

RESEARCH

Chasing the Conservative Dream:

Why Shinzo Abe Failed to Revise the Constitution of Japan

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This paper examines the role of domestic actors in shaping Japan's constitutional debate during Shinzo Abe's time as prime minister. Based on a holistic analysis of the prevailing literature and the role of the public, leadership, and other political actors, this study finds that Abe was unable to garner enough support from the public or fellow lawmakers to push his version of proposed revisions to the Constitution of Japan. The paper identifies the wide spectrum of views that exist on the issue and how revising the constitution is viewed as a challenge against prevailing norms. Public opinion remains opposed to revision and the inability of lawmakers to build consensus on what to amend stymies the process further. Abe seems to have had a grasp on the political climate, opting to pursue constitutional revision largely for electoral purposes.

Introduction

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced his decision to step down in August 2020.¹ Japan's longest-serving prime minister left behind a mixed legacy defined by electoral and foreign policy achievements, as well as a period of economic stagnation and string of political scandals.² But what best defines Abe's political career will undoubtedly be his desire, and ultimate failure, to revise the seventy-four-year-old Constitution of Japan (COJ). Although Abe's failure to amend the COJ is often attributed to institutional hurdles, this paper argues that varying interests among domestic actors—from public resistance to militarism, to the prime minister's agenda, and lawmakers' scattered interests regarding what exactly to amend—ultimately determined the fate of his political

¹ Eric Johnston and Satoshi Sugiyama, "Abe to resign over health, ending era of political stability," Japan Times, August 28, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/08/28/national/politics-diplomacy/shinzo-abe-resign/>.

² Rintaro Nishimura, "Saying Goodbye to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe," Northeastern University Political Review, August 31, 2020, <https://www.nupoliticalreview.com/2020/08/31/saying-goodbye-to-prime-minister-shinzo-abe/>.

maneuvers.

This paper attempts to understand why attempts to revise the COJ failed under Abe. Scholars point to the roles of norms and institutions in shaping Japan's national security policy, but little has been said about domestic actors. Some argue that norms have continued to restrain leaders from shifting policy and rewriting Article Nine, the provision that renounces war and prohibits maintaining war potential.³ Sheila Smith writes that “while changing public attitudes toward Japan's military have accompanied a rising interest in the constitutional debate, these two trends do not yet add up to a public majority wishing to rid the Japanese constitution of Article Nine.”⁴ Tom Berger adds that realist and liberalist theories fail to account for the unique constraints Japan has faced, stating that anti-militarism remains strong among citizens.⁵ Others disagree, claiming that anti-militaristic norms would have forced leaders to adopt a neutral-state status free of military commitments. Those like Richard Samuels believe pacifist ideals have been left behind, but that Japan's post-war leaders have voluntarily remained committed to them.⁶ This implies that conservative leaders have been constrained by institutional norms but can overturn policy if deemed necessary.

Now that Abe has stepped down, it is worth reassessing how effective these constraints continue to be. To some, Abe was a conservative ideologue willing to break with his predecessors by freeing the limits imposed by the constitution.⁷ Christopher Hughes asserts that the 2014 Cabinet decision and subsequent legislation to reinterpret the COJ indicates a trajectory away from tradition.⁸ While common practice, Abe's ability to undermine the Supreme Court—which refuses to rule on political issues—and the Cabinet Legislation Bureau—traditionally in charge of constitutional interpretation—was seen as wading in uncharted territory.⁹ Yet to others, Abe was a pragmatic realist who strengthened Japan's status and presence in the world.¹⁰ He is seen as a politician

³ See, for example, Adam P. Liff, “Japan's Defense Policy: Abe the Evolutionary,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 79-99; and Kenneth B. Pyle, “Japan's Return to Great Power Politics: Abe's Restoration,” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2 (April 2018): 69-90.

⁴ Sheila Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 165.

⁵ Tom U. Berger, “Norms, identity, and national security in Germany and Japan,” in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identities in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 317-356.

⁶ Richard J. Samuels, “Securing Japan: The Current Discourse,” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 33, no. 1 (Winter, 2007): 152.

⁷ Sheila Smith, “The Abe Factor,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2015): 66.

⁸ Christopher W. Hughes, “Japan's Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision,” in *Demilitarization in the Contemporary World*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 150.

⁹ See, for example, Christopher W. Hughes, “Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Shift?” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 123; and Adam P. Liff, “Policy by Other Means: Collective Self-Defense and the Politics of Japan's Postwar Constitutional Reinterpretations,” *Asia Policy* 24, no. 1 (July 2017): 152-154.

¹⁰ Hiroshi Nakanishi, “Reorienting Japan? Security Transformation Under the Second Abe Cabinet,” *Asian Perspective* 39 (2015): 417.

striking a balance between conservative ideals and pragmatic statecraft.¹¹ These scholars have focused on Abe's adaptability to work within the prescribed constraints, while identifying the gap between conservative rhetoric and restrained actions taken by his cabinet.¹²

This paper has three main findings. First, institutional and procedural hurdles exist, but are not the decisive factor. While certainly cumbersome, comparative data shows the COJ is not especially difficult to amend, and that few other nations have proposed fundamental changes to their constitutions. The relatively short COJ also allows leaders to utilize legislation to pass significant changes under fewer conditions.¹³ At first glance, these are sweeping changes to Japan's security policy, but a thorough examination reveals that other proposals more radical than these have been blocked. Second, much like past studies find, norms continue to play a sufficient role as a bulwark against fundamental changes to security policy. Public opinion data during the Abe years suggest that net support for constitutional revision was highest when Abe returned to power in late 2012 but has been on a general decline ever since. Abe's ideological side may have put off the average voter and made constitutional revision look more like political ambition than strategic necessity. Politicians remain divided on the idea as well. Although support for revision remains more consistent across political parties than citizens, the inability to come to consensus on what to revise has similarly constrained leaders. Third, domestic actors and their electoral calculations matter. An analysis of surveys conducted before the 2017 and 2019 Diet elections indicates that Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politicians and their corresponding factions were not as enthusiastic about revising Article Nine as Abe and his faction were.

The diverse priorities of elected representatives lend credence to the idea that Abe was unable to consolidate support for constitutional revision. Instead, Abe understood these diverse interests and adapted accordingly, attempting to package Article Nine with other amendments such as educational and electoral reform. The overwhelming evidence points to the fact that Abe was a pragmatic realist who persisted with constitutional revision not because he had a winning strategy, but to appease interest groups for their vote in future elections.¹⁴ The paper also examines the role of the Komeito Party, the LDP's junior coalition partner whose ideology is often at odds with Abe's party.¹⁵ An analysis of electoral data from national elections since the coalition began finds that the LDP

¹¹ Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2020), 49-50.

¹² See, for instance, Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy: Abe the Evolutionary," 81; and Nakanishi, "Reorienting Japan?," 407.

¹³ Hughes, "Japan's Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision," 138.

¹⁴ See, for example, Kenneth M. McElwain and Christian G. Winkler, "What's Unique about the Japanese Constitution?: A Comparative and Historical Analysis," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 251; and Nakakita Koji 中北浩爾, *Jimintō – Ikkyō no Jitsuzō 自民党—「一強」の実像 [The Liberal Democratic Party – Reality Behind the Dominance]* (Tokyo: Chūkō Shinsho, 2017), 283-286.

¹⁵ Michael I. Magcamit, "The Fault in Japan's Stars: Shinzo Abe, North Korea, and the Quest for a New Japanese Constitution," *International Politics* 57 (2020): 624.

partnered with the Komeito mostly for electoral purposes. With both bases declining, the coalition has devised a win-win election strategy by compromising on key issues, most notably Article Nine.

The Truth about Procedural Hurdles to Revise the COJ

The oft-cited argument for failure to amend the COJ points to procedural barriers.¹⁶ Article Ninety-six of the COJ stipulates that an amendment is ratified once passed by an absolute supermajority in both Houses and a majority of votes cast in a national referendum.¹⁷ Abe claimed that the supermajority condition made the constitution “rigid,” proposing to lower the requirement to a simple majority.¹⁸ One could surmise that this formidable barrier forced prior governments to reinterpret rather than revise aspects of the COJ. Adam Liff writes that “constitutional revision was not politically feasible ... In contrast, from the perspective of LDP leaders, effective reinterpretation by elites, though suboptimal on strategic and nationalist grounds, was possible.”¹⁹ While reinterpretation helped leaders expand the scope of Japan’s defense posture, much of it was incremental.

