

'Presidentialization' in Japan? The Prime Minister, Media and Elections in Japan

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Both academics and journalists have given increasing attention to the rising importance of prime ministers – a phenomenon often referred to 'presidentialization'.¹ Although many commentators use the term differently, and the term blurs the line between the very different institutional contexts of a parliamentary and presidential system, one careful definition of the term is 'the movement over time away from collective to personalized government, movement away from a pattern of governmental and electoral politics dominated by the political party towards one where the party leader becomes a more autonomous political force.'²

This phenomenon has been observed primarily in Britain and in West European parliamentary democracies – no one has ever described the Japanese parliamentary system as even remotely 'presidentialized'. In fact, the Japanese prime minister has not been the subject of much academic research, and even the Japanese press often used to ignore the prime minister. Despite being the leader of a majority party in a centralized political system, the Japanese prime minister was almost universally described as weak and uninteresting, with both academic and popular discourse focusing on the powerful bureaucracy and factional politics within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). However, recent political changes, most prominently the selection and popularity of Junichirō Koizumi as Japan's prime minister in the spring of 2001, have led to a surge of interest in the prime minister.

This Note focuses on one core aspect of the 'presidentialization' argument: the relationship between the prime minister, the media and elections. We seek to put the focus on the apparent sudden increase in importance of the Japanese prime minister in perspective, arguing that the newly noted importance of the prime minister is the culmination of a trend that began two decades ago.

UNDERSTANDING THE JAPANESE PRIME MINISTER

The standard account by scholars who engage in the comparative study of prime ministers (primarily in Europe) is that prime ministers are most powerful when they lead a majority government that is unconstrained by other powerful domestic and international actors.³ Japan does not fit well into

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¹ Mughan, Anthony, *Media and the Presidentialization of Parliamentary Elections* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb, eds, *The Presidentialization of Democracy: A Study in Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Mughan, *Media and the Presidentialization of Parliamentary Elections*, p. 7

³ Rose presents a two-by-two typology of prime ministerial roles, with number of parties in government on one dimension, and the degree to which the constitution centralizes government on the other; see Richard Rose, 'Prime Ministers in Parliamentary Democracies', *Studies in Public Policy No. 185* (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 1990). These dimensions are similar to Lijphart's conception of

this model. Although Japan has a centralized political system, and until recently has had a dominant majority party, the prime minister has been invariably described as weak. Kenji Hayao's pioneering work on the subject found that although the prime minister possessed all the usual formal powers of the role, he was significantly constrained by other political actors.⁴ He was condemned primarily to a role of 'reactive leadership', despite sometimes being able to enhance the priority of favoured issues in his party's and government's agenda.

Mulgan's incisive analysis similarly emphasizes Japan's 'leadership deficit' because of the constraints imposed by informal power structures.⁵ In contrast to Hayao and Mulgan, Shinoda's book on the prime minister emphasizes the weakness of his formal resources.⁶ All agree that differences in informal sources of power of particular prime ministers explain any variations in leadership capability and their ability to effect policy. These studies all conclude that the Japanese prime minister is in fact a weak leader, even if they do not agree that this weakness is a problem.⁷

The reasons for this weakness are clear. The prime minister was not necessarily considered to be a strong leader of the government or his party. The policy-making process was primarily bottom-up, not top-down, with a wide range of interest groups incorporated throughout.⁸ The prime minister's main role in a fairly pluralistic policy process was generally only facilitation and co-ordination, or providing extra energy to issues that had already been put on the policy table by others.⁹

Although on paper Japan was an almost prototypical centralized parliamentary democracy, with essentially the ruling party as the only effective 'veto player', the policy-making process was decentralized. With the LDP highly factionalized, and all factions represented in the cabinet, all major government decisions had to be the result of consensual agreement among all the party leaders, because cabinet decisions had to be unanimous. In fact, to maximize the distribution of cabinet posts to the faction members, cabinets were shuffled every year or so, depriving the prime minister and ministers of the ability to oversee their ministries effectively.

The LDP was a highly fragmented, decentralized party with independent bases of power in the factions and the *zoku* (policy 'tribes') – veteran politicians who had developed expertise, experience and contacts in a specialized policy area. Individual candidates had their own constituency support base and ability to gain election independent of the party's leader, due to an electoral system that promoted intraparty competition.¹⁰ Intraparty competition led to a focus on the personal vote in

(F'note continued)

majoritarian and consensual democracies, and generally fit with Tsebelis's conceptualization of veto players (Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999); George Tsebelis, 'Decision Making in Political Systems: Veto Players in Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, Multicameralism, and Multipartyism', *British Journal of Political Science*, 25 (1995), 289–326; George Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002)).

⁴ Kenji Hayao, *The Japanese Prime Minister and Public Policy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993).

⁵ Aurelia George Mulgan, 'Japan's Political Leadership Deficit', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2002), 183–202.

⁶ Tomohito Shinoda, *Leading Japan: The Role of the Prime Minister* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000).

