

Article

Separating Faction from Fiction: How the Past Helps Explain the Present and Possible Future of Factions in Japan's Liberal Democratic Party

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I. Introduction

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), for most of the time since its founding, has contained a network of factions—groups vying for power within the party built on the loyalty of members to their leaders. These factions, some of which can trace their roots to the original two parties that merged to form the LDP in 1955, have been argued to play influential roles in party functions, including leadership appointments, electoral district nominations, campaign financing, and information-sharing. Critics have accused the factions of channeling power through clientelism that encourages corruption, while defenders have highlighted salubrious functions of these groups, such as their role in developing and sustaining new political talent or in facilitating orderly leadership turnover while reducing risk to party unity. Although there have been past periods in the 1970s and 1990s when these factions were formally disbanded, they always returned to play similar roles and have continued to have relevance well into the current decade. In fact, two of the last four LDP prime ministers, Fumio Kishida and Shigeru Ishiba, had been the leaders of factions before their elevation to the office, and one, Shinzō Abe, would go on to assume the leadership of the party's largest faction after stepping down as prime minister.

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It thus might have come as a surprise to many observers of Japanese politics when most of the LDP's factions announced plans to disband in January 2024. Over the next eighteen months, faction offices were closed, applications to dissolve factions as political organizations were submitted, and plans to transfer remaining faction funds to the LDP's coffers were announced, all ostensibly in response to a scandal involving the alleged misuse of faction-based campaign funds. Despite these moves, the long history of factions disbanding only to reform after a brief period and the relatively slow pace of the dissolution process this time led some skeptics and the opposition parties to express doubt regarding the sincerity and long-term commitment to the elimination of factionalism within the LDP. Through a review of the extensive scholarly literature on LDP factions, this article seeks to understand what this latest development means for Japanese politics. Specifically, it addresses the following questions: *Why did most factions dissolve themselves during this period? Are they likely to reform again in the future?*

To fully answer these questions, it is necessary to leverage the insights of the large body of existing research on the LDP's factions, which has addressed relevant topics such as how the factions first emerged, what roles they initially played in intraparty politics, how they sustained themselves for nearly all of the LDP's uninterrupted period of one-party rule from 1955 to 1993 despite multiple efforts by party leadership to eliminate them, how they reemerged following the LDP's first fall from power in the early 1990s, how their roles evolved over time as reforms in the 1990s brought new electoral rules and campaign finance systems, and how they reemerged again to play significant roles within the party following the establishment of the second Abe administration in 2012. Only by considering their changing roles, their past periods of dissolution and reemergence, and the changing political contexts in which they have operated is it possible to offer tentative answers to important questions concerning their current predicament, their possible futures and the long-term implications of their recent diminution in the Japanese political scene. This study thus seeks to contribute to the rich scholarship on LDP factionalism by providing a review of this literature tailored to extract insights from past analysis that can help make sense of the most recent developments in factional

politics which have yet to receive sufficient attention from scholars of Japanese politics.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section defines the term “faction” and considers its general types, functions, origins and consequences. The third section reviews the literature on the history of the LDP's factions during the period of one-party rule, also known as the 1955 system period, and then considers their type, functions and explanations for their emergence and persistence over this period as well as accounts of their consequences for Japanese politics. The fourth section reviews what scholars have to say about how factions have fared over the past three decades under a transformed electoral and campaign finance system as well as party leadership that has alternated between hostility and encouragement towards factions. In particular, comparisons are made between how factionalism worked under the 1955 system and during this more recent period to uncover clues regarding the underlying level of stability of factions within the party in the latter period. The fifth section provides an account of the recent dissolutions of most of the LDP's factions. The final section applies the findings of the third and fourth sections to an analysis of the proximate causes of the recent dissolutions and then to an assessment of the long-term prospects of factionalism in the LDP. The article concludes by arguing that factions in the LDP are down but likely not out; in other words, recent developments largely conform to the parameters of previous episodes when factions were disbanded only to return later, and it is not clear that the long-term factors that some scholars assert fatally undermine factions have operated as predicted. The one major caveat in this conclusion is that it assumes the LDP avoids a major split in the future and is able to stabilize its control of the government, neither of which is guaranteed.

II. All About Factions

Pioneering work on factions in modern political parties focused on definitions, typologies, functions and the causes and consequences of their formation.¹ With regard to definition, it should be noted that scholars have disagreed about the

¹ Rose, 1964; Sartori, 1976; and Beller & Belloni, 1978.

exact parameters of this intraparty group.² However, this study adopts the following definition developed by Bettcher (2005), who based his definition on some of the pioneering works referenced above and applied it in a comparative analysis of factional politics in Japan's LDP and Italy's Christian Democratic Party: Factions are relatively organized groups that compete for power with other such groups within a single political party.³

A key goal of this definitional exercise is to distinguish between factions and other types of intraparty groups. Building on earlier work, Bettcher specifies a typology of intraparty groups by categorizing them across two distinct dimensions, the degree of organization and the degree to which the motivation behind the group is mere self-interest or shared ideological principle. Factions are then distinguished from other types of intraparty groups, such as tendencies (loosely-organized, fluid groupings based on shared ideological commitments) or clienteles (loosely-organized networks centering on the personal relationships between patrons and their clients), by their relatively higher level of organization.⁴ In this approach, factions can thus vary from ones based to a high degree merely on the self-interest of their members ("faction of interest") to ones that are based largely on shared ideological principle ("faction of principle") but remain distinct from other types of intraparty groups due to their higher levels of organization.⁵

Scholars have noted a number of common functions performed by factions.⁶ First, they can help advance the careers of their members through material and electoral support and by helping them achieve party and/or governmental posts. Second, factions can sometimes forward particular ideological or policy goals, as long as they conform generally with the party platform or involve ideals or policy positions that are considered "up for grabs" within the party. Third, factions can provide representation to specific interest groups or subsectors

² For a brief introduction to these disagreements, see Köllner & Basedau, 2005, pp.7-9.

³ Bettcher, 2005, p.340.

⁴ Ibid., pp.341-345.

⁵ Bettcher, 2005, p.344; Sartori, 1976, pp.76-77.

⁶ Sartori, 1976; Köllner & Basedau, 2005.

of society, including ethnic and religious groups. Fourth, factions serve as educational and information-sharing entities that help their junior members learn from the past experiences of veteran members and to obtain information from the higher echelons of the party elite. Finally, as a member spends time in a faction and experiences its benefits in the above areas, membership may provide for the identity or emotional needs necessary for establishing a sense of community and belonging.

Scholars are no more divided on topics related to the study of factions than they are with regard to theories regarding their origins and general impacts on politics. First, as Köllner and Basedau (2005) note, “there is so far no consensus on which factors should be regarded as decisive” with regard to the origins and development of factions.⁷ One might expect that the presence of stark cleavages in a society, a culture that encourages clientelism or the advent of new political ideas to which politicians must react would favor the development of factions in political parties.⁸ In addition, formal institutions, such as laws that forbid party-switching or certain rules governing the electoral system, have also been linked to the development of factionalism in case studies, although there is disagreement about which electoral rules matter most.⁹ Finally, scholars have tied the development of factionalism with characteristics of the party system and of individual parties. Party systems with high levels of polarization and small numbers of parties can be seen to favor factionalism, although the significance of the latter claim has been called into doubt.¹⁰ Elements of party organization, such as the level of control by party leadership of party finances, the presence or absence of local branches, and the level of centralization in party organization, have also been cited as potential factors, but empirical research has questioned many of these hypotheses.¹¹ In addition, dominant party systems, in which one party repeatedly wins competitive elections and thus enjoys a prolonged period in power, have been linked with

⁷ Köllner & Basedau, 2005, p.16.

⁸ Ibid., pp.16-17.

⁹ Ibid., pp.17-18.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.18.

¹¹ Ibid., p.19.

the development of factionalism.¹² Although much remains unknown about what causes factionalism in general, as will be shown below, some of the above hypotheses apply well to the development of factions in Japan's LDP.

Although the presence of factions within a party is often viewed negatively as a sign of internal division that can only serve to undermine party unity and success, scholars have noted both positive and negative consequences associated with factions.¹³ On the positive side of the ledger, factions can serve as vehicles that represent previously excluded groups in society and as focal points that encourage participation from party supporters, especially with regard to party elections. Factions can also help organize and regularize patterns of opposition within a party in such a way that they become more predictable and do not spin out of control.¹⁴ And, in dominant party systems, factions can serve as partial substitutes for robust interparty competition by encouraging competition among party personnel and debate over policy ideas.¹⁵

The negative reputation of factionalism is, however, not an unearned one, and scholars have also specified ways in which factions can harm parties, party systems and even democracy itself. First, faction leaders can become dangerous foils for party leaders that weaken their leadership and undermine party cohesion on policy positions, election strategy and coalition-building in the legislature. Second, the allocation of party and government posts on the basis of factional affiliation can lead to personnel decision that place in powerful positions unqualified people or persons who do not share the policy priorities of the party or government leadership. Third, factionalism has sometimes been linked to increases in corruption, as excesses in intraparty competition encourage illicit efforts to gain power advantages. Fourth, extreme factionalism can generate party splits, endangering the stability of the party system. Finally, by weakening the public's faith in the integrity of the party system, factionalism can even threaten the stability of democratic regimes in backsliding

¹² Hayes, 2025, pp.284, 288-290.

¹³ Ibid., p.284; Köllner & Basedau, 2005, p.13.

¹⁴ Köllner & Basedau, 2005, p.14.

¹⁵ Bettcher, 2005.

or immature democracies.¹⁶ As will be shown below, some of the above negative consequences associated with factionalism, particularly the link with corruption, are repeatedly cited in the case of postwar Japan, especially in episodes ending in some form of factional “reform.”

III. LDP Factionalism under the 1955 System: 1955–1993

Following a brief summary of the history of factions in the LDP during the 1955 system period, this section reviews what scholars have had to say about these factions' proper place in the typologies of factions, their functions, explanations of their origins and persistence as well as their consequences to Japanese politics during this time.

Factions have played a central role in LDP intraparty politics since the party's beginning. Factions emerged almost immediately after the party was founded through a merger of the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party in 1955. These early factions formed not from ideological divergence, but as personal networks centered around leading politicians with ambitions for power and control over party resources.¹⁷ Although the clientelist model clearly applied to these early factions, they already exhibited relatively high levels of organization by establishing permanent offices.¹⁸

Although the number of factions expanded in the 1960s, this number declined over the course of the 1970s, falling from as many as thirteen in 1970 to just five by 1980.¹⁹ This consolidation resulted in a stable set of five dominant factions, each led by a prominent figure with distinct power bases. These five main factions included: the Ōhira (Masayoshi) faction (founded by Hayato Ikeda and later led by Zenkō Suzuki and Kiichi Miyazawa), the Fukuda (Takeo) faction (founded by Nobusuke Kishi and later led by Yoshihiro Mori and Shinzō Abe), the Tanaka (Kakuei) faction (founded by Eisaku Sato and later led by Noboru Takeshita and Keizō Obuchi), the Miki (Takeo) faction (founded by Takeo

¹⁶ Beller and Belloni, 1978, pp.439–442; Köllner & Basedau, 2005, p.13.

