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The Political Economy of the Japanese Gender Gap

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After three decades of remarkable economic growth, the last 20 years have brought tremendous uncertainty to Japan, with ramifications for the role of women in national politics. The “lost decade” of the 1990s saw the collapse of the Japanese economic miracle and the Liberal Democratic Party’s first electoral loss after 40 years of uninterrupted rule. The conservative LDP’s surprising defeat was attributed in part to discontent among women voters. Moreover, this political turbulence appeared in the wake of a longer term challenge to social norms, particularly the traditional division of household duties between husband and wife. Today women are waiting longer to get married, are having fewer children, and are more likely to work outside the home. These are notable changes in a nation where women were unable to vote until 1945, and only then because of a Constitution imposed by military victors in World War II. Women hold a smaller share of seats in legislature than in any other industrial democracy.¹ The United Nations Development Program puts Japan near the top of the list of nations when it comes to human development but 43rd on its gender empowerment measure. This poor gender ranking is due to its sparse representation of women in professional ranks and the low wages of Japanese women compared to men. It is easy to conclude that Japan is “arguably the most gender-inegalitarian industrialized country” (Raymo 2003, 84).

The economic and political instability of modern Japan would thus appear to have a strong gender component. Yet the relationships between social and economic change on the one hand and sex differences in political preferences are yet to be understood. Based on theories from the field of political economy, one might expect Japanese men and women to have starkly differing political views. As in other nations these differences would be encapsulated in a “gender gap” in partisan preferences. As women’s roles in family life and business have evolved, the gender gap would naturally have widened as it did in the U.S.

In this project I conduct an initial investigation of the political economy of the Japanese gender gap. By assembling rich time series of public opinion data toward the LDP and merging them with economic and social indicators, I am able to identify causal relationships between support macroeconomic performance and gender differences in support for the ruling party. Replicating an analysis of the U.S. gender gap by Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin (2004), I find surprisingly little role for the economy, or practically any other explanatory variable, aside from support for the prime minister’s cabinet. The near-constancy of the gender gap over the last 45 years in Japan remains puzzling because it runs against conventional political economic explanations in every way.

Theoretical Guidance

Despite the fact that there has been little empirical investigation of gender differences in Japanese political views, several political science literatures provide concrete guidance on how to conceptualize the gender gap and which variables might be of greatest import. Because political opinions are a product of cultural values, gender differences have been linked to stages of national development because of its impact on cultural norms. In particular, gender gaps ought to emerge in post-industrial societies in Japan rather than in developing societies. In *Rising Tide*, Inglehart and Norris (2003) argue that the shift from agrarian to industrial and then postindustrial society should expand gender differences. These changes bring women into the workforce, depress fertility rates, and produce more gender equality. These processes produce a

¹ The Inter-Parliamentary Union ranks Japan 100th in terms of female representation in the lower chamber of the national legislature (90.6% male). <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>>

relationship between economic development and attitudes toward gender equality. Inglehart and Norris demonstrate that women have shifted toward parties on the left in recent decades and that this movement is greatest in the most developed societies. Given its rapid economic development after World War II, Japan provides a convenient environment for evaluating this prediction.

Turning from general theories of gender equality for the moment, other research provides insight on variables most relevant to the Japanese case. For example, women's labor force participation has also been shown to affect the gender gap quite powerfully across a range of nations. Increasing the rates with which women work outside the home ought to accelerate women's support for parties of the left (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006). Single working women in particular ought to be more supportive of progressive government policies because they make lower salaries, and so the gender gap is expected to be inversely related to the marriage rate as single women gravitate toward parties on the left (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004; Edlund and Pande 2006). Delayed marriage and increasing divorce rates, both of which are taking place in Japan, ought to push women away from the conservative LDP.

When women do work outside the home, gender differences in wages ought to contribute to divergent political views as well (Patterson and Nishikawa 2002). Most intriguingly, in Japan it seems that economic downturns harm men less than women because female workers serve as a "buffer" for male workers (Houseman and Abraham 1993). As Schoppa's (2006) argues, women in Japan have long played the role of "shock absorbers," taking lesser paying jobs when unemployment was low and facing termination or resignation when the economy deteriorated. Government policies actually reinforce these differential employment practices. In fact, some would argue that this sexual division of labor was a necessary part of the massive growth in the Japanese economy from the 1960s to the 1980s. As a result of these inequalities, part-time workers in Japan are disproportionately female and suffer from lower wages and fewer benefits (Broadbent 2003). As temporary, "pink collar," and otherwise dispensable employees, women are more likely to be laid off by their employers in times of economic difficulty. Hence they serve as buffers to protect men from unpleasant side-effects of economic downturns. This asymmetry is extremely well-established in the literature and could be the key to understanding the political economy of the gender gap.

