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Disengaged and Disempowered: How Depoliticization Prevents Two-Party Competition in Japan

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DISENGAGED AND DISEMPOWERED

HOW DEPOLITICIZATION PREVENTS TWO-PARTY COMPETITION IN JAPAN

COOPER PRICE

Democracy, like many concepts in political science, escapes easy definition. But it's safe to say that most models of democracy include some notion of political competition, and of the peaceful transfer of power from one group to another. As Adam Przeworski puts it, "Democracy is a system in which parties lose elections."[1] But by this metric, Japan hardly qualifies as a democracy. For the vast majority of its postwar history, the country has been ruled by a single political party - the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP). After a landmark electoral reform introduced proportional representation in 1994, many observers declared an end to the "1955 system" of LDP dominance.[2] For a brief moment in the early 2010s, it seemed that regular two-party competition between the LDP and Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had finally become a reality.[3] But the past eight years have seen a return to the "old days" of LDP control. After a crushing electoral defeat in 2012, the DPJ was forced back into the political wilderness. In the years since, the LDP has decisively reestablished its control over the Diet and premiership, while the opposition has returned to its previous state of fragmentation and electoral weakness.

The causes of LDP resurgence are varied, and scholars have explored many potential explanations for the party's post-2012 recovery. But one area that has been relatively overlooked is the relationship between LDP success and the phenomenon known as "depoliticization." As we will discuss at greater length in the literature review, depoliticization theorists like Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood recognize three main forms of depoliticization: governmental, societal and discursive. In this paper, we will focus on the first two categories. Governmental depoliticization is generally characterized as the "denial of political contingency and the transfer of [state] functions away from elected politicians".[4] In the Japanese context, this kind of depoliticization is manifested through the de facto assumption of control over policymaking

[1] Adam Przeworski, Democracy and the market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Cambridge University Press, 1991),10.

[2] Momo Iida, "The Fall of the 1955 System in Japanese Politics and the Current Crisis of Hegemony," Social Justice 21, no. 2 (1994): 55.

[3] Pempel, TJ. "Between Pork and Productivity: The Collapse of the Liberal Democratic Party." The Journal of Japanese Studies (2010): 228.

[4] Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood, "Depoliticisation, governance and the state," Policy & Politics 42, no. 2 (2014): 135.

authority by bureaucratic agencies like the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), which emerged as the primary originators of economic policy in the postwar era.[5] Over the course of this period, the LDP developed a symbiotic relationship with Japan's administrative state, and with the country's leading corporations. At the height of the 1955 system, scholars like Chalmers Johnson characterized the LDP regime as a technocracy controlled by an axis of bureaucrats, professional politicians and business interests.[6] Societal depoliticization refers to a "sense of diminished interest in public affairs on the part of the public".[7] Such attitudes can be cultivated by a variety of actors in civil society.

The current literature on LDP electoral strength would benefit from an analysis of the unique role that depoliticization plays in creating a favorable political climate for LDP dominance. Scholars like Thomas Feldhoff have noted that "depoliticisation [sic], which extends across all governing levels in Japan and across multiple policy spheres, is in the interest of those parties in power." Feldhoff says that this "is a key message that has rarely been touched upon in the literature so far".[8]

This paper seeks to fill that gap by applying the general model of depoliticization to the specific case of Japan. We will explore the ways in which historical, social and political factors have contributed to widespread societal and governmental depoliticization, and how these processes laid the groundwork for the LDP's post-2012 resurgence. We will examine how the two aforementioned forms of depoliticization reinforce each other in contemporary Japan, exemplifying the "interplay" between governmental and societal depoliticization that Wood and Flinders describe in their 2014 article "Rethinking Depoliticisation: Beyond the Governmental."[9] In the Japanese case, linkages between governmental and societal depoliticization are particularly clear with regard to the 2009-12 DPJ government and its failure to forge a strong two-party system. The DPJ's failure, which was caused in large part by governmental depoliticization, contributed to societal depoliticization in the long run (as expressed by low voter turnout and generally limited political participation).

First, we discuss the scholarly literature on LDP dominance, analyzing some of the most important factors behind the party's half-century of electoral success. Then we examine the ways in which governmental depoliticization prevented the DPJ from fulfilling its electoral mandate during the party's brief stint in government from 2009-12, and how this failure may have contributed to internal splits within the opposition (which increased the LDP's electoral strength) and fueled societal depoliticization. Next, we discuss the depoliticizing role played by the Japanese educational system and the media, and the broader relationship between societal depoliticization and LDP success. Finally, we consider the implications of depoliticization for Japan's political future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the second half of the twentieth century, the "dominant-party" model of democracy (as exemplified by cases like South Korea, Taiwan, Mexico and Italy) seemed to present a strong alternative to competitive, multiparty democracy. But the last few decades have generally seen a decline in the prevalence of dominant party systems. This trend can be observed in countries as diverse as Italy, Mexico, South Korea and Taiwan. But the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party is a notable outlier in its avoidance of dominant party decline. While the LDP can no longer claim to be electorally undefeated, the party has still governed (whether as a majority or in coalition) for roughly 22 out of the 26 years since the end of the one and a half party system. This record is especially unusual in light of the fact that Japan has possessed ostensibly democratic political institutions since 1947. Furthermore, it sets Japan apart from neighboring countries like South Korea and Taiwan, which both overcame a legacy of single-party dominance. While there are some major historical and political differences between these three countries, they are a compelling set of cases to compare. All three followed a general policy of state-led capitalist development for most of the 20th century. They also share similar long-term economic challenges (e.g. aging demographics and diminished GDP growth prospects), broadly comparable electoral systems, and the common institutional legacy of Imperial Japan.[11] South Korea, in particular, seems an apt counter model as the various iterations of Korea's conservative dominant party were "deliberately modeled" after the LDP.[12] In addition, the election of Korean leftist Kim Dae Jung in 1997 was an example of the opposition overthrowing a once-dominant party in the wake of a major economic disaster (the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis) that revealed the failings of the status quo. The 2008 recession provided a similar opportunity for the

[5] As Wood and Flinders note in "Rethinking Depoliticization", there is some overlap between this process of governmental depoliticization and the general concept of state autonomy. Indeed, many scholars view depoliticization as part of a "conceptualisation [sic.]...relating to 'good governance' or 'autonomy for technocratic authority from what are seen as distributional (political) coalitions.'" (Wood and Flinders, 158)

[6] Chalmers Johnson, "Political institutions and economic performance: The government–business relationship in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan," *The Political Economy of the New Asian Industrialism* (1987): 143–5.

