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After Populism?

The Long and Winding Road to the Westminster Model

Why can't Japan have a competitive opposition? Through an analysis of survey datasets, this article shows the loss of faith in the DPJ, and the vulnerability of voters' support. Although our analysis indicates the strength of the current Abe cabinet since 2012, it simultaneously displays that there is a greater divergence in emotional thermometer to Prime minister Abe and the LDP since regaining power in 2012, which suggests conflict in evaluation to the incumbent cabinet among Japanese electorates.

KEYWORDS: weak opposition, vulnerability of voters' support, cabinet approval and disapproval

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Research Questions

JAPAN EXPERIENCED two power transitions after the government of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro (2001 to 2006): one was the 2009 formation of the coalition government led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009, and the other was the DPJ coalition's subsequent fall and return of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komei Party coalition in 2012. Ironically, this situation also seemed to imply the failure of the two-party system in Japan, which was one purpose of the introduction of the mixed-member electoral system in single-member districts (SMDs) and proportional representation (PR) in 1994. The situation is reminiscent of the past party system of dominance by the LDP and fragmented, weak opposition parties (SCHEINER 2006).

Japanese elections, especially the general (lower house) elections, have been nationalized since the introduction of the current electoral system and have shown a high level of volatility (MCELWAIN 2012). High volatility in electoral outcomes and opposition party vulnerability has become quite a serious problem in Japanese politics. The DPJ coalition's defeat in the 2012 general election meant not only losing seats, but also the trust of the DPJ as a competent party in government. This article clarifies this situation using a national survey dataset.

Why doesn't Japan have a competitive opposition? This huge question remains unsolved. Without a competitive opposition, the Japanese electorate cannot have a meaningful choice in elections. Thus, this article examines the DPJ's rise and fall using survey datasets. Here I note some key variables: cabinet approval and disapproval ratings, percentage of supporters for each party, voters' recognition of the party's ability to govern, and feeling thermometers (likability indices) for political parties and leaders. The reasons for which we choose these variables are explained below.

The cabinet approval and disapproval rating is a critical index for maintaining the government. Low approval and high disapproval ratings can pressure a prime minister to resign, not only from opposition parties but also from their own party. For example, Koizumi's leadership as prime minister, often called "populism," was sustained with a high approval rating for his cabinet (OTAKE 2003; 2007; YAMADA 2004b). In the next section we compare these values to confirm each cabinet's situation after Koizumi.

The percentage of party supporters is also important from two perspectives. One perspective is from the party system. To be a stable two-party system like the Westminster model, the largest opposition party must be competitive not only in parliament, but also in its support rate. Another

perspective is that of independents. The more independent the voters, the more volatile the electoral outcome.

If voters do not recognize an opposition party as competent enough to manage the government, they have no substantial alternative to an incumbent government. Thus, the significance of the elections weakens. YAMADA (2010) has indicated the importance of this variable to explain the voting behavior in the 2009 general election, and these data have been collected by the Japanese Election Study (JES) team since 1983.

The importance of feeling thermometers to party leaders and parties has increased with the political trends known as “populism” (ALBERTAZZI and McDONNELL 2007; MOFFITT 2016), “personalization of political leadership” (BLONDEL et al. 2010), or the “presidentialization of politics” (POGUNTKE and WEBB 2007). These phenomena stress the importance of political leaders. AARTS, BLAIS, and SCHMITT (2011) also describe the importance of political leaders to explain people’s voting behavior. Additionally in Japan, Prime Minister Koizumi is well-known as a typical populist (OTAKE 2003; 2007). Moreover, the rise of some local politicians in metropolitan areas is seen as part of populist movements.