While the "buffer" theory predicts the women will be more responsive to economic fluctuations than men, other facts challenge this view. Unlike their American counterparts, Japanese women are less likely to affiliate with political parties. They also express less interest in politics, yet vote at higher rates than men (Steel 2004). This suggests that voting is more a social than an instrumental act for Japanese women, who are not particularly well represented by the fiscally conservative LDP (Patterson and Nishikawa 2002).² Unlike the U.S. (Norrander 1997), Japanese women are more likely to report supporting no party. If so, we would expect women's opinions to be less responsive to economic conditions even though their wages might more affected by the macroeconomy. This fundamental irony could go a long way in explaining why women are underrepresented in the party system despite being more sensitive to national economic performance.

There is some support for differential attention to the economy in the U.S. case. Men's ratings of the president reflect evaluations of the economy more than do women's, yet women are also more pessimistic about the economy than are men (Clarke et al. 2004). At the same time, American women are more likely to rely on assessments of the national economy in

² Unlike in the U.S. (Norrander 1997), Japanese men are more likely than women to report that they support a party.

judging political leaders whereas men are more likely to base opinions on their personal financial situations (Clarke et al. 2004; Welch and Hibbing 1992). By drawing upon multiple economic measures, I can assess whether Japanese men and women react differently to economic indicators.

In addition to these clear predictions based on a political economic understanding of gender in Japan, it is possible that old-fashioned politics might also matter. Since the dependent variable of interest here is support for the LDP, the gender gap is likely that factors that contribute to LDP support in general could also influence relative support of men and women for the party. In my study of strategies used by the LDP to maintain popular support, I find no evidence that economic variables have direct influence on party support (Burden 2006). They shape attitudes toward LDP leaders but do not spill over to affect the party itself. Instead, support for the LDP is heavily driven by support for its leaders, namely the prime minister and his cabinet. The prime minister (PM) is a key figure because he has also been president of the party and the one person in politics most clearly responsible for the government's actions. It is a curious but important fact that party support is affected by PM support but not the other way around. If this relationship is different in any way for men and women, then we would expect changes in PM support to affect the gender gap in LDP support.

Data

To understand these relationships, I require data on the partisan preferences of Japanese men and women over a long period of time. Fortunately the Jiji Press Service provides the source: nationwide polls with representative samples of Japanese citizens conducted monthly since the formation of the modern political system in the 1950s. Early each month a representative sample of Japanese was interviewed in person and asked which party they currently support and whether they support the current prime minister's cabinet. Remarkably, the methodology and question wording have remained unchanged through this entire period. Included in the surveys are batteries of questions about economic performance, ideology, support for the prime minister, and preferred political party. I study the period from June 1960 to December 2004, which envelopes the long stretch of aggressive growth and the more uncertainty period of the last 15 years.

