Changing partisan support patterns and the rise of the *Mutōhasō* during the 1990s

~ Can the decline of the JSP be explained through voting behaviour? ~

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Introduction

Between 1989 and 1996, the Japanese left went from boom to bust. In the 1989 Upper House election, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) won a majority in the House for [i]the first time since the party's formation in 1955. However in 1993, the party lost half of its seats in the House of Representatives election and shortly before the next Lower House ballot in 1996 it split, with the majority of Diet members joining the newly formed Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).[1] The JSP still exists and has nineteen Diet members in the Lower House and twelve in the Upper House, yet it has become more of a single-issue party basing its policies on the maintenance of the Constitution. This paper analyses whether voting behaviour can account for the decline of the JSP in the 1990s. It will be based on the findings of *The Japanese Voter* (Flanagan et al. 1991), analysing first how voting and partisan support have changed and look at the reasons which can account for the change. It will show that the biggest change has been the decline of partisan support.

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[1] The JSP is the name of the party from its formation in 1955 until 1989 when it was changed in English to the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ). In 1995, the party also changed its Japanese name to a similar title, Nihon Shakai Minshutō. For clarity the JSP will be used to refer to the party. When referring to the JSP, I refer to the pre-1996 manifestation of the Party. Even after the emergence of the DPJ, there has been a small group of the JSP which remains. When referring to this party is its post-1996 entity I will refer to it as the SDPJ. The Democratic Party of Japan was formed in 1996 and was drastically enlarged in 1998. The Japanese differentiates between these two periods as Kyū Minshutō and Minshutō. Once again, for reasons of clarity, only one term will be used and the English title DPJ has been adopted.

As *The Japanese Voter* has pointed out, contemporary political sociologists' concern for the role of socio-political cleavages have been a reflection of the importance of these cleavages on European politics. These cleavages have been defined by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) as centre - periphery; state - church; land - industry; and owner - worker. However, this framework of cleavages cannot be applied to Japan for various reasons. Firstly, there is no religious divide that can be considered influential enough to be a cleavage, despite the presence of the Kōmeitō, the political party of the lay Buddhist organisation, the Sōka Gakkai. Secondly, there are no cleavages based on regionalism. Japan has some districts where a particular party is stronger than others but these in no way create a cleavage such as the cleavage which exists in South Korea between government and the south-west of the country, which had opposed the government for so long that the government deliberately withheld development projects and resources. Similarly, in Japan there is no region with a strong ethnic divide which affects voting patterns. Finally, the application of the Lipset-Rokkan thesis to Japan is also complicated by the fact that the Meiji Restoration of 1868 was the 'revolution' that enabled the industrialization of Japan to take place (Ware 1995: 208). The rural and urban divide was also not as pertinent to the creation of the party system in Japan as in Europe, as pre-war conservative parties were coalitions of urban and rural interests (Flanagan 1991: 399).

What theories then, can be used to explain voting behaviour in Japan? Why do the electorate vote in the way that they do? Theories of voting behaviour can be broken down into two main concepts: instrumental and expressive voting. As models of voting behaviour, these are not exhaustive, but they do capture the salient features of Western debate on the subject and can be considered a useful starting point for analysis of Japan.

The instrumental models stress the importance of calculation of individual self-interest and issue preferences on electoral choice because voter choice is conscious and deliberate rather than reflexive or deterministic. Thus the voter will analyse policy preferences and votes for the party which he feels will maximise his own gains, whether that be a personal gain or a benefit for society at large.

Expressive theories stress the importance of environment and socialization experiences on voting behaviour. These theories suggest that conformity to parents, friends, workplace etc. is highly influential on voting behaviour and party identification

Once formed, this type of party identification is believed to be increasingly durable and leads to stable voting patterns. In Britain, this equates with voting based on the 'class' structure. Martin and Stronach (1992) suggest that Japan is a hybrid of these two models because, as in Britain:

- the electorate may be acting out of mixed motives in different proportions at different elections
- different voters vote out of different motives
- rationality is strongly shaped by circumstance and lifestyle.

