

## Intergenerational Politics in Aging Society:

### The Graying of Japanese Voters

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*Japan's population is aging faster than any other nation's, resulting in a large growth of older voters. The graying of Japanese voters raises an important question related to the principle of intergenerational equity. Do older voters prioritize their short-term self-interest at the expense of other generations? This article argues that the older voters in Japan are surprisingly less self-interested – even less than similarly aged voters in other advanced economies - in maximizing their benefits as service-consumers to the detriment of younger voters. This voting behavior of older voters in Japan is indeed an enigma. To stimulate dialogue about an equitable and sustainable welfare system, the author presents a set of structural and institutional factors that may individually or collectively induce apparently less self-interested preferences for possible explanations in the case of Japan.*

In Japan, the socio-economic impacts of an aging population have been widely discussed and well documented but the political implications of this demographic change have not been significantly explored. The effect of an aging population is producing a substantial change in politics, which is currently characterized as a struggle for managing a mismatch in resources between different generations. In 1973 the program of free medical care for those aged 70 and over, which had already been implemented among local governments, came into effect at the national level under strong political pressure (Campbell 1979, 334-35). Given the rapidly aging population, this generous program was hit by a cost blow-out and the no-charge policy was

modified in 1982 by introducing a co-payment for medical services. Foreign observers warned that Japan's welfare state retrenchment would become accustomed to the high politicization of public policy making (Campbell 1984). In 1979 the Prime Minister's Secretariat compiled a number of reports from different ministries that had jurisdiction over national policy for the elderly and published it as a monograph to describe the existing state of social security, employment, and welfare problems and of their policy measures in the context of aging population (JCO 1979). In response to the aging population issues, the primary focus of policy analysis in these early reports was on the socio-economic impact of aging population in Japan.

In political terms, although this demographic change is in itself striking and pose a major social and economic challenge, it is also important to draw attention to the relative size of older people in the eligible voting population. In substantial change in the age distribution of a population, there are more older voters and they thus potentially have more political clout. Does this mean that a graying electorate pushes for higher individual benefits and population aging inevitably leads to an arguably unsustainable increase in government spending? The most widely-used approach to this question in the literature is the simple model of majoritarian decision-making in which all political outcomes reflect median voter preferences (Black 1948; Downs 1957). The median voters are then assumed to act like a market-driven rational age-group and seek their own short-term interests. Some studies apply this median voter theory to an increase in the age of the median voter and argue that the median voter will be older and thus more likely to support more generous social benefits (Galasso 2006; Persson and Tabellini 2000). Several Japanese scholars refer to the hypothesis that an increase in the age of the self-interested median voter will cause pro-elderly policy bias (Ohtake and Sano 2010; Yashiro, Shimasawa, and Toyoda 2012); Oda Toshikatsu (2014) tested the hypothesis in the context of intergenerational conflict in Japan and found (from multivariate analysis based on n=1,361) that each

generation does not, interesting enough, have profit-oriented attitudes towards national budget allocation for its own side of generation. The findings imply that self-interest may not be the primary determinant of preferences over government spending, although the median voter theory is still useful for predicting the preferred funding level.

There is a body of the literature suggests that the applicability of merely self-interested preferences over policies may be very limited when many other structural (e.g., cohort effects), institutional (e.g., existing health insurance systems), and interest-group (e.g., labor union-led retirement associations) factors are also relevant for explaining determinants of voters' preferences (e.g., Busemeyer, Goerres and Weschle 2009; Fullerton and Dixon 2010; Sun 2015). Following such multi-dimensional approaches to the effects of age on preferences, Uchida Mitsuru argues that senior citizens should play a key role in creating a new form of democracy (Uchida 1986; Uchida and Iwabuchi 1999). Interesting enough, his argument is not based on the median voter assumption that voters are self-interested without altruistic preferences for redistribution, especially with regard to future generations (e.g., Milanovic 2010), but is made in anticipation of *kyōsei* (the idea of co-living) living and working together for the common good.<sup>1</sup>

In the broad research areas of “political gerontology,” Neal Cutler (1977) also takes a multi-dimensional approach to political consequences of population aging, while examining the role played by the aged in the political system: political attitudes, generational differences in political orientation, and the political role of age-based organizations. Previous research showed that differences in voter turnout between the young and the old might result from either age differences (the “life-cycle” theory) (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Jennings and Stoker 1995) or generational differences (the “cohort” theory) (e.g., Miller 1992; Miller and

Shanks 1996; Highton 2000). The life-cycle effects of age on political behavior will change as people get more experienced in the political process, yet the effects of cohort generations are assumed to persist over their lifetime.

There are two well-established approaches to the elderly's political participation: “resource” theory (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Brady, Verba, and Schozman 1995) and “mobilization” theory (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Abramson and Claggett 2001; McClurg 2004). The former emphasizes the causal relationships between political resources (e.g., votes, education and money) and individual decisions in the political participation of the elderly, while the latter points out the political choices and incentives (e.g., pension eligibility and health-care of elderly), which are offered by political leaders, as the primary determinant of the elderly’s political participation. In relation to the resource theory, Peter Laslett (1989) argues that the “third age” is an emerging predictor of political participation. In his view, the third age cannot be defined as a chronological period of the life course, but as a less definitive period of categorized life where a person no longer has childcare or work responsibilities but is actively healthy and has disposal incomes to have the freedom of pursuing voluntary and rewarding activities. Third age citizens may often participate in political processes for reasons other than self-interest.

