefore, it is important to consider the role of the Chinese Communist Party in China's political attention. Although some studies focus on the attentional changes of Chinese political elites, there is a considerable gap in the understanding of the general pattern of the political attention of this authoritarian party. On the other hand, parties in parliamentary democracies transform their preferences into a government agenda after competing to become the ruling party. In these democracies, the interaction among the main policy venues is reflected in the party competition and the balance between the parliament and the executive. However, there is no party competition in China, and the head of government is also a core member of the politburo of the CCPCC. Hence, how do the authoritarian party's preferences become the national policy agenda? How can we understand the relationship among the core policy venues in a party-state regime? In the remainder of this article, we respond to the above theoretical issues through a comparative agenda analysis.

Data and Methods

Methodology: Topic Modeling

Text coding is a widely used approach in the literature concerning political attention. Researchers code various types of political texts according to the topic codebook developed by the Comparative Agendas Project. However, text coding is very complex and subjective, and analytic reliability may not be guaranteed, especially when researchers consider a large number of documents (Quinn et al. 2010).

This study approaches topic modeling (TM) instead of human coding to process text corpora. This approach is adopted because not only the algorithm in TM reduces manual labor and avoids unintentional coding bias but also, more importantly, TM does not require the category and coding rules of the topic to be determined in advance, which is of great value for our study because there is no guarantee that the existing topic categories can be fully applied to China's institutional context, especially the CCP, and it is difficult to provide an objectively defined coding system *a priori*. TM satisfies the conditions that render text analysis reliable, as follows: TM is clear and automated, defines categories inductively rather than *a priori*, and recognizes words based on context (DiMaggio et al. 2013); therefore, TM meets the needs of our research. TM emphasizes the intentionality of the choice and placement of words. Therefore,

mathematically modeling words and their placement in a given text can reveal potential rather than immediately visible topics or the thematic structure in a large corpus of documents. TM has proven to produce consistent substantive results in extensive political science research and has been used in the automatic analysis of the Chinese corpus (Miller 2013).

Data Collection and Processing

Political attention in democracies can be measured using diversified datasets from parliament, cabinet, and politicians' speeches. Recently, empirical studies have explored social changes in China through text mining of government work reports (Wei et al. 2018). However, government work reports have a fixed content arrangement and are delivered only once a year; thus, it is impossible to track the dynamics of China's daily governance. Other studies use written directives to measure the attention of political elites (Chen et al. 2019), but the cost of obtaining written directives is high, especially from leaders who are still in office, and it is difficult to collect all written directives through public channels. In addition, in contrast to liberal democracies, China's legislature (the National People's Congress, NPC) cannot exert checks and balances on the party and the government, answer open questions or hold debates; thus, the NPC is not an ideal target for obtaining data in this study. To more accurately capture the everyday attention of China's macropolitical system, this research establishes a new text dataset. This dataset contains press releases on the daily meetings of the CCPCC and the SC issued by China's official news outlet, *Xinhua News Agency*, from 2003 to 2019. "Daily meetings" in this study refers to sessions that discuss important party or state affairs weekly or monthly, and the sessions are presided over by the general secretary of the CCPCC or the premier of the SC; thus, issues discussed or decisions made at the daily meetings can reflect the will of the party and the government. We selected the following sessions in the period since 2003 that meet the above conditions: (1) sessions of the politburo and its standing committee (SPSC), (2) sessions of the politburo group study (SPGS), (3) sessions of the central leading group (SCLG), and (4) executive meetings of the State Council (EMSC). These four types of sessions in China's macropolitical system are held regularly and frequently. The press releases issued by *Xinhua News Agency* include a basic introduction to the main content of each meeting and extract the important speeches of the general secretary or the premier at the meeting. Therefore, these monthly or weekly observations of sessions can be used to record the daily dynamics at China's highest political level. The texts of all releases are collected from the *Major Chinese Newspapers Database*.¹ The information of the session texts obtained in this study is shown in Table 1.

To prepare the corpus for TM, we first preprocessed all collected texts in two steps. (1) In this study, Chinese word segmentation was applied by using the *Jieba* Chinese word segmentation package in *Python 3.0*. *Jieba* is widely used for the segmentation of Chinese political texts since it allows researchers to provide customized dictionaries based on their professional fields and research purposes, thus improving the accuracy of segmentation (Wang and Zhang 2017). For example, the Chinese term "Ba Xiang Gui Ding (eight-point austerity rules)" should not be divided into separate words, such as "Ba Xiang (eight-point)" and "Gui Ding (rules)". Therefore, to enable specialized or new Chinese vocabularies to be accurately segmented, we added some customized dictionaries.² (2) Stopwords, punctuation, and numbers were removed. Chinese texts

Table 1. Daily meeting information

Sessions	Introduction	Total
<i>CCPCC</i>		
SPSC	Politburo and its standing committee exercise the functions and powers of the CCPCC during the intersessional period of the CCPCC.	202
SPGS	Politburo group study system was established in 2003. Scholars in related fields make a speech, and members of the politburo exchange their views during this session.	137
SCLG	Central leading group is a unique organization mechanism of the CCPCC. The Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform and the Central Leading Group of Finance and Economy chaired by Xi Jinping have become new daily policy venues of the CCPCC since 2013.	65
<i>SC</i>		
EMSC	EMSC discusses and determines various important state and public issues, such as the plans for national economic and social development, the state budget, major policies and measures for macro-control and reform, important state and public management affairs, laws, proposals and administrative rules and regulations.	689

contain a large number of stopwords, including mood particles, connectives, and personal names. These words usually have no clear meaning in the text and need to be removed. We loaded four Chinese stopword lists during the word segmentation.³ In addition, some Chinese terms that have a minimal effect on the actual meaning of the text but appear frequently were removed by part-of-speech tagging, such as “*Ting Qu* (listen to)”, “*Qiang Diao* (emphasize)”, and “*Zhi Chu* (point out)⁴. After the preprocessing tasks, a standard corpus was established.

