

PIPELINES OF PORK

Japanese Politics and a Model of Local Opposition Party Failure

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The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has dominated Japanese politics since 1955, and the party's even greater dominance of *subnational* level elections is much of the reason why. This article seeks to explain local electoral outcomes in Japan by focusing on two key features of the Japanese political system: the heavy centralization of governmental finances and an emphasis on clientelistic exchange. Because Japan's political system focuses so heavily on the clientelist distribution of goods, local politicians and voters casting ballots in local elections have an incentive to align with parties that have access to the state budget. Because Japan's public funds are primarily controlled by the central government, parties that control the national budget will be the most likely to benefit. In short, Japan's fiscally centralized and clientelist system helps generate for the LDP a near monopoly on local power across most of Japan.

Keywords: *party competition; fiscal federalism; clientelism; one-party dominance; Japanese politics*

It looked like the end of business as usual in Japan as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost power in 1993. After the parliament (Diet) passed a no-confidence motion and new elections were held, a coalition of former opposition parties, former LDP members, and new parties entered

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into the first non-LDP government since the party was created in 1955. It was widely perceived that Japan's long-used single-nontransferable-vote in multi-member district (SNTV/MMD) electoral system for its House of Representatives (HR) had been responsible for many of Japan's ills, including the long-time dominance of the LDP. Not surprising, therefore, the non-LDP government's main act in office was replacing the HR's SNTV/MMD system with a mixed-member system that combined 200 proportional representation (PR) seats (changed to 180 seats prior to the 2000 election) and 300 single-member-district (SMD) seats. However, by the summer of 1994, the LDP was back in power, the leading party in a coalition government. Since then, the party has continued to be at the center of every government, with only a small party or two joining it in a coalition.

Japanese party politics are a puzzle. Two points make them all the more difficult to understand. First, Japan is a democracy. Citizens maintain all the usual civil liberties, and non-LDP parties contest elections, hoping to topple the LDP. Second and most troubling, the LDP is not popular. Indeed, the party has not won a majority of the HR vote since 1963. Nevertheless, despite a change in the electoral system, the LDP has maintained power. Observers of Japan and democracy in general are left asking, Why, even in the face of great dissatisfaction with the dominant party, has no opposition party been able to offer itself as a credible challenger in Japan?

Most arguments about LDP dominance focus on Japanese culture, the "radical" nature of Japanese opposition parties such as the Socialists, or the SNTV/MMD electoral system, but these explanations all miss a critical component of opposition failure: At the heart of opposition failure in national-level elections in Japan throughout the postwar period is even greater opposition weakness at the local level. At the same time that the opposition has controlled an even smaller percentage of subnational offices than national-level ones, the LDP has controlled the bulk of Japan's prefectural governments. As a result, the LDP has held a massive advantage over the opposition in campaigning for national office. Able to control very few local governments, Japanese opposition parties have had little chance to demonstrate a capacity to govern at the local level, which in most countries serves as opposition parties' best chance to prove themselves. At least as important, control of local office has provided the LDP with a huge pool of local politicians, who act as the principal campaigners and, very often, the most credible candidates for the party in national elections.

Given the importance of local party success to national electoral outcomes, any explanation of opposition failure in Japan must help us understand why the opposition has failed so dramatically at the local level. For this reason, this article seeks to explain local electoral outcomes in Japan. The

explanation here focuses on two key features of the Japanese political system: the heavy centralization of governmental finances and an emphasis in Japanese politics on clientelistic exchange. Because Japan's political system focuses so heavily on the clientelist distribution of goods, local politicians and voters casting ballots in local elections have an incentive to align with parties that have access to the state budget. Because Japan's public funds are primarily controlled by the central government, parties that control the national budget will be the most likely to benefit. In short, Japan's fiscally centralized and clientelist system helps generate for the LDP a near monopoly on local power across most of the country.

I begin by providing background on the Japanese case, and I explain why we should expect the combination of clientelism and fiscal centralization to lead to opposition failure at the local level. Then I provide evidence demonstrating the link between clientelism/centralization and local opposition failure.

EXPLANATIONS FOR OPPOSITION FAILURE IN JAPAN

Many arguments have been used to explain opposition failure in Japan, but these analyses typically are insufficient for a number of reasons. Many cannot account for continued LDP dominance even after new, moderate parties took the opposition lead and the SNTV electoral system was eliminated. Perhaps most important, most analyses overlook a key continuity of Japanese politics: the substantial discrepancy between national- and local-level party success.

The most traditional view of Japanese political studies emphasizes Japanese culture and how the LDP has created in voters a sense of indebtedness and obligation to it. Yet this explanation is not wholly convincing today, because only about 20% of the total eligible electorate cast ballots for the LDP. In addition, cultural arguments cannot satisfactorily explain the ups and downs of support for the LDP.

Others, particularly in the popular press, argue that LDP dominance was due to the longtime strength of the Japanese economy, LDP policy flexibility, and the LDP's ability to make appeals that matched a large cross-section of the Japanese public. Similar and frequently used explanations for opposition failure are that Japan's leading opposition party was typically too radical to gain much support (see Kohno, 2001) and that voters found the opposition incompetent and therefore a risk if it ever were allowed to control the government. To some extent, all of these arguments hold water, but they are clearly insufficient. To begin with, opposition parties of the post-1993 period are of a

new shape: more moderate, pragmatic, and likely to attract the average Japanese voter. In addition, these explanations for LDP dominance run into difficulty when faced with the fact that the LDP simply is not very popular. As noted above, the LDP has not won a majority of the HR vote since 1963. The lack of popularity of the party itself is made especially clear by the results of elections held since the introduction of its mixed PR/SMD system. The opposition has not found success in district races, but in *party*-based PR races roughly 70% of voters cast ballots for parties other than the LDP.

