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Political Cynicism in Japan*

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I. A Paradox

We may argue that cynicism directed at a political system will decrease the inputs of support, whether it is against authority, regime, or political community. I will follow Arthur Miller's definition of cynicism, as it "refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations."⁽¹⁾ A political system needs positive expressions of support from its citizens. Generally speaking, this is the case with the Japanese political system. Otherwise, elections and opinion polls will be meaningless. In Japan, however, political cynicism, at least as expressed in opinion polls, seems not necessarily to bring about negative support to the system. In this paper, I would like to consider some of rather unique relationships between political cynicism and support for the political system in Japan. Political attitudes or political opinions are strongly culturally bound, so that my discussion will emphasize the uniqueness of Japanese political culture. It is my hope, however, that my presentation will have some general meaning for the understanding of support for any political

* This paper is based on the opinion survey which was administered by the Institute of Local Government, Tokyo, Japan, in the fall of 1978. I am grateful to the Institute for its kind permission to use freely the data obtained in this survey.

(1) Arthur H. Miller, "Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 3 (September, 1974), p. 952.

systems.

Conceptionally, a political system needs a "minimal level" of support. David Easton says, "Where such support threatens to fall below a minimal level, regardless of the cause, the system must either provide mechanisms to revive the flagging support or its days will be numbered."⁽²⁾ And this may be particularly important for a democratic political system, where the support for each level of the political system is openly expressed and calculated by way of elections and opinion polls. These calculations will determine the fate of the political system.

But, if we apply this criterion *directly* to the Japanese political system, very little will be explained. A remarkable example is the widespread distrust of political leaders, particularly those on the national level. Recently, *the Asahi Newspaper* reported how statesmen were not trusted by many Japanese.⁽³⁾ This newspaper asked the people how much they trusted such entities as weather forecasts, courts, police, the revenue office, newspapers, medical doctors, school teachers, statesmen, fortune tellers: 71% of the respondents did not trust statesmen, compared to over 50% who expressed trust in other choices. Trust for statesmen was the lowest.....along with fortune tellers. This might not surprise most Japanese. This kind of distrust has become a common feeling in Japan. Distrust for political leaders is clearly shown already in the process of political socialization of Japanese youth. At ages 11-12, many Japanese children begin to regard Diet Members as "persons who take money on the sly and do bad things."⁽⁴⁾

Thus it is quite natural that the support for the Cabinet is rather low. A recent opinion poll reported that those who supported the Ohira Cabinet were only 31% and those who did not were 30%. This was in March 1979, three months after Ohira took office.⁽⁵⁾ The former Fukuda

(2) David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965, p. 124.

(3) *The Asahi Newspaper*, January 1, 1979.

(4) Tadao Okamura, "Children in the Japanese Politics," *The Annals of the Japanese Political Science Association*, 1971, p. 120.

(5) *The Asahi Newspaper*, March 10, 1979.

Cabinet got only 27% support in December 1977.⁽⁶⁾ In spite of such unpopularity, most mass media expected that the Fukuda Cabinet would continue in 1978 and in 1979. In general, it is very seldom that the percentage of those who support the incumbent Cabinet exceed 40%. Needless to say, the results of opinion polls are important for the fate of the Cabinet. When it is very low, as was the case with Prime Minister Kishi in 1960 (those who supported him were only a little more than 10% at that time), he has to resign. In sum, in Japan, what Easton calls the "minimal level of support" is not clear, if we apply the criterion from opinion polls.

More than that. As is well known, former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka was prosecuted for taking bribes from the Lockheed Corporation, but he was re-elected with an overwhelming majority in his constituency, and is still very influential in the Liberal Democratic Party. This contrasts with President Nixon after Watergate, who has almost lost his political life. As far as mass media are concerned, Tanaka has been blamed no less than Nixon. Tanaka is no exception. Eisaku Sato, the only Nobel Prize Winner in the field of government in Japan, was once involved in corruption, but later became Prime Minister. It is generally believed that among Diet Members there are many semi-Tanaka figures.

Nevertheless, the Japanese political system seems to be very stable. There is virtually no prospect of revolution or *coup d'état* in the near future. Not even a change of the ruling party and the opposition parties is expected. Can the Japanese political system, particularly its authority level, persist without support from its citizens?

