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Japan Votes: Rational Choices and Social  
Obligations

*17.537 Paper 2*

Japan is not unique in its status as a parliamentary democracy. In Japan, as in other parliamentary democracies, people vote for politicians, and politicians seek to win votes in exchange for power within government. It is in the strategies voters employ in making voting decisions and the complementary strategies politicians craft to influence those voting decisions that scholars contend the Japanese electoral system is unique. This uniqueness stems from the distinctive structural feature of many relationships and organizations in Japan: vertical, as opposed to horizontal, solidarity. Japanese voters and politicians act within their vertically organized system in ways that seek to both maximize utility and fulfill social obligations. The resultant strategies adopted by voters and politicians in voting and vote seeking are best explained by examination of both sociocultural and rational choice economic factors.

In this paper I will first present the model of Japan as a patron-client democracy as advanced by scholars Chie Nakane and Nobutaka Ike. I will argue that this characterization and its implications of vertical solidarity apply to the Japanese electoral system. Subsequently, I will present descriptions of social obligations, networks, and *koenkai* and discuss them in the context of vertical relationships. I will then reexamine these social phenomena of the electoral process from a rational choice economic perspective and argue for voting strategies that maximize economic and political utility for the individual. I will conclude this paper by incorporating social and rational choice factors into an explanation of the patron-client model of voting in Japan.

In 1970 Chie Nakane typified Japanese society as a hierarchy in which superiors and inferiors form patron-client relationships. In these relationships, patrons represent the interests of their clients in return for client loyalty, and emotional ties between

patrons and their clients are assumed. Most importantly, group solidarity is found vertically, or by institution or family unit. In other societies, solidarity is based horizontally on shared placements within the social hierarchy; an example is the solidarity amongst mine workers in the United States. Contrastingly, solidarity exists in Japan for all workers of a particular company, not for all workers of a particular type.

In *Japanese Politics: Patron-Client Democracy*, Nobutaka Ike applies this conception of Japanese social organization to Japan's government. Ike argues that patron-client social relationships have helped form group-centered patron-client democracy, in which "individuals...tend to relate to the political system through their patrons, who typically are local notables, political bosses, union leaders, local politicians, and leaders of local organizations" (1972, p.19). It is a logical extension of this patron-client conception of the Japanese political system to view voter behavior and vote-seeker behavior as functioning within the vertical system. Voters are clients that expect political patrons to provide for their particular needs. Patrons provide goods such as local public works to their clients. Thus, in the vertical relationship voting model, personal connections and expectations of care supersede ideologies as the basis for voting choices. Because the electoral system in Japan is structured to allow local representation through its districting, local politicians serve as local patrons in patron-client democracy. At the central level, nationally elected politicians should typically vertically represent the organizations of institutions such as the Japan Medical Association. If Japanese democracy can be modeled as patron-client, it is probable that Japanese voter and vote-seeker behavior in the electoral system can be understood within the patron-client vertical model.

Social obligations in vertical relationships play a role in voter mobilization and voter behavior, as evidenced by the phenomenon of social obligation voting and the local support network known as the *koenkai*. Gerald Curtis describes social obligation voting, or the “hard vote,” as a vote based on personal ties (1971, p. 38). This “hard vote” is described as a cultural phenomenon arising from *giri*, or obligation to those who have reached a voter through a web of personal relationships. The conception of social networks as an important factor in voter mobilization and behavior is supported further in the writings of Scott Flanagan, who posits that social network influences manifest themselves in voter behavior characterized by assimilation effects, reference group effects, opinion leader effects, and effects of mobilization (1991). Assimilation of voting choice in reference groups such as family units under the influence of the family leader, or patron, is in accord with the vertical conception of Japanese social arrangement and electoral behavior because it reflects vertical solidarity of people in patron-led groups. Vertically organized voter mobilization reflecting the patron-client relationship is observable in the *koenkai*.

The *koenkai* is a politician’s local personal support network, made up of associations representing institutions and social groups like schools and local businesses. As documented by Hideo Otake, the *koenkai* act as vertically organized political mobilization institutions (1998). They are hierarchically organized around their politician patrons, who benevolently look after the interests of their local client voters in exchange for ballot loyalty. *Koenkai* also reflect an expected outcome of politicians’ mobilization strategies in society characterized by vertical relationships in that they are local, comprised of people sharing a relationship within a particular geographical region

and not a horizontal solidarity, such as a national association of workers of a particular type gathering as a personal support system for a politician.

Just as *koenkai* can be viewed as demonstrative of the importance of social ties in Japanese voter mobilization and behavior, they can be interpreted as presenting important support for a rational choice economic rationale for voting and vote-seeking strategies in Japan. Hideo Otake acknowledges that the *koenkai* functions not only as a social organization for voter mobilization, but also as an outright spoils distribution system (1998). Such an admission acknowledges that a type of market is inherent in the relationship between voter and vote-seeker: the promises of tangible goods and services to be delivered to individuals or communities by politicians are purchased by voters with their votes. This conception of Japanese voters as rational actors seeking economic benefits for themselves through the political system is supported by the fact that Japanese voters are among the most literate and informed voters in any modern parliamentary democracy. Furthermore, emphasizing the significance of the utility a particular politician might bring to the voters who support him credits the fact that Japan is a modern nation and that the vestiges of feudalism no longer institutionally limit those individuals lower in the power hierarchy from seeking personal gain through the political system.

Neither the rational choice economic view of voter mobilization and behavior nor the sociocultural account solely explains the Japanese electoral process. Rather, the two can supplement each other in providing explanations for the mechanisms and trends at work in Japanese elections. For example, many citizens that are a part of the electorate in Japan choose not to exercise their right to vote (Passin 1979). Those advocating a social

approach to voting behavior might posit that qualified members of the electorate not involved in specific social networks due to the increasing mobility of the industrialized, technological world would thus not feel the obligation to support a patron-politician because they would not expect their needs to be met by such a figure, even if they offered ballot loyalty. Those advocating rational choice might posit a case of rational apathy to politics, or even rational ignorance, on the part of electorate members choosing not to vote. As political events such as the Lockheed and Recruit scandals have diminished public confidence in the political system's ability to fulfill their needs, voters may feel that gathering information about parties and candidates is too costly in terms of their time when they believe that their votes will bring them no tangible benefits, and so they do not participate in elections. These two explanations for those who fail to participate in the electoral system in Japan are mutually exclusive, and when combined they have expanded explanatory power.

In conclusion, both social explanations and rational choice explanations for voter behavior and mobilization in Japan have weaknesses, and a combination of these explanations thus enriches the patron-client vertical relationship model of Japanese voting behavior by addressing the weaknesses of each particular viewpoint. As pointed out by Gerald Curtis, a rational choice economic perspective of voting behavior makes the assumption that voting takes place in a system in which voters are always well-informed and structural and institutional features of the system allow them to make a rational choice (1971). Moreover, rational choice theory tends to ignore the biases and assumptions an individual brings to a decision. Social relationship theories can be challenged in that modernization theory claims that the patronage system is supposed to

fade with modernization, and that they may also attribute too much uniqueness to Japan. For instance, reciprocity in human relationships and obligation in human relationships are arguably world norms, and thus obligations and social networks may not be the best picks in finding causal factors for the peculiarities of the Japanese voting system. Rational choice theory addresses voting choices from an individual perspective, and social network theory from a social perspective, and thus they can complement each other in fostering a more complete understanding of how voters and vote-seekers interact in Japan's vertically organized democratic and electoral systems.

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