Some argue that opposition difficulty must therefore have arisen from nomination coordination problems at the district level, especially under the SNTV/MMD system (Cox, 1997). Under the system, multiple seats were available in each district, but each voter could cast only one ballot for a single candidate and votes could not be transferred to other candidates or to parties. As a result, parties or blocs of parties (such as the opposition bloc) needed to coordinate so as to avoid wasting votes by running too many or too few candidates. Cox's (1997) evidence suggests that the LDP won more winnable seats (i.e., overcame coordination problems) more frequently than the opposition. However, Christensen's (2000) evidence suggests that the opposition was actually a better coordinating body but that the LDP won more seats simply because it won more votes per winnable seat. In short, opposition failure was due less to coordination failure and more to a failure to win more votes. Post-1993 results work against the SNTV/MMD argument as well: If the electoral system was largely responsible for opposition (mis)fortunes under SNTV/MMD, one would expect the opposition to find greater success under the new PR/SMD system. But even under the new system, opposition failure continues.¹

IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL-LEVEL FAILURE OF THE OPPOSITION

In addition, these theories also face an important problem in that their focus is solely on the national level and therefore miss a critical factor in LDP success: even greater dominance at the local level. The LDP has always dominated the prefectural level, in many prefectures and many years exceeding that which it held at the national level. In contrast, even when the opposition did moderately well at the national level, it was unable to translate this suc-

1. Continued opposition failure under the new system does not appear to be due to coordination problems in the single-member-district (SMDs). In only 29 out of the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP's) 177 SMD victories in the 2000 House of Representatives (HR) election did the LDP win SMDs with fewer votes than the combined non-Communist opposition.

cess into seats at the subnational level. Although non-LDP success in national-level elections fluctuated over time, the number of seats held by non-LDP parties at the local level stayed very low—at a nearly constant level. From 1970 to 1997, on average the LDP won 54% of seats in HR races and 56% of seats across the country in prefectural (subnational) legislative races. In contrast, non-LDP parties won 44.5% of HR races but only 30.2% of prefectural assembly races. (There was also a small percentage of conservative independents who leaned toward the LDP.)

This local opposition failure continued into the 1990s, even when new opposition parties emerged and achieved quick national level success by bringing in defectors from existing parties.² The New Frontier Party (NFP) was born in 1994 out of a merger of a number of opposition parties. With 178 HR members, the party appeared well positioned to challenge the LDP, which held roughly 200. In the 1995 House of Councillors (HC) election, the NFP outpolled the LDP by 1.5 million votes in PR balloting and took home three more PR seats than the LDP. However, that very same year, the NFP took a total of only 4.8% (141 out of 2,927) of all of Japan's prefectural assembly seats (*Japan Statistical Yearbook*, 1996). By 1998, internal bickering led the NFP to disband into an array of splinter parties, and another new party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), became the main opposition hope. The DPJ delivered a blow to the LDP in the 1998 HC election, winning roughly as many PR votes and seats as the ruling party. However, out of the 44 prefectures that held local elections in 1999, the DPJ won 6.4% of all prefectural seats, *much* less than its shares of votes and seats in national-level elections (*Asahi Shinbun* local editions, April 12, 1999). In the 2003 HR election, the DPJ defeated the LDP in PR balloting and won a larger share (37%) of all seats than any opposition party in postwar history. Nevertheless, in local elections held that same year, the party won only 7.7% of all prefectural assembly seats (*Asahi Shinbun*).

Local-level opposition failure has helped beget national-level opposition failure. Oftentimes it is only through holding office at the local level that opposition parties can begin to gain credibility. Weakness at the local level in Japan has caused the opposition to miss opportunities to attract greater attention and overcome voter skepticism of its general competence. Also, local political organizations are key determinants of national-level electoral contests in many countries. Ames (1994, p. 95) cites Columbia, Mexico, Venezuela, Italy, and Japan as countries where local politicians are able to use clientelist networks to generate support for national politicians and parties at election time. Without many local politicians who can use such networks, the

2. The New Liberal Club faced a similar problem in Japan in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

opposition is therefore greatly disadvantaged. Park explains the advantages local politicians bestow upon parties in Japan:

Local politicians clearly serve as a primary force in national-level electoral campaigns. Securing the cooperation of local politicians is critical to the success of the electoral campaign. Local politicians are specialists in campaigning; they are not only knowledgeable but also willing to engage in campaigning. These politicians can identify the political loyalties of nearly every household in their home territories. And as they are engaged in politics as a career, they can volunteer their time for the campaign. Those in other occupations have to take time off from work to make a serious commitment to campaigning. In addition, as local politicians have their own personal supporters, Diet candidates can use their channels to secure easy access to ordinary voters. (Park, 1998b, p. 76)

Lacking a base of local politicians, Japan's opposition is missing a group that is particularly adept at creating citizen-party links and mobilizing voters in national elections.

In addition, local politicians usually make the best candidates for national office. Where voters cast ballots for individual candidates, a party's success hinges on its candidates. Jacobson's (1990, pp. 61-63) analysis of U.S. congressional elections finds that former local office holders make very good candidates; they are particularly likely to win congressional races. Jacobson shows that Republicans' difficulty in the U.S. Congress for years was partly due to the poor "quality" (lack of experience, such as local office) of many Republican challengers. Indeed, the Republican party did not make serious gains in southern house races until it had first gained a number of state legislative seats and prior office experience was a key to success for Republican congressional hopefuls (Aldrich & Griffin, n.d.). Japan too is a highly candidate-centered system, and elsewhere (Scheiner, in press) I demonstrate that in the 1990s, among nonincumbents, the group most likely to win HR office in Japan was quality candidates, in particular former local office holders. Indeed, even with gains in 2003, the opposition's greatest successes were in PR races, where candidates matter less, and SMDs in regions where quality candidacies were less important (Scheiner, 2003-2004). Because of its base of local seat holders, the LDP has had many candidates it could run (and win) in HR races. But the opposition's shallow pool of such candidates has led it to far greater weakness in national district races.

