

Voices of the Future: A Study of Youth Protest in Japan

Rie Aiyama
Advisor: Dr. Phillip Lipsy

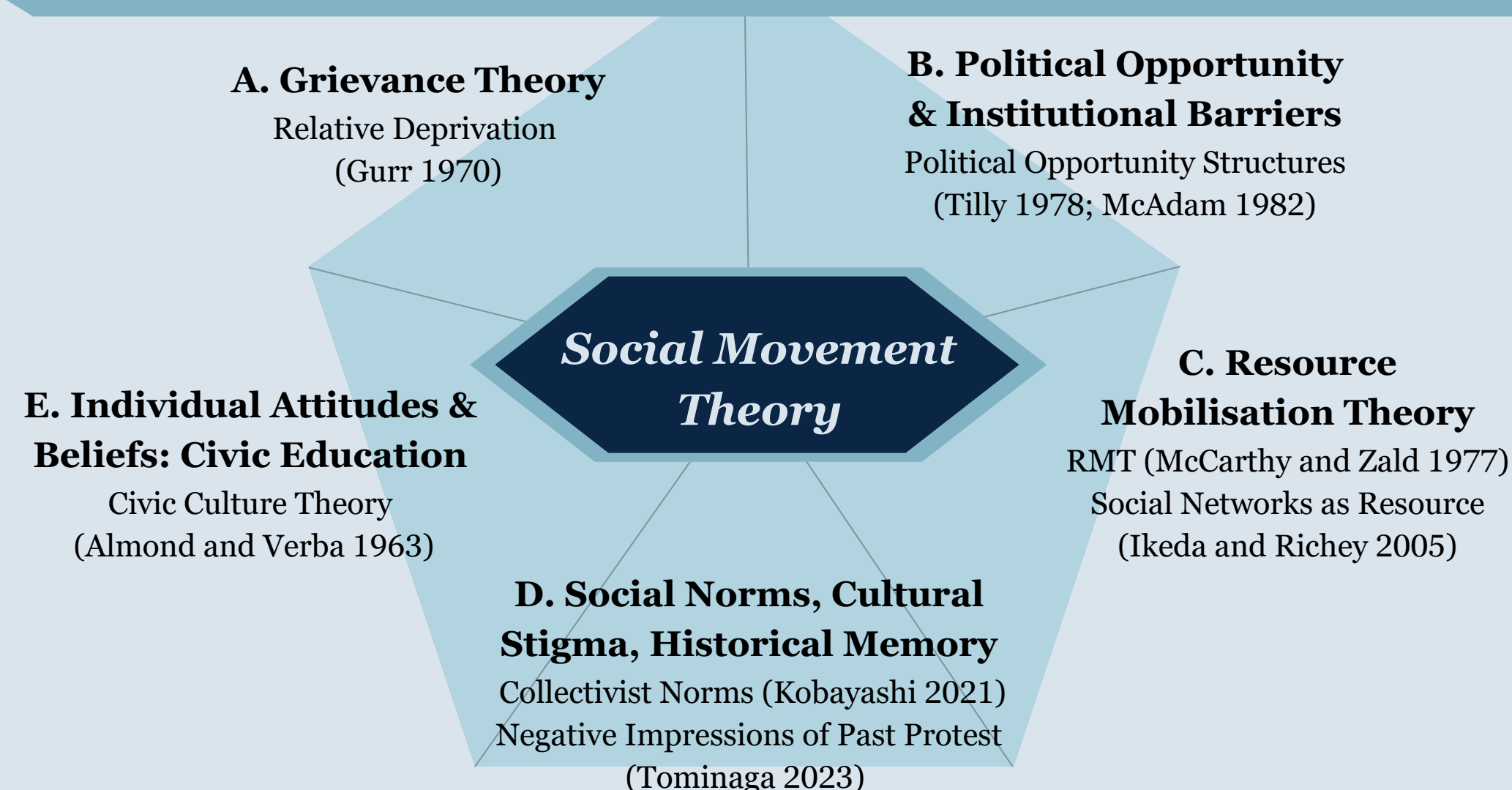
Introduction

Despite being a “free and stable” democracy, Japanese youth have been characterised as politically apathetic, with low participation in protests. This research investigates the contemporary status of youth protest in Japan. Employing a mixed-methods approach, it first produces a cross-national quantitative analysis of the World Values Survey to distinguish whether Japan is a regional outlier. Subsequently, it presents novel qualitative insights from interviews with Japanese university students to illustrate the sentiments and barriers surrounding protest.

Research Questions:

- ◆ How do behaviours and attitudes towards civic engagement in Japan compare to those in similar East Asian democracies?
- ◆ How do contemporary Japanese youths perceive public activism, specifically *protest* as a form of political participation?
- ◆ What factors influence their attitudes toward protest?

