In Search of Political Leadership? Populists in Power in Japan

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Abstract

This article surveys the state of the research on populism in Japan and examines the recent success of the Japan Innovation Party (JIP). In line with newer research, it argues that one potential answer for the recent strong showings of the JIP at national and subnational elections lies less with neoliberal, anti-statist policy preferences of voters than support for populists in power. In this sense, the JIP seems to have been able to utilize a ground hitherto fertilized by a long and pervasive call for political leadership in postwar Japan.

1) Introduction

Populism has been a – no pun intended – popular topic of social and political science research for more than two decades by now. This interest was caused by the electoral success enjoyed by European (far) right-wing populist parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party, Front National (later Rassemblement National), the Swiss' People Party (SVP), or the Italian Lega Nord at the turn of the century. In Japan, meanwhile, such (far) right-wing populist parties never managed to pose an electoral threat to the center-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), in power for all but four years since its foundation in 1955. And yet, especially an anti-statist, neoliberal type of populism has been a feature of Japanese politics for multiple decades. In the early 2000s, its flag bearer happened to be none other than the president of the LDP and Prime Minister,

Koizumi Junichirō. Later, regional parties such as Koike Yuriko's Tomin First or One Osaka (*Osaka Ishin no Kai*) would take up the anti-statist populist mantle. The latter in particular has been very successful not only on the sub-national, but in recent years, also on the national level. This paper analyzes anti-statist populist politics and policies in Japan, examining the gap between electoral success of these actors and a lack of clear support for their policy agenda.

2) Defining populism

As Jan-Werner Müller (2016, 2) points out in his famous contribution to the topic, political scientists have struggled to agree on a definition of populism. Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) argued that definitions of populism can be broadly assigned to the following three categories: ideology, discourse, strategy or some combination thereof. In this piece, I will adopt a dual approach of ideology and strategy, taking cues from Mudde, Kitschelt, Müller, and others.

First, it is important to recall that populist parties come in various forms and ideological variations (Kitschelt 1997, 21; Yoshida 2020, 296). Müller (2016, 2-3), for instance, has made the case that populists were not simply "critical of elites," but also anti-pluralist, in claiming they, and only they themselves could and would represent the people. Furthermore, the populist "claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly moral" (Müller 2016, 3). These criteria are very broad, and thus result in Müller discussing the rhetoric and actions of a broad range of populists in his volume: From South American left-wingers Hugo Chavez (president of Venezuela from 1999-2013) and Evo Morales (president of Bolivia from 2006-2019) over the Islamic Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan to Hungary's Victor Orban and Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski as examples of right-wing populism (see, e.g., Müller 2016, 41-

45). De Radt et al. (2004) have offered a slightly more specific definition, albeit one similar to Müller's, in that they have argued populist parties had 1) defined the people as "monolithic", as well as "'common and ordinary', in need of protection against the establishment" (de Radt et al. 2004, 6), 2) styled themselves as a "movement" and "the direct link between the preferences of the people and the political arena" (de Radt et al. 2004, 7), and 3) frequently made anti-establishment statements targeting not only political actors and institutions, but also "cultural elites, media, trade unions, bureaucrats and intellectuals [that] in the populist imagination [are] suspicious of disturbing the direct link between the people and their leader" (de Radt et al. 2004, 7).

Likewise, in an earlier study of radical right-wing Western European parties, Kitschelt discussed a variety of populist currents, including an anti-statist one that might appear as a backlash against entrenched political parties and elites. Paying particular attention to institutional frameworks, he argued that such parties should enjoy strong support in countries where the moderate left and right had converged and a party system and political economy based on patronage existed (Kitschelt 1997, 24-25).

Among these varieties of populism, the far-right variant is the one that has arguably attracted the most attention from scholars and the media, in no small part, due to the success of what Mudde (2007) has labeled "populist radical right parties" across Europe. In France or Austria, for instance, the "early consolidation of the populist radical right" led to a "backlash against increasing immigration and the cultural changes as far back as the 1980s", in other countries such as Germany or Sweden it took longer for the populist radical right to make its mark (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021, 295). As Mudde (2007, 138) notes "the key concept of the populist radical right is nativism, the idea that a state should

comprise 'natives' and that 'nonnatives' are to be treated with hostility". In fact, various studies have shown that "grievances arising from Europe's ongoing immigration crisis" (Ivarsflaten 2008, 18, see also: Harteveld 2023, 62-63) were the one programmatic feature that united all populist right parties on the continent. Mudde (2007, 89) notes that among the many foes on the populist radical right's "black list", "enemies within the state, but outside the nation (notably immigrants and indigenous minorities)" receive the most attention.

