Age of eligibility to run for election in Japan: a barrier to political careers?

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ABSTRACT
Recently, students’ political movements are emerging in the world. In countries other than Japan, students often play important roles as political actors. On the other hand, in Japan student movements are failed, and it is often argued that the reason lies in young people’s low political awareness. However, this article argues that the political awareness of young people in Japan is not low, and that the problem lies in the difficulty of access to politics for the young. This article investigates student movements around the world focusing on age of eligibility to run for election. In countries and regions where university students reach the age of eligibility to run for election during their school years, student movements to develop into political parties, and core members can become politicians while they are still university students. On the other hand, in Japan, the late age of eligibility to run for election means that students cannot enter politics during their time in university. In addition, given the Japanese traditional employment system, there is a significant risk involved in stopping regular employment to become a politician, which is not permanent employment, as it is dependent on election results. Thus, Japanese university students who are interested in politics are less likely to sustain that interest and become politicians after graduating from university.

KEYWORDS
Umbrella movement; SEALDs; eligibility to run for election; political consciousness; Japanese employment system; student movement

1. Introduction
In Japan, student movements are usually discussed in connection with the political awareness of young adults. It is often argued that the lack of success of Japanese student movements is the result of low political awareness among the young.\(^1\) However, it appears that the age of eligibility to run for election is also a factor. This article examines a number of student movements around the world, particularly in Asia, focusing on age of eligibility to run for election.

Numerous studies have explored the political consciousness of Japanese citizens, as reflected in declining voter turnout, especially in national elections and elections of local government heads and assembly members. This is a long-standing issue in Japanese politics,
identified by the mass media even at the time when the campaign against the Japan–U.S. Security Treaty intensified in 1960. In particular, the “family first” principle, highlighting the advance of individualism and the nuclearization of families, has become a mainstream theoretical explanation for the spread of political indifference among the young.  

However, in recent years, some studies have argued that the political awareness of Japanese young people is not substantially lower than the international average; and that the real problem is that the political awareness of the young generations is lower than that of the older generation, and thus the will of the elderly is reflected in politics while the will of young adults is ignored, i.e. the advance of “silver democracy.” Meanwhile, another study maintains that the political awareness of Japanese young people is not low, but rather than their avenues of access to politics are closed. This article is largely in agreement with the assertion that the political awareness of young people in Japan is not low, and that the problem lies in the difficulty of access to politics for the young. It is argued here that the disparity in maturity among student movements is largely the result of the relatively late age of eligibility to run for election in Japan, along with Japan’s unique labor system characterized by mass employment of new graduates, seniority rules and lifelong employment.

In countries and regions where university students reach the age of eligibility to run for election during their school years, politically inclined youth, such as core members of student movements, can become politicians while they are still university students, and can gradually evolve from political movement activists to politicians. This opens the door for student movements to develop into political parties. On the other hand, in Japan, the late age of eligibility to run for election (25 for the House of Representatives and 30 for the House of Councilors) means that students cannot enter politics during their time in university. In addition, given the Japanese traditional employment system, there is a significant risk involved in stopping regular employment to become a politician, which is not permanent employment, as it is dependent on election results. So Japanese university students who are interested in politics are less likely to sustain that interest and become politicians after graduating from university.

The structure of this article is as follows. The second section presents the view that in countries other than Japan, students often play important roles as political actors. The section also presents cases where student movements have become venues for political education of the young and have raised the political consciousness of the young. The third section offers an international comparison of the impact of age of eligibility to run for election on the development of students’ political activity. In particular, the aftermaths of two political movements that developed at about the same time, are examined: Scholarism, a Hong Kong pro-democracy student activist group, and SEALDs, a Japanese student group, with reference to Japan’s unique employment system. In addition, the fourth section shows that the Japanese employment system makes job-changing to the political area riskier in Japan than in other countries. The fifth section summarizes the findings and presents conclusions.

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2 See, for example, Mita, Gendai Nihon no Shakai Ishiki; Mita, Shinban Gendai Nihon no Seishin Kozo; and Tanaka, Shiseikatsushugi Hihan; and Miyajima, Gendai Shakai Ishikiron.

3 ISSP Research Group, 2012, International Social Survey Programme: Citizenship – ISSP 2004, GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA3950 Data file Version 1.2.0, doi: 10.4232/1.10078.

4 See, for example, Highton and Wolfinger, “The first Seven Years of the Political Life Cycle,” Feldman, Seiji Shinrigaku.

5 Takahashi, “Wakamonoha Hontouni Seijini Mukanshin nanoka.”
2. Political actions by students and student movements

This chapter presents a qualitative multi-country comparison of political actions by students. Politically, it might be not easy for the Japanese people (who tend to be criticized for the low political awareness of their young generation) to imagine that in many other countries, university students are an influential group of actors in the political process, with a significant influence on government decision making.

