

AFTER THE REFORM: HOW IS JAPAN'S LOCAL DEMOCRACY CHANGING?

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I. *Introduction*¹

Over the past decade Japan's local democracy is undergoing a considerable change. Until the revision of more than 400 laws concerning local autonomy, known as the decentralization reforms, extensive use had been made of local governments as central government implementing agents through the system of agency-delegated functions. This system gave the central government in Japan the authority to require local executives to implement certain functions that they chose to delegate. With the passing of the decentralization reform package in 2000 — praised as one of the most spectacular reforms of post-war Japan — the system of agency-delegated functions (*kikan i' nin jimū*) was eliminated and replaced with an equal cooperation system (*taitō kyōryoku*), which has substantially changed Japan's centre-local relations. The NPO (Non-Profit Organization) Law has established a new legislative framework in response to activities undertaken by NPOs.² Finally, the revision of the Law on Municipal Mergers, a complement of the decentralization reform package, has led to a reorganization of municipalities by reducing their number significantly.³

Decentralization reforms occur nearly universally in the developed world, and there is evidence of a close link between the granting of more autonomy and societal transformations, such as declining birth rates and aging populations. Central governments increasingly rely on localities and private actors to provide services formerly delivered by the nation state. As a result of this ongoing shift of power between political actors in Japan one central research question emerges: To which extent have these reforms impacted the nature of Japan's local democracy especially with regard to citizen participation and local interest intermediation?

While voting in national elections is only one way of participating in politics, it is the key one in democracies. Consequently, the practice of citizens' participation in local elections is investigated with regard to changes in voter turnout and party affiliations. The debate on social and political change in post-industrial societies, however, implies a growing dealignment from the established parties and a decline in the turnout rate. This decline is expected to go hand in hand with an increase in participation through non-institutionalised channels. Thus, the question

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¹ The author is engaged in a project on "Local Level Political Participation in Japan", which is supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS).

² In Japan, groups that are active locally are usually called "NPOs" (Non-Profit Organizations) rather than "NGOs" (Non-Governmental Organizations), which is commonly used in Western societies.

³ For details concerning the changing institutional framework for local democracy in Japan see Schmidt 2009.

of changes in non-conventional political participation, such as participation in voluntary activities and NPO membership, will also be examined on basis of survey data.

Given that political parties and other intermediary organizations play a decisive role in the exchange between citizens and local governments, the characteristics of the local party system also have to be analysed in a study on local democracy. Special emphasis will be placed on changing patterns of interest aggregation and the role of new actors at the local level, such as independents, women and new local parties.

The paper begins by examining the old and new law regulations concerning local democracy in Japan due to their importance for setting the framework for local participation and interest intermediation. The next section will focus on political participation on the local level and the changing modes of citizen involvement in local government. After that, the characteristics of the local party system are analyzed. The essay concludes with a set of implications of the reforms' impact on the nature of Japan's local democracy.

II. *The Legislative Framework for Local Democracy in Japan*

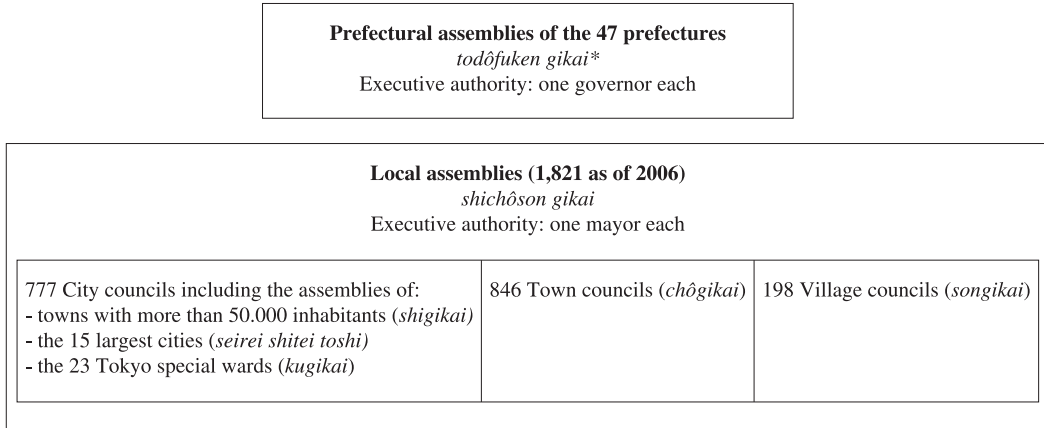
The local government system in Japan is a two-tiered system comprising the 47 prefectures and approximately 1,800 municipal authorities that carry out administrative work at the city, ward, town, and village level. The municipalities represent local government at the basic level, while the prefecture represents local government at a wider regional level. The political and administrative structures are based on popularly elected executives (governors or mayors) and an assembly that forms the legislative body (see Figure 1).

Traditionally, the mayors and governors have a strong role. Important powers are given to local chief executives, including rights to enact regulations, to draft budgets and introduce bills. In addition, they are responsible for the execution of all local government affairs. Even though the assemblies are responsible for enacting local legislation and deciding their politics, the majority of local assemblies are believed to play a weak role. Their lack of competence, low political morale, and low level of activity are the most commonly mentioned criticisms (Etô 2004: 19-25).

Through Japan's system of local government, local residents have had a direct voice in the way matters are run for a long time. Eligible voters can, for example, demand the dissolution of the assembly as well as the dismissal of assembly members and municipality chiefs by obtaining a required number of signatures. The governor or mayor may be dismissed if a majority of the eligible voters in an administrative district approves a referendum for his or her dismissal. In 2002, subsequent amendments to the Local Autonomy Law (*Chihô jichi hô*) saw a reduction in the minimum number of voter signatures required for petitions involving dissolution or dismissal where the local government population exceeds 400,000. The new minimum threshold is now defined as the sum of one third of 400,000 (= 133,000) plus one-sixth of the number in excess of 400,000 (Ohsugi 2007: 5).