Before the introduction of the mixed-members electoral system in the 1996 general election, one salient feature of Japanese politics was factions in the LDP. After the introduction of the new electoral system, the LDP’s power structure began to concentrate on party executives, especially party leaders. Moreover, the Hashimoto cabinet reformed governmental organizations to expand the political initiative of a prime minister. These reforms produced power concentrated on the prime minister, who is usually the majority leader in parliament (TAKENAKA 2006; IIO 2007). Therefore, we need to pay attention to people’s recognition of prime ministers, and party leaders.¹ Such leaders are sometimes called populists. As we will see later, Japan has an enormous volume of independent voters who popular leaders can exhort.

In the following sections I analyze these key variables and their implications.

Cabinet Approval and Disapproval

I have used the Jiji press monthly survey as an index of cabinet approval and disapproval rates. This survey consisted of face-to-face interviews

1. For seminal studies emphasizing the importance of a prime minister in explaining voting behavior in Japan, see ARAKI et al. (1983) and KABASHIMA and IMAI (2002).

TABLE 1. Cabinet approval and disapproval ratings from July 1960 to May 2016.

PRIME MINISTER	PARTY OF THE PM	APPROVAL (%)		DISAPPROVAL (%)		MONTHS
		AVERAGE	S.D. [#]	AVERAGE	S.D.	
Ikeda Hayato		41.0	4.0	27.8	4.4	52
Sato Eisaku		35.0	6.7	33.3	9.1	92
Tanaka Kakuei		28.6	16.0	44.2	17.3	29
Miki Takeo		30.6	5.9	31.9	7.7	25
Fukuda Takeo		27.4	3.2	39.0	4.6	24
Ohira Masayoshi		30.1	5.1	37.1	9.0	19
Temporary Agency (*)	LDP	43.1		18.1		1
Suzuki Zenko		31.2	5.6	34.7	7.6	28
Nakasone Yas- uhiro		40.7	7.0	33.3	7.3	59
Takeshita Noboru		30.3	11.4	40.0	44.0	19
Uno Sosuke		14.8	12.3	56.9	25.7	2
Kaifu Toshiki		43.1	6.7	31.6	4.8	27
Miyazawa Ki'ichi		25.6	8.7	52.6	38.6	21
Hosokawa Morihiro	JNP	59.0	7.4	19.9	15.6	9
Hata Tsutomu	SHINSEITO	40.8	0.1	31.4	5.2	2
Murayama Tom'iichi	JSP (***)	34.9	3.9	39.2	4.8	18
Hashimoto Ryutaro		38.1	6.4	37.3	7.9	31
Obuchi Keizo		33.2	8.1	39.2	9.2	20
Mori Yoshiro		19.8	6.6	56.1	15.4	13
Koizumi Jun'ichiro	LDP	47.2	11.6	32.5	9.3	65
Abe Shinzo (1st)		36.5	9.6	38.2	14.5	12
Fukuda Yasuo		29.2	9.5	47.9	13.4	12
Aso Taro		22.3	8.6	58.0	12.2	12
Hatoyama Yukio		39.8	14.8	39.4	16.8	8
Kan Naoto	DPJ	26.0	10.3	53.5	14.2	15
Noda Yoshihiko		27.1	9.0	49.6	12.9	16
Abe Shinzo (2nd & 3rd)	LDP	49.3	6.4	29.4	6.6	41

Notes:

* The temporary agency was led by Masayoshi Ito because of the sudden death of Prime Minister Ohira.

** "JNP" = "Japan New Party"

*** "JSP" = "Japan Socialist Party"

"S.D." = "standard deviation"

conducted using randomly selected national samples of 2,000 adults.² TABLE 1 displays the ratings for each cabinet, for which higher approval and lower disapproval are desirable. According to this data, the most popular prime minister was Hosokawa Morihiro, who enjoyed a 59.0% approval rate on average and passed political reform bills that included the introduction of the current electoral system in the lower house and public subsidies to political parties. But the Hosokawa cabinet lasted only a short nine months.

