From conspiracy theory movement to challenger party: why the case of Japan's Sanseito isn't more widely replicated

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Abstract

The rise in salience of conspiracy theory beliefs has created a new potential space for political entrepreneurs to emerge, but the costs of openly engaging in conspiracy theory rhetoric outweigh the potential rewards for most parties, which instead use "dog whistle" strategies to maintain deniability regarding their views. We present the case of Sanseitō, a fringe Japanese political party founded during the COVID-19 pandemic which won a seat in the National Diet in 2022. Initially coming to prominence as an anti-vaccine party, it now promotes a conspiracist, anti-globalist worldview—but through the creation of an alternative media ecosystem and a highly developed membership system, it has been very successful in fundraising and attracting volunteer support. In this article we examine the party's strategy and the contextual factors which permit it to openly embrace conspiracy theories in a way that sets it apart from similar parties overseas. The article contributes to research on niche parties and digital parties by presenting an example of structural and programmatic innovation that is specific to the post-pandemic political order.

Keywords: Political parties, conspiracy theories, niche parties, digital parties, party competition, Japan

1 Introduction

While conspiracy theory beliefs have been commonplace throughout history, there is little doubt that the salience of such beliefs in political and social spheres has risen in recent decades. This has been especially true in the years during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, when restric-

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tions aimed at controlling the spread of the virus, as well as widespread vaccination programs, became the focus of a wide range of conspiracy theories. Fuelled by the sense of insecurity and helplessness many people felt in the face of the pandemic—sentiments which can make conspiracy theories, with their sense of an ordered reality where everything has happened for a reason, highly appealing (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Oliver and Wood 2014)—and amplified by burgeoning online communities in a time when offline social contact was often curtailed, conspiracy theories about the pandemic enmeshed with existing conspiracy frames related to everything from far-right politics to alternative medicine and spirituality. The resulting conspiracy beliefs have been implicated in events ranging from the riot at Capitol Hill in Washington, DC on January 6th 2021, to widespread rejection of COVID-19 vaccinations in many different countries. These conspiracy theories and the communities which coalesced around them—now encompassing elements of both right-wing nationalist groups and left-wing "alternative health" groups (Baker 2022)—did not disappear or die out as the pandemic faded from salience. Instead, their beliefs evolved into broader forms: fears stoked over mRNA vaccines for COVID-19 metastasised into conspiracy narratives about vaccines in general; claims that malevolent groups had manufactured the pandemic as a pretext for imposing strict controls on the population transitioned into new conspiracy frames such as "15 Minute Cities" (an urban planning proposal to create walkable neighbourhoods, framed by conspiracy theorists as a sinister scheme to ban public travel between areas).

Survey research into conspiracy beliefs (using question batteries such as the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS) developed by Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013) now consistently show that between 20 and 30 per cent of citizens in developed countries express some degree of belief even in quite extreme conspiracy theory narratives such as the "Great Replacement Theory"—the idea that elites are conspiring to replace native populations with more biddable and compliant migrant populations[1]. Setting aside the troubling implications of such widespread conspiracy belief for social cohesion and public order, we might expect that the rise to prominence of such beliefs would also have implications for political competition. Conspiracy theories effectively represent, to their believers, a highly salient set of political issues—up to and including significant threats to the individual, their community, or to the nation itself—that are

1. To give two recent examples, a 2024 Electoral Commission survey in Ireland found that more than 20 per cent of respondents believed in the Great Replacement theory to some degree (Electoral Commission (Ireland) 2024: 76), while a mass survey in the UK in 2023 found even higher rates of agreement, at over 30 per cent (Duffy and Dacombe 2023: 3). Survey research in Japan, the location of this paper's case study, has also shown levels of conspiracy belief broadly in line with other developed nations (Fahey 2023; Majima and Nakamura 2020).

generally unaddressed by any existing party. As the proportion of citizens holding such beliefs grows, so too does the size of the opportunity this presents for political entrepreneurship in the form of taking ownership over these issues and concerns.

