

# Neoconservative Political Reform under the Leadership of the Prime Minister's Office

LEE Jukyung\*

**Abstract** | This study analyzes the mechanism of the conservative political shift in the Abe Shinzō administration, focusing on the interaction between the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) coping strategies and a series of political reforms that have led the structural changes in the Japanese political process. The paper examines the input and output structure of political reforms presented by Abe and the LDP at the three levels of government, party, and social constituency. First, the conservative shift emerged from the input process of political reforms. Since the 1990s, amid a series of political reforms that has taken place under anti-clientelism, the rivalry between the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the LDP led policy competition. In the end, a comprehensive social reform of the LDP emerged as a compelling alternative to construct a new Japanese system. The conservative shift has deepened through the output process of the political reforms. Under the political reform that promoted the unification of the ruling party and the government, meetings of the Council of Policy Advisers became a routine practice. In addition, the special offices under the president of the party increased their influence, and the governance of the ruling party using policy specialists (*zoku giin*) and preliminary review system was established. Overall, there has been a simplification in policy decision process and acceleration of policy implementation regarding the reforms for the conservative political shift. On the other hand, this unity and improvement of policy momentum enhanced the government's performance for Abe and the LDP. This led the LDP to rise as a dominant political party again. Furthermore, the movement of the conservative shift in the Abe era has been further strengthened by linking with the partisan realignment that combines the traditional conservatives and the neoconservatives.

**Keywords** | political reform, Abe cabinet, Liberal Democratic Party, conservative political shift, partisan realignment, political process

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\* LEE Jukyung (leejk928@gmail.com) is an Associate Researcher at the Korean Studies Institute, Pusan National University.

## Introduction

Japan is undergoing comprehensive reforms under the slogan of “departure from the postwar regime” (*sengo rejimu kara no dakkyaku*). The reforms include political, economic, and social changes. In addition, there is a dominant view that the political landscape of Japan has turned conservative under new right-wing political forces led by Abe Shinzō (Nakano 2016; Kinoshita 2014; Tsukada 2017). However, this is different from the right-wing shift of Japanese society. There is an agreement that the preference of majority voters and right-wing political planning are not related (Takenaka, Endō, and Willy 2015; Taniguchi 2015). Nonetheless, the current Japanese party politics is under the control of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as a result of successive victories from the previous three general elections. Since the LDP returned to power in 2012, it secured a majority of seats in the House of Representatives. The overwhelming victory of the LDP weakened the opposition’s power in inter-party and intra-party competition (Takayasu 2014; Machitori 2015; Makihara 2016; Nakakita 2017). As a result, a series of conservative reforms led by Prime Minister Abe is underway. If Japan’s political landscape did not shift right, but is rather a reform of the new right-wing political leadership and the failure of the opposition party, how can we define the changes in Japanese politics?

In order to answer the question, this study focuses on coping strategies of the political forces to find out how conservative shifts are derived from and deepened in the Abe era. If Japan’s conservatism is emerging as a result of the new right-wing political forces, it is necessary to clarify how the strategic responses of the political forces act in the politico-social domain and electoral policy process. Indeed, it is imperative to examine the following questions. What are the strategic responses of political parties and political elites that led to the conservative political shift? What kind of electoral effectiveness does the reform politics of the conservative shift have? What kind of process would accelerate the policies for the conservative shift? Moreover, how did the LDP’s continuous victories in elections relate to the Abe government’s performance to pursue conservative reforms?

This study avoids a one-sided analysis that only focuses on Prime Minister Abe’s policy orientation or his personality. Instead, the study focuses on the political reforms promoted by Abe-LDP at the three levels of government, political party, and social constituency. This is because a series of political reforms that have confirmed structural changes in Japanese politics and the coping strategy of Abe-LDP are likely to be highly interactive. It is widely known that “reform” has been an issue in Japanese politics for the past thirty

years. There was a political and social consensus that Japan has an urgent need to establish an “alternative system” to replace the “Japanese system.” This awareness was due to rapid changes in the domestic and foreign environment that has threatened Japan since the 1990s. Indeed, Japan has carried out reforms for a long time, varying in both scope and purpose. However, there are still calls for reform in Japanese society. The departure from the postwar regime of the Abe administration is a part of these reforms. In fact, the “postwar period” conveys a distinct characteristic historically and structurally in Japan. Abe’s reform aims to promote overall regime transformation from the “postwar period.” It distinguishes Abe’s reforms from previous attempts which explicitly define their scope and objectives. Abe’s reforms constitute a comprehensive conservative shift that includes administration, education, economy, employment, central-provincial relations, diplomacy, and security. These reforms posit a structural transformation. They call for a constitutional amendment that can help to build a state system which corresponds to the changes of the times.

In essence, this study focuses on the changes in the multi-layered structure (government-party-social constituency) linking the electoral process and the policy process. The study then examines the mechanism of the conservative shift in Japan through the implementation and results of the Abe-LDP’s conservative reforms.<sup>1</sup>

## **Analytical Perspective: A Qualitative Change in Japanese Politics and a Multi-layered Structure of Political Processes**

There is a strong interest in the Korean academic community regarding the phenomenon of the conservative shift in Japan. In particular, studies on domestic political processes analyzed the increasing power of the prime minister and party leader and their charismatic politics (e.g. Han Euisuok 2014). From social and economic perspectives, there are studies on the economic recession and social structure change (Yi Chŏng-hwan 2014; Kim Yong-bok

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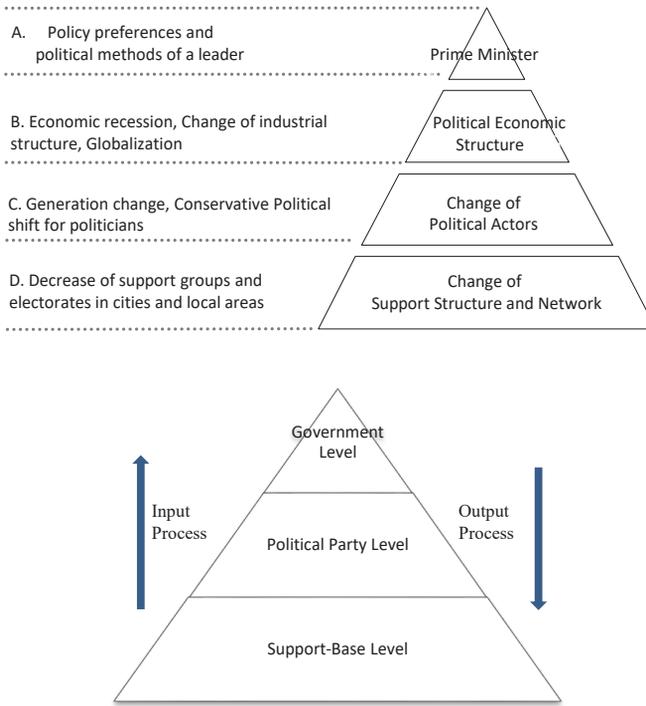
1. Rather than grasping the content of the conservative political shift in individual policy and their compatibility with conservative ideology, this study focuses on understanding the reality of the conservative political reform, which is the key ruling ideology of the Abe era. This will help to understand how the conservative political shift in Japan took place through the political reforms proposed by the Abe-LDP that are linked with the electoral-policy process. The political reforms proposed by the Abe-LDP follow the catchphrase of the Abe era, the departure from postwar regime, and set an overall reform agenda that emphasizes community, tradition and nationalistic elements when implementing individual policies.

2016), changes in the composition and consciousness of political actors due to generation change (Ko Sŏn-gyu 2014; Park Cheol Hee 2014; Yi I-bŏm 2015, Kyŏng Che-hŭi 2017), and changes in organizational management, such as the decline of traditional support bases and personal support organizations (Kim Sang-jun and Kim Ji-gang 2013; Lee Jukyung 2016a). They describe various reasons that promote the conservative shift.

Although the above studies differ in subject of analysis and research method, they provide a logical clue to understand the changes in the Abe era for the following reasons. First, they attempt a rational approach to the phenomenon of the conservative shift. While there is controversy about whether the political terrain in Japan is conservative or not, and the criteria to determine a conservative shift is vague, it is a clear fact that the LDP is emphasizing its own ideological position as the conservative party since the Abe era began. In this sense, the above studies are based on the changes in the consciousness and behavior of the political forces and the reactions and evaluations of the social forces. These balanced analyses are distinct from the “right wing extremism” discourses that concern the return to militarism or historical revisionism.