Modeling and Outputs

Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) is among the algorithms most commonly used for topic modeling (Blei et al. 2003). LDA treats topics as the probability distribution of terms, while documents are the probability distribution of multiple topics; thus, a single text in a document collection can share a set of topics with different probabilities. In addition to LDA, alternative algorithms, such as nonnegative matrix factor (NMF), can effectively uncover latent topics in a corpus (Lee and Seung 1999). Compared with LDA, NMF has the advantage of involving less parameter selection in the modeling process. Furthermore, NMF can identify the niche themes that are not easily identified in LDA models (Greene and Cross 2017), which is of special relevance for our study because some specialized policy issues are often discussed in the daily meetings of the CCPCC and the SC. Therefore, we used the NMF algorithm as the TM method to process the corpora. The core step of TM is to determine how many topics the model should generate. Roberts et al. (2014) suggest that for small and medium-sized corpora, changing the number of topics (K) from 5 to 20 is a good start. Therefore, for the two corpora in this study, we allow the K value to vary from 10 to 40. Specifically, for the modeling of the CCPCC’s corpus, the topic structure is optimal when $K = 21$. When $K > 21$, some topics are inappropriately divided into two or three subtopics; for example, “ethnic” is divided into “Xinjiang” and “Tibet”. Moreover, when $K < 21$, some important topics are

Figure 1. Number of sessions by TM labels (CCPCC, 2003–2019)

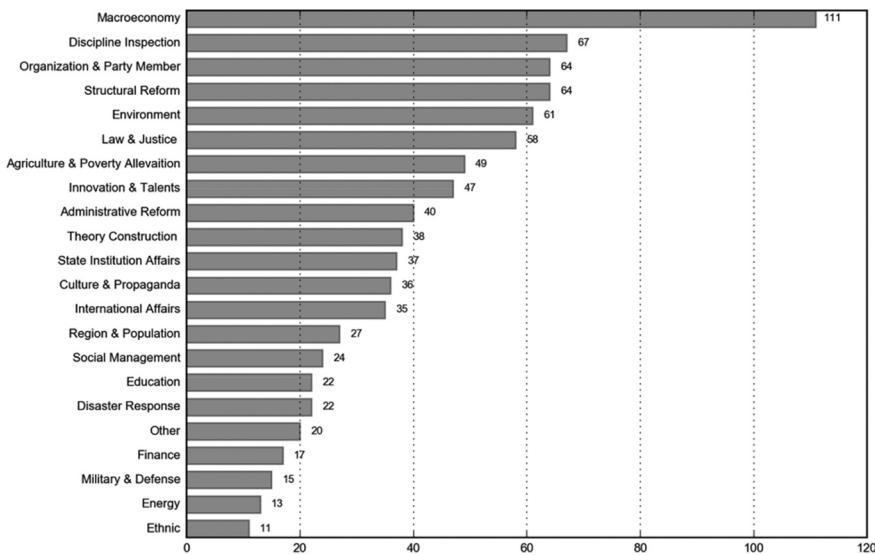
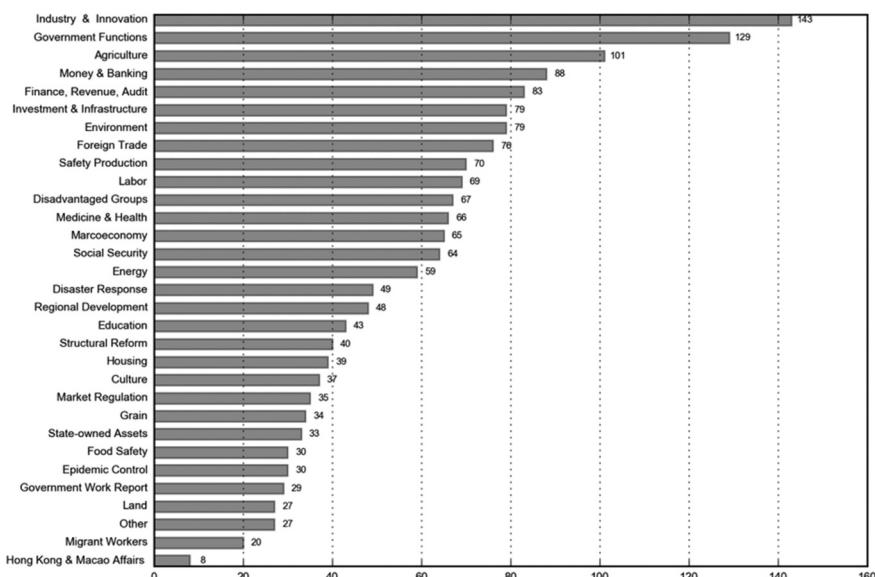


Figure 2. Number of sessions by TM labels (SC, 2003–2019)



missed, such as environment and finance. Similarly, the text analysis of the SC's corpus generates the most interpretable results when $K = 30$. We determined the labels of each topic based on the keyword clusters and the documents most relevant to the keywords.⁵ Finally, we identified the themes of each daily meeting of the CCPCC and the SC from 2003 to 2019 according to the TM labels ([Figures 1 and 2](#)). The final model outputs show that many traditional policy themes are consistent with the CAP codebook,⁶ including macroeconomy, agriculture, education, environment, energy, international affairs, etc. However, the model also generates many policy topics with Chinese characteristics, such as “discipline inspection”, “organization and party member”, and “theory construction”, and many of these topics are components of the party’s agenda. Notably, the NMF algorithm helps identify some niche or subdivided topics. For example, the topic of “domestic commerce” in the CAP codebook is subdivided into multiple topics in this study, including “market regulation”, “disaster response”, and “money and banking”; “agriculture” and “grain” are also divided into two independent themes. The above theme categories correspond to the functions of Chinese government ministries, which is more consistent with China’s political operation.

