

Is There Left Populism in Japan? The Case of Reiwa Shinsengumi

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Abstract: The rather heterogeneous state of populism research on Japan and the potentially populist quality of the new political party Reiwa Shinsengumi are the two key points addressed in this paper. Based on a summary of dominant concepts of populism and the pertinent research on Japan I argue for an ideational approach to make Japan more accessible to comparative efforts. Using Reiwa Shinsengumi as an example, I conclude that there is little populism to be found and suggest that future research needs to look for explanations why Japan is apparently different in this respect from other mature liberal democracies.

Keywords: Populism, Reiwa Shinsengumi, ideational approach

Introduction

Anyone interested in populism in Japan will quickly realize that the academic discourse on the topic is as enlightening as it is confusing. The relatively few scholars who are active in this field have produced a conceptually and empirically diverse body of literature. In some of it the sheer existence of populism is contested as are its key components and consequently its definition. The phenomena labelled as Japanese manifestations of populism include a very diverse group of political actors that make it difficult to see a common conceptual ground. One finding most scholars agree upon, however, is that the case of Japan is almost non-existent in comparative efforts of the international political science community.

When *Reiwa Shinsengumi*² (RSG) entered the political arena in April 2019, it appeared as a social activists' movement poised to add yet another player to Japan's fluid and fragmented opposition camp. With growing publicity and media coverage, however, RSG was converted into yet another piece of Japan's heterogeneous populism mosaic, albeit with the qualifier "*left* populism" attached to it. Obviously, it was RSG's founder and leader Yamamoto Tarō, at the time an independent Upper House member, whose campaign style and rhetoric seemed to justify this categorization, at least for some political observers (Minami 2019, Yamaguchi 2019, Takaku 2019, Asahi 02 Sept. 2019).

The potentially populist quality of RSG and the rather heterogeneous state of populism research on Japan are the two key points addressed in this paper. Based on a summary of dominant concepts of populism and the pertinent research on Japan I argue for an ideational approach, meaning a definition of populism as a small set of specific ideological elements (see below), which is best suited to make the case of Japan accessible to comparative efforts of the political science community. This seems all the more prudent given the increasing attention paid to the phenomenon, the more recent proliferation of scholarship on populism and the potential for theoretical and methodological insights that comparisons with other mature liberal democracies hold.

Based on this argument I use the case of RSG to discuss whether this new political party does indeed constitute (left) populism. In order to

answer this question I analyze three representative texts of the movement: (1) its mission statement and party platform, (2) a campaign speech by party leader Yamamoto, and (3) a town-hall meeting featuring Yamamoto in Gifu prefecture. I find that although there is some overlap between RSG's texts and elements of the ideational definition of populism, key components are missing, rendering the label "(left) populism" for RSG inept.

Studies on Populism in Japan

In 2015, Petter Lindgren began his comprehensive review of populism studies on Japan by stating that the "literature on Japanese populism is, comparatively speaking, small." (2015: 579)³ The few journal articles on this subject published since 2015 all agree or assert like Yoshida Tōru that despite "rapidly growing literature on populism in advanced democracies, Japan is often overlooked" (2019: 1). And indeed, although there also have been some monographs published in Japanese since Ōtake Hideo's pioneering work (2003),⁴ the last almost 20 years of research on Japanese populism have hardly been incorporated into comparative studies by the international political science community. The standard literature on this topic discusses democracies in Europe, North America and Latin America, but Japan (as well as the other two East Asian democracies, for that matter) seems to be off the academic map (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart et al. 2017: 1-18).

Why is that? "Nothing to see here!" is what Ian Buruma (2018), Jennifer Lind (2018) and others argue.⁵ In their analyses, there is no populism to speak of in Japan. According to these authors, the country's apparent immunity is mostly a function of its relatively egalitarian society, its lack of elites that "have betrayed" the ordinary people, a government that has

kept Japan's economy the "most protected and least globalized in the developed world" (Buruma 2018), and responsive policies that "put national interest first in immigration and trade" (Lind 2018: 69). Clearly, the appraisal of these authors is based on an understanding of populism derived from the experience of other industrialized countries.

Why is it that other scholars *do* find populism in Japan? Their studies reflect in one way or another two concepts of populism that the international political science community has been discussing for at least three decades. The "political strategic approach" argues that "populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers." (cf. Weyland 2001: 14) On the other hand, the "ideational approach" (cf. Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 5) defines populism as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the 'pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people."

One major difference to Buruma, Lind and others seems to be that some scholars who identify populism in Japan apply mainstream definitions in a partial way, meaning that the existence of single elements of those definitional concepts is considered sufficient to label political actors as populists. For example, Ōtake Hideo (2003: 122-123) used a one-dimensional concept that allowed him to include such diverse politicians as Koizumi Jun'ichirō, Ozawa Ichirō, Doi Takako, Kan Naoto, Tanaka Makiko, and also Ishihara Shintarō in this category. According to Ōtake (2003: 123) populists share one key characteristic: they criticize "(selfish) elites" for damaging the democratically legitimate

interests of "the (virtuous) people". Looking through this definitional lens, Ōtake later put forward his concept of "interest-led populism" (2006) of which former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei was a typical representative. Interestingly, some of the policies pushed by these "interest-led populists" are the same discussed by Buruma and Lind as protections *against* populism. Based on his definition, Ōtake also identified a form of populism which evolved out of a criticism of "interest-led populism" and has been referred to as "neoliberal populism". Koizumi Jun'ichirō (Prime Minister 2001-06) was the first national politician to be labelled a "neoliberal populist" by political scientists and journalists. On the local level, governors like Koike Yuriko (Tokyo) and Hashimoto Tōru (Osaka) were placed in this category.

