

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE 2000 ELECTION IN JAPAN

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The aim of this paper is to examine newspaper coverage of the 2000 election campaign in Japan with respect to four areas. First, we consider the extent to which election coverage focuses on the ‘game’ aspects of the campaign (the ‘horse race and hoopla’) rather than the substance of the campaign (such as policy positions of parties). Next we look at newspaper editorials to see if any partisan bias is evident. Thirdly, we address the question of whether election coverage in the newspapers is ‘presidential’ — is there a disproportionate emphasis on party leaders? Finally, the analysis concludes by looking at the major issues covered during the election campaign.

Characteristics of Japanese Newspapers

Despite the advance of the electronic media in the post-war era, the print media has continued to flourish both in terms of the wide range of publications available for mass consumption and the levels of readership. For example, the world’s top ten largest-circulation newspapers had combined sales in 1995 of over 60 million. Although newspaper circulation in OECD countries declined slightly from a post-war peak in the 1980s, towards the end of the century, one quarter of the population continued to buy a newspaper and readership figures were even higher.² Furthermore, when the phenomenal increase in

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² From Pippa Norris (2000) *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-industrial Societies*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p.65.

television ownership is considered, it is clear that television has supplemented rather than supplanted newspapers as a source of information.

The impact of the media will be greater when the ‘credibility’ of the particular medium is high. In the case of Japan, the credibility of newspapers is well documented. A study in the early 1980s found that newspapers in Japan were perceived as providing information that is more detailed, accurate, and reliable than that provided by television.³ More recently, Ellis Kraus cites a 1997 survey that found that 83 per cent of the public viewed newspapers as accurate, 81 per cent as trustworthy, and 58 per cent as having balanced views; television scored less well on all these measures.⁴ In a *Yomiuri* survey conducted during the 2000 Japanese election campaign, 74.2 per cent of respondents considered newspapers as the most important medium for relaying campaign news. In a post-election survey, also by the *Yomiuri*, 93 per cent of respondents believed newspapers were ‘necessary’ and 83 per cent said they trusted reports carried in newspapers — in contrast only 56 per cent said they trusted television reporting.⁵ Overall, in the case of Japan, there seems much validity to Freeman’s comment that “...newspapers, and especially the national dailies, remain by far the most important media outlet in the news-making process”.⁶

The importance of newspapers in Japan is given added significance by the fact that the Japanese are avid newspaper readers. Japan is ranked second only to Norway among OECD countries in terms of newspaper circulation per 1000 people.⁷ There are five main dailies in Japan and three of these are covered in this study. The major dailies are considered ‘quality’ rather than popular or tabloid newspapers. Despite being quality newspapers, however, they also have mass readerships. For the three papers in this study, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* had a circulation in 1999 of 14,383,085, the *Asahi Shimbun* 12,356,276 and the *Mainichi Shimbun* 5,373,392.⁸ These newspapers occupy the top three spots in the world’s ten largest-circulation daily newspapers.⁹

³ Ofer Feldman (1993) *Politics and the News Media in Japan*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, p.19. Ellis Krauss (2000) however, cites a 1997 survey that shows the NHK to be more trustworthy than newspapers: see *Broadcasting Politics in Japan* Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p. 4.

⁴ Ellis Krauss (2000) ‘Japan: News and Politics in a Media-Saturated Democracy’. In R. Gunther and A. Mughan (eds) *Democracy and the Media*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 284

⁵ *Daily Yomiuri* (English edition) October 14, 2000.

⁶ Laurie Freeman (2000) *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, p. 16.

⁷ *Unesco Statistical Yearbook 1999*, Paris, Unesco.

⁸ The other two dailies, *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* and *Sankei Shimbun*, are business oriented newspapers – even so they have combined sales of over 7 million.

⁹ Each of the newspapers has links with major television networks: *Yomiuri* with NTV, *Mainichi* with TBS and *Asahi* with TV *Asahi*. In addition, each newspaper has affiliated

These circulation figures are inflated somewhat in that all three have morning and evening editions (see Table 1). Furthermore, for home delivery (which accounts for the vast majority of sales) these two editions are usually sold as a set. The evening editions contain less news about politics (domestic or international), no editorials, and more sport and entertainment than the morning editions. Only the morning editions for the Tokyo region of the three newspapers were analysed.¹⁰

| Newspaper | | Morning | Evening | Total |
|------------------|------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| <i>Yomiuri</i> | 1874 | 10,154,961 | 4,228,124 | 14,383,085 |
| <i>Asahi</i> | 1879 | 8,232,355 | 4,123,921 | 12,356,276 |
| <i>Mainichi</i> | 1882 | 3,947,198 | 1,790,194 | 5,737,392 |

There are three inter-related features of the major dailies that should be noted. First, the newspapers are economically viable, relying on sales for their profits more than advertising. This allows the newspapers to adopt more of an independent stance on issues and resist potential pressure from outside interests. Legislation also allows newspaper companies to restrict ownership to individuals connected with the newspaper industry, such as employees of the company. This fosters a sense of security against outside interference and against takeovers – especially against takeovers by foreign media magnates. Secondly, to maintain their mass readership, the newspapers have to avoid sensationalism, radicalism or controversial issues for fear of alienating readers. The result is little variation in content and format across newspapers. This focus by the newspapers on the ‘average’ reader is made easier by the homogeneity of the Japanese audience in terms of social class, ethnicity, education and religion.¹¹ Thirdly, the newspapers have largely remained politically neutral, avoiding a partisanship that is often found with quality

companies involved in varied business, social and cultural activities. The *Yomiuri* for example, is at the centre of the *Yomiuri* Group whose affiliated companies are engaged in, among other things, managing real estate, advertising, operating cultural facilities, multimedia system engineering, and publishing travel guides.