Findings and Discussion

The Attention Structure and Dynamics of the CCPCC and the SC

The common issues that occupy a large amount of agenda space in liberal democracies include macroeconomics, defense, international affairs, government operations, and law and justice (Jennings et al. [2011](#)). In China, issues such as “macroeconomy”, “military and defense”, “international affairs”, and “law and justice” form the main content of the CCP’s agenda structure, and the SC is not a major venue for discussing these policy issues. The authoritarian party’s absolute control over core agendas illustrates that party-state relations should be seriously considered in research concerning China’s political attention. In addition, the agenda content shows that China is in a period of economic and social transformation. The long-term pursuit of economic growth introduced problems such as environmental pollution, corruption, and social unfairness; thus, these issues account for a considerable proportion of the agenda structure. We also report the results of a longitudinal analysis of the topic keywords of each policy issue. As shown in [Figures 3 and 4](#), not all policy issues will always appear on China’s macropolitical agenda. Only a few topics that are important or closely related to government functions, such as macroeconomy and agriculture, are of long-term concern to the CCPCC and the SC.

Another important task in longitudinal analyses of political attention is testing whether the distribution of policy attention is “leptokurtic”. A leptokurtic distribution is considered a typical feature of punctuated equilibrium in the policy process and can be tested by statistics such as kurtosis and L-kurtosis. A leptokurtic distribution indicates that the policy change is characterized by long periods of stability and occasional dramatic shifts (Jones and Baumgartner [2005](#)). Similar to relevant studies, we calculate the “annual change scores” of the percentage change of each topic in the agenda structure of the CCPCC and the SC and test the punctuated characteristics of political attention through the distribution of these yearly change scores. Specifically, for the CCPCC, we obtain 247 valid observations of yearly change scores from 2003 to 2019, while the SC

