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BOOK REVIEW

Japan decides 2017. The Japanese General Election (2018).

By Robert J. Pekkanen, Steven R. Reed, Ethan Scheiner, and Daniel M. Smith. London: Palgrave Macmillan, $39.99.

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The snap election on 22nd October 2017, not even three years after the 2014 general election, caught most commentators – and the opposition – on the hop. Kudos to the editors and authors of *Japan Decides 2017* – 22 in total – for pulling together this wide-ranging volume so quickly. In common with the first two volumes in the series, this one begins with a useful, brief review of politics (this one includes an arguably overly harsh telling of the DPJ's rise and demise). This summary (Part I) will serve as an invaluable reminder in future days. The volume then proceeds to a section on parties (Part II) before ending with a section on the campaign and issues (Part III). The editors have skillfully brought together leading experts from across Japanese politics to analyze features of the election and politics and presented this in a highly accessible way. This volume could easily be used for undergraduate courses, unlike many of the journal articles that cater to a specialized, statistics-savvy readership.

The chapters are mostly strong, well-researched, and largely evidence-based and they cover an impressively broad range of election-related topics, such as policy issues, party platforms, scandals, electoral rules, and women's under-representation. There are too many chapters for me to give a critique of each chapter, but all are well worth reading and some provide rebuttals to conventional wisdom.

The central themes are that the 'landslide' was due to low turnout, divided, uncoordinated opposition, and the formation of new parties that left voters unsure which new opposition party would be best. Although this is much too brief to do the research justice, here is a whirlwind tour of some of the take home points of the volume: the Liberal Democratic Party-led (LDP) coalition gains support because it has mainly governed effectively; Abe Shinzō dexterously switches between valence and position issues to maintain support; the LDP continues to benefit from the solid support of Kōmeitō (who in turn benefit from the solid – but not absolute – support of Sōka Gakkai members); uncompetitive races depress turnout; conservative opposition parties lose votes; the Japan Communist Party is not the spoiler many assume it to be; voters support Abe for his overall performance, not his policies and cabinet support largely bounces back after scandals; women's underrepresentation is mainly due to the electoral system and the LDP nominating so few women candidates; the 'politics of diversion' (North Korea) worked well for Abe; and although Abe tried to frame the election as security-related, few voters selected this issue as important in their voting decision.

Abe, the editors also claim, is a 'master of political timing.' This does not seem to be entirely satisfactory, but more of a post-hoc reasoning of what could equally be plain luck on Abe's part – had Hope not fizzled or had this election turned out to be a 'normal' scandal election, things could have easily gone badly for the LDP. The editors also point out that the 'landslide' was produced by an ever-shrinking group of voters turning out for the LDP. But these LDP partisans are hardly discussed in the volume; knowing more about LDP stalwarts would be useful; here they are largely ignored. The editors claim that nonvoters would turn out if opposition parties could find 'convincing policy alternatives.' But it is unlikely that any platform would appeal to all non-voters or even enough to defeat the core LDP partisans who are unlikely to jump ship. The editors also argue that the opposition needs to be unified and attractive to give the LDP a run for its money, yet this is rather like saying the opposition could 'get elected by being electable.'

The volume's focus on policies, too, is slightly puzzling. Dividing policy issues into a dozen different chapters appears to give equal weight to issues that are important to voters, and those that are not. While the issue chapters are all interesting and augment our understanding of politics in general, many of the issues were not particularly important to voters or parties in this election. Including them gave an uneven feeling to the volume, making chunks of the book seem like an update on politics in general, rather than one about this election specifically. The chapters could have considered why particular issues were not important to voters, adding more overall coherency. We know that in general, very few policy preferences are crucial at the ballot box: winning is more complex than positioning your party near the median voter on a whole range of issues. Perhaps a future volume could divide chapters by valence, position, and unimportant issues. Multivariate analyses of voters' preferences would have clarified what was important to voters, sorting the issues that voters say the pay attention to (selected from a 'show card' in the survey) from those that correlate with their voting decision.

Having said that, I enjoyed some of these chapters immensely – the ones on immigration, inequality, the Constitution, and the chapters that attempt to clarify the Rorschach test of Abenomics, for example. These and other chapters, analyzed manifestos and candidates' positions, updating evidence on parties and augmenting our understanding of candidates and parties, but they did little to help us understand the motivations of voters and in a few chapters, the discussions wander considerably off-track. Few voters care about some of these issues and even on the economy, evidence is mixed about whether Japanese voters enact reward-punishment scenarios at the ballot box. Moreover, most voters experienced the election through the media, rather than through detailed study of policy positions. That is why it is surprising that there is so little on either how the campaign was covered by the mainstream media or social media. Newspapers, television, and the internet are only briefly mentioned in passing (newspaper themes are summarized in one table). But a book on a particular election begs for a detailed analysis of the 'cyber battle' or a more comprehensive look at how the mainstream media framed the election. This is particularly jarring since broadcasters, for example, spent twice as much time on this election than they did in 2014, according to *The Mainichi Shimbun*, the Wide Shows were particularly vocal ('衆院選とテレビ放送時間増えたが争点「深掘りなし」,' 2017) and candidates' use of social media has increased.

The series is partly inspired by the 'Nuffield Studies' of British elections. Two of the strengths of the Nuffield Series are first, that they provide a detailed documentation of each election, so that we can compare developments in campaigning over time. And second, the authors have access to insiders and share their insider information – unavailable elsewhere – with readers. From this, we get an understanding of the views, hopes, and disappointments of some of the major players. Perhaps taking a leaf out of the Nuffield books might strengthen future volumes in this series. With a few brief exceptions, in this volume, both the 'feel' of the election and a deeper understanding of motivations of the decision-makers are largely absent (with the exception of the chapter on North Korea). Even descriptions of the campaign on the ground, an old staple in the field of Japanese politics, are largely missing here. This also harks back to my point about the lack of attention to social media; while social media do not carry elections, previous research details the ways that candidates used social media to promote their offline campaigning activities in 2014; it would be interesting to track developments, or lack thereof, in online campaigning. Candidates have increased their use of blogs, video, and live streaming platforms such as Niconico Dōga, suggesting that politicians are turning to social media, rather than conventional media, to connect with the public in general and with their own support base in particular (Kinoshita *et al.*, 2011, cited in Werner, 2019).

A more complete Index would be helpful. I looked up several topics that were not in the index but were actually in the text. This may seem like a minor gripe but this makes it difficult to use the book as a reference.

Despite these criticisms, there are important insights and analyses throughout the volume and I would highly recommend this book to experts and students alike. This new volume, and the whole series, is fast becoming central to the study of Japanese elections.

References

Werner R (2019) Japanese Politicians' Twitter Use in the 2017 General Election (unpublished B.A. thesis). Doshisha University.

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