⁷ Hayao argues that there is sufficient capacity for change and policy innovation in the Japanese political system even with the weakness of the Japanese prime minister, while Mulgan finds the lack of executive leadership much more problematic. See Hayao, *The Japanese Prime Minister and Public Policy*, pp. 202–10; and Mulgan, *Leading Japan*, pp. 200–1.

⁸ Ellis S. Krauss and Michio Muramatsu, 'The Dominant Party and Social Coalitions in Japan', in T. J. Pempel, ed., *Uncommon Democracies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 282–305.

⁹ Hayao, *The Japanese Prime Minister and Public Policy*.

¹⁰ The House of Representatives had a multi-member district, SNTV system to which each district elected between two and six representatives, theoretically according to population, but each voter had only one ballot. This placed candidates of the largest, ruling party, the LDP, into competition with each other in the district. See

Japanese elections,¹¹ and relatively weak emphasis on the party label, although empirical analysis of voting behaviour has always shown that both are significant.¹² Because of the importance of the personal vote, campaigns did not revolve around policy issues, party identity or the party leader's image, so that the public image of the prime minister had little meaning.

The electoral incentives for cultivation of the prime minister's public image were weak, to the point that the academic literature on Japanese elections has largely ignored the behaviour and impact of the prime minister (and other party leaders) on election outcomes until quite recently.¹³ Although Japan had majority party government and a formally centralized political system, the system was much more fragmented than that would suggest. The prime minister was not considered the representative of the government or the LDP by voters, who based their voting decision primarily on evaluations of individual candidates, not on parties or government performance.

The structure of the mass media also limited Japanese prime ministers' ability to enhance their public image. Most Japanese reporters from the major national newspapers and broadcasters are assigned to specialized 'beats' within the important organizations of government and society – the reporters' club (*kisha kurabu*) system.¹⁴ This system induced conformity of stories and dependence on official sources. Although some aspects of press–government relations elsewhere resemble Japanese reporters' clubs,¹⁵ in Japan the majority of these clubs have been attached to the bureaucracy, and news from the prime minister's office has been given less attention.

Television news, which usually provides the primary means for enhancing political executives' image, remained rather unimportant as an information source about elected politicians. NHK, the major public service broadcaster, dominated television news. In part because of the reporters' club system and in part because of its fear of alienating the ruling party by broadcasting controversial news, its news emphasized coverage of the bureaucracy rather than the prime minister.¹⁶

Reporting focused on policy making by the bureaucracy, and coverage of politicians centred on

(Footnote continued)

J. Mark Ramseyer and Frances McCall Rosenbluth, *Japan's Political Marketplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹¹ On Japan, see Ramseyer and Rosenbluth, *Japan's Political Marketplace*, and Steven R. Reed, 'Democracy and the Personal Vote: A Cautionary Tale from Japan', *Electoral Studies*, 13 (1994), 17–28. For a comparative perspective, see Bruce Cain, John Ferejohn and Morris Fiorina, *The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); and John Carey and Matthew S. Shugart, 'Incentives to Cultivate a Personal Vote: A Rank Ordering of Electoral Formula', *Electoral Studies*, 14 (1995), 417–39.

¹² Much depended on the number of candidates that the LDP ran in that district. The fewer the candidates, the more important the party label became. See Thomas Rochon, 'Electoral Systems and the Basis of the Vote: The Case of Japan', in John Creighton Campbell, ed., *Parties, Candidates, and Voters in Japan: Six Quantitative Studies* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1981), pp. 1–28; Bradley M. Richardson, 'Constituency Candidates Versus Parties in Japanese Voting Behavior', *American Political Science Review*, 82 (1988), 695–718; Scott C. Flanagan, Shinsaku Kohei, Ichiro Miyake, Bradley M. Richardson and Joji Watanuki, *The Japanese Voter* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); Stephen M. Swindle, 'The Supply and Demand of the Personal Vote: Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Implications of Collective Electoral Incentives', *Party Politics*, 8 (2002), 279–300.

¹³ The few exceptions include Sadafumi Kawato, 'Shū-San Dōjitsu Senkyo to Nakasone Ninki' [An Analysis of Voting Behavior in the 1986 'Double Elections'], *Hokudai Hōgaku Ronshū [Hokkaido Law Review]*, 39 (1988), 432–90, and more recently Ikuo Kabashima and Ryosuke Imai, 'Evaluation of Party Leaders and Voting Behaviour: An Analysis of the 2000 General Election', *Social Science Japan Journal*, 5 (2002), 85–96.

¹⁴ See Laurie Ann Freeman, *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ofer Feldman, *Politics and the News Media in Japan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 67–93; and Ivan P. Hall, *Cartels of the Mind* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), pp. 45–79.

¹⁵ Michael Cockerell, Peter Hennessey and David Walker, *Sources Close to the Prime Minister: Inside the Hidden World of the News Manipulators* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 9–12, 31–47. See also Feldman, *Politics and the News Media in Japan*, pp. 196–7.