This paper will show that expressive theories of voting, rather than instrumental theories, can better explain the tendencies of the Japanese electorate. Whilst the argument will not be made that instrumental theories are completely irrelevant, as that would disregard the important issues of ideology, peace and welfare issues within the Japanese political structure, this chapter intends to show how significant expressive methods of voter

mobilisation have been in Japan suggest that it is changes in these patterns of voting that can explain the electorate's move away from the party and why the parties are not able to mobilise the electorate as effectively as they did up to the 1980s.

When *The Japanese Voter* analysed Japan from the perspective of a social cleavage hypothesis, some conformities and deviancies to the western normative of working class/middle class cleavage were displayed. Unionised workers supported the JSP or the Japan Communist Party (JCP). Professionals and managers tended to support the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This is where the conformities to the West ended because white-collar workers were split between support for the LDP if they were not unionised and the progressive parties (JSP/JCP/DSP) if they were. This trend could also be seen to a lesser degree amongst blue-collar workers. As a rough generalisation, it would be fair to say that the larger the organisation, the more likely the workers were to be unionised and therefore supportive of a progressive party. Farmers and small business owners tended to vote for the LDP.

A more relevant cleavage in Japan was the type of housing and community that the voter lived in. An urban, rural divide has been suggested, noting that the urban voter was more likely to be progressive and the rural voter conservative. If the voter lived in a stable community of home owners, they were more likely to be conservative, and if they lived in transient rented apartments, they were more likely to vote for a progressive party. This last divide was connected with the issue of social networks, as home owners were more likely to be integrated into neighbourhood associations which have been considered to be organisationally part of the conservative vote gathering machine.

In *The Japanese Voter*, the 1976 Lower House election was studied statistically and results showed that education, income and occupational status had no impact on the vote as would may be expected from Western norms of voting behaviour. However, community integration, occupational environment and the urban rural divide had an impact on who would vote for each party.

Martin and Stronach (1992) found similar results with two major differences. They found that higher levels of education would result in higher turnout for opposition parties. They also concluded that age would influence voting patterns although they contradicted *The Japanese Voter*'s assumption and suggested that young people are becoming conservative rather than tending to vote for opposition parties as they had done in the 1960s and 70s. Yet, alongside the conclusions of *The Japanese Voter*, they found that being integrated into societal groups was important, as was the urban-rural cleavage. Personalism, 'the extensive and complex hierarchical and lateral communication networks that broaden the reach of interpersonal messages in Japan', which are 'well-developed, institutionalised procedures for transmitting partisan communications' are also of importance (as shown in *The Japanese Voter*).

Based on the above findings, this chapter will ask whether voting behaviour has changed sufficiently since 1980 to explain the decline of the JSP and the increase of non-partisan support in the 1990s.

Voting behaviour, 1980-2000

Analysing voting behaviour can be difficult in Japan due to the lack of available data to the researcher who does not have the resources to commission their own survey. Consequently, data has been obtained from the Asahi Shimbun's monthly opinion poll on support for political parties (Asahi 1996) An average of 2,500 Japanese over the age of 20 are questioned monthly. Data is collected on support for parties according to age, sex, type of electoral district and type of employment. According to Yoshida Takafumi of the newpaper's Opinion Poll Department, data is not collected on income or education, since Japanese people would regard this an infringement of privacy.[2]

There are three main areas that I have decided to analyse. First, voting for political party according to age, secondly support for parties according to type of occupation and finally support for parties broken down to size of the town or city in which the voter is resident. We have opted not to analyse voting behaviour according to sex, as this has not existed in other voting behaviour surveys which we are using for comparison in this study. However, all other categories will be analysed to show how that variable has affected party voting patterns.

Parties have been split up into four groups. The LDP, the JSP, other parties, and non-voters.[3] The category 'non-voters' includes those who do not know which party they support as well as those who do not support a party.