Second, the research is consistent with the main empirical studies in Japan that clarify the changes in the political process. The main concern of Japanese researchers is to understand the volatility of Japanese politics. Since the 1990s, the Japanese political process has been changing, which includes party politics, policymaking, and voting behavior. Thus, the studies focus on understanding the political volatility rather than clarifying the phenomenon of the conservative shift. The studies commonly pointed out the strengthening of policymaking centered on the prime minister (Makihara 2013; Takayasu 2014; Machitori 2015), the political elite’s preference change on individual political issues (Taniguchi 2015; Tatehayashi 2017), and the tendency of voting behavior to focus on government operating status rather than ideology (Hirano 2015; Yamada 2017). These studies share the same factors as the analysis of the conservative shift in Japan, which depicts the importance of the studies. Consequently, these studies explain the qualitative changes in Japanese politics, both directly and indirectly.

However, in order to understand the phenomenon of the conservative shift in the Abe era, certain important issues have to be clarified. The previous research only focused on analyzing the factors of the conservative shift (or the qualitative change in Japanese politics). There was no clear explanation of how the conservative policies were created and strengthened. The conservative movement of Japan’s domestic and foreign policies from the Abe cabinet in 2012 is clearly distinguishable from the previous ones. Considering this difference, it



**Figure 1.** The Qualitative Change in Japanese Politics and the Multi-layered Structure for the Political Process of Conservative Political Shift

is important to explain the causes of the policies for the conservative shift in this period and how the conservative shift has intensified.

Figure 1 is an alternative analytical framework suggested by this study to understand the formation and strengthening of the conservative reforms in the Abe era. The analytical framework is different from the existing interpretation in the following two aspects. First, two structures constitute the political process, input process and output process. This study examines how the conservative planning developed through the input process before showing how the conservative shift deepened through the output process. This study's focus on the process of the conservative shift differentiates it from the mainstream perspectives which discuss the changes in the Japanese political process. Other mainstream studies have a theoretical perspective of institutional change and factor analysis based on behaviorism.<sup>2</sup>

2. Since the 1990s, Japanese politics has undergone institutional and structural changes. The

The second characteristic of the analytical framework is that it uses a multi-layered structure for the conservative shift. It focuses on the strategic actions of the political forces that have led the conservative shift. This helps to explain how their behavior patterns are projected at each level of government, party, and social constituency. For example, the framework analyzes how reforms of the conservative shift were combined and accumulated, which processes were used to produce them, and how these policies are related to strategies to attract supporters. The analysis is conducted in relation to the cycle of electoral policy. In this context, this study aims to identify what changes the political reforms of the Abe era brought about and how they are related to the process of derivation and strengthening of the conservative shift in each area of government, party, and social constituency.

Details of the analysis are as follows. First, the study aims to clarify the change of policy positions proposed by the LDP in the input process. Then, the study clarifies the political differences among parties focusing on the change of the relationship between each party and its voters. Next, the study conducts an examination at the three levels of government, party, and social constituency in the output process. The examination clearly reveals that the structural change in policy decisions is the key mechanism to strengthen the conservative shift at the level of the government and the party. This paper will then observe whether there was a change in response strategies for general voters and support groups. The observation helps to see how the Abe-LDP promotes partisan realignment for the conservative shift. In addition, the paper discusses how Abe's political reforms in each area are related to the derivation and strengthening of the conservative shift. Then, the study explains the mechanism of the conservative shift led by the political forces. Based on the results of this analysis, the conclusion suggests present implications of this study in relation to the structural changes of the Japanese political process.

## **The Input Process of the Conservative Political Shift: The Spatiotemporal Shift of Reforms and Strategic Validity**

What was the reason for the conservative political reforms in the Abe era? To

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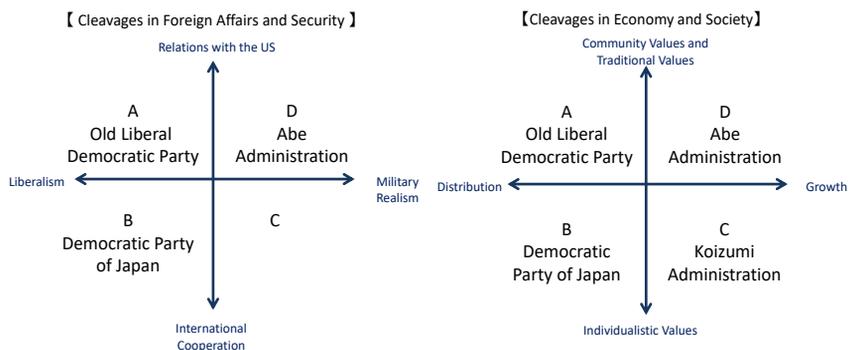
institutionalist perspective, which focuses on how institutional changes define actors, has been the dominant idea. On the other hand, a socio-economic perspective addresses not only institutional changes, but also the socio-economic factors that caused them (Rosenbluth and Thies 2010). A structural perspective pays attention to the dynamics of political institutions (Estevez-Abe 2008) describing Japanese politics, which is changing from a consensus to a majoritarian type.

answer the question, it is necessary to see the process of comprehensive social reform that focuses on the departure from the postwar regime. The following will analyze inter-party policy competitions, voting strategies, and intra-party policymaking process.

### 1. A Competition between Parties and a Differentiating Strategy for Policy Position: The Spatial Shift of Reform

The first important aspect to derive the frame of conservative reform is the relation to the inter-party competition. Since the 1990s, the core of Japanese political reform has been to establish a system capable of power transition centered on policy competition between political parties. It was realized in the mid-2000s. Since then, the policy position between parties regarding the direction of future reforms has changed. As shown in figure 2, the reaction to the Koizumi administration, which promoted neoliberal structural reforms (economic and social C), contributed to the transfer of power to the DPJ. The DPJ created policies for a new welfare state and the East Asia community (foreign affairs and security B, economic and social B). The change of government policy, along with trial and error, followed the power transition. During the transition, the LDP changed their existing policy position, placing the party as the opposite to the DPJ government.

Since December 2012, Abe-LDP has promoted discourse and policy directions against the DPJ. Regarding foreign affairs and security, Abe-LDP



Source: Compiled by the author based on Tanaka and Kōno (2009, 15-26) and Park Cheol Hee (2011, 491). These studies suggested a four-dimensional categorization of the policy positions.

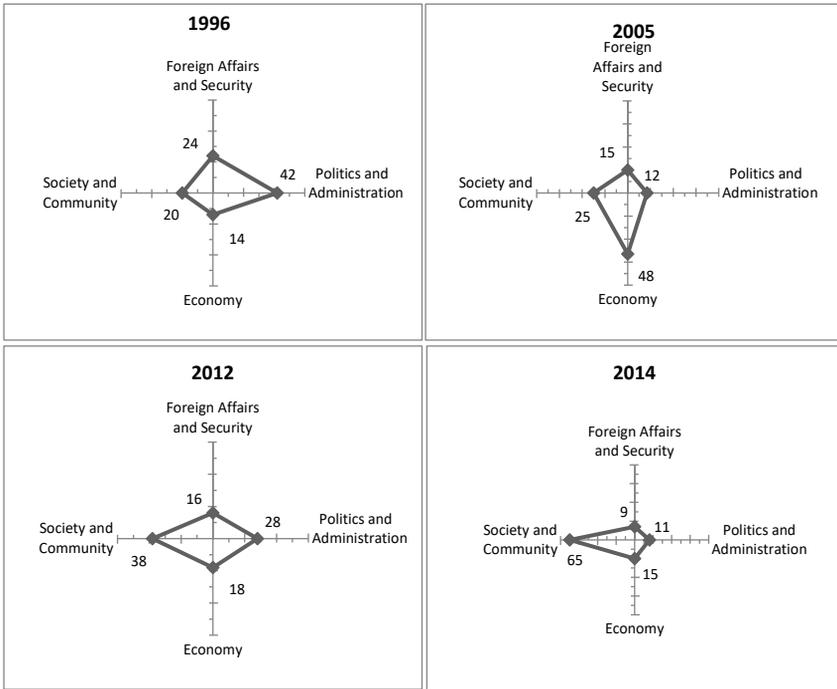
Figure 2. Policy Positions on Domain Space

emphasized national security, relations with the US, and military realism (foreign affairs and security D). Regarding the economic and social area, Abe-LDP emphasized traditional values and community along with growth (economic and social D). First, in terms of foreign affairs and security, the strategy of Abe-LDP concentrates on active pacifism and military normalization through constitutional revision. This reflects the expectation of the regional security provision by the US. It will strengthen international cooperation, cooperation with the US, and the US-Japan alliance. In other words, the strategy of Abe-LDP aims to strengthen Japan's independent defense capability through military normalization. The economic and social strategy was formed by the combination of neoliberalism and nationalism. The strategy inherited the neoliberal approach of the Koizumi administration in that it emphasizes small government, economic reform based on free competition, and growth. However, the strategy is distinct because it considers social dynamics that promote the growth for a revival of a strong nation. The social dynamics include Japanese tradition, culture, and a strong bond among family, regional community, and state. "Toward a beautiful country, Japan" and "a strong nation, Japan" are the catchphrases of the Abe administration and reveal that Abe's socio-cultural values reflect nationalist attitudes similar to those of traditional conservatives.