Such entrepreneurship, however, has proven relatively rare in recent years—perhaps surprisingly so. Certainly, some political parties have begun to echo conspiracy theory rhetoric, with some even doing so overtly. Perhaps the most notable case of a major party openly embracing conspiracy rhetoric is the U.S. Republican Party, which has openly promoted conspiracy theories claiming that the 2020 Presidential Election was "stolen" from Donald Trump. For mainstream parties, however, the risks of such open adoption of conspiracy rhetoric generally outweigh potential rewards: they appeal strongly to a minority, but as long as a majority of citizens firmly reject rhetoric that is seen as too extreme or radical, the potential costs are high. Consequently, it is more common to see mainstream parties either avoiding conspiracy rhetoric entirely, or permitting themselves a degree of deniability by using "dog whistle" strategies to reference conspiracy narratives in ways that appeal to believers without risking backlash from other citizens—for example, the UK Conservative Party has made a number of references to 15 Minute City conspiracies, using terms which would be understood to explicitly reference the conspiracy theories for those aware of them, but which could plausibly be explained as pro-motorist rhetoric to citizens unaware of the conspiracy narrative (Dawson 2023). Other research has pointed to the use of conspiracy theories in more or less overt forms by new authoritarian parties in Eastern Europe (Enyedi 2020) or by populist parties that succeed in entering government (Pirro and Taggart 2023).

In theory, the salience of conspiracy theories for a significant minority of the population, combined with the difficulty of engaging with such conspiracy rhetoric for mainstream parties, creates an opportunity for new challenger parties to emerge with political identities centred around conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy believers also tend to be highly dissatisfied with the existing political establishment, potentially making them more amenable to supporting a new party seen as challenging the establishment rather than an existing political party that only dog-whistles their conspiracy beliefs. Nonetheless, in practice new challenger parties which openly embrace conspiracy theories and try to capitalise on the high profile of such narratives are rare.

In this paper, we examine this mismatch between the potential that conspiracy theories would create a space for political entrepreneurship, and the reality that explicitly conspiracy theory fo-

cused parties are very rare, by considering the case of one such party—Japan's Sanseitō ("The Party of Do-It-Yourself!!"), a right-wing niche party founded in 2020 (during the COVID-19 pandemic) which won its first seat in the Upper House of the National Diet in 2022 and went on to win 100 seats in local assembly elections in 2023. We describe the origins and organisational strategies of the party, showing how differences in the context in which it emerged may explain why it is so explicit in its conspiracy-focused rhetoric compared to the more cautious approach to conspiracy theories taken by right-wing niche parties in Europe. While our analysis reveals important contextual differences in the political environments of Sanseitō and its overseas equivalents, it also shows that Sanseitō has taken an innovative approach to party organisation, drawing upon both the structures of digital political parties and on the "influencer" marketing strategies of alternative digital media outlets, which has the potential to be emulated by similar parties elsewhere in future.

2 Niche Parties and Conspiracy Theories

Niche parties are generally defined as being political parties which focus on a range of issues (or issue positions) that are largely ignored by mainstream political parties—a broad concept which encompasses well-established political groupings such as Green / environmentalist parties and right-wing / nativist parties as well as a wide range of single-issue or regional parties (Wagner 2023). This conceptual grouping of parties was proposed in the mid-2000s, with Meguid (2005, 2008) offering a tripartite definition which, though not uncontested, both clarifies the boundaries of this conceptual grouping and highlights the importance of these parties to our understanding of party competition. Meguid proposes that niche parties are defined by a rejection of the traditional class-based orientation of politics; the raising of novel issues which cut across existing lines of political division; and the limiting of issue appeals to a relatively narrow focus, potentially allowing niche parties to have ownership and agenda-setting power over the issues within their scope. Wagner (2023) notes that later authors have sought to simplify this definition by focusing on niche parties' emphasis on different issues to their competitors and their relatively narrow issue focus (Bischof 2017; Meyer and Miller 2013; Wagner 2012; Zons 2016), while an alternative framing of niche parties by Adams et al. (2006) emphasises their ideological extremity—their willingness to take positions on issues that are far outside the political mainstream.

116 While the precise definition of niche parties remains contested, there is broad agreement on
117 their core characteristics, and particularly on the difference between this concept and that of
118 the challenger party, which is generally defined simply as an opposition party that has never
119 been in government. Unlike challenger parties, niche parties are defined by the programmatic
120 characteristics, not by their history in government; this is an especially important distinction in
121 countries where large coalitions are common, as a niche party may continue to be defined as
122 such even after spending time as part of a ruling coalition. One of the most important concep-
123 tual aspects of niche parties is that they are, almost by definition, issue entrepreneurs (De Vries
124 and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and de Vries 2015). Niche parties mobilise around new issues that
125 were either formerly ignored entirely in mainstream party competition, or where mainstream
126 parties have taken relatively uniform, centrist positions. Wagner (2023) notes that niche party
127 strategies consequently tend to focus around a combination of *politicisation*, whereby they at-
128 tempt to make their focus issues more salient with the electorate, which generally results in the
129 creation of a new axis of polarisation due to the niche party's extreme position on the issue,
130 and *contagion*, whereby their existence and the threat of taking attention and votes from main-
131 stream parties forces those parties to adopt positions on this previously ignored issue, or even
132 to move their platform closer to that of the niche party.

