

# Site Fights: Divisive Facilities, NIMBY and Civil Society in Japan and the West

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By some accounts, the location of America's capital was decided at a secret dinner party that Thomas Jefferson held in 1790 at his New York City residence. There, through the age-old practice of logrolling, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton hatched a plan to build the nation's capital in Virginia. "Madison agreed to permit the core provision of Hamilton's fiscal program to pass; and in return, Hamilton agreed to use his influence to assure that the permanent residence of the national capital would be on the Potomac River" (Ellis 2001, 49).

Alas, siting decisions are rarely made that smoothly. In modern democracies, governments face formidable challenges in locating essential facilities. Everyone wants cheap gasoline and lower heating bills, but no one wants to live near an oil refinery or a fuel storage facility: not in my backyard (NIMBY). Huge segments of the population desire the convenience of a major airport, but no one likes to be awakened by the roar of a landing red-eye. The public needs clean water and flood control, but what families want to see their homes destroyed to make way for a new dam? Faced with strong local opposition, governments must decide where to place these facilities. While the empty Nevada desert around Yucca Mountain is clearly preferable to New York's Central Park as a storage location for long-term radioactive waste, most siting decisions involve multiple technically feasible

alternatives. And, unlike those at Jefferson's fete, modern politicians – whether in Japan or the United States – rarely hammer out these decisions over a dinner party.

As of 2007, Japan has more than 3,000 dams, 8 international airports and more than 80 regional airports, as well as 52 nuclear reactors in a land area roughly the size of California—and the government is planning to build more of each. The dominance of Japan's "construction state" (*doken kokka*) is often explained by its deferential, low-efficacy political culture (Doi 1974; Lebra 1976; Nakamura 1975; Nakane 1978; Pye 1985), which, it is claimed, acts as a barrier to citizen mobilization. One commentator went so far as to decry her fellow citizens as "sheep" who have forgotten how to fight back or struggle against unwanted impositions (Sakurai 2000); another argued that civil society in Japan was "virtually unknown" (van Wolferen 1991, 17).

In explaining the plethora of public works projects in Japan, some scholars instead focus on closed hearings and procedures (Cohen, McCubbins, and Rosenbluth 1995) and restrictive regulations that have prevented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—potential opponents for these facilities—from achieving official recognition and tax exemption (Pekkanen 2000a, 2000b; Vosse 2000, 2003, 7; Broadbent 2002, 22; Nakamura 2002). Others emphasize the social welfare function of public works projects: as pork-barrel projects for Liberal Democratic Party politicians, dams and other facilities provide jobs for low-skilled citizens (Hamilton and Kanabayashi 1994; McCormack 1996,

2002; Woodall 1996; Amano 2001; Takahashi 2002). Arguments that Japanese political culture is not efficacious or even existent cannot explain why communities regularly resist public bads. The remaining approaches shed light on some aspects of the issue, but none fully capture the important dynamics between the state and civil society which undergird it.

Using cases from Japan alongside those of France and the United States, I argue that civil society, whether anticipated or encountered by the state, deeply conditions both the selection of sites for public bads and the state's response to opposition to such projects. My book, [Site Fights: Civil Society and Divisive Facilities in Japan and the West](#), advances two core arguments. First, state agencies initially manage potential conflict over controversial facilities by avoiding contestation wherever possible. Despite public pronouncements, in selecting sites for nuclear power plants, dams, and airports, state bureaucracies hardly use only neutral technical criteria, nor is their selection of host communities based on the concentration of minorities, economic conditions, or support for certain political parties.

Instead, authorities place facilities in technically feasible locations where organized resistance from groups within civil society is judged to be lowest. By selecting geologically suitable villages seen as most likely to be cooperative, given their weak or weakening local civil society, state agencies seek to avoid costly delays, demonstrations, and stalemate. Hence authorities place "projects at some distance from groups with the potential to block them" (Altshuler and Luberoff 2003, 229). Politicians can intervene in the siting process to deflect projects from or draw them into their constituencies, but not all have the political power and will to do so.

My analysis of close to 200 localities in Japan

shows that a village or town that lost 80 percent of its civil society strength over time was almost 100 times as likely to be chosen to host a nuclear power plant as one that maintained its population of groups such as unions of fishermen and farmers. Fishermen and farmers recognize that reactors cause "nuclear blight": either actual damage to health, produce, and livelihood or fears among food purchasers about radioactive contamination of food. As long as local fishing and farming cooperatives could at least maintain their relative strength over time, siting authorities judged them as effective at fighting off proposed controversial facilities and did not select those areas as hosts. On the other hand, in areas where fishing and farming cooperatives were losing capacity, their chances of being chosen as a site for a nuclear reactor rapidly increased.



**Tsuruga reactor, site of a 1999 leak**

For example, in the village of Tomari, on the northern island of Hokkaido, local fishing cooperatives drastically declined over a 15 year period. Initially, a third of the village workers belonged to these groups, but by 1995 less than five percent remained engaged in those occupations (with little shift in overall population). With fewer association members available to resist, Tomari ended up being selected for not just one but three nuclear plants. By contrast, in the nearby village of Taisei, also on the northern island of Hokkaido, close to one-fourth of the working population

continued as fishers and farmers over the same period, and because of this stronger social capital, it was not selected as a host community. Authorities recognized that localities with easily mobilized groups can better fight off their attempts at siting facilities. Despite the care involved in selecting locations, in recent decades conflict has become all but inevitable.

