

Political Participation and Prosperity in Rural Japan

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Introduction

Democracy in the United States features a strong and robust advocacy industry. Unions, associations, and interest groups all play an important role in encouraging voter participation and shaping legislation. At its best this structure gives contributing citizens a sense of ownership and control over laws that are passed or decisions that are made.

Citizens of Japan do not have access to this same opportunity. There are fewer unions, associations, and interest groups to be a part of. Those that exist do not prioritize public education or advocacy. None of the nonprofit organizations or community groups we studied included an advocacy component in their work.



In this essay we will briefly consider similarities in the democratic structure as it exists in Japan and the United States. We will also explore a limited number of key differences. With these in mind, we will attempt to identify opportunities for greater citizen participation and involvement.

Analysis

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2017 measures the state of democracy in 167 countries, including Japan and the United States. The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. This tool is used to compare the relative health of democracy in countries or regions and assess the state of democracy on a worldwide basis.

According to these official measures, Japan and the United States are more similar than not. Each is considered a "flawed democracy." These are countries that "...have free and fair elections and, even if there are problems (such as infringements on media freedom), basic civil liberties are respected. However, there are significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation."

The index measures each of the five categories on a 0-10 scale. The ratings show Japan and the United States to be nearly identical. The countries are separated by more than one point on only two measures: Japan receives a greater score under “functioning of government,” while the United States receives a higher score for “political participation.”

It is this latter measure that deserves our attention. According to the report, lower scores for political participation are “... a problem faced by many developed countries and reflects poor voter turnout, low membership of political parties and a general lack of political engagement.” Declines in this measure, combined with relatively low marks for “political culture,” have resulted in Japan falling from a “full democracy” in 2015 to a “flawed democracy” today.



These findings should come as no surprise. While the Democracy Index as a whole relies primarily on expert assessment, the political participation ratings (along with political culture) are driven at least in part by public opinion surveys. The public sentiment reflected in these surveys is consistent with what we found anecdotally in the communities and organizations we visited.

What can be done to improve political participation in Japan?

This question is especially salient in rural areas, where declining population and limited industry can combine to create a leadership void. Emerging and future leaders in Japan’s rural communities must be able to effectively collaborate with governmental entities in order to maintain and increase quality of life. The government must be responsive if it expects to slow or halt rural emigration.

In our limited study, the Japanese RMO model was presented as a viable solution meriting further exploration.

As it exists today, the Kamiechigo Yamazato Fan Club already serves many functions that require citizen investment and involvement. The organization capably supports local activities, develops local projects, identifies regional trade opportunities, and provides infrastructure for community development. In doing so it helps advance and reinforce a regional identity.

The Kuni concept as applied in this region has potential to evolve further. Though non-governmental in nature, it is reasonable to envision this arrangement as one that achieves existing goals while also advancing advocacy or policymaking functions. In that way it could be



similar in nature to a Chamber of Commerce or regional economic development entity in the United States.

In doing so, a Kuni could be seen as a key partner for governmental entities to rely upon and work alongside. This would require successfully leveraging current citizen participation to advocate for a set of policies that advance shared economic development

and quality of life goals. The grassroots, citizen-based nature of the Kuni model already includes an outlet for community collaboration and shared decision-making. The next step is communication with government officials in an effort to transform these shared priorities into policy wins.

While it is tempting to focus exclusively on the role of individuals or organizations, it is important to note that meaningful improvement will require meaningful cooperation on the part of government. Whether local, prefectural, or national, political leaders must be open and responsive to the ideas, needs, and preferences of every day citizens. Until that happens, individuals will lack the motivation or incentive to become greater participants in Japan's political system.

Conclusion

Japan boasts an innovative and capable set of leaders committed to improving quality of life in rural areas. They have found success in developing a renewed sense of community and supporting new business enterprises. For many, the future is bright.

In order to maintain this progress, it is important that rural leaders seek out and identify opportunities to shape public policy. Each is engaged and involved at the community level and are therefore well-positioned to share their unique insight with elected leaders. Doing so is a first step toward improving political participation in a way that will ensure prosperity in rural Japan.

