



# Japan Report

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## Sustainable Governance Indicators 2022

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## Executive Summary

Despite a rapidly aging population and alarmingly high levels of public debt, Japan remains one of the three largest economies in the world. Its per capita economic growth rate is roughly in line with that of the United States and the EU. However, disposable incomes have risen little since the early 2010s, and real per capita consumption has been flat. In a country once hailed as the epitome of equitable growth, income inequality has grown and a new precariat has emerged, with some 40% of the labor force in non-regular employment. The situation was further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic as Japan saw significant economic contraction and, along with it, a continuous decline in real wages.

The – for Japanese standards – long-lived government led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020) pursued two major policy goals: a robust economic upturn and introducing changes to Japan’s postwar constitution. Neither of these aims were achieved. The initial economic-stimulus program of 2013 (“Abenomics”) included an aggressive course of monetary easing and additional deficit spending. The short-term effects of this policy gamble were positive, but consumption and investment levels remained anemic, leading to a weak but prolonged recovery. Deflation gave way to mild inflation without producing a definitive upswing. Monetary easing reached its limits after a few years. A lack of serious structural reforms and the population’s limited purchasing power help to explain the stimulus measures’ poor outcome.

Since 2015, the policy focus on boosting the economy, expanding childcare and improving social security programs has further deflected attention from structural reforms. Meanwhile, old-age poverty and the instability of jobs, especially among young people, remain pressing issues. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, in office since October 2021, appears to be steering away from Abenomics, seeking to raise wages, foster startups, revitalize rural regions and reduce carbon emissions. The new government’s initial stimulus package included more funding for universities and digitalization, and incentives for employers to raise wages. Endowed with solid majorities in both houses of parliament, the government will not be able to blame political gridlock if it does not manage to achieve its aims.

Since the early 2000s, LDP-led governments have increasingly steered away from the center. However, some observers have expressed concern that tightening the political reins has negatively affected the neutrality and professionalism of the state bureaucracy. The courts and the media remain unable to provide effective checks on the government. While high-level courts have become somewhat more restless, social media criticism of the government has grown in intensity. Civil society organizations have also become somewhat more active. However, these developments have so far had a limited impact on public policy. Concerns about press freedom and civil liberties have been mounting. The governing coalition's parliamentary strength severely impedes the opposition's capacity to exercise effective oversight. Decreasing voter turnout rates signal indicate that alternative party options lack appeal. A traditional bulwark of liberal democracy in East Asia, Japan has become overshadowed in this regard by Taiwan and perhaps even South Korea.

Faced with an assertive China and a more inward-looking United States (especially under the Trump administration), Japan has again become more active internationally. For instance, Japan was instrumental to obtaining a trans-Pacific free-trade agreement after the United States' withdrawal. If only on the surface, relations with China have become somewhat less strained, while Japan has also signed a free-trade agreement with the European Union, paving the way for closer strategic relations. Moreover, under the banner of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Japan has strengthened strategic links to other "like-minded" countries such as Australia and India. Seeing itself as a defender of a free and rules-based multilateral order, Japan has in recent years also actively supported multilateral mechanisms and initiatives at the global and regional levels.

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## Key Challenges

Serious structural reforms are needed in order to restore vigor and momentum to Japan's economy. Vital policy objectives in this regard include a reduction in agricultural protections, the provision of equality-enhancing reforms and effective support for women and workers, liberalization of the immigration regime (paired with corresponding integration policies), a recalibration of energy policy, and better-targeted social policies. Some progress has already been made in these areas, one example involves a program inviting more foreign workers to Japan. However, other developments have moved in the wrong direction. Given that former long-serving Prime Minister Abe famously vowed to "let women shine," the fact that the cabinet appointed in 2021 included only three women constitutes an embarrassment.

Overall, LDP-led governments have since 2012 not pursued structural reforms whole-heartedly. It is thus not surprising that the Japanese population is overall among the most pessimistic in the OECD . The LDP managed to hold onto power after the Lower house election in November 2021, but its success derives less from its own popularity and performance than from the calamitous state of the opposition. New Prime Minister Kishida has vowed to strive for a "new capitalism" that is focused on addressing income inequality and digitalization issues. The question is whether the government can undertake relevant reforms to affect changes or whether this will remain just a political slogan.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been wreaking social and economic havoc in Japan since 2020, making decisive reform difficult. On the foreign policy front, the U.S.-China trade conflict, and China's increasingly aggressive behavior continues. However, being exposed to the pressure of global economic cooling and disruptions, possibly including financial turmoil, might in fact provide a rare opportunity to push through a far-ranging reform agenda.

Given the country's already ultra-low interest rates, monetary policy can play only a supportive role in this regard. The country needs to maintain its fiscal response until the economy recovers from the pandemic. The government should also consider implementing a major infrastructure drive to exploit the full potential of digital and artificial intelligence (AI) solutions within and across borders.

Continuous opposition to restarting nuclear reactors from the public, regional governments and even courts should encourage the government to strive for a more acceptable and effective energy policy in line with the COP26 agreement. Broader socioeconomic reform will require the government to strengthen alliances with interest groups supporting such reforms. This may include Japan's globally oriented business sector and its more unconventional tech and startup companies.

Japan's parliament does not currently provide effective governmental checks and balances. Parliamentarians need to make better use of their resources to develop alternative legislative initiatives. Courts, the media (including social media) and civil society movements should also seek to improve their capacities to monitor and provide checks on the government. The government itself should not view media criticism as an obstacle to the fulfillment of its ambitions, but rather as a necessary corrective.

Moves toward constitutional change will have a negative impact on Japan's foreign relations, particularly within the region. The government will also need to strike a balance between improving relations with an increasingly powerful China and the need to safeguard sound relations with the United States, which has become a difficult but still indispensable security and economic partner. Relations with South Korea are worse than they have been for many years, though the two democracies are natural partners sharing many challenges. Common strategic interests should guide their forward-looking relations.

In its pursuit of a liberal, rules-based multilateral system, Japan needs reliable allies. In this respect, the EU, Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, some Latin American countries and, indeed, South Korea appear to be suitable partners with similar values and interests. The country's policymakers should thus seek to build on the progress achieved over the past few years, including the 2019 Strategic Partnership Agreement with the EU. Japan should consistently strive for and act in the spirit of multilateral collaboration in areas of global relevance. This should include credible action in pursuit of its COP26 climate commitments, and an end to any circumvention of generally accepted rules such as the ban on whaling.

## Party Polarization

Given the demise of the Japan Socialist Party in the 1990s and the continued marginal parliamentary presence of the Japanese Communist Party, party polarization has not been an important issue in Japan for many years. Both the

center-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its more recent genuine rival, the Democratic Party of Japan, have been “big-tent parties,” with personal allegiances to individual leaders and intra-party factions playing a bigger role than policy-related differences in terms of structuring intra-party competition.

While the LDP has moved toward the right in recent years (as reflected in the composition of its leadership and the views held by its parliamentarians), the main parties still show substantial agreement on many policy issues. The one especially divisive issue that came to the fore during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s second time at the helm of government (2012-2020) was constitutional reform. At its core, this issue turns on whether Article 9 of the country’s constitution, the so-called peace clause, should be changed or not. The coalition’s loss of its previous two-thirds majority in the upper house in 2019, however, effectively closed the government’s window of opportunity for constitutional change.

As there is currently no other important, salient issue for which party polarization plays a significant role, it cannot be said that party polarization generally presents a major obstacle for policymaking in today’s Japan. (Score: 8)

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# Sustainable Policies

## I. Economic Policies

### Economy

Economic Policy  
Score: 5

Recent macroeconomic developments have been mixed. Japan has experienced an extremely long business-cycle upswing, lasting since late 2012. But growth rates have remained relatively modest, while structural constraints such as demographic conditions and labor market rigidities continue to cast a shadow on future growth prospects. According to the IMF, the real growth rate in 2019 was only 0.5%. The COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Japan in January 2020, has made the situation worse. The real growth rate in 2020 fell to -4.6%, a contraction of 29% on an annualized basis. However, there are some signs of pandemic recovery in late 2021, with the IMF projecting 2.4% economic growth in 2021 and 3.2% in 2022.

The policy goals of a 2% annual inflation rate and concomitant increases in inflation expectations remain elusive. In mid-2019, the Bank of Japan trimmed its 2020 inflation target and hinted that it would not hesitate to take additional easing measures if the economic situation worsened. After conducting an assessment of the economic activities in March 2021, the bank introduced new policy framework that would strengthen quantitative and qualitative monetary easing that it had led previously. This signals that existing measures remain insufficient, particularly as the global economy continues to remain shaky due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has depressed all inflationary potential. The inflation rate in 2020 stood at 0%, down from 0.5% in 2019, and in 2021, it fell further to -0.2%. In November 2021, the new LDP government led by Prime Minister Kishida announced a ¥56tn/0bn stimulus package to support families and businesses affected by the pandemic. While this reflationary monetary policy promises some immediate and longer-term investments, it will contribute to increased national debt.

Despite consistent government and central-bank activity, and despite the presence of significant corporate cash holdings deriving from retained profits, consumption and domestic investment rates remain sluggish. Compensating for the negative effects of an aging and shrinking workforce has proven to be extremely challenging. The initiation of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the free-trade agreement with the EU in 2019 may be interpreted as positive signals. The much hoped-for economic boost from the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games was undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a one-year postponement and the eventual banning of audiences and spectators. While the actual impact of the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games is difficult to calculate, many argue that its cost was likely greater than its benefits.

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## Labor Markets

Labor Market  
Policy  
Score: 7

Despite the devastating impacts of the pandemic on the Japanese economy in 2020, its effects on employment were relatively mild. The total unemployment rate stood at 2.9% in October 2021 (although this figure would likely be somewhat higher if measured in the same manner as in other advanced economies).

Like many other countries, the Japanese labor market has witnessed a significant deterioration in the quality of jobs. Retiring well-paid baby boomers are often been replaced by part-timers, contractors and other lower-wage workers. The incidence of non-regular employment has risen substantially to about 40%. Many young people have difficulty finding permanent employment and are not covered by employment insurance. Moreover, because of the non-permanent nature of such jobs, they lack appropriate training to advance to higher-quality jobs. Most economists argue that the conditions for paying and dismissing regular employees have to be liberalized to reduce the gap between the two types of employment. The



incidence of non-regular employment is not just a concern for young people but also for women. According to the Japan Statistical Agency, whereas the total non-regular employment rate in 2021 was 37.1%, the rate among men was 22.1% and among women was 54.4%. A recent study of job separation and re-employment due to COVID-19 by the Japan Institute of Labor (JIL) found that while 93% of workers continued to work at the same company, the job separation rate was higher among women, younger workers and non-regular workers than it was among male and older workers as well as permanent employees.

Adding to the deterioration in the quality of jobs, Japan has been facing a growing labor shortage in both skilled and semi-/unskilled sectors as a result of population aging and decline, a situation that has worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there are some signs of a shift toward a more open immigration regime, a reform of immigration policies to attract foreign workers will be inevitable.

Unemployment insurance payments are available only for short periods. In combination with the associated social stigma, this has kept unemployment rates low. The government raised the mandatory minimum-wage to ¥930/hr (.15/hr) in March 2021. The minimum wage is low enough that it has not seriously affected employment opportunities, although some evidence shows it may be beginning to affect employment rates among low-paid groups such as middle-aged low-skilled female workers.

The Labor Standards Law was changed in 2018. Among its provisions, the allowed quantity of overtime work, a serious problem in Japan, was limited to 100 hours per month, while the work-hour limitations and overtime payments for highly paid professionals have been removed. The law also addresses the wage gap between regular and non-regular work (“equal pay for equal work”). However, a number of structural issues have not yet been fully addressed. In December 2018, the OECD published a report in which it recommended further improvements in job quality and reforms to the mandatory retirement age.

The government has sought to increase the role played by women in the economy while additionally boosting the national birth rate. These two goals have proved difficult to achieve in parallel.

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## Taxes

Tax Policy  
Score: 6

Generally speaking, Japan has a reasonably fair tax system that has helped the government to finance expenditures and allowed the corporate sector to thrive. Following the international trend, the Japanese government began cutting its corporate-tax rate (calculated as the statutory national rate plus the local rate) in 2012. This led to a combined corporate-tax rate decline from 39.5% in 2011 to 29.7% in 2021. The fact that authorities followed up on their initial promise to lower corporate-tax rates despite the country's tight fiscal situation provides a positive signal. However, only around 30% of Japanese firms actually pay corporate tax, with the remainder exempted due to poor performance.

Increasing the comparatively low consumption-tax rate is an important factor in easing budgetary stress, particularly given the huge public debt and the challenges presented by an aging population. The government raised the consumption-tax rate from 5% to 8% in 2014, increasing it further to 10% in 2019. While this displayed the government's willingness to tackle difficult issues, the rate change has not significantly improved the country's fiscal situation.

