

# *Sontaku* and political scandals in Japan

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Matthew M. Carlson

*University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explain a new scandal ingredient in Japanese politics called *sontaku*. This word refers to cases when officials grant special treatment to a project because they believe they are acting in accordance with the wishes of an associated powerful person.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper describes the specific construction of major scandals involving *sontaku* from 2017 based primarily on newspaper accounts, examines the consequences of these scandals for politicians and bureaucrats, and discusses their implications for combating corruption in Japan.

**Findings** – The scandals after 2017 damaged to some extent the public support for the current Japanese administration and influenced the prime minister's decision to call a snap election. The scandals also highlighted systematic problems in the bureaucracy and motivated the government to reform laws concerning the management of public documents.

**Originality/value** – This paper will be useful to scholars and policy makers interested in studying the causes and consequences of scandals and political corruption in Japan.

**Keywords** Political scandals, *sontaku*, Japan, Shinzō Abe, Liberal Democratic Party

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

The current Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government under Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has experienced a considerable number of scandals since coming to power in 2012. The most significant scandals involve two school operators and a new scandal ingredient in Japanese politics called *sontaku*. Previously an obscure word, *sontaku* refers to cases when officials grant special treatment to some project because it is associated with a powerful person such as a prime minister. Officials are influenced by the belief that the powerful person will be displeased if they fail to do what they think the powerful person wants. The word *sontaku* surfaced when it was used by the school director of Moritomo Gakuen and soon became one of Japan's most important "buzzwords" of the year (*Kyodo*, 2017). Whether or not Abe or his wife made specific requests on behalf of either school operator or whether bureaucrats made decisions because they believed they were acting in accordance with the wishes of the prime minister's office became a major source of controversy.

This article examines two major scandals involving *sontaku* that have affected the Abe administration after 2017. *Sontaku* is a universal phenomenon linked to the exercise of political power but was not linked to political scandals until 2017. It became an important buzzword after a controversy over the sale of government-owned land to a school operator. Critics of the Abe administration began to use the term to criticize the government and bureaucracy, without direct evidence of misdeeds or corruption. These scandals contributed to some loss of public support for the Abe cabinet and influenced Abe's decision to call a snap election in 2017. The scandals also highlighted systematic problems in the bureaucracy and in the government's management of public documents.



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The article consists of three sections. The first section discusses scandals in Japanese politics and analyses the meaning of *sontaku* to provide the context for how the scandals after 2017 emerged. The second section analyses two major scandals involving the Abe administration after 2017. Newspaper accounts are used to explain the origins of these scandals and the roles played by the main actors. The final section examines the consequences of these scandals for politicians and bureaucrats, and it discusses efforts to change some of the mechanisms underlying the management of public documents.

### Scandals, *sontaku* and the Abe administration

The Japanese government has experienced many scandals since the passage of political reforms in 1994. The reform bill, passed by Japan's non-LDP coalition government after the LDP lost power, introduced a new mixed-member election system for the lower house featuring single member districts and proportional representation. The election system practically eliminated intra-party competition, which was linked to candidate-centred campaigns and money politics. With its emphasis on single-member districts, the system also stimulated two-party competition and led to two switches in power. The functioning of this two-party system played an important role in generating major scandals that affected the fortunes of ruling parties in the 2009 and 2012 elections. The reforms also created a new public subsidy system for political parties and implemented stricter campaign finance regulations. The reforms enhanced transparency particularly with the stricter disclosure rules linked to political finance, which made it easier for the opposition parties and the press to construct scandals.

Scandals are socially constructed phenomena created among different political actors that provide an unsystematic glimpse into the issue of political corruption. In a major study of scandals based on the United States and Britain, Thompson (2000, p. 13) defines scandals as actions or events that involve the transgression of certain norms or values that become known to others and often elicit a public response. It provides a useful theoretical classification of scandals as falling into three major types as follows: sex, money and power. Kerby and Chari (2002) propose a fourth type of scandal called the policy scandal, which relates the cause of the scandal to an event or failure related to policy. In Japanese politics, major policy failure scandals became a more frequent form of political scandal after the political reform (Carlson, 2017). A major cause of policy failure scandals is linked to bureaucratic practices and the behaviour of bureaucrats.

