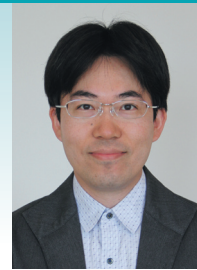


Members of Parliament & Their Activities in Japan

By Yoshikuni ONO



Author Yoshikuni Ono

There are substantial differences in political activities among the members of the Diet (*kokkai*)—the national parliament of Japan. Some members engage in constituency service extensively, while others spend their time and energy on legislation. In this essay, I introduce some results of my recent research that aims to account for such differences in political activities among the members of the Diet by focusing on their individual backgrounds and experience before they win a seat in parliament.

Background of Japanese Legislators

The Japanese Diet has two chambers: the House of Representatives (Lower House) and the House of Councilors (Upper House). They currently have 480 members and 242 members, respectively. Although these members have diverse backgrounds because they are recruited from various sectors, many of them come from one of the following three careers: national government officials, local politicians, and legal professionals. In Japan, cabinet ministers are mostly chosen from among members of parliament with these backgrounds; the ministers make and implement policy on behalf of the government. In the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government, cabinet ministers have been predominantly members who were former government officials and members who had some previous political experience at the local level. Prime ministers of the LDP government in the 1960s particularly gave many important cabinet posts to former government officials because bureaucrats have played an important role in making government policies in Japan and their experience as government officials was invaluable for the LDP leaders to manage the government. The background of recent cabinet ministers, however, appears to be different from in this period. As shown in the *table* below, cabinet ministers with extensive legal expertise are becoming more prominent than before. For instance, the current cabinet led by Prime Minister Naoto Kan has three ministers who were previously legal professionals (Satsuki Eda, Ritsuo Hosokawa, and Yukio Edano). Similarly, Prime Minister Koizumi's cabinet in 2005 also had three ministers who practiced law (Sadakazu Tanigaki, Yasufumi Tanahashi, and Kazuo Kitagawa).

This trend may indicate the changing nature of recent politics in the Diet. In parliament, individual members not only represent different interests, but also bring different knowledge and expertise. Since they have different resources and opportunities depending on their background and personal attributes, they engage in different

TABLE

Previous careers of cabinet ministers in Japan

Period	Bureaucrats	Local politicians	Legal professionals
1961 - 1970	144 (51%)	60 (21%)	10 (4%)
1971 - 1980	78 (35%)	57 (26%)	8 (4%)
1981 - 1990	70 (28%)	75 (30%)	2 (1%)
1991 - 2000	64 (22%)	81 (27%)	13 (4%)
2001 - 2010	55 (21%)	39 (15%)	30 (11%)

Source: Compiled by author

political activities, which may produce different policy outcomes. Below I examine the effect of the members' backgrounds on their political activities to show the linkage between the knowledge and expertise the individual members of the Diet have and their political activities in parliament.

Data & Methods

To examine the relationship between the members' backgrounds and their political activities, I employ data drawn from two types of political activities—(1) law-making activities and (2) parliamentary questions—conducted by the Lower House members of the Diet between 1990 and 1998. The dataset includes information on 814 members for each parliamentary session in this period (26 sessions were convened in total). The advantage of using data from this period is that we can also see the effect of being in government or in opposition, because the members experienced multiple rotations of political power.

Two types of legislation exist in Japan: cabinet bills and private members' bills. Cabinet bills are introduced by cabinet ministers as part of the government's program. In contrast, private members' bills are introduced by individual members of the Diet, independent of the government's program. Since a legislative majority forms a government in parliamentary democracies, most of the bills proposed to the parliament are cabinet bills. However, the Diet consistently receives about 50 private bills from legislators every year; some of them have significant political implications and play an important role in parliamentary politics. In addition to private members' bills, the individual members of the Diet are also able to submit questions to the government in written form in order to seek government information. The number of parliamentary questions drafted by the members each year in the last 20 years is about 300. I identify factors that influence the submissions of private members' bills and parliamentary questions made by individual members of the Diet.