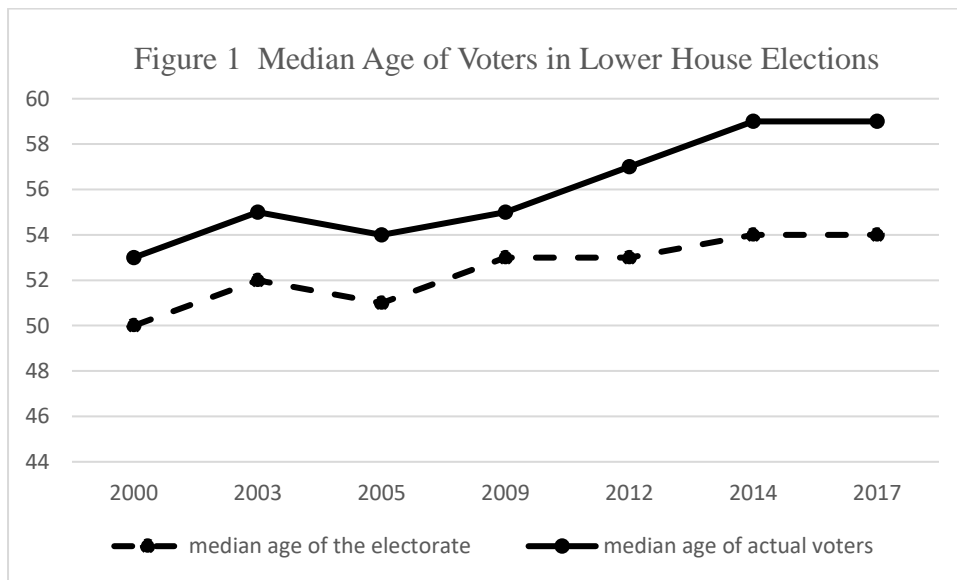
So do older voters in Japan really prioritize their short-term self-interest at the expense of other generations? This article claims that no single factor explains the voting behavior of older voters, and indeed multi-dimensional approaches are required by using many indicators to explain why the elderly in Japan are not as self-interested as predicted by the median voter theory. The components of the physical and social environment that shapes voters’ preferences can be broken down in structural and institutional factors as well as actors or stakeholders (e.g., media professionals and policy elites). Several areas are of particular importance in shaping older voters’

preferences in Japan: the impact of profound demographic change on public awareness, cohort effects of the postwar baby boomer generation, labor force participation of older people, public health insurance policy, continuous wealth and higher rates of self-employment among older generations, and *kyōsei* policy.

### **Aging Demographics and the Graying of the Median Voter**

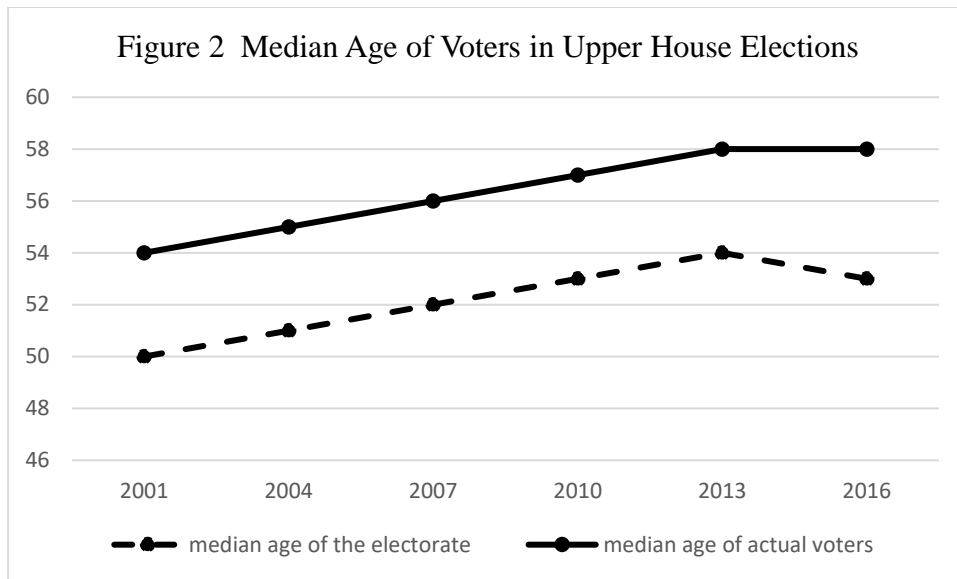
As of September 2021, among 235 United Nations member states, Japan had the highest estimated percentage (29.1 percent) of population aged 65 or over (JMIAC 2021<sub>a</sub>) and the second highest percentage point change (11.7 percent) from 2000 in the proportion of the population aged 65 years or over (DESA 2019). The major age groups of population can be categorized into three groups: young population (aged 0 to 14), working population (aged 15 to 64), and elderly population (aged 65 and over). In most countries, the elderly population has been the smallest segment of a nation's population. In 1997, for the first time, Japan's proportion of those aged 65 and over (15.7 percent) exceeded the proportion of those aged 0 to 14 (15.3 percent) (NIPSSR 2016). The National Institute provides an estimate of the dependency ratio that by 2030 the shrinking proportion of working population (59.2 percent) will need to support the growing pool of both the elderly population (29.6 percent) and the young population (11.3 percent) (NIPSSR 2016). Since 2004, the labor participation of Japan's elderly cohort (aged 65 and over) continuously increased for nine years in a row, with over 9 million elderly / 25.1 percent of the employment rate in 2020 still working (JMIAC 2021<sub>b</sub>). In political terms, the aging population will inevitably be accompanied by the graying of the median voter and predicts that retirees thus have more political clout. As Figures 1 and 2 indicate, the age of the median voter who actually turned out to vote has increased continually in recent years from 53 (the mean value of 52.6) in the 2000 lower house election to 59 (the

mean value of 56.3) in the 2017 and similarly from 54 (the mean value of 53.2) in the 2001 upper house election to 58 (the mean value of 55.5) in the 2016 upper house election (JMIAC 2021). The elderly population as a percentage of Japan’s eligible voters (aged 20 and over) will increase from 21 percent in 1991 to an estimated 33 percent in 2025 and 40 percent by 2050 (NIPSSR 2016).<sup>2</sup> The focus of electoral politics in Japan may shift away from taxpayers to pensioners, with the expectation that the elderly will exert political pressure on policy makers as the population ages. This will place elderly citizens in a position to act as decision-making partners of the shrinking work force in Japanese politics.