Mudde (2007, 297-298) has pointed out that European right-wing populist parties had found fertile breeding ground for their nativist propaganda, in no small part because of the challenges linked to the integration of immigrants and the resulting real or perceived endangering of national identities. De Raadt et al. (2004, 9-10, 13, 18) show that many populist parties in Europe, especially the French Rassemblement National, have aggressively criticized European institutions as elite enemies of ordinary people. In addition, enemies of the past are still characterized as would be occupiers or at least potential foes of tomorrow (Mudde 2007, 74-78).

3) Populist potential and parties in Japan

Research on populism in Japan has diversified quite considerably since Ōtake Hideo first took up the study of the topic two decades ago, during the time of the Koizumi administration (from 2001 through 2006). In contrast, some studies have questioned whether populism even existed in Japan. A comparative study of right-wing populism published in the mid-2000s, listed Japan as a country with no "radical right electoral parties" (Norris 2005, 55). In the present, radical right parties exist, as the example of the Japan First Party (JFP, Nippon Daiittō) demonstrates, but their electoral success is limited, to say the least. The JFP was established by Sakurai Makoto, the founder of the *Zaitokukai*

(Association against Special Privileges of Resident Koreans). This association has rallied against what it regards as unfair support for resident Koreans in particular, and often used hate speech to get its message across. Sakurai himself came in fifth in the 2020 Tokyo governor election (winning 179,000 votes or 3% of the total vote) (Asahi Shimbun 2020).

This lack of success can be seen as evidence that Norris' assessment still holds. In fact, Lind (2018) arrived at a similar conclusion, arguing that "populism [had] missed Japan," because "Japanese leaders put the national interest first in immigration and trade policy. Immigration policies reflected (rather than ignored) public opinion, and never lost sight of the challenges of integration" (Lind 2018, 69). In similar fashion, Klein (2020, 14), concluded that "a cursory view through the ideational lens at the political arena in Japan only detects traces of populism here and there but no consistently populist party".

Meanwhile, other authors have emphasized the similarities Japanese populism shares with its counterparts abroad. A recent overview article by Fahey et al. (2020) covering political actors that might be considered populist in Japan shows a substantial variety, in line with Müller's observations. While some studies (Hijino and Vogt 2019) have focused on regional populism, e.g., in Okinawa, the strain of populism most frequently discussed in the literature is the anti-statist variant outlined by Kitschelt. Its key representatives include former Prime Minister Koizumi or the Japan Innovation Party (JIP, Nihon Ishin no Kai) (see, e.g., Ōtake 2005, 2006, 2009 or Yoshida 2020).

For a long time, evidence has pointed to anti-statist populist forces (with the exception of Koizumi) faring much better on the sub-national level: In Osaka, the *Osaka Ishin no Kai* (One Osaka), a regional party out of which the national-level JIP emerged has maintained its iron grip over the

positions of mayor of Osaka City and governor of Osaka prefecture for more than a decade. In the Japanese capital, former LDP politician and Cabinet Member Koike Yuriko has been elected governor of the Tokyo Metropolitan government twice. Her regional party, Tomin First remains the second largest faction within the metropolitan assembly. In Nagoya, mayor Kawamura Takashi has been in office since 2009. His regional party *Genzei Nippon* (Tax Cuts Japan) is the third largest in the Nagoya City assembly.