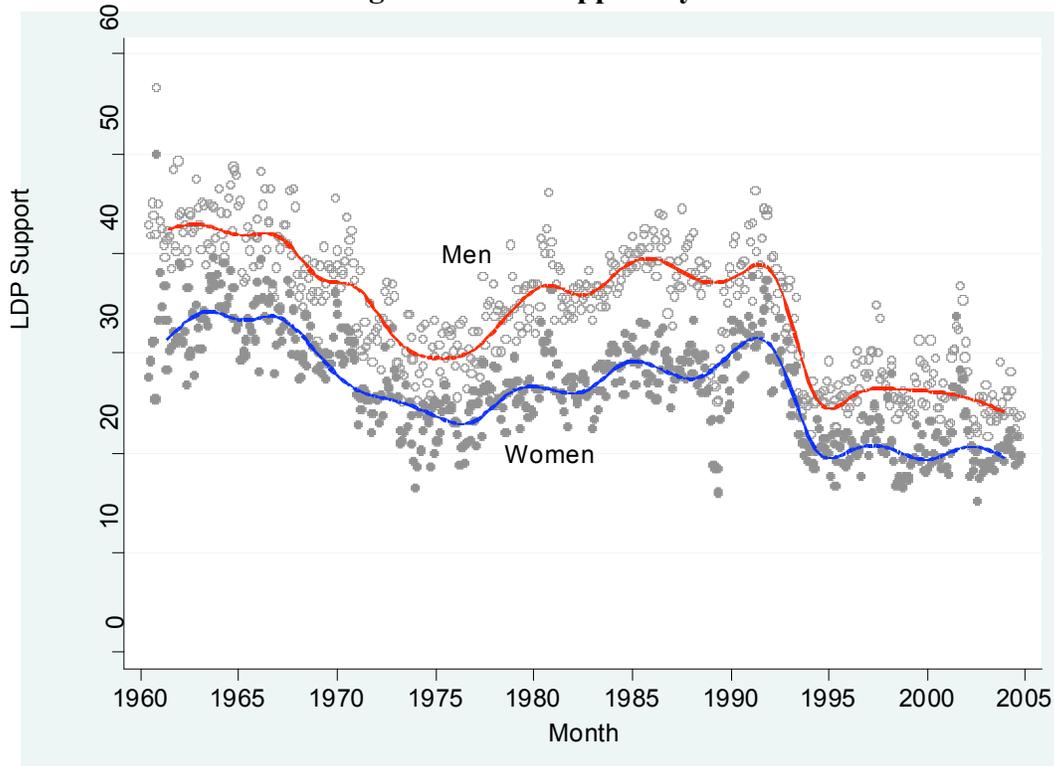
Because the LDP has formed the government or been the major partner in every coalition government in this era (aside from a short spell in 1993-4), the party provides a convenient baseline for assessing public opinion over a long time period.³ Although party positions are not completely fixed, the LDP has long been considered to be center right of the ideological spectrum and is almost always described as "conservative" (Hrebentar 2000). Kato and Laver (2003) show that the LDP is especially conservative on social policy and issues of national identity, although perhaps not on spending policy.

Figure 1 shows support for the LDP by sex over this time span. Because the data are collected monthly, the raw time series show significant bobbling around from one period to the next. To make the trends more apparent, I have fit flexible splines through both time series.

³ The LDP was not part of the governing coalition for the 11 months from August 1993 to June 1994. For these observations the cabinet support measure is reversed so that it represents non-support. The results are unchanged if these observations are removed from the analysis.

Men are consistently more supportive than women of the conservative LDP.⁴ Men average about 34% support and women about 26% support, with men being somewhat more variable.⁵ The two lines tend to move up and down in tandem, indicating that men and women's views of the LDP often shift for the same reasons and at the same times. When the LDP suffers from inflation and scandals in the 1970s and when defeated in the 1989 upper house and 1993 lower house elections, both sexes became less supportive of the party. The gap appears to grow somewhat during good times for the LDP in the 1960s and 1980s mainly because men become disproportionately supportive. This fact with the finding that men's support levels fluctuate more.

Figure 1. LDP Support by Sex



Before moving to the statistical analysis, I convert these two time series into a single gender gap indicator. My measure is simple the difference in support for the LDP between men and women (Matsuda 2005). Figure 2 displays the monthly gender gap in LDP support. The mean gap during this time period is 7.7 percentage points. It ranges from essentially zero to almost 18 points, with a standard deviation of 3.2 points.⁶ By examining the smoothing spline, however, it seems that practically speaking the gap seldom exceeds 10 or 12 points and rarely falls below five points for more than a month or two. The gap begins at a relatively high level in the 1960s, and then declines into the early 1970s before returning to its peak in the mid 1980s.