The OECD has recommended that the country's energy-related taxes be increased both for environmental and fiscal reasons. Apart from a fairly low "global warming tax," imposed since late 2012 on the consumption of fossil fuels such as petroleum, natural gas and coal, fostering environmental sustainability does not figure as a prominent consideration in Japan's tax system.

Japan's tax system achieves a reasonable amount of redistribution. However, salaried employees benefit from far fewer tax deductions than do self-employed professionals, farmers and small businessmen.

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## Budgets

Budgetary Policy  
Score: 2

Gross public indebtedness in Japan amounted to nearly 260% of GDP in 2021, the highest level among advanced economies. Though the primary balance has shown a declining tendency since 2009, it dropped sharply from -3.3% in 2018 to -10.3% in 2020, largely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, the government shifted back its goal of achieving a balanced primary budget to 2025. However, in November 2021, the government announced that it was unlikely to achieve this until 2027, even under a high economic growth scenario.

Nominal interest rates remain low, partly due to the fact that more than 90% of public debt is held by Japanese, mainly institutional investors. The government and institutional investors appear to have little interest in lower bond prices, which can help sustain the current price level of Japanese government bonds for the time being. However, should national savings fall short of domestic needs – a foreseeable development given the aging Japanese population – government deficits may be difficult to absorb domestically. In this case, government bond prices could fall and interest rates could rise quickly, which could then create serious problems for the Japanese government budget and the country's financial sector.

In addition to such structural longer-term concerns, the unprecedented and continuing presence of the central bank in the financial market could lead to short-term liquidity shortages with regard to the availability of Japanese government bonds (JGBs). This could lead to considerable short-term swings in JGB prices and may ultimately trigger significant concerns regarding the stability of the financial system.

Given the record levels of public indebtedness in global comparison, Japan's fiscal sustainability looks fragile.

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## Research, Innovation and Infrastructure

R&I Policy  
Score: 7

Science, technology and innovation (STI) receive considerable government attention and funding. Building on the 5th Science and Technology Basic Plan (2016-2020), in which the government aimed to spend 1% of GDP on R&D to achieve a combined public-private R&D investment of 4% GDP, the government announced its 6th Science and Technology Basic Plan (2021-2025) in 2021 with a goal to invest ¥30 trillion/1 billion between 2021 and 2025 in public R&D, cumulating to ¥120 trillion /0.4 trillion in combined public-private investment. In addition to the expected investment of ¥90 trillion to industry, a new university fund of ¥10 trillion has been created to raise Japanese universities' global competition and performance. There is some suggestion of the 6th Plan aiming to incorporate humanities and social sciences in the National STI policy.

The government and outside observers, pointing to various indicators, realize that Japan's strong position among the world's top technology nations is on the decline. As a recent government report pointed out, Japan's international strength in quality and quantity of scientific output has weakened over the last 20 years. The lack of progress in university reforms and government's stalled public investments in R&D are blamed for the country's anemic industry-academia partnership development.

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## Global Financial System

Stabilizing  
Global Financial  
System  
Score: 5

Developing initiatives for the reform of the global financial architecture has not been a high-priority issue for Japan. The 2019 G-20 summit in Osaka led to the creation of Task Force 2 (TF2) which is tasked to review the T20's aspirations and achievements during the past decades and to propose ways to promote an international financial architecture for stability and development.

However, since then, there has been very little discussion or follow up on TF2 activities or Japan's role in relation to the reform of the global financial architecture.

On the regional and plurilateral levels, Japan's influence has been somewhat eclipsed by China, as China is heavily involved in creating a number of new international financial institutions such as the BRICS New Development Bank, the BRICS Reserve Contingent Arrangement and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Japan has, for now, chosen not to join these institutions. Still, Japan developed its own Partnership for Quality Infrastructure in the mid-2010s, has started to work with its partners in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the United States, Australia and India, on infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific, and pushed the passage of the G-20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment in Osaka.

On balance, Japan is more of a follower than a leader with regard to global and regional (financial) initiatives.

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## II. Social Policies

### Education

Education Policy  
Score: 6

The Japanese educational system has experienced a steady gradual downturn over the last few decades. One of the challenges it currently faces is to deliver adequate quality. The LDP-led coalition has renewed emphasis on reaching the top international tier as well as on improving students' English-language skills. While the number of students studying abroad has been on the decline for a number of years, this trend seems to have halted more recently.

The government is actively promoting reforms. In the context of the Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (2018 – 2022), which stresses the

development of creativity, policymakers announced in May 2019 that the general curriculum taught at schools would be revamped. A government panel in June 2019 proposed the inclusion of more digital, tech-based elements in the education system.

Another issue is rising income inequality at a time of economic stagnation. Measures providing free early-childhood education and free higher education, as well as additional policies related to the country's expensive private high schools, have to be implemented.

In terms of efficiency, the ubiquity of private cram schools indicates that the ordinary education system is failing to deliver the desired results. However, the public's general willingness to spend money for educational purposes reduces the pressure to economize and seek efficiencies.

There is growing concern that reform measures have not achieved their intended goals. Despite major university reforms and the government's well-publicized intention to place 10 universities among the world's top 100, the rankings accorded to leading Japanese universities have been disappointing in recent years. In the Times Higher Education 2022 World University Rankings, only two Japanese universities of (Tokyo and Kyoto) made it into the global top 200. However, this ranking seems to underrate the country's university system.

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## Social Inclusion

Social Inclusion  
Policy  
Score: 4

Japan has developed considerable problems with respect to income inequality and poverty over the past decade. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this situation. Former Prime Minister Abe's economic stimulus measures included a focus on supporting women's economic participation ("womenomics"). Nonetheless, gender inequality has remained a serious issue. The gender wage gap in Japan is one of the largest in the OECD (23%) while the share of

women in parliament is lowest. The country now ranks in the bottom half of the OECD with respect to its poverty rate, income distribution measured by the Gini coefficient, and levels of life satisfaction. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021 ranks Japan at a dismal 120th place out of 156 countries in the overall Global Gender Gap Index and among the bottom third out of 20 East Asian and Pacific nations. Japan also ranked 117th in terms of economic participation opportunities, and 147th in political empowerment for women.

Despite the LDP-led government's relatively strong focus on social-inclusion issues since 2016 – also targeting groups such as people with disabilities and the elderly – there is little evidence that these policies have led to positive outcomes. While 2% of private sector jobs are to be provided to people with disabilities, the actual share sometimes seems to be over-reported. Recent reports suggest increased income inequality. In 2019, the government estimated that there are 1.15 million people in Japan who are socially withdrawn (hikikomori), which constitutes a major problem. Experts argue that this number may exceed 10 million. Many of these individuals are adolescents who are not well integrated into the education and employment systems, but the problem has also spread to middle-aged people. To combat the hikikomori problem, the government appointed its first Minister of Loneliness in February 2021.

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## Health

Health Policy  
Score: 7

Japan has a universal healthcare system. Life expectancies are among the top three in the world for women (87 years at birth) and for men (81 years). The Bloomberg Healthiest Country Index ranked Japan at fourth place in 2021. Infant-mortality rates are among the world's lowest (2 deaths per 1,000 live births). A persistent shortage of doctors represents one serious remaining medical-system bottleneck. The number of doctors per capita is about 40% lower than that found in Germany or France. However, judging on the basis of fundamental indicators, Japan's healthcare system, in combination with traditionally healthy eating and behavioral habits, delivers good quality.

Although Japan has fared comparatively better than other OECD countries in terms of COVID-19 cases and deaths, the pandemic has nevertheless strained its healthcare system. The political fallout of the pandemic has also been serious. The Abe administration was widely criticized for its poor handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, and in 2021, Prime Minister Suga was forced to resign only a year after assuming the position largely due to his administration's decision to hold the Tokyo Olympics and the slow response to the pandemic prior to the event. Japan was also slow to roll out vaccination, which did not begin until the summer of 2021. By the end of the year, though, over 70% of the population were reported to be fully vaccinated. Challenges for the healthcare system also include the need to contain costs, enhance quality and address imbalances. The national health insurance program continues to show a structural deficit despite additional fiscal support that was provided in a 2018 reform package.

Although spending levels are relatively low by international standards, Japan's population has reasonably good healthcare access due to the comprehensive National Healthcare Insurance program. A 2019 OECD review on public health in Japan reaches a positive verdict on Japan's primary strategy, Health Japan 21, but points to room for improved focus and coordination.

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## Families

Family Policy  
Score: 5

While the employment rate among women aged 15 to 64 remains at around 71% in 2021 – a level higher than that observed in the United States – the majority of employed women work in part-time, non-regular jobs. Several policy measures aimed at addressing these issues have been implemented since the 1990s but without much success.

The LDP-led government has sought to provide support for women in the labor force (so-called womenomics). For example, it has made efforts to expand the provision of childcare in order to improve conditions for working mothers. Efforts to abolish kindergarten waiting lists have made some progress, as the daycare capacity has expanded from 2.2 million in 2012 to 2.8



million in 2018. The ratio of fathers taking paternity leave has also increased significantly, from around 2% in 2012 to 5% in 2017, but this number is still low, and many fathers take only a few days leave.

In 2020, the country recorded its lowest number of births, at 840,832. The birth rate has stabilized at a low level of around 1.4 births per woman with the government's target rate of 1.8 remaining out of reach.

The main reason the Japanese government is unable to achieve its aims of improving women's employment conditions and raising fertility rate is that its family policies are not in sync with labor market and employment policies. Women are unable to gain a greater foothold and advance their careers despite generous childcare and other positive family policies because employers and employment practices continue to discriminate women. As women continue to experience gender inequality and employment insecurity in the labor market, they will continue to postpone marriage and childbirth. The question is whether the government is willing to address this gap between positive family policies and the lack of gender-sensitive employment and labor market policies

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## Pensions

Pension Policy  
Score: 6

Given the rapid aging of the population, Japan's pension system faces critical challenges. Already, more than 28% of the population is older than 65. The last major overhaul of the pension system occurred in 2006. Under its provisions, the value of future pension disbursements would rise less than inflation, payments would eventually commence at age 65 instead of 60, contributions would top out at 18.3% of income, and a payout ratio of 50% was promised. The program's assumed relationship between future payment levels, contributions and the starting age for receiving benefits was based on optimistic macroeconomic forecasts, but so far only minor revisions have taken place.

In March 2020, the government passed a pension reform bill that is designed to make it easier for part-time workers to join public corporate pension

schemes (kosei nenkin). Starting in October 2022, part-time and contract workers in workplaces with more than 100 employees will be eligible to join kosei nenkin. This will be extended to workplaces with more than 50 workers in 2024. The planned reform also includes benefit reductions for workers aged 60 to 64, and options for workers to continue paying into the pension system until they reach 70, and to start receiving pensions as late as age 75.

Another pressing issue is Japan's high old-age poverty rate of 19.6% (OECD average: 13.5%), with the poverty rate among men standing at 16.2% and women at 22.3%.

The Government Pension Investment Fund has shifted its asset portfolio somewhat away from bonds (and away from Japanese government bonds/JGBs in particular), toward other assets such as domestic and international stocks. Japanese corporate pension funds are following this trend, with their exposure to domestic government bonds dropping to 18.3% by March 2019. Many observers are concerned about the higher levels of risk associated with stocks. However, JGBs are also risky due to the Japanese state's extraordinary level of indebtedness.

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## Integration

Integration Policy  
Score: 4

In spite of its aging and shrinking population Japan maintains a fairly restrictive immigration policy. The number of legal foreign residents reached a total of 2.9 million in 2020, the highest number on record; yet, the foreign-born workforce represents only about 2% of the total.

Bilateral economic-partnership pacts have allowed Filipino, Indonesian and Vietnamese nurses and caregivers to enter Japan on a temporary basis since 2008. Efforts to attract more foreign workers have been piecemeal. For example, the LDP-led government has relaxed some immigration restrictions

in an effort to attracting highly skilled foreign professionals. In mid-2018, then-Prime Minister Abe announced plans to allow about 70,000 workers into Japan annually until 2025, for a total of about 500,000. Two new temporary visa categories were added in 2019, covering low-skilled and semi-skilled workers in 14 industrial sectors facing labor shortages. The resultant gradual increase in the number of foreign workers has not lessened the country's serious labor shortages, which has been exacerbated by the demographic shifts and the pandemic-related demand for low- and semi-skilled workers, including care workers. Concerns over human-rights issues related to the treatment of the technical interns and other low-skilled workers, and the lack of adequate labor protection and long working hours imposed on foreign workers have also contributed to Japan's reputation as a not-so-attractive destination for foreign workers. In November 2021, the government announced plans to give foreign workers in certain blue-collar jobs long-term residency beginning in 2022. Japan will have to implement more open immigration policies and stronger employment protections if it wants to attract more foreign workers of all skill levels.