In many countries, by means including demonstrations, students are constantly expressing their views on various social issues such as ethnic conflicts, human rights of minorities, opposition to nuclear power and weapons, disarmament and environmental problems. Active political expression by university students can have a great impact on public opinion, and if the government makes mistakes in its handling of student actions, the government’s political situation can become unstable. In many countries, then, the government cannot ignore the voice of the students.6

2.1. The UK’s National Union of students

The student demonstrations that occurred from November to December 2010 in the UK are a case in point. The students requested the withdrawal of the university tuition fees increase proposed under the austerity financing of David Cameron’s Conservative Party administration. The student action was terminated when the Cameron administration passed the increase into law, but the student movement itself gained strong social approval.7 The Guardian stated that although the bill for the revisions of school fees passed through Parliament, at least the students could bring attention to the broken promise of the politicians.8

The National Union of Students (NUS, a part of the European Student’s Union, ESU), led the movement. The NUS is not subsidized by the British Department of Education, so the students were not restrained from taking the lead in protest activities.9

The NUS is characterized as not being tied to specific ideas or political parties.10 Students’ freedom of thought, belief and political position are a given in the union, and there is no exclusivity on either side but rather a free atmosphere for the active exchange of opinions.11

NUS stages free and vigorous debates as the center of its activities, and at times it organizes demonstrations related to important political issues, but basically its activities do not involve violent behavior. Therefore, as a mature organization with political influence, NUS has a considerable degree of societal trust. The UK government cannot ignore the existence of NUS when making decisions.12

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6Brooks ed., Student Politics and Protest: International Perspectives.
7Brooks, Byford, and Sela, “The changing role of students’ unions within contemporary higher Education.”
8Student Protest – as They happened” (The Guardian December 9 2010).https://www.theguardian.com/education/blog/2010/dec/09/student-protests-live-coverage?INTCMP=SRCH.
9January 31 2019 at the website of National Union of Student (NUS), https://www.nus.org.uk/.
10During his time in graduate school in the UK, the author observed that the students of Warwick University were divided into supporters of Labor Party and Conservative Party, and during the British general election took part in frequent debates organized by the Warwick student union. The two sides invited politicians from their respective parties to give speeches.
11The author was a MA student and a PhD candidate and observed Warwick Student Union during 2000–2007.
12Kumar, “Achievement and Limitations of the UK Student Movement”.
2.2. Scholarism in Hong Kong

In October 2014, pro-democracy agitators led the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. That movement, led by the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism on September 26, protested the decision by the Chinese government to impose restrictive qualifications on candidacy for the 2017 election of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. The demonstration attracted several thousand students and citizens, and on the last weekend of September, the demonstrators occupied major roads including those in the business district near Central Station. In response to the demonstrators’ occupation of central Hong Kong, the police fired 87 tear gas canisters to disperse the demonstrators. Since the demonstration team used umbrellas to protect themselves, this demonstration was called the Umbrella Movement.13

The Chinese government remained firmly opposed to the demonstration for Hong Kong’s democratization. The government warned foreign media and governments, making comments such as, “We will never change the election method stipulated by the National People’s Congress no matter what happens in Hong Kong,” and “Since Hong Kong is China’s domestic concern, we hope foreign countries will never send out erroneous messages.” Leung Chun-ying, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, responded to the request for dialogue with the students but said, “Dialogue must proceed within the premises of the Basic Law of Hong Kong and the decisions made by China” and refused the suggestion that Hong Kong protest claims should be considered. He also refused to resign. Subsequently, the administration was paralyzed and financial institutions and schools were closed temporarily. Some of the citizens of Hong Kong voiced criticism of the situation, the students who occupied the central area eventually withdrew, and the Umbrella Movement ended in failure.14

Regardless of the success or failure of the movement, the presence of Scholarism, one of the organizations that led the Umbrella Movement, was impressive. Scholarism was formed in 2011, and the members at the time of its inception were mainly junior high and high school students, born in the 1990s. Some 500 students joined at the time of the launch of Scholarism, but word of mouth attracted 3,000 students at the peak.15 The participants attended civic education lectures to deepen their understanding of the mechanism of politics and democracy. One of the students who attended civic education lecture is Agnes Chow.16 She served as Scholarism public relation officer and was dubbed goddess of the Umbrella Movement.17

Scholarism developed its protest campaign when China tried to introduce mainland patriotic education in Hong Kong in 2011. The group successfully opposed the plan by mobilizing students and citizens, notably parents. Subsequently, the group members