In defining scandals, it is also important to distinguish between the substantive and procedural. The initial transgression of norms or values represents the substantive scandal that captures the initial public attention. The procedural scandal refers to those "second level actions" to cover up the scandal (Lowi, 1988, p. viii). In many scandals, the initial focus of attention is often overshadowed by efforts to conceal the offence. In the Moritomo Gakuen scandal discussed below, the Ministry of Finance was implicated much later in a systematic effort to alter public documents and protect the Abe administration from embarrassment.

For a transgression to elicit a public response, the mass media is the key institution. Compared to authoritarian countries, the media in established democracies have more leeway in reporting on specific actions or events that may help precipitate a scandal (Thompson, 2000). In post-war Japan, the media played a proactive role in exposing corrupt behaviour in the 1960s but was reduced to a more passive and reactive role in the 1970s after the LDP had established political dominance (Carlson and Reed, 2018a; Farley, 1996). The media once again began to play a more proactive role after the 1990s after various political reforms as well as significant changes in the party system. In the *sontaku*-based scandals discussed in this paper, mainstream newspapers such as *Asahi* played pivotal roles in uncovering and publicizing scandalous and corrupt behaviour in the political system. However, as will be

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discussed below, the media helped create *sontaku* as a “new” scandal ingredient, which by itself was not necessarily scandalous or corrupt.

Scandal is often associated with corruption, but the two words are quite different. Most corruptions happen without becoming public knowledge. Scandals only provide an unsystematic glimpse into corruption, and thus they must be used with considerable caution when assessing the nature of corruption in any given country. There are also scandals that do not involve corruption. Those that focus on incompetence or carelessness might not fit the common definition of corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain. Many scandals generate efforts to cover up the transgression; so scandals that began as a public response to the violation of some norms may quickly involve other transgressions, including those that might be labelled corrupt.

The current Abe government came to power after the 2012 election and has experienced scandals of various stripes. Many of the scandals involve cabinet ministers doing or saying something inappropriate. Two prominent female cabinet ministers, for example, were forced to resign in 2014 after reports surfaced that they distributed gifts to voters or failed to keep accurate financial records of their interactions with constituents. Prime Minister Abe managed the fallout by dismissing both ministers quickly on the same day. This prevented either scandal from seriously damaging the LDP or cabinet support. Abe was not always successful in this regard. He was also criticized for appointing friends and ideological allies to the cabinet with some of them causing problems (Carlson and Reed, 2018a). Besides the “bad” behaviour of cabinet ministers, the Abe administration also confronted problems linked to Japan’s small but powerful bureaucracy in areas such as the administration of the pension system (Carlson and Reed, 2018a).

#### *Sontaku: a new scandal ingredient*

*Sontaku* is not a new concept to politics and is detailed in earlier research on the issue of responsibility in government. One way to translate *sontaku* is the notion of “anticipated reactions,” described in the research by political theorist Carl Friedrich (1960, 1963) [1]. Writing about the dilemma of administrative responsibility, Friedrich (1960) links responsible conduct as being closely related to the problems of authority. When A is responsible to B, it is assumed that B has given A discretion to decide upon B’s behalf in accordance with what the situation requires. Understanding what the situation requires is difficult and this is where the personal aspect of responsibility plays an important role. The personal perspective is related to what B desires or prefers. B may give explicit orders or suggestions, or A may anticipate what B wants. This personal aspect of administrative responsibility focusing on the anticipated reactions by those who are influenced by a superior speaks directly to discussions over the role of *sontaku* in recent Japanese scandals.

The word *sontaku* surfaced when the head director of Moritomo Gakuen, Yasunori Kagoike, was speaking at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan in Tokyo. He was asked by a reporter from the *New York Times* whether he was accusing Prime Minister Abe of giving him favourable treatment with the discounted land. The questions and answers were simultaneously translated live in English and Japanese, and there was immediate confusion on how to translate *sontaku* in English. When pressed further, Kagoike clarified that he did not think there was direct influence by the prime minister, but the translator became confused on who was doing the *sontaku*, initially saying that it was Abe or his wife who were “reading between the lines” before being interrupted by several persons in the room. After pressing Kagoike for more details, it became clear that he did not believe that Abe or his wife were directly involved in the influence but rather the people around them – specifically several bureaucrats in the Ministry of Finance (Kagoike, 2017).

