Do the Collectivist Legacy of Long-standing Clan-based Governance Still Influence Local Politics in Japan? A Quantitative Study

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Abstract. Historically, Japan's clan-based governance has a lasting impact on its domestic politics. Whether these legacies continue to shape contemporary local politics, however, remains a topic of heated debate in current internet forums and academic circles. To contribute to this discussion, this study conducts a quantitative analysis based on cross-sectional data from all 47 prefectures in Japan, investigating whether the collectivist legacy of clan-based governance continues to shape political representation at the local level today. The analysis focuses on the relationship between the density of neighborhood associations (chōnaikai), regarded as a legacy of local clan governance, and the differences in local party representation between municipal and prefectural assemblies. To address potential endogeneity, earthquake frequency is employed as an instrumental variable, while a regional dummy for western Japan is introduced to control for cultural variation. The second-stage regression results reveal that chōnaikai density does not significantly predict differences in local party representation, suggesting that the influence of traditional localism in contemporary electoral outcomes has weakened. Although the explanatory power of the model is constrained by limited sample size and the absence of key control variables, the findings nonetheless provide new empirical evidence supporting the view that Japan's historical system of clan-based governance has little effect on contemporary local politics.

Keywords: Local Politics, Japanese Studies, Political Representation, Japanese Clans

1. Introduction

In contemporary Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has long dominated national politics, with limited alternation in ruling power. However, in local elections, the presence and influence of newlocal political parties have been steadily growing. For instance, the rise of Osaka Ishin no Kai in the Kansai region and its victory in the 2023 Osaka Prefectural Assembly election reflect how local political forces are increasingly challenging the dominance of national parties.Some political scientists have attributed this to Japan's growing decoupling between national and local parties, as well as to the combined impact of the electoral system, redistricting, and localism [1,2]. Among these interpretations, a long-standing perspective suggests that the legacy of Japan's local clan-based governance—deeply rooted in collectivism—hasrevived at the local leveland informedlocal political

dynamics. While this view remains controversial, it continues to exert influence in both academic and public discourse.

Since the Meiji era, scholars have observed a persistent tendency toward localism in Japanese society. Early folklorist Kunio Yanagita emphasized the tight-knit cooperation within local communities and the distinct exclusion of outsiders [3]. During the Pacific War, Ruth Benedict's The Chrysanthemum and the Sword linked local collectivist values to Japanese political behavior [4]. More recent studies have sought to uncover the geographical and economic roots of this collectivism, suggesting that Japan's mountainous terrain constrained agricultural expansion and limited inter-village exchange, while frequent natural disasters necessitated mutual aid and cooperation. In such conditions, collective life and localized governance often proved more effective than centralized authority [5,6]. Political dynasties have played a continuous role in Japan's political system [7], and prior to the Meiji Restoration, local governance largely depended on ruling families [8]. This kind of clan-based governance lasted for over avery long period, with some ancient clans tracing their origins back to mythology [9].

In the present day, scholars remain divided on whether the long-term historical reliance on local clans for governance continues to shape the local political dynamics in contemporary Japan. Most quantitative research suggests that the socio-economic conditions which once sustained collectivism —such as agricultural dependence and geographical isolation—have been fundamentally altered by the growth of the secondary and tertiary sectors, as well as the expansion of transportation infrastructure. Consequently, collectivist tendencies have significantly weakened and are no longer geographically bound [10]. Some studies even argue that levels of collectivism in contemporary Japan now closely resemble those in more individualistic societies such as the United States [11]. Nonetheless, other scholars maintain that traditional forms of collectivism remain influential [12,13], thereby challenging dominant narratives about modernization and political transformation.

This revisionist view often critiques the presumed depth and impact of Japan's historic political reforms. Some evidence supports this skepticism. For example, new archaeological findings suggest that the centralizing Taika Reforms existed mainly at the institutional level and had limited practical effect [14]. Similarly, although the Meiji Restoration is widely seen as diminishing local clan control, subsequent wartime mobilization efforts led to the establishment of chōnaikai (neighborhood associations) to more effectively manage grassroots resources [15]. According to John Masland, a GHQ official during the Allied Occupation, chōnaikai functioned as authoritarian organizations, featuring mandatory membership and, in some cases, hereditary leadership [16]. These organizations inherited many characteristics of pre-Meiji clan governance, suggesting that local authority was not entirely dismantled by the Meiji reforms.