Age

Graph 1
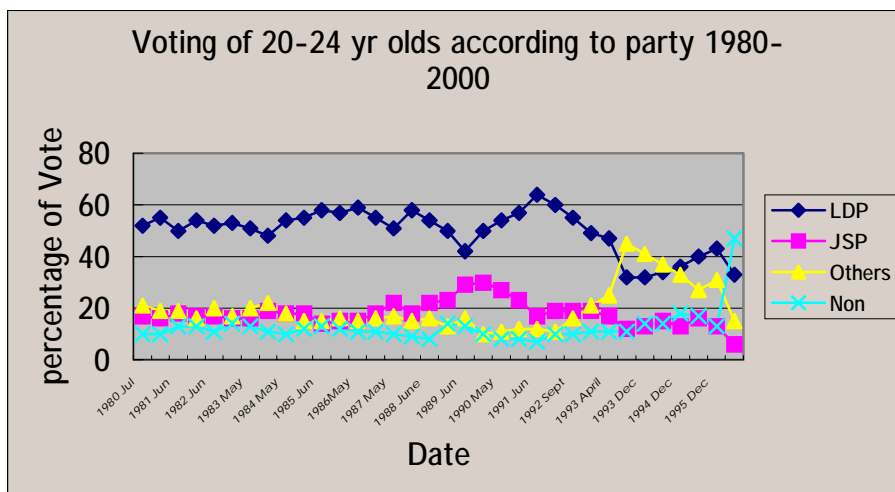
Graph 1 shows how 20-24 year olds voted between 1980 and 2000. This is first graph of

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2 Interview with Yoshida Takafumi, 12th March, 2001.
3 Other parties includes the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), Kōmeitō, Japan Communist Party (JCP) and since 1992 the Japan New Party (JNP), the Shinseitō, Sakigake, and Shinshintō.

this series that breaks traditional expectations. Younger people are expected by both Western and Japanese voting behaviour literature to vote progressively (Flanagan 1991). What we see here is that young people always have and still do support the LDP above any other party, thus confirming the view of Martin and Stronach (1992). Furthermore, we see as much support for other parties combined, as we do for the JSP, the main opposition party until 1993. If we take into account the high levels of support for other parties in 1993, we see a situation in which young voters are obviously interested in politics and want to support a new party through probable feelings of disillusionment about existing parties and policies. Finally, the most important result in this table is the sudden surge from 1995 onwards in non-voting. 20-24 year olds are showing themselves to be the key component of the non-partisan strata and should this behaviour continue as they get older, it could continue to grow steadily throughout each age cohort.