The Japanese government still appears reluctant to embrace a full-fledged immigration policy and is cautious of rhetoric pointing in this direction. Despite the Japanese public's positive support for immigration, the nationalistic viewpoints held by many LDP lawmakers pose a particular challenge in this regard. Nevertheless, while the new measures cannot be regarded as a comprehensive package, there has been some progress in facilitating an increased inflow of valuable foreign workers.

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## Safe Living

Internal Security  
Policy  
Score: 9

Japan enjoys a very low crime rate, although it is unclear how much the effectiveness of internal security policies contributes to this. For major crimes such as homicide or hard-drug abuse in particular (950 cases or 0.1% of total crime in 2019), Japan's good reputation is well deserved. The number of recorded crimes reached a postwar low in 2020, with thefts accounting for 70%, and seniors making up 22% of offenders. In 2019, Tokyo was again ranked by the Economist Intelligence Unit as the world's safest (major) city, with Osaka ranking third. Low crime rates, however, should not be equated with low levels of violence as crime such as domestic violence is often not accounted for in national crime statistics. Indeed, the number of incidents involving domestic violence in Japan is high. In 2020, it rose to a record level of 132,355, up from 119,267 in 2019.

Terrorism also poses no major discernible threat today. Nevertheless, ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, parliament passed an "anti-conspiracy bill" in 2017 that considerably expanded police power. This bill has been strongly criticized for curbing civil liberties. Unsurprisingly, the massive security system in place for the Olympic Games in 2021 and related mobility restrictions were widely criticized as being overly heavy-handed.

The existence of organized gangs, the so-called yakuza, remains an issue. These groups have moved into fraud and white-collar crimes. Unlike the Italian mafia, yakuza gangs are not forbidden in view of the constitutionally protected right of association. However, the number of their members has declined sharply, from around 90,000 in the early 1990s to an estimated 25,900 in 2020. Aside from police efforts, low unemployment levels have played a major role in reducing the incentive, or felt need, to join a gang.

### Citation:

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## Global Inequalities

Global Social  
Policy  
Score: 7

The total amount of official development assistance (ODA) stood at \$16.3 billion in 2020 (at current prices), making Japan the fourth-largest OECD Donor Assistance Committee donor country in absolute terms and the largest in Asia. ODA represents 0.31% of Japan's gross national income (GNI). The quality of ODA has improved in recent years, but assistance has been increasingly aligned with Japan's broader international security concerns, a trend which can be criticized from the perspective of potential recipients or indeed the development community at large. The country's 2015 Development Cooperation Charter stresses the principle of cooperation for nonmilitary purposes; the important role of partnerships with the private sector, local governments, NGOs and other local organizations and stakeholders; an emphasis on self-help and inclusiveness; and a focus on gender issues.

Another Japanese ODA priority, with strong geostrategic roots, is infrastructure development. The concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" has gained further traction, with the Trump and Biden administrations having latched on, although with a somewhat less pronounced economic focus than is the case in Japan. Japan has shown active interest in development cooperation with Africa, underlined by the Tokyo International Conferences on African Development (TICAD).

The government used the 2019 G-20 Summit in Japan to support major initiatives aimed at achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Tariffs for agricultural products remain high, as are those for light-industry products such as footwear or headgear in which developing economies might otherwise enjoy competitive advantages. On the non-tariff side, questions about the appropriateness of many food-safety and animal- and plant-health measures (sanitary and phytosanitary measures) remain.

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### III. Environmental Policies

#### Environment

Environmental  
Policy  
Score: 6

Japan used to be a global leader in terms of effective anti-pollution policy and energy conservation. More recently, however, the government has faced the top-priority challenge of adjusting its domestic energy mix in the wake of the triple 3/11 disaster. While the official vision of the government is to create a “circular and ecological economy,” a goal that necessarily touches on various public-policy domains, environmental concerns have taken a back seat in terms of energy policy. The government has reiterated that nuclear power will remain an important part of the country’s energy mix well into the future. All 48 nuclear-power reactors were shut down between 2011 and 2012. By 2021, only five nuclear power plants with a total of nine reactors meeting new, stricter standards had resumed operations. Opposition has made it difficult to restart more.

The Japanese government also faces the challenge of following up on its climate change promises. For example, after announcing at the World Economic Forum in January 2021 that Japan would take on the “Three Transitions” challenge (decarbonization, circular economy and decentralized society) and pledging later at COP26 in Glasgow to step up its fight against climate change by taking actions such as increasing funding to climate finance and phasing down the use of coal power, the government almost immediately backtracked by slowing down the shift away from fossil fuels for fear of fuel shortages. The plan to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions to net-zero by 2050 also seems shaky.

According to the 5th Strategic Energy Plan, released in July 2018, the basic proportions envisioned for the country’s 2030 energy mix remain unchanged, including the goal of a 22% to 24% share for renewables and 20% to 22% for nuclear energy. This is ambitious, and will be hard to achieve if many nuclear reactors remain shut down. Given the uncertainty, the government has been slowing down the phasing out coal-based power plants.

Japan has a severe plastics problem. According to a 2018 UN report, Japan is the world’s second-largest consumer of single-use plastic packaging per person, trailing only the United States. It is also the world’s second-largest exporter of plastic waste. While the government supports the development of

more plastics recycling facilities, as well as research into biodegradable plastic and its applications, its 2030 target for a 25% reduction in single-use plastics is relatively unambitious compared to EU plans, for example.

Japan has made great progress in recent decades with regard to wastewater management. The country today has one of the world's highest-quality tap-water systems, for example. Japan also has a proactive forestry policy. The 2018 Forest Management Law promotes the commercialization of forestry, which may create some tension with wider societal and environmental objectives. Japan's biodiversity is not particularly rich compared with other Asian countries, but the government has in recent years taken a more proactive stance under its National Biodiversity Strategy.

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## Global Environmental Protection

Global  
Environmental  
Policy  
Score: 6

For many years, international climate policy profited considerably from Japanese commitment to the process, with the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 serving as the most visible evidence. Ever since, however, Japan has assumed a more passive role, though major Japanese cities such as Tokyo, Kyoto and Yokohama have shown substantial commitment to the elimination of carbon emissions. Following the Fukushima disaster in 2011 Japan had to find substitutes for its greenhouse-gas-free nuclear-power generation. This rendered implausible Japan's 2009 pledge to decrease greenhouse-gas emissions by a quarter by 2020. Japan's position vis-à-vis the environment is somewhat inconsistent. For example, at COP26 in Glasgow 2021, Japan declared to reach carbon-neutrality by 2050; yet, it declined to sign the Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement, which called for ending the use of coal-fired plants by 2030.

Japan supports the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change and has adopted relevant measures. The plan reconfirms the goal of a 26% reduction in carbon

emissions by 2030, which is at the lower end for OECD countries. After much criticism from international communities, Japan announced in 2021 that it will strive for 46% emission by 2030 in order to achieve carbon-neutrality by 2050.

Japan put climate change high on the agenda of the 2019 G-20 summit in Japan. However, due to U.S. opposition, little was accomplished. However, one notable success was the approval of the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, aimed in particular at tackling plastic waste.

With respect to multilaterally organized conservation issues, Japan is known for its resistance to giving up whaling. Commercial whaling was resumed in mid-2019.

Japan supports numerous international environmental-protection programs by contributing funds and making advanced technologies available, with significant emphasis on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Through the Asian Development Bank, the Japanese government helped raised nearly \$30 billion between 2011 and 2018 for projects supporting green growth. Over the past decade, Japanese overseas development assistance has also put a strong focus on projects addressing energy efficiency and greenhouse-gas emissions.

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# Robust Democracy

## Electoral Processes

Candidacy  
Procedures  
Score: 8

Japan has a fair and open election system with transparent conditions for the registration of candidates. Candidates running in local electoral districts for the lower or upper house of parliament have to pay a deposit of JPY 3 million (around €23,000, plus a deposit of JPY 6 million if also running on the party list). This deposit is returned if certain conditions are met in terms of vote shares received (individual candidates) or the number of seats won (party list). The deposit is meant to deter candidatures that are not serious, but in effect presents a hurdle for small parties and independent candidates. The large amount required for such a deposit also discourages younger candidates, who generally find it more difficult to secure such funds. The minimum age for candidates, set at 25 for the lower house and 30 for the upper house, could also be lowered, although in other countries such as the United States, the minimum age to run for office ranges from 18 to 35, depending on the state.

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Media Access  
Score: 8

Access to media for electioneering purposes is regulated by the Public Offices Election Law and basically ensures a well-defined rule set for all candidates. Since 2013, the law has allowed the use of social media such as Twitter in electoral campaigning and provided for a more liberal use of banner advertisements. The use of such campaign-communications tools has varied among parties and candidates. Regulations are in place to prevent abuses such as the use of false online identities.

Citation:

Diet OKs Bill To Allow Online Election Campaign, Nikkei.com, 19 April 2013

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Voting and  
Registration  
Rights  
Score: 8

The Japanese constitution grants universal adult suffrage to all Japanese citizens. The voting age was lowered from 20 to 18 in 2015. One exception applies to individuals currently in prison, who are not allowed to vote. Since 2006, Japanese citizens living abroad have also been able to participate in elections.

One long-standing issue concerns the relative size of electoral districts, as rural districts contain far fewer voters than urban areas, a malapportionment that has historically favored the ruling LDP. Vote disparities concerning lower house electoral districts had been reduced by means of redistricting in 2017 but climbed back to slightly more than 2:1 in 31 of the 289 single-seat constituencies before the lower house election held in October 2021.

Vote-weight disparities are even more pronounced for the upper house. In 2018, the LDP-led coalition passed a law adding two seats in the densely populated Saitama prefecture as well as four party-list seats. The maximum vote-weight disparity in the July 2019 upper house elections was 3:1. In October 2019, the Takamatsu High Court ruled that this level of disparity was unconstitutional, but did not nullify the election results. Other rulings are still pending.

Citation:

Supreme Court rules vote-value disparity under 2 constitutional, The Asahi Shimbun, 19 December 2018, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201812190057.html>

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Party Financing  
Score: 5

Infringements of the law governing political-party financing are common in Japan. To some extent, the problems underlying political funding in Japan are structural. Under the electoral system that existed until 1993, most candidates tried to elicit support by building individual and organizational links with local voters and constituent groups, which was often a costly undertaking. Over time, these candidate-centered vote-mobilizing machines (koenkai) became a deeply entrenched fixture of party politics in Japan. Even under the present electoral system, many politicians still find such machines useful. The personal networking involved in building local support offers considerable opportunity for illicit financial and other transactions. While the Political

Funds Control Law requires parties and individual politicians to disclose revenues and expenditures, financial statements are not very detailed.

It is very disappointing that no action has been taken to revise existing laws despite the recurrence of problems. In 2020/2021, LDP lawmaker Tsukasa Akimoto was arrested and later given a 4-year prison sentence for bribery involving a casino project, and Komeito lawmaker Kiyohiko Toyama was arrested for illegal loan brokering.

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Philip Brasor, Fundraising loopholes, a political norm, The Japan Times, 15 July 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/07/15/national/media-national/fundraising-loopholes-political-norm/>

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Popular Decision-Making  
Score: 3

Politically binding popular decision-making does not exist in Japan, at least in a strict sense. At the local and prefectural levels, referendums are regulated by the Local Autonomy Law. A referendum can be called if demanded by two percent of the voting population, but any such results are non-binding for local and prefectural assemblies. Despite the legal strictures, referendums have played an increasingly important role in Japan's regional politics in recent years. In February 2019, citizens in Okinawa prefecture voted against the construction of a new U.S. base to replace an older one. However, the national government intends to proceed with its plans.

A National Referendum Law took effect in 2010. Since 2018, the minimum age for voting on constitutional amendments has been 18. According to the law, any constitutional change has to be initiated by a significant number of parliamentarians (100 lower house members or 50 upper house members) and has to be approved by two-thirds of the Diet members in both chambers. If this happens, voters are given the opportunity to vote on the proposal. An amendment to the National Referendum Law passed in June 2021 makes it easier for citizens to vote, allowing them to cast their ballots in heavily-frequented places such as train stations and shopping centers.

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### Access to Information

Media Freedom  
Score: 4

Japanese media are largely free to report the news without significant official interference. While the courts have ruled on a few cases dealing with perceived censorship, there is no formal government mechanism that infringes on the independence of the media. The NHK, the primary public broadcasting service, has long enjoyed substantial freedom. However, the Abe-led government (2012-2020) pursued a more heavy-handed approach, highlighted by a number of controversial appointments of conservatives to senior management and supervisory positions.

In practice, many media actors are hesitant to take a strong stance against the government or expose political scandals. Membership in government-associated journalist clubs has long offered exclusive contacts. Fearful of losing this advantage, representatives of the established media have frequently avoided adversarial positions.

