

The Political Leadership of Mayors in Japan

- Examining the Results of a Nationwide Survey of Mayors-

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Nippon Institute for Research Advancement

The rapidly accelerating aging and decline of Japan’s population, combined with climate change, and digitalization are forcing major policy shifts in the ways that government is administered and community development organized. While some municipalities have successfully pioneered dramatic shifts in public policy to meet these challenges, the majority have failed to reform sufficiently in the face of change. The reality is that bold leadership by local mayors is indispensable for achieving meaningful reforms, as they play a key role being at the core of local decision making. Unfortunately, the record of mayoral leadership and achievement in Japan, has thus far failed to leave a positive impression, and this is reflected in the lack of meaningful scholarship on the realities of mayoral leadership within the country.

To help rectify this deficit, the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement, in collaboration with Professor Toshihiro Okubo of Keio University, Professor Takuya Tsuji of Hitotsubashi University, and Professor Masayuki Nakagawa of Nihon University conducted a survey sent out to each of Japan’s 1,741 mayors¹ on “Policy Initiatives and Leadership.” The survey, conducted between October 12 and November 30 of 2020, received 824 responses for a response rate of 47%.

This paper examines the realities of municipal governance and mayorship from the perspective of leadership to find the secret to executing successful policy change in a society undergoing rapid population aging and population decline. Under such conditions, how do mayors exercise leadership, and what are the factors that hinder reform? What kinds of

¹ The survey was sent out to the mayors of cities, towns, and the 23 special wards (*tokubetsu-ku*) of Tokyo, all of which are designated as legally independent municipalities under Japanese law. This number does not include the heads of the administrative wards (*ku*) of “cities designated by government ordinance,” (for example, Kohoku-ku in Yokohama City) as these wards are mere subdivisions of municipal authority, do not exist as independent legal entities, and are not considered municipalities under Japanese law. Therefore, for the purposes of both the survey and this paper, the term “mayor” refers exclusively to the elected leaders of municipalities as defined under Japanese law.

personalities do mayors possess and what separates those who have successfully pioneered reforms from those whose record is merely average? By asking such questions, this paper seeks to provide critical insight into the kind of leadership required to achieve meaningful reform.

This paper is divided into two main parts. In part one, the results of the survey on municipal leadership and policy initiative are used to paint a picture depicting the average state of mayors in Japan. In part two, six municipalities that have achieved pioneering reforms are taken up as case studies and compared to the average outlined in part one, to uncover the potential key ingredients of their success.

