Reading China:

Predicting Policy Change with Machine Learning

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EcoMod 2019 (Ponta Delgada, Portugal)

The views expressed here are the authors' and do not represent the views of Bates White, the Mercatus Center, or their other employees.



State-run media

- Example: the *People's Daily*.
 - Official newspaper of the Communist Party of China;
 - Toed by other media in the country;
 - ...
 - The Pravda of China.
- The primary mission is not to report news.

State-run media tell us a lot — about the state!

- Example: the *People's Daily*.
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 - The Prayda of China.
- The primary mission is not to report news... but to propagate official viewpoints and signal policies.

Machine learning can help decipher propaganda

- Deciphering propaganda content has been complicated due to
 - Opaque system;
 - Manipulated data;
 - Difficulty in validation;...
- Machine learning with some twists can help!
- The method has wide applicability in other contexts.

Policy Change Index (PCI) project

First use case: China.

• Data: People's Daily text, 1946-present.



Goal: predict policy change based solely on the newspaper.

• Output: the Policy Change Index (PCI) for China.



Constructing the PCI

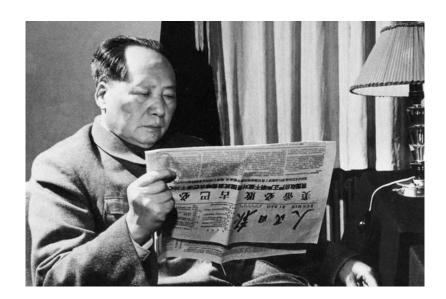
Results



The Soviet tradition:

- "[T]he whole task of the Communists is to be able to convince the backward elements." (Lenin, 1920)
- It is a fundamental necessity "to transform the press... into a serious organ for the *economic education* of the mass of the population." (Lenin, in early USSR years)
- Even the film was considered "a great and invaluable force... aiding the working class and its Party to *educate* the toilers in the spirit of socialism." (Stalin, 1935)

- The Soviet tradition, in China:
 - "Newspapers *must* be run by politicians." (Mao, 1957)
 - The media should "uphold the *correct orientation* of public opinion in all aspects and at all stages." (Xi, 2016)



People's Daily: central to China's propaganda system

+

Propaganda often precedes policies.

 \downarrow

Detect changes in newspaper's priorities

 \approx

Predict changes in gov't policies

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Machine learning

Constructing the PCI

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Start with something seemingly trivial

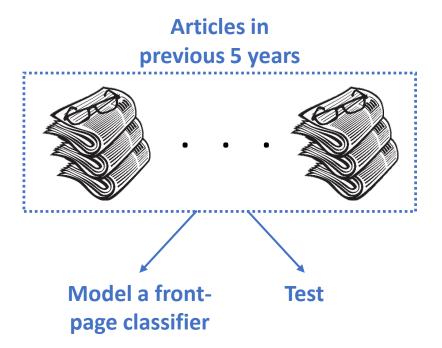
Build an algorithm that classifies **front-page** articles ("reverse-engineering" the editor's mind).

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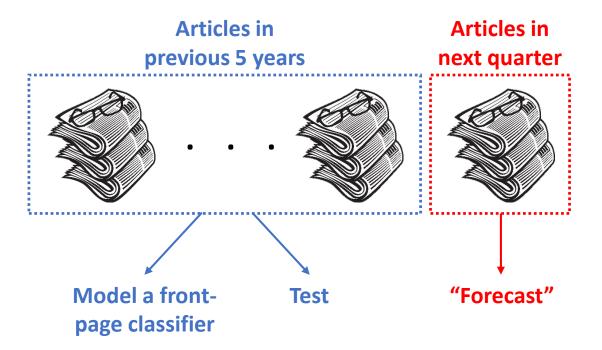
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But what's the point?