¹⁷ Fukui, 1970; Curtis, 1988.

¹⁸ Bettcher, 2005, p.345.

¹⁹ Bouissou, 2001, p.582

Miki), and the Nakasone (Yasuhiro) faction (founded by Ichirō Hatoyama).²⁰ All the men mentioned in the previous sentence either had already become prime minister by the late 1970s or would later serve in that office, including twelve of the fifteen prime ministers of the 1955 system period. These factions became semi-permanent institutions with their own offices, funding channels, and rules for leadership succession, which they were able to maintain through the end of this period.²¹

Membership in factions became nearly universal by the end of the 1955 system period. By the early 1980s, a large majority of LDP Diet members were members of a faction and, as the period approached its end, more than 90% had a factional affiliation.²² As this change occurred in the context of a decline in the overall number of factions, this meant the number of members in each faction rose dramatically from the 1970s to the 1980s. One early faction leader once expressed the opinion that forty was the ideal number for faction membership, enough for the group to have influence, but not too many to create excessive fund-raising burdens or coordination problems in the distribution of district nominations and party or government positions.²³ Factions in the 1980s came to dwarf this ideal. In 1986, the top four factions all had more than 80 members, with the largest, the Tanaka faction, hosting 140 members.²⁴ This growth in membership was likely driven in part by a campaign finance reform in the mid-1970s that shifted the fund-raising burden from factions to individual members and in part by competition over time for nominations in the multimember districts among new candidates.²⁵ The former lowered the amount faction leadership had to raise per member and the latter made it easier for

²⁰ Bouissou, 2001, p.584; Curtis, 1988, pp.81-82; Cox and Rosenbluth, 1993, p.582. Please note that the list of the main faction leaders is abridged here, with only those who became prime minister listed, excluding leaders of splinter factions. For a fuller list, see Watari, 2023, p.68.

²¹ Bettcher, 2005, p.345.

²² Kohno, 1992, p.372; Bouissou, 2001, p.582.

²³ This opinion was attributed to faction leader Bamboku Ōno in Watanabe (1964, pp.2-3) cited in Curtis, 1988, pp.82-83.

²⁴ Curtis, 1988, p.83. For a detailed comparison across the decades, see Masumi, 1995, pp.456-459.

²⁵ Kohno, 1992, pp.385-391.

factions to recruit new candidates, because factions increasingly avoided running more than one candidate in the multimember districts which elected three to five candidates, a situation which helped match factions with new candidates seeking election in districts in which the faction in question had no member who was an incumbent. Efforts by faction leader Kakuei Tanaka to expand his faction in order to maintain his influence in the party after he was forced to resign as prime minister due to a corruption scandal may also have played a part in sparking the competition among the largest factions to expand their rolls.²⁶

In addition, the stability of member retention within factions evolved over time. While early on, faction switching was relatively common, by the 1980s, most members remained with their original faction for long stretches of their careers. This was likely due to two factors. First, as the factions introduced seniority rules the prioritized benefits based on how many times a member had won elections as a member of the faction, faction switching came to mean an assured loss of standing in the new faction compared to the old and thus a loss of support for the switcher.²⁷ Second, because factions mostly avoided nominated more than one candidate per electoral district, the decline in the overall number of factions reduced options for would-be switchers, who had to find a new faction that did not already have an incumbent in their current electoral district.²⁸

The level of organization in factions also increased over this period. In addition to establishing offices, factions now maintained membership lists that were made public.²⁹ They also developed leadership structures that mirrored that of the LDP itself, with leadership meetings and full faction meetings held regularly.³⁰ Some factions developed bureaus for managing internal

²⁶ Curtis, 1988, pp.83-86.

²⁷ Fukui, 1978, p.55, Hayes, 2009, p.74. For discussion of how this seniority rule came to be applied to party and cabinet posts by the LDP generally, see Satō & Matsuzaki, 1986 and Kohno, 1992.

²⁸ Hayes, 2009, p.74; Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 1999, pp.37-39.

²⁹ Hayes, 2009, p.73.

³⁰ Bettcher, 2005, p.346; Kohn, 1992, p.373.

policy or election issues, while some published their own newspapers.³¹ Each organizational element was governed by a set of established rules internal to the faction. The development of these organizational elements signaled a reduced dependence on the faction leader and thus a reduction of the leader's power within the group.

The pattern of competition for power within the party also shifted over time. During the first part of this period, this competition was characterized by “dominant duo” alignments, in which the two strongest factions (also known as the “mainstream”) combined to control leadership decisions in the party and cabinet.³² Although this duo changes from the Sato and Kishi factions to the Tanaka (formerly Sato) and Ohira factions (formerly Ikeda) in the 1970s, the new duo is ultimately unable to maintain dominance over top appointments due to fierce factional competition (e.g. the “Kaku-Fuku war”) and the pattern subsequently shifts to one of power-sharing among the top factions, with party leadership shared among the top four factions and other cabinet appointments increasingly determined proportionately by factional strength.³³ It is important to note that alliances among factions were pragmatic and power-based rather than ideological, reflecting the factional system's role as a mechanism for distributing spoils and maintaining intraparty order.

Among scholars analyzing the functions of LDP factions during this period, a broad consensus categorizes LDP factions as the “faction of interest” type —organized chiefly around functions such as providing members with access to party and government appointments, district nominations (endorsements) and fund-raising support (especially for new members) as well as information-sharing.³⁴ In this view, LDP factions were pragmatic vehicles for clientelist

³¹ Bettcher, 2005, p.346; Hayes, 2009, p.73.

³² Bouissou, 2001, pp.584-586.

³³ According to calculations made by Frances Rosenbluth and Michel Thies, the mean correlation coefficient between factional strength and shares of cabinet (full ministers) positions rose from 0.789 in 1963-1978 to 0.904 in 1978-1993. Rosenbluth & Thies, 2010, p.111.

³⁴ Bettcher, 2005; Satō & Matsuzaki, 1986, pp.56-63; Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 1999; Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011.

politics under Japan's single non-transferable vote (SNTV) electoral system and generally not related to ideological or policy commitments. To the extent some scholars do adopt a more nuanced view, they point out that, although factions in this period did not take group-wide positions on policy issues or enforce ideological consistency, some did have members who became influential in specific policy areas. Curtis (1988), for example, notes the Tanaka faction's dominance of appointments in the Construction Ministry in the 1970s and the Fukuda faction's control over the education division of the LDP's internal policy-making organ, among other cases of factional influence in policy-making.³⁵

Prominent explanations for the causes of the emergence and then persistence of LDP factions during the 1955 system period point variously to cultural, electoral and historical institutionalist factors. It should be noted here that a factor that helps generate an institution is not necessarily also responsible for its persistence over time. In addition, many scholars point to multiple factors rather than offering single-factor explanations.

Some scholars have offered cultural explanations for the formation and persistence of factions during this period. Nakane (1970) contends that the LDP's factionalism is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, particularly preferences for group-oriented behavior in which the groups are hierarchically organized and based on patterns of personal relations (*oyabun-kobun*) that generate loyalty and trust between senior leaders and their junior supporters.³⁶ Other scholars incorporate cultural explanations in concert with other factors. Fukui (1970) sees a role for prewar Japanese political culture ("the traditions and mores of prewar party politics") in the emergence and continuation of factions within the postwar LDP.³⁷ However, he also cites non-cultural factors, such as the electoral and campaign finance systems, and is generally critical

³⁵ Curtis, 1988, p.88.

³⁶ Nakane, 1970; See discussion of other cultural explanations of the origins of factions in Fukui, 1978, pp.44-48 and Kohno, 1992, pp.375-382.

³⁷ Fukui, 1970, p.49.

of the most expansive cultural explanations for factions.³⁸ Other authors note cultural values expressed in factional relationships but go on to reject broad cultural explanations for key elements of the Japanese political world.³⁹ Critics of these cultural explanations note that they fail to account for changes over time in the organizational norms that governed the factions (e.g. the emergence of practices such as the use of seniority to govern appointment decisions and the pattern of power-sharing of senior party posts among the largest factions, neither of which existed in the early years of the LDP) and also cannot explain why similar factions did not emerge in some of the smaller political parties during this period.⁴⁰

Other scholars argue that factions emerged and persisted as a rational adaptation to the electoral system in place from 1947-1994.⁴¹ Specifically, they note the incentives created by the period's SNTV electoral system, in which a voter could vote for only one candidate in a district that ultimately elected three, four or five candidates to the Diet's lower house (the House of Representatives), the most powerful chamber in Japan's bicameral legislature. In this electoral system, multiple LDP candidates often competed against one another in the same district, thus fostering intraparty rivalry and encouraging individual candidates to seek advantages over intraparty opponents that the shared party label and formal party apparatus simply could not provide.⁴² In this explanation, these advantages instead came to be furnished by the informal, intraparty factions, whose leaders, in exchange for their members' support in party presidential elections, helped them 1) to receive endorsements to run in particular districts as the faction's sole candidate, 2) to raise funds for their campaigns and develop their own personal support networks (*kōenkai*) in their districts, and, over time, 3) to be appointed to party and government posts on the basis of seniority in the faction.⁴³ In this way, factions can be seen as a rational adaptation to the rigors of the SNTV system. Although the fund-

³⁸ Fukui, 1978.

³⁹ Curtis, 1988, p.81; Curtis, 1999, pp.10-15.

⁴⁰ Kohno, 1992, pp.375-382; Fukui, 1978, p.51-52 ; Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.110.

⁴¹ Ramseyer & Rosenbluth, 1993; Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 2000; Satō & Matsuzaki, 1986.

⁴² Kohno, 1992; Cox & Rosenbluth, 1993; Curtis, 1988.

⁴³ Fukui, 1970; Bettcher, 2005; Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 1999, p.35-37.

raising aspect was somewhat transformed following campaign finance reform in the mid-1970s, the fundamental relationship between faction members and leaders remained the same: "In return for help with money, endorsements and posts, factional bosses received their followers' support in the contest for the LDP presidency."⁴⁴ During this period of singular LDP dominance, attaining the LDP presidency meant becoming prime minister. And since the party by-laws set the term of party president at only two years, leadership contests were always just around the corner, and faction leaders always needed to be ready.⁴⁵

As the popularity of this electoral explanation rose, critics began to emerge. In particular, they noted that factions based on the above pact between members and leaders did not emerge immediately following the introduction of the SNTV system in 1947 and that the key features of this pact (endorsements, funding and post allocation) developed gradually over time, fully maturing only in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁶ In the place of a simple electoral explanation, they offer a more complicated historical institutionalist one involving the interplay of intraparty rivalry among leaders, complimentary institutions and the sequencing of events.⁴⁷ In this view, factions of the type described in electoral explanations began to emerge only after the introduction in late 1956 of the party convention method of electing the LDP party president in which LDP members elected to the Diet had an outsized role.⁴⁸ This then led to a mad scramble among would-be contenders to recruit members to new informal intraparty groups that

⁴⁴ Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 1999, p.36.