Figure 3. Keyword frequency of 21 topics of the CCPCC over time

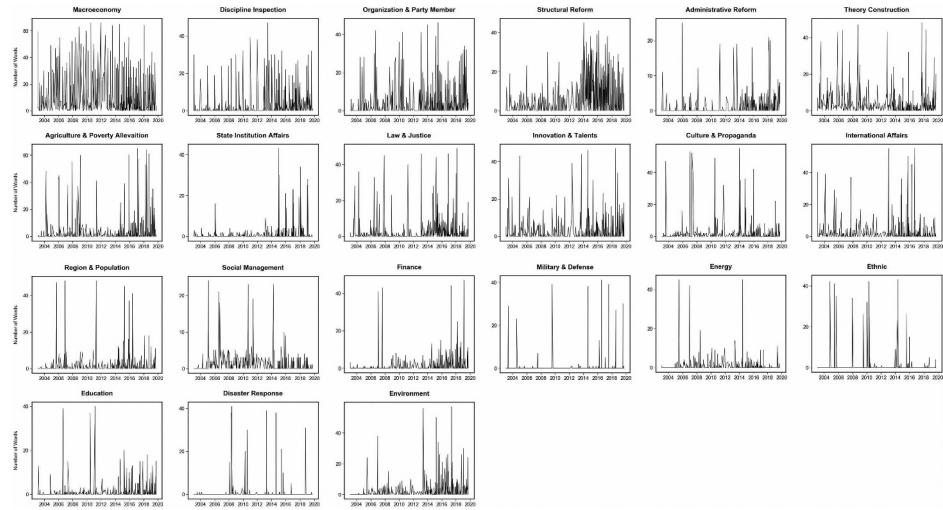


Figure 4. Keyword frequency of 30 topics of the SC over time

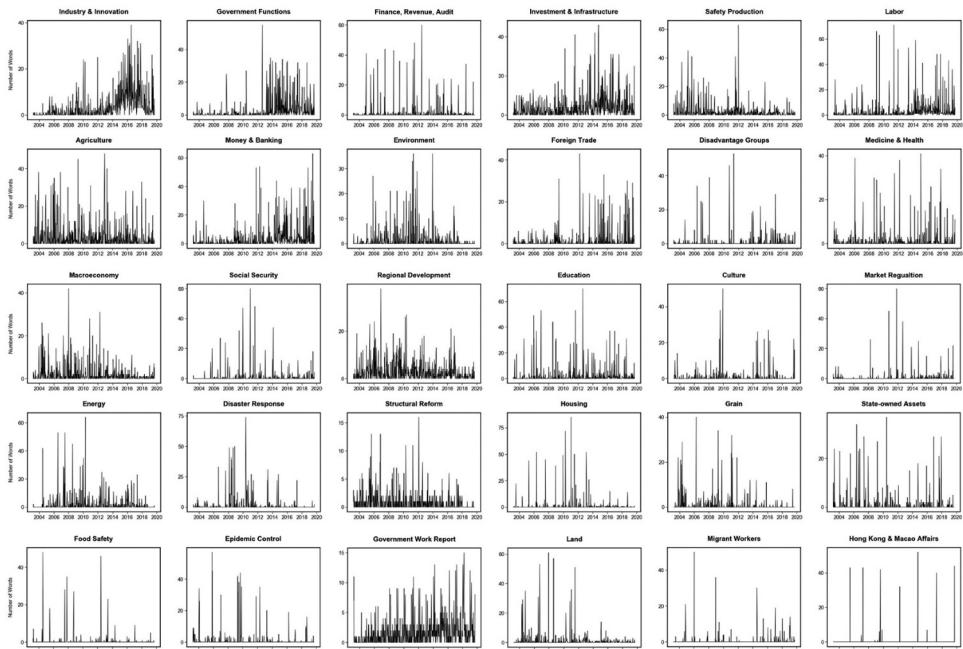
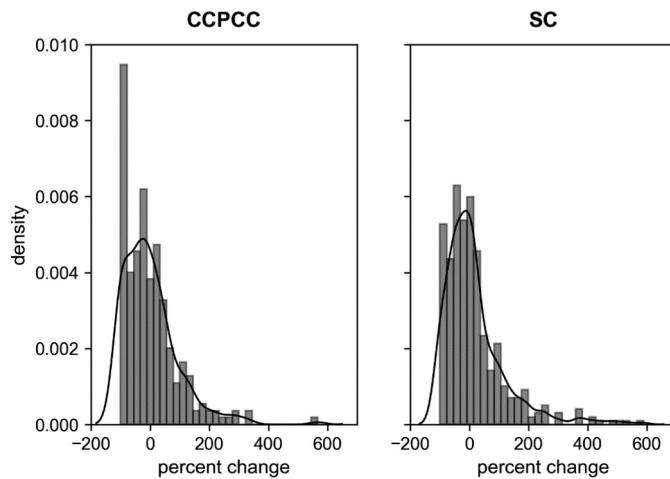


Figure 5. Distribution of the percent change (CCPCC and SC, 2003–2019)**Table 2.** Statistics and normality tests of the percentage change in the policy attention of the CCPCC and the SC

Statistics	Value
<i>CCPCC</i>	
Mean	-0.15
Median	-18.04
Standard deviation	94.66
Inter-quartile range	-65
Skewness	1.80
Kurtosis	5.79
L-kurtosis	0.201
Min	-100
Max	566.67
Shapiro–Wilk W statistic	0.855***
<i>N</i>	247
<i>SC</i>	
Mean	16.53
Median	-5.22
Standard deviation	107.03
Inter-quartile range	-50
Skewness	2.11
Kurtosis	6.07
L-kurtosis	0.241
Min	-100
Max	588.89
Shapiro–Wilk W statistic	0.813***
<i>N</i>	429

Note: *** $p < 0.01$.

generates 428 valid observations. The results are shown in [Table 2](#) and [Figure 5](#). The distribution of the annual percentage change observations in the policy topics of the CCPCC and the SC show a leptokurtic distribution as follows: a “slender peak” with “weaker shoulders” and “fat tails”. A Shapiro–Wilks test, which is considered an optimal method for analyzing punctuations (John and Jennings [2010](#)), was also applied to the original dataset. The results of the W-statistic also provide evidence of the punctuated equilibrium of China’s macropolitical system. Statistically, the L-kurtosis value (LK) of the SC is 0.241, which is lower than or close to the change in questions (LK = 0.27) of Denmark’s prime minister (1971–2003), the change to hearings in the House (LK = 0.33) and Senate (LK = 0.27) in the US (1828–2000), and the agenda change (LK = 0.332) of the European Council (1975–2010) (figures from Baumgartner et al. [2009](#); Alexandrova et al. [2012](#)). Moreover, although the long-term dynamics of political attention in China are characterized by punctuated instability, the L-kurtosis value of the SC’s agenda changes in this research is lower than previous studies’ estimates of policy punctuation in authoritarian regimes; for example, the annual change in China’s regional government spending has an average L-kurtosis of 0.87 (Chan and Zhao [2016](#)), and Hong Kong’s LK of budgetary allocation during the postcolonial era is 0.713 (Lam and Chan [2015](#)). Thus, the present research does not support the findings of previous studies suggesting that an authoritarian system amplifies the intensity of policy punctuation. A recent study also showed that the punctuation of budget processes in China is almost the same as that in Western countries (Li et al. [2019](#)). The lower L-kurtosis value in the present research may be related to the data and time range we selected but, more importantly, this finding may indicate that both China and Western democracies are facing institutional frictions though in different forms. For example, in China, different ministries have different capacities to influence policy agendas (Lian [2016](#)); large ministries, such as the National Development and Reform Commission, always have a greater say in agenda-setting; more importantly, different ministries represent different interest groups and, therefore, compete for agenda space.