[7] Flinders and Wood, 137.

[8] Thomas Feldhoff, "Japan's electoral geography and agricultural policy making: The rural vote and prevailing issues of proportional misrepresentation," *Journal of Rural Studies* 55 (2017): 140.

[9] Matt Wood and Matthew Flinders, "Rethinking depoliticisation: Beyond the governmental," *Policy & Politics* 42, no. 2 (2014): 165.

[10] Jeongah Lauren Sung, "Becoming Electable: The Causes of the Successes and Failures of Opposition Parties in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan," PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2018, 3–4.

[11] Hahm Chaibong, "South Korea's miraculous democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 136.

[12] Chaibong, 137.

Japanese opposition, but the DPJ government collapsed after just four years in power (and hasn't regained control in the eight years since).

Despite the aforementioned similarities in political climate, center-left opposition parties in South Korea and Taiwan have repeatedly outperformed their Japanese counterparts in recent years.[13] This raises an important question: how has the LDP managed to overcome the post-Cold War legitimacy crisis (that felled virtually all other dominant party democratic regimes) and survived as a viable, and arguably still monopolistic, political force? Scholars have not come to any definitive consensus with regard to the causes of continued LDP dominance, but a variety of different explanations have been proposed.

Some scholars, like Karen Cox and Leonard Schoppa, have observed that the LDP exploits certain weaknesses built into Japan's election reform laws. One such weakness is the fact that Japanese law does not allow candidates in single-member districts to list themselves under multiple party tickets. This creates a structural disadvantage for small parties in Japan, as they must take the "ad hoc approach of running candidates here and there".[14] Minor parties in Italy are spared this problem thanks to electoral reform legislation enacted in the 1990s, which allowed for multi-ticket candidates.

More significantly, the LDP enjoys several big structural advantages which reforms have been incapable of eliminating thus far. One of these advantages is the disproportionate voting power of pro-LDP rural districts. The LDP has long relied on the rural vote as a key pillar of support, and it continues to do so today. The party "systematically [wins] rural constituencies with low ratios of population to representative," as this group is especially "dependent on redistributive benefits" to which the LDP possesses "nearly uninterrupted access".[15] As Masahisa Endo, Robert Pekkanen and Robert Reed point out in "The LDP's Path Back to Power," the agricultural lobby's continued alignment with the LDP helped the party mobilize voters to unseat the DPJ's legislative majority in 2012.[16]

This brand of pork-barrel politics speaks to a larger underlying factor that Japanese reformers have not sufficiently addressed: pervasive clientelism. This clientelism largely benefits the LDP, as noted by scholars like Ethan Scheiner and Filippo Tronconi. This is because the country's "clientelistic and centralized governmental system" ensures that the ruling party/coalition in the Diet has great control over dispersal of funds at all levels of government.[17]

This creates incentives for local politicians to align themselves with the party most likely to win national elections (and therefore best able to dispense patronage/pork barrel spending to their district). The LDP has had decades to build up a network of fiercely loyal politicians, who enjoy firm support from *koenkai*.[18] Thus, even after substantial electoral reform, the LDP still enjoys the advantage of a "deep pool of local politicians who could mobilize voters for the party".[19] Organizationally speaking, it has proven difficult for the opposition to catch up. Ellis Krauss and Robert Pekkanen also emphasize the continued role of *koenkai* in the LDP party machine, arguing that *koenkai* are useful in gathering the votes of "ticket-splitters" who vote for opposition parties in PR contests but are persuaded to vote LDP in SMD races due to the influence of "personal" politics.[20] This kind of particularism has gone "hand in hand" with outright corruption and "money-power politics".[21] As the largest, most well-organized and well-funded party in Japan, it stands to reason that the LDP would thrive in such a political climate.

Finally, the LDP's success is undoubtedly aided by high levels of factionalism and fracturing among Japan's numerous opposition parties. Like many of the aforementioned factors, this is a long standing issue. In the 2000 election, for example, a failure to coordinate among the various opposition parties granted the LDP around 68 more district seats than it would have otherwise gained - enough to tip the balance of power in the Lower House.[22] This kind of result was typical until the 2000s, when the opposition began to consolidate in earnest around the DPJ. But the DPJ proved vulnerable to fragmentation, and collapsed entirely in the mid-2010s.[23]

While each of the aforementioned explanations may hold some explanatory power, the literature on LDP dominance would benefit from an application of depoliticization theory to the Japanese case. There is already some scholarly support for a "depoliticization hypothesis" to (at least partially) explain the LDP's resilience. Eric C. Browne and Kim Sunwoong claim that the failure of dominant parties like Italy's Christian Democracy (CD) and Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was primarily caused by an erosion of voter confidence (due to decades of corruption), which grew so intense that it triggered party fragmentation as breakaway factions saw an opportunity to capitalize on anti-establishment fervor. In Japan, however, erosion of voter confidence hasn't led to widespread support for opposition parties. Instead, it has generated "apathy toward the political system itself".[24] This has led to

13 Sung, 1.

14 K. E. Cox and L. J. Schoppa, "Interaction effects in mixed–member electoral systems: theory and evidence from Germany, Japan, and Italy," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 9 (2002): 1050.

15 Feldhoff, 133.

16 Masahisa Endo, Robert Pekkanen, and Steven R. Reed, "The LDP's path back to power," in *Critical Readings on the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan*, 51, Brill, 2018.

17 Ethan Scheiner and Filippo Tronconi, "Electoral Reform in Italy and Japan: Unanticipated Outcomes?" In *A Natural Experiment on Electoral Law Reform*, 18, Springer, New York, NY, 2011.

