

Political Trust and Distrust in Japan

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In recently years, it is pointed out that declining political trust is a great problem in advanced industrialized democracies by a lot of scholars. However, little is known about the structure and functions of political trust. Therefore the question of what is the crisis of democracy is also still open.

The purpose of this article is to answer that question through an empirical analysis of political trust in Japan. More specifically, I provide the answers to following four research questions: (1) what is political trust and how to define it? (2) How does political trust decrease? (3) Why did political trust decrease? (4) What is the consequence of declining political trust? I show the answers to these questions, based on the quantitative analysis of many large-scale sample surveys.

The findings and contributions of this study are summarized to the following four points. First, I showed a new conceptual framework on political trust. In previous works, political trust had been classified by the trust objections. The conceptual framework in this study is to classify political trust into cognitive and affective trust. Second, I found two different declining political trusts. On the one hand, in Japan, trust in political actors as cognitive trust decreased rapidly in the 1990's. On the other hand, trust in institutional responsibility as affective trust had gradually decreased since 1970's. Third, I explained the causes of the decline of trust in political actors and institutional responsibility. Why did trust in political actors decline in the 1990's? Why has trust in institutional responsibility decreased since 1970's? In this study, I pointed out the collapse of one party dominant system and electoral reforms in Japan caused the decline of trust in political actors. On the other hand, declining trust in institutional responsibility was caused by the development of individualism and generation change. Forth, I suggested the consequence of the decline of political trust. Generally, many scholars argue political trust is a necessary component of a smooth-functioning democracy. However, this argument lacks in consideration of the negative effect of political trust on the function of system feedback in political system. In the result of this study, it was made clear that trust in institutional responsibility weakened the relations between positive evaluation of public policies and the positive evaluation of the cabinet. This finding gives a critical suggestion to a lot of previous works which have exaggerated the causal effect of political trust.

These findings of the present research offer two implications. (a) We cannot rebuild political trust easily. Especially, declining trust in institutional responsibility is more difficult to reconstruct because it results from generation change based on individualization. (b) If the government could rebuild political trust, democracy does not necessarily work because there is a "paradox of political trust." Therefore it follows that we should design a new political system which replaces representative democracy.