By comparison with the 20-24 year olds, the voters who are over 60 (see Graph 2) show an obvious tendency throughout the 1980s and 1990s to support the LDP. What we see here - in a very significant finding - is that the over-sixties have also become part of the non-voting/non-partisan phenomenon. In the period around the Asian financial crisis in Summer 1998, over 60 year olds show a considerable drop in support for the LDP. Perhaps this represents feelings of distrust and insecurity towards the government and the LDP about what could happen to their lifelong savings. Also, the trend towards non-partisan support has levelled off in this age cohort and shows the extent to which the non-voting crisis is affecting political parties, particularly the LDP, if they cannot even count on one of their main support cohorts to vote for them. The JSP never really received much support from this cohort apart from in the 1989 House of Councillors election, yet the disillusionment showed by this cohort is no doubt significant to the decline of the JSP as it represents the general declining interest in politics and political parties by all age cohorts.
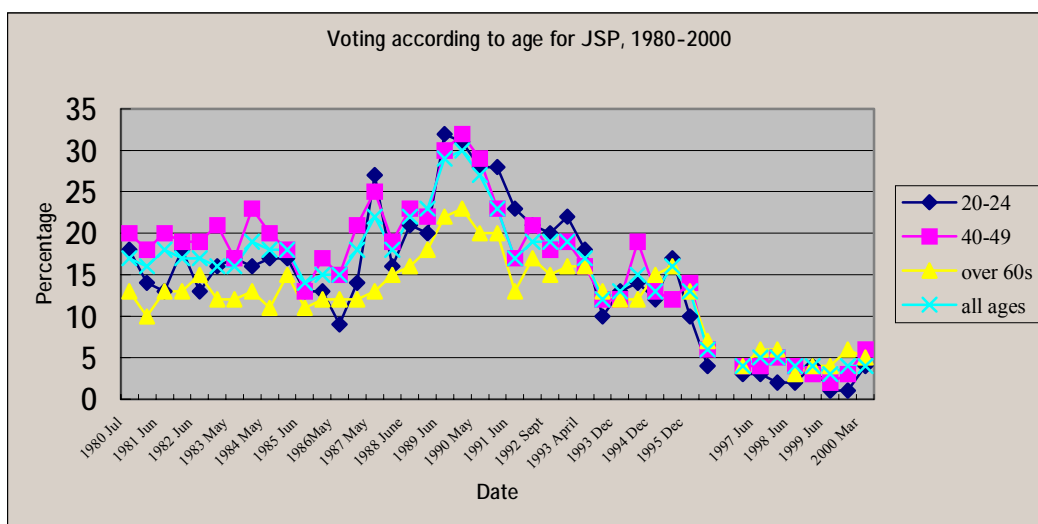
Graph 2
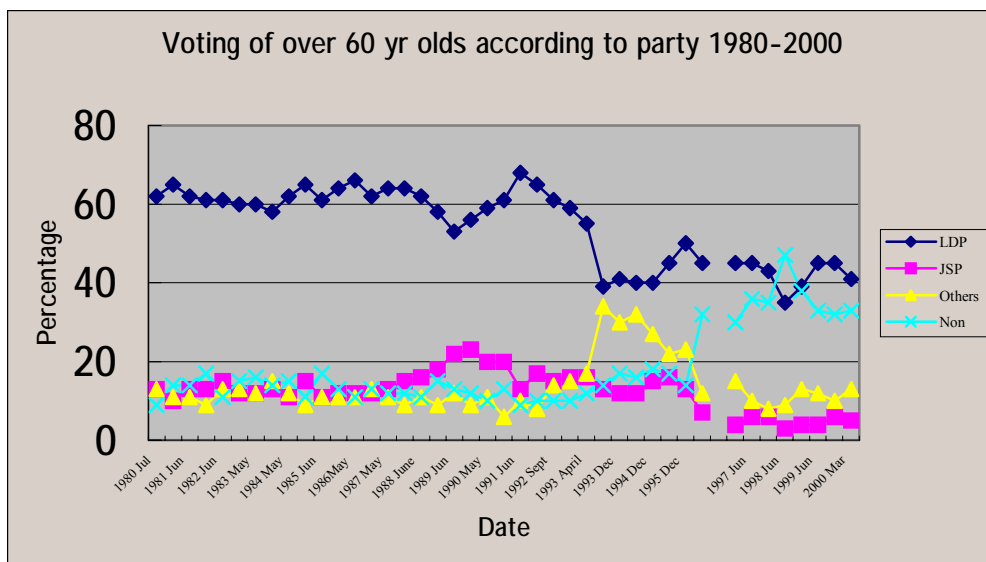
I will now examine how the age cohorts compare with each other in terms of support for the JSP. In Graph 3, we see results that contradict a Western norm that younger people are more likely to vote for a progressive party and, once again, we see the JSP as a party with little support. It should be recognised, however, that *The Japanese Voter* did not suggest

age to be a significant variable for voting in Japan. Graph 3 shows that 20-24 and 40-49 year olds have similar tendencies towards voting for the JSP which suggests that *The Japanese Voter* variable of socialisation is in fact more valid than age. Those in their twenties are as likely to be unionised as their seniors which would be the main social factor affects JSP voting behaviour. We can also see that support remains for the JSP after 1996 and the emergence of the DPJ. This support mostly consists of those in their forties closely followed by people in their sixties. I would suggest that this key support is based around the peace and defence cleavage, and the JSP continues to receive support as it is the only party, apart from the JCP, which has a clear, concise commitment to maintaining the Constitution and Article Nine. These voters maybe have memories of wartime, the occupation and financial hardship after World War II, or they could have been brought up by parents with vivid memories of hardship. Thus, the JSP has managed to maintain a small core support from the generation with memories of World War II because of its clear cut pacifism. Once this age cohort begins to die out, I would suggest that the JSP will also cease to exist.

