



Our topic today is the state, with a focus on parliament, bureaucracy, and local authorities. The video lecture is relatively short because there are many materials available about Japanese politics. Some are listed in the class website, including a concise summary of the political system in the Statistical Handbook of Japan, election coverage on NHK, a video tour around the Diet building, and links to various government websites. But, please also actively seek out other materials. In particular, one of the best ways to learn about the Japanese government is to watch television news and read a newspaper regularly.

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Today's Topics

- Voting system
- Constitutional reform
- Nationalism
- Hereditary politics
- Corruption & scandal
- Women in politics
- Powerful bureaucracy
- Local government and municipal mergers

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Today I will introduce eight topics which I think are characteristic of Japanese politics: the voting system, constitutional reform, nationalism, hereditary politics, corruption & scandal, women in politics, the powerful bureaucracy, and local government and municipal mergers. In addition to my short introduction, please read about them in more detail via the articles and other materials on the website.

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1. Voting System

- A mixture of first-past-the-post and proportional representation.
- Close to an “ideal system”.
- This has not stopped the dominance of the LDP.
- The failure of Japan’s liberal opposition parties to organise effectively against conservatives.

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The first key feature is that the Japanese voting system, on paper at least, is very close to an ideal system. It combines first-past-the-post and proportional representation. Each system has advantages and disadvantages. I will not go into this in detail here because there is another video on this topic embedded in the class homepage. I will just say that the Japanese system means that everyone gets to say which individual they want representing their locality, and which party they want representing their ideology. However, this hybrid system has not prevented the domination of the LDP since the current system was introduced in 1996. The LDP has consistently been in government with around 35-40 percent of the popular vote, except in the years 2009 to 2012. This says much about the failings of Japan’s divided liberal opposition parties, and their inability to organise effectively against Japan’s united and power-hungry conservative political machine: the Liberal Democratic Party.

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2. The Constitution

- Again, close to an ideal document.
- Former Prime Minister Abe pushed hard, but unsuccessfully, for constitutional reform.
- The contradiction between the existence of the SDF and Article 9 of the Constitution.
- Article 96 enshrines the right to change the constitution.

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If you have not already read the Japanese constitution, please do so. Again, it is close to an ideal document for a democratic country. In which case, why is there so much discussion of constitutional reform? Well, Japanese conservatives would like a constitution written by Japanese people, rather than the one that feels like it was imposed on Japan by the victorious allies after World War II (although the reality is much more complicated than it being an “American-imposed constitution”). The position of the Self Defense Force is clearly in contradiction with Article 9, which states that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained”. Plus, there are other ways in which the constitution could be updated from its 1947 version, on issues such as privacy, digital society, and social issues such as gay rights. But, the constitution in its current form has many strong defenders in Japan, too. Ultimately, though, the right to revise the constitution is clearly stated in Article 96 of the constitution. Thinking about what type of constitution people want for themselves, therefore, is the democratic right and constitutional duty of all eligible voters in Japan.

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3. Nationalism

- Is Japan shifting to the right?
- How do we measure whether Japan is more rightwing now than it was ten, twenty or fifty years ago?
- What social forces might be pushing Japanese people to more rightwing politics?
- Questions for our age ... and not just in Japan.

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In recent years there has been discussion that Japanese politics is shifting to the right, most notably by political scientist Nakano Koichi. He is one of the LDP's strongest public critics, and both his article Contemporary Political Dynamics of Japanese Nationalism and one of the videos from his YouTube channel are linked from the class homepage. However, rightwing nationalism has existed within the Japanese system throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The two key questions we must ask are: How do we measure whether Japan is more right wing now than it was ten, twenty or fifty years ago? And what social forces might be pushing Japanese people to more rightwing politics? Looking beyond the shores of Japan, we can also see that many countries now have strongly nationalist leaders, often chosen in backlash to the forces of globalisation, widening inequality, and international migration. Revived nationalism, therefore, is one of the political topics of our age, and one which affects Japan as well as the other advanced industrialised nations.

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4. Hereditary Politics

- At the 2017 House of Representatives election:
 - One quarter of MPs elected had a relative who was also a politician.
 - One third of LDP MPs were hereditary.
- Japan has a ruling class of political families.

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Politics in Japan is often a family business. In the 2017 House of Representatives election, one quarter of elected MPs had a family member who was also a politician. Among conservative LDP members, the number was one third. This indicates the major advantages of people who inherit the support networks and connections of family members. Japan, therefore, has a ruling class of political families that exists alongside the individuals who enter politics out of personal conviction.

