

pursuit toward secure white-collar jobs have all contributed to killing the challenges to selective relationalism before they even had their fighting chance. As we enter into the second decade of the new millennium, the jury is still out whether or not the series of crises would manage to dislodge Japan's entrenched system.

Saori N. Katada  
University of Southern California

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Ikuo Kabashima and Gill Steel, *Changing Politics in Japan*, Cornell University Press, 2010, 184 pp.  
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Kabashima and Steel ground their analyses of almost 25 years of voter surveys (from 1983–2007) in dominant scholarly and public debates to offer the most comprehensive overview of electoral dynamics in Japan since *The Japanese Voter* (Flanagan *et al.*, 1991). Whereas much work on party politics and mass political participation has focused almost exclusively on one of many catalysts for change in modern Japanese politics – electoral reform, administrative reforms and decentralization, rising income inequality, and demographic change are among the most significant institutional and social factors affecting political change – Kabashima and Steel examine how these combined factors reshaped public opinion, created new electoral incentives for politicians, and opened new access points to voters to demand change through the ballot box.

When *The Japanese Voter* was written, Japan was still a one-party dominant democracy headed by the LDP. There was more continuity than change. No one foresaw the demise of traditional opposition parties and the ensuing electoral volatility that would characterize Japanese politics for more than a decade as new parties formed, splintered, and reformed in rapid succession in the years leading up to and following the electoral reforms of 1993–94. The bubble economy had not yet ended, giving way to Japan's 'lost decades' and insufficient efforts to restructure the political economy. Kabashima and Steel analyze these missing years, detailing the erosion of the LDP's traditional support bases in the countryside, and the ascent of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

In contrast to observations of more continuity – even stagnancy – than change in Japanese politics after electoral reform, this book uncovers a dynamic political world. In Chapters 2 and 3, Kabashima and Steel provide a broad overview of how the socio-economic foundations of the LDP-dominated 1955 System eroded over time, loosening ties between voters and political parties across the spectrum, and creating demand for institutional reforms. Administrative and electoral reforms enacted from the late 1980s onward produced three distinct but interrelated shifts in Japanese politics: a stronger role for the media in linking citizens to national politics, a more prominent role for the prime minister, and an increase in voters who use issue positions to distinguish between political parties.

First, the Japanese media attained more importance as a voter mobilization vehicle while traditional social networks and patron–client relationships became less influential in the electoral process. In Chapter 4, Kabashima and Steel find that Japan’s highly educated electorate demands, accesses, and interprets a broad range of information resources. Increased mobility and urbanization make it more likely that voters will turn to media resources as a replacement for recommendations from local notables in small towns and close-knit neighborhoods.

Second, the authors use prime minister Junichiro Koizumi—the subject of Chapters 5 and 6—to deepen understanding of the ‘presidentialization’ of the Japanese prime minister, an unfolding process first described by Krauss and Nyblade (2004). While the authors present strong evidence that the tenor of media coverage correlates with fluctuations in public support for the prime minister and cabinet, data limitations force them to rely on public opinion in the aggregate. Consequently, they lose the fine granularity needed to connect media exposure, party support, and vote choice.

Finally, parties’ positions on major issues are increasingly important to voters’ decision-making calculus. Under LDP dominance, conventional wisdom held that voters preferred candidates best able to deliver public works projects and other benefits to their district. Koizumi grasped evolving political dynamics because they were fundamental to his own ascendancy to the post of LDP party president and prime minister, and his lengthy tenure. He used the media and tools of his office to assume a more active role in agenda setting domestically and internationally. Koizumi set the political agenda, shaped the terms debate, and won public support, circumventing the party. In the final chapter, Kabashima and Steel show that the two largest parties—the LDP and the DPJ—moved closer to the median voter. By 2006, the DPJ was able to win by credibly appealing to voters with its message of political ‘change’.

*Changing Politics in Japan* shows us that the relationship between public opinion and voting behavior was closer on the evening of Japan’s “triple crisis” than in previous decades. Politicians are no longer as insulated from public opinion as they were during the 1955 System. Voters have the expectation that politicians will attend to their interests and savvy politicians realize that they are going to be held accountable and cannot hold their seats when their actions deviate from the public interest. The earthquake and tsunami, followed by the nuclear crisis in Fukushima Prefecture, will likely change Japanese politics yet again. *Changing Politics in Japan* is a good place to start for grasping the broad trends in contemporary Japanese politics to forecast how the political trajectory will unfold in the immediate future.

Sherry L. Martin\*  
Cornell University

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\*The views expressed in this review are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government.