18 A term which refers to local "political machines" that build patron–client bonds between a particular candidate and his/her constituents.

19 Scheiner and Tronconi, 18.

20 Ellis S. Krauss and Robert Pekkanen, "Explaining Party Adaptation to Electoral Reform: The Discreet Charm of the LDP?" *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 25.

21 Feldhoff, 132

22 Cox and Schoppa, 1037.

23 Purnendra Jain, "Japan's 2019 upper house election: Solidifying Abe, the LDP, and return to a one–party dominant political system," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 1 (2020): 30.

24 Eric C. Browne and Sunwoong Kim, "Factional rivals and electoral competition in a dominant party: Inside Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, 1958–1991," *European Journal of Political Research* 42 no. 1 (2003): 131.

decline in turnout and participation. While Browne and Kim frame these trends as a weakness for the LDP, it could be interpreted as a strength because apathy prevents the emergence of a bottom-up political movement that could generate grassroots opposition outside of the LDP-dominated system of formal electoral politics. Furthermore, the LDP's superior ability to mobilize the "organized vote" (through well-developed *koenkai* networks) gives the party a general advantage in low-turnout elections. This view is reinforced by Hirotaka Kasai, who claims that Japan's business and political elite have intentionally fostered a climate of cynicism and indifference towards Japan's constitutional principles, in order to facilitate the acceptance of undemocratic policies that protect those in power from public scrutiny.[25] Examples of such policies include the anti-transparency State Secrets Law enacted in 2013.[26] While Browne, Kim, Kasai and others have identified a general culture of apathy and "depoliticization," there does not yet appear to be a firm scholarly consensus regarding the root causes of Japanese depoliticization, nor has there been sufficient analysis of the relationship between depoliticization and LDP dominance.

This paper will analyze the Japanese case by applying a theory of depoliticization advanced by Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood, who have emerged as leading scholars on the subject in recent years. In "Rethinking Depoliticization: Beyond the Governmental", Wood and Flinders distinguish between three separate but mutually reinforcing categories of depoliticization.

The first is "governmental" depoliticization, which is characterized as a mode of statecraft that transfers decision making responsibility away from actors who can be held directly accountable to the public (e.g. elected officials) and places it in the hands of "apolitical" institutions like regulatory agencies, central banks, and the judiciary.[27]

The second is "societal" depoliticization, which encompasses any process by which the "social deliberation surrounding [political issues] gradually erodes," often resulting in low levels of political participation among the citizenry.[28] This kind of depoliticization can be carried out by a wide range of actors in civil society, including media outlets, social movements and business associations.[29]

The final category of depoliticization is "discursive." Discursive depoliticization refers to the use of ideas and language as a tool to "naturalize" political issues by making certain options seem inevitable, and opposition to those options irrational.[30] This concept draws on the work of Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who emphasized "the role of language and culture in relation to political debates."[31] There is a great deal of overlap between discursive and societal depoliticization, as "these two forms or modes of depoliticisation are both distinctive, interrelated, and to some extent even parasitical".[32] For the purposes of this paper, we will limit ourselves to a discussion of societal and governmental depoliticization, for two main reasons. First, discursive depoliticization is often produced by the same actors (in the state and civil society) as societal depoliticization. Second, a proper understanding of discursive depoliticization requires an extensive engagement with theoretical literature that is beyond the limited scope of this paper. Discursive techniques are employed by many of the same institutions that promote societal depoliticization, such as the media and education system.

Having established a basic understanding of depoliticization and its two main forms (governmental and societal), we can now discuss the role that each type of depoliticization plays in the LDP's return to power. We will begin with governmental depoliticization.

GOVERNMENTAL DEPOLITICIZATION AND THE DPJ'S FAILURE

Governmental depoliticization has a complex and important relationship to the Japanese case. The LDP has traditionally maintained a tacit arrangement with Japan's powerful, highly autonomous bureaucracy. For much of the postwar era, bureaucratic agencies were allowed to take the lead in the policymaking process, and the role of the LDP-controlled Diet was to approve (or occasionally reject) bureaucratic proposals. This technocratic system is a clear example of governmental depoliticization, as the legislature and prime minister (the democratically accountable branches of government) generally take their cue from unelected policy experts and the private business interests that the bureaucracy tends to represent due to Japan's *amakudari* system (an implicit *quid pro quo* exchange which involves state officials being rewarded with lucrative positions on the boards of companies they were charged with overseeing, in return for lax regulation).[33]

In 2009, it seemed like things might finally change. Taking advantage of 1990s-era electoral reforms and a succession of short-lived, scandal-ridden LDP premierships, the DPJ won a landmark electoral victory "by promising to turn politicians into the true decision-makers and end the practice of bureaucrats calling the shots on behalf of ministries instead of the people".[34]

25 Kasai, H. "Democratic Meltdown and the Contemporary Forms of Political Apathy." *The Study of International Relations* 45 (2018): 23–4.

26 Kasai, 24.

27 Wood and Flinders, 157–8.

28 Ibid., 159–60.

29 Ibid., 159.

30 Ibid., 161.

31 Ibid., 162.

32 Ibid., 152.

33 Tetsuro Mizoguchi and Nguyen Van Quyen, "Amakudari: The Post-Retirement Employment of Elite Bureaucrats in Japan," *Journal of Public Economic Theory* 14, no. 5 (2012): 815–16.

34 Masami Ito, "DPJ's Promise to Change the System Failed," *The Japan Times*, 01 December, 2012, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/12/01/national/dpjs-promise-to-change-the-system-failed/.