Local failure by the opposition has played a critical role in opposition failure at the national level, but existing theories can do little to explain the opposition's greater subnational weakness. Explanations that seek to explain general levels of LDP popularity—such as culture and opposition radicalism—cannot explain why the opposition has done so much more poorly at the local

level than at the national. Electoral system arguments are similarly insufficient: Like HR races, prefectural assembly races also used (and continue to use) SNTV/MMD, but the subnational races frequently use districts of much greater magnitude than those at the national level. Partly because the largest of these prefectural-level districts are in relatively urban areas—where voters are less tied into conservative politicians' networks and are less dependent on financial support from the center—and also partly because they reduce many of the problems surrounding the coordination of candidates, opposition parties are typically markedly *more* successful in such large districts than in smaller national-level SNTV/MMD districts or smaller assembly districts. That is, because the large magnitude districts maintain so many seats, even small groups can win, so there is less need to coordinate on candidates. As a result, in such prefectural assembly districts, opposition parties ought to have done *better* than they did in the smaller district magnitudes that existed at the national level. Moreover, where the opposition did poorly in smaller magnitude prefectural assembly districts, failure was very often not because of coordination failure but rather because opposition parties ran no one at all.

The opposition's great failure at the subnational level remains a puzzle. Moreover, as subnational failure clearly plays a critical role in opposition failure in general in Japan, it is a puzzle that must be unraveled to understand the country's one-party dominance.

CLIENTELISM + FISCAL CENTRALIZATION = LOCAL OPPOSITION WOES

What then shapes local opposition failure in Japan? Two factors central to the workings of Japanese politics appear critical: centralization of governmental finances and clientelism.

FISCAL CENTRALIZATION

Japanese localities depend heavily on the national government for financing. Although local spending makes up roughly two thirds of all government expenditures in Japan, local taxes compose only about 30% of all revenues. Most of the difference must be made up by the central government (Akizuki, 1995). Local taxes covering 30% to 40% of revenues is at or above the median for major industrialized countries (Reed, 1986), but this figure does not capture the flexibility of revenue sources.³ In reality, the freedom of Japa-

3. Merely knowing the degree to which funding is based in the center or the periphery does not tell us who is actually controlling how the money is spent (Tarrow 1978, p. 12).

nese local governments to raise their own revenue is limited. Central government regulation of local taxes is very restrictive—even compared to other unitary systems—and grants and loans are typically given solely for purposes defined by the central government (Reed, 1986, pp. 27-29). The central government determines how much money each locality needs according to a fairly politically blind variety of formulae (Ishihara, 1986, pp. 139-141; Yonehara, 1986, p. 161). According to an index of fiscal strength, localities are expected to make up a certain proportion of their vital needs through local taxes and the central government makes up the bulk of the remainder of such “needs” through allocation tax transfers. The tax is applied to all regions, but the money is then redistributed to the poorer ones. Additional central government disbursements (subsidies) are typically at the central government’s discretion to cover projects beyond those that are “need-based” (Ishihara, 1986; Yonehara, 1986), so the central government can push its own priorities at the local level.

Comparative literature on centralization of government finances suggests that this all gives a substantial advantage to the party controlling the national purse strings. In general, in countries where localities depend heavily on the center, voters’ and candidates’ relationship with parties may be shaped extensively by politics at the national level, but where localities have financial autonomy, voters and candidates may be more inclined to affiliate with and support parties without consideration of their position in the national party context. Sellers (1998) indicates how decentralized policy making has helped create significant local strongholds for the Greens in Germany, whereas centrally led expansion has retarded Green growth in France. Studies of Italy (Hine, 1993), Mexico (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, & Weingast, 2000), and Japan (Curtis, 1971) suggest that in centralized systems, local candidates and/or voters tend to affiliate with a national government party to have a better chance of gaining central funding.⁴

CLIENTELISM

That country specialists of three different centralized cases reach such similar conclusions offers substantial weight to their claims, but there is reason to think that centralization by itself is insufficient. Even in centralized systems, it does not always make sense for local politicians or voters to affli-

4. In the bulk of such work, these arguments are largely made in passing. Only Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast (2000) appear to make it a focus of their study. Diaz-Cayeros et al. make mention of the same factors—centralization and clientelism—as I do but leave them as assumptions for their framework. In contrast, I see them as variables whose impact requires testing.

ate with a party simply because the party controls the central government. In fact, in the highly centralized United Kingdom, local party fortunes fluctuate with little clear relationship to the makeup of the central parliament.⁵ In countries where ideology and/or issues are more important than simple allocation of goods, services, or funds, we should expect local politicians and voters to affiliate with parties according to their policy stances.

In other words, the nature of the politician-citizen linkage is of great importance in determining the impact of national-level politics on local partisan electoral outcomes. In the most ideal types, such linkages typically divide into clientelist and programmatic arrangements (Kitschelt, 2000). But the difference between these linkage patterns is not merely a distinction between collective and selective incentives. As Kitschelt emphasizes, the distinction is *procedural*. Parties are not clientelist “as long as they disburse rents as a matter of codified, universalistic public policy applying to all members of a constituency, regardless of whether a particular individual supported or opposed the party that pushed for the rent-serving policy” (p. 850). Most strictly defined, clientelism refers to benefits that are awarded to people who supported the party and withheld from those who are found, on the basis of some kind of monitoring, not to have supported the party.

