# SOCIAL PERCEPTION AND POLITICAL OPINION: AN APPLICATION OF STATUS CHARACTERISTIC THEORY

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The principal objective of the paper is to examine the mechanisms by which people form their opinions about social policies concerning minorities, applying to status characteristic theory. As a result, three factors: the general opinion, social perception about minorities and conservative characteristics play an important role in policy formation process concerning certain groups such as minorities. From a macroscopic view, perceived public opinion, perceived disadvantage due to ethnicity, and characteristics connected with conservatism can hamper the policy making process for minorities. Finally, the implications regarding to a social consensus about policies are discussed.

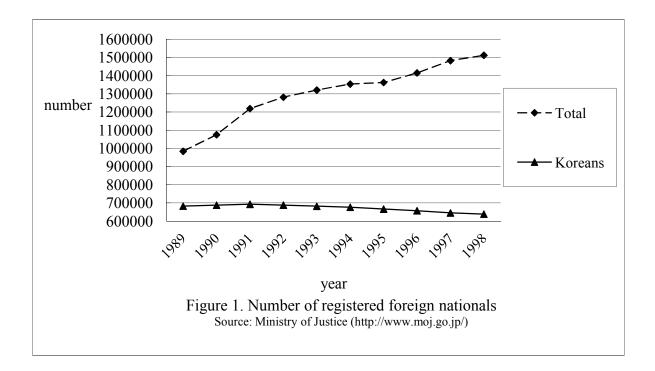
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

There are two main purposes in this paper. The first one is to consider the process in which people form their opinions about a political issue regarding to the social policy toward certain groups, especially the minorities or "the socially disadvantaged" (Wilson 1987). A number of studies have been made on the issue regarding to the social policy in Japan (e.g. Miyagawa 1994; Shakai Hosyo Kenkyusho 1995; Watanuki and Miyake 1997). In this paper, we have approached the subject from different aspects.

First, we deal with one of our major domestic political issues about voting rights of the foreign residents <sup>1)</sup>, especially Koreans, many of them were born in Japan and pay taxes there. In fact, Koreans are the largest ethnic group (minority) in Japan. In 1998, there were 638, 828 Koreans residing in Japan (see Figure 1), including those who were brought to Japan as forced laborers during 1910-1945 Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula. Most of them were born in Japan.

In recent years, social movement claiming voting rights in local elections of non-Japanese, especially of permanent residents is taking place and getting support from the general public in Japan (Miyajima et al., 1996) <sup>2)</sup>. For example, in the 1995 Social Stratification and Social Consciousness of the Korean residents in Japan (SSC) survey data, 713 of the 899 respondents (Korean residents in Japan) wanted voting rights (Kim et al., 1997). On the other hand, in Japanese Social Justice Survey Project (JSJP) survey data

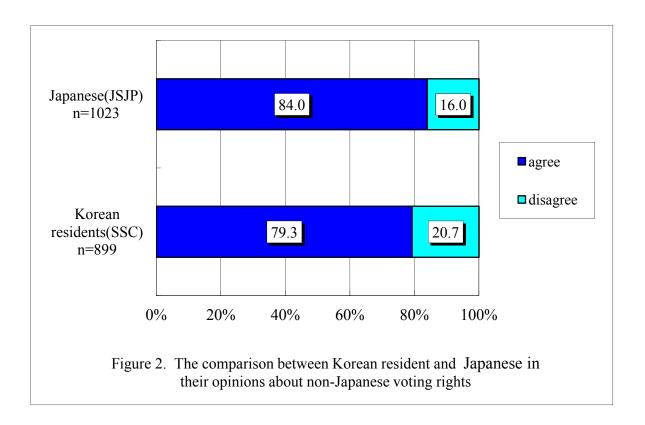


(1997), 859 of the 1,023 Japanese respondents answered that foreign residents in Japan "Should definitely be allowed" or "Probably should be allowed" to vote (see Figure 2). Thus, it is obvious that there are many Japanese and Korean residents who support non-Japanese voting rights. However, this issue is under controversy <sup>3)</sup>.