The goal of my study is not to simply describe the behavior of individual members of the Diet in this period, but to make predictive inferences about their political activities so that we can learn about general causal effects from the data observed. Thus, I analyze the data

statistically by treating the individual members of the Diet in the dataset as observed samples drawn randomly from a group of potential members. The number of such empirical studies that use statistical theory in the field of political science is increasing in Japan, and indeed, many undergraduate programs in the social sciences (including political science) these days offer research methodology courses to introduce students to the basic skills used in most social science research. In this study, I use panel negative binomial regression models to see how the personal attributes of individual members affect the numbers of private members' bills and parliamentary questions submitted by them. In addition to the explanatory variables that describe the members' personal attributes and party affiliation, the models also include variables that are used to control the length of the parliamentary session and the government's approval rating, which are not constant across parliamentary sessions.

Findings of Empirical Analysis

The results of my empirical analysis show that legal knowledge helps the members of the Diet engage in legislative activities. Political parties play an important role in parliament and almost all members of the Diet affiliate with any one of the parties. The members of ruling parties do not rely on their own legislative activities to exert an influence on policy because they are able to have direct access to the government. Thus, the number of private members' bills is smaller for the members of ruling parties than for those of opposition parties. Their party affiliation, however, is not the sole factor that determines their legislative activities in parliament. Their background and experience also affect their parliamentary behavior.

Members who are former government officials or legal professionals introduce more private members' bills to parliament than others, while members who were recruited from local politics show the opposite tendency. The coefficients of these personal attributes are statistically significant. That is, the effects of personal attributes on legislative activities are discernible from zero and the results are not accidentally observed due to chance. Such a difference in legislative activities is derived from the fact that members with legal knowledge (former government officials and legal professionals) can bear the cost of making laws and that they have a strong incentive to use their expertise to appeal to their constituencies. In contrast, members with strong local ties but without legal expertise (former local politicians) do not need to rely on legislation in order to get re-elected because such activities as pork barreling and casework are more efficient tools for them to reward their local supporters than legislative activities.

The submission of parliamentary questions is slightly different from the case of legislative activities. The results in this area show that, while members recruited from legal professionals are more active in drafting parliamentary questions than others, members who are former government officials are less active than others. This difference arises because former government officials have an alternative route in seeking government information and they can

obtain information via their former colleagues in the government; meanwhile, members recruited from legal professions have to rely on parliamentary questions to get necessary government information for their legislative activities. The results of empirical analysis also show that members with local political experience are not necessarily inactive in drafting parliamentary questions. This is partly because they can use parliamentary questions to push for government actions as a part of constituency services; indeed, some of their questions were about very specific issues in their electoral districts.

In summary, members of the Diet who are recruited from amongst government officials and legal professionals engage in legislative activities extensively, while members who are recruited from local politics spend their time on other political activities. That is, Diet members with legal knowledge are more active in legislative activities than others. However, the way they gain information is different for former government officials and legal professionals in parliament. Members recruited from legal professions draft parliamentary questions to obtain government information, while members who are former government officials do not rely on parliamentary questions. These results suggest that the legislators' backgrounds affect their political activities in parliament since they have different knowledge and expertise. The individual members of the Diet utilize the knowledge and expertise they gained before they entered national politics for their own political activities. Moreover, among various means for their re-election, they choose to engage in whichever activities are more efficient.

Implications for Japanese Politics

In Japan, cabinet minister posts have been dominated by Diet members who are former government officials or local politicians. However, members recruited from legal professions are becoming more visible in cabinet than before. Such differences in their background can have a significant effect on policy outcomes because the resources and opportunities available for them are different. The results of my study indeed show that their activities such as drafting bills and parliamentary questions differ depending on their background.

Modern democratic government heavily relies on bureaucracy, but there is concern that powerful bureaucracies may limit the capacity of democratic political systems due to the lack of a mechanism to provide accountability to the public. In particular, the balance between bureaucratic elements and democratic elements has been a big issue in Japanese politics throughout the reform period. The more visible presence of legal professionals in the recent Japanese cabinet may be one of the solutions taken by political actors, because members recruited from the legal profession, who often represent different interests from those of bureaucrats, are able to discuss the details of legislation without completely delegating their task to bureaucrats.

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Yoshikuni Ono is assistant professor at the Graduate School of International Relations, International University of Japan.