Sources: Japan, Statistical Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (JMIAC). “Shūgiin Giin Sōsenkyo Nenreibetsu Tōhyōritsu Shirabe” [Voter Turnouts by Age Cohorts in the House of Representatives Elections], 2000, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017.

Note: In 2016 Japan lowered the minimum voting age from 20 to 18 and those aged 18 and 19 thus became eligible in the 2017 lower house election. In the Figure, those 80 or more are counted as 80 regardless of age differences.



Sources: JMIAC. “Sangiin Giin Sōsenkyo Nenreibetsu Tōhyōritsu Shirabe” [Voter Turnouts by Age Cohorts in the House of Councillors Elections], 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016.

Note: Those aged 18 and 19 became eligible in the 2016 upper house election. In the Figure, those 80 or more are counted as 80 regardless of age differences.

### **Elderly Voting Behavior and Voter Turnout**

In general, older age-cohorts are more likely than younger ones to vote. In Japan, the turnout levels of older people are consistently much higher than younger generations, and has steadily increased. In the 1950s and 1960s, once eligible voters reached their 70s the voter turnout rates abruptly dropped. This would suggest that growing physical and mental limitations may have impaired their ability to vote. In the 1967 lower house election, the turnout rate of voters in their 70s was 56.8 percent, at the bottom of the age range (JMIAC 2019). Yet their voter turnout began to continually rise with the 1969 election, eventually reaching a high of 73.2 percent in the 2005 lower house election (JMIAC 2019). Their increased turnout in recent years suggests that eligible voters aged 70 and over may be more physically and mentally fit for political activity than in previous generations.

For most OECD countries it would seem that older generations are more engaged in electoral processes than younger generations (OECD 2016). The age gap in voter turnout in Japan is exceptionally high, with a 2011 OECD study showing a 25.2 percentage point gap between the voting rates of older age groups (aged 55 and over) and younger age groups (under 35 years old), as compared with the OECD average of 12.1 percent (OECD 2011). In the 2017 lower house election there was a 38.2 percentage point gap between the voting rates of those aged 60 – 69 (72.0 percent) and younger groups aged 20-29 (33.8 percent) (JMIAC 2019). Given both the large representation and the high turnout, older voters will have much influence on the overall outcomes of election results. In this election, the number of votes (i.e., eligible voters x the voting rate) was 42 million of those aged 50 and over, as compared with 31 million of those aged 18-49 (JMIAC2018). One may argue through the median voter theorem that elderly voters are self-interested at the expense of younger and future generations and policy-making is subsequently responsive to the preferences of the elderly. In this view, Japanese older generations are rationally self-interested towards redistributing resources and policy making reflects a pro-elderly policy bias to the growing weight of elderly voters. As discussed previously, some pioneering studies tested if there is such a significant correlation between Japan’s aging population and pro-elderly policy bias, but no major surveys have clearly shown such consistently rational and narrowly self-interested elderly voters who attempt to maximize benefits as a service-consumer against others.

### **Elderly’s Perceptions of, and Interest in, Politics**

Political interest is a precondition for political participation. A nationwide opinion poll on the 2017 lower house election (n=2,208), conducted by the Association for Promoting Fair Elections or Akarui Senkyo Suishin Kyōkai (ASSK) from January 26 to February 21, 2018, asked respondents to measure the levels of interest in the election on a scale from 4 (“very



much”), 3 (“somewhat”), 2 (“not really”) to 1 (“not at all”). The survey found that the older people get, the more interested they are in the election, with the scores of 4 and 3 jointly accounting for 42.0 percent in their 20s, 51.9 percent in their 30s, 57.3 percent in their 40s, 69.7 percent in their 50s, 81.9 percent in their 60s, 82.6 percent in their 70s (ASSK 2018). This positive correlation between age and interest was also found in the past national elections (ASSK 2006, 2010, 2013, 2015).

One of standard predictors that are thought to influence voter turnout rates is political efficacy (Craig, Niemi and Silver 1990; Sullivan and Riedel 2001; Southwell 2012). Political efficacy can be defined as people’s perceptions that their political action does have, or can have an influence on the political process. The concept of political efficacy is two-fold: internal efficacy (a sense of self-efficacy that one can influence politics) and external efficacy (a sense of efficacy whether the system of public institutions is responsive to people’s demands) (Balch 1974). The nationwide opinion poll on the 2017 lower house election, conducted by the ASSK, asked respondents who had abstained from voting to select one or more options from a list of answers for abstention. There were age group characteristics in terms of selection rates: 33.7 percent of “had a work to do” and 33.7 percent of “little interested in the elections” in their 30s as compared with 19.1 percent and 23.5 percent respectively in their 50s, and 52.2 percent of “in poor physical condition” in their 70s (ASSK 2018). This investigation on abstention also provided a set of internal efficacy options: “many people vote at elections, so it doesn't matter if I don't,” “people like me don't have any say as politics is too difficult to understand,” “voting has nothing to do with politics.” Interesting enough, the survey found no discrete differences among the age groups of their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s in the percentage for the first option (10 – 15 percent across the age cohorts), for the second one (5 – 8 percent), and for the third one (15 – 19 percent) (ASSK 2018).