Hashimoto also features prominently in studies that apply a concept of populism which is built around "strategic" aspects and "political style" (*seiji sutairu*) (Mizushima 2016: 6). In these studies, key definitional characteristics of populists may well be summarized as *prominent*, *polarizing*, and *performative*, all of which need to be understood against the backdrop of standard political rhetoric and behavior in Japan. Hashimoto was credited with giving birth to "theatrical populism" (Arima 2017) because of his "performance", his rhetoric, his explicit criticism of his political opponents, and the energetic consistency with which he demanded change. Koizumi was also included in this category as were other governors like Tanaka Yasuo (Nagano) and Kawamura Takashi (Nagoya).

A review of the most recent articles in English academic journals adds to the conceptual diversity.⁶ Weathers (2014) combined an ideational and a strategic approach in his analysis of former Osaka governor Hashimoto, who founded the political party *Nippon Ishin no Kai*. Weathers finds that Hashimoto represents "a classic case of Japanese-style populist

neoliberalism" (2014: 77). While the neoliberalism label refers among other things to austerity policies, "likening government to private business" (2014: 82) and Hashimoto's "signature policy, unifying Osaka City and Osaka Prefecture" (2014: 78), the argument for calling him "populist" is partly built around behavioral traits like Hashimoto's "flamboyant political performance skills and ability to connect with ordinary people", "political theatre", "intensive use of personal interaction, social media, and television messaging" and "aggressive rhetoric" used to "berate individuals" (2014: 81-83). Weathers also points to a part of Hashimoto's ideological self-justification, stating that in "classic populist fashion" the former governor argued he was elected by a majority providing him with "a strong mandate from the voters" (2014: 83) and therefore a legitimate basis for all of his political projects and decisions.

Hieda, Zenkyo and Nishikawa (2019) make a point by keeping the two basic concepts of populism explicitly separate. The authors state that the ideational approach has been developed and almost exclusively applied to European parliamentary systems, but not to presidential [electoral] systems such as those that can be found in Latin America, nor to elections for governors on the prefectural level in Japan. Using an online survey after the 2017 Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election,⁷ the authors operationalize populism using 15 items based on sub-categories of the ideational elements of (anti-)elitism, sovereignty and homogeneity of the people. Their goal was to test whether voters of the "strategic-populist party" *Tomin First*, created by Tokyo governor Koike, displayed ideational populist attitudes (the authors find little correlation).

Yoshida Tōru (2019) rejects "the ideological and organizational aspects of populism". Instead, he defines populism "as a form of political style that maximizes mobilization in order to win an election in particular

circumstances" (Yoshida 2019: 2), the core of this definition being the "political style" and the "particular circumstances". The former refers mostly to behavior similar to what Weathers and Arima described in the case of Hashimoto, while the "particular circumstances" refer to the electoral system for governors and the institutional antagonism between governors and prefectural assemblies. Yoshida explains that candidates for governor need to address "geographically dispersed constituencies" with a dominant urban electorate, a situation that creates incentives to propose populist neoliberal reforms to attack "the local assembly and its councilors, blaming them for prioritizing the particular interests of a specific sector or industry that they represent." (Yoshida 2019: 8)

Finally, Hijino and Vogt (2019) add to the diverse understanding of Japanese populism by applying an ideational approach to the subnational level in their study of Okinawa's governor Onaga (2014-2018) and his *All Okinawa*-movement. The evidence they find for the "new phenomenon" of "regionalist populism" consists of "subnational identity politics" and the "unity of a virtuous Okinawan people against a discriminatory Japanese mainland" (Hijino, Vogt 2019: 1).

The Argument for an Ideational Approach

This short review suggests that the present state of populism research on Japan is characterized by relatively few academic publications, conceptual heterogeneity, a yet small base of empirical data and an expandable connection to international comparative efforts. Of course, we may agree that there are "varieties of populism" (cf. Gidron, Bonikowski 2013) and therefore any phenomenon that fits any set of criteria should be included into the discussion. As Yoshida (2019: 2) argues, because "[...] types of populism vary tremendously in their form, style, and context,

it is more appropriate to discuss populisms, rather than populism" and to accept Japan as one particular (Japanese) species of the extant "variety of populisms".

I suggest an alternative path and propose that a concept of populism should be chosen based on meaningful comparative options. If we want to tap into the potential of comparisons with other mature liberal democracies featuring a parliamentary system, a well-developed economy and a (post)materialist society, Europe is the place to turn to. Since populism research on European liberal democracies is dominated by ideational concepts, such an approach seems a simple but promising choice.

Adopting a common conceptual foundation for comparative endeavors requires the separation of core elements from common satellite characteristics of populism or those that would better be categorized under a different framework. There are also many shades of grey in the way "the elite", "the people", their "will" and other potentially populist phenomena can be framed and understood.⁸ For example, in a highly centralized state like Japan it is not uncommon to hear politicians on the prefectural level use confrontational rhetoric against the central government, but that *per se* is not the same as the antagonism between "the pure people" and the "corrupt elite". Campaigning on a platform that demands cuts in public spending and less pork-barrel politics may sound attractive to most Japanese voters but this attractiveness alone does not turn these proposals into populism. The same can be said about reform-oriented politicians who are media-savvy, adroit, present themselves as outsiders to the political establishment and strongly criticize their opponents. Otherwise, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama would find themselves labelled populists.

The core of the ideational definition of populism is the basic frame of reference it offers to potential voters. These voters are

referred to as the morally pure people, the (silent) majority, those who by virtue of the democratic ideal should be the sovereign over their own polity but who - according to the populist narrative - are either insufficiently heard or completely cut off from power by the ruling establishment. As a result, “the people” are entangled in a Manichean conflict with the establishment, a conflict between the two moral antagonisms of good and bad. The conflict is over the “general will of the people” that populist leaders claim to exclusively represent and fight for. Everyone opposing the *volonté général* is an enemy of the people which inevitably leads to anti-pluralism, illiberal attitudes towards society and hostility towards political opponents (cf. Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016)(Figure 1).