As elaborated in Friedrich’s 1960 article, the personal role of administrative responsibility can be anticipated by others and does not require a superior to give orders. When the word

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*sontaku* surfaced at the press conference, it helped build a scandal based on the allegations that *sontaku* took place. Abe was implicated in the scandal even if he was not directly involved. He was put in a difficult position in having to “prove” that he never did or said anything. The more he denied involvement, the more it looked like the government had something to hide. The scandal contributed to a significant decrease in public support for the Abe cabinet. The word *sontaku* further captured public attention and stimulated efforts by opposition lawmakers and journalists to find additional examples. Although the personal aspects that surface in administrative affairs are universal, why did *sontaku* become a new scandal ingredient for the Abe administration and not earlier?

*Sontaku and the strengthening of prime ministerial powers*

The 1994 reforms mentioned above had important impacts on Japanese politics, including scandal creation, but another important trend is the strengthening of prime ministerial powers that began in the 1990s. The scandals involving *sontaku* are closely related to debates over the powers exercised by the Abe administration. Scholars have detailed the institutional changes that have contributed to increasing powers of the prime minister as well as how Abe has become more skilled in using his power base after 2012 (Mulgan, 2018; Shinoda, 2004; Takenaka, 2006; Makihara, 2016; Nakakita, 2017). This line of enquiry cannot be used to fully explain unsystematic data based on scandals, but it provides useful context in making sense of the *sontaku*-linked scandals involving Abe.

The strengthening of the powers of the prime minister which began before Abe has also been increased further since the launch of the Abe administration in 2012. In 2014, for example, the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs was created. The structure was designed to give power to the prime minister and the chief cabinet secretary in overseeing appointments of hundreds of top bureaucrats. These appointments had previously been the responsibility of individual ministries and agencies. While the powers of the Abe administration over the bureaucracy have expanded in many ways, Abe himself is also more experienced in wielding his own political power. In the school operator scandals, Abe was criticized for favouring his friends and for essentially wielding power even if there was no conclusive evidence that he gave instructions or said anything, which is not required for the wielder of power for *sontaku* to happen. The increasing powers of the prime minister, as well as Abe’s ability to wield power, seem to have played some role in heightening public scrutiny and criticisms of the government.

The rise of the *sontaku*-linked scandals overlaps with some of the structural changes in the powers of the prime minister’s office and Abe himself. The creation of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs is encouraging bureaucrats to look to the prime minister and chief cabinet secretary instead of their ministries and is increasing the importance of the connections between the two. The creation of scandals based on *sontaku* did not need to uncover persuasive evidence that Abe or his wife was involved in favouring the school operators. The scandals damaged the standing of the Abe cabinet because of the appearance of misdeeds or public dissatisfaction with the government’s handling and explanations of the various incidents.

The strengthening of the powers of the prime minister is also connected to party structure as well as the freedom of the press. Prior to ascending power in 2009, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had some success in obtaining damaging information from the bureaucracy on the LDP. After the collapse of the DPJ, the party system has lacked a single, strong and effective opposition party to hold the LDP in line and check corrupt behaviour. Within the LDP, there is also no anti-Abe faction or force criticizing Abe (Mulgan, 2016). While the mass media is the most critical institution in exposing corrupt deeds, there are many examples of Abe and the LDP taking an aggressive stance against the mass media, which many believe is weakening press freedom and its ability to investigate and criticize the government

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(Nakano, 2016; Fackler, 2016). Some observers in Japan, however, have blamed the mass media, particularly the *Asahi*, for unfairly targeting Abe and portraying him as guilty in the scandals detailed below (Ogawa, 2017).