Japan instead took steps to expand its defense capabilities without amending the COJ. The most significant, of course, was the 2014 Cabinet decision and ensuing bundle of legislation that revised Japan’s long-standing ban on collective self-defense (CSD) to allow overseas military missions in cooperation with other countries.²⁰ While this reinterpretation may have reduced the need for full-scale revision, so long as the LDP remains in power, the party is likely to continue its pursuit of amending the COJ on a dual track, arguing that the deteriorating security environment and accusations about the Self-Defense Forces’ (SDF) unconstitutionality warrant such an approach.

Constitutional revision remains the sole option to achieve normal state status. But even that process requires time, given the COJ’s uniqueness. Data from the Comparative

¹⁶ See, for example, Eric Johnston, “Abe’s Push to Amend Japan’s Constitution Faces Uncertain Future after Upper House Vote,” *Japan Times*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/07/22/national/politics-diplomacy/abes-push-amend-japans-constitution-faces-uncertain-future-upper-house-vote/>; Leika Kihara and Linda Sieg, “Abe to Push Reform of Japan’s Pacifist Constitution after Election Win,” *Reuters*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-election-idUSKBN1CQ0UW>; and “Abe’s Next Act; Japan’s Constitution,” *Economist* 425, no. 9064 (October 2017): 16. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A511506276/AONE?u=mlln_b_north-east&sid=AONE&xid=fd62d22.

¹⁷ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “The Constitution of Japan,” accessed November 6, 2020, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

¹⁸ Tadashi Hitora, “Behind Moves to Revise Article 96,” *Nippon.com*, July 11, 2013, <https://www.nippon.com/en/column/100042/>.

¹⁹ Liff, “Policy by Other Means,” 146.

²⁰ Cabinet Office 内閣府, “Kuni no Sonritsu wo Mattoushi, Kokumin wo Mamoru Tame no Kireme no Nai Anzen Hoshō Hōsei no Seibi ni Tsuite” 国の存立を全うし、国民を守るための切れ目のない安全保障法制の整備について [About the Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect its People], July 1, 2014, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/anpohosei.pdf>.

Constitutions Project (CCP), a project which aims to provide systematic data on constitutions to comparative legal scholars, finds that the COJ is one of the shortest constitutions and covers very little of what is included in other constitutions.²¹ Besides basic individual freedoms and core principles like Article Nine, the COJ leaves most other issues to be legislated by the Diet. This has resulted in leaders utilizing reinterpretation, which is significantly easier than revision. Conversely, the lack of guidance provided by the COJ must be offset by greater deliberation and crafting of the law. Although revision has been intermittently discussed since the 1950s, the National Referendum Law governing how to conduct the citizen vote was only enforced in 2010, making it a rather recent piece of legislation.²²

This procedural explanation has two glaring flaws. In 2016, Abe and fellow pro-amendment parties held a two-thirds supermajority in the Diet.²³ Despite meeting the condition he had criticized prior, Abe failed to proceed with constitutional revision. This points to the fact that the procedure itself was not what prevented him from succeeding. In a comparative study using data on 558 constitutions compiled by the CCP, McElwain and Winkler conclude that the COJ's amendment process ranks "average" in procedural difficulty.²⁴ More than 78 percent of studied constitutions fell into the same category, with 35 percent requiring a referendum as an additional condition.²⁵ Germany's Basic Law, often compared to the COJ, requires an absolute two-thirds majority of the Bundestag alongside a simple two-thirds in the Bundesrat; despite this, it has been amended more than fifty times.²⁶

The Indian constitution is one of the most amended constitutions, having been revised over a hundred times. Most amendments to it require a special majority—fifty-one percent of two-thirds of parliamentary members present and voting—for an amendment to pass.²⁷ The lower hurdle explains why India's constitution has been amended more frequently. South Korea has a similar amendment procedure to Japan, requiring a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly and support from a majority of at least half

²¹ Zachary Elkins, Tom Ginsburg, and James Melton, "Constitution Rankings," Comparative Constitutions Project, accessed on October 11, 2020, <https://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/ccp-rankings/#>.

²² Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication of Japan 総務省, "Kokumin Tōhyō Seido" 国民投票制度 [National Referendum System], accessed on November 22, 2020, https://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/kokumin_touhyou/.

²³ Justin McCurry, "Japan Could Change Pacifist Constitution after Shinzo Abe Victory," *Guardian*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/11/japan-could-change-pacifist-constitution-after-shinzo-abe-victory>.

²⁴ McElwain and Winkler, "What's Unique about the Japanese Constitution?," 263.

²⁵ Kenneth M. McElwain, "Why Did Abe Fail to Change the Japanese Constitution?" (speech, online, October 15, 2020).

²⁶ McElwain and Winkler, "What's Unique about the Japanese Constitution?," 263.

²⁷ "Constitution Amendment Procedure," *Constitute Project*, accessed November 11, 2020, https://www.constituteproject.org/search?lang=en&key=amend&status=in_force&status=is_draft.

the eligible voter population in a referendum.²⁸ Although employing similar processes, the South Korean constitution has been amended nine times. This suggests that easier processes help, but cannot explain variation among similar constitutions.

Another flaw is that Japan's amendments are significantly different compared to those of other countries. In other words, the process may matter less than the actual content. The LDP proposals would fundamentally transform the COJ's identity as a pacifist constitution. It would, in effect, fundamentally transform Japan's post-war identity. Considering the Japanese public's disdain for the wartime militarist regime and citizens' ready embrace of the COJ, resistance to such changes is likely to be high.²⁹ Furthermore, nations such as the United States and Germany tend to amend their constitutions to curtail executive power, or for electoral reform, much less consequential than changes in Japan.³⁰ Focusing on the number of amendments diverts attention from the content being revised. A study of content confirms that the COJ is inherently more difficult to revise due to the nature of the provisions in question.

“Domestic Brakes”

This section takes a theoretical approach to understand how prevailing ideas, opinions, and interests on constitutional revision have acted as an intended or unintended brake on the ambitions of conservative leaders. It will examine three actors—the public, the leader, and other political players—and the complicated process of forming consensus among these groups.

Public Opinion

Tom Berger best captured public opinion through his discussion of the “political-military culture,” or the cultural beliefs and values that shape a given society's orientations toward politics.³¹ He argues that the incremental nature of military development in Japan owed to the reluctance of society to accept force. A similar conclusion is made by Adam Liff, who wrote that “widespread public discomfort with Abe's ambitious security reform agenda ... was the most conspicuous restraint.”³² The interesting contradiction has been the Japanese public's strong support for the LDP despite its nationalist and militarist

²⁸ Cheryl Saunders, “Symposium: South Korean Constitutional Change in Comparative Perspective,” *The International Association of Constitutional Law*, July 9, 2018, <https://blog-iacl-aicd.org/blog/2018/7/9/south-korean-constitutional-change-in-comparative-perspective>.

²⁹ For a recent example, see Matsushita Hideo 松下秀雄, “#KokuminTohyōKaiseianniKōgiShimasu' Kakusan wo Kini Kaiken Tetzuzuki wo Tokoton Kangaeta” 「#国民投票法改正案に抗議します」拡散を機に改憲手続きをとことん考えた [I Scrutinized the Constitutional Amendment Process After 'IProtesttheRevisedNationalReferendumLaw' Went Viral], *Asahi Ronza*, May 25, 2020, <https://webronza.asahi.com/politics/articles/2020052400008.html?page=1>.