Abe-LDP remade its policy position on the premise of political reform that does not return to old LDP politics (Domain A). Currently, the LDP moved to a completely different policy zone. It is different from the DPJ and even previous governments that led reforms. This shows a strategic validity of the LDP policy, which successfully returned to power. The LDP placed itself at a point that satisfies both the need to continue to replace the existing Japanese system and the national demand for a new political and ideological vision.

## 2. Strategy for Voters and Linkage Choice: Temporal Shift of Reform

Since the political restructuring in the 1990s, the LDP promoted administrative, economic, and social reforms. As figure 3 suggests, the Hashimoto Ryūtarō administration at the end of the 1990s focused on administrative reform. It hastened to improve institutions to strengthen the leadership of the prime minister and cabinet. In the early 2000s, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō shifted its priority to economic reform. Through these reforms, the neoliberal economic structure has been strengthened, deviating from the existing policy stance of protecting local and domestic industries. On the other hand, the second Abe administration that came into office in December 2012 focused on



Note: A coding method for election pledges by European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) was used to understand the change of policy position for a party. See Budge (1987) for specific coding method. See Mair (1987) and Lee Jukyung (2014) for examples of application for the coding method.  
 Source: Compiled by the author based on “Pledges of the LDP” of each election year that was posted on the LDP website (Liberal Democratic Party. Policy Brochure. <https://www.jimin.jp/policy/pamphlet/>).

**Figure 3.** The LDP’s Election Pledges for the House of Representatives and Changes in Policy Priority

revitalizing national identity and enhancing competitiveness. These are core mechanisms that encompass economics, foreign affairs, and society. Throughout the process, the Abe administration followed the neoliberal economic reforms of the Koizumi administration. Meantime, the Abe administration prioritizes the “social reforms” that emphasize conservative ideology.

This kind of reform is related to the LDP’s strategy for party-voter linkage.<sup>3</sup>

3. See Kitschelt (2007, 1-49) for the diversity of party (politician)-voter linkage and strategic choice

**Table 1.** The LDP's Type of Reforms and the Strategy for Voter Linkage Choice

Period	Type	Linkage Choice	Strategy
1996-98 Hashimoto Administration	Administrative reform	Introduction of the removal of clientelism	Preparing an institution for linkage changes
2001-06 Koizumi Administration	Economic reform	Regularize the removal of clientelism	Easing the risk of linkage changes (direct linkage with the majority of the public)
2012 - Abe Administration	Social reform	Promoting linkage implementation	Stabilize the support (strengthening conservatism)

This is because of the socio-economic environment surrounding Japanese politics, such as the recession, the change of industrial structure, and globalization. The LDP paid a high political price to maintain clientel linkage, and the change of environment made this difficult. The LDP-voter relationship based on profit-driven politics that exchanges votes for profits corresponds to a typical clientel linkage.<sup>4</sup> Along with local grants and public works, the subsidies and financial policies for backward domestic industries, such as agriculture, commerce, and small and medium-sized enterprises, created a process of exchanging votes and profits that lasted for a long time. In addition, there was a decentralized organization structure and autonomy over budget and financial operations. Moreover, the LDP could monopolize government resources because the party ruled the government for so long. This resulted in an extended period of clientel linkage. However, a coalition government has emerged since the 1990s, and the budget decreased due to the economic recession. The sense of deprivation prevailing among urban voters fostered the atmosphere of anti-clientelism. These factors made it hard for the LDP to maintain the existing clientel network, which involved a high political cost. (Lee Jukyung 2016a, 216).

The LDP had to consider changing the relationship between the party and

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of political parties.

4. The relationship between a political party (politician) and voters vary depending on the type of benefit the politician distribute to whom he gets supports. For example, local grants and public works projects that give beneficiaries to specific areas, or subsidies and financing policies to specific industries are typical clientelistic linkage. On the other hand, non-exclusive policies of security, macroeconomic growth, full employment, and environments benefit the whole nation. This kind of ideological and normative policies are programmatic linkage (Kitschelt 2007, 10-11).

voters. To establish a new linkage and target, the LDP came up with reform strategies according to each period. As summarized in table 1, the Hashimoto administration attempted to eradicate clientelism. It set up an institution to implement linkage through administrative reform. During the Koizumi administration, there was a transitional risk, due to the removal of clientelism. The Koizumi administration tried to overcome this risk through a direct linkage with the majority of the public. The neoliberal economic reform carried out during this period helped the administration overcome this issue. On the other hand, the Abe administration began a social reform based on conservatism. This reform took place during the removal process of clientelism. The reform was a strategy to establish concrete support to prevent voters from abandoning the party (Lee Jukyung 2016a, 219-26). During the transition to the alternative linkage system, the LDP established an institution for its implementation. Then, the LDP formed a direct linkage with the majority of the public. The social reform under the Abe administration suggests that the LDP has developed a new linkage system based on ideology.

### 3. The Process of Establishing the Social Reform for the Conservative Shift within a Party

The goal of social reform in the Abe era is to respond to domestic and international challenges by promoting social cohesion through the centripetal forces of national values and competitiveness. This is a prepared reform project of the LDP. The LDP seeks to extend the direction of political reform by strengthening the forces driving policy through cohesiveness and social unity. The direction of political reform extends not only towards the level of government-party, but also towards the level of society (voters).

Party reform already began in 2005. In November of that year, the LDP finalized a new “ideology” and a “party platform” led by Abe (acting secretary-general) on the 50th-anniversary party convention. The statement says, “We are committed to the safety of the country and our own safety. We respect the tradition and culture of Japan and promote their prosperity” (Jiyū Minshutō 2005a). In addition, the platform stipulates “the establishment of a new constitution” and says that the country should “foster Japanese people to become strong-willed people” (Jiyū Minshutō 2005b).

On the other hand, when Abe retired as prime minister in September 2007, improvements for both organization and policy took place. Regarding the reform for the party organization, the LDP realized that electoral volatility derived from the independent voters. This support came from the neoliberal

reform, which was inherited from the Koizumi administration. Thus, the LDP attempted to reestablish the social constituency by emphasizing the unique ideology of the LDP's social conservatism (Nakakita 2014, 221-25). The LDP started to focus on revising the policy platform of the party. The LDP became the opposition party in 2009, and this escalated the desperate need to establish a new ideology to regain power. As a result, "A Meeting to Plan for a New Government" began that aimed to build a specific political ideology and policy system. By 2010, the LDP officially announced the new platform.

The new party platform, promulgated in 2010, could be considered an extension of the platform announced in 2005. The new party platform strengthened the conservative characteristics of the previous platform by clearly explaining the "Japanese conservatism (*Nihon rashii hoshushugi*) which focused on the aspect of bonding (*kizuna*)" (Jiyū Minshutō 2010). In other words, the LDP created a platform that coordinated their conservative ideology. There was a strong demand inside of the LDP to intensify confrontation with the DPJ by reaffirming themselves as a conservative party. This suggests that the LDP expanded ideological conservatism to become the party's core ideology. The LDP has done this by linking ideological conservatism with party reforms during the period in which they were the opposition party.