Apparently bowing to government pressure, Japan's largest English-language newspaper, The Japan Times, announced in November 2018 that it would no longer refer to "forced laborers," but would instead use the term "wartime laborers." It also said it would revise its definition of "comfort women," no longer defining these as women "forced" to provide sex to the Japanese army during the war effort, but rather as "women who worked in brothels, including women who did so against their will." Some major Japanese-language newspapers including the Asahi shimbun, the Mainichi shimbun and the Tokyo shimbun have to date withstood pressure to engage in this form of "language revisionism." Japan's ranking in the World Press Freedom Index has plummeted in recent years, from 22nd place in 2013 to 67th in 2021, the lowest rank among G-7 members.

As a result of the passage of the State Secrets Act, which came into effect in 2014, journalists and others charged with leaking relevant information face jail sentences of up to five years. What exactly constitutes "state secrets" is left very much up to the discretion of the government agencies in question. The UN special rapporteur on the freedom of expression expressed in 2017 serious concerns, stating that the Act could erode media freedoms and stifle public debate.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) formed a Platform Services Study Group in 2018 to discuss measures combating misinformation (“fake news”) on social and possibly other forms of media.

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Media Pluralism  
Score: 6

Japan has an oligopolistic media structure, with five conglomerates controlling the leading national newspapers and the major TV networks. These include Asahi, Fuji Sankei, Mainichi, Yomiuri and the Nihon Keizai Group. Another major force is NHK, the public broadcasting service, which rarely criticizes the status quo. The main media groups also tend to avoid anything beyond a mildly critical coverage of issues, although a variety of stances from left-center (Asahi) to conservative-nationalistic (Sankei) can be observed.

Generally speaking, the small group of conglomerates and major organizations dominating the media does not capture the pluralism of opinions in Japan. Regional newspapers and TV stations are not serious competitors. However, competition has emerged from international media, and particularly from interactive digital-media sources such as blogs, bulletin boards, e-magazines and social networks. Their use is spreading rapidly, while the circulation of traditional newspapers is in decline, and the traditional media have begun using digital channels more actively as well. Currently, the biggest online news source is Yahoo! Japan, which is increasing the amount of original content it produces.

The loss of public trust in the government and in major media organizations may have intensified the move toward greater use of independent media channels, also opening some new potential for independent investigative journalism. However, such channels tend to cater to their specific audiences. Thus, while there is more pluralism, there is also a tendency toward increasingly one-sided interpretations of events. Among Japanese youths, right-wing internet channels have gained a significant following.

Access to  
Government  
Information  
Score: 4

Citation:

Alessia Cerantola, Investigative Journalism in Japan: Tough Times But Signs of Hope, Global Investigative Journalism Network, 6 July 2017, <https://gijn.org/2017/07/06/investigative-journalism-in-japan-tough-times-but-signs-of-hope/>

Yasuomi Sawa, Japan Digital News Report 2018, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/japan-2018/>

Yasuomi Sawa, Digital News Report 2019 Japan, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/japan-2019/>

Japan's Act on Access to Information held by Administrative Organs came into effect in 2001, followed in 2002 by the Act on Access to Information held by Independent Administrative Agencies. The 2011 Public Records Act provides the basis for information access in Japan. Japan does well among OECD member states with respect to open-government information policies and practices, according to the OECD's 2019 OURdata index.

However, there are a number of issues. For example, various exemptions apply with respect to information concerning specific individuals, national security issues and confidential business matters. Claims can be denied, and the head of the agency involved has considerable discretion. Appeals are possible, but only in court, which involves a very burdensome process.

In 2019, it came to light that no records had been kept of the prime minister's meetings with senior bureaucrats in the year ending that January, despite earlier record-keeping scandals. It also became known that documentation regarding who had been invited to a huge publicly funded cherry-blossom viewing reception had been shredded shortly after opposition members of parliament demanded to see the list of invitees, leading to a major political scandal engulfing the prime minister. It was also revealed that about half of the prefectural governments had deleted campaign bulletins, including pledges, after the last round of local elections.

The controversial 2014 State Secrets Law gives ministries and major agencies the power to designate government information as secret for up to 60 years. There are no independent oversight bodies controlling such designations. Whistleblowing can be punished by up to 10 years in prison, and even trying to obtain secrets can result in jail terms of up to five years. Critics argue that governments may be tempted to misuse this new law. Moreover, the rights and powers of two Diet committees tasked with overseeing the law's implementation have been criticized as being too weak.

Citation:

OECD Open, Useful and Re-usable data (OURdata) Index: 2019, OECD 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/digital-government/ourdata-index-policy-paper-2020.pdf>

Ministry excluded panel discussion records from freedom of information request, The Mainichi 21 July 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180721/p2a/00m/0na/018000c>

Eric Johnston, Cherry blossom-viewing party: Breaking down Abe's latest cronyism scandal, The Japan Times, 27 November 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/27/reference/cherry-blossom-viewing-party-shinzo-abe-cronyism-scandal/#.Xejq2fKiUk>

Hiroyuki Oba et al., No records remain of PM's meetings with top gov't officials over 1-yr period, The Mainichi, 15 April 2019, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190415/p2a/00m/0na/001000c>

Shotaro Asano and Shinya Oba, Half of Japan's prefectural gov'ts delted online campaign pledge info after elections, The Mainichi, 6 June 2019, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190606/p2a/00m/0fp/016000c>

### Civil Rights and Political Liberties

Civil Rights  
Score: 6

Civil and human rights are guaranteed under the Japanese constitution. However, courts are often considered overly tolerant of alleged maltreatment by police, prosecutors or prison officials. Moreover, existing laws give prosecutors and the police substantial leeway. Arrested suspects can be kept in prison for 23 days without a formal charge being lodged, with a further 10 days of detention possible with a routine court request. Assistance by lawyers during interrogation can be denied. Interrogations can last for up to eight hours per day. Supporters of Japan's justice system point to its high confession rate, which has produced a record number of convictions. However, there is clearly a dark side to this.

LDP-led governments have made little effort to address such issues. Critics have demanded – to date unsuccessfully – the creation of independent agencies empowered to investigate claims of human-rights abuses. There is no national or Diet-level ombudsperson or committee tasked with reviewing complaints. Citizens have no legal ability to take their complaints to a supra- or international level. Unlike 35 other UN member states, Japan has not signed the so-called Optional Protocols to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In response to the ILO international harassment guidelines of 2018, Japan revised its legislation on the issue of workplace harassment in 2019. The Comprehensive Labor Policy Promotion Act, aimed at eliminating sexual harassment, harassment against women and workplace bullying came into effect in June 2020. While the law mandates employers to take actions aimed at preventing workplace harassment, there is no punishment for employer non-compliance.

Japan has been widely criticized for its harsh prison conditions, and for being one of the few advanced countries that continues to apply the death penalty.

Prisoners are given only a few hours' notice before executions, and families are usually informed afterward.

Citation:  
United Nations Human Rights, Japan Webpage,  
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/JPIndex.aspx>

Kana Inagaki and Robert Harding, Fate of Olympus financier shines light on Japanese legal system, Financial Times, 9 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/382998a4-81f4-11e9-b592-5fe435b57a3b>

Jake Adelstein, 23 days later: Getting arrested in Japan, The Japan Times, 28 November 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/12/01/national/media-national/23-days-later-getting-arrested-japan/>

Japan bolsters fight against workplace harassment, but laws lack punitive measures, The Japan Times, 29 May 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/29/national/japan-bolsters-fight-workplace-harassment-punitive-measures-elusive/>

Japan, new law to deal with harassment and abuse of power at work, Industrial Relations and Labor Law Newsletter, March 2021, <https://ioewec.newsletter.ioe-emp.org/industrial-relations-and-labour-law-march-2021/news/article/japan-new-law-to-deal-with-harassment-and-abuse-of-power-at-work>

Political Liberties  
Score: 8

The freedoms of speech, the press, assembly and association are guaranteed under Article 21 of the constitution. Reported infringements have been quite rare, though it has often been claimed that the police and prosecutors are more lenient toward vocal right-wing groups than toward left-wing activists.

In 2019, the organizers of the Aichi (Art) Triennale in Nagoya were strongly criticized by the authorities for some of the artwork presented, including the statue of a “comfort woman.” Public funds for the exhibition were recalled.

There are concerns that the anti-conspiracy laws – an amendment to the existing law against organized crime syndicates that expands the catalogue of offenses considered illegal – passed in 2017 in preparation for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Critics are concerned that this could undermine political liberties. Under these rules, “words” rather than simply “deeds” can be grounds for prosecution.

There is also concern that right-wing activism, including so-called hate speech, is on the rise, and that this might be supported by politicians associated with the government. Indeed, some senior LDP politicians have been linked to ultra-right-wing groups.

An anti-hate-speech law has been in place since 2016, but has run into problems in terms of implementation. In particular, conflicts exist between efforts to guarantee free speech and to allow the operation of open public services such as websites that enable public comments.



## Citation:

Michael Hoffman, Is Japan slipping into prewar politics?, The Japan Times, 3 June 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/03/national/media-national/japan-slipping-prewar-politics/>

Lacking direction from Tokyo, Japan's municipalities struggle to implement anti-hate speech law, The Japan Times, 24 May 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/05/24/national/lacking-direction-tokyo-japans-municipalities-struggle-implement-anti-hate-speech-law/>

Jeff Kingston, The Politics of Hate and Artistic Expression in Japan, The Diplomat, 14 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/the-politics-of-hate-and-artistic-expression-in-japan/>

Non-discrimination  
Score: 5

Women still face considerable discrimination, particularly in the labor market. Japan's gender wage gap is the third-largest among OECD countries at 22.5% (2020 data), which is well above the OECD average of 12.5%. Women make up barely 10% of all parliamentarians in the more powerful lower house, placing Japan among the 30 worst-performing countries worldwide in this regard. Former Prime Minister Abe called women "Japan's most underused resource," but had only two women in his cabinet formed in September 2019. In 2021, the new Kishida government added one more female minister.

The government has designated "womenomics" as a key pillar of its reform program. Programs implemented under this rubric include childcare support and similar measures. However, given the persistent undercurrent of sexism in Japanese society, de facto workplace discrimination will be hard to overcome. This is underscored by the passage of the new anti-workplace-sexual-harassment (powa hara) law in 2021 that imposes no penalty for employer non-compliance.

The three million descendants of the so-called burakumin, an outcast group during the feudal period, still face social discrimination, though it is difficult for the government to counter this. Korean and Chinese minorities with permanent resident status also face some social discrimination. Naturalization rules have been eased somewhat in recent years. Workers from the Philippines, the Middle East and elsewhere frequently complain of mistreatment and abuse.

There are no legal protections against racial, ethnic, religious or gender-identity-based discrimination in Japan. The country ranks below the OECD average with regard to discrimination against LBGTQ+ individuals.

The country continues to have a rather serious human-trafficking problem with respect to menial labor and the sex trade, in some cases involving underage individuals.

The treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers is frequently criticized. Asylum is rarely granted – only 47 asylum-seekers saw their applications approved in 2020, against a total of 3,936 applications lodged that year. In 2019, a hunger strike protesting harsh conditions occurred in one of the country’s immigrant detainee centers.

Japan is also criticized for its human-rights abuses of foreign workers, particularly its foreign technical intern program, including low-wage, forced overtime work, and dangerous and unsanitary working conditions. The Justice Ministry announced 759 cases of suspected abuse in 2019. There were 171 trainees’ deaths between 2012 and 2017. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation worse.

Citation:

Inter-Parliamentary Union, Statistical Archive: Women in National Parliaments, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif010219.htm> (accessed 16 February 2022)

Kathy Matsui et al., Womenomics 5.0, Goldman Sachs, Portfolio Strategy Research, April 2019

Japan Accepts 47 Refugees in 2020 as Applicants Fall by 60% Due to Pandemic, Nippon.com, 30 April 2021, <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00991/>

Sakari Mesimaki, The Quiet Desperation of Refugees in Japan, The Diplomat, 23 August 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/the-quiet-desperation-of-refugees-in-japan/>

COVID-19 Made Life Even Worse for Japan’s Foreign Trainees, The Diplomat, 15 October 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/covid-19-made-life-even-worse-for-japans-foreign-trainees/>

### Rule of Law

Legal Certainty  
Score: 6

In their daily lives, citizens enjoy considerable predictability with respect to the rule of law. Bureaucratic formalities can sometimes be burdensome but also offer relative certainty. Nevertheless, regulations are often formulated in a way that gives considerable latitude to bureaucrats. For instance, needy citizens have often found it difficult to obtain welfare aid from local-government authorities. Such discretionary scope is deeply entrenched in the Japanese administrative system, and offers both advantages and disadvantages associated with pragmatism. The judiciary has usually upheld discretionary decisions by the executive.