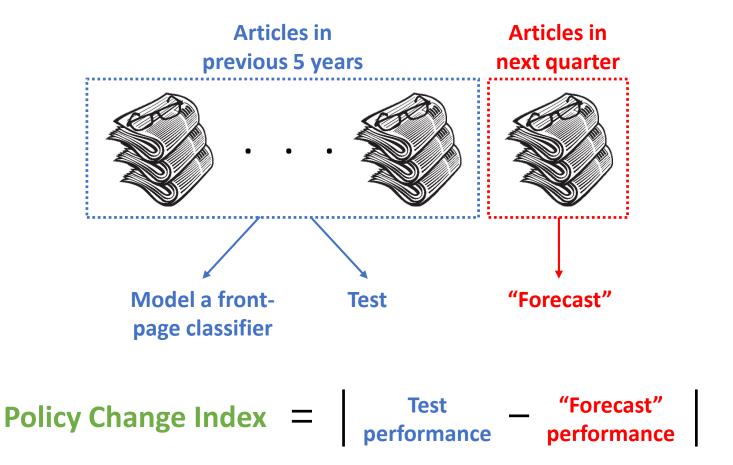
The framework



The framework



The framework



 $PCI \gg 0 \Rightarrow$ Structural difference in the newspaper's priorities

Data structure

sample_df

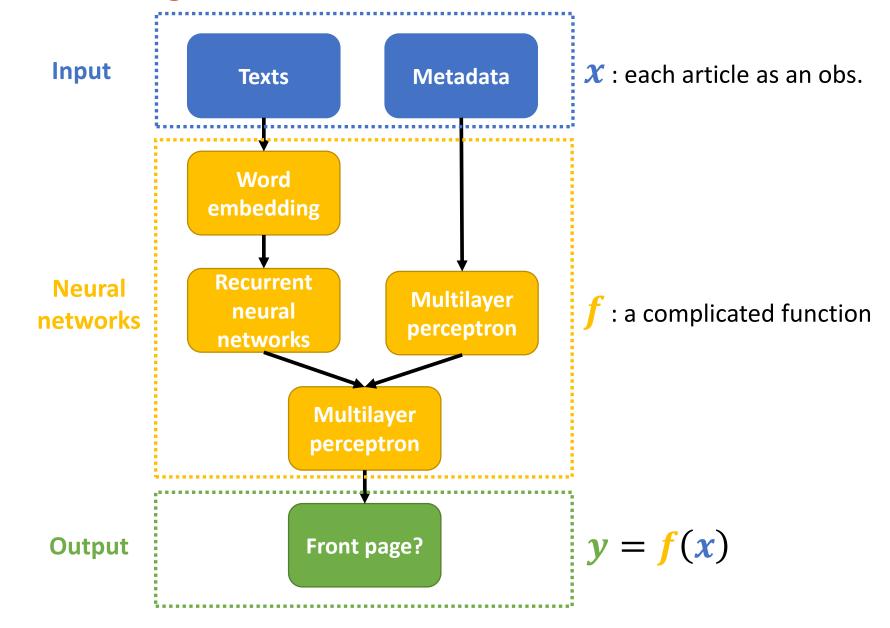
id	date	page	title body
20181202525	2018-12-31 00:00:00	1.0	今年粮食总产量13158亿斤 农业农村发展取得新成绩,乡村振兴开 本报北京12月30日电 (记者高云才、郁静娴)记者从30日召开的 局良好 全国农业农村厅局长会议获…
20181202526	2018-12-31 00:00:00	1.0	新时代改革再出发的重要里程碑——写在党的十八届三中全会召开——本报评论员——改革开放40年来,我们党带领人民绘就了一幅波澜————————————————————————————————————
20181202527	2018-12-31 00:00:00	1.0	改革引领中国经济新航向(在习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想指 本报记者 许志峰 吴秋余 王 珂 林丽鹏 巨轮向前,离不开 引下——新时代新作为新篇章)
20181202528	2018-12-31 00:00:00	1.0	产量连续六年超1200亿斤,实现"十五连丰" 黑龙江 粮食再丰收,粮 本报哈尔滨12月30日电 (记者方圆) 此刻的黑土地,正在冬眠蕃 仓更稳固 力。今年黑龙江粮食又是一
20181202529	2018-12-31 00:00:00	1.0	伟大的变革——庆祝改革开放40周年大型展览 现场观众达223万人 据新华社北京12月30日电 "伟大的变革——庆祝改革开放40周年大次 展览将持续到2019年… 型展览"自11月13日…
20181202530	2018-12-31 00:00:00	1.0	航线不停、景区不休、生意不闲、游客不断 新疆 旅游无淡季,今冬 本报乌鲁木齐12月30日电 (记者杨明方、阿尔达克)一年之中半 更红火 年是降雪期,冬季雪深超过3
20181202531	2018-12-31 00:00:00	1.0	图片报道 徜徉知识海洋,感受阅读乐趣。十二月三十日是元旦小长假的第一 天,全国各地的特色文化活动丰富…
20181202532	2018-12-31 00:00:00	2.0	创造新的更大奇迹——一党的十八届三中全会召开五周年述评——全面发力、多点突破、蹄疾步稳、纵深推进"——庆祝改革开放40周 年大会上,习近平总书记用
20181202534	2018-12-31 00:00:00	3.0	开启中国特色大国外交新征程(2018年度国际特别报道) ——国务 本报记者 赵嘉鸣 管克江 杜尚泽 焦 翔 王海林 国务委员 委员兼外交部长王毅回顾20 兼外交部长王毅12月29日接
20181202535	2018-12-31 00:00:00	3.0	二〇一七年岁末,莫斯科大学的中国留学生们欣喜地收到了习近平主 本报驻俄罗斯记者 吴 焰 "一年前,习近平主席给留学生回 席的回信;一年来,牢记习主席的… 本报驻俄罗斯记者 吴 焰 "一年前,习近平主席给留学生回 信,鼓励我们胸怀大志,刻苦学习…
20181202536	2018-12-31 00:00:00	3.0	外交部发言人就中美建交40周年发表谈话 本报北京12月30日电 外交部发言人陆慷30日就中美建交40周年发 表谈话。 陆慷说,2