In 2011, the party platform emerged as a specific policy rather than a mere ideology. The Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 was the turning point. After the disaster, the LDP issued a collection of policies entitled "The Eight Key Policies for the Reconstruction of Japan." The collection included the LDP's stance on eight areas: disasters, provinces, economy, the future, agriculture, education, territory, and Japan (Jiyū Minshutō 2011). In addition, Japan's reconstruction, centered on ties with families, communities, and nations, was an encompassing logic linking important individual policies. It represented the compatibility of the conservative reforms with social reconstruction and revitalization. Moreover, it showed that ideological conservatism had been embodied in the policy. In particular, social reconstruction and revitalization was linked to national risk management through the so-called national resilience (*kokudo kyōjinka*). The social reconstruction and revitalization have led to the resumption of local public projects. As I will discuss later, they promoted foreign and domestic policies undergirding the conservative reforms, which aimed to combine (1) the traditional conservative power of the LDP, deriving from pork barrel politics, and (2) the neoconservative powers who support the normalization of Japan.

## The Output of the Conservative Political Shift (1): Changes in Government-Ruling Party Policy Decision-Making and the Acceleration of Reform

Japanese political reforms have pursued a unified policymaking strategy centered on the prime minister and political leaders. In particular, this tendency emphasized bonding and unity between the government and ruling party. It resulted in cabinet-led politics (Hashimoto administration), prime minister-led politics (Koizumi administration), and politician-led politics (administration under DPJ). Finally, the Abe administration structured the prime minister's office-led politics. Based on this framework, the Abe administration is accelerating the implementation of conservative reforms to see their effects. The following sections discuss how the government and party have changed their policymaking and analyze what mechanisms led the conservative shift.

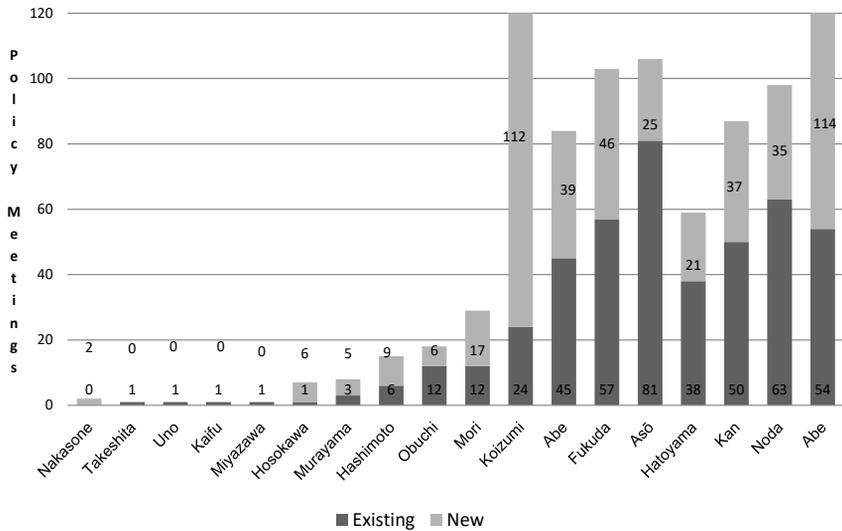
### 1. Government Level: From the Policy Council System to the Council of Policy Advisers System

The prime minister's office-led politics is a central characteristic of the Abe era. The term indicates that a few decision makers around the prime minister determine the main actors and decision-making method for the government. This change has occurred when Abe entered office.<sup>5</sup>

The Abe administration led three distinct changes in decision-making. First, the existing policy council (*shingikai*) system that is highly influenced by bureaucrats and policy specialists (*zoku giin*) is fading. Instead, a number of Council of Policy Advisers (CPA) under the names of specific headquarters (*honbu*) and meetings (*kaigi*) are increasing. The CPA is an extended version of the prime minister's private advisory council. External professionals (*yūshikisha*) can be freely involved with the meetings and government bureaucrats related to each policy meeting have a difficult time responding systemically. This is similar to the private advisory councils of previous prime ministers, such as the Secondary ad-hoc Commission on Administrative Reform of the Nakasone Administration and the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy of the Koizumi

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5. Based on the interviews from the previous prime ministers, Machidori (2015, 29) found that prime ministers from the LDP used to strongly connect with LDP diet members since 1955. However, he adds that, currently, the prime minister is in close contact with chief cabinet secretary and other cabinet members. This means that the prime minister has strengthened his leadership role within a narrow network around him, resulting a change of decision-making by the government and ruling party.



Source: Recomposed the data from Nonaka and Aoki (2016, 77-78).

Figure 4. Number of Council of Policy Advisers from Previous Administrations

administration. Figure 4 shows the increasing trend of the number of CPA in each administration. The prime minister’s policymaking power has increased since 2000. After 2000, the number of CPA has been increasing, even during the period of power transition between the LDP and the DPJ. This suggests that Japanese political reforms that centered decision-making around the cabinet, prime minister, and politicians were the forerunners to the prime minister’s office-led politics during the Abe era.

Second, there was a qualitative expansion of CPA. Considering that the quantitative increase of the CPA over the last thirty years is an extension of reform, the qualitative expansion is related to the government performance. In other words, since the second Abe cabinet, the policy meeting became a key mechanism for determining the main policies of the government. A decision by either the cabinet or the prime minister can organize a policy meeting. Indeed, the Abe administration actively uses the prime minister’s discretion to organize CPA, especially for matters in which the government and the ruling party have hard time reaching a consensus. As a result, decision making and policy implementation are accelerating by excluding the discordance among other actors.<sup>6</sup>

6. For example, in the process of changing the interpretation of the constitution regarding the right

Third, the policy preference of the prime minister and his inner circle is strongly reflected in the major issues of the government. Unlike the existing policy council system, the CPA is composed of the prime minister, his inner circle politicians, bureaucrats, and experts from outside. The policy meeting system has flexible foundation, objective, and membership. In addition, rather than a forum for discussion among members, it has a structure that easily reflects the preference of the prime minister. Due to the presence of the prime minister and cabinet ministers at the meeting, the meeting is under approval of the prime minister (Nonaka and Aoki 2016, 110-26). In addition, the government has established a management system for bureaucrats called Cabinet Personnel Management Agency (*Naikaku Jinjikyoku*) in 2014. Along with CPA, this agency indirectly supports the decision-making powers for the prime minister's office.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the Clean Government Party (CGP), a ruling coalition party also responsible for the administration, has limited influence in decision-making. The coalition between the LDP and the CGP builds electoral cooperation and the coalition critically influences the electoral process. In addition, the LDP-CGP coalition has been consolidated for budget and legislation proposals in the National Diet, the nomination and adjustment of candidates, and cooperation in elections.<sup>8</sup> However, it is difficult to deny the dominance of Abe-LDP based on their policy planning ability and the leadership in the administration. The prime minister and his cabinet currently decide the direction of policies, and a policy discussion body between the ruling parties is weak compared to the power of the prime minister and his cabinet.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the influence of the CGP is limited.

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of collective self-defense, the first Abe administration reassigned the "Council for security legislation" and made decision based upon the reports from the meeting. During the process, Abe replaced director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau, who was hesitant in changing the interpretation of the constitution, with a diplomat who was an active supporter for changing the interpretation (Sindō 2015, 324).

7. The Abe administration wanted to establish the Cabinet Personnel Management Agency for the personnel management of high-level government officials. The administration wanted to operate a government led by politics. The related draft passed the cabinet decision in 2013. Finally, a piece of legislation called the "Amendment Act of the National Civil Servants Act," was passed by the National Diet in 2014, establishing an affiliated organization under Cabinet Secretariat on May 30.

8. The coalition between the LDP and the CGP was possible because of their shared interests, including single-member districts. The LDP had an interest in electoral districts that have one or two members for the House of Councilors, and the CGP wanted to participate in a coalition cabinet. These shared interests enabled the coalition between the two parties despite their political and ideological differences (Kim Yong-bok 2015, 283).

9. Japan has had a coalition government since the 1990s. However, in the present coalition government by the LDP and the CGP, a policy discussion body among the government and ruling parties is not central to government policy decisions. Instead, bureaucrats from each department consult with each party (*nemawashi*). This kind of intermediation between departments of the

Since the second Abe cabinet, the CGP has conceded on the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets and collective self-defense right. The CGP promoted cooperation in the economic and social areas, including the tax reduction rate that is directly linked to elections. In other words, the CGP was expected to slow down the policies of the conservative shift.<sup>10</sup> However, the LDP and the CGP respect mutual autonomy and prefer to emphasize agreements between the parties to maintain the coalition government.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the CGP incorporated its own electoral cooperation with the LDP into the power of the LDP. This helped the CGP participate in individual policies of social welfare and education as a coalition party. The CGP also enjoys the benefits that come from a ruling coalition, including influence over bureaucratic organizations and drafts of legislation.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Party Level: Use of the Preliminary Review System Centered on Special Offices under the President

The prime minister's office-led system reflects the preferences and leadership of the prime minister in making policy decisions. The cabinet's high approval rate and successive election victories further support the system. In the LDP, which returned to the power after three years in the general election of 2012, it is difficult to raise a counter-argument against the Abe administration's operation of the government. Indeed, this difficulty has helped the prime minister's office-led politics persist. However, there are also structural changes in the intra-party space that support the prime ministerial power. These changes are similar to the

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government and parties plays a major role in cabinet decisions (interview with the cabinet office bureaucracy January 30, 2016).