Lit Review & Theoretical Framework



Statistics: Youth Protest in Contemporary Japan

- *Japanese Trade Union Confederation Report (2021)*: When asked which form of political activism they did not want to take part in, 46.8% answered “rallies, demonstrations, marches and parades” compared to 19.5% who cited “crowdfunding, donations etc”. 60.5% of respondents in their 10s and 53.3% in their 20s reported that they perceive demonstrations as “negative, scary or extreme”
- *Nippon Foundation’s Awareness Survey of 18-Year-Olds (2024)*: Political engagement in Japan ranked the lowest among eight countries (China, South Korea, US, UK etc.)

Qualitative Data: Youth Interviews

Protest Perception & Participation

- Described perceptions of protest as legitimate in principle but negative & ineffective in practice
- Associated with partisan politics than social issues
- Disruptive & violent aspects make it unappealing
- “[It] ends up involving people who have nothing to do with it. It affects everyday life”
- Protests viewed as participated by older generations (40-50s) while youths are apathetic & uninvolved, instead observe
- 1 out of 7 respondents had previously participated in protest

Non-Protest Participation

- Openness to low-risk activities (voting, petitions, donations) due to low visibility & minor barriers
- Voting recognised unanimously as obligatory
- But voting viewed as a solitary process, party preferences often not shared with peers or family

Barriers to Protest

A: Perceived Lack of Grievances & Urgency

- Perception that current social and economic conditions do not constitute sufficient urgent or compelling grievances

“Even if you don’t join a protest, your life will still be protected.”

- Students struggle to identify issues that justify mobilisation
 - Normalisation of gradual deprivation erodes sense of widespread urgency; e.g. rising costs & taxes
- “There are many possible issues — recently prices have been high, and economically everyone is struggling a bit — but there’s no shared agreement on what the best solution is.”

B: Collectivist Cultural Norms: Fear & Stigma

- Social norms discourage confrontation and being political outspoken, perceived risk of criticism and peer judgement - particularly conscious of their parents/peers’ perceptions

“People who stand out with political opinions tend to get distanced from their communities— like at school or at work”

- Stigma of politics in society; rarely discussed in public spaces to avoid conflict in communities
- Cultural norm of “和” (“harmony”), unspoken rules of “空気を読め” (“read the air”) and “波を荒らすな” (“don’t stir up the waves”)

C: Education: Civic Socialisation

- Civics education differed between private/public system; private school students received opportunities for critical engagement & debate
 - Widespread sense of political inefficacy due to limited political literacy →
- “If you don’t have knowledge about an issue, speaking out won’t necessarily change anything.”

D: Social Media as Risk & Opportunity

- SNS as an alternative for political expression
 - But concerns about backlash & visibility
 - Student feared identity exposure and online harassment after protest participation
- “Platforms like X don’t require you to use your real name, so it’s easier to post anonymously.”

E: Historical Memory of Past Protest

- Negative impressions of Anpo prevalent in older generations but not youth
- Minor awareness of Anpo and SEALDs

F: Time & Resource Costs

- University students have sufficient time and financial resources to protest
- Paired with a sense of inefficacy → barrier

Potential Catalysts:

- Indicated conditional willingness to protest under urgent circumstances, such as economic or political crisis
- Some students more likely to join a protest if invited by friends or if they could see that large enough public support had been mobilised
- Need for a leadership figure who could rally youth and articulate clear goals

(Weighted) Order of Significance

1. Perceived Lack of Grievances/Urgency (2.00)
2. Social/Cultural Norms (2.83)
3. Social Media Backlash (3.17)
4. Education: Limited Civic Socialisation (3.67)
5. Time/Resource Costs (4.50)
6. Historical Memory (4.83)

Thesis

This paper finds that Japanese youths’ protest disengagement is driven by a **perceived lack of immediate grievances** and **collectivist norms that render political expression socially undesirable**. Secondary factors such as concerns about **social media backlash** and **weak civic education** reinforce disengagement, while **historical memory** and **resource constraints** play a marginal role.