Graph 3

In Graph 4, we see the worrying increase in numbers who do not support any of the existing political parties (the so-called *mutōhasō*). In 1980, about 15% of voters in their early twenties tended not to support any party, whereas by 1998 this had risen to over 70%. In 1998, over 60% of those in their forties did not support any party compared to less than 10% only twenty years ago. Even over 30% of those in their sixties had decided not to support any party. The other significant finding is that the 60 year old cohort and the 40 year old cohort have changed places. Prior to the mid-nineties, the 40 year old cohort was the one most likely to support a political party. This group by the late 1990s has become second most likely not to vote after the 20-24 year old cohort. This is a significant trend as this cohort still has a further life expectancy of at least thirty years and their apparent disinterest in politics could continue for this period of time.
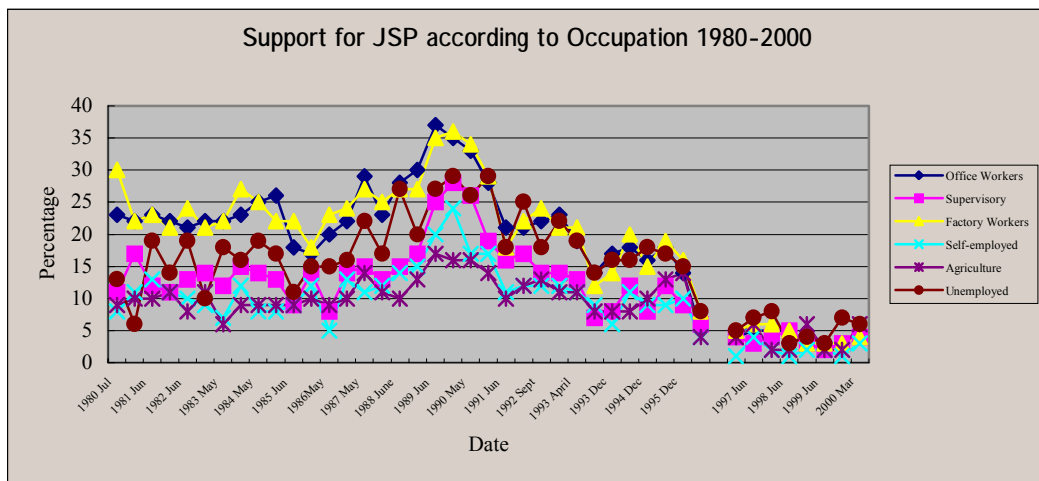
Graph 4

