

Japan's Parliament and other political institutions

SUMMARY

Japan is a constitutional monarchy, with a parliamentary system of government based on the separation of powers. The Emperor is the symbol of the state and does not hold political functions, only performing ceremonial duties. Nevertheless, he can play a relevant diplomatic role. With Emperor Naruhito's enthronement in 2019, following his father's abdication, Japan has entered the *Reiwa* (beautiful harmony) age.

The 2001 administrative reform strengthened the Prime Minister's leadership in the cabinet. The Chief Cabinet Secretary also plays a relevant role. Suga Yoshihide, leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party, is the country's Prime Minister, succeeding Abe Shinzō, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, in 2020.

The Supreme Court is at the top of the judicial system. It is not a constitutional court, despite handling appeals arising from actual disputes. The appointment of its Justices is reviewed by the people at the first general election of the Lower House following their appointment.

Japan is a unitary state divided into 47 prefectures. A Metropolitan Government administers the capital, Tokyo. Japan's 1947 Constitution recognises 'local self-government.' Local governments carry out many of the national policies and programmes. They have limited autonomy, also because of their dependence on financial resources from the central government.

Japan has a bicameral parliament – the Diet. Although the two chambers share legislative powers, the Lower House (House of Representatives) prevails in the legislative process and is empowered to adopt the final decision on the budget and on the approval of international treaties.

Changes in the regional geopolitical environment and in the country's demographic structure have prompted debates on issues such as the revision of the 'pacifist' Article 9 of the Constitution and the seat distribution among electoral constituencies.

This is an update of a briefing published in June 2020.



Ideogram of the Reiwa age overlaid on the Japanese flag.

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Introduction

Japan is an archipelago of around 6 850 islands, forming an arc to the east of the Asian continent, in the Pacific Ocean. Its surface area is slightly larger than that of Germany and it has a coastline of 30 000 km – the world's sixth longest. Located in the [Ring of Fire](#), the country records the most earthquakes per year in the world.¹ It has a population of around 126 million, according to [2019](#) data, mostly urban ([92 %](#)), but undergoing an [accelerating decline](#) – long-term projections suggest it will fall below [100 million by 2049, and decline to 82 million by 2065](#).

Japan, like the EU, is an ageing society, topping the group of 20 countries with the highest share of people aged 65 or above. All remaining countries on this list are [EU Member States](#). Japan is the country with the [highest median age](#) and currently has over [80 000 centenarians](#), mostly women.

The country is ethnically homogeneous, with ethnic Japanese making up 98 % of the population. Japanese is the only spoken language. As regards religion, around two thirds of the population adhere to both [Shintoism and Buddhism](#). Christianity ranks third, with a mere [1.5 %](#) of the population. Freedom House, in its 2020 Freedom in the World Report, classifies Japan as [free](#). The country ranks 66th out of 180 in the 2020 [World Press Freedom Index](#) (in an improving trend, though it ranked 53rd in 2013) and 20th out of 180 in the 2019 [Corruption Perception Index](#).

Map 1 – Japan, its neighbours, and territorial disputes



Source: [EPRS](#). The three territorial disputes in the area covered by the map are:

- (Southern) Kuril Islands / Northern Territories, with [Russia](#);
- Senkaku / Diaoyu (/Diaoyutai), with [China](#) and Taiwan;
- Dokdo /Takeshima, with [South Korea](#).

Executive power

The [1947 Constitution](#) is the second in Japan's history, being a formal revision of the preceding [1889 Meiji Constitution](#). However, whereas the Meiji Constitution drew inspiration from the Prussian Constitution, the 1947 Constitution was deeply influenced by United States General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan until 1952, when the country's sovereignty was restored, with the exception of the [Ryūkyū Islands](#) – Okinawa prefecture – which only recovered their sovereignty in 1972. Japan is a constitutional monarchy, where the Emperor's power is limited to mainly ceremonial duties and with a parliamentary system of government based on the [separation of powers](#). It is a unitary state, split up into 47 administrative divisions – one metropolitan district (*to*: Tokyo), 2 urban prefectures (*fu*: Kyoto and Osaka), 43 prefectures (*ken*), and one district (*dō*: Hokkaido).

Head of State

His Majesty [Naruhito](#) is the 126th Emperor of Japan. According to tradition, he traces his lineage directly to Jimmu, the first emperor of Japan, considered a descendant of the goddess Amaterasu. He ascended to the throne on April 2019, following the abdication of his father, Akihito (see box). The Emperor (*tenno*) is 'the symbol of the State and the unity of the People, with whom resides sovereign power.' Article 1 of the 1947 Constitution departs from pre-war era tradition, when the Emperor was 'sacred and inviolable' and held total sovereignty. Today, the Emperor holds a mere symbolic role and no political function. However, he serves an important [diplomatic role](#). The previous Emperor, Akihito, was active in reconciliation with former wartime adversaries. The Emperor's functions include: the appointment of the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the promulgation of legislation, the convocation of the Diet, the dissolution of the House of Representatives and the proclamation of elections to the Diet (the parliament), the appointment and dismissal of Ministers of State, and the ratification of treaties.