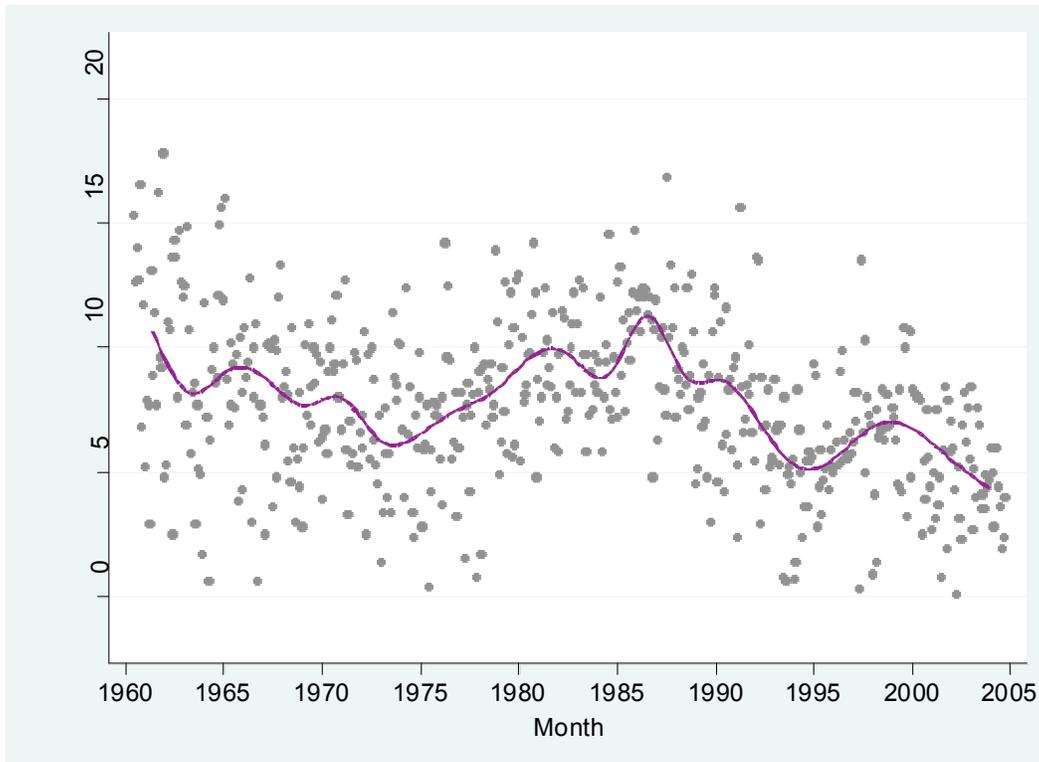
⁴ Using the formula in BDL (2004, footnote 4), the observed gap in LDP support is significantly different from zero in 475 out of 533 months or about 90% of the time using a 95% confidence interval.

⁵ A standard deviation of 6.8 for men versus 5.4 for women.

⁶ Future analysis should consider how much of this fluctuation is due to error variance rather than true variance in the underlying variable.

Gender differences in LDP support fall through the 1990s with a modest but temporary reversal in the late 1990s.

Figure 2. Gender Gap in LDP Support



Note: Vertical axis is the difference between male and female support for the LDP.

Considering the theoretical expectations raised earlier, Figure 2 is puzzling on several counts. First, pattern is precisely the opposite of that predicted by Inglehart and Norris (2003), and that observed in other nations. Unlike in the U.S. and Western Europe where the gender gap emerges and continues to grow over the postwar period, in Japan it appears to cycle up and down with no trend upward. If anything the overall trend is downward; the correlation of the gap and time is $-.29$ ($p < .001$). So the gender gap in Japan does not display the secular increases in sex differences expected in other postindustrial democracies. Despite massive changes in industrialization, urbanization, gender roles, and the party system over the past 45 years, the gender gap has hovered quite consistently between five and 10 points. It thus seems implausible that standard structural variables will account for much of the fluctuation. Short-term political effects are more likely explanations.

Second, the gap does not appear to correspond to commonly understood changes in gender consciousness in Japan. One might have expected women to assert their independence from the LDP in the late 1980s and early 1990s, yet precisely the opposite happens. The “Madonna boom” and the identification of the Socialists (and their female leader, Takako Doi) with women’s causes could have drawn female support and widened the gender gap. Despite claims that women responded more strongly to LDP scandals, it is difficult to see evidence that the gap grew after Recruit, Lockheed, or other visible scandals. The challenges faced by the LDP in assembling governing majorities over the last decade have also not exacerbated the gap.

In fact, the gap appears smaller just at the points where the LDP is most vulnerable, such as the early 1990s and mid 2000s. This suggests a negative relationship between support for LDP leaders (presumably the prime minister and his cabinet) and the gap.