Another problem is the relationship between political efficacy and educational level. It has long been believed that those with more education would be more politically efficacious, vote more, and participate more in political activities. This is particularly emphasized in the United States. In Japan, this is again not necessarily the case. For Sidney Verba and others the data from Japan is a puzzle. Pointing out

(6) *The Asahi Newspaper*, December 21, 1977.

weak relationships between socio-economic level and participation in Japan and Austria, they say, "the data appear to contradict our basic generalization about individual political behavior: Everything else being equal, individuals with higher levels of education and higher levels of income will be more active in politics."⁽⁷⁾ Their remarks may also be applied to the sense of political efficacy, for political participation in their sense of the term must be based on the sense of political efficacy. In Japan, the correlations between educational level and political efficacy are not only weak: they are sometimes inverse. See the following Table.

Table 1 To what extent are our opinions and hopes reflected in the running of the government?

education	N	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
middle school	1,914	6	21	44	16	13%
high school	1,486	2	16	58	21	3
junior college	282	1	14	62	22	1
college, university	238	*	16	62	21	*

(* under 1%)

(1) fully reflected

(2) considerably reflected

(3) to some extent reflected

(4) not at all reflected

(5) D.K. and N.R.

(Japan Broadcasting Corporation's Opinion Poll, national sample, 1973)⁽⁸⁾

If "our opinions are fully reflected in the running of the government" is a more efficacious response than "our opinions are reflected to some extent," our interpretation will be that those with higher educational levels are less politically efficacious than those with lower levels of education. It is my opinion that this phenomenon should be

(7) Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 64.

(8) Japan Broadcasting Corporation ed., *Japanese Value Orientations*, (NHK ed., *Nihonjin no Ishiki*), Tokyo: Shiseido, 1975, p. 324.

considered not only from the cultural background of political attitudes, but also from the general meaning of support for a political system.

II. Nature of Political Cynicism

Here, I would like to present some of the data on political cynicism in Japan, based on an opinion survey conducted by the Institute of Local Government, Tokyo, Japan, in which I myself participated. This survey was administered in the autumn of 1978 in a medium sized city in the Tokyo metropolitan area. At the same time, exactly the same questions were asked in Kanazawa City, an old traditional city, with a smaller sample, in order to make a comparison between the new city and the old. As far as the data to be presented in this paper is concerned, I cannot find any decisive differences between the two cities. Therefore, mainly because of the size of the sample, my discussions will be confined to the data from Tokyo. What follows will be fairly representative of the general trends among the Japanese as a whole, considering the results of various opinion polls in Japan.

Firstly, let us look at distrust of political leaders. Following the methods of the Michigan Election Study, I asked,⁽⁹⁾

- Q. 1 Generally speaking, Diet Members we elect lose touch with the people pretty quickly. Do you agree or disagree?
(U.S.: Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly.)
- Q. 2 I don't think Diet Members care much what people like me think. Do you agree or disagree?
(U.S.: I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.)
- Q. 3 I don't think Members of City Council care much what people like me think. Do you agree or disagree?

(9) Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, *The CPS 1976 American National Election Study*, Vol. 1, Ann Arbor, Michigan: ICPSR, 1977, pp. 417-8.

Table 2

		agree	disagree	D.K., N.A.
Diet Members lose touch	{Japan	77	15	8%
	{U.S.	68	26	6
Diet Members (public officials) don't care much	{Japan	69	17	14
	{U.S.	51	44	5
City Council Men don't care much	}Japan	41	46	13
N.: Japan		700	1978	
U.S.		2,404	1976	

A simple comparison will be meaningless, for the contents of the questionnaires are not exactly the same, and the institutions and cultures involved are also different from each other. The figures for the United States are presented here only for reference. Concerning Diet Members, the trends shown in Table 2 are quite in accord with what I have mentioned. Distrust in national political leaders can be called considerably high; on the other hand, trust in Members of the City Council is not so low. The questions with "yes-no" alternatives like the above can divide the respondents rather clearly. In studying political attitudes of the Japanese, however, it seems that "yes-no" type questions are not enough. When we ask in the following way, different aspects of political distrust will appear.