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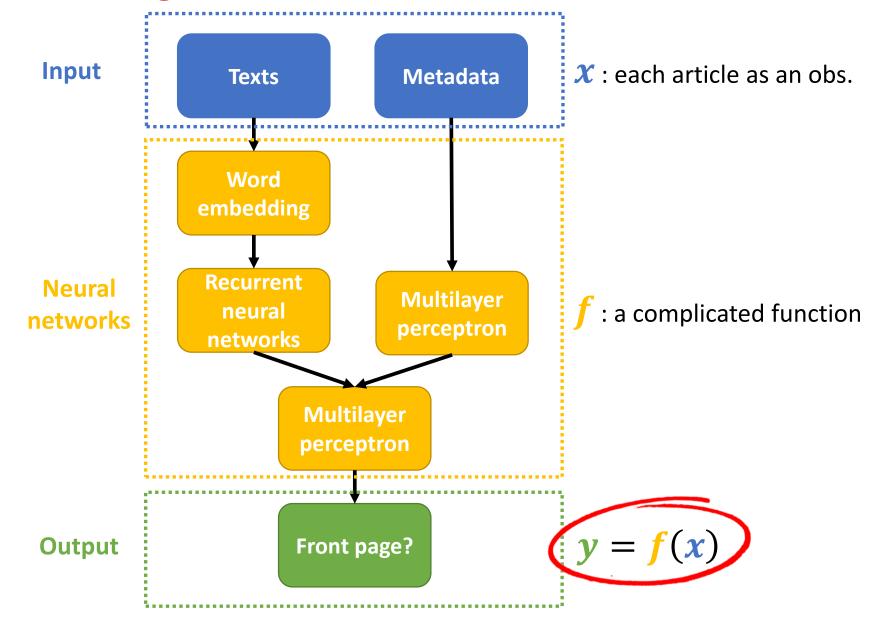
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Modeling