All three parties share similar histories. Their respective founders all used to be affiliated with or backed by one of the two major political parties at the time, the ruling LDP and the then largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Lawyer and TV personality Hashimoto Tōru, the now retired founder of One Osaka, was initially picked by the LDP as its candidate for the governor of Osaka in 2008. However, the relationship between the LDP's local chapter and the new governor quickly soured, as the latter sought to merge the cities of Osaka and Sakai with Osaka prefecture to establish a prefecture with multiple special administrative districts modelled after Tokyo's 23 districts (*Ōsaka-to Kōsō*). Hashimoto claimed the existing dual administrative structure was a waste of taxpayers' money; a municipal merger would bring about more efficient administration, thus leaving more money to be spent on badly needed welfare (Hashimoto 2014, 56-57). When the LDP balked at the proposal, Hashimoto reacted by establishing his own regional party, One Osaka (Hijino 2013).

Koike was an established member of the LDP, having led the Ministry of the Environment and, as first woman in that position, the Ministry of Defense. In 2008, when Hashimoto was elected governor of Osaka, Koike's bid to get elected LDP president and, thus, Prime Minister, fell short. In 2016, she decided to run for governor of Tokyo, against her own

party's wishes, leading to a breakup. She won a resounding victory and like Hashimoto before her, established her own regional party, the Tomin First (Pekkanen and Reed 2018, 82-85).

Kawamura too once was a member of the LDP, but had spent most of his time as a member of the Lower House in opposition to the LDP. When he ran for mayor of Nagoya in 2009, he had been a member of the opposition DPJ for almost a decade. However, like Koike and Hashimoto, Kawamura quickly ended up clashing with the city assembly and his old party, forming *Genzei Nippon* (Hijino 2015, 108, 115).

In other words, these populist actors' strategies were the same as those populist trailblazers who had been electorally successful before them: "[Distance] themselves from all political parties including their own" (Ōtake 2009, 205). Needless to say, this strategy has long been part of the populist playbook, as noted by Barr, who observed that a populist leader typically portrayed themselves as an outsider "who gains political prominence not through or in association with an established, competitive party, but as a political independent or in association with new or newly competitive parties" (Barr 2009 cited in Gidron and Bonikowski 2013, 13-14). The Japanese populists discussed above might have gained their initial name recognition through their affiliations with established parties, but once they were elected governor/mayor they quickly decided to embrace the outsider label and create their own party organizations.

4) Populist pledges and policies

Next, we will examine what messages these parties used to appeal to voters and how these appeals relate to the populism literature introduced above. The JIP's and to a lesser degree, the Tomin First/Party of Hope's election platforms feature three interlinked sets of policy appeals that are of relevance to our inquiry at hand and fit with de Radt et al. (2004)'s

three aforementioned pillars of populist statements:

First, a strong emphasis of fighting "corrupt, inefficient elites", that is, assemblymen and women affiliated with the established parties who are primarily interested in filling their own coffers, former bureaucrats landing jobs with companies their agency does business with (*amakudari*), etc. This explains why pretty much all election platforms of the JIP and its predecessors have advocated the reduction of seats in parliament, the slashing of benefits attached to being an MP, and the eventual transition from the current bicameral to a unicameral parliament; moreover, the election platforms have pledged to ban *amakudari* and abolish government-owned banks, funds, etc. In other words, here, we have the anti-statist promise of a slim and efficient government.

The second set of policy appeals revolves around (direct) democracy. While neither the JIP nor the Party of Hope nor Tomin First have consistently called for national referenda, JIP's Osaka-based parent One Osaka has made the Osaka metropolis concept the topic of two local referenda. However, both parties have been outspoken in their support for decentralization and the empowerment of subnational entities. The JIP has also consistently argued for the direct election of the Prime Minister (JIP 2017, 8; JIP 2021, 24).

Finally, the third set of policy promises seeks to portray the party in question as the caring partner of citizens, offering free education up to university or freezing/reversing consumption tax hikes (JIP 2017, 4; JIP 2021, 6, 28). Put differently, the JIP has promised to focus directly on citizens' needs (as opposed to those of vested interests).