Q. 4 How much do you trust following persons?

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Prime Minister | 1. very much |
| 2. Diet Members | 2. to some extent |
| 3. Governor (of Tokyo) | 3. cannot say either |
| 4. Mayor | 4. rather do not trust |
| 5. Members of Metropolitan Assembly | 5. do not trust at all |
| 6. Members of City Council | 6. D.K. |

By reviewing Figure 1, we can discover other aspects of political distrust toward political leaders. First of all, it is pointed out that political distrust is not widespread vertically, namely from the national to the local level. The Mayor may be said to have enough trust from

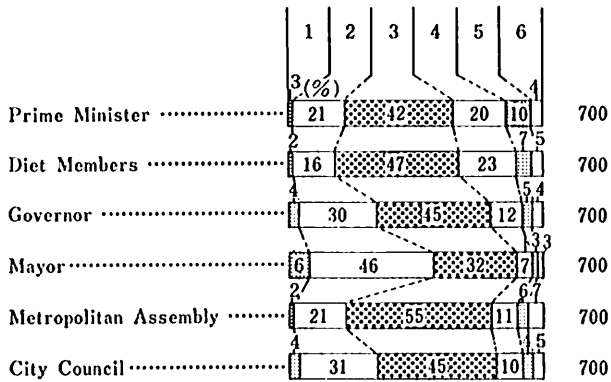


Fig. 1 Political Trust

the citizens. In Kanazawa City, exactly the same trend is observed in this regard. Local political leaders are less distrusted in all groups, regardless of sex, age, education, and party support. Why local political leaders are less distrusted than national leaders is one of the difficult questions in the study of Japanese political attitudes. Because of the space, I cannot discuss it fully here: I would like only to suggest that many Japanese tend to think of "national government" when asked what the government is. And the news of political corruption in the mass media is usually about the national level. Therefore, when they regard politics as a dirty business, they mean national politics.

More important is the fact that even the national leaders are not distrusted so much. In the cases of the Prime Minister and Diet Members, only 30% express outright distrust. Of course, this does not mean that the national political leaders are trusted.....merely that they are *not distrusted*. As is clear from the Figure, the most frequent response is "I cannot say either." This response is sometimes interpreted as indifference, apathy, or ignorance. Certainly there must be such people among those who answer so. Considering the responses to other questions, however, I dare say that most Japanese are not politically indifferent or apathetic. Remember that there are very few who say "I don't know" to Questions 1, 2, and 3.

I propose that this phenomenon is mainly due to the "compound eyes" of the Japanese, by which they see both side of the coin, good and bad. This attitude leads them to put reservations on rather general judgements. Several years ago, I asked middle school children about the United States of America. When questions were specific (J.F. Kennedy, Lincoln, high living standards, super expressways, Vietnam, racial segregation, etc.), they could answer easily "yes" or "no". But when asked in a general way, "Do you like the United States or not?" about one third of them answered, "I cannot say either." The children answered so, not because of lack of knowledge about the United States, but because of considerable knowledge about the United States. The "I cannot say either" response in the trust-distrust scale should be understood in the context above. Yet, it cannot be denied that this "I cannot say either" is inclined smewhat toward distrust.

To see the nature of distrust in more detail, let us take the Prime Minister as an example. Figure 2 indicates trust-distrust toward the Prime Minister by sex, age, educational level, and party support.

In Figure 2, because of the size of my sample, minor party supporters are omitted. We may summarize the trends here as follows. Females, older people, those with lower educational levels, and LDP supporters are less critical of the Prime Minister. In all groups, even among people who are rather favorable to the Prime Minister, the general trend which we have seen is observed: that is, the Prime Minister is never trusted positively. This is also true for LDP supporters. It is quite understandable that the Liberal Democratic Party supporters trust the Prime Minister more than others do, for the Prime Minister at the time of my survey, and almost all the time in post-war Japan, belonged to the LDP or its predecessor. Even among these supporters, however, the majority response is "I cannot say either." It is only 38% who trust him positively. And among the Socialist Party supporters, only 35% of them say, "I rather do not trust the Prime Minister," or "I do not trust him at all." If we can interpret "I cannot say either" as a kind of support with some reservations, the Prime Minister gets

