

Prosperity's Children: Generational Change and Japan's Future Leadership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study measures generational differences in the views of Japanese legislators across three key areas of Japan's political discourse—economic policy, security policy, and cultural issues related to right-wing nationalism. The study then explores the policy implications of these differences through three plausible midterm scenarios.

MAIN FINDINGS

The study of generational differences provides only a limited explanation for the dynamics of Japanese politics. (1) Generational differences are most significant in domestic economic policy, where the eldest cohort favors maintaining the institutions of Japanese-style capitalism more than both younger cohorts. (2) Although the youngest cohort favors more muscular security policies than do the elder cohorts, only one instance of this generational difference proves statistically significant. (3) Even though there are no statistically significant differences between generations on cultural issues related to right-wing nationalism—an unexpected finding in itself—that the midcareer cohort, which is the primary object of this study, is more progressive than the other cohorts in this area is surprising.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Given that generational differences in two of the three most salient dimensions of Japanese politics are statistically significant in only a few instances, the findings of this study do not support expectations for impending policy transformation based on generational change.
- Japanese leaders are likely to continue trying to reform the domestic economy, especially in areas such as fiscal policy and public works.
- U.S. and Japanese alliance managers should expect continued support from Tokyo for enhanced Japanese roles and missions over the medium term despite an increasing number of questions over U.S. motives and intentions.
- Because the range of security and economic policy preferences is less extreme than is sometimes presumed, U.S. policymakers should not overreact when Japanese leaders question U.S. policies.
- Barring an unforeseen event, the study finds no evidence that right-wing nationalism in Japan will become a major problem for U.S.-Japan relations.

A new generation of politicians will rise to occupy the highest positions of political leadership in Japan over the next five to fifteen years. In the course of this transition future leaders will face challenges both new and old. On the one hand, these leaders will need to navigate a political landscape in which many traditional “paths to power”—the stepping stones in career trajectories leading to the highest party and government posts—appear to have been undermined by over a decade of electoral, campaign finance, and party reforms; by the development of a nascent two-party system; and by increased volatility in voting patterns among the electorate. On the other hand, these politicians will be called on to deal with long-standing issues on the national agenda, such as constitutional revision, the pressing need to reform government spending practices, and demands from both home and abroad for Japan to assume a more activist security posture. How will members of this new generation respond to this changed—and still changing—political environment? Will they cohere as an identifiable group with shared values and preferences, or will fundamental differences in political orientation cause this generation to fragment into different policy camps? Will the new distribution of values and preferences differ from that of the generation currently in power?

This study considers whether generational change spells political change for Japan. Drawing on Diet member survey data and elite interviews, this article examines the preferences of over 450 of the 480 members of Japan’s House of Representatives (HOR) in order to gauge the policy views of those who will come to lead Japan over the next fifteen years and compare these views to the policy views of the older and younger age cohorts. The study finds that however much change is afoot, much continuity remains in the distribution of policy preferences among Japanese elites—and that party affiliation is consistently more important than generational location in defining this distribution. Generational differences appear strongly significant in economic policy, where the younger generations are clearly less supportive of the institutions of Japanese-style capitalism than the older generation. In security policy, however, although the youngest cohort’s enthusiasm for strengthening Japan’s defense capabilities distinguishes this generation from the current leadership generation on many important issues—including whether to reinterpret the constitution to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense—no significant divisions among the three generations are apparent. Finally, in what may be the study’s most surprising finding, the sides in Japan’s “culture war” over history and traditional values do not appear to be drawn along generational lines. In sum, generational differences matter

more on economic policy issues, less on security, and almost not at all on cultural issues.