⁴⁵ Bouissou, 2001, p.586.

⁴⁶ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, pp.105-107. Empirical research showing that key elements of the factions described in the electoral explanation did not emerge until decades after the introduction of the SNTV system includes Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, pp.118-123 on factions endorsing only one candidate per district, and Kawato, 1996a, 1996b and Kohno, 1997 on the allocation of cabinet posts based on factional strength and in accordance with seniority. In fact, of the three key elements of the factional pact, only financial support from faction leader to member appears to have worked as described in the electoral explanation during the first two decades after the founding of the LDP, although this would be altered by the campaign finance reform of 1975. Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, pp.115; Carlson & Nakabayashi, 2024; Curtis, 1988, p.84, 178-183.

⁴⁷ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.108.

demanded exclusive loyalty from their members in party presidential elections but set no ideological or policy tests in order to maximize their numbers.⁴⁹ As competition ramped up over time, faction leaders came to offer their members the full panoply of benefits described above. In addition, factions were able to exist in this form due in part to complementary institutions, such as *kōenkai*, which were also non-ideological and thus good electoral fits for a system in which non-ideological factions supported candidates, and the Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC), which, by serving as the locus of intraparty policy-making, allowed factions to flourish without the limitations that policy tests for its members would entail.⁵⁰ Further, sequencing also mattered in how the factions developed. For example, in the first party presidential election under the party convention rules, a candidate from the former Liberal Party (Kōjirō Ishii) dropped out and supported the winning candidate (Ishibashi Tanzan) originally from the former Democratic Party, an early event that likely foreclosed the possibility of LDP factions developing based exclusively on former party affiliations.⁵¹ Finally, as factional rivalry intensified in the 1970s, reform efforts intended to restrain factions, such as Prime Minister Miki's campaign finance reform and Prime Minister Fukuda's introduction of an LDP primary system, backfired spectacularly, ultimately leaving the factions larger and just as involved in party presidential elections as ever.⁵² The role of unintended consequences thus looms at least as large in determining the persistence of factions during this period as the rational calculations of any relevant actor.

Finally, although not offering an explanation for the origin of the LDP's factions during the 1955 system period, some scholars note factors involving the party system of the time likely contributed to the persistence of factions in the LDP. First, the party system during this period was a clear example of a dominant party system, one in which, although opposition is legal, one party still continuously wins power in regular contested elections. Such systems have

⁴⁹ Leiserson, 1968, pp.770-771; Masumi, 1995, p.119.

⁵⁰ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.125-126.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.127.

⁵² Ibid., pp.116-118; Carlson & Nakabayashi, 2024.

a pronounced tendency to shift the focus of politics from competition between parties to competition within the dominant party in the form of factionalism.⁵³ Second, the LDP faced little or no party competition on its ideological right throughout this period, and interparty competition with the leftist opposition parties, especially the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), was characterized by a high degree of polarization regarding fundamental differences over economic ideology, national security and Japan's place in the Cold War. Although this polarization waned over time, for much of this period, potentially rebellious LDP factions had no natural partners to join to form a new ruling coalition should they choose to leave the LDP and thus faced strong strategic and material incentives to remain in the dominant party even in the face of serious intraparty rivalry.⁵⁴ In this way, certain features of the 1955 system period party system can be argued to have favored continued factionalism in the LDP.

Scholars are perhaps more unified in their views of the consequences of the LDP's factions for politics during the 1955 system period. First, factional competition effectively replaced the weak and divided opposition parties by creating a *de facto* competitive political environment within the dominant party. Factions allowed politicians within the LDP to vie for leadership, policy influence, and resources, producing a dynamic similar to multiparty competition in other democracies.⁵⁵ Second, despite frequent leadership changes, the factional balance and eventual power-sharing norm created institutional stability. By accommodating diverse interests within the party, the LDP avoided splits and major ideological shifts.⁵⁶ Third, factions served as political apprenticeship systems, nurturing new candidates and future leaders with veteran advice and information, election support, including campaign funds, and access to party and government posts and the policy-making process. This contributed to the development of human capital within the party and thus governance capacity.⁵⁷

⁵³ Heywood & Laing, 2025, p.289.

⁵⁴ Masumi, 1995, p.208; Cox & Rosenbluth, 1995.

⁵⁵ Fukui, 1970, pp.142-143.

⁵⁶ Curtis, 1988, pp.241-242; Pempel, 2010, p.237

⁵⁷ Bettcher, 2005.

Scholars also note the negative consequences of LDP factionalism in this period. First, factional rivalry often prioritized the distribution of spoils over coherent policymaking. Since individual factions facilitated their members efforts to cultivate the personal vote in their districts, factionalism overall can be said to have promoted pork-barrel politics.⁵⁸ Second, factions needed vast financial resources to maintain loyalty and fund electioneering. This incentivized corruption and scandal, including the Lockheed (1976), Recruit (1988) and Sagawa (1992) scandals, among many others, eroding public trust.⁵⁹ Third, factional leaders sometimes resisted reforms that threatened their power, including electoral and campaign finance reforms. This delayed necessary adaptations to Japan's changing political and economic landscape.⁶⁰ Fourth, it is clear that as the LDP factions evolved during this period, prime ministers became increasingly beholden to factional bargains regarding appointments, weakening their authority. Leadership tenures were short, appointments were based on factional affiliation rather than merit or policy views, and decisions were frequently constrained by intraparty deals rather than the national interest.⁶¹

In the 1955 system period, factionalism within the LDP was both a mechanism for stability and a source of dysfunction. While it enhanced internal competition and fostered elite development, it also fueled corruption, parochialism, and policy inefficiencies. Ultimately, the accumulation of some of these negative effects led to the LDP's fall from power in 1993, electoral reform in 1994, and the subsequent transformation of the role of factions in LDP politics.

IV. LDP Factionalism after the 1955 system: 1993-2022

Scholars generally point to a number of factors that led to the end of the 1955 system in 1993. Importantly, factional rivalry within the LDP figures into all

⁵⁸ For an example involving faction leader Kakuei Tanaka, see Pempel, 2010, pp.242-243.

⁵⁹ Curtis, 1999, pp.73-78; Nyblade & Reed 2008; Carlson & Reed, 2018; Masumi, 1995, p.18; Nester, 1990.

⁶⁰ Shiratori, 1995, p.82.

⁶¹ Bouissou, 2001.

these accounts.⁶² In short, in June 1993, Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's LDP administration was toppled by a nonconfidence motion that passed the Diet in part due to votes from a new LDP faction led by Tsutomu Hata and Ichirō Ozawa that had formed after its members departed the Takeshita (formerly Tanaka) faction over a leadership fight in December 1992. After the vote, the new faction resigned from the LDP to form its own party (Shinseitō or the Japan Renewal Party) and other members left the LDP to form another new party (Sakigake or the Harbinger Party) or join an existing party (Nihon Shintō or Japan New Party). Having lost more than sixty party members, Miyazawa dissolved the lower house and called for an election in which the LDP would prove unable to win a majority of the seats, yielding instead to a fragile seven-party coalition government composed of the former LDP elements and the JSP and Kōmei, among others. This coalition government then went on to pass ground-breaking legislation that replaced the SNTV electoral system in the lower house with a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system combining first-past-the-post single-seat districts with proportional representation (PR) regional districts and, of equal significance for the fate of factions, reformed campaign finance laws to limit factional fund-raising and introduce publicly-funded elections. Although the LDP would return to power the following year in a surprising coalition government with the JSP, as will be shown below, these reforms had profound effects on the vote-seeking functions of LDP factions.

Before considering how factions change after the end of the 1955 system, it is important to understand how LDP factionalism, which had been cited as a source of stability for LDP rule, contributed to the end of one-party rule. As noted above, a dominant party system encourages intraparty factionalism in the dominant party. Understanding what undermined Japan's dominant party system in 1993, especially the LDP factions' role in it, may thus provide insights into the possible fate of factions after their declared dissolutions in 2024.

Scholars point to a number of factors that contributed to the end of the 1955

⁶² Curtis, 1999, pp.65-97; Cox & Rosenbluth, 1995; Kohno, 1997; pp.145-155; Sakaiya & Maeda, 214.

system. First, the end of the Cold War and a prolonged economic downturn caused by the bursting of Japan's real estate asset bubble, both beginning in 1989, reduced the salience of the ideological differences between the LDP and opposition parties, especially the JSP and Kōmei, and undermined the LDP's image as the best party to manage the Japanese economy.⁶³ The former made the possibility of forming a coalition government with the opposition parties more palatable to disgruntled LDP members while the latter contributed to a marked decline in the LDP's popularity with the public, which called into question the durability of the LDP's majority.

A second set of "trying events" plaguing the dominant party involved scandals, the most prominent of which implicated members of the giant Takeshita faction, including the 1992 Sagawa political funds scandal, which ultimately toppled faction chairman Shin Kanemaru, who had failed to report a large political contribution from a package-delivery firm, and was eventually put on trial after authorities discovered large unreported money and assets in his home.⁶⁴ This led to a leadership struggle within the faction, the losers of which left the Takeshita faction to form the new faction mentioned above under Hata and Ozawa, who further separated themselves from their former faction by advocating for electoral reform—the introduction of a single-member district electoral system. When Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa proved unable to pass any such reform by the summer of 1993, the Hata/Ozawa faction joined the opposition parties to pass a nonconfidence motion, bringing down the Miyazawa government and leading to the LDP split, the 1993 lower house election, the rise of a seven-party coalition government, and the end of the 1955 system as described above.

In explaining the timing and manner of the end of this dominant party system, scholars also emphasize certain conditions that create incentives for members of the dominant party to switch parties. Specifically, these include "electoral

⁶³ Cox & Rosenbluth, 1995, p.362; The LDP's introduction of a consumption tax, also in 1989, damaged the party's popularity as well, see Curtis, 1999, pp.126-127.

