

POLITICAL CHANGE  
IN JAPAN:  
ELECTORAL  
BEHAVIOR, PARTY  
REALIGNMENT, AND  
THE KOIZUMI  
REFORMS

Edited by  
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and Kay Shimizu



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## PREFACE

People study the politics of particular countries for various reasons. Often, the motivation is personal: you study the country you were born in or you live in, since it affects you directly. International salience may matter: American elections, economic performance, and foreign policy are interesting because the United States is the dominant nation in the global arena today. Japanologists, however, typically cite a different and more controversial justification: Japan is somehow *different* from comparable advanced industrialized democracies. The postwar performance of the Japanese state seemed to validate the limelight; the economy grew at an unprecedented rate while minimizing wealth disparities and social unrest.

The stated reasons for Japanese exceptionalism vary—from cultural characteristics and unique historical trajectories to distinct institutional frameworks. Some of these purportedly *sui generis* logics are more questionable than others. However, two facets of Japanese politics are genuinely puzzling. First, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) held a continuous majority in the Japanese parliament (the Diet) for thirty-eight years (1955–1993). In 1994, after only a nine-month interruption, the LDP resumed its rule through a coalition government. Such long tenure in the legislative and executive functions of government is unseen in other stable democracies. Second, one-party dominance has given the Japanese bureaucracy a legislative autonomy that is uncommon in most democratic states. Japanese laws are largely drafted by bureaucrats, not legislators, and the elite ministries have broad jurisdiction over economic and social issues that give them significant say over how the country is run. Indeed, a common argument is that bureaucratic insulation explained Japan's rapid economic growth: long-serving civil service elites simply made better managers than reelection-maximizing, short-sighted politicians.

Because Japan does not fit into classical typologies of cross-country analysis—it is not part of Europe or the British Commonwealth or North America—comparable cases tend to vary with the issue under question. Scholars who examine government longevity, for example, tend to examine the LDP in Japan with reference to the Social Democrats in Sweden, Labor in Israel, or the Christian Democrats in Italy. Those interested in public administration from a Weberian perspective, however, contrast Japan with France (strong bureaucrats) or the United States (weak bureaucrats). Indeed, Japan is fascinating to scholars of comparative politics because its component parts share similarities with a diverse range of cases, but its whole is distinct from the state structures of most democracies.

Since the 1990s, however, the myth of Japanese exceptionalism—at least in the positive sense of the term—has dissipated, and the Japan that was studied as

an exemplary model in the past is now viewed as inflexible and outmoded. The economy's "lost decade" punctured theories that Japan presents an alternative, state-centric model of democracy, and the bureaucratic scandals of that period dispelled the pristine aura of the civil service. Even the keystone of Japanese politics, the LDP, crumbled in 1993, when the party lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since its formation. Although the LDP swiftly returned to power, it has done so in a diminished capacity, relying on coalition arrangements with various conservative and centrist parties. In some ways, Japan is increasingly seen as an example of what *not* to be—an eccentric democracy, not an exemplar.

When Ichiro Ozawa, a major figure within the LDP, left his party in 1993, he argued that for Japan to be economically competitive, politically accountable, and internationally relevant, it needed to become a so-called normal nation. His motivation came from failings in Japanese foreign policy, particularly the inability of the Japanese government to take decisive action in the first Gulf War, but his prescriptions for transformation were straightforwardly domestic and institutional. Ozawa became an ardent supporter of electoral reform, with the goal of encouraging the multiple opposition parties to coalesce into a single viable alternative to the LDP. A two-party system would result in coherent ideological competition, stronger government leadership built on a clear electoral mandate, and more frequent alternations in power. In other words, the goal was to make Japan more like other democracies, or at least like Ozawa's conception of Britain and the United States.

Perhaps no leader epitomized these expectations for political transformation as much as Junichiro Koizumi. Koizumi was the first LDP president elected in a primary in over two decades, and he entered—and more importantly, left—the political limelight as one of the most popular prime ministers in postwar history. During his tenure, LDP factionalism weakened, the cabinet seized greater control over policymaking from the bureaucracy, major policy reforms became the focus of electoral competition, and public interest in politics exploded. There has scarcely been a time when so much *appeared* to be changing, justifying many observers' excitement in unfolding events.