The election regulations are spelled out in the Public Office Election Law (*Kôshoku senkyo hô*). Each municipality has a single-chamber assembly. The assemblymen are elected directly by popular vote for a four-year term. The head of the municipality or prefecture is likewise elected for a period of four years. Members of local assemblies and heads of local governments can only be elected by Japanese citizens who are 20 years of age or older and who have been

FIG 1. OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN JAPAN



Source: Own compilation based on data by the Japanese government (<http://www.soumu.go.jp/gapei/gapei.html>).

Note: The prefectures include one metropolitan district (Tokyo [*to*]), two urban prefectures (Kyoto and Osaka [*fu*]), forty-three rural prefectures (*ken*), and one “district” (Hokkaidō [*dō*]).

resident at an address within the respective community or prefecture for at least three subsequent months. Candidates for local assemblies and mayoral posts must fulfil the residence requirement in order to be eligible for election and must be 25 years of age or older, while candidates for governorships must be at least 30.

In any election, each voter can cast one vote for one candidate in a multi-candidate race for multiple offices, known as a single, non-transferable vote (SNTV). The candidates with the most votes obtain the posts. SNTV electoral systems generally produce more proportional electoral outcomes as the size of the electoral districts, i.e. the number of seats in each constituency, increases (Nohlen 1989: 65ff.). As a rule, in Japan cities as a whole constitute a voting district; exceptions are the designated (largest) cities and the Tokyo special wards. In these cases, the wards (*ku*) constitute the voting district (Public Office Election Law, Art. 15). In the case of the Tokyo city ward councils, for example, the average number of seats per constituency is 40, which means that the proportional outcome is very high and even small parties and independents have a good chance to be represented.⁴

Compared to other nations, the rate of successful candidates is extraordinarily high and competition is extremely low. In the 2007 election in the Tokyo city wards, for example, only 1,203 candidates ran for 913 seats, which means that nearly 76 percent of all candidates were successful, and only slightly more than one percent of the votes were required to obtain a seat. In the rural environments of the Tokyo prefecture, which not only comprises the 23 special wards of the former city, but also 26 cities, 4 towns and villages and 9 islands, voting competition is even lower. Due to the lower number of seats, however, a somewhat higher

⁴ On 1 July 1943, Tokyo City was merged with Tokyo Prefecture, forming the current “metropolitan prefecture” (*Tōkyō to*), which is one of the 47 prefectures of Japan. The area comprising the 23 Tokyo city wards is informally considered the “City of Tokyo”.

TABLE 1. DATA ON LOCAL VOTING COMPETITION IN THE TOKYO METROPOLIS

	Candidates	Members	Candidates on average	Assembly members on average	Percentage of candidates winning* ₃	Minimum of votes required* ₃	Assemblies constituted without vote
All special wards	1203	913	52	40	75.9	1.4	0
All cities* ₁	777	645	31	26	83.0	2.2	1
All towns and villages	65	58	16	15	89.2	3.8	0
All islands* ₂	92	82	12	10	89.1	4.2	1

Source: Own compilation based on election data by Tokyo Senkyo kanri iinkai.

Note: The 2007 election; exceptions: Katsushika, Koganei, Aogashima (2005), Tachikawa, Machida, Hino, Nishitoyko, Hachijo (2006).*₁) without Akiruno (no data available); *₂) without Toshima (no data available).*₃ Estimation without the assemblies constituted without vote (Mushashimurayama, Miyake).

percentage of the vote is required for election (Table 1).⁵

In some cases, there are not even enough candidates for elections to be held and the members assume office without a public vote (*mutôhyô tôsen/ mufu senkyo*). This is especially true in rural environments with a high percentage of elderly people. For example, 13 percent (732 out of 5627) of town and village assemblymen who took office after the 2007 election were inaugurated without a public vote. Conversely, this is true of only 1.3 percent (13 out of 983) of the 15 largest cities' assemblymen.⁶

A recent revision of the Public Offices Election Law allows candidates running for leadership posts in local government to print their election "manifestos" with public money and to distribute copies during the campaign period. The distribution of printed manifestos for Diet elections has been allowed since the 2003 Lower House elections. The introduction of manifestos for local government elections is expected to encourage candidates to work harder to write feasible and attractive policy proposals as a means of attracting votes. In their manifestos, candidates are likely to present their policy proposals with numerical goals, specifying available financial resources and presenting timetables for realizing these goals. Voters will be able to judge the feasibility and attractiveness of policy proposals by comparing different candidates' manifestos. After the election, voters can later judge the policy achievements of the winning candidates by reviewing the manifestos distributed during the campaign. For the candidates these manifestos mean a greater independence from political parties and their platforms as they can present their political goals and views independently.

Overall, it is obvious that the local voting system differs markedly from the national system, especially with respect to modes of direct political participation and the prospects of election. The local system works towards benefiting smaller parties and independent candidates and offers them a greater chance of election to a public office than the national voting system does. The latter only allows independents to run in single-seat districts and requires the majority of the districts' votes for election.⁷ Consequently, on the local level, the nomination,

⁵ In the case of the Osnabrueck city election (Northern Germany) in 2006, for example, 355 candidates ran for 50 seats, which meant that only 14% of the candidates were successful and the required minimum number of votes for a seat was approximately 20% of all the votes in the specific district (Schmidt 2008: 84).

⁶ Own estimation based on Asahi shinbun, 7 April 2007 (<http://www2.asahi.com/senkyo2007t/news/TKY200704060383.html>), and Asahi shinbun, 18 April 2007 (<http://www2.asahi.com/senkyo2007t/news/TKY200704170386.html>).

campaign and election are more likely to focus on the candidate than on the party. At the government level, regulations foster strong executive leadership and less party politisation.