[Table 3](#) presents the policy topics with changes exceeding 250 per cent and captures the information related to major policy punctuations in China from 2003 to 2019. Among the 12 major punctuations, more than half occurred when the leadership changed or an

Table 3. Major policy punctuations in China’s macropolitical system (2003–2019)

Percentage change (%)	Policy topic	From/To	Policy venue
258	Structural reform	2013/2014	CCPCC
293	Culture	2009/2010	SC
304	Investment and infrastructure	2013/2014	SC
362	Structural reform	2013/2014	SC
325	Environment	2015/2016	CCPCC
327	Region and population	2013/2014	CCPCC
422	Industry and innovation	2005/2006	SC
451	Government function	2013/2014	SC
481	Medicine and health	2004/2005	SC
538	Disaster response	2008/2009	SC
567	Theory construction	2017/2018	CCPCC
588	Land	2003/2004	SC

important conference was held. For example, after Li Keqiang assumed office as premier in 2013, he initiated a massive reform of government functions (*Fang Guan Fu* Reform). Additionally, at the end of 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCPCC proposed the “comprehensively deepening reform” and further relaxed the “one-child policy”.⁷ In 2017, the CCP’s 19th National Congress updated the guiding ideology of the party,⁷ and the CCP subsequently embarked upon a period of learning new theory. Additionally, other policy punctuations are related to external events. For example, after the outbreak of SARS in 2003, the government’s attention to the “medical and health” issue increased by 481 per cent. Similarly, the “southern snow hazard” and the “Wenchuan earthquake” in 2008 considerably intensified the government’s attention toward “disaster response” (538 per cent).

Policy Venue and Attention Distribution under the Party-State Regime

A stacked-area chart can present political attention over time and across topics. As shown in Figure 6, after Xi Jinping became the party’s leader at the end of 2012, the attention distribution of the CCPCC started to become more “distracted”. Differing from Hu’s era during which the party’s attention focused more on economic and party affairs, during Xi’s era the CCPCC paid more attention to public policy issues, such as the environment, finance, and administrative reform, which led to a relative decline in attention to the macroeconomy and party affairs. The attention distribution of the SC does not show the same trends as that of the CCPCC. As shown in Figure 7, during Xi’s era, the SC paid considerable attention to “industry and innovation” and “government functions” rather than evenly allocating its attention to different issues. The attention distribution dynamics

Figure 6. Variation in the policy attention of the CCPCC over time

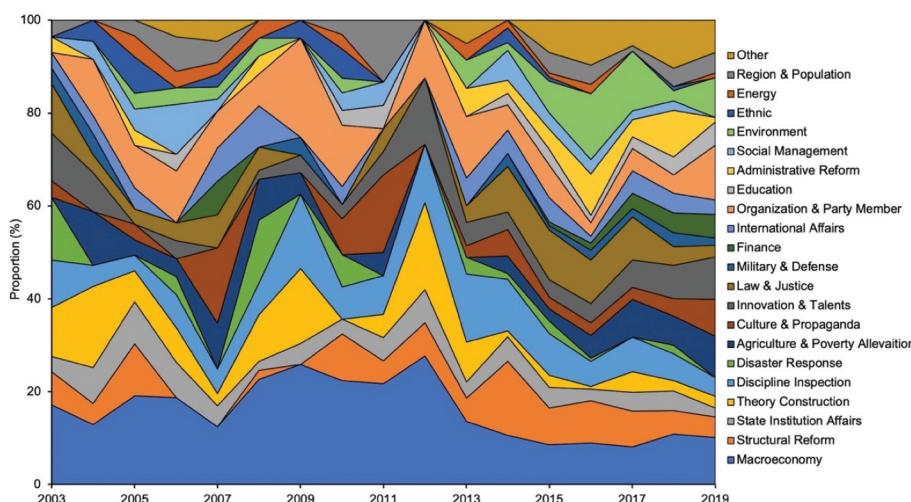
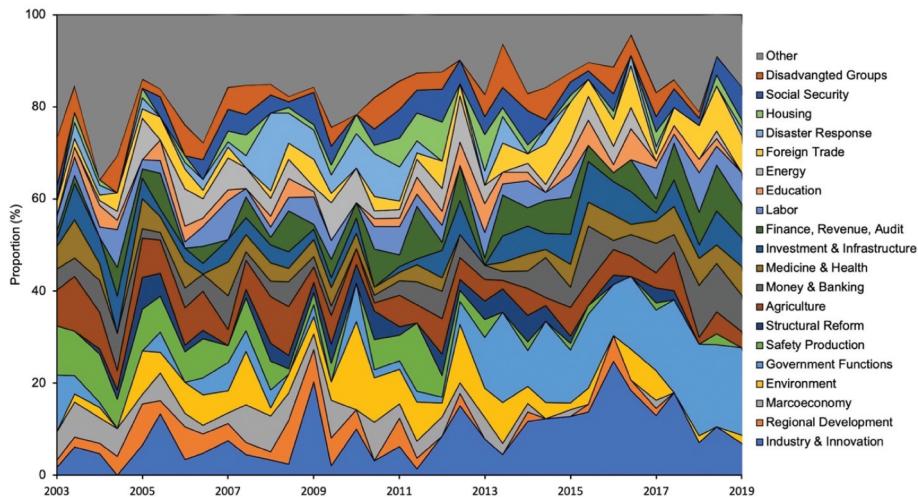
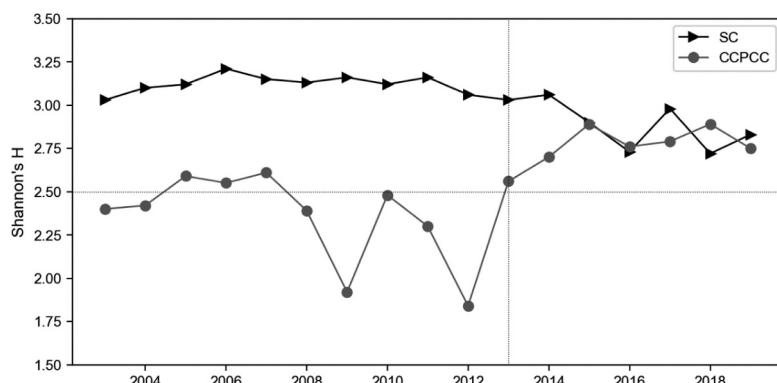