¹⁶ Ellis S. Krauss, *Broadcasting Politics in Japan: NHK and Television News* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

their scandals, factional backroom deals and need for money, with comparatively little attention placed on the nation's leader. Through the 1970s even schoolchildren had little affective attachment to the prime minister, and their view of the Japanese executive's competence and honesty fell precipitously in higher public school grades, decreasing to an extent not found in any other industrialized democracy. Japan's prime minister was called the 'missing leader' in the political socialization of children.¹⁷

In general, news coverage in Japan is a zero-sum game where coverage of any single actor or event has been limited.¹⁸ In this type of media system, it seems likely that the prime minister, even if there were incentives to cultivate an increasingly prominent public image, might be constrained in doing so. Image-enhancement activities are pointless if they are not prominently conveyed to the voters.

However, we suggest in this Note that this view of the prime minister, although certainly appropriate two decades ago, has become much less accurate. Beginning twenty-five years ago, an important increase in the relevance and impact of the Japanese prime minister's public image can be seen, a trend that has continued and even accelerated over time.

The most frequently noted change in the Japanese political system in recent years is the 1993 reform of the electoral system. A new mixed electoral system of single-seat districts and regional proportional representation districts was created, which many have argued should increase the importance of the party label in voting. Getting rid of intra-party electoral competition was one of the explicit purposes of the reform, with the aim of encouraging more voting based on party and issues. It is important to note however, that this was not the first major electoral reform in post-war Japan: the electoral system in the House of Councillors was reformed in the early 1980s. The electoral system remained mixed, but what had previously been a single non-transferable vote in one nationwide district was transformed into nationwide proportional representation.

The introduction of proportional representation was only for 100 seats out of the more than 750 in the two chambers of the Diet. But for the first time in their lives voters were directly faced with the need to consider which party (not which candidate) to vote for. And as a number of scholars have noted, there often is a 'contagion' or spill-over effect from one electoral system to others, particularly when the elections are concurrent.¹⁹ We should expect an overall increase in the importance of the party label and the prime ministers' public image to parties and voters, beginning in the early 1980s with the change in the electoral system. This effect should be further reinforced with the electoral reform in the House of Representatives in the early 1990s.

In addition to the increased importance of the party label, we see another important factor: changes in partisanship and the party system. LDP politicians, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, became more nervous about their electoral prospects and chances of holding on to their parliamentary majority. The LDP vote share in national elections began a long decline almost immediately after its formation in 1955. However, support did not gravitate towards the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), the LDP's main rival. Rather, the party system fragmented with the arrival of new smaller parties. Despite the steady decline in popular support, the LDP majority was not particularly threatened until the mid-1970s.

Perhaps more important than the threat to the LDP parliamentary majority in making LDP MPs more concerned with the public image of the prime minister was the decline of partisan identification and rise of swing or 'floating' voters, especially those who cared more about policy and issues.²⁰

¹⁷ Joseph Massey, *Youth and Politics in Japan* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976), pp. 27–31.

¹⁸ In part this is because of a fixed 'news hole' in newspapers in which stories were never continued on later pages and each topic – such as politics, economics or international affairs, also appeared daily in the same, fixed number of pages.

¹⁹ Matthew S. Shugart, 'The Electoral Cycle and Institutional Sources of Divided Government', *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1995), 327–43; David Samuels, 'The Gubernatorial Coattails Effect: Federalism and Congressional Elections in Brazil', *Journal of Politics*, 62 (2000), 240–53. Karen E. Cox and Leonard J. Schoppa, 'Interaction Effects and Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: Theory and Evidence from Germany, Japan, and Italy', *Comparative Political Studies*, 35 (2002), 1027–53.

²⁰ Gary D. Allinson, 'Japan's Independent Voters', *Japan Interpreter*, 11 (1976), 36–55.

In the mid-1970s, for the first time pollsters asked what party people supported, and the number who replied 'no party' surpassed the LDP supporters (and all other parties). Non-partisans consistently polled around 30 per cent of the electorate since in the mid-1970s, occasionally temporarily increasing (particularly when scandals broke), but rarely dropping much lower.²¹ Long-term partisan identification weakened; strong partisans were replaced by floating voters who based their support on contemporaneous evaluations of parties. The LDP (and other parties) faced a new challenge in trying to appeal to those voters.²²

Both the decreased vote share of the LDP and the increasing percentage of the public that did not support a political party served to make the public image of the prime minister more crucial. If the prime minister had even a minor impact on his party's electoral fortunes prior to this period, its importance would have been magnified by the increase in marginal candidates and the threat to the LDP majority as the whole party was forced to become more responsive to swing voters' interests. Furthermore, the fact that the loss of supporters is primarily not to other parties but to the 'undecided' category since the mid-1970s makes the prime minister's public image even more important because these voters' decisions were made at the last minute and had been strongly influenced by news and scandals.²³

We should only see changes in the importance of the prime minister's image, however, if the efficacy of his public image enhancement activities improved. As noted previously, the rigid structure of the printed press and of NHK (the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation), the dominant public broadcaster whose turgid, bureaucracy-focused television news was similar to and modelled on the printed press's news, offered little opportunity for the prime minister to connect to voters personally and cultivate a clear public image prior to the 1980s. However, this too changed.

