The Infrastructure of Public Opinion Research in Japan

Yuichi Kubota
Tokyo Satellite Office
University of Niigata Prefecture, Japan


Introduction

Public opinion research is one of the most important academic fields in Japan. To explore citizens’ opinion and perceptions on various issues, many surveys have been administered by not only universities but also organizations such as the central government, local administrative units, and the media.

In the post-World War II era, public opinion polls were initiated by the U.S. occupation authorities out of recognition that political leaders’ incapability to capture public attitude had caused Japan’s militarism and inclination toward expansionism. In the authorities’ plan to develop domestic public opinion polls, the media, including newspaper publishing companies and broadcasting stations, was expected to play a central role in the administration of polls.

For the development of domestic infrastructure of public opinion research, a major event was the establishment of the Japanese Association for Public Opinion Research in 1950. The association aims to develop public opinion research in Japan by bringing domestic polling organizations together. The association played a significant role also in setting up data archives. Following deliberations in working groups organized by the association, some universities set up data archives, including the Social Science Japan Data Archive (SSJDA) at University of Tokyo, the Social Research Database on Questionnaires (SRDQ) at Osaka University, the Social and Opinion Research Database
(SORD) at Sapporo Gakuin University, and the Education Data Archival Service (JEDI) at Hyogo University of Teacher Education. These are the major data archives of public opinion research that collect, maintain, and provide survey data.

The purpose of this paper is to brief types and issues of public opinion polls recently conducted in Japan by referring to the report of the Cabinet Office of Japan. The data here would help us understand the current circumstances of public opinion research in Japan.

Public Opinion Polls between April 2010 and March 2011
In August-September 2011, the Cabinet Office of Japan conducted a survey for various polling organizations (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2011). The purpose of this survey is to capture what surveys were conducted during the last fiscal year. Targeted samples include 138 governmental organizations, 47 prefectural institutions, 809 municipalities, 247 universities, 185 media companies, and 710 private companies. Response rates vary between organizations; 5.80% for governmental organizations, 65.96% for prefectural institutions, 48.33% for municipalities, 15.79% for universities, 10.81% for media companies, and 2.39% for private companies. The following sections summarize part of the results reported by this survey.

Numbers of Survey
The number of surveys in Japan varied across months. Figure 1 represents number of surveys conducted between April 2000 and March 2011. Because it does not count all surveys, it is important to note that the results may be biased and actual number may be higher than that in the figure. Although the line largely fluctuates between 100 and 200, it sharply rises in June-July 2010. This would be because a national election for the Upper House was held on July 11th. It is highly likely that many surveys were conducted to assess citizens’ preference for political parties.
Figure 1. **Numbers of Survey**

Figure 2 shows topics for which surveys were administered between April 2010 and March 2011. The most popular topic is local administration. This would be partially because many of the surveys were administered by prefectures and municipalities. Their surveys are aimed at drawing citizens’ perception, (dis)satisfaction, and demands about public services provided by local administration. The second frequent topic is politics/foreign affairs/elections. Some polling organizations, including the government and media companies, conduct surveys to capture citizens’ opinion about these issues. For instance, the Cabinet Office administers surveys about perceptions on neighboring countries at regular intervals. However, again, it is important to note that the national election was held in July 2010 and many surveys were administered to assess citizens’ preferences for political parties. Aged society, which is the third frequent topic, is also an important issue in Japan. It would be significant for not only the central government and local administrations but also private firms (e.g., insurance company) to understand citizens’ demands for pension and social welfare.
Figure 2. **Topics**

![Graph showing various topics]

**Organizations**

Figure 3 shows a breakdown of organizations that conducted surveys between April 2010 and March 2011. Municipalities account for 63.41% of this figure. This would not be surprising simply because they number in more than 1700. Beside municipalities, the media is also a major polling organization that amounts to 18.76%. Unexpectedly, universities account for only 3.66%. This may be because universities are underrepresented in the data.
Figure 3. **Organizations (%)**

- Government: 3.66%
- Prefectures: 18.76%
- Municipalities: 7.78%
- Universities: 3.89%
- Media: 2.50%
- Private companies: 63.41%

**Sample Size**

More than half of the surveys conducted between April 2010 and March 2011 collected 1000–2999 samples. Surveys whose sample size ranges from 3000 to 9999 account for 33.22%. Smaller or larger surveys, whose sample size were 500–999 and more than 10000 respectively, were less frequent than these surveys.

Figure 4. **Sample Size (%)**

- 500–999: 33.22%
- 1000–2999: 55.28%
- 3000–9999: 8.65%
- 10000+: 2.85%
Survey Modes
In terms of survey modes, the self-administered measure through mail was most used (more than 1000 surveys). Surveys based on telephone interview and face-to-face interview are the second and third, respectively. It should be necessary to mention that some surveys used more than two modes.

Figure 5. Survey Modes

Response Rates
Figure 6 represents response rates of the surveys. The majority of the surveys had response rates between 60 and 70%. Surveys with smaller response rates (40–50% and 50–60%) number in more than 300.
Figure 6. **Response Rates**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Less than 20%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20~30%</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sampling Methods**

To collect samples in the surveys, the random sampling method is most used and accounts for 84.26%. Although methods of complete count and judgment sampling are also used, their proportion is far smaller than that of random sampling (9.06 for complete count and 6.68 for judgment sampling).

Figure 7. **Sampling Methods (%)**
Conclusion
This short paper has briefed the infrastructure of public opinion research in Japan, focusing on historical background of polls, data archives, and topics and measures of surveys conducted between April 2010 and March 2011. Although a number of surveys are administered every month in Japan, their topics largely vary. Some ask respondents about political issues such as elections and local administration, but others focus on social issues such as aging society. In Japan, many polls are carried out by local administrative units. In addition to the finding that random sampling is the most frequent used method, most polls adopt the self-administered mode through mail.

Bibliography