

## Aging Electorates and Intergenerational Equity in Japanese Politics

Prime Minister Kishida sounded the alarm in a policy speech at the opening of this year's National Diet session that Japan was “on the brink of not being able to maintain social functions” due to the country's population crisis. The country's median age is 49 — the second highest in the world. This raises an important question related to intergenerational equity. Do older voters prioritize their short-term self-interest at the expense of other generations?

In political terms, the median age of actual voters is 59 – those who actually voted in Lower House elections. The focus of electoral politics in Japan may shift from taxpayers to pensioners, suggesting that the elderly will exert more political pressure on policymakers as the population ages.

The most common approach to this question is the simple model of majoritarian decision-making, in which all political outcomes reflect median voter preferences. Based on this model, we would expect aging voters to be inevitably self-interested and thus support more generous social benefits, even at the expense of other generations. But the updated surveys show otherwise in the case of Japan.

In Japan, voter turnout has consistently been higher—and has steadily increased—among older people. The age gap in Japan's voter turnout is exceptionally high, with an OECD study finding a gap of 25 percentage points between voters 55 and older and voters under 35, as compared with the OECD average of only 12 percentage points. Assuming that high turnout is a reflection of political interest, does this mean that elderly voters influence politics in a self-interested way, to the detriment of younger generations? Again, no studies have found clear evidence for such self-interest among Japan's elderly voters.

In the early 2000s, the general public became seriously concerned over the seemingly unsustainable level of social security. Indeed, the elderly, more than any other cohort of the population, consider social security issues important to their votes. Yet old people are not so explicitly self-interested as predicted by the median voter model. A series of surveys on the burden-sharing of social security, conducted by the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, the elderly respondents support policy constraints on themselves just as much as other age cohorts did.

Internationally, the Japanese elderly are seen as more accepting of intergenerational equity than in other countries. Cross-national surveys on those 60 and older, conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020, asked whether government policy should prioritize younger people over older people or vice versa. Over the period, Japan had the highest percentage (31%), agreeing that “young people should be prioritized,” as compared with those of US (14%), Germany (17%), and Sweden (17%).

The assumption of 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 may contribute to this situation.

First, the most fundamental condition influencing public attitudes toward social security is changes in demographics. In the early 2000s, the urgent need for social security reform in Japan's population crisis began to arouse great public attention. Policymakers brought the

issue into an ongoing discussion, and the media acted as information providers, to make it more visible to voters. Public discourse played a significant role in influencing the attitudes of the elderly toward social security benefits in a constrained manner.

The second condition is a distinctive generational difference in political attitudes. The *dankai* cohort (around 7 million baby boomers), who were born between 1947 and 1949, collectively experienced turbulent events in their youth—Japan’s rapid economic growth, anti-establishment student movements, industrial pollution, and the Vietnam War, among others. The *dankai*-specific socializing experiences reveal life-long patterns of progressiveness and a collective propensity to consider the common good rather than sectional interests alone. In the 2009 election, for example, the greatest proportion (49%) of voters age 60–69 (the *dankai* cohort was 60–62) voted for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) that toppled the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japanese conservative politics.

Third, Japan’s elderly cohort has the highest labor-force participation among the OECD group of major industrial countries. Nearly half of all Japanese men ages 60 to 70, and one-quarter of those 70 to 75, are still in the workforce. About three quarters of the Japanese elderly workforce of those 65 and over are working in nonregular positions and these old people indeed consider social security issues important to their votes. This less secure position of contract or temporary workers does not necessarily mean that elderly voters influence politics in a self-interested way, to the detriment of younger generations. Employed elderly people continue to find security in 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.

The fourth factor is the ironic impact of Japan’s public, mandatory long-term care insurance (LTCI) on the elderly. The dramatic rise of its operation costs has undermined the fiscal stability, yet this universal system weakens self-interested political activism by the elderly. Eligibility is not based on income or family situations but purely on age and physical/mental conditions: all older people (65 or older, plus those 40–64 with aging-related diseases) are eligible for nearly the full range of institutional or community-based care, depending on functional and cognitive status.

Finally, self-employed individuals, of whom 40% are 65 or older and have no mandatory retirement age, hold opinions consonant with the protection of their small businesses, often against the interests of elderly consumption. Over 10 million people belong to Nōkyō (Japan Agricultural Cooperatives). As Zenchū (Central Union) of Nōkyō serves as the political arm and thus represents their interests, the elderly in farming households have less incentive to organize and speak out on their own.

The overall implication is that if policymakers effectively seize these rather altruistic/inequality-averse attitudes in their policymaking, aging does not necessarily lead to politically charged generosity for the elderly, at the expense of other generations. The complex causal links among 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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