¹⁰ Even without counting the evening editions, the world’s two largest selling newspapers would still be the *Yomiuri* and *Asahi*. Sales in the Tokyo region accounts for 40 per cent of total sales for the *Mainichi*, 54 per cent for *Asahi* and 60 per cent for *Yomiuri*. The *Mainichi* and *Asahi* both have five regional offices (including Tokyo), while the *Yomiuri* has six. Newspaper content does differ between regional editions but primarily with regard to local news; for national news stories there was often differences in layout but not content.

¹¹ Krauss in Gunther and Mughan, p. 268.

newspapers overseas. The newspapers stress their ‘impartial’, ‘factual’ approach to reporting, largely eschewing journalistic commentary and interpretation. This is not to say that the newspapers are always perceived as being a-political. Until the early 1970s, the newspapers were seen as largely leftist in orientation and this was probably in reaction to their role before the war.¹² Today, the newspapers are often perceived as situated on a left-right political spectrum with the *Asahi* being left-of-centre, *Mainichi* relatively centrist and *Yomiuri* right-of-centre. However, for the whole of the post-war period, it has been argued that both the leftist stereotyping of the earlier period and the more nuanced political characterisation of the later period, are misleading and simplistic. In Ellis Krauss’ view, the newspapers’ “political stances can barely be detected in the substance of their coverage.”¹³ What is more apparent is the newspapers’ consistent anti-government stance which, given the fact that the centre-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been in power almost uninterruptedly since 1955, has often de facto made the newspapers appear ‘leftist’.

The Context

The 2000 election was the second election to be held under the new electoral system and campaign regulations introduced in early 1994. Some proponents of the reforms felt that these changes would shift the focus of campaigns away from candidate characteristics and pork barrel politics, and towards more party- and issue-centred campaigns. Furthermore, with less prominence on rank-and-file candidates, a correspondingly greater emphasis on party leaders, in particular the prime-minister, was expected. The role of the prime-minister in Japan has been characterised as weak, lacking leadership qualities, and being ‘maintenance oriented’.¹⁴ It was hoped that the new electoral set-up would force the prime minister to adopt a higher profile.

An irony here, however, is that the electoral and campaign reforms may encourage the presidentialisation of Japanese politics. Presidentialisation refers to the process by which the major party leaders come to play a role in

¹² Youchi Ito (1990) ‘Mass communication theories from a Japanese perspective’ *Media, Culture and Society*, 12, pp. 423-464. Ito states that “major Japanese newspapers not only supported the military in the Manchurian Incident in 1931 but also criticized ‘weak’ government leaders, and invented chauvinistic and sentimental stories to make the Japanese public more psychologically involved in the war” (p. 431).

¹³ Krauss ‘Japan, News and Politics,’ pp. 269-270.

¹⁴ See for example, Karel Van Wolferen (1989) *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, MacMillan, London; Robert C. Angel (1988-89) “Prime Ministerial Leadership in Japan” *Pacific Affairs* 61:4, pp. 583-602; Aurelia Mulgan (2000) “Japan’s Political Leadership Deficit” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 35:2, pp. 183-202.

parliamentary elections similar to the role presidents play in US congressional contests. As Mughan puts it, “a popular and respected parliamentary leader can now bring votes to her party that would have been denied to it had she not been at its head. Equally, of course, an unpopular leader can cost the party votes”.¹⁵ Image and personality traits, therefore, may become the focus of the election campaigns in Japan without necessarily any greater attention being given to issues than occurred under the previous electoral regime. It may indeed be the case that if presidentialisation is occurring in Japan, it is part of a more general process of trivialisation or tabloidisation of election coverage. There is strong competition between the major newspapers in Japan, who also face increasing competition from the daily sports newspapers and specialist magazines, and greater competition from commercial television channels.¹⁶ This may be having a dumbing-down effect on newspaper election coverage as the newspapers strive to retain readers and attract advertisers.¹⁷ The emphasis of newspaper coverage switches from stories that are substantive and serious to stories surrounding the hoopla and horse race of the campaign. The various gaffes of Prime Minister Mori, for example, may make better copy for the newspapers than the details of government policy on social welfare.