One of the most important changes was in the increasing importance of television in politics.²⁴ The relationship between the prime minister, voters and the non-print news media has also been undergoing profound changes since the mid-1980s, when the media environment was transformed with the appearance of a new programme: Kume Hiroshi's 'News Station'. This programme made its debut in 1985 on TV Asahi and brought a combination of entertainment and cynical commentary to the news, a stark contrast to NHK's factual news primarily about government bureaucracy. Focusing more attention on government mistakes and corruption and on politicians as individual personalities, it eventually rivalled NHK news in popularity and spawned other commercial station imitators. Simultaneously, television public affairs interviews and debate shows featuring politicians became a staple of weekend and late night viewing. Voters were exposed more directly to national politicians and the prime minister, and the coverage of them became much more critical and opinionated.

It is clear that changes in the electoral arena and in the media could have led to an increase in the importance of the Japanese prime minister's public image over the last two decades. In the following section we assess the degree to which this has happened.

ASSESSING THE CHANGES

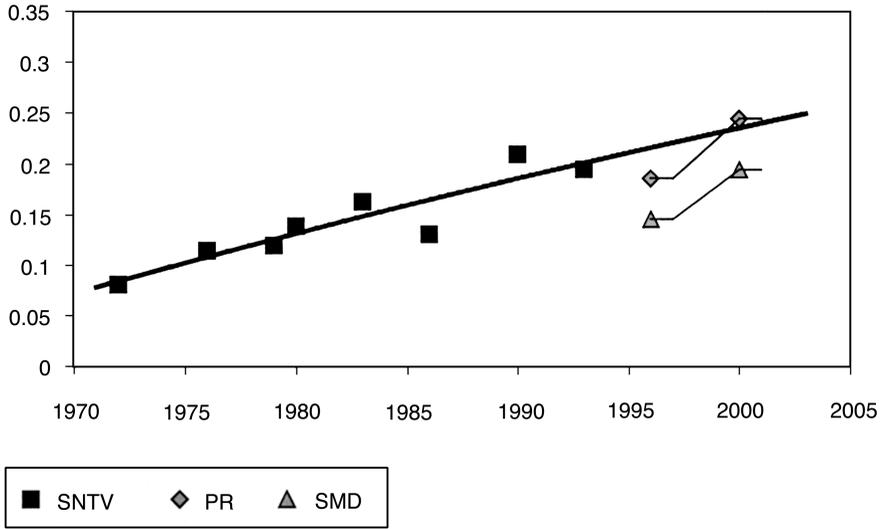
The importance of television news (and its more personalistic emphasis) in politics has increased vastly in the years following the arrival of the News Station. In post-election voter polls that began in 1972, shown in Figure 1, we see a clear upward trend in the number of voters who report that television news reports and commentary were useful in deciding which candidate or party to vote for. The percentage in House of Representatives elections more than doubled to roughly 20 per cent

²¹ Jiji Press, ed., *Sengo Nihon no Seitō to Naikaku [Postwar Japanese Parties and Cabinets]* (Tokyo: Jiji Press, 1982); Jiji Press, ed., *Nihon no Seitō to Naikaku, 1981–1991 [Japanese Parties and Cabinets 1981–1991]* (Tokyo: Jiji Press, 1982).

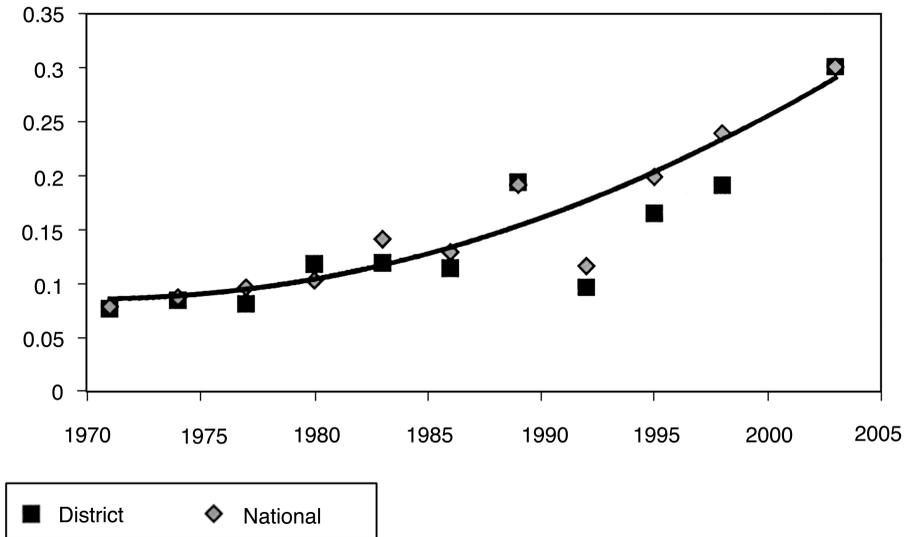
²² Flanagan *et al.*, *The Japanese Voter*.