### The *sontaku*-based scandals

Scandals are, of course, socially constructed events; so, it is difficult to pinpoint their underlying causes (Sherman, 1989). Each scandal event is unique, and the causes of one scandal cannot be easily generalized to another scandal. Scandals involve complex interactions, responses and reactions from different political actors. Sometimes small idiosyncratic events shape the progression of the controversy in ways that were not anticipated or predictable. In one of the scandals detailed below, for example, the exposure of bureaucratic corruption by politicians leads to payback when a fired bureaucrat criticizes the Abe administration. Efforts to cover up original transgressions can further give rise to procedural scandals that can be equally or more consequential to the various actors involved.

#### *Moritomo Gakuen scandal (2017)*

Hiroshi Moritomo created a kindergarten in Osaka in 1950, and in 1971 he set up a legally recognized educational institution named after himself. His daughter Junko was actively involved and her husband, Yasunori Kagoike, took over as the head director upon Moritomo's death in 1995. Part of the educational mission of the kindergarten was to instill patriotism and pre-war ideals into its students, a cause which found support within the Abe government and made it conducive to a friendship between Junko and Abe's wife, Akie (Carlson and Reed, 2018b). When Moritomo Gakuen decided to expand and build an elementary school, they used their personal connections as well as questionable methods to obtain the financial means necessary to begin construction. Their plans proceeded smoothly for years until local politicians and journalists began to raise serious concerns.

The sale of state-owned land to the school initially caught the attention of local politicians in Osaka, who repeatedly asked to view the documents (*Asahi*, 2017a). The media then began to play an active role in getting to the bottom of the story. When reporters discovered that the prime minister's wife was listed on the organization's website as an honorary principal of the planned elementary school and had also publicly supported its mission in the past, public interest in the controversy even generated major world headlines (Soble, 2017). After the *Asahi* and other media outlets began applying considerable pressure, the authorities involved in the land transaction agreed to release some of the documents, which made it possible to confirm whether there was more to this scandal besides the personal connections and *sontaku* (*Asahi*, 2017b).

The documents revealed that Moritomo Gakuen had originally applied to buy the land from the Finance Ministry's Kinki bureau but signed a 10-year lease with the option of buying the land in the future because it lacked the funds. The most stunning discovery was the fact that Moritomo bought the land for only 134 million yens when it was appraised at 956 million yen. Apparently, Moritomo managed to obtain the discount after industrial waste was discovered on the building site, and the bureau agreed to reduce the cost (*Mainichi*, 2017a). The media asked whether politicians had intervened in the process and questioned whether Abe or Abe's wife played some role in Moritomo's purchase of government-owned land. In the absence of clear facts, reporters both in Japan and abroad reported on sensational or embarrassing details about Moritomo Gakuen, its ultra-conservative educational philosophy and its original plan to name its elementary school after Prime Minister Abe.

In a major effort to defuse the scandal, Abe himself came out with a forceful denial and promised to "resign as prime minister" if he was directly involved in Moritomo's purchase of

land (*Yomiuri*, 2017a). He claimed to know nothing about the curricula of Moritomo Gakuen and argued that the school had used his name without his permission. He also defended his wife, stating that she resigned as honorary principal and had not inappropriately influenced the land deal. Repeated efforts by the media and opposition parties to obtain the release of more administrative documents went nowhere. The Finance Ministry and the local administrators involved in the sale of the land discarded key documents in accordance with the existing laws on the storage and handling of government documents.

As concerns over a cover-up spread, the media focussed their efforts on investigating the roles of specific politicians that might have helped Moritomo Gakuen. One of the major names to surface was Ichirō Matsui, governor of Osaka prefecture. Matsui denied any involvement in the land purchase and was now threatening to reverse the decision to allow Moritomo's new school to open in that April (*Nihon Keizai*, 2017). In a significant document release that proved damaging to Moritomo Gakuen, Matsui and the Osaka prefectural government opened its books on some of the paperwork related to the land sale. These documents were damaging because they showed that Moritomo was presenting different estimates for its construction costs. The estimates given to the land ministry were much larger than the amounts agreed upon with the construction company (*Asahi*, 2017c). The amount presented to the Osaka prefecture, however, was considerably lower. The paperwork suggested that Moritomo was trying to inflate the costs with the land ministry to obtain a larger subsidy but was using the low estimates to show the prefectural government that it could afford the terms of the purchase.

