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Dominant-party system and opposing parties' ability in Japan

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Abstract

There have been many countries whose political system is described as a dominant-party system. Japan is among these. In fact, Liberal Domestic Part (LDP) in Japan had been a ruling party from 1955 to 1994. Moreover, since 1995, LDP has been also in power except from 2009 to 2012. Many scholars try to explain why opposition parties in Japan could not capture government and find some factors behind this: ideology, clientelism, the election rule (single-nontransferable vote with multimember districts), malapportionment, etc. In this paper, I shed light on the opposing parties' ability to construct network in districts and look for candidates. I show the significance of this point by providing a simple analytical model and prove its relevance by focusing on Japan Socialist Party and using data of the elections from 1958 to 1993. My finding is important in analysis of political system of other countries as well because competition among parties is necessary for good governance.

Keywords: dominant-party system, opposition party, valence, kōenkai

1. Introduction

What is democracy? This has been controversial question. Schumpeter (1942) defines: "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." Becker (1958) rephrases this as follows: "an ideal political democracy is defined as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals endeavor to acquire political office through perfectly free competition for the votes of a broadly based electorate." In addition, Becker (1958) says that "in a political democracy parties compete for political office — in, say, periodic elections — by offering platforms to the electorate."

From this viewpoint, we can find 'uncommon democracy' in the world (Pempel (1990)). In fact, there have been many countries whose political system is described as a dominant-party system or one-party dominant system. Japan is among these. Liberal Domestic Part (LDP) in Japan had been a ruling party from 1955 to 1994. Moreover, since 1995, LDP has been also in power except from 2009 to 2012. We can say that Japan had 'democracy without competition' (Scheiner (2006)). Failure of

opposition parties to capture government was doubtlessly one of the distinctive characters of Japanese politics.

Many scholars try to explain why opposition parties in Japan could not capture government and find some factors behind this: ideology, clientelism, the election rule (single-nontransferable vote with multimember districts), malapportionment, etc. I think these are persuasive and might be called structural explanations since these factors are relatively stable. Common agents, however, make decision strategically given a structure. So it is meaningful to investigate each agent's strategic decision making. For example, Maeda (2012) analyzes the incentive of incumbents in Japan Socialist Party (JSP), which was the largest opposition party in Japan, and demonstrates that they prevented their party from becoming more popular.

In this paper, I shed light on the opposing parties' ability to construct network in districts and look for candidates. To do so, I focus on 'valence'. If a candidate has constructed will-developed network in a district, the electorates in the district may vote this candidate even if the policy the candidate announces is far from the electorates' ideal policy. In this sense, the candidate has high valence, non-policy attributes that are valued by electorates (see, for example, Groseclose (2001)). So construction of such network influences the party's nomination of a candidate.

I show the significance of this point by providing a simple analytical model and prove its relevance by focusing on Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and using data of the elections from 1958 to 1993. My finding is important in analysis of political system of other countries as well because competition among parties is necessary for good governance.

2. Structural explanation for the failure of Japan's opposition

Many scholars find some factors behind the failure of Japan's opposition. We can say that there are at least four factors: ideology, clientelism, the election rule (single-nontransferable vote with multimember districts) and malapportionment. In this section, I explain these factors.

Japan Socialist Party (JSP), which was the largest opposition party in Japan, was never able to capture government. Otake (1990) attributes its failure to its rigid Marx-Lenin ideology. Otake (1990) says that "as Marxist diagnosis lost its persuasive power among the general electorate, the JSP clung more tightly to Marxist terminology to maintain its declining power base." In addition, Kohno (1997) emphasizes the inability of the JSP to adjust because the sharp ideological division between the left and right wings of the party prevented leaders from forging a new electoral strategy that all members could support.