²³ Allinson, 'Japan's Independent Voters'.

²⁴ Krauss, *Broadcasting Politics in Japan*.



1a. House of Representatives elections, 1970-2000



1b. House of Councillors elections, 1970-2001

Fig. 1. Share of voters who find television useful in making vote decisions

Source: Election surveys provided by the Akarui Senkyo Suishin Kyōkai.

Note: The data for 2001 is for the 'combined' House of Councillors election decision (changes in the electoral system gave voters the opportunity to combine their ballots).

in the most recent elections, and more than tripled in House of Councillors elections to nearly 30 per cent. As expected, the influence varies by the type of election, with more voters in proportional representation districts being more likely to suggest that television news was important in their decision making. The most significant increase occurs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after the advent of more opinionated, personalistic coverage of politics.

There were significant changes even in the more rigid print media. Figure 2 draws on a representative sample of newspaper coverage from each election campaign period,²⁵ showing a gradual increase in the coverage of the prime minister during election campaigns; the increased coverage seems to have begun in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Figure 2a shows the trend for elections for the House of Councillors: even without Koizumi's highly increased coverage in 2001, the average number of stories about the prime minister per day increased in our sample by nearly half. Figure 2b shows that the same trend is manifest, and perhaps even clearer, in elections for the House of Representatives. Again the changes seem to originate around the early 1980s, with the average number of articles roughly doubling over the thirty years we have examined.

This enhanced coverage of the prime minister during electoral campaigns has gone hand-in-hand with the increased role the prime minister has played in these campaigns. The prime minister has become much more actively involved in campaigning, not only for himself, but for the party as a whole and also on behalf of specific candidates. Figure 3 shows the increasing role the prime minister has played in campaigning in the elections to the House of Representatives from 1972 to 2000.

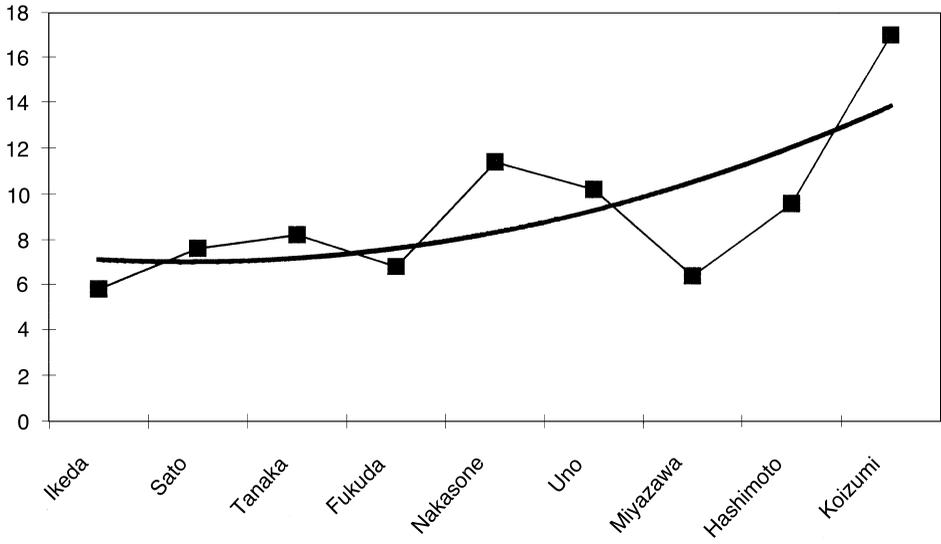
Not surprisingly, the two most recent elections under the revised electoral system saw a dramatic increase in campaigning by the prime minister. The new electoral system includes one ballot on which voters directly choose a political party (the PR portion), and in such a system the importance of party labels (and party leaders as representatives of the party) should naturally increase. However, it is important to note that there is a significant increase earlier in the series as well. The prime ministers for the first two elections in the 1970s, Tanaka and Miki, were not as active as subsequent prime ministers, with Ohira, Nakasone and Kaifu all engaging in more than twice the number of speeches and meetings in constituencies as the earlier prime ministers.

Prime Minister Miyazawa was significantly less popular than the LDP as a whole during the 1993 campaign, which, combined with the major split in the party prior to the elections, makes it unsurprising that he was less active in campaigning on behalf of candidates. The trend noted in this graph, however, cannot be explained away by the popularity of prime ministers. The highest prime ministerial popularity during this period at election time was for the 1972 election, when Tanaka's campaign activities were the most infrequent.