The postwar Peace Constitution of 1947 sought to further democratize Japanese society and reduce the influence of political dynasties. However, critics argue that this democratization was a top-down, elite-driven process that failed to fundamentally transform political culture [17]. The enduring influence of political families—such as the Abe, Aso, and Hatoyama dynasties—attests to the persistence of hereditary power in modern Japanese politics [18]. At the local level, candidates from long-established families or those deeply rooted in their communities of ten enjoy a strong electoral advantage. Although chōnaikai were banned in the immediate postwar period due to their authoritarian associations, they were re-legalized in 1952 and quickly reinstated as active grassroots organizations, many of which remain prevalent today.

This study employs a quantitative approach to examine whether the collectivist legacy of long-standing clan-based governance still helps explain contemporary patterns in local political representation. In particular, it investigates whether localist tendencies rooted in this historical

governance model continue to shape the structure of modern local politics. The findings suggest that such influences may no longer be significant. The researcher argues thatthe assumption that clan-based traditions continue to drive local political outcomes has become increasingly untenable in contemporary Japan.

2. Estimation method

This study employs cross-sectional data to investigate whether the density of chōnaikai, which represents collectivist legacies, is correlated withthedifferences in local party representation across regions in Japan. The dependent variable is the difference in the proportion of local party seats between prefectural and municipal assemblies across Japan's 47 prefectures. This variable serves as an indicator ofthe difference invoting behaviorbetweendifferent levels of local elections. The main explanatory variable is the number of neighborhood associations (chōnaikai) per capita in each prefecture, which reflects the extent of localist structures associated with clan governancehistory. To address potential endogeneity between the dependent and explanatory variables, the study uses the number of magnitude 6 or higher earthquakes recorded in each prefecture since the year 2000 as an instrumental variable, which is significantly correlated with chōnaikai per person but are only indirectly correlated with election difference through chōnaikai. Additionally, a dummy variable for the Kansai region is included to isolate region-specific effects and examine whether patterns in Kansai differ from other parts of the country. All data were collected from three official online sources: the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, the Headquarters for Earthquake Research Promotion, and the e-Stat portal. After collection, the data were manually entered and processed using Stata software.

2.1. Independent variable: chōnaikai

This study uses chōnaikai (neighborhood associations) as the main independent variable, as these organizations remain active in contemporary Japan. During the imperial period, chōnaikai assumed certain autonomous functions that were originally carried out by local clans. Institutionalized in 1940, they were intended to replace clan-based local governance structures. However, due to their authoritarian nature, chōnaikai were dissolved during the postwar democratization process. In 1952, they were re-legalized and quickly regained influence, and their main function are disaster rescue. John Masland described chōnaikai in 1946 as authoritarian organizations [16]. He viewed them as modern substitutes for traditional clan-based governance [16]. The data used for this study on chōnaikai are drawn from the 2022 survey conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, titled Survey on the Role of Neighborhood Associations and Similar Organizations in Supporting Municipal Administration [19]. These data are used to assess the role of chōnaikai in contemporary Japanese local politics.

2.2. Dependent variable: municipal–prefectural local party representation gap

The dependent variable in this study is the gap between the proportion of seats held by local parties or independent candidates in prefectural assemblies and the corresponding proportion in municipal assemblies within the same prefecture. Japan's local government system is composed of two levels: 47 prefectures (todōfuken) and 1,718 municipalities (shikuchōson). These two levels collectively constitute what are referred to as "local public bodies" [20]. Article 92 of the Japanese Constitution

guarantees the principle of local autonomy, and the Local Autonomy Act stipulates that governors and assembly members must be directly elected byvoters.