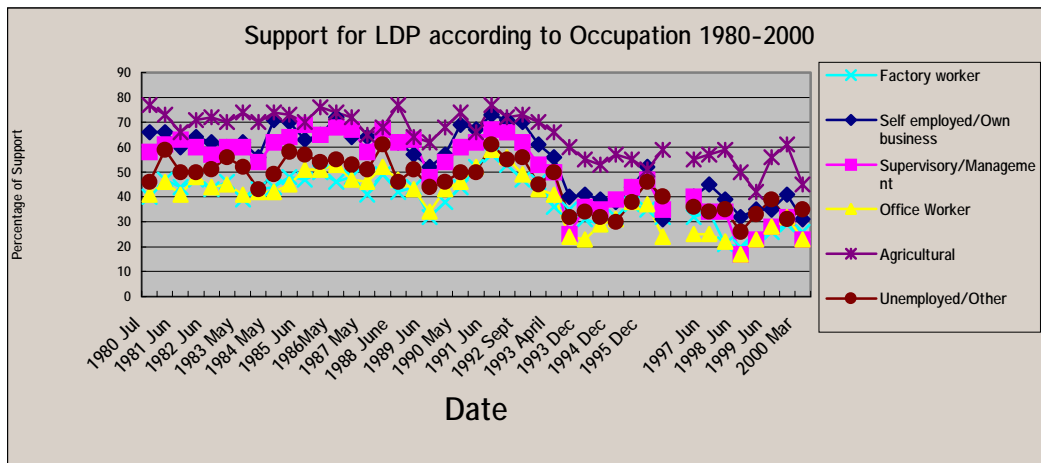Non-partisan support according to age 1980-2000
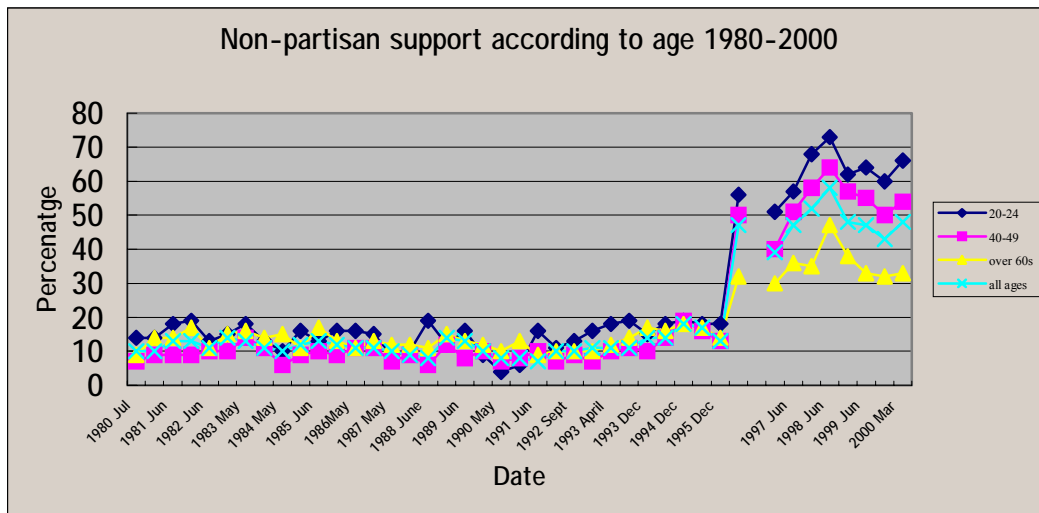
Occupation

Graphs 5 and 6 show how classic Japanese occupations have related to mobilised voting. The JSP garnered its main support from office workers and factory workers who were most likely to be members of a union. This form of mobilisation is highly dependent on union membership remaining high. As will be shown below, the level of unionisation is gradually dropping and this could partly explain the decline in JSP support. The JSP's lowest support comes from among self-employed and agricultural workers who show the greatest amount of support for the LDP. It must be noted, however, that support for the LDP is also consistently dropping in each occupation.
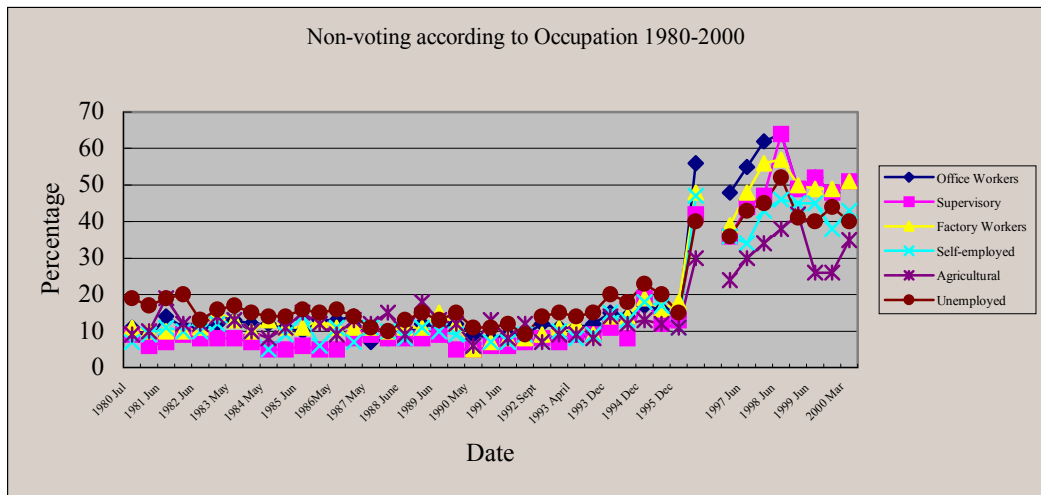
Graph 5