Koike's *Tomin First* and the Party of Hope both sold themselves as the people's voice fighting against established interests: "We have included 'tomin [citizens of Tokyo prefecture] first' in our name, because we think

that the number one goal of the metropolitan government should be nothing else but the optimization of the citizens' interests. The metropolitan government must not be [only] for the interests of certain people and groups" (Tomin First no Kai 2017, 1). In the election platform for the prefectural assembly election 2017, the first pledge is to eradicate the privileges and wasteful spending of the "old" and "lazy" assembly and its members who were alleged to have bureaucrats write their inquiries to the prefectural government (Tomin First no Kai 2017, 1, 3). Accordingly, the first two major clusters of promises in the manifesto include a more streamlined, efficient and open administration as well as a more democratic, less corrupt prefectural parliament (Tomin First no Kai 2017, 11). Already several months before the 2017 prefectural assembly election, Koike had characterized her campaign as a battle between vested interest groups and the quest for reforms (Koike and Tachibana 2017, 102).

Similarly, in its 2017 national election platform, the Party of Hope promised to "remove vested interests, [special] ties, and murky interests, and realize politics that put citizens first" (Party of Hope 2017, 2). Here too the wasteful spending of parliamentarians whose compensation was "the highest in the world" as well as the slow reduction of seats in the Lower House is criticized. Instead, the party promises to "boldly" slash the compensation of members of parliament and reduce their numbers (Party of Hope 2017, 4). Just like during the prefectural election campaign, Koike and her followers proposed open, free access to government documents and zero cover-ups, a 20% cut in the number of bureaucrats, a ban on donations by business organizations; furthermore, a freeze of the consumption tax hike, and "bold deregulation" (Party of Hope 2017, 13). In other words, the general anti-static message is the same on both, the sub-national and national level. Needless to say, issues

such as consumption tax hike, national security or the future of nuclear power are matters of national – as opposed to sub-national – politics, and thus feature more prominently in the national election platform.

The JIP's rhetoric has been similar. In its 2014 Lower House election manifesto, the party argued that "the reform of dismantling its [own] support organizations, is something that the LDP is incapable of doing. We can do this, because we are the Japan Innovation Party, that has no [such] bonds to vested interests" (JIP 2014, 2). In the same year, Hashimoto (2014, 54-55) gave a concrete example of vested interests he wanted to reign in: Private schools had been subsidized by taxpayers' money, while Hashimoto wanted to get rid of the subsidies and use the money to directly support pupils. In other words, cut out the supposedly corrupt intermediary, in line with deRadt et al. (2004)'s definition. In 2016, the JIP pledged to "enact a growth strategy that battles vested interests" (One Osaka 2016, 4). Specific proposals included: Fewer parliamentarians, less MP benefits, transition towards a unicameral parliament, limitations on or bans of corporate donations and re-employment of retired bureaucrats in the private sector, deregulation to achieve more freedom for the private sector, and freezing (or temporarily reversing) consumption tax hikes (JIP 2017, 8, JIP 2021, 1-2, 6). This message has remained consistent, with then party president Matsui criticizing in 2022 that politicians still clang "to their status and remuneration" (JIP 2022, 1), behavior, which Matsui likened to politicians betraying the promises they had made to the people (JIP 2022, 1). In contrast, the JIP had always been the party of "painful reforms (*mi o kiru kaikaku*)" (JIP 2022, 1).

Meanwhile, on the local and prefectural level, One Osaka (2011, 5-8, 25-26) has blamed the inefficient dual structure of prefecture and city for comparatively high administrative costs or inconvenient public

transportation. Furthermore, the city council hall and the mayor's office were too far removed from the specific needs of the different city wards' citizens. The result was a lack of local self-government. The realization of a unified Osaka metropolitan government would make city and prefecture more democratic and efficient (One Osaka 2011, 5-8, 25-26). By the end of the 2010s, this rhetoric has subsided somewhat, which is natural, seeing how One Osaka had been in control of the city and prefectural governments for a decade by then. Instead, the party launched a second referendum to realize the municipal merger, toting the benefits of a unified government, such as a unified growth strategy. The fruits of this growth would then reach the people via greater citizen service delivered by the special administrative districts that were to be newly established under the metropolis concept (One Osaka 2019, 2).

The emphasis of being the true and trustworthy representatives of the citizenry of Tokyo or Osaka, as opposed to the representatives of vested interests, is akin to Müller's aforementioned definition of anti-elitist populism claiming only it can represent the people (Müller 2016, 2-3) or the direct link between populists and people, without pesky and allegedly self-serving intermediaries, which deRadt et al. (2004) had outlined. Giving the large number of corruption scandals that have plagued Japanese politics throughout the postwar period from Shōwa Denkō over Lockheed and Recruit to more recently, egg producer Akita Foods paying politicians to prevent stricter animal welfare measures, the promise of clean politics certainly has strategic appeal at the polls.