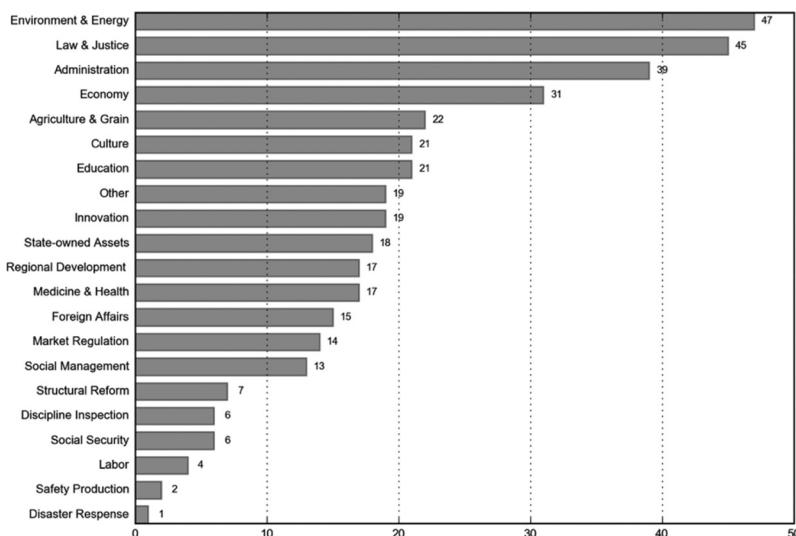
Figure 7. Variation in the policy attention of the SC over time

were further confirmed by calculating the annual information entropy (Shannon's H) of policy agendas (Boydston et al. 2014). After 2013, the Shannon H index of the CCPCC began to rise, while that of the SC declined ([Figure 8](#)). Thus, the following question arises: how should we understand the changes in the agenda diversity of China's macropolitical system in different periods?

Figure 8. Attention diversity of the CCPCC and the SC (2003–2019)

Scholars believe that Xi Jinping adopted a strong rule to concentrate power within the party centre since 2013 (Lam 2015; Shirk 2018). To strengthen the party's control over major policy issues, central leading groups have been established under the leadership of Xi. Among these leading groups, the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform (CLGDOR) and the Central Leading Group of Finance and Economy (CLGFE) are the most important. The leader of the CLGDOR is Xi Jinping, and the group members include the premier, first deputy premier, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee in charge of party affairs, and ministers of several core ministries of the CCPCC and the SC. The CLGDOR generally holds a plenary session each month at a frequency similar to that of the SPCS. The CLGFE is another venue for daily decision making in Xi's era, and a plenary session every two months. The CLGFE was chaired by Premier Wen Jiabao in Hu's era, but since 2013 Xi Jinping has been the leader, and the premier served as deputy leader. In particular, the sessions of the CLGDOR and CLGFE from 2014 to 2019 have discussed and adopted over 350 policy documents covering multiple issues, including economy, finance, culture, justice, administration, environment, energy, agriculture, social management, health, and education (Figure 9). These documents not only propose general directions for macro-policy development but also formulate more detailed decisions regarding specific policy issues, highlighting the uniqueness of the policy venues within the party during Xi's era; the CCPCC tends to directly intervene in the policy process by generating more "professional policy documents" rather than merely proposing "strategic thoughts", and increasingly more specialized public policy issues that should be discussed at the executive meeting of the government also appear at the sessions of the party's leading groups. The emergence

Figure 9. Number of policy documents issued by the CLGDOR (2014–2019)



of these new venues has greatly expanded the party's capacity to implement professional policies in Xi's era, thus affecting the party's attention diversity.

The establishment of the central leading groups in Xi's era is intended to not only strengthen the top leader's control over public policy making but also accelerate the implementation of important policies to quickly respond to governance challenges in transitional China. Here, we consider environmental issues as an example to further illustrate the changes in policy venues from Hu's era to Xi's era and the resulting impact on the policy process. Figure 10 shows the attention dynamics of the CCPCC and the SC regarding environmental issues since 2003. An interesting observation is that environmental issues received more attention in the daily meetings of the CCPCC in Xi's era than in Hu's era, while the opposite pattern is observed in the meetings of the SC. Furthermore, based on a review of information regarding the daily meetings related to environmental issues since 2003 (Tables 4 and 5), we find that most professional environmental policies in Xi's era involving environmental supervision, the national park system, biodiversity conservation, etc., were devised in the leading groups rather than the SC. This phenomenon is not consistent with the general understanding of China's party-government relations in Hu's era; that is, regarding environmental issues, the CCPCC determined macro-strategies, while professional environmental policies were mainly formulated by the SC. The CCPCC in Xi's era broke the tradition of the party-government division established during the post-Deng era, and the central leading groups allowed the CCPCC to rely on "political authority" to quickly mobilize resources inside and outside the party to address various governance challenges. In authoritarian China,

Figure 10. Number of keywords related to the environmental topics of the CCPCC and the SC (2003–2019)