10. Since the Seiwa Political Analysis Council (*Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai*) began to overwhelm the LDP in the 2000s, the hawkish tendency in security policy and education policy was strengthened. In particular, as the advocates for constitutional revision strengthened their voices, the policy gap between the two parties grew. With the establishment of the second Abe cabinet, the LDP and the CGP announced the issues they both agreed to support. Although there was no problem in economic policy, such as setting an inflation rate target of two percent, it was difficult to reach consensus on policies such as revision of the constitution and nuclear power plants. As Abe asked to cooperate with the conservative right-wing policy, the CGP now confronts conflicts internally about the party's policy line (Yakushiji 2016, 226-29).

11. The CGP has opposed the collective self-defense rights since the establishment of the party. Now, the party is forced to seriously consider whether to maintain its existing stance, which would destroy the coalition, or to maintain the coalition through compromise. The LDP and the CGP have started discussing the issue from the end of 2013. Consequently, they compromised to save the coalition and the CGP added three conditions (Yakushiji 2016, 9-10).

12. Interview with officials from the CGP, August 10, 2017.

government's policy decision-making process.

It is imperative to pay attention to the intraparty decision-making process as the government and the ruling party formulate a policy. The decentralized, parallel decision-making system of LDP under the 1955 system includes factions, the Policy Affairs Research Council (*Seimu Chōsakai*), and policy specialists. The system has been the target of political reform in Japan, and the LDP has concentrated on building a more centralized decision-making system. Watching the intra-party divisions under the DPJ administration was a learning experience for the LDP. The LDP saw that political unity and cohesion within the party must be secured to sustain the political power.

The Abe era depicts distinct changes even in the intra-party policy making process. Most importantly, the policy preference of the prime minister strongly determines the party's policy direction. Abe's power and discretion have greatly increased after political party-oriented voting became an important factor in choosing a government.

Two of the most complicated decisions for the party were TPP participation, which is the party's core policy for economic and trade policies, and the issue of collective self-defense rights, which is the core policy for foreign affairs and security. After returning to power in December 2012, Abe made his first decision to participate in TPP. At the time of the general election in 2012, the LDP was cautious toward TPP. More than a half of the LDP diet members supported this stance. However, the party made an official decision to participate in TPP in March 2013, only one month after the party's discussions had begun (Lee Jukyung 2016b, 102-105). There was a similar process regarding collective self-defense. In 2014, the cautious approach toward collective self-defense rights was dominant in the General Council (*Sōmu Kondankai*) and Policy Research Council. However, the establishment in March of the "Headquarters for Promoting the Development of Legislation for Peace and Security" (*Anzen Hōshō Hōsei Seibi Suishin Honbu*), a special office under the president, changed the forum of discussion. Consequently, it also changed the direction of discussion and the party decision.

Regarding the change in decision-making, it is important to understand the qualitative change of the preliminary review system (*jizen shinsasei*) that used to secure the unity of the LDP. Under the preliminary review system, each policy goes through an intra-party preliminary adjustment process in the subcommittees and committees under the Policy Affairs Research Council. Then the Executive Council (*Sōmukai*) finally approves the resolution through consensus agreement. It is a bottom-up decision-making system that binds the LDP politicians to the party discipline (*tōgi kōsoku*). Shown in the postal privatization case in 2005, the

Koizumi administration tried to exclude the restriction of the intra-party preliminary review system. Unlike the Koizumi administration, the Abe administration actively uses the preliminary review system for compulsory adherence to a party decision. This is a stark contrast between the two administrations.

However, it is difficult to see this as parallel, bottom-up decision-making centered on existing policy specialists. An official party decision still has to go through the Policy Affairs Research Council and the final resolution of the Executive Council to have binding power. However, offices under the direct supervision of the prime minister replaced the Policy Affairs Research Council for the virtual discussion forum. As a result, discussions in subcommittees of the Policy Affairs Research Council became limited. On the other hand, the number of offices under the direct supervision of the prime minister, which was only four during the first Abe cabinet, increased to twenty-one. These offices are linked with CPA at the prime minister's office and cabinet office, which were the important changes in the Abe administration. The link implies that this is a key mechanism for the unity of the government/ruling party and cohesion within the party (table 2).

The prime minister's office-led politics during the Abe era is far from a bottom-up, deliberative politics in that it has a closed policy decision-making process that limits discussions within the party. Instead, it increased the power of the prime minister's office and cabinet office. On the other hand, it achieved the unity of the government and ruling party, which had been a challenge of Japanese political reform both in Koizumi's prime minister-led politics and the DPJ's politician-led politics. As shown in the diagram in figure 5, there has been a systematization of CPA as the number of important CPA increased. The example of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy under the Koizumi administration was the prototype of the basic policy formation process (domain A). In addition, the operation of the National Strategic Council during the DPJ administration materialized the so-called PDCA (Plan→Do→Check→Act) cycle, which was a frame for the policy evaluation and amendment process (Domain B).<sup>13</sup>

In domain A, which determines the direction of the policy, the Abe

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13. In process A, the policy meeting decides the basic direction of the policy. Based on the meeting, each department in the government carries out the legislative process, and the cabinet submits the decision to the National Diet. In process B, a meeting is held to announce the policy or check its effectiveness. The meeting confirms the implementation status of each area. This is different from the Koizumi administration in terms of confirming the legislation at the policy meeting before submission to the National Diet and evaluating the result of the legislation after the bill has passed.

**Table 2.** A List of Special Offices under the President and Their Tasks

Names of Special Offices under the President	Tasks in Detail
Headquarters for National Vision Project	Medium- and long-term policy making
Headquarters for Promoting Administrative Reform	Reform for civil service system
Headquarters for North Korean Abductions	The problem of abductions
Headquarters for Party and Political System Reform Implementation	Reform for national diet and party principle
Headquarters for Promoting the “ <i>Doshūsei</i> ” Regional System	Adjustment with six of regional bodies
Headquarters for the Promotion of Revision of the Constitution	Revision for the national referendum
Headquarters for Accelerating Reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake	Proposing policies for revitalization
Headquarters for Electoral System Reform	Decreasing the number of diet members
Headquarters for Japan’s Economic Revitalization	Escape from deflation
Headquarters for the Revitalization of Education	Reform for education
Strategic Council on Diplomacy	Setting keynote in foreign affairs
Headquarters for Regional Diplomatic and Economic Partnership	Response to TPP
Headquarters for the Action Committee for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games	Preparation for Tokyo Olympics
Headquarters for Creating Attractive Cities and Regions	Policy measures for local regions
Headquarters on Creation of Regional Vitality in Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries	Agricultural revitalization
Headquarters for Implementing National Campaigns to Cheer up Japan	Escalation of the increase in income
Headquarters for Overcoming Population Decline and Regional Revitalization	Regional revitalization
Headquarters for Promoting Women’s Active Participation	Promoting women’s active participation
Headquarters for Promoting Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens	Policy measures for low fertility rate and aging
Headquarters for the Revitalization of Education	Reviewing reform of education
Headquarters for Promoting the Development of Legislation for Peace and Security	Promoting the security legislation

Source: Compiled by the author referring to *Asahi shinbun* [*Asahi Newspaper*] (as of September 15, 2013) and special offices created after the date.