This study focuses specifically on the gap between the municipal and prefectural levels because, while national and local elections differ significantly in terms of electoral systems and voter priorities, municipal and prefectural elections are both local in nature and therefore more comparable. In many cases, the proportion of local or independent representatives is higher at the municipal level, making the difference between municipal and prefectural representation a useful indicator of voters' localist preferences. The data for the dependent variable are current as of July 2025 and cover all 47 prefectures using a consistent methodology.

Importantly, to avoid confounding effects from the unique rise of Osaka Ishin no Kai in the Kansai region—and to isolate the legacy of localist traditions unrelated to this specific party—the study classifies Osaka Ishin no Kai as a national party rather than a local one. All data were obtained from the official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan.

2.3. Instrumental variable: earthquake frequency

This study uses earthquake frequency as an instrumental variable to address potential endogeneity between the number of chōnaikai per capita and the municipal–prefectural local party representation gap. In areas where chōnaikai activity is more robust, local parties are more likely to receive organizational support during municipal elections, which might change their chances of electoral success [21,22]. This, in turn, may affect the proportion of local party representation at the municipal level relative to the prefectural level. Therefore, the explanatory variable—chōnaikai per capita—may be correlated with the error term, leading to biased estimates.

As key actors in community-based disaster preparedness, the presence and prevalence of chōnaikai are strongly related to earthquake frequency [23]. In regions where earthquakes occur more frequently, there is greater institutional and cultural demand for chōnaikai to coordinate emergency response and resource distribution. Thus, earthquake frequency is assumed to be highly correlated with chōnaikai presence but to have no direct effect on the difference in local party representation between municipal and prefectural assemblies. Since earthquakes typically affect entire prefectures, they are expected to influence both municipal and prefectural elections equally and therefore should not directly impact the representation gap between the two levels.

To ensure consistency and comparability, this study collects data on all magnitude 6.0 or higher earthquakes that have occurred in each prefecture since the year 2000. This includes not only earthquakes with epicenters located within the prefecture but also those originating elsewhere that were felt at that intensity locally. For instance, Ibaraki Prefecture experienced seven significant earthquakes during this period, five of which reached or exceeded magnitude 6. As such, its recorded frequency is five. Earthquake data were obtained from the Headquarters for Earthquake Research Promotion [24].

2.4. Regional dummy variable: Kansai

Since the 2010s, the Kansai region has experienced marked political shifts, largely driven by the emergence and expansion of the regional party Osaka Ishin no Kai. In 2023, the party secured a majority in the Osaka Prefectural Assembly, making Kansai the region with the highest proportion of local party representation in Japan. Scholars have attributed this trend to Kansai voters' strong sense of regional identity, which distinguishes them from voters in other parts of the country [25]. Notably, Kansai residents tend to support regional parties even in national elections—for example,

Nippon Ishin no Kai won all 19 electoral districts in Osaka in the 2024 House of Representatives election and secured 2 of 4 seats in the 2025 House of Councillors election.

This trend has been interpreted as a response to the Liberal Democratic Party's policy failures in the region and as an expression of Kansai's distinct local identity [25,26]. Historically, Kansai was Japan's economic and political center before the Edo period and continues to exhibit unique political and cultural characteristics [27]. Although modern Japanese politics are centered in Tokyo, Kansai retains a relatively autonomous regional mindset, reflected in its dialects and strong competitive ethos [28-30].

However, because the rise of Osaka Ishin no Kai is a recent phenomenon and not directly rooted in traditional collectivist practices or clan-based governance, this study classifies Osaka Ishin no Kai as a national party rather than a local one to avoid potential bias. Furthermore, a regional dummy variable for Kansai is introduced to isolate and evaluate whether local party representation in Kansai —excluding the influence of Osaka Ishin no Kai—is significantly higher than in other regions.

3. Empirical result

In the empirical stage, this study first tests the validity of the instrumental variable earthquakeby using regression analysis to demonstrate its strong explanatory power for the endogenous variable chōnaikai per capitaand its lack of correlation with the dependent variable municipal prefectural local party representation gap. In the second step, the instrumental variable approach is implemented through the two-stage least squares method.

