

Comment on ‘Japan’s Multimember SNTV System and Strategic Voting: The ‘ $M + 1$ ’ Rule and Beyond’

GARY W. COX

Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093-0521

Patrick Fournier and Masaru Kohno (2000) have considered some apparent differences between my view of strategic voting in Japan (Cox 1997) and Steve Reed’s (1990). I think they succeed in showing these differences to be small in most instances. Along the way, they note some problems with the use of the S–F ratio. In this note, I comment briefly on this latter issue.

Let me begin by stressing that the S–F ratio (the second loser’s vote total, divided by the first loser’s) and the associated bimodality test are very low octane. They were devised for use in a book that sought to examine strategic voting in a wide range of systems using similar data. As the only ‘similar data’ that were widely available consisted of electoral returns at the constituency level, the S–F ratio itself requires only such data. That is the good news.

The bad news is that the ratio’s value is clearly ambiguous. A value of ‘1’ on the S–F ratio can arise when the first and second losers get nearly the same vote shares and are both ‘non-trivial’ candidates. In such cases, the voters might view neither of the two ‘close losers’ as hopeless and, consequently, neither will suffer much loss due to strategic desertion. However, a value of ‘1’ on the S–F ratio might also arise if there are two minor candidates, both of whom suffer strategic desertion, with the result that both are driven down to nearly identical and very low vote shares (cf. Gaines, 1997). Thus, high values of the S–F ratio can arise either when strategic voting does not affect either loser or when it affects both severely. Similar problems afflict the interpretation of low S–F ratios. A value near ‘0’ would result if the second loser suffered a substantial loss of votes due to strategic desertion. Yet, it is also possible that the second loser is simply an extremely weak candidate with very few supporters. In summary, a given value of the S–F index can in principle reflect ‘all sorts’ of considerations (Cox, 1997: 86). Finding bimodality in the S–F distribution is merely suggestive of the existence of strategic voting and needs to be bolstered in any given case with further evidence (e.g., from surveys).

Fournier and Kohno provide evidence on how severe the potential problems with the S–F ratio are in practice in Japan. On the one hand, they show that there are not too many cases in which both of the first two losers end up with very low vote totals, so that most of the high S–F values do suggest the absence of substantial strategic voting. On the other hand, they also show that low S–F ratios are produced regularly when the Communist candidate is the second loser, which raises the distinct possibility that many of the low values reflects sincere, rather than strategic, voting.

Fournier and Kohno's work raises an interesting substantive question about Japan that can be addressed with aggregate data. The question is whether Communist support in each district was systematically related to the expected fate of the *marginal* JSP candidate. A method to answer this question, based solely on aggregate data, is as follows.

First, code a variable – call it the JSP margin of victory/defeat – indicating how close to the margin between winning and losing the marginal JSP candidate in each district was. Suppose, for example, that there were two JSP candidates in a four-seat district, one finishing second and one fourth. The 'marginal' candidate is the one finishing fourth, as he is closest to the margin between victory and defeat. To quantify how close he is to that margin, subtract the vote total for the fifth-place candidate (the first loser) from the vote total for the fourth-place Socialist. The result shows how many votes away from losing the weakest Socialist was.¹

If there is some element of strategic coordination between the JCP and JSP, then one would expect to find that the JCP vote total *decreases* the smaller the margin of victory/defeat for the marginal JSP candidate is. This correlation might result because the candidates behave differently: perhaps the JCP candidate coasts when the JSP needs more votes, or perhaps the JSP candidate who needs the votes works harder to get them, or perhaps both. Alternatively, the JCP vote might correlate with the marginality of the marginal JSP candidate because some JCP voters are strategic: When the marginal JSP candidate seems in greater need of votes, they desert their first choice to support an acceptable second choice on the cusp between winning and losing.

To test for strategic coordination on the JCP/JSP frontier, one can perform either of two analyses. One analysis is to regress the JCP vote share in a given district on the JSP margin of victory/defeat, controlling for the previous JCP vote share in the district, year effects, and district magnitude. Another analysis is to regress the JCP vote share in a given district on the JSP margin of victory/defeat, controlling for fixed effects for each constituency and for each year. Both analyses attempt to control for the 'normal JCP vote' in each district, either by the lagged vote or by using fixed effects for each constituency. The fixed effects analysis, in particular, can be

¹ To take another example, suppose the second JSP candidate finished as the first loser. In this case, the margin of victory/defeat would be the absolute difference between this candidate's vote and the vote of the last winner – i.e., how many more votes the marginal JSP candidate needed to convert defeat into victory.

interpreted as asking whether, *within each district*, the JCP vote total decreases when the marginal JSP candidate is in greater need of votes.

The empirical answer from either analysis is the same: the JCP vote does decline significantly when the marginal JSP candidate is more marginal. The substantive size of the JCP reaction (from the fixed-effects analysis) can be characterized as follows: for every twelve-vote decrease in the marginal JSP candidate's margin of victory/defeat, the JCP loses on average 1 vote from its total. If the marginal JSP candidate was in a dead heat for the last seat (a zero vote margin), rather than at the average vote margin (15,961), the JCP's vote total would be expected to decline by about 1,277 votes (or 8% of the median JCP vote total). Thus, there does appear to have been strategic coordination of some sort between these two parties during the period (1960–1993) examined.²

References

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² The Japanese districts were to some extent modified in 1967, 1976, and 1986. Running the analyses separately for each redistricting period – 1960–63, 1967–72, 1976–83, and 1986–93 – produces qualitatively similar results in each period, except the last (where the effect of JSP marginality has the same sign but a smaller and no longer significant impact on the JCP vote).