ORIGINAL PAPER

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Local level political and institutional changes in Japan: An end to political alienation?

Abstract *Background:* In Japan, a steady increase of non-voters is evident on the national and local levels over the past few decades. However, since the mid-1990s, a new wave of political participation at the local level has attracted politicians as well as social scientists. Citizen participation is increasing in terms of the number of non-profit organizations, participatory procedures, and engagement in new political networks. Citizens growing involvement in local politics coincides with institutional changes that offer new autonomy in respect of local policy-making. *Objectives:* In this paper, we will argue that these local trends might have an impact on national politics through the repolitization of citizens. However, preconditions are, ceteris paribus, the restoration of political trust through participation and institutional changes that support citizen involvement in politics.

Introduction

The past decades have seen a rapid and widely noted increase in the Japanese electorate's political apathy at the national level. Voter turnout has decreased dramatically and the number of political non-supporters has risen. However, since the mid-1990s changes have been observed in local politics that indicate a paradigm shift from politics for the people towards politics with the people. Citizen involvement in non-profit organizations is increasing, new forms of participation

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like public hearings and referenda have been introduced, and new political networks compete with established political parties.

Increased citizen political involvement coincides with decentralization reforms that give local governments more responsibility and more autonomy from the national government. These two tendencies can be regarded as an indicator of the end of alienation from politics—at least on the local level. The crucial question is whether or not local changes have the potential to serve as a driving force for a return of citizen engagement in politics on the national level as well. Theoretical debates on the transfer conditions for political attitudes and behaviour from the local to the national level indicate that at least two preconditions are decisive for transferability, namely political trust and local politics' responsiveness to citizens' demands. This paper will discuss institutional and political changes in Japanese local governments with regard to their potential to fulfil the preconditions for the restoration of political trust and responsiveness.

We start off by presenting data comparing conventional political participation on the national and local level in order to demonstrate the overall tendency towards non-voting. By using public opinion polls on the Japanese public's attitudes towards national and local politics, we highlight the noticeable loss of public faith in Japan's political leaders and institutions. Next, we contrast these developments with an overview of recent trends in citizen participation at the local level. Finally, we will explore the institutional and political changes concerning citizen involvement at the local level in order to answer the question on whether or not they have the potential to serve as a driving force to end political disengagement in Japan.

A comparison of conventional political participation on the national and local level

The national level

In the past, one of the main characteristics of electoral behaviour in Japan was relatively high levels of voter turnout in elections together with ordinary citizens' low political involvement (Hrebenar 2000: 17). Compared to German, American or Dutch voters, Japanese voters already had lower levels of party loyalty, trust in politics, and interest in politics in the second half of the 1970s (Richardson 1991: 25).

Figure 1 reveals a steady decrease in the turnout rate since the early 1960s. During the 1990s, the turnout rates declined further and reached a historical low during the 1996 Lower House elections with a turnout of only 59.6%. Although it increased slightly in 2000 and 2005 due to political polarization, this cannot be regarded as a change in the trend.[1]

As mentioned above, Japanese voters have been disinterested in or were even hostile towards political parties for quite some time; party identification has therefore declined dramatically as well. The number of non-partisans increased considerably from around 16% in 1966 to 34% in 1972. Their number was more or

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[1] In interpreting voter turnout rates, one should distinguish between long-term trends caused by major structural determinants and short-term fluctuations caused by political polarizations idiosyncratic to a specific election.
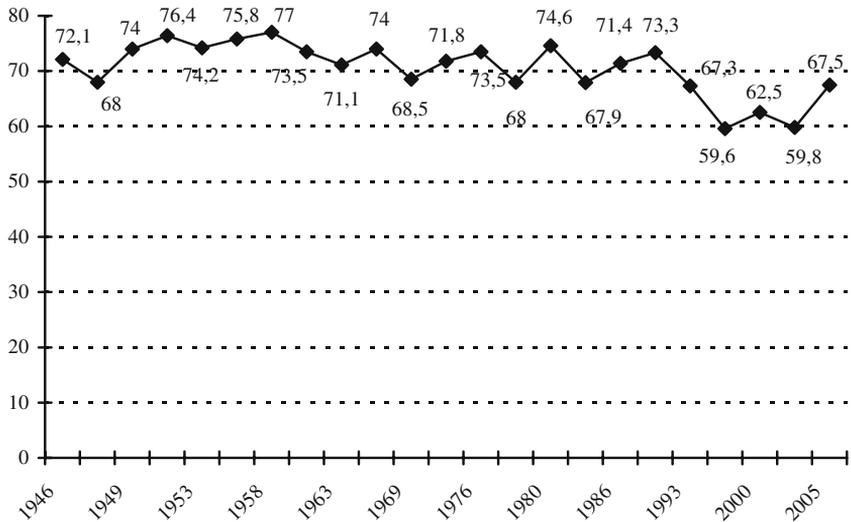
Fig. 1 Voter turnout during the Lower House elections 1946–2005. Source: Election Department, Local Administration Bureau, Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts, and Telecommunications. Note: Since 1996: voter turnout in the single constituencies

less stable during the 1970s and 1980s, but the 1990s saw a further dramatic increase from 32% in 1990 to 48% in 1996 (Schmidt 2001: 194). Today non-partisans make up the largest group of respondents in public opinion polls. The results of the "party support question"[2] employed by the Jiji Press surveys to measure partisanship in Japan show that between 1998 and 2003 around 60% of the respondents claimed not to support any party (Table 1).