After the introduction of the lower house's current electoral system, the average approval rating for each Japanese cabinet was less than 40% until Koizumi's cabinet. Although his cabinet had a relatively higher approval rating than those of his predecessors, its fluctuation was also relatively greater as per the value of the standard deviation (11.6) shown in TABLE 1.

From the first Abe cabinet to the Aso cabinet, the approval rating steadily decreased. From the Fukuda cabinet, the disapproval rating rose higher than the approval rating. Finally, in the Aso cabinet, the average disapproval rating was 58%, more than twice the approval rating. The 2009 snap election by Aso marked the defeat of the LDP-Komeito coalition government. Aso's bad performance in approval and disapproval ratings resembles that of the Mori cabinet, which resigned with a low approval rating on 26 April 2000.

The DPJ achieved a power shift through their victory in the 2009 general election. However, the DPJ coalition could not win the general election in 2012 and each cabinet lasted only briefly. Among the three cabinets of the DPJ-led coalition, Hatoyama's had the best approval rating, but its standard deviation was large (14.8) and it lasted for only eight months. For the Kan cabinet, the average disapproval rating was 53.5%.³

Abe Shinzo returned to office through his triumph in the 2012 lower house election. The second and the third Abe cabinet, which is still in power, has the highest approval rating, 49.3%, higher than that of Koizumi's term, and the lowest disapproval rating, with 29.4% on average. The standard deviations, 6.4 for approval and 6.6 for disapproval, are also the lowest under the current electoral system, implying that the national evaluation of the current cabinet is relatively high and stable as of May 2016.

2. For data collection, I am indebted to Mikitaka Masuyama (National Graduate Institute for Policy Research) and Yukio Maeda (The University of Tokyo) who kindly provided their datasets.

3. For a brief summary in English, see PEKKANEN and REED (2013).

Party Support and Independents

In this section, we address three parties (LDP, DPJ, and Komeito) to examine the percentages of supporters, and independents, that is, those respondents who answered “I have no party to support” in the Jiji monthly survey. TABLE 2 shows values and standard deviations for each cabinet since the Mori government.

As for the LDP, from Mori to Aso, each cabinet received on average only 20% of the vote. Even under the Koizumi cabinet LDP supporters accounted for only 24.2% of the vote, almost half of the cabinet’s average approval rating. This gap was the one of the crucial resources for Koizumi’s leadership and governance of the LDP. As his popularity was higher than that of the LDP, he could have carried out the privatization of the national postal service in spite of strong resistance from some LDP politicians. After Koizumi, support for the LDP gradually declined and did not recover until it was recaptured in the 2012 general election. But Abe’s revenge against the DPJ seems to have succeeded in terms of the rate of supporters, which exceeds that of the Koizumi cabinet. Interestingly, although standard deviations under Koizumi and the first Abe cabinet were relatively high at 3.6 and 3.0 respectively, under the second and third Abe cabinets, the standard deviation is 1.9, indicating that the fluctuation was less than under the Koizumi cabinet. Komeito, a partner in the LDP coalition, has a very small but stable rate, less than 4% on average, with the standard deviation from 0.4 to 0.8. The DPJ obtained 23.2% of the vote under the Hatoyama cabinet, but it was unstable and seldom more than 20%.

AS TABLE 2 clearly shows, the majority of the Japanese electorate are independent voters, comprising nearly 60% of adults. As YAMADA (2004b) has argued, this is a source of electoral volatility that sustains the effectiveness of populist strategy in Japan.⁴ In particular, we should focus especially on the 67.4% under Noda’s term. At that time, the LDP’s value remained unchanged, and this implies that past DPJ supporters seemed to move to the independents.

4. NISHIZAWA (2004) and YAMADA (2004a) show Japanese people’s negative attitude to political parties and refusal to commit to party activities using JEDS 1996 and 2000 datasets, which are available at the SSJ Data Archive (SSJDA) in the Institute of Social Science, the University of Tokyo (<http://csrda.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/>).

