

Breaking through Viscosity:

The Three Modes of Conflict in the Diet, 1947-1996

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In 1994, soon after regaining the office of prime minister after several decades in opposition, the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) abandoned its symbolic defense policy centered upon opposition to the Self Defense Forces (SDF). Many believe that internally, the JSP abandoned the anti-SDF stance sometime before the establishment of the Murayama cabinet. Nonetheless, there is much debate about when this change of policy, which was part of an overall change in the party's stance versus the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), actually occurred. Generally speaking, during the thirty eight years of one party dominant system, it was hard to determine whether opposition parties objected to government bills because of their content or simply because they were "opposition" parties. My research shows that in the Japanese legislative process there are subtle differences of attitudes about the reasons for opposition. I have constructed a database of all the 7535 bills proposed by the government from the first postwar session of the Diet in 1947 to the last general election in 1996. I have classified the bill deliberation process quantitatively into three "modes of conflict" to show on which issues (not only ideological points) the government and opposition parties conflict and in what style this conflict manifests itself, either seriously or merely as a public display of opposition. (*tatema*)

Many regard the Diet as a "rubber stamp," a body without great influence that simply passes bills.¹ In contrast, "viscosity theory," now dominant in political science, argues that legislatures in the parliamentary system can kill or amend a fair number of government bills by taking advantage of the "scarce time resource."² In the case of the Japanese Diet, the "scarce time resource" is a result of four factors: control of the agenda and the deliberation timetable, time limitations of the session system, the committee system, and bicameralism. That is, the legislative schedule of a bill (even a controversial one) must be decided by consensus, and parties objecting to the bill can halt its deliberation with a veto. A quick end to a session brings about the death of a bill or its amendment by compromise. Therefore according to viscosity theory, the more important a bill is or the more parties oppose it, the longer (the more viscous) its deliberation becomes. Additionally, the shorter a session is, the more bills fail.³ My statistical analysis, however, denies such propositions of viscosity theory as outlined above and suggests that there is another way of mounting opposition to bills other than by simply refusing deliberation.

I was able to develop another type of deliberative process by first using principal component analysis to translate numerous variables into four components. The first component I developed indicates how early or late a bill passes each legislative step. The second is the length of deliberation. The

interval from the proposition of a bill to its referral to committee (*tsurushi* literally the time when a bill is in “suspension”) constitutes a third factor. This is a period when a bill is in limbo because opposition parties suspend a bill at the house, preventing it from moving on to committee. The last is a degree of “deliberative partisan conflict,” a mixed index of the number of parties opposing a bill and the frequency of discussion. While the first three components are related to viscosity, “deliberative partisan conflict” reveals a different dimension.

Plotting these four components in all bills between 1947-1996, I used clustering analysis to divide all bills into three groups according to “modes of conflict.” The first of these is the “non-conflict mode,” where bills have a low score on every dimension (60%). This indicates little or no political conflict among parties over the content of the bill. Next, bills with a high score on any of three viscosity components form a “viscous mode” (22%). In this mode, although opposition parties delay deliberation by making gestures of objection, they offer little opposition to the substance of the bill. As a result, there is next to no discussion of the bill despite its long stay in the Diet. Finally, the “deliberative mode” can be found in the group of high “deliberative partisan conflict” bills (18%, nearly as much as the viscous mode). We can see truly serious confrontation between the government and opposition over bills in this mode, marked by heated and repeated discussion and the fiery objections of opposition parties. In sum, looking back at the first generation of Japanese legislative studies, it is clear that the “rubber stamp view,” deals with the “non-conflict mode”. The revised view of the traditional approach, viscosity theory, focuses on the viscous mode, “resistance without discussion.” Yet both theories overlook the deliberative mode, “confrontation with discussion,” to which I pay special attention here.

So which mode of conflict prevails in which policy areas? The deliberative mode is predominant in bills relating to tax and defense. Welfare (including public insurance and pension), labor, public personnel, postal services, and science and technology issues tend to assume the “viscous mode.” Surprisingly, parties rarely come into conflict (the non-conflict mode) over bills dealing with education, police, justice, environment, foreign affairs and antimonopoly measures. Hence I call these “silent ideological issues.” According to the conventional view, confrontation between the government and opposition is fiercer concerning ideological issues than interest issues. Yet statistically speaking, I find that parties are not more inclined to oppose or attempt to amend ideological bills, and do not think of them as more important than interest ones. I believe that this phenomenon is due in part to “silent ideological issues.”

Notes

¹ Hans H. BAEWARD, *Japan's Parliament: An Introduction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

² Jean BLONDEL, et al.
“Legislative Behavior: Some Steps toward a Cross National Measurement,” *Government and Opposition* Vol. 5, No. 1. (1969).

³ Mike M. MOCHIZUKI,
“Managing and Influencing the Japanese Legislative Process: The Role of the Parties and the National Diet” Unpublished, Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilm International, 1986).
IWAI Tomoaki. *Rippō Katei* [Legislative Process] (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1988).
TANI Katsutoshi. *Gendai Nihon no Rippō Katei* [Legislative Process in Contemporary Japan] (Tokyo: Shinzan-sha, 1995).



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It is particularly interesting that even bills concerning defense do not always fall into the “deliberative mode.” While it is true that until the 1960s, defense bills were likely to assume the “deliberative mode,” those since the 1970s have tended end up in the “viscous mode.” That is, opposition parties simply prolong deliberation and do not attempt to ignite hot debate about the issue in question.

So to answer the question posed at the beginning of this essay, I believe that in truth, the JSP gave up intensely challenging the SDF as early as the 1970s. By analyzing the Japanese Diet, a legislature in a parliamentary system, through a statistical method usually applied to legislative studies of the U.S. Congress, I have developed a conclusion which challenges the orthodox view of confrontation between the LDP and the JSP in the postwar period. □

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