There has not only been a distinct tendency for a large portion of the electorate to refrain from commitment to any political party, but also a shift in the composition of the non-supporters. In the 1960s, non-partisanship was rife among the older, less educated workers in fishery, forestry or agriculture and the self-employed. In the 1980s and 1990s, this group was, conversely, chiefly comprised of younger, better-educated employees living in large cities (Schmidt 2001: 194–96). As in other industrialized nations, we find a distinct shift from so-called "apolitical non-supporters" to "cognitively mobilized non-supporters" (Inglehart 1990: 363).

The local level

At the local level,[3] these trends are oblivious as well. As visible in Fig. 2, voter turnout has decreased in all elections. In 1951, 91% of the eligible voters cast their ballots at local assembly elections; in 2003, this number dropped to only 55.9%.

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[2] The respondents were asked, "What party do you support?"

[3] The local government system in Japan is a two-tiered system, comprising 47 prefectures and approximately 2,000 municipalities (special Tokyo wards, designated (largest) cities, cities, towns and villages). The political and administrative structures are based on a popularly elected executive (the governor of prefectures, the mayor of municipalities) and an assembly. The assembly members, governor and mayor are elected once every 4 years.

Table 1 Party support 1998–2003 (in %)

Year/month	1998		1999		2000		2001		2002		2003	
Party	1	6	1	6	1	6	1	6	1	6	1	6
LDP	23.1	22.2	20.7	21.6	22.3	23.6	23.1	28.3	26.5	20.6	20.9	21.9
DPJ	–	–	4.9	3.4	5.1	5.2	6.8	3.9	4.3	4.5	3.5	4.2
Kômeitô	–	–	2.8	3.4	4.3	4.9	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.2	3.4	3.2
JCP	4.0	2.2	3.0	2.9	2.9	2.6	2.8	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.8
LP	–	–	1.9	0.9	1.1	1.4	1.5	2.5	2.4	2.9	1.7	2.0
SDPJ	2.9	2.8	2.5	2.4	2.5	2.2	2.1	2.5	2.6	2.0	1.4	1.6
No party	59.5	59.2	60.3	61.2	58.0	55.8	57.0	54.9	57.2	63.0	65.0	63.1

Source: Jiji Press in: Seikai kanchô jinji roku 2003: 22–25
LDP Liberal-Democratic Party (*Jiyû minshu tô*), *DPJ* Democratic Party of Japan (*Nihon minshu tô*), *SDPJ* Social Democratic Party of Japan (*Nihon shakai minshu tô*), *LP* Liberal Party (*Jiyûtô*); in November 2003, the party merged with the DPJ

While voter turnout is comparably low at the local level today, partisanship is traditionally even lower than at the national level (Richardson 1997: 88). Most candidates run as independents, and in 2003, nearly 80% of all elected officials in sub national politics were independents (Election Department, Local Administration Bureau). Even though it is well known that the majority of independent candidates are supported by one or more political parties, running as an independent indicates a commitment to the local community but not to party politics, which seems to correspond to the voters' weak party attachment.

As Table 2 indicates, in 2003, for example, only around 20% of the voters surveyed by the Society for the Promotion of Clean Elections (*Akarui senkyo suishin kyôkai*) indicated that affiliation to a political party was decisive for their vote at prefectural elections, while the majority (68.8%) reported that the personality of the candidate had influenced their decision. For the elections of local assemblies, this figure was 14.2% for the party and 75% for the candidate.
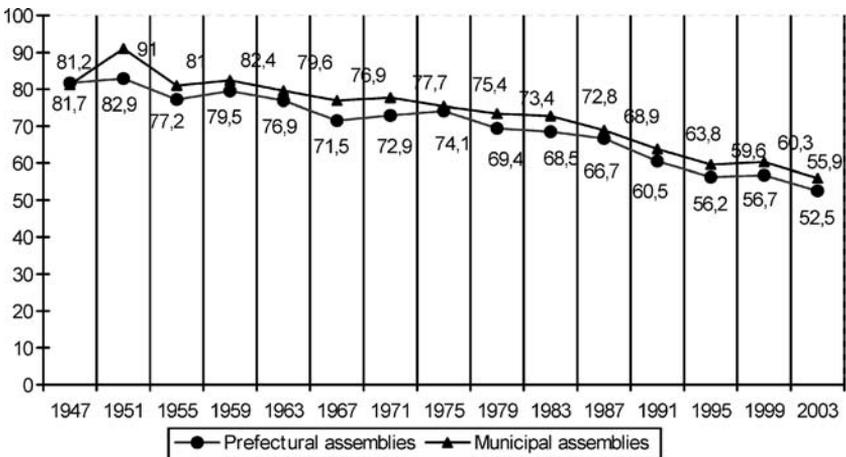