The impact of external efficacy on voter turnout remains unclear, but in my view there are country-specific factors, such as organizational characteristics and political culture, which need further consideration to examine that impact. *Chien* (neighborhood ties) and *kaishaen* (company ties) are ways of cooperative life in Japanese society but also sources of favoritism. For example, a personal candidate support organization, known as *kōenkai*, outside the formal party organization plays a prominent role in Japan's electoral politics. In this social mobilization network, the candidate receives the personal votes from members in exchange of favors that the candidate distributes to members. Membership provides citizens with an opportunity to acquire political knowledge through a personalized channel. I suspect that “incumbent-based” responsiveness (external efficacy - evaluation of individual representatives) may have, if any, a greater impact on voter turnout than “regime-based” responsiveness (external efficacy - evaluation of the political system) (see Craig, Niemi and Silver 1990). Under the 1993 new electoral system of single-member districts and proportional representation, community and industry associations whose members receive exclusive benefits remained strong and the hybrid election system did not eliminate the need for a personal vote (Krauss and Pekkanen 2004). The ASSK database from 1972 to 2018 indicates that those who were members of those exclusive associations were approximately 15 percent more likely to vote than others in their 40s, 50s and 60s (Krauss and Pekkanen 2011, 33). Indeed, the impact of community associations on electoral behavior was pervasive, especially among older generations, since elderly were more likely to participate in community associations (Flanagan et al. 1991).<sup>3</sup> The impact of employees’ associations was also significant among elderly. As discussed later, Japan’s elderly cohort had one of the highest labor participation rates among OECD countries (OECD 2018) and thus closely linked to their workplaces by company ties. Involvement in the representative bodies of employees helped the elderly realize their external efficacy .

## **Policy-based Voting and Social Security<sup>4</sup>**

Assuming that high turnout is a reflection of political interest and efficacy, the ultimate issue boils down to one question: does the overall high turnout among the elderly really influence politics in a self-interested way to the detriment of younger generations? To answer this question, let us begin with voter perceptions among different age groups about important issues in elections. Since 1976, the ASSK has conducted national election surveys and all of the surveys included one shared question: “What issues did you consider important to your vote in this election?” (multiple responses). The issue of economy (business stimulus and employment measures) has been one of the top issues, indicating no discrete perception differences in the importance of this issue among the age groups of 20s-30s, 40s-50s, and aged 60 and over. Likewise, in the 1976 general election survey, the issue of welfare and health did not correlate with age, with a moderate 35 percent of all respondents saying that the issue was considered important. Since then, the average figure for welfare and health rose rapidly to 51 percent in the 2000 general election survey. Most important, in this election the issue of welfare and health began to clearly correlate with increasing age, with older voters more concerned about this issue.

There were two main drivers in Japan's social security reform that might have led to this trend: the 2000 introduction of the public, mandatory long-term care insurance (LTCI) and the 2001-2013 gradual introduction of the pension eligibility age of 65. The government's initial response to the dramatic rise of individualized social services for the elderly was the 2000 introduction of LTCI. Under this scheme, everyone aged 40 and over with an income must contribute, and all those aged 65 and over, regardless of income or family situation, were eligible for receiving the nearly full cover of institutional or community-based care, depending

on the level of care required. Half of total LTCI spending came from social insurance based on premiums paid by persons aged 40 to 64 (referred to as category 2) and those aged 65 and over (withheld from pension benefits) (referred to as category 1). As voters became concerned about possible increases in premiums and decreases in the minimum age of insurance contributors, care for the elderly had become a major political issue. With the 1994 major revision of public pension laws, by 2001 the Japanese government also began to gradually raise the eligibility age for the employees' pension insurance from 60 to 65 and by 2013 there were no longer special legal provisions allowing employees under aged 65 to receive the full benefits. As the population continues to age, the raising of eligibility ages in public pension systems became one of the most controversial debates for voters.

In the early 2000s, the general public became seriously concerned over an “unsustainable” level of social security. The Japanese government was under pressure to tackle the fiscal condition of the public pension problem. To contain public pension spending, the 2004 pension reform introduced an upper limit on premium increases for younger generations and set up an automatic adjustment of benefit levels in order to respond within the limit to changes in demography (Sakamoto 2005; Yoshida, Guo and Cheng 2006). The 2005 general election survey asked about what policy issues matter to their voting (multiple choice - multiple answers) and confirmed the correlation between age and such concerns: older voters were, or becoming, more concerned about social security issues in elections. The respondents answered with the results of significant relationships between different age groups and voter support for specific issues – “pension” from 46.7 percent in their 20s-30s through 65.4 percent in their 40s-50s to 70.6 percent aged 60 and over; and “health care and elderly care” from 46.0 percent in their 20s-30s through 55.5 percent in their 40s-50s to 69.4 percent aged 60 and over. Not surprisingly, the 2017 lower house election survey continued to indicate a similar pattern, with the results of “pension” from 21.9 percent in their 18 - 20s through 32.0 percent in their 30s-

40s, 52.9 percent in their 50s-60s to 63.4 percent aged 70 and over; and “health care and elderly care” from 26.0 percent in their 18 - 20s through 39.0 percent in their 30s-40s, 56.1 percent in their 50s-60s to 73.4 percent aged 70 and over.

As the Japanese government pledged to guarantee a minimum amount of 50 percent of the average after-tax income for future generations' pension benefits, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare released the fiscal estimates in 2014 and 2019 to decide if any reform of the pension schemes becomes necessary (JMHLW 2014, 2019<sub>b</sub>). The fiscal investigation, under a government's scenario model for economic growth and demographic changes, showed that by the 2040s pension payouts would be barely above the pledged 50 percent (JMHLW 2019<sub>a</sub>). This automatic adjustment of benefit levels, known as the macro-economic slide formula, which is likely to reduce pension payouts in future, could not manage voters' concerns about uncertainty inherent in demographic projections (JMHLW 2019<sub>b</sub>). Indeed the elderly, more than any other cohort of the population, consider social security issues important to their votes. But does it necessarily follow that given the elderly's concerns about social security issues, it will lead to self-interest in automatically governing their attitudes in elections? According to the median voter model, an older median voter will be more successful at pushing its preferred policy outcomes (e.g., Persson and Tabellini 2006) since voters are self-interested in maximizing benefits as a service-consumer against others (Milanovic 2010). Are older people simply willing to put their self-interest above that of other generations?