Prime Minister Hatoyama pledged to act on this electoral mandate, and implement a "shift in 'sovereignty' [...] to end the bureaucracy-controlled government and establish a true people-centered government".[35] Hatoyama planned to achieve this grand promise through a set of institutional reforms. The new administration quickly moved to abolish vice-ministerial meetings (which were traditionally a vehicle for the bureaucracy to decide on policy that the politicians would subsequently enact). Hatoyama's government also created an administrative firewall between politicians and bureaucrats, constraining the latter to the role of "providing basic data and information" rather than determining what policies are actually implemented.[36] The overall goal was the transfer of policymaking authority away from unelected, LDP-era bureaucrats and its centralization in the hands of elected DPJ cabinet ministers.[37]

Unfortunately for the DPJ's would-be reformers, decades of governmental depoliticization had swollen the bureaucracy's role in governance to such an extent that bureaucratic compliance was necessary to accomplish virtually any policy objectives. Political appointees lacked the policy experience to effectively manage their ministries without direction from career officials, and the sudden exclusion of career officials damaged bureaucratic morale.[38] The abolition of vice-ministerial meetings also backfired in many respects. Under the old system, the prime minister would influence policy making by informally participating in vice-ministerial meetings to communicate the government's agenda to bureaucrats (using the deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary as an intermediary). The loss of this communication channel created a disconnect between the policymakers who made the decisions and the officials responsible for implementing them.[39] The deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary (CCS) could no longer function as the prime minister's liaison to the bureaucracy, and as a result the cabinet's policy making power actually weakened.[40] Over the next few years, the DPJ's poor relationship with the bureaucracy would result in a series of policy failures, dooming the reformers' dream of repoliticizing Japan's governing process. Ironically, the long-term effect of DPJ rule was increased societal depoliticization, as indicated by steadily decreasing voter turnout rates in recent elections.[41]

The costs of breaking with the bureaucracy had already begun to materialize by 2010. Hatoyama resigned his premiership on June 2, after abandoning a campaign pledge to relocate Marine Corps Air Station Futenma,

base relocation in a negative light.[42] The Japanese media, for reasons we will later explain, is typically willing to report official leaks with little corroboration or context, and this case was no exception. The press "utterly [failed] to explain to the people the true nature of the power struggle that was going on or to treat the leakers with a due degree of skepticism."[43] As a result, Hatoyama "completely surrendered" and abandoned the relocation effort.[44]

Under Hatoyama's successor Kan Naoto, it became even clearer that the DPJ could not effectively govern without bureaucratic support. During his time as Hatoyama's finance minister, Kan's lack of economic expertise had forced him to rely on memos prepared by bureaucratic advisors. This experience changed his prior anti-bureaucratic outlook, and when Kan became prime minister he took several measures to break down Hatoyama's "firewall" between politicians and career officials.[45] Still, Kan refused to reinstate the vice-ministerial meetings, despite "basically admitt[ing] that the old vice-ministerial meeting was necessary for policy coordination".[46]

In 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear meltdown would test the limits of the DPJ's ability to govern without bureaucratic direction. This disaster revealed the pitfalls of Hatoyama's hardline reform effort, as "inter-agency coordination was needed at various working levels" to address the myriad of problems caused by the earthquake and meltdown.[47] Since the DPJ had "identified inter-agency policy coordination as the jurisdiction of political leaders" and had limited bureaucrats' ability to contact officials or politicians from other ministries, the "network for inter-agency coordination within the government [...] had basically been destroyed." Poor coordination greatly delayed the government's response in regard to certain forms of complicated relief assistance which required involvement by multiple ministries.[48] This "crisis of crisis management" was politically devastating for Kan, and a vote of no confidence forced his resignation in August of 2011.[49]

The failures of Hatoyama and Kan would haunt the next DPJ prime minister, Noda Yoshihiko. Understanding that path dependency had limited the DPJ's ability to govern without heavy bureaucratic input, Noda quickly reintroduced the vice-ministerial meeting (in all but name), and generally allowed the bureaucracy to re-acquire its hold on the reins of power.[50] Not only did Noda demolish what was left of the Hatoyama-era "firewall", he also proved willing to reverse long standing DPJ political stances upon urging from

35 Tomohito Shinoda, "Japan's Failed Experiment: The DPJ and Institutional Change for Political Leadership," Asian Survey 52, no. 5 (2012): 799.

36 Shinoda, 800–01.

37 Shinoda, 800.

38 Ibid., 808.

39 Ibid., 808–09.

40 Ibid., 810.

41 Feldhoff, 140.

42 Penn, Michael. "The Hatoyama administration and the outing of the establishment media." In Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan, 60. Routledge, 2016.

43 Penn, 60.

44 Ibid., 61.

45 Shinoda, 814.

46 Ibid., 815.

47 Ibid., 819.

48 Ibid., 819.

49 Ibid., 820.

50 Ibid., 821.

his technocratic advisors. Specifically, Noda acquiesced to an increase in the consumption tax that was proposed by Ministry of Finance officials.[51] This move was particularly controversial because the DPJ's 2009 manifesto had promised that the party "would not try to raise the levy during the four-year terms of its Lower House ranks".[52] The consumption tax hike was in keeping with previous increases that the MOF and Treasury had pressured Japanese governments to propose in the past, despite the typical effect of a "significant reduction in popularity immediately after [...] raising the possibility of tax legislation".[53] Thus, Noda's decision to raise the tax, despite the political risks, demonstrated the enduring strength of bureaucrats' agenda-setting power.

As a result, Noda's administration alienated followers of Ozawa Ichiro, a powerful factional leader within the DPJ. This anti-Noda contingent felt betrayed by the Prime Minister's consumption tax increase and moderate position on nuclear power. As a result, the party underwent a major split between Ozawa's allies and Noda loyalists. Opposition fracturing was a major factor in smoothing the LDP's path back to dominant-party status, and at the present moment the opposition is weaker and more disunified than it has been at any point since the end of the 1955 system.[54] This process of fracturing was accelerated by the 2012 election,[55] and the LDP has managed to win six consecutive elections over the course of the decade in the face of opposition weakness and division.[56]

After years of policy failure, the DPJ under Noda had more or less capitulated to the Japanese bureaucracy. Generations of governmental depoliticization had fostered a system in which autonomous inter-agency coordination (and institutions like the vice-ministerial meeting) were essential for the effective implementation of policy, especially in a crisis like the Fukushima meltdown. The DPJ's inability to repoliticize the governing process contributed to its electoral downfall in 2012, and to the resurgence of the LDP as a dominant party in the mid to late 2010s. After successive DPJ governments either abandoned, reversed or failed to implement their campaign promises, voters were left "completely confused about what the DPJ stood for."[57] This brings us to the second type of depoliticization described by Flinders and Wood: societal depoliticization.