Fig. 2 Voter turnout at prefectural and local assembly elections 1947–2003. Source: Akarui senkyo suishin kyôkai 2004: 25

Table 2 Party orientation vs. candidate image in sub national elections and national elections during the 1990s (in %)

Year	Lower house elections		Elections to prefectural assemblies		Elections to local assemblies	
	Party	Candidate	Party	Candidate	Party	Candidate
1990/91	51.2	37.3	28.8	56.8	16.4	69.5
1995/96	40.6	49.1	18.3	70.7	11.5	74.4
1999/2000	43.4	43.8	23.8	63.1	10.8	77.8
2003	46.1	42.8	19.6	68.8	14.2	75.2

Source: Sub national elections: Akarui senkyo suishin kyôkai 1992: 24, 1996: 23, 1999: 38, 2004: 10 (Q 19), 14 (Q 36). National Elections: Akarui senkyo suishin kyôkai 2001: 34; 2003: 8 (Q8)

Note: The figures are data from election studies conducted during each election. National elections were held in 1990, 1996, 2000 and 2003; sub national elections were held in 1991, 1995, 1999 and 2003. Respondents without an opinion were excluded

A comparison of political trust as a source of legitimacy on the national and local level

A certain level of trust in political institutions has been assumed as a prerequisite for representative democracies' legitimacy and stability (Lipset 1962: 64; Almond and Powell 1966, Powell 1982, Dalton 1996). Easton (1965) analysed political trust as based on the concept of political support, and distinguished between "specific support," in respect of just the incumbent authorities and, "diffuse support" in respect of the system itself. Contrary to specific support, the latter extends to all objects of political support. Generally speaking, the term stands for attitudes that are less related to what an object actually does than to what it represents. It is a set of attitudes that is quite stable and refers to the objects as such. Diffuse support can be created in two ways: through socialization processes or through direct experience. In the second case, members of society acknowledge good experiences with the political system by transferring them to a more abstract level, i.e. into diffuse political support. It is more or less a spill-over effect of specific support created over a longer period of time (Easton 1965: 273). In this sense, Easton's system analysis is a dynamic concept. Constant interactions between the system and the citizens cause reciprocal effects, i.e. the performance of the system influences citizens' attitudes and vice versa.

Public opinion polls on the Japanese public's attitudes toward key institutions and political leadership show a noticeable loss of public faith in Japan's political leaders and institutions during the 1990s. Only a minority of the public expressed any confidence in their political system, and only a quarter of the pollees felt that democracy works well in Japan. The polls furthermore reveal a steadily increasing loss of confidence in Japanese politicians and bureaucrats (Schmidt 2005a: 111–118).

While Japan and other advanced industrialized countries have similar reasons for the decrease in political support, such as the ongoing value change among the young, better-educated, post materialist citizens in urban districts, and the weakening of political ideologies' binding power, other reasons, such as the political elite's high involvement in corruption, the LDP's constant majority, as

well as the weak opposition parties, seem to be unique to Japan (for this discussion see Schmidt 2005c).

The following analyses comparing citizens' trust in national and local politics are based on the four-yearly surveys conducted during the sub national elections by the Society for the Promotion of Clean Elections. The data include around 3000 cases per poll. As can be seen from Fig. 3, there is a noticeable loss of public faith in Japan's politics on all levels of the system. In 1991, the poll showed that 40% of those polled trusted or somewhat trusted national politics, but by 2003, this share had dropped to only 13.7%. As we mentioned earlier, this appears to have been the result of a combination of political scandals, the failure of political reform, and the reduced chance of political change.

The growing confidence gap in national leaders and institutions is reflected in local politics, where there is a steady downward trend in citizens' trust in local politics as well. In 1991, 54.8% of those polled trusted or somewhat trusted local politics. In 2003, this figure had dropped to 35.2%. It is quite obvious that the constant relationship of mutual exchange between the national and sub national levels creates reciprocal effects, even though citizens' trust in local politics is three times higher than their trust in national politics. Today the confidence gap is expressed in an increasing number of non-voters and unaffiliated voters as well as in a steadily declining voter turnout rate, but in the long run it could threaten the stability and legitimacy of Japan's political system and leadership.