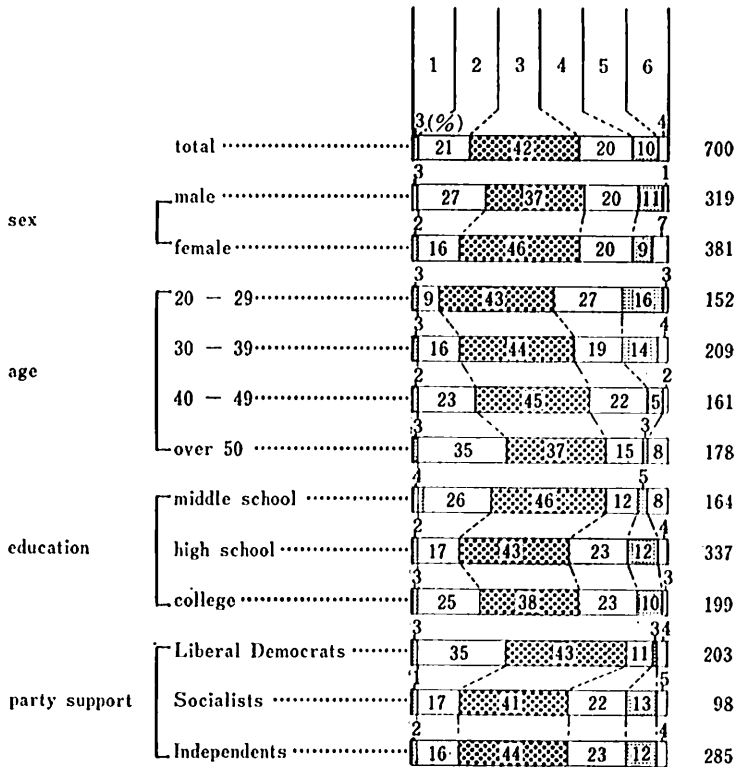


Fig. 2 Trust and Distrust toward the Prime Minister

1. very much, 2. to some extent, 3. cannot say either, 4. rather do not trust, 5. do not trust at all, 6. D.K.

fairly good support from the Socialist Party supporters and from Independents. We may conclude, therefore, that support for the authority level of the Japanese political system comes from the reluctance to deny authority.

It seems that age and education are most closely correlated with trust in the Prime Minister. To see these relationships in more detail I have made a cross tabulation, controlling for age which shows that age is far more influential than educational levels: namely, younger people are more critical of the Prime Minister regardless of levels of

education. At the present stage of my research, it is difficult to decide whether this is due to the generational gap or to their differing positions in life cycle. Political cynicism of Japanese youth will be discussed later, with the problems of political efficacy.

It might be well assumed that the trust-distrust scale is correlated with the sense of political efficacy in some way. Concerning political efficacy, I asked:

Q. 5 Sometimes the national government seems so complicated that a person like me can't understand what's going on. Do you agree or disagree?

(U.S.: Politics and government seem so complicated.)

Q. 6 Voting is the only way that people like me can have our opinion reflected in the running of the national government. Do you agree or disagree?

(U.S.: People like me can have any say about how the government runs things.)

The questions above are again adopted from the Michigan Election Study,¹⁰ with some modifications. For reference, the results in the United States are also presented. If we assume that those who do *not* think that the national government is too complicated to understand are politically efficacious, the political efficacy of the Japanese seems to be not so low. Males, particularly those with higher levels of education, deny the complexity of the national government. Even among the youngest group, age 20-29, whose political apathy is often pointed out, about 40% of them think that the national government is not so complicated. On the other hand, concerning the means of having their opinions reflected in the running of the government, the predominant majority of the respondents agree with the statement that voting is the only way, although a trend similar to that of Q. 5 is observed by sex, age, and education to a much lesser extent. From the data above, it is very difficult to say whether the Japanese are politically efficacious or

(10) *Ibid.*

Government is complicated.

Voting is the only way.