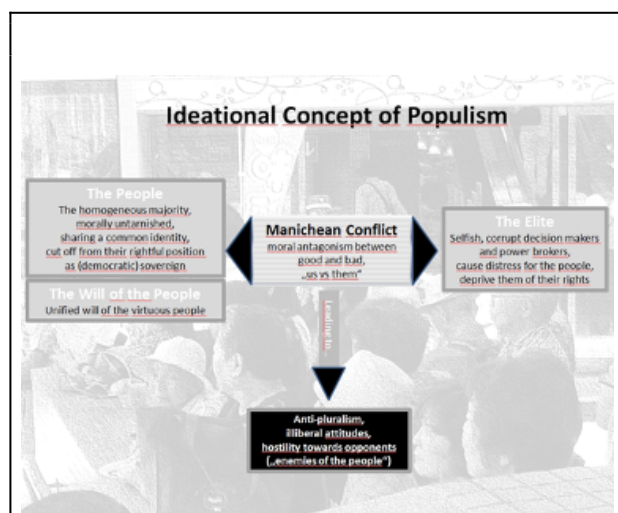


Figure 1: Key Elements of an Ideational Concept of Populism

(Based on Müller 2016, Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017)

Clearly, this concept of populism does not provide a well-developed, comprehensive *ideology* as Socialism, Marxism, (Neo-)Liberalism or others do. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser therefore call populism “a thin-centered ideology” (2017: 6), a term that has

drawn some criticism, among other things, for its conceptual spuriousness, the methodological inconsistencies it invokes, and potential problems of classification and measurement (Aslanidis 2016: 89). For our purpose, however, it is sufficient to understand populism as a small set of ideological notions that allows populist politicians to add all kinds of elements from other belief systems, dogmas, philosophies, worldviews etc. to their particular populist brew and season it to taste the local sufferings. This ability accounts for the many different subspecies of populism that can be found in democracies worldwide. Naturally, populism coming from the opposition cannot draw on hegemonic ideas of the ruling elite and therefore usually takes the shape of countervailing ideologies. As Lindgren (2015: 582) stated for Europe, “nativism and authoritarianism can be part of the ideological core of the PRR [populist radical right] because they are not part of the core ideologies of the established parties.”

In other words, the only way to justify labelling some political actors in Japan as populists in an ideational sense is to lower the definitional threshold, both in terms of the number of criteria applied and in terms of the way in which these criteria manifest themselves. If we revisit the cases of the Japanese governors with the ideational concept in its entirety, the populist label loses adhesiveness. Of course, governors need to use dualistic rhetoric that suggests that a large part of the prefectural electorate demands reforms, and that the central government is a natural opponent. In addition, neoliberalism offered a welcome ideological basis for these governors because of Japan’s particularism, myriad of veto players and vested interests. This is, however, significantly different from the moral claim of populists to be the exclusive representative of the “pure people” fighting a thoroughly corrupt elite. The overlap of these governors with the ideational understanding proposed here therefore seems insufficient to argue for

populism as a promising concept for comparative analysis.

The same seems to apply to the case of Okinawa's governor Onaga, whose movement *All Okinawa* Hijino and Vogt (2019) frame as "regional populism".⁹ The authors' reasoning is that Onaga used the shared Okinawan identity of his potential supporters to rally them behind him and create an "us versus them" narrative in which the "virtuous people" of Okinawa "'unite their hearts' against an 'indifferent' and 'discriminatory' mainland." (Hijino, Vogt 2019: 3) While these characteristics of Onaga's campaign do indeed overlap with those of populists, some core elements of the ideational concept are either only weakly pronounced or missing. First, Onaga and his movement were not illiberal or anti-pluralist. Secondly, they did not claim an exclusive moral superiority for their fight. Different from, for example, regional populists in Italy, Onaga did not view the world with a "Manichean outlook" (Mudde 2004) but framed the dispute with Tokyo as "as a conflict between the inherently peaceful island of Okinawa and an overbearing central government." (Flint 2018: 40) Finally, if Mudde's definition applies and *All Okinawa* shared - as Hijino and Vogt (2019: 3) write - "a world-view that divides the world into two monolithic, but antagonistic groups (a corrupt elite and virtuous people)", it remains unclear which group the majority of the Japanese people living in the rest of the country belong to.

Reiwa Shinsengumi

As stated in the introduction, RSG has already attracted the label of a (left) populist party. Yamamoto was also confronted with this categorization in interviews with mass media soon after the Upper House election in 2019, and replied that if rescuing people was called populism, he would call himself a populist.¹⁰ A cursory survey of public appearances of RSG

also reveals elements that merit an analysis according to an ideational definition of populism. The party frames its activities as a sincere fight for every single Japanese against a selfish political elite that makes life miserable for ordinary citizens and destroys the country. RSG also claims to be the only political force to represent the justified demands of the people, because the political establishment (including the other opposition parties) failed to take on this task.¹¹



Although Yamamoto had been a member of the Upper House for six years (2013-19), the behavior and policy stances of the former actor and TV-personality qualified him sufficiently as an outsider to the establishment. His public appearances show him as a leader with distinct rhetorical talent. In contrast to standard political lingo, Yamamoto delivers his campaign speeches in everyday language. For good measure, he is also media-savvy, stage experienced and a prolific user of new social media.