In this situation, the local political level gains importance. If local government were to allow political participation, it could foster citizens' trust in local authorities that could spread to the national level and help to enhance the legitimacy and trust of the political system as a whole. The local level can therefore function as a political legitimacy resource for higher levels of government. However, the most important precondition to have a positive spill-over effect from the local to the national level is for citizens' trust in the local level to be
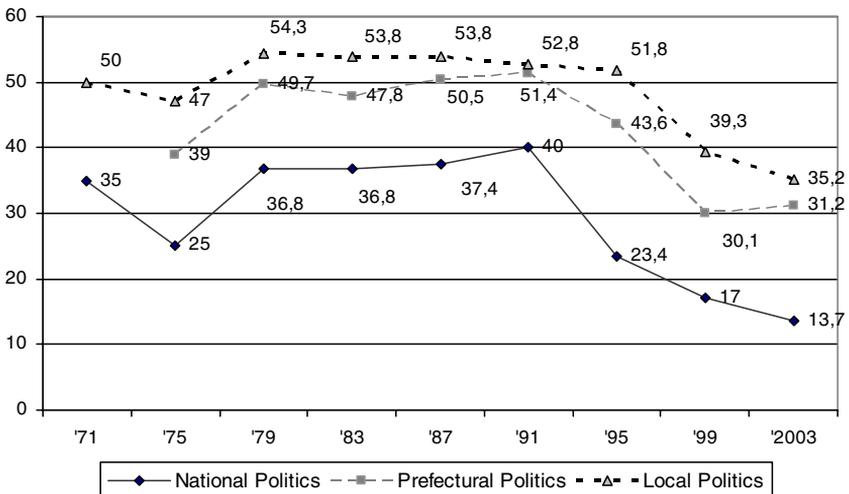

Fig. 3 Trust in national, prefectural and local politics 1971–2003. Source: Akarui senkyo suishin kyôkai 2004: 51

higher than their trust in the national level (Vetter 2002a: Chap. 1, Vetter 2002b: 608–610, 616–619, Easton 1965: 347, Page and Goldsmith 1987: 5).

New local tendencies: revival of political participation

In contrast to declining voter turnouts, growing dealignment from existing parties and rising distrust in political institutions and leaders, we observe an increasing number of citizens engaging in citizens' activities on the local level. In the following section, we will distinguish between individual engagement in local affairs, institutionalised engagement in NPOs and engagement in citizen networks that participate in local politics as an alternative to conventional parties. While the former is more often than not philanthropically oriented, the latter is explicitly political in terms of nominating candidates for local elections. NPO engagement is regarded as something in-between, because many NPOs strive for the realisation of the organisation's purpose by trying to influence social and political outcomes on the local level.

The "volunteer revolution" and the rise of NGOs

The Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake that hit the Kobe area in January 1995 is said to have ushered in the "Age of Volunteerism" in Japan (Kaimura 2001: 4). More than one million volunteers from all over Japan came to support the victims. In contrast to the local politicians and bureaucrats' ineffectiveness in dealing with the catastrophe, their help was praised as "... a bright spot in the otherwise grim scene of disaster" (Yamamoto 1999: 99). After the earthquake, the social welfare sector specifically experienced a boom in volunteer activities. The number of volunteer groups in the various welfare activity fields increased from 861 in 1995 to 1915 in 2002 (Kobayashi 2004: 130).

The rise in the number of volunteers is regarded as an indicator of a new kind of consciousness among citizens who have realized the limits of the state's capacity to organize relief and who are thus experiencing a new kind of power. Even though these activities are more often than not motivated by social interests and a search for self-fulfilment, they are political in that sense that they demonstrate the emancipation of the passive citizens from the state. The boom in volunteer activities is therefore regarded as the beginning of the emergence of civil society in Japan (Yamamoto 1999, Satô 2002).

Nevertheless, the emergence of civil society in Japan was evident before the earthquake. According to the "Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities" (STULA),[4] there was a rapid increase in the number of persons engaged in voluntary activities in the 1980s. In 1976, only 7.4% of the respondents said that they engaged in voluntary activities. In 1986, this number had increased to 24.9% (STULA according to Omori and Yonezawa 2002, Table 2). The 1990s saw a

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[4] The survey has been conducted every five years since 1976 by the Statistical Bureau, Ministry of Public management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, with the 6th survey done in October 2001. It collects data on 77 thousand households constituting 210 thousand people. For details see: http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/shakai/2001/kodo/yoyakuk.htm

further increase. According to the latest STULA survey, nearly 30% of people participated in some kind of "volunteer activities" in 2001. Compared with 1996, there was an increase in all age groups, with a particularly sharp increase in the age groups up to the early 20s (see Fig. 4).

When the participation rate in "volunteer activities" is broken down per gender, similar to the citizen networks (see below), the female participation rate (30.6%) is higher than the male participation rate (27.0%). This indicates a new potential for political mobilisation that has been under-utilised to date. With regard to the type of activity, the highest participation was in "local improvement activities" at 14.0%. We could argue that engagement in community affairs is the basis for building up attachment and local identity, both of which are regarded as the foundation of political trust. When the participation rate in "volunteer activities" is broken down per city group, the average number of participation days becomes greater, the larger the population is. The highest can be observed in large cities with a population of 1 million or more (STULA, Chap. 2). Even though volunteering is not always related to direct political involvement, the large number of volunteers represents a potential for participation in local policy-making. Because it is still individualistic and spontaneous, it offers experiences in participation and may serve as a training ground for conventional political activities.