Next, the second purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the cognitive states (or beliefs) about the observed inequalities for minorities when people form their opinion about the social policy toward the groups. The discussion is based on the following ideas of status characteristic theory (e.g. Berger et al., 1966).

- 1) The power and prestige order in a newly constituted group of high and low status members comes to parallel the relative ranking on a status characteristic initially held by members of the group (Cohen and Roper, 1972) <sup>4)</sup>.
- 2) Each person holds some internal image of the other. This internal representation of the other is much affected by the visible fact of differing status (Cohen and Roper, 1972) <sup>5)</sup>.

Status characteristic theory explains how status difference existing in the society determines the power and prestige order within a small group: group members use the knowledge or information of each other's status (status characteristic) in the society in order to figure out how to interact with other group members, and this more or less results in a reproduction of the society's status structure <sup>6)</sup>. For example, generally, high-status persons are expected to be



more competent and, consequently, are accorded more power and influence in the group (Hembroff and Myers, 1984). The theory assumes that group members will be used as the basis for decisions in social interaction: In that case, the status differences initially external to the group is the main influence on the decision, regardless of the relevance of those external characteristics to the collective, valued task (group task) <sup>7)</sup>. In this theory, two types of status characteristics are important: diffuse status characteristics (such as sex, race, age) related to general expectations about individuals, and specific status characteristics (such as mathematical ability or juror competence) directly related to performance expectations about his/her ability and capacity. For example, the negative belief that blacks are generally less competent than whites is imbedded in contemporary culture (Cohen and Roper, 1973). To sum up, status characteristic theory describes a process by which one diffuse status characteristic operates to create and maintain observable inequalities in participation, evaluation, and influence (Berger et al., 1972). And, this theory has been applied to issues of discrimination based on race, gender, educational attainment, and ethnicity (Berger et al., 1989).

Our concern is how status differences transform into structural inequalities in the broader society, not in the small group settings: That is, the effect of combination of different types of information (such as the combination of two or more different characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, nationality, social category)) on the observable power and prestige order in every day life (e.g. social situation that minorities are placed in Japan). We must modify these ideas of status

characteristic theory when applied to our research. This work will contribute to the development, extension, and refinement of the theory <sup>8)</sup>.

Finally, this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the basic assumptions applied to status characteristic theory. Section 3 describes the characteristics of the cognitive states about observed inequalities on the basis of assumptions. Section 4 examines the mechanisms by which people form their opinions about social policies concerning minorities.

# 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on the assumption that the opinion formation process takes place in a simple situation. The following assumptions have been made for formulating and analyzing the cognitive states about the observed inequalities toward minorities:

- 1. There is a political issue regarding to the policy toward minorities. The policy is regarded to be necessary for the groups to live an ordinary life as a member of the society. This is a problem which is now confronted by every member of society.
- 2. An individual has two differentiated opinions on the issue in his/her mind: (1) his/her own opinion and (2) the perceived opinion of the generalized others (the general opinion) known through social interactions.
- 3. When the policy on the minority issue attracts people's interest, the individual decides either to agree or disagree on the policy by utilizing his/her own perception of the minorities' social situation (based on the knowledge or information of the minorities' status characteristic), and his/her perception of whether the generalized others agree or disagree on the policy.
- 4. It is assumed that the general (public) opinion is formed by the aggregation of the individual opinions and affect the policy making process. The general opinion determines the social status of minorities in a whole society.