The Emperor's abdication

In August 2016, Emperor Akihito publicly announced his wish to abdicate due to health reasons. As the 1947 [Imperial Household Law](#) did not contemplate the case of abdication, in June 2017 the Diet had to adopt a provisional law to allow it. Akihito formally declared his intention to abdicate in December 2017, and the government began making arrangements for the first imperial abdication since 1817, when Emperor Kōkaku abdicated in favour of his son. On 30 April 2019, Akihito stepped down, becoming Emperor Emeritus, and Naruhito became the Emperor of Japan. Following the Imperial Succession, a new era was proclaimed to define the country's future and to replace the [Heisei](#) era (achieving peace). It has been named *Reiwa* (beautiful harmony).

While Japan is often associated with its spectacular spring cherry blossoms, the Imperial Throne is rather referred to as the '[chrysanthemum throne](#)'. The 16-petal chrysanthemum can be found on the cover of Japanese passports. The throne is dynastic and only male offspring from the family's paternal line can assume it. Emperor Naruhito has only one daughter, Princess Aiko. The shrinking of the Imperial family – currently made up of only [18 members](#), as [princesses](#) who marry commoners are removed from it – and the shortage of male heirs have led to calls for a [change to the succession rule](#) so as to allow women to become empresses. Another idea is to reinstate the Imperial family members of 11 branches that lost their status in 1947.

The debate on the reform of Article 9 of the Constitution

With [Article 9](#) of the Constitution, Japan renounced to war and committed not to keep an army. In the post-war period, Japan kept the right to individual self-defence, but not the right to collective self-defence, which states that an attack against one country is considered an attack against all of that country's allies. This put [limits](#) on the status and operational capabilities of its Self-Defence Forces (SDF), as each mission they carry out must correspond to an express legal provision. There was a risk that the legislator would overlook certain eventualities and that the SDF would thus become irrelevant. In July 2014, a [cabinet decision](#), followed by the Diet's passing of new legislation in September 2015, reinterpreted Article 9 of the Constitution to allow for the application of a new collective right to self-defence, under three conditions. This change was one of a series of [reforms and initiatives in defence and security policy](#) that can be explained by the more challenging regional geopolitical context – including enhanced Chinese assertiveness and North Korea's growing nuclear threat – and by Japan's desire to become an 'active contributor to peace.' Japan can now help to defend its allies – the United States in particular – even if it is not under attack itself. The new legislative framework gives the SDF [operational possibilities](#) that they did not have in the past.

The [primary political goal](#) of the leading party's leadership has been to introduce the first ever amendment to the Constitution, in order to include an explicit reference to the SDF, but many believe it [unachievable](#). The ruling coalition does not hold the two-thirds majority required in the Upper House to amend the Constitution, forcing any draft amendment to be put to a referendum. Japanese [public opinion](#), however, is generally against abandoning the pacifist character of the Constitution.

Prime Minister

The [executive power](#) lies with the [Cabinet](#), headed by the Prime Minister, whose leadership has been strengthened through the [2001 reform](#) – aimed, among other goals, at strengthening political leadership over a traditionally strong bureaucracy² – which amended the Cabinet Law and established the Cabinet Office. The reform gave the Prime Minister the authority to submit to the Cabinet proposals on issues such as 'basic principles on important policies of the Cabinet', namely basic principles on external and national security policies, financial management, economy, budget planning, and administration. The Cabinet Secretariat, which coordinates ministries and agencies, drafts the 'basic principles'. The Chief Cabinet Secretary is very [influential](#) and is sometimes seen as a shadow Prime Minister, holding the role of cabinet spokesperson. The maximum number of Ministers has been fixed at 14, but in special situations, three additional ones can be appointed (the Prime Minister is not included in these figures).

The Prime Minister, chosen by the Diet from its members, appoints and dismisses the remaining ministers. The majority of ministers must be chosen from among the Diet's members. The Cabinet is collectively responsible to the Diet, which can adopt a non-confidence resolution. In such a case, the Cabinet has to resign collectively and new elections have to be held. The [Cabinet](#) enacts cabinet orders so as to execute the provisions of the Constitution and of the law. However, they cannot include penal provisions. [Suga Yoshihide](#) has been Prime Minister since September 2020. He succeeded [Abe Shinzō](#),³ Japan's [longest-serving prime minister](#), who, after having been in charge uninterruptedly from December 2012, breaking a sequence of short-lived cabinets, in August 2020 suddenly announced his resignation on health grounds. [Suga](#) was Chief Cabinet Secretary throughout Abe's premiership and, like him, also became the [longest-serving](#) in office.⁴ *Kantei* is the name of the Prime Minister's official residence. Like the Diet, it is located in Tokyo's district of *Nagatachō*, with both terms sometimes used by the media to refer to domestic politic environment.