Support for JSP according to Occupation 1980-2000
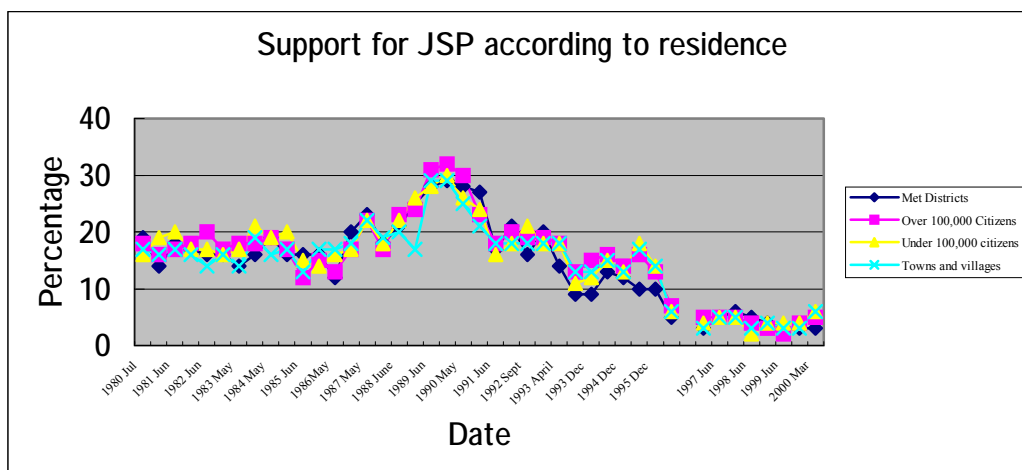
Graph 6

Graph 7

Non-voting according to occupation (Graph 7) shows more subtle results. Non-partisan support seems higher amongst the unionised office workers and factory workers, traditionally JSP and now DPJ supporters. In contrast to this, traditional LDP supporters, self-employed and agricultural workers seem to have maintained their voting habits. These results tentatively suggest that it is the opposition that is being the hardest hit by the increasing *mutōhasō* (block of non-aligned partisans) and this can partially account for the decline of the JSP.
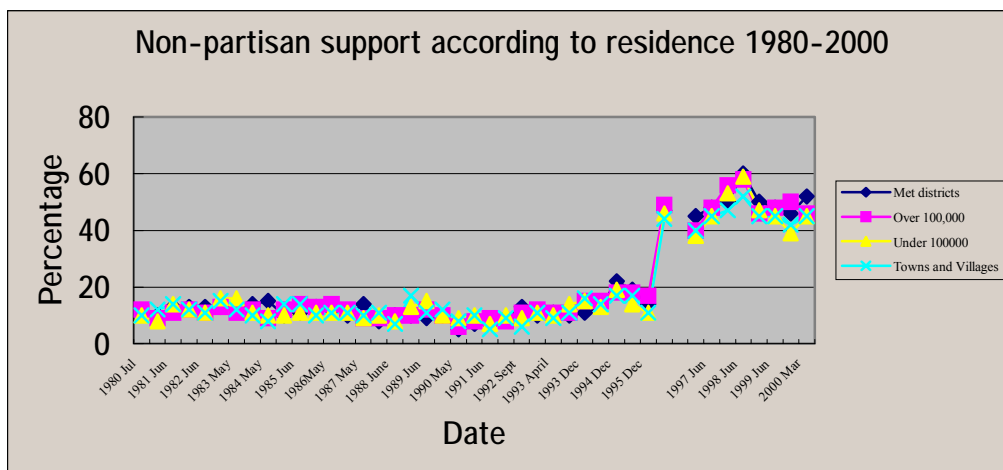
Residence

Japanese voting behaviour has traditionally suggested that it was in the big cities where workers are mobilised into unions and where the lack of *chōnaikai* and *kōenkai* weaken LDP mobilisation tactics that we would see a high level of progressive voting. To the contrary, Graph 8 suggests that voting for the JSP is higher in towns of over 100,000

residents rather than in the ten (thirteen) metropolitan districts.[4] Furthermore, at several points in the twenty years under analysis (and also in March 2000), we see that voting for the JSP is in fact higher in small towns and villages. By March 2000 this is probably accounted for by the age shift mentioned above. High levels of JSP supporters are in their forties and above and it is this group that is likely to live in smaller towns and villages. The fact, however, that prior to the nineties we also saw high levels of voting for the JSP in towns and villages does challenge traditional expectations.