III. *Changes in Local Political Participation*

1. **Conventional Political Participation**

On the national level, the past decades have seen a rapid and widely noted decrease in voter turnout rates and, simultaneously, a significant rise in the number of political non-supporters. In the late 60s, only approximately seventeen percent of those eligible to vote belonged to this category. By 2005, the figure had risen to nearly forty percent (see Akarui senkyo suishin kyōkai for the respective years). The unaffiliated voters, who take a strong anti-establishment stance, not only refuse to vote at all, but also increasingly finding expression through new parties or candidates who are not affiliated with any party.

There has not only been a distinct tendency for a large portion of the electorate to refrain from voting, but also a shift in the composition of these non-supporters. In the 60s, non-partisans were numerous among the older, less educated workers in fishery, forestry or agriculture and the self-employed. Conversely, since the 80s this group has been chiefly comprised of younger, better-educated employees living in large cities (Schmidt 2001: 192ff.). As in other industrialized nations, we find a distinct shift from “apolitical non supporters” to “cognitively mobilized non supporters”, which is generally associated with postmodernism and value change (Inglehart 1990: 363). Even though political apathy in Japan is also due to political scandals, it is largely caused by transformations within Japan’s socio-economic structure. With respect to the attributes of post-modern societies, such as economic growth, the rise of the service economy, increasing levels of education, changes in geographical mobility, such as urbanization and sub-urbanization, and changes in mass communication, Japan is undoubtedly one of the most advanced nations in the world. Plummeting levels of partisan support are therefore not surprising.

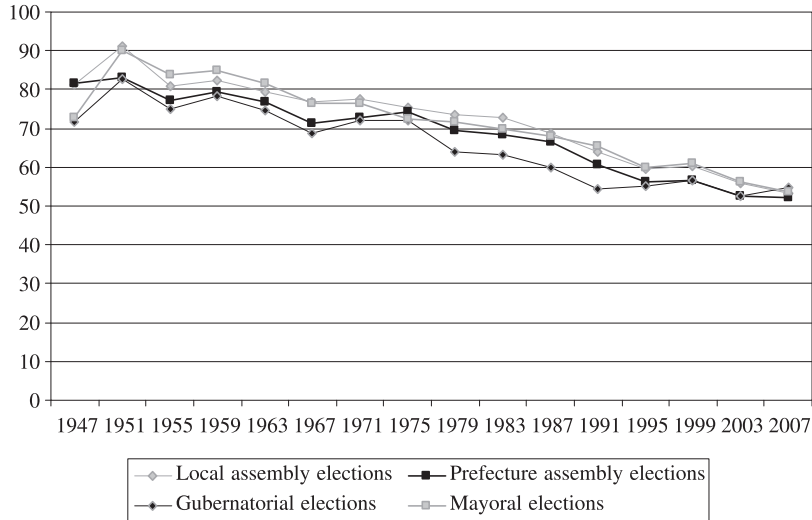
On the local level, the trends towards non-voting and political apathy are also oblivious. As Figure 2 demonstrates, voter turnout has decreased in all elections. In 1951, more than 90 percent of the eligible voters cast their ballots during local assembly elections; in 2007, this number dropped to only 54 percent. During prefecture assembly elections, the figure fell to 52 percent in 2007. The same tendencies are observed at gubernatorial elections and mayoral elections.

Since the 1980s, the proportion of voters casting their ballots at local elections has been clearly lower than at the national level. As shown in Table 2, the mean turnout rate during sub-national elections held between 2000 and 2007 was approximately ten percent below the mean turnout rate in national elections within the same period. Even though turnout levels are notoriously ambiguous indicators, the data point towards disaffection from the political system in general and the local political system in particular.

A closer examination of the turnout rates shows a considerable variation in the turnout rate between Japanese cities and between the different age groups. A Tokyo Metropolitan

⁷ For details on the national voting system see Schmidt 2001: chap. 4.1.

FIG 2. VOTER TURNOUT AT SUB-NATIONAL ELECTIONS 1947-2007



Source: Akarui Senkyo suishin kyōkai 2007 (<http://www.akaruisenkyo.or.jp/070various/tihoug.html>).

TABLE 2. VOTER TURNOUT IN LOWER HOUSE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS 1940-2007 (on average)

	1940s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s	2000s
Lower House elections	71.4	75.9	71.8	71.1	71.3	66.7	63.3
Prefecture assembly elections	81.7*	79.9	74.2	72.2	67.6	57.8	52.4
Local assembly elections	81.2*	84.8	78.2	75.5	70.8	61.3	54.7
Gubernatorial elections	71.9*	78.6	71.7	69.3	61.5	55.4	53.7
Mayoral elections	72.7*	86.2	78.9	73.5	68.9	62.1	55.0

Source: Own estimation on basis of data from the Election Department (Lower House elections) and the data shown in Figure 2 (sub-national elections).

Note: The data give the mean turnout rate of all elections held during the respective period. *In the 40s only one election was held on the sub-national level (1947).

Government survey of local voting behaviour shows that during the assembly elections the rural islands' voter turnout was nearly twice that of the special wards of the former city. Voter turnout at the city and the towns and villages' assembly elections was somewhere in between (see Table 3). These figures point to the participation level in elections in industrialized countries being lowest in the most densely populated urban constituencies and highest in the sparsely populated rural ones. The table also indicates that older citizens (those aged 60+) are generally more likely to vote than younger citizens are, and those aged 25-39 are less likely to vote than the overall population. This is consistent with the findings of the theorists of value change who suggest that in almost all advanced democracies non-voters are usually younger citizens (Inglehart 1990, Hildebrandt/ Dalton 1977). It also indicates the importance of general factors of urbanization such as mobility, cross-pressures, and loss of identification, all of which

TABLE 3. VOTING PERCENTAGE BY TYPE OF ASSEMBLY, DENSITY, AND AGE GROUP IN THE TOKYO PREFECTURE (2003)