⁶⁴ Cox & Rosenbluth, 1995, p.358, 362; Curtis, 1999, pp.85-87; Carlson & Reed, 2018, pp.53-57.

marginality”(i.e. the member is not confident in his or her reelection chances), “ideological compatibility”(i.e. the member holds policy stances generally compatible with those of the opposition parties) and low “share of the spoils” (i.e. the member is junior or a member of an anti-mainstream faction and thus receives less of the benefits of being in the ruling party than other party members).⁶⁵ At the individual level, Cox & Rosenbluth (1995) find that, in the 1993 LDP split, “[m]embers who had closer links to the opposition, who had less seniority and therefore lesser shares in the spoils of office, and who were electorally more marginal tended to defect more frequently than their colleagues with opposite characteristics.”⁶⁶

Research on the 1993 split provides insights that can help in building an assessment of the prospects for the factions in the LDP after 2024.⁶⁷ Specifically, these findings suggest that “trying events,” such as scandals or an economic downturn that accompany a fall in the popularity of the ruling party or coalition, a reduction in the policy distance between parties and/or an increase in the policy distance between factions in the major ruling party, and the concentration of electorally vulnerable, relatively junior members in a faction or factions bodes poorly for the future stability of the ruling party or coalition. As Sakaiya & Maeda (2014) find, the ruling parties of most dominant party systems that collapsed “suffered from major splits that significantly reduced their electoral strengths before their final electoral defeat.”⁶⁸ What would be the impact of such a split on the long-term prospects for factionalism in the LDP? This question will be considered in the final section.

⁶⁵ Cox & Rosenbluth, 1995, p.367; Sakaiya & Maeda, 2014.

⁶⁶ Cox & Rosenbluth, 1995, p.369.

⁶⁷ Please note this research also examines other major incidences of LDP splits or near-splits. These include the LDP “civil war” in 1979-1980, in which bitter conflict between the mainstream and anti-mainstream factions led some of the latter to abstain from a nonconfidence motion in the Diet, causing it to pass and felling the Ōhira cabinet, and the move by Yōhei Kono and five colleagues to briefly deprive the LDP of its majority by leaving the party to form the New Liberal Club (NLC) in 1976. Cox & Rosenbluth, 1995, p.364-365; Curtis, 1999, pp.66-69.

⁶⁸ Saikaiya & Maeda, 2014, p.397.

The factions were a “prime target” of the electoral and campaign finance reforms passed under the coalition government in 1994.⁶⁹ In short, the elimination of multimember electoral districts in favor of single-member ones was supposed to end the intraparty competition that sustained the factions according to electoral explanations, and the campaign finance reforms, which banned contributions to factions (after a five-year period), making parties and the personal funding organizations of individual politicians the main legal channels for political contributions, and introduced public financing of political parties, were intended in part to bring an end to the “money politics” scandals associated with the factions.⁷⁰ The public subsidies, originally totally 30.9 billion yen per year (approximately \$300 million at the time), were to be distributed to party leadership (president and secretary-general) based on the percentage of the vote each party received in the previous national election.⁷¹ Thus deprived of their electoral and fund-raising logics and now squeezed from above by a newly empowered party leadership and from below by the enhanced financial autonomy of their members, factions appeared fated to disappear.⁷²

But they did not. Instead, the factions continued to evolve, maintaining some of their previous functions, surrendering or deemphasizing others and developing a new emphasis on policy. This evolution takes place over a period when the LDP loses power twice (1993-1994 and 2009-2012) and repeatedly forms coalition governments with partners spanning its erstwhile progressive enemy, the JSP, the Harbinger Party, the Ozawa-led, newly formed Liberal Party, and finally its present Kōmei ally. Far from the days of the dependable single-party Diet majorities in which they had originated, LDP factions showed they could sustain themselves under very different electoral, campaign finance and governing environments.

⁶⁹ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.128.

⁷⁰ Curtis, 1999, pp.137-170; Shiratori, 1995.

⁷¹ Shiratori, 1995, p.90; Park, 2001, p.436.

⁷² Note that the *Asahi Shimbun* predicted in the 1960s that the elimination of the multimember electoral districts would cause the factions to disappear. See Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 1999, p.41.

The period begins inauspiciously with factional politics receiving the lion's share of the blame for the LDP's fall from power in 1993, the factions being a major target of the electoral and campaign finance reforms that followed, and, after the LDP's return to power as part of a coalition government with the JSP and the Harbinger Party in 1994, LDP President Yōhei Kono announcing the dissolution of the party's factions. However, although the major factions closed their offices and nominally disbanded that year, they continued on as "policy groups," maintaining their "organizational core," and remerged as the same full-fledged factions by 1998.⁷³

The brief period of factional dissolution in the 1990s mirrored another such previous incidence, which occurred from 1977 to 1978. First, the trying event was the 1976 arrest of former Prime Minister Tanaka on bribery charges related to the Lockheed scandal that soured the public on the LDP in a similar fashion as the Sagawa scandal did in 1993. Second, with Cold War tensions easing during the *détente* of the 1970s, and the availability of a conservative alternative in the form of Yōhei Kono's New Liberal Club (NLC), which had just split from the LDP, the opposition parties, including the JSP and Japan Communist Party (JCP), were more attractive to voters than during previous years under the 1955 system. Third, as a consequence of the previous two points, the LDP lost its absolute majority in the lower house for the first time since its formation in the general election in December 1976. The major difference with the 1990s case was that the LDP, under Prime Minister Fukuda, was able here to form a single-party minority government by gaining the support of a number of conservative independents. Promising reform, Fukuda announced the dissolution of the LDP factions as a means to regain the public's trust. This dissolution, however, was largely symbolic, as intense competition among faction members determined the outcome of the very next leadership context, the newly established LDP primary in 1978, in which Fukuda was unseated.⁷⁴ Factions then immediately reemerged under Prime

⁷³ Park, 2001, p.429. Please note that this article omits discussion of the episode in which factions were declared disbanded under Prime Minister Ikeda because that effort was seen as largely symbolic and was quickly reversed. See Masumi, 1988, p.301.

⁷⁴ Masumi, 1995, p.217; Curtis, 1988, pp.101-103.

Minister Ōhira, who was himself the leader of a major faction. These past episodes of largely cosmetic dissolution followed by quick reformation in the 1970s and 1990s thus naturally raise questions about the permanence of the factions' disbanding in 2024.

A more recent episode confirms the above pattern of faction-blaming after an electoral setback and also raises suspicions about current factional reform. In the 2009 lower house election, the LDP suffered the worst electoral defeat in the party's history, losing power and even ceding its position as the largest party in the chamber. In the party leadership contest that followed this defeat, Sadakazu Tanigaki, who would become the next party president, began his campaign by declaring that the LDP "cannot maintain its old system and customs based on the assumption that it will remain a perpetual ruling party."⁷⁵ Once president, he immediately set up the "Committee on Vision in Government" (Seiken Kōsō Kaigi) but no major party reforms resulted. Although the Party Reform Committee would come around to address factions nearly two years later, no measures limiting factional influence followed.⁷⁶ In short, just over a decade ago, facing its most severe existential crisis, the LDP ultimately chose to remain factionalized.

Following their formal reemergence under the Obuchi administration in the late 1990s, factions continued to change in both number and membership sizes. First, although the five major factions of the 1955 system period all returned, they continued to experience splits and, for the first time, the new phenomena of mergers.⁷⁷ Ironically, the Obuchi faction (also known as the Heisei Kenkyūkai, founded by Eisaku Satō, formerly led by Tanaka/Takeshita and most recently by Toshimitsu Motegi), whose split with Hata, Ozawa and their followers in 1992 had contributed so much to the ending of the 1955 system, was the only faction to remain unscathed by these phenomena during this period. Prior to its

⁷⁵ Ito, Masumi. 2009. "Vowing reform, Tanigaki makes bid to become LDP president" *Japan Times* (September 16): <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2009/09/16/national/vowing-reform-tanigaki-makes-bid-to-become-ldp-president/> (accessed July 19, 2025).

⁷⁶ Pekkanen, 2013.

⁷⁷ Park, 2001, p.460.

dissolution in 2024, the then Motegi faction was the third largest in the LDP, with around 54 members.⁷⁸

The faction most affected by cycles of splits and mergers was the Katō (Kōichi) faction (also known as the Kōchikai, founded by Hayato Ikeda, and formerly led by Ōhira and Miyazawa). Having already experienced a split during the period of nominal factional dormancy in 1995 over Yōhei Kono's failed effort to win a second term as LDP president, which resulted in the creation of the Kono faction (also known as the Taiyūkai and later the Ikōkai), the Katō faction would split again in 2000 over its leader's failed effort to bring a nonconfidence motion against LDP president and then prime minister, Yoshirō Mori, resulting in the Horiuchi (Mitsuo) faction (later led by Makoto Koga and Fumio Kishida) and the Katō faction (later led by Sadatoshi Ozato and Sadakazu Tanigaki). Seeking to increase their influence, these two groups reunited in a 2008 merger with Koga as the faction leader and Tanigaki as his deputy. However, when Fumio Kishida assumed the group's leadership in 2012, a small number of members broke off again to form a splinter faction under Tanikagki's leadership.⁷⁹ Prior to its dissolution in 2024, the Kishida faction was the fourth largest in the LDP, with about 45 members.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, most members of the Kono faction would eventually come under the leadership of Tarō Asō in the mid-2000s and then his faction (known as the Shikōkai) merged with the Santō (Akiko) faction (founded by Takeo Miki and later led by Toshio Kōmoto and Masahiko Kōmura.) in 2017. In 2023, the Asō faction was the second largest in the LDP, with around 55 members.⁸¹

Such was the fate of the three factions originally founded by Satō, Ikeda and Miki. But what became of the other major factions of the earlier era founded by Kishi and Hatoyama? Although their destinies were intertwined, one flourished while the other declined during this period. First, the Mitsuzuka (Hiroshi)

⁷⁸ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16; Watari, 2023, p.68.

⁷⁹ Bosak, Michael. 2022. "The Evolution of LDP Factions." *Tokyo Review* (January 4): <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2022/01/the-evolution-of-ldp-factions/> (accessed July 20, 2025).

⁸⁰ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16; Watari, 2023, p.68.