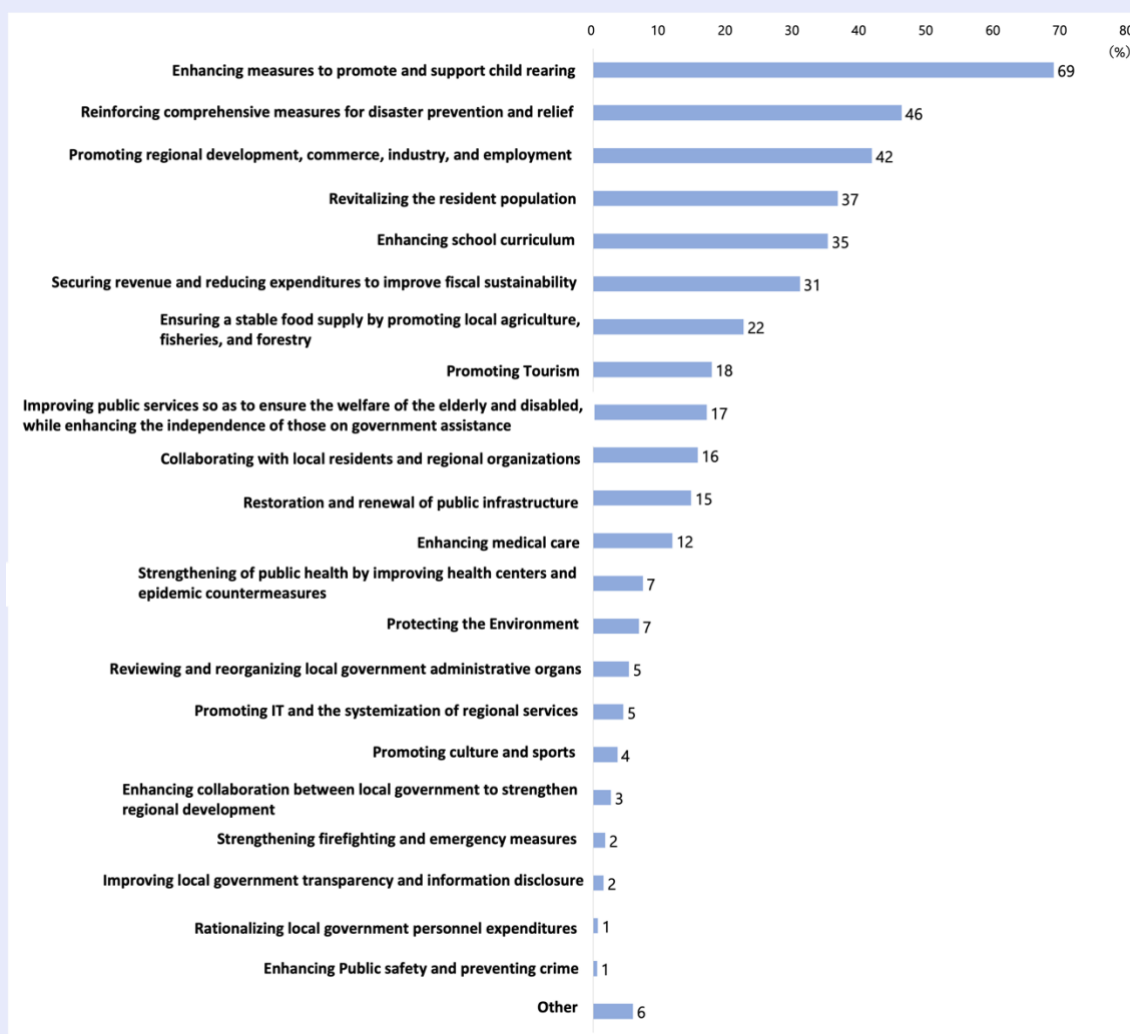
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Key Points from the Survey

1. Key Policy Issues and Priorities for Mayors and Municipalities:

- The most important policy issue identified by mayors nationwide was “enhancing measures to promote and support child rearing.”
- Of the policies prioritized by mayors and examined in this report, the majority were financed primarily via funds provided by the central government, with very few initiatives being undertaken that would entail local governments taking on the risk of sourcing their own financing.

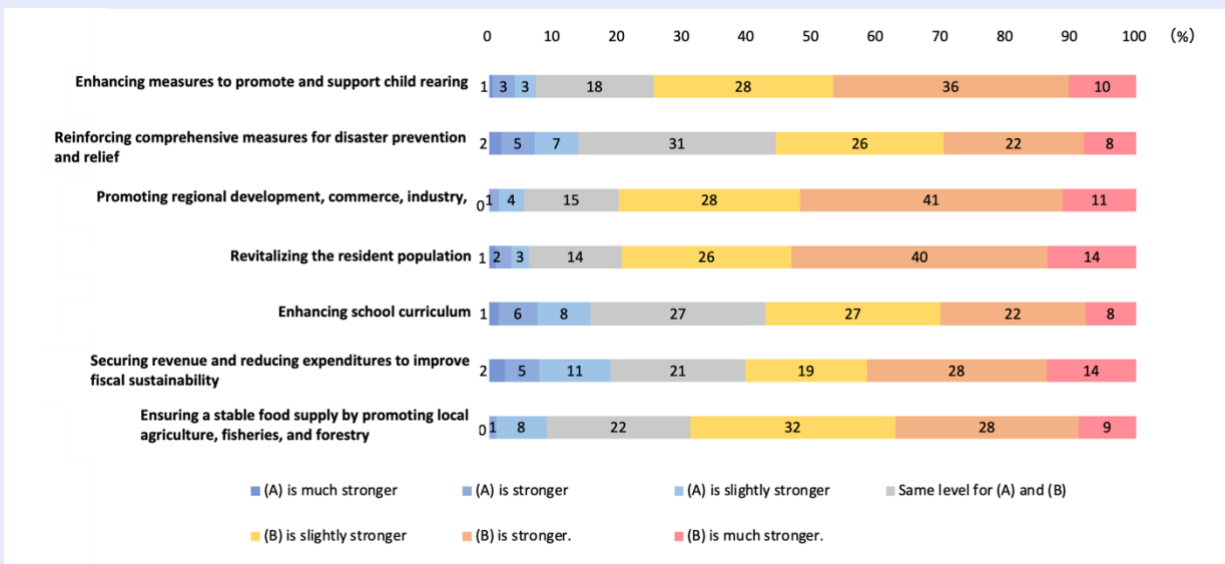
Figure 1: Key Policy Issues and Priorities for Mayors and Municipalities



