



Japan's electoral geography and agricultural policy making: The rural vote and prevailing issues of proportional misrepresentation



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ABSTRACT

This study of Japan's electoral geography focuses on the outcomes of the 2014 General Election for the House of Representatives. It reflects on the political power of segmented policy communities involved in international free trade and domestic agricultural policy reform and the way they interact with each other. The capability of these policy communities to negotiate behind-the-scenes trade-offs, in order to facilitate reform without disrupting the status quo, is identified as a major determinant of the power structure in contemporary Japan. Also, as low-information and low-participation elections tend to result in a high rate of re-election of incumbents, the depoliticisation of the citizenry is in the interest of these policy communities. Therefore, specific policies and the differentiation among political parties played only a minor role during the 2014 electoral campaign. The paper demonstrates that the strong force of the agricultural policy community to resist transformational change is still deeply rooted in the proportional overrepresentation of agricultural interests built into the electoral system. It concludes that within the context of an increasing deficit of legitimacy and an aggravating depoliticisation trend, commitments to fundamental polity reform are integral to voters' perceptions of the fairness of Japan's democratic institutions. Significant structural reforms that embody federalist and direct democracy principles are discussed as an alternative to the unitary state model in order to seriously tackle issues of proportional misrepresentation and adequately accommodate rural interests.

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1. Introduction

Among others, McCormack (2001), Broadbent (2002) and George Mulgan (2005, 2016a) argued that Japanese policy actors are deeply embedded in long-term relationships of mutual obligation with special interests. The specific configurations and memberships of policy communities differ by field, but institutionalised patterns of power relations, the delineation of insider and outsider groups, and a common cognitive order concerning fixed agendas, the nature of policy problems, and the responses required including information asymmetries in elite–public relations, are what tends to create long periods of policy stability. It is only under certain circumstances that such periods are punctuated by short, but intense periods of change. This requires a focusing or triggering event that attracts high levels of public attention and creates a situation in which an issue reaches to the top of the political agenda (Baumgartner et al., 2014). The agricultural policy

community has been very effective in avoiding such punctuations and defending its policy monopoly up to the present day.

Throughout the post-war years, the sector enjoyed powerful backing from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), public administrative bodies such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), the agricultural business community and its nationwide organisation of agricultural cooperative unions (George Mulgan, 2000, 2005, 2006a; Maclachlan and Shimizu, 2016; Nakamura, 2001). Otherwise, it would have collapsed under the pressures of socio-economic structural change. At the same time, despite Japan's genuine interest in international free trade, agricultural protectionism has repeatedly been a major obstacle to trade liberalisation (Blaker, 1998; George Mulgan, 2006b; 2014; Honma, 2015; Yamashita, 2015a). Recently, Japan's resistance to fully open its agricultural market has largely contributed to marathon negotiations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was finally concluded in October 2015 but will not enter into force.

This study of Japan's electoral geography focuses on the 14 December 2014 General Election for the House of Representatives (HR), and how the run-up to the election and its outcomes relate to major agricultural policy reforms in the 2013 to 2015 period.

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Moving well beyond the peculiarities of Japan's geography of representation, the purpose of this paper is to revisit the enduring nexus between elections and agricultural policy making in Japan, hence assessing the after-effects of previous electoral reform. The prospect of the TPP as an event potentially triggering transformational policy change comes under scrutiny with a view towards the vested interests of policy communities involved in international free trade and domestic agricultural policy making. Their capability to negotiate behind-the-scenes trade-offs, in order to facilitate reform without disrupting the status quo, is identified as a major determinant of the power structure in Japan. Furthermore, as low-information and low-participation elections tend to result in a high rate of re-election of incumbents, the depoliticisation of the citizenry along with public interests is a relevant trend for these policy communities seeking to sustain institutionalised patterns of power and authority. Wood and Flinders (2014:150) noted that “[a] ‘depoliticised polity’ would (...) exhibit very little public debate about major social issues or political options alongside a very barren political landscape in terms of public engagement and social dynamism.”

The paper is divided into four parts. The first part introduces main features of the political and electoral system referring to the political science literature on party competition and voting behaviour, following which the outcomes of the 2014 General Election are analysed. In the third section, key features of the agricultural policy community in the context of the TPP and structural reform negotiations are presented. It illustrates that segmentation within the institutions of the state results in bargaining over policy decisions between the different stakeholders involved in these organisationally separated, yet interrelated policy arenas. The paper closes with an appraisal of Japan's electoral system functionality with regard to more fundamental polity reform needs. Overall, the paper contends that contrary to what might have been expected from policy theory assumptions regarding triggering events, the TPP has not resulted in transformational agricultural policy change. It reinforces the broader argument underlying this research, by suggesting that the agricultural policy community's responsiveness to reform pressures proves strong enough to prevent outsider groups from successfully promoting alternative policy agendas. This is mainly because external triggering events do not necessarily induce changes at the deeper institutional level of the Japanese polity. Moreover, these institutional frictions to reform work in favour of political parties which benefit from organised votes when voter turnout in national elections is low.