Yamamoto became politically active after more than 20 years in Japanese show business and appearing in a number of movies and television programs.¹² As he recalled during one of his town-hall meetings, his political engagement started after the 2011 triple-disaster in Japan's Northeast when he shared his concerns on

social media. Back then he also explained that Japanese celebrities would destroy their careers if they criticized corporations which are considered “Gods” (*kami sama*) in show business, since they finance the world of celebrities.¹³

Yamamoto failed in his first electoral attempt, losing his bid for the 2012 Lower House election in Tokyo’s 8th single member district (SMD). In 2013, however, he successfully ran as an independent candidate from the electoral district of Tokyo for a seat in the Upper House, winning 11.83% of the votes.¹⁴ In October that year he caused a stir and massive protest when, during an Imperial Festivity, he handed a letter containing information about the working conditions at the nuclear power plant Fukushima Daiichi to the Emperor. In 2014 he joined Ozawa Ichirō’s *People’s Life Party* (*seikatsu no tō*) as a co-leader (*kyōdō daihyō*)¹⁵ but five years later, when Ozawa merged his party (then called the *Liberal Party*) with the *Democratic Party for the People* (DPFP, *kokumin minshu tō*), Yamamoto left and began what he called “the challenge of establishing a grassroots party on the national level”.

Yamamoto named his new party after a brigade of lordless Samurai (*rōnin*). This “newly chosen group” (*shinsengumi*) was founded by the Tokugawa Shogunate (*bakufu*) at the end of Japan’s isolationist Edō period and charged with upholding public order in Kyōto. RSG’s first electoral effort was the Upper House election in July 2019 for which the party ran nine candidates in the proportional representation (PR) tier and one in Tokyo’s multi-member district. Although he was not only party leader but also the only prominent face of RSG, Yamamoto did not put himself on the first position of the party list. Instead, the top position was taken Funago Yasuhiko, a 61 year old graduate from Takushoku University who was diagnosed with ASL at the age of 41 and has been depending on an artificial respirator since 2002. The second spot on the

party list was taken by 55 year old Kimura Eiko, the founder of a self-support organization for physically handicapped people in Tama City, who badly fell as a toddler, damaging her cervical vertebrae, resulting in physical disability that left her dependent on a wheelchair.¹⁶

Yamamoto also surrendered his candidacy in Tokyo’s multi-member district that he had won in 2013. Instead, Nohara Yoshimasa ran in this district. In his home prefecture of Okinawa, Nohara was an active member of Sōka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist organization whose many million members treat vote-gathering for the “Clean Government Party” (*Kōmeitō*) as a component of their religious practice (Klein, McLaughlin forthcoming). In Tokyo, Nohara was now directly competing with *Kōmeitō* leader Yamaguchi Natsuo, aggressively criticizing the leaderships of both the religion and the political party for having abandoned Sōka Gakkai’s ideals. As Yamamoto said in his campaign speeches, Nohara’s candidacy was intended to create an interesting and “hot fight”, potentially mobilizing otherwise disinterested voters.¹⁷

In the Upper House election, Nohara won 214,438 votes, finishing 8th, not enough to win a seat there, but in PR, RSG won 4.55% or more than 2.2 million votes (991,756 of which were cast for Yamamoto), meaning that the party had secured Upper House seats for its top two candidates, Funago and Kimura (see Table 1). Yamamoto, third on the party list, lost his seat. Still, since RSG had won more than 2% of all PR votes it was legally recognized as a political party and entitled to receive public party subsidies.

List Position	Name	No. of votes
01	FUNAGO, Yasuhiko	
02	KIMURA, Eiko	
03	YAMAMOTO, Tarō	991,756
04	HASUIKE, Tōru	20,557
05	ŌNISHI, Tsuneki	19,842
06	YASUTOMI, Ayumi	8,632
07	WATANABE, Teruko	5,073
08	TSUJIMURA, Chihiro	4,070
09	MITSUI, Yoshifumi	3,907
	Votes for party	1,226,412
	Sum total	2,280,249

TABLE 1: PR-Result of 2019 Upper House election for RSG

(Data source: NHK¹⁸)

In preparation for the next general election RSG has already been fielding candidates in a number of SMDs. Some of these candidates are experienced former local or national politicians, but several hundred newcomers have also responded to the call on RSG's website.¹⁹ All official candidates have to consent to RSG's policy platform. Before the Coronavirus crisis took also hold of politics in Japan, RSG had announced it is willing to electorally cooperate with other opposition parties as long as they agree to demand a reduction of the consumption tax to 5%. Otherwise RSG would aim at running between 100 and 131 candidates on its own (see below).

***Testing RSG for Populism

In order to test RSG for ideational populism I screened three representative (written and spoken) texts of the party from 2019 and 2020 to look for those defining criteria laid out above.

I analyzed:

(1) the party's basic platform and its major policies as published on its website (June

2019);

(2) a speech by Yamamoto during the election campaign for the Upper House (July 2019); and
(3) an unedited video of an almost three-hour long town-hall meeting in Gifu prefecture (February 2020);

Given my intention to identify populist rhetoric and ideas, the following pages present data in the form of translated texts, consequently rendering the next three subsections quite descriptive in nature. However, after a presentation of each text I will discuss and analyze potentially populist elements. Given the manageable amount of text, no automated processes or methods of text mining have been applied. Not all translations are verbatim.

Party Declaration and Platform²⁰

RSG states in its basic declaration that its key mission is to "serve all the people (*subete no hitobito*) living in this country." Explicitly mentioned are those with low or no income, those "struggling heavily with 20 years of deflation", the "lost generation",²¹ people with lower educational attainment, the unemployed, handicapped and chronically ill. For all of these members of society RSG wants to build a "future without insecurities."