The Japanese party system is clearly founded very much on clientelistic competition (see, e.g., Fukui & Fukai, 1996). There is no question that many voters affiliate with particular candidates because of “personal” factors—personal connections, warmth, and loyalty they have for the candidate—but candidates’ capacity to deliver material benefits is critical as well. Curtis (1992) notes that candidates’ focus in Japanese electoral campaigns is on developing their own local organizations and securing the backing of powerful interest groups in the district: “In working toward these goals, the stress is on constituency service to convince voters that the candidate has the clout in Tokyo to bring the district new roads and bridges, industrial development, and higher living standards” (p. 228). Indeed, as Fukui and Fukai (1996) write, “Japanese voters are mobilized at election time mainly by the lure of pork barrel, only marginally by policy issues, and even less by ideals and visions” (pp. 268-269). Although much of the patronage distributed in Japan (e.g., subsidies to all farmers) does not fit neatly into Kitschelt’s procedural definition of clientelism, a great deal follows the clear pattern of exchange that is required by the definition. In particular, funding for local projects is often clearly targeted to LDP Diet members’ financial and political support-

5. For example, even though it held twice as many seats in the British House of Commons as all other parties in 1999, in local elections that year Labour lost more than 1,300 seats, compared to the Conservatives’ net gain of more than 1,400 (data from <http://www.lgcnnet.com/>).

ers, especially local politicians who deliver the vote for the Diet members (Curtis, 1971; Mulgan, 2000, p. 81; Park, 1998a, 1998b).

How does this linkage affect local party patterns? Where strong policy-based or ideological links bind voters, candidates, and parties, local party success ought to be based on whether individuals are drawn to a given party's messages. Where linkages are founded on a clientelist provision of goods and services, local success ought to be based on impressions of which party is the best provider.

INCENTIVES TO AFFILIATE WITH THE LDP

In Japan the *combination* of clientelism and local fiscal dependence creates incentives for (a) *local* politicians—who rely on the image of being able to draw money and projects from the center—to ally with the party controlling the national budget and (b) voters to cast ballots in local elections for such candidates. In centralized but *programmatic* systems (e.g., Britain), the more universal distribution of benefits makes close ties to the center less critical for localities and reduces parties' capacity to use fiscal resources to affect local outcomes similarly. In heavily clientelistic but *decentralized* Brazil, it is important to hold close ties to subnational politicians who control the purse strings: Party switching is very common at the national level in Brazil, and national politicians often do so to join the party of their state governor (Desposato, 2002). However, in Japan, where linkages are founded on clientelist exchange rather than ideology and localities depend on the central government, even local voters and candidates who prefer opposition parties will have a strong incentive to affiliate with the *national* ruling party because of the party's discretionary ability to share or withhold central fiscal resources.

The LDP does not simply reward all supporters and punish all opponents,⁶ but local politicians and voters have good reason to believe that the LDP distributes funding politically (and even vengefully). The LDP controls the national government and has discretion in deciding which localities get subsidies beyond the most basic needs. Subsidies are more likely to be given to poorer localities, but the LDP has been known to halt subsidies for political reasons (Igarashi & Ogawa, 1997). Fukui and Fukai (1996) express a widely held belief that regions electing politicians affiliated with the national ruling party are more likely to receive more funding from the central government

6. The LDP no doubt often focuses its spending in areas where its support would be particularly useful from an electoral perspective (e.g., where it is engaged in a close race) and also does fund projects that it deems particularly necessary, irrespective of political considerations. For this reason, it should not be surprising that Reed's (2001) statistical analysis of central government spending on localities finds no evidence of totally systematic carrot/stick behavior by the LDP.

and offer a number of examples supporting the view. Ultimately, they argue that this pattern is widespread: “Distribution of resources needed for the development of local and regional economies by pork barrel politics gets inevitably skewed in favor of localities that are politically better connected” (p. 285).⁷ And in an even more effective use of power, the LDP threatens to remove funding from areas supporting the opposition. Leaders of the LDP suggest that victories by non-LDP candidates will lead to a curtailment of local funds. Newspapers frequently report such threats (e.g., see the *Asahi Shinbun*, October 19, 1999, and the online version of the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, September 19, 2000). A recent article discussed the freezing of projects in non-LDP supporting areas and quoted a leading LDP politician: “We can’t allow a new project in an area that didn’t vote for the LDP” (*Asahi Shinbun*, online version, March 6, 2002).

Even if governmental threats to cut benefits are simply bluffs, anecdotes of the LDP’s withholding funds and threats to do so appear to have given voters and candidates a perception that links to the LDP-led central government are critical for funding. Moreover, as long as the LDP is dominant at the center and has discretion over subsidies, it is easier for areas with many LDP local politicians to lobby the LDP central government.

As a result, even voters who normally support opposition parties—because of issues or principles they represent—have incentives to vote for LDP local politicians if they, as voters, also care about procuring club goods for their localities or even private goods for themselves, and ambitious local politicians have incentives to join the LDP. Although I have no survey data on local election voting, survey results indicate that Japanese voters are much more likely to cite national-level LDP candidates than opposition candidates as subsidy deliverers, and voters citing an LDP candidate’s ability to deliver subsidies were more likely to support the LDP than other parties (Scheiner, in press).

However, even in the context of voters who care less about gaining distributive goods, the clientelist/centralized system will still be likely to bestow advantages on the national ruling party at the local level: Specific businesses and organizations are the principal beneficiaries of clientelist favors. In exchange, these organizations work hard to mobilize voters—many of whom do not benefit directly from the favors—to cast their ballots for the specific LDP local politicians who help provide the goods (Curtis, 1971).

Certainly, many voters may simply cast their ballots for the incumbent, irrespective of his or her party affiliation, but even here the LDP has an advantage because *candidates* (including incumbents) also have substantial

7. Okuda (2001) offers preliminary statistical evidence on the 1990s that as the number of ruling party HR seats in a given prefecture increased, so too did the subsidies awarded to that prefecture.

incentive to affiliate with the national ruling party. Local legislators in Japan's highly clientelistic system, where localities have little autonomy in making real policies, are often evaluated on their ability to develop a relationship with national governmental leaders and bring home funding for local projects (Reed, 1986, p. 29). Because other local politicians and local organizations and interests, as well as large numbers of voters, expect them to cultivate contacts in the central government, ambitious local politicians have very strong incentives to affiliate with the LDP if they wish to perform their function as local representatives—that is, create a strong link to the central government. As one local politician in Tochigi prefecture said, when asked about which party he and his mates planned to align with, “It does not matter [which party] wins the election. What matters to us is to stand in line with the ruling party whichever the case is” (Park, 1998a, p. 214, fn. 39).