Methodologically, a spatial approach to understanding the nexus between elections and public policy making is central to this paper. The mapping and literature analysis supported interpretation of official election data, published in Japanese by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC, 2015), is used to illustrate the patterns behind political party competition and voting behaviour. As electoral districts across Japan's prefectures vary greatly in number, size and population, the distinctive cartograms of election data presented in the figures use a specific square grid pattern visualisation in order to avoid misleading interpretations due to spatial features or geographical determinism. The focus is on first-past-the-post elements of the electoral system: single-member districts, which are used in the election of nearly two-thirds of Japan's HR politicians, the plurality voting and winner-take-all principles. Abstract squares simply represent single-member districts as they are placed in their approximate relative geographical positions. The mapping ignores the geographic size and other features of constituencies, which vary substantially across the archipelago, but actually do not matter in the districting process with its focus on the voting-eligible population.

2. Japan's political and electoral system: theoretical reflections on party strategies and vote choices

Flint and Taylor (2007) discussed the conceptualisation of voting within a model of “liberal social democracy”, which is identified as “a normative argument that regards itself as the rational and correct culmination of the western political tradition” (Flint and Taylor, 2007:202). Assuming that this ideal can be simply transplanted into very different socio-cultural and political contexts to further democratisation across the globe is criticised as a manifestation of the West's claim to universalism. In Japan, the classical liberal assumption that the electorate articulates its will through pluralistic, free and fair elections, was legislated into the political system during the American occupation after the defeat of Japan in the Asia-Pacific War. It has been argued, however, that it has not translated into diffusion of classical western understandings of the liberal social democracy argument as electoral incentives have produced important consequences for particularistic legislative organisation (Maeda, 2007; Pekkanen et al., 2006). Most intriguingly, the LDP maintained its HR majority nearly continuously from its formation in 1955, a phenomenon widely referred to as the “1955 System” (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2010; Shinoda, 2013).

With the bursting of Japan's bubble economy and economic stagnation in the early 1990s, the party system underwent an evolutionary process of realignment, which led to what Schoppa (2011) labels the “2000 System”. Whereas the political parties have converged ideologically and programmatically, elections now focus on the LDP and the newly formed Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) as the strongest number two party. The 2009 HR election was the first in which the LDP was not the top party and lost power to the DPJ, but it regained its majority already in 2012. Kamikawa (2016) argues that the DPJ government was greatly constrained by the existing institutions and networks established under the previous predominant party system. He highlights the “unusual closeness” between the ministries and the LDP and the LDP's “inclusive party strategy” open to adopting the policies of competing parties for the purpose of vote-seeking.

At the heart of Japan's “dysfunctional democracy”, Bowen (2003) analysed the relationship between the electoral system and political corruption that encouraged politics of personalism and money-power politics. Chang and Golden (2006:134) stressed that “corruption and the search for the personal vote go hand in hand”, so it is not surprising that particularism emerged as a consistent feature of both campaigning and legislative action in Japan. As elsewhere, widespread cultivation of a personal vote breeds an oversupply of particularistic legislation and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Golden, 2003; Hicken and Simmons, 2008). The pork barrel politics of elected representatives using their office to favour interest groups in their constituencies by influencing patterns of public works expenditure has been widely discussed in the literature (Feldhoff, 2005; George Mulgan, 2005, 2016a; McCormack, 2001; Ono, 2015; Pekkanen et al., 2006; Richardson, 1997; Woodall, 1996). Because distributive policy benefits serve the needs of well-organised special interest groups, these groups in return mobilise votes and contribute substantial amounts of money to election campaigns. These interest groups seek stable, predictable coalitions with specific actors in the bureaucracy and the political parties based on informality, intransparency, and reciprocity.

Until the electoral reform of 1994, a medium-size election district system of 129 multimember electoral districts with three to five available seats each was in effect. This system encouraged severe competition among fellow party candidates within the same district (Bouissou, 1999; Bowen, 2003; Fukui and Fukai, 1999). A candidate's personal support group (*kōenkai*), mainly based on social networking and mutual give-and-take obligations, was

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