RSG aims at "raising the living [standard] of all people" with a policy platform that proposes massive deficit spending to subsidize household income and - via increased private consumption - seeks to stimulate the economy. These are proposals taken from RSG's website:

- Abolishing the consumption tax, thus effectively increasing real wages;
- Expanding affordable public housing;
- Waiving student loans for over five million former recipients;
- Introducing a nationwide minimal hourly wage of Yen 1,500, guaranteed and subsidized by the state where necessary;

- Raising the minimum social security benefits to annually Yen 2 million per household;
- Increasing the number of public officials;
- Subsidizing farm households to achieve a food self-sufficiency rate of 100%;
- Establishing a disaster prevention agency and employing experienced members of NPOs;
- Creating a “new deal” for massive investment in infrastructure;
- Paying Yen 30,000 monthly to every person during deflation until the inflation target of 2% is reached;
- Financing through new government bonds until 2% inflation target is reached, refinanced through increased tax revenues;
- Enforcing “reasonable consideration” of handicapped citizens;

Campaign Speech²²



RSG's main campaign instruments were many dozens of small-scale, low-key speeches by Yamamoto on street corners and in front of train stations all over Japan. In contrast to many other candidates he did not talk to his audience from the top of a minivan or bus, but instead stood at ground level and often in front of a monitor used to project information alongside his speech. Yamamoto began his one-

hour long campaign speech in Matsue, Shimane prefecture, on 10 July 2019 by presenting his diagnosis of what is wrong in Japan:

“In my six years in parliament I’ve seen that issues regarding money are quickly decided upon while issues regarding life (*inochi*) are hardly moved forward [...] National politics is not conducted for you [*his audience*] but for corporations: big tax reductions for big companies and the rich, deregulation, and favors for the Prime Minister’s friends. This violates the constitution. The present government is not a servant of all (*zentai*) but only of a part of it (*ichibu*). Result: The life of the people (*hitobito*) is going under. A new survey by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare shows that 57.7% of all respondents say their livelihood is tough (*kurushii*), 80% of single mothers say the same, more than 60% of all households report income below average, the worst number ever. You’ve all reached the limit. This situation has been caused by the mistaken economic policies the LDP has been pushing for the last 20 years.”

Yamamoto then presented the abolition of the consumption tax as a first counter-measure:

“When the consumption tax was raised, the individual maximum tax rate and the corporation tax were reduced. In other words: to allow corporations and the rich to make more money, their taxes were reduced and the consumption tax had to be raised to compensate. This is rampageous behavior (*ranbō rōseki*) [...] The time has come for all of you to get angry. This is state run domestic violence!”

According to RSG's plan, the revenue to compensate for the abolished consumption tax would come from a higher maximum tax rate and from income tax on *all* income, including

stock profits. Yamamoto also explained his proposal for a progressive corporate tax.

The second part of his speech was dedicated to another major policy proposal: a nationwide minimum hourly wage of Yen 1,500 which Yamamoto also presented as an effective measure to revitalize rural regions (like Shimane prefecture). People would not have to move to the urban regions and “live a tough city life”. Small companies, unable to pay Yen 1,500, would be supported by state subsidies.

Yamamoto continued with an appeal to those “40% who have given up on politics” to support his movement, if only for the fact that he and his fellow candidates would “make politics intriguing because we can start fights about what is going on in Nagatachō and tell you about it.”²³ He promised to act in “puzzlingly complicated” (*yayakoshii*) way and not to observe the unwritten rules of standard parliamentary behavior (*kūki ga yomanai*). “No matter how disillusioned you are, please do not surrender the control over politics. We can turn a world in which you only want to die, into a world in which you want to live.”

Yamamoto also explained that RSG put Funago and Kimura on the top positions of the party list for their experience leading a handicapped life, stressing RSG’s fight against a marketisation of human beings: “If we allow a world in which the value of people is measured by their productivity, it will lead to a world that will put a time-limit on life. I want a society in which people with disabilities are valued and not discarded. I want a society in which you can try over and over again to make things right.” He concluded this part with a few statistics to make his point: “One in seven children lives in poverty. One in three single mothers lives in poverty as does one in five senior citizens. We need to stop this. What this country needs is love and money for all of you (*minna san he no ai to kane*).”

After being told by an assistant that there was

still some time remaining, Yamamoto elaborated on his plans to restore dignity to many senior citizens whose pension is insufficient and who need to apply for additional social benefits. Yamamoto explained that RSG proposes to replace the pension system and the “livelihood protection system” (*seikatsu hogo seido* = social security benefits) with a “livelihood compensation system” (*seikatsu hoshō seido*) that kicks in earlier than the present system and targets all those who need support by subsidizing rent and food.

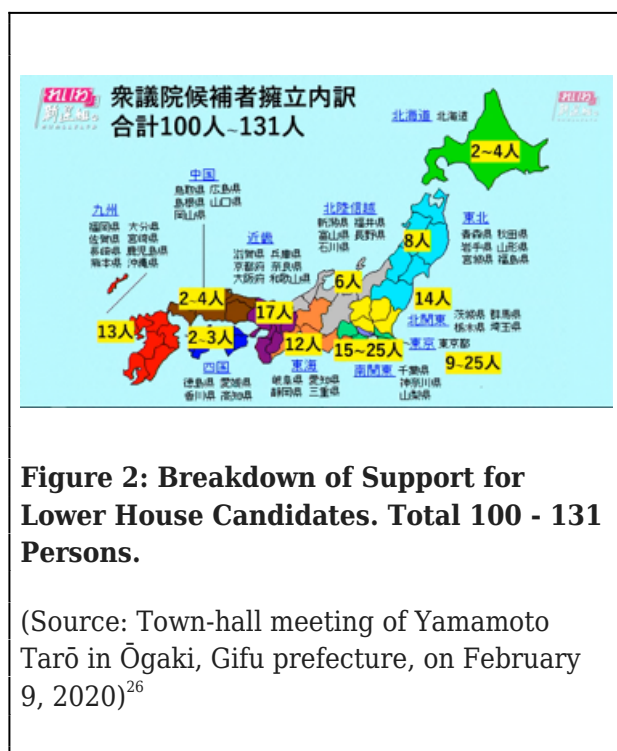
Yamamoto continued his speech by apologizing for the rough and incomplete ideas. He told his audience that he needs to be educated by them and that over his six years as member of the Upper House he had been counselled by many citizens. Then he added: “Let’s change things together. [...] I surely don’t want you to give up on this. Those of you disinterested in politics: Just give it a shot once. Those of you who dislike politics, give it a shot just once. This project is definitely intriguing. Let’s make it even more intriguing!”