The DPJ's failure to fulfill its electoral mandate had a depoliticizing effect on voters who had hoped in 2009 that the LDP-bureaucratic establishment would be overcome by a DPJ government. Accordingly, the 2012 election saw "irresistible apathy on the part of the electorate,"[58] and the LDP won in a landslide. Voter disillusionment appears to have persisted, as the LDP won repeatedly throughout the mid-late 2010s in low-turnout contests. As we will soon discuss, there is evidence that these low-turnout elections accentuated the LDP's organizational advantages and strengthened the party's position. The conclusion is clear – "would-be challengers [to the LDP] must find a way to turn [voters] out and keep them active for more than just a single election."[59] By reneging on its 2009 commitment to end the bureaucracy's stranglehold on policy making, the DPJ lost the credibility necessary to mobilize disaffected voters.

By preventing the DPJ from fulfilling its 2009 electoral mandate, governmental depoliticization foreclosed the possibility of systemic change that might repoliticize the populace and spur future opposition victories. Policy reversals and electoral failure contributed to DPJ (later renamed the Democratic Party) fracturing and the collapse of Japan's nascent two-party system. Thus, we can see that the relationship between governmental and societal depoliticization is crucial to understanding how Japan "missed its chance" (for the time being) to fully institutionalize two-party competition.

The impact of societal depoliticization on LDP success is twofold. First, citizens' sense of disinterest/disinvestment in politics leads to a decreased interest in electoral participation. Considering the fact that low voter turnout has likely benefited the LDP in recent elections,[60] this is a boon for the ruling party. A strong case can be made that the "disappointed deactivation" of "casual voters" helped cause the DPJ's loss in 2012.[61] Additionally, societal depoliticization may be at least partially to blame for the lack of an electorally viable populist movement in Japan. While Japan's employment rate is significantly above the OECD average,[62] Japan faces rising economic inequality[63] and slow wage growth;[64] problems which have triggered the rise of populism elsewhere. But new populist parties like Reiwa Shinsengumi have thus far failed to gain much traction in the Japanese political landscape. And

[51] Ibid., 821.

[52] Ito, "DPJ's Promise to Change the System Failed."

[53] Takashi Inoguchi, "Japan in 2012: Voters swing, and swing away soon," *Asian Survey* 53, no. 1 (2013): 187–88.

[54] Jain, 33.

[55] Inoguchi, 197.

[56] Jain, 24–5.

[57] Schoppa, Leonard. "A Vote Against the DPJ, Not in Favor of the LDP." *Centre for Strategic and International Studies* (2012), 2.

[58] Inoguchi, 197.

[59] Ethan Scheiner, Daniel M. Smith, and Michael F Theis, "The 2017 Election Results: An Earthquake, a Typhoon, and Another Landslide," in *Japan Decides 2017, The Japanese General Election*, 50–51, Robert J. Pekkanen , Steven R. Reed , Ethan Scheiner and Daniel M. Smith, eds., Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.

[60] Feldhoff, 136.

[61] Scheiner et. al, 50–51.

[62] Japan – OECD Data. https://data.oecd.org/japan.htm

[63] Mayger, James and Hannah Dormido. "The Rich are Getting Richer in Abe's Japan." Bloomberg. 13 December 2017. https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-japan-inequality/

[64] Shirai, Sayuri. "Japan's Labor Shortage and Low-Wage Puzzle." The Japan Times. 26 May 2019.

while the post-Fukushima era has seen a number of mass demonstrations, these events have largely failed to coalesce into a politically effective grassroots pressure campaign. To be sure, societal depoliticization is far from the only factor that stymies populism and grassroots protest in Japan. But it seems likely that this type of depoliticization plays some role, for as the next section will go on to show, societal depoliticization is associated with a decreased interest in informal political participation.

Our discussion of societal depoliticization will be divided into two parts. First, we will introduce the concept of "political citizenship," and explain how it relates to depoliticization (specifically, in the context of the Japanese educational system). Then, we will discuss the role of the Japanese media in undermining active political citizenship and thereby increasing societal depoliticization.

PART I – POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP

Like depoliticization, political citizenship is a broad and fluid concept. Here, we will use the definition provided by Bernard Crick: political citizenship constitutes an "'involvement in public affairs by those who [have] the rights of citizens: to take part in public debate and, directly or indirectly, in shaping the laws and decisions of a state.'"[65] In other words, political citizenship requires more than legal obligation or national identification; it requires that the citizen actually engage with the institutions that govern their country. The link between political citizenship and societal depoliticization is clear. If a nation's citizens do not actively engage with the institutions that govern their country, then it seems to follow that the citizenry in question has been depoliticized. Thus, when determining whether or not a Japanese institution contributes to societal depoliticization, we will use the promotion (or discouragement) of political citizenship as our primary metric.

The first institution that we will consider is the Japanese education system. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the American Occupation government made a brief effort to "democratize" Japan's school system. Aiming to create a "thick" democracy in Japan, the United States tried to inculcate democratic values by introducing a "citizenship education curriculum" that might "nurture a cohort of youth who could then later on function as active political citizens in Japanese democracy".[66] However, this focus on democratization was short-lived and the civic education program was "never [...] firmly institutionalised [sic.] in post war Japan."[67] Civic education efforts fell victim to a broader policy shift in the early years of the Cold War, as the U.S. decided that its geopolitical interests were best served by propping up

the LDP and "prioritizing 'economic rehabilitation'" over democratization.[68] In ensuing decades, the "political socialisation [sic.] process which is seen as essential for establishing and nurturing political citizenship[...], especially so for a society that had never operated under popular sovereignty, [was] seen to have been poorly institutionalized."[69] As a result, contemporary Japanese civic education is not particularly robust. While Japanese law mandates that schools promote a "public mindset," students are not generally taught more than the "basic facts about democracy and social rules," and they are not often "required to take part in rule/policy making" exercises or given lessons concerning the "broader meaning of political skills." Essentially, Japanese students are "taught to 'obey rules' but are not taught how to make them".[70] Overall, political citizenship is ignored (if not actively discouraged) by the Japanese education system.

