

*The Rhythm of Government: Attention in China's Central- and Provincial-Level Executive Meetings**

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Abstract

Government attention plays a crucial role in agenda-setting and ensuring good governance. This article examines the distribution, stability, fragmentation and transmission of government attention using data from 2,840 government executive meetings at central and provincial levels in China. The findings reveal distinct patterns in attention allocation between the central and provincial governments. While the central government focuses predominantly on the economy, provincial governments show a notable interest in organizational functioning and environmental protection. Furthermore, provincial governments consistently address a broad spectrum of policy areas, in contrast to the more unstable attention focus of the central government. Interestingly, the concentration of attention at the central level is comparable to that of Western counterparts, such as Britain and Australia. Additionally, panel

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data analysis shows that provincial governments respond to the central agenda. *Ceteris paribus*, an additional mention of a policy area by the central government correlates with a 0.109 times increase (OLS regression) or a 1.918 percent increase (Poisson regression) in the number of mentions at the provincial level. These findings suggest that the diverse patterns of attention allocation and the hierarchical transmission of attention make the Chinese government an organized and agile entity capable of concerted efforts to advance national interests.

Attention allocation is crucial for shaping policy agendas.¹ According to Jones and Baumgartner, “the process by which information is prioritized for action, and attention allocated to some problems rather than others is called agenda setting.”² The past few decades have witnessed substantial advances in understanding the rationale behind agenda-setting and government policymaking in electoral democracies, with the punctuated equilibrium model emerging as one of the most influential theories in this field.³ Adopting a pluralist approach,⁴ the extensive literature on this subject has yielded valuable insights into how factors such as public opinion, interest groups, the media, and political actors collectively influence government attention and agenda-setting.⁵

The study of attention and agenda-setting has gained momentum, thanks to a range of data infrastructure projects that empower scholars to analyze policy attention across issues, time, and countries. Among these initiatives, the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) stands out as one of the most popular and well-known. Though originally designed for studying political attention in the United States of America,⁶ it soon became evident that PAP was equally applicable to many European countries.⁷ Despite some shortcomings in coding and measurement,⁸ PAP has drawn the interest of numerous scholars specializing in various countries and policy areas. These scholars, under the banner of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), have brought together multiple country-specific datasets using the PAP coding scheme.⁹ At present, CAP datasets encompass over twenty countries across the continents of North America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. Notably, the project has recently further expanded to include three Latin American countries—Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador.¹⁰

Despite CAP’s expanding coverage, data for China—the world’s second largest economy—are not yet available at the time of writing,