He then explained ways to support RSG and asked for donations, describing what RSG would do with this money. Yamamoto then ended his speech by saying: “It’s not politicians who move this country. It’s every single one living in this country. The Prime Minister is on the level of a hired shop manager of this country. The owner of this country is you. You are its stakeholders; all of you are controlling it. I want to be at the center of this, I want to be the vanguard of this. Please let me go on a rampage in parliament with a party created by all of you!”

“Chat Meeting”²⁴

On 9 February 2020, Yamamoto concluded a tour of all 47 prefectures with a “chat meeting” (*oshaberi kai*) in Ōgaki, a city of about 160,000 inhabitants in Gifu prefecture. After an

introductory video, Yamamoto began by taking questions from two journalists.²⁵ In reply to an inquiry whether there will be RSG candidates running in Gifu, Yamamoto explained RSG's plans for the coming general election, using slides on the video-screen. As mentioned above, RSG intended to run between 100 and 131 candidates in SMDs, selecting the electoral districts primarily according to the number of votes received in each district during the Upper House election (Figure 2).



According to Yamamoto, the eventual number of candidates depends on three major factors. First, the Public Office Election Law requires a deposit of Yen 6 million for each candidate.²⁷ Given the other costs of a campaign, at least Yen 2 billion are required for 100 candidates, making RSG highly dependent on political donations. Secondly, each individual candidate should be from the respective region and able to spend at least the last three months before the election mostly working the streets of their electoral district and campaigning. Third, a sufficient local support setup for each candidate is indispensable.

After 17 minutes, Yamamoto began taking questions from a total of 18 citizens, sometimes consulting a tablet computer on his lectern to better understand the specifics of a question and often using content of RSG's policy platform in his replies. The following list shows all topics in original order that they were raised by an audience clearly keen to hear many more comments from Yamamoto:

- Funding gap in social security starting in 2040 with the retirement of the second baby-boomer generation;
- Lack of transparency in handling of general and special state budgets;
- Japan's dependence on US military;
- Election financing of RSG;
- Extending RSG's party structure to the subnational level;
- "Spy prevention law" (Law to prevent espionage targeting state secrets);
- Energy policy
- Consequences of abolishing the consumption tax;
- Employment situation of employees in public libraries;
- Cost of winning a seat in parliament;
- Counter-measures against low voter turnout;
- Revitalization of rural regions;
- Working conditions of local teachers;
- Plea to run a candidate in Gifu's 1st SMD against Noda Seiko (LDP);
- What can be done against this bad government?
- Why does no one have to take responsibility for their misdeeds?
- Target group of RSG policies;
- RSG's stance re. a guaranteed basic income;
- Patriotic content of history classes at school;

Toward the end of the Q&A, a 12-year-old boy asked Yamamoto for advice on how to become a politician. Yamamoto answered by recalling his own path into politics and suggesting that

the will to change things may be a similarity between him and the boy. “I’m waiting for you!”, Yamamoto said before then laying out his plans for the financing of his policies and occasionally asking for a show of hands to get feedback for his ideas.

He closed the event by offering a party poster to each attendee (“Please consider putting this on the wall of your house.”), inviting his audience members to join RSG as a volunteer, introducing two of his books,²⁸ pointing to the open call for candidates on RSG’s website, explaining how to donate (“Only as much as you can reasonably afford.”), how to avoid the many legal pitfalls of political donations (“Do not simply transfer the donation to our bank account!”), asking for volunteers to stack up the chairs of the venue, excepting those who wanted to take a picture with him (“Please remain seated!”), and finally rushing to the exit to personally hand every attendee his name card.

In contrast to his outdoor speeches, Yamamoto spoke very matter-of-factly and without much of the emotion and intensity displayed in his campaign appearances. The attacks against the LDP and the government were comparatively meek, both in terms of language and content. Since the open and unprepared questions often led Yamamoto in not too familiar territory, he sometimes even apologized for his ignorance (e.g. when asked about the “spy prevention law”). After more than two hours Yamamoto began to explain why Japan cannot go bankrupt, showing a number of slides packed with text and graphs, again apologizing for talking so long. Judging from a dialogue with an assistant standing off-stage, only a time-limit forced him to end his presentation after 2h 45 m.

Is Reiwa Shinsengumi a Populist Party?

If we adopt an ideational approach, RSG does

not fit the definitional criteria of populism even though there is some overlap.²⁹ While populists portray “the people” as the homogeneous, (morally) pure majority of a polity, RSG’s addressees are referred to as “every single one living in this country” and “the owners” of the country, those who are mobilized to regain control over politics. It may be a signifier of a left populism that a term like “(we) Japanese” (*wareware nihonjin*) is not used. Instead, (potential) voters are addressed as “persons” (*hitobito*), “every single one” (*hitori hitori*), “you” (*anata*) or “all of you” (*minna san*).



Two other aspects also do not match the populist image of “the people”. For one, there is no complete “purity”. In RSG’s view, the reason why “the owners” are not taking their democratic position as sovereign is that “more than 40% have given up on politics”. While there is sympathy for this attitude, RSG frames it as a civic duty to be politically informed and engaged. Yamamoto explicitly rejects the idea of praising people simply for voting if they are not sufficiently informed and admonishes his audience to use their power to improve “the quality of politics”.

