

Grassroots Democracy and Civil Society in Japan

By Robert Pekkanen

The way that civil society connects to and supports democracy in Japan differs in important ways from what we find in the United States. Of course, the fundamental logic of the connection is essentially the same—in both countries, civil society groups support democracy and governance through providing services, ideas, and generating connections among citizens. However, the patterns or configurations of civil society in the two countries are quite distinct, and as a result, we find important differences in how the two civil societies contribute to their respective democracies. In what follows, the concept of “civil society” is defined, and the respective roles of civil society in Japan and the US are compared. Then, neighborhood associations (NHAs), a key component of Japanese civil society, are addressed in some detail with a focus upon their domestic function and, comparatively, their roles in generating social capital and NHA-related problems. The essay also includes two related teaching exercises.

Civil Society: What Is It?

Civil society is the organized non-state, non-market sector of society. That means it comprises almost any voluntary group not aiming for profits in the market (companies, etc.) or control of the government (e.g., political parties). Religious groups of all kinds, women’s groups, 501c3 nonprofit organizations, charities, sports leagues, the American Medical Association, environmental groups, etc., all make up parts of civil society. We all know that social science definitions are often contested, and the definition of civil society is no exception. Scholars argue about whether labor unions or business organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, should be counted, whether media companies need to be included, and what we should do about groups espousing violence. Without wading into those debates, it probably matters more that we are crystal-clear about our definitions—and what the implications of changing those definitions would be—than which definition we adopt; although there is a lot of agreement among scholars, it seems unlikely that a single definition will ever satisfy everyone.

Japan boasts a distinctively varied network of local civil society organizations, most notably its neighborhood organizations (NHAs).

There are many ways to understand civil society. Some scholars consider it a sphere of action into which various actors become involved when they act in or try to influence the public interest. Others contend that civil society is better understood as a set of organizations. The latter understanding makes it easier to compare civil societies across countries and over time, which is important for our understanding civil society’s causes and consequences. To compare civil societies, one has to tote up these organizations in one country and then examine the corresponding set in another country.

Let’s be careful, however, because even if we follow the “set of organizations” approach, there is no single number we can use to quickly compare civil societies. It is not as simple as just counting up the number of organizations and comparing the analogous number. A simple thought experiment shows us why. Let’s say one country has 100,000 civil society organizations, and only a single person belongs to each organization. We want to compare that country’s civil society to another country, which features only 95,000 civil society organizations—but each of them boasts

10,000 members. Obviously, the number of members is another factor we might want to keep track of when we compare civil societies. When we start to think of it, there are probably a number of important organizational dimensions we want to know in order to understand how rival civil societies stack up. Besides the number of members, we might want to know about participation (how active the members are), financial resources, etc. One feature I discuss below is the number of professional staff—a critical resource for organizations.

Civil Society in Japan and the US

Comparisons of civil society in Japan and the US yield several noteworthy points for reflection. The US has one of the more vibrant civil societies in the world. Although Japan has many groups, the professional component is small. In other words, the share of people who make their livings working for a civil society organization—as opposed to corporations or the government—remains about a third of those in the United States. In some fields, the differences are even more striking—the largest Japanese environmental groups or foundations would not register as important in the US arena because of their relatively modest full-time employee numbers. Most Japanese nonprofits get by with a handful of dedicated staff at most, unlike large and sophisticated groups such as the AARP or the Sierra Club. The comparatively meager number of professional staff notwithstanding, Japan has a rich network of local civil society organizations, above all NHAs. This has profound consequences for the way civil society contributes to democracy.

Scholars have posited a number of explanations for the weakness of professional civil society in Japan. Some point to society, arguing that Japanese citizens do not seek solutions to common problems through utilization of civil society, but traditionally turn to the state first. Other analysts identify Japan’s labor market, characterized by limited job mobility, as a disincentive for young people to risk a short stint working in low-paying nonprofits that may involuntarily turn into a lifelong career. Another well-known explanation for the small number of paid professional staff associated with civil society in Japan is cultural; Japanese culture is not conducive to the values of philanthropy. Finally, some observers perceive that the government, through exercising a large regulatory role, negatively affects civil society development. For our purposes, though, it is enough to know that the facts about the size of Japan’s professional civil society sector are not in dispute.