5) Populism at the polls

As of writing, One Osaka controls 46 out of the 81 seats on the Osaka City council and 53 out of 79 seats on the Osaka prefectural assembly. Meanwhile, Koike's Tomin First holds 26 out 127 seats in the Tokyo

Metropolitan assembly, Kawamura's Genzei Nippon 14 out of 68 seats on the Nagoya City council. While the latter two have lost electoral ground in recent elections, One Osaka has managed to strengthen its position as the largest political force in local and regional politics in Osaka.

Earlier studies (e.g., Yoshida 2020) have attributed this success to the relatively strong position of the local/regional executive vis-à-vis the assembly. Unlike the head of the national government, the Prime Minister, governors and mayors are directly elected in Japan. This means that it is possible for populist actors to get (re)elected mayor or governor even without backing from major political parties, most prominently the LDP, as long as the candidate in question has name recognition. The Prime Minister, of course, is elected indirectly, by the members of parliament, ensuring that for all but five years since 1955, the Prime Minister has been the president of the LDP at the time (Gaunder 2017, 140). The presidency of the LDP, though, is not readily available to outsiders, even though some, like Tanaka Kakuei or Koizumi have styled themselves as such. Moreover, Japan's parliamentary Cabinet system ensures that no Prime Minister can rule without the backing of the national assembly's more powerful Lower House. Meanwhile, the directly elected local or regional executives are less dependent on the assembly, and can even govern against a hostile assembly (Hijino 2015, 105-106, 112).

Furthermore, the Lower House's Mixed Member Majoritarian (MMM) system has been seen as a major impediment for (populist) newcomers seeking to make a splash on the national stage, as Koike and her Party of Hope found out the hard way in 2017. After all, the MMM's strong SMD (Single Member District) component favors large parties, which explains the LDP's relative dominance. Earlier studies on populism have shown that there is no direct link between particular types of electoral systems

and the fortunes of populist parties at the polls, though (Norris 2005, 248, Mudde 2007, 233-237). For instance, it has been said that the strong proportional representation elements in continental European election systems had been beneficial to populist parties in the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway or Switzerland. And yet, a majoritarian system does not necessarily impede populist parties' chances of winning votes, though, as the Canadian case has shown (Norris 2005, 253).

As Yoshida's analysis has suggested, national level success has traditionally been hard to come by for populist parties. Instead, candidates running for the governorship or mayorship of urban areas utilized neoliberal populism as a strategy to appeal to unaffiliated, urban voters (Yoshida 2020, 296-297). The political situation in the early 2010s offered what might have looked like an opening on the national stage, though. Utilizing the popularity of its founder Hashimoto and widespread discontent with the party in power at the time, the unpopular and divided DPJ, a JIP predecessor, the Japan Restoration Party (JRP, *Nihon Ishin no Kai*), a national party led by Hashimoto and former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō (1932-2022), won 54 seats to become the third largest party in the Lower House in 2012 (for details, see Reed et al. 2013). This national-level success did not last, though. By the time the next Lower House election was called in 2014, Ishihara and Hashimoto had agreed to go their separate ways.[1] The two sides had been unable to overcome differences regarding key policy issues such as nuclear power and the proposed merger with another opposition party. After the split, the Hashimoto faction of the JRP went ahead with the merger, creating the Japan Reform Party, which also did not last more than two years. In the 2017 Lower House election, the first after Hashimoto's retirement from active politics, the JIP won only 11 out of 465 seats (Pekkanen and Reed 2018, 78).

In the same year, Koike tried to make her mark on national politics, by orchestrating the formation of the Party of Hope (*Kibō no Tō*). Without candidates, she relied on an old acquaintance, the then chairman of the DPJ successor, Maehara Seiji. Maehara's Democrats, still reeling from their unpopular time in government, needed a popular face, which Koike could provide. Meanwhile, the latter was in need of candidates, whom Maehara could provide. This marriage of convenience, however, quickly turned sour, when Koike decided to withhold nominations from the left-liberal wing of the Democrats. With no place to go, these left-liberals led by Edano Yukio formed the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), which would go on to win more seats than Koike's outfit in the 2017 Lower House election (Pekkanen and Reed 2018, 86-91).

