

Liabilities of partisan labels: Independents in Japanese local elections

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Abstrak

Traditional explanations for the electoral strength of independents (non-partisan candidates and seat-winners) both in Japan and elsewhere have focused on electoral rules, socio-demographic factors, and political culture. These analyses do not adequately address why Japanese local candidates, particularly conservatives, have tended to actively avoid partisan labels despite being affiliated to national parties. Nor does it explain the considerable variation in the number of independents over time where institutional and sociological factors remain largely constant. The article identifies two other factors, under-developed theoretically in existing literature, which discourages partisan affiliation at local level in Japan: (a) the effect of the unpopularity of parties at the national level on the behavior of local candidates; and (b) the partisan affiliation of directly elected local chief executives. These claims are substantiated by observations of local candidate behavior when the party in national government is unpopular and when the local chief executive is non-partisan.