 Scheiner (2006) says that "Japan's clientelist structure — whereby the LDP-led central government rewards its supporters with patronage — plays a central role in" explaining the failure of Japan's opposition. Particularly, Scheiner (2006) emphasizes

Japan's fiscal centralization and unitary state as factors encouraging clientelistic relationships, which the LDP took full advantage of in order to mobilize support. Competing LDP politicians in each district developed close connection with local assembly politicians and served as "pipelines" to bring pork-barrel benefits to local voters, especially to conservative bastions in rural areas.

From 1955 to 1994, Japan adopted the single-nontransferable vote with multimember districts (SNTV-MMD), under which a political party had to field more than one candidate in most of electoral districts in order to win a majority. However, because the number of members elected from each district varied, it was sometimes difficult for a party to accurately figure out the number of candidates it should field in a particular district. Moreover, even if the party fields the right number of candidates, it must distribute votes equally among its candidates. Because vote is nontransferable and votes that the party gets cannot be transferred from one of its candidates to another, if party supporters overwhelmingly vote for one of the party's candidates in a particular district, the other candidate of the same party cannot get enough votes to be elected.

Malapportionment has been a problem in Japan. Many argued that Diet seats were apportioned in favor for rural areas where the LDP enjoyed strong political support. Johnson (2000) says that "large inequality between urban and rural areas still remained that worked to the advantage of the ruling party and it was probably only because of that the LDP managed to remain in government." Although the LDP's vote share declined monotonically from 1955 until 1980, malapportioned districts allowed rural voters to give LDP more seats than it otherwise might have received.

3. Kōenkai in Japan

Many scholars say that LDP was better at avoiding nomination errors. (See for example Cox (1997).) Krauss and Pekkanen (2011) point out three features that defined the LDP's organization: (1) candidate-centered personal support organizations, called kōenkai; (2) formal and exclusive factions of politicians; and (3) a main policy-formulating body, the Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC), that stood outside the legislature. In order to analyze the effect on elections, kōenkai that is unique to Japan, as many scholars say, is important. In fact, kōenkai likely reduced LDP's nomination errors. (See for example McCubbins and Rosenbluth (1995).)

"Prior to 2005, victories in most lower house contests were a result of the candidates' personal attributes, irrespective of the party the candidates belonged to" (Reed, Scheiner and Thies (2012)). Politicians mobilize the personal vote through kōenkai. Richardson (1991) says that in Japanese elections, kōenkai are an important source of mobilization. In fact, kōenkai retains their value to candidates even after adoption of new electoral system in 1993 even though kōenkai is not a party organization but a support group for some specific candidate.

The electorates who are member of kōenkai of a particular candidate may vote this candidate even if the policy the candidate announces is far from the electorates' ideal policy. Moreover, a candidate with well-developed network in the district is valued by general electorates in the district. So, as mentioned before, we can regard kōenkai as a part of valence. In the next section, I analyze the relation between parties' behavior and their valences.

4. Election with endogenous valence

In this section, explaining the structure of the model in Serra (2010) and the equilibrium of this model briefly, I show the point that is ignored in Serra (2010). This point enables us to interpret some opposition parties' decision that is missed in Serra (2010).

Denote by $x \in R$ the policy implemented and by $v \in R_+$ the valence. A median voter's utility function is $U_M(x, v) = -|x| + v$. There are two parties, Party L and Party R, whose ideal policies are X_L and X_R respectively. Moreover, (possible) candidates of Party L and Party R have some initial amount of valence, v_{L1} and v_{R1} respectively and try to increase his own valence to $v_{L1} + v_L$ and $v_{R1} + v_R$ by paying cost $C(v_L)$ and $C(v_R)$ respectively. The utility of Party L and R are $U_L(x) - C(v_L) = -(X_L - x)^2 - c \cdot v_L{}^2$ and $U_R(x) - C(v_R) = -(X_R - x)^2 - c \cdot v_R{}^2$.