Besides the increase in Japanese who become active as a volunteer for some public purpose, an increasing number of NGOs have started to channel this "volunteer energy". As can be seen from Fig. 5, the number of NPOs shows a steady upward trend. The number of NGOs rose from 1,724 in 1999 to 19,155 in 2004. The majority (17,494) is active on the local level, while only a few (1,661) act nationwide (see Cabinet Office, http://www.jimin.jp/jimin/npo/shiryo/ naikaku/naikaku03.pdf).

The main working environment for NGOs is in Tokyo, where the ratio of organizations per 10,000 inhabitants is 2.84, while it is lowest in rural Kagoshima prefecture with only 0.68 organizations per 10,000 people (see http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/16/08/04081301/008/008.pdf).
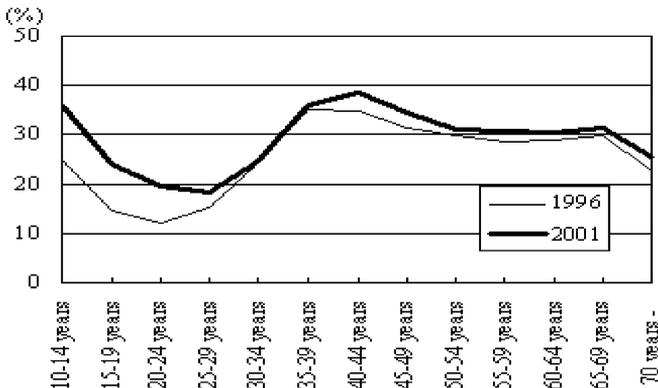

Fig. 4 A comparison between 1996 and 2001 volunteer activity participation rates per age group. Source: STULA 2001, Fig. 3
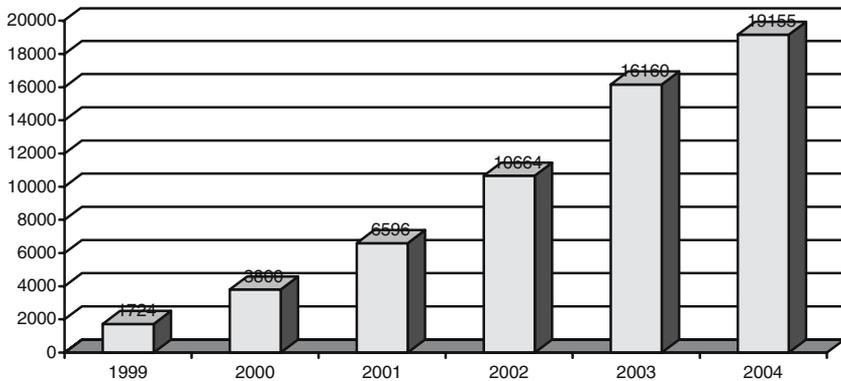
Fig. 5 Growth in the number of NGOs between 1999–2004. Source: http://www.jimin.jp/jimin/npo/shiryo/naikaku/naikaku03.pdf

The social structure is also similar to volunteer and citizen networks: the activists are well-educated, young urban employees, students, and professionals in their 40s or 50s, united in their wish to participate in shaping their community and their dissatisfaction with conventional political performance.

Citizen networks

The citizen networks (*seikatsusha nettowâku*) are part of the consumer cooperative movement. *Nisseikyô* (*Nihon seikatsu kyôdô kumiai rengôkai*), the largest consumer cooperative umbrella organization in Japan was founded in 1951 with strong backing from leftist opposition parties, the Japan Communist Party and the Japan Socialist Party. Along with organic retailers and distributors with New Left influences, new consumer cooperatives, with their emphasis on grassroots-based and -initiated actions and dealing with various cultural, environmental, and women's issues, emerged in the early 1970s. One of them was the Seikatsu Club Consumer Cooperative Union (SCCU, *Seikatsu kurabu seikyô*), which was founded in Tokyo's Setagaya Ward in 1968. Its goal was primarily to offer safe, high quality products at fair prices with an emphasis on direct marketing from producer to consumer. Other cooperatives followed and currently they form an association of 25 consumer cooperatives that are active in 15 prefectures (Seikatsu Club 2004: 1). The association calls itself "Seikatsu Club Group" (*Seikatsu kurabu seikyô rengôkai*) and has a membership of about 340,000, which is more than the biggest opposition party, the DPJ, has.[5]

SCCU gave birth to two kinds of organizations: (1) The Workers Collective Movement (*wâkasû korekutibu*) and (2) the Political Network Movement. The Workers Collective Movement is a new form of working in which workers fund, manage and work in their own enterprise as an alternative to being employed by a corporation. Currently there are about 400 Workers Collectives embracing about 15,000 people in enterprises such as lunch-box preparation, bread-baking and other food-processing activities, care for the aged and handicapped, kindergartens,

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[5] In 2002, the number of DPJ party members was about 300,000. See Yomiuri nenkan 2003: 157.

recycling, editing, advertising and delivery of consumer materials (Tsubogô 2003: 218).