### **Elderly People's Attitudes and Intergenerational Equity**

In Japan, some union-mobilized retirees groups such as the Japanese Confederation of Retired Persons (established in 1991, with 0.8 million members in 2021) (JCRP 2021), have been seeking a solution through burden-sharing with other generations. Members of such groups often understand when cuts to elderly benefits are necessary for fiscal or political reasons in

order to preserve programs for the elderly in the longer term (JCRP 2020). One of the most important factors to be considered for striking a balance between benefits and burdens is public responsiveness – how public preferences respond to financing of social security. Part of a nationwide survey (n=8,219), conducted on public preferences concerning social security by Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in July 2019, asked respondents to select one option from a list of answers for burden-sharing in the future and found that the elderly respondents were as equally supportive of policy constraints on themselves as other age cohorts. Interesting enough, 19.7 percent in their 60s, 20.4 percent in their 50s, 20.6 percent in their 40s, 22.1 percent in their 30s, and 17.9 percent in their 20, agreed to the statement, “heavier burdens on the elderly are inevitable to prevent further burdens on working generations” (JMHLW 2019<sub>a</sub>). Likewise, constrained self-interest among older people was also found in another survey on low birth-rate and aging population (n=1,826), conducted by Japan’s Cabinet Office in August 2014. This survey also asked respondents to choose one answer for the list of answer choices for sharing the costs and benefits to meet their needs and found that older generations were quite sympathetic towards the future for younger generations; 25.8 percent in their 60s, 25.5 percent in their 50s, 25.6 percent in their 40s, 21.3 percent in their 30s, and 24.0 percent in their 20s, agreed to the statement that we “should expand policy for younger generations while constraining policy for the elderly, in order to manage increasing national burdens” (JCO 2014). This survey also showed that as people age, they become more inclined to disagree to the statement that we “should expand policy for the elderly while constraining policy for younger generations, in order to manage increasing national burdens.” Only 15.7 percent in their 60s agreed to the statement, as compared with 18.3 percent in their 50s, 17.4 per cent in their 40s, 19.7 percent in their 30s, and 21.4 percent in their 20s (JOC 2014).

Table 1 Elderly Citizens Support for Redistribution to Younger Generations				
	2005	2010	2015	2020

Japan	26.1 n=842	28.4 n=1,183	37.5 n=1,105	29.8 n=1,367
United States	9.6 n=1,000	7.8 n=1,000	16.8 n=1,003	23.2 n=1,006
Germany	18.9 n=1,023	16.7 n=1,004	14.1 n=1,008	16.8 n=1,043
Sweden	n/a	23.8 n=1,054	20.4 n=1,000	5.9 n=1,528

Sources: Japan, Cabinet Office (JCO). 2006. *Dai-6-kai Kōreisha no Seikatsu to Ishiki ni Kansuru Kokusai Chōsa Kekka* [Cross-national Survey Results of Old People’s Life Style and Attitudes]; JCO. 2011. *Dai-7-kai*; JCO. 2016. *Dai-8-kai*; JCO. 2021. *Dai-9-kai*. Available at <https://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/ishiki/chousa/index.html> and [https://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/ishiki/h27/zentai/pdf/kourei\\_h27\\_3-9.pdf](https://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/ishiki/h27/zentai/pdf/kourei_h27_3-9.pdf) (Accessed on December 14, 2021).

Note: These cross-national surveys of those aged 60 and over asked if government policy should prioritize younger people over older people or vice versa. The figures in the table show the percentage of those who chose the answer, “young people should be prioritized” (multiple choice – single answer) in each country and the number of respondents.

	2005	2010	2015	2020
Japan	18.9 n=842	29.2 n=1,183	28.4 n=1,105	25.8 n=1,367
United States	43.2 n=1,000	40.2 n=1,000	44.2 n=1,003	36.5 n=1,006
Germany	35.4 n=1,023	36.6 n=1,004	46.8 n=1,008	45.8 n=1,043
Sweden	n/a	48.9 n=1,054	51.7 n=1,000	54.8 n=1,528

Sources: The same as in Table 1.

Note: These cross-national surveys on those aged 60 and over asked the desired level of social security benefits and burdens. The figures in the table show the percentage of those who chose the answer, “the current level of social security benefits should be improved, even if premiums and taxes on them increase in future” (multiple choice – single answer) in each country and the number of respondents.

Internationally, the Japanese elderly are seen to be more accepting of intergenerational equity than in other countries. A series of cross-national surveys on older people’s life styles and attitudes were carried out by Japan’s Cabinet Office in 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020. These surveys collected information regarding the attitudes of those aged 60 and over towards benefits and burdens of social security. As Table 1 shows, the survey asked if government

policy should prioritize younger people over older people or vice versa. Japan had the highest percentage (26.1 percent in 2005, 28.4 percent in 2010, 37.5 percent in 2015, and 29.8 percent in 2020) of those who answered affirmatively to the statement that, “young people should be prioritized,” distinctively higher than in other countries: United States (9.6 percent in 2005, 7.8 percent in 2010, 16.8 percent in 2015, and 23.2 percent in 2020), Germany (18.9 percent in 2005, 16.7 percent in 2010, 14.1 percent in 2015, and 16.8 percent in 2020), and Sweden (23.8 percent in 2010, 20.4 percent in 2015, 5.9 percent in 2020) (JCO 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021). This would indicate that a significant proportion of Japanese elderly show some altruistic preferences for a more equitable redistribution of the burden on younger generations.<sup>5</sup> The survey also asked about the level of services and the amount of burden which will affect future generations who cannot as yet provide their contribution to the decisions. As seen in Table 2, Japan’s percentage (18.9 percent in 2005, 29.2 percent in 2010, 28.4 percent in 2015, and 25.8 percent in 2020) of those choosing the answer, “the current level of social security benefits should be improved, even if premiums and taxes on them increase in future,” was distinctively lower than other countries: United States (43.2 percent in 2005, 40.2 percent in 2010, 44.2 percent in 2015, and 36.5 percent in 2020), Germany (35.4 percent in 2005, 36.6 percent in 2010, 46.8 percent in 2015, and 45.8 percent in 2020), and Sweden (48.9 percent in 2010, 51.7 percent in 2015, 54.8 percent in 2020) (JCO 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021). Elderly people in Japan thus appear to be less self-interested in maximizing their benefits as service-consumers to the detriment of others.