Table 1 – Japan's leadership

Position	Name	Date started
Emperor	Naruhito	May 2019
Prime Minister	Suga Yoshihide	September 2020
Chief Cabinet Secretary	Kato Katsunobu	September 2020

Judicial power

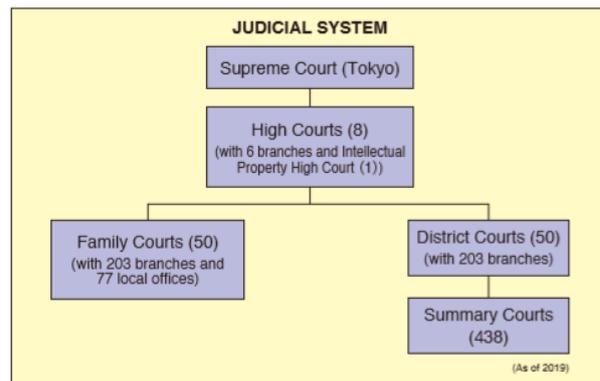
The Constitution stipulates the separation of powers and the independence of the judges. It has no provision for administrative courts, while it prohibits the setting-up of extraordinary tribunals. The [Supreme Court](#) is at the top of the judicial system. It is the only court mentioned in the Constitution, whereas other courts are dependent on ordinary legislation. It is headed by the Chief Justice, appointed by the Emperor following his designation by the Cabinet. The remaining 14 Justices are appointed by the Cabinet and then confirmed by the Emperor. Supreme Court Justices are not necessarily judges. However, at least 10 of them must be selected from among judges, public prosecutors, attorneys, or professors of law at university or graduate-school levels. The appointment of each Supreme Court Justice is reviewed by the people at the first general election for the Members of the House of Representatives following their appointment. This review is then carried out every 10 years. If a majority of voters supports a Justice's dismissal, the Justice has to resign. However, this has never happened – also because the retirement age at 70 often makes a second review unlikely. As for its internal organisation, it hardly ever decides as Grand Bench (all 15 Justices). Rather, three Petty Benches made up of five Justices each adjudicate most cases. The Supreme Court is [not a constitutional court](#) and has no original jurisdiction. It is a court of last resort with powers of

judicial review that handles appeals arising from actual disputes – *Jokoku* appeals against judgements rendered by high courts and special *Kokoku* appeals filed against judgments rendered by other courts.

Under the Supreme Court, eight High Courts execute jurisdiction over appeals against judgements by the District Courts, Family Courts, and Summary Courts. A three-judge panel handles cases in a High Court. Judges and assistant judges are appointed by the Cabinet from lists of candidates nominated by the Supreme Court. [Judges](#) can be impeached. The Lower Courts are usually courts of first instance. The 50 District Courts deal with both civil and

criminal cases, except for matters specifically coming under the exclusive original jurisdiction of other types of court. District Courts also have jurisdiction over appeals against Summary Court decisions and rulings in civil cases. Within each District Court, six *saiban-in* – lay judges similar to a jury system – are selected to form a panel together with three professional judges to handle certain more serious cases. The *saiban-in* system was introduced in 2009. Six Family Courts⁵ have exclusive jurisdiction over cases involving domestic relations and juvenile delinquency. The 438 Summary Courts are the courts most accessible to the average citizen. They have jurisdiction over civil cases of up to ¥1 400 000 (+/- €11 500) and over criminal cases punishable by lighter sentences.

Table 2 – Japan's Judicial System



Source: [Supreme Court of Japan](#).

The Ghosn case and calls for reform of the criminal justice system

In November 2018, Carlos Ghosn, Nissan Motor's chair, was arrested in Tokyo. Prosecutors indicted him for [financial misconduct](#) and for under-reporting his income. He was first released, then arrested again on the basis of [new charges](#), and eventually released on bail three weeks later. He escaped surveillance and fled to Lebanon in the last days of 2019. Ghosn, who was barred from having contacts with his wife, claimed having been questioned [eight hours](#) a day, given limited access to interpreters, and given little opportunity to defend himself, as in Japan, once suspects have been indicted, 99 % of them are convicted. Mori Masako, Japan's Minister of Justice, [rebutted](#) Ghosn's arguments, defending the fairness of the Japanese criminal justice system, where each criminal case goes through multiple stages. She underlined that in Japan only 37 % of accused suspects are indicted, and that Japan's Constitution stipulates that forced confessions shall not be admitted as evidence.

The story has drawn international attention to the Japanese [criminal justice system](#). The Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA) asked for a [reform](#). In Japan, pre-trial detention can last up to 23 days in [daiyou kangoku](#) (substitute prisons). The JFBA has been demanding the eradication of the *hitojichi-shiho* (hostage justice), audio/video recording of processes in their entirety, and a court-appointed attorney system. In April 2019, more than 1 000 lawyers and scholars submitted a [petition](#) to the Justice Ministry demanding an end to *hitojichi-shiho*. Minister Mori has not excluded the [possibility](#) of reforming the system.