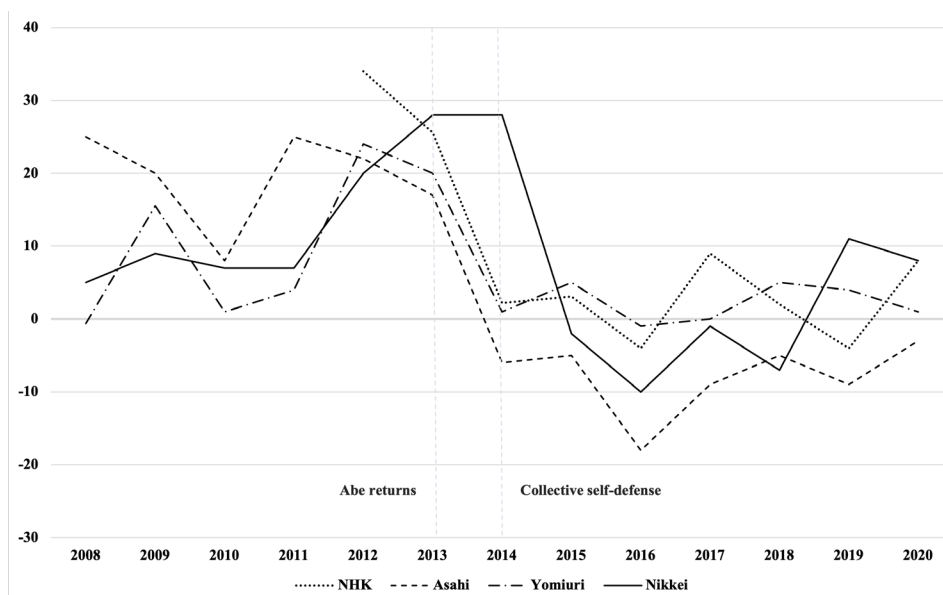
³⁰ Itoh Makoto 伊藤真, “Kenpō Kaisei no Jōken wa Dōshite Kibishiinoka” 憲法改正の条件はどうして厳しいのか [Why is Constitutional Revision so Difficult?], *Imidas/Shūeisha*, August 2, 2013, <https://imidas.jp/jijikaitai/f-40-089-13-08-g208/2>.

³¹ Berger, “Norms, Identity, and National Security,” 325-326.

³² Liff, “Policy by Other Means,” 163.

tendencies. Most scholars believe support for the conservative party has little to do with constitutional revision, and more to do with a weak opposition, stable economy, and general favorability among all age groups.³³ Political party approval ratings prove this, as the majority of voters seem to begrudgingly support the LDP, frequently saying they have “no other option.”³⁴

Figure 1. Net Change in Public Opinion Polls Asking: “Should the Constitution Be Amended?”



³³ Ethan Scheiner, “Democracy Without Competition: Opposition Failure in One-Party Dominant Japan,” Stanford University, accessed on November 21, 2020, <https://www.rieti.go.jp/en/events/bbl/03101501.pdf>; Mitsuru Obe, “What Keeps Aso Awake at Night: Abe,” Wall Street Journal, April 21, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-JRTB-13781>; Mina Pollman, “Japan Election Results: It’s the Economy, Abe,” The Diplomat, July 12, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/japan-election-results-its-the-economy-abe/>; and “Naikaku Shijiritsu no Suii” 内閣支持率の推移 [Change in Cabinet Approval Rating], Asahi Shimbun Digital, accessed on November 20, 2020, <https://www.asahi.com/politics/yoron/>.

³⁴ For a 2017 poll, see “Yoron Chōsa” 世論調査 [Public Opinion Poll], Hōdō Station (TV Asahi), October 2017, https://www.tv-asahi.co.jp/hst_archive/poll/201710/index.html; for a 2021 poll, see “Nisen-nijūichinen Shigatsu Seiji Ishiki Getsurei Denwa Chōsa” 2021年4月政治意識月例電話調査 [April 2021 Monthly Political Awareness Phone Survey], NHK, April 12, 2021, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/pdf/aggregate/2021/y202104.pdf>.

Figure 1 illustrates the results across four major media outlets representing a wide spectrum of political views.³⁵ The graph suggests that, although net support for constitutional revision fluctuates over time, all polls in early 2013 registered high support months after Abe's return to power. Support begins to wane as the "Abe effect" wears off, with the Nikkei poll registering a sharp plummet after the Abe Cabinet reinterpreted the constitution to permit CSD in 2014. The negative trend is consistent across all four outlets, indicating constitutional revision does not sit well with any ideological group. Since 2014, net support has settled between plus five to ten percentage points. Only the left-leaning newspaper,

³⁵ Masaki Miki 政木みき, and Hiroshi Aramaki 荒牧央, "Kenpō wo Meguru Ishiki no Henka to Imā" 憲法をめぐる意識の変化といま [Changes in Views on the COJ to the Present], NHK, October 1, 2017, https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/yoron/pdf/20171001_9.pdf; Ayumi Teraoka, "Japanese Public Opinion on Constitutional Revision in 2016," Council on Foreign Relations, August 1, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/japanese-public-opinion-constitutional-revision-2016>; THE SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM (@fumiomatsuda), 2018, "Kenpō 'Genjō Iji' Yonjūhachi Paasento" 憲法「現状維持」48% [Support for 'Untouched' COJ at 48%], Twitter, May 3, 2018, 11:09 a.m., <https://twitter.com/fumiomatsuda/status/991862317879971840>; "Abe Seikenka no Kaiken 'Hantai' Gojūhachi Paasento Asahi Shimbun Yoron Chōsa" 安倍政権下の改憲「反対」58% 朝日世論調査 [58% Oppose Revising the COJ Under the Abe Cabinet Asahi Shimbun Public Opinion Poll], Asahi Shimbun, May 1, 2018, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASL4R4HT3L4RUZPS005.html>; "Kaiken Fuyō Yonjūroku Paasento Hitsuyō Yonjūsan Paasento Hobo Narabu Asahi Shimbun Yoron Chōsa" 改憲不要46% 必要43%ほぼ並ぶ 朝日新聞世論調査 [46% Oppose Revising the COJ 43% Support and Close the Gap Asahi Shimbun Public Opinion Poll], Asahi Shimbun, May 3, 2020, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN4Z56Y3N4WUZPS004.html>; "Kenpō Igai no Mondai Yūsen Shite Torikumubeki' Nanajūhachi Paasento" 「憲法以外の問題 優先して取り組むべき」78% [78% Say 'Government Should Prioritize Issues Other Than the Constitution'], NHK, May 3, 2020, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/statement/35651.html>; "Kenpō Kaisei, Sanpi ga Kikkou" 憲法改正、賛否が拮抗 [Roughly Equal Support and Opposition for Constitutional Revision], Nihon Keizai Shimbun, May 3, 2017, https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGKKASFS02H1S_S7A500C-1MM8000; "Kenpō Kaisei wa 'Kuni no Arikata' to 'Kenryoku wo Shibaru' de Giron Subeki" 憲法改正は「国のあり方」と「権力を縛る」で議論すべき [Constitutional Revision Debates Should Be About 'What the Country Should Look Like' and 'Restraining Authority'], Nippon Broadcasting System, May 3, 2018, <http://www.1242.com/?p=103603>; "Kenpō to Seiji Ishiki no Yoron Chōsa – Shitsumon to Kaitō (Sangatsu~Shigatsu Jisshi)" 憲法と政治意識の世論調査 – 質問と回答 < 3 ~ 4 月実施 > [Public Opinion Poll on the Constitution and Political Awareness – Questions and Answers (Conducted March/April)], Asahi Shimbun, May 3, 2019, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASM4M4CDXM4MUZPS003.html>; "Sūji de Miru Riaru Yoron Yūsou Chōsa Nisen-jūkyū" 数字で見るリアル世論 郵送調査 2019 [Public Opinion by the Numbers Mail Survey 2019], Nihon Keizai Shimbun, January 10, 2020, <https://vdata.nikkei.com/newsgraphics/postal-mail-research-2019/#?current=section-0>; "Nisen-jūkyūnen Shichigatsu Seiji Ishiki Getsurei Chōsa' Chōsa Kekka" 「2019年7月 政治意識月例調査」調査結果 [July 2019 Political Awareness Monthly Survey' Survey Results], NHK, July 2019, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/pdf/aggregate/2019/y201907.pdf>; "Nisen-nijūnen Kinkyū Jitai Sengenka no Yoron Kansoku Repōto" 2020年 緊急事態宣言下の世論観測レポート [2020 Public Opinion Observation During the State of Emergency], Nikkei Research Inc., June 5, 2020, https://www.nikkei-r.co.jp/files/user/pdf/news/newsrelease7250_repo20200605.pdf; "Naikaku Shijiritsu Nisen-jūhachinen Shigatsu" 内閣支持率2018年4月 [Cabinet Approval Rating April 2018], NHK, April 10, 2018, https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/archive/2018_04.html; Marikko (@3qjutyXHDzt0AK), 2020, "Kenpō Kaisei, Sansei Yonjūkyū Paasento..." 憲法改正、賛成49%... [Support for Constitutional Revision at 49%], Twitter, May 3, 2020, 8:17 a.m., <https://twitter.com/3qjutyXHDzt0AK/status/1256724466735837184>.