Type of assembly	Special wards	Cities	Towns and villages	Islands	
	Density	13 663.2	5 101.1	157.7	70.8
Age	(Per sq. km)	(Per sq. km)	(Per sq. km)	(Per sq. km)	
-20	33.1%	36.8%	37.5%	52.9%	
20-24	25.1%	31.3%	25.2%	68.6%	
25-29	24.5%	28.8%	28.9%	78.0%	
20s overall	25.3%	30.4%	28.7%	73.6%	
30-34	30.3%	33.7%	36.6%	88.1%	
35-39	36.9%	41.8%	44.2%	89.0%	
30s overall	33.4%	37.5%	39.7%	88.4%	
40-44	43.3%	49.0%	54.0%	84.7%	
45-49	46.8%	54.7%	47.9%	89.4%	
40s overall	44.9%	51.8%	51.0%	88.0%	
50-54	51.7%	56.4%	58.0%	87.7%	
55-59	56.2%	61.7%	63.4%	89.1%	
50s overall	53.9%	58.9%	61.0%	88.3%	
60-64	63.6%	69.9%	72.0%	88.7%	
65-69	68.8%	75.8%	80.4%	85.3%	
60s overall	66.1%	72.6%	76.3%	87.3%	
70+	63.0%	70.1%	77.9%	83.0%	
Average	46.1%	52.1%	55.0%	85.3%	
Turnout overall on average	43.2%	48.9%	57.9%	86.3%	

Source: Age groups: Survey of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government 2003; density: Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (as of 1 October 2005).

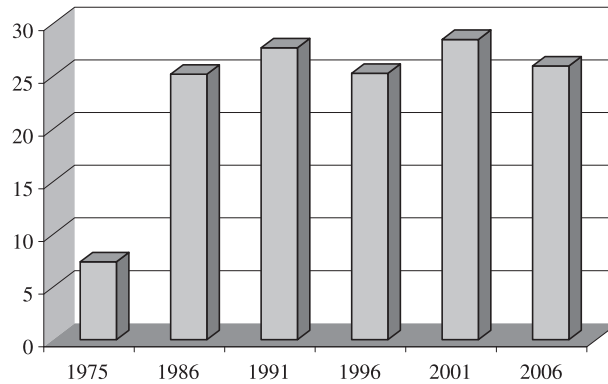
influence the political behaviour of citizens, especially on the local level (Berelson et al. 1954; Cox 1968; Johnston 1979, Johnston and Taylor 1979).

Evidence from survey data, however, suggests that, on the whole, Japanese voters still have more trust in their local councils than in their national system, even though there is a steady downward trend in citizens' trust in local politics as well. In 1991, 53 percent of those polled trusted or somewhat trusted local politics. In 2003, this figure had dropped to 35 percent. However, compared to the national level, citizens' trust in local politics is three times higher than their trust in national politics (see See Akarui senkyo suishin kyôkai 2004: 51). Nonetheless, it is evident from these data that, on the whole, the electorate is less inclined to reflect the concept of active citizens in a vital democracy. Furthermore, the data indicate the need for an approach that targets the younger age groups to combat growing political disengagement.

2. Civil Society Activities and the "Volunteer Revolution"

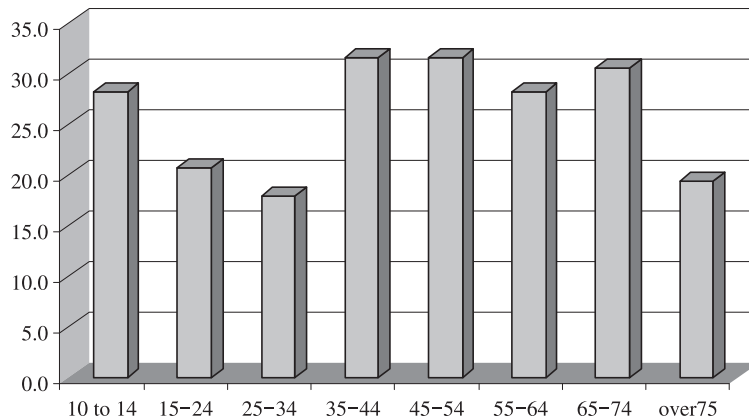
The origins of the social capital concept and studies of general civic engagement can be traced back to Tocqueville (1985, orig. 1835). He was the first to introduce a connection between a high level of voluntary engagement and a democratic system's stability and efficiency. Especially his analyses of the individualization of society and the system of voluntary associations are still mirrored in the current conceptualisation of social capital by Putnam and others. According to this concept, membership of locally based voluntary groups

FIG 3. PERCENTAGE OF JAPANESE ABOVE TEN YEARS OF AGE PARTICIPATING IN VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES 1975-2006



Source: Own estimation based on the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities 2006.

FIG 4. 2006 VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION RATES BY AGE GROUPS



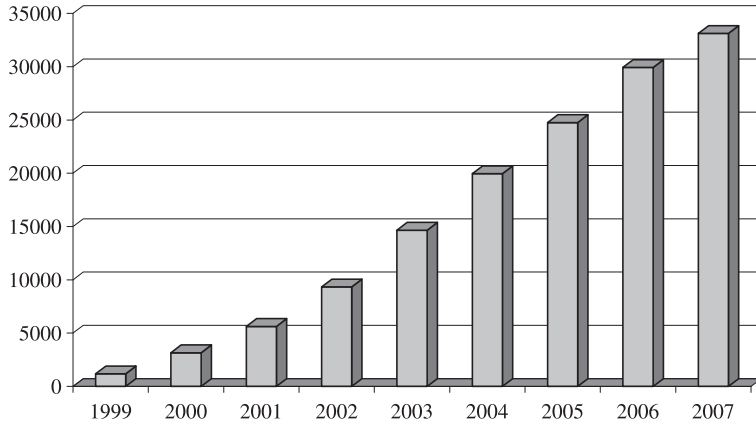
Source: Own estimation based on the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities 2006.

indicates a vibrant democracy, because participation in non-political contexts is regarded as an important determining factor for political participation (Putnam 2000).