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13“Hong Kong’s students want you to stop calling their protest a ‘revolution’” (Washington Post October 4 2014). https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/10/04/hong-kongs-students-want-you-to-stop-calling-their-protest-a-revolution/?utm_term=.1ce3be4a85de.
14“Police clear final Hong Kong protest site at Causeway Bay” (BBC News December 15 2014) http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia—30474687.
15Fung and Yip, “The policies of reintroducing Liberal Studies into secondary school in Hong Kong,”; and Macfarlane, “If not now, then when? If not us, who?” Understanding the student protest movement in Hong Kong.”
16In an interview with the author, she said, “When I entered junior high school, I was a just geeky girl who liked anime, but that changed completely.” She speaks fluent Japanese as she learned the language just by watching Japanese animations in DVDs. Author’s Interview with Agnes Chow in Chinese University of Hong Kong on September 18 2015.
17Lee, “Media Communication and the Umbrella Movement: introduction to the special issue.”
became students at universities in Hong Kong, and Scholarism played a central role in the Umbrella Revolution along with the college student union, Hong Kong Federation of Students.  

2.3. **Japanese student movements: active opposition to the Japan-US security treaty**

*Anpo*, the student movement in opposition to the Japan–US Security Treaty, was the largest anti-government and anti-America campaign in Japanese history. That movement, formed in 1948 by autonomous student associations from 145 universities, was heavily influenced by the Japanese Communist Party. The movement, joined by Diet members, workers, students, and domestic leftists who opposed the ratification of the treaty, went into action twice, in 1959–1960 and in 1970.  

The 1960 *Anpo* agitation was opposed to the Nobusuke Kishi cabinet’s attempt to revise the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which had been signed in 1951. The central players in the opposition campaign were the Socialist Party of Japan and *Zengakuren* (the All-Japan Federation of Students’ Self-Governing Associations), who claimed that “Revising the treaty would increase Japan’s risk of being involved in war.”  

*Zengakuren* organized demonstrators and surrounded the National Diet Building. The demonstrators collided with the riot police in front of the main gate of the Diet Building, and Michiko Kanba, a University of Tokyo student participating in the demonstration, was crushed to death. That incident prompted some students to turn to riotous acts including burning police vehicles. Some 400 students were injured, 200 people were arrested and 300 police officers were injured. The scale of the demonstration expanded to 330,000 participants (as announced by the organizers; Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department reported 130,000) in activities in front of the Diet building.  

Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi ignored the demonstration and pushed the revision of the Security Treaty through in the Diet. However, the Kishi cabinet was forced to resign because of its responsibility for the chaos. Although *Zengakuren* was unable to prevent the security treat revision, it did succeed in forcing the cabinet to resign. That successful experience led the group to expand its activities to the anti-Vietnam war movement and protests over Narita Airport construction and the return of Okinawa to Japan.  

In 1970 when the 10-year term of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty ended, it was scheduled for automatic extension. The 1970 *Anpo* action was in opposition to that extension. *Zenkyoto* (the All-Campus Joint Struggle League, which had evolved from *Zengakuren*) and students from various left-wing sects mounted campaigns nationwide,

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18 Macfarlane, “If not now, then when? If not us, who?” Understanding the student protest movement in Hong Kong.”
19 Kapur, *Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo*.
20 Andrews, *Dissenting Japan: A History of Japanese Radicalism and Counterculture, from 1945 to Fukushima*.
21 Hirakawa, “Maiden Martyr for New Japan.”
22 Dowsey, *Zengakuren: Japan’s Revolutionary Students*.
23 Kishi said, “The area around the National Diet Building is noisy, but other areas, such as Ginza and Korakuen baseball stadium, are as usual. I can hear the voiceless voices.” See Kudo, *Kenrantaru Akuun Kishi Nobusuke Den*.
24 See above 20
and major universities throughout the country, including the University of Tokyo and Nihon University, were barricaded.

The student movements, which were also involved in issues of public concern such as the Vietnam War, were supported by some members of the working class. However, compared to the 1960 campaign, public opinion against the extension of the security treaty was weaker. In addition, with internal conflicts between Zenkyoto and the Democratic Youth League of Japan (led by the Japanese Communist Party), and the intense control and suppression by riot police, the student movements became exhausted and gradually lost the support of the citizenry.25