⁸¹ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16.

faction (also known as the *Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai*, founded by Kishi and later led by Takeo Fukuda, Yoshirō Mori and Shinzō Abe) grew to be the largest faction in the LDP during this period, despite a split in 1998 over post allocation issues. This incident saw Shizuka Kamei lead a group out of the faction to form the Murakami-Kamei faction with a group of lawmakers who followed Masakuni Murakami after the break-up of the Watanabe (Michio) faction (formerly the Nakasone faction), which is discussed further below.⁸² Despite this setback, the “Seiwa” faction, now led by Yoshirō Mori, grew to be the largest faction by the mid-2000s and placed three of its members, Mori, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzō Abe, in the prime minister’s office, serving a combined fifteen years of the period between 2000 and 2020. After stepping down as prime minister in 2020 and prior to his assassination in 2022, Abe assumed the leadership of this faction. Prior to announcing it was disbanding in 2024, the Abe faction was the largest faction in the LDP, with around 100 members.⁸³

Finally, the former Nakasone faction (originally founded by Ichirō Hatoyama), the last of the five major factions of the 1955 system era, survived into this period as well but would break-up after the death of its then leader Michio Watanabe in 1995. As mentioned above, one group followed Masakuni Murakami into the Murakami-Kamei faction (which came to be known as the *Shisuikai* and was later led by Bunmei Ibuki and Toshihiro Nikai). Prior to the dissolution announcements in 2024, the then Nikai faction was the fifth largest in the LDP, with about 42 members.⁸⁴ The others followed Taku Yamasaki to form the Yamasaki faction (also known as the *Kinmirai Seiji Kenkyūkai* and later led by Nobuteru Ishihara and Hiroshi Moriyama).⁸⁵ Prior to dissolution in 2024, the then Moriyama faction had shrunk to one of the smallest in the party, with only 8 members.⁸⁶

⁸² Park, 2001, pp.441-442.

⁸³ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16; Watari, 2023, p.68.

⁸⁴ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16.

⁸⁵ Park, 2001, p.433.

⁸⁶ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16; Watari, 2023, p.68.

In addition to an increase in the total number of factions through splits, this number also increased during this period through the more familiar pattern of ambitious politicians creating factions or faction-like groups to support their candidacies for the party presidency. One example of this is the Ishiba (Shigeru) faction (also known as the Suigetsukai). Founded with 19 members in 2015 by Shigeru Ishiba, this faction was created openly for the purpose of advancing its leader's ambition to become party president.⁸⁷ When he placed last in the next party presidential contest in 2020, Ishiba resigned as faction leader.⁸⁸ Although the faction retained its formal status afterwards, it failed to select a new leader, lost members and largely ceased to function as a unified entity. Prior to the dissolutions in 2024, it had become the smallest faction in the LDP, with just 7 members.

A less clear representation of this type of growth in factions was the Suga Group (as known as the Ganesha no Kai), an informal collection of about thirty young and mid-career lawmakers who supported the leadership of Yoshihide Suga after he cut other factional ties (leaving the Koga faction in 2009). Although Suga, who came to openly oppose factionalism in the LDP, did not operate this group with the same level of formality as other faction leaders, it did exhibit some of the traits of a traditional faction, including the provision of favors and attention from the veteran leader in exchange for support from members in the 2020 party presidency election. *Jiji Press* noted in 2020 that these lawmakers "comprise what is viewed in effect as the 'Suga faction.'" ⁸⁹ However, *Asahi Shimbun* declared that when Suga became prime minister he was

⁸⁷ Aoki, Mizuho. 2015. "With eye on succeeding Abe, Ishiba launches own LDP faction." *Japan Times* (September 28): <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/09/28/national/politics-diplomacy/eye-succeeding-abe-ishiba-launches-ldp-faction> (accessed July 19, 2025).

⁸⁸ *Asahi Shimbun*. 2020. "Ishiba resigns as faction leader over last-place finish in LDP poll." (October 23): <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13863162> (accessed July 19, 2025).

⁸⁹ *Jiji Press*. 2020. "Suga may become 1st non-faction, non-dynasty LDP head." Appearing in *Arab News Japan* (September 6): https://www.arabnews.jp/en/japan/article_25913/ (Accessed July 5, 2025).

“not affiliated with any of the factions.”⁹⁰ *Yomiuri Shimbun* also observed that the Suga Group differed from other factions in that it lacked a headquarters, was not a registered organization capable of political fundraising and did not endorse candidates as a faction, but was similar to factions with regard to its roles in post allocation, policy coordination and ultimately in Suga’s leadership fight.⁹¹ The fact that this group proved to be a “weak force” that failed to “behave as one large bloc” after Suga withdrew from leadership contention also indicates that it was a more personalized, less formal entity (perhaps more akin to a clientele).⁹²

As the total number of factions grew during this period from five to seven or eight, memberships also shifted. Some factions grew. For example, the Hashimoto faction (formerly the Tanaka/Takeshita faction) was able to recover from its split in 1992, going from being the third largest faction in 1993 to the largest by the end of the 1990s.⁹³ As noted above, the “Seiwa” faction (formerly the Fukuda/Mori faction) became the largest in the mid-2000s, expanding to the point where it achieved a membership in the low triple digits and towered over the other factions, which were mostly only about half its size. Other factions shrank. In addition to the relatively brief life of the Ishiba faction discussed above, the Yamasaki faction’s membership fell from in the thirties in the mid-2000s to only 8 at the time of its dissolution in 2024. Despite these dramatic shifts in the inter-factional competition for members, the overall rate of factional affiliation remained high throughout this period until the dissolutions in 2024, with about 80% of LDP Diet members belonging to a faction for most

⁹⁰ *Asahi Shimbun*. 2020. “Suga takes unorthodox route to reach top of Japanese politics.” (September 17): <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13736153> (accessed July 19, 2025).

⁹¹ *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 2020. “Suga gains affinity, support of LDP’s factionless members.” (October 19): <https://www.inkl.com/news/suga-gains-affinity-support-of-ldp-s-factionless-members> (accessed July 19, 2025).

⁹² Kamata, Jio. 2024. “The Coming Clash Between Japan’s Current and Former Prime Ministers.” *The Diplomat* (July 19): <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/the-coming-clash-between-japans-current-and-former-prime-ministers/> (accessed July 19, 2025). Gigante & Wan also do not treat the Suga Group as a formal faction. See Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16.

⁹³ Park, 2001, p.438.

of this period.⁹⁴ This remained the case even after Prime Minister Koizumi waged a war against the factions to some success, especially after the 2005 lower house election, when he was able to increase the percentage of unaffiliated LDP Diet members to more than 30%.⁹⁵ This figure, however quickly fell after that, with the percentage of LDP members in a faction exceeding 80% again in just a few years' time.⁹⁶ Prior to the dissolutions in 2024, the percentage with factional affiliation exceeded 80%, thus showing that factional membership remained a valued commodity for LDP lawmakers during this period whether party leadership discouraged factionalism (Koizumi, Suga) or encouraged it (Obuchi, Mori, Abe).⁹⁷

During this period, factions in the LDP functioned largely as before in a number of ways. First, there is no evidence of change in the psychological or informational benefits provided by factions to their members. With regard to the former, the survival of organized groups within the party that could legitimately claim the legacy of at least four of the five factions that dominated the LDP in the latter part of the 1955 system period certainly did not reduce the prestige and identity-related benefits of membership in those storied groups.⁹⁸ Second, as large factions continued to be composed of a combination of veteran party elites, mid-career backbenchers and newcomers, there is no reason to believe that the mentoring and information-sharing functions factions always provided for their members diminished during this period.⁹⁹ Third, scholars generally agree that factions continued to dominate the role of post allocation, especially with regard to "subcabinet appointments," such as party and Diet positions.¹⁰⁰ It thus seems to be the case that joining a faction remained an important stepping

⁹⁴ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.10. Park also notes that factions continued to recruit aggressively during this period. See Park, 2001, pp.438-439.

⁹⁵ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.149.

⁹⁶ Ibid.; Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.12.

⁹⁷ Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.12.

⁹⁸ Park, 2001, p.442.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.445.

¹⁰⁰ Rosenbluth & Thies, 2010, p.110; Krauss & Pekkanen, 2004, pp.16-17; Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, pp.132-134; Park, 2001, pp.440-441. Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 1999, p.56.

stone to career advancement during this period, especially for newcomers seeking junior and midlevel party and Diet committee posts.

Scholars disagree, however, in their assessments of how the allocation of top party and cabinet posts changed during this period and even about what these changes meant for the power of factions.¹⁰¹ Park notes that the practice of power-sharing of top party posts across the biggest factions also continued during the first decade of this period, although it was largely abandoned under the Koizumi administration.¹⁰² After the LDP returned to power in December 2012, successive LDP prime ministers mostly failed to follow the previous formula of proportionality and separation of powers with regard to the top party posts.¹⁰³ For example, all of them except Suga appointed at least one person without factional affiliation to one of these posts during their time in office.¹⁰⁴ In addition, Abe violated the separation of powers principle on several occasions by appointing members of his own faction as the General Council, PARC and Election Strategy chairpersons. Finally, proportionality, in the form of each of the largest factions receiving at least one of these posts was also not observed, as smaller factions such as the Moriyama and Tanigaki factions repeatedly received appointments. That said, these principles were largely observed with regard to the powerful secretary-general position, with three of the five men who occupied this position between 2012 and 2022 coming from one of the largest factions that was not the faction of the appointing prime minister. Finally, the appointment set that most conformed with late 1955 system norms was that of Suga, the only prime minister without a faction during this period. Although only one data point, this suggests that a lack of factional backing perhaps reduced the independence of prime ministers to allocate top party posts without factional consideration during these years.

¹⁰¹ For an interesting discussion of differences in how factional influence should be measured, see Ono, 2012.

¹⁰² Park, 2001, p.444, 458.

¹⁰³ Kohno, 1992, 1997.

¹⁰⁴ These findings are based on analysis conducted by the author with regard to the following posts: Secretary-General, General Council Chair, Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC) Chair, Chairperson of the Election Strategy Committee.

Regarding cabinet post allocation, Rosenbluth and Thies find a statistically significant difference in the decrease in the mean correlation coefficient matching factional strength and shares of cabinet posts between the periods 1978-1993 (0.904) and 1994-2008 (0.760).¹⁰⁵ This is one of the reasons they declare that the LDP factions of the latter period “are not the factions of the 1960s-1980s.”¹⁰⁶ However, it is important to note that they also find a statistically significant difference in the increase in the mean correlation coefficient matching factional strength and shares of cabinet posts between the periods 1963-1978 (0.789) and 1978-1993 (0.904). This is consistent with the view that factional practices and norms evolved during the 1955 system period and that the “dominant duo” or mainstream factions took more than their proportional share of cabinet posts in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although prime ministers such as Koizumi (2001-2006) and Asō (2008-2009) famously refused to allot cabinet posts according to factional considerations, analysis of more recent cabinet appointments indicates that evolution in factional influence continued. When the LDP returned to power in 2012, the estimated correlation coefficient for the second Abe cabinet (2012-2014) was about 0.74, similar to the previous period, although four faction leaders (Asō, Kishida, Nobuteru Ishihara and Tanigaki) received posts in this cabinet.¹⁰⁷ The third Abe cabinet (2014-2017), however, had only two faction heads (Asō and Kishida) and a correlation coefficient of just 0.49. In addition, ministers unaffiliated with any faction represented more than 25% of both of these Abe cabinets, a figure much higher than the norm for the previous period, where unaffiliated members occupied anywhere from 0% to almost 15% of cabinet posts.¹⁰⁸ More systematic research covering the fourth Abe cabinet to the second Kishida cabinet (2017-2021) finds “strong regularity” in the proportionality between

¹⁰⁵ Rosenbluth & Thies, 2010, p.111.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.110.