As noted earlier, Japan boasts a distinctively varied network of local civil society organizations, most notably its neighborhood organizations (NHAs).¹ These are small, local groups, representing about 100 families each. The antecedents of today’s NHAs can be traced back to groups formed by ordinary people centuries ago to defend each other from bandits and protect their homes from fires, but most modern NHAs were formed in the twentieth century as part of a government push to spread this useful organizational form across the country. Today, these organizations remain the centerpieces of local life in many places. They perform an astonishingly wide variety of functions, such as organizing the local festival—the highlight of the year for many communities—holding an athletic meet for local elementary school kids, hosting lectures on health issues for the aged, performing neighborhood-watch patrols, cleaning the local parks, disseminating notices from the local government, or telling local officials what residents want done. With nearly 300,000 of the groups operating over almost every single square centimeter of Japanese territory, it might be harder to find things that these groups *don’t* do.

Neighborhood Association and Governance

One thing on which almost everyone agrees is that NHAs do help the government work better. Because of problems like budget deficits and challenges like globalization, some scholars believe governments have little choice but to turn to models of governing that create systems through which stakeholders can collaborate, compete, and cooperate. This literature on “governance” has been booming in recent years. Japan’s NHAs are in some ways quintessential partners in local governance. They contribute in five important ways: 1) they provide social services directly in the community; 2) they cooperate with local government through both subcontracting and unpaid collaboration; 3) they encourage political participation by demand articulation as well as endorsements and campaigning; 4) they form networks with other local community groups and actors; and 5) they sustain social capital.

Direct social service provision encompasses those activities that NHAs do themselves, e.g., working together as neighbors on a volunteer basis. More than 70 percent of NHAs maintain and improve their local living environment, hold social gatherings, and provide some care or programs for the local elderly in this fashion. Urban NHAs also engage in neighborhood-watch crime patrols, familiar to many Americans. Besides things they do by themselves, NHAs do even more working together with local governments. Disaster preparedness and beautifying neighborhoods are also common projects. Although there has been no comprehensive research done as of the time of this writing, press reports lead me to believe that NHA leaders were crucial to the safety of their communities in the huge March 11, 2011, earthquake that rocked eastern Japan; the devastating tsunami that followed on its heels; and the painful work of rescue, relief, and recovery. NHA leaders rallied their communities, directed fellow citizens to safety, and coordinated rescue efforts with their knowledge of their local areas.

On a more mundane level, often NHAs contract with the local government for a particular service or function, but sometimes the NHA simply donates its labor to get the work done. Local governments surely appreciate this provision of low-cost communications, especially as the NHA is usually more successful at getting people to read what they disseminate than the government’s tactics of using mailings or newspaper inserts. One task of over 81 percent of NHAs is circulation of local government information.

The successful NHAs are able to leverage their cooperation with the government for success in getting local issues resolved to their satisfaction.

Most NHAs have a clipboard that circulates from house to house. When a neighbor finishes with the clipboard, she takes it to the next-door neighbor, and the process is repeated from neighbor to neighbor. In this way, the clipboard makes its way through the NHA fairly quickly, and handing it from neighbor to neighbor encourages friendly social interaction. Of course, the local governments would love to stuff that clipboard full with things they consider critically important. Local governments often want to put on even more notices about everything local government does. But, it is the NHA itself that decides how much to circulate, and they often tell the government “no” to notices they don’t consider all that important. For instance, the NHA might tell the local government that a notice about a reshuffle in the internal organization of the government doesn’t merit being put on the clipboard, but a notice about signups for city-run children’s soccer leagues will make the cut. Local groups, schools, and others can ask the NHA to include their notices on the clipboard. Overall, the system works pretty well.

The information doesn’t flow only one way, though. Because the NHA leaders work frequently with local government officials, they take the opportunity to press forward community demands. In fact, the successful NHAs are able to leverage their cooperation with the government for success in getting local issues resolved to their satisfaction. NHAs might ask that a dan-

Understanding the concept “social capital” is important, not just for this article, but more generally for understanding civil society and perhaps even policy performance and governance.

gerous intersection be given an additional traffic light, for example, or that the existing traffic light time be extended because it is too short for the elderly to cross safely. Or NHAs might ask the police to talk to everyone in their community about how to prevent identity theft, something members had grown increasingly worried about but didn’t know how to prevent. NHAs are not afraid to contact politicians, either. In fact, many NHAs endorse local political candidates and even sometimes help on their campaigns. Imagine how much local candidates in the US would give to have a base of community organizers blanketing their district!