The situation where an individual is interviewed about the policy toward minorities in the public opinion poll provides us a concrete example: Mr. A must decide his opinion about non-Japanese voting rights in local elections in this situation. He imagines the Korean residents in Japan as a typical group of the foreign residents and considers this issue by using all the available information about them under the influence of the general opinion (that is, the general expectation) in every day life. One might argue that they aren't Japanese or they don't have the Japanese nationality. Or under ethnic prejudice, one might believe that Koreans are generally inferior to Japanese. One might consider whether or not they have lived in Japan for a long time, have paid taxes, or more are competent than Japanese. After consideration, one might not agree to non-Japanese voting rights. Thus, if the majority of people are perceived to be negative about this issue, the person would not be positive about it either, and thus the public opinion will not be roused on this issue and it will not reach a national consensus. Consequently, the Government won't improve the social status of the foreign residents in Japan. It follows that the status characteristic such as ethnicity defines the social situation, that is, the stable and observable situation of institutional inequalities: "Being a Korean" is a great disadvantage for the Korean residents to take part in politics as a citizen in Japan.

Now, these four assumptions consist of the three elements as follows:

IP: the individual's perception about the existence of inequality for minorities: unfairness, prejudice and discrimination based on one social characteristic such as ethnicity (+ or -)

+ : existence - : absence

IO: the individual's opinion about a social policy toward minorities (+ or -)

+: agreement -: disagreement

GO: the individual's perception of the general opinion (+ or -)

+: agreement -: disagreement

These basic elements can be organized in the following eight logical patterns of the cognitive states (see Table 1).

Table 1. Cognitive states (CS) about the observed inequalities toward minorities

<u>IP: +</u>			<u>IP: -</u>		
<u>IO</u>	<u>GO</u>	<u>CS</u>	<u>IO</u>	GO	<u>CS</u>
+	+	1	+	+	5
+	_	2	+	-	6
_	+	3	-	+	7
_	_	4	-	-	8

In the next section, by using the above assumptions and JSJP data, we examine the

cognitive states about the observed inequalities toward minorities in opinion formation processes about a political issue.

# 3. ANALYSIS I

First, the opinions about policies toward minorities are measured using the following two questions.

(Q20) Some resident aliens have lived in Japan for a long time and pay taxes. Some people believe that they should be allowed to vote.

- a. How do you feel about this?
- b. What do you think the general Japanese opinion is on this issue?
- 1. Should definitely be allowed
- 2. Probably should be allowed
- 3. Probably should not be allowed
- 4. Should definitely not be allowed

Respondents were asked to choose a response from 1 to 4 in regarding to both a and b. The respondent's opinion (IO) was measured by a while the general opinion (GO) was measured by b.

Next, the individual's perception about the existence of inequality toward minorities (IP) was measured using the following two questions:

(Q10i) Besides the overall evaluation that you have just given me, do you think the following kinds of unfairness (unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality) exist?

- 0. Does not exist
- 1. Exists

(Q12e) In your opinion, how often is each of the following factors a reason for why there are poor people in Japan today? Prejudice and discrimination against certain groups in Japan.

- 1. Very often
- 2. Often
- 3. Sometimes
- 4. Rarely
- 5. Never

Now, the relationship between the respondent's opinion (IO) and general opinion (GO) on the issue of non-Japanese voting rights is shown in Table 2 below. The numbers in the table represent frequencies. Most of respondents tend to agree on this issue. The general Japanese opinion on the issue tends to be more disagree than the respondents' own opinion. And, about 30% of respondents' opinions go with the general opinion. From these facts, the respondent's opinion has a certain degree of relevance to the general opinion on this issue.