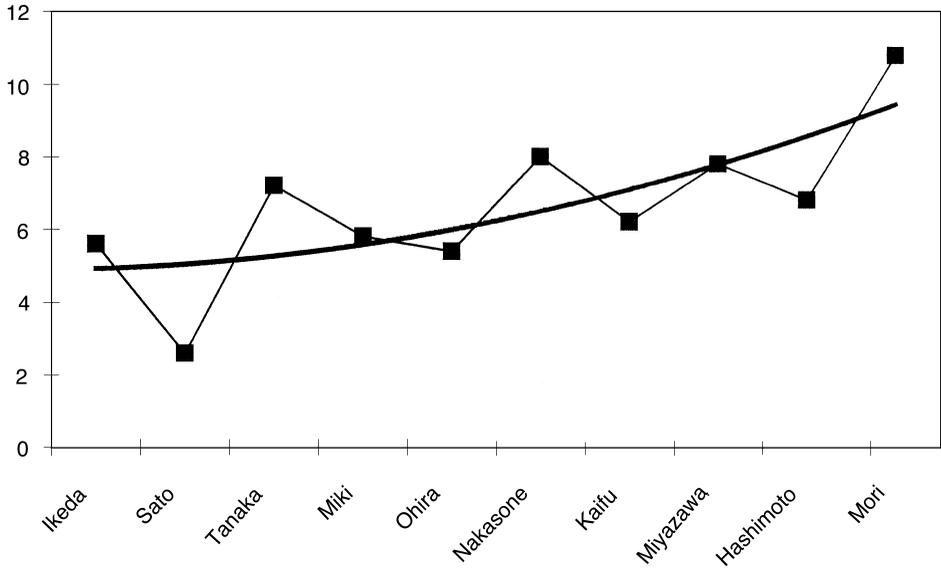
Does this campaigning matter? While data limitations make it difficult to do similar analyses as those done on the impact of campaigning by the US President for congressional candidates,²⁶ we do think that it may be important. At a most basic level, if the visits to districts and other forms of campaigning by the prime minister did not matter, why would candidates request it and the prime minister spend so much time and effort? While it is possible to come up with alternative stories, the most plausible explanation is that which the actors themselves seem to believe: the prime minister has an impact on party popularity and elections. In fact, survey and election analyses make it clear that the public has distinguished much more between the LDP and its prime ministers since

²⁵ The data are derived from articles published in *Asahi Shimbun*, Japan's national 'paper of record', for a sample of five days from each official election period. These articles featured the prime minister in all aspects of his role, governmental and political, and included election and non-election-related activities. Election campaign periods for the House of Councillors varied from seventeen to twenty-four days (with the latter being prevalent prior to the 1980s); twelve to twenty-one days for the House of Representatives (again with the longer periods common before the 1980s). The five-day sample in each case consisted of one of the weekdays for each of the weeks of the campaign, chosen so that all the weekdays were represented in the sample.

²⁶ For example, see Gary C. Jacobson, Samuel Kernell and Jeffrey Lazarus, 'Assessing the President's Role as Party Agent in Congressional Elections: The Case of Bill Clinton in 2000', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 29 (2004), 159–84.



2a. *House of Councillors elections, 1970–2001*



2b. *House of Representative elections, 1970–2000*

Fig. 2. *Average number of newspaper articles on the prime minister during campaigns*
 Source: Sample of Asahi newspaper coverage during the election campaigns.
 Note: The 1980 election is excluded due to Prime Minister Ohira's untimely death.

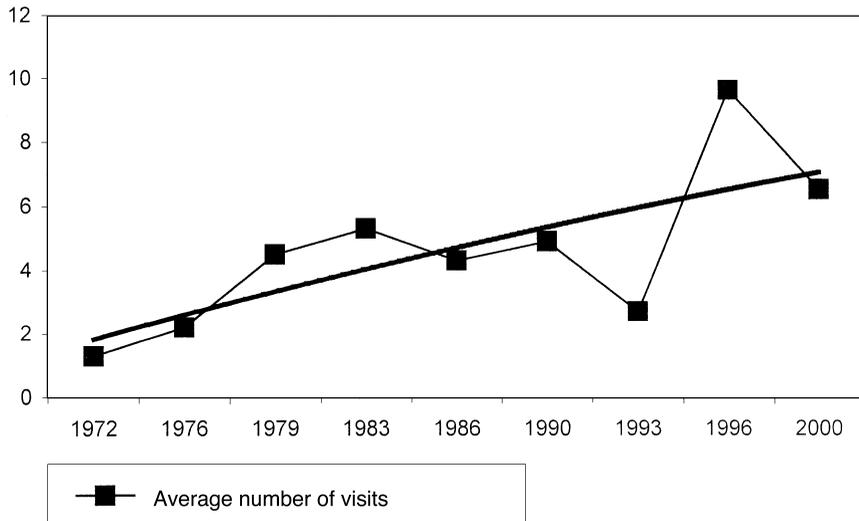


Fig. 3. Prime ministers' visits to candidates during House of Representatives elections
 Source: Data collected from *Asahi* newspaper coverage of prime ministers' daily activities.

the early 1980s, and that prime ministerial support has increasingly affected support for the LDP and election results.