Relations between central and local governments

Japan is a unitary state, although the country's Constitution recognises 'local self-government.' The 1947 Local Autonomy Act, which took effect on the same day as the Constitution, governs relations between the central and the local governments. Further reforms introduced in 1999 and between 2011 and 2014 transferred more power from the national to the local governments.

Japan's administration has a three-tiered structure. The top tier is the national government. Next are the two tiers of local government – 47 prefectures and 1 700 municipalities. Municipalities are named cities (at least 50 000 inhabitants), towns, or villages, according to population size. Both prefectures and municipalities have assemblies whose members, elected every four years by the population, have the power to approve the budget and submit bills and ordinances. The governor

(prefecture) or mayor (municipality), also elected directly by the population for a term of four years, is the executive organ, submitting bills, enacting regulations, and implementing the budget. The assembly can pass a vote of no confidence against the executive. In general, bills are submitted by the [executive](#). Both the assembly and the executive have veto power, which is nevertheless seldom applied. The executive also enjoys discretionary action power, allowing it to take prompt action when required.

Tokyo, the country's capital, has a population of [13 million inhabitants](#). It stands [ready](#) to host the 2020 [Olympic and Paralympic Games, postponed to 2021](#) due to the outbreak of [Covid-19](#). Tokyo has a unique administrative system. Despite counting as one of the country's [47 prefectures](#), the city's government is named [Tokyo Metropolitan Government](#) (TMG) and encompasses 23 special wards, 26 cities, 5 towns, and 8 villages. This allows for a unified administration and supervision across the whole of the ward area as well as local ward governments that are closer to the residents. [Koike Yuriko](#) has served as TMG Governor since 2016 and is the first woman ever elected to the post. Koike – who expressed [frustration](#) at not holding stronger powers as a governor to address the coronavirus crisis – should seek [re-election](#) at the next polls for TMG Governor, due to take place on 5 July 2020. A proposal to create the country's second metropolitan government, this time in [Osaka](#), was rejected twice by referendum: first in [May 2015](#), then in [November 2020](#).

Table 3 – Competence-sharing among central and local governments

	Public works	Education	Welfare	Others
Central government	Expressways, Designated national roads	Universities	Pensions	Defence Diplomacy Currency
Local governments	Prefectures Other national roads, Prefectural roads	High schools, Management of elementary and junior high schools, Personnel	Public health centres	Police
	Municipalities Urban planning, Municipal roads	Elementary and junior high schools, Kindergartens and day-care	Garbage disposal, Care and welfare	Fire services, Resident registry

Source: [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication](#). This list is not exhaustive.

With the exception of foreign relations and national defence, most administrative functions are financed by both national and local governments. Local governments carry out many of the national policies and programmes. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, the ratio between local government expenditure and gross domestic product (GDP) was 10.9 %, about [2.7 times](#) that of central government expenditure. However, ratios for [tax revenue](#) showed a different trend. Of the total taxes collected in FY 2016, national taxes accounted for 59.9 % and local taxes for 40.1 %. The financial autonomy of local governments is limited – they are largely dependent on financial resources from the central government.

Tokyo's irresistible charm versus rural depopulation

For reasons of economic survival and fiscal stability, [many municipalities merged](#). This happened against a backdrop of rural exodus towards Tokyo and other metropolitan areas. In some areas, there are not enough candidates for the local assemblies. To counter this trend, the national government put [regional revitalisation](#) high on the agenda. First, it set the goal of achieving [balance](#) in migration between the greater Tokyo area and the rest of the country by 2020. This effort did not produce tangible results. It then fixed the goal of reversing the ongoing net [migration](#) into the Tokyo area in five years from FY 2020.

Japan's Parliament

A bicameral system

The National Diet (*Kokkai* or National Assembly) is composed of the House of Representatives (*Shūgiin*) – the Lower House – and the House of Councillors (*Sangiin*) – the Upper House. Plenary sessions of both houses are open to the public.

The [House of Representatives](#) has 465 members (minimum age 25) elected for a four-year term – 289 of them chosen from single-seat constituencies and 176 by proportional representation. Although the two chambers share legislative powers, the Lower House prevails in the legislative process,⁶ as it can turn draft legislation rejected by the Upper House into law with a two-thirds majority. It also has the power to adopt the final decision on the [budget](#) and on the approval of international treaties. The Cabinet can dissolve the House of Representatives.

The [House of Councillors](#) is composed of 245 members (minimum age 30) elected for a six-year term – 147 of them elected first past the post in 47 plural-seat prefectural constituencies and 98 by proportional representation. Every three years, half of the Upper House is renewed in a mid-term election. In contrast to the House of Representatives, the Upper House cannot be dissolved by any other power.

