The 21st Century Japanese Prime Minister: An Unusually Precarious Perch

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Abstract

The nature and rapidity of turnover of prime ministers in Japan in recent years (2006~2010) is nearly unprecedented both historically in Japan and in comparison to other developed parliamentary democracies. This paper contextualizes the recent high degree of turnover in the post of prime minister both in historical and comparative perspective. The central argument of the paper is that the recent rapid turnover in the post of the prime minister is a perverse consequence of the increased prominence and influence of the post and the greater electoral importance of the party label in a time of great electoral volatility and voter dissatisfaction.

Key words: Japanese Prime Minister, Cabinet Support, Electoral Incentives, Political Leadership, Intra-Party Politics

1. Introduction

The nature and rapidity of turnover of prime ministers in Japan in recent years (2006~2010) is nearly unprecedented both historically in Japan and in comparison to other developed parliamentary democracies. While older scholarship on Japanese politics has focused on the collegial and/or 'bottom-up' nature of party politics and policymaking in Japan, the current instability at the top follows a series of reforms in the late 1990s that aimed at increasing the administrative capacity and strengthening the leadership role of the prime minister and cabinet in policymaking.

This paper contextualizes the recent high degree of turnover in the post of prime minister both in historical and comparative perspective. The central argument of the paper is that the recent rapid turnover in the post of the prime minister is a perverse consequence of the increased prominence and influence of the post and the greater electoral importance of the party label in a time of great electoral volatility and voter dissatisfaction. As a greater proportion of rank-and-file Diet Members of the governing party are dependent on the prime minister's coattails and overall voter evaluation of the party's performance for re-election, the incentives to replace unpopular PMs with a fresh face (and a new honeymoon period) is strong. In a time of strongly divided government and weak economic performance leaders may find it particularly difficult to maintain the support of swing voters and the perch at the top may be

particularly precarious.

The consequences of these political dynamics for policymaking are mostly negative, and more so than they would have been twenty or thirty years ago. With greater capacity for and greater expectations of top-down political leadership, the greater instability at the top may lead political leaders to have shorter time horizons and thus a greater focus on maintaining their polling numbers rather than enacting reforms that may require inflicting short-term pain for long-term gain.

2. The 21st Century Japanese Prime Minister

Through the 1970s and into the 1980s scholars of Japanese politics could reasonably characterize the position of the Japanese Prime Minister in the 1955 system of LDP dominance as a 'missing leader' (e.g. Massey 1976). To the extent that the characterization of the Japanese political system was a 'pyramid without a peak' (van Wolferen 1989) was criticized, it was generally not because scholars felt that the prime minister or cabinet truly exercised power at the top. Traditionally, the Japanese prime minister's role was to manage factional balancing and oversee a bottom-up policymaking process—to the extent that prime ministers were seen as leaders, they were mostly seen as engaging in 'reactive leadership' (Hayao 1993).

In the 1990s, however, in the wake of scandal and popular dissatisfaction with lack of leadership and reform, various political reforms were implemented that scholars, pundits and the public expected to increase the capacity for political leadership. Electoral reform for the House of Representatives, enacted in 1994, involved abandoning the medium sized district system with a single non-transferable vote (SNTV), and a mixed member system in which 60% of MPs would be elected from single member districts, and 40% from PR. The reform was expected to eliminate intra-party electoral competition and increase the dependence of MPs on the party label. As the highly factionalized and decentralized nature of party politics was a major constraint on executive leadership in Japan, some suggested that removing this constraint had the potential to increase executive leadership.

The partisan constraints on the prime minister in Japan were not the only major weaknesses scholars noted. The administrative capacity of the prime minister's office was quite limited and the legal authority of the prime minister to direct the executive was unclear in a range of areas. However, with administrative reforms that were adopted in 1999 and gradually implemented through 2001, not only was the explicit authority of the cabinet office (formerly the PM office) to initiate legislation and co-ordinate amongst bureaucracies enhanced, but the staffing of the office more than tripled.

With the political reforms came increased expectations of political leaders in Japan. For many voters, enhanced executive leadership was personified in the tenure of Prime Minister Koizumi. Koizumi took office in 2001 shortly after administrative reform was enacted, and lead

the country and the governing Liberal Democratic Party through a tumultuous five and a half years. He began his term immensely popular, and although his popularity ebbed and flowed, he left his post 'on top', serving out the final year his term as LDP party leader following a dramatic snap election victory in 2005 during which he used the leverage that electoral victory gained him to enact major postal reform (e.g. MacLachlan).