Historical Context



Left: Protestors from Shizuoka join the demonstrations in Tokyo (Hamaya 1960)



Right: Student protestors gather with placards and microphones (Yabe 2015)

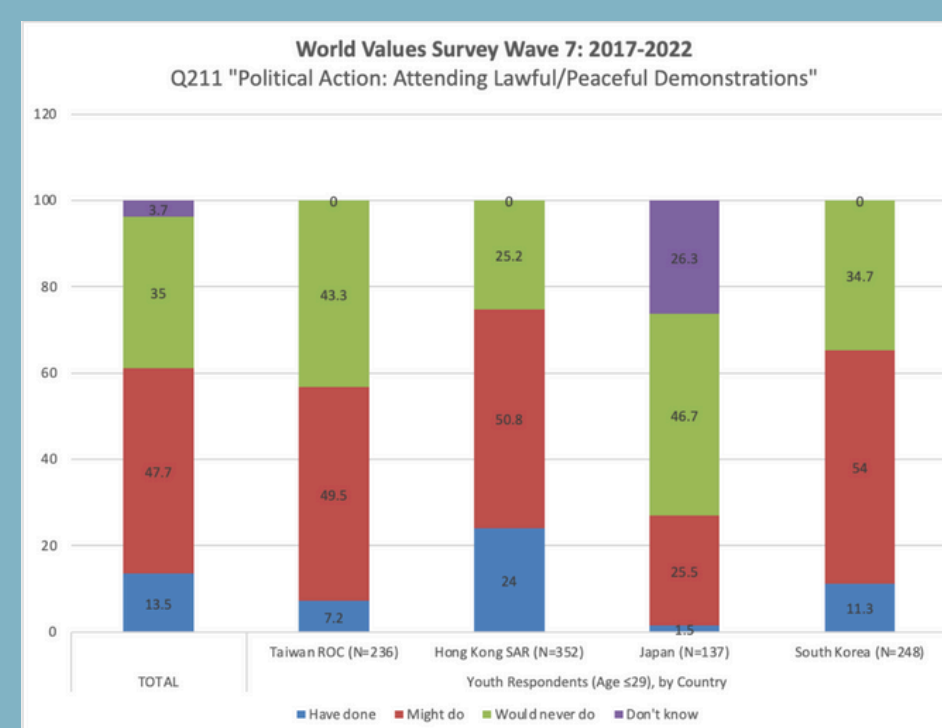
1959-60 Anpo Protests

- Most significant and large scale protest in Japanese history, against revision of U.S-Japan Security Treaty
- 30 million people mobilised in Tokyo, including students (*Zengakuren* activist organisation)
- June 15 occupation of the Diet building escalated to violence
- Anpo triggered a gradual decline in organised labour, student activism and intellectual leadership
- Rise of institutional restrictions
- Solidified an image of protests as violent, extreme, ineffective

2015-16 SEALDs Movement

- Student-led mass movement against PM Abe security bills; Article 9 (expanded JSDF)
- August 2015: over 120,000 protestors mobilised outside Diet
- Consciously tried to disassociate from violent past of protest & connect with the younger generation through pop culture
- Tominaga (2024) survey experiment argues memories of SEALDs and Anpo discourages Japanese citizens today from participating in politics and civil society (including protest)

Quantitative Data: World Values Survey



Left: Youth responses to “Political Action: Attending Lawful/Peaceful Demonstrations”, by country
Right: Table comparing actual participation rates (%) across nine variables and four countries

WVS Variable	Japan (N=137)	Taiwan ROC (N=236)	Hong Kong SAR (N=352)	South Korea (N=248)
Q211 Political Action: Attending Lawful/Peaceful Demonstrations	1.5%	7.2%	24.0%	11.3%
Q209 Political Action: Signing a Petition	26.3%	23.8%	22.3%	19.0%
Q210 Political Action: Joining in Boycotts	1.5%	9.8%	10.1%	4.8%
Q212 Political Action: Joining Unofficial Strikes	0.0%	0.2%	3.9%	0.4%
Q213 Social Activism: Donating to a Group or Campaign	35.8%	33.3%	40.0%	13.7%
Q215 Social Activism: Encouraging Others To Take Action About Political Issues	0.7%	5.6%	19.1%	2.8%
Q218 Political Actions Online: Signing an Electronic Petition	1.5%	24.5%	30.9%	8.9%
Q219 Political Actions Online: Encouraging Other People to Take Any Form of Political Action	1.5%	10.8%	17.1%	2.4%
Q220 Political Actions Online: Organising Political Activities, Events, Protests	0.0%	0.2%	11.4%	2.0%

In the majority of indicators, Japanese youth reported the lowest levels of actualised civic participation (“Have done”), as well as reduced levels of willingness to participate (“Might do”) and highest levels of rejection (“Would never do”), distinguishing Japan as an outlier.

Data: Protest Participation

- **Hong Kong**: highest rate of actual participation (24%) and strongest willingness (50.8%)
- **South Korea**: high openness to protest (54%) but lower reported participation (11.3%)
- **Taiwan**: high willingness to participate (49.5%) but low actual participation (7.2%)
- **Japan**: significantly low protest attendance (1.5%) as well as the lowest willingness (25.5%) and highest refusal to engage (46.7%) among the four countries. Furthermore, 26.3% selected the “don’t know” category, indicating notable uncertainty or disengagement.