There is a precedent for pessimism, however. To repeat the oft-quoted adage: the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. With a bit of creative license, we can apply this malady to Japan researchers—including ourselves. The demise of LDP politics—sometimes labeled the "1955 system"—was predicted for over thirty years: in the mid-1970s, when internecine warfare over Tanaka's pork-barrel politics and corruption divided the LDP; in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, when a splinter faction left the LDP and formed the New Liberal Club; and in the early 1990s, when the LDP's stranglehold over government was finally loosened. Each time, analysts predicted a fundamental shift in the nature of Japanese politics: parties would prioritize ideological platforms over clientelist appeals, factional power-balancing would give way to meritocratic

cabinet appointments and pluralism in policy input, and governments would alternate between political parties. And in each case, we saw changes in the process and output of policymaking around the margins, but signs of structural transformation were elusive.

The overriding question of this book is thus whether recent events and apparent transformations in Japanese politics will stick. Koizumi *seemed* to embody strong latent desires for political reform, and we have seen important changes (or at least we *think* we have seen changes) in policymaking processes and outcomes. But will these changes persist, or will traditional structures regain their place of prominence? Already we have seen the fall of Shinzo Abe, who many thought was cut from the same cloth as Koizumi. The next prime minister, Yasuo Fukuda, was less of a firebrand and more of a competent manager—exactly the type of leader that factions have historically preferred. These recent events do not indicate a reversion to the past, but hopes for change have not always been rewarded. Our apologies for mixing metaphors, but even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Each author in this volume has tackled an important issue in contemporary Japan, with an eye toward evaluating deep-rooted as opposed to surface-level changes. We have explored what tangible effects Koizumi has had on Japanese politics, and whether his tenure was merely a brief pause in long-running conservatism or the harbinger of new politics. While we hesitate to arrive at definitive conclusions, we believe there is sufficient data to identify concrete changes, or at least to separate cases of “slow change” from “no change.” As with the best studies of Japan in the past, we analyze Japan in the context of empirical and theoretical findings from other countries. This is particularly relevant to understanding transitional processes, since many arguments for and against institutional or policy reforms were made with reference to similar experiences abroad. To take one example, the expectation that switching to an electoral system combining single-member districts (SMDs) and proportional representation (PR) would result in two-party competition was based on how SMDs have shaped politics in the United States and Great Britain. As such, we can best understand the successes and failures of Japanese reforms by looking outside the country and teasing apart the factors that are unique to Japan from larger global trends.

This book touches on a number of themes, some of which have a venerable academic tradition and others that have been understudied with respect to Japan. The introductory first chapter provides an overview of electoral and party politics in postwar Japan. It focuses on the emergence and evolution of LDP politics, including factionalism, leadership, and electoral trends, and provides a context for the analytical content found in later chapters.

The first section of the book looks at electoral politics in both the pre- and post-1993 period. In chapter 2, Steven R. Reed and Kay Shimizu examine the prospects of two-party competition and government alternation under the new electoral system. They argue that the increasing volatility of public opinion,

coupled with the growing irrelevance of other minor parties, suggest the possibility of opposition victories and government turnover in the future. In chapter 3, Ko Maeda demonstrates that the party label has played a greater role in recent elections, in contrast to the candidate-heavy nature of earlier competition. Using data from the 1990s, he finds that there is growing correspondence in vote swings in the SMD tier (typically the more candidate-centered choice) and the PR tier (typically the more party-centered choice). In chapter 4, Jun Saito looks at bipartisanship from the perspective of legislators. He finds that party-switching, which was rampant in the first few years after electoral reform, was motivated by a combination of ideological and particularistic interests. As legislators' demand for pork-barrel projects to their districts decline, however, we can expect more stable partisanship in the future. In chapter 5, Robert J. Weiner adds an important word of caution to our expectations that two-party politics means greater political accountability. He finds that bipartisanship at the national level masks relatively uncompetitive contests within individual districts, suggesting that incumbents in "safe" districts may become less attuned to the demands of minority groups within their jurisdictions.

The second section of the book examines the emergence and success of Junichiro Koizumi, the most prominent Japanese prime minister in recent memory. In chapter 6, Chao-Chi Lin studies the factors that led to Koizumi's surprising ascension to the role of LDP party leader. She argues that the LDP's decision to switch to local primaries for leader selection allowed Koizumi, who had strong support from voters, to win a surprising victory over the establishment candidate, Ryutaro Hashimoto. In chapter 7, Kenneth Mori McElwain analyzes the electoral impact of Koizumi's popularity. Utilizing statistical analyses of the 2005 House of Representatives elections, he finds that Koizumi generated important coattail effects by making personal appearances and swinging crucial votes in close district races, facilitating the LDP's historic victory. In chapter 8, Patricia L. Maclachlan studies Koizumi's impact on policymaking through the lens of postal-privatization reform. She argues that Koizumi succeeded in pushing through a bill with little bureaucratic or legislative backing by establishing and staffing policymaking councils within the cabinet agency instead of locating decision-making in individual ministries or within the LDP.