### **Possible Explanations of What Is Shaping Elderly Opinion**

The assumption, based on benefit maximization by self-interested voters, would seem to be less applicable to the case of the Japanese welfare state. Although only suggestive rather than definitive, there are specific factors that could reduce the likelihood of the impact of self-



interested elderly voters at the expense of younger generations. Assuming that the patterns of public preferences are largely based on human adaptation to physical and socio-structural environments and power of institutions, there is a set of structural and institutional factors in Japan, which may interactively shape the nature and patterns of older people's preferences for social security. To be specific, structural factors, such as demographic change and cohort effects, do not directly determine but narrow the range of preferences for voters to express, and thus this causal mechanism is situational. By contrast, institutional factors, such as existing public health insurance and labor participation, with which political resources and influences lie, are likely to directly influence the direction and scope of their preferences. Their preference-formation can be observed in interactions among structural and institutional complementarities as a causal mechanism that informs the behavior of voters as well as other stakeholders (e.g., media professionals and policy elites).

The most fundamental condition for influencing public attitudes towards social security is changes in demographics. As previously described, Japan has the highest proportion of elderly citizens in the world. The world's most aged country needs to reform a social security system in which the ratio of workers-to-retired people decreased significantly from 3.6 in 2000 (78.9 million of those aged 20-64 / 22.0 million of those aged 65 and over) to 1.9 in 2021 (69.1 million of those aged 20-64 / 36.4 million of those aged 65 and over ) (JMIAC 2021<sub>a</sub>), resulting in fewer workers to support a growing retired population. As the LTCI was introduced in 2000, the urgent need of social security reform began to arouse great public attention. Across the country local assemblies often convened public debates on the pressing topic of the future of social security, with the total number of local assemblies' minutes including the key words of "social security benefits and burden" increasing from 3,294 documents in 2000 to 8,561 documents in 2021 (i.e., 143,985 documents between January 2000 and December 2021).<sup>6</sup>

National newspapers also dramatically increased their coverage of social security issues. For example, in the past 5 years (2016-2021) the *Asahi Shimbun* had more than 2,200 news stories, including about the problems with *shōshi-kōreika* (the declining birth rate and aging population) and other related articles.<sup>7</sup>

In general, democratic policymaking is expected to be a “bottom-up” process, wherein elected officials are responsive to public preferences which are often recognized first on the media agenda, and subsequently get on the policy agenda, leading to policy change. However, attention is a limited resource in the issue of demographic change; policy elites needed to gain the attention of voters over the technical information regarding the economic consequences of population aging. Policy makers made an effort to bring the issue of social security reform into an ongoing discussion and the media acted as an information provider, in order to make it more visible to voters. Public discourse on a number of platforms played a significant role in influencing the elderly’s attitudes towards social security benefits in a constrained manner. It is important to note here that the elderly’s constrained attitudes would not simply be altruistic, but might also in part self-interested, especially because those aged between 65 and 74 (called “young-old”) do not want social services to run out of resources when they reach their 80s or 90s.

Another condition is a series of historical events that a cohort of individuals born within the same time span experience at similar life stages. There would seem to be a distinctive generational difference in political attitudes. In particular, the experience of the postwar baby boomer generation, the so-called *dankai*, who were born between 1947 and 1949, deserves closer attention. The *dankai* generation plus those who were born in 1950 and 1951 accounts for more than 10.6 million or 8.3 percent of the total population (JMIAC 2021<sub>a</sub>). This cohort

has collectively experienced turbulent events, such as Japan's high economic growth, anti-establishment student movements, industrial pollution, and the Vietnam War, among others in their youth. While supporting the basis of Japan's economic prosperity, these turbulent times nurtured *dankai* generation's spirit of activism. In 2009 the country's largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), toppled the LDP that dominated Japanese conservative politics for 54 years. In this national election, 49.3 percent, the highest percentage, of those aged 60 - 69 (the *dankai* cohort aged 60-62) among voters' age cohorts voted for the DPJ (ASSK 2010). They collectively acted contrary to the popular perception, "the older we get, the more conservative we tend to become." It is widely reported that the age cohort is willing to contribute to society and take entrepreneurial activity (e.g., *Nikkei Shimbun*, February 21, 22, 23, 25, 2013). To actively engage with the information they are learning, 82.4 percent of those aged 60-79 (n=14,440) are internet users in 2019 (JMIAC 2021<sub>c</sub>). The *dankai*-specific socializing experiences reveal life-long patterns of progressiveness and have developed a collective attribute of the cohort to acknowledge the common good rather than sectional interests alone.