Thus, the evidence suggests that populist parties do fare far better on the subnational level (Yoshida 2020, 292). Then came the 2021 Lower House election, in which the JIP managed to more than triple the number of its seats, compared to 2017 (from 11 to 41 seats). In the PR tier, the JIP more than doubled its vote share from 6.1% (in 2017) to 14% in 2021 (Maeda 2023, 26-27). The following year, it managed to increase its number of seats in the Upper House from 15 to 21 (NHK 2022). In the unified local elections in spring 2023, the JIP easily exceeded its goal of getting 600 local and regional assembly members elected (Yomiuri Shimbun 2023). In other words, in spite of Hashimoto's, and in early 2023, his successor Matsui's retirements, the JIP at present is arguably more successful than at any time since 2012, having expanded its support beyond its traditional home base of the greater Kansai area.

Some have cautioned that the JIP's success at the polls in 2021 might have been only the result of party leader Yoshimura's increased media exposure and high popularity during the COVID crisis, and thus merely a temporary "covid bumb" (Pekkanen and Reed 2023, 67). Moreover, as

noted by Maeda (2023, 27), the gap between the JIP's strong performance in its home base of Osaka and elsewhere has remained substantial. In Osaka, the party's candidates won seats in all 15 districts in which they had run for office. In contrast, in the rest of the country, the JIP secured only one SMD seat, despite running candidates in 79 districts (Maeda 2023, 27). In the 2022 Upper House election, JIP candidates won seats in three multi-member districts (Osaka, neighboring Hyōgo, and Kanagawa), while winning 14.8% of the votes in the PR tier (NHK 2022).

6) Support for populist government rather than populist policies

The successes of the Tomin First, and more so the JIP were initially explained as a preference by urban voters for the anti-statist populist agenda outlined by Kitschelt and others. For instance, Tomita has argued that the "winners (kachigumi)", that is, white-collar workers "living in high-rise apartment buildings in downtown Osaka or in single family homes in the suburbs, burned with a strong resentment and hatred towards 'the poor,' 'the elderly,' and 'sick persons'" (Tomita et al. 2022, 26). This resentment was fueled by heavy tax burdens imposed on those well-offs, who felt they did not receive sufficient benefits, in contrast to those depending on state support (Tomita et al. 2022, 26). In other words, this sounds similar to Ōtake's notion that earlier populists' support base was an unaffiliated urban middle class (Ōtake 2009, 205). After the LDP and the successors of the DPJ had – to varying degrees – moved away from their earlier support for a neoliberal agenda during the second half of the 2000s (see, e.g., Winkler and Hijino 2018, 599-600), the JIP could be seen as a new political home for these voters.

Moreover, as we recall, Kitschelt (1997, 24-25) had argued that a system where the major center-left and center-right parties had converged and patronage was an important factor in the party system and political

economy, would be fertile ground for anti-statist policy appeals. Kitschelt's example thereof were anti-statist appeals of the Austrian Freedom Party during the 1980s. Austria, due to its clientelism and long-time rule by the same coalition, has at times been compared to Japanese politics under the 1955 regime (Scheiner 2006, 103-104). Moreover, studies of Japanese election platforms have shown that the major political parties have indeed converged (Giannetti and Taniguchi 2011). Meanwhile, the debate over the effects the electoral reforms of the 1990s have had on the clientelist relationship between LDP politicians and vested interests, is ongoing, with some scholars arguing that clientelism has declined (Catalinac 2016), and others stressing that electoral reform was insufficient in ruling it in (Natori 2002, Scheiner 2012). In other words, there are several decent, albeit not perfect arguments to be made for an anti-statist pushback in Japan. However, is this pushback, which ostensibly has manifested itself in the success of the JIP, the result of anti-statist policy preferences?