The Upper House beginning to represent the country's diversity

The last mid-term elections for the House of Councillors, held in July 2019, produced an historic high share of female members (see paragraph on women in the Diet), the [first openly gay male](#) lawmaker,⁷ and two severely disabled members (one with [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis](#) and one with [cerebral palsy](#)) – both belonging to the Reiwa Shinsengumi, a small party founded a few months before the elections by actor-turned-politician [Yamamoto Tarō](#), who lost his [seat](#). These results may point to changing attitudes in Japan, where disabled people have long been kept out of the public eye.

Table 4 – Powers of the National Diet and of each House

Powers of the National Diet	Powers common to both Houses	Powers unique to each House
Enactment of laws, Decisions regarding the budget and other matters related to national finances , Decisions regarding approval for the conclusion of international treaties, Designation of the Prime Minister, Initiation of amendments to the Constitution	Election of the House-presiding officer, deputy presiding officer, and standing committee chairmen; Establishment of special committees; Establishment of rules pertaining to meeting procedures and internal discipline; Right to conduct investigations in relation to government; Right to accept and vote on petitions	Right of the House of Representatives to pass a non-confidence resolution against the Cabinet, Convocation of the House of Councillors in an emergency session

Source: [House of Representatives](#).

Parliamentary sessions

As for parliamentary sessions, it is up to the Cabinet to call the [National Diet](#) – an Imperial Rescript is then promulgated. The Ordinary session is called once a year, starting in January, with a duration of 150 days and one possible extension. Extraordinary sessions can be called by the Cabinet, on request from one-quarter or more of the total number of members of either House, after a general election. A special session is called after a general election following the dissolution of the House of Representatives.

Electoral constituencies and the issue of equality among Japanese electors

The main rule of seat distribution across prefectures within the House of Representatives is first to give a seat to each of the 47 prefectures, then to allocate the remaining ones according to the population breakdown. Yet, in [several rulings on elections](#) to the Lower and Upper Houses, the Supreme Court ruled that the large disparities in the weight of a vote between any two constituencies was 'in a state of unconstitutionality,' as this disparity exceeded 100 %. In other words, a vote cast in the least populous electoral district carried more than double the weight of a vote cast in the most populous constituency. However, the Court did not invalidate the election results.⁸ In 2016, the Diet amended the Public Offices Election Act, scrapping 10 seats in the Lower House and redrawing some electoral districts. After the Upper House elections of 2016, some [constituencies](#) were merged in order to rectify vote-weight disparities between the most densely and most sparsely populated electoral districts. A new method of seat distribution is to be introduced on the basis of the 2020 census, in order to at least reduce disparity in the weight of votes.

Committees

There are two kinds of committee – standing (permanent) and special, set up through a House Resolution for a given Diet session. Each house has 17 standing committees. Their meetings are generally closed to the public, although sometimes the Chair might allow the media to attend. Under special permission from the House, Members can meet even if the Diet is not in session. The two committees on Fundamental National Policies normally meet jointly as a forum for debate between the Prime Minister and opposition leaders on fundamental national policies. Each House sets up a Deliberative Council on Political Ethics and a Board of Oversight and Review of Especially Designated Secrets.

Table 5 – Standing and special committees of each House

Common to both houses		Specific to the House of Representatives	
<i>Standing</i> Cabinet; Judicial Affairs; Foreign Affairs; Financial Affairs; Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; Health, Labour and Welfare; Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Economy, Trade and Industry; Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism; Environment; Fundamental National Policies;	Budget;	<i>Standing</i> Internal Affairs and Communications; Security;	
	Audit and Oversight of Administration;		
	Rules and Administration	<i>Special</i> Promotion of Science and Technology, and Innovation; Investigation of Nuclear Power Issues.	
	Discipline;		
	<i>Special</i>	Specific to the House of Councillors	
	Disasters;		
	Political Ethics and Election Law;		<i>Standing</i> General Affairs
	Okinawa and Northern Problems;		
	North Korean Abductions and Other Issues;		<i>Special</i> Official Development Assistance and Related Matters
	Consumer Affairs;		
	Reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake;		<i>Research</i> Internal Economy and Foreign Affairs; National Life and Economy; Natural Resources and Energy.
	Regional Revitalisation.		

Source: [House of Representatives](#), [House of Councillors](#). In the case of Committees common to both Houses, the name of the Committee belonging to the House of Representative has the words 'House of Representatives' placed in front of its name.