NHAs don’t just go it alone but form networks with other local organizations as well. These associations are attractive partners because they are universal in membership and usually have high participation rates. It is no surprise that they are sought out by local groups. In forming these local networks, NHAs become important players in constructing governance. Information certainly does flow along these networks, to the benefit of NHAs and the other organizations. Moreover, NHAs embedded in these networks act differently. For example, they articulate more demands to the government, probably because they have been alerted to a wider range of local issues. NHAs who enjoy stronger networks with other organizations also provide more social services in their communities.

Neighborhood Associations and Social Capital

NHAs also contribute to governance through sustaining social capital. Understanding the concept “social capital” is important, not just for this article, but more generally for understanding civil society and perhaps even policy performance and governance. The idea was developed by Harvard scholar Robert Putnam in his 1993 book about Italy, *Making Democracy Work*, and his follow-up book on the US, *Bowling Alone*, and has since taken on a life of its own. There’s been a virtual cottage industry on social capital, with tens of thousands of articles elaborating the concept since Putnam’s groundbreaking 1993 book. Unlike many academic ideas, this one also resonated with policymakers. The concept informs policymaking in the World Bank and the US and has even made its way into a State of the Union speech.

Essentially, social capital is defined as the connections among people that make it possible for them to get things done together. In this way, it is like other forms of capital. Financial capital makes it possible to buy things that would be otherwise unaffordable. Human capital is the expertise that makes it possible for people to do things that others are not able to do. Social capital is the result of people cooperating to reach a common goal from which they all may benefit. Scholars have lots of technical definitions of “cooperation,” such as solving the prisoner’s dilemma, but these don’t really improve on our common sense understanding of the term. A more formal definition of social capital, however, might be helpful: “features of social organization, such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”²² In other words, the more widespread that norms of trust and reciprocity are in a group and the more networks that link people together in that group, the more likely those people are to be able to cooperate.

NHAs in Japan link neighbors together in face-to-face relationships that last for years. Studies have shown that this greatly builds the trust neighbors have in one another—and it also “generalizes” so that people begin to trust others in general, not just their neighbors. Much of Putnam’s argument has been that this, in turn, leads to more effective government and economic growth. Fostering the growth of social capital represents a formidable con-

tribution to governance by NHAs. Building up stocks of social capital generally makes a place much nicer to live. People feel connected and are more disposed to act kindly to their neighbors. Watching out for one another makes everyone safer, helps children do better at school, and even improves health. Besides the psychological benefits, people with strong social networks have others who notice if they exhibit worrying health signs, and, if need be, could drive them to the doctor. Areas with higher social capital are also likely to respond to disasters by pulling together instead of being more prone to crimes such as looting. Although I have no evidence, I think this is one of the reasons that communities devastated by the March 11, 2011, Great Eastern Japan Earthquake turned to each other for help instead of turning on each other—in stark contrast to the aftermath of other natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina).

Problems of Neighborhood Associations

NHAs do a lot for their communities. I have had more than one American local government official tell me they wish we had these groups in the US. Although NHAs exist in the US, they are not pervasive in American society. Even in cities that have NHAs, there are many districts where they do not operate, and where they do operate, they do not typically enjoy the great participation of Japanese NHAs.

Of course, NHAs are far from perfect. Many people feel compelled to participate rather than alienate their neighbors, but some do not enjoy it and would rather be doing something else. This brings up interesting questions about what “voluntary” really means in “voluntary associations” (see Classroom Exercise 1). Even more striking than this debatable compulsion is the gender imbalance in NHA leadership. Nearly all NHA presidents are men. This is astounding even in a country like Japan, where gender inequality is much higher than the US.³ Leadership is greying, too, as Japan’s society ages and new leaders are hard to find since an NHA presidency can be a substantial time commitment—much more than being a Condo Association Board Chair, for example.