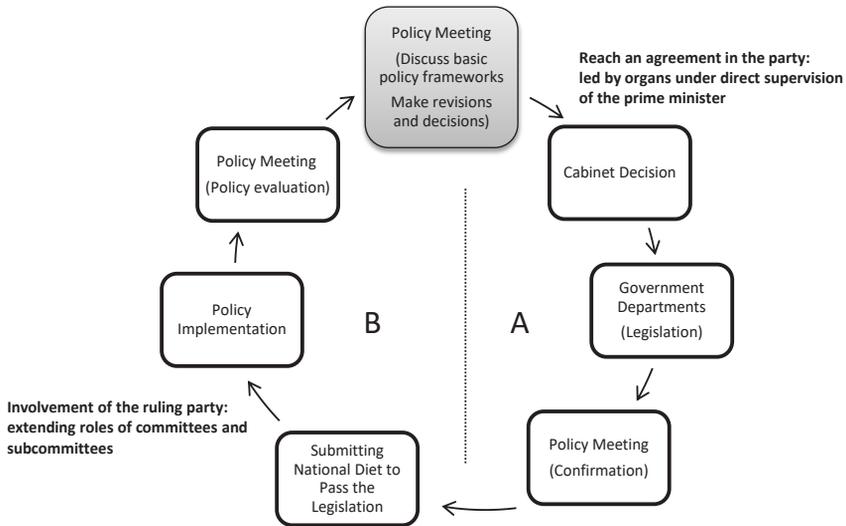


Figure 5. Model of Important Policy Meetings and Intra-party Agreement

administration uses the special offices under the president and preliminary review system to restrict the intra-party debate. This eliminates the influence of opponents within the party. Checks and adjustments take place in domain B. The Abe administration emphasizes the role of policy specialists and subcommittees of Policy Affairs Research Council that provide detailed measures. In other words, the Abe administration applied the logic of exclusion in the policy development process and the logic of inclusion in the modification process. It shifted the role of policy specialists from focusing on political responsiveness to explanation of policies and political accountability.<sup>14</sup> This was derived from the intra-party governance strategy of the Abe era to minimize the divisions and oppositions within the party, which had been challenges for the Koizumi and

14. A typical example is the political process of TPP negotiations. In March 2013, the Abe administration excluded the opponents in the party to reach an agreement. Instead, the Headquarters for TPP (policy meeting) and special offices under the LDP president related to foreign affairs and economics swiftly led the agreement for participation in TPP. Then, the Headquarters for TPP, under government control, led the negotiation process and information provisions. By contrast, the Agriculture and Forestry Committee of the LDP rose after the TPP negotiation in October 2015. The Committee presented the framework for countermeasures. The Abe administration adopted a conciliatory policy of accepting the opinions of agricultural community by appointing Moriyama Hiroshi, who advocated for the agricultural community to take a cautious stance toward the TPP, as the Minister of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries to deal with policy measures (Lee Jukyung 2016b).

DPJ administrations. The strategy organized a way of reaching intra-party agreement through CPA linkage. As a result, prime minister's office-led politics was established in the Abe era, and it supports the unity of government and the ruling party.

## The Output Process of the Conservative Political Shift (2): Specification of Partisan Realignment

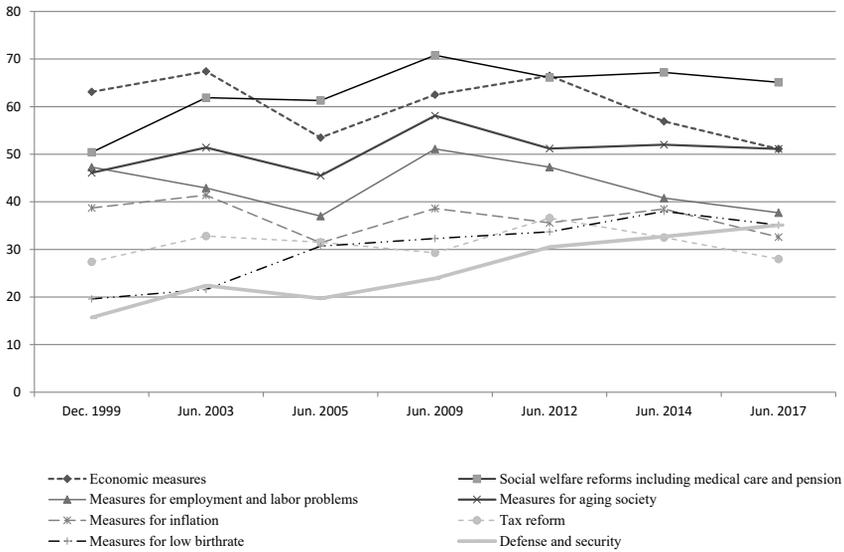
These continuous reforms resulted in the prime minister's office-led politics. Based on the decisions made under this system, the Abe administration appealed to the general electorate the superior ability of operating the government. It distinguished itself from the DPJ administration. In fact, in recent research on the results of the Lower House elections in 2017, more than half of the voters highly approved of the ability of the Abe cabinet. This shows that the LDP's execution of policy and government operation has greatly improved (Yi I-bȫm 2017). At the same time, the Abe administration is launching a two-sided strategy. It is asserting reforms by promoting messages such as the departure from the postwar regime, Japan as a strong nation, and Japan's revitalization. On the other hand, the Abe administration also embraces ideological conservatives. This study analyzes the change in response to the general electorate and support groups (subordinate organizations and party members). Based on this observation, this study clarifies the strategy of partisan realignment for the conservative shift in the Abe era.

### 1. Strategy for the General Electorate

The Abe administration devised a survival strategy to structure fluid voter support by applying ideological and normative principles of conservatism. It is a strategy to pursue neoliberal reforms that emphasize market principles, gain support from independent voters, and establish grassroots conservatism by explicitly advocating constitutional revision (Nakakita 2012, 157-58). However, the political preference of the electorate and these key policies of the Abe era are not consistent. Figure 6 shows that, since the late 1990s, the electorate has been interested in social welfare issues, such as economic measures, medical care, pension, and aging society measures. By contrast, the security legislation and constitutional revision which are classified as major policies of the Abe administration are not a priority of the electorate.<sup>15</sup>

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15. Meanwhile, there was support for the LDP and conservative thinking in the results of the



Note: Allowed only voter responses, including multiple responses. Included the top six categories.

Source: Compiled by the author based on annual research of “Requests to Government” by Cabinet Office. The chart focused on the election period for the House of Representatives.

Figure 6. Tendency of Requests to Government (%)

Thus, Prime Minister Abe focused on the establishment of an economic policy, considering this as his weakness point during the first Abe cabinet, and proposed Abenomics. Abenomics aims to escape from deflation and economic growth through quantitative easing. Specifically, the policy seeks to eliminate conflicts in the neoliberal reforms by making fiscal mobilization and the growth strategy compatible. This helps to prevent factors that impede social conservatives from uniting. It is still controversial whether Abenomics will transform the country’s economic structure by stimulating the economy and whether growth and welfare can be compatible. However, it is noteworthy that this policy was

Lower House elections in October 2017. Prime Minister Abe defined the dissolution of the Lower House as “The election settled down the national crisis”. In addition, the threat of North Korea also played a major role. The great victory of LDP can be interpreted as implying that there are many voters who agree with the perception and explanation of Prime Minister Abe. It also suggests that the conservative party, the LDP, is likely to win in the future in the face of the security crisis (Yi Myön-u 2017, 11).

effective in responding to voters who were disappointed with the performance of the DPJ. The policy addressed the expectations of voters who were sensitive about the recovery of the economy. As the analysis of the recent election and voting behavior revealed, the opposition party's standing on the issue has weakened. At the electorate level, expectations for the competitiveness and recovery of the Japanese economy and the policy's approach to settling the increasing stock rate created a favorable environment for the LDP (Maeda and Hirano 2015).

In addition, the new economic and social system proposed by Prime Minister Abe aims to build a society based on the efforts of individuals and local communities. In other words, by emphasizing the external pressure from the international community, the nationalistic values of enhancing the status and competitiveness of the nation have become the centripetal force. It is well known that this has sealed off social opposition and led to the self-transformation of inefficient sectors. There is no doubt that Abe's strategy to promote ideology is most visible in the fields of foreign affairs and security.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, even regarding major social issues such as employment, low fertility, aging, local revitalization, women's activities, and educational reform, nationalistic values are embedded. In addition, the direction and implementation of individual policies and the distribution of public goods all include nationalistic values.

## 2. Strategy for Support Groups

In the Abe era, the LDP has promoted three main strategies for support groups. First, the LDP strengthened local organizations and secured party members. The existence of strong local organizations is one of the LDP's strengths. These local organizations overwhelm the other parties.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the LDP is planning to enhance the party by focusing on these groups. The party emphasizes local governments to vitalize the party and secure the party members. For example, the LDP started a campaign called "Securing 1.2 Million Party Members." The

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16. In December 2013, a secret protection bill was established. In July 2014, the cabinet decision (*kakugi*) to exercise the collective self-defense right was made. In 2015, the Security Legislation (*Anzen Hōshō Hōsei*) was revised. Along with these examples, the expression of strong willingness for constitutional revision prior to the Lower House election in 2017 is another example.