It should be pointed out that there was considerable potential for the 2000 election campaign in Japan to centre on the credibility of the then incumbent Prime Minister, Yoshiro Mori. Before the election he had made two controversial remarks. On 15 May in a speech at a Tokyo hotel he had said that Japan was a “divine nation centring on the Emperor”. Later, on June 3 in a speech at Nara, with reference to the Japanese Communist Party, he asked, “How could we possibly secure Japan’s ‘kokutai’ and ensure public safety with such a party?” Kokutai is a term that has fallen into disuse since 1945 and refers to a national polity centring on the Emperor before and during World War Two. The ‘divine nation’ statement in particular caused widespread controversy throughout Japan, and Mori’s refusal to retract the statement did little to help the situation. During the election campaign, his most notable ‘slip of the tongue’ happened in a speech in Niigata on June 20. When referring to newspaper reports that showed that about half of voters had

¹⁵ Anthony Mughan (1995) “Television and Presidentialism: Australian and US Elections Compared” *Political Communication* 12:3, pp. 327-343.

¹⁶ A reflection of this fierce competition between the three major dailies are the offers of free washing powder and beer tokens as a common inducement to the householder to swap newspapers even if only for a month!

¹⁷ In 1975 newspapers lost their dominant share of advertising expenditure to television. By 1999, television had one-third of advertising expenditure compared to twenty per cent for newspapers. See (2000) *The Japanese Press 2000*, Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, Tokyo, p.79 and (1997) *Japan’s Mass Media*, Foreign Press Center, Tokyo, p. 27.

not decided their choice of candidate, he said “If they still have no interest in the election, it would be all right if they just slept in on that [election] day.”¹⁸

Methodology

Elections to Japan’s lower house, the House of Representatives, took place on Sunday 25 June 2000 after a short official campaign of just 12 days. The newspaper analysis covered 13 days as, unlike some countries, newspapers in Japan are allowed to carry campaign news and even party advertisements on election day itself. Unofficial campaigning began much earlier on 2 June when Prime Minister Mori dissolved parliament and announced the election date.¹⁹ This study focuses on the official campaign only, when campaign activity is most intense. It is also the case that in Japan, all legal campaign activities are strictly limited to the official campaign period itself.²⁰

In analysing the content of election coverage, newspaper items on the 2000 election were placed in one of three mutually exclusive categories:²¹

Game – includes articles on the ‘hoopla’ and ‘horse race’ of the campaign, the comings and goings of the candidates on the campaign trail, and discussion of the strategy and tactics of the parties. Opinion polls are often seen as epitomising the ‘horse-race’ aspect of campaign coverage of elections and are included as a separate sub-category of game.

Substance – includes articles setting out details of party policies, comparing policies across parties, and commentary by journalists and invited experts on campaign issues.

Background – includes articles providing factual information (lists of candidates) or information on the procedural aspects of the election (how to enrol, overseas voting procedures).

¹⁸ In fact, in a post-election survey carried out by *Asahi Shimbun*, 38 per cent of respondents said that Mori’s character had been an important factor in deciding who they voted for while 54 per cent said it was not important.

¹⁹ Constitutionally, an election had to be held sometime in 2000. An election was expected after the July 21-23 summit of the Group of Eight major powers in Okinawa but the election date was brought forward following the hospitalisation of the then Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi on 2nd April and his death six weeks later. The LDP administration met with some criticism for what seemed a blatant attempt to capitalise on the sympathy vote. Mori replaced Obuchi as prime minister on 5th April following behind the scenes negotiations within the LDP hierarchy.

²⁰ The legal restrictions on campaigning are, however, widely flouted.

²¹ These categories are largely based on those of Thomas Patterson (1980) in his *The Mass Media Election*, Praeger, New York.

Game and substance were further categorised according to whether they focussed on a particular party and/or leader and/or issue.

Results

Table 2 presents the distribution of election stories across the three broad categories for the three newspapers.

| Table 2 | | | | |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Newspaper Coverage by Category and Newspaper | | | | |
| | Yomiuri | Asahi | Mainichi | Total |
| Game | 29,751.25 | 26,580.00 | 22,145.75 | 78,477.00 |
| <i>Opinion Polls</i> | 4,137.50 | 4,851.25 | 6,904.00 | 15,892.75 |
| Total Game | 33,888.75 | 31,431.25 | 29,049.75 | 94,369.75 |
| Substance | 8,949.25 | 16,825.75 | 9,502.00 | 35,277.00 |
| <i>Editorials</i> | 2,299.00 | 2,436.00 | 3,094.00 | 7,829.00 |
| Total Substance | 11,248.25 | 19,261.75 | 12,596.00 | 43,106.00 |
| Total Game + Sub. | 45,137.00 | 50,693.00 | 41,645.75 | 137,475.75 |
| Background | 46,222.75 | 34,897.00 | 31,617.75 | 112,737.50 |
| Total | 91,359.75 | 85,590.00 | 73,263.50 | 250,213.25 |
| | | | | |
| | Yomiuri | Asahi | Mainichi | % of total |
| Game | 65.91 | 52.43 | 53.18 | 57.08 |
| <i>Opinion Polls</i> | 9.17 | 9.57 | 16.58 | 11.56 |
| Total Game | 75.08 | 62.00 | 69.75 | 68.64 |
| Substance | 19.83 | 33.19 | 22.82 | 25.66 |
| <i>Editorials</i> | 5.09 | 4.81 | 7.43 | 5.69 |
| Total Substance | 24.92 | 38.00 | 30.25 | 31.36 |
| Total | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

Most of the background news was made up of the listing of candidates for the single-seat constituencies and the proportional representation seats. Even though the campaign period was just 12 days, each newspaper listed the candidates three times: on 14 June, then on 20 or 21 June, and finally on 24 June. The second listing was accompanied by some commentary on the current state of the contest in selected seats.