Parties

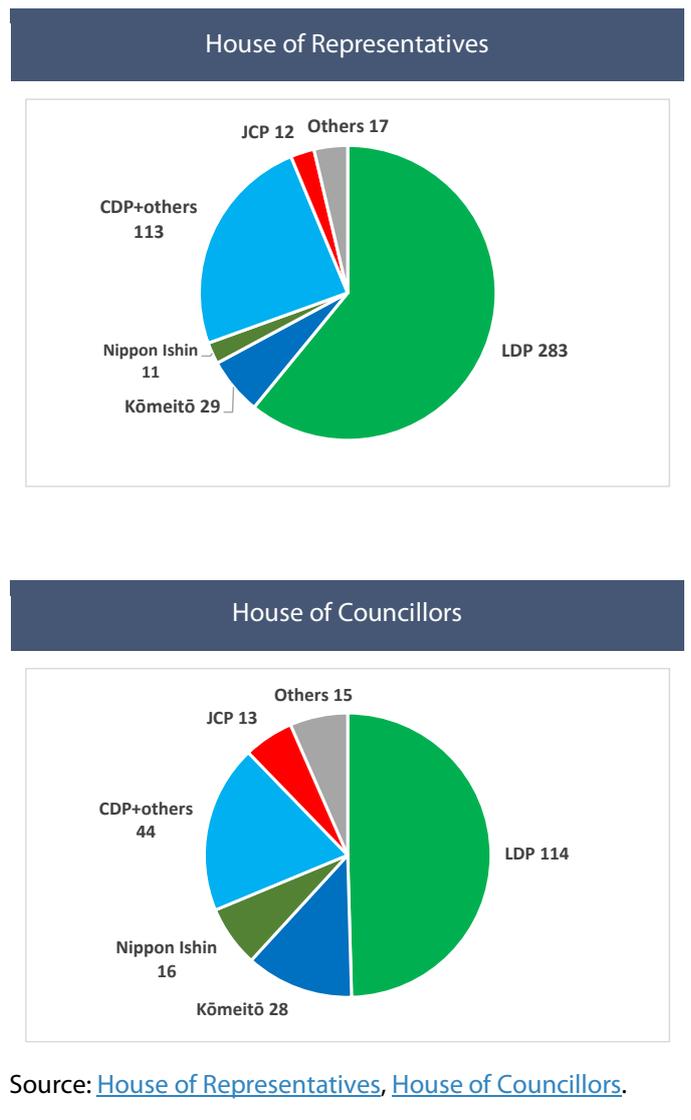
The [Liberal Democratic Party](#) (LDP) holds the record for longevity in power. It has held office almost continuously since its foundation in 1955, with the exception of the periods between 2009 and 2012, when the Democratic Party succeeded in breaking its hold on power, and between 1993 and 1994. The LDP is a conservative nationalist party, with a stronghold in rural areas. It has a liberal view of the economy and aims at keeping a strong relationship with the United States. According to [analysts](#), the party has a strategy of giving benefits to key constituencies in order to consolidate power. Suga Yoshihide has been the party's leader since September 2020. He took over from Abe Shinzō, who had been in charge since September 2012. Abe, taking advantage of the [opposition's weakness](#), led the party to three successful election victories – December 2012, December 2014, and October [2017](#) – securing his position as Head of Government in a coalition with the New Kōmeitō. Abe was the promoter of '[Abenomics](#)', a strategy aimed at reviving Japan's economy and fighting stagnation and deflation. Abenomics is based on [three arrows](#) – boosting government spending while keeping the fiscal consolidation goal, applying the monetary easing policy from the Bank of Japan, and implementing a package of structural reforms to enhance economic growth and competitiveness. Suga is expected to ensure [continuity](#) of Abe's domestic and international politics.

The [Constitutional Democratic Party](#) (CDP) was created by Edano Yukio in the run-up to the 2017 elections, following the Democratic Party's disbanding. He has been party president ever since. The party promotes pacifism as described in the Constitution, an inclusive society free from discrimination, and sustainable social welfare. In September 2020, it merged with the second-largest opposition party, the Democratic Party for the People (DPP). The CDP, together with other small parties, makes up the biggest opposition group in the House of Representatives.

[Kōmeitō](#) (Clean Government Party) is a centrist party. Founded first in 1954, it was re-established in 1998. For this reason, it is often referred to as New Kōmeitō. It has been closely associated with the [Sōka Gakkai](#), a pacifist lay Buddhist movement that spread rapidly across Japan during the 1950s and 1960s and today is active worldwide. Headed by Yamaguchi Natsuo since 2009, it has been the [instrumental](#) junior partner in the LDP-led coalitions since 2012. According to observers, the party has exerted a decisive [influence on security-related issues](#), including the debate on the modification of Article 9 of the Constitution (see box above).

[Nippon Ishin no Kai](#) (Japan Innovation Party) has its stronghold in Osaka. It defends a reform of the structure of the state – which it considers too centralised – in order to empower local governments.

Figure 1 – Party representation in the Diet



It also defends the preservation of Japan's traditional values and culture. Osaka's Mayor, Matsui Ichirō, has been the party's leader since 2015.