17. According to a survey by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, there are 1,338 LDP Diet members out of 2,675 in the National Diet since the local election in 2015, or 50.5 percent. The DPJ, at second place, has 11.6 percent (*Sōmushō Jichi Gyōseikyoku Senkyobu* 2015, 10). There is no doubt that the local assembly acted as a stronghold for the LDP. In addition, the number of seats varies greatly at the national level, depending on political reforms and current pending issues, but the local assembly does not get a lot of influence from the political realignment and political reform (Tsuji 2008).

LDP sets the target number of party members for individual central-local politicians.<sup>18</sup> It is important to secure the party members because it is directly related to strengthening the personal support organizations (*kōenkai*), which have weakened. Even after adopting the Single Member District (SMD) system, personal support organizations by individuals still play a major role in the LDP-voters linkage. In fact, there is a problem caused by the specificity of the composition of personal support organizations. These organizations are based on an old network of regional representatives, industries, and associations. This network is far from an ideological organization. Thus, it is not easy to make a structural transition from the election campaigns that try to garner support from personal support organizations based on nonpartisan regional networks.

Second, the LDP is attempting to change the operating principles of local organizations in a way that reinforces ideological conservatism. There are two types of LDP members. One is the neoconservatives who pursue normalization for Japan. The others are the traditional conservatives stemming from pork barrel politics. According to an attitude survey by the *Asahi newspaper* (*Asahi shinbun*) of LDP members, the neoconservatives were positive in their evaluation of the Abe cabinet and constitutional revision. On the other hand, traditional conservatives tended to be negative or show reservations.<sup>19</sup> This implies that even if the partisan realignment coping strategy in the Abe era is intended to foster grassroots conservatives, there is a gap at the support level. The gap exists between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives who support the normalization of the nation. It is caused by the different policy preferences and values of the groups. In this regard, it is important to see the LDP's response to the local organizations in 2015. The LDP, which had been pursuing the security legislation, held two or three open lectures for the

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18. The National Diet members set a goal of securing 1,000 members each. The local assembly members set a goal of securing 100 to 500 members, depending on their local organizations and the number of elections they won. The achievement rate differs from region to region, but it is higher in the traditional conservative region in the rural area (Interview with officials from the Prefectural Federation of LDP Branches, September 28, 2015).

19. According to the survey that asked about admiring politicians, each politician took up following percentages: nineteen percent for Abe, seventeen percent for Koizumi, and six percent for Tanaka Kakuei. There is also a question asking whether the LDP currently reflects the opinions of party members to party operation and policies. Twenty-eight percent answered "yes" while fifty-four percent answered "no" to the question. For a question asking whether the constitutional revision should take place swiftly, thirty-four percent answered that it should be implemented swiftly while fifty-seven percent answered there is no need for haste. For a question related to amending Article 9 of the Constitution, forty-three percent answered it should not be revised, ahead of thirty-seven percent that answered it should be revised (*Asahi shinbun*, November 30, 2015).

Prefectural Federation of LDP Branches (*Todōfuken Shibu Rengōkai*) to explain the purpose and direction of the policy.<sup>20</sup> During the time, most of the LDP members in rural areas were highly interested in the TPP negotiations and the implications for agriculture. Despite the high level of interest, the policy explanation by the party tried to prompt self-help for economic issues while asking for support and understanding about the Abe administration's foreign affairs and security policies. This indicates the subordinate organizations of the Abe administration attempted to enhance the cohesion among party members through ideological linkage.

Third, the LDP is preparing for the era of post-clientelism by promoting social groups who support strengthening efforts towards the normalization of Japan. This could be a supplementary mechanism for the existing business-oriented voting organizations. After the election of the House of Councilors in 2013, groups supporting vocational representation has strengthened the relationship with the LDP again. In addition, the Abe administration, which places importance on the relationship with support groups, restored its relationship with fixed support groups, such as the postal service, construction industry, and the Japan Association of Medical Practitioners. However, the vocational representation system with links to clientelism, which exercises the power of aggregated votes from organized interest groups at a national level, is declining. In contrast, the most prominent supporters at present for the LDP are some conservative religious groups, such as the Shinto Political League (*Shintō Seiji Renmei*), Association of Shinto Shrines (*Shintō Honchō*), Society of Friends of the Spirits (*Reiyukai*), *Bussho Gonenkai Kyōdan*, a Buddhist Organization Practicing the Lotus Sutra, and Japan Conference (*Nippon Kaigi*), which is related to former groups.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the diversification and emergence of opposing media, right-wing individuals, who used to be a minority in Japanese society, are raising their voices. Many LDP politicians, including Prime Minister Abe, eagerly make use of their impact.<sup>22</sup>

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20. An interview with an official from the Prefectural Federation of LDP Branches, September. 28, 2015.

21. Studies by Sugano (2016), Aoki (2016), and Tawara (2016) are famous for examining the Japan Conference and Tsukada (2015, 2017) is famous for research on the relationship between conservative religious groups and politics.

22. On the other hand, there are reservations about whether these people can replace the power of aggregated votes by a vocational representation system. There are also reservations about whether these people encourage the LDP to turn rightist. Even a candidate supported by the Shinto Political League, which exercises strong power to aggregate votes, does not get the 200,000 votes needed to enter the House of Councilors. Moreover, the power for aggregating votes is declining. There is an argument that the Japan Conference complies with the direction of the LDP, but the increasing

**Table 3.** Comparison between the Koizumi Administration and the Abe Administration

	Koizumi LDP	Abe LDP
Reform strategy	Economic reform (structural reform)	Social reform (conservative political shift)
Policy stance	Neoliberalism Limited conservative shift	Neoliberalism + Pork barrel politics Conservative shift (normalization of the nation)
Policy decision process	Prime minister-led	Prime minister's office-led
Governance in the party	Factions, excluding policy specialists Destroying preliminary review system.	Factions, including policy specialists Utilizing preliminary review system
Response to voters	Direct (charismatic) linkage with voters Emphasizing independent voters	Seeking ideological linkage Emphasizing supporters

The LDP faced the challenge of restoring its support base that weakened since the Koizumi administration. The Abe era implemented specific measures for this recovery. The Abe administration is different from the Koizumi administration. The Koizumi administration sought to implement a neoliberal economy and defeat factional politics. Based on this premise, the Koizumi administration received support through the direct linkage with general voters. On the other hand, the Abe administration focused on its response to the weakened support base by restoring the traditional support for the LDP. It also attempted to build another base, which combines conservative social forces who support the normalization of Japan through ideological linkage (table 3). Abenomics includes aggressive financial easing, monetary support for public projects, and growth strategies with deregulation. This shows that the Abe administration is avoiding the contradiction of neoliberal reform which has troubled the LDP since the Koizumi administration. In addition, the Abe administration is increasing the budget for public works and land improvement. The traditional support base has an interest in local revitalization and public works exemplified by the national resilience project. Indeed, the interest of the traditional support base is intertwined with social reforms that emphasize local organizations in the Abe era.

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influence of the Japan Conference does not promote the LDP to turn rightist (Nakakita 2017, 212).

## Political Reforms and Mechanism of the Conservative Political Shift

The conservative shift of the Abe era aligns with the structural changes in LDP politics. While political reforms have continued, Japanese politicians have tried various methods to direct them. Recently, they were combined with the coping strategies of Abe-LDP, which supported and even enhanced the conservative shift. In the following section, this study summarizes how the conservative shift is related to political reforms and its mechanisms in the Abe era.

As shown in figure 7, the conservative shift was first derived in the process of inputting political reforms. A series of reforms towards anti-clientelism has continued since the 1990s. During this period, a social reform by the LDP, which is ideologically conservative, emerged as an alternative for establishing a new Japanese system. This occurred during the power transition between the LDP and the DPJ, and there were much competitions and trials and errors. The alternatives provided by the LDP distinguished itself with a counter-discourse to regain power and were effective electoral strategies.

Moreover, the output process of political reform enhanced the conservative shift. The power of the prime minister's office was strengthened as part of the political reform that promoted unity between the government and the ruling party. Based on this, there was a structural change in policy decision-making. A change in the policy process through the prime minister's office currently leads the conservative shift. At the government level, CPA became routine. In the intra-party level, the special offices under the president are increasing their influence. These all show a structural characteristic of policymaking in the Abe era that is strongly bound with the policy preference of the prime minister and party leadership.