Asahi Shimbun, registers consistent negative support.

This data supports the argument that, over the years, Abe unintentionally dampened the mood for constitutional revision. Despite having a strong mandate early in his second term, support steadily declined to below the pre-Abe (2008-2012) levels across the board. This indicates that Abe's ideology and policies triggered the opposite effect among voters. And while one can argue that Abe's push for CSD exhausted his political capital and prevented a successful attempt at revising the COJ, the later sections of this paper reveal that the underlying obstacle at the end of the day is the lack of consensus among lawmakers and their sensitivities to public sentiment.

Abe's Personal Role in Shaping the COJ Debate

Political debates tend to revolve around policy positions and groups that continue to exist over time. Cass Sunstein and Jack Balkin both find that, while ideas may persist because of their merits, they also endure because of who bears them and how successful that group is at staying relevant.³⁶ The LDP's policy position on revising the constitution has persisted over the post-war period and eventually passed on to Abe. This makes the former prime minister's role in the discussion difficult to ignore. In 2006, before he first became prime minister, Abe showed his intent to revise the COJ, writing, "a strong state is not a potential threat to political liberty that must be restrained by constitutionalism and civil society. It is the ultimate guarantor of national independence in a dangerous world governed by the law of the jungle."³⁷ This realist worldview has shaped his vision of a strong Japan—a nation that can be proud of itself and reclaim its place in the world where survival is contingent on a competent state.³⁸

However, Abe's politics are a mixture of contradicting characteristics that stem from conservative ideology and pragmatic realism. Abe was a nationalist who desired to see his country revived as a great power, and constitutional revision was just one of many nationalist aspirations.³⁹ He justified an accelerated departure from postwar pacifism by sustaining economic reform.⁴⁰ External threats, such as North Korea's missile development, were evoked to convince citizens that his hawkish policies were necessary, not

³⁶ Mark Chinen, "Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan and the Use of Procedural and Substantive Heuristics for Consensus," *Michigan Journal of International Law* 27, no. 1 (2005): 77. <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1182&context=mjil>.

³⁷ Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan*, 50.

³⁸ Hughes, "Japan's Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision," 140.

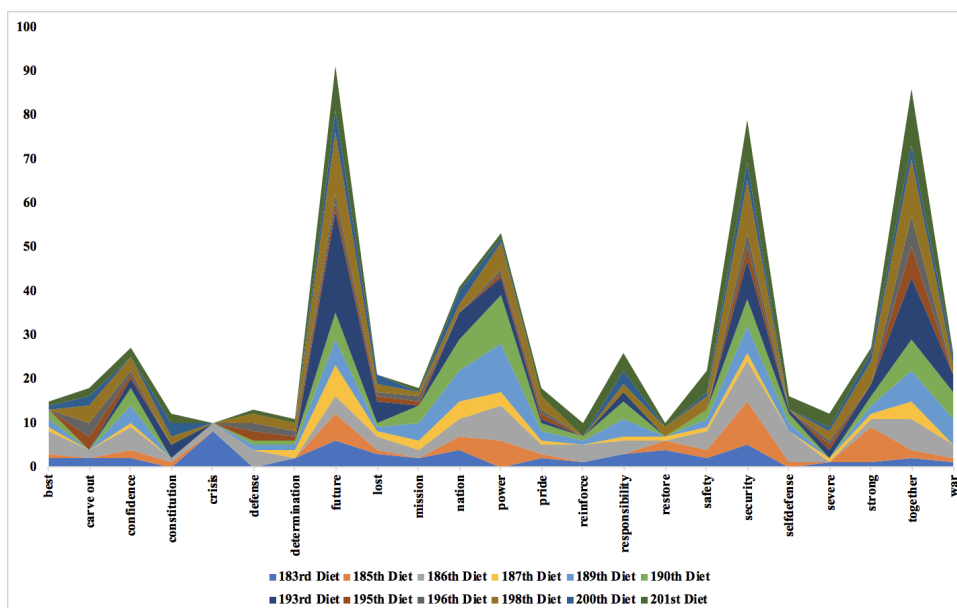
³⁹ Even after stepping down, Abe continues to call for constitutional revision. Endo Shuhei 遠藤修平, "Abe-shi 'Jieitai wa Kenpō Ihan ni Shūshifu wo' Nigata de Kōen, Kaiken Uttae" 安倍氏「自衛隊は憲法違反に終止符を」新潟で講演、改憲訴え [Mr. Abe Urges Constitutional Revision During Lecture in Nigata, 'Put an End to Claims That the Self-Defense Forces Are Unconstitutional'], *Mainichi Shimbun*, March 27, 2021, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20210327/k00/00m/010/225000c>.

⁴⁰ Sebastian Maslow, "A Blueprint for a Strong Japan? Abe Shinzō and Japan's Evolving Security System," *Asian Survey* 55, no. 4 (July/August 2015): 765.

an extension of his ideological ambitions.⁴¹ On the other hand, the pragmatic side of Abe instead made long-overdue reforms to adapt to an increasingly “severe” security environment. In times of unpopularity, he curtailed any attempts to force through hawkish policies, indicating to citizens he was no radical ideologue. This balancing act has contributed to the often-conflicting narrative surrounding his intentions.

A study of Abe’s rhetoric throughout his second term demonstrates this balancing act. Last year, I along with other researchers from Northeastern University conducted a text analysis using Lexos Software to count the number of times specific words connoting “nationalism” or “patriotism” were used in Abe’s speeches to the Diet.⁴² The annual inaugural speech to the legislature is an overview of the prime minister’s agenda for the year and covers a range of topics from education, to the economy, and national security.

Figure 2. Examining Abe’s Speeches for Nationalist Rhetoric (2013-2020)



⁴¹ Magcamit, “The Fault in Japan’s Stars,” 627.

⁴² See Appendix 1 for a list of words flagged as invoking nationalism or patriotism.

Figure 2 is a graph of the most frequently spoken words during a sample of twelve Diet speeches between 2013 and 2020.⁴³ Abe regularly uses “future,” “responsibility,” and “together” to persuade fellow lawmakers to support his policies. For example, at the 198th Diet session beginning in January 2019, Abe calls upon fellow Diet members to “fulfill this responsibility” to establish a new set of ideals through constitutional revision.⁴⁴ His use of strong language indicates seriousness to pursue constitutional amendments, as well as an emotional appeal to citizens that this is a necessary reform for Japan’s future.

Usage of words such as “constitution” or “self-defense” are less frequent but spike in certain speeches. The word “constitution” is mentioned in 2013, 2017, 2019, and 2020. These years coincide either with a period following an electoral victory, a major security-threatening event, or an impending term limit. The speeches made in 2017 were special in many ways, as Abe mentions the COJ by name, and begins those speeches outlining security issues. The standard format for speeches is to start with the economy and mention security issues in the concluding sections. However, the speeches in 2017 fail to follow that pattern, most likely due to the continued North Korean missile tests the previous year (for the 193rd session speech) and the firing of a missile over Japanese territory in September (before the 195th session speech).⁴⁵ Overall, Abe carefully selected words that promote constitutional revision when electoral prospects were unharmed,

⁴³ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 183rd Session of the Diet,” January 28, 2013, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201301/28syosin_e.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 185th Session of the Diet,” October 15, 2013, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201310/15shoshin_e.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 186th Session of the Diet,” January 24, 2014, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201401/24siseihousin_e.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by the Prime Minister to the 187th Session of the Diet,” September 29, 2014, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201409/policyspch.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 189th Session of the Diet,” February 12, 2015, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201502/policy.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 190th Session of the Diet,” January 22, 2016, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201601/1215627_10999.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 193rd Session of the Diet,” January 20, 2017, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201701/1221105_11567.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 195th Session of the Diet,” November 17, 2017, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201711/_00006.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 196th Session of the Diet,” January 22, 2018, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00002.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 198th Session of the Diet,” January 28, 2019, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00003.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 200th Session of the Diet,” October 4, 2019, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201910/_00003.html; Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by the Prime Minister to the 201st Session of the Diet,” January 20, 2020, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202001/_00004.html.

⁴⁴ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 198th Session of the Diet,” January 28, 2019, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00003.html.