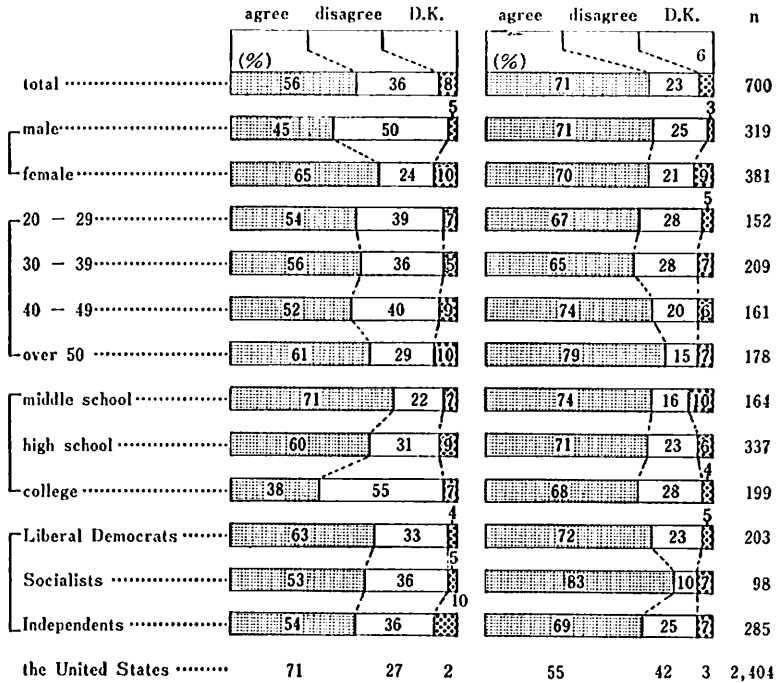


Fig. 3 Political Efficacy

not. In fact, there seems to be little relationship between Q. 5 and Q. 6.

As has been pointed out by the Michigan Election Study Group, the meaning of "voting is the only way" might have changed recently. When a democratic political system was regarded as stable, those who

Table 3 Voting is the only way

		agree	disagree	D.K.	N
Government is complicated	agree	75	19	6	394 (100%)
	disagree	70	29	1	251 (100%)
	D.K.	46	24	31	55 (100%)

thought of other means than voting (such as sending letters to statesmen, or participating in political meetings) could be politically efficacious. After the so-called "revolt of the youth", means other than voting have emerged: violent, radical, expressive and sometimes frustrating. In order to test this proposition in Japan, I have made a double cross-tabulation between Q. 6 ("voting is the only way") and the trust expressed in the Prime Minister, controlling again for age. The results is shown in Table 4. It is clear that the meaning of "voting is the only way" is different from generation to generation. Among the youngest group, those who think of means other than voting are very critical of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is denied in such terms as "I cannot trust him at all" by 24% of this group. Among older groups (over age 40), we do not find this tendency: that is, those who find means other than voting are rather favorable toward the Prime Minister. Then, those young people who tend to favor some means other than voting and at the same are very critical of the Prime Minister might be a core of Japan's "youth revolt." They may have something in common with the angry youth in Western democracies. However, this group is, as is clear from the Table, in a minority, even in the youth sample as a whole.

Table 4 Trust in the Prime Minister

Voting is the only way	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	N
20-29 { agree	2	13	42	28	12	3%	102
20-29 { disagree	5	0	45	26	24	0	42
30-39 { agree	2	17	47	16	15	2	135
30-39 { disagree	5	15	37	22	14	7	59
40-49 { agree	2	28	42	21	7	1	119
40-49 { disagree	3	9	56	25	3	3	32
50- { agree	3	37	34	15	3	8	140
50- { disagree	4	27	42	19	4	4	26

(1) trust very much (2) trust to some extent
 (3) cannot say either (4) rather do not trust
 (5) do not trust at all (6) D.K.

III. Cultural Context of Political Cynicism

Perhaps one of the reasons why political leaders in Japan are not trusted is recurrent political corruption. In post-war Japan bribery and scandal in the political world have not been uncommon, as I have mentioned in the first part of this paper. Partly because of the strictness of the election laws, and partly because of pre-modern political behavior, many are arrested in electoral campaigns. It is not surprising that most Japanese regard politics as a dirty business.

Poor output from the political system will be another source of cynicism. Inflation, pollution, low social investment, unfair tax structures, and so on may bring about political cynicism or distrust. Needless to say, no political system can satisfy every demand from the society. When demand is slight, distrust will not appear, even when the output is poor. On the other hand, when demand is great, distrust will appear, even when the output is great. Namely, political distrust may be a function of the amount of demand and the output from a political system. Before the democratization of Japan, it had long been believed that the national government was very strong, and that it could do almost anything. Even after the democratization, this traditional and authoritarian attitude still remain in another form. Among many Japanese there is an implicit assumption that the national government, consequently the national political leaders, can do and should do a lot. It is difficult, therefore, to satisfy these demands.