Secondly, in spite of its mission statement to “serve all the people living in this country”, RSG clearly focusses on weaker and disadvantaged members of society. This focus may have a much stronger effect in terms of identity building than the rhetoric regarding a shared country and it does not include those Japanese doing well economically or professionally. In other words, RSG’s rhetoric does not address a “homogeneous people”.

In addition, the enemy image of a “corrupt elite” or “corrupt establishment” is not part of RSG’s texts either. Of course, criticism is directed at the ruling LDP,³⁰ its economic policy and “Nagatachō”, but this rather remains within the bounds of standard political rhetoric. Keidanren, Japan’s Business Federation, is portrayed as an external actor to political decision making that manages to influence policies and is rewarded for being politically involved.

Another missing element of the ideational concept of populism is “the will of the people” which is never evoked. Instead, RSG offers a set of policies to create a humane society, to fight against the marketisation of human life, and to restore respect and dignity of all members of society by, among others, supporting those in need financially. This set of policies is well summarized by Yamamoto’s statement: “What this country needs is love and money for all of you.”

As a consequence of the above there is neither a Manichean antagonism nor any anti-pluralist or illiberal element in RSG’s texts. Yamamoto especially argues for inclusion of minorities and weak members of society. Even though political and economic power brokers and decision makers are being criticized for their policies, they are not referred to as “foes” or “enemies of the people”. There is no “us vs. them”. Yamamoto even expressed understanding for younger Liberal Democrats who do not dare to speak up against their seniors or the Prime

Minister. Yamamoto also explained that he will not touch the “internal reserves” (*naibu ryūho*) that corporations were able to set aside using legal opportunities.

RSG does not draw on any host-ideology either. On the contrary, the idea of ideology is conspicuously absent from its rhetoric. There is no discussion of socialism, of anti-capitalist or anti-system ideas. Even though many of RSG’s proposals fit Keynesian economic policies Keynes isn’t part of the texts. Even more limited concepts like “middle class” or terms common in Japanese discourse like *kakusa shakai* (social inequalities) are missing. There is very little in terms of abstract concepts to be found but mostly real-life narratives and examples for the grievances of RSG’s target groups.³¹

The absence of abstract ideological terminology in its political communication seems partly a result of RSG’s origin within NPOs active in social work and Yamamoto’s experience within these circles. Remarkably, Yamamoto has succeeded in creating a nation-wide network, overcoming a hurdle that many Japanese social and citizens’ movements fail to take, movements that remain on the local level with very little public recognition. At the same time, RSG neither seeks office in subnational parliaments nor is it building a formal party organization below the national level.³²

RSG is focused on a limited set of policy fields, all of which promise a direct impact on the livelihood of the party’s target groups. At the same time, RSG’s ideas stay strictly within the boundaries of Japan’s socio-economic system. There is no reference to rising social inequalities in other industrialized countries or an international comparison that would broaden the perspective beyond Japan’s woes and identify similar patterns in the development of capitalist societies in general. As RSG is still a very young political party these limitations may change with time. For now,

however, RSG can best be understood as a national-level, social activists' movement with a prominent leader and as a new addition to Japan's fluid and fragmented opposition camp.

Conclusion

In this paper I noted the conceptual heterogeneity in populism studies on Japan and argued for an ideational approach in order to make the case of Japan more accessible to comparative efforts and use the "coherent wealth of research" (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart et al. 2017: 1) on populism available from the international political science community. Given the increasing attention paid to the phenomenon, I also proposed to use mature European democracies as promising options for comparative studies due to their many systemic similarities with Japan. The alternative, it seems, is to argue for a wide variety of populisms and consequently defining one or more particularly Japanese categories. The price for this approach, however, may be as high as insulating research on Japan from the international community.

While there is an obvious benefit in pointing out the overlap between populism and empirical phenomena in Japan's political arena, confusion looms large if the concept is rendered overly inclusive. Such a conceptual overstretch seems imminent, for example, if some of populism's core defining criteria are only cursorily applied or left aside. The problem can be easily illustrated by juxtaposing Koizumi Jun'ichirō and Viktor Orbán, *Tomin First* and the *Rassemblement National* (until 2018 known as *Front National*), or *All Okinawa* and *Lega Nord*, all of which are manifestations of populism according to one or more of the above-mentioned studies. Comparisons of these pairs, however, promise only limited theoretical insights because of their substantial differences.

Finally, it is not only *Reiwa Shinsengumi* that does not fit the label of populism. A cursory view through the ideational lens at the political arena in Japan only detects traces of populism here and there but no consistently populist party. This finding raises the next question: Why is there none? After all, some of the causes for the surge of populism identified in studies on other democracies can also be found in Japan. The list includes political corruption, growing social inequalities, economic and financial crises, negative effects of globalization, external shocks like the 2011 disasters, and political frustration among large parts of the population. Maybe populism is a late-comer to Japan and will develop when the many challenges of demographic change bear even stronger on Japanese society? Comprehensive studies on populist attitudes among Japanese voters could provide important answers to this question.³³

The dynamics and institutions that shape Japan's party system offer another promising avenue for research. After all, it's not only the non-existence of a populist party that distinguishes Japan's party system from that of other parliamentary democracies but also the absence of a green party, a competitive political left or any strong oppositional force, for that matter. Some potential explanations come to mind, among them: The enormous costs of entry into the political arena are clearly prohibitive for many who may otherwise run for office. The "catch-all" LDP may be just too absorbing to allow other parties to thrive. Prime Minister Abe himself, although very much a member of the political gentry of the country, has repeatedly displayed disdain for other elites like liberal journalists or scholars, possibly serving populist demands among Japanese voters to a degree that prevents right-wing groups from growing. Should Japan indeed be immune to populism, a comparative approach with Europe seems all the more promising to understand why. Given the relevance of the phenomenon for democracies

political science should consider pursuing this path more extensively in the future.