3.1.1. Relevance restriction

$$\text{Chonaikai\_peri} = \alpha + \pi \cdot \text{Earthquakei} + \text{ui} \tag{1}$$

To test the relevance restriction required for an instrumental variable, this study uses earthquake frequency as the explanatory variable to verify the proposed instrument.

Table 1. Relevance restriction

	(1)
VARIABLES	Chonaikai_per
Chonaikai_per	
earthquake	-0.413**
	(0.165)
	-2.512
	(0.0157)
Constant	5.632***
	(0.717)
	7.853
	(5.65e-10)
Observations	47
R-squared	0.123
R-squared	0.123

Table 1. (continued)

Adj. R-squared	0.103
F-statistic	6.309
Prob > F	0.0157
N	47

se pval in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The results (Table 1) show that earthquakes have a statistically significant negative effect on the number of chōnaikai per capita, with a coefficient of -0.413 at the 5% significance level (p = 0.0157). This indicates that, holding other factors constant, each additional earthquake is associated with an average decrease of approximately 0.413 chōnaikai per thousand people. One possible interpretation is that larger, more centralized chōnaikai may be more effective in organizing disaster response and resource distribution, leading to fewer but larger associations in earthquake-prone areas. The model's R-squared is 0.123, and the adjusted R-squared is 0.103, suggesting that earthquake frequency explains around 10% of the variation in chōnaikai per capita. Although the explanatory power of the model is limited, the F-statistic is 6.309 with a corresponding p-value of 0.0157, indicating that the model is statistically significant overall. These results fulfilling the relevance condition required for a valid instrumental variable.

3.1.2. Execution restriction

$$\mathrm{MunicipalPrefDiff}i = \alpha + \gamma \cdot \mathrm{Earthquake}i + \varepsilon i \tag{2}$$

Next, we examine whether the instrumental variable has a direct effect on the dependent variable. This procedure is intended to test whether the exclusion restriction is violated.

Table 2. Execution restriction

	(2)
VARIABLES	municipal_prefectural_diff
municipal_prefectural_diff	
earthquake	-0.00584
	(0.00909)
	-0.642
	(0.524)
Constant	0.419***
	(0.0396)
	10.57
	(0)
Observations	47
R-squared	0.009
R-squared	0.00908

Table 2. (continued)

Adj. R-squared	-0.0129
F-statistic	0.412
Prob > F	0.524
N	47

se pval in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In the second-stage regression, we examine whether the instrumental variable has a direct effect on the dependent variable. This serves to test whether the exclusion restriction condition is violated. The regression results (Table 2) show that the coefficient of earthquake is -0.00584 with a standard error of 0.00909, yielding a t-value of -0.642 and a p-value of 0.524. This indicates that the effect is statistically insignificant at conventional levels. The model's R-squared is 0.009, and the adjusted R-squared is -0.0129, suggesting that the model has almost no explanatory power. The overall F-statistic is 0.412 with a p-value of 0.524, confirming that the regression as a whole is not significant, thus satisfying the exclusion restriction. Together with the prior finding that earthquake frequency is significantly related to chōnaikai per capita, earthquake can be considered a theoretically and empirically valid instrumental variable.

3.2. Two stage least squares

$$\text{Chonaikai\_peri} = \alpha 0 + \alpha 1 \text{Earthquake}i + \alpha 2 \text{WestJapan}i + ui \tag{3}$$

$$\text{MunicipalPrefDiff}i = \beta 0 + \beta 1 \text{Chonaikai\_peri} + \beta 2 \text{WestJapan}i + \varepsilon \tag{4}$$

Table 3. Two stage least squares

	(3)	(4)
	Chonaikai_per	municipal_prefectural_diff
earthquake	-0.474**	
	(0.137)	
West_Japan	-1.536	-0.057
	(0.868)	(0.050)
Chonaikai_per		0.020
		(0.016)
Constant	6.244***	0.331***
	(0.849)	(0.069)
Observations	47	47
R-squared	0.176	0.131
F-statistic	6.17	
Prob > F	0.004	0.289

Standard errors in parentheses

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

In the first stage of the 2SLS, the variable Chōnaikai per capita is regressed on the instrumental variable earthquake and the control variable West_Japan. The results (Table 3) show that earthquake has a coefficient of -0.474 with a standard error of 0.137, which is statistically significant at the 1% level. This indicates a strong and negative correlation between earthquake frequency and the number of chōnaikai organizations. The model's R-squared is 0.176, and the F-statistic is 6.17 (Prob > F = 0.004), suggesting that the model is overall significant and meets the relevance condition for a valid instrument.