133 We argue that certain conspiracy theory belief systems provide grounds for issue entrepreneur-
134 ship of the sort which often fuels the formation of niche parties. Conspiracy theories—generally
135 defined as attempts to explain the causes of significant events by rejecting conventional un-
136 derstandings in favour of claims of secret plots by groups of powerful, self-interested actors
137 (see for example Douglas et al. (2019: 4), Levy (2007: 181–192), Uscinski (2019: 48))—are very
138 commonly held, with some research suggesting that a majority of people hold some form of
139 conspiracy belief (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014). While many con-
140 spiracy theories are relatively harmless (albeit that even a belief that the moon landings were
141 faked or that the Earth is flat is suggestive of a notable lack of trust in institutions and author-
142 ities), other such theories posit a malicious conspiracy that may pose a direct and immediate
143 threat to the believer, their family, or their community. Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories hold
144 that malicious elites are conspiring to inject harmful substances or technologies into children
145 and adults; the "Great Replacement Theory" claims to warn of the deliberate displacement or
146 even destruction of the white race in Europe and North America; "15 minute city" conspiracies
147 depict a dystopian future where shady supra-governmental organisations dictate how far citi-

zens may drive or how often they may leave their homes. Other widespread conspiracy theories make claims of threats including deliberate tampering with national food supplies to weaken or make infertile the populations of non-compliant nations, the use of 5G mobile phone signals for mind control or to cause targeted cancers, and the widespread trafficking of children by liberal elites who harvest their organs to make immortality drugs. What all of these beliefs share in common, despite their incredibly disparate and often contradictory narratives, is the sense of powerful and imminent threat. Anyone holding such beliefs would feel motivated, on some level, to act against that threat—and while conspiracy believers are certainly inclined to support non-normative actions (Jolley and Paterson 2020; Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino 2024; Obaidi et al. 2022), many of them would likely also support a niche party that challenges the existing political establishment, even if their faith in the ability to combat the threat of conspiracy through the democratic system is low.

3 The Emergence of Sanseitō

New Japanese niche party Sanseitō was founded in the first half of 2020 by a group of right wing conservatives with previous experience in politics or in running political YouTube channels. Of its initial founders, current leader and Upper House lawmaker Kamiya Sōhei and former Lower House lawmaker (as a member of centre-right opposition party *Nippon Ishin no Kai*) Matsuda Manabu still remain in the party today. Many of the other founding members have left, citing irreconcilable disagreements in the direction of the party. The party leader, Kamiya, had a brief and unstoried prior career in politics; he became a member of city council of Suita, a suburb of Osaka, in 2007 and ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the ruling centre-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in national elections in 2012. Following his failed candidacy, he switched focus away from electoral politics, starting a new company called Ishikikaikaku Co. the following year and launching a new venture on YouTube, Channel Grand Strategy, which attracted a significant following for its right-wing, nationalist political content.

The party's initial focus at its launch in 2020, and the platform on which it contested the Upper House election in 2022 (at which Kamiya won his seat in the Diet, to date the party's only electoral victory at national level), was opposition to COVID-19 countermeasures—with the party taking stances opposed to mask-wearing and vaccination which often leaned into conspiracy theories and misinformation (Asahi Shimbun 2022). Toriumi et al. (2024) showed that the party

178 rapidly became an important nexus for the spread of anti-vaccination misinformation over so-
179 cial media, although Sanseitō rejects this characterisation—taking the unusual step of holding
180 a press conference to criticise the paper and assert that their stance on vaccines simply urges
181 caution and demands personal freedom in vaccination decisions (Sanseitō 2024b). However, in-
182 dividual politicians running or serving in local assemblies under the Sanseitō banner have made
183 clear reference to claims that mRNA vaccines are universally damaging to people's health, anti-
184 vaccine campaigners from outside of the party have been given platforms on Sanseitō's social
185 media channels and at its town hall events, including doctors who promote the (unproven) use
186 of Ivermectin as a COVID-19 cure, and many of the party's rally events were explicitly presented
187 as protests against pandemic countermeasures (Kamizawa 2022).