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Notes

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² *Reiwa* refers to the era name under Emperor Naruhito (2019-), *Shinsengumi* (新選組) is a Kanji pun on a group of Samurai (新撰組) in the late Edo period (see below). Note that RSG does not use the Kanji for *Reiwa* but only Hiragana.

³ Lindgren (2015: 579-580) continues: “It consists of several books and articles concerned mostly with Koizumi, but also with contributions on Hashimoto and Ishihara.”

⁴ Ōtake based his concept on what US historian Michael Kazin (1995) had written about US populism.

⁵ Burrett 2019, Hellmann 2017, Soris 2019;

⁶ For this brief review I use four of the only seven academic articles found by a search in titles, abstracts and keywords for “populis* AND Japan” in SCOPUS, JSTOR and “Web of Science” since 2014. The other three articles are not suited for this purpose: Lindgren (2015) summarizes the state of the field, Smith (2019) studies “online representational practices of anti-minority political activist groups”, and Lind (2018) sets out to explain “Why Populism Missed Japan”.

⁷ The election system of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly is not presidential but single non-transferable voting in multi-member districts. The authors argue, however, that their approach is justified because all “the TFP candidates rode on Koike’s coattails to win seats.” (Hieda et al. 2019: 5)

⁸ Kirk Hawkins (2010) in his study on Venezuela proposed an approach that measures populist discourse on a numerical scale.

⁹ *All Okinawa* was largely driven by a single issue (opposing the central government’s policies on US military facilities).

¹⁰ Cf. [source 1](#); [source 2](#); (Accessed: March 2020)

¹¹ Cf. [Yamamoto’s campaign speech](#) (Accessed: March 2020)

¹² Cf. [source](#) (Accessed: March 2020)

¹³ Yamamoto also talked about [his political beginnings in a video](#) produced by “[Labor Video Project](#)” which features English subtitles (Accessed: March 2020)

¹⁴ Cf. [source](#) (Accessed: March 2020)

¹⁵ Ozawa’s party needed a fifth member to fulfill the criteria for a parliamentary group in the Upper House.

¹⁶ The election system for the Upper House allows Japanese citizens everywhere to either vote for the party or pick a candidate from the party’s list. Starting in 2019, political groups were allowed to add a “designated frame” (*tokuteiwaku*) to the top of their open party list. This created the option to put certain candidates on high list positions irrespective of the number

of votes cast for them personally. In fact, personal votes for these candidates were counted as party votes, not as personal votes.

¹⁷ The speech can be reviewed [here](#) (Accessed: March 2020). Kōmeitō's leader Yamaguchi came in second, winning more votes than ever before (815,445).

¹⁸ Cf. [source](#) (Accessed: March 2020)

¹⁹ On February 9, 2020, RSG reported 599 applications, see [here](#) (Accessed: Feb 2020)

²⁰ The party declaration is available [here](#); the policy platform [here](#) (Accessed: February 2020); [RSG's official NHK campaign video](#) (*seiken hōsō*) featured very similar contents (Accessed: Feb. 2020);

²¹ Those Japanese who graduated from school and university during the economic downturn of the 1990s, facing fewer employment opportunities and often being unable to find regular full-time positions (presently the cohort of 35-45 year olds).

²² July 10, 2019, in Shimane, available [here](#) (Accessed: Feb. 2020). This speech is representative of many other campaign speeches by Yamamoto.

²³ Nagatachō is the part of Tokyo that is host to parliament and party headquarters.

²⁴ Cf. [source](#) (Accessed: February 2020)

²⁵ One from a local newspaper and one freelancer.

²⁶ Screenshot from [video](#) (Accessed: March 2020)

²⁷ In fact, the legally required deposit (*kyōtakukin*) for a candidacy in an SMD is not 6 but 3 million Yen. However, running in SMD and on the party list simultaneously doubles the deposit for a single candidate. Therefore, Yamamoto may have misspoken or assumed that all RSG candidates will run in SMDs and on the party list.

²⁸ One book (Yamamoto 2019a) entitled "Even I could be an MoP" [*Boku ni mo dekita! kokkai giin*] recalls his term as Upper House member, the second book (Yamamoto 2019b) is called "I want to make you happy" [*Anata wo shiawase ni shitain da!*] and is meant to explain "everything about RSG".

²⁹ RSG would not qualify as populist under the political-strategic concept either as a close reading of Weyland (2017) shows.

³⁰ Kōmeitō, the junior coalition partner, is not mentioned once in this regard.

³¹ Kōmeitō uses a similar plain rhetoric in addressing concerns of its voters. Like RSG Kōmeitō was created outside of parliament and with an economically weak clientele as target group (cf. Ehrhardt, Klein et al. 2014).

³² This approach resembles that of the Happiness Realization Party (*kōfuku jitsugentō*) which, as a complete newcomer founded by a New Religion, entered the 2009 general election with a massive investment and 288 candidates in SMDs. Continuously failing to win a single seat at national elections the party changed its strategy and decided to grow bottom-up, increasingly pushing candidates in local elections.

³³ Airo Hino, Sebastian Jungkuz and Robert Fahey are working on a study looking at explanatory power and problems of measuring populist attitudes. Hieda, Zenkyo and Nishikawa (2019) were mentioned above as another group of scholars conducting empirical research on populism in Japan. Finally, a new research project at Tokyo's Sophia University and Duisburg-Essen University, Germany, will join this as of now small research community.