2. Policy Emphasis and the Need for Political Leadership in Decision Making

- The greater the emphasis mayors place on a given policy the more likely they are to emphasize the necessity of their own political leadership and decision making.
- This is particularly evident in a strong tendency to take political ownership of expansionary policies designed to combat the aging population, emphasizing their role in the decision-making process. Conversely, mayors tend to deemphasize their role when it comes to administrative reform or the downsizing of local governments in response to the expected decline in population, by saying it is the “direction laid out by the central government.”

Figure 2: Emphasis on following "Administrative Followership (A)" vs " Political Leadership" (B) in decision making for the following policies



Note: "Administrative Followership (A)" refers to a policy that emphasizes following the recommendations of the national and prefectural governments, including heading the broader direction they have laid out and respecting the precedents they have established. By contrast "Political Leadership (B)" implies taking on an active role in public policy decision making, using one's own political judgment.

3. Personality Traits of Municipal Mayors

- Japanese mayors tend to be less neurotic than the general public while also being more outgoing, open-minded, diligent, and willing to take risk.
- Their image is that of an “everyman” who, despite being more sociable and less afraid of risk than the public at large, remains a relatable and down to earth figure who attempts to shape government institutions over time.

Figure 3: Personalities of Municipal Mayors vs the General Public (Average)

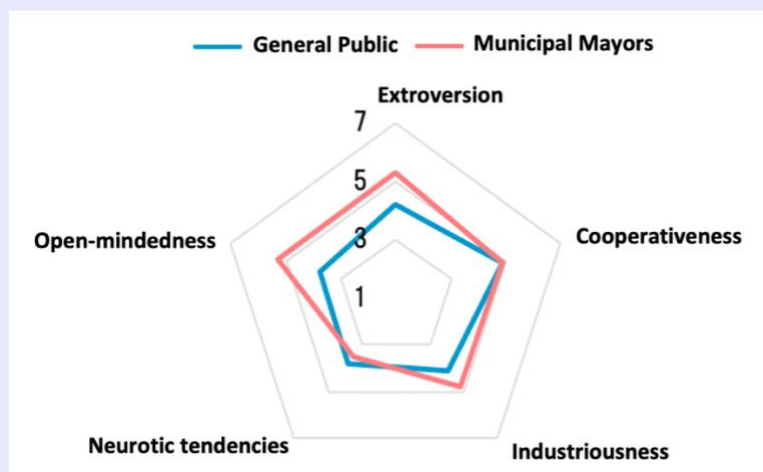
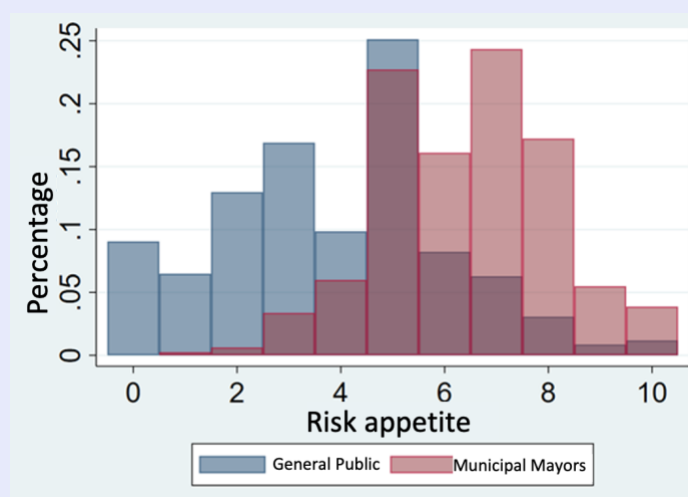


