Xi Jinping’s anticorruption campaign has shown no sign of abating since it began in 2013, soon after he took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party. How does this current campaign differ from China’s previous anticorruption campaigns? What have researchers learned about it over the past six years? Melanie Manion, Vor Broker Family Professor of Political Science at Duke University and an expert on contemporary authoritarianism, highlighted some special features of Xi’s campaign in a broad historical context. In addition, she added to the existing body of research with her own investigation of the political selection of “winners” in this ongoing campaign.

Manion first noted that cross-national research on corruption finds that it is usually costly in economic and political terms. For example, it reduces investment and thereby economic growth, which in turn reduces state revenues. It increases economic inequality and often accentuates political support. Given its effects, it is not surprising that leaders might adopt anticorruption measures, including campaigns. An “anticorruption campaign” is a short intensive burst of anticorruption enforcement in a top-down approach.

Xi’s campaign has lasted longer and targeted more and higher-level officials than any previous anticorruption campaign in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). More importantly, it has strengthened the power and authority of the Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission (中央纪委) and its subordinate committees at local levels. These committees no longer require the approval of the local leading communist party committees at the provincial, prefectural, or county levels to initiate investigations in the locality. This unprecedented structural change has weakened the leadership of the local party committees over the disciplinary inspection committees at the same administrative level, thereby preventing local party committees’ attempts to curtail investigations of themselves or officials in their own networks. The boundary between a violation of the party’s disciplines and a criminal offence is ambiguous in a legal sense. But what is clear is that expulsion from the party, or even the investigation itself, is serious enough to signal the end of a cadre’s political career, even if no legal prosecution follows.

Manion then summarized the state of scholarly research to date, which has mainly addressed the following three questions: Is this campaign popular among ordinary Chinese? Has it hurt
China’s economic growth? Is it merely window dressing for eliminating Xi’s political opponents? Research suggests this campaign has garnered attention and public support for Xi, although not necessarily for the regime more generally. Research also indicates that the impact of the campaign on public support depends partly on prior events. The campaign can weaken support from Chinese who are shocked at the magnitude of corruption at high levels, epitomized by Zhou Yongkang’s dramatic downfall from the Politburo Standing Committee in 2014. The research also suggests that the campaign has hurt economic growth at least in the short run, as it creates uncertainty, which impedes initiative and paralyzes decision-making by local officials.

Finally, careful analysis suggests the campaign aims both to target actual corruption and to purge Xi’s opponents. So far, officials with personal connections to Xi have not suffered in the campaign.

Against this body of scholarship, Manion discussed her own research undertaken with her graduate students on the current anticorruption campaign. For example, in one paper they found that the state permits sensational reporting by commercial media outlets on corruption at middle or low levels, but strictly controls reports on corruption of “tigers” or “mega-tigers.” In another paper, on the question of how free Chinese “netizens” feel about speaking on politically sensitive matters such as corruption, they find heterogeneity in people’s comfort level across time and physical space. For example, ordinary Chinese exercise more caution in political talk in cyberspace after a sensitive announcement about high-level corruption, and when at or near a sensitive political place such as Tiananmen Square, compared to less sensitive times and places.

Focusing primarily on a third paper, Manion argued for a view of Xi’s campaign as a classic purge, which is a disruptive shock to the political system that reverberates all the way down to the bottom of the official ladder. It generates immense uncertainty, increases risk and alters perception of risk in political decision-making. One way to measure the impact of this changing risk environment is to examine the political selection process in a risk-fraught environment, in particular, the “winners” who have emerged from the campaign.

To Manion, this approach is more general and consequential than focusing on the top level or on campaign losers. She conjectured that the selection decisions by communist party officials to fill vacancies created by the purge would reflect a perception of risk in this new environment. Specifically, risk perception, which changed in accordance with the heterogeneity of purge intensity, would lead party officials to attempt to signal to Beijing in their selection decisions that they are not building their own factional networks. A preliminary finding from this project is indeed a risk-sensitive bias against clients in political selection during the campaign: the more officials purged in the locality, the greater the subsequent bias against connections in promoting winners, without sacrificing the normal meritocratic criteria for promotion. Manion concluded
that one effect of the heightened political uncertainty brought by Xi’s anticorruption campaign may be to weaken elite factionalism.