The de-emphasis of political citizenship has a close relationship with overall societal depoliticization. The Japanese people are certainly legal citizens of their democracy, and national identity is strong in Japan. But neither legal nor national citizenship demands the kind of deep civic engagement that political citizenship does. A study commissioned by Tohoku University in 2015 indicated that Japanese students are "highly accustomed to the role as a 'recipient' of politics and political services", rather than the role of active participant.[71] This "recipient" model of political engagement implies a hard separation between the political class and ordinary people, wherein the "decision makers" are not part of the same body politic as their constituents. This worldview is profoundly incompatible with a strong concept of political citizenship, and seems to reveal a high level of societal depoliticization among Japanese youth. The survey subjects tended to see politics as a temporary action, centered around periodic votes or circumscribed moments of engagement.[72] Furthermore, the students were often cynical towards voting/formal participation, but simultaneously uninterested in or critical of demonstrations/informal politics. While many students expressed a desire to make positive change in society, they felt as though the avenues of political action available to them (both formal and informal) were ineffective.[73]

Generally speaking, there "appears to be a missing 'pipe' that sufficiently connects the interest and concerns that youth have toward society, with politics and action".[74] As previously discussed, one reason for the absence of such a "pipe" is the lack of substantive civics education in Japanese schools. Alongside the education system, the Japanese media has also failed to "[equip]

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[65] Tsukada, Jun. "Examining Japanese youth's perception of political citizenship." *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies* (2015): 3.

[66] Tsukada, 4.

[67] Ibid., 4.

[68] Ibid., 4–5.

[69] Ibid., 5.

[70] Ibid., 5.

[71] Ibid., 9.

[72] Ibid., 17.

[73] Ibid., 17.

[74] Ibid., 20

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the youth with the concepts, values, and skills to function as political citizens in a democracy".[75] As we will discuss at length in the following section, the Japanese press has systematically colluded with the LDP-dominated state bureaucracy, decisively failing to promote the "sense of 'inclusion' […] in the political arena" that is necessary for the development of strong political citizenship.[76]

PART II – THE MEDIA

The media is one of the most important agents in the process of societal depoliticization, as news outlets are deeply involved with shaping our interpretation of information. As Laurie Ann Freeman explains in *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media*, "the power of the media resides […] in their ability to channel information and ideas (both to and from elites, to and from society), to influence the setting and framing of political and social agendas, and to legitimize certain political economic or social groups and ideas as they delegitimize others".[77] This power functions as a depoliticizing force in Japanese society (largely to the benefit of the LDP).

Large, mainstream media outlets in Japan tend to frame themselves as "impartial" and "nonpolitical," so as to appeal to as wide a reader/viewership as possible. But the "neutrality" of Japanese media is "that of the closely linked insider who rarely challenges the status quo".[78] Reporters are so closely tied to the LDP-dominated state ministries that they routinely present pro-government narratives as the only legitimate viewpoint, often basing their articles very closely on pre-approved press releases.[79] Certainly, journalists in other democracies also enjoy close working relationships with government officials. But Japanese reporters tend to rely on official sources to a far greater degree than their foreign counterparts. At the turn of the millennium, it was estimated that up to 90 percent of reporting is based on information provided by government (and therefore, generally LDP-aligned) sources.[80] Despite reform efforts under the 2009-12 DPJ government, media-state relations in Japan have remained significantly closer than in most other developed democracies.

This symbiotic relationship between state and media is explained by a number of institutional arrangements. The Japanese press has often been characterized as an "information cartel." This means that newsgathering is organized according to a set of rules and relationships that "limit the types of news that get reported and the number and makeup of those who do the

reporting".[81] The Japanese media landscape is dominated by collegial organizations called *kisha* clubs, which are composed of journalists from various media outlets. Their purpose is to streamline newsgathering in one particular area of government – for example, one *kisha* club might cover the Ministry of Finance, while another might focus on the Prime Minister and his cabinet. The members of these clubs are allowed exclusive access to official sources in their assigned area of government, but in exchange they are expected to practice self-censorship at the risk of expulsion from the club.[82] *Kisha* reporting is governed by a set of implicit norms, such as the infrequency of exclusive interviews with sources,[83] vague attribution (or outright non-attribution) of quotes from government officials,[84] and "secret briefings" for club members that lack the transparency of public press conferences.[85]

These arrangements are mutually beneficial for both the kisha members and their sources. The journalists are "entitled" to a certain degree of information-sharing by their sources, and they can generally expect equitable distribution of this information among all members of the club, with limitations on favoritism for certain reporters over others.[86] In exchange, government officials are able to control the dissemination of information and avoid being blindsided by unfavorable news stories. Scandals are rarely broken by *kisha* club reporters,[87] and limitations on information exchange between members of different clubs prevents coordination between journalists specializing in different areas. This prevents the kind of collaboration necessary to break big, investigative stories that expose government corruption.[88] Furthermore, the compensation structure of large Japanese media firms creates a strong incentive for reporters to follow the rules. Many of these companies adhere to a system of more-or-less lifelong employment, wherein "employees with permanent positions know that if they lose their job and re-enter the job market at middle age, they may never work again." Therefore, "'[anyone] transgressing the *kisha* system runs the risk of losing access and having their career derailed[…] in clinging to this privileged access, the media[…] becomes beholden to the officials and institutions they are supposed to cover'".[89]

While the *kisha* club cartels may be beneficial for journalists and bureaucrats alike, those benefits come at the expense of the news-consuming public. Not only is the public less aware of scandals but everyday reporting is

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75 Ibid., 21.