TABLE 2. Percentage of Party Supporters and Independents from the Mori Cabinet to the Second Abe Administration.

PM	TERM	LDP		KOMEITO		DPJ, DP (*)		INDEPENDENTS	
		AVERAGE	S.D.	AVERAGE	S.D.	AVERAGE	S.D.	AVERAGE	S.D.
Mori Yoshiro	2000.4– 2001.4	22.7	2.0	3.8	0.4	7.0	2.0	56.8	2.6
Koizumi Jun'ichiro	2001.5– 2006.9	24.2	3.6	3.9	0.6	7.9	3.5	57.6	4.8
Abe Shinzo (1st)	2006.10– 2007.9	22.9	3.0	3.6	0.5	11.0	3.6	57.5	3.8
Fukuda Yasuo	2007.10– 2008.9	21.6	1.7	3.3	0.5	14.9	1.2	55.4	2.0
Aso Taro	2008.10– 2009.9	19.4	2.6	3.8	0.6	16.2	3.6	55.3	3.3
Hatoyama Yukio	2009.10– 2010.5	14.9	1.5	3.7	0.8	23.2	4.9	52.3	5.0
Kan Naoto	2010.6– 2011.8	15.6	1.3	3.6	0.4	14.6	4.1	59.8	5.1
Noda Yoshihiko	2011.9– 2012.12	13.6	1.6	3.6	0.6	9.1	2.2	67.4	2.6
Abe Shinzo (2nd & 3rd)	2013.1– 2016.5	25.4	1.9	3.6	0.5	4.5	1.0	60.2	2.7

Note: *The Democratic Party (Minshintō) since April 2016.

Voters Evaluate the Parties who will Govern

A prerequisite for performance voting and power shifts throughout an election is a voter's evaluation of a party's competence to govern. Without such evaluations, we cannot vote for another party as the alternative to the incumbent party (CLARKE et al. 2009). For an explanation of swing voting in the Japanese 2009 general election, this variable played a critical role (YAMADA 2010; 2013); voters' evaluations were surveyed by the Japanese Election Study (JES) group.⁵ In the JES survey the respondents are asked, "Which political parties do you think have the ability to be in charge of the government? Choose as many parties as you like from the list." Here, multiple answers were allowed.

I then used the datasets JESIII (2001–2005), IV (2007–2011), GCOE–CGCS (2012), and the JESV (2013–2016).⁶ FIGURE 1 shows evaluations of

5. All of the JES projects (I to V) are subsidized by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS).

6. The JESIII and IV datasets are also available at SSJDA. GCOE–CGCS (2012) was col-

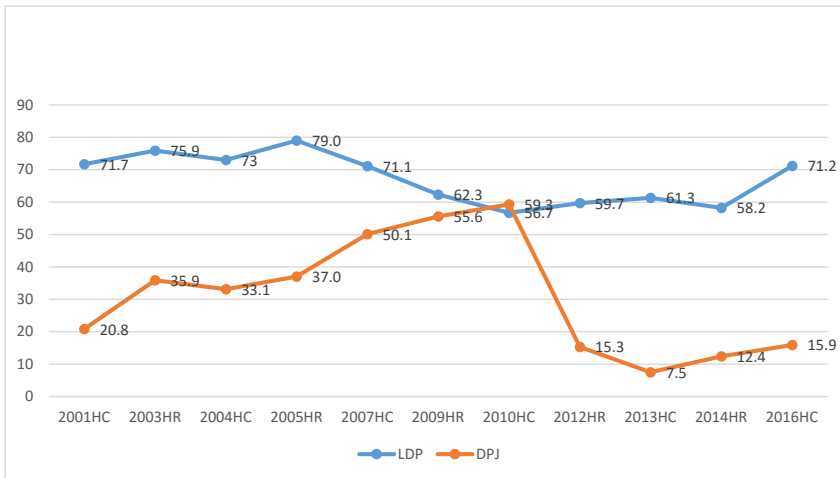


FIGURE 1. Voters' evaluation of the LDP and the DPJ's ability to govern.