In a more abstract sense, the idea of the rule of law per se does not command much of a following in Japan. Rather, a balancing of societal interests is seen as demanding a pragmatic interpretation of the law and regulations. Laws, in this generally held view, are meant to serve the common good, and are not regarded as immutable norms to which one blindly adheres.

## Citation:

Carl F. Goodman: *The Rule of Law in Japan: A Comparative Analysis*, The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2003

Judicial Review  
Score: 6

Courts are formally independent of governmental and administrative interference in their day-to-day business. The organization of the judicial system and the appointment of judges are responsibilities of the Supreme Court. Thus, the behavior of its justices is of significant importance. Some critics have lamented a lack of transparency in Supreme Court actions. Moreover, the court has an incentive to avoid conflicts with the government, as these might endanger its independence in the long term. This implies that the court is careful to come in direct conflict with the government so as to avoid unwanted political attention. Perhaps because of this, the Supreme Court engages only in judicial review of specific cases, and does not perform a general review of laws or regulations.

The conventional view is that courts tend to treat government decisions quite leniently. This is not to suggest that the future Japanese government might curtail the freedom of the courts if they decide in a way that disagrees with the government. Indeed, some of the recent cases suggest that the court is taking positions that are not in agreement with the government. The evidence is thus more mixed.

Appointment of  
Justices  
Score: 2

According to the constitution, Supreme Court justices are appointed by the cabinet, or in the case of the chief justice, named by the cabinet and appointed by the emperor. However, the actual process lacks transparency. Supreme Court justices are subject to a public vote in the lower house elections following their appointment, and to a second review after 10 years (if they have not retired in the meantime). However, in all of postwar history, no justice has ever been removed based on this procedure. In response to calls for more transparency, the Supreme Court has put more information on justices and their track record of decisions on its website. The Tokyo District Court ruled in 2019 that voters living overseas cannot be denied the right to review Supreme Court justices, thus strengthening the role of the constitution.

## Citation:

Indictment of Diet inaction over rights to review justices, Editorial, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 4 June 2019, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201906040042.html>

Corruption  
Prevention  
Score: 5

Corruption and bribery scandals have emerged frequently in Japanese politics. These problems are deeply entrenched and are related to prevailing practices of representation and voter mobilization. Japanese politicians rely on local support networks to raise campaign funds and are expected to “deliver” to their constituencies and supporters in return.

Financial and office-abuse scandals involving bureaucrats have been rare in recent years. This may be a consequence of stricter accountability rules devised after a string of ethics-related scandals in the late 1990s and early 2000s. A new criminal-justice plea-bargaining system implemented in June 2018 is expected to create additional pressure on companies to comply with anti-corruption laws.

There has been some signs of legal action being taken against political corruption in recent years. For example, in 2021, LDP lawmaker, Tsukasa Akimoto, was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison over bribery involving a casino project, and the Komeito lawmaker, Kiyohiko Toyama, was arrested for illegal loan brokering.

In 2017, Japan joined the UN Convention against Transnational Crime and the UN Convention against Corruption, which have respectively existed since 2000 and 2005. Still, a 2019 OECD report found the enforcement of Japan's foreign bribery law to be lacking.

Citation:

UNODC Chief welcomes Japan's decision to join crime and corruption conventions, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 12 July 2017, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2017/July/unodc-chief-welcomes-japans-decision-to-join-crime-and-corruption-conventions.html>

OECD, Japan must urgently address long-standing concerns over foreign bribery enforcement, 3 July 2019, <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/japan-must-urgently-address-long-standing-concerns-over-foreign-bribery-enforcement.htm>

Build public trust in the plea bargaining system (Opinion), The Japan Times, 1 June 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/06/01/editorials/build-public-trust-plea-bargain-system/>

# Good Governance

## I. Executive Capacity

### Strategic Capacity

Strategic  
Planning  
Score: 6

The central-government reform of the Koizumi government in 2001 strengthened the role of lead institutions considerably. The unit officially in charge of “policy-planning and comprehensive policy coordination on crucial and specific issues in the cabinet” is the Cabinet Office (Naikaku-fu), which assists the prime minister and his cabinet. It is supported by a well-staffed Cabinet Secretariat (Naikaku-kanbō). The Cabinet Office also coordinates a number of policy councils including the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy. While there is a certain amount of overlap between councils concerning strategic issues, the councils have at least contributed to informing executive and public discourses. Whereas individual line ministries have strategic-planning units staffed with mid-ranking officials, their actual influence on long-term planning seems to be limited compared to the clout of bureau chiefs and more senior officials such as administrative vice-ministers. Policy-planning units tend to have very few staff members.

Prime Minister Abe’s (2012-2020) reliance on the same chief cabinet secretary since 2012 greatly contributed to strengthening the role of the Cabinet Office as a strategic-planning unit, as it came to dominate fields such as foreign policy. However, the power rests with the leading politicians rather than the bureaucrats involved.

Citation:

Harutaka Takenaka, Institutional Foundation for the Abe Government’s Political Power, Japan Foreign Policy Forum, No. 49, October 2018, <https://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/politics/pt20181011174513.html>

Dmitry Filippov, How Shinzo Abe Is Changing Japan’s Foreign Policy Apparatus, *The Diplomat*, 13 December 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/how-shinzo-abe-is-changing-japans-foreign-policy-apparatus/>

Expert Advice  
Score: 6

The Japanese government is assisted by a large number of advisory councils. These are traditionally associated with particular ministries and agencies, with some cross-cutting councils chaired by the prime minister. Such councils are usually composed of private sector representatives, academics, journalists, former civil servants and trade unionists. The question is whether advisory boards truly impact policymaking or whether the executive simply uses them to legitimize extant policy plans. The answer may well vary from case to case. In some instances, LDP-led governments have used outside expertise to overcome opposition to policy changes and reform. Think tanks, most of which operate on a for-profit basis, play only a limited role in terms of influencing national policymaking.

In 2019, powerful Financial Services Minister Taro Aso publicly rejected findings of a Financial Services Agency panel report on the pension system, raising concerns that expert recommendations would in the future be less able to guide policymaking. Similarly, throughout 2020, the government was criticized for its failure to consult with experts on COVID-19 policies and its response to the pandemic.

Sebastian Maslow, Knowledge Regimes in Post-Developmental States: Assessing the Role of Think Tanks in Japan's Policymaking Process, *Pacific Affairs* 91 (2018), 1: 95-117.

Advisory panel in works to speed up review of Japan defense guidelines, *The Japan Times*, 26 August 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/08/26/national/politics-diplomacy/advisory-panel-established-step-defense-guideline-review/>

Naoko Furuyashiki, Finance minister Aso blasted for rejecting report on inadequate pension system, *The Mainichi*, 21 June 2019, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190621/p2a/00m/0fp/015000c>

### Interministerial Coordination

GO Expertise  
Score: 7

The Cabinet Secretariat has more than 800 employees, with expertise in all major policy fields. These employees are usually seconded by their ministries. While these staffers possess considerable expertise in their respective fields, it is doubtful whether they can function in an unbiased manner on issues where the institutional interests of their home organizations are concerned. Moreover, the system lacks adequate infrastructure for broader coordination (including public relations or contemporary methods of policy evaluation).

It is widely acknowledged that during his second administration (2012-2020), Prime Minister Abe was able to gradually implement institutional reforms within the Cabinet Office by strengthening the Cabinet Secretariat's (Kantei) coordinating capacities, and creating new decision-making bodies such as the National Security Council and the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs, which helped minimize the power of external veto players and enhanced the prime minister's power in the policymaking process.

## Citation:

Izuru Makihara, The Role of the Kantei in Making Policy, nippon.com, 27.06.2013, <http://www.nippon.com/en/features/c00408/>

Markus Winter, Abe and the Bureaucracy: Tightening the Reins, The Diplomat, 16 June 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/abe-and-the-bureacracy-tightening-the-reins/>

Karol Zakowski, 2020. Gradual Institutional Change in Japan: Kantei Leadership under the Abe Administration, Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis.

Line Ministries  
Score: 7

In Japan, the role of line ministries vis-à-vis the government office is complicated by the influence of a third set of actors: entities within the governing parties. During the decades of the LDP's rule, the party's own policymaking organ, the Policy Affairs Research Council, developed considerable influence, ultimately gaining the power to vet and approve policy proposals in all areas of government policy.

Under the current LDP-led coalition government, former Prime Minister Abe was able to ensure that he and his close confidants determine the direction of major policy proposals. The Cabinet Office seems to drive reform programs, with the ministries either following this course or trying to drag their feet. Given his short term as the prime minister, Yoshihide Suga (2020-2021) proved unable to engage in a push for reform.

While ministries have sometimes sought to regain their former control over their portfolios, nearly eight years under one prime minister (Abe, 2012-2020) have entrenched centralized policymaking practices.

## Citation:

Leo Lewis and Kana Inagaki, Japan Inc.: Heavy meddling, The Financial Times, 15 March 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/0118e3a6-ea99-11e5-bb79-2303682345c8>

Jesper Koll, Abe's lesson in stability and pragmatism, The Japan Times, 13 September 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/09/13/commentary/japan-commentary/abes-lesson-stability-pragmatism/>

Cabinet  
Committees  
Score: 6

Government committees exist in a number of important fields in which coordination among ministries with de facto overlapping jurisdictions plays an important role. The most important is the Council for Economic and Fiscal Policy (CEFP), headed by the prime minister. However, this has never been a "ministerial committee" in a strict sense. First, it has only an advisory function. Second, individuals from the private sector – two academics and two business representatives in the current configuration – are included. This can increase the impact of such councils, but it also means they are somewhat detached from political processes.

Former Prime Minister Abe (2012-2020) strengthened the formal role of the CEFP and setup the Headquarters for Japan's Economic Revitalization as a "quasi-sub-committee" of the CEFP encompassing all state ministers. The CEFP or the Headquarters are expected to hold initial discussions on the assignment of policies to committees, while the cabinet has to approve decisions. However, given Abe's strong grip on the policy process, council discussions lost some of their relevance.

There are currently four councils operating directly under the Cabinet Office: the CEFP, Council for Science and Technology Policy, Central Disaster Management Council, and Council for Gender Equality (CGE). Among them, the CGE probably has the lowest profile.

The creation of the National Security Council in 2013 was a similar case in which interministerial coordination was intensified in the interest of asserting the prime minister's policy priorities.

Citation:

Important councils, Cabinet Office, <https://www.cao.go.jp/en/importantcouncil.html> (accessed 17 February 2022)

'Bold' economic and fiscal policy in Japan becoming a mere facade, Editorial, The Mainichi, 22 June 2019, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190622/p2a/00m/0na/009000c>

Ministerial  
Bureaucracy  
Score: 7

The LDP-led government in power since 2012 has worked effectively with the bureaucracy. In 2014, the government introduced a Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs tasked with helping the prime minister make appointment decisions regarding the 600 elite bureaucrats in ministries and other major agencies. This significantly expanded the Cabinet Office's involvement in the process and its influence over the ministerial bureaucracy. There are more political appointees in the ministries than before, and during Abe's long spell in power (2012-2020), the average stay of such appointees became longer, giving them greater expertise and clout in their ministries. There are growing concerns that basing the promotion of senior ministry civil servants on political considerations and personal allegiances may diminish their utility in terms of offering neutral expertise.

Citation:

Hideaki Tanaka, Should Civil Servants Offer Allegiance or Expertise? Lessons from the Moritomo and Kake Scandals, Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research, 1 May 2018, <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2018/role-of-civil-servants>

Informal  
Coordination  
Score: 9

Informal relations and related agreements, which are very common in Japan, can facilitate coordination but may also lead to collusion. In terms of institutionalized informal coordination mechanisms in the realm of policymaking, informal meetings and debates between the ministries and the



ruling party's policy-research departments have traditionally been very important.

The LDP-led government in power since 2012 has skillfully navigated between the coalition partners, line ministries and their bureaucrats, and the public. The chief cabinet secretary is a key actor in this regard. Cabinet meetings are essentially formalities, with sensitive issues informally discussed and decided beforehand. Ministries collect and make public few, if any, records of meetings between politicians and bureaucrats as they are supposed to do under the 2008 Basic Act of Reform of the National Civil Servant System.

The general trend toward greater transparency may even have strengthened the role of informality in order to avoid awkward situations. In a number of instances, it has become apparent that senior agencies have deleted files relating to discussions extremely early. In 2019, the chief cabinet secretary admitted that no records of meetings between the prime minister and senior officials are kept at the prime minister's office.

