Pork barrel politics

Encountering the term

This term was discussed in session 3 of our discussion. It was mentioned by Pempel (2010), who discussed it in relation to productivity, as well as by Sugimoto (2010).

What is it?

The term “pork barrel” originated from the era of slavery before the US civil war, when “when slave owners occasionally would present a barrel of salt pork as a gift to their slaves” (Drudge, 2008). Since then, it has been used often to describe US politics when congressmen set aside funds for their own district to garner votes.

In a wider sense, pork barrel politics refer to governmental spending on policies that are popular with and benefit a certain group of people, which then helps to win favour (in the form of votes) from the affected group(s) of people.

Within Japan, the deeply rooted iron triangle system supports the formation of pork barrel politics. This triangle refers to politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups (like businesses) which work closely together for mutual interests through a “back-scratching alliance” and the practice of amakudari (Sugimoto, 2010).

Pempel (2010) argues that pork barrel politics have led to huge regions of LDP agricultural blocs, comprising farmers from rural areas who vote in return for the protection of domestic agriculture. Another form of pork barrel politics that he identifies are large public spending on construction projects like highways and bridges. He thus argues that this has led to an underlying tension between “pork and productivity”, deeming pork barrel policies to be largely inefficient and a wastage of resources. Additionally, Japanese politicians’ heavy reliance on pork barrel politics have led to a problem of dependence. They face difficulty when trying to change policies because pushing for competitive neoliberal market reforms often go against the ideals of these sheltered groups like the farmers who wield much political power.

Other relevant information

Refer to amakudari for more on the term.

I would also recommend the essay by Fukui and Fukai (1996), which examines several forms of pork barrel politics in sectors like, agriculture, public sewage systems, and construction in relation to detailed examples of various prefectural policies. Additionally, the section pertaining to the 1994 electoral reform is useful in understanding how multiseat district system supported collusive pork barrel politics.

Bibliography