Table 2. Opinions about the vote for foreign residents in Japan

	The general Japan opinion (GO)	1	2	3	4	Total
						(%)
Re	spondent's opinion (IO)					
1.	Should definitely be allowed	65	249	109	24	447
		(7.3)	(27.8)	(12.2)	(2.7)	(49.9)
2.	Probably should be allowed	16	159	116	24	315
		(1.8)	(17.7)	(12.9)	(2.7)	(35.2)
3.	Probably should not be allowed	5	20	49	17	91
		(0.6)	(2.2)	(5.5)	(1.9)	(10.2)
4.	Should definitely not be allowed	1	8	16	18	43
		(0.1)	(0.8)	(1.8)	(2.0)	(4.8)
Total		87	436	290	83	896
(%)		(9.7)	(48.7)	(32.4)	(9.3)	(100.0)

Note.  $\chi^2 = 138.14 \text{ (p} < 0.01).$   $\gamma = 0.34 \text{ (p} < 0.01).$ 

Table 3. Four opinion groups: the issue of non-Japanese voting rights

Туре			<u>Pattern</u>		Frequency(%)
	(IO	GO)			
Ι	(+	+ )	IO: agreement	GO: agreement	489( 54. 5)
П	(+	-)	IO: agreement	GO: disagreement	273( 30. 5)
Ш	( –	+ )	IO: disagreement	GO: agreement	34( 3. 8)
IV	( –	-)	IO: disagreement	GO: disagreement	100( 11. 2)
То	tal				896(100. 0)

Note. IO: respondent's opinion GO: the general Japanese opinion

Taking the first and the second categories in IO: these two categories represent people who agree to give voting rights to foreign residents. Then, combine these two categories and name it "+" category. For the third and forth categories, combine them and name it "-" category. In the same fashion, we distinguish "+" or "-" category in GO. Concerned with the "+" or "-" category in IO and GO, we can classify four categories Type I to IV. This creates four different types and refers to as them Type I, II, III and IV as in Table 3. While Type

I and IV show that the respondent's opinion is relatively close to the general Japanese opinion, Type II and III show that the respondent's opinion is not very close to the general Japanese opinion on this issue.

Then, this paper investigates the relationships between the opinion groups and some demographic factors. Figure 3 shows the relationship between the above opinion groups and age. The proportion in each type is shown in Figure 3 ( $\chi^2=30.52$  df=12 p<0.01). There are almost the same ratios in all generations (20s to 60s) of Type I and II. The ratio of the older people (60s) is greater than that of the younger people (20s and 30s) in Type III and IV.

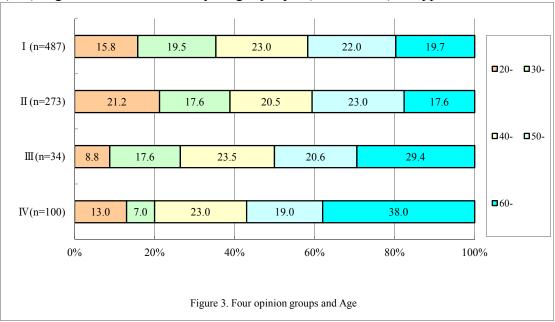


Figure 4 shows the relationships between the groups and educational attainment <sup>9)</sup>. The proportion in each type is shown in Figure 4 ( $\chi^2$ =13.61 df=6 p<0.05). It is found that the ratio of people with high educational attainment is a little higher in Type II and III compared with Type I and IV. Finally, the opinion groups have some relevance to gender ( $\chi^2$ =8.74 df=3 p<0.05). The ratio of female is greater than that of male in Type I and II. The opinion groups are not significantly related with occupation ( $\chi^2$ =11.0 df=21 p=0.96 n.s.) and income ( $\chi^2$ =9.34 df=12 p=0.67 n.s.).

These results demonstrate the following findings:

- (1) Older people tend to disagree on (oppose) the issue of non-Japanese voting rights.
- (2) The perception of general opinion of the highly educated people tends to be the opposite of their own opinion in terms of this issue.
- (3) Females tend to agree to non-Japanese voting rights.