In order to measure the state of civil society in Japan, we will distinguish between individual engagement as a volunteer, and institutionalised engagement in NPOs. To measure voluntary and community activities, the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (STULA), which has been conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications' Statistical Bureau every five years since 1976, provides detailed information on volunteer activities within Japanese society. As Figure 3 indicates, the number of persons engaged in volunteer activities has increased notably since the late 70s and has remained relatively stable at around 25 percent.

However, booms in volunteer activities after major disasters, such as the Great Hanshin

FIG 5. GROWTH IN THE NUMBER OF NPOs 1999-2007



Source: Cabinet Office, NPO-Homepage (<http://www.npo-homepage.go.jp/data/pref.html>).

Note: 1999-2006: Number of registered NPOs as of December of the respective year; 2007: as of November.

earthquake in January 1995, which is said to have ushered in the “Age of Volunteerism” in Japan (Kamimura 2001: 4), are not reflected by these data. This is mainly due to the survey not covering volunteer activities that are concentrated on specific days (Omori/ Yonezawa 2002: 4).

Compared with 1996, the 2001 survey showed an increase in volunteer activities in all age groups. Nevertheless, younger age groups — with the exception of pupils who do volunteer activities during school hours — tend to be less active in volunteer activities. The participation rate is lowest among the age group 25-34 and increases significantly among the older age groups (see Figure 4).

The number of NPOs shows a steady upward trend too (Figure 5). The number rose from less than 2,000 in 1999 to more than 33,000 in 2007. In 2007, the majority (or 30,497) was active on the local level, while only a few (2,627) acted nationwide.⁸ Even though the number of NPOs has increased substantially, a poll on NPO activities conducted by the Cabinet Office (2005) showed that only around 9% of Japanese have participated in NPO activities.

The main working environment for NPOs is Tokyo, where the ratio of organizations per 10,000 inhabitants was 2.84 in June 2004, while it is lowest in rural Kagoshima prefecture with only 0.68 organizations per 10,000 people.⁹ This is not only true for registered NPOs, but also for other voluntary organizations. According to Tsujinaka (2003: 94f.), the Tokyo metropolitan area hosts the greatest number of organizations (21,366) in Japan, and the number of associations per 10,000 inhabitants is 1,177 compared to only 296 in the more rural Ibaraki prefecture.

The data on the role of voluntary organizations and NPOs in Japan are not convincing. However, if the examination of social capital in Japan is confined to the picture drawn in this section, the outcome is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Japanese citizens are increasingly involved in voluntary activism and grassroots activities, and the number of NPOs,

⁸ See Cabinet Office, NPO Homepage; <http://www.npo-homepage.go.jp/data/pref.html>; 26.1.2008.

⁹ See Ministry of Education; www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/16/08/04081301/008/008.pdf.

which channelled this “volunteer energy”, rose significantly. On the other hand, voluntary participation is lowest among the younger cohorts, as is the case with conventional political participation, which runs contrary to the suggestions of value change according to which the younger cohorts are more likely to engage in unconventional political participation (Inglehart 1977: 361ff.; Barnes/ Kaase et al. 1979: 524). The data rather seems to confirm the assumptions about the overall decline of civic and political activism in post-industrial societies (Pharr/ Putnam 2000).

IV. *Changes in Local Interest Intermediation*

1. **The Rise of Independents**

At the local level, independents have always played a major role in Japanese politics. A strongly non-partisan view of local self-government is not unique in Japan. However, the “nationalization” of the vote (e.g. Claggett/ Flanigan/ Zingale 1984) in Japan has never reached the level of that in other advanced nations.

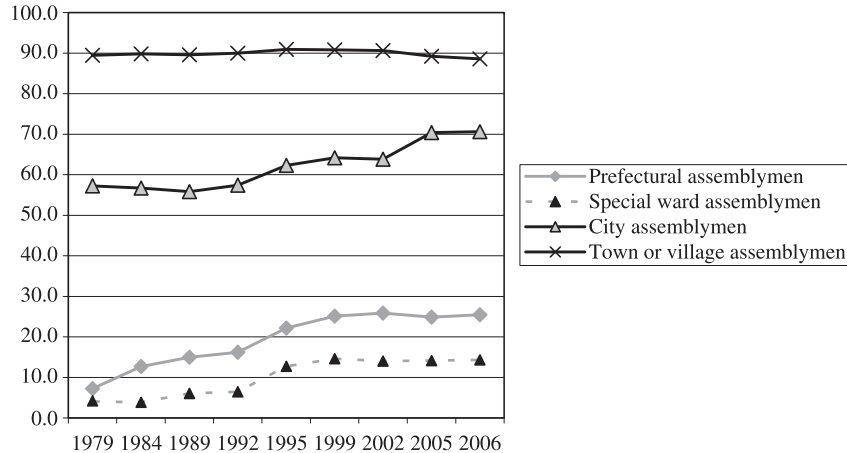
“Nationalization” refers to the extent to which a party receives similar levels of support throughout the country and the absence of differences in the party system at all political levels. Party nationalization in Western societies was regarded as a consequence of the modernization process and the growing complexity of the problems that communities faced. In this sense, nationalization marks a shift from non-professionalized “honorary” politics to professionalized party politics (Wehling 1991). As voting in Germany illustrates, the nationalization of the vote is more widespread in large cities, while independents still play an important role in smaller cities and villages (Pappi 1976). As predicted by Wehling (2003: 310), however, growing dealignment trends among the electorate, together with direct modes of election may foster the spread of “new” independents in future, especially within the more urban municipalities.

Trends in Japan seem to confirm these assumptions. In town or village assemblies, the percentage of votes for independents has, at around 90%, remained very constant over the time. In contrast, the national parties always played a major role in the Tokyo city parliaments’ assemblies, with independents only gaining around 4% of the vote in 1979. Their share grew only slightly to 6% in 1990, but has increased significantly since then to 14% in 2006. The same tendencies have been observed during prefectural and city elections since the early 1990s, with the share of independents growing markedly at the expense of established parties (Figure 6).