It should also be noted that the incentives to align with the LDP—substantial for politicians at either level—are greater for local politicians than for national-level ones. Programmatic-policy debate does not play much of a role in most prefectural assemblies. Except in prefectures that have greater independent budgetary power, holding a prefectural assembly office involves little more than attempting to provide constituent service and distributive favors. To do well, it is overwhelmingly in a candidate's best interest to affiliate with the LDP. In contrast, national Diet members perform a wider array of functions. Delivering pork to one's district is certainly one of them, but national Diet members can also advertise and push policy positions. And many run for national office under an opposition banner in order to challenge the LDP and the policies it represents. For a number of reasons—including greater access to central budgeting and greater involvement in government policy making—there appear to be incentives for politicians to run under the LDP banner at the national level as well, but because of national politicians' varied roles, these incentives appear to be stronger at the local level.⁸

For these reasons, it should not be surprising that the LDP is not merely advantaged but is dominant in most prefectural elections, with its most potent challenge coming from (typically conservative) independent candidates. Interviews bear out my argument here. When asked about local LDP hegemony, local opposition leaders explain that it was because LDP politicians are perceived as more capable of acting as a “pipeline” (*paipu*) between the LDP-led central government and localities.⁹

8. In addition, voters no doubt more typically look to local politicians as service providers but expect a wider set of functions performed by their national politicians.

9. Interviews with local opposition leaders from various prefectures, October 1998 to August 1999.

MEASURES OF LOCAL AUTONOMY AND LOCAL OPPOSITION SUCCESS

If the argument laid out here is correct, we ought to see a particular pattern in local opposition fortunes. We should expect that the principal group of voters and candidates willing to affiliate with the opposition ought to be those who depend less on the goods delivered by the central government. Certain areas of Japan are more financially autonomous than others, and as I discuss below, the country as a whole goes through periods where localities hold greater independence. In these cases, politics may be less like the clientelist/centralized system I describe above. Voters and politicians will have less incentive to affiliate with the ruling party and can more freely support politicians of their most preferred party. That is, local opposition strength ought to occur primarily in areas with substantial financial autonomy from the center.

LOCAL AUTONOMY INDEX AND PREFECTURAL ASSEMBLY SUCCESS

Japan is divided into 47 prefectures. If local dependence on the center is important to local electoral politics, the opposition will do poorly in dependent prefectures and be most successful in autonomous ones. A commonly used index of local fiscal strength (*zaiseiryokushisū*) in Japan is computed by dividing localities' revenues (e.g., local taxes) by their expenditure needs.¹⁰ Using this index for each prefecture in the fiscal year directly before the seven local elections held from 1967 to 1991, I find a very substantial .57 correlation between autonomy and prefectural assembly seats held by opposition parties (see Figure 1). Only in the most autonomous prefectures does the opposition win a large proportion of seats.

I conduct more systematic regression analysis using data from six elections held from 1971 to 1991.¹¹ The dependent variable is *PrefOpp_{it}*, the proportion of the prefectural assembly seats won by the opposition in prefecture *i* in election *t*. The independent variables are as follows: (a) *autonomy*, which is the local fiscal strength score for the prefecture in the year leading up to the election; greater autonomy should lead to opposition success, and the

10. The central government usually caps all localities' tax rates fairly uniformly.

11. I use data beginning with the first year (1967) the LDP did not win a majority of the HR vote and ending with the last election (1991) before it lost power and then entered into a coalition government. I use an estimation method that correctly treats the data as panel data (Johnston & Dinardo, 1997, chap. 12). I use Stata's "cluster" function, which produces ordinary least squares coefficients with panel-adjusted standard errors. I confirm the results using fixed and random effects models.

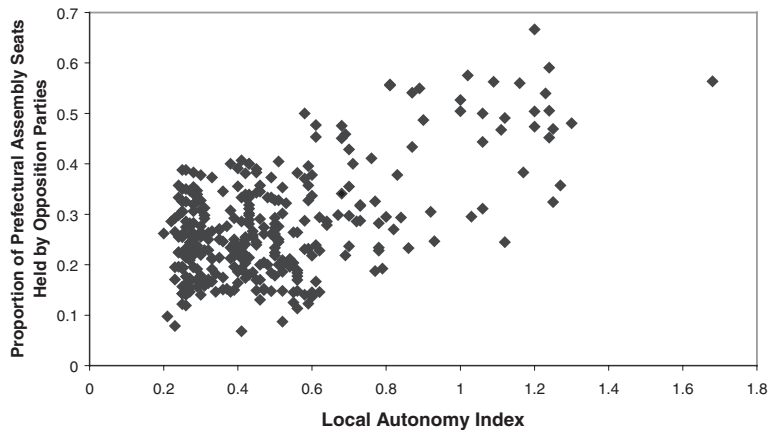


Figure 1. Opposition prefectural assembly success by level of autonomy (1967-1991).
Source: Jichishō (various years-c).

coefficient ought to be positive; (b) *HROpp*, the proportion of national HR seats held by the opposition within the prefecture; even controlling for other factors, certain prefectures will—whether due to ideology, policy, or socialization—be more likely to support one party in all elections; the coefficient should be positive; (c) GDP, the percentage growth in Japan's GDP in the year leading up to the election; because higher growth rates ought to lead to greater support for the ruling party, GDP ought to have a negative coefficient; (d) 1971, a dichotomous dummy variable coded 1 for the 1971 election; during the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposition parties' popularity increased dramatically because of their stances—and the LDP's unresponsiveness—on, in particular, pollution; even controlling for other factors, the opposition may have been more successful in the early 1970s; and (e) *previous election*, the proportion of seats the opposition took in the previous election; given the power of incumbency, the opposition should win more seats when it already holds a substantial number.