The median voter votes Party R if $-|X_R| + v_{R1} + v_r > -|X_L| + v_{L1} + v_L$; the median voter votes Party L if $-|X_R| + v_{R1} + v_r < -|X_L| + v_{L1} + v_L$. Forward looking this median voter's behavior, each party simultaneously decides his own policy, X_R or X_L, and the level of valence, v_R or v_L.

Serra (2010) proves that, in the subgame perfect equilibrium of this game, Party L chooses

$$v_L^{**} = \frac{X_R - X_L(c+1) + c \cdot v_{R1} - c \cdot v_{L1}}{c(c+2)},$$

Party R chooses

$$v_R^{**} = \frac{X_R(c+1) - X_L - c \cdot v_{R1} + c \cdot v_{L1}}{c(c+2)},$$

and the policy implemented is

$$x^{**} = \frac{X_R + X_L + c \cdot v_{R1} - c \cdot v_{L1}}{c+2}.$$

Without loss of generality, I assume that the policy of Party R is implemented in the equilibrium. Then Party L's utility is as follows:

$$U_L(x^{**}) - C(v_L^{**})$$
$$= -\left[x_L - \frac{X_R + X_L + c \cdot v_{R1} - c \cdot v_{L1}}{c + 2}\right]^2$$
$$- c\left[\frac{X_R - X_L(c + 1) + c \cdot v_{R1} - c \cdot v_{L1}}{c(c + 2)}\right]^2$$

Suppose that Party L does not endorse the (possible) candidate and the (possible) candidate does not run for the election. (This case is ignored in Serra (2010).) Then, Party R announces his ideal policy X_R that is implemented in the equilibrium because of nonexistence of competition. So Party L's utility is as follows:

$$U_L(X_R) - C(0) = -(X_L - X_R)^2$$

Now, we can find the cases where Party L's utility when the candidate does not run for the election, $U_L(X_R) - C(0)$, is higher than that when the candidate runs, $U_L(x^{**}) - C(v_L^{**})$. That is, if Party L endorses the candidate, Party L gets caught in competition for increasing valence that involves the cost, reducing Party L's utility. For example, in the case where $X_R = 0$, $X_L = -1$, $v_{L1} = 0$ and $v_{R1} > [3c^2 + 5c + 1]/[2c(c + 1)^2]$ hold, Party L prefers not to endorse the (possible) candidate.

In such cases, the (possible) candidate of Party L does not run for the election. It is easily shown that the relatively higher initial valence of one party possibly produces such a result.

5. Conclusion

The table in below shows the numbers of candidates of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and the number of the total seats in the House of Representative (lower house) elections from 1958 to 1993 (See Ishikawa (2004)).

Year	Number of candidates		Total seats
	LDP	JSP	
1958	413	246	467
1960	399	186	467
1963	359	198	467
1967	342	209	486
1969	328	183	486
1972	339	161	491
1976	320	162	511
1979	322	157	511
1980	310	149	511
1983	339	144	511
1986	322	138	512
1990	338	149	512
1993	285	142	511

In the 1958 election, the number of JSP candidates was more than half of the total seats. Henceforth, however, the number of JSP candidates was less than a majority. This implies that JSP could not have captured government even if all JSP candidates had won the election. We can say that disability for JSP to endorse candidates ensured LDP's position as a ruling party.

Muramatsu (2010) says that the politicians of LDP, delegating substantial discretion to bureaucrats after 1955, exerted effort to construct well-developed network in each district. I think that the typical outcome of this effort is kōenkai. Because of existence of kōenkai, LDP was relatively easier to endorse multiple candidates in each district. Moreover, if kōenkai increases a candidate's valence, JSP faced difficulty in endorsing a candidate in the district, as shown by the analysis in this paper.

I show that strong asymmetry in initial valence is likely to result in one-party dominance. Nowadays, there are countries with nondemocratic governments that should transit to democracy and countries with new democratic governments that should nurture democracy. The competition, as mentioned before, is necessary for democracy and needs credible opposition parties. For sound basis for democracy, we have to create initial condition such that many parties can endorse candidates and compete for government.

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