My second argument is that in handling resistance from contentious civil society, state agencies are more likely to rely on coercive techniques and tools of hard social control, such as land expropriation and police force, when long-term opposition from civil society is weak. Agencies siting controversial facilities interact with multiple localities and their allies over time and evaluate the strength of relevant civil society on the basis not of a single village or town but rather of numerous exchanges with citizen groups as a whole. States continue to rely on the oldest, most reliable, and least costly strategies in their toolkits when they can. And hard social-control tools—such as blocking access points for citizens and limiting information dispersal—bring almost guaranteed results to the state; softer strategies of social control and financial incentives do not.

Japan's experiences during World War II with the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the 1954 Lucky Dragon Incident created a population broadly sympathetic to anti-nuclear groups.[1] The way that the Japanese state and private utilities have handled nuclear power plant siting provides striking contrast to cases elsewhere where authorities rely on coercion. For example, in early 1981, after initial surveys by the central government had determined that local conditions met the necessary geological and geographical criteria, the Chugoku Electric Power Company proposed a nuclear reactor complex for the rural town of Kaminoseki in the southern prefecture of Yamaguchi. Central government bureaucrats assisting with the process learned through phone surveys, visits,

and discussions with local politicians that local feelings about the project were mixed. To overcome opposition from fishermen's cooperatives, the utility and the local government used central government funds to fly local residents to visit other communities that were hosting nuclear power plants. The bureaucrats also promised residents millions of dollars for new roads, medical and old age facilities, and loans and subsidies for new businesses.

As talks bogged down, officials from the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy visited and emphasized to local residents the importance of nuclear power plants for Japan's energy security. The government distributed to households thousands of pro-nuclear brochures stressing the safety of nuclear power and the country's need for new reactors. In their science classes, middle school students used a curriculum written by pro-nuclear central government bureaucrats. Local government officials were flown to Tokyo to learn not only the technological aspects of nuclear power but also how to "spin" it to local residents. Although protests continue, and one fishing cooperative from Iwaishima regularly blocks attempts to survey the area (Japan Times, 22 June 2005), the state has never used eminent domain, police presence, or other coercive tools to force the issue. The utility expects the plant to be operational by 2015.

Only when authorities encounter intense opposition of long duration – as in the case of Japan's nuclear power plant siting – do they adopt soft social-control strategies and incentives. In most cases governments rely on land expropriation and police coercion to handle opposition to their siting plans. This has been the most common policy instrument used by the Japanese state in siting airports and dams and by the French state in handling nuclear power plants. Even against fierce resistance, state planners rarely back away from their nationwide energy and

infrastructure goals. Instead, bureaucrats facing opposition seek to change the hearts and minds of local citizens through tactics tailored toward subgroups within potential host communities. Studies of anti-nuclear and ecology movements within civil society in industrial democracies show that such groups have rarely altered national public policy (Giugni 2004), but I conclude that states are in fact Machiavellian. [3]

Many controversial facilities foist externalities onto segments of local communities that have difficulty building larger coalitions of opposition groups and mobilizing additional support. Dams and airports, for example, impose costs primarily on abutters: small numbers of citizens who live close to these facilities, whether in areas flooded by a new reservoir or in the noisy but narrow flight path of airplanes. In such cases, anti-facility groups find it difficult to mobilize allies willing to invest time, energy, and financial resources.



**Police battle protesters against the Narita airport**

Local, disaggregated groups within civil society rarely affect state policy (Pekkanen 2004, 244). Accordingly, although many local communities oppose plans for dams and airports, sustained, intense competition between broader civil society and the state over the siting of these projects is rather rare. My analysis of media

coverage of events, through article count analysis in major Japanese newspapers, and also case studies of these groups as they seek to mobilize and maintain pressure, support the argument that few anti-facility protests sustain strong resistance for long periods.

When local and extra-local groups within civil society are able to keep up broad, intense opposition to state plans for facilities over an extended period of a decade or more, however, bureaucrats display remarkable flexibility in adapting policies to dampen current and future resistance. For example, given the Japanese experience as the first and only target of nuclear weapons, the siting of nuclear power plants in Japan has been a contentious process since the earliest attempts in the 1950s. By precisely tailoring strategies to woo local officials and members of groups who might veto the project, while maintaining their core goals, state authorities seek to contain current resistance and reduce the likelihood of future contestation. There is a strong correlation between sustained, intense opposition and the state's use of preference-altering policy instruments that seek to capture the hearts of local citizens, primarily through the lavish dispensation of financial incentives.