Other background news items were largely concerned with how the electoral system worked — this was only the second time the new electoral system introduced in 1994 had been used — and voter turnout. The latter reflected concern with the declining turnout at recent elections (a concern also reflected in some editorials — see below). There were articles on levels of voter registration, how many people had voted early, and the response of Japanese nationals living overseas who were, for the first time, allowed to cast a vote in the national election (but for the list seats only).

Because of the significant amount of background news — a total of 43 pages were devoted to the listing of candidates — this has been excluded when calculating the relative shares of total coverage accounted for by game and substance in Table 2.

Game versus Substance

Overall there was nearly three times the coverage of campaign rituals and activities that lacked policy content as there was substantive news.²² Reports of where politicians went, when, and what they did (shaking hands in shopping malls, making speeches at train stations etc), all figured prominently in the three newspapers. All three newspapers had daily items on the ‘Prime Minister’s Day’ or ‘Prime Minister’s Movements’ and regular reports on what party leaders and candidates had said on the campaign trail – for example, the *Asahi’s* ‘Candidate Statements’ and ‘On Air’, the *Yomiuri’s* ‘war of words’ and ‘Report on 2000 Election’, and the *Mainichi’s* ‘Campaign Tour Record’. The *Yomiuri* had most coverage of day-to-day campaigning (over three-quarters) with the *Asahi* the least – just over 60 per cent.

All three newspapers conducted their own opinion polls and did not use each other’s or any outside polling organisations. Less than 12 per cent of total coverage was devoted to stories based on opinion poll results. However, any regular reader of the *Mainichi* would have come across such a story every other day of the campaign; for the other two newspapers there were two stories every five days. There was, therefore, a consistent drip-feed of opinion polls across the campaign. Furthermore, if the *placement* of opinion poll stories is examined, of the total 16 stories, 10 were placed on the front pages (and half of these were headline stories presented with coloured graphs and diagrams). So, while readers were not bombarded with these ‘horse race’

²² Election campaign news was displaced from the front pages of all three newspapers first by the Korean summit of 13-15 June and then by the death of the Empress Dowager on 16 June. Undoubtedly the total amount of coverage was considerably reduced by these two events.

stories about ‘who is winning?’, it is unlikely they missed seeing the stories – it was quality rather than quantity coverage.

Without further research it is not possible to assess what effect, if any, the opinion polls had on readers/voters. It seems doubtful, however, that there was any bandwagon or underdog effect as all the parties began the campaign with meagre poll support, although it was the government that got the headlines (‘Government support hovers around 19 per cent’, ‘58 per cent not supporting government’). Towards the end of the campaign, the polls showed increases in support for the main parties, and by this stage there was a consensus across the polls that the government was going to win the majority (which it did) (‘LDP to win solid majority’ ‘LDP support increases to 24 per cent’, ‘LDP to win majority’). There was a late surge of voting by unaffiliated voters who largely cast their vote for the Democratic Party; but if the newspapers played any part in this it would be more likely the election-day editorial pleas to the unaffiliated to vote that had the effect rather than opinion poll stories.

There was significant variation across the newspapers with regard to substantive news, with the *Asahi* well ahead of the other two both in absolute and relative terms. The *Asahi* had a series of articles analysing the key issues and its opinion page and ‘Press Gallery’ had invited journalists, academics and other experts discuss the major issues and policies. The *Yomiuri*’s ‘Hard Look at Politics’ and the *Mainichi*’s ‘Major Election Issues’ also made use of outside commentators, while the *Mainichi*’s ‘Election Viewpoint’ and ‘Following the Issue’ were written by in-house specialists.

It is not easy to say whether the findings of the study would support the view that newspapers were over-preoccupied with the ‘game’ aspects of the campaign at the expense of more substantive coverage. Over one-quarter of total election coverage devoted to substantive news does ‘seem’ impressive — although this varies across the three newspapers from around one-fifth for the *Yomiuri* and *Mainichi* and one-third for the *Asahi*.²³ How much game coverage is *too much* is a subjective assessment depending upon how much substantive information it is believed that citizens require in order to make an informed vote — informed in the sense that citizens know enough about issues and party/candidate positions on these issues, to make inferences about how parties/candidates are likely to behave as government actors.

²³ Without similar studies of earlier elections, it is not possible to say whether the election coverage by the newspapers of the 2000 election was more or less ‘horse race and hoopla’ than for previous elections. Without similar studies of other countries with parliamentary systems of government, it is not possible to say whether the major newspapers in Japan are more prone to focus on the ‘game’ than their counterparts elsewhere.

Editorial Bias?

Studies in the US have found that the endorsement of a party or candidate in an editorial can have a significant influence on the outcome of an election, especially in certain circumstances.²⁴ As noted already, the quality newspapers in Japan, have tended to avoid anything that might appear as overt partisanship as this would adversely affect circulation. Such self-imposed impartiality contrasts sharply with the clear partisanship exhibited by many overseas newspapers, particularly those in the US and UK.