On September 26th, 2006, Abe Shinz. succeeded Koizumi Junichirō as Prime Minister of Japan. Koizumi ended his tenure the third-longest serving postwar prime minister, having lead the Liberal Democratic Party through. In many ways Abe was seen as the natural successor to Koizumi. At 52 years old, he was the youngest to achieve the position of the Prime Minister in nearly 70 years, and was widely seen as being telegenic and his initial popularity was unusually high for a Japanese prime minister.[1] However, hopes that Abe would be as durable and popular a Prime Minister as Koizumi were not met. Following a poor performance in the 2007 House of Councillors election and polling numbers that reached the low twenties by the end of that summer, Abe announced his resignation in early September 2007 and was succeeded one year to the day by Fukuda Yasuo.[2]

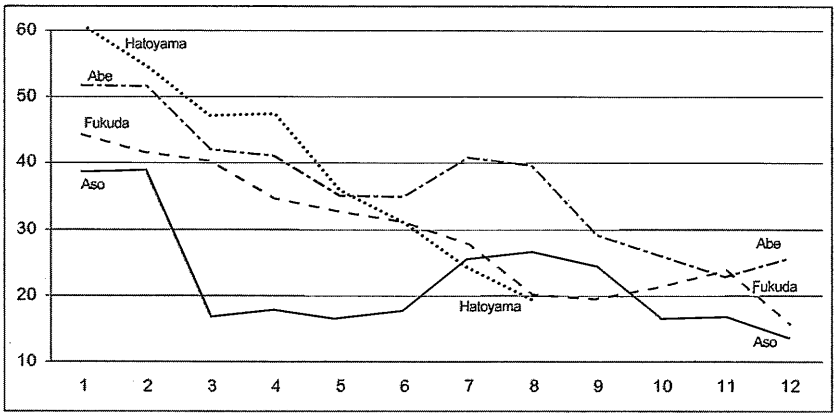
Fukuda Yasuo, the first Japanese PM whose father was also PM, began his term with twenty percentage points more support than Abe had at the end of his term (although not as much as Abe began with), but Fukuda's support dissipated even more rapidly than Abe's did, and after nearly five months of his popular support hovering around 20%, Fukuda announced his resignation in September 2008. Fukuda was succeeded by Asō Tarō, grandson of former PM Yoshida, whose polling numbers proved to be even lower than Fukuda's. Asō led the LDP into the 2009 House of Representatives and to the most crushing electoral defeat in the party's history.

The victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the 2009 election marked the first time a party other than the LDP was the largest in the House of Representatives since the formation of the LDP in 1955. The 2009 election results represented an almost perfect reversal of the results of the 2005 landslide victory for the LDP under Koizumi, with the DPJ garnering more than 60% of the seats. Party leader Hatoyama Yukio became the first non-LDP PM since Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, facing great expectations and strong popular support, with most polls showing his initial support rating as being in the low sixties—an extraordinarily high number in the Japanese context. However, like his three immediate predecessors, Hatoyama's initial popularity plummeted—it was cut in half in six months, and fell below 20% by May 2010. In early June 2010, with the July 2010 House of Councillors election looming,

1) Most polls showed that the initial support for Abe in September 2006 was just above 50%, marking him as only the fourth of twenty postwar prime ministers (along with Tanaka, Hosokawa and Koizumi) to have initial support at that level or higher since consistent newspaper polling of the question began in 1960.

2) On the relationship between Upper House electoral performance, popularity and prime minister durability, see Masuyama 2008.

Figure 1. Cabinet Support for Japanese Prime Ministers, Abe to Hatoyama



Notes: Data from JiJi Press Monthly Polling September 2006 to May 2010

Hatoyama announced his resignation, becoming the fourth consecutive Japanese prime minister to hold office for less than a year. While the initial support numbers for his successor, Kan Naoto, were above 40%, this replacement did not salvage the DPJ's performance in the July House of Councillors election, as the DPJ garnered only 44 seats, (whereas the LDP garnered 51), and the DPJ's ruling coalition lost its working majority in the upper house.