Governors and mayors traditionally run as independents, even though it is well known that one or more political parties support the majority of independent candidates. However, new patterns have occurred very recently. An increasing number of gubernatorial election candidates are running successfully without any party support or with the support of both political camps, the Liberal Democrats and the Democrats, which blurs the old ideological cleavage between the governing party and opposition.¹⁰ Owing to this development, the governors are no longer agents of the national government or a specific political party and they can promote themselves

¹⁰ Despite the DPJ’s official policy of not supporting the same candidate as the LDP, the party is jointly backing candidates in many prefectures, because it is missing candidates in local elections.

FIG 6. INDEPENDENTS IN SUB-NATIONAL POLITICS 1979-2006



Source: Own estimation based on the Statistical Yearbook of Japan for the respective years.

as local leaders, not dependent on the established parties. Further, we observe a diversification of career paths. Governors now come from all sorts of different backgrounds, ranging from bureaucracy to media, literature to public life (Jain 2003).

Besides being organized in the national associations of governors (*Zenkoku chijikai*) and mayors (*Zenkoku shichōkai*), local government heads are increasingly networking to coordinate their policies. Especially the governors have recently made serious attempts to work together in informal groups, such as the “Changing Japan from the Regions Group” or the “Reformist Governors Study Group”, to exchange ideas and to act as a pressure group to seek greater autonomy for local government (Jain 2003: 70f.).¹¹ These new forms of cooperation between the localities may strengthen their role and give them a stronger voice against the central government.

Independent candidates are a vital way for local citizens to signal their discontent to the local political elite, to pursue a single-issue cause, focus on local concerns and enhance political accountability and engagement. The increase in independent candidates is an indication of the mainstream parties’ failure to aggregate and articulate the interests of local communities. When local representatives are directly elected by the people, it removes the party politics layer and these representatives can take a stronger leadership role than their counterparts at the national level. Strong leadership is, however, not always a guarantee of more democracy. Even though we view leadership democracy as a vital way to keep an otherwise omnipotent bureaucracy under control, it could also lead to demagogic dictatorship with an unthinking mass following if it is not embedded in vital electoral competition and a lively associational life (Weber 2002). Further, we should bear in mind that due to the decrease in national and local finance after the

¹¹ According to Jain (2003: 69), the “new breed of governors” is labelled reformers (*kaikakuha*) instead of progressives (*kakushinha*), because their aim is mainly to reform the political system and to strengthen local autonomy rather than being politically progressive.

burst of the bubble economy in the 1990s, national and local governments made huge borrowings to deal with budget deficits; consequently, both governments are now forced to undertake strict fiscal measures to repay their borrowings (Muto 2008). Local authorities have thus increasingly introduced private sector management and are driven by cost effectiveness rather than the needs of the population.

2. Women as New Actors on the Sub-National Level

The onset of decentralisation provides an opportunity to raise questions of women's space and citizenship in state processes. The under-representation of women in Japanese politics has been debated for many years. While there is evidence to suggest that more women are now being elected to local authorities, they continue to be largely underrepresented. Except for a short period after the Second World War, the percentage of women in the House of Representatives wavered between one and two percent until the 1986 General Election. Since then, the percentage has started to increase significantly, reaching nine percent in the 2005 election. In the House of Councillors, the percentage of female representatives was always higher than in the Lower House, reaching approximately fourteen percent in the 2004 election (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office 2006: 23).

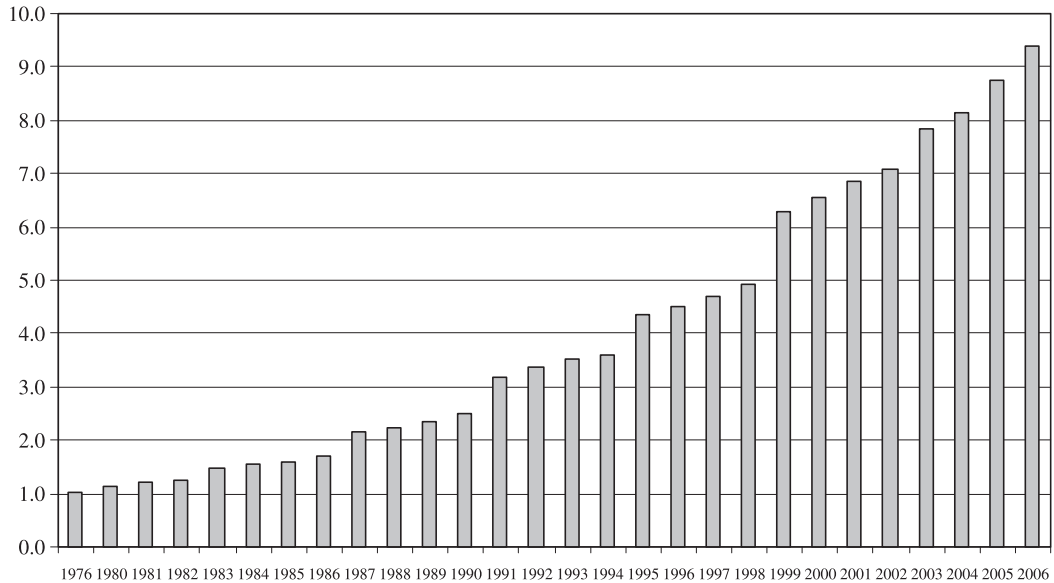
Women's representation in local politics has increased substantially since the early 1990s, which was praised as "women's start into politics" (Yoshino/ Imamura 2001). Overall the percentage of female assembly members in sub-national parliaments has increased from less than three percent in 1990 to approximately nine percent in 2006 (see Figure 7).