I am not denying the explanations above. They are based on a *rational model* of human behavior. It is my opinion, however, that a rational model alone is not enough for the understanding of political cynicism in Japan. Political cynicism in Japan should be considered in the context of Japanese political culture as well. Although Japan is hardly a paradise, its political system to have functioned anyway, I dare say, rather well. Living standards have been rising; there are few crimes even in the metropolitan cities; and the rate of unemployment has been low. In a recent opinion poll, about

90% of the respondents answered that they were happy to be born in Japan.⁽¹⁾ If we apply the results of opinion polls *literally*, the Japanese are satisfied with their society, although not with their political system. What is the relationship between society and politics?

As I have suggested in this paper, somewhat critical attitudes toward political leaders are rather inputs of support than negative support. For the understanding of this problem, I asked the following:

Q. 7 The government needs to maintain some kind of secrecy, so that it is rather difficult to make the running of the government completely open. Do you agree or disagree?

Q. 8 Statesmen should be so broad-minded as to be tolerant of all sorts of men. Do you agree or disagree? (Literally translating, this is "to be tolerant of purity and impurity.")

These questions are constructed from Japanese sayings about politics and government which represent traditional aspects of Japanese political attitudes. The results are presented in Figure 4. These two statements are supported by the majority of the respondents: particularly, secrecy in government is approved by 65%. As one of the "principles of democracy," "openness of the government" is emphasized in public schools and in the mass media. "Clean government" has been the most frequently used catchword at every election, national and local. Many Japanese, however, seem to prefer traditional political attitudes rather than "principles of democracy."

Those who accept secrecy in government are found more among males, older people, and LDP supporters. As this statement represents a traditional aspect of political behavior, it is understandable that older people and LDP supporters (conservatives) tend to approve it. At first glance, it seems that those with higher educational levels tend to approve, but this correlation is illusory. When we examine in more detail by controlling for age, it becomes clear that the influence of age is much greater than educational levels. See Table 5 below. 86% of

(1) Japan Broadcasting Corporation ed., *op. cit.*, p. 298.

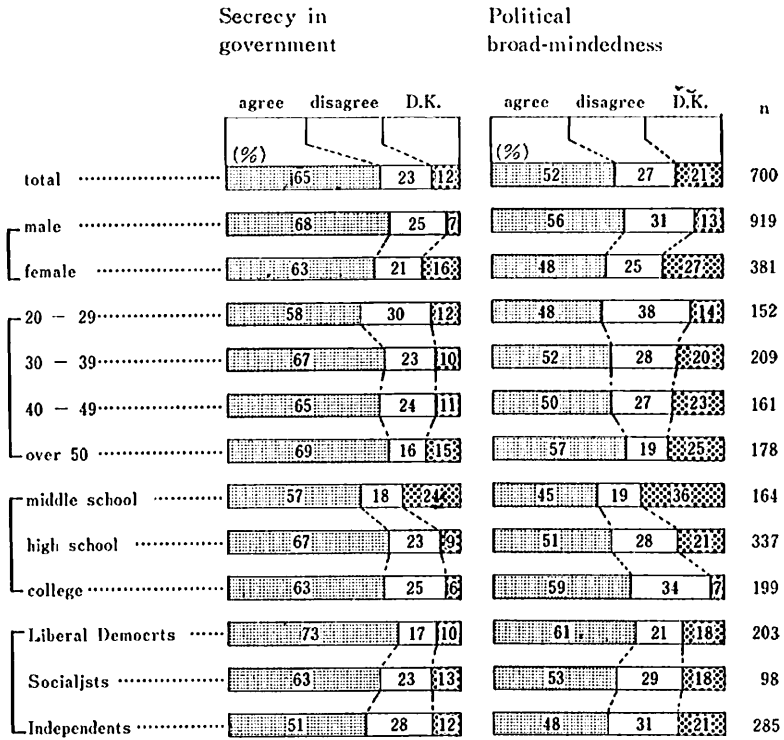


Fig. 4 Political Culture

the oldest age group (over 50) accept secrecy in government, which is the highest percentage of all. Again, at the present stage of my research, I cannot say whether this is due to a generational difference or to different positions in life cycle. However, I would like to say hypothetically that political culture in this regard is changing gradually: in other words, the phenomenon might well be due to the generational gap. Yet, even in the youngest group of college graduates, 57% accept secrecy in government, which would suggest an inertia in Japanese political culture.

The statement concerning political broad-mindedness is also supported by more than the half of the respondents, but to a lesser extent.