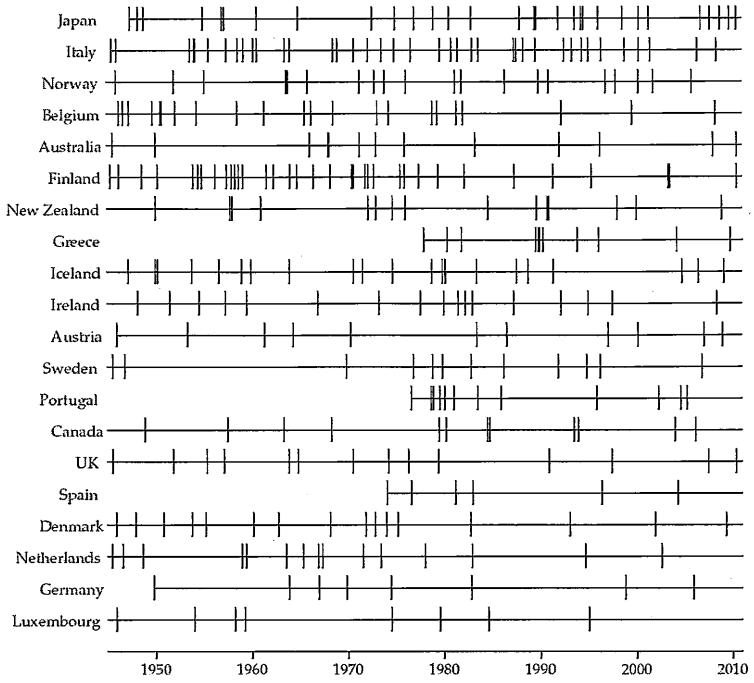
Figure 1 shows the popularity dynamics for the four prime ministers from 2006-2010 across their time in office using Jiji Press data. The clear honeymoon effect in prime minister popularity followed by dramatic collapse of popular support in less than a year is striking and fairly consistent across PMs, although the level of initial support has varied. As discussed below, the recent volatility in the support for prime ministers and the rapid turnover in the post is unusual in a comparative context and contrasts sharply with the experience of the first forty years of postwar Japanese politics.

3. Comparative and Historical Perspective

In comparative perspective, both the nature and the rapidity of the changes of Japanese Prime Minister is quite unusual. In the postwar period, 70% of changes in PMs in developed parliamentary democracies are tied to changes in the party composition of cabinet—less than one-third of changes are solely intra-party matters. There is no stretch of four prime ministers each lasting one year or less in an established parliamentary democracy since the late 1950s (Finland).

Prime Ministerial turnover across developed parliamentary democracies is illustrated in Figure 2. Countries are ordered from top to bottom by the durability of the five most recent prime ministers. Several things stand out from even a quick glance at Figure 2. First, while

Figure 2. Change in Prime Ministers in Developed Parliamentary Democracies



Notes: Data from Müller and Strøm 2000, updated and expanded by author. Countries are sorted by average duration of most recent 5 prime ministers.

Table 1. Prime Ministerial Change in Developed Parliamentary Democracies

Country	Last 5 PMs (Days)	No. of PMs	PMs 2000~	Intraparty Replacement
Japan	1404	30	8	21
Italy	4301	25	4	9
Norway	5027	13	2	5
Belgium	6720	17	3	7
Australia	6798	13	3	5
Finland	7036	24	4	4
New Zealand	7270	14	2	6
Greece	7416	10	3	2
Iceland	7976	16	4	4
Ireland	8544	11	2	5
Austria	8811	11	4	5
Sweden	8907	9	2	6
Portugal	9033	8	3	2
Canada	9448	11	3	4
UK	11411	13	3	6
Spain	12446	6	2	2
Denmark	12952	13	3	5
Netherlands	13595	14	2	1
Germany	14893	8	2	2
Luxembourg	18779	7	1	3

Notes: Data from Müller and Strøm 2000, updated and expanded by author. Countries are sorted by average duration of most recent 5 prime ministers, and the total in Column 2 includes the current PM of each country as of July 31, 2010. The number of prime ministers in columns 3 and 4 count distinct prime ministers (thus prime ministers who return to office are not included). Column 5 includes all changes of the post of prime minister which do not coincide with a change in the partisan composition of cabinet or prime minister.

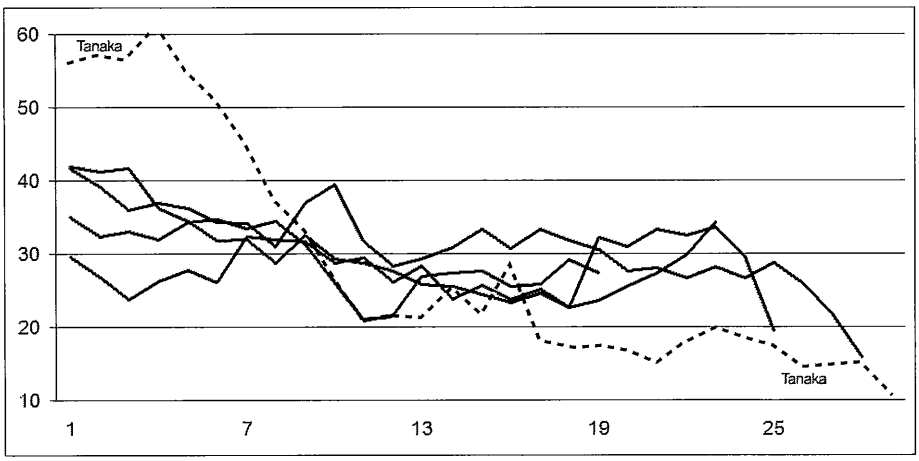
countries other than Japan have had rapid prime ministerial turnover for long stretches (most notably Belgium, Finland and Italy), no country has had turnover at the top over the past decade at the rate Japan has. In fact, no developed parliamentary democracy has had a stretch of four PMs none of whom has lasted more than a year since Finland in the 1950s.