The student movements and new left-wing movements did continue their activities, although they were weakened when it was revealed that Chukaku-ha (the Middle Core Faction of the Japan Revolutionary Communist League) had murdered the leader of Kakumaru-ha (the Revolutionary Marxist Faction), and that in retaliation, Kakumaru-ha had murdered Chukaku-ha activists. Furthermore, when people became aware of a series of brutal events including the Asama-Sanso Incident (a hostage crisis and police siege in a mountain lodge in 1972) and the Mountain Bases Incidents (a series of terrible purges within the Japanese United Red Army), student movements and left-wing movements came to be seen as synonymous with murder and crime. Even left-wing supporters began to criticize the left-wing movements, and the left-wing forces declined in number at once. With decreased support, those movements were unable to prevent the extension of the security treaty in 1970.26

Since the 1970s, the student movements in Japan have declined significantly. They have split into various factions, and autonomous student associations at many universities have been driven to disband. As of 2017, there were 14 Kakumaru-ha affiliated autonomous student associations at 13 universities, 8 universities affiliated with the Japan Communist Party, and 5 autonomous associations affiliated with Chukaku-ha at 5 universities. Kakurokyo affiliated autonomous associations have disappeared. The reason for this decline is that student movements have lost support, largely because of the above-mentioned brutal incidents.27

When the students of today leave for college, their parents warn them never to get involved in religions or dubious student movements. As a result, self-governed student organizations have been disappearing from many universities.

In addition, in some cases when junior high and high school students in Japan intend to participate in political activities, they are required to inform their schools. In 2016, when the Japanese voting age was lowered to 18, voter education was provided in high schools nationwide. However, the content of the courses was limited to practical considerations such as how to put a ballot in the ballot box. Discussion of freedom of ideological belief was carefully avoided.28 As a result, even though Japanese young people are interested in politics, they have little opportunity to learn about it, aside from self-education. In particular, students have no opportunity to learn how to critically examine political beliefs.

25Watanabe, Today Zenkyoto 1968–1969.
26Kapur, Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo, 134–175.
27Nihon Kyouiku Kyoukai, “Heisei 28 Nen no Kagekiha, Kyousantou no Ugoki.”
28“Systemic avoidance of political issues by schools keeps youth vote in the dark” (The Japan Times May 2 2016) https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/05/02/national/politics-diplomacy/systemic-avoidance-political-issues-schools-keeps-youth-vote-dark/#.XFnrtPZuJPY.
2.4. Students emergency action for liberal democracy (SEALD s)

However, a new student movement has emerged in Japan. In December 2013, when the State Secrecy Law was enacted by the second Abe administration, university students in the metropolitan area who had held study sessions before the enactment of the law formed Students Against Secret Protection Law (SASPL). SASPL launched a demonstration against the State Secrecy Law on February 1, 2014, and dissolved with a final demonstration in front of the official residence of the prime minister on December 10, when the law came into effect.

In May 2015, as a successor group to the SASPL, students who felt a sense of crisis about Prime Minister Abe’s administration and constitutional views formed the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs). They emphasized the significance of young people’s political participation as representative of the young generation.

Young people in various regions who learned of such student movements through Twitter and LINE launched SEALDs KANSAI, SEALDs TOHOKU, SEALDs RYUKYU, and SEALDs TOKAI, one after another. The number of members exceeded 1,000 as of September 2015. Many of the members were young people in their late teens and early twenties, enrolled at various colleges and schools. They engaged in those activities by taking time from their studies and part-time jobs.

SEALDs hosted demonstrations in front of the parliament building, protesting against the 2015 Japanese military legislation. The activity spread beyond students. Other campaign groups influenced by SEALDs to oppose the Japanese military legislation were launched: Mothers Against War, largely consisting of middle-aged membership.

Since the Abe Cabinet enacted its security bill in September 2015, those groups have been campaigning toward election defeat of politicians who approved the bill. In addition, in the House of Councilors election in July 2016, they also called on the opposition party to enter into a joint struggle and to work to support unified candidates of the opposition party.

2.5. Student organizations in Japan, the UK and Hong Kong

There appear to be three main reasons why the UK’s National Union of Students has political influence on the government. First, the union has no direct relationship with
the government, not even in the form of subsidies; second, the union is not bounded to specific ideologies or political parties; and third, it is an established organization with a long history, valuable experience, and social reliability.

Japanese student associations and student movements are rather the other side of the coin. In Japan, even if students are interested in politics, they tend not to get involved in student associations or student movements. This reflects the historical fact that at one time Japanese student associations and student movements were linked to extreme leftist ideas and when disputes arose, there were cases of purges and even terrorism outside the organization. In the end, student associations lost the trust of society and eventually went into decline. However, if the Japanese movement had followed the example of the UK student association, they could have capitalized on opportunities to develop healthy political consciousness, while avoiding involvement with specific ideologies.