Figure 4 shows popular support for the prime minister and LDP between 1960 and 2001 using data from monthly polls conducted by Jiji Press. Polls of this sort in Japan ask whether respondents support the prime minister's cabinet, rather than the prime minister himself, but as these are the standard measures of prime ministerial popularity in Japan, we use them here. Prior to Nakasone, the support rates generally followed each other extremely closely. On average, no prime minister had a support rate that differed from the LDP support rate by more than 5 per cent, as one might expect in a system where the executive hardly stood out amidst the collective factional leadership of the party in image or policy-making influence.²⁷ However, after Nakasone all but two prime ministers had an average cabinet support rate that differed from the average party support rate by 5 per cent or more.²⁸ Koizumi's literally 'off-the-chart' popularity is in fact an example of the increased variability of popular support for Japanese prime ministers – his record popularity followed the record unpopularity of Mori at the end of his tenure.

Despite the increasing divergence between cabinet and LDP support figures, there still is a strong relationship between the two; particularly notable is the honeymoon effect when a new prime minister takes office.²⁹ While it would be ideal if we could use election surveys to test our theory about the impact of the prime ministers' image or cabinet support on voters at the individual level, appropriate individual-level data over the time frame we consider in this Note is not available.³⁰

²⁷ Tanaka seems to be an anomaly: in the end his final support averaged close to that of the LDP overall, but his popularity varied more extremely than any other pre-Nakasone prime minister. It started out at record levels and then dropped like a stone.

²⁸ The two exceptions, Takeshita and Mori, follow the pattern of Tanaka mentioned in the previous footnote, and so in essence, all post-Nakasone prime ministers in office for more than three months have been quite distinct from the LDP.

²⁹ See Ichiro Miyake, Yoshitaka Nishizawa and Masaru Kohno, *55-Nen Taiseika no Seiji to Keizai – Jiji Seron Chosa Deeta no Bunseki* [The Economy and Politics Under the 1955 System: An Analysis of Jiji Poll Data] (Tokyo: Bokutakusha, 2001).

³⁰ In order to test our argument we require data that go back at least through the 1970s – this prohibits the use of the major academic election studies and surveys by other organizations, such as the Akarui Senkyo Kyokai, which do not ask the appropriate questions.

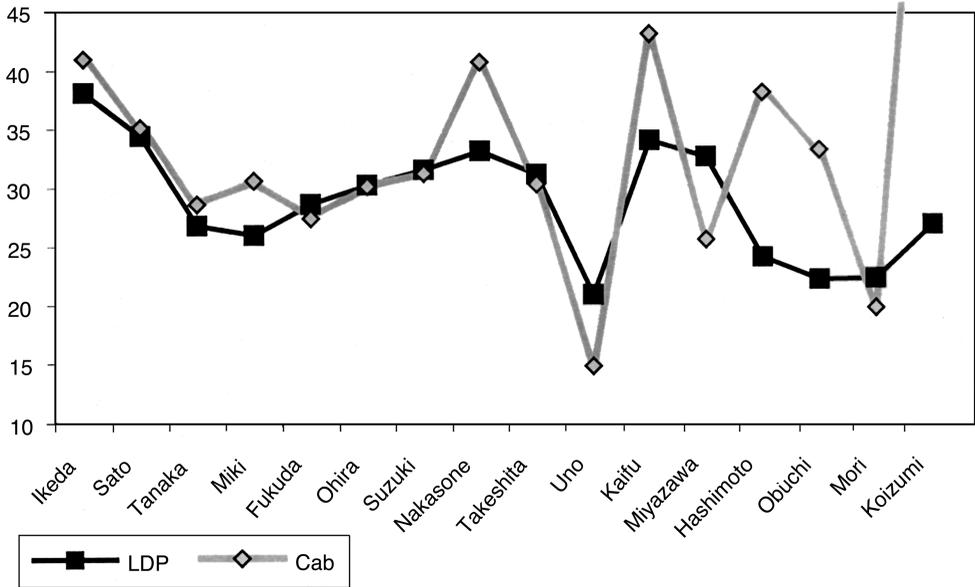


Fig. 4. Cabinet and party support by LDP prime minister, 1960–2001

Source: Polling data is from Jiji Press.

Note: Prime ministers whose tenure lasted less than three months are excluded. All polling data is from monthly polls done by Jiji Tsūshinsha (Jiji Press). The data were collected by Jiji Press (1982, 1992) and *Seron Chōsa Nenkan* (various years, published by the Prime Minister's Office up to 1999, and the Cabinet Office in 2000).

We can, however, test the impact of changes in party and cabinet support on district-level vote shares over time. Table 1 presents the results of a pooled time-series cross-sectional analysis³¹ of the effect of cabinet support on the LDP vote share in Japan's Lower House under the old single non-transferable vote (SNTV) electoral system, comparing elections from 1960 to 1976 with those from 1979 to 1990.³²

The polling data again comes from Jiji Press, combined with Steven Reed's electoral data for Lower House elections in Japan.³³ While the independent variable is national-level party and prime ministerial support, we use a district-level dependent variable (LDP vote share) in order to include superior control variables. We include the following controls: lagged district LDP vote share, vote share for 'independent' conservatives, lagged independent conservative vote share, and two measures to capture the effects of incumbency.³⁴ The incumbency variables were coded as the number of LDP candidates who were incumbents and the number of opposition candidates who were

³¹ The table reports results for a random-effects OLS model, but fixed-effects specification finds similar results for the effect of cabinet support in the two periods.