⁴⁵ “North Korea Fires Second Ballistic Missile over Japan,” BBC, September 15, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41275614>.

external threats could justify such a move, or when he was facing a time limit himself.

Consensus among Policymakers?

Another significant constraint on any leader attempting to undertake constitutional revision is the difficulty of probing what each lawmaker's interests are. Fred Willhoite asserts that disagreement on the how and what of political issues are inherent parts of a constitutional democracy.⁴⁶ This is especially true for controversial cases such as revising the COJ. Conservative leaders must find ways of reaching across the aisle while accommodating intra-party interests. As this section will reveal, although amending the COJ itself is largely uncontested among most political parties, it is the exact nature of the revisions that remain contested. Japan's political party system and the LDP's unique factionalism make it especially difficult to reach a consensus and sustain that for sweeping change.⁴⁷

The LDP is best described as a coalition of factions.⁴⁸ Each faction is led by a powerful politician, most of them vying to become the leader of the party. They enter into temporary alliances with other factions to accumulate power and influence the direction of the party. Here, consensus is highly valued and allows every member to voice their opinion. The most commonly cited example is the preliminary review process (*jizen shinsa*) for any policy or legislation; it requires unanimous consent from every LDP Diet member to be passed up for a cabinet decision or a vote in the Diet.⁴⁹ In the case of constitutional revision, unanimous consent has been a major roadblock, with most proposals receiving some criticism along the way. It is therefore wrong to consider the debate over revising the COJ as one between the LDP and opposition parties.

⁴⁶ Fred H. Willhoite Jr., "Political Order and Consensus: A Continuing Problem," *The Western Political Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (June 1963): 303.

⁴⁷ Chinen, "Article 9 of the Constitution," 79.

⁴⁸ Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 15.

⁴⁹ Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 93-96.

Table 1. Notable Proposals to Revise Article Nine of the COJ⁵⁰

Leader	Year	Chief Changes Proposed
Ichiro Ozawa (Liberal Party)	1999	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add 3rd paragraph to permit individual and collective self-defense (CSD) 2. Add new article encouraging participation in international peacekeeping activities
Yukio Hatoyama (DPJ)	1999	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explicitly state possession of armed forces under conditions that it will not be used for acts of aggression and that conscription will not be employed
Yasuhiro Nakasone (LDP)	2000	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rewrite 2nd paragraph to clearly state right to self-defense 2. Add 3rd paragraph that establishes claims to CSD
Junichiro Koizumi (LDP)	2005	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rewrite 2nd paragraph to rename SDF as the Self-Defense Army (<i>jiei-gun</i>)
Sadakazu Tanigaki (LDP)	2012	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Delete 2nd paragraph and rename SDF as Defense Force (<i>kokubō-gun</i>) 2. Insert statement saying nothing in A9 can prevent the exercise of the right to self-defense

Table 1 shows five drafts that vary on how to revise Article Nine. The 1999 proposal by Ichiro Ozawa was an attempt to rewrite the “imposed” constitution. Ozawa was a nationalist who sought to expand Japan’s rights to individual and collective self-defense. Unlike other conservatives, he believed Japan should send the SDF on international peacekeeping missions alongside UN forces. Critics argue that his proposal to add a third paragraph contradicting the first two only made things confusing. That same year, Yukio Hatoyama of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) drafted a rebuttal to Ozawa’s draft. He agreed that the COJ should include a provision about the SDF, but disagreed on the inclusion of CSD to restrain Japan’s ability to use force. As the opposition party, the DPJ vehemently opposed the LDP’s overreliance on the United States. The contradiction here is that, although he desired to distance Japan from Washington, Hatoyama also rejected the extension of self-defense capabilities which would become necessary if that happened. A year later, the late-former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, who took part in the initial debates in the 1950s and 1960s as a freshman lawmaker, published his proposal to amend the COJ. Nakasone argued that then-prime minister Shigeru Yoshida had given in to the dominant ideology of pacifism when the COJ was enacted. He sought to redress this by rewriting the second paragraph to accept self-defense and add a third permitting CSD.

⁵⁰ Ozawa Ichiro 小沢一郎, *Nipponkoku Kenpō Kaisei Shian* 日本国憲法改正試案 [Drafting Amendments to the Constitution of Japan] (Bungei Shunju, September 1999), 98; Hatoyama Yukio 鳩山由紀夫, *Jieitai wo Guntai to Mitomeyo* 自衛隊を軍隊と認めよ [Accept the SDF as an Army] (Bungei Shunju, October 1999), 262-73; Nakasone Yasuhiro 中曾根康弘, *Waga Kaiken-ron* 我が改憲論 [My Theory on Constitutional Revision] (Shokun, April 2000), 55-56; Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 286; and Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, “Nipponkoku Kenpō Kaisei Sōan” 日本国憲法改正草案 [Revised Draft Constitution of Japan], April 27, 2012, https://jimjin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/news/policy/130250_1.pdf.

The last two major proposals were published in 2005 and 2012. The former was proposed by Junichiro Koizumi, a populist prime minister who promised to destroy the old LDP allergic to reform.⁵¹ His draft proposed rewriting the second paragraph to rename the SDF as the Self-Defense Army, in effect upgrading its status to a normal military. This is largely viewed as a compromise made by Koizumi following the dismal 2003 general election in which the LDP lost a significant portion of its Lower House seats. With the proposal, Koizumi sought to pacify the party elite who disliked his reformist agenda. The 2012 proposal was announced by then-president Sadakazu Tanigaki during the LDP's opposition days.⁵² The radical proposal, fully endorsed by Abe as "LDP-like (Jimintō rashii)" a few months after he replaced Tanigaki, called for the removal of the second paragraph and inserting a statement that nothing could prevent the right to exercise self-defense.⁵³ It also removed "self-defense" from the name SDF, renaming it the Defense Force and establishing a military tribunal for crimes committed by officers on the job.⁵⁴ It was criticized for heightening the risk of conflict with neighboring states who could misinterpret this as a reversion to imperial Japan. Other proposed amendments were left intentionally vague to permit a wide scope of activities. Tanigaki, a relatively left-leaning LDP lawmaker, later said the draft made unrealistic demands just to raise awareness on the issue.⁵⁵ Much to conservatives' dismay, even Abe eventually shelved it, instead proposing in 2017 a four-point plan that watered down his most desired amendment to a mere naming of the SDF in the text of Article Nine.⁵⁶ These exemplify that, while it is relatively easy to agree on principles, it is difficult to agree on specifics.

⁵¹ "Koizumi has uphill battle for reform," CNN, April 24, 2001, <https://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/04/24/koizumi.react/>.

⁵² Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, "Tanigaki Sadakazu Sōsai ga 'Kenpō Kaisei Sōan' wo Happyō" 谷垣禎一総裁が「憲法改正草案」を発表 [President Sadakazu Tanigaki Announces 'Constitutional Amendment Draft'], April 27, 2012, <https://www.jimin.jp/news/press/128867.html>.

⁵³ Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, "Waga tō 'Kaisei Sōan' no Shintō wo Kenpō Kaisei Suishin Honbu" わが党「改正草案」の浸透を 憲法改正推進本部 [Spreading the Word on Our Party's 'Revised Draft' Headquarters for the Promotion of Revision of the Constitution], February 20, 2013, <https://www.jimin.jp/news/policy/129745.html>.

⁵⁴ Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, "Nihonkoku Kenpō Kaisei Sōan Q&A Zōho-ban" 日本国憲法改正草案Q&A増補版 [Revised Version of Q&A on Amended Draft Constitution of Japan], October 2013, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/pamphlet/kenpou_qa.pdf.

⁵⁵ "Tanigaki-shi Jimin Kaiken-an wa 'Ejji Kikasete Mondai Teiki'" 谷垣氏 自民改憲案は「エッジ利かせて問題提起」 [Mr. Tanigaki: The LDP Constitutional Amendment Draft 'Raises Awareness with Sharp Rhetoric'], TV Asahi News, February 26, 2016, https://news.tv-asahi.co.jp/news_politics/articles/amp/000069127.html.

⁵⁶ LDP Headquarters for the Promotion of Revision of the Constitution 自由民主党憲法改正推進本部, "Kenpō Kaisei ni Kansuru Ronten Torimatome" 憲法改正に関する論点取りまとめ [Summary of Debate Regarding Constitutional Amendment], December 20, 2017, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/news/policy/136448_1.pdf; and Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, "Nisen-jūnananen Seisaku Panfuretto" 2017年政策パンフレット [2017 Policy Pamphlet], October 3, 2017, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/pamphlet/20171003_pamphlet.pdf.