In Hong Kong, the organization called Scholarism provides political education for young people, even as early as the middle school years. There is no equivalent phenomenon in Japan. Also, there is a very cautious attitude in schools regarding political activity.

3. Comparison of age of eligibility to run for election and student political activity

There are many cases around the world where students become members of government. In the UK general election in May 2017, 20-year-old female college student Mhairi Black was elected as a Scottish National Party member of parliament. In Taiwan, where citizens can run for election at age 23, the New Power Party, created centered around students, was formed after the Sunflower Student Movement, whose student members, wishing to voice their alarm about the approach of Ma Ying-jeou (then president of Taiwan) to China, occupied the Legislative Yuan (National Assembly) in 2014. The New Power Party elected five members to the Legislative Yuan of Taiwan and grew to be the third strongest faction after the Taiwanese National Party and the Democratic Progressive Party. Similarly, in the Hong Kong legislative election, 23-year-old Nathan Law of the Demosisto party was the youngest person ever elected to the Hong Kong legislature.

3.1. Scholarism becomes a political party while SEALDs is dissolved

When the author visited the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2016, one year after the Umbrella movement, it was so quiet that it was hard to believe that that was the venue of a fierce student demonstration just one year earlier. There were only a few posters on the campus demanding democratization, and a small number of students

36 Sankei Shinbun Shuzaihan, Saraba Kakumeiteki Sedai – 40 Nenmae, Campus de Naniga attaka.
37 “SNP’s Mhairi Black becomes Britain’s youngest MP since 1667 after defeating Douglas Alexander” (The Telegraph May 8 2015) https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/SNP/11591144/SNPs-Mhairi-Black-becomes-Britains-youngest-MP-since-1667-after-defeating-Douglas-Alexander.html.
38 “POLITICS: Time to relate to China like any other country, chairman says” (Nikkei Asia News February 3 2016). https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Time-to-relate-to-China-like-any-other-country-chairman-says.
39 “Hong Kong elections: anti-Beijing activists gain foothold in power” (The Guardian September 5 2016) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/05/hong-kong-poll-pro-independence-activists-poised-to-win-seats-in-record-turnout.
appealing for democratization gathered in the open space in the center of the campus. Many students, showing no interest in the matter, headed quickly to class.  

Many students lost hope for the democratic movement and moved on. Hong Kong is a major base for large industrial sectors such as finance, real estate, and shipping. Many top students will enter the business world after they graduate. It can be said that if protests occupied the business district for a long period of time and lost society’s trust, it would be natural for students to distance themselves from the movement, making employment their top priority. However, there are always some members in student political movements who try to continue their political activities, not seeking jobs even after graduating from university. In Hong Kong, after the Umbrella Movement dissolved, some students, including Nathan Law, Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow, the main members of the movement, formed Demosistō, a new political party, in April 2016.  

Chow maintained, “We could not change the election system through demonstrations, but if we want to have a say about the future, we should make a political party of young people.” Since the Hong Kong eligible age to run for election is just 21, becoming candidates for the Legislative Council of Hong Kong is a realistic goal for them.  

The election for the Legislative Council of Hong Kong was held on September 4, 2016. Young people who opposed the plan to reform the administrative chief election process and staged a large-scale demonstration for the Umbrella Revolution in 2014 continued their political activities after the failure of the revolution, and eventually six of them won seats in the legislature. It was an epoch-making victory: the anti-China group won 30 seats, some of them held by young people. That is more than one third of the 70 Council seats, a strong enough showing to allow the party to vote down bills.  

Eight democratic legislators including Nathan Law had to swear that when they took office they would observe the Hong Kong Basic Law and serve in the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China. However, their seats in the legislature were revoked as they were seen as taking actions insulting to China.  

Democratic power in Hong Kong has been driven into a corner by the Chinese Communist Party. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the young people who had formed the new party fought the election campaign on the basis of policy proposals for various fields such as public finance, housing, welfare, education and demographic policy, not just opposition to the reform of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong as demanded by the Umbrella Movement.

In an interview in 2015, Agnes Chow affirmed political activity involving violence, arguing that since there are no fair elections in Hong Kong, there was no choice but to
use violence in the work toward democracy. In another interview in 2017, she argued that Hong Kong’s social security policy is not impartial, giving preferential treatment to large companies with foreign capital.

Chow, a 21-year-old active college student, attempted to run for the supplementary Hong Kong Legislative Council election in April 2018 but she was suspended by the authorities. Clearly in the last two years Agnes Chow has transformed from a democratization activist to a politician.