Was there any evidence of partisanship in the editorials of the three newspapers during the 2000 election? There was certainly no lack of editorial comment on the election. The *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* ran an election editorial every other day of the campaign while the *Mainichi* only failed to run an election editorial on three days.

The underlying theme throughout nearly all the editorials was that *all* the parties ought to confront the issues and face up to the tough decisions (*Asahi* series of editorials ‘Don’t run away’); and that parties should clearly set out their position on these issues so that voters both have a choice and a means to judge performance at the next election. The *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* were critical of the seven party leaders’ debate that opened the campaign (‘Can we see differences?’ ‘Insufficient time for discussion by party leaders’). Subsequent editorials in the three papers called for more policy details on taxation (‘Show outline of tax system’), medical care (‘Promises over medical care avoid the real issue’), welfare (‘Show what are the costs and benefits of welfare system’), education, and economic reform (‘Want parties to show their blueprint for economic restructuring’). Constitutional reform, and security and defence were issues the newspapers felt had not been sufficiently discussed by the parties (‘Think about the fundamentals of the nation’s identity’, ‘Want to hear debate on security’).

All the newspapers had an editorial on election-day encouraging everyone to vote. These final editorials showed concern that a low turnout would mean Japan would continue to drift as it had during the 1990s and that real change would only come about by popular participation (with the *Asahi* quoting Machiavelli in support of their plea for voters to turn out on election-day!).

It would be hard to disagree with earlier findings of an impartial press, at least with regard to editorials. The editorials were unsympathetic to the governing parties but were equally hard on all the opposition parties for their unwillingness to articulate clear policy positions. There was, in fact, a feeling

²⁴ John P. Robinson (1974) “The Press as King-Maker: What Surveys From Last Five Campaigns Show” *Journalism Quarterly* 51, pp. 587-606; Byron St Dizier (1985) “The Effects of Newspaper Endorsements and Party Identification on Voting choice” *Journalism Quarterly* 62, pp. 589-594.

of exasperation in editorial sentiment, that facing a prime minister and LDP-led administration which at the outset of the campaign had rock-bottom approval ratings, the opposition parties were unable to exploit this situation. This is perhaps best exemplified by the Democratic Party originally taking a clear position regarding lowering the minimum income-tax threshold. Subsequently the Democratic Party fudged its position which led the *Mainichi* to bemoan such vacillation: ‘tax allowance – bitter medicine turned to sweet medicine already’.

Despite his numerous campaign gaffes the prime minister came in for little editorial attention – the clear exception being the *Mainichi*’s criticism of his ‘stay in bed’ comment. Even the LDP was not singled out for particular criticism although the editorials’ attacks on pork-barrel politics and vote buying through public works programme can be seen as directed against the LDP rather than all parties.

By focusing only on the editorials, it may be that we miss party bias found in the news columns rather than editorials. Such bias elsewhere in the newspapers may be reflected qualitatively through the ‘tone’ of the news articles or quantitatively in the amount of coverage given to each party. While we did not measure for tone, the amount of coverage devoted to each party is shown in Table 3.

| | Yomiuri | Asahi | Mainichi | Total |
|------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Jiminto | 3,517.25 | 6,469.25 | 4,414.00 | 14,400.50 |
| Komeito | 1,215.00 | 1,461.50 | 746.50 | 3,423.00 |
| Hoshuto | 741.50 | 322.50 | 439.25 | 1,503.25 |
| Government Parties Combined | 5,913.25 | 8,309.25 | 6,150.75 | 20,373.25 |
| Minshuto | 1,535.50 | 3,011.25 | 1,707.50 | 6,254.25 |
| Shaminto | 706.50 | 440.25 | 487.50 | 1,634.25 |
| Jiyuto | 834.25 | 317.25 | 641.25 | 1,792.75 |
| Kyosanto | 891.75 | 486.00 | 534.25 | 1,912.00 |
| Major Opp. Parties Combined | 4,186.75 | 4,282.75 | 3,501.75 | 11,971.25 |
| Other Minor Parties | 810.00 | 80.50 | 191.75 | 1,082.25 |
| Independents | 208.25 | 42.00 | 35.00 | 285.25 |
| Total | 11,118.25 | 12,714.50 | 9,879.25 | 33,712.00 |

Coverage of the LDP and the Democratic Parties is well ahead of the other parties, and the LDP has twice the coverage of the Democratic Party. Compared to their pre-election share of seats, all the parties received a similar

coverage in the newspapers. The exception was the LDP which held over 50 per cent of the seats and received ‘just’ 43 per cent of coverage – which was still, however, well above their support in the pre-election opinion polls. With regard to these figures, it would be difficult to argue the case that any of the parties were denied ‘fair’ coverage in the three papers – at least not in quantitative terms.

Presidentialisation?

Was the 2000 election campaign presidential? Was the campaign coverage focused on the major party leaders, their popularity, personality and image, at the expense of coverage of the policies of their parties and local candidates?