the LDP and the DPJ. All data (except 2007) were measured in the pre-election surveys in each national election, the lower house (the House of Representatives, HR), and the upper house (the House of Councilors, HC).⁷ From 2001 to 2005, under the Koizumi cabinet, over 70% of the voters regarded the LDP as capable of governing. But from 2005, the public's evaluation of the party declined, with the lowest being 56.7% in 2010. Even after the LDP returned to office it did not succeed in recovering its past levels until 2014, and 2016 marked a recovery.

On the other hand, evaluation of the DPJ by the general public rose from 2001 to 2010. In 2010, the DPJ was evaluated above the LDP. But since 2010, it has fallen drastically, to 12.4% in 2014, which seems catastrophic. Indeed, the merger with the Japan Innovation Party (Ishin no tō) and the formation of the Democratic Party (Minshintō) could not prevent the damage. It will take a long time for the DP to be once again regarded as a competent party in office.

lected by Keio University, and I would like to thank them for their permission to use the data. All surveys were conducted face-to-face. However, data from 2013 to 2014 by JESV were collected via Internet surveys, and the 2016 data is from a mail survey. The JESV's principal investigator is Yoshiaki Kobayashi (Keio University). The JESV dataset will be released in 2017. See <http://www.res.kutc.kansai-u.ac.jp/JES/en/index.html>.

7. The 2007 data was collected in the post-election survey.

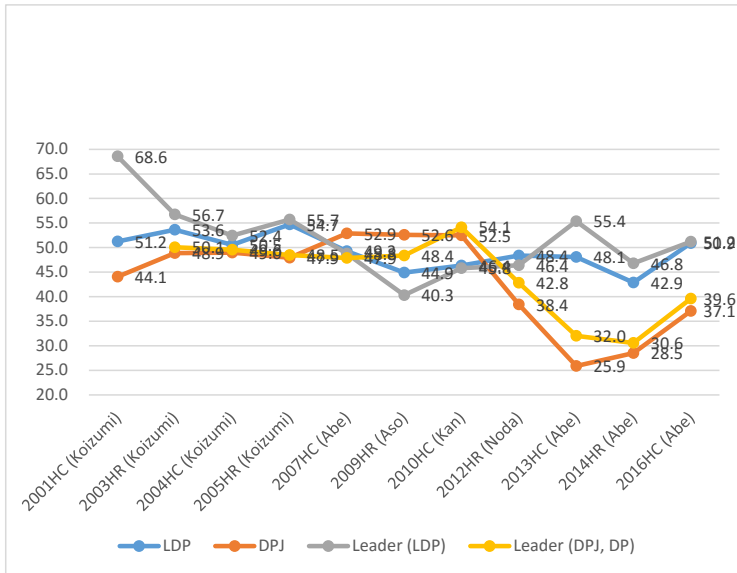


FIGURE 2. Emotional thermometers for the LDP and the DPJ (DP since 2016).

Feeling Thermometers

A feeling thermometer is a kind of likability index; 50 degrees is neutral, zero indicates “mostly dislike,” and 100 indicates “mostly like.” This index is also part of the survey on political parties and leaders by the JES project. We used the data from 2001 to 2014 and created FIGURE 2, similar to that of FIGURE 1.

As FIGURE 2 shows, under the Koizumi cabinet, the LDP had enjoyed relatively higher support (although near 50 degrees) than the DPJ, although in 2004, support for the LDP and the DPJ was almost the same. Then in 2007, support for the DPJ exceeded that of the LDP until 2010. In 2012, the success that the DPJ had enjoyed collapsed, and support for the DPJ and its leaders (Noda Yoshihiko in 2012, Kaieda Banri in 2013 and 2014) fell sharply, although in 2016, showed a slight recovery by the party itself and its leader (Okada Katsuya). Generally, no leaders of other third parties performed better than prime ministers. For that reason, third-party leaders are not listed in FIGURE 2.