188 As its Japanese name (参政党, literally "Party of Political Participation") suggests, Sanseitō also
189 had an early emphasis on encouraging its members to participate directly in the party's activities
190 and decision-making processes, and sought to appeal to non-voters and non-politically engaged
191 citizens. Alongside its opposition to masking and vaccination, the party also promoted conser-
192 vative views on history and opposed the participation of foreign residents in local politics. Its
193 self-presentation was sleek and professional, notably avoiding the usual symbols of the nativist
194 right despite what was, at least in the early stages of the party's evolution, a fairly typical far-
195 right political ideology. Many early writings published by the party and its leaders take positions
196 largely indistinguishable from other right-wing niche parties and movements in Japan, such as
197 demanding that the education system should focus on instilling national pride in students—a
198 reference to the right-wing belief (itself a form of conspiracy theory) that the post-war occu-
199 pation authorities of Japan had deliberately tried to weaken the nation by forcing educators to
200 teach a 'masochistic' view of Japanese history (Kamiya 2019; Sanseitō 2024a).

201 While new niche parties are formed and disbanded quite regularly in Japan—several others
202 emerged in the years around Sanseitō's creation, including Nihon Hoshutō (日本保守党, "Japanese
203 Conservative Party"), Mintsuku (みんなでつくる党, "The Collaborative Party," formerly and com-
204 monly known as the "NHK Party") and ultra-fringe far-right party Tsubasa no Tō (つばさの党,
205 "Tsubasa Party")—Sanseitō's campaign for the 2022 Upper House election drew attention due
206 to its well-attended election rallies and prominent usage of YouTube and other social media
207 throughout the campaign. Coverage of the party's electoral results in the Asahi Shimbun noted
208 that supporters valued the opportunity to participate in party policy and management, but sug-

gested that its appeal rests in large part on its anti-vaccine and anti-masking rhetoric, topics which drove large volumes of traffic to its YouTube channels and social media sites (Kado and Sasayama 2022). In a conversation for *Chūō Kōron*, Hatakeyama and Fujikura (2023: 37) observed that the party's candidates strategic use of conspiracy narratives had been successful in lowering the guard of potential supporters—a stark contrast, they argued, to a prior similar party, the Happiness Realization Party, whose status as the political wing of cult religious group Happy Science had been offputting to most voters. One of the journalists noted that one could see the party's supporters handing out flyers on the streets without ever realising that it was a group promoting such extreme conspiracy theories.

A full accounting of Sanseitō's conspiracy beliefs and worldview is beyond the scope of this study (for more detail on these aspects, see Marcantuoni and Fahey (2024, forthcoming in *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*), but to summarise in brief, the party has developed its initial nativist and anti-vaccination stances into a more comprehensive platform that promises to defend Japan from "the logic of powerful nations and excessive globalism", to protect its resources from foreign capital, and to improve the income of the Japanese by deprioritising the acceptance of immigrants. A worldview in which conspiring globalist elites[2] orchestrate affairs to serve their self-interested designs and force nations, especially Japan, into compliance lies at the heart of Sanseitō's ideas across a wide swathe of its political positions (Kamiya 2024: 116–119). In common with the views of conspiracy theory movements in other countries (see for example Mello and Estre 2023), this globalist cabal is seen to include a wide and often contradictory variety of "enemies"—international organisations, China, feminists and LGBT+ activists, socialists, big business, and the media establishment are all presented as parties to conspiracy. Sanseitō's conspiracy narratives promote distrust of the media and medical professions, highly essentialist views of gender and sexuality, strongly anti-China sentiment, and—most recently—protests against the World Health Organisation's proposed treaty to improve international responses to future pandemics. Unlike many other parties which share some of this conspiracy worldview, Sanseitō does not hide these beliefs, and its rejection of the "conspiracy theory" label is not based on a dispute over the content of such beliefs, but on the grounds that it claims these narratives are correct—stating that dismissing its views as conspiracy theories "is to cloud the pursuit of truth" (Sanseitō 2024b).

2. This "cabal" of elites are explicitly described as "a number of organizations centered on Jewish international finance capital" in the party's earlier publications (Kamiya 2022: 95), although perhaps in response to accusations of anti-semitism, later publications (such as Kamiya 2024: 118) drop the Jewish aspect of this description.