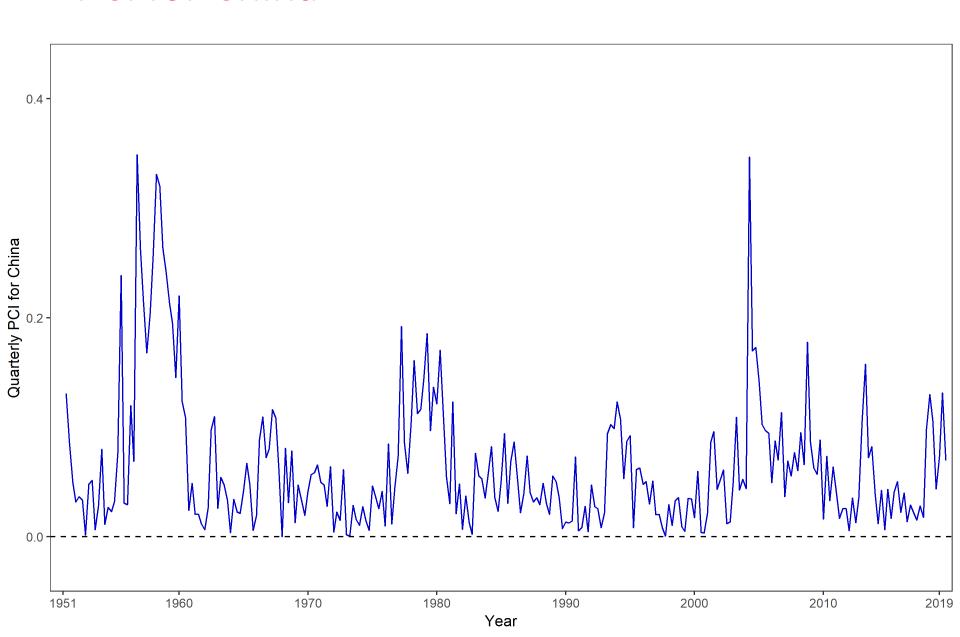
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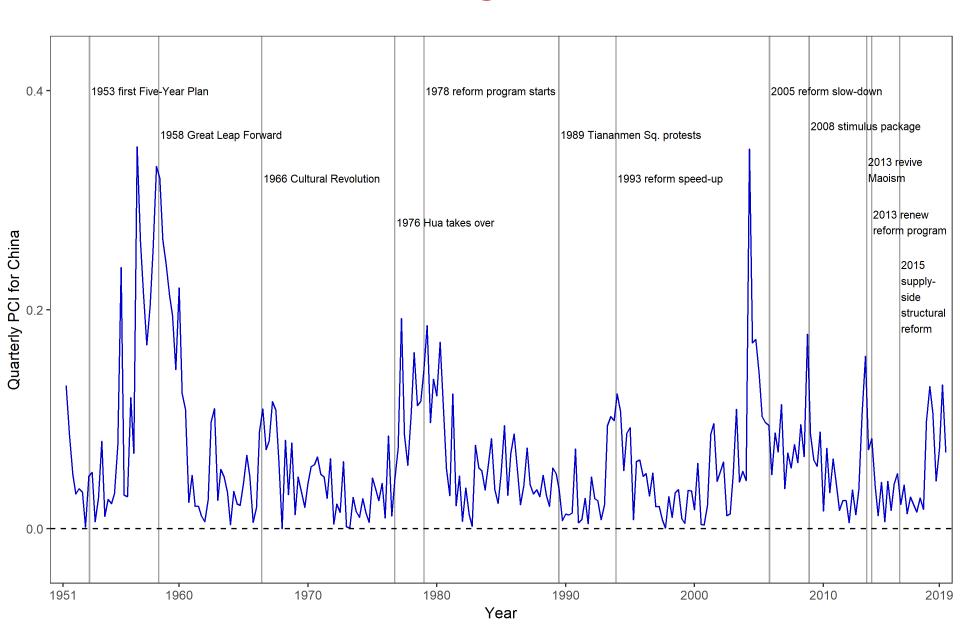
Constructing the PCI

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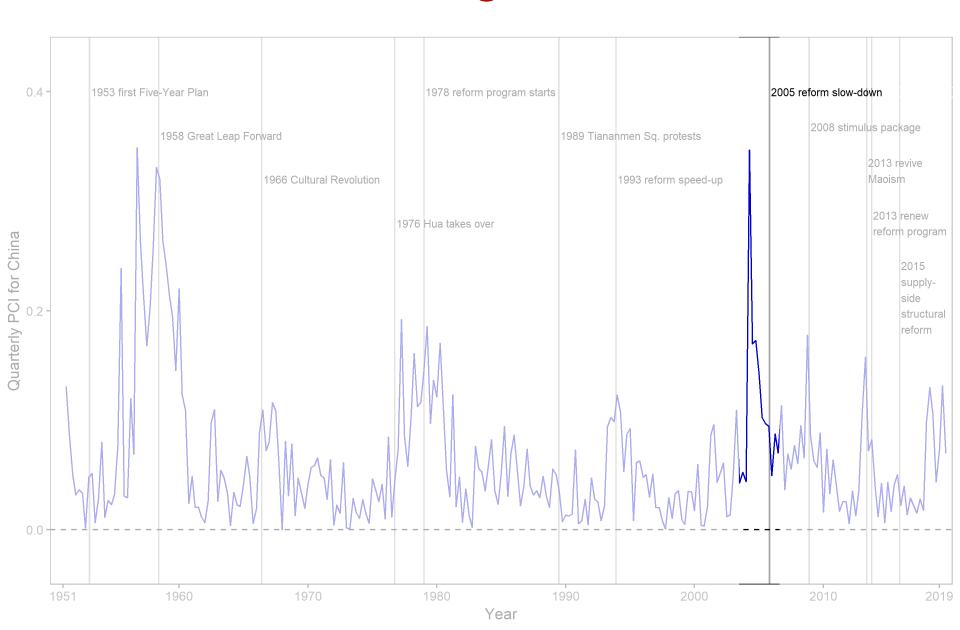
PCI for China