In the second stage, the predicted values of Chonaikai_per from the first stage are used as the explanatory variable for the dependent variable Local Party Gap, with West_Japan still included as a dummy. The coefficient for Chonaikai_per is 0.020 with a standard error of 0.016, but it does not reach statistical significance. The model's R-squared is 0.131, indicating a limited ability to explain variation in the dependent variable. The overall model is not statistically significant (Prob > F = 0.289). And we can see the dummy West_Japan is not significant without ishinnokai as a local party. So this conclusion can also be applied in Kansai region.

The researcher believes there are two key limitations to this result. First, the sample size is small. Ideally, individual-level data from all municipal units would be used, but only aggregate data at the prefectural level was available. Second, the model lacks sufficient control variables due to the absence of prior studies directly addressing this topic and the unavailability of reliable data on income, education, and industrial structure at the appropriate level.

In summary, results align with the hypothesis that the legacy of clan-based governance no longer has a significant influence on local elections. However, this study does have significant limitations, which will be explained in the next section.

4. Conclusion

This study aims to examine whether traditional clan-based governance legacies still shape localism in contemporary Japanese politics, particularly in terms of their influence on the representativeness of local parties in local elections. Using a cross-sectional regression model based on data from all 47 prefectures, the researcher designates the number of neighborhood associations (chōnaikai) per 1,000 people as the key explanatory variable representing localist tradition, and the difference in the proportion of local party representatives between municipal and prefectural assemblies as the dependent variable. To address potential endogeneity between the chōnaikai variable and political outcomes, we introduce earthquake frequency as an instrumental variable. Additionally, to account for regional political and cultural differences, a dummy variable for western Japan is included in the model. Although this variable does not significantly affect the dependent variable, its inclusion helps isolate and remove region-specific noise, thereby improving model robustness and highlighting the importance of controlling for spatial variation when analyzing localism.

The findings of this study provide new empirical insights into the evolution of political localism and voter behavior in Japan. The hypothesis developed in the literature review is supported: under the instrumented model, the effect of chōnaikai per capita on the municipal-prefectural representational gap is statistically insignificant. Moreover, the data do not show a significant difference in local party representation between the Kansai region (excluding Osaka Ishin no Kai) and other areas. It appears that the localism once rooted in clan governance has lost its political

salience in the context of modernization, urbanization, and the expansion of centralized state institutions.

Nonetheless, this study has certain limitations. In the first-stage regression, earthquake frequency was found to be significantly negatively correlated with the number of chōnaikai, confirming the relevance condition of the instrumental variable—namely, that it is theoretically and empirically correlated with the endogenous explanatory variable. However, in the second-stage regression, the instrumented chōnaikai variable did not significantly predict the dependent variable. The model's explanatory power was also weak ($R^2 = 0.131$, Prob > F = 0.289). One key reason may be the limited sample size, as the analysis relies solely on prefectural-level data, whichmeans a limited sample size andmay not able to capture intra-prefecture heterogeneity. A more granular dataset at the municipal level would significantly improve model accuracy and representativeness. Another issue is the lack of control variables, which may result in omitted variable bias. Due to data limitations, the researcher was unable to incorporate important predictors of local political behavior such as per capita income, industrial structure, average years of education, transportation accessibility and regional demographic characteristics.

In conclusion, this study suggests that in contemporary Japan, the collective localism shaped by traditional clan-based governance is no longer a sufficient explanation for local party representation in elections. While the limited explanatory power of the model warrants cautious interpretation, the findings nevertheless offer quantitative support for the view that traditional localism has diminished in political influence. These results contribute to the understanding of political transformation in Japan and offer a potential comparative framework for studying countries in East Asia with similar historical legacies.

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