3.1 Party Structure and Media Strategy

Arguably the most important reason to pay attention to Sanseitō—despite the aforementioned commonplace nature of the emergence and disbanding of niche parties in the Japanese political system—lies in the innovative way in which the party has structured itself and its consequent ability to raise funds. Sanseitō is in essence a digital party, and in many ways it conforms to expectations for such parties; it allows members to join and participate through an online platform, and claims to involve members directly in decision making processes, although in general this involvement is in the form of ratifying proposals from the established leadership (Gerbaudo 2019: 127). The party's conspiracy theory alignment is well-suited to its structure as a digital party; as Gerbaudo (2019: 51) notes, "digital parties are parties of outsiders, of people who, because of their age, professional situation, or economic security, feel excluded from society, and therefore harbour grievances against the existing system and establishment parties that are seen as keener on representing insiders", a description that also matches with many accounts of conspiracy theory believers and their online communities.

However, Sanseitō has successfully evolved the concept of the digital party in innovative ways that have overcome some of the limitations outlined by prior literature on this class of party—most notably the difficulty of fund-raising which these parties often face, with their large membership numbers often being driven by easy online sign-up processes with no payment barriers (Gerbaudo 2019: 169), which undermines efforts to attract funding and donations from members. In this regard, Sanseitō is an outlier—dramatically so. The most recent available party funding reports, covering calendar 2022, show that Sanseitō raised more money from its members than any other political group, even including the largest factions of the ruling LDP. More than 90 per cent of its income in that period came from individual donations, while the two large fund-raising events organised by the party raised significantly more money than those of any other party grouping (Asahi Shimbun 2023; Jiji Press News 2023). This high level of income has been achieved largely due to very high membership fees; Sanseitō charges ¥1000 per month for ordinary members and ¥4000 per month for a higher tier ("managing member"), which is an order of magnitude more expensive than membership in other Japanese political parties[3]—by comparison, membership of the mainstream opposition Constitutional Democratic Party costs ¥1000 per year. The party's actual membership numbers are difficult to ascertain;

3. The other exception is the Japanese Communist Party, which sets its membership fees as a percentage of the member's income.

269 according to its own claims, membership grew from from 10,000 in December 2020 to 90,000
270 by the 2022 Upper House election (Kado and Sasayama 2022), but the party also declared a
271 total membership of 46.524 in its financial report for 2022 (Asahi Shimbun 2023), and in Febru-
272 ary 2024, in the midst of an ongoing scandal involving the suicide of Kamiya's former secretary
273 which may have prompted some members to leave the party, it updated its claimed membership
274 to 75,000. The difficulty in pinning down exact numbers notwithstanding, it remains the case
275 that Sanseitō has attracted significantly more funding from its membership than most niche or
276 digital parties—in Japan or otherwise—ever receive.

277 Much of the reason for Sanseitō's financial success and its ability to charge much higher fees
278 than other parties lies in the concrete benefits which it offers to party members in exchange
279 for their dues. Members gain access to the group chat for their region, receive a daily ten
280 minute audio 'mail magazine' (essentially a short daily podcast), are invited to regular events
281 and activities, and have the ability to join the "DIY School" program of lectures and training
282 events which opens the path to becoming a "community organizer" within the party. Managing
283 members additionally receive the right to vote in internal primary elections and on internal policy
284 proposals, as well as the right to be included in the organization of large-scale events. These
285 offerings are a combination of exclusive media and community access, with the latter arguably
286 being especially powerful in terms of member retention, since ceasing to pay membership dues
287 would essentially cut people off from the communities in which they had been participating. By
288 contrast, most other political parties in Japan offer paying members little more than occasional
289 email updates and invitations to fundraising events.

290 Sanseitō's offering to its members dovetails into its broader media strategy, which encom-
291 passes the party's official video and social media channels as well as those (such as Channel
292 Grand Strategy) operated separately by its leaders, and aims to provide an alternative right-wing
293 media ecosystem on sites such as YouTube, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) that can also func-
294 tion as a pipeline pushing viewers towards party membership. One perhaps surprising boon
295 to the party's efforts in this regard has been YouTube's policy of removing (or demonetising)
296 videos that include false information on COVID-19 vaccines, which it began doing in Septem-
297 ber 2021. Although this policy impeded Sanseitō's ability to make money from YouTube, the
298 party has used it as a pretext to claim that Japanese citizens are being blocked from access to
299 important information about the vaccines (and other conspiracy elements), and to promote the