¹⁰⁷ All estimates in this paragraph for the second and third Abe cabinets were made by the author.

¹⁰⁸ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.149.

faction seat share and cabinet portfolios.¹⁰⁹ In addition, the prime minister's faction and the largest factions are found to have relative advantage in cabinet post allocation.¹¹⁰ Finally, similar to the analysis of the second and third Abe cabinets above, those unaffiliated with factions (independents) are found to not be disadvantaged and in fact are often chosen to serve in these cabinets.¹¹¹ This suggests further evolution in how factions influence cabinet appointments, with the prime minister's faction and the largest factions again receiving disproportionate shares, as they did in the 1960s and 1970s, but independents benefiting for the first time since the Koizumi and Asō administrations in the 2000s. The latter may indicate, on the one hand, that prime ministers were now strong enough to appoint loyal independents regardless of the demands of faction leaders but also, on the other hand, that LDP prime ministers still felt the need to maintain the image that personnel decisions were not determined by factional considerations, as factional politics remained unpopular with the public throughout this period.¹¹²

Scholars also disagree regarding the degree of influence factions retained over what was their original *raison d'être*: determining who becomes LDP party president. First, Rosenbluth and Thies contend that factions “lost control over leadership selection almost immediately after electoral reform,” arguing that Ryūtarō Hashimoto won the 1995 leadership fight by making a cross-factional appeal to young members, Obuchi won in 1998 against a competitor from his own faction, something that had never happened before, and, Koizumi won in 2001 due largely to the increased input of party members, which was made possible by a primary reform driven by the backlash to the faction-influenced selection of

¹⁰⁹ Kubo, 2023, p.216. Converting the coefficients of determination calculated by Kubo to the correlation coefficients used above yields a range from about 0.70 to 0.83. Matsuura, 2023 also finds a positive relationship between factional affiliation and cabinet appointments for members of the upper house.

¹¹⁰ Kubo, 2023, pp.216.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.216-2017.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Mori following the sudden death of Obuchi the year before.¹¹³ Other scholars, while agreeing that the way factions influence party leadership selection had changed, argue nonetheless that the factions were far from powerless in this process during this period. First, Park, echoing the historical institutionalist explanation, argues that factions continued to exist in part due to the rules governing the LDP presidential primary, specifically, the requirement in LDP by-laws for aspirants to receive the endorsement of a minimum number of LDP Diet members in order to be eligible to enter the race, which is currently set at twenty.¹¹⁴ Would-be candidates signal their intent to run in a future leadership election by taking the reins of a faction, preferably one with around or more than twenty members. This helps explain Ishiba's decision to start a faction with nineteen members in 2015. Second, Asano and Patterson, focusing on data from the 2021 primary, find that factions "remain an important influence on how party members cast their votes in LDP Presidential elections."¹¹⁵ More specifically, they find that the extent of influence differs across factions, which also exhibit different patterns of influence, including impact that "can be either positive or negative [for a particular candidate or candidates] and, also, directed at multiple candidates rather than a single candidate as implied in the scholarly literature."¹¹⁶ Thus, as recently as 2021, the last time a leadership election was held before the dissolution of factions in 2024, candidates were aware that factions mattered and, even with faction leaders now largely allowing their members to vote based on their own individual preferences, factions could damage or enhance candidates' chances in far more complex patterns than observed during the 1955 system period.

¹¹³ Rosenbluth & Thies, 2010, pp.109-110. The authors also see this decline in factional power to be a good thing for the party's electoral chances: "Not only had factions lost control of the leadership selection process, but the party elite as a group had realized the wisdom of courting public opinion." (p.110)

¹¹⁴ Park, 2001, pp.446-447. See Chapter 4 of the "Rules for the Public Election of the LDP President" (Sōsai Kōsen Kitei): <https://storage2.jimin.jp/pdf/election/results/sousai18/rules.pdf>. Please note the required number of endorsers has changed over the years. For an overview, see Wang, 2016, p.122.

¹¹⁵ Asano & Patterson, 2024, p.473.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Facing new electoral and campaign finance rules, the role of factions probably changed the most in LDP electioneering during this period. The reduction in the function of factions here appeared most prominently in nominations and endorsements in the electoral districts of the lower house.¹¹⁷ With intraparty competition eliminated in these districts, and district nominations initially entrusted to party leadership and then the local branches, factions only had limited routes left to influence nominations, such as running new candidates against an opposition incumbent or in a district where an LDP incumbent had died or retired as well as attempting to improve the place of their candidates on the closed PR list. However, increases in the use of dual candidacy, through which candidates running in the districts are also given preferential treatment on the PR list, and the increase in hereditary candidates, who take over the personal support networks (*kōenkai*) of deceased or retired Diet member relatives and use this advantage to win the districts in the next election, have reduced both of these routes to almost nothing.¹¹⁸ That the power of endorsement had passed to party leadership was made clear in the 2005 lower house election, when Prime Minister Koizumi endorsed alternative candidates to run against former LDP members he had expelled from the party for voting against his postal savings reform bill.¹¹⁹ With regard to campaign finance, the limitation and then ban of political contributions to any organization other than a political party further undermined this traditional function of a faction. This continued the trendline of “factions’ shift in reliance on individual members seeking their own funding” that began with the 1975 campaign finance reform.¹²⁰ Faction leaders and veteran members may introduce other members to potential donors, but everyone, including junior members, were now expected to play the key role in attracting private donors or holding fund-raising parties (more on that in the next section).¹²¹ However one considers these developments, the link between factions and elections, once so robust, was seriously weakened during

¹¹⁷ Cox, Rosenbluth & Thies, 1999; Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, pp. 130-131. Rosenbluth & Thies, 2010, pp.108-109; Rehmert, 2022.

¹¹⁸ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.130-131.

¹¹⁹ Uchiyama, 2023.

¹²⁰ Park, 2001, p.439. For a comparison of the redistributive effects among the factions of the campaign finance reforms of 1975 and 1994, see Carlson and Nakabayashi, 2024.

¹²¹ Park, 2001, p.439; Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.131-132.

this period.

Under the 1955 system, factions were seen as primarily active in two of the three major roles of political parties, vote-seeking (i.e. electioneering) and office-seeking (i.e. post allocation), with far less of a role in the third, policy-seeking.¹²² This seems to have changed during this period, especially after the LDP returns to power in 2012.¹²³ Part of this change is likely the result of an increase in the importance of policy at the party level. As a number of scholars argue, policy differences became more important in elections during this period, and factions seeking to expand their memberships while also sustaining the LDP's success surely took note, as did those in the opposition parties.¹²⁴ Still further, Krauss and Pekkanen, comparing the eleven-year periods before electoral reform and after it, find that the percentage of members of the five major factions who were policy experts (*zoku giin*) increased from about 3% to 4-6%.¹²⁵ They also find that the range of policy areas that factions' experts specialized in narrowed in the second period, with factions moving from a "general hospital" model to a "specialty clinic" one when it comes to policy expertise.¹²⁶ Why do they find factions focusing more on some policy areas than on others? They point to the end of intraparty competition in the lower house electoral districts as the major cause. No longer needing to distinguish oneself in detailed policy terms from an opponent who shares the same party label allowed more faction members to become generalists that focus on wider issues affecting the entire district.¹²⁷ More broadly, Gigante and Wan demonstrate that factional dynamics can both sustain continuity and trigger significant and sudden shifts in foreign policies, citing Japan's longstanding policy of maintaining friendly relations with Southeast Asian countries and also its rapid decision to place

¹²² For an introduction to these three key political party roles, see Strom, 1990.

¹²³ Bosak, Michael. 2022. "The Evolution of LDP Factions." Tokyo Review (January 4): <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2022/01/the-evolution-of-ldp-factions/> (accessed July 20, 2025).

¹²⁴ Catalinac, 2016; Hamzawi, 2022; Kubo, Matsumoto & Yamamoto, 2022.

¹²⁵ Krauss & Pekkanen, 2011, p.135.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp.135-136.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp.136-138.

unprecedented levels of sanctions on Russia in 2022.¹²⁸ However, these shifts often depend on the dominance of particular factions, which have leaders with strong policy views, rather than broad factional consensus.

In sum, the functions of factions in the LDP between 1993 and 2022 evolved and continued to play vital roles in office-seeking, declined significantly in vote-seeking, and became more relevant in policy-seeking. The LDP's adaptation to a more centralized party and programmatic policy-based electoral environment reshaped the role of its factions during this period, making them somewhat less dominant but still important to understanding how the members of the party pursue offices, votes and policies.

V. LDP Factions at a Crossroads: 2023-2025

Seven LDP factions, five with at least forty members and all of them combined representing more than 80% of LDP parliamentarians, entered 2023 in what must have been a mixed mood.¹²⁹ On the one hand, the reshuffled second Kishida cabinet began the year with a net approval rating above water, the LDP's party support figure towered over those of the divided opposition parties mired in the single digits, and the party did not need to face voters again until 2025.¹³⁰ On the other hand, the shocking assassination of Shinzō Abe, former prime minister and leader of the largest faction, six months before by a man motivated by a personal grudge against the Unification Church, to which he believed Abe had ties, had shaken the world of the LDP factions. First, it created a power vacuum in the most important faction. Unable to settle on a single replacement, the “Seiwa” faction opted for a collective leadership arrangement that decreased internal stability in the around 100-person group and likely weakened the

¹²⁸ Gigante & Wan, 2025.

¹²⁹ The seven were Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai (former Abe faction), Shikōkai (Asō faction), Heisei Kenkyūkai (Motegi faction), Kōchi Seisaku Kenkyūkai (Kishida faction), Shisuikai (Nikai faction), Kinmirai Seiji Kenkyūkai (Moriyama faction), and Suigetsukai (former Ishiba faction). Gigante & Wan, 2025, p.16.

¹³⁰ NHK: <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/> (accessed July 21, 2025).

faction's influence within the party.¹³¹ Second, media coverage and public outrage focused on the alleged connections between the suspect's motive—his bitterness over the Unification Church's cult-like hold over his mother and her finances—and the LDP's longstanding ties to that organization.¹³² Kishida responded by reshuffling his cabinet to remove members with acknowledged ties and by ordering an internal survey of party members, which eventually found half had some ties to the church, including among his new cabinet members.¹³³ The weakening of the mighty “Seiwa” faction and the increased scrutiny regarding the LDP's financial dealings from the media and opposition parties brought on by these events laid the foundation for the party's next major trying event: the slush-fund scandal.¹³⁴

In late 2023, Japanese media published credible accounts of LDP factions failing to meet the requirements of the Political Funds Control Law (PFCL) with regard to money raised by selling tickets to the types of fund-raising

¹³¹ Johnston, Eric. 2022. “Abe's faction faces uncertain future following his assassination.” *Japan Times* (July 20): <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/07/20/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-faction-leadership/> (accessed July 21, 2025).