Figure 4: Risk Appetite of Municipal Mayors vs the General Public

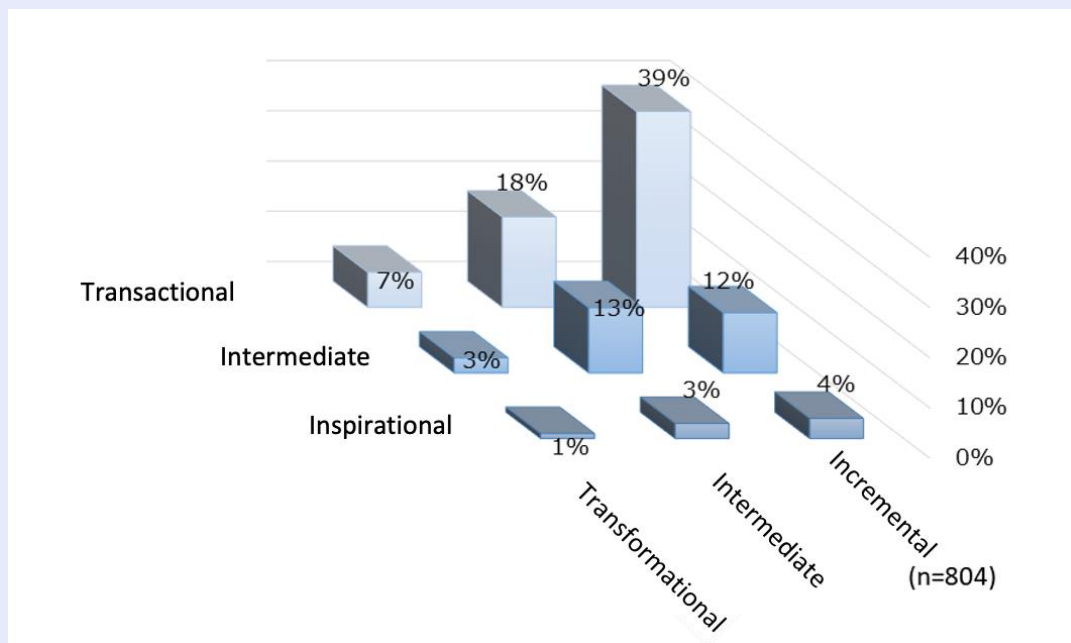


Note: Distribution of responses to the risk appetite question are on a scale of 0 (not at all willing to take risks) to 10 (very willing to take risks.)

4. Identifying the Leadership Style and Traits of Mayors

- Mayoral leadership was evaluated based on the typology of leadership developed by Joseph S. Nye, which looks at two primary criteria: "objectives" and "style".
- Of the municipalities surveyed, about 40% have mayors whose leadership style can be classified as "transactional and incremental," in which changes are made gradually, over time, with the consent of concerned parties.
- However, only about 1% of the municipalities surveyed featured mayors who sought to achieve change by inspiring those around them to challenge the prevailing reality. This suggests that despite mayors being less risk adverse than the general population, the "inspirational and transformational" style of leadership that relies on such personality traits, is rarely put into practice.

Figure 5: Identifying the Leadership Style and Traits of Mayors



Note1: The objectives of the leaders were categorized based on how they strongly they identified with the following two statements: "I want to make drastic changes to the organization" and "I want to make deliberate changes to the organization, step by step, over time." For both statements, respondents were asked to select from a value between 1 and 7 corresponding to a range from "very true" to "not true at all." A respondent who more strongly identified with the statement "I want to make drastic changes to my organization" compared to the statement "I want to make deliberate changes to the organization, step by step, over time," would be categorized as "transformational," whereas a respondent who more strongly identified with the opposite response would be categorized as "gradual." Respondents who gave equal weight to both statements were categorized as