There is mixed evidence to support the presidentialisation thesis (see Tables 4). Mori as PM and leader of the largest party, and Hatoyama leader of the Democratic Party – the largest opposition party – received greatly more coverage than any of the other party leaders. Mori received twice as much coverage as Hatoyama. Ozawa, whose Liberal Party placed him to the forefront of their campaign (and advertisements) received less than one-quarter the coverage of Hatoyama and trailed Mori by a factor of 8:1. Half the party coverage for the LDP and the Democratic Party was devoted to their two leaders respectively.

| | Yomiuri | Asahi | Mainichi | % of Total |
|---|----------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Mori | 46.76 | 46.62 | 48.37 | 47.14 |
| Kanzaki | 10.12 | 10.60 | 7.44 | 9.61 |
| Ogi | 7.55 | 2.31 | 4.57 | 4.42 |
| Leaders of Government Parties | 64.43 | 59.53 | 60.38 | 61.16 |
| Hatoyama | 14.01 | 29.32 | 16.58 | 21.49 |
| Doi | 5.66 | 4.11 | 6.04 | 5.08 |
| Ozawa | 6.73 | 3.08 | 8.74 | 5.65 |
| Fuwa | 5.27 | 3.96 | 6.64 | 5.06 |
| Leaders of Opp. Parties Combined | 31.66 | 42.37 | 38.00 | 38.13 |
| Other party Leaders | 3.90 | 0.00 | 1.04 | 1.40 |
| Independent | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.58 | 0.16 |
| Total | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

This picture of dominance by the two main party leaders is reflected across all three newspapers. It is noticeable however, that the *Asahi* gave Hatoyama significantly more coverage than the other two newspapers; Mori's coverage in all three papers was fairly similar.

As to the actual content of the coverage of the two leaders, Hatoyama tended to get more positive and policy-based coverage than Mori. There were various stories on how Hatoyama felt the campaign was going, his views on the number of seats his party might win, and his proposals for a government if the Democratic Party should 'win' the election. Such stories identified Hatoyama as the 'leader' of the opposition. Hatoyama, especially at the outset of the campaign, received wide coverage of his 'clear', 'bold' policy proposals – in particular the proposal to lower the tax exemption rate. Hatoyama also grabbed the headlines with his declaration that the Democratic Party might support Kato for prime minister.

Mori, on the other hand, entered the campaign on the back of controversy surrounding his 'divine nation' and 'kokutai' speeches, a low level of support for his administration²⁵ and the opposition parties' censure motions submitted in both houses of parliament which cited Mori's lack of character and competence to be a prime minister.²⁶ This set the tone for newspaper coverage of Mori throughout the campaign. The *Asahi* in its article 'PM character is the point at issue' commented that this was the first time that a prime minister's character had been such an important election issue. Mori himself fuelled the newspaper commentary on his credibility with further slips of the tongue such as his comment that those who were not interested in the election should stay in bed and sleep in on election-day ('PM says to let the voters sleep'). His attempt to use policy announcements to try and capture the agenda away from the media seemed obvious and superficial: 'Are new policies just to cover gaffes?' 'Boldness of plan: is that only for the election?' 'Mori-san: are you really going to do it?'

Mori made many other minor gaffes which may just have been the result of campaign tiredness – during the 12 day campaign he made 51 street speeches, 15 indoor speeches and travelled 7500 kilometres – but which were eagerly picked up by the newspapers and further undermined his credibility.²⁷

²⁵ A *Mainichi* survey in late May found support for the Mori Cabinet had halved from 40 to 20 per cent in just over a month. The Mori cabinet had the fifth highest unpopularity rating since *Mainichi* began polling. Sixty-one per cent of those opposing the government cited 'lack of faith in the prime minister's leadership' as their main reason.

²⁶ On a less serious note, there was some publicity at the start of the campaign to a noodle shop owner who pegged the price of one of his popular dishes to Mori's popularity rating. At that time, a bowl of 'Mori's Excuse Noodles' cost 125 yen based on the 12.5 per cent support rate for Mori in the latest public opinion poll.

²⁷ Mori used incorrect words on a number of occasions, for example, the Okinawa 'International Exposition' rather than Okinawa 'Summit'; 'IC' rather than 'IT'. He also referred to the Korean peninsula as divided into two 'races' rather than two 'countries'.

Photos of leaders are important additions in terms of 'presidentialisation' both because they literally give visibility to the leader concerned but also because they draw attention to the article concerning the leader's activities. Photos, however, do not explain policies, and photo-opportunities carefully contrived by a politician's spin-doctors are indicative of image-making at the expense of policy discussion.

There were in fact few photos of politicians in the three newspapers. Mori led with 20 photos, Hatoyama next with 14, Ogi (leader of the Conservative Party) and Kanzaki (leader of Komeito) both with 11, Fuwa (leader of the Communist Party) with 10, and Doi (leader of the Socialist Party) and Ozawa each with 8. The overall number of photographs of party leaders does not seem particularly impressive for a 12-day national election campaign. Clearly, photo opportunities were not a particular priority for party campaign managers. It should also be noted that, despite growing public disaffection with their politicians, there is little heckling and barracking during election speeches or campaign walkabouts. Thus, photos of politicians confronted by angry gesticulating members of the public are not a common sight in Japanese newspapers, unlike overseas newspapers which thrive on such visual displays of 'drama'.