media available exclusively to party members as the only way to access this information free of censorship or constraint. On the party's official channel, speakers make explicit reference to the need for restraint and circumspect language due to these curtailments on their free speech, while YouTube channels that upload speeches made by Sanseitō politicians often bleep out or otherwise censor claims and words that they claim would run afoul of this policy. In both cases the degree of self-censorship is frequently exaggerated, with speakers claiming that they are banned or otherwise restricted from discussing information that is actually not referenced in YouTube's guidelines, and pointing viewers to Sanseitō membership as a pathway to finding out about this information. The most recent addition to this media ecosystem, and a good example of the strategy outlined above, is a daily talk show called *Akasaka News*, which was launched by Sanseitō in early 2024. On the show, two members of the party's national politics reform committee (*kokusei kaikaku iin*) interview politicians, journalists, and medical professionals about contemporary political issues. The first half of each daily episode is posted publicly on YouTube, but access to the second half—where the presenters say that they will talk more explicitly about topics that would be banned on YouTube—is limited to party members.

Members are also upsold a variety of opportunities to participate in paid-for training sessions that are designed to develop their political knowledge and skills as campaign volunteers and potential future candidates. The participation fee for the fifth series of these DIY School lectures, held in 2024, is priced between ¥50,000 and ¥80,000, and the official website claims that 3,324 people attended the previous series of lectures. Topics covered include geopolitics, economics, history, health care, food security, and even English lessons with a focus on understanding American political discourse. While access is only available to party members, the published outlines of the lectures suggest that they also include content on conspiracy theories, with one lecturer promising that he will impart expert knowledge about an epidemic of excess deaths that is not being reported in the news, and another offering an account of global warming that is "different from the prevailing view of the media".

Sanseitō's party organisation and media strategies have not only been successful in financial terms—the party also has a significant capacity to mobilise volunteers for campaign activities, with the strength of the party's "ground game" at a recent by-election in Tokyo's 15th District being remarked upon both by the media and by volunteers for other parties. The party also frequently holds canvassing events and speeches in busy public areas, even when no election is

imminent, with its distinctive orange banners and t-shirts helping it to become a highly recognisable part of the political party landscape despite its newcomer status and relatively modest electoral success thus far. The party has effectively managed to mobilise its ”super volunteers” (coined by Bond and Exley 2016), but the context in which it has done so challenges the assertion of Gerbaudo (2019: 173) that the focus on such volunteer activists comes about due to lack of funding in digital parties. Gerbaudo states that “these movements attempt to make up for the ‘power of money’, which they so sorely lack, with the ‘power of people’, to utilise the voluntary labour offered by the militancy as a means to compensate for their comparable lack of economic resources”—but Sanseitō, with its significant economic resources and its ability to mobilise volunteers, appears to have found a strategy that grants it the best of both worlds.

4 Sanseitō in Comparative Context

As mentioned in the introduction, cases exist where conspiracy theories have been employed in an instrumental fashion by political actors, especially in attempts to raise negative sentiments about minority groups and other political opponents. However, the potential costs of using such beliefs in rhetoric are significant, especially for more mainstream political actors, and although it has become more common to see conspiracy theories alluded to (in dog-whistle style, at least) in recent years, it remains a risky strategy for most parties. de Jonge (2021b: Ch.6) points out that other mainstream political actors and the mass media will generally act to punish a party which engages explicitly in conspiracy-peddling, instituting a “cordon” around them and “limiting their political and discursive opportunities”. In the relatively rare occasions where parties do engage with conspiracy rhetoric, it is generally instrumental—conspiracy theories are deployed strategically and couched in terms that give some degree of deniability, rather than being presented as an integral part of the identity of the party (Bergmann 2018; de Jonge 2021a; Hannan 2024; Maly 2024). This is in stark contrast to Sanseitō’s approach, which has been described by journalists and scholars as that of a “conspiracy theory party” (Chūnichi Shimbun 2022; Fahey 2023; Fujikura 2022; Hatakeyama and Fujikura 2023).

In examining Sanseitō, we considered the cases of a number of other contemporary fringe parties that have become known for mobilising conspiracy theories, including Forum voor Democratie (FvD) in the Netherlands, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) / Reform UK. In each of these cases, however, the parties have used a “Trojan

Horse" approach for their conspiracy beliefs, initially presenting themselves as less radical (and expressing conspiracy views, if at all, in a deniable, "just asking questions" kind of rhetoric), before starting to reveal the full extent of their conspiracy theory beliefs after achieving electoral breakthroughs (de Jonge 2021b: Ch.6). Other niche parties such as the Netherlands' BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB, "Farmer-Citizen Movement") have engaged with very specific conspiracy theories—in this case, elements of agrarian conspiracy theories which posit that agricultural regulations are part of a broad conspiracy by environmentalists and international organisations to change patterns of land ownership and usage—while holding much more conventional views and policies in other areas; unlike the other mentioned parties, these groups generally move away from conspiracy rhetoric in an attempt to become more mainstream after achieving electoral breakthroughs.