As Table 1 indicates, each variable is statistically significant and in the expected direction. Most important, the positive coefficient on autonomy tells us that as prefectures' ability to fend for themselves increases, opposition parties win a larger share of their assembly seats. Autonomy remains significant and positive, irrespective of the inclusion of other independent variables.

Table 1
Opposition Party Success in Prefectural Assembly Elections (1971-1991): Panel Data Estimation (N = 280)

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Autonomy	0.182	0.055*
HROpp	0.588	0.187*
GDP	-0.033	0.008*
1971 (dummy variable)	0.254	0.055*
Previous election (lag of dependent variable)	0.718	0.051*
Constant	-0.543	0.129*
<i>F</i> (5, 46)	463.95	
Probability > <i>F</i>	0.0000	
<i>R</i> ²	0.755	
Number of clusters (prefectures): 47		

Note: *HROpp* = the proportion of national House of Representatives seats held by the opposition within the prefecture. The dependent variable is the proportion of seats won by opposition in prefecture *i* in election *t* (with logit transformation).

**p* < .01.

SLACK RESOURCES AND THE OPPOSITION'S ABILITY TO GAIN SUBNATIONAL EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Subnational governments that have more slack resources—resources that localities can use at their own discretion—hold greater policy freedom and are less beholden to the central government (Reed, 1986, p. 159). Therefore, we should expect greater opposition success in localities with slack resources.

It is difficult to find direct measures, comparable to those I used above, of such resources for Japan's 3,000-plus municipalities, but proxy measures are useful. For example, during times of economic growth, local governments ought to gain more slack resources and thus rely less on the center. Thanks to such growth, in the 1960s and early 1970s Japanese local tax revenues grew dramatically. In turn, local governments were able to pursue new programs, and as expected, local programmatic innovation and the number of opposition local governmental executives both increased dramatically.¹²

12. In this period, the mean prefectural autonomy index score reached its postwar peak. The most prominent "innovation" was local response to pollution. Successful innovation appeared to encourage local governments to pursue other problems, especially social welfare programs. When programs began in one region, they developed a snowball effect, carrying over to others as well: As Reed (1986) explains, once Tokyo enacted such policies, other local governments, recognizing the independence that localities seemed to gain, put into place similar programs.

If budget autonomy was the key, why did the opposition win on public goods issues such as pollution and social welfare? Reed (1986) offers an answer:

Economic growth provided local governments with slack resources that could be allocated to new programs. . . . It makes eminent sense to argue that economic growth and increased revenues were necessary conditions for the spurt of innovative local policymaking, providing local governments with the wherewithal to respond creatively to new needs and demands. (pp. 58-59)

As local governments saw that they could spend more and enact their own plans, and as the opposition pushed such measures without serious punishment by the central government, candidates grew more likely to run under progressive/opposition party banners and voters became more likely to support them. Opposition groups made great strides in local executive elections, going from 84 mayoral seats in 1963 to 92 in 1967 to 114 in 1971 and 122 in 1975 (Zenkoku Kakushin Shichōkai, 1990).

Deficit spending can also work as a rough proxy for autonomy because it can undercut constraints created by the central government. Many localities ran deficits in the 1960s—with seemingly little relationship to the number of opposition mayors—but because of the economic growth of the late 1960s and early 1970s, fewer fell into the red (see Jichishō, various years—a, b). At first, because of local innovation, the number of progressive (non-LDP) mayors elected during this time increased. But with the added expense of new programs in the early 1970s and a drop in growth, the number of deficit-running localities increased during the years 1972 to 1975. In the last half of the 1970s, concerned about the new low growth era and trying to roll back the local programmatic “excesses” of the early 1970s, the central government sought to curb local social welfare programs and push localities away from their programmatic promises. This was partly an ideological battle over policy substance, but it was also focused on the issue of central governmental control over local policy (Reed, 1986). Ultimately, the central government won, and fewer localities were permitted to operate at a deficit. By 1979, the number of municipalities operating at a deficit was at its lowest in more than two decades. The decline in local slack resources led in turn to a decrease in progressive party government executives. The proportion of such mayors peaked in the mid-1970s but then steadily declined after localities were forced to stay out of the red.

Using the prefectural autonomy measure reinforces the argument above. Figure 2 plots the mean autonomy measure (for all prefectures) by year and

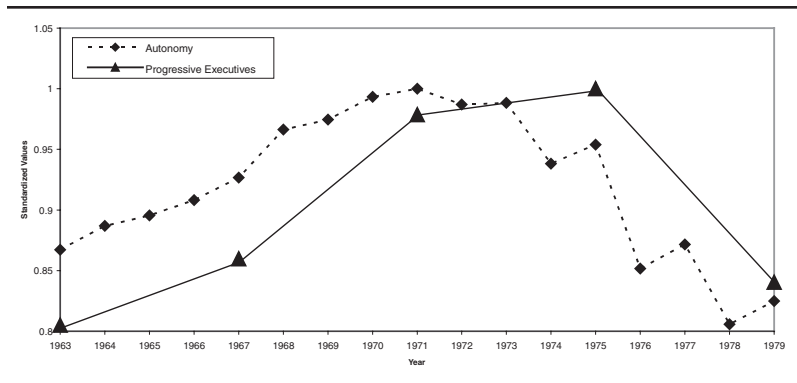


Figure 2. Correlation between proportion of local executives who are progressive (opposition) and mean levels of autonomy.

Note: To make all patterns more visually recognizable, all values are standardized by dividing each year's mean by its largest value for all the years examined (i.e., the highest mean recorded in any of the years).