As with photos, cartoons can capture people's attention. Good cartoons, like good cartoon strips, have a regular following. Across the three newspapers, Mori was the direct or indirect focus of 7 cartoons – prominent were the cartoons on his 'let the voters sleep' comment – none of the cartoons were complimentary to Mori. Mori appeared in a further two cartoons with Hatoyama, which portrayed the election as a contest between the two leaders. In total there were just 19 cartoons that could be interpreted as alluding to the election with less than half focusing on party leaders – again, as with photos, hardly overwhelming evidence of presidentialisation.

The newspaper coverage of Mori (and Hatoyama) needs to be placed in the context of overall election coverage before any definite conclusions on presidentialisation can be made. The coverage of Mori was a meagre 3 per cent of total campaign coverage and only 5.3 per cent when background coverage is excluded. The respective figures for Hatoyama are 1.2 and 2.5 per cent. Total coverage of *all* leaders amounted to just 6.3 or 11.3 per cent. In other words, although Mori, and to a much lesser extent, Hatoyama, did receive considerable newspaper coverage relative to their party colleagues, total election coverage was in no way 'presidentialised'. There was considerably more coverage of the day-to-day campaigning of politicians other than the two main party leaders; editorials were not preoccupied with Mori (see above) and substantive coverage of issues tended to link issues with parties and/or government–opposition, rather than with Mori or Hatoyama.

How much coverage was there of the party leader compared to coverage of their party? This may say something about how much the party

sought to focus its campaign on its leader. Looking at the ratio of party to leadership coverage, for all the parties except the Democratic Party and the LDP, party coverage was at least as great as coverage of the party leader. This was so even for the Liberal Party, often seen as an Ozawa fan club and which featured Ozawa in *all* the party's newspaper advertisements. Mori got slightly more coverage than his party – but not significantly so given he was both the party leader and the incumbent prime-minister. There is a greater gap between Hatoyama and the coverage of his party suggesting his importance to the party – a fact reflected in post-election analyses.²⁸

Issues

Table 5 sets out the ten issues that received the most coverage by the three newspapers at the 2000 election. The surprising entry in the list is the high-ranking of 'security and defence' which failed to appear as a significant issue in public opinion polls and seems to be an example of the newspapers trying to impose this issue on the election agenda.

| Issue | centimetres | No. of Articles |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1. Social Welfare | 6,272.75 | 32 |
| 2. Economy | 5,692.50 | 29 |
| 3. Security & Defence | 5,025.75 | 30 |
| 4. Education | 3,155.75 | 20 |
| 5. Public Works | 3,127.75 | 16 |
| 6. Taxation | 2,933.00 | 25 |
| 7. Unemployment | 1,732.00 | 7 |
| 8. Financial Reform | 1,512.50 | 14 |
| 9. IT | 1,059.50 | 5 |
| 10. Youth | 1,036.75 | 5 |

Note: There were numerous articles on coalitions and the electoral system but these were not considered 'election issues'. They would have ranked 7th and 9th respectively. Social Welfare includes pensions but excludes health. Economy includes economic recovery and debt. Security and defence includes constitutional reform and foreign affairs.

²⁸ See, for example, 'To attain maturity Minshuto [Democratic Party] must strengthen its structure', *Daily Yomiuri* (English edition), July 3, 2000.

This was, in fact, clear from various editorials (see above) but as the *Asahi* acknowledged, ‘Security and foreign affairs: not vote winners’. Hatoyama was also reported in the *Yomiuri* as saying that security was not an important election issue.²⁹

The Japan-US Security Treaty, US troops in Okinawa, the size of the Self-Defence Forces and the sanctity of article 9 of the constitution, were all raised in the context of security and defence; but with the exception of the Socialist and Communist Parties, all the parties preferred to be vague and platitudinous on these topics, probably realising that there were more votes to be lost than gained in this area. There was also a lack of agreement between the LDP and the Conservative Party that favoured expanding the role of the Self-Defence Forces, and Komeito which was more cautious on the issue. Within the Democratic Party there was similar disagreement between members who had come to the party from the LDP and those formerly of the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party’s unambiguous defence of ‘peace’ and article 9 of the constitution, and the Communist’s traditional hard-line stance on anything to do with defence and the US, reflected the appeal of these parties to a specific clientele.

The top issue, social welfare, was another area where parties were reluctant to take opposing positions. All parties favoured maintaining present pension levels, and all favoured ‘adequate’ home care and child allowances. All parties saw a future role for government in providing welfare although the question on the size of this role did bring out differences between the minor parties: the Communists and Socialists were for a ‘big’ role for government, Komeito and the Conservatives for a ‘small’ role. While the Democratic Party hinted at greater targeting (for child allowances) and employee contributions (for pensions), Japan’s welfare state/society seemed under no threat from any political party.

That social welfare was the top election issue in the newspapers probably reflected public unease about future welfare provision in the context of an ageing population, declining birth-rate, and increasing unemployment. Perhaps not surprisingly, economic issues came second in the table, and other economic related issues dominated the second half of the table – public works, taxation, unemployment, financial reform and information technology (IT). All these issues were tied in with ‘economic recovery’ in some way.