A growing body of research has revealed the adverse effects on regimes or nations of a weak civil society. Those regions with weaker horizontal ties suffer from poorer governance, weaker institutions, and even higher levels of homicide (Lee and Bartkowski 2004). Areas with fewer active members in civic, sport, and religious groups have lower levels of economic development and, in nondemocratic nations, less likelihood of transition toward stable democracy (Alagappa 2004). But this research demonstrates another important corollary to studies of networks, communities, and volunteerism: states interacting solely with weak civil society tend to deploy fewer soft policy instruments for handling contestation. Instead, they rely on police suppression, land



expropriation, and other coercive policy instruments. Strong civil society serves as a Galbraithian “countervailing force” (Hasegawa 2004) that deepens and broadens the toolkits held by state decision makers.

Several strong suppositions guide research on states and bureaucracies, especially concerning the responsiveness of states to their citizens and the roles played by nonelected state agencies in the policy process. Many social scientists hold fast to the normative assumption that the ways in which states interact with their citizens are tied to the times. Kent Calder (1988) made this explicit argument in linking Japanese state response to certain historical periods when challengers pushed the dominant ruling party to alter its policies and expand its programs to new constituencies.[2] John Noakes (2001) and others make a more teleological argument about the development of “softer” ways of handling contention over time, pointing out that police departments within the United States have moved from explicit coercion to management of protests. An obvious example is that whereas police departments may have used barking dogs, fire hoses, truncheons, and tear gas to handle protest marches in mid-twentieth century America, demonstrations in the twenty-first century at annual political party conventions and international conferences have been handled by means of prearranged “arrest zones” and roped-off “protest areas” that isolate protesters from the population at large and prevent protests from gaining momentum.

Similarly, many analysts hold that modern states in the early twenty-first century face growing pressure to develop policies that reflect the interests of their constituents than in the past, as citizens can better punish legislators and governments who fail to meet their needs. Also, better-educated citizens have more access to information about the actions of their representatives; accordingly, researchers assume that they have greater sway over

national and local policy. At the same time, political scientists regularly view bureaucracy relative to its capacity to create or enforce legislation (see Huber and McCarty 2004).

In this sense, bureaucracies are often compared to politicians who follow cues from voters to determine their course of action, with one reading of bureaucracies as agents for their politician principals (Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1993). Bureaucracies can do more than merely monitor and enforce laws, however. Some analysts have distinguished between mere politicians, who enact policies they imagine will allow them to retain their electoral seats, and statesmen, who seek to guide their people toward a new future. Franklin D. Roosevelt stands out as a paradigmatic statesman who utilized a variety of techniques, such as “fireside chats” and other innovative pulpits, to push both Congress and the American people toward new social, political and international agendas, ranging from a radically altered role for the government in promoting employment and the arts to lending programs for America’s European “neighbors” (Kernell 1997). Bureaucrats too can do more than simply enact popular policies; they can also act as statesmen, guiding the nation on a new path (Johnson 1982).

Unelected civil servants within powerful ministries—the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now METI) in Japan, the Ministry of Industry in France, or the Atomic Energy Commission (now Nuclear Regulatory Commission) in the United States—can seek to lead the country in a new direction, whether it is one in which nuclear power is the dominant source of electricity or one in which dams block the flow of every river. Thus, although pluralists and normative democratic theorists believe that democratic states initiate policies demanded by constituents and that the ties between citizen interests and state policy should only be tightening over time, this study illustrates the opposite. I stand with previous

scholarship in not seeing “any clear trend towards citizen inclusion in governmental decision making” (Flam 1994, 330) while emphasizing governmental development of managerial techniques to quell civil protest. Even in the early twenty-first century, states—especially their bureaucratic agencies responsible for siting controversial facilities—are not influenced by public opinion to the degree that democratic and pluralist theorists would claim; often, authorities either ignore public opinion or attempt to shape it. And government bureaus, seeking to implement their often-independent agendas, smoothly ignore or manipulate public opinion to meet their goals.

resistance to the siting of nuclear power plants and dams. Joseph Morone and Edward Woodhouse (1989, 148), in a discussion of nuclear energy, argue that Japan is “actively shap[ing] technology to serve social purposes”, that is, adopting programs and policies involving the peaceful use of the atom which meet the interests of Japanese citizens. Their argument should be reversed: Japanese officials, along with authorities in other advanced industrial democracies, seek to shape social purposes and preferences to serve technology. Once states set themselves on certain development and technological trajectories, future policies, even if they become unpopular, rarely deviate from these initial choices.

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## Notes

[1] See McCormack (2007) for a discussion of the ways that Japan’s close ties to America created an environment in which Japan itself relied on the American “nuclear umbrella” of security while simultaneously pursuing the world’s most advanced commercial nuclear power regime.

[2] Calder argued that when the Liberal Democratic Party felt its position was challenged by internal or external forces in the



**METI headquarters in Kasumigaseki**

The postwar Japanese state, for example, employed a broad variety of policy instruments: it wrote school curricula, tested opinions through focus groups, provided payments, and used public relations campaigns to lower

early 1950s, late 1950s, and early 1970s, it provided more compensation to its supporters.

[3] “Machiavellian” here refers to the well-known, pragmatic, and perhaps ruthless advice that Niccolò Machiavelli gives to an authoritarian ruler in *The Prince*, which departs from the more republican approach he adopts in *The Discourses*.

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