

THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE POLITICS.  
BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

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Masaru Kohno, *Is Science of Politics Possible?*, Tokyo: Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc., 2018, vii/224.

In this global age, is it meaningless to write about Japanese politics in the Japanese language? Professor Masaru Kohno firmly answers «no». Being a leading Japanese political scientist, Kohno published many scholarly articles in top-ranked international journals. He claims, though, that political scientists should not sacrifice practical relevance in responding to global, economic, and societal concerns. Japanese political scientists who want to write in Japanese have to build a bridge between academia and the general public. In this book, Kohno succeeds in doing so. This admirable collection of articles is the fruit of years of illuminating and intense research activity by the author.

The chapters in Part I focus on the rationality of Japanese voters. In chapter 1, for example, Kohno tackles a puzzle concerning the so-called «ruling effect».<sup>1</sup> It is widely acknowledged that support for the incumbent government declines over time.<sup>2</sup> There are many competing explanations for the ruling effect. Interestingly, Kohno identifies a notable exception: the approval rate of Prime Minister Abe. Abe's approval rate went down several times, especially after the Moritomo-Kakei scandal and the heated debate on proactive security policy. However, it rose very quickly, returning to its previous level. How can we explain this puzzle? After conducting an online survey, Kohno concludes that shortfalls in the approval rate were instant punishments from Abe's core supporters. Rational Japanese voters were sending a warning signal to their political leader. Another example is given in chapter 2, in which Kohno shows that Japanese voters are so rational that they can use the notion of «security crisis that threatens the survival of Japan» (*Sonritsu-Kiki-Jitai*) as a cue or heuristic in evaluating the security policy. Furthermore, in chapter 3, he suggests that political leaders are fully aware that voters have a coherent set of policy preferences and ideologies: Japanese political leaders are rational actors too.

1. Alan Abramowitz, 'An improved model for predicting presidential election outcomes', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1988, pp. 843-846.

2. Christopher Wlezien, 'Policy (Mis) Representation and the Cost of Ruling: U.S. Presidential Elections in Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 50, Issue 6, 2016, pp. 711-738., here pp. 1-5.

The next two chapters in Part II concern what the author considers «the fundamentals of Japanese politics». They address issues related to the preferences and ideologies shared by ordinary Japanese voters, not the elite. For instance, in chapter 4, Kohno describes the results of an online survey, which successfully replicated the «domestic audience cost», originally proposed by James Fearon and Mike Tomz.<sup>3</sup> The domestic audience cost comprises the disapproving and punishing of leaders when they back down and fail to fulfil pledged international commitments. According to Kohno, Japanese voters show this effect too.

Chapters 6 and 7 in Part III originate from the author's reflection on the Great East Japan Earthquake, which occurred on March 1, 2011. After the earthquake, Kohno started to investigate normative political questions. It is morally right for us to feel sorry for those who suffer hardships. However, building upon the idea initially developed by Hannah Arendt, Kohno distinguishes between «compassion» and «pity», as they have different mental sources. The former is a passion based upon a sense of co-suffering toward the victims. The latter is, instead, a narcissistic sentiment of «praise of suffering as the spring of virtue».<sup>4</sup> So, those who have «pity» for the sufferers look down on them as if they are incompetent and helpless individuals. The author conducted an online survey and showed that Japanese people are eager to help others when the hardship is taking place in a foreign country. However, the results of the survey suggest that, in this case, what motivates Japanese people is «pity». On the other hand, if the hardship occurs somewhere in Japan, their willingness to help others is characterised by «compassion». At the end of chapter 7, Kohno poses normative (and paradoxical) questions to the reader. If aid from Japan to a foreign country is based on «pity», that could represent a typical form of paternalism rather than goodwill. However, if it is «compassion», that would sometimes hinder our effort to aid sufferers in Japan. Because those who feel «compassion» for the victims wish that *all* the sufferers are given support. So, ironically, they hesitate to donate aid in case even a single victim is left behind.<sup>5</sup>

I recommend this book to a wide range of readers. It would be particularly instructive for researchers interested in policy and policymakers interested in research. The book is also suitable for undergraduate and graduate students. However, a few issues are still left unresolved.

3. James D. Fearon, 'Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3, 1994, pp. 577-592; Michael Tomz, 'Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach', *International Organization*, Vol. 61, Issue 4, 2007, pp. 821-840.

4. Philip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993, p. 180.

5. Masaru Kohno & Norihiro Mimura, 'Compassion and Pity as Motivation for Assisting Others Exploring Moral Intuition through Survey Experiments', *The Annals of Japanese Political Science Association*, Vol. 66, Issue 1, 2015, 61-89, here p. 61.

There are a few unanswered questions about data used in this book. For instance, in chapter 5, Kohno investigates the effect of bandwagoning in Japanese elections. In order to do so, he uses survey data about Japanese people's preference for some DVD recorders over others. The question is whether data on DVD recorders can be appropriately extended to a study on political bandwagoning. It seems rather incompatible to use the DVD data for this research. Furthermore, in chapter 1, a survey was conducted on people aged 20 to 69. As it does not contain samples from people aged 70 and above, selection bias is likely to occur. In Japan, voters aged above 70 would most likely be more dovish on security issues, so the survey might underestimate the opinions of those people.

My final concern is about the rationality of political actors. Whether or not politicians are rational remains highly controversial. In chapter 3, Kohno claims that politicians are independent and rational in making their political decisions. However, according to the UCLA school, «groups of organized policy demanders are the basic units of our theory of parties».<sup>6</sup> In making nominations, the parties define their basic positions, decide how much risk to take in pursuing those positions, and choose which candidates will be supported by the party.<sup>7</sup> In short, politicians are neither independent nor rational: they are vehicles of policy-demanding groups.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the assumption that politicians are rational is in need of further substantiation.

Also, whether or not voters are rational is highly controversial. Kohno assumes that voters are rational on the basis of experimental data on Japanese voters. Some Japanese political scientists offer further support to this contention.<sup>9</sup> However, Achen and Bartels propose a strong counterargument against the idea that informed and engaged citizens produce popular judgement.<sup>10</sup> They argue that voters are busy with their lives, and their choices are based on processes of social identification with reference groups. In the political sphere, the most salient reference groups are political parties. People tend to adopt beliefs, attitudes, and values that reinforce and rationalise the loyalty to their party. Those loyalties, not beliefs or ideologies

6. Kathleen Bawn, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel & John Zaller, 'A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, 2012, pp. 571-597.

7. Noran McCarty & Eric Schickler, 'On the Theory of Parties', *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2018, 175-193, here pp. 176-177.

8. Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel & John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations before and After Reform*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

9. Kazunori Inamasu, *Political Framing: The Gap between Voters, Media, and Politicians*, Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Press, 2015; Masahiro Zenkyo, *Support for the Ishin: Is It Consequences of Populism, or Rational Choice?*, Tokyo: Yuhikaku, 2018.

10. Christopher H. Achen & Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 3-9.

or policy commitments, are fundamental to understand how ordinary voters think and act.<sup>11</sup> Achen and Bartels say that «[a]ctual people are far from the unrealistic ideal citizens».<sup>12</sup> Whether or not voters are rational should be corroborated by further research.

Stephen Hawking once wrote, «scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge». This book and its author well deserve this accolade.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

12. *Ibid.*, p.10.