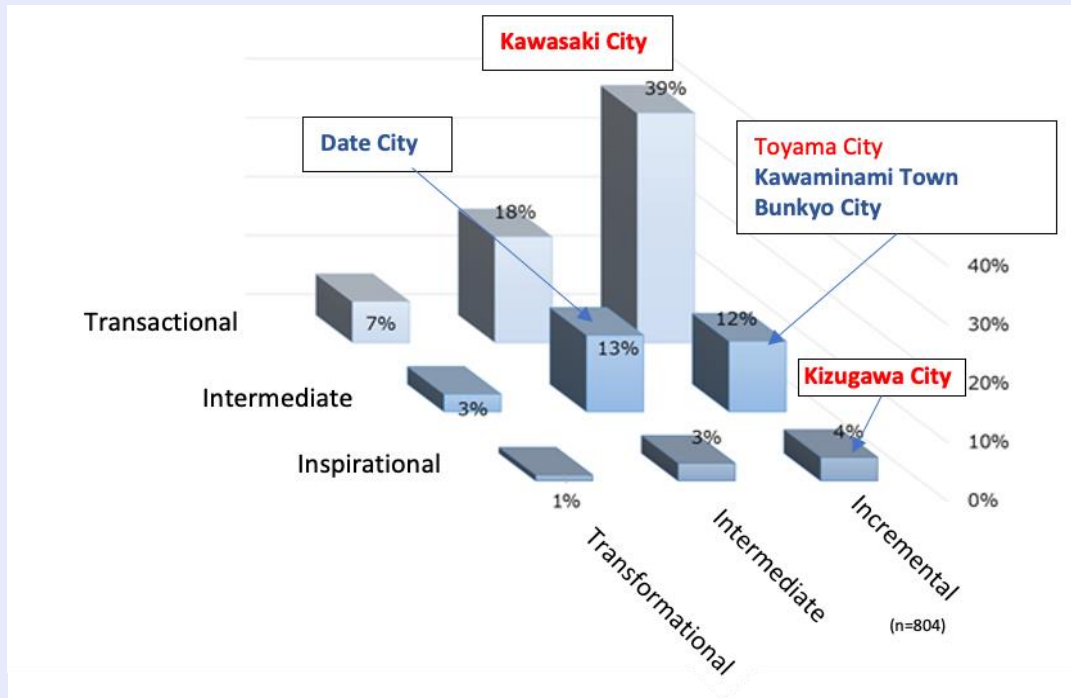
"intermediate.

Note2: Leadership style was similarly categorized based on the degree to which respondents identified with the following two statements: "I am good at persuading people to follow my ideas," and "I think an important part of persuading others is to present conditions that are acceptable to them." Respondents who identified more strongly with the statement "I am good at persuading people to follow my ideas" were categorized as "inspirational" leaders, whereas those who identified more strongly with "I think an important piece of persuading others is to present conditions that are acceptable to them" were categorized as "transactional" leaders. Those who gave equal weight to both statements were categorized as "intermediate."

5. Mayors of Municipalities With Pioneering Achievements Compared to the National Average

- Six municipalities, Kawasaki City, Toyama City, Bunkyo City, Kizugawa City, Date City, and Kawaminami Town (of Miyazaki Prefecture,) were taken up as case studies due to their notable and pioneering achievements.
- One thing to note is that the mayors of the aforementioned municipalities do not necessarily emphasize political decision-making.
- Compared to the average mayor, most of them are more willing to take more risk, however this trait is primarily reflected in their leadership style, not the scope of their goals. Their leadership style tends to be "inspirational," pursuing their goals by persuading others of the merit of their ideas, in contrast to the "transactional" leadership style which presents counterparts with bargaining chips in order to secure their cooperation.
- This makes sense, as the current period of slow growth can be thought of as a "zero-sum game," in which the room for deal making is limited, because there is very little surplus that can be negotiated away or used to make a deal without compromising the end goal. If that is indeed the case, inspirational leadership, that is, the ability to persuade others solely on the strength and persuasiveness of one's ideas, will be increasingly important for municipal leaders going forward.

Figure 6: Leadership Style and Traits of Mayors of Municipalities with Pioneering Achievements



Note: Municipal case studies that have implemented "reforms that appropriately reduce the scale of business in line with population decline, using demographic trends as a precondition" are shown in blue, while those that have implemented "policies designed to mitigate the degree of population decline and smooth out the pace of demographic change," are shown in red.