Source: The Local Fiscal Autonomy data were compiled from Jichishō (various years–c). The progressive executive data were compiled from information in *Japan Statistical Yearbook* (various years), Jichishō (various years–a, b), Richardson (1997, Table 4.2, p. 87), and Zenkoku Kakushin Shichokai (1990, appendix, pp. 549-558).

the proportion of opposition local executive office holders.¹³ The number of opposition seats goes up and down with autonomy.

Figure 2 also helps refute the argument that the results are driven not by autonomy but instead by level of urban-ness. That is, it might be argued that autonomy and urban-ness are correlated and urbanites have reasons beyond independence from the center for supporting or affiliating with opposition parties, so prefectural opposition success is dependent on urban-ness and not autonomy. LDP-linked networks certainly play a bigger role in rural areas, but there are two reasons to believe that clientelism and fiscal centralization are also critical. First, without considering clientelism and dependence on the center, urban-rural differences cannot explain why the opposition does so much worse in *subnational* elections. In contrast, my argument regarding clientelism and centralization posits affiliation with the national ruling party in contests for subnational level office. In fact, if the urban-ness argument were correct, there ought to be little difference between national and subnational seats, and HROpp (the proportion of HR seats held by the opposition in the prefecture) would probably wash out the effect of autonomy in Table 1.

13. To make the patterns more visually recognizable, I standardize the variables by dividing each year's mean by its largest (mean) value for all the years examined. However, even before standardizing the variables, the correlation between them is an extremely high .8.

Second, as shown in Figure 2, subnational success was not solely due to urban-ness but also increased and decreased over time: Changing levels of opposition success were very much a result of, first, an increase in local governmental financial independence and second a return to greater dependence on the central government for funding.

Up to this point, my argument has been that the opposition has difficulty getting elected in the first place when localities are very dependent on the center, but I should add that the drop in progressive mayors was not wholly due to election loss: From the late 1970s, many opposition mayors actually linked up with the LDP. The percentage of joint LDP-opposition party mayors increased dramatically from less than 10% in 1976 to greater than 50% of all mayors by 1987, whereas the number of opposition-only mayors plummeted to approximately 10%. This shift away from opposition-only to LDP-linked executives occurred when the central government restricted localities' ability to run deficits: *Opposition party local executives developed stronger ties to the LDP exactly when links to the central government appeared more critical to funding local programs.*

Local Party Switching

Party switching patterns also indicate the impact of Japan's clientelist, financially centralized system on the opposition's ability to take office at the subnational level. In 1993–1994, a number of Diet members left the LDP to join new parties, especially the new party *Shinsei*, but at the local level, few politicians followed. By and large, the prefectural assembly members who did were closely affiliated with a national Diet LDP patron who first left the LDP.¹⁴

Had all the local politicians affiliated with LDP Diet defectors also defected, we would not know if they were driven by personal loyalty or an attempt to maintain their primary pipeline to the center. Instead, my interviews indicate that (a) on the whole, local politicians did not defect if their national patron stayed in the LDP, and (b) most local politicians defected when their patron did, but some did not, out of fear of losing their funding from the center. This suggests a strong link between local- and national-level politicians, founded to a large degree on the ability of national-level politicians to act as a pipeline for the local-level politicians' distributive needs.

There is other evidence that patron-client relationships had more to do with election and patronage considerations than personal loyalty. In 1994, Japan changed its electoral system. The changes in district lines complicated

14. Interviews conducted with local politicians, staff, and journalists (March–August 1999).

patron-client relationships when the patron Diet member and client local office holder no longer shared portions of a district. Kataoka (1997) indicates that in a number of such cases, local politicians sought new patrons, whose shared sense of region made them better suited for electoral purposes. In addition, in 1994 the NFP was gradually establishing a presence in a number of prefectural assemblies by drawing additional LDP defectors, *until the LDP abruptly returned to power* (Kataoka, 1997, p. 210). Local politicians were willing to defect to *Shinsei* or the NFP when it held national power and were largely unwilling to defect from the LDP once it was in power again.

PRELIMINARY COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Opposition failure and LDP dominance in Japan is very much a result of the combination of clientelism and the centralization of governmental finances. The focus of this article is on party politics in Japan, but broader, more comparative implications can be drawn out and the analysis can be put into a more generalizable form. I am arguing that the combination of party-voter linkages and degree of local fiscal autonomy shapes local party success. Table 2 offers a typology of their likely combined impacts. To simplify, I make each variable dichotomous, thereby creating four distinct categories: programmatic/financially decentralized, clientelist/decentralized, programmatic/centralized, and clientelist/centralized.

In decentralized cases, there is less incentive for local voters and politicians to affiliate with the *national* ruling party. The national government simply does not affect local finances enough. Empirical examples of Germany and Brazil bear this out. Second, Britain illustrates that financial centralization is an insufficient explanation for local affiliation with the national ruling party. Britain's centralized but programmatic party system creates very different outcomes from centralized/clientelist cases. In the latter, subnational success will not match the national popularity of the opposition. Rather, it will be more highly skewed at the subnational level in favor of the ruling party at the national level. In contrast, in programmatic/centralized cases, seats held at the local level will have less to do with the distribution of national-level seats and more to do with the popularity of the national party at the time of the local election. Because both national and local elections represent voter sentiment at the time they occur, the main difference between national and local outcomes is a measure of changing sentiment: Miller (1988) finds that 84% of votes in British local elections are in accord with the voters' national political preferences (pp. 167, 236).