Electoral Calculations

Political theorists have developed three models to explain party behavior: the vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking models.⁵⁷ The LDP is an interesting case where the rational pursuit of electoral votes requires it to focus on consolidating its political base. While Koizumi alienated the core rural base to win larger shares of independent, urban voters, Abe reverted back to courting the well-established rural vote.⁵⁸ This switch was a result of what lawmaker Seiko Noda called a shift to the right to accommodate the views of groups that had supported the LDP during its opposition years.⁵⁹ In particular, studies point to the 2012 COJ draft as signaling a further shift to the right and most likely proposed for symbolic reasons to reward these supporters.⁶⁰ This section argues that such electoral calculations have played a significant role in constraining amendments to the COJ. Specifically, it will examine the role of individual interests within the ruling coalition between the LDP and its junior coalition partner Komeito, and a waning base, as “brakes” on revision.

The “Constitution Factor” in Elections

Abe was remarkably sensitive to public opinion, compromising on key issues such as constitutional revision. He employed the common political “bait and switch tactic” of focusing on economic issues prior to an election and sidelining constitutional issues.⁶¹ During the 2018 LDP presidential election, Abe’s rival candidate, Shigeru Ishiba, criticized him for watering down the 2012 COJ draft.⁶² These shifts were less an ideological defeat than a realistic adjustment to the political environment. This balancing between ideology and pragmatism has contributed greatly to the confusion among the electorate as to where Abe’s true intentions lie. And, to the extent that he was adapting to this political environment, so were other politicians.

A survey conducted by Asahi Shimbun and Professor Masaki Taniguchi of the University of Tokyo asked 1,140 Lower House and 428 Upper House candidates a series of questions regarding election issues, including one about constitutional revision.⁶³ It yielded several results. First, 97 percent of LDP respondents in the 2017 Lower House survey supported amendments to the COJ, while only 64 percent of Komeito respondents

⁵⁷ Kaare Storm, “A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 2 (May 1990): 566-568.

⁵⁸ Ellis S. Krauss and Robert J. Pekkanen, “The Rise and Fall of Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (February 2010): 13; and Ken Victor Leonard Hijino, “Local Revitalization and Politics in the Abe Era,” *Nippon.com*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00623/>.

⁵⁹ Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 283-286.

⁶⁰ McElwain and Winkler, “What’s Unique about the Japanese Constitution?” 251.

⁶¹ Hughes, “Japan’s Strategic Trajectory,” 125.

⁶² Izumi Hiroshi 泉宏, “Abe Shushō vs Ishiba-shi ‘Kaiken’ to ‘Seiji Shuhō’ de Gekitotsu” 安倍首相vs石破氏改憲と政治手法で激突 [PM Abe vs Ishiba – Clash Over Constitutional Revision and Political Approach], *Tōyō Keizai*, September 13, 2018, <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/237410?page=2>.

⁶³ See Appendix 2 for full table of responses.

did. Reluctance from Komeito is best described by its deputy leader Kazuo Kitagawa, who in 2017 questioned the necessity to revise the COJ urgently.⁶⁴ Second, out of the 97 percent of LDP candidates who supported amendment of the COJ, only 42 percent named Article Nine as their top priority. This indicates that, despite Abe's best efforts, less than half of the candidates sought the same objective.

The second survey registered less support for constitutional revision, with only 64 percent and 13 percent support from the LDP and Komeito candidates, respectively.⁶⁵ This can be explained by the dwindling enthusiasm for amendments among the electorate, and the Upper House being known as the "house of good sense," free from political partisanship. Out of those who supported constitutional revision, a majority listed several different priorities. Unsurprisingly, while 73 percent supported inclusion of the SDF in Article Nine, only 17 percent called for the inclusion of CSD. Finally, it is important to note that opposition to constitutional revision within the largest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), has grown over time. This signifies the CDP's consolidated position as the main opposition since its establishment ahead of the 2017 election.⁶⁶

The same dataset shows that there was a diverse and dispersed coalition backing Abe's prime objective. Abe's Hosoda faction takes the largest share of the pie, followed by unaffiliated members (*muhabatsu*) and the Asō faction. However, there were some notable omissions, such as current Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Taro Kono, and Shinjiro Koizumi. It is also worth noting that two faction leaders—Fumio Kishida and Shigeru Ishiba—did not select the same first priority as Abe during the 2017 election. These results support the conclusion that factions have a diverse set of interests, and that Abe did not have full support within the party to push his version of constitutional revision.

Further evidence is found in campaign brochures from past elections. These brochures provide insight into campaign pledges made by each party, usually listing policies in order of importance. Leading up to the 2019 election, Abe reportedly put strong emphasis on constitutional revision at forty of the forty-eight locations where he made stump speeches.⁶⁷ This is in stark contrast to the party's official brochure which mentions it

⁶⁴ Anna Fifield, "Abe May Have Hit a Snag in Plans to Revise Japan's Pacifist Constitution: His Own Party," *Washington Post*, December 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/abe-may-have-hit-a-snag-in-plans-to-revise-japans-pacifist-constitution-his-own-party/2017/12/13/e3c651aa-df22-11e7-9eb6-e3c7ecfb4638_story.html.

⁶⁵ See Appendix 3 for full table of responses.

⁶⁶ "Rikkenminshutō, Tō Setsuritsu wo Todokede Riberaru-kei Ukezara" 立憲民主党、党設立を届け出 リベラル系受け皿 [The Constitutional Democratic Party Reports the Establishment of the Party Hopes to Draw in Liberals], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO21817110T01C17A0000000/>.

⁶⁷ Matsuyama Naoki 松山尚幹, and Takahiro Ōkubo 大久保貴裕, "Kaikeneno Kodawari Nijimu Shushō Enzetsu Giron no Zehi Tou" 改憲へのこだわりにじむ首相演説 議論の是非問う [PM Speech Emphasizes Constitutional Revision Asks Whether Public Wants Debate], *Asahi Shimbun*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASM7D3H28M7DUTFK006.html>.

as the last major policy initiative.⁶⁸ In fact, LDP brochures frequently place this issue after other topics, such as economic growth and social welfare.⁶⁹ The Japan Communist Party, in contrast, positioned it second out of nine main issues.⁷⁰ It is revealing that, while Abe individually promoted revising the COJ, the party avoided making it the primary issue of the election.

The Peculiarity of the LDP-Komeito Partnership

One of the most perplexing coalitions in contemporary politics is the LDP-Komeito coalition government (*renritsu seiken*). The two parties could not be more different. The LDP is a right-leaning conservative party with nationalist elements. Komeito, meanwhile, is a pacifist party founded by the Buddhist movement Sōka Gakkai (SG).⁷¹ Before the birth of the coalition in 1999, the LDP had run an anti-Komeito campaign to win the 1995 election.⁷² This goes to say that the marriage did not occur from ideological alignment, but rather from rational vote-seeking behavior. In fact, several scholars have described the relationship as a win-win situation—the LDP relies on SG, one of the largest and most reliable voting blocs in Japan, while Komeito gains political influence, despite being a small party holding less than thirty seats in the Diet.^{73,74} In particular, SG garners around twenty thousand to twenty-five thousand votes per single-member district and can easily swing an election in favor of an LDP candidate.⁷⁵

It is understandable that Komeito holds a sizable “veto power” on contested issues,

⁶⁸ Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, “Reiwa Gan-nen Sangiin Senkyo Kōyaku” 令和元年参議院選挙公約 [Reiwa 1 House of Councilors Election Manifesto], July 21, 2019, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/manifest/20190721_manifest.pdf.

⁶⁹ Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, “Kōyaku · Seisaku Panfuretto” 公約政策パンフレット [Manifesto/Policy Pamphlets], accessed November 29, 2020, https://www.jimin.jp/policy/pamphlet/?fbclid=IwAR2huaCpbnwAtZPb17TotoWb-vjUpXqL2EssiurL63_eOKbo4v__4A_Lfdo.