Second, to the extent that there is a general trend across countries over time, it is towards prime ministers lasting in office longer than in the early postwar period and Japan appears to be the only country with a trend in the opposite direction. Countries Finland and Belgium started having dramatically fewer changes in prime minister in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and Italy saw greater stability following the reforms in the mid1990s. Even countries with comparatively more stability in the post have seen even fewer changes in recent decades (e.g. Iceland, Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal).

As of July 31st, there were more than half a dozen countries where the incumbent prime minister had been in power longer than the combined tenure of the 5 most recent Japanese prime ministers. To take the most extreme example, during the tenure of PM Juncker of Luxembourg (who took office in 1995 and continued in office at the time of this writing, having scored a resounding electoral victory in 2009), Japan has had ten prime ministers.

Figure 2 suggests that while frequent change in PMs is hardly the norm, it was not necessarily as uncommon in the earlier postwar period. Belgium, Finland and Italy have all had periods in which frequent change in the PM was common. However, as shown in Table 1, the distinguishes the frequent changes in Japanese PMs is the extent to which it is a current and recent phenomenon, and the fact that the changes in Japanese PM are predominantly a pure matter of internal party politics. The frequent PM and cabinet change in other developed parliamentary countries was largely to rapidly changing coalition governments. Japan has had more than twice as many intraparty PM replacements as any other parliamentary democracy in the postwar period. And in the last decade the difference is more extreme.Japan has had six

Figure 3. Cabinet Support for Japanese Prime Ministers, Tanaka to Suzuki



Notes: Data from JiJi Press Monthly Polling July 1972 to November 1982

intraparty PM changes whereas no other country has had more than two.

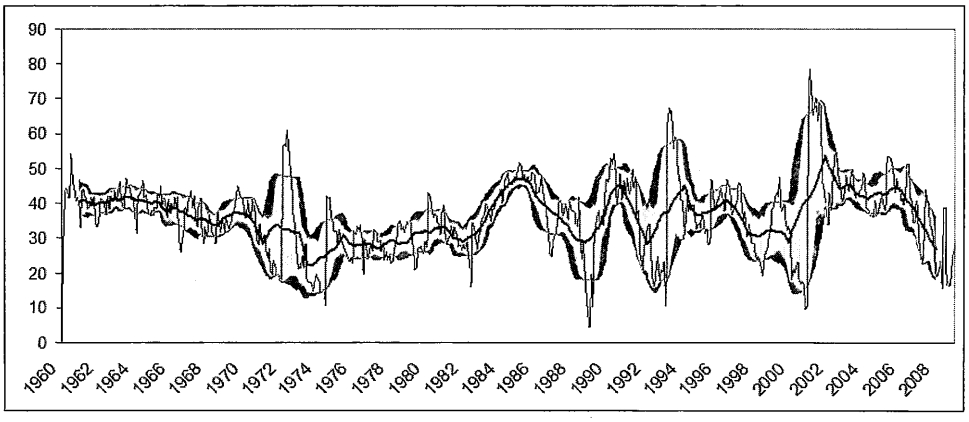
Considering PM turnover prior to the 1970s, Japanese PM turnover does not look atypical in comparative perspective. From 1945~1970 across the developed parliamentary democracies, prime ministers averaged barely over 3 years from 19451970, and postwar PM duration in Japan through Sato was perfectly typical. The crossnational pattern of shorter cabinet and PM duration in fluid coalitional situations showed in the Japanese situation prior to the formation of the LDP as well (e.g. Ashida and Katayama).

However, starting in the 1970s we see a change with the change in patterns of party leadership politics in the LDP. Starting with Tanaka and his rapid fall from grace, we see a pattern emerge in which the prime minister's post, like other governmental posts, becomes regularly rotated, with Tanaka, Miki, Fukuda, Ohira and Suzuki all serving a two-year stint as PM (roughly). Figure 3 shows the popular support for these 5 PM over their time in office. What is noticeable is how, with the exception of Tanaka, the decline in popularity over the first year in office is generally relatively small and gradual, particularly in comparison to the pronounced honeymoon and precipitous drop seen for Japanese PM over the past decade (Figure 1).