Recent research has suggested that the answer to this question is "no". Hieda et al. (2021), for instance, concluded that there "was no substantive correlation between populist attitudes and either voting behavior for or feelings towards a populist party". Their conclusion was based on an analysis of an online survey conducted after the 2017 Tokyo metropolitan assembly election. In studying voter sentiment towards Koizumi, the JIP under Hashimoto and Tax Cuts Japan, Matsutani (2022) too found no correlation between policy preferences and the backing of anti-statist populist parties/actors at the polls.[2] Likewise, he found no evidence that populist supporters were the "usual suspects," people on the fringes of society feeling discriminated against. Rather, those supporting populist political actors came from all social strata and even those with socially or economically high standing showed little antipathy towards populist

politicians (Matsutani 2022, 187). Matsutani concluded that voters ended up voting for these parties or politicians not for ideological reasons, but for the way they conduct politics. These voters supported a populist style of government, or populists in power (Matsutani 2022, 188-189), even if they did not necessarily agree with their political appeals.

In noting this dichotomy, Matsutani cautioned that voters should be careful what they wish (and whom they vote) for. Voters may not have elected politicians, because they wanted to see a neoliberal or nationalist political agenda advanced, but ended up enabling the realization of such a potentially unwanted agenda due to their choices at the ballot box. Matsutani here gives the example of mayor Kawamura's "extreme nationalism," that came to the forefront during the controversy over the comfort woman statue exhibited at the Aichi Triennale art exhibition. Matsutani argues that many voters had been unaware of this side of Kawamura (Matsutani 2022, 190), even though the latter has a long track record of historical revisionist statements (see, e.g., Asahi Shimbun 2019).

To some extent, this lack of a link between support for populists and anti-statist political preferences seems to fit with the conclusions reached by some earlier studies that had argued against the prevalence of populism, at least the variant based on the ideational definition, in Japan (e.g., Lind 2018, Klein 2020). How then can we make sense of this preference for populists in power without the support for populist policy preferences among those supporting populists?

7) The quest for political leadership

The support for populists in power, which Matsutani and Hieda et al. have observed, is not without precedent. In fact, it can be seen as an extension of the decade-old call for political leadership (*seiji shudō*). In his

analysis of this phenomenon, Mori (2012) interestingly made a point very similar to Matsutani's: According to Mori, many political scientists had long lobbied for stronger political leadership, but when somebody who exerted such politically leadership like Hashimoto appeared, they were often critical (Mori 2012, 78-79). When Mori wrote his article, Hashimoto arguably was at the peak of his power, challenging the established parties to vote him out of power, if they dared. Victory would vindicate him, having received direct support from the sovereign, that is, the people themselves (Ariba 2017, 235-236).

In some ways, Hashimoto (and his successors) have been, for better or worse, manifestations of the call for political leadership, which is as old as postwar democracy itself. This notion should not suggest that the call for political leadership necessarily has to descend into populism. After all, the type of strong leadership many political scientists beginning with Maruyama Masao had in mind, was hardly anti-pluralist. Maruyama himself, in fact, was not oblivious to the anti-pluralist dangers and potentially despotic outcomes, which inevitably accompany the call for strong leadership (Mori 2012, 88). It is also not to say that Hashimoto and his successors would qualify as "despots," even though their rule in Osaka has produced a long list of controversies.[3]

In following Mori (2012), it is simply stating that the call for populist leadership found a ground fertilized by a discourse that has been around since the late 1940s. In the aftermath of World War II, Maruyama had criticized the lack of political leadership during the prewar period (Maruyama 2020, 200-201). The postwar sequel to this prewar episode came in form of the argument about the bureaucracy's (too) strong influence over policy making under the 1955 regime. The nature of the relationship between the central government bureaucracy and the ruling LDP, specifically, whether the former or the latter had the final say,

would later trigger a fierce debate among political scientists (see, e.g., Johnson 1982, Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1997). Out of this debate, and the introduction of the MMM system in the Lower House, emerged an argument that Japan had to embrace a Westminster-style parliamentary Cabinet system led by a powerful Prime Minister's office (Gaunder 2017, 32, 137, Takenaka 2020, 178-189).