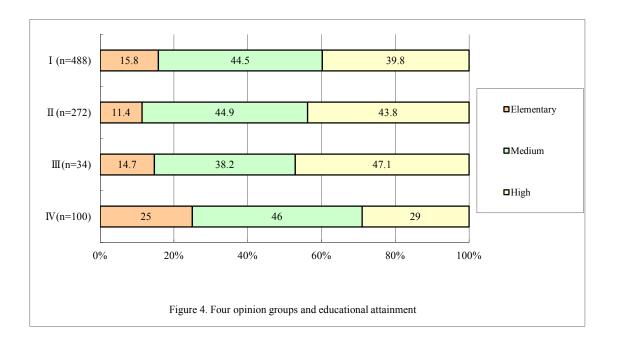
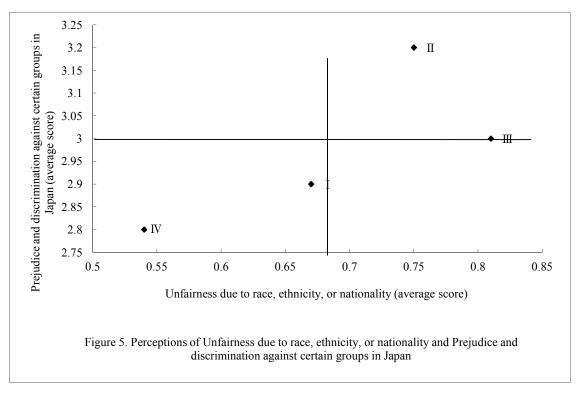


Figure 5 is the scattered plot of the opinion groups by the average scores of *Unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality* (Q10i) and *Prejudice and discrimination against certain groups* (Q12e). These two questions correspond to IP.

This figure indicates the following tendencies:

- (1) People belong to Type I are likely to take neutral positions in both perceptions about unfairness due to race, ethnicity or nationality and prejudice and discrimination against certain groups.
- (2) People belong to Type II are more likely to perceive unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality and prejudice and discrimination against certain groups.
- (3) People belong to Type III are more likely to strongly perceive unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality and prejudice and discrimination somewhat against certain groups.
- (4) People belong to Type IV have the tendency to see less unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality and perceive less prejudice and discrimination.



Note: The result of ANOVA shows significant main effects and two-way interaction: *Unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality* F=6.78. (p<0.01) . *Prejudice and discrimination against certain groups in Japan* F=4.25. (p<0.01). The interaction F=4.4. (p<0.01)

Now, getting back to Table 1 and considering the cognitive states (CS) of Type I to IV. Type I can be either CS1 or 5. However, the result of (1) shows that Type I has the negative tendency in IP. So, we can empirically evaluate Type I to be 5 (not 1). In the same fashion, we can evaluate the other types in the following ways:

Type I corresponds to  $\odot$ . Type II corresponds to  $\odot$ .

Type III corresponds to ③. Type IV corresponds to ⑧.

In short, people in Type II and III, whose opinion and perception of general others' are incongruent, perceive unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality and perceive prejudice and discrimination against certain groups. In contrast, people in the Type I and IV, whose opinion and perception of general others' are congruent, do not perceive unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality and do not perceive prejudice and discrimination against certain groups.

From the above findings, it is possible to build up two propositions:

1) People whose opinion and perception of general others' are congruent, those who have similar judgments on their own opinion and general others' perception, will change their opinions under the influence of the general opinion, even if they perceive prejudice and discrimination against minorities.

2) People whose opinion and perception of general others' are incongruent will not change their opinions under the influence of the general opinion, no matter how they perceive prejudice and discrimination against minorities.

# 4. ANALYSIS II: REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Here, a model of the effects on the opinion formation process of a political issue regarding social policies concerning minorities is constructed (see Figure 6).

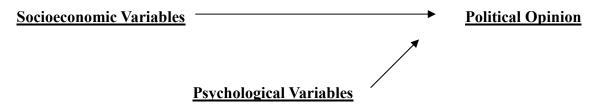


Figure 6. Proposed Causal Model of Political Opinion

The variables used in this analysis are briefly described below:

# **Dependent Variables**

*IO* (Q20b): The individual's opinion about non-Japanese voting rights, scored from 1 (agree) to 4 (disagree).