Neighborhood Associations, Civil Societies, and Japan’s Democracy

Despite their problems, it is fair to say that NHAs do contribute greatly to Japan’s governance. Japan’s civil society overall can be characterized as having a lot of groups like NHAs that smooth governance and furnish high levels of social capital but do not have professionalized groups that are willing to engage in policy advocacy. This means Japan misses out on having civil society groups that fight for the interests of the people. Japan’s stagnation might also be extended by a lack of innovative policymaking engines like the think tanks ringing the Capitol Beltway and elsewhere throughout the US. On the other hand, highly polarized interest group politics in the US can make political compromise difficult, and an argument can be made that they don’t really represent the public anyway. Considering linkages between these different configurations of civil society and democracy can make a very interesting classroom discussion (see Classroom Exercise 2).

Classroom Exercises

Classroom Exercise 1: Students will probably agree that there is a difference in what we think of an organization depending on whether people *must* join it or have the right to decide for themselves whether to join. Voluntary organizations are the bedrock of groups that promote social capital. But what’s so “voluntary” about joining an organization? This exercise guides students into understanding how individual decisions are embedded in our relationships with other people. More technically, it draws attention to the fact that joining something voluntarily is effected by the social networks in which we operate. The exercise also allows a student to come to their own decision about how effective

voluntary NHAs (or any organization) are—and what that means for our understanding of participation in organizations. Start by asking students to name a few voluntary organizations. Examples may include clubs, religious groups, or civic associations. You can also ask students to name groups for which they have volunteered, instead of joining, if that gets more responses. Then, ask why students joined the group. Many join groups or volunteer because a friend is doing it. Social networks exert a powerful influence. What if a friend “guilts” you into joining? Was it still a free choice? You could choose to lose the friend instead of joining, after all. My answer is that social pressure is not the same as coercion, so it is voluntary. But, you and the students may come up with different answers. Be prepared—students might bring up “mandatory volunteering” if volunteer activity is required by your school, college, or university. There are no right answers for that, so let them decide what they think. Most scholars would say mandatory volunteering is still voluntary if the person can choose their volunteer group.

Classroom Exercise 2: Ask students to debate which is “better”—civil society in Japan or the US. Students can quickly understand that US civil society features a rich palette of interest groups and nonprofits, which are intimately involved in policymaking. Japanese civil society, on the other hand, can be characterized as full of local groups, especially NHAs, which contribute to governance but without the strong pluralistic elements created by powerful professionalized civil society organizations. Using a value-laden term such as “better” forces the students to define normatively their vision of how civil society connects to democracy, and this connects nicely to the contrasts between US and Japanese civil society. There’s more than enough evidence for both sides. I have regularly run a debate along just these lines in one of my courses for years, with students acting also as judges for the debate. There’s been no clear pattern for which side emerges victorious. ■

NOTES

1. These are known in Japanese variously as *chōnaikai*, *jichikai*, *chōkai*, and other names.
2. Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 no. 1 (1995): 67.
3. Yutaka Tsujinaka, Robert Pekkanen, and Hidehiro Yamamoto, *Gendai nihon no jichikai chōnaikai (Neighborhood Associations and Local Governance in Japan)* (Tokyo: Bokutakusha, 2009). Americans may mistakenly assume the US is the world leader in gender equality, but that is far from the case—indeed, the US is about the mid-point between Sweden or Norway and Japan in UN ratings.

REFERENCE LIST

- Haddad, Mary Alice. *Politics and Volunteering in Japan: A Global Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Pekkanen, Robert. *Japan’s Dual Civil Society: Members without Advocates*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Putnam, Robert. *Making Democracy Work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- . “Bowling Alone.” *Journal of Democracy* 6 no. 1 (January 1995): 65–78.
- Schwartz, Frank J., and Susan J. Pharr, eds. *The State of Civil Society in Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Tsujinaka, Yutaka, Robert Pekkanen, and Hidehiro Yamamoto. *Gendai nihon no jichikai chōnaikai (Neighborhood Associations and Local Governance in Japan)*. Tokyo: Bokutakusha, 2009.

ROBERT PEKKANEN is an Associate Professor at the University of Washington in the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies. He has published articles on Japanese politics in such journals as *The American Political Science Review*, *The British Journal of Political Science*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, and *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, among others. His first book, *Japan’s Dual Civil Society: Members without Advocates* (Stanford, 2006) won the Masayoshi Ohira Prize in 2008 and an award from the Japanese Nonprofit Research Association (JANPORA) in 2007. He has also authored books on Japan’s political parties and neighborhood associations.