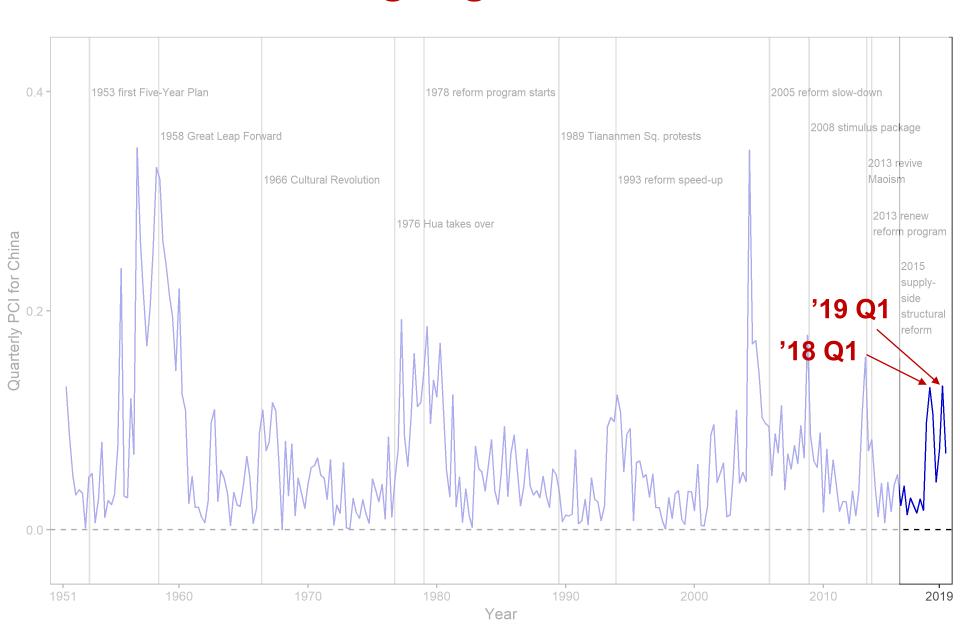
PCI for China — with ground truth



PCI for China — with ground truth



PCI for China — going forward



Understanding changes

		Classified on front page?	
		No	Yes
Front nogo?	No		false positives
Front page?	Yes	false negatives	

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Content of *misclassified* articles has policy substance.

- 2018 Q1 spike represents:
 - internally: strengthening party authority;
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 - populist policies to boost political support.

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 - internally: strengthening party authority;
 - externally: nationalism and global leadership;
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- 2019 Q1 uptick: similar patterns.
- ⇒ Curb your enthusiasm for the US-China trade talks!

Takeaways: many applications

Generally

- PCI for other (ex-)Communist regimes, using:
 - Soviet Union's Pravda
 - East Germany's Neues Deutschland
 - Cuba's Granma
 - North Korea's Rodong Sinmun
 - Vietnam's Nhân Dân
 - ...

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•

Work in progress

More generally

- PCI for other countries:
 - The state may not control the media.
 - But politicians/policymakers still talk!

Even more generally

- Applicability well beyond predicting policies.
- Omitted here. See our research paper.

Interested in DIY?

- Website: policychangeindex.org
- Newsletter: mercatus.org/PCInewsletter
- Repository: github.com/PSLmodels/PCI
- A simulated example to show how the PCI works.

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Questions?