Variables and Statistical Model

I use multivariate time series analysis to explain the rise and fall of the gender gap between 1960 and 2004. The explanatory variables come from the theoretical literature cited earlier. To capture the effects of the overall macroeconomy, I use national unemployment and inflation rates. These are standard variables in the comparative study of economic effects on electoral outcomes and appear in other studies of the gender gap (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2006). To the degree that the gender gap is a product of economic performance, it should increase in magnitude as unemployment and inflation rise. I use two other variables to gauge the unique economic positions of women. It is likely that women respond not so much to general economic indexes as much as those that pertain to their own well being (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006). I account for the percentage of women who are single (Matsuda 2005) and the percentage who are unemployed to assess the “buffer” hypothesis. Again, the gender gap ought to grow as these measures increase. Finally, the one purely political variable is support for the prime minister’s cabinet. Cabinet support affects support for the LDP (Burden 2006) and might by extension also influence the gender gap.

I adopt the time series framework proposed by Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin (2004, hereafter BDL). They posit that both male and female partisanship are linear functions of a common set of explanatory variables. In my framework,

$$\text{Female LDP Support} = \mathbf{X}\beta + \mathbf{u}$$

and

$$\text{Male LDP Support} = \mathbf{X}\gamma + \mathbf{v}$$

where \mathbf{X} is a matrix of covariates such as economic conditions, β and γ are vectors of coefficients, and \mathbf{u} and \mathbf{v} are random disturbances. If men and women react identically to the variables in \mathbf{X} (and have identically distributed error terms), then the two equations need not be separated since $\beta = \gamma$. This would also result in a constant gender gap over time, even if overall levels of LDP support rise and fall.

Since we hypothesize that variables influence men and women differently, our interest is in how β and γ compare. Following BDL, we subtract one model from the other so that

$$\text{LDP Gender Gap} = \text{Male LDP Support} - \text{Female LDP Support} = \mathbf{X}(\beta - \gamma) + (\mathbf{u} - \mathbf{v}).$$

This specification allows for direct tests of whether explanatory variables affect men and women’s support for the LDP differently, or the null hypothesis that $\beta - \gamma = 0$. The variables in \mathbf{X} include the five described above as well as several others used as controls in the BDL analysis. These controls are macroideology (the proportion of self-identified progressives among both progressives and conservatives) and lagged values of female and male support for the LDP.

Using this specification, I estimate a linear regression model after prewhitening the series to avoid spurious relationships. I use the AutoRegressive Fractionally Integrated Moving Average (ARFIMA) approach of BDL and others (see Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1998; Lebo, Walker, and Clarke 2000). This requires estimating the standard AR and MA terms as well as the degree of fractional integration in the parameter d . Unlike traditional ARIMA formulations in which the degree of integration must be an integer, ARFIMA permits fractional estimates that put a series somewhere between the standard categories of integrated and stationary.

To estimate d I use the semiparametric estimator developed by Geweke and Porter-Hudak (1983).⁷ Table 1 reports the ARFIMA estimates, repeating BDL's approach to estimating the ARMA terms and whitening the series for further analysis. The table suggests that several of variables are fractionally integrated. Interestingly, the estimate of .38 for d for the gender gap variable is strikingly close to the estimate of .47 BDL find for the U.S. gender gap. The gender gap in LDP support follows neither the random walk of a fully integrated time series nor the quickly declining autocorrelation of a stationary series. Instead, the gap shows considerable persistence and supports the view from Figure 2 that the gender gap is relatively resistant to political and economic shocks.

Table 1. Fractional Integration Estimates

| Variable | d (SE) | t -ratio ($d = 0$) | t -ratio ($d = 1$) | ARMA |
|--------------------|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| LDP Gender Gap | .38 (.14) | 2.65* | 4.41** | (0,0) |
| Female LDP Support | .66 (.16) | 4.13** | 2.09* | (0,0) |
| Male LDP Support | .71 (.15) | 4.65** | 1.86 | (0,0) |
| Unemployment | .44 (.17) | 2.65* | 3.41** | (1,1) |
| Inflation | .81 (.11) | 7.05** | 1.65 | (0,0) |
| PM Cabinet Support | .16 (.11) | 1.48 | 7.50** | (0,0) |
| Macroideology | .01 (.17) | .07 | 5.82** | (0,0) |
| Single Women | .56 (.11) | 5.04** | 3.99** | (1,1) |
| Unemployed Women | .18 (.21) | .88 | 3.94** | (0,0) |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, one-tailed tests

Unemployment, Unemployed Women, and Macroideology required obvious differencing first. Macroideology exists until June 1991 (373 observations).