¹³² Yamaguchi, Mari. 2022. “Unification Church pledges reforms after Abe's assassination.” *Associated Press* (September 23): <https://apnews.com/article/shinzo-abe-religion-japan-philanthropy-assassinations-4f18b1c688ed8f25fbc43a6fb2dcd782> (accessed July 21, 2025).

¹³³ Yamaguchi, Mari. 2022. “Half of LDP National Lawmakers Tied to Unification Church.” *The Diplomat* (September 9): <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/half-of-ldp-national-lawmakers-tied-to-unification-church> (accessed July 21, 2025).

¹³⁴ The journey of Kōichi Hagiuda during this time is indicative of the throughline between the Unification Church and slush-fund scandals. Serving as the economy minister in the Kishida cabinet, Hagiuda was also a senior figure in the “Seiwa” faction who became part of the faction's collective leadership following Abe's assassination. However, after he acknowledged Unification Church ties, Kishida removed him from the cabinet, giving him the consolation prize of the LDP PARC chair in August 2022. Once the slush-fund scandal centering around the activities of the “Seiwa” faction became public, Kishida removed Hagiuda as PARC chair and other faction members from key posts in December 2023. *Asahi Shimbun*. 2022. “3 members in new Cabinet tied to Unification Church.” (August 10): <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14691855> (accessed July 21, 2025). *Reuters*. 2023. “Japan PM Kishida to replace industry minister and LDP policy chief-Asahi.” (December 10): <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-pm-kishida-replace-industry-minister-ldp-policy-chief-asahi-2023-12-09> (accessed July 21, 2025).

parties mentioned in the previous section.¹³⁵ Specifically, factions were accused of failing “to properly report income from fundraising parties and expenditure of that income.”¹³⁶ The sale of such tickets was legal, a popular way to get around the PFCL’s ban on political contributions from companies and organizations to factions, but failing to report these funds as income or to provide details on how the money was spent was not legal. Further, some factions set quotas for their members to sell the tickets and allowed them to keep extra funds if they were able to exceed the quota. This was also not illegal, but “there was evidence that many of the individuals who received such revenue had not declared it as income,” with some factions also failing to declare these payments as expenditures.¹³⁷ The reported scale of the underreporting grew over time, with the amounts the “Seiwa” faction was accused of failing to properly disclose rising from an initial report of 100 million yen (roughly \$650,000) to nearly 700 million yen (around \$4 million) over a five-year period.¹³⁸ With his cabinet’s approval rating already firmly under water beginning in the summer, Kishida responded first by reshuffling his cabinet to remove members who served in leadership positions in factions implicated in the scandal and also by announcing the creation of a task force within the party to institute reforms. Although the Prosecutor’s Office indicted the treasurer of the “Seiwa” faction on January 19, 2024, and ultimately indicted three LDP lawmakers on the grounds that their misreported incomes were excessively large (40 million yen or more (about \$200,000 or more)), the vast majority of LDP faction members who had misreported these funds escaped legal jeopardy.¹³⁹

The opposition parties and the public were not satisfied with this result, calling for more accountability and transparency. Kishida then responded by announcing

¹³⁵ Asahi Shimbun. 2023. “Prosecutors looking into ‘slush fund’ of LDP’s Abe faction.” (December 1): <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15072057> (accessed July 21, 2025); Catalinac, 2025, p.177.

¹³⁶ Catalinac, 2025, p.177.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p.178.

¹³⁹ Asahi Shimbun. 2024. “2 lawmakers from Abe faction indicted; others in LDP charged.” (January 19): <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15120042> (accessed July 21, 2025); Catalinac, 2025, p.178.

he was dissolving his faction. The Abe and Nikai factions, who together with the Kishida faction, were most directly implicated in the scandal, also quickly announced their disbanding. The Moriyama, Motegi and Ishiba factions also eventually announced their decisions to disband, leaving only the Asō faction in place. Kishida then agreed to ethics investigations in both chambers of the Diet, but these yielded little. An internal LDP ethics committee investigation, based on data from a self-reported survey, ultimately found wrongdoing in the actions of 39 lawmakers, applying various punishments to them, ranging from expulsion from the party (2), temporary party membership suspensions (3), temporary prohibitions from posts (17) and mere warnings (17).¹⁴⁰ The LDP then finished out the Diet session by revising the PFCL to strengthen slightly disclosure requirements and reporting procedures while increasing penalties for violations. However, the changes were derided by the press as woefully insufficient, referred to by one newspaper as “unworthy of being called political reform.”¹⁴¹ In the end, with regard to individual politicians, only the three who were indicted and the two who were expelled from the party suffered serious punishments.¹⁴² And then there was the matter of the slow process of the dissolution of six of the seven factions that existed in January 2024 over the next eighteen months, the last of which occurred when the “Seiwa” faction submitted its notice of dissolution as a political organization to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in late June 2025.¹⁴³ Now only the Asō faction remained fully intact.

VI. Conclusions

Why did most of the factions dissolve themselves between 2024 and 2025? And are they likely to reform again in the future? With regard to the first question,

¹⁴⁰ Catalinac, 2025, p.179.

¹⁴¹ *Mainichi Shimbun* cited in *Ibid.*, p.180.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 2025. (“The former Abe faction disband, only the Asō faction remains”) *Jimintō no kyū Abe-ha ga kaisan, nokoru habatsu wa Asō-ha nomi ni.* (June 25): <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20250625/k00/00m/010/142000c> (accessed July 22, 2025). For an account of the Ishiba faction, see Jiji. 2024. (“The LDP’s Ishiba Group Submits Notice of Dissolution”) *Jimintō no Ishiba Gurusu Kaisantodoke.* (September 9): <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2024091200791> (accessed July 21, 2025).

the proximate cause was clearly the arrests relating to the slush-fund scandal. But Kishida had just weathered the storm of the Unification Church scandal, which involved the assassination of a faction leader and former prime minister, without resorting to extreme party reforms. Indeed, he otherwise used some of the same moderate tactics to address both scandals, such as a cabinet reshuffle and the implementation of an internal party survey. Why did this particular scandal cause such a different response, especially when Kishida and the other faction leaders had other options? For example, they could have more seriously disciplined their members, expelling more from their factions and even the party to show the public that misbehavior of this type would not be tolerated anymore. This would have damaged the comity and unity of the intraparty groups, but would have sent a strong signal to the public that things had changed. They could have enacted a very strict reform of the PFCL, one that made the misreporting involved in the scandal impossible (e.g. by banning ticket sales for faction fund-raising parties, etc.). Of course, such a reform would take away the ability of intraparty groups within the LDP, in whatever form they take in the future, to raise money in these ways, but a serious reform that received some support from opposition parties and praise from the media would likely have been an effective way to regain the public's trust and support.

If the analysis in the fourth section reveals anything, it is that factions continued to play vital roles in the office-seeking and policy-seeking activities of their members during the period after electoral and campaign finance reform, with vote-seeking activities such as the type involved in the slush-fund scandal reduced to secondary importance. Surely, a more aggressive disciplinary and campaign finance reform effort that responded to the public's concerns about the "money politics" of the factions but preserved the groups themselves for their valuable office-seeking and policy-seeking functions was possible. It should also be noted that the "nuclear option" of announcing the faction dissolutions in early 2024 did not improve Kishida's situation. He continued to remain unpopular afterwards, with approval ratings in the low twenties for the remainder of his time in office, forcing him ultimately to decide not to run for reelection as LDP party president when his term ran out in September.

Leaders are obviously not perfect and often make decisions with unwanted and unintended consequences. One could thus argue that Kishida made a panicked decision because the slush-fund scandal reached deeper into the Kishida faction, and LDP factional politics more broadly, than previous scandals and also further damaged a key ally in the party, the Abe faction, which was still in a weakened state following the events of the Unification Church scandal, leaving Kishida feeling vulnerable to internal challenges. However, if that was the case, it is unclear how disbanding the factions would reduce his vulnerability, as the move must certainly have been unpopular with the group that would most likely determine Kishida's next challenger, faction leaders and senior members. In fact, when one considers the previous analysis of the history of factions, including Kishida's important place in that history, his decision to attempt to end factions seems all the more puzzling.

This puzzlement quickly dissipates if one considers an obvious possibility: That the current faction dissolution is a ploy, or, to use a term coined during a different scandal (the Watergate scandal in the United States during the 1970s), a "limited hangout"—a concession containing a partial admission of wrongdoing used strategically to limit damage, maintain plausible deniability, and prevent deeper inquiry. Even though coming from as unlikely an advocate as a major faction leader such as Kishida, the strategy to call for an end to factionalism in the LDP forestalls future investigations into the factions' fundraising practices as well as new efforts to force major factional reforms, while also limiting the damage of the ongoing scandal by recasting Kishida as a reformer on the right side of public opinion. It also allows Kishida to distance himself from faction members and staff charged and/or convicted of crimes and to maintain plausible deniability that he was unaware of and always disproved of any improper behavior.

This interpretation of the current faction dissolutions as a ploy is supported below by both reference to the findings in the previous sections and analysis of some current events. However, it is important to note that what follows is speculation based on knowledge of historical patterns and observation of recent developments rather than on secret or insider knowledge. In fact, some faction

leaders and members may well be sincere in their intent to dissolve their factions for the moment only to change their minds later when more favorable conditions for reforming factions prevail. Over the years, many factors have shaped the ebb and flow of factions in the LDP, and human agency is certainly one of them. Speculative exercises such as this should thus always be open to the complications presented by the wonder and unpredictability of individual human decision-making.

A first reason to view the faction dissolutions as a ploy is how closely the current situation resembles previous incidences of factional dissolutions in the 1970s and 1990s. First, the slush-fund scandal (strengthened by the reverberations of the Unification Church scandal) is every bit the “trying event” that the Lockheed and Sagawa scandals were to the earlier cases of factional dissolutions. Although the monetary amounts are significantly smaller in the most recent case, all three cases nonetheless involve illicit behavior in fund-raising by faction leaders and their staffs. Second, in all cases, the LDP faces a competitive electoral environment in which voters have options and losing power is a real possibility in upcoming elections. Third, the party leader calling for factional dissolution is in all cases himself the leader or a senior member of a major faction. In 1976, Prime Minister Fukuda led the former Kishi faction, in 1994, LDP President Yōhei Kono was a senior member of the Miyazawa faction who would split to form his own faction the very next year, and, in 2024, Kishida was the leader of that same former Miyazawa faction. Fourth, the manner in which the dissolutions were implemented are the same in all three cases: All were voluntary, meaning party leadership called for them or facilitated them, but did not formally revoke factional status through party rule changes. This allowed faction leaders the freedom to choose their own paths forward, with the understanding that many will take the steps necessary to preserve the organizational core of their groups in preparation for a future return as a full-spectrum faction. Finally, on a related point, Prime Minister Kishida and many other faction leaders and senior members were fully aware of these past patterns of temporary factional dissolutions because they were young members in the Diet the last time it was implemented in the 1990s. Thus, this was not a new trick that old dogs needed to learn in 2024.

