

PLSC 2433/7433; EAST 2521: Japanese Politics and Foreign Policy

Instructor: Charles McClean

Fall 2026 (Updated 10.08.26)

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Office Hours: Wed. 3:30–5pm ([scheduler.zoom.us/charles-mcclean](https://scheduler.zoom.us/j/charles-mcclean))

Room: Rosenkranz 02

Time: Wed. 1:30–3:25pm

Course Description

This class introduces students to 11 important puzzles about contemporary Japanese politics and foreign policy, discusses various ways in which scholars have attempted to solve these puzzles, and suggests pathways for future research. Together, we seek to explain policy outcomes across a wide range of topics, including constitutional revision, defense, economic growth, energy, gender, immigration, income inequality, population aging, territorial disputes, and trade. In the process, we learn (1) the important actors in Japanese politics (e.g., voters, politicians, parties, bureaucrats, and firms); (2) the positions that different actors take with respect to various policies, as well as the sources of these policy preferences; and (3) how political institutions block or enhance the representation of these actors' interests.

11 Puzzles of Japanese Politics and Foreign Policy

1. Why study Japanese politics and foreign policy?

Part I: Foundations of Japanese Politics

2. Election campaigning, Japanese style?
3. The survival of the Liberal Democratic Party
4. Who governs Japan, politicians or bureaucrats?

Part II: Political Economy and Social Change

5. Egalitarian development and its demise
6. Demographic decline and gender equality
7. Immigration

Part III: Japan and the World

8. Security transformation, the alliance, and U.S. bases
9. Historical memory and territorial disputes
10. Nuclear power, energy security, and climate policy
11. Agricultural protectionism, trade, and international economic leadership

Course Requirements

All students are responsible for participating in the class, writing Reading Reflections, and completing the Foundations Quiz (40% of the final grade). After completing Part I, students can then choose one of two assignment tracks—a **policy track** or **research track**—based on their interests (60% of the final grade). Students should notify me of their selected track.

Common Requirements (40%)

1. Class Participation (15%)

I will give short lectures at the beginning of each class to frame the discussion, but this is a seminar course. Our experience will be enriched when every member of the class is familiar with the readings, has thought about them seriously, and shares their reactions with the class.

2. Reading Reflections (15%) - Due the day before class (8 times)

Eight times this semester, you will write a short response to the readings (no longer than 250 words) and post it on Canvas. Responses should offer a critical reaction to the readings rather than a summary. Each response should cite *at least one reading* and refer to *at least one specific point discussed in a previous class*. You can pick three weeks to skip between Weeks 2–12.

3. Foundations Quiz (10%) - September 30 (In Class)

This short, paper-based quiz will include multiple-choice and short-answer questions covering the readings, documentary, and class discussions from Part I: Foundations of Japanese Politics. To do well, you should read the assigned materials carefully, critically assess their main arguments (including through your Reading Reflections), and participate fully in class discussions. The quiz will be straightforward and will not test your trivia knowledge about Japan.

Policy Track (60%)

1. Domestic Policy Memo (25%) - Due October 28

You will write a 5–7 page (double-spaced) policy memo directed to the Japanese government that recommends how it should respond to a domestic policy challenge. The prompt will be distributed on October 7.

2. Foreign Policy Presentation (10%) - December 2 or 9

You will give a five-minute presentation on your foreign policy analysis, followed by three minutes of questions and class discussion. Presentation dates will be assigned. You should incorporate feedback from the presentation into your final written analysis.

3. Foreign Policy Analysis (25%) - Due December 22

You will select a recent event affecting Japanese foreign policy and write a 5–7 page (double-spaced) analysis explaining its causes, significance, and implications to a public audience.

Research Track (60%)

1. Research Proposal (10%) - Due October 20

This preliminary, one-page (single-spaced) proposal for your final research paper should include your research question, tentative argument, at least five citations, and your empirical strategy.

2. Research Presentation (10%) - December 2 or 9

You will give a five-minute presentation on your research paper, followed by three minutes of questions and class discussion. Presentation dates will be assigned. You should incorporate feedback from the presentation into your final paper.

