

Reviews

Sherry L. Martin, *Popular Democracy in Japan: How Gender and Community Are Changing Modern Electoral Politics*, Cornell University Press, 2011, 191 pp., ISBN 0801449170
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We all know that citizens' distrust in politics has been an important driving force for political change at both local and national levels in Japan since the early 1990s. But how, exactly? Sherry L. Martin explores this question in this book mainly by analyzing the content of 'free answers' to a national survey and focus group discussions. This methodological approach, in my understanding, has an advantage over quantitative methods in two regards. First, it allows us to examine a causal mechanism by which distrust turns into a widespread protest against political elites, while quantitative methods only show correlations between them. Second, it makes it possible to reveal the potential direction of change, which has not yet been observed clearly in terms of the number of cases, while frequency always matters in quantitative methods. Equipped with these powerful tools, this study sheds light on how political activism quietly developed through grassroots 'women-centric networks,' which have not necessarily been well examined in political science.

Martin starts her investigation by asking the question, 'What keeps voters who we would expect to abstain interested in electoral politics?' (p. 7) In Japan, the majority of unaffiliated voters are women who have lower levels of resources for political participation. Nevertheless, those women are more likely to vote than men, especially in local elections. Rejecting the dominant explanations that emphasize the influence of civic duty and social networks, the author argues, 'Study group participation increases women's confidence in using voting in combination with other forms of political participation to pressure political elites for a more inclusive democracy.' (p. 14) This conclusion is acquired through analyzing the narratives among women in focus groups (Chapters 3 and 4), preceded by the examination of individual responses to open-ended questions in the Japanese Election and Democratic Study (JEDS) that indicates the psychological distance between citizens and politicians (Chapters 1 and 2).

More specifically, Chapter 3 gives 'a more nuanced interpretation of voting behavior that links local and national electoral outcomes' (p. 92) through understanding the attitudes expressed in a focus group discussion in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture. The participants, all women in their forties and fifties, were not necessarily involved in political activities, but were interested in politics while studying environment, health, and welfare issues in their local community.

Through the exchange of knowledge and accumulation of information, they felt more confident in challenging the decisions of public officials at the local level that they used to accept without question. Such an attitude fostered by communal activities is a key to understanding the gap between growing apathy toward national politics and increasing engagement in local action. According to Martin, 'Japanese voters reinvest their political resources into local politics where their efforts are most immediately felt.' (p. 93)

Chapter 4 explores the gendered reasons for political participation by analyzing two focus group discussions in Tokyo. The detailed analysis suggests that women's political participation is motivated by 'self-improvement and community development that are achieved through education and lifelong learning, independently and in the company of others.' (p. 103) Although these two groups consisted of different types of women, professionals and housewives, with different life experiences, they share the similar problem of 'how to establish a space for achieving one's personal goals that exists independent of care-giving roles and other constraints that women face in Japan.' (p. 106) While these groups are not political in their origins, rather they are characterized as study or hobby groups, the members develop 'a shared narrative about how gender and politics affected their opportunities and choices' (p. 107) by exchanging their experiences in their everyday lives. The link between the rapid proliferation of such study circles among women and their active political engagement is studied historically in Chapter 5, which suggests that "'Communities of practice" outside of institutions of formal education enrich a dense and vibrant civil society.' (p. 133)

What I find most interesting in this book is the author's argument to relate citizens' demand for participatory democracy and their support for strong leadership. According to Martin, these two are not contradictory because voters believe that 'strong political leaders can facilitate a collective journey toward a more participatory politics.' (p. 54) This voter sentiment seems to explain well a series of successes of maverick independent candidates and their political parties in local elections in recent years. Especially, the case of Yasuo Tanaka, who served as Governor of Nagano Prefecture, supports this argument very well, as suggested in Chapter 3.

I believe, however, that more recent and notably successful candidacies for heads of local authorities, including Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture, Osaka Prefecture and City, do not fit into this pattern very well. Toru Hashimoto, for example, went into his campaign for Mayor of Osaka City in November 2011 by claiming, 'What politics needs now is dictatorship,' and won massively with a 13% increase in turnout from the last election. Moreover, it was he who proposed in his office of Governor of Osaka Prefecture to close the Dawn Center, one of Japan's leading public institutions devoted to promoting gender equality, as described in this book. This suggests that there is something left untouched by this book about how distrust in political elites can turn into active engagement at the local level in contemporary Japan. (It is, perhaps, a typical populist effort to mobilize public support by appealing to people's antipathy with privileged politicians and bureaucrats in power.)

However, this criticism might be pointless, because Martin did not intend to reveal the general tendency of voters, including women, as quantitative researchers do. Rather, the author's effort was devoted to capturing a good snapshot of local activism among women that is changing Japanese politics from grassroots, which I believe was successful.

Takeshi Iida
Graduate School of Law, Kobe University