Citation:

Cabinet minutes show formality, no substance, *The Japan Times*, 5 October 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/10/05/national/politics-diplomacy/cabinet-minutes-show-formality-no-substance/>

Enhancing government accountability (Editorial), *The Japan Times*, 13 August 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/08/13/editorials/enhancing-government-accountability/>

Tadashi Kobayashi and Taiji Mukohata, Japan trade ministry told employees to obscure meeting records, *The Mainichi*, 30 August 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180830/p2a/00m/0na/004000c>

Hiroyuki Oba, Suga admits Japan PM office kept no records of meetings between Abe, gov't agency execs, *The Mainichi*, 4 June 2019, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190604/p2a/00m/0na/011000c>

Digitalization for  
Interministerial  
Coordination  
Score: 4

Digital technologies designed for interministerial coordination and broader government-to-government (G2G) services are not at the core of Japan's e-government initiative. Rather, the focus of e-government policies is on the creation and use of e-platforms that enable citizens to interact with the various levels of government more effectively and efficiently (G2C). This approach was confirmed in the Digital Government Action Plan released in 2018, in which G2G models do not play a prominent role.

Recent public discussion has focused on how to properly use official email services and other features such as shared folders. Quite a few civil servants, including senior ones, consider such technologies to be cumbersome. More importantly, these critics seem concerned that emails will be stored as public documents, a fact that might result in the emergence of unwelcomed evidence in the case of scandal, based on the requirements and disclosure rules of the

Public Records and Archives Management Act and the Information Disclosure Law. Given this perspective, it is doubtful that G2G technologies will gain much momentum among senior ministry officials.

In 2020, Prime Minister Suga launched an initiative to complete the digitalization of the government by 2025 and created the Digital Agency in September 2021 to facilitate the process. The current Kishida administration appears thus far to be continuing this digitalization initiative.

Citation:

Leading administrative reform under premise of digitalization, METI Journal in the Japan Times, 11 January 2019, <https://meti-journal.japantimes.co.jp/2019-01-11/>

Bureaucrats reveal that most official emails are not kept properly, The Mainichi, 15 January 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180115/p2a/00m/0na/017000c>

New Digital Agency Pursues Inclusive Digitalization, Government of Japan, 16 September 2021, [https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2021/09/new\\_digital\\_agency.html](https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2021/09/new_digital_agency.html)

### Evidence-based Instruments

RIA Application  
Score: 8

Japan's RIA process has improved over the recent years. The government introduced the Basic Program on Reducing Administrative Burden in 2017 as a part of its regulatory and institutional reform initiatives. A report of the review of this program by the Subcommittee for the Administrative Burden Reduction in 2018 found that the government was able to reduce administrative costs quite significantly.

The most recent OECD review of Japan's regulatory policy commends the positive changes in the country's regulatory review processes, including more and more regular ex post evaluations of primary laws and subordinate regulations since 2017. It, however, also notes that stakeholders are rarely consulted for either the ex post or ex-ante-evaluations nor are they consulted in any of the RIA development processes. The OECD review thus urges the government to make information about RIAs accessible to the public and to engage more with stakeholders.

OECD Regulatory Policy Outlook 2021, OECD, [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-regulatory-policy-outlook-2021\\_196ce20a-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-regulatory-policy-outlook-2021_196ce20a-en)

Basic Program on Reducing Administrative Burden: Review results and future policies, Subcommittee for Administrative Burden Reduction, 24 April 2018, <https://www8.cao.go.jp/kisei-kaikaku/english/pdf/180424/gyosei.pdf>

Quality of RIA  
Process  
Score: 7

According to the Basic Guidelines for Implementing Policy Evaluation, revised in March 2007, the necessity, efficiency and effectiveness of measures are to be the central considerations in evaluations. However, issues of equity

and priority are also to be included. The structure and content of assessments are further clarified in the Policy Evaluation Implementation Guidelines of 2005 and the Implementation Guidelines for Ex Ante Evaluation of Regulations of 2007. All of these specifications contain quite demanding tasks that must be performed as a part of the evaluations.

Critics have argued that many officials regard RIA as bothersome and lack strong incentives to take it seriously. Having RIA run by a line ministry, the MIC, instead of a powerful independent agency, does not seem to be very effective.

According to recent data, Japan scores below the OECD average with regard to RIA implementation, particularly in the areas of oversight and quality control. However, the most recent OECD report notes improvements taking effect since 2017.

Citation:

OECD Regulatory Policy Outlook 2021, OECD, [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-regulatory-policy-outlook-2021\\_196\\_ce20a-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-regulatory-policy-outlook-2021_196_ce20a-en)

Naohiro Yashiro, Regulatory Coherence: The Case of Japan, ERIA Discussion Paper 2016-16, March 2016, [http://www.eria.org/publications/discussion\\_papers/DP2016-16.html](http://www.eria.org/publications/discussion_papers/DP2016-16.html)

Nikolai Malyshev, Regulatory Impact Assessment: State of Play in OECD Countries, Paper for the KDI-OECD Seminar on Improving Regulatory Governance: trends, practices and the way forward, 6 September 2017

Sustainability  
Check  
Score: 2

The 2001 Government Policy Evaluation Act sets its evaluation criteria for policy effects on three indicators: necessity, efficiency and effectiveness. These terms are somewhat flexible and do not necessarily encompass sustainability concerns. Indeed, actual evaluations apply the three guiding principles in a somewhat loose way, with few rigorous quantitative assessments. Reviews cover both ex ante as well as ex post evaluations.

The Basic Program on Reducing Administrative Burden introduced in 2017, which sets the new framework for RIAs, also focuses almost entirely on cost reduction and cost effectiveness. As such, there is little consideration in relation to a regulation's impacts on sustainability and the implementation of the SDGs.

Citation:

MIC (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Japan), Website on evaluation results, [http://www.soumu.go.jp/menu\\_seisakuhyouka/kekka.html](http://www.soumu.go.jp/menu_seisakuhyouka/kekka.html)

Basic Program on Reducing Administrative Burden: Review results and future policies, Subcommittee for Administrative Burden Reduction, 24 April 2018, <https://www8.cao.go.jp/kisei-kaikaku/english/pdf/180424/gyosei.pdf>

Quality of Ex  
Post Evaluation  
Score: 7

Government ministries evaluate their policies on an ex post basis. The Administrative Evaluation Bureau (AEB) conducts inspections, and each ministry carries out independent evaluations of the effects of its own policies. The AEB supports such activities, for instance by encouraging ministries to share methodologies and experiences. It also works to standardize and prioritize policy evaluations, and reviews ministry and agency evaluations.

Japan ranked comparatively low in an OECD ex post evaluation index for 2014. However, things started to improve with the introduction of the Basic Program on Reducing Administrative Burden in 2017. The program required regulatory enforcement ministries and agencies, which had previously mostly evaluated regulations themselves, to engage in ex post evaluations.

Citation:

Council for Promotion of Regulatory Reform, Third Report by the Council for Promotion of Regulatory Reform – For New Era to Come, Provisional Translation, 4 June 2018

Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (Administrative Counseling Division), Japanese Ombudsman System, Tokyo, March 2018

OECD Regulatory Policy Outlook 2021, OECD, [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-regulatory-policy-outlook-2021\\_196 ce20a-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-regulatory-policy-outlook-2021_196 ce20a-en)

### Societal Consultation

Public  
Consultation  
Score: 5

LDP-led governments have traditionally engaged in societal consultation through the so-called iron triangle, that is, the dense links between parliamentarians, the ministerial bureaucracy and large companies. However, these mechanisms tended to exclude other societal actors such as trade unions. With the onset of economic problems in the 1990s, tensions within this triangle increased, and relations over time became strained enough to indicate the effective demise of the iron triangle system at the national level.

The exclusion of societal actors in consultation processes and the lack of real and perceived political changes have also contributed to public mistrust and political disengagement. A 2014 NHK survey found over 70% of respondents claiming no interest in engaging in political issues, while the Economist's Democracy Index in 2020 ranks Japan one of the lowest in terms of political participation among full democracies. Since 2020, a number of public consultations have been initiated on issues such as immigration, nuclear energy, education, etc., often by soliciting comments from the public on an e-government digital platform. How effective such mechanisms are in effecting government policies remains to be seen.

It is frequently argued that business has considerable influence on government decision-making. Substantiating such claims is difficult, as there is a lack of transparent rules governing lobbying. There seems to be little scope for business – state alignment, as major firms have become global players that are decreasingly interested in or bound to the home market. Some lobbying firms now cater primarily to smaller and foreign-owned companies. One traditional mechanism of bureaucracy – business alignment, the “amakudari” system of providing bureaucrats with lucrative post-retirement jobs – has been suppressed since the 2008 reform to the National Civil Service Law.

Citation:

Grant Newsham, Japan’s conservative Nippon Kaigi lobby: Worth worrying about?, Asia Times, 19 July 2016, <http://www.atimes.com/article/japans-conservative-nippon-kaigi-lobby-worth-worrying-about/>

Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health?, The Economist, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

Yumiko Yokota, Ending “Amakudari” Descent from Heaven at Last?, <http://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00317/>

Rieko Miki, Lobbying firms offer outsiders access to Japan’s policy machine, Nikkei Asian Review, 30 March 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Lobbying-firms-offer-outsiders-access-to-Japan-s-policy-machine>

## Policy Communication

Coherent  
Communication  
Score: 6

Policy communication has always been a priority for Japanese governments. Ministries and other governmental agencies publish regular reports on their work, including white papers and other materials.

However, the triple disaster of March 2011 seriously undermined the population’s trust in governmental information, due to the lack of transparency and the failure to deliver timely public information. The degree to which Japan’s public trusts the government has since recovered somewhat, but according to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2019 survey, only 39% of citizens trust the government, a significantly lower share than in many other countries.

The LDP-led coalition has pushed through its policy priorities more assertively than earlier governments, while giving less consideration to dissenting opinions. This is partly a result of Prime Minister Abe’s strategic move to create new decision-making bodies such as the National Security Council and the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs which in turn strengthened Cabinet Secretariat’s coordinating capacities and reduced the voices of dissenters within and outside of the LDP coalition.

Citation:

Edelman, 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer – Japan, <https://de.slideshare.net/EdelmanJapan/2019-edelman-trust-barometer-japan>

Hideo Hayakawa, Japan's Statistics Scandal: The Need for New Approaches, Nippon.com post, 18 March 2019, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00475/japan%E2%80%99s-statistics-scandal-the-need-for-new-approaches.html>

## Implementation

Government  
Effectiveness  
Score: 6

While the economy improved when Prime Minister Abe was in power (2012-2020), major aspects of the government's economic-policy program remained unrealized. Most critically, structural reforms have not been carried out as promised, partly because the government's key policy agenda has been sidetracked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic growth remains weak and the two percent inflation goal unrealized. The consumption-tax hike of October 2019 is too small to achieve fiscal consolidation any time soon.

Many longer-term issues continue to linger in the area of social policy. This is particularly true with regard to the much-needed reform of the social security system. While a new government panel was created in late 2019 to discuss sweeping measures in this area, the future course is still unclear and contested.

Although the new Digital Agency was created in pursuit of former Prime Minister Suga's digitalization policy reform – one of the two structural reforms announced in 2020 – there are already signs of backtracking and reduced tempo with respect to the second reform, that is, achieving carbon-neutrality by 2050.

In terms of international relations, the Japanese government has been at the forefront of pushing the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region, also seeking to balance an increasingly assertive China. A trade pact was successfully concluded in late 2019 with Japan's core ally, the United States, though this came at the price of major concessions.

### Citation:

Kaori Kaneko, Japan's Abe gets middling marks on his economic performance, Reuters, 12 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-economy-poll/japans-abe-gets-middling-marks-on-his-economic-performance-from-analysts-poll-idUSKCN1LU0FB>

Japan seen as unlikely to achieve fiscal consolidation target despite tax hike, The Japan Times, 1 October 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/01/business/japan-seen-unlikely-achieve-fiscal-consolidation-target-despite-tax-hike/>

Song Jung-a and Kana Inagaki, Why Japan-South Korea relations have soured, The Financial Times, 28 August 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/94ce21dc-c584-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9>

Ministerial  
Compliance  
Score: 8

Japan's political framework formally provides the prime minister with powerful tools to control ministers. Prime ministers can appoint and fire ministers at will. Moreover, prime ministers can effectively veto specific sectoral policies. In practice, however, prime ministerial options have been more limited, as most have lacked full control over their own parties and over the powerful and entrenched bureaucracy.

Recent governments have sought to centralize policymaking within the core executive. Some measures have been institutional, such as giving new weight to the Cabinet Secretariat attached to the Cabinet Office and to the Council for Economic and Fiscal Policy, a cabinet committee in which the prime minister has a stronger voice. Other measures include affording the prime minister a stronger role in top-level personnel decisions, aided by the creation of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs in 2014. Such institutional measures have proved quite successful, and certainly former Prime Minister Abe (2012-2020) had a strong grip on ministerial appointments.