	Labor Participation Rates (%)		
	Total	Male	Female
Japan	25.5	35.0	18.1
USA	19.4	23.9	15.8
Canada	13.8	18.5	9.7
UK	10.7	13.5	8.4
Germany	7.4	10.1	5.3
Italy	5.1	7.7	3.0
France	3.4	4.5	2.5

Sources: Figures are adopted from OECD. 2021. *OECD Employment Outlook 2021*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

A set of institutional factors is also likely to influence the elderly's attitudes towards intergenerational equity. The first factor is a range of policy measures aimed at improving the

labour force participation of older people who stay physically fit and mentally healthy. In 2012, as the *dankai* generation reached 65, a Cabinet meeting adopted the Outline of Aging Society Measures, which emphasize the priority of older people's employment for the “total participation society” (*zen'in-sanka-gata shakai*). The Japanese government has been implementing policy measures to increase the labor force participation rate of older people, in order to control rising social security costs and address continuing labor shortages. In April 2021 the revised Elderly Persons Employment Stabilization Act came into force, and while the provisions are not mandatory it called on companies to choose one of the following options regarding older workers: increase of the retirement age, abolishment of the retirement age, or introduction of continuous employment beyond the age limit (JMHLW 2021). Alternatively, the amended Act suggests that companies may also outsource some operations to retirees who start their own business, or to transfer them to philanthropic projects run by retirees. It is intended to urge businesses to allow employees to work until age 70. As Table 3 indicates, Japan's elderly cohort has the highest labor force participation rates among the OECD group of major industrial countries (OECD 2021). Nearly half of all Japanese men aged 60 to 70, and one-quarter of those aged 70 and 75, are still in the work force. Employed elderly people tend to continue to find the warmth and security of their belonging to a particular company, which prevents them from organizing their own interests with others beyond their company ties. Employed elderly people are more likely to embrace younger co-workers through their support of pro-business operations (Iio 1999; Nakamaki and Sedgwick 2003).

Second, Japan's public LTCI insurance policy by providing adequate care, will weaken political activism by the elderly for their self-interested preferences. The insurance eligibility is not based on income and family situations, but purely on age and physical/mental conditions; all elderly (i.e., everyone 65 years old or over as well as those aged 40-64 with aging-related

diseases) are eligible for nearly the full range of institutional or community-based care, depending on the level of functional and cognitive status (JMHLW 2002). Half of total LTCI expenditures is subsidized by government payments – 25 percent national and 25 percent local. The universal, mandatory LTCI would make the inequality, which may exist between those who can afford to purchase in health insurance markets and those who cannot, less salient in Japan. It helps to find ways to avoid conflicts and cooperative solutions that can benefit all the age groups involved. Kyoto prefecture's surveys on LTCI user satisfaction, although there is no such nation-wide survey available, asked about "how the LTCI should be in the future" to choose one answer for the list of answer choices: "a premium hike is unavoidable," "premium increases should be avoided," or "I do not know." The first choice of accepting the hike in the context of population aging, with a percentage higher than other choices, increased from 33.6 percent in 2004 (n=2,151) through 37.0 percent in 2010 (n=2,368) to 38.1 percent in 2017 (n=2,009) (Kyoto Prefecture 2017).

Third, the most successful generation of the *dankai* baby boomers (8.3 percent of the total population) who were born between 1947 and 1949 accumulated their wealth over the life-cycle, leading to current wealth levels. They have a potential capacity to use the individual savings and financial assets for their own benefits. As compared with homeownership rates by baby boomers in other countries, such as 49.5 percent of those born between 1956 – 1965 in East and West Germany, 63.6 percent of those born between 1940-1950 in Sweden, and 77.8 percent of those born between 1946-1964 in the United States,<sup>8</sup> the *dankai* cohort of those aged 69-71 in 2018 had 86.2 percent of the homeownership rate with the average current assets of US\$ 240,000 (JCO 2020). This generation also received the company retirement allowance of US\$ 220,000 on average (JBF 2015). Older generations as a whole are among the most financially stable; as of 2020, 51.6 percent of those 60 and over (n=1,755) did not have to

reduce savings for their living expenses (JCO 2020). The *dankai* cohort lived in continuous wealth is likely to behave less assertively toward other generations and adopt more conciliatory attitudes to tacking economic inequality.

Fourth, self-employed individuals who have no mandatory retirement age imposed on them, hold opinions consonant to their small business protection, often against the interests of elderly consumption. As of 2020, self-employed proprietors were 6.7 million; those aged 65 and over accounted for 39.8 percent of those owners (JMIAC 2021<sub>b</sub>). In other words, older adults consistently had a higher rate of self-employment than their younger counterparts. As of 2020, 1.52 million people engaged in agriculture and the number of people who primarily earn their living from farming was 1.36 million, and among those primarily engaged in agriculture, 0.95 million (70 percent) were aged 65 or older, or 4 times more than 30 years ago (JMAFF 2020). In 2019, 10.4 million people belong to the Nōkyō (Japan Agricultural Co-operatives - JA) (4.2 million members and 6.3 million associate members) (JAcom, January 20, 2022). As the Central Union of the Nōkyō (JA Zenchū) serves as the political arm of the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives and thus represents their interests, the elderly in farming households have less incentive to express and organize their self-interests.

Finally, the idea of *kyōsei*, which is understood by Japanese people as a spirit of co-living, has already become a guiding principle of local governance in Japan, transcending generational divides in local communities for the common good. Almost all local government websites in Japan are partly used to disseminate information with regard to their *kyōsei* policy. Reflecting on this principle, socially mobilized elderly groups, such as Nippon Active Life Club (NALC 2021) (established in 1994, with 13,633 members in 2021) tend to be better informed about

this principle so that they are unlikely to single-mindedly pursue the benefits of elderly programs unfairly at the expense of the youth.

Since the mid-1990s, the World Health Organization (WHO) has sought to convert the member states, including Japan, to the normative convictions of a more holistic approach to aging (WHO 2002). The international norm of active aging, developed through the WHO, has provided socially mobilized elderly groups with a platform to hold policy-makers to account for international commitments to promoting positive ageing through appropriate policy responses. In Japan, a number of think tanks and other non-profit organizations, such as Japan NGO Council on Ageing (JANCA 2021) (established in 1998 as a federation of elderly groups in response to the International Day of Older Persons), have coordinated the social expectation of *kyōsei* with the international norm of active aging as part of policy proposals. Some local governments thus have taken initiatives to incorporate active ageing principles into existing policies such as health, employment, and social inclusion. In 2011, for example, Akita City became the first member in Japan to join the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities, with the pursuit of active aging agenda (City of Akita 2021). The city has been working with Friends of the International Federation on Aging (FOIFA) Japan to empower older people to be an active participant rather a mere benefit recipient. In other words, local action has involved extending the meaning of international norms to link its policies and practices with the domestic experience of *kyōsei*. The holistic, inclusive approach to ageing is expected to increase the elderly's social roles in participation in community life for public purposes.