# **Independent Variables**

# **Socioeconomic Variables**

Gender: coded 1 for male and 0 for female (dummy variables).

Age: measured by the respondent's age.

Education (Educational Attainment): measured by the respondent's years of schooling.

Occupation: measured by the respondent's occupational prestige

(cf. 1995 SSM occupational prestige scores) <sup>10)</sup>.

*Income*: measured by the household annual income of the respondent.

# **Psychological Variables**

UREN (Q10i): individual perception of unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality, scored from 0 (Does not exist) to 1 (Exist).

PPD (Q12e): individual perception of prejudice and discrimination against certain groups,

scored from 1 (Never exit) to 5 (Very often exit).

Authoritarianism (Q21i): scored from 1 (Low) to 5 (High).

Political stance (Q33): scored from 1 (Liberal) to 5 (Conservative).

GO (Q20b): the general Japanese opinion, scored from 1 (Should definitely be allowed) to 4 (Should definitely not be allowed).

The multiple regression analysis was conducted according to the above settings. The two variables (*UREN* and *PPD*) correspond to IP. The unstandardized and standardized coefficients for the independent variables are shown in Table 4. As the result below, there is no significant difference in gender. The socioeconomic variables, such as *Education*, *Occupation*, and *Income* have no significant effect. *PPD* is not significant either. *GO* is a strong positive predictor of *IO*. This result suggests that the general opinion has a great influence on the political opinion formation process. The political consciousness variables, such as *Authoritarianism* and *Political stance* have positive effects on *IO*. As respondents become older, they tend not to agree to non-Japanese voting rights. Finally, the respondents who have a sense of unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality are more likely to agree to non-Japanese voting rights.

Table 4. Regression estimates for the individual's opinion about non-Japanese voting rights

	Beta	Unstandardized	
		Coefficients	
Gender	0.37	0.06	
Age	0.11	0.01	**
Education	- 9.67E-04	-3.28E-04	
Occupation	- 0.07	-0.002	
Income	- 0.04	7.68E-05	
UREN	- 0.11	-0.20	**
PPD	- 0.02	-0.01	
Authoritarianism	0.08	0.09	**
Political stance	0.10	0.08	**
GO	0.32	0.35	***
Constant		0.81	**

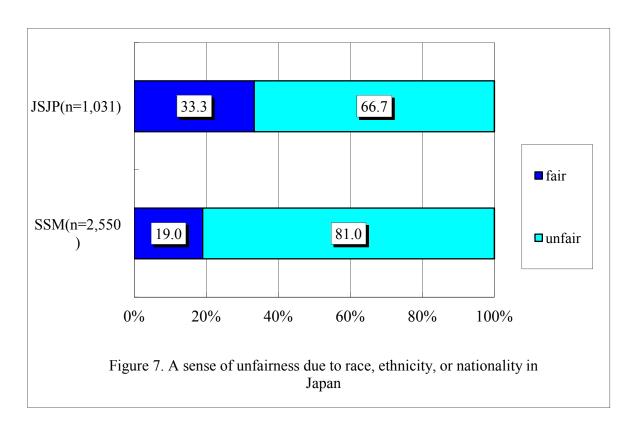
\*p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001, N=765, R<sup>2</sup>=0.16

Authoritarianism, political conservatism and age indicate characteristics of

conservativeness. That is, conservativeness influences the individual's opinion about the social policy toward minorities.

# 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In these analyses, the results demonstrated that the general opinion, social perceptions (unfairness, prejudice and discrimination) about the characteristics of minorities and conservative characteristics (authoritarianism, political conservatism and age) play an important role in the opinion formation process of a political issue regarding social policies concerning certain groups such as minorities.