This article is divided into four main sections:

- ≈ pp. 18–24 clarify the study’s theoretical assumptions and methodological approach through a review of the literature on political generations
- ≈ pp. 24–38 develop generational classifications for postwar Japan and map the contemporary political discourse to provide context for the policy dimensions examined
- ≈ pp. 38–45 focus on the midcareer cohort—first comparing the members of this generation with their younger and elder colleagues and then considering what promising figures from this key group might assume future leadership roles
- ≈ pp. 45–51 assess the possible implications of the study’s findings for policymaking in three midterm scenarios

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Assumptions

The concept of political generation is intuitive but at the same time deceptively complex. Though theorists have proposed several different models for explaining how generations shape political change, two are dominant: the experiential model and the maturation model.¹ First offered by Karl Mannheim in 1928, the experiential model is still used most widely.² Mannheim suggests that political values formed by particular historical experiences become an enduring part of a youth’s intellectual orientation. Yet contemporaneity is not a sufficient condition for the formation of a political generation. A group of similarly aged individuals becomes politically relevant only when “endowed...with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process”—that is, when such individuals also experience the same historical events.³ Mannheim refers to these events

¹ For a review of the full range of approaches, see Richard J. Samuels, ed., *Political Generations and Political Development* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1977); and Richard G. Braungart and Margaret M. Braungart, “Political Generations,” in *Research in Political Sociology*, volume 4, ed. Richard G. Braungart and Margaret M. Braungart (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1989): 281–319.

² Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” in *From Karl Mannheim*, 2nd edition, ed. Kurt H. Wolff, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993), 351–95. For recent comparative applications, see Bruno Wanrooij, “Youth, Generation Conflict, and Political Struggle in Twentieth-Century Italy,” *European Legacy* 4, no. 1 (1999): 72–88; and Olena Nikolayenko, “The Revolt of the Post Soviet Generation: Youth Movements in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine,” *Comparative Politics* 39, no. 2 (2007): 169–88.

³ Mannheim, “Problem of Generations,” 79.

as “crystallizing agents.”⁴ When shared crystallizing agents are absent there will be greater diversity of “generational units” within the same cohort. In Mannheim’s view distinctive politically relevant generations are more likely to form in times of rapid social change:

Whether a new generational style emerges every year, every thirty, every hundred years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all depends entirely on the trigger action of the social and cultural process.⁵

The maturation (or “life cycle”) model is often associated with S.N. Eisenstadt’s structural-functional model of individual development in a stable society.⁶ In Eisenstadt’s view values change as individuals age. The demands of adult life temper youthful rebelliousness, with adult roles shaping new social and political orientations. Eisenstadt sees the smoothly functioning society as one that allocates roles in part on the basis of age. Political orientations are thus temporal in such a society. Although initially formed as a response to an established order, political orientations change as youths adjust to adult society.

There have been relatively few studies of political generations in Japan. Kenneth Pyle has analyzed the Meiji generation of young leaders and identified how this generation both instigated political change and inspired social and intellectual trends.⁷ In a longitudinal study of the careers and political orientations of radical students in postwar Japan Ellis Krauss provides evidence for the usefulness of the experiential model, especially for analyzing the most highly politicized members of his sample.⁸ Through an examination of Japanese survey data Nobutaka Ike suggests that more than one variety of generational change prevails.⁹ More recently Tanaka Aiji

⁴ Ibid., 365, 385.

⁵ Ibid., 385.

⁶ S.N. Eisenstadt, *From Generation to Generation: Age Groups and Social Structure* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1956). For application and elaboration of this model, see Richard A. Settersten, Jr., and Karl Ulrich Mayer, “The Measurement of Age, Age Structuring, and Life Course,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997): 233–61; and Michael J. Shanahan, “Pathways to Adulthood in Changing Societies: Variability and Mechanisms in Life Course Perspective,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 667–92.

⁷ Kenneth B. Pyle, *The New Generation in Meiji Japan: Problems of Cultural Identity, 1885–1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

⁸ Ellis S. Krauss, *Japanese Radicals Revisited: Student Protest in Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

⁹ Nobutaka Ike, “Economic Growth and Intergenerational Change in Japan,” *American Political Science Review* 67, no. 4 (December 1973): 1194–203.