Unemployed Women begins in July 1972 (399 observations).

After stripping these variables down to innovations by filtering out the ARFIMA elements, I estimate simple ordinary least squares regression models of the gender gap. I specify several versions, beginning with the most basic economic and control variables in \mathbf{X} and then sequentially adding others. One reason for doing this is to evaluate hypotheses sequentially once a baseline model has been fit, but the other reason is that two of the variables (Macroideology

⁷ Although a full maximum likelihood estimator might be preferred when the sample size is small (BDL), I have over 500 observations, which is an adequate length to justify the semi parametric approach. Lebo, Walker, and Clarke (2000) use much shorter time series and find no substantive differences between the two kinds of estimators. I estimated d using the `-gphudak-` command in Stata 9.0. Further analysis will probe the sensitivity of these estimates to the particular estimator and the specified power of the test.

and Unemployed Women) do not exist for the full time period. Recall that each coefficient is an estimate of the effects of $\beta - \gamma$, or whether men's and women's support for the LDP responds differently to explanatory variables. Table 2 presents the results of these models.

Table 2. Models of the Gender Gap in LDP Support

| | I | III | III | IV | V |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Unemployment _t | -1.23 (.93) | -2.15 (1.19) | -1.28 (.93) | -.34 (.99) | -.05 (1.02) |
| Inflation _t | .02 (.15) | .07 (.17) | .01 (.15) | -.06 (.16) | .06 (.18) |
| PM Cabinet Support _{t-1} | | | -.02* (.01) | -.02* (.01) | -.02* (.01) |
| Macroideology _{t-1} | | -.03 (.03) | | | |
| Macroideology _{t-2} | | -.05* (.03) | | | |
| Single Women _t | | | | | -.81 (.75) |
| Unemployed Women _t | | | | -2.22 (1.26) | |
| Female LDP Support _{t-1} | .37** (.04) | .33** (.05) | .38** (.04) | .37** (.05) | .41** (.05) |
| Female LDP Support _{t-2} | .10** (.04) | .07 (.05) | .11** (.04) | .13** (.05) | .24** (.05) |
| Male LDP Support _{t-1} | -.24** (.04) | -.20** (.05) | -.23** (.04) | -.21** (.04) | -.23** (.05) |
| Male LDP Support _{t-2} | -.17** (.04) | -.20** (.05) | -.17** (.04) | -.15** (.04) | -.15** (.05) |
| Constant | .53 (.54) | 1.39* (.79) | 1.09* (.61) | 1.05 (.64) | -.06 (.70) |
| Adjusted R ² | .16 | .12 | .16 | .15 | .18 |
| Number of Cases | 530 | 370 | 530 | 462 | 379 |
| Durbin-Watson | 2.02 | 2.09 | 2.01 | 2.00 | 1.98 |
| Mean Square Error | 2.82 | 2.94 | 2.82 | 2.68 | 2.62 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, one-tailed tests

Model I begins with unemployment, inflation, and controls for previous LDP support level among men and women. The economic variables are far from statistically significant. Lagged female support has positive effects while lagged male support has negative effects, suggesting positive feedback for women and negative feedback for men. More analysis is required to understand these effects. For now it is important to note that general macroeconomic indicators play no role in governing the gender gap. Model II reinforces this result by adding lagged values of macroideology to the model. Again neither unemployment nor inflation are statistically significant, challenging the standard political economic story for gender differences in partisan preferences.

Model III introduces politics in the form of lagged support for the prime minister's cabinet. Although economic variables remain insignificant, cabinet support is negative and statistically significant, indicating the gender gap in LDP support decreases when support for the PM's cabinet increases. That is, an unpopular prime minister harms the party's image primarily by lowering evaluations of the party more among women than men, thus widening the gap. When the cabinet's favorability rises, men are more likely than women to rally behind the LDP and so the gender gap shrinks.

Finally, models IV and V introduce the two measures of female economic independence. The cabinet approval variable is retained in these models since it demonstrated importance in model III. Although cabinet support remains just as important in these last two models, neither the percentage of single women nor the proportion of women who are unemployed seems to affect the gender gap.