Economic recovery was another valence issue – all parties supported this goal! There were however, differences as well as similarities between the position of the government and opposition parties on how to achieve recovery. The similarities were seen in the consensus on the need to deregulate the communications industry and use IT to stimulate employment and industrial

²⁹ For example, a *Yomiuri* survey in May asked voters which policy themes they would like parties to discuss. ‘State of the economy’ came first, followed by ‘medical and welfare issues’, with ‘educational reform’ third *Daily Yomiuri*, (English edition), May 31, 2000, p.6.

growth ('IT key to promoting industry'). Linked to this, there was cross-party support on the need to increase the training and retraining of workers so that they could meet the needs of the new technology industries.³⁰ Taxation was another area of general party agreement – largely an agreement not to propose any increases in taxation until after economic recovery was achieved. The exception was the Democratic Party's proposal to lower the minimum taxable income limit ('Democratic Party gives concrete plan for tax reform'). While such a proposal was labelled 'courageous', the Democratic Party sweetened its 'bitter pill' by saying it would also increase allowances for children.

Financial reform was an issue that clearly divided government and opposition. The governing parties believed that economic growth of two per cent was necessary before attempting financial reform ('Mori says priority is economic recovery'), with Komeito specifying 2003 as the earliest date for trying to deal with the government's budget deficits. The governing parties saw further public works expenditure as a key to stimulating economic recovery; conveniently for the government it was able to announce on the campaign trail that funds from a special reserve of ¥500 billion would be available after the election for more public works projects. Specifically mentioned were new shinkansen projects and the improving of agricultural infrastructure. This inevitably led to accusations of vote buying ('Are reserve funds pocket money for the government?').

The opposition parties believed that it was possible 'to get two hares at one go', that economic recovery and financial reform could be tackled simultaneously and, furthermore, that without financial reform to combat the burgeoning public deficit, economic recovery would be compromised. However, as the newspaper commentators were quick to point out, the opposition failed to provide voters with details of how financial reform was going to be achieved. The closest to specifics was the Democratic Party's proposal to cut public works by 30 per cent over ten years (with savings to go to social security and IT). Ozawa himself talked of reducing government expenditure at a 'steady rate' over seven years in order to achieve financial reform.

On the two non-economic issues, education and youth, the parties again showed remarkable consensus on these valance issues. The consensus, however, was to be rather vague, leading to newspaper comments that, 'Education Reform; more concrete proposals needed', 'Want parties to clearly show their basic thinking on education', 'No blueprint for education for 21st Century' and 'Discussion of reform of the basic law is necessary'. Reform to the juvenile law was seen as necessary and on this the LDP was quite specific in its proposals to lower the age of criminal accountability from 16 to 14, and

³⁰ The Communist Party stood out from the other parties in wanting legislation to make it harder for firms to lay-off workers.

to give prosecutors greater power in trials involving minors. All the parties saw increasing juvenile crime, bullying at school and truancy from school as pressing problems but the Communist Party opposed any changes to the basic law that would be a shift back to the imperial system — especially as this would involve an undermining of the left-wing teachers' union.

Overall, apart from security and defence, there is little surprise to the top ten issues discussed by the three newspapers. What is prominent in their coverage, however, is the criticism by the newspapers of the lack of specifics provided by all the parties on most of these issues. So, ironically, while readers received plenty of substantive coverage of the major election issues, it is doubtful this gave them that much help in identifying significant differences between the parties on these issues when it came to deciding who to vote for. Issue voting can only really happen when parties offer 'choices, not echoes'.

Conclusions

Newspapers are a vital medium of political communication in Japan. How newspapers cover election campaigns, therefore, will have consequences for the Japanese citizen's political interest and knowledge, and ultimately political behaviour (even if it remains very hard to actually measure such impact). In an era of weakening party loyalties in Japan, with the appearance and disappearance of new parties, the demise of old ones, party splits and mergers, and changes in party labels, all of this can be expected to heighten the importance of the campaign and its coverage in deciding final electoral outcomes.³¹ Much of the literature on newspaper coverage of elections has focused on the degree to which such coverage has come to emphasise the 'game' aspects of the campaign at the expense of coverage of substantive issues of the campaign. Within this framework there has been an interest in measuring the degree to which leaders dominate newspaper coverage. Greater coverage of leaders need not always be equated with more 'game' but is likely to be the case; electoral contests are portrayed almost exclusively as 'battles' or 'gladiatorial contests' between (usually two) leaders with heavy emphasis on the ambitions, appearances and other personality traits of leaders. Leaders come to be viewed as the sole representative of their respective parties.

The evidence from this study, albeit a snapshot of just one election, is that readers of the major quality newspapers in Japan are fairly well served in terms of being exposed to a considerable amount of substantive coverage of

³¹ It is, however, acknowledged that the influence of the media extends to the inter-election period when its role in priming and contextualising is often crucial for how media audiences actually interpret election activity.

the election campaign. With the exception of security and defence, there was also little to suggest an issues agenda of the newspapers at odds with what issues the public found most pressing. Furthermore, there was not much evidence of presidential-style election coverage. Parties and policies received the lion's share of election coverage with party leaders assuming a minor role. It remains to be seen whether this situation will change as parties continue to adapt to the new electoral system. If a two-party system were to emerge in Japan, then more game and leaders, and less substance in newspapers' coverage of election campaigns is likely. An undesirable outcome, maybe, but one which proponents of political reform in Japan seem willing to accept in order to create a more 'competitive' party system.