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Discovering China's Policy Trajectories in the Xi Jinping Era: A Text-as-Data Approach to Presidential Speeches, 2012-2021

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How many policy agendas has Xi Jinping as the supreme leader set forth and promoted since he took office in 2012? How much presidential attention has been paid to each agenda over the decade? What is the relationship among the agendas and how has it evolved over time? Despite the scholarly interest in the rise – and fall – of Xi's innovative policy initiatives, few studies have attempted to systematically map out the overall structure – the number, underlying relationships, and temporal evolution of policy agendas pursued by the Xi administration. To fill the gap in the literature, we use a novel dataset of presidential statements, speeches and reports from 2012 to 2022 and employ machine learning methods in text analysis to identify major topics and terms associated with each topic. By doing so, we demonstrate that about 20 mutually distinct policy agendas are identified, there are remarkable temporal variations between and within agendas in terms of the amount of presidential attention, and the arrival of covid-19 has taken away much attention from many but not all of the existing agendas. Combining a probabilistic topic model and network analysis, we also discover the latent structure of policy agendas, providing a systemic understanding of policy developments in the Xi era.