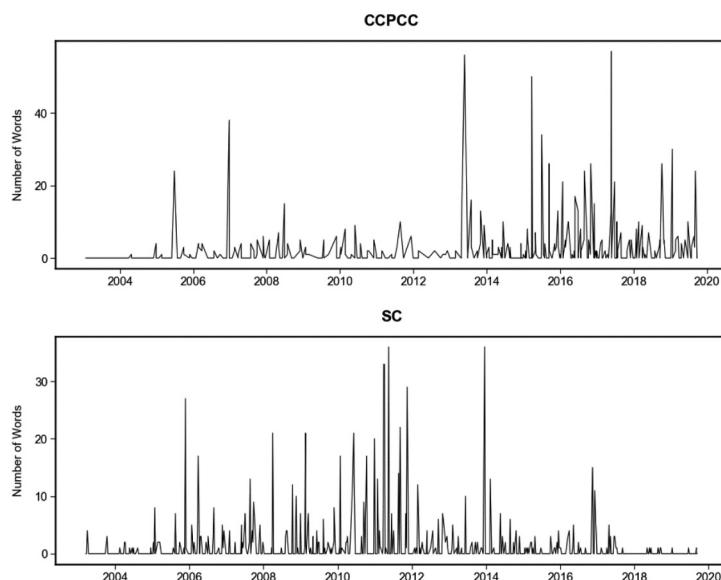


Table 4. Topics of environment-related sessions in Hu's period (2003–2012)

Policy venue	Session topics
CCPCC SPSC SPGS	1. Energy conservation (June 28, 2005) 2. Energy and resources conservation (Dec. 25, 2006) 3. Climate change (June 28, 2008) 4. Climate change (Feb. 23, 2010) 5. Farmland protection (Aug. 23, 2011)
SCLG SC EMSC	1. Ecological conservation in the Sanjiangyuan region (Jan. 26, 2005) 2. Desertification control (Feb. 23, 2005) 3. Desertification control (Aug. 17, 2005) 4. Environmental protection plan (Nov. 23, 2005) 5. Water resources fee management (Jan. 25, 2006) 6. Songhua River pollution control (March 29, 2006) 7. Mining industry sustainable development (April 19, 2006) 8. Marine environment (Aug. 30, 2006) 9. Songhua River pollution control (Nov. 22, 2006) 10. Climate change (May 30, 2007) 11. Conversion of farmland to forests (June 20, 2007) 12. Water pollution control (July 4, 2007) 13. The 11th Five-year Plan of environmental protection (Sept. 26, 2007) 14. Sustainable development of resources-based cities (Nov. 28, 2007) 15. Water pollution control (Dec. 26, 2007) 16. Taihu Lake environment management (April 2, 2008) 17. Farmland protection (Aug. 13, 2008) 18. Waste electronics recycling (Aug. 20, 2008) 19. Tibetan region environmental protection (Oct. 15, 2008) 20. Forest ecological restoration (Nov. 12, 2008) 21. Three Gorges environmental protection (Dec. 31, 2008) 22. Tibet ecological safety (Feb. 18, 2009) 23. Climate change and environmental impact assessment (Aug. 12, 2009) 24. Climate change (Nov. 25, 2009) 25. The 11th Five-year Plan of environmental protection (Jan. 27, 2010) 26. Air pollution control (March 24, 2010) 27. Forest land conservation (June 9, 2010) 28. Sustainable land use (June 12, 2010) 29. Biodiversity conservation (Sept. 15, 2010) 30. Prairie ecosystem protection (Oct. 12, 2010) 31. Natural forest protection (Dec. 29, 2010) 32. Huaihe River water environment management (Jan. 26, 2011) 33. Qinghai-Tibet Plateau environmental protection (March 30, 2011) 34. Prairie ecosystem protection (April 6, 2011) 35. Yangtze River pollution control (May 18, 2011) 36. Groundwater pollution control (Aug. 24, 2011) 37. Bohai Sea environmental protection (Sept. 6, 2011) 38. Ecological conservation of Sanjiangyuan region (Nov. 16, 2011) 39. Air pollution control (Feb. 29, 2012) 40. Energy conservation and emission reduction (July 11, 2012) 41. Conversion of farmland to forests (Sept. 19, 2012) 42. Soil environment protection (Oct. 31, 2012) 43. Circular economy (Dec. 12, 2012) 44. Marine ecological environment (Feb. 6, 2013)

Table 5. Topics of environment-related sessions in Xi's period (2013–2019)

Policy venue	Session topics
<i>CCPCC</i>	
SPSC	1. Resource-saving consciousness (Oct. 29, 2013) 2. Ecological progress (March 25, 2015)
SPGS	1. Ecological progress (May 24, 2013) 2. Marine environment (July 30, 2013)
SCLG	1. Energy conservation (June 13, 2014) 2. (1) Environment protection inspection (2) Environment monitoring network (3) Accountability of leading cadres for environmental damage (July 1, 2015) 3. Sanjiangyuan National Park (Dec. 9, 2015) 4. (1) Forest conservation (2) Yangtze Economic Zone ecological conservation (Jan. 26, 2016) 5. Ecological progress (Feb. 23, 2016) 6. Ecological compensation (March 22, 2016) 7. Ecological civilization experiment area (June 27, 2016) 8. Vertical management of environmental protection agencies (July 22, 2016) 9. (1) Industrial access in key ecological function area (2) Performance assessment of ecological construction (3) Environmental damage compensation (Aug. 30, 2016) 10. River Chief System (Oct. 11, 2016) 11. (1) Green agriculture (2) Ecological protection red lines (3) Wetland conservation (Nov. 1, 2016) 12. (1) Farmland protection (2) Panda and Tiger National Park (3) Sea reclamation management (Dec. 5, 2016)
SC	3. Ecological progress (Sept. 11, 2011) 4. Yangtze River ecological conservation (March 25, 2016) 3. Green development and green living (May 26, 2017) 13. Drainage basin environmental supervision (Feb. 6, 2017) 14. Solid waste import management (April 18, 2017) 15. (1) Monitoring and warning of resource and environmental carrying capacity (2) Environmental monitoring data quality (3) Cross-regional environmental protection (May 23, 2017) 16. (1) Qilian Mountain National Park (2) Ecological civilization experiment area (3) Audit of natural resources assets of outgoing officials (June 26, 2017) 17. (1) National Park System (2) Green agriculture (July 19, 2017) 18. Environmental damage compensation (Aug. 29, 2017) 19. Ecological remediation (Oct. 10, 2018) 20. (1) Rural living environment (2) Lake Chief system (Nov. 20, 2017) 21. (1) Nature protected area system (2) Property rights system of natural resources (Jan. 23, 2019) 22. (1) Green living (2) Plastic pollution governance (Sept. 9, 2019)