The damaging documents and denials of involvement from the political world put Moritomo's director Kagoike and his wife under intense scrutiny. He blamed the company he used for the discrepancies in the paperwork and made efforts to amend some of the conflicting estimates. Kagoike's wife and Abe's wife exchanged emails during this time, which Kagoike made public and cited as evidence that there was a political effort underway to silence him. There was little Kagoike could do to manage the fact that investigators were already building a criminal case against him and his wife. Moreover, it was now clear that the Osaka government led by Matsui was going to cancel the permit to allow the new school to open. Legal troubles further mounted as construction companies sued over unpaid invoices (*Mainichi*, 2017b) and as former kindergarten parents filed various lawsuits in the Osaka District Court (*Yomiuri*, 2017b). Moritomo Gakuen had little choice but to return the land and subsidy, withdraw its application and transfer its director position to Kagoike's daughter (*Asahi*, 2017d).

The ruling LDP relented in its efforts to prevent opposition parties from summoning Kagoike as a sworn witness, which paved the way for him to testify in parliament. Kagoike largely stuck to some of his previous comments, including his claim that Prime Minister Abe donated one million yens to his organization via his wife. He was unable to provide a receipt or smoking gun evidence to substantiate his story. Kagoike revealed a fax received from the aide of Abe's wife about his inquiry about extending the lease for the land with the ministry, but Abe and his wife denied any direct involvement or donating money to the school (*Asahi*, 2017e). Later the same day, Kagoike spoke at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan in Tokyo and used the word *sontaku* several times (*Kagoike*, 2017).

After Kagoike's testimony and public appearances, the opposition parties pressed the LDP to allow others to testify before the parliament. They called on finance ministry bureaucrats and Abe's wife to testify. The ministry distanced itself from various inquiries by claiming that the Board of Audit would investigate details of the land purchase. The LDP refused to let Abe's wife testify because they claimed there was no evidence that she was involved in any sort of crime (*Asahi*, 2017e). With the avenues blocked for additional testimony, focus shifted back to the legal system and on a second school operator scandal detailed below. While politicians and bureaucrats managed to escape severe consequences,

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Kagoike and his wife were in serious legal trouble. The Osaka prefectural and city government had filed formal complaints against them. The special investigation squad from the Osaka District Public Prosecutors Office then arrested and put them on trial for subsidy fraud [2].

### *Kake Gakuen scandal (2017)*

A second scandal over a different school operator emerged in 2017 that featured Prime Minister Abe and his close friend Kōtarō Kake. They met while studying in the United States and played golf regularly. Kake Gakuen was established in 1961 and today operates three universities, a high school, a junior high school, two vocational schools and a kindergarten. In line with the Abe government's plan to establish National Strategic Special Zones (*Kokka Senryaku Tokku*), the Cabinet Office solicited applications to establish a new faculty of veterinary medicine. The government then granted approval for the new faculty to be built in Ehime prefecture and affiliated with the Okayama University of Science, which is part of Kake Gakuen. These facts raised eyebrows. Despite Abe's repeated denials, the opposition repeatedly asked whether Abe was extending his friend a favour and whether the application was discussed on the golf course.

The scandal erupted after a leak of internal Ministry of Education documents first published in the *Asahi*. A government watchdog panel had previously blamed the ministry for helping senior officials find post-retirement jobs. The ministry's top official, Kihei Maekawa, was forced to resign to take responsibility for his ministry and his own actions. The leak could be viewed as a form of political retribution, with bureaucrats exposing political corruption because politicians had exposed bureaucratic corruption. The leaked papers detailed the exchanges between the Cabinet Office and the ministry regarding Kake Gakuen's project. The most stunning detail from the papers is the mention of the "prime minister's intention" to expedite the approval for the project. The government responded by suggesting that the leaked documents were not authentic. It ordered a search of the ministry to establish the truth but claimed that the documents in question could not be found.