76 Ibid., 21.

77 Laurie Anne Freeman, *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 19.

78 Freeman, 31.

79 Ibid., 86.

80 Ibid., 165.

81 Ibid., 15.

82 Freeman, 104–5.

83 Ibid., 128–31.

84 Ibid., 130.

85 Ibid., 88.

86 Ibid., 88.

87 Major scandals are more often reported in news magazines or the foreign press before they make their way into the rest of the Japanese media ecosystem (Freeman, 100).

88 Freeman, 98.

89 Steven Borowiec, "Writers of wrongs: Have Japan's press clubs created overly cosy relationships between business leaders and the press?" *Index on Censorship* 45, no. 2 (2016): 50.

done in the style of "press release journalism." This term derisively refers to the practice of uncritically repeating official talking points (originating in government press releases) without doing any outside investigation to corroborate official claims or find dissenting perspectives.[90] Cloaked in a veneer of "impartiality," press release journalism is nonetheless a "denial of the existence of choice" that serves to dim public awareness of any political opposition to the government's agenda. Considering that the LDP has maintained a monopoly on political power for the vast majority of Japan's postwar history, media-state collusion has generally benefited the LDP and marginalized its opposition. This dynamic has led Freeman to conclude that Japan's cozy media-state relationship is "certainly one of [the factors]" keeping the LDP in power.[91]

The rise of non-print media has proven little obstacle to the *kisha* system. Televised news broadcasters are owned by the same major companies that control newspaper circulation in Japan, and corporate policy typically limits the independent reporting abilities of television journalists, such that their primary function is to report on stories that have already been broken by *kisha* newspaper reporters. This produces a homogenized media landscape across multiple platforms, and enables the continued primacy of "press release journalism" in Japan's modern media landscape.[92] The proliferation of digital media does not appear to have upset this dynamic, as television and print media continue to play a commanding role in the landscape of Japanese political news.[93] If online, alternative media does in fact possess the potential to open up Japan's media shop, then that potential remains untapped for the time being. Regardless, online media outlets are not immune to the pressures of *kisha*-style reporting, as they can still be denied access to official sources unless they submit to self-censorship.

During the DPJ's stint in government from 2009-12, the *kisha* clubs saw the first real challenge to their stranglehold on political reporting. Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio pledged to open up the "closed shop" that controlled Japanese media, a move that was clearly in the party's "self-interest since the DPJ felt Japan's closed media system favored its Liberal Democratic Party rivals".[94] Hatoyama tried to move away from exclusive, *kisha*-only briefings in favor of more transparent press conferences that allowed in foreign journalists and non-*kisha* "freelancers" (two groups that the Japanese media establishment distrusts due to their nonadherence to *kisha* club rules). Many of his cabinet ministers soon followed suit. Hatoyama also formally disclosed

the existence of an LDP-era "slush fund" that prime ministers had used to "curry political favor" among journalists. However, these actions did not fundamentally change the kisha system, and the return of the LDP in 2012 foreclosed the possibility of more substantive reforms.[95]

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the LDP has systematically worked to re-entrench the country's media cartel. At government press conferences, Abe rarely takes questions from non-kisha journalists. On the rare occasion that the Prime Minister or one of his Cabinet members faces real scrutiny (usually from foreign or freelance reporters), the resulting stories fail to gain traction in the broader media landscape. For example, in 2015 Abe was questioned on his government's refugee policy by a Reuters reporter. His answer, which suggested that "he had not seriously considered the refugee issue", was widely circulated through the global media ecosystem while remaining "mostly ignored by the big media in Japan".[96]

But Abe has done far more than simply reinforce pre-existing norms regarding media behavior. His administration has taken aggressive steps to incentivize self-censorship in the Japanese press, enacting security legislation that restricts the public's access to information. The Abe government has also used informal techniques of coercion to intimidate media organizations like the newspaper Asahi Shimbun, a liberal paper that has been openly critical of the Prime Minister.[97]

Since its return to power in the early 2010s, the LDP has enacted controversial laws that restrict speech and press freedoms. Most significant for the Japanese media is the 2013 State Secrets Law. This deeply unpopular law gave the government great discretion regarding what information can be classified as a "state secret" and concealed from the press and public.[98] The law also increased the penalties for leaking classified information. Critics worry that this law allows the LDP government to exercise even stricter control over the public dissemination of information. The government has officially stated that nuclear power could be considered a national security issue under this law, which raised concerns in 2014 that the State Secrets Law would be used to conceal government incompetence or malfeasance surrounding the Fukushima meltdown response.[99]

For the time being, these concerns remain largely hypothetical. But when

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[91] Freeman, 167.

[92] Freeman, 157–9.

[93] Duncan McCargo and Lee Hyon-Suk, "Japan's political tsunami: What's media got to do with it?" *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15, no. 2 (2010): 243.

[94] David McNeill, "False dawn: The decline of watchdog journalism in Japan," *The Asia Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 14, no. 20–2 (2016): 6.

[95] McNeill, 6.

[96] Ibid., 6.

[97] Martin Fackler, "Rewriting the War, Japanese Right Attacks a Newspaper," The New York Times, 2 December 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/world/asia/japanese-right-attacks-newspaper-on-the-left-emboldening-war-revisionists.html

[98] Mina Pollmann. "Japan's Troubling State Secrets Law Takes Effect." The Diplomat. 18 December 2014.