The four prime ministers from Miki to Suzuki are fairly typical in terms of support dynamics for Japanese PMs from the 1960s through the 1980s, as can be seen in Figure 4. The area shaded grey in Figure 4 is a measure of the standard deviation of Cabinet support. On average, the month-on-month change in cabinet support in the 1960s was less than 4 points, but in the 1990s and 2000s, this had more than doubled to 10 points.[3)]

Nakasone's five-years in office are quite noticeable in Figure 4 (1982 to 1987). Nakasone's

Figure 4. Cabinet Support for Japanese Prime Ministers



Notes: Data from JiJi Press Monthly Polling June 1960 to December 2009

3) This standard deviation includes changes in cabinet support from that last month of one PM to the first month of the next PM. Even focusing exclusively on changes in popularity for a given cabinet, volatility in cabinet support has nearly doubled.

tenure as PM was seen by some as a sign of potentially a greater role for the PM in terms of leadership on the international stage (e.g. the Ron-Yasu relationship) and with Nakasone, scholars first seriously analyzed the impact of PM popularity on election outcomes (Kawato 1988). However, in terms of popularity dynamics, like most earlier prime ministers there was effectively no honeymoon and decline. There is a distinct pattern in his popularity dynamics, but this was a gradual and relatively smooth trend, not the more rapid changes seen with Tanaka or with more recent PMs, including Nakasone's immediate successor Takeshita.

There have been fifteen Japanese PM to enter and leave the post since Nakasone retired in 1987, and the median duration in office of those Japanese PMs has been less than 13 months, and the mean duration not much greater than that (18 months). Only three PMs of the last fifteen have even lasted two years (Kaifu, Hashimoto, Koizumi) and of those three, only one (Koizumi) lasted more than three years.

That being said, there are some key differences between the PMs of the late 1980s and 1990s (through Obuchi) and the twenty-first century prime ministers to date. All six Japanese prime minister in the twenty-first century to date, including Koizumi, lost more than 20 points of cabinet support in his first year of office—something only PM Tanaka (1970s) and Miyazawa (1991-1993) had previously achieved.[4]

Furthermore many of the cases of PM turnover in the 1980s and 1990s were clearly tied to changes in coalition politics, either explicit inter-party coalition politics as in the case of Hata or Murayama, or intra-LDP factional politics (e.g. Kaifu or Miyazawa). Lack of popular support is not the primary explanation for most changes in the prime minister in this period. For example, Kaifu, Hosokawa and Hata all left office with popular support higher than 40%, Murayama's cabinet support was nearly identical when he entered and exited the office and Obuchi died in office.[5]

That is not to say that cabinet support did not influence durability in this period. just as lack of popular support helped contribute to the resignation of Kishi and Tanaka in previous decades, popular opinion mattered at times in this period as well. However, the dynamics of popular opinion were quite different from what we've seen in the twenty-first century, where it has played a crucial role in almost all of the changes of prime minister.

Ultimately, the lack of durability of the Japanese Prime Minister in the twenty-first century is distinctive both in its extremity and in its nature. It is exceedingly rare for a developed democracy to go through five prime ministers in five years, and even in the rare cases in which

4) In fact, over the first decade of the twenty-first century every Japanese prime minister saw at least a twenty-five point drop, except Mori whose drop was from 33.8% to 9.6% over his first year in the Jiji polls. While the twenty-point cutoff is arbitrary and not without its problems (e.g. it would have been very difficult for PM Uno to generate a twenty point drop given that his initial cabinet support level was only 19.5% in the Jiji poll), regardless of choice of measure, the general point holds.

5) In contrast, it is clear that lack of popular support was somewhat more directly linked to the replacements of Takeshita, Uno and Hashimoto.

this has occurred, or something close to that has occurred, it is almost always attributable to fluid changes in coalition politics. Japan is essentially alone amongst the countries that have had a history of high cabinet turnover in that prime ministers in recent decades have lasted in office for a much shorter period of time than prime ministers from the 1940s through the 1970s. In the next two sections, I consider the causes and consequences of this high turnover in the post of prime minister.

5. Causes

Given the steps made to strengthen the leadership role of the Japanese Prime Minister, the disappointment of the Japanese public in the high rate of turnover of Japanese prime ministers in recent years is understandable. However, the high rate of turnover of the Japanese prime minister is in fact largely driven by the changes that have strengthened the position of the prime minister. Ultimately, because the prime minister matters more to the career prospects of MPs, backbench MPs can no longer safely tolerate an unpopular leader, and political leaders have a much more difficult time maintaining popular support in poor economic times and with divided government.

There are a number of factors that appear to have contributed to the changes in the durability of prime ministers. Previous work has identified two major factors that has lead to an increase in the 'presidentialization' of the Japanese prime minister: the changing nature and role of the mass media and the changing nature of elections. Krauss and Nyblade (2006) suggests both may play a role, and suggest that a trend toward the increasing importance of the prime minister in elections and voting behavior may predate electoral system reform.[6] As a cause of these changes, they focus on the changing nature of the mass media and style of news coverage, and the role of the media in elections (Krauss 2000). Beginning in the 1980s the Japanese media, particularly certain private network TV news and 'tabloid' magazines, dramatically increased their coverage of politicians and political leaders.