⁷⁰ Japan Communist Party 日本共産党, “Kibou to Anshin no Nippon wo 2019 Sangiin Senkyo Kōyaku” 希望と安心の日本を 2019年参議院選挙公約 [A Japan Full of Hope and Comfort 2019 House of Councilors Election Manifesto], July 2019, https://www.jcp.or.jp/web_download/2019/06/201907-sanin-kouyaku-zen.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0i6xlPWcgF6DSqhqmxWKERMjIH-biLkGKHonGg5F345rPd11sfXmYBjZBM.

⁷¹ Liff, “Japan’s Defense Policy,” 92.

⁷² Adam P. Liff and Ko Maeda, “Electoral Incentives, Policy Compromise, and Coalition Durability: Japan’s LDP-Komeito Government in a Mixed Electoral System,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2019): 59.

⁷³ Michio Umeda, “The Liberal Democratic Party: Its Adaptability and Predominance in Japanese Politics for 60 Years,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 4, no. 1 (2018): 16.

⁷⁴ For Upper House seats, see “Nisen-jūkyūunen Saninsen: Jikō, Kaisen Nanajūichi Giseki Kakuto-kushi Shōri Kaiken Seiryoku wa Sanbun-no-ni Waru” 2019参院選：自公、改選71議席獲得し勝利 改憲勢力は3分の2割る [2019 Upper House Election: Victory for LDP-Komeito with 71 Seats Won: Pro-Revision Forces Fall Short of 2/3], *Nippon.com*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.nippon.com/ja/japan-data/h00502/>; for Lower House seats, see “Jikō Nado Kaiken Seiryoku Hachiwari Zengiseki Kakutei” 自公など改憲勢力8割 全議席確定 [Pro-Revision Forces Obtain 80%: All Seats Confirmed], *Chunichi Shimbun*, October 24, 2017, <https://static.chunichi.co.jp/chunichi/archives/article/senkyo/shuin2017/zen/CK2017102502100011.html>.

⁷⁵ Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 147.

notably constitutional revision. The party agrees with constitutional revision, but opposes revising Article Nine.⁷⁶ To borrow Liff and Maeda's words, Komeito is able to "punch significantly above its weight" to serve as a "brake" (hadome) on the more radical proposals advocated by its senior partner.⁷⁷ For example, multiple scholars credit the junior party's role in watering down the 2015 security legislation formally permitting CSD.⁷⁸ It is said that Komeito forced Abe to reword one of the conditions for CSD, to limit its use to when an armed attack occurs against Japan and "a country in a close relationship," closing the door to the possibility of aiding any country around the world.⁷⁹ Policy compromises indicate both the importance of Komeito and the balancing act between maintaining the coalition and pushing radical policies for the right-leaning LDP base.

Still, with the LDP having won six consecutive elections under Abe, it seems irrational to compromise on policy. But a closer examination of the electoral landscape reveals that the LDP is not as dominant as widely perceived. In recent years, the party's vote share in national elections has declined from approximately 30 percent in the 1980s and 1990s to 15–20 percent in the last few elections.⁸⁰ Komeito is also losing votes, with the 2019 Upper House election registering its lowest proportion of votes since the coalition was formed.⁸¹ A plummeting base serves as the chief reason for the two parties to continue cooperating despite their ideological differences. In addition, the LDP has a stronghold in rural areas, while Komeito gets votes in urban areas. These bases do not compete, minimizing friction when selecting candidates, and resulting in no contested races since 2000.⁸² Between 2000 and 2017, Komeito has also reduced the number of electoral seats it competes for from eighteen to nine, largely following its declining vote tally.⁸³ Finally, Komeito endorsements for LDP candidates have remained above 80

⁷⁶ Hughes, "Japan's Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision," 149; Smith, *Japan Rearmed*, 154.

⁷⁷ Liff and Maeda, "Electoral incentives, policy compromise, and coalition durability," 64.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Hughes, "Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense," 113; Liff, "Policy by Other Means," 92; and Nakanishi, "Reorienting Japan?," 413.

⁷⁹ Hughes, "Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense," 113–114.

⁸⁰ Nakakita Koji 中北浩爾, "Jimintō Banjyaku Janai ga Yūi wa Kuzurenai Riyū" 自民党盤石じゃないが優位は崩れない理由 [Why the LDP Remains Dominant Despite Not Having a Solid Base], *Tōyō Keizai*, May 21, 2017, <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/172234>.

⁸¹ For data between 2000 and 2017, refer to Igarashi Jin 五十嵐仁, "Nisen-jūnananen Shūinsen no Bunseki to Kongo no Tatakai" 2017年衆院選の分析と今後のたたかい [Analysis of the 2017 Election and Future Strategic Outlook], *Gekkan Zenrōren* (National Confederation of Trade Unions Monthly), February 2018, https://www.zenroren.gr.jp/jp/koukoku/2018/data/252_01.pdf; for 2019 election data, refer to "Komeito, Saninsen Hirei de Hyakumanhyō-gen Giseki Zōmo Kikikan Takamaru" 公明党、参院選比例で100万票減 議席増も危機感高まる [Komeito Loses One Million Votes Under Upper House Proportional System: Win Seats But Sense Crisis], *Sankei Shimbun*, July 28, 2019, <https://www.sankei.com/politics/news/190728/pl1907280010-n1.html>.

⁸² For data between 2000 and 2014, refer to Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 151; for 2017 data, refer to districts Komeito sent candidates to, at "Shūinsen 2017 Kaihyō Kekka" 衆院選2017開票結果 [2017 Lower House Election Ballot Results], NHK, October 22, 2017, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/database/shugiin/2017/index.html>.

⁸³ For data between 2000 and 2014, refer to Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 151; for 2017 data, refer to Komeito Party 公明党, "Shūinsen 2017 Tokusetsu Saito" 衆院選2017特設サイト [Special Website for 2017 Lower House Election], October 2017, <https://www.komei.or.jp/campaign/shuin2017/>.

percent since 2005, reflecting the LDP's dependence on organized votes (*soshiki hyō*) in exchange for policy compromises.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The Abe years saw a delicate balancing of ideological ambitions and pragmatic statesmanship. At times, Abe pandered to right-wing interest groups by advocating a radical proposal to rewrite the postwar constitution. At other times, he was more reserved and compromised on key issues, such as preserving the second paragraph of Article Nine. Abe's persistent pursuit of constitutional revision, even at the expense of watering down the original draft, highlights how the issue came to define his political identity. There was no turning back, and this inconsistency rather frequently contributed to confusion over his real intentions, thereby further alienating public support. Abe's failure is evidence of lasting domestic resistance to, and a lack of political consensus for, constitutional revision.

As many constitutional scholars have warned, expanding the scope of the SDF's capabilities will require amendments to be legally consistent.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Japan's changing security environment may warrant such an expansion. Concerns include North Korea's ever-salient nuclear weapons program, and China's maritime assertiveness, as evidenced by its new coast guard law.⁸⁶ Despite the Biden administration's efforts to reassure allies, there is also some doubt over the durability of U.S. security commitments with the shifting power balance in the region.⁸⁷ Future prime ministers will encounter the same issue: convincing domestic actors that revising the COJ, and therefore moving closer to a normal state, is a necessary and non-ideologically motivated change.

There continues to be ample resistance to hawkish security policy and revising the COJ.

⁸⁴ For data between 2000 and 2014, refer to Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party*, 151; for 2017, divide the total number of LDP candidates with the number of candidates endorsed by Komeito; and refer to Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 自由民主党, “Kōnin Kōhōsha” 公認候補者 [Official Candidates], accessed October 26, 2020, https://www.jimin.jp/election/results/sen_shu48/candidate/index.html#pref_0; “Komei, Jimin Sanjūkyūnin wo Tsuika Suisen” 公明、自民39人を追加推薦 [Komeito Backs 39 Additional LDP Candidates], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO21996070W7A001C1EA3000/>; and “Komei, Jimin Hitori wo Tsuika Suisen” 公明、自民1人を追加推薦 [Komeito Backs 1 Additional LDP Candidate], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO22459910Z-11C17A0PP8000?s=6>.

⁸⁵ “Shūdanteki Jieiken Kōshi, Zensankōnin ga ‘Iken’ Shūin Kenpō-shin” 集団的自衛権行使、全参考人が「違憲」 衆院憲法審 [Commission on the Constitution, House of Representatives: All Experts Say Collective Self-Defense is Unconstitutional], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, June 4, 2015, https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASF04H3U_U5A600C1PP8000/.