The [Japanese Communist Party](#) (JCP) was founded in 1922. Shii Kazuo has been its leader since 2000. Its [programme](#) promotes a socialist transformation of the economy, the end of the Japan-United States Security Treaty, and the withdrawal of the US military forces from Japan. [Analysts](#) have remarked that in the 2017 general elections, the JCP cooperated with the CDP in order to ensure the latter's victory in some districts.

Dynasties in Japanese politics

According to Daniel M. Smith, Japan has an unusually high percentage of [political dynasties](#) in both the Parliament and the Cabinet. This could potentially affect candidate selection, elections, and even Cabinet promotion. Smith has pointed to the [1994 electoral reform](#) as one of the reasons for such high percentage. Purnendra Jain argues that even [Japan's next generation of leaders](#) and prime ministers will be for the most part hereditary politicians.

Parliament's role

Analysts point to a diminished role of Parliament and an enhanced role of the Executive in shaping legislation – a trend which they claim has not been sufficiently debated. Rules require a bill introduced in the Diet to be supported by 20 Members of the House of Representatives and 10 Members of the House of Councillors. In the case of bills that might have consequences for the budget, the quorum rises to 50 and 20 respectively. Despite such low quorum requirements, the percentage of bills initiated by the Diet that are finally approved is rather low. In [2017](#), of the 164 bills initiated within the Diet, only 12 were made into law. In the same year, the Cabinet proposed 75 bills to the Diet. All but four were made into law. Under the authority of the Cabinet office, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau (CLB, *Naikaku Housei Kyoku*) plays a leading role in drafting bills, as it reviews all bills prepared by Ministers. Despite such importance, the nomination of CLB directors⁹ does not require Diet approval.¹⁰

The adoption of bills in plenary has the character of a consensual decision. Among the few instances of heated debate were the security bills adopted in 2015 (see box above). It has been argued that the [power of the Diet](#) to authorise SDF missions and to design and scrutinise defence policy has decreased.

Parliamentary debates often include question-and-answer sessions – an arrangement that has been criticised for not promoting a free exchange of views among parliamentarians, as queries are often prepared and submitted to ministers in advance. The opposition however has taken advantage of the question-and-answer sessions and, according to [Nonaka Naoto](#), used them as a platform from which to criticise the government, for it knows that the prospects of overturning the ruling coalition altogether are rather limited. Nonaka also argues that plenary sittings have become 'pro forma' and been relegated to the status of 'rubber stamp' in favour of the Committees, which have taken over as the main forum for debate (which is quite limited in Plenary sittings: it amounts to an average of 60 hours a year only).

The Japanese people's distrust in politics

The Diet – not to mention politics in general – is not faring well in public opinion. According to a [poll](#) carried out in May-June 2019, 60.4 % of the people either 'do not have very much trust' or 'no trust at all' in the Diet. Only 29.4 % have either a 'great deal of trust' or 'quite a lot of trust.' Mistrust of political parties is even stronger – 67.6 %, with the highest percentage among young people in their 20s and 30s. The government is trusted by 54 % of the people and mistrusted by 36.4 %, whereas the media is trusted by 56.6 % and distrusted by 32.3 %. By contrast, the public has a very positive view of other institutions. On top of the list comes the Emperor, with a remarkable 87.1 % rate of approval. The SDF and the police also obtained good results – 77 % and 71.6 % respectively. By way of comparison, a spring 2018 standard Eurobarometer survey of public awareness of the EU institutions showed that the [European Parliament is the most trusted](#) of all European Institutions – 50 % of respondents.

Women in Parliament

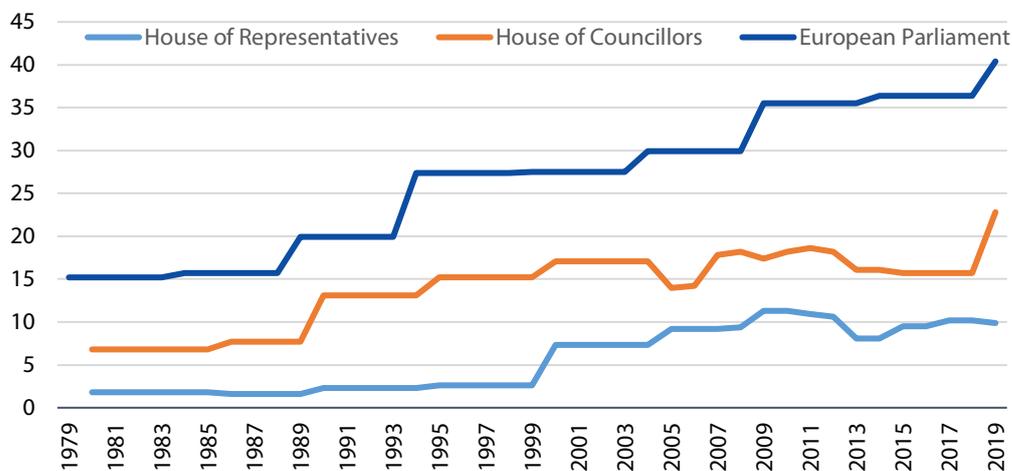
Women occupy only 9.9 % of the seats in the Lower House (46) and 22.8 % of the seats in the Upper House (56). Figure 2 compares these figures to the percentage of women elected to the European Parliament since 1979. In 2019, 40.4 % of all MEPs are women.

Despite Abe's '[womenomics](#)' policy and some [improvements](#), Japan ranks [164](#) out of 192 countries in women's political participation, according to the International Parliamentary Union (IPU), and well behind other developed countries. The 2018 [Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field](#) requires political parties and groups to work as much as possible toward achieving equality in the number of male and female candidates in the elections for the Diet and the local assemblies. However, the law does not impose legal quotas, relying only on parties' voluntary efforts. On the whole, politics in Japan remains a [male-dominated environment](#).

The first female speaker of the Lower House was [Doi Takako](#), of the Japan Socialist Party (1993-1996). Previously, in 1986, she had become the first female leader of a major political party. The first female speaker of the House of Councillors was [Ôgi Chikage](#), as she was known – her real name being Hayashi Hiroko. She was in office from 2004 to 2007. [Santô Akiko](#), in office since August 2019, is the second ever female speaker of the House of Councillors.

There has never been a female Prime Minister. [Moriyama Mayumi](#) is to this date the only woman to have served as Chief Cabinet Secretary, from August 1989 to January 1990.

Figure 2 – Women in the Japanese Diet and the European Parliament



Sources: [Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office](#), [Kôchi Gender Equality Centre](#), [European Parliament](#).

The European Parliament and the Japanese Parliament

The [Delegation for relations with Japan \(D-JP\)](#) is the European Parliament's body in charge of relations with the Japanese Diet. It has held annual meetings with its Japanese counterpart since 1979, alternating meeting locations between the EU and Japan. The [39th EU-Japan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting](#) took place in Strasbourg on 27 November 2019. In their [Joint Statement](#), the Delegations, highlighting the importance of the EU-Japan partnership, expressed their strong support to the [EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement \(EPA\)](#) and the [EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement \(SPA\)](#). They agreed to keep monitoring the implementation of the agreements and to provide support to parliamentarians on various issues, including matters not included in the EPA.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The [Great East Japan Earthquake](#) of 11 March 2011 was the country's most powerful ever. It unleashed a tsunami that produced a death [toll](#) of 19 729, with 2 559 missing, and a nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The European Parliament expressed its solidarity in the 24 March 2011 [resolution](#).
- ² The [Cabinet Personnel Bureau](#) was introduced in 2014 in order to exercise centralised control over the appointment of top bureaucrats.
- ³ This publication follows the Japanese government decision, according to which, as of 1 January 2020, Japanese names in official documents should [first](#) show [the surname\(s\)](#) and then the given name(s), breaking with a long-established tradition that coincided with the western style.
- ⁴ It was [Suga Yoshihide](#) who, on 1 April 2019, revealed the name of the new era – *Reiwa*.
- ⁵ Several cases of parental [child abduction](#) have put the spotlight on Japan's family legislation, which does not recognise shared custody, visiting rights, or the right of non-Japanese parents to have access to their children. Although Japan ratified the 1980 [Hague Convention](#) on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction in April 2014, in reality there is a [serious flaw](#) in the country's implementation of the convention. In February 2020, the [European Parliament Committee on Petitions](#) examined a series of petitions on parental child abduction in Japan. In July 2020, the Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on international and domestic parental abduction of EU children in Japan. MEPs sounded alarm on the increasing number of unsolved child abduction cases where one parent is an EU national and the other Japanese.
- ⁶ In the [House of Representatives](#), an open ballot is used for the national budget and other important bills. Members vote using one of the wooden name cards provided at their seat. A white wooden name card is cast to indicate approval of the bill in question, and a green wooden name card is cast to indicate opposition.
- ⁷ On a less positive note, the [turnout was the second lowest in the post-war period](#) (48.8 %, the first time below 50 % since the 1995 44.5 % record low). Also, for the last election to the House of Representatives, in 2017, the turnout was the [second lowest](#) in the post-war period (53.7 %, slightly above the record low of 52.7 %, in the previous elections of 2014). The 2017 elections were the first after the voting age was lowered from 20 to 18.
- ⁸ In November 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that the July 2019 election for the House of Councillors was [constitutional](#), though a vote in the district with the fewest voters for an Upper House member carried three times the weight of a vote in the district with the most votes per Upper House member.
- ⁹ It has been noticed that the CLB Director regularly appears in official government pictures – a sign of the extreme importance of this organ for the Executive.
- ¹⁰ It is also difficult for Diet Members to recruit qualified experts, as they are entitled to employ a maximum of three assistants each, who are supposed to be government officials.

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