Why should changes in the media affect the durability of prime ministers? Simply put, greater coverage of political leaders should provide voters with more opportunities to update their attitudes toward such leaders. Increasingly in Japan, voters have suggested that they are less reliant on personal networks in determining how to vote and that TV news coverage is useful. All in all, when there is little coverage of the prime minister, we should expect less volatility in popular support for that prime minister *ceteris paribus*, but in Japan we have seen the opposite.[7]

6) Patterson and Maeda (2007) also show an effect of prime ministerial popularity on election outcomes under the medium sized district system but do not assess changes over time.

7) Prime ministerial popularity may also be influenced by factors unrelated to the (in)actions of prime ministers, however that does not obviate this point.

Of course, polling numbers and prime ministerial popularity are not important in and of themselves. Prime ministers are not selected and de-selected by the public at large, but are chosen by and held accountable to MPs. Thus the popularity of the prime minister may only be an important determinant of prime ministerial durability to the extent that prime ministerial popularity is important to MPs.

There are a number of reasons to expect that prime ministerial popularity is of increasing importance to MPs. First of all, with the electoral reform of the mid-1990s, a substantial portion of lower house MPs are elected from party lists in proportional representation districts and a majority of lower house MPs are elected from single member districts. Both single member districts and proportional representation districts are generally expected to increase the importance of the party label in voter decision-making relative to the previous electoral system (e.g. Carey and Shugart 1995, etc.).

Crucially, this effect (and the effect of most such changes in electoral and party systems, see Mair 1997?) rests on the idea that there are a substantial number of voters 'available'. In cases where most voters have strong and stable partisan identification and vote according to their party ID, changes like this are not particularly influential because elections are primarily about mobilization of supporters rather than influencing voters who are wavering or undecided. However, all evidence points to quite low partisan identification in Japan. Since the 1970s a plurality of voters have refused to self-identify as a party supporter, and these 'floating' voters have been decisive in election outcomes ever since. Ultimately, when the change in the importance of party label is combined with a greater number of voters without strong partisan identification, this has dramatically increased the likelihood of large national swings in voting, as amply demonstrated in the 2005 and 2009 elections (Maeda, forthcoming).

Of course these structural conditions allowing increasing volatility in prime ministerial support and the increasing importance of prime ministerial support to MPs can not entirely explain the distinctive pattern of prime ministerial support seen in the 21st century. What the recent pattern numbers suggest is that a extraordinarily large number of voters initially support each new prime minister but within the first year a large portion of these voters become disenchanted.[8)]

While these cabinet support numbers may be influenced by a combination of economic factors, gaffes by individual prime ministers and such, (e.g.), this extreme honeymoon effect for Japanese prime ministers in the twenty-first century suggests that something about voters' expectations of Japanese prime ministers has changed. The timing suggests that this coincides roughly with the administrative reforms that strengthened the powers and office of the PM. A substantial portion of Japanese voters have high hopes for that new leaders will live up to the rhetoric surrounding these reforms, and when each prime minister turns out to be no different

8) One could reasonably ask what is going on in the minds of those voters who appear to have hope for each new prime minister only to be repeatedly disappointed and withdraw their support within the first year.

from the last, they are quickly disappointed.

When faced with a choice, MPs selecting a party leader in the twenty-first century have chosen the candidate who appears to be most popular with the public. However, the determinants of popularity of politicians with the public before they are prime minister and during the time in office as prime minister are not identical.Japanese voters now have expectations of (an appearance of) leadership, change and top-down reforms. Needless to say, when change does not proceed apace, many voters who previously supported the politician update their beliefs and realize that 'this one is no different from the rest', and withdraw their support.

Ultimately, this argument is consistent with a principal-agent perspective in understanding parliamentary democracy (Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1993, Saalfeld 2000, Strom 2000). The prime minister is the agent of MPs--while leaders have resources which they can use to reward and punish MPs, ultimately party leaders are selected by and can be replaced by their backbench (their principal). These MPs in turn are the agent of the voters (the 'grand-principal' of the PM). What has occurred in Japan is not simply an increased capacity of the party leader to act (and reward and punish MPs), but a change in what backbenchers need from their party leader. That is to say, institutional reforms have strengthened the capacity of the agent, but these reforms have also changed what the principal and 'grand-principal' expect of that agent as well.[9] What we see then in Japan and the high degree of turnover in prime ministers is, if anything, a perverse consequence of the increase in accountability of the prime minister to MPs and indirectly to voters.

Greater accountability of the prime minister and MPs to voters is generally viewed in positive terms in democratic theory. However, the 'hyper-accountability' we have seen in the twenty-first century Japanese PM, most notably their greater susceptibility to ups and downs of public opinion, has a number of perverse consequences as well.