(continued)

Table 5. (Continued)

Policy venue	Session topics
EMSC	<p>1. Air pollution control (June 14, 2013) 2. Urban sewage treatment (Sept. 18, 2013) 3. Agricultural pollution control (Oct. 8, 2013) 4. Ecological environment construction (Dec. 18, 2013) 5. Air pollution control (Feb. 12, 2014) 6. Water resource saving (May 21, 2014) 7. Ecological environment construction (Aug. 24, 2014) 8. Air pollution control (Nov. 26, 2014)</p> <p>9. Sustainable agriculture (March 18, 2015) 10. Air pollution control (April 28, 2015) 11. Energy conservation and emission reduction (Dec. 2, 2015) 12. Clean energy (Dec. 16, 2015) 13. The 13th Five-year Plan of environmental protection (Nov. 15, 2016) 14. Water pollution control (Dec. 6, 2016) 15. Air pollution control (April 26, 2017)</p>

the political authority originating from the CCP and its top leader often allows the entire bureaucratic system to prioritize policy plans issued by the CCP instead of other institutions (Zheng 2009). For example, the CLGDOR adopted the “Central Environmental Protection Inspection System” in 2015 and then quickly carried out the first round of inspections across the country within two years. In total, 4,218 cadres were held accountable, and nearly 150,000 environmental problems were solved (Li 2019). In fact, the SC introduced the “Regional Environmental Protection Inspection System” as early as 2006, but this policy had a much lower implementation effect and influence than the later central environmental protection inspection system (Guo 2019). Overall, regarding policy issues such as environmental governance that are urgent or difficult to resolve in transitional China, policy making through the party’s leading group rather than through sole reliance on the SC is a unique institutional arrangement in Xi’s era.

Conclusion and Limitations

This paper introduces a longitudinal multi-issue approach to research concerning political attention in contemporary China and systematically demonstrates the structural and dynamic characteristics of policy attention in China based on TM. The results show that the agenda changes of China’s macropolitical system follow the logic of the punctuated equilibrium thesis, but this article does not find that the punctuated instability in China is more intense than that in liberal democracies. In addition, the punctuation of some major policy issues is often related to important party conferences or external events. The above findings illustrate the necessity to strengthen the mutual verification of various agenda datasets to accurately evaluate the intensity of punctuated equilibrium in China.

This study introduces the concept of “resilient authoritarianism” to the comparative agenda research, which contributes to revealing the differences in political attention between single-leading-party and democratic regimes. Recently, a range of theoretical

developments concerning China's policy process, such as expert knowledge (Zhu and Xue 2007), policy experiments (Zhu and Bai 2019), and truncated decision making (Xue and Zhao 2018), have been studied. This paper further discusses the role of the "central leading group" in the Chinese policy process; thus, although the authoritarian party is not constrained by aspects of a democratic system such as opposition parties and legislatures, the CCP still strengthens its absolute control over major policy issues, especially when strong leaders are in power. The leading group mechanism expands the party's agenda space and helps the party concentrate its efforts on governance challenges by integrating political authority and policy resources. However, the influence of the leading group mechanism is also limited because this new policy venue increases the total volume of the CCP's agenda and improves its attention diversity but also reduces the party's attention to other traditional issues, such as macroeconomics and party affairs.

Nevertheless, limitations remain in this study. First, the dataset used in this research does not cover daily meetings during Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin's eras, although the extended dataset helps provide more information regarding China's political attention. Second, although this study presents the general characteristics of attention changes in China's macropolitical system, it is still necessary to further identify the specific forms of cognitive bottlenecks and institutional frictions under the authoritarian system and examine their impact on policy punctuations. Third, this paper only focuses on the authoritarian regime of China's "single-leading-party" system; thus, we cannot generalize the research findings to other authoritarian states, such as the soft authoritarian system widely existing in central Asia.

Notes

1. More details regarding the database can be found at <http://kns.cnki.net/kns/brief/result.aspx?dbprefix=CCND>.
2. The customized dictionaries used in this study include political terms, state institutions' and officials' names, Chinese geographical names, general economic terms, and new terms in the CCP's congress reports.
3. Four Chinese stopword lists include three common stopword lists (<https://github.com/goto456/stopwords>) and a customized stopword list.
4. Following the method described by Wei et al. (2018) to process Chinese policy texts, this study selects nouns and parts of speech similar to nouns as the research object, since adding these frequently occurring verbs to the corpus could cause unrelated words to appear in the keyword clusters of some policy topics, thus rendering it difficult to identify the topic labels accurately.
5. The authors are willing to provide the detailed test results through correspondence.
6. The CAP codebook currently includes 21 major topics and 220 subtopics; more information can be found at <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/pages/master-codebook>.
7. The Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

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