These calls were eventually heeded. When it became obvious that corruption scandals were not the exclusive domain of politicians in the 1990s, criticism of Japan's "modern day samurai" increased. The practice of *amakudari*, civil servants descending from bureaucratic heaven to the lower realm of the corporate sector, became increasingly an object of scrutiny (Noble 2010, 241).[4] To the LDP and its newly formed center-right challengers, the bureaucracy became a convenient punching ball, and a welcome distraction from negative news of politicians' scandals. The administrative reforms at the turn of the century eventually created the hitherto demanded (more) powerful and better staffed Cabinet Office (Takenaka 2020, 178-189).

A next step, which was actively discussed during Koizumi's Prime Ministership and has been part of all JIP manifestos since 2012, was the direct election of the Prime Minister: If introduced, it would make the head of the executive branch directly responsible to the people, in other words, cut out the self-serving intermediaries populists love to criticize. The commission tasked to debate the potential introduction of such an almost unprecedented direct election of the Prime Minister in a parliamentary Cabinet system, included several leading political scientists, including former University of Tokyo president Sasaki and Hōsei University's Yamaguchi Jirō. Members were divided over whether to endorse a direct election of the head of government, but nonetheless agreed on the need for strong government with strong leadership (Mori

2012, 81). Eventually, the LDP lost interest in this topic after Koizumi had left the Prime Minister's office in 2006. Meanwhile, to the JIP led by popular figures such as Hashimoto and at present, Yoshimura, a direct election of the Prime Minister – like that of a mayor or governor on the local or regional level – obviously continues to hold great appeal. Thus, the party has continued to include direct elections of the Prime Minister in its election platforms. Leaving aside the potential problems that a direct election of the head of government in a parliamentary Cabinet system can cause,[5] the issue mentioned by Matsutani would simply be transferred to the national level: Voters deciding for emotional or rational reasons to elect a populist leader, who then might enact policies that the very people who voted them into office, do not necessarily agree with.

A decade before Matsutani, Mori had already noted the irony that political scientists pushing for political reforms including the abolishment of LDP-centric interest politics via strong leadership had to watch how this goal was being realized not by the then declining Democratic Party, but by the "anti-intellectualist, populist" Hashimoto (Mori 2012, 79). In this sense, the key to the JIP's success, indeed might extend beyond a desire for anti-statist, neoliberal policies, and highlight a deeper-rooted support for political leadership within certain quarters of Japanese society.

Conclusion

The findings of Matsutani and Hieda et al. go against the long-held view that neoliberal tendencies, especially strong among urban white-collar workers, were behind support for the JIP, and to a lesser degree the Tomin First, in the Kansai and Tokyo metropolitan areas (or for that matter, Koizumi a decade earlier). These studies have shown that voters did not necessarily back these actors, because they shared with them

anti-statist, neoliberal preferences. Rather, as Matsutani has shown, the backing is positively correlated to support for a populist style of governing. It is postulated here that one potential reason for the appeal of this populist style of governing – as opposed to anti-statist, populist policies – is the pervasiveness of the strong leadership discourse, which has gained traction during the post-Cold War decades.

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Notes

1) The Ishihara group formed the Party for Future Generations (*Jiseidai no Tō*), which would loss all but two of its seats in the 2014 House of Representatives elections (Pekkanen and Reed 2016, 67-68).

2) Hieda et al. conducted their survey in 2017, while the surveys used by Matsutani are slightly older. In other words, they do not capture voter sentiment as of 2022 or 2023, which is obviously less than ideal. However, given the short time that has passed since the 2022 Upper House election, there is still a dearth of newer studies that tackle the same questions.

3) Many critics have attacked Hashimoto and the JIP for their attempts to clamp down on civil servant unions or their initiatives designed to bring education under the control of the governor (Mori 2012, 77). Hashimoto and the JIP's most vocal critics have suggested they were preaching an "intolerant populism" (Tomita 2022, 104) not unlike former US president Trump. In other words, these critics stress the anti-pluralist element of populism which is part of Müller's aforementioned definition.

4) In 2007, a revision to the National Public Service Act prohibited government agencies from actively mediating *amakudari* jobs to bureaucrats about to leave their posts (Mainichi Shimbun 2023).

5) Israel had adopted the direct election of the Prime Minister in its parliamentary Cabinet system in the 1990s, but after three elections abandoned it and returned to an indirect selection process again by the early 2000s. For a detailed discussion, see Ottolenghi 2001.