As the analysis in the fourth section sought to establish, factions endured after the electoral and campaign finance reforms because their members valued membership for reasons other than the factions' diminished roles in vote-seeking. In addition to providing psychological and informational benefits, factions continued to play a pivotal role in the office-seeking and an increased role in the policy-seeking behavior of their members. It thus makes sense that faction leaders and members should be less resistant to a change that temporarily eliminates the remaining vote-seeking functions of the group in exchange for the preservation of an organization that could still fulfill the other more important functions. And that is exactly what the current calls by some faction leaders to transform their factions into "policy groups" seems to represent.¹⁴⁴ Please note here that this also fits the pattern of the 1990s dissolution, when factions used variants of the same term to describe their transformed groups.¹⁴⁵ The point here is that a "dissolution" that temporarily eliminates vote-seeking functions but retains virtually all the other benefits of LDP factional membership, while also positioning the group to eventually restore itself as a full-spectrum faction in the future, is a very attractive option

¹⁴⁴ According to public statements, the Kishida, Motegi and Ishiba factions all intend to reorganize as policy or study groups. There has also been some indication of a similar move by the Abe faction as well. NHK. 2024. ("Prime Minister Kishida moves to consolidate opinions on transforming factions into policy groups") Kishida shushō habatsu o seisaku shūdan ni aratameru hōkō de iken shūyaku e. (January 23): <https://web.archive.org/web/20240123080537/https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20240123/k10014331421000.html> (accessed July 22, 2025); *Mainichi Shimbun*. 2024. ("Motegi faction to withdraw its registration as a political organization – intends to continue as a policy group") Motegi-ha, seiji dantai no todokede o torisage e – seisaku shūdan to shite sonzoku hōshin. (April 17): <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20240417/k00/00m/010/167000c> (accessed July 22, 2025); *Mainichi Shimbun*. 2024. ("Ishiba group decides to dissolve its political organization – "in light of the circumstances" – study group will continue") Ishiba gurūpu, seiji dantai no kaisan kettei – "jōkyō kangamite" – benkyōkai wa keizoku. (February 7): <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20240207/k00/00m/010/270000c> (accessed July 22, 2025); *Kyodo*. 2024. ("Tatsuo Fukuda: "I will form a new group" – Grandson of the Abe faction's founding leader") Fukuda Tatsuo-shi "atarashii shūdan tsukuru" – Abe-ha genryū sōsetsusha no mago. (January 19): <https://web.archive.org/web/20240120024409/https://nordot.app/1121083992045716188> (accessed July 22, 2025).

¹⁴⁵ Park, 2001, p.429.

to people who have come to depend on and appreciate those other benefits.

An additional indicator that the current dissolution is temporary is the simple fact that the Asō faction has refused to disband and continues to act as a full-spectrum faction. In that sense, this makes the current faction dissolution a hybrid that combines the past incidences of faction dissolutions in the 1970s and 1990s with the period from 2009–2012, when factions refused to disband despite finding themselves in the same conditions that had prompted such dissolutions in the past. And the fact that the cases in which at least one faction refuses to disband when facing those conditions are the two most recent ones suggests that LDP members’ commitment to factionalism has increased not diminished over time. Finally, as the Asō faction continues to operate as a full-spectrum faction in the midst of a series of “policy groups,” one has to wonder if the simple dynamics of group competition will not encourage the reformation of other factions after a relatively brief period of dissolution. The Asō faction’s decision also undermines the partywide claim that the LDP has ended factionalism and thus diminishes whatever overall benefit can be gained in party image enhancement and public trust from this dissolution exercise.

One final but admittedly anecdotal point of evidence is the slow pace of the dissolution process for some of the factions. With of course the exception of the Asō faction, all factions had announced their dissolution by early February 2024. However, after that, there is wide variance in when factions got around to completing the most meaningful act in the dissolution process: submitting a notice of dissolution as a political organization to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication. While the Moriyama faction submitted its notice in April 2024, no other factions submitted theirs within six months of their dissolution announcement.¹⁴⁶ The Kishida and Ishiba factions did not submit their notices until September 2024, the same month in which the first party leadership contest was held following the faction dissolution announcements, a

¹⁴⁶ *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 2024. (“LDP Moriyama faction submits notice of dissolution—the first among the five factions that announced their disbanding”) Jimintō Moriyama-ha, kaisan todoke o teishutsu—kaisan hyōmei no go habatsu de hajimete. (April 26): <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20240426-OYT1T50101/> (accessed July 22, 2025).

contest that Ishiba won.¹⁴⁷ The Motegi faction waited until after the October lower house election to submit in late December 2024.¹⁴⁸ Most striking of all were the submissions of the Abe and Nikai factions, the two factions most implicated in the slush-fund scandal. Both submitted their notices in June 2025, a month before the next upper house election was to be held and about a year and a half after they announced their dissolutions.¹⁴⁹ It is possible that the complexities of winding down a faction's affairs before officially disbanding take large amounts of time for some and not others, but the variance in the submission dates, the location of many of them just prior to or after important electoral contests and the fact that the two factions most implicated in the slush-fund scandal held out the longest all point to the likelihood that some factions adopted a "wait-and-see" posture during this period, putting off the most meaningful act until they were sure it could not be avoided. That does not strike one as the behavior of groups fully committed to ending factionalism in the LDP.

Finally, the first party leadership contest following the faction dissolution announcements was held on September 27, 2024. It can thus serve as a mini-case study to observe post-faction dissolution intraparty group dynamics. That said, it should be noted that, in addition to the Asō faction, the Motegi, Nikai and Abe factions, despite their dissolution announcements, remained

¹⁴⁷ *Sankei Shimbun*. 2024. ("LDP Kishida faction submits notice of dissolution") Jimin Kishida-ha ga kaisan todoke. (September 3): <https://www.sankei.com/article/20240903-GPLLXXXK2FNYXKOHETPWKB5X6M/> (accessed July 22, 2025); *Jiji*. 2024. ("The LDP Ishiba group submits a notice of dissolution") Jimintō no Ishiba gurūpu ga kaisan todoke. (September 12): <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2024091200791> (accessed July 22, 2025)

¹⁴⁸ *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 2025. ("The LDP's former Motegi faction is formally dissolved") Jimin kyū Motegi-ha ga seishiki kaisan. (January 22): <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20250122-OYT1T50143/> (accessed July 22, 2025).

¹⁴⁹ *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 2025. ("The former Abe faction disband, only the Asō faction remains") Jimintō no kyū Abe-ha ga kaisan, nokoru habatsu wa Asō-ha nomi ni. (June 25): <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20250625/k00/00m/010/142000c> (accessed July 22, 2025); *NHK*. 2025. ("The LDP's former Nikai faction is formally dissolved") Jimin kyū Nikai-ha ga seishiki kaisan. (June 20): <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20250620/k10014840221000.html> (accessed July 22, 2025).

formally registered factions at this time. Journalistic accounts of the lead up to the event and the contest itself uncover multiple examples of what look like traditional factional politics.¹⁵⁰ Asō managed his faction like a faction leader of old, getting the entire group to vote for his preferred candidate, Sanae Takaichi. Kishida advised the members of his now former faction to vote against Takaichi, with whom he had policy differences, and they did. The contest was decided in the last round when enough members of the still registered Abe faction voted for Ishiba, who had just officially dissolved his small faction the month before. Although this is not a comprehensive analysis of what was only the first such leadership fight of the new post-faction dissolution era, with all the uncertainty first times bring, it is striking to note the continued influence of factions in the voting and former factions performing in a similar manner as Asano and Patterson found factions did in the prior 2021 leadership election.¹⁵¹ Obviously, more detailed analysis is needed to understand this episode fully, but, at first glance, it does seem like the mixture of factions and new policy groups performed in similar ways as factions had in recent leadership contests.

There is every reason to believe that the basic conditions for a revival of factionalism remain present in the LDP today. In addition to the likelihood that the current faction dissolution represents a limited hangout strategy based on similarities with past episodes of such dissolutions, the value to members of the office-seeking and policy-seeking functions of factions appears to remain high, and the loss of what was already a diminished vote-seeking function does not seem to be a deal breaker. The continued presence of the full-spectrum Asō faction and the quick move by a number of former factions to reform as policy groups also point to competitive dynamics and efforts to preserve organizational cores that have the potential to foster full factionalism in the party again. Finally, the behavior of factions and former factions in both the dissolution process and the first party presidential primary after the dissolution

¹⁵⁰ Nishimura, Takuya. 2024, “LDP Chooses Ishiba for its Next Leader.” *Asia Policy Point* (September 30): <https://www.jiaponline.org/2024/10/ldp-chooses-ishiba-for-its-next-leader.html> (accessed July 22, 2025); Johnston, Eric. 2024. “Despite disbandment, factions still loom over LDP leadership race.” *Japan Times* (August 16): <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/08/16/japan/politics/ldp-power-struggle/> (accessed July 22, 2025).

¹⁵¹ Asano & Patterson, 2024.

announcements does not inspire confidence in these intraparty groups' commitments to ending factionalism in the LDP going forward. To conclude, it is likely that the proximate cause of the dissolution of the LDP's factions in 2024 and 2025 was a scandal during a period of electoral vulnerability that greatly resembled past patterns of faction dissolutions that were followed by their reemergence in relatively short order. However, here the analysis ends with an important caveat drawn from the earlier analysis of how dominant systems end. The above conclusions are dependent on the ability of the LDP to remain the dominant or near dominant party in Japan's party system. It failed to do so in 1993 and again in 2009, but quickly returned to power in both cases with its factionalism ultimately renewed. However, should the LDP suffer an electoral defeat or party split so devastating that its remaining members have a hard time imagining a return to power, the calculus changes. Deprived of the benefits of access to government appointments and the bureaucracy over the long term in the context of an opposition party populated by increasingly policy-seeking factions seems a formula for party-switching and further break-up of the LDP.¹⁵² This is because, whatever else has shaped the emergence and evolution of the LDP's factions, the party's factionalism is built on the foundation of its dominance. Should this foundation be taken away, it is difficult to see how factionalism survives in the party that is left.

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¹⁵² Kubo, Matsumoto & Yamamoto, 2022.

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