In the 1995 SSM survey data (Part B), about 80% of respondents (2,068of 2,550) answered that there exists unfairness due to race, ethnicity, or nationality in Japan. In the 1997 JSJP survey data, about 66% of respondents (686 of 1,031) responded in the same way (see Figure 7). These results are closely related with the fact that there are many Japanese and Korean residents in Japan who support non-Japanese voting rights. However, the individual's perception of the general opinion tends to maintain the present situation. From this tendency, it can be seen that the individual perception of the general opinion has a great influence on the

opinion formation process. And, it is clear that the individual perception of unfairness about minorities and conservativeness also affect the individual opinion formation. Furthermore, it follows that these three factors influence on the process of not only the individual opinion but also the general opinion formation. These findings suggest that these factors of the opinion formation process can activate as obstacles to policy decision concerning minorities, that is, to correct structural inequalities in our society from a macroscopic view.

We should not abandon the problem about social inequalities and unfair treatments toward minorities. The political issue about voting rights of the foreign residents seems to be opened to the public for the purpose of reaching a consensus of opinion. And, all of the people, as members of society and as opinion makers, might continue to hold discussions about policies on this issue (for example, the activities of NPO for the human rights). In our opinion, this action connects with the formation of new publicity based on the fundamental human rights, regardless of status differences.

Lastly, we should conduct further research on the process in which people longitudinally change their opinions through social interactions, or the process to motivate people to take action for the policy (for example, participation in the movement for non-Japanese voting rights).

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#### **NOTES**

- 1) For example, the Supreme Court issued a historic ruling that the Constitution does not prohibit giving foreign residents the right to vote in local elections in February 1995. In recent years, more than 70 local governments have adopted resolutions calling on the government to establish voting rights for foreign residents.
- 2) In addition, a Korean resident in Japan tried to run as a candidate (the Zainichito) in the Upper House election in 1992. In 1996, Kawasaki city scrapped the nationality requirement (the nationality clause = "kokuseki joko") for all types of municipal jobs except for firefighters. See, for example, Miyajima et al,. (1996).

- 3) Recently, three parties; the Japan's Liberal Party, the Komeito party and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have jointly submitted the proposal to the Diet to give permanent foreign residents the right to vote in local elections. However, The LDP did not participate in submitting the bill because some of its members remained reluctance to support the issue (Asahi Shinbun (Asahi News), May 24, 2000).
- 4) Berger et al. (1972, p. 243) argue:
  - When a task-oriented group is differentiated with respect to some external status characteristics, this status differential determines the observable power and prestige within the group whether or not the external status characteristics is related to the group task.
- 5) Cohen and Roper (1972) illustrate this idea, as quoted the words of Mead:

  "As Meads said, through a process of "taking the role of the generalized other" one comes to be influenced by the attitudes of those about him."
- 6) McWilliams and Blumstein (1991) suggest that one important component of status is the properties that actors bring to relationships as a result of their ascribed or achieved location in the society (e.g. age, class, sex, race, occupation, physical attractiveness, and physical handicap).
- 7) Social interaction is the exchange of behaviors reflecting an underlying decision process on the part of the actors (Hembroff and Myers, 1984).
- 8) For example, Martin and Sell (1985) discuss about the close relation between status characteristic theory (a branch of the expectation-states research program) and the generalization of information for decision-making. On this point, see Berger et al. (1989).
- 9) Educational attainment is classified into three categories: Elementary: The elementary level of education (primary school and junior high school level).

Medium: The middle level of education (senior high school level).

High: The high level of education (junior college and university level).

10) "SSM" is the abbreviation for the National Survey of Social Stratification and Social Mobility, conducted every ten years since 1955. The SSM occupational Prestige score is the index of occupational status (Hara, 1998). The questionnaire asks respondents to "rank" 56 different occupations according to their subjective standards in the 1995 SSM survey. There are five choices for each occupation: they are scored from 100 for the highest category to 0 for the lowest category. The arithmetic means for each occupation are calculated from all the valid responses. For example, "medical doctor" had a prestige score of 90.1.

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