Sanseitō maintains somewhat ad-hoc connections with a number of overseas parties whom it considers to share its anti-globalist worldview, and its politicians and candidates have expressed admiration for FvD and AfD in particular, as well as the US Republican Party under Donald Trump, calling electoral successes by such parties overseas "wind in the [party's] sails" (Sanseitō 2024c). Why, then, does Sanseitō appear to be such an outlier within this group in terms of its apparent ability to find a space within the political party landscape where it can achieve success—in fundraising and volunteering, at least, if only very limited electoral success thus far—even while being unusually explicit about its identity as a conspiracy theory party? While we propose that Sanseitō's innovative membership structure and media ecosystem strategy, outlined above, is a very important factor in explaining this discrepancy, in this section we also outline a number of background and contextual factors which have played a role in the party's success thus far; while none of these circumstances is unique to Japan, their combination may suggest that Sanseitō was to some degree a party in the right place, at the right time, and may also hint at how the party's window of opportunity may ultimately close.

4.1 Factor I: The Right-Wing Party Landscape

Japan's political party landscape has been dominated since 1955 by the LDP, a broad tent centre-right to right-wing party that has held power almost continuously, with the exception of brief periods in 1993-1994 and 2009-2012. LDP vote share has mostly remained stable since the 1996 general election under the mixed member majoritarian representation system

391 (Nakakita 2020: 98)—but this can give a false impression of the party's electoral security in 392 recent years, as the number of absolute votes won by the party has also remained largely the 393 same since the party's *loss* in the 2009 general election. LDP dominance post-2012, then, is 394 different to its pre-2009 dominance—buttressed by low voter turnout coupled with a compara- 395 tively high rate of partisanship loyalty for the LDP, and arguably much more dependent on the 396 electoral appeal of the party' s leader. There was a significant exodus of rank-and-file members 397 from the party after the 2009 defeat, revealing the extent to which the LDP's ability to sustain 398 its national party apparatus depended on it being in government.

399 After the LDP returned to power in 2012 under the leadership of Abe Shinzō, almost all of the 400 challenges the party faced came from the left, with left-wing and centre-left opposition parties 401 driving resistance to various aspects of the government's programme (most notably national 402 security related laws) but failing to achieve any electoral breakthroughs in the following decade. 403 One reason for the LDP's relative electoral security despite its historically low vote numbers is 404 that it maintained a strong hold on right-wing voters; where the left-wing opposition was splin- 405 tered among various parties and factions, Abe, as a right-wing leader who was close to various 406 nationalist groups and actors, was a popular figure who held together the country's various right- 407 wing interest groups and factions. The only serious challenge to emerge from the right during 408 this era was *Nippon Ishin no Kai*, a regional party based in the Osaka area which combined 409 a centre-right policy platform broadly compatible with the LDP's with a strong local identity in 410 an area that has traditionally bristled at Tokyo's dominance of Japanese politics, and ultimately 411 displaced the LDP as the main conservative political force within that region. Ishin's ability to 412 topple the LDP's control of the Osaka region hinted at the fragility of the party's dominance, but 413 was not replicated elsewhere—although another centre-right regional party, *Tomin First no Kai*, 414 did also displace the LDP's control of local politics in Tokyo itself, albeit without translating that 415 success to the national level.

416 Abe left office in September 2020 citing health issues, but remained active behind the scenes 417 of the LDP, and the unpopularity of the pandemic-era Suga Yoshihide administration which 418 followed led to speculation that he would attempt a third comeback as Prime Minister (having 419 previously served a largely disastrous one-year term in 2006-2007). While Abe denied having 420 any ambition to return to the premiership, the rumors continued up to his death in June 2022, 421 when he was assassinated while giving a speech in support of an LDP candidate for the Upper

422 House election (the same election in which Kamiya would win Sanseitō's first seat in the Diet).
423 His death created a vacuum on the right-wing of the LDP. The party leader, Kishida Fumio (who
424 remains Prime Minister at the time of writing in August 2024), is considered to be from the more
425 liberal centre-right wing of the party, and although he was elected with the support of right-wing
426 lawmakers, he is now widely seen to have failed to defend the party's right-wing from successive
427 scandals that have rocked it following Abe's death, including a recent financial scandal that saw
428 Abe's former faction within the party being formally dissolved.