As a general trend, women are more likely to be elected to local assemblies in metropolitan areas than in rural areas. Consequently, the Tokyo Ward Councils had the highest percentage of women representatives at nearly 22 percent in 2006. In the cabinet-order designated (largest) cities, women comprised 17 percent of all assembly members, and 11 percent in city councils. In the prefecture assemblies and in town or village councils, women accounted for around 7 percent (Cabinet Office 2007: p. 22).

The election of female governors is a rather recent phenomenon. Backed by 1.38 million voters in Osaka prefecture, Ôta Fusae, a former bureaucrat at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), became the first female governor of Japan in 2000. She was followed by those of Kumamoto, Chiba and Shiga prefectures, and in 2006 five of the 47 governors were female (Table 3).¹² With the exception of Domoto Akiko, the governor of Chiba, female governors in Japan still tend to have an elite status, for example, to be part of the ministries of the central government (Aiuchi 2004: 62). However, it is not only in Japan where people with an elite status form a pool of those eligible for important political executive posts. Therefore, the increased entry of women into male-dominated spheres, such as the ministerial bureaucracy, and their subsequent promotion to executive posts will enhance women's recruitment to political executive posts as well.

¹² However we should note that Ôta was replaced by 38-year old Hashimoto Toru, a well-known TV personality, in the January 2008 election because she decided not to run for a third term. Hashimoto Toru thus became the youngest incumbent governor in Japan. Shiotani Yoshiko, governor of Kumamoto, resigned office in 2008 and was replaced by former Tôdai Professor for Politics, Kabashima Ikuo.

FIG 7. PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN SUB-NATIONAL POLITICS 1979-2006



Source: Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office; percentage: own estimation

Note: Data as of January 31 of the respective year.

TABLE 3. OVERVIEW OF FEMALE GOVERNORS IN JAPAN (as of 2006)

Name	Prefecture	Election year	Party (backed by)	Past occupation
1 Ôta Fusae	Ôsaka	2000	Independent (LDP, Liberal Party, Kômeitô, DPJ, Reformers Network Party)	Ministerial Bureaucracy
2 Shiotani Yoshiko	Kumamoto	2000	Independent (LDP/ Kômeitô)	Private welfare institution
3 Domoto Akiko	Chiba	2001	Independent (DPJ/ Kômeitô, SDPJ)	Journalist/ Upper House member
4 Takahashi Harumi	Hokkaidô	2003	Independent (LDP/ Kômeitô)	Ministerial Bureaucracy
5 Kada Yukiko	Shiga	2006	Independent (SDPJ)	Professor Kyoto Seika University

Source: Compiled by the author.

Note: LDP= Liberal Democratic Party; DPJ= Democratic Party of Japan; SDPJ= Social Democratic Party of Japan.

3. New Parties: The Citizen Networks

Among the minor parties, the Citizen Networks (*seikatsusha nettowâku*) are achieving notable success in local politics. Even though they are still underrepresented in rural areas, they have become a serious political force in urban city councils. They emerged from the Seikatsu Club Consumer Cooperative Union (SCCU, *Seikatsu kurabu seikyô*), which was founded in Tokyo's Setagaya Ward in 1968; their primarily goal was to offer safe, high quality products at

fair prices with an emphasis on direct marketing from producer to consumer. They were a member of the consumer cooperative movement Nisseikyō (*Nihon seikatsu kyōdō kumiai rengōkai*), the largest consumer cooperative umbrella organization in Japan, which was founded in the early 50s with strong backing from leftist opposition parties such as the Japan Communist Party and the Japan Socialist Party.

In 1977, it was proposed that interested persons should stand for elections with a view to ending the domination of Japanese politics by a small number of professional politicians, who ignored the demands of the citizens, and to democratise the local political sphere (Eto 2005: 323). Since the Special Law on Consumer Cooperatives prohibits consumer cooperatives from political engagement, the SCCU gave birth to the political Networks, which are commonly known as Citizen Networks (*Seikatsusha nettowāku*), in 1978.¹³ In 1979, their first political candidate was elected as a representative of Tokyo's Nerima Ward. Citizen Net enjoyed a major electoral victory in 1987 when 30 Net candidates won seats in local assemblies in Tokyo and Kanagawa. After the 1991 sub-national elections, when the Networks expanded their activities into five additional prefectures (Chiba, Saitama, Hokkaidō, Nagano and Fukuoka) the Net had 75 representatives in prefectural and local assemblies. By 2003, this figure had increased to 153 but decreased slightly in the 2007 election (Figure 8).

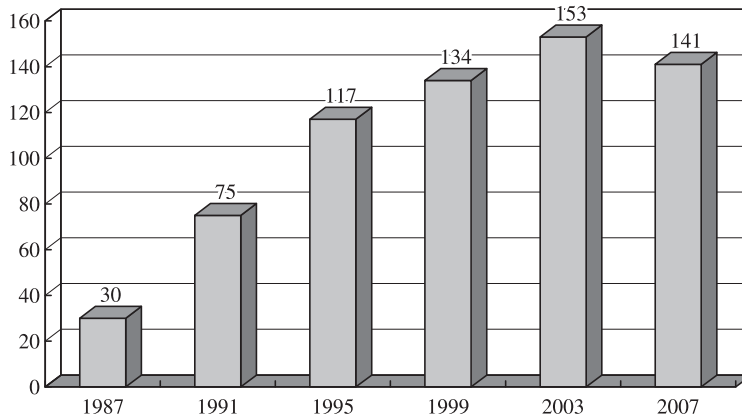
Net candidates are particularly successful in Tokyo, where they held 6 seats in the prefectural assembly in 2005 (5.1%), and 56 seats (3.2%) in the prefecture's local town assemblies, including Tokyo city ward assemblies (Schmidt 2005: 35ff.). To date, Net candidates have not run in all elections, which means that they are not represented in all assemblies throughout the prefecture. The Networks receive most of their support from the more affluent Western suburbs of Tokyo. In the town assembly of Kunitachi and Kokubunji, for example, they held 12.5% of the seats after the 2007 election. Even though there is no comprehensive study on political participation and suburbanization in Japan, this indication of support matches the findings of Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) regarding American politics; there too a large number of members of the social strata who participate most actively in local political life have left the core districts, which are increasingly populated by the rather apathetic segments of the public. The process of suburbanization may therefore play an important role in reshaping the intermediary sector of big cities as well as patterns of participation in urban politics.