[99] Pollmann, "Japan's Troubling State Secrets Law Takes Effect."

it comes to the informal suppression of dissenting media, the Abe government has taken much more concrete action. The administration and its right-wing supporters have repeatedly attacked the Asahi over its coverage of controversial historical issues (like the so-called "comfort women" of World War II), and television broadcasters like NHK have been pressured to self-censor under the implicit threat of funding loss (as the company's license fee revenue depends on government approval).[100] This pressure is suspected to have caused the firing of three anti-Abe television anchors in March of 2016.[101] That same year, Abe's communications minister publicly asserted that the government has the authority to censor "politically biased" broadcasters.[102] Although this sweeping claim has not yet been acted upon, it illustrates the administration's attitude of intolerance towards dissent. NGOs have recognized this turn towards press restriction. The media watchdog organization Reporters Without Borders lowered Japan's "press freedom" ranking in 2016 from 61st to 72nd (out of 180 states).[103] Today, Japan still stands diminished at 66th place in the organization's press freedom index.[104]

As previously mentioned, this overrepresentation of government viewpoints contributes to societal depoliticization. Since the quality of discourse in a democratic polity is shaped by "the way in which [...] information is generated and disseminated",[105] the *kisha* clubs' press release journalism is actively damaging to the opposition's ability to mobilize voters and rally them against the LDP-dominated political establishment. This is an example of the "denial of the existence of choice" that Wood and Flinders argue is central to societal depoliticization. When the official narrative becomes the only legitimate one, room for political contestation is removed. We can see the depoliticizing effects of this process in the 2014 general election campaign, when opposition viewpoints were systematically undercovered by the mainstream media, likely encouraging low voter turnout.[106] Low turnout was particularly beneficial for conservative incumbents in rural areas, as the "organized vote" of LDP-aligned agricultural cooperatives "gains more weight when the overall voter turnout declines."[107] In the same electoral cycle, some observers also criticized "non-transparency and the biased reporting by the mainstream media" surrounding the then-ongoing Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade negotiations.[108] Trade liberalization is a particularly sensitive issue for the LDP, because it is unpopular with the party's all-important rural constituency and is often opposed by the powerful "agricultural policy

community".[109] Thus, the LDP benefits from reporting that "continues to downplay or even ignore critical issues"[110] like the proposed trade pact.

Through the promotion of official views at the expense of dissenting ones, Japanese media outlets serve as de facto "social managers," undercovering opposition forces, ignoring controversial issues, and often undermining protest movements by "showing institutionalized means of conflict resolution (court cases, meeting with bureaucrats, etc.) in a neutral light while casting opprobrium over more confrontational, grass-roots activities (human barricades, etc.)".[111] An example of this can be seen in the media coverage of mass protests that broke out in the wake of the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster. These demonstrations were given relatively little attention in the mainstream press, particularly the major conservative paper Yomiuri Shimbun.[112]

Under the *kisha* club-dominated mode of journalism, "[controversial] stories are not pursued, wayward politicians are not held accountable, and the public is [often] left ignorant of fundamental incongruencies in its own political and economic system".[113] The *kisha* clubs discourage serious "watchdog" reporting on the part of mainstream journalists, and their exclusive nature cuts off information access for the alternative media outlets that actually are engaging in independent journalism (e.g. freelance journalists, foreign reporters and news magazines). Multimedia keiretsu groups ensure that uncritical "press release journalism" is dominant across all major media platforms. Finally, the "impartial" public stance of many of these media outlets discourages critical examination of LDP talking points by framing them as objective truth. Each of these dynamics contributes to societal depoliticization and weakens the average person's sense of political citizenship, as previously mentioned. If problems are ignored and solutions are not presented, it is little wonder that an increasing number of Japanese citizens feel apathetic towards (and are disengaged with) politics.

CONCLUSION: CONNECTING THE THREADS OF DEPOLITICIZATION

To be sure, depoliticization is far from a "silver bullet" explanation that fully accounts for the LDP's return to dominant-party status in recent years. Since the LDP's loss in 2009 occurred under a set of fairly special and unique circumstances (which were no longer present by 2012), perhaps some level of "pendulum swing" back to the LDP was inevitable, regardless of the outcome of the DPJ's struggle against the bureaucracy. There were numerous other factors at play in the 2009 general election, such as the political reverberations

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[100] McNeill, 10–11.

[101] Martin Fackler, "The Silencing of Japan's Free Press," Foreign Policy, 27 May 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/27/the-silencing-of-japans-free-press-shinzo-abe-media/.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Fackler, "The Silencing of Japan's Free Press."

[104] 2020 World Press Freedom Index. https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table

[105] Freeman, 166.

[106] Feldhoff, 136.

[107] Ibid., 137.

[108] Ibid., 137.

[109] Ibid., 139.

[110] Ibid., 140.

[111] Freeman, 169.

[112] McNeill, 7.

[113] Ibid., 161.

of the Great Recession, which saw governing parties thrown out of office in other parts of the world as well. Also, the LDP faced a number of inconvenient problems/political setbacks around that time, such as a scandal involving the mass disappearance of employee pension records.[114] It is entirely possible that without this "perfect storm" the LDP would not have lost in 2009, or at least not by such an immense margin. But all things considered, it is clear that societal and governmental depoliticization have played at least some role in smoothing the LDP's path back to power. Societal depoliticization has long served to benefit the ruling party, as the postwar education system discouraged the development of meaningful political citizenship and the media collaborated with LDP politicians and bureaucrats to restrict the public's access to information regarding the "fundamental incongruencies in its political system" (and regarding the opposition's response to these incongruencies).[115] Neither of these institutions has been substantively reformed - Tsukada's 2015 study indicates that the education system is still depoliticizing students, and the LDP-press relationship has gotten even more controlling than the days of *Closing the Shop*.

All things considered, the LDP's resurgence confirms Wood and Flinders' argument that the different forms of depoliticization are mutually reinforcing. Decades of governmental depoliticization left the opposition party unprepared to manage the affairs of state without direction from bureaucrats, leading to a string of policy failures and subsequent capitulations to the bureaucracy. These failures created intra-party splits in the DPJ, weakening the opposition's unity. Furthermore, they fatally undermined voters' confidence in the DPJ's ability to govern, worsening the problem of societal depoliticization (which was already an issue due to the depoliticizing influence of media and schools). In other words, the long-term ramifications of governmental depoliticization serve to increase societal depoliticization in Japan. In turn, increased societal depoliticization is preventing opposition parties from regaining power and enacting the kinds of administrative reform that might repoliticize the Japanese state. If the opposition hopes to break Japan's dominant party system once and for all, this "vicious cycle" of depoliticization must somehow be redressed.

[114] Krauss, Ellis S., and Robert J. Pekkanen. "The rise and fall of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010): 9. [115] Freeman, 161.