Graph 8

Graph 9

Non-partisan support according to residence (Graph 9) shows significant results. Rather traditionally, towns and villages show the highest level of voting which can be expected due to higher levels of 'social control' and the significance of the mobilisational theories which control voting in Japan. What this graph also shows is the huge increase in non-partisan support which affects all parties, as it is happening in every type of electoral district regardless of traditional expectations of high voting levels in rural areas.

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[4] In the statistics used, the number of large metropolitan districts increased in June 1981 to 11, in April 1989 to 12, and in April 1992 to 13.

Conclusion

From the graphs shown, four main conclusions can be drawn. First, a traditional Western voting behaviour pattern cannot be assumed to be relevant in Japan as young people have never been strong supporters of the left-wing parties (Graph 1). This suggests that voting is more along the expressive model than the instrumental model with young people being mobilised to vote through environmental influences rather than policy and ideological considerations. The progressive nature of young people has been shown by their huge support for the new parties in 1993.

Secondly, whilst we have suggested that mobilisational forces and environmental factors are important in determining voting behaviour, we have seen a tendency for these voting patterns to break down. Graph 5 has shown that whilst people are becoming non-partisan across all occupations, support is particularly dropping among those in occupations which left-wing parties have traditionally mobilised through unions. LDP support is also dropping (Graph 6) across each occupation but not to the extent of the decline of the left.

Thirdly, a core of support remains for the JSP, which Graph 3 has shown to consist of voters in their forties and above. It is thought that this group may continue to support the party through considerations of peace and the peace cleavage.

Finally, the biggest change that the graphs have shown, is the large increase in non-partisan supporters which can relate in real terms to non-voters. I would suggest that it is this factor - aided by the other factors mentioned above - which partly explains the decline of the JSP.

This leads to the question: why have the electorate become disengaged from politics? As has been discussed above, expressive and instrumental theories of voter mobilisation combine to influence the electorate on why they vote for a certain party. The decline and changes of trade unions, *chōnaikai*, and working patterns have combined to make expressive forms of voter mobilization more difficult for the parties to undertake. Furthermore, the electorate's concerns about political corruption have created an *ennui* that has also affected the instrumental methods of voter mobilization. I believe that the decline in voting and partisan-support is connected to the feeling that politics have become corrupt and the electorate feels that there is no party who supports their concerns.

This paper has also both confirmed and contradicted the findings of *The Japanese Voter*. This work, which has been the basis of analysis on Japanese behavioural politics in the past twenty years showed that environmental and mobilizational factors were pre-eminent in the establishment of voting patterns. They discounted some factors which are Western norms of voting behaviour, such as age, and instead said that a person's environment, family and work situation were more important. In this paper, I have confirmed these findings. I have found that there is no real correlation between age and voting trends for left-wing parties yet a Japanese voter's work place is far more important.

Yet, I have also shown that some environmental factors (residence and occupation) are not as important as *The Japanese Voter* considers. Voting for the JSP was higher in large cities than in metropolitan districts and voting for the LDP is declining amongst farmers and self-employed. The most significant finding is that in comparison to *The Japanese Voter*, levels of voting and partisan support have declined significantly.

Finally, how do these changes contribute to changes in the Japanese left - my original question? Other variables are of critical significance in understanding why the JSP declined in the 1990s and the DPJ emerged in its place. To understand these changes it is important to consider the changes made to the electoral system of the House of Representatives in 1994, declining trade union support for individual politicians, the impact that debate over the Constitution since the Gulf War has made and the individual actions of politicians as well as voting and mobilisational factors. This paper has demonstrated two factors which have undoubtedly contributed to the decline of the JSP: the declining ability of trade unions to successfully mobilize the left vote and the increasing group of non-partisan supporters (*mutōhasō*). Both of these factors have been instrumental in the decline of the JSP.

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