³² We limit ourselves to the old electoral system for several reasons: it is the 'hardest' test of any change in impact of cabinet support; as was noted earlier, the emphasis in this system was on the personal vote for individual candidates. And by limiting ourselves to one electoral system we can avoid issues of cross-system comparability and still are able to have the necessary timeframe to test our theory.

³³ Steven R. Reed, *Japanese Election Data: The House of Representatives 1947–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992).

³⁴ Some scholars may be surprised that economic control variables are not reported; however, generally little evidence is found of economic voting in Japan (see Christopher J. Anderson and Jun Ishii, 'The Political Economy of Election Outcomes in Japan', *British Journal of Political Science*, 27 (1997), 619–30), and normally are not included in district-level analyses; for a recent example, see Eric C. Browne and Sunwoong Kim, 'Factional Rivals

TABLE 1 *Effect of Cabinet Support on LDP LH Vote Share 1960–90*

Change in LDP support (1960–76)	0.204 (0.08)**
Change in LDP support (1979–90)	0.354 (0.12)**
Change in cabinet support (1960–76)	0.037 (0.02)*
Change in cabinet support (1979–90)	0.179 (0.06)***
Lagged LDP vote share	0.794 (0.02)***
Independent Conservative vote share	– 0.663 (0.02)***
Lagged independent Conservative vote share	0.642 (0.03)***
LDP incumbency	0.083 (0.01)***
Opposition incumbency	– 0.015 (0.01)
Post-1979 dummy	0.015 (0.004)***
Constant	0.053 (0.015)***
Observations	1,256
Adjusted R^2	0.81

Note: This table reports an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression on district-level LDP vote share, using a random effects time-series cross-sectional specification. Significance noted as follows: * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

incumbents, both divided by district magnitude (and as such they both varied from 0 to 1). Finally, we included a dummy variable coded 1 for the second period, to act as a second constant.³⁵ The effects of all control variables are in the expected direction, and each is significant except for opposition incumbency.

Change in LDP support from the previous election is significant in both periods, and the effect is 75 per cent larger in the second period. The results suggest that an increase in party support of 10 percentage points would lead to a predicted increase of 2 percentage points in the LDP vote share through the mid-1970s and 3.5 points in the 1980s. This is consistent with our suggestion that the importance of the party label increased from the mid to late 1970s, although the support is not especially strong, as the difference between the two periods is not statistically significant.

The central claim of our argument is more strongly supported. The impact of cabinet support on LDP vote share has increased significantly across the two periods. The effect of cabinet support is significant but relatively small in the earlier period – a 10 percentage point increase in cabinet support would lead to an increase of less than half (0.4) of a percentage point in LDP vote share. However, since the 1979 election, the effect of changes in cabinet support became much greater, in fact more than quadrupling.³⁶ In the latter period a 10 point jump in cabinet support would increase the LDP's share of the popular vote by almost 2 points.

The results strongly suggest that the greater impact of cabinet support on LDP vote share in Japan has significantly increased between the two periods examined, even under the personal vote-centred SNTV electoral system. While more work on prime ministers' coattails in Japan should be done to enhance our understanding of the electoral impact of prime ministers, this analysis strongly supports our contention that the impact of prime ministers' popularity on voters has increased significantly in the last twenty years.

(*F*'note continued)

and Electoral Competition in a Dominant Party: Inside Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, 1958–1990', *European Journal of Political Research*, 42 (2003), 107–34.

³⁵ This is necessary as not only the slope but also the intercept for the variables may vary between the two periods. The variable, although significant, is not substantively important, however.

³⁶ A Chow test gave a computed F of 5.98, meaning the difference between the two periods is significant for this sample size at 0.0146.

CONCLUSION

While recognizing that individual leaders have agency and that generalized theories about constraints and incentives may not capture all that is important to understand politics,³⁷ there have been clear, systematic changes in the role of the prime minister of Japan. The recent focus on the Japanese prime minister in the media and increased academic interest in the subject is not an aberration; it is recognition of a longer-term trend towards the greater 'presidentialization' of the role. The importance of the public image of the prime minister as a factor in Japanese politics has grown significantly in the past twenty-five years.

Prior to the 1980s, the prime minister's role and image had little independent influence on the media, on the public or on voters distinct from support for the ruling party. Now the Japanese focus on the position to a degree not seen before, and evaluate the prime minister critically as the leader of his party and of Japan. While the Japanese prime minister may not necessarily be the strong leader seen in many other countries, most notably Britain, the public image of the prime minister has become a more potent force in Japanese politics.

³⁷ Richard J. Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).