The Networks consider themselves as "local parties" and they have neither a central party organization nor do they have a party programme. However, they concur on supporting the peace movement, protecting the environment, working towards a new society based on peace and social justice and fight for the empowerment of women in society. (Moen 2000: 63). In the assemblies, they address problems that affect the local citizens. Most of the Networks' members were housewives originally; consequently, they have spent all their time in their communities and have a particular awareness of the needs in these areas (Eto 2005: 325).

The Net representatives' term of office is limited to two or three terms, which means that they are then replaced to prevent professionalization and burnout. The salaries they earn through political functions are donated to the SCCU's political activities and their election campaigns are organized with volunteer staff only. They refrain from any political party

¹³ *Seikatsusha* literally means "consumer", but according to the organization, it should be translated as "citizen": "Seikatsusha = *people who live*, in the sense of *inhabitants* rather than *consumers*." See: Seikatsu Club 2004: 8.

FIG 8. THE RISE OF SEIKATSU NET OFFICE HOLDERS AT THE SUB-NATIONAL LEVEL DURING 1987-2007



Source: 1987-2003: Tsubogô 2003: 216; 2007: own estimation based on <http://www.local-party.net/modules/contents0/index.php?id=1>.

affiliation, which means that they do not form coalitions with existing political parties (Tsubogô 2003: 221 f.).

Over the past decade, the Networks have been able to increase their influence substantially and to take part in local and prefectural politics to restructure Japanese society in a more egalitarian way. The impact of these Networks on local politics has been particularly meaningful with regard to women's role in the Networks. Even though they do not exclude men from the Networks, all candidates have to date been female. As it was noted elsewhere, female representatives are quite rare, especially in the governing LDP. During the assembly elections of the designated (largest) 12 cities in Japan in 1999, for example, only 5% of the female candidates were from the ruling LDP. Only the Japanese Communist party and the Networks have actively recruited female candidates in the past (Yoshino/ Imamura 2001: 160). Contrary to the traditional parties, the Networks therefore create an opportunity for women's participation in politics, and challenge the traditional social norms of women's exclusion from the public sphere.

The increasing participation of women and independents in local politics can contribute to a more open-minded, non-professional and moral approach to politics, thus weakening the existing old boy networks and patterns of clientalism. Conservative politicians of the ruling LDP have in the past formed electoral coalitions or "pipelines" with conservative local politicians for their mutual benefit. For the LDP Diet members, such coalitions are primarily a vote-mobilization machine, while they help the local politicians to bring pork to the local constituency and thus enhance their chances of re-election (Fukui/ Fukai 1996: 280). The continued success of LDP Diet members depends largely on their local bases. Therefore, the rise of new actors at the local level may weaken the pipelines between conservative local politicians and LDP Diet members and have serious consequences for LDP performance in future national elections.

V. *Conclusion: How is Japan's Local Democracy Changing?*

Over the past decade, Japan's local democracy has been strengthened significantly. Two reasons lie behind this process: First, decentralization, a globally occurring political reform process, strengthens local political actors. Second, for the case of Japan a close linkage between societal transformations and the political gain in local autonomy can be observed. Driven by developments such as a declining birth rate and population aging, the central government increasingly relies on localities and private actors to provide services which hitherto have been delivered by national-level state actors.

It appears that the improvement in local autonomy has not yet stimulated Japanese voters' increased participation in local elections. Even though the range of participatory activities varies to a remarkable degree in advanced democracies, electoral participation still remains the most important way of including citizens in the political process. The past decades have seen a rapid and widely noted increase of political non-supporters among the Japanese electorate and a steady decrease of the turnout rate. Compared to the national level, these processes are even more drastic and visible on the local level. Simultaneously, grassroots activism has become more prominent during a time of declining voter turnouts. However, if we take into account that that unconventional as well as conventional political participation is comparatively low among youngsters, we might predict a further disengagement of citizens from political and civic life.

Encouraged by the local voting system and growing dealignment of the electorate, new actors such as women, independents and candidates form minor parties, occurred on the local level. As a general trend, those new actors register a higher percentage in metropolitan areas, while hitting a lower percentage in rural areas. The merger drive may therefore intensify these trends. For local representatives are elected directly by the people, they can take a stronger leadership role than their counterparts at the national level and we might argue that new political options emerged at the local level. The election of new candidates challenges the old networks between conservative local politicians and LDP-Diet members, which may weaken conservative politicians' local power base. Instead, new networks created by volunteers and NPOs, gain importance for coordinating votes for smaller parties and independents. The emergence of new groups and independents on the other hand will lead to a higher fragmentation and a less integrative capacity of the party system and thus foster dealignment among the electorate. Further we have to take into account that strong leadership is not always a guarantee for more democracy. Due to the financial shortcomings local authorities increasingly introduce private sector management and are driven by ideas of efficiency, managerialism and cost effectiveness. As a result, they become city managers rather than political leaders, working only for the interest of the locality they represent.

It may be too early to pass judgement to the outcome of the reform, and we cannot predict whether Japan's political system moves from a strong central state towards a dual power structure with the national and the local level each performing their own tasks and roles. Regarding the role played by central and local authorities and the citizens, two predictions may be derived. Firstly, Japan's local political system is increasingly characterized by strong elements of direct democracy, the emergence of new actors in local politics, but also with a decline in civic and political activities especially among youngsters. Secondly, as long as

budgetary streamlining is the major driving force behind the reforms, local democracy and autonomy remain secondary goals of the reform process and are not likely to be effectively realized despite the improvement in law regulations over the past decade.

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