The Political Networks were founded in Tokyo in 1978 under the name "Citizen Group" (*grûpu seikatsusha*), now called Citizen Network (*seikatsusha nettowâku*).[6] In their own words " ... it was keenly felt that in order for the citizens' voice to be reflected in political work, it was necessary to participate in and reform politics." (Seikatsu Club 2004: 8). In 1979, they succeeded in having their first political candidate elected as a representative of Tokyo's Nerima Ward. Citizen Net enjoyed a major electoral victory in 1987, when 30 Net candidates won seats in local assemblies in Tokyo and Kanagawa. After the 1991 regional elections, when the networks expanded their activities into five additional prefectures (Chiba, Saitama, Hokkaidô, Nagano and Fukuoka) the Net had 75 representatives in prefectural and local assemblies. By 2003, this figure had increased to 153, all of whom were women (Fig. 6).[7]

The SCCU has evolved from an organic-food-buying collective to a broad-based and multi-faceted movement advocating radical changes in the structure of Japanese society. Expanding the network from Tokyo to other prefectures, it has been able to increase its influence substantially and to take part in local and prefectural politics to restructure Japanese society in a more egalitarian manner (Moen 2000: 63).

Their stronghold lies in Tokyo where they held six seats in the prefectural assembly in 2005 (5.1%), and 56 seats (3.2%) in the prefecture's local town assemblies (including Tokyo city ward assemblies). Overall, 3.2% does not seem very impressive, but it is noteworthy that Net candidates do not run in all elections. In the town assembly of Kokubunji in western Tokyo, e.g. they hold 11.5% of the seats (Schmidt 2005b: 35ff.).

The networks call themselves "local parties" (*rôkaru pâti*) and they have neither a central party organization nor do they have a party programme. Each candidate addresses issues affecting the residents in the local area in which she or he is running. Beyond this, the candidates are united in supporting the peace movement (e.g. defending the Peace Constitution, and fighting against U.S. military bases in Japan), protecting the environment (e.g. opposing nuclear energy, water and air pollution, and global environmental devastation), and working towards a new society based on peace and social justice (e.g. working against social discrimination of all types, and increasing social benefits for the elderly, handicapped, and children). They refrain from any political party affiliation, which is why they do not form coalitions with existing political parties (Moen 2000: 63; Tsubogô 2003: 221). With regard to their three basic principles, the German Green Party's influence (Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen) on the networks is undeniable. The principles are:

(1) The rotation of political functions (*rôteishon seido*), which means that assembly members are replaced after 2 to 3 legislative periods to prevent professionalization and burnout;

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[6] *Seikatsusha* literally means "consumer", but according to them it should be translated as "citizen": "Seikatsusha=*people who live*, in the sense of *inhabitants* rather than *consumers*." See: Seikatsu Club 2004: 8.
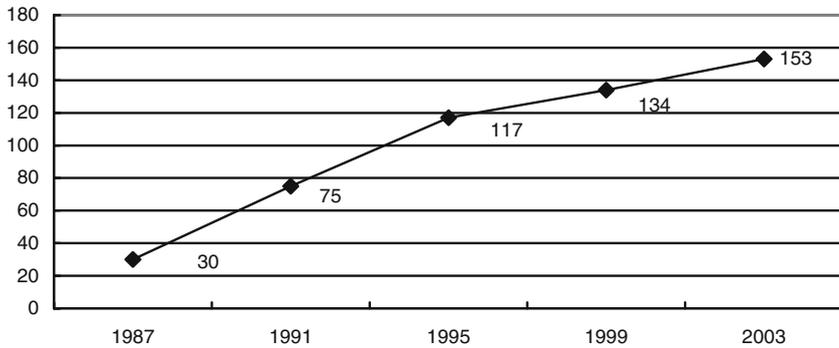[7] On the history of the SCCU also see Eto 2005: 323ff.

Fig. 6 The rise of Seikatsu-Net office holders at the sub national level during 1987–2003. Source: Tsubogô 2003: 216

(2) The donation of individual salaries earned through political functions for the SCCU's political activities;

(3) The organisation of election campaigns with volunteer staff only (Tsubogô 2003: 222).

With regard to the impact of these networks on local politics, two features are innovative and could influence citizens' view of politics. One is women's role in the networks and the other the membership's social composition.

Most striking is the fact that the networks are organized and managed by women.[8] It is therefore not surprising to find that the empowerment of women in Japan is high on the organization's agenda. Even though they do not exclude men from the networks, all candidates to date have been female. As many authors pointed out, women are largely underrepresented in Japanese politics (Yoshino and Imamura 2001: 147–150). Female representatives are quite rare, especially in the governing LDP, as well in the largest opposition party, the DPJ. During the assembly elections of the designated (largest) 12 cities in Japan in 1999, for example, approximately 20% of all the female candidates and the elected assembly members came from the networks, while only 10% of the female candidates were members of the biggest opposition party, the DPJ, and merely 5% were from the ruling LDP (Table 3).[9]

The figures indicate that contrary to the traditional parties, the networks create an opportunity for women's participation in politics, and challenge the traditional social norms of women's exclusion from the public sphere.