6. The Consequences of the Hyper-Accountability of the Japanese Prime Minister

Japanese prime ministers in the twentieth century are both more powerful and more vulnerable to the vagaries of public opinion than in the past. Their MPs expect them to be popular and in particular to generate sufficiently large coattails so that their (re-)election and place as members of the governing can be ensured. Voters expect Prime Ministers to take a strong leadership role, and to do so quickly. All too often however, voters and MPs have been disappointed.

The increased expectations and hyper-accountability of the Japanese prime minister may

9) 9 Further discussion could be made about how agents can go over the head of their principal through influence with the grand-principal both empirically (e.g. with Koizumi) and theoretically (Moe's work, etc.)

have a number of perverse consequences. First and foremost, the greater vulnerability of the prime minister may lead to shorter time horizons and a focus on maintaining popular support, which at times may conflict with leaders' desires to enact good policy or adopt policies that inflict necessary short-term costs for greater long-term benefits. In June 2010, reasonable people debated whether raising the consumption tax is a good policy in Japan, but regardless of the merits of the proposal, it is precisely the sort of policy reform that is made more difficult by hyper-accountability. Like many other costly policy reforms, it was hugely unpopular and PM Kan's popularity and the DPJ's electoral fortunes took a substantial hit because of his statement that he would be pursuing a tax increase. The electoral consequences of merely proposing costly policy change did not go unnoticed.[10)]

While the reforms to strengthen political leadership in the policymaking process in Japan may have increased capacity for top-down policy initiatives and oversight of the bureaucracy, rapid turnover in political leadership can have the opposite effect. Instability in political leadership can make oversight of bureaucracy more difficult (Huber and Lupia 2001), particularly in the short-term (Huber 1998). In Japan, the rapid turnover of political leadership was long been seen as one of the impediments to political leadership in policymaking and in bureaucratic oversight (Johnson, Kohno, R&R).

7. Discussion

An interesting contrast to the characterization of the twenty-first century Japanese prime minister in this paper is the experience of the last Japanese Prime Minister of the twentieth century, Obuchi Keizō. While as noted above, every twenty-first century prime minister lost more than twenty points in popular support in their first year, Obuchi's popular support *increased* 20% within his first twelve months in office. The contrast between Obuchi and subsequent prime ministers is worth further discussion, particularly in the context of understanding the causes and consequences of the changes in the role of the Japanese prime minister and the possibilities for mitigating the negative consequences of the hyper-accountability of twenty-first century Japanese prime ministers.

One key difference between Obuchi and subsequent prime ministers lies in his selection and the contest for party leadership. In 1998 LDP MPs consciously selected a party leader who was substantially less popular with the public than the alternative candidates (Koizumi Junichirō and Kajiyama Seiroku). The relatively short race between the three candidates for party leadership in 1998 was largely a forgone conclusion given that the party rules were such that there was no polling of rank and file members, unlike more recent LDP party leadership

10) Regardless of how strongly scholars can demonstrate causality in a case like this, it seems clear from the press coverage and Kan's comments following the election to his party caucus that this was seen as a major factor in the DPJ's loss.

contests (cf. McElwain and Umeda).

Why did the MPs choose the least popular candidate for their party leader? One possibility is that the crucial importance of prime ministerial popularity to MPs' electoral fates was not as obvious to them as it became in subsequent years. However, it is worth noting that the selection of Obuchi came directly after a disastrous performance in the 1998 House of Councillors election that led PM Hashimoto to resign. So although it is likely the acuity of the issue was not as great as in subsequent years, it is unlikely that MPs failed to weigh the lower popularity of Obuchi in their calculations.[11]

Instead, what is likely is that the MPs chose a less popular candidate for PM conscious of the risks in doing so because they believed that they would be better off by doing so. They were choosing a party leader at a time when economic performance and financial reform was a crucial issue, and Obuchi's credibility in this policy area and his long history and strong support base within the party caucus suggested to MPs that he would be able to guide through a stimulus package and economic reforms which were seen as both necessary for national welfare and also for the LDP's prospects of maintaining power in the next election.

Obuchi's initial poor polling numbers were no doubt in part largely due to his lack of a distinct public image beyond being the face holding up the 'Heisei' placard.[12] However, Obuchi was well placed to enact stimulus packages and continue and even move beyond the reform ambitions of his predecessor. Thus, unlike his successors who began their term with fairly lofty expectations and generally failed to live up to them, it is fair to say that the distinctiveness of Obuchi from subsequent prime ministers is that he began his term with quite low expectations and exceeded them.

It is unlikely that the pattern of twenty-first century Japanese prime ministers with extreme drops in popularity in the first year of their term will continue indefinitely. Nor is it likely that the that prime ministers lasting less than a year, like the last four prime ministers, will become the norm.[13] However, it does seem likely that the hyper-accountability of the twenty-first century Japanese prime minister will continue.