Michael Macarthur Bosack, Abe shows his command over LDP in reshuffle, *The Japan Times*, 12 September 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/09/12/commentary/japan-commentary/abe-shows-command-ldp-reshuffle/>

Monitoring  
Ministries  
Score: 6

Generally speaking, the Cabinet Secretariat, upgraded over a decade ago, offers a means of monitoring ministry activities. In recent years, its staff has expanded, improving its monitoring capacity. However, effective use of the secretariat has been hindered in the past by the fact that the ministries second specialists to serve as secretariat employees. It de facto lacks the ability to survey all activities at all times, but former long-serving chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga, who later became premier in 2020, served as an effective enforcer of official positions.

At the same time, some critics argue that the need to handle the simmering scandals engulfing Prime Minister Abe prior to his resignation in 2020 distracted him and his central staff from following up on major policy issues.

Citation:

Heizo Takenaka, The season of economic policy (Commentary), *The Japan Times*, 1 July 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/07/01/commentary/japan-commentary/season-economic-policy/>

Monitoring  
Agencies,  
Bureaucracies  
Score: 7

Japanese ministries are traditionally run by civil servants who work in a single ministry throughout their career. Government agencies that belong to a specific ministry's sectoral area are thus also directed by civil servants delegated from that ministry, who may return to it after a number of years. From that perspective, control of executive agencies below the ministerial level can be quite effective. This mechanism is supported by budget allocations and peer networks.

Task Funding  
Score: 6

In 2001, so-called independent administrative agencies were established, following new-public-management recommendations for improving the execution of well-defined policy goals by making them the responsibility of professionally managed quasi-governmental organizations. These agencies are subject to evaluation mechanisms similar to those discussed in the section on regulatory impact assessment (RIA), based on modified legislation. In recent years, voices skeptical of this arrangement have gained ground because the effectiveness of this independent-agency mechanism has been hindered to some extent by the network effects created by close agency-ministry staffing links. In addition, the administrators in charge have typically originated from the civil service, and thus have not always possessed a managerial mindset.

In Japan, local governments – prefectures and municipalities – strongly depend on the central government. Local taxes account for less than half of local revenues and the system of vertical fiscal transfers is fairly complicated. Pressures to reduce expenditures have increased, as local budgets are increasingly tight given the aging of the population. In 2019, the Ministry of Finance issued proposals to reduce the local-government workforce accordingly.

Other measures have included a merger of municipalities designed to create economies of scale, and a redefinition of burdensome local-agency functions. In rural regions, the merger of municipalities has led to some serious challenges and declines in provisions of services such as long-term care and other social and healthcare services. Since 2014 – 2015, special regional vitalization zones and special economic zones (tokku), where national regulations have been eased, have served as field experiments for improved policymaking. Many observers have criticized this approach as being insufficiently bold. In late 2018, the government unveiled a plan to designate 82 regional cities as core urban centers and support them with special assistance.

Citation:

Takuji Okubo, The truth about Japan's tokku special zones, Jbpress Website, 02.07.2014, <http://jbpress.ismedia.jp/articles/-/41109>

Promoting local autonomy, The Japan Times, 9 January 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/01/09/editorials/promoting-local-autonomy/>

Eric Johnston, Abe's plan to battle Japan's regional brain drain draws mixed reviews, The Japan Times, 9 January 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/01/09/national/social-issues/abes-plan-battle-japans-regional-brain-drain-draws-mixed-reviews/>

Japan's Finance Ministry proposes cuts to local-government workforce as population drops, The Japan Times, 23 May 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/23/business/japans-finance-ministry-proposes-cuts-local-government-workforce-population-drops/>



Constitutional  
Discretion  
Score: 4

The Japanese constitution guarantees the autonomy of local governments. However, articles 92 to 95 discussing local self-government are very short and lack specifics. The central government makes its power felt through three mechanisms in particular: control over vertical fiscal transfers, the delegation of functions that local entities are required to execute, and personnel relations between local entities and the central ministry in charge of local autonomy. Moreover, co-financing schemes for public works provide incentives to follow central-government policies.

Over the last decade, there have been a growing number of initiatives aimed at strengthening local autonomy. However, the success of the government's regional revitalization drive remains questionable given the continuing allure of Tokyo and its surroundings. This issue is gaining in urgency as remote regions age and lose population with increasing speed.

The most recent example of a push for local autonomy by merging the Osaka prefecture and Osaka city to create an Osaka metropolis failed to materialize, partly due to the lack of central government interest.

Citation:

Local autonomy in dire peril (Editorial), The Japan Times, 26 January 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/01/26/editorials/local-autonomy-dire-peril/>

Shuntaro Iizuka, Consequences of Agencification in Japan: An Analysis of Survey Data, Paper for IPSA Conference 2018, <https://wc2018.ipsa.org/events/congress/wc2018/paper/consequences-agencification-japan-analysis-survey-data>

National  
Standards  
Score: 8

Japanese government authorities put great emphasis on the existence of reasonable unitary standards for the provision of public services. The move toward decentralization makes it particularly important to raise standards for the local provision of public services. Within the central government, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications is in charge of this task, which involves direct supervision, personnel transfers between central and local entities, and training activities. While a 2000 reform abolished local entities' agency functions in a strict sense (with direct administrative supervision losing some importance as compared to legal and judicial supervision), other channels have remained important. At the local and particularly the prefectural level, there is an elaborate training system that is linked in various ways to national-level standards. The government seeks to promote evidence-based policymaking through new data platforms, which are also meant to support local governments in the implementation of plan-do-check-adjust cycles.

A unified digital "My Number Card" system (based on the new social security and tax number system) was introduced for citizens in 2015 to help authorities

provide and enforce uniform services. The take-up rate for the card remained initially very low (22% in late 2020), which was due in part to its limited usage and in part to concerns over privacy. The government has thus implemented a variety of initiatives and incentives to increase usage, including the use of these cards for health insurance and as a driver's license. However, the government's goal of achieving universal take-up by March 2023 seems out of reach, also as a result of local bottlenecks in the provision of cards to citizens.

Citation:

My Number law takes effect amid privacy fears, *The Japan Times*, 5 October 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/10/05/national/number-law-now-effect-notifications-set-sent/>

Japan starts My Number card use for health insurance, *The Japan Times*, 20 October 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/10/20/national/my-number-insurance/>

Cabinet Office, Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2017 – Increasing productivity through investment in human resources, Overview, 9 June 2017

Japan gov't wants 'My Number' ID cards distributed pronto, but local gov'ts can't keep up, *The Mainichi*, 19 November 2020, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201118/p2a/00m/0na/026000c>

Effective  
Regulatory  
Enforcement  
Score: 6

During the early postwar period, the operations of the so-called iron triangle between LDP politicians, the ministerial bureaucracy and big business served to promote overall economic growth, with a bias in favor of large enterprise groups. At the same time, this system ensured that policymaking was not captured by selective industry interests. Following the collapse of the bubble economy around 1990, the iron triangle declined, but a bias in favor of larger enterprises can still be noted.

In some policy areas, however, the role of vested interests is conspicuous. A notable example is energy policy, where the relationship between ministerial bureaucrats, specialized politicians and the nuclear-power industry – basically the major regional energy providers – has remained rather close. Another example is agriculture, which has received particularly favorable treatment and protection for decades as governments have sought to secure rural votes. Whereas the government has stepped up the liberalization of agriculture in recent times, trade agreements such as the Japan-EU FTA and even the 2019 Japan-U.S. trade pact have reflected this to only a limited degree.

Citation:

Jeff Kingston, Japan's nuclear village. Power and resilience, in: Jeff Kingston (ed.), *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan*, Abingdon: Routledge 2013, pp. 107-119

Masayoshi Honma and Aurelia George Mulgan, Political Economy of Agricultural Reform in Japan under Abe's Administration, *Asian Economic Policy Review*, Volume13, Issue1, January 2018, pp. 128-144

Xiao Chen Su, The Toxic Influence of Japan's Rural Political Interest Groups, *The Diplomat*, 5 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/the-toxic-influence-of-japans-rural-political-interest-groups/>

### Adaptability

Domestic  
Adaptability  
Score: 6

Japan's reform processes are usually driven by domestic developments and interests, but international models or perceived best practices do play a role at times. Actors interested in reform have frequently appealed to international standards and trends to support their position. Some of the recent reforms adopted in response to international standards are digitalization and regulatory impact assessment process.

International  
Coordination  
Score: 7

Japan is actively involved in G-7 and G-20 mechanisms. While the country has a lower profile in international and global settings than might be expected in view of its global economic standing, the growing linkages between international economic and political issues have helped the LDP-led government to raise its profile, for instance by chairing the G-20 in 2019, with various initiatives getting underway. Like various other nations, Japan committed in 2020 to reaching carbon-neutrality by 2050. It remains to be seen, though, how implementation will pan out. The Climate Action Tracker, run by an international scientific consortium, rates Japan's current efforts as insufficient.

The Japanese constitution makes it difficult for Japan to engage in international missions that include the use of force, although it can contribute funds. As a result of Japan's five-year participation in a UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan (which ended in 2017), the government has flexibly expanded various procedures stopping just short of active military engagement, such as providing ammunition to endangered military units from partner countries. In 2015, despite considerable public opposition, new security laws were passed that allow military intervention overseas in defense of (somewhat vaguely defined) allies.

Japan has actively supported and contributed to regional initiatives and organizations like the Asian Development Bank. Also in response to Chinese-led institutions and signature initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, Japan has successfully promoted its own geostrategic initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, which aligns with, or has fed into, related designs of Australia, India and the United States. There has also been an invigoration of development cooperation with Africa, also in the context of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD).

Citation:

Japan's Roadmap to "Beyond-Zero" Carbon, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 11 November 2020, [https://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/energy\\_environment/global\\_warming/roadmap/report/20201111.html](https://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/energy_environment/global_warming/roadmap/report/20201111.html)

Climate Action Tracker, Japan country site, <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/japan/> (accessed 17 February 2022)

Mitsuru Obe, Japan Parliament Approves Overseas Military Expansion, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-parliament-approves-abe-security-bills-1442596867>

Werner Pascha, The political economy of new multilateral initiatives in Pacific Asia, in: Carmen Mendes (ed.): *China's New Silk Road. An Emerging World Order*, Routledge: London and New York, 2019, pp. 69-86

Michael Bosack, What did Japan Learn in South Sudan?, *The Diplomat*, 10 June 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/what-did-japan-learn-in-south-sudan/>

Paul Goldstein, Japan's growing geostrategic role, *The Japan Times*, 23 June 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/06/23/commentary/japan-commentary/japans-growing-geostrategic-role/>

### Organizational Reform

Self-monitoring  
Score: 7

Reform of the executive has been a major topic in Japan for two decades. During Prime Minister Abe's second administration (2012-2020), the LDP-led government sought to readjust institutional arrangements by establishing and/or reinvigorating a number of councils and committees. To some extent, the Abe government was able to bring back the leadership framework that characterized the government under Prime Minister Koizumi (2001–2006), for instance through a strong Cabinet Office. Whether these institutional changes will result in more effective self-monitoring of the government or whether these new institutional arrangements will become more permanent under the current Prime Minister Kishida's administration remains to be seen.

Institutional  
Reform  
Score: 7

The failure of the reform initiatives led by the short-lived DPJ governments (2009-2012) demonstrated the difficulties of transplanting elements from Westminster-style cabinet-centered policymaking into a political environment with a tradition of parallel party-centered policy deliberation. Reverting to the traditional system coupled with strong central leadership, the Abe-led government (2012-2020) was quite successful in getting at least parts of its policy agenda implemented. The passage of the security laws in 2015 – a major success from the government's perspective – may seem to provide evidence of more robust institutional arrangements than in earlier years. However, problems in moving the government's economic-reform agenda decisively forward, particularly in fields such as labor market reform, suggest that the Abe-led government also struggled to overcome resistance to change in a number of policy areas. This also applies to the slow progress of plans to change the constitution.

## II. Executive Accountability

### Citizens' Participatory Competence

Political  
Knowledge  
Score: 7

A substantial amount of information about policies is available in Japan. For instance, ministries regularly use so-called white papers to explain the current parameters and content of policies in many areas, often in great detail.

However, this does not necessarily mean that citizens feel satisfied with the information available or consider it trustworthy. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, only 42% of participating Japanese citizens said in 2020 that they trusted the government; only Russia exhibited a lower score among the 26 countries covered. Voter apathy also reflects the public's lacking confidence in the government to bring about changes. The voting turnout in the most recent lower house election in November 2021 was barely 56%, the third lowest in the postwar history.

Citation:

Edelman, 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer – Japan, <https://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanJapan/2020-edelman-trust-barometer-japan-full-version>

Japan's Election Turnout Third Lowest in Postwar Era, Nippon.com, 2 November 2021, <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01156/>

Open  
Government  
Score: 8

E-government issues, particularly services aimed at making public information available to citizens in a secure and timely manner, have been on the government agenda since the 2000s. Current efforts are based on the Basic Plan for the Advancement of Utilizing Public and Private Sector Data and the Policy for Open Data, both released in May 2017. The various branches of government make an overwhelming number of statistics, data and reports available, with coordinated access through sites like e-Gov, Data.go.jp and e-Stat.