Besides the rise of women as political actors, it is worth mentioning the network candidates' social composition: of the 53 town assembly members in the Tokyo prefecture in 2003, the majority (54.7%) was between 40 and 49 years old, nearly 32% were older than 50 and younger than 60. Almost 50% had attended a four-year

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[8] In its early years, a few left-wing male activists ran the SCCU. The men thus in effect wielded the power in the group. Nowadays female members, who have gained experience and acquired a great deal of expertise, wield real power in the movement, taking responsibility for all its activities (Eto 2005: 330).

[9] The Japanese Communist party has actively recruited female candidates since the late 1960s, which is why the percentage of JCP members of all the female incumbents at the local level is very high.

Table 3 Female candidates and successful incumbents during the assembly elections of the designated (largest) cities in 1999 per party affiliation

Party	Elections to the assemblies of designated cities	
	Candidates	Elected persons
JCP	61 (36.1)	45 (38.5)
Networks	34 (20.1)	22 (18.8)
Independents	22 (13.0)	8 (6.8)
Kômeitô	19 (11.2)	18 (15.4)
Democratic Socialist Party	17 (10.1)	15 (12.8)
LDP	9 (5.3)	5 (4.3)
SDPJ/ *Shin shakai tô**	5 (3.0)	4 (3.4)
Others	2 (1.2)	– (-)
N=	169 (100)	117 (100)
Overall	169 (15.6)	117 (15.0)

Source: Yoshino/ Imamura (2001): 160
Note. Data in persons; ()= % of candidates and successful incumbents. * Founded in March 1996; leftist splinter group of the SDPJ

university course, which is much higher than the average (Schmidt 2005b 26f.). As Moen (2000: 74) pointed out, many of them were active in the student political movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, but tended to refrain from political activities because of disillusionment with electoral politics. The SCCU gave them the opportunity to re-enter the political arena in their own towns without the ideological boundaries embodied by either the Socialist Party or the Communist Party. We can therefore conclude that due to the rise of political networks, political options emerged on the local level in terms of organisation, political goals and political career paths.

Institutional changes as a precondition for restoring political trust

The socialising function of communities as "schools of democracy" was already emphasised by Tocqueville (1985) and Mill (1971). Tocqueville drew the conclusion that participation at the local level focuses people's attention on mutual responsibilities. Citizens are therefore educated to become "democratic individuals". Mill's argumentation mirrors these assumptions. Currently, empirical democratic theory considers the importance of the local level in order to stabilise democracies (Dahl 2000). The return to the local community is regarded as a means of compensating for developments like globalisation, liberalism and individualism that lead to citizen alienation and growing egoism (Etzioni 1996).

If municipalities were to play an essential compensating role in the socialisation of citizens' democratic attitudes, the local level's discretion would be an indispensable precondition. Discretion refers to the ability of actors within local governments to make decisions about the type and level of service it delivers within the formal statutory and administrative framework for local service delivery, and how that service should be provided and financed (Page and Goldsmith 1987: 5).

In the past, the central-local relations in Japan were strongly centralized. The Local Autonomy Act of 1947 was intended to insulate local government from

excessive interference by the central government: however, under the system of agency-delegated functions (*kikan i'nin jimu*), which was practiced from the 1950s onward, the central government in Japan had the authority to require local authorities to implement certain functions that they chose to delegate. In the 1970s, some 70 to 80% of administrative tasks performed by local authorities were of this nature (Stockwin 2003: 153). However, local government has never ceased to strive for more independence. During the 1970s, a combination of the deterioration of the living environment and the national government to deal with the crisis lead local citizen movements to call for independent local environmental politics. They demonstrated their power by voting for those candidates who promised to introduce strict environmental regulations. This result was the birth of what was called the "reformist local governments" (*kakushin jichitai*) and independent local environmental protection initiatives that met local people's demands (Foljanty-Jost 1988: 69–71, 2006a: 28–30). However, the phenomenon of agency-delegated functions meant that reformist local governments were subject to various kinds of pressure from the central administration in Tokyo. Moreover, to avoid further electoral defeat on the local level, the ruling conservative Liberal Democrats took over much of the opposition's policies and its electoral fortunes revived in the early 1980s (Hrebenar 1992: 289).

Domestic and international problems during the 1980s favoured the return of decentralization reform on the political agenda. After more than a decade of debate, the revision of more than 400 laws concerning local autonomy was approved by the Japanese parliament in 2000. It has been called one of the most spectacular reforms in post-war Japan because it eliminates the majority of formerly agency-delegated functions, and acknowledges local governments as political actors equal to the central government (for details see Foljanty-Jost 2006b forthcoming).