Meanwhile, in Japan, on August 15, 2016, World War II Memorial Day, the SEALDs (Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy – s) student organization was dissolved. In 2015, using the music of cafes and clubs, they rapped their opposition to the security-related laws and the constitutional amendments that the Abe administration aimed to establish. Demonstrations spread to various parts of the country. However, only 3% of the population actually participated in the demonstrations, and it was not possible to obtain the support of the majority of the people.

SEALDs did not offer any countermeasures to various policy issues, but they did continue protesting that the security law was unconstitutional. Daisuke Tsuda, a journalist, commented, “The outcome might have been unavoidable, but in the end the students lacked freshness in their claims, just the same as the traditional leftists.” They failed to produce any policy on how to resolve anxiety about the future, an anxiety felt by many young people about issues such as employment and economic measures, increased social security for an aging society, and increased fiscal deficits.

In July 2016, when the Diet passed all the laws that SEALDs had opposed, including security laws, and the opposition party that SEALDs supported lost in the House of Councilors election, SEALDs disbanded instantly. They announced that they had always intended to continue their activities only until the election, because they wanted to seek employment or proceed to higher education after that.

### 3.2. The age of eligibility to run for election: divergent fates of student movements in Japan and Hong Kong

The student political movements in Hong Kong and in Japan each had setbacks. However, the youth movement in Hong Kong overcame the setback and formed...
a political party, becoming a new political force, while the Japanese youth movement disappeared rather suddenly. One of the reasons for that difference seems to be the different age of eligibility to run for election in the two countries.

The age of eligibility to run for election in Japan (25 for the House of Representative and 30 for the House of Councilors) is relatively high from a global viewpoint. In 60% of countries and regions around the world, including Hong Kong, the age of eligibility is 21 or younger. Among the major (G7) industrialized countries, the age of eligibility is 18 in the UK, France, Germany and Canada; it’s 25 in the United States and Italy. Usually people think democracy is more advanced in Japan than in Hong Kong. However, in terms of eligibility to run for election, Hong Kong is more liberal than Japan.

The author interviewed one experienced Hong Kong politician who was elected as a local council member in 1985, after graduating from college in 1984, and was elected to the Legislative Council in 1995. During his university time, Britain and China began the negotiations for the retrocession of Hong Kong. He participated in student movements focusing on the future of Hong Kong rather than immediate issues and became a politician as soon as he graduated.

In Hong Kong, there is a long history of political campaigns by students, starting before the return of Hong Kong: the Umbrella Movement was not the first such campaign. Those students who devote themselves to political movements are not only opposing aspects of the current situation; they are also committing to playing important roles in deciding the future of Hong Kong when they become politicians. How is it that Hong Kong youth consider the future as well as the present? One factor is surely that they can be considering entering politics when they are still studying at university, since they are eligible to run for election at the age of 21.

From the beginning, Japan’s SEALDs decided to end their activity at the time of the House of Councilors election in July 2016, and they disbanded as planned. The core members of SEALDs talked about their future activities in terms of the importance of having a citizen side movement for change rather than forming a political party and getting citizens more involved in politics. However, they never produced a concrete strategy for achieving those goals.

According to “Street Politics: The legacy of SEALDs” (a ten-part series of Asahi Shimbun articles tracing the history of the SEALDs movement), SEALDs leaders Aiki Okuda and Chiharu Takano, who participated in the East Asia Youth Conference held in Manila in April 2016, were harshly questioned by Joshua Wong, the charismatic leader of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and Lin Fei-fan, the student leader of Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement, demanding an explanation for SEALDs dissolving rather than creating a political party.

When Joshua Wong met SEALDs on another occasion, he asked, “If you can get 10 members, the organization will expand to 1000. You should think how to sustain the momentum. SEALDs has been wasting its time.” However, Okuda and Takano remained reluctant to form a party. They replied,

“No matter how many new political parties we make, we cannot defeat the current ruling party unless the entire opposition is consolidated. It is more important to have movements

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54 Nasu, “Shogaikokuno Senkyoken Nenrei oyobi Hisenkyoken Nenrei”.
55 Author’s interview with Sin Chung Kai, Legislative Councillor, in the Office of Members in the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region on September 22 2016.
working to change the citizen side. We want to get people more involved in politics. It does not make sense if we are in the spotlight by ourselves.\textsuperscript{56}

SEALDs, which strongly rejected the notion of becoming a political party, voiced criticism in various media that the age of eligibility to run for election is too high. For example, in an interview, Takeshi Suwahara, a leading member of SEALDs, asked, “It is strange that the right to be elected is not granted until age 25, isn’t it?”\textsuperscript{57} Okuda also argued that “The younger generation should be more politically involved, but this requires a lower age of eligibility to run for election.”\textsuperscript{58}

In the end, it proved difficult for the students to continue political activities from the time they graduated from university until they became eligible to run for the House of Representatives at 25. Even if they did form a political party, they could not run for elections immediately. Perhaps they could not truly imagine themselves becoming politicians.