The Koizumi administration and the DPJ administration had consistently pursued unified decision-making between the government and ruling party, for intensified policy conflicts among prominent leaders in the party make it difficult to showcase the government's performance. As shown in the case of the TPP negotiation and security legislation, there were disputes between the prime minister's office and the party even in Abe-LDP administration. However, the empirical learning effect, which taught them that conflicts within the party might hurt the government's ability to operate, helped Prime Minister Abe to strengthen the intra-party cohesion for the challenges he faced regarding the conservative reforms. Abe also worked for inter-party governance that embraces policy specialists and subcommittees of the Policy Affairs Research Council. The governance transformed the role of policy specialists. As a result, it

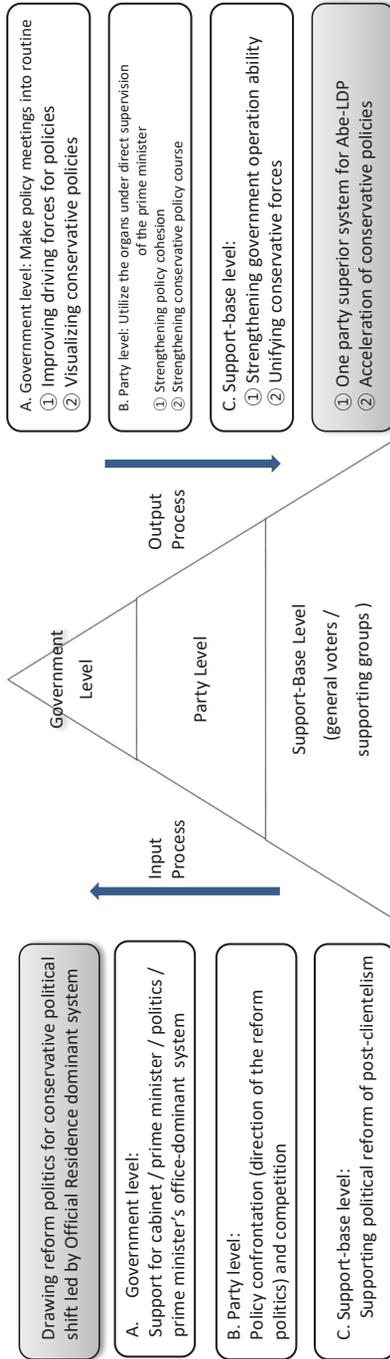


Figure 7. The Multi-layered Structure of the Political Process of the Conservative Shift

simplified the decision-making process for conservative reform tasks and accelerated the policy implementation.

The acceleration of policy implementation and the actualization of ongoing policies are deepening conservative tendencies. Nonetheless, the unity and cohesion between the government and the ruling party has consolidated the support base of the LDP. The image of the ruling party, which is different from that of the DPJ, enhances government performance. This helped the LDP return to the top. The reform strategy of the Abe era continuously sends the messages of conservative reform. It is becoming an effective measure to reconstruct the support-base of the LDP that has weakened since the Koizumi administration. The strategy strengthened as it linked with another neoconservative reform strategy that combines traditional conservatives and neoconservatives in the Abe era.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion and Implications: Prospects and Challenges of the Political Reform

This study examined the input and output process of the political reform by Abe-LDP at multiple levels of the Japanese political system, thereby highlighting the mechanism of reform towards the conservative shift during the Abe era. It analyzed the structural change of the LDP politics cycle at the levels of government, party, and social constituency. The study also found that the coping strategies of Abe-LDP linked the Japanese political reforms, which has persisted for a long time, with the conservative shift. Finally, it reached the conclusion that the response strategies of Abe-LDP are embedded in the structural changes of LDP politics.

In the Abe era, the LDP succeeded in securing a stable majority in repeated national elections. This is partially due to the failure of the DPJ administration and the polarization of the opposition party. This created a favorable environment for the LDP, which has relatively more solid voter support. It was difficult to change this competitive advantage. The government performance, local organizations, local community, and relations with industry associations empower the LDP and this power overwhelms all other political forces. As a

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23. On the other hand, it is difficult to establish an ideological linkage in a short period of time. Thus, it is hasty to discuss the effects and achievements. Nevertheless, if the LDP continues this conservative reform strategy, it will pose a challenge for the post-Abe era. The challenge is how to combine the political values and the heterogeneity of the policy preferences of the traditional conservative forces and the neoconservatives who support the normalization of the nation.

result, the inter-party and intra-party effects are weakening the opposition, and Japanese politics is returning to the LDP dominant system. It is an ironic phenomenon because the system of one party dominance has been the target of reforms. In addition, the direction of the reforms is accelerating the conservative policies under the leadership of the prime minister's office.

This move by the LDP seems stable enough to maintain power in the short term. However, it includes factors that could possibly lead to a power transition. Japanese reform politics has shifted to the right, and the input and output structure of the Japanese political reforms have the following structural limitations. First, it became difficult for the LDP to suggest an alternative discourse that can absorb the general voters' support in the future, as the policy flexibility of the LDP has narrowed. By focusing on strengthening unity and cohesion within the party, it became difficult to discuss the revision of existing policies and alternative discourses. The LDP failed to sustain administrations in the early 1990s and late 2000s. These cases show that the LDP's ability to change policies narrowed when intra-party competition, which reflects public opinion, was reduced. Because this is an important factor for governmental change, the past regime-change cycles are still present.

Second, there is a rigidity problem from the output process which happens during decision-making in the prime minister's office-led politics. The rigidity of government policy in the Abe era has become more intense than any of the periods in the past. The relationship between the government and bureaucrats under the leadership of the prime minister's office helps to make swift policy decisions and prepare for policy measures. Nevertheless, it extremely constrains the behaviors of bureaucrats who have policy expertise and exercise political neutrality. This became a problem. The reforms have aimed to design an institution that constructs a governance system which allows for power transitions. Despite this aim, the Abe administration reestablished the relationship between the government and bureaucrats for realizing policies that the prime minister stresses. As a result, no further efforts to improve the neutrality and autonomy of the bureaucracy were made during the Abe era. In contrast with the DPJ administration, which could not avoid confrontation between the government and bureaucracy, Abe-LDP appropriately utilized the bureaucracy as well. It shows that Abe's government operation was strategically effective. Despite this fact, it caused excessive involvement and constraints on bureaucracy at the same time. In order to secure the superiority of the LDP in government operation ability and complete the realignment of the governance structure that Japanese political reforms have pursued, the administration needs to establish a relationship between the government and bureaucracy with clear roles. Based

on the relationship, the administration has to establish a rational and transparent policy decision system.

Finally, there is an unconformity between the reform strategy for the conservative shift and Japanese political reform. The strategy for the conservative shift devised by the LDP in the Abe era was effective in restoring the administration. However, it differs from the blueprint for Japanese political reform that aimed to achieve responsible politics through power transition by the electoral process. The electorate gave justification for political reforms to see a new system replace the Japanese system, namely, a system capable of responding swiftly to changes in the domestic and international environment, and a system that guarantees policy competition based on parties along with a swift, transparent policy decision by government and the ruling party. However, the purpose of the political reform has become a means to promote the reform to “recover national identity by realizing the normal state” in the Abe era. If swift responses and unified policy decisions do not occur, the government will be criticized as pursuing a politics-led conservative shift or over representing extreme rightists. Moreover, if power transition is difficult to take place through elections, it is necessary to consider responsibility for the consequences. In this sense, the post-Abe era faces a challenge of how to complement political responsiveness and accountability under a superior one party system.

In the political history of the postwar period, the driving force for Japan to overcome crisis came from “self-renovation of the existing power.”<sup>24</sup> Then, how will the LDP construct a new system for the post-postwar period? The self-innovation of the LDP, which makes a virtuous cycle of the political process, would be one condition for Japan to complete the reform.

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24. From the perspective of social history of politics, Amamiya (1997) points out that there was “self-innovation of the existing power (*kisei seiryoku no jiko kakushin*)” on the basis of continuity and discontinuity of the postwar system. He focuses on the process of social reintegration led by the second and third generations of local notables at the local government level. He sees it as the core of political change connected to the local government level and national level. In addition, he suggests considering the post-postwar system by reviewing the prewar and postwar systems (Amamiya 2013).

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## Interviews

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