That being said, there are reasons to believe that the degree of accountability of prime ministers in Japan will vary, both based on systematic and somewhat more idiosyncratic factors. MPs are more sensitive to public opinion as elections approach, so PMs are more likely to be able to ride out weaker poll numbers when elections are less imminent. PMs are also

11) LDP MP Tanaka Makiko's coinage of less-than-flattering nicknames for the party leader candidadates in 1998 received an extraoardinary amount of media coverage, and her nickname for Obuchi hints at his lack of a strong image and popular appeal. Tanaka called Obuchi a *bonjin* (an undistinguished or mediocre man), in contrast to the *henjin* Koizumi and the *gunjin* Kajiyama.

12) Obuchi was the cabinet minister in 1989 who announced the name of the new era (Heisei) with the assumption of the throne by Emperor Akihito.

13) It is unclear that the political parties would even be able to come up with a potential leader who could have a honeymoon effect if the replacements continued annually. Cf. Dewan and Myatt on the limited pool of talent for ministers and their replacement.

likely to maintain their position when there are fewer credible alternative candidates. Furthermore, there may be times when political demands or MPs' desires to enact certain policies necessitate greater continuity in leadership.[14]

Although as of this writing it is too early to compellingly make the case, there are reasons to expect that the current PM (Kan) will be given more opportunity than his predecessors ride out his early decline in popularity and be given the opportunity to be in office long enough to claim credit for new policies and reforms enacted by the DPJ.[15] Although Kan faces a party leadership election in Fall 2010, it is unclear that any compelling alternative candidate will arise, and despite the decline of support for Kan's cabinet from its initial polling numbers, in August 2010 a majority of voters indicated they would prefer Kan to remain as PM than being replaced by another leader, possibly an indication of voter fatigue with the constant PM turnover (Asahi poll). Furthermore, the electoral calendar allows the DPJ a bit of breathing room, as no election need occur until summer 2013 unless the DPJ sees it to be electorally advantageous.

Fundamentally, the hyper-accountability that drives the recent rapid turnover of Japanese prime ministers is consistent with arguments about the strengthened role of political leaders in Japanese policymaking and their greater importance in elections, and although individual prime ministers may come and go, while the current structural conditions of extremely competitive elections, large national electoral swings, and a great degree of public and media scrutiny of political leadership continues, there is no reason to expect that the hyper-accountability and greater importance of the PM to disappear.

The role of the Japanese PM has been strengthened, and concomitantly, the public, the media and other politicians expect and need more from prime ministers. Most crucially, MPs are more tied to PM coattails than in the past. Rather than the high turnover of PMs being inconsistent with the recent 'Koizumi boom' of scholarship on the prime minister, the recent high rate of turnover of PMs in part was anticipated by some scholarship that highlighted the changing in the role of the PM (e.g. Masuyama and Nyblade 2005: 254).

The consequences of hyper-accountability discussed in the previous section is similar to arguments across a range of fields about how certain accountability mechanisms with short time horizons can lead to less than optimal outcomes.[16] However, while the structural conditions that help induce short time horizons and narrowness of vision amongst politicians may exist in Japan to a greater extent than in the past, this does not necessitate that politicians will necessarily be unable to enact reforms or invest in the long-run at short-term expense.

14) In 2000, one of the reasons discussed in the media for PM Mori staying in office as long as he did despite weak polling numbers was the demands on the prime minister's office for hosting the G8 summits that year necessitating greater continuity in the office than usual.

15) For a brief discussion of some of the early actions of the DPJ that contrasted with the prior LDP administration, see Pempel 2010: 229-230.

16) e.g. the focus for some corporations to perform for quarterly economic earnings reports, the electoral business cycle literature, etc.

Politicians may still choose, based on their own policy preferences or belief in what is right, to push through unpopular reforms and potentially pay the consequences at the polls. Policy entrepreneurs have motivated both political elites and the masses at time to support and enact various reforms with serious short-term costs, and may be more likely to be successful in such endeavors when they reforms can be tied to the long-term interests of organized and far-sighted groups and/or packaged in such a manner to provide short-term benefits to other important groups.[17]

As such, although the hyper-accountability discussed in previous sections may at times create challenges for the enactment of reform and may serve to increase political turnover, it is not entirely clear in net the people are better with such hyper-accountability than with weaker accountability mechanisms. Given the dim view of voters about the political class as a whole and particularly about abuse of power, it is probably fair to guess that hyper-accountability, even with its weaknesses, is preferred to the previously perceived lack of accountability of political leadership.

Ultimately, although there are downsides to the fact that the position of the Japanese prime minister has become much more precarious twenty-first century, overall the enhanced accountability of political leadership in Japan is something that Japanese voters have long desired and is something that strengthens Japanese democracy.

17) For further discussion, see Jacobs forthcoming.