Table 5 Secrecy in Government

		agree	disagree	D.K.	N
20-29	{middle school high school	59	27	14%	87
	{college	57	34	9	65
30-49	{middle school high school	66	22	12	272
	{college	69	28	3	98
50-	{middle school high school	64	18	18	142
	{college	86	8	6	36

Recent revelations of political corruption might have influence in this respect. It is noteworthy, however, that the majority of the Japanese find some value in such broad-mindedness even while former Prime Minister Tanaka and others are on trial and criticized bitterly by the mass media. Here may be one of the reasons why Tanaka and other so-called "black-mist" politicians are still influential in the political world. The responses to these last two questions correlates fairly with each other. The mode here is the one of those who accept secrecy in government *and also* approve of this broad-mindedness. The Japanese political system is based on such political attitudes.

Positive expressions of support for a political system alone may not become support for the system. As William A. Gamson points out, "apparently inactivity can be a sign of confidence as well as alienation."¹² Or following Seymour M. Lipset, "it is possible that non-voting is now, at least in the Western democracies, a reflection of the stability of the system, a response to the decline of major social conflicts and an increase in cross-pressures."¹³ The case in Japan, which we have observed, is a little different. Most Japanese are neither politically inactive nor indifferent to politics. In the constituency in which this opinion poll was administered, about 70% of the eligible voters did vote in the

(12) William A. Gamson, *Power and Discontent*, Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1968, p. 46.

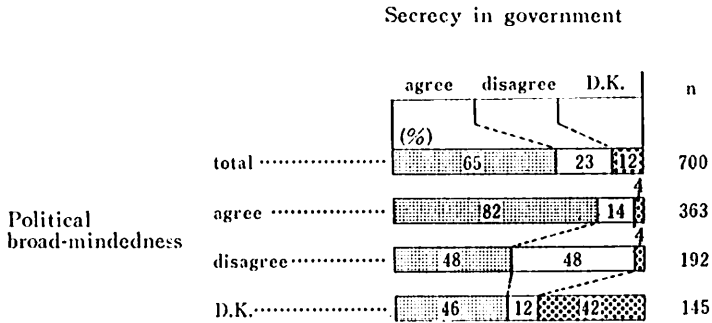


Fig. 5

recent national general election and in the local election. And their political knowledge and political interests are not so low, generally speaking. Why, then, are they so cynical—or more precisely, why don't they express positive trust in the political system?

As I have mentioned, one of the reasons for this may be the "compound eyes" of the Japanese, which make their responses rather situational. The Japanese do not leave everything to be governed by a single principle. For example, there are the following pairs of proverbs:

"Knowing what is right but not doing it is the coward's way"; *but*
 "The devil one ignores causes him no trouble."

"See another, see a thief"; *but*

To travel is to find companionship, to live is to find kindness."

The great number of such contradictory pairs of sayings in Japan serves to underscore the point that what is important is not to choose one guiding principle for all one's subsequent actions, but rather to know what one should do according to the exigencies of the situation. With the images of political leaders, this makes it possible that the ideals of statesmen and the realistic perceptions of politicians co-exist peacefully in one's mind. Even when one expresses mild distrust of

(3) Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960, p. 181.

political leaders, he sees *at the same time* another aspect of them as can-do statesmen.⁽⁴⁾

Another point I want to emphasize is the necessity to distinguish between “to be critical” and “to be cynical.” Democracy presumes some kind of diversity of opinions and interests in the society. If everyone agrees with everything, a democratic political system will not function at all. In the same context, blind obedience, particularly to the authority level of the system, cannot constitute inputs of support for the system. I have pointed out the fact that in Japan those with higher levels of education tend to be somewhat distrustful of political leaders, and that the correlations between education and political efficacy are weak, and sometimes reversed. Those with more education may avoid blind obedience. Hypothetically, I dare say that the “seeming cynicism” of those with higher levels of education may be interpreted as “being critical.” And there may be cases in which the more knowledge one has, the more difficulty he recognizes in his political behavior. In the same way, it may be that one can see the political world in a simple way with less political knowledge.

I am not arguing that all Japanese who express distrust of political leaders are “being critical.” There must be cynical people among them, as we have seen in some of the youth. At present, I cannot distinguish empirically between being critical and being cynical. However, a conceptual distinction between the two will be helpful for further empirical research on support to political systems in the future.

(4) Okamura, *op. cit.*, p. 63.