4. Distinctive Japanese employment system

Certainly, age of eligibility to run for election cannot account for the rise and fall of student movements around the world. In the U.S.A. and Italy, where the age of eligibility is 25, the same as in Japan, student political activity is very vigorous.\textsuperscript{59}

Student political movements in Japan can be characterized as intertwined with the distinctive Japanese employment system based on collective employment of new graduates, Japan’s seniority system, and lifetime employment.\textsuperscript{60} In Japan, the majority of current Diet members worked as local assembly members or secretaries of politicians before they took office. In total, more than 50% of the current Diet members were politicians from the beginning of their careers. This is a remarkably high proportion, compared to 18% in the U.S.A and 5.4% in the UK. On the other hand, few Diet members had occupations other than politically related ones: among Japan’s Diet members, only 22.2% arrived from the business world, civil service, and labor unions, whereas in the USA, 61.6% come from legal, business and financial backgrounds, and in the UK 48.2% are former businesspersons, teachers, laborers and company workers.\textsuperscript{61}

It has been pointed out that in light of the situation in Japan, in elections three attributes are considered more important than the ability of the candidate: constituency, name, and funding. In short, candidates from political families who have those

\textsuperscript{56}“Gaitou Seiji SEALDs ga Nokoshitamono [Street Politics: The legacy of SEALDs]” (a -part series of Asahi Shim bun articles, from 14 August to August 27 2016).
\textsuperscript{57}“Moto SEALDs Suwahara Takeshi Hisenkyoken ga 25 Saimade Mitomerarenai noha Okashikunai?[Former SEALDs Takeshi Suwahara Claims Is It Strange that the Age of Eligibility is 25 in Japan?]”(AERA.dot February 6 2018) https://dot.asahi.com/dot/2018020600011.html.
\textsuperscript{58}“18 Sai Senkyoken Wakamono Minnano Koe Touhyou de Todokeyou SEALDs Okuda-sanra Tokyo Shibuya de Appeal [Right to Vote is Lowered to 18 Years Old: SEALDs Members As Okuda Appeal Young People Should Vote to Pass their Voice to the National Diet]”(Mainichi Newspaper June 27 2016) https://mainichi.jp/articles/20160627/ddp/041/010/005000c
\textsuperscript{59}See, for example, Cini, “Student struggles and power relations in contemporary universities: the case of Italy and England,” Mehreen and Thomson, “Affinities and barricades: a comparative analysis of student organizing in Quebec and the USA.”
\textsuperscript{60}Kitagawa, Ohta, Teruyama, and Tokunaga, eds., The Changing Japanese Labor Market: Theory and Evidence.
\textsuperscript{61}“Kokkaigiin no Shusshin Shokugyou Kokusaihikaku (2011 nen)[International Comparison of Member of Parliaments’ Former Careers in 2011]” on the website of Shakai Jitsuyou Date Zuroku [Data Catalog of Actual Social Situations] http://honkawa2.sakura.ne.jp/5217.html.
attributes have an advantage, so there are many hereditary Diet members.\textsuperscript{62} This means that newcomers to the political world face a significant barrier. On the other hand, in the UK, which has a single-seat constituency system, emphasis is placed on the ability of the candidates to convey the policies of their political parties, since candidates have no relatives or territorial connections in their constituencies, and since there are also many parachute candidates.\textsuperscript{63}

In addition, it is important to consider the LDP’s long-term administration of some 60 years with only four years out of power, and the continuation of the medium-size constituency system until the 1993 House of Representatives general election. This institutionalized the LDP seniority system and the career system based on number of election victories.\textsuperscript{64}

This is a very unusual system in the world today, given that the occupation of politician is, in principle, a precarious job. Recently in the UK a number of politicians became prime minister in their forties, for example John Major, Tony Blair and David Cameron, and there are often young cabinet members.\textsuperscript{65} In Japan, a Diet member with only two or three election victories cannot be appointed even to the level of deputy minister,\textsuperscript{66} while in Britain it is not unusual for a parliament member with two or three election victories to serve as prime minister or cabinet minister. In particular, in the Cameron administration, politicians in their early 40s occupied major cabinet posts, e.g., George Osbourne as finance minister\textsuperscript{67} and William Haig as foreign minister.\textsuperscript{68}

It can be pointed out that the distinctive career system of the LDP poses a significant disadvantage to those who try to move into the political world after obtaining some social position and credit in business circles or government work, and favors hereditary politicians who have the potential to be Diet members at an earlier age.