429 In the vacuum created by Abe's absence and the lack of a clear successor as the figurehead of
430 the right-wing movement, various niche parties have emerged to the right of the LDP—including
431 Sanseitō and the aforementioned Japanese Conservative Party (Hoshutō), which is headed by
432 popular right-wing author and former Abe friend and confidante Hyakuta Naoki. These parties
433 openly accuse the LDP of having abandoned Abe's vision and ambition for Japan, pointing to
434 examples such as the passing of (heavily watered down) legislation recognising the existence
435 of LGBT individuals or the government's support for Ukraine following its invasion by Russia as
436 examples of the Kishida administration abandoning Abe's intended path. Sanseitō in particular
437 paints these events, along with conspiracy-framed issues such as the planned ratification of the
438 WHO's pandemic treaty, as examples of the government bowing to the wishes and demands of
439 the globalist conspiracy which, it implies, Abe was working behind the scenes to oppose and
440 overthrow.

441 This first factor is crucial to Sanseitō's success in the post-COVID environment. Without a
442 right-wing vacuum in the LDP, we might reasonably expect a party like Sanseitō to follow the
443 well-worn path of other right-wing niche parties in Japan—emerging in response to a specific
444 event (the pandemic, in this case), making some noise for a short period of time, and then
445 seeing its leadership absorbed into the LDP, making it clear in hindsight that the party itself
446 was largely designed as a way to springboard LDP political careers for these figures. In the
447 wake of Abe's assassination and the supposed centrist turn of the LDP which followed, however,
448 the weakness of the ruling party (from a right-wing perspective) created an unusual opportunity
449 for a niche party to grow and persist, building a significant campaigning and alternative media
450 infrastructure of its own and seeking to mount more significant electoral challenges down the
451 line.

4.2 Factor II: The Electoral System

The second factor that we consider important to Sanseitō's success thus far is Japan's electoral system. The country uses a variety of different electoral systems at different levels. Focusing on those levels where Sanseitō has won seats, the Upper House elections have simple majoritarian elections in a combination of single- and multi-member districts, topped up through the D'Hondt method with a national-level party list proportional representation ballot, while local assembly elections use simple majorities in very large multi-member districts. These systems allow parties with relatively low levels of support distributed widely around the country to win representation. In the 2022 Upper House election, Sanseitō won a 3.5 per cent share of the vote in the PR ballot, giving it a single seat. In the local assembly elections the following year, Sanseitō won 100 seats; here too, the majoritarian system (which in some cases elects as many as 50 candidates based simply on ranking their absolute vote counts) can let fringe candidates win on extremely low vote totals, giving a new party widespread political representation across the country even if its actual influence in those local assemblies is extremely limited.

Sanseitō has made the most of its limited electoral successes so far, highlighting the legitimacy which it receives from these elected positions and its intention to build upon them to further representation. Kamiya, in particular, has been very active in his role as an Upper House member, often asking questions in the Diet on issues that are important to the right-wing (albeit themselves quite conspiratorial) such as the supposed plot by Chinese nationals to buy up land in strategically important locations in Japan. He has also reached out to lawmakers from other parties who have expressed views sympathetic to conspiracy beliefs, convening cross-party discussion groups on topics such as the WHO pandemic treaty—allowing him to carefully tread a line between projecting serious political legitimacy and showing his party rank-and-file that he is actively working against the conspiracies Sanseitō promotes.

Although Sanseitō's vote shares in 2022 and 2023 were good results for a brand new party, in most countries' systems its performance would not have been close to enough to win seats. This helps to explain the "Trojan Horse" strategy adopted by other parties mentioned above; even in the earliest stages, these parties needed to court mainstream respectability in order to achieve electoral breakthroughs, whereas that challenge for Sanseitō arguably lies further down the line as it attempts to grow its representation at various levels of government. Perhaps the closest parallel to Japan's system in this regard is the proportional representation system of the

Netherlands, and indeed, the Netherlands' FvD is arguably the European political party that most closely parallels Sanseitō's explicit embrace of conspiracy theories, suggesting that these types of electoral systems act to shift the strategic calculus on revealing conspiracy beliefs.

4.3 Factor III: Strategic Constraints on Mainstream Parties

The final factor which we consider to have led to Sanseitō's early success is also related to the Liberal Democratic Party, but is specifically to do with constraints that Japan's political system places on the messaging strategy of the LDP. In several other countries, mainstream political parties—even those which were in government