Shortly after the documents leaked, the *Yomiuri* decided to publish a story about how former ministry bureaucrat Kihei Maekawa had been a regular customer at a dating bar (*Yomiuri*, 2017c). It was unusual for a mainstream newspaper to report on such personal details, but presumably the *Yomiuri* viewed Maekawa as a central character in the Kake Gakuen scandal. The newspaper's decision to publish the story forced Maekawa to speak publicly for the first time. He explained that he had visited the bar in question but nothing "improper" took place. Most important, Maekawa went on record claiming that the leaked documents from his ministry were authentic (*Asahi*, 2017f). He effectively shifted the headlines away from a personal scandal to a former top bureaucrat publicly criticizing the Cabinet Office and the political pressure placed on the ministry to approve the project.

Opposition parties demanded that the LDP allows Maekawa to give sworn testimony in parliament, but the chief cabinet secretary and the minister of education refused, claiming the documents lacked credibility or did not exist. This position, however, became untenable when the DPJ managed to find a copy of an email message showing that some of the leaked material had previously been sent to senior education ministers. Nearly every major media organization had conducted their own probes into the leaked papers and concluded that the documents were authentic. The LDP reversed itself and ordered the education minister to look for copies of the leaked documents (*Asahi*, 2017g). After a brief search, the Ministry of Education claimed to have located digital copies for some of the documents. To critics, the contents suggest that the government may have favoured Kake Gakuen before ministry officials had even reviewed its application. However, those named in the documents claim that the notes and recollection of past events are inaccurate or fabricated (*Asahi*, 2017h).

The LDP relented and allowed Maekawa and other witnesses to give unsworn testimony during a special parliamentary session. With the nation watching, Maekawa iterated that Abe's office had intervened in the administrative decision to approve the department. He claimed that the government had changed the requirements to make it easier to select Kake Gakuen over another competing university. The ruling coalition summoned its own witnesses to discredit Maekawa's testimony. One of the members who approved the bid for the new department, for example, dismissed Maekawa's claims as outright lies. Maekawa and other critics of the Abe administration cast serious doubt on the government denials but were unable to uncover damaging evidence. The minister of education gave the final green light for the new veterinary school to open its doors in April 2019.

*Ministry of Finance and the Altered Documents scandal (2018)*

Almost a year after the Moritomo Gakuen scandal first surfaced, the *Asahi* uncovered a more serious case of political corruption that implicated the bureaucracy in a cover-up linked to the Abe administration. The newspaper reported that the Ministry of Finance may have altered some of the original documents given to lawmakers related to the sale of state-owned land for the construction of the elementary school. These documents had been altered sometime after February 2017 in an act that called into question the entire policy-making process and raised serious concerns whether Abe or the prime minister's office was involved. The efforts to cover up within the bureaucracy generated a major procedural scandal that implicated the Ministry of Finance and tainted the Abe administration.

The *Asahi* discovered dozens of deletions across a total of 14 documents. Whoever made the changes purposely and systematically removed any mention or hints of political involvement in the land transaction. This included deleting any embarrassing mentions of Abe or Abe's wife. In one of the original documents, for example, Abe's wife was cited as having praised the ultra-conservative mission of the school, but in the altered document given to lawmakers, this part was stricken from a document that was supposed to have already been finalized. Apparently, whoever cleaned up the records also took the time to purge the names of four additional LDP politicians whose names surfaced in the land deal as if the Finance Ministry was covering up for the prime minister's office and the ruling party.

The document controversy shook the political establishment and led to a flurry of speculation about the intended reasons for the alterations. One obvious concern was whether political pressure had been exerted upon the ministry officials by politicians. The *Mainichi* (2018a) suggested that the documents were "doctored" to support the points made by Nobuhisa Sagawa, the former head of the Ministry's Financial Bureau. Sagawa was the senior finance ministry official who had testified before parliament after the Moritomo scandal surfaced. Sagawa proved to be the government's star witness because he strongly supported the government's position that Abe and his wife were not directly involved in the sale of discounted land. After Sagawa's testimony, he was promoted to the head of the National Tax Agency, which some saw as a reward for defending the government.