Table 2

Party-Voter Linkages and Level of Governmental Financial Centralization: Typology and Predictions for Local Party Success

Party-Voter Linkage	Level of Governmental Financial Centralization	
	Financially Decentralized	Financially Centralized
Programmatic	<p>Prediction: Within a given region, each party will receive roughly equal numbers of votes in both local and national level elections; Within a given region, small parties may even do better in local level races than in national level ones.</p> <p>Cases: Germany</p>	<p>Prediction: A party's success in local-level elections will be highly correlated with its general level of party support within the region at the time.</p> <p>Cases: United Kingdom</p>
Clientelist	<p>Prediction: Local- and national-level party success within a given region will tend to be idiosyncratic.</p> <p>The exception: Where a subnational executive dominates resources, there will be substantial affiliation with the party of the executive.</p> <p>Cases: Brazil</p>	<p>Prediction: Parties that sit in the government at the national level will dominate local level elections.</p> <p>The exception: Other parties may find success in areas that do not rely heavily on central governmental funding.</p> <p>Cases: Italy, Austria, Mexico, Japan</p>

The argument here is not simply that ruling parties have an advantage because of their access to pork. Rather, it is that in contrast to other types of systems, in clientelist/centralized systems *national ruling parties will monopolize local power across most of the country*. Preliminary analysis of other clientelist/centralized cases offers additional support.

Italy is among the most clientelistic countries in the Western world; financial power in the system is focused on the central government, and the link between partisanship and the ability to deliver goods to the locality is well established. Getting complete data to test the Italian case is difficult, and preliminary analysis offers mixed results (Scheiner, in press). But there is substantial evidence supporting the argument made in this article. Writing of Italy, Hine (1993) explains,

In a centralized political system the extraction of benefits from the centre is a prime obligation for national representatives. . . . Representatives are better placed to serve the locality if they are part of the party which is strong (preferably in government) in the centre. (p. 260)

For decades the Christian Democratic Party (DC) was the clear leader in most localities in the country, with its greatest strength in the especially dependent south, where the DC often did better in subnational elections than in national. The opposition's greatest success came in areas such as Emilia Romagna, which although admittedly also more industrial and left leaning, were among the most autonomous regions of Italy.

Austria probably offers a better comparison to Japan, given that compared to Italy, it usually has had a less fragmented party system and has offered small parties less bargaining power in cabinet formation. Austria has been heavily clientelist for years, typically with two leading parties controlling patronage (Lauber, 1996), and the central government strongly controlling finances (Dachs, 1996). From the 1940s to the mid-1980s, nearly every Land (state) maintained a predominant party system. Even though two parties (usually jointly) dominated Austrian national politics, each carved up niches for itself in specific *Länder*, where regional politics centered on that single party. Party competition has grown in recent years, but this shift occurred *first* at the national level. Local voters and elites did not give up their distributive gravy train until it was no longer running at the national level (Dachs, 1996).

Mexico has long been clientelistic and financially centralized (Rodriguez, 1997), and the similarities to Japan are striking. The longtime ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) usually received greater support at the local than at the federal level. The opposition tended to control at best only 20% to 25% of all municipalities, including the bulk of the large and (presumably) more fiscally autonomous ones (Klesner, 1997; Rodriguez, 1997). And quite striking, the bulk of opposition Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) success (before its candidate Fox took the presidency in 2000)¹⁵ was in local elections in areas that appeared to rely less on central governmental spending.¹⁶

More systematic work would be welcome to help give the conclusions greater weight. If my argument is correct, a more detailed analysis of other clientelistic/centralized cases will find a similar link between local financial dependence and local success by parties in the national government.¹⁷ Nevertheless, more specific to the focus of the study here, the above preliminary comparative analysis further bolsters the more detailed evidence brought to

15. Unlike Japan, in Mexico a strong candidate for president is a way for the opposition to develop.

16. However, decentralization of fiscal control and an increase in state governor power appears to be altering the underlying calculus in Mexico (see Diaz-Cayeros, Gonzalez, & Rojas, 2002).

17. Elsewhere (Scheiner, in press, chap. 4), I provide a more detailed comparative discussion, but more systematic analysis will be necessary to demonstrate the relationships cross-nationally.

bear on the Japanese case. The analysis here shows a very close relationship between levels of local financial independence and the capacity to gain opposition representation in local governments. Incumbent parties have a substantial advantage in most systems, but this advantage grows in clientelist/financially centralized systems. In such systems, national ruling parties such as Japan's LDP are apt to dominate local politics throughout the bulk of the country.

LDP dominance of local politics is very damaging to opposition's national-level fortunes for a number of reasons. It is in part very troublesome because of the emphasis on candidate-centered elections in Japan. Local office holders make particularly quality candidates for national-level office in candidate-centered electoral systems (Jacobson, 1990; Scheiner, in press). As a result of the country's clientelist/financially centralized system, Japan's opposition parties have had trouble developing a pool of local officeholders and therefore have faced great difficulty not only at the local level but at the national level as well. In addition, a lack of local politicians has hindered opposition ability to organize and mobilize support in national elections, which is a problem whose impact cannot be overestimated in Japanese politics.

This all suggests a catch-22 for Japan's opposition. It needs strong local officeholders to do well in national elections, but without national-level strength, it has had difficulty finding them. None of this is to say, however, that the opposition is bound to permanent failure. Based on the analysis here, it appears that there are three potential routes to power for the opposition. First, decentralization of government finances: Decentralization *is* occurring to some extent in Japan, but it is unlikely to go sufficiently far as to cut off the central government's monopoly on funding control. Second, decline of clientelism: Clientelist practices are losing support in Japan, especially in urban areas, and even Prime Minister Koizumi rails against clientelism in speeches. But clientelism undergirds so much of Japanese politics, in particular the power bases of much of the LDP, that it is unlikely to be cut off any time soon. Third and finally, new defections from the LDP could occur. The opposition's one genuine opportunity for power occurred in 1993 when Diet members from the LDP left the party to form new alternatives. And with these new alternatives in power, there was an increase in interest in the opposition at the local level as well. Should unhappiness with LDP clientelist practices continue to grow, the likelihood of national defections will grow as well. Nevertheless, although the opposition can attempt to encourage any of these three potential routes, ultimately achieving them will be out of its control.

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