These results paint a portrait of gender and politics in Japan that is surprisingly void of economics. Despite the clear theoretical expectations of the political economy literature and findings in other nations, economic factors – whether they be indicators of macroeconomic performance or the gendered nature of labor – appear to play little role in driving the gender gap in attitudes towards Japan's dominant political party. A casual inspection of the gender gap time series implied as much since it exhibited no clear secular increase despite massive changes in Japanese society and its economy. Instead, the gender gap seems to be a produce of its own feedback and of attitudes toward the performance of the LDP's leaders, namely the prime minister and his cabinet.

Conclusions and Future Research

In the wake of these surprising results, much remains to be done both theoretically and methodologically. Although the explanatory power of the models presented here is equivalent to that in BDL, my results seem less satisfying because they fail to jibe with clear predictions coming from the scholarly literature. The standard political economic accounts for gender differences in partisan preferences do not find any support in the multivariate models. If economic development did not lead to gender equality and the independent political views that normally ensue, then it suggests that the more appropriate research question may be why industrialization and growth did not transform gender roles in Japan as they did in other western nations (Gelb 2003).

Beyond feedback effects of male and female support for the LDP, the only explanatory variable that affects the gender gap is support for the prime minister's cabinet. This follows quite naturally from my other work showing that support for the prime minister affects support for the LDP (Burden 2006; see also Maeda and Patterson forthcoming). If the result holds up to further empirical scrutiny, it suggests that gender differences wax and wane in response to politics rather than for structural or economic reasons. I expect to pursue these questions in future research.

Clearly more can be done with the statistical models. The drop in LDP support and the gender gap in the 1970s suggest that scandal may play a role, particularly if women are more "moralistic" about such things (Pharr 1998; cf., Aldrich and Kage 2003). It is also possible that women respond differentially to changes in policy. For example, Figure 2 suggests a spike around the adoption of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO) in 1985. Schoppa's

(2006) work provides a justification for examining the interactions of the gender gap and LDP policy adoptions that target women.

These important issues aside, it is nonetheless striking that the gender gap shrunk rather than grew over time, contrary to what prominent developmental theories assert (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Perhaps Japan fails to follow the patterns of other nations because of its unusual party system, namely fragmentation of the opposition (Hrebentar 2000). Many of the political economic explanations for gender differences in political views identify variables that push women away from conservative parties and toward leftist parties. In Japan the center-right of the ideological spectrum is dominated by the LDP but the left has typically been segmented among the communists, socialists, and recently the Democratic Party of Japan.

For most of the postwar period the most durable opposition on the left in postwar Japan came from the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP), which was not only associated with labor unions and workers but also, late in its development, women. So while economic variables might not explain a gender gap in LDP support, perhaps they are more potent in explaining a gender gap in JSP support. To test this proposition I reestimated the models in Table 2 replacing the dependent variable with a measure of the JSP gender gap. This test failed on two fronts. First, the gap runs the wrong way, with men, not women, being more supportive of the JSP. From July 1960 to June 1991 the average gap is 3.6 points. Second, the models show none of the expected effects for unemployment, inflation, the percentage of single women, or the percentage of unemployed women. Moreover, PM cabinet support is statistically insignificant, as my theory about LDP-specific effects would suggest (Burden 2006). Similar results hold for the gap in “no party” support, where women do outnumber men. In summary, although the hypothesis that fragmentation on the left is responsible for the failure of the gender gap to respond to economic variables, this preliminary exploration of JSP support provides little encouragement for this line of thinking.

Peculiarities of the LDP itself are areas for further exploration. The LDP’s inconsistency in positions across policy dimensions might also limit the effects of economic factors on the gender gap. The Kato and Laver (2003) expert surveys mentioned above indicate that the LDP is in fact as liberal as other parties on issues of taxing and spending. To the degree that these are the positions that economically vulnerable women care most about, abandoning the LDP in times of economic turmoil might not be the rational reaction. In my other work (Burden 2006) I suggest that the LDP manages to limit the impact of macroeconomic troubles on the LDP by shifting blame onto outgoing personnel in the party. To the degree that this calibration strategy is successful, changes in economic indicators will affect gendered attitudes toward the prime minister and his cabinet but not the party, and might just be the key to LDP longevity.

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