To overcome that situation, other political parties have been trying since the 1990s to diversify candidates and to mitigate the barriers to entry to the political world with measures such as the public recruiting of candidates.\textsuperscript{69} As a result, in the 2000s, there were numerous elections of young newcomers who did not have the three attributes (constituency, name and funding), e.g., the “Koizumi Children” (LDP, 2005 general election) and the “Ozawa Girls” (Democratic Party, 2009 general election). Then it can be said that the barriers to entry have eroded. However, when various scandals occurred and the decline in the quality of politicians was severely criticized, the opinion was voiced that better human resources might have been secured before the easing of the political entry barriers.\textsuperscript{70} The opinion is still heard that in Japan, politician is not an attractive option for outstanding talent.

Another cause of limited political activity by the Japanese young is the employment system. Japanese students, denied the right to run for election while studying at

\textsuperscript{62}Curtis, Election Campaigning Japanese Style.
\textsuperscript{63}Knight, British Politics for Dummies.
\textsuperscript{64}Kohno, Japan’s Postwar Party Politics.
\textsuperscript{65}Parker, British Prime Ministers.
\textsuperscript{66}“The Cabinet” on the website of Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/meibo/index_e.html.
\textsuperscript{67}“George Osborne to become Chancellor of the Exchequer” (BBC News 24 Ticker. May 11 2010).
\textsuperscript{68}“William Hague to become Foreign Secretary” (BBC News 24 Ticker, May 11 2010).
\textsuperscript{69}“Kouhosha Koubo [Candidate Recruitment]” on the website of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) https://www.jimin.jp/election/candidate/.
\textsuperscript{70}“Seiken ni Children no Jyubaku [Administrations are under a spell of ‘Children’]” (Nikkei News July 14 2014) https://www.nikkei.com/article/DBKLZO18863020U7A710C1EAC000/.
university, tend to focus on job hunting for lifetime employment, and their involvement in politics is generally interrupted.

The aforementioned SEALDs members were acting with their own job hunting in mind. Various SNS announcements have indicated that members of SEALDs were keen on job hunting. Also, there are many discussions of SEALDs members’ job hunting on the internet. Moreover, Okuda, who was preparing for Hitotsubashi University graduate school during the period of SEALDs activity, did in fact pursue his studies. Not thinking about employment, he continued his political activities after entering graduate school, but he did not expect a large number of members to do so.

Consequently, career change is risky in the lifetime employment and seniority system, so diverting one’s career to political work is generally seen as not a life choice option.

5. Conclusion

In discussions of the failure of the student movements in Japan, it is often argued that the reason lies in young people’s low political awareness. However, it is argued here that is not the case, and rather, the problem lies in the difficulty of access to politics for young people.

In Japan, student organizations, which are a main avenue to politics and a venue for learning the craft of politics, have not developed, largely because historically, student organizations have lost the trust of society as a result of their association with extremism and the use of violence.

Since the Japanese voting age was lowered from 20 to 18 in 2016, isn’t it common sense that the age of eligibility to run for election should be lowered too? Since the 1990s, the Japanese-style employment system has been criticized as being incompatible with the times. In this era of global competition, it is widely recognized that we need to acquire excellent talent with high expertise and put it in the right places. In order to make it possible for Japanese students to grow up with the option of entering politics, it is necessary to look at the problems of political circles as issues related to the optimization of human resources development throughout Japanese society.

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71 See SEALDs members’ twitter. For example, @domoboku on twitter https://twitter.com/domoboku/status/75434299399917568/photo/1, Shinta Yabe on twitter https://twitter.com/257syabe/status/799611717156147200. There are a lot of information of SEALDs members’ job hunting on the internet. For instance, “SEALDs member no genzai. Kaisan Shitemo Aikawarazuno Katsudouka. Nakaniha Mushoku de NEET no Katsudouka mo [Current situation of SEALDs Member: There are Activists. Some become jobless and NEET.” (Seiji-chi-shin August 20 2018) https://seijichishin.com/?p=7199.

72 Many journalists and academics strongly supported job-hunting of SEALDs members. For instance, Satoshi Masuda, Associate Professor at Osaka City University, sent a message on Twitter saying, “If there were ordinary global companies, they would be competing to hire active SEALDs students,” https://twitter.com/smasuda/status/622798208092147713?lang=ja.

73 Interview with Okuda on the website of Litera https://lite-ra.com/2016/08/post-2498_3.html, and Interview with him (Huffington Post April 15 2018) https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2018/04/14/okuda-aki_a_23411459/.

74 Kitagawa, Ohta, Teruyama, Tokunaga, eds., The Changing Japanese Labor Market: Theory and Evidence.
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