## **Conclusion**

One of the greatest challenges facing Japan and other advanced economies over the coming decades is the aging of population. Driven by a combination of declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy, the median age of voters is increasing in Japan and at a higher rate than other advanced economies. This leads to an increase in the age dependency ratio of working-age to old-age individuals and thus poses a challenge to the fiscal stability of Japan facing increased government spending on healthcare and social benefits for the elderly. In this context, most median voter models argue that the behavior of an older median voter is inevitably self-interested and demanding for increased healthcare and social benefits, even at the expense of younger and future generations. This article has closely looked at the voter surveys on the preferences of the elderly in Japan and found that they are indeed seriously concerned about their social benefits but not so explicitly self-interested as predicted by median voter models. In other words, the elderly in Japan have less self-interested preferences (e.g., burden-sharing with other generations) rather than single-peaked ones in one-dimensional way (e.g., demand for short-term social benefits). For possible explanations of why this is so, this article has identified a set of structural and institutional factors to whose constraints the elderly need to adapt in a changing environment and shape their preferences. The overall implication is that if policy makers effectively exploit the elderly's sentiment of rather altruistic attitudes for policy-making, aging does not necessarily lead to more generous pensions and other social benefits, in particularly at the future expense of other generations.

In Japan, people aged 65-75, who normally fall within the category of the third age, are healthier, wealthier, and more educated than those in past generations (generational



differences). They have a higher sense of political efficacy, a higher level of voter turnout, and a stronger sense of voting issue over social security than younger generations (age differences). Increased resources and political efficacy, high voter turnout, and strong issue-based interests all appear to be related to greater political participation by older people than younger people. However, whether these generational and age differences will indeed result in pro-elderly policy bias is another matter of inquiry. In contrast to the theorem of median voters, a significant proportion of Japanese elderly voters would seem to prefer a policy option seen as inequality-averse or altruistic and vote out of concerns for the well-being of future/younger generations. Fairness orientation that concerns the utility of future/younger generations can be accounted for by government-subsidized pensions, universalized LTCI benefits, and wealthier baby boomers. Pro-elderly policy bias is less likely as long as policy makers acknowledge and exploit this structural opportunity for maintaining a sustainable level of social security.

Elderly people in Japan are now expected to do more to organize their interests, while not necessarily maximizing only their own utility. These conditions, such as growing needs, limited resources and fundamental value changes, at a rather general level are likely to contribute to an expansion of elderly interest representation over a long period of time.

The factor for the explanation of increases in elderly interest representation is found in the fundamental shift of policy beliefs, such as WHO-driven "active aging," with a holistic, inclusive approach to aging. In shorter terms, one cohort factor, the *dankai* generation, which has collectively experienced turbulent events, stands out among contributory factors. *Dankai's* participation in public life increased at considerable rates, reflecting the inclusive nature of the coming aged population. It may shape a new collective belief or expectation of social networks to bring different generations together across different social divides.

The complex causal links of these factors, which are shaping the role of age and the aged, suggest the need for a renewed examination of the direction and nature of participation by the elderly in the political process of Japanese society.

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<sup>1</sup> The conceptualization of *kyōsei*, which is an attitude to respect each other's sanctuaries, was pioneered in 1987 by Kurokawa Kishō (1987), and embraced and expanded by other scholars. From 1998 to 2004, the Inquiry Committee on *Kyōsei* Society, established in the House of Councillors, extensively investigated the problems between the elderly and the youth. The idea of *kyōsei* has become an integral part of national policy. Almost all webpages of local governments in Japan are partly used to disseminate information with regard to their *kyōsei* policy.

<sup>2</sup> In 2015 the Public Office Election Law was amended to lower the voting age from 20 to 18. The NIPSSR estimated the figures, according to the old minimum voting age of 20.

<sup>3</sup> However, it is important to note that the rate of *kōenkai* membership for local election candidates peaked at 30.3 percent in 1987 and over the past decade it sharply dropped to 8.7 percent in 2015 (ASSK 2016: 48). Changes in social networks are yet to be examined.

<sup>4</sup> In this section, the survey questions and figures are based on data files that are provided by the Association for Promoting Fair Elections, or else specifically cited. The social security

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system in Japan is comprised of pensions, health and long-term care insurance, public assistance, policy for people with disabilities and labor insurance, although it has been constantly revised and reformed.

<sup>5</sup> For other government surveys on social security benefits and burdens, see Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (JCO), “Shakai Hoshōseido ni Kansuru Tokubetsu Chōsa” [Special Opinion Survey on the Social Security System], July 24 - August 3, 2008; Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (JCO), “Kōreisha no Keizai Seikatsu ni Kansuru Ishiki Chōsa” [Public Opinion Survey on Elderly People’s Economic Life], October 13 – 23, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Figures are adopted from the database of *chiholog*, available at <https://chiholog.net/chiholog> (accessed December 14, 2021). In 2021, 100 percent of prefectures (47/47) and 85 percent of municipalities (1474/1724) made their minutes and agendas available on their Website.

<sup>7</sup> The figure is adopted from the *Kikuzo II Visual* (online article database) from the Asahi Shimbun Company.

<sup>8</sup> The estimated figures are adopted from the U.S. Census (Housing Vacancy Survey), March 12, 2022 and the EROSTAT (EU-SILC survey), March 9, 2022.