The new pattern of burden-sharing between central and local government is defined by law as follows: the national government is now limited to international affairs that involve the state or the international community (diplomacy, defence etc.), to affairs that should be defined and unified throughout the nation (standards of social welfare, labour standard etc.) and affairs that involve the enforcement of policies and projects undertaken from a national point of view (basic infrastructure, space projects etc.). Local government's role is to independently and comprehensively steer local public policies to promote the welfare of its residents. This implies that the central government can only intervene in local affairs where this has been legally defined. Local governments have responded to the increase in political autonomy by enacting local ordinances (*jôrei*) that serve as a political framework for local politics. Most of these ordinances are in line with the local citizens' growing engagement in local affairs by calling for partnership between citizens and local government, and offering new forms of participation and cooperation. The introduction of some kind of referendum seems to have become widespread, even though many of the referendum results still lack legal binding power. This demonstrates a remarkable response to citizens' demands since citizens have initiated referenda in the past, in the city of Maki, for instance, to stop the construction of a nuclear power plant. Besides the promotion of public hearings and the implementation of the Freedom of Information Law, administrative councils are now open to citizens to apply for membership. Innovations like these vary from local government to local government, but the diffusion of successful policies is visible (Sasaki 2004: 129–130).

However, to make these institutional and political changes work towards the restoration of political trust and citizens' renewed political participation, more reforms are required: one crucial point is the discrepancy between the new administrative independence and the continued financial dependency. The proportion of tax revenues granted to national and local governments is approximately 60:40, while expenditures are roughly vice versa. Even though local governments collect their own taxes, fees, and charges, they have never been able to cover more than 30% of their expenditure. This is why local autonomy in Japan has been called "30% autonomy", implying that only one third of revenues can be spent without the national government's control. Since the national government is still planning to drastically cut its contribution to education and social welfare, it has been criticized for duplicity in the decentralization of power. (Asahi shinbun 8.12.2005). Empirical research indicates that those prefectures with a relative high proportion of own local revenue are mostly engaged in new public management reforms (Kataoka 2004: 145–146). This indicates that local governments are striving to secure their independence by increasing public expenditure's efficiency.

Another focus for further reform might be the role of local assemblies. Local assemblies as well as mayors and governors are elected by direct popular vote. However, while the mayors and governors' role is traditionally strong, the majority of local assemblies is weak. Their lack of qualification, low political morale, and low level of activity are the most commonly mentioned criticisms (Etô 2004:19–25). In order to implement new modes of participation and relations between local government and citizens, local assemblies' involvement in policy-making processes, independent of the local administration, is believed to be crucial. Nonetheless, the prerequisites have improved under the decentralization reform: in order to encourage assembly members to submit a bill, the consent of one-twelfth of the assembly members is now sufficient instead of the previous one-eighth. This regulation favours citizens networks and offers them better conditions to improve their political performance, but as Etô (2004: 207–208) stresses, transparency and political education for assembly members are also urgently needed. According to his research, there are, however, local governments where assembly members already form networks of study groups, attend local graduate schools' programmes to improve their ability to prepare bills and organise "assembly member summits" to exchange views.

Like local politicians, local administration also has to change. Lacking efficiency, low motivation and creativity, and insufficient incentives have been listed as reason for citizens distancing themselves from local politics (Matsushita 2004: 147). According to Sasaki (2004: 126–29), civil servants should be educated with regard to responsible financial expenditure, effective time management, and their image of citizens. They should learn to accept citizens as equal partners, and be trained to organise civil participation in public hearings, administrative councils, and referenda. In order to secure changes in local administration, some local governments have already introduced some forms of evaluation, for example, in Hokkaido time spent on special functions is evaluated on a regular basis (Hidaka 2004: 74–75).

Conclusion

In Japan, the relationship between citizens and their government is undergoing a profound change. Conventional political participation has been eroding for more than a decade, and citizens have lost their trust in politicians and administration, have become sceptical about democratic institutions, and disillusioned with the democratic process. Japan's political system is losing its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, who are the foundation of the democratic system. Dissatisfaction with the present political system has grown most rapidly among the better educated, the more affluent, and young urban citizens, but among women as well.

New forms of citizen participation have simultaneously gained momentum at the local level, including community-based involvement in decision-making, participation in NGOs and volunteer activities. Citizen networks, which form a new kind of local party, can be regarded as distinctly different from the established political parties, indicating that citizens are ready to develop their own political alternatives. Not only the number, but also the composition of those citizens who become involved in local politics, is evolving: especially women and younger urban citizens are increasingly involved in these movements.

These new forms of citizens' involvement in local affairs are not an isolated social phenomenon, but are integrated into the broader context of a paradigm shift in local politics that started with institutional reforms of decentralization, but has already moved to new political innovations involving cooperation between politicians, administration, and citizens.

The decentralization reform has improved the preconditions for local governments to meet citizens' needs, while simultaneously providing citizens with the means to actively participate in local politics. This combination could be the foundation on which the restoration of political trust could be built. Citizen participation in governance is essential for enhancing public confidence and belief in governing institutions, state policies formulated to meet people's needs, and providing feedback on such policies. The ongoing process could therefore strengthen and further develop citizens' political involvement as long as institutional reforms and political improvements regarding politicians and civil servants' qualifications and professionalization continue, and independent financial local sources are guaranteed. The future will show whether the revitalisation of local politics and participation in local affairs can restore participation in elections as a core political behaviour.

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