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5. Corruption & Scandals

- There have been many money-related scandals over the years: Lockheed, Recruit, Moritomo Gakuen ...
- An ever-present part of Japanese politics. And of course the Unification Church problem right now.
- Scandals regarding personal behaviour: marital infidelity and problematic comments ...

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There have been many money-related scandals over the years. Sometimes they have brought down the government, such as the Lockheed Scandal in the 1970s and Recruit Scandal in the 1980s. The Abe administration from 2012 to 2020 also faced a number of scandals regarding favours to political allies, such as the 2017 scandal regarding the sale of land to Moritomo Gakuen at a discounted price. They are an ever present part of national and local politics. Large amounts of money are distributed by government, and the connections between beneficiaries of such funding and politicians are not always in accordance with the law. This issue of connections between politicians and shady non-government groupings have come under particular scrutiny since the assassination of former prime minister Abe Shinzo.

Scandals can also be related to personal behaviour, such as marital infidelity and problematic comments that force a politician's resignation. I will not go into any case studies in detail here, but do be aware of how common scandal is in Japanese politics.

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6. Women in Politics

- Very low numbers of female politicians.
- Women face serious barriers to achieving senior positions in politics, the bureaucracy and business.
- Misogyny: Sexual harassment of female MPs a major problem.
- "Womenomics" and "making women shine".

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The sixth characteristic is the role of women in politics. Look at the number of female MPs in parliament as shown in the Statistical Handbook of Japan. It's very low as a percentage of total MPs, and also low in comparison with other advanced industrialised nations. Japan has never had a female prime minister, women are barred from the imperial throne, there are usually only two or three women in the cabinet, and there are low numbers of women in senior management positions within the bureaucracy and major corporations. In short, Japan has a serious gender inequality problem at work. This is also manifested in the political sphere being a hostile place for women to be. Read Emma Dalton's work about the sexual harassment faced by female politicians and their broader struggles to be treated equally for the political work that they do. Japanese politics is a very male, and misogynous, place. Headline policies such as womenomics and "making women shine" are very empty when you look at the actual results.

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7. The Bureaucracy

- *Komuin* (civil servants): Another male-dominated profession with crazy working hours.
- Significant power behind the scenes to influence policy.
- They can steer political decisions by supplying politicians with the “recommended options”.
- “Who rules Japan?” ... don’t forget the bureaucracy.

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One of the safest and most respected jobs within Japan is to be a koumuin, or civil servant. These public employees often work incredibly long hours, especially in the heart of the national bureaucracy in Nagatacho. Working until late at night and then having to be back in the office early in the morning is one of the most effective ways of maintaining the male domination of Japanese government, both local and national: men can manage it with a long-suffering wife and kids waiting at home, but most women cannot pursue this career and maintain aspirations of family life. So, the bureaucracy, like politics, is male dominated. The bureaucracy often has significant powers behind the scenes in Japan. Next time you watch the television news, see how politicians give testimony to committees in the Diet. They often read out preprepared statements in answer to questions. These statements have often been drafted by the bureaucrats, who sit just behind them listening carefully. While Japanese bureaucrats do not have decision-making powers, the ability they have to steer political decisions in a particular direction by supplying politicians with the “recommended options” is absolutely legendary. Whenever you think about who rules Japan, do not forget the bureaucracy!

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8. Local Government

- There are prefectural and municipal levels of government and bureaucracy, too.
- The municipal mergers of the early 2000s, but not as yet a realignment of the prefectural system.
- Many local governments are severely short of cash (remember Yubari from 2 weeks ago) and rely a lot on central government.

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Finally, in addition to national government there is local government. This exists at prefectural and municipal levels. Both have their own sets of politicians and bureaucrats. One of the key issues within local government in the past three decades has been municipal mergers. These are towns that have joined together to save on the costs of running Japan’s provinces in an era of economic stagnation and depopulation. The wave of Heisei municipal mergers in the early 2000s also led to discussion of the rationalisation of Japan’s prefectural system, although this has not become a reality yet. See the article by Anthony Rausch on this issue. It is linked from the class website. One of the key issues facing local governments, as we learned in Week 2 in the case study of Yubari, is that local finances can be under considerable strain given Japan’s ageing and shrinking population. This makes the provinces highly reliant on the the centre. The power of Tokyo and the power of central government to dictate to the provinces is a theme that we often see arising in local government.

Finally

- Make sure to watch/read the news regularly!



So, these are some of the main issues to look out for as you watch Japanese political news over the coming few years. Make sure to watch and read domestic news regularly. This will be your best means of deepening your understanding of politics in day-to-day Japanese life.