The discovery of the altered documents coincided with the suicide of a local finance ministry official in Osaka, which did little to alleviate public concerns about what the government did or knew at this point. While the government cautioned that the reasons why the official took his life are difficult to fathom, the man left a note saying he had been involved in the doctoring of the land records under the orders of his superiors from the finance ministry in Tokyo (*Mainichi*, 2018b). Sagawa, the former head of the financial bureau, saw the writing on the wall, resigned from his new government position and apologized for causing "confusion." After launching an internal probe, the Ministry of Finance admitted that nearly 200 alterations had occurred. The finance minister apologized, volunteered to return some of his salary and announced that around 20 officials will face some sort of punishment such as



salary cuts. The probe also pinned much of the blame on Sagawa and admitted that others made the alterations to match the responses he gave to opposition lawmakers in parliament.

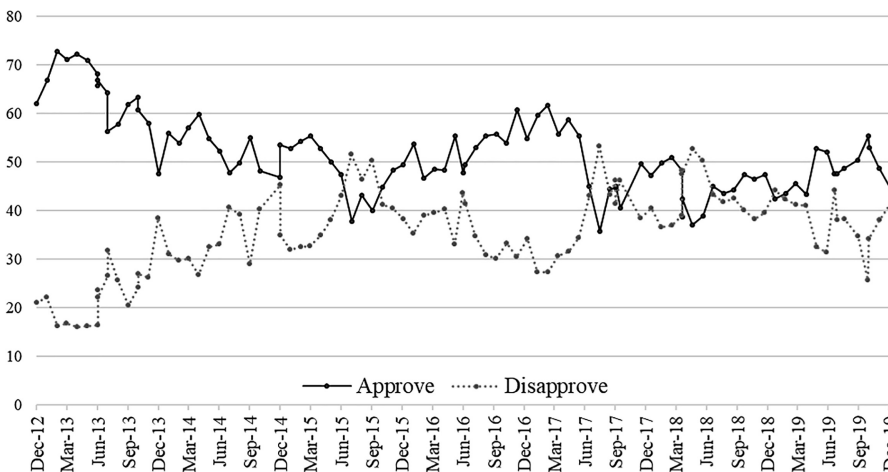
The opposition insisted on calling Sagawa as a sworn witness and boycotted diet sessions in protest until the LDP and its coalition partner agreed. When Sagawa testified, he denied that Abe or the prime minister's office played any role in the altering of the documents. Because he was under criminal investigation, he refused to answer questions about the specific circumstances by which the documents were changed. Prosecutors considered charging Sagawa and other bureaucrats with crimes such as forgery or breach of trust, but the evidence was not strong enough to indict. There was also probably little political will to hold them accountable, particularly when the bureaucrats were trying to cover up the original transgressions related to the school operator.

### Consequences of the scandals

To say more about the impact of the scandals on public perceptions, it is useful to briefly examine the approval and disapproval rates of the Abe cabinet from polls taken by *Kyodo* News Agency. The support rate for the Abe cabinet has been quite high as shown in Figure 1 with the disapproval rate surpassing the approval rate primarily during only three major periods. The first period is from July to September 2015 when security-related bills were debated in the parliament. These debates generated considerable controversy and led to large public demonstrations and even physical confrontations inside the parliament.

The second period of increasing disapproval was from July to September 2017. This was the period just prior to the 2017 election when the government was confronting the school scandals. When the Moritomo Gakuen controversy first surfaced, the approval rating remained above 50% and did not drop below this percentage for several months. Initially, the public did not blame the Abe cabinet for the incident. The disapproval rating, however, exceeded the approval rating several times after the media began to focus intensely on the Kake Gakuen controversy.

The third major period when disapproval was higher than approval is from March to May 2018. This time period coincides with the altered documents scandal described above that involved serious misdeeds by bureaucrats [3]. After this period, however, the approval rate has exceeded disapproval except for two polls; the most recent was in December 2019, a



**Figure 1.**  
Support rating for Abe  
cabinet, Dec. 2012–Dec.  
2019 (*Kyodo* poll)

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period coinciding with the emergence of the cherry blossom viewing party scandal that is mentioned briefly below.