However, ensuring transparency, usability and security remains an ongoing challenge. In late 2018, it was revealed that the Monthly Labor Survey had used an improper methodology for collecting data since 2004, leading to an overestimation of wage growth. Following this exposure, weaknesses in other government statistical measures also became apparent. In a February 2019 survey, 67% of the population indicated that this incident had eroded their trust in government statistics.

Citation:

Government of Japan, Digital Government in Japan, January 2018, <https://de.slideshare.net/hiramoto/170119-digital-government-in-japan>

English-language access points to major sites: <http://www.e-gov.go.jp/en/>, <http://www.data.go.jp/?lang=english>, <https://www.e-stat.go.jp/en/>

61% think Abe inadequately handles labor survey scandal, The Asahi Shimbun, 19 February 2019, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201902190053.html>

### Legislative Actors' Resources

Parliamentary  
Resources  
Score: 7

Parliamentarians have substantial resources at their disposal to independently assess policy proposals. Every member of parliament can employ one policy secretary and two public secretaries paid through an annual fund totaling around JPY 20 million (€153,000 as of February 2022). However, in many cases, these secretaries are primarily used for the purposes of representation at home and in Tokyo. Both houses of parliament have access to a 560-staff-member Research Bureau tasked with supporting committee work and helping in drafting bills. A separate Legislative Bureau for both houses, with around 160 staff members, assists in drafting members' bills and amendments. The National Diet Library is the country's premier library, with parliamentary support among its primary objectives. It has a Research and Legislative Reference Bureau with over 190 staff members whose tasks include research and reference services based on requests by policymakers and on topics of more general interest such as decentralization. For such research projects, the library research staff collaborates with Japanese and foreign scholars.

Notably, the substantial available resources are not used in an optimal way for purposes of policymaking and monitoring. The Japanese Diet tends toward being an arena parliament, with little legislative work taking place at the committee level. Bills are traditionally prepared inside the parties with support from the national bureaucracy. Ruling parties can rely on bureaucrats to provide input and information, while opposition parties can at least obtain policy-relevant information from the national bureaucracy.

Jun Makita, A Policy Analysis of the Japanese Diet from the Perspective of 'Legislative Supporting Agencies,' in Yukio Adachi, Sukehiro Hosono and Iio Jun (eds), *Policy Analysis in Japan*, Bristol: Policy Press 2015, pp. 123-138

Junko Hirose, Enhancing our Role as the "Brains of the Legislature": Comprehensive and Interdisciplinary Research at the National Diet Library, Japan, paper for the IFLA Library and Research Services for Parliaments Section Preconference 2014, [http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/services-for-parliaments/preconference/2014/hirose\\_japan\\_paper.pdf](http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/services-for-parliaments/preconference/2014/hirose_japan_paper.pdf)

Obtaining  
Documents  
Score: 9

Government documents can be obtained at the discretion of legislative committees. There are typically no problems in obtaining such papers in a timely manner.

Summoning  
Ministers  
Score: 9

Committees may request the attendance of the prime minister, ministers and lower – ranking top ministry personnel such as senior vice-ministers. When summoned, these ministers often attend the meetings to answer questions.

Summoning  
Experts  
Score: 7

Under Article 62 of the constitution, the Diet and its committees can summon witnesses, including experts. Summoned witnesses have the duty to appear before parliament. The opposition can also ask for witnesses to be called, and under normal circumstances such requests are granted by the government. However, the use of expert testimony in parliamentary committees is not widespread; experts, academic and otherwise, are relied upon more frequently within the context of government advisory committees, in particular at ministerial level.

Task Area  
Congruence  
Score: 9

The Diet's standing committees (17 in both chambers) closely correspond to the sectoral responsibility of the government's major ministries. The portfolios of the ministers of state cover special task areas and are in some cases mirrored by special committees (e.g., consumer affairs). Special committees can and have been setup to deal with current (or recurring) issues. In the lower house, there are currently nine such committees that deal with issues such as disaster management.

Citation:  
The House of Representatives, Japan, Committees, n.d.  
[https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb\\_english.nsf/html/statics/guide/committee.htm](https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_english.nsf/html/statics/guide/committee.htm)

## Media

Media Reporting  
Score: 6

The Japanese media system has historically been dominated by five major TV networks, including the public broadcaster NHK, along with a handful of major national newspapers. These publications remain widely read even though their circulation is declining, and provide information in a sober style. However, because of their close personal links to political figures, which finds its institutionalized expression in the journalist club system (kisha kurabu), these newspapers rarely expose major scandals while freelancers are often locked out. Investigative journalism is typically undertaken by weekly or monthly publications. While some of these are of high quality, others are more sensationalist in character. Personnel changes at NHK after the Abe-led government took power produced a leadership that openly declared its intention to steer a pro-government course. The government's assertive approach has also been evident in other media areas. For these reasons, Japan is ranked 67th in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index.

In recent years, social media outlets such as YouTube, Line, Twitter and Facebook, along with the news channels based on them, have gained a considerable following. This also holds true for new online publications such

as BuzzFeed Japan and the Huffington Post. While the impact of the new media on the overall quality of information remains unclear, they do seem to be contributing to the emergence of so-called partisan media in Japan.

Citation:

Tomohiro Osaki, Academics, TV journalists slam minister's threat against 'biased' programming, fear media self-censorship, The Japan Times, 2 March 2016, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/03/02/national/tv-journalists-slam-ministers-threat-biased-programs-fear-media-self-censorship/>

Philip Brator, Sticky bonds of the media and government, The Japan Times, 24 June 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/24/national/media-national/sticky-bonds-media-government/>

2021 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders, <https://rsf.org/en/japan>

### Parties and Interest Associations

Intra-party  
Decision-Making  
Score: 3

Parties in Japan are fairly insider-oriented, with policy and personnel decisions driven by leading politicians and their networks.

Japan's strongest party is the LDP (holding 259 of 465 seats in the lower house after the 2021 election). Its coalition partner, Komeito, holds 32 seats. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which has for some time been the LDP's main rival, suffered a major blow before the 2017 election, when many of its lower house members left to form the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP, 96 seats), an entity primarily devoted to opposing changes to the existing constitution.

The LDP has traditionally revolved around individual politicians, their personal local-level support organizations and the intra-party factions built by key party leaders. Local party chapters may play decisive roles in choosing a parliamentary candidate if there is no "natural" successor to the former incumbent. Ordinary party-member involvement is usually limited to membership in a local-level support organization for a politician, and is mainly (but not solely) based on mutual material interests: While members want tangible support for their communities, politicians want secure "vote banks" for (re-)election.

Party congresses offer little real opportunity for policy input by delegates. However, delegates from regional party branches have participated in party leader elections since the early 2000s. When Fumio Kishida was elected LDP president in September 2021, votes from party members in the various prefectures counted for half the votes cast in the first round of voting. If no candidate can secure majority in the first round, the party's Diet members decide the contest. While the LDP has also paid some lip service to increased intra-party democracy, it has shied away from major internal reforms.



Association  
Competence  
(Employers &  
Unions)  
Score: 7

Citation:

Eric Johnston, The LDP's leadership race kicks into high gear this week: This is how it will go down, The Japan Times, 14 September 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/09/14/national/politics-diplomacy/ldp-presidential-campaign-explainer/>

Japan's leading business and labor organizations regularly publish policy proposals aimed at influencing public debate and policymaking. The three umbrella business federations – Keidanren, the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Doyukai), and the Japanese Chamber of Industry and Commerce (Nissho) – as well as Rengo, the leading trade-union federation, try to impact policy by publishing policy papers and participating in government advisory committees. As the business sector's financial support of political parties has declined and major companies have globalized their operations, politicians may have become less willing to accommodate the views of these interest groups.

While there is an obvious scramble for influence between Rengo and the business organizations, there is also a notable degree of competition among the business organizations themselves. For instance, Keidanren is dominated by large enterprise groups, and has been somewhat slow in demanding further economic opening. Critics also contend that its membership policies are too conservative, de facto keeping startups and tech companies at bay. However, the accession of new members such as Facebook in 2019 may indicate that the federation is trying to adapt. The Doyukai is characterized more by strong independent companies, and has been outspoken in demanding a more open business environment.

Citation:

On 70th anniversary, top business lobby looks at what distance to keep from politics, The Mainichi, 31 May 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20170531/p2a/00m/0na/021000c>

Shigenori Arai, Facebook joins Keidanren, Japan's leading business lobby, Nikkei Asian Review, 2 July 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Facebook-joins-Keidanren-Japan-s-leading-business-lobby>

Association  
Competence  
(Others)  
Score: 4

Civil society organizations with a public-policy focus are rare in Japan. With few exceptions, such organizations in Japan have limited depth and breadth. Japan has only a few well-resourced public policy-oriented think tanks. Some non-profit organizations are used by the government bureaucracy as auxiliary mechanisms in areas where it cannot or does not want to become directly involved.

Following the 3/11 disasters, and more recently in the context of the controversy over the government's security-law extension, civil society groups have taken on an increased role in expressing public concerns and organizing

mass rallies. High levels of engagement on the part of activists notwithstanding, it is difficult for such actors to create professionally operating, sustainable organizations. Among the general population, the idea of NPOs does not enjoy strong support.

Citation:

Susanne Brucksch, Japan's Civil Society and its Fight against Nuclear Energy, Sustainable Governance Indicators Website, 09.04.2014, <http://news.sgi-network.org/news/details/1212/theme-democracy-sustainability/japans-civil-society-and-its-fight-against-nuclear-energy/>

U.S.-Japan Council, Japan's NPO Sector Today, Summary of a breakout session of the 2018 Annual Conference, [http://www.usjapancouncil.org/japans\\_npo\\_sector\\_today](http://www.usjapancouncil.org/japans_npo_sector_today)

### Independent Supervisory Bodies

Audit Office  
Score: 6

The Board of Audit of Japan is considered to be independent of the executive, legislative and judiciary. Its yearly reports to the cabinet are forwarded to the Diet along with the cabinet's own financial statements. The board is free to direct its own activities but parliament can request audits on special topics. The Board can also present opinions, reports and recommendations in between its annual audit reports. In these reports, the board frequently criticizes improper expenditures or inefficiencies, fulfilling its independent watchdog function.

Citation:

Colin Jones, Japan's Board of Audit: unlikely guardians of the Constitution?, The Japan Times, 4 December 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2016/12/04/issues/japans-board-audit-unlikely-guardians-constitution/>

Ombuds Office  
Score: 5

While there is no national-level ombuds office as such, both houses of parliament handle petitions received through their committees on audit and administrative oversight. Citizens and organized groups also frequently submit petitions to individual parliamentarians.

An important petition mechanism is located in the Administrative Evaluation Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. The bureau runs an administrative counseling service with around 50 local field offices that can handle public complaints, with some 220 civil servants engaged in administrative counseling. About 5,000 volunteer administrative counselors serve as go-betweens. A related mechanism is the Administrative Grievance Resolution Promotion Council, which includes non-governmental experts.

Administrative Evaluation Bureau, News from Japan, accessed in November 2018 from Asian Ombudsman Association website <http://asianombudsman.com/>

Administrative Evaluation Bureau, Japanese Ombudsman System, March 2018

Data Protection  
Authority  
Score: 7

Based on the Act on the Protection of Personal Information, a Personal Information Protection Commission was established in January 2016. The commission is a cross-sectoral, independent government body overseeing the implementation of the act. The body's chairperson and commissioners are appointed by the prime minister, with the consent of both chambers of parliament. It is still difficult to judge whether this commission will be able to maintain independence from the government and, ultimately, whether it will prove effective. A tightening of existing rules proposed by the commission found its way into the mid-2020 revision of the Personal Information Protection Law. The amended law requires firms and the like to better take into account the personal data protection interests and preferences of Japanese citizens.

Citation:

Akemi Suzuki and Tomohiro Sekiguchi, Data Protection & Privacy Japan, Getting the Deal Through lawyer and law firm network, September 2018, <https://gettingthedealthrough.com/area/52/jurisdiction/36/data-protection-privacy-japan/>

A step toward the restoration of privacy (Editorial), The Japan Times, 30 May 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/05/30/editorials/step-toward-restoration-privacy/>

Fumiko Kuribayashi, Users in Japan to get more rights to stop abuse of personal data, The Asahi Shimbun, 26 April 2019, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201904260045.html>

Hiroyuki Tanaka and Noboru Kitayama, Japan enacts Amendments to the Act on the Protection of Personal Information, International Association of Privacy Professionals, <https://iapp.org/news/a/japan-enacts-the-act-on-the-protection-of-personal-information/>

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Peng I., Köllner P. & T. Kalinowski (2022).  
Japan Report. Sustainable Governance Indicators.  
Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh.  
<https://doi.org/10.11586/2022103>

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