The third section, titled "Beyond Electoral Politics," focuses on the legislative and administrative aspects of Japanese government. In chapter 9, Ethan Scheiner and Michio Muramatsu compare the relationship between LDP politicians and government bureaucrats before and after the LDP's ouster in 1993. They argue that the bureaucrats' willingness to cooperate with the opposition parties in 1993–1994 generated LDP mistrust, and the new, competitive relationship between these two pillars of government led to bungled policy responses to the nonperforming loans crisis of the 1990s. In chapter 10, Ray Christensen and Kyle Colvin study a relatively unexplored aspect of elections: last-minute ballot stuffing, or "election-night corruption." Despite widely acknowledged

corruption problems in other aspects of governance, they find that Japanese elections are relatively clean, due in part to the delegation of election management to a nonpoliticized administrative agency.

The book's final section examines an issue important to the future of Japanese politics: the involvement of women in the political process. In chapter 11, Barry C. Burden analyzes the gender gap in postwar voting trends and finds that unlike in other advanced industrialized democracies, Japanese men and women respond to political stimuli in similar ways. An important exception is the role of political leaders: Japanese women are more likely to link support for the LDP to support for the prime minister, raising the stakes for finding popular leaders to ensure electoral victory. In chapter 12, Alisa Gaunder looks at the factors that constrain or enable the electoral success of female candidates. She notes the emergence of nonprofit and civil-society organizations that provide funding and training to potential candidates, but argues that the biggest reductions in the parliamentary gender gap occur only with the backing of strong political leaders such as Koizumi. In chapter 13, Sherry L. Martin looks at voters' perceptions of legitimacy and satisfaction with respect to the political process. While most voters who support a particular party are happy with the legislative process, even if their party is not in government, she finds that nonpartisan voters are much less likely to express satisfaction, a problem that is pronounced for the disproportionately large number of women in the nonpartisan pool.

Finally, we bring these issues full circle in chapter 14, in which we evaluate the arguments and evidence of these chapters from the perspective of three principal questions that will affect Japanese politics in the long run: the importance of political leaders, the potential for government alternation, and pluralism in the policymaking process.

This project's conception was a conference at Stanford University, organized by two of the editors, Kenneth Mori McElwain and Kay Shimizu, and by Robert J. Weiner, who is now at the Naval Postgraduate School. We were all affiliated with Stanford at the time, and we were united by our interest in Japanese politics. The two-day "2007 Stanford Conference on Electoral and Legislative Politics in Japan," as it came to be called, was (we think) a huge success, with fifteen papers and twenty participants from around the country. It could not have materialized without the long-suffering, wonderfully kind, and extremely efficient staff members of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center (Shorenstein APARC) at Stanford University. Dan Okimoto, Gi-Wook Shin, Dan Sneider, and Bob Carroll helped us work out the conference's purpose and budget, while Neeley Main, Denise Matsumoto, Debbie Warren, Huma Shaikh, and Vivian Beebe efficiently managed the conference logistics. Shorenstein APARC was the primary funder of this conference, but we also received invaluable contributions from Stanford's Center for East Asian Studies (CEAS) and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies.

From the beginning, we hoped to make this conference a stepping stone for a book project, focusing on recent events and their significance to the future

of Japan. To this end, Steven R. Reed kindly came on board as the senior editor, since the rest of us lacked the temperament to crack the editorial whip when deadlines approached. As it turned out, the authors did a wonderful job of policing themselves. The participants utilized original data sets, personal interviews, new statistical techniques, and their deep knowledge of relevant cases to write chapters that not only add to our understanding of Japan, but also open new avenues for research in the future. We collectively received fantastic feedback from discussants at the 2007 Stanford conference, who helped all the authors with theoretical, empirical, and methodological suggestions. This volume would be much poorer without the advice of Frances Rosenbluth, Mike Thies, Len Schoppa, Laurie Freeman, Ben Nyblade, Shigeo Hirano, and Meg McKean. Barbara Milligan and Fayre Makeig did a great job copyediting and proofing all the chapters. Victoria Tomkinson, Shorenstein APARC's wonderfully patient editor, helped us all the way from picking a book cover to fixing up and organizing the chapters, thereby making this book much more than the sum of its parts.

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