Although Koizumi certainly had a higher evaluation than other politicians, Abe’s performance from 2013 onward was not bad. In the 2016 upper house election, the LDP recovered. Additionally, when we compare the 2003 and 2005 general elections, which showed a great difference in the

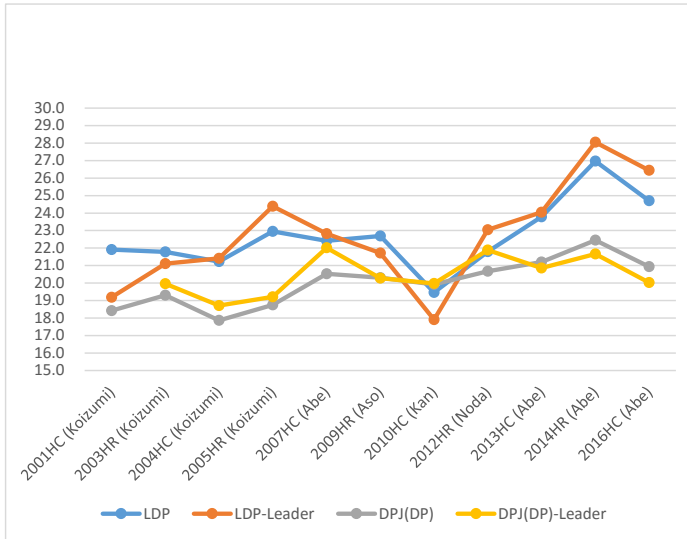


FIGURE 3. Standard deviation of emotional thermometers.

number of seats, we do not find such a difference in the average degree of Koizumi and the LDP's emotional thermometers.

So what about the variance in the thermometers? They show us the divergence of evaluation to politicians and parties. FIGURE 3 displays standard deviations with the same data as in FIGURE 2. Before the 2009 power transition from the LDP to the DPJ, the values of the LDP and its leaders were relatively higher than that of the DPJ. In the 2001 upper house election, when Koizumi performed well, the standard deviation was relatively low (19.2). But in the 2005 general election, his standard deviation was the highest (24.4), increasing by approximately 5.2 points. This trend was similar to the LDP, suggesting that evaluation of the LDP and Koizumi was divided among the Japanese electorate at that time.

On the other hand, the lowest standard deviation for the LDP and its leader (Tanigaki Sadakazu) was recorded in the 2010 upper house election: the former was 19.5 and the latter 17.9. Only in that 2010 election was the LDP the opposition party. From then on, the standard deviation values for the LDP and its leaders grew. Values in the 2014 general election and the upper house election in 2016 were higher than those of Koizumi in 2005. Therefore, people's evaluation of the second and third Abe cabinet seems the most dispersed so far in the twenty-first century.

Tentative Conclusion

Through examination of these variables we can confirm the breakdown of the competitive two-party system in Japan. Japanese people do not regard the DP as a competent party in government. In the short term, this situation does not seem to be easy to change, meaning that Japanese voters have no alternatives to the current coalition. This marks the resurgence of the predominant party system, but with greater volatility in elections than the past system under the SNTV (single non-transferable vote) since 1955.

To establish a two-party system with the requisite power shifts we need a competent and stable opposition. The ratio of supporters of the current largest opposition party, the DP, is very low, and not so different from that of Komeito in the 2016 upper-house election. The DP must endeavor to win the trust of voters as a competent governing party during high volatility national elections. This, of course, is not easy (WEINER 2013).

On the other hand, currently the LDP and the Komeito coalition seem unrivaled. However, as we have observed, the feeling of voters toward Abe and the LDP diverge greatly. Additionally, the majority of the Japanese electorate are independent voters and could produce a swing from a governing coalition to the opposition as in the 2009 general election.

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