Bureaucrats were involved heavily in the scandals detailed above, and there was evidence of bureaucratic misdeeds such as the doctoring of public records. The consequences of the scandals for the bureaucracies involved, however, mostly focused on punishing the “bad” bureaucrats. Politicians pinned a considerable amount of blame on Sagawa, a former top head of the Finance Ministry, who ultimately lost his job. Many of the other bureaucrats caught up in the scandals were helping to protect the Abe administration. Only some faced a token form of punishment such as salary cuts. The legal system is not active in prosecuting any of the major bureaucrats in the scandals, including Sagawa.

Japan is among the few Asian countries which lacks a dedicated anti-corruption agency, and its public prosecutor’s offices mainly react to major corruption scandals (Quah, 2015). In the document alteration scandal, prosecutors decided not to charge any bureaucrats with crimes. The government, however, relied on a traditional response for preventing corruption, which is the implementation of various preventative measures targeting public servants (Oyamada, 2015). One of the most important areas of reform to emerge from the scandals between 2017 and 2019 are the rules and regulations regarding the management of public documents.

The scandals revealed systemic problems and the importance of creating a more unified system and changing the incentives of government officials. The Public Records and Archives Management Act implemented in 2011 requires the government to preserve public documents as an intellectual resource for independent use by citizens. In 2018, the Abe cabinet solicited proposals for reforms from a working group representing the coalition government (Yomiuri, 2018). It decided to adopt some of these measures such as upgrading the post of inspector general, requiring the preservation of administrative documents for more than one year, improving training programmes for bureaucrats and imposing stricter punishment for malicious acts such as tampering. It rejected other reform proposals to expand the scope of public documents to include such things as memos or strengthen the penal code in ways that would make it easier to prosecute bureaucrats such as former finance minister Sagawa. Recent scandals in 2019 and 2020 have revealed widespread concerns about the destruction of public records and have spurred calls for subsequent reforms [4].

The scandals above helped focus attention on the universal phenomenon of *sontaku* but only revealed a small glimpse into the dark corners of Japanese politics. Already, new scandals at the end of 2019 and in 2020 suggest that media focus is moving back to a more common scandal ingredient in Japanese politics, the often troubled relationship between money and Japanese politics. Since the early 1950s the government has held a tax-funded cherry tree blossom viewing party at a park in Tokyo to recognize citizens with significant accomplishments. The Japanese Communist Party proved to be the key in generating a major scandal implicating the Abe government as well as Abe himself. On top of this, Tokyo prosecutors arrested the then LDP member Akimoto Tsukasa over allegations that he accepted illegal funds from a Chinese gambling firm. At the time, Akimoto was an LDP member in charge of overseeing issues related to integrated casino resort projects in Japan, which is a critical long-term pillar of Abe’s policies for revitalizing Japan’s economy. These “new” scandals borrow upon *sontaku* themes such as political favouritism, government secrecy and cover-up, as well as the misuse of funds. The political and bureaucratic consequences of these scandals for the Abe administration will not be known for some time.

## Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Michio Muramatsu and Steven R. Reed for this insight. This article builds upon an earlier effort by Carlson and Reed (2018b). The author also wishes to thank Jon Quah and the reviewers of this manuscript for their many suggestions.

2. They were found guilty at the Osaka District Court in February 2020. Kagoike received a five-year prison sentence.
3. This time period also importantly coincides with a minor scandal that erupted in April 2019 when deputy land minister Tsukada Ichirō boasted that he had used *sontaku* in influencing the allocation for funds for a highway project. His comments were troublesome for the government because the highway would be built in the prefectures of Prime Minister Abe as well as Finance Minister Tarō Asō.
4. In the cherry blossom viewing party scandal that emerged in 2019, for example, the opposition parties requested the guest lists of those who attended the party from the Cabinet Office for documents which they deemed to be important government records. To their dismay, the Cabinet Office shredded the guest lists on a gigantic shredder and further denied requests to locate digital copies, which apparently are not considered official government documents.

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### About the author

Matthew M. Carlson is Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont, USA. He is the author of *Money Politics in Japan* (2007) and co-author of *Political Corruption and Scandals in Japan* with Steven R. Reed (2018). Matthew M. Carlson can be contacted at: [matthew.carlson@uvm.edu](mailto:matthew.carlson@uvm.edu)

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