⁸⁶ “Nichibei, Chūgoku Kaikeihō ni ‘Shinkokuna Kenen’” 日米、中国海警法に「深刻な懸念」 [Japan-U.S., China's Coast Guard Law a ‘Serious Concern’], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGKKZO70045720X10C21A3MM8000/>.

⁸⁷ “Bei Indo Taihei'yōgun Shireikan, ‘Chūgoku ni Yoru Genjō Henkō’ ni Kenen” 米インド太平洋軍司令官、「中国による現状変更」に懸念 [U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander, ‘Chinese Actions to Change Status Quo’ a Concern], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOGN1005D0Q1A310C2000000/>.

Last year, the LDP failed to materialize talks to acquire “enemy counter-strike capabilities,” or the ability to strike at foreign bases before missiles are launched.⁸⁸ This is the result of a lack of consensus within the coalition. On the constitution, Prime Minister Suga has opted to value deliberation with opposition parties in the Diet’s Commission on the Constitution (Kenpō Shinsakai). Unlike Abe, who for the most part neglected reaching across the aisle, Suga understands the need to give the impression that this is a unified act, not an independent push by pro-amendment parties. The party is also crafting a new draft, likely to seal off a return to the 2012 draft that hardliners such as Ishiba desire. Forming consensus will be an arduous task given the multitude of views and opposition to creating a new draft.⁸⁹

That is not to say the COJ is unshakable. Just in the last few months, the LDP has successfully chipped away a few hurdles that stand in its way. At the party convention in March, Suga said he expects “some conclusion” on the revised National Referendum Law this Diet session, and reiterated his determination to achieve COJ revision, a key pillar of the LDP’s original platform.⁹⁰ The Lower House Commission on the Constitution passed the bill on May 6, a few days after the seventy-fourth anniversary of the COJ, making it highly probable the revised law will be passed by both Houses during this Diet session.⁹¹ The party has also implemented public relations campaigns targeted at women and younger generations through posters and comics.⁹² Much like the soft social control tactics utilized for citing “public bads” like nuclear power plants, these tools may take years to have effect, but can shape otherwise malleable opinions on the issue.⁹³ This is especially true in Japan, where younger citizens lack interest in politics and

⁸⁸ “Japan’s defense plan won’t include strike capability acquisition,” *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 6, 2020, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201106/p2g/00m/0na/029000c>.

⁸⁹ “Jimin ga Kaiken Gen-an Kisou Iinkai Tachiage e Jūninen Irai, Tōnai no Teikō wa Nezuyoku” 自民が改憲原案起草委員会立ち上げへ 12年以来、党内の抵抗は根強く [LDP To Establish a Drafting Committee First Since 2012, Strong Opposition from Within Party], *Tokyo Shimbun*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/60669>.

⁹⁰ Suga said the ruling coalition and opposition agreed to arrive to some conclusion (*nanraka no ketsuron wo eru*) on the National Referendum Law. He also said revising the COJ is a pillar of the party’s platform (*waga tō no tōze*). See, Suga Yoshihide 菅義偉, “Dai Hachijūhachikai Jimintō Taikai Suga Yoshihide Sōsai Enzetsu” 第88回自民党大会 菅義偉総裁演説 [88th Liberal Democratic Party Convention Speech by President Yoshihide Suga], Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, March 21, 2021, <https://www.jimin.jp/news/information/201354.html>.

⁹¹ “Kokumin Tōhyōhō Kaisei-an Shūin Kenpō Shinsakai de Kaketsu Kon-kokkai de Seiritsu e” 国民投票法改正案 衆院憲法審査会で可決 今国会で成立へ [Lower House Commission on the Constitution Approves Amendments to the National Referendum Law Likely to Pass Diet During This Session], NHK, May 6, 2021, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210506/k10013014891000.html>.

⁹² LDP Women’s Affairs Division 自由民主党女性局, “Shiawase no Katachi Watashitachi no Kenpō” 幸せのカタチ 私たちの憲法 [Pursuing Happiness – Our Constitution], accessed December 1, 2020, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/women/pamphlet/women_pamphlet2020.pdf; and LDP Youth Division 自由民主党青年局, “Kuni ni Todoke – Nippon ni wa Wakai Chikara ga Hitsuyōdesu” 国に届け – 日本には若い力が必要です [A Message to Citizens – Japan Needs the Power of the Youth], accessed December 1, 2020, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/18voice/vol06/kunitodoke_all.pdf.

⁹³ Daniel P. Aldrich, *Site Fights: Divisive Facilities and Civil Society in Japan and the West* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 64-65.

end up supporting the LDP without much thought.⁹⁴ The most recent public opinion polls also show net positive support for revision, stemming from the view that stronger emergency powers are necessary to deal with disasters like COVID-19 and respond to the increased threat from China.⁹⁵ Accordingly, there will be a degree of uncertainty as to whether resistance will endure in the decades to come.

⁹⁴ “Do the Young Lean Right? Mainichi Polls Show Strong Youth Support for Abe, LDP” Mainichi Shimbun, October 9, 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20171009/p2a/00m/0na/014000c>.

⁹⁵ Support is not necessarily for amending Article Nine. When asked whether Article Nine should be amended, results are reversed, with “it should not be amended” higher than “it should be amended.” See, for example, “NHK Yoron Chōsa ‘Kenpō Kaisei Hitsuyō’ Sanjūsan Pāsento ‘Hitsuyō Nai’ Nijū Pāsento” NHK世論調査 “憲法改正必要” 33% “必要ない” 20% [NHK Poll ‘Constitutional Amendment Necessary’ 33% ‘Not Necessary’ 20%], NHK, May 2, 2021, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210502/k10013010101000.html>; Aoki Jun 青木純, “Kenpō Kaisei ‘Sansei’ 48%, ‘Hantai’ Sanjūichi Pāsento Mainichi Shimbun Yoron Chōsa” 憲法改正 「賛成」 48%、「反対」 31% 毎日新聞世論調査 [Constitutional Amendment ‘Support’ 48%, ‘Oppose’ 31% Mainichi Shimbun Poll], Mainichi Shimbun, May 3, 2021, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20210502/k00/00m/010/141000c>; and Isobe Yoshitaka 磯部佳孝, and Tatsuya Eguchi 江口達也, “Kaiken Hitsuyō Yonjūgo Pāsento, Fuyō Yonjūyon Pāsento, Kyūjō Iji Rokujūichi Pāsento Asahi Chōsa” 改憲必要45%、不要44%、9条維持61% 朝日調査 [Constitutional Amendment Necessary 45%, Not Necessary 44%, Maintain Article Nine 61% Asahi Chōsa], Asahi Shimbun, May 3, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASP52632JP47UZPS009.html>.

Appendix

Appendix 1.

Words connoting nationalism/patriotism: national security, responsibility, security, our nation, nation, strong, strong Japan, together, strength, power, determination, defend, defense, defence, patriotism, rectify, crisis, pride, best, threat, threatening, future, devote, devotion, revive, reviving, revived, restore, restoring, restored, severe, severely, reinforce, reinforced, reinforcing, reinforcement, resolute, warning, warn, vigilant, vigilance, mission, safety, safely, confidence, lost, loss, serious, seriously, carve out, carve

Words connoting Constitutional revision: constitution, article9, article 9, article, article nine, articlenine, war, war power, selfdefense, self defense, collectiveselfdefense, collective selfdefense, collective self defense

Appendix 2.⁹⁶

See full tables at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1j15BHul8JVok7PaKUJYxYc-gA55qfjQY1/view>

Appendix 3.⁹⁷

See full tables at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1j15BHul8JVok7PaKUJYxYc-gA55qfjQY1/view>

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⁹⁶ University of Tokyo Taniguchi Research Team 東大谷口研究室, and Asahi Shimbun, “Nisen-jūnananen Shūinsen Kōhosha Chōsa” 2017年衆院選候補者調査 [2017 Survey of Lower House Candidates], September 23, 2017, <http://www.masaki.j.u-tokyo.ac.jp/utas/utasp.html>.

⁹⁷ University of Tokyo Taniguchi Research Team 東大谷口研究室, and Asahi Shimbun, “Nisen-jūkyūnen Sangiin Giin · Saninsen Kōhosha Chōsa” 2019年参議院議員参院選候補者調査 [2019 Survey of Upper House Representatives and Candidates], May 20, 2019, <http://www.masaki.j.u-tokyo.ac.jp/utas/utasp.html>.

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