3. Research Paper (40%) - Due December 22

You will write a 15-20 page (double-spaced) original research paper. The use of primary sources and Japanese-language material, qualitative or quantitative, is encouraged but not required. Please do not "recycle" research papers that you have submitted for other classes.

Course Policies

No Book Purchases Required

This course does not require the purchase of any books. All required articles, book chapters, and policy reports will be provided as PDF files on Canvas.

Diversity and Inclusion in this Classroom

I am personally committed to making sure this classroom is a safe space where everyone feels welcome and comfortable expressing their views. While I expect us to have rigorous discussions and even disagreements, I ask that you engage each other with empathy and respect.

Accessibility

If you anticipate requiring academic accommodations for a disability, please contact [Yale's Student Accessibility Services](#). In an effort to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible, you are also welcome to privately discuss options with me as soon as possible to establish

mutually-agreeable accommodations in a timely fashion. I am committed to creating a course that is inclusive and every effort will be made to be supportive.

Assignment Due Dates

If an important change in circumstances makes it impossible to meet a due date, please email me and contact your residential college dean as soon as possible. Unless covered by a Dean's Extension, the grade for late work will be lowered one grade step for each calendar day late (e.g., an A becomes an A-). Because Reading Reflections are designed to be submitted before class, they cannot be submitted after the relevant class has met.

Academic Honesty

You must document all of your source material. If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear the text is being quoted and where the text comes from. You must also cite any sources from which you obtain numbers, ideas, or other material. If you have any questions about what does or does not constitute plagiarism, ask! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be treated lightly. For more information, please consult the [Poorvu Center](#).

Generative AI

You may use AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude) as a companion to your reading and writing process, but not as a replacement for your own judgment. Appropriate uses including conducting preliminary research, identifying possible sources or questions, and copyediting what you have already written. However, the arguments, analysis, and substantive writing in your work must be your own. It is your responsibility to ensure the accuracy and validity of anything you submit in this class. If you do use AI in preparing your work, include a brief note describing how you used it. In describing these uses, please distinguish between uses that directly shape your research or the content of the assignment (e.g., collecting data) and uses that supported the writing process (e.g., proofreading).

Course Schedule

The schedule is tentative and subject to change.

09.02 Week 1 - Introduction

- *Puzzle 1: Why study Japanese politics and foreign policy?*
- Readings:
 1. Sneider, Noah. 2021. "Japan: A Country That Is on the Front Line." *The Economist*, December 11. pp. 1–7.
 2. Lipsy, Phillip Y. 2023. "Japan: The Harbinger State." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 24(1). pp. 80–97.
- Documentary (in class)
 - Soda, Kazuhiko (director). 2007. [Campaign: The Kawasaki Candidate](#). (PBS version of *Campaign (Senkyo)*).

Part I: Foundations of Japanese Politics

09.09 Week 2 - Election Campaigning, Japanese Style?

- *Puzzle 2: Are Japanese election campaigns "unique" or "different" from other advanced industrialized nations (e.g., the United States)?*
- Readings:
 1. Curtis, Gerald. 1971. *Election Campaigning, Japanese Style*. pp. 33–61 (Ch. 2).
 2. Curtis, Gerald. 1992. "Japan." In David Butler and Austin Ranney, eds. *Electioneering: A Comparative Study of Continuity and Change*. Clarendon Press. pp. 222–243.
 3. Catalinac, Amy. 2016. "From Pork to Policy: The Rise of Programmatic Campaigning in Japanese Elections." *Journal of Politics* 78(1). pp. 1–18.
 4. Umeda, Michio. 2025. "Electoral Campaigns in Japan's 2024 HR Election: Emerging Signs of Transformation." In Kenneth M. McElwain, Robert J. Pekkanen, and Daniel M. Smith, eds. *Japan Decides 2024: The Japanese General Election*. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 109–125.
- Discussion Questions:
 1. How do Japanese election campaigns compare to campaigns in the United States and other democracies?
 2. What are the possible explanations (theories) for these similarities and differences?
 3. How much have election campaigns change since Curtis first conducted his research?

09.16 Week 3 - The Survival of the Liberal Democratic Party

- *Puzzle 3: Why has the Liberal Democratic Party been able to stay in power for most of the postwar period?*

- Readings:

1. Curtis, Gerald. 1988. *The Japanese Way of Politics*. Columbia University Press. pp. 1–44 (Ch. 1).
2. Scheiner, Ethan. 2006. *Democracy Without Competition in Japan: Opposition Failure in a One-Party Dominant State*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 7–30 (Ch. 1).
3. McElwain, Kenneth Mori. 2008. "Manipulating Electoral Rules to Manufacture Single-Party Dominance." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(1). pp. 32–47.
4. McClean, Charles T. 2021. "The Element of Surprise: Election Timing and Opposition Preparedness." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(11): 1984–2018.

- Discussion Questions:

1. Does LDP dominance primarily reflect the party's own strengths or the weakness of its opponents?
2. How have policy adaptation, clientelism, electoral rules, and control over election timing helped sustain LDP dominance?
3. Which sources of LDP dominance survived the 1994 electoral reform? What might eventually bring this dominance to an end?

09.23 Week 4 - Who Governs Japan?

- Puzzle 4: Who governs Japan, and under what conditions do politicians or bureaucrats prevail?

- Readings:

1. Johnson, Chalmers. 1982. *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*. Skim pp. 1–34 (Ch. 1). Read pp. 35–82 (Ch. 2).
2. Ramseyer, J. Mark and Frances M. Rosenbluth. *Japan's Political Marketplace*. 1997. Harvard University Press. Skim pp. 1–15 (Ch. 1). Read pp. 99–120 (Ch. 6).
3. Kushida, Kenji E. and Phillip Y. Lipsky. 2013. "The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Party of Japan." *Japan Under the DPJ: The Politics of Transition and Governance*. The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University. pp. 3–42.
4. Goplerud, Max and Daniel M. Smith. 2023. "Who Answers for the Government? Bureaucrats, Ministers, and Responsible Parties." *American Journal of Political Science* 67(4): 963–978.

- Discussion Questions:

1. How do Johnson and Ramseyer and Rosenbluth differ in their accounts of who governs Japan?
2. How did the DPJ attempt to change the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats, and why did it fail?
3. When government policy succeeds or fails, whom do Japanese voters hold responsible?

Part II: Political Economy and Social Change

09.30 Week 5 - Economic Growth, Stagnation, and Inequality

★ Foundations Quiz (In Class)

- *Puzzle 5: How did Japan achieve rapid and relatively egalitarian growth, and why did that model unravel?*
- Readings:
 1. World Bank. 1993. *The East Asian Miracle*. Policy Research Report of the World Bank. pp. 1–26.
 2. Hoshi, Takeo, and Anil K. Kashyap. 2004. “Japan’s Financial Crisis and Economic Stagnation.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18(1): 3–26.
 3. Estévez-Abe, Margarita. 2008. *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan*. Cambridge University Press. Skim pp. 1–18 (Introduction). Read pp. 19–50 (Ch. 1).
 4. Chiavacci, David. 2008. “From Class Struggle to General Middle-Class Society to Divided Society: Societal Models of Inequality in Postwar Japan.” *Social Science Japan Journal* 11(1): 5–27.
 5. Schlesinger, Jacob M. 2015. “Japan May Be Exception to Piketty’s Thesis.” *Wall Street Journal*, February 9. pp. 1–3.
- Discussion Questions:
 1. Did government intervention make Japan’s “economic miracle” possible? Or did it merely accompany, or even impede, economic growth?
 2. Did the institutions that produced rapid and relatively egalitarian growth also contribute to Japan’s subsequent stagnation and rising inequality? Which actors deserve the most credit or blame?
 3. Has Japan become a “gap society?” If so, why has inequality not generated a clearer partisan divide?

10.07 Week 6 - Demographic Decline and Gender Equality

★ Policy Track: Domestic Policy Memo Topic Distributed

- *Puzzle 6: Why has Japan struggled to adapt its institutions to demographic decline and changing family needs?*
- Readings:
 1. Seike, Atsushi. 2015. “Japan’s Demographic Collapse.” In Yoichi Funabashi and Barak Kushner, eds., *Examining Japan’s Lost Decades*. Routledge. pp. 1–16.
 2. Rosenbluth, Frances McCall. 2007. “The Political Economy of Low Fertility.” In Frances McCall Rosenbluth, ed., *The Political Economy of Japan’s Low Fertility*. Stanford University Press. Read pp. 3–25 (Chapter 1).

3. Kage, Rieko, Frances M. Rosenbluth, and Seiki Tanaka. 2019. "What Explains Low Female Political Representation? Evidence from Survey Experiments in Japan." *Politics & Gender* 15(2): 285–309.
4. McClean, Charles T. 2026. "Does Youth Representation Matter for Social Spending?" *The Journal of Politics*. Read the main text only.

- Discussion Questions:

1. How do employment practices, family roles, and government policy shape Japan's low fertility and its capacity to adapt to population aging?
2. Do the same institutions that constrain women's employment and family choices also limit their political representation?
3. Does responding to population aging require shifting resources between generations? How might greater representation of women and younger people change policy priorities?

10.14 Week 7 - Immigration

- ★ Guest lecture: Michael Strausz (Texas Christian University), via Zoom, 1:30–2:30 p.m.

- Puzzle 7: Why has Japan expanded access to foreign labor yet resisted a broader opening to immigration despite its demographic needs?

- Readings:

1. Chung, Erin Aeran, Darcie Draudt, and Yunchen Tian. 2024. "The Developmental Migration State." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50(3): 637–656.
2. Kage, Rieko, Frances M. Rosenbluth, and Seiki Tanaka. 2022. "Varieties of Public Attitudes toward Immigration: Evidence from Survey Experiments in Japan." *Political Research Quarterly* 75(1): 216–230.
3. Maeda, Ko, and Michael Strausz. 2025. "Conservative Politics and the Dilemma of Immigration in Japan." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 25(3): 352–367.
4. Strausz, Michael. 2026. "Immigration: Youth, Partisanship, and Candidates' Positioning." Chapter 15, *Japan Decides*. Draft.

- Discussion Questions:

1. How does the developmental-state approach explain Japan's preference for temporary labor migration over permanent settlement?
2. How do economic interests and cultural concerns shape public attitudes toward immigration? How well do those attitudes explain conservative politicians' positions?
3. Under what conditions might immigration generate an electoral backlash even where employers and incumbent politicians support expanding foreign labor?

10.21 - No Class

- Fall Break

- ★ Research Proposal Due (by 10.20)

Part III: Japan and the World

10.28 Week 8 - Security Transformation, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and U.S. Bases

★ Policy Track: Domestic Policy Memo Due

- *Puzzle 8: Why has Japan expanded its security role while remaining dependent on the United States? And why are the costs of the alliance so concentrated in Okinawa?*
- Documentary (watch before class):
 - Fink, Micah (producer and writer). 2008. *Japan's About-Face*. PBS Wide Angle.
- Readings:
 1. Samuels, Richard J. 2007. *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia*. Cornell University Press. Skim pp. 13–37 (Chapter 1). Read pp. 38–59 (Chapter 2).
 2. Liff, Adam P. 2021. Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe: Assessing Institutional and Policy Change." In Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Y. Lipscy, eds., *The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 479–510.
 3. Hikotani, Takako, Yusaku Horiuchi, and Atsushi Tago. 2023. Revisiting Negative Externalities of U.S. Military Bases: The Case of Okinawa." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 23(2): 325–349.
- Discussion Questions
 1. Does Japan have a coherent grand strategy? Is the Yoshida Doctrine still relevant?
 2. What do Japan and the United States each gain from their alliance? What risks does it create for each country?
 3. Why are so many U.S. facilities concentrated in Okinawa? How much influence do Okinawans have over their continued presence?

11.04 Week 9 - Historical Memory and Territorial Conflicts

- *Puzzle 9: Why do the legacies of Japan's wartime defeat and postwar settlement remain politically consequential?*
- Readings:
 1. Hara, Kimie. 2001. "50 Years from San Francisco: Re-Examining the Peace Treaty and Japan's Territorial Problems." *Pacific Affairs* 74(3): 361–382.
 2. Smith, Sheila A. 2019. "Revising Article Nine." In *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power*. Harvard University Press. pp. 162–172.
 3. McCarthy, Mary M. 2021. "The Enduring Challenges of History Issues." In Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Y. Lipscy (eds.), *The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 511–533.

4. Incerti, Trevor, Daniel Mattingly, Frances Rosenbluth, Seiki Tanaka, and Jiahua Yue. 2021. "Hawkish Partisans: How Political Parties Shape Nationalist Conflicts in China and Japan." *British Journal of Political Science* 51(4): 1494–1515.

- Discussion Questions:

1. Who keeps disputes over Japan's wartime past alive, and what political purposes do they serve?
2. Why do some citizens and politicians care so much about small, uninhabited islands?
3. Why has Japan's Constitution remained unchanged despite repeated efforts to revise it?

11.11 Week 10 - Nuclear Power, Energy Security, and Climate Policy

- *Puzzle 10: Why is Japan seeking to revive nuclear power despite the Fukushima disaster?*

- Readings:

1. Cohen, Linda, Mathew D. McCubbins, and Frances M. Rosenbluth. 1995. "The Politics of Nuclear Power in Japan and the United States." In Peter F. Cowhey and Mathew D. McCubbins (eds.), *Structure and Policy in Japan and the United States*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 177–202.
2. Kato, Takaaki, Shogo Takahara, Masashi Nishikawa, and Toshimitsu Homma. 2013. "A Case Study of Economic Incentives and Local Citizens' Attitudes toward Hosting a Nuclear Power Plant in Japan: Impacts of the Fukushima Accident." *Energy Policy* 59: 808–818.
3. Incerti, Trevor and Phillip Y. Lipsky. 2018. "The Politics of Energy and Climate Change in Japan under Abe: Abenergyonomics." *Asian Survey* 58(4): 607–634.
4. Sklarew, Jennifer F. 2023. "Japan's Energy Security Strategy: The Implications of Fukushima and Ukraine." In *The Revenge of Energy Security: Reconciling Asia's Economic Security with Climate Ambitions*. NBR Special Report No. 105. pp. 25–36.

- Discussion Questions:

1. Why has Japan's "nuclear allergy" applied more strongly to nuclear weapons than to civilian nuclear power?
2. Why did the Fukushima disaster fail to produce a lasting transformation of Japan's energy policy?
3. Is Japan's return to nuclear power driven primarily by energy security, climate policy, or domestic political interests?

11.18 Week 11 - Agricultural Protectionism, Trade, and International Economic Leadership

- *Puzzle 11: Why has Japan become a leader of free trade despite its long history of economic protectionism?*

- Readings:

1. Horiuchi, Yusaku, and Jun Saito. 2010. Cultivating Rice and Votes: The Institutional Origins of Agricultural Protectionism in Japan." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10(3): 425–452.
2. Naoi, Megumi, and Ikuo Kume. 2011. Explaining Mass Support for Agricultural Protectionism: Evidence from a Survey Experiment During the Global Recession." *International Organization* 65(4): 771–795.
3. Maclachlan, Patricia L., and Kay Shimizu. 2021. Japanese Agricultural Reform under Abenomics." In Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Y. Lipscy (eds.), *The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 421–444.
4. Katada, Saori N., and Kei Koga. 2026. Power of Regionalism: Building Institutions and Integrating Economy." In *Japan's Grand Strategy: Liminal Power in an Uncertain World*. Oxford University Press. pp. 152–175.

- Discussion Questions:

1. Why have agricultural interests exercised political influence disproportionate to their economic size?
2. Why have Japanese consumers supported agricultural protection despite bearing some of its costs?
3. Is Japan's international economic leadership best explained by changes in domestic politics or changes in the international environment?

11.25 No Class

- Thanksgiving Break

12.02 Week 12 - Final Presentations

- ★ Policy and Research Tracks: Final Presentations (Round 1)

12.09 Week 13 - Final Presentations

- ★ Policy and Research Tracks: Final Presentations (Round 2)

12.22 Final Projects Due

- ★ Policy and Research Tracks: Final Projects Due