

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, ACTORS, ATTITUDES, AND THE RELATIONSHIP TO
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ON THE LOCAL LEVEL: AN OITA CASE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways citizens participate politically in a small rural Japanese city. It specifically addresses how citizens attempt to exact change and/or influence policy; how the government/bureaucracy engages citizens in political participation; and the relationship between citizens' attitudes towards government and political participation. Research has been conducted on the local level in Japan particularly on, extreme forms of local participation, such as protests, and involvement in environmental movements / NGO's. On the national level much scholarship has been focused on political attitudes and political behavior of the country as a whole, including waves of the Asian Barometer Survey, and JES. However, discourse bridging the two levels has been limited. The majority of the literature regarding local government has been in terms of central government/ local government power dynamics. As Japan slowly moves toward decentralization of power from the central to the local government, issues concerning local government administration and decision making policy will become more important.

This research attempts to fill in the gap in the literature and add context to the national data by examining three methods of "regular," in the system, non-extreme, forms of participation, as seen in one small rural Japanese city. Political participation theory is used to analyze the types of participation by citizens. Three methods of participation are examined: attending a town meeting; campaigning; and contacting a public official. Three case studies are then presented exploring the study's research questions via forms of participation. The study employs a mixed-method research design, as the qualitative findings from the case studies are used to create questions for a quantitative survey. The data from the random survey of 158 citizens is compared to the qualitative case study findings, along with national and world data.

This study has 3 main findings. First, the participation explored in the case studies is dictated by political intermediaries who create disincentives for more independent forms of political participation. Second, citizens who participate politically have higher levels of perceived efficacy (the idea they can make a change in government) and a lower perception of government corruption. Finally, the participatory mechanisms in place on the local level do not equally engage all citizens. In conclusion, the findings suggest that participatory mechanisms do exist, and those who participate view government more positively, with a higher sense of efficacy and lower perceptions of corruption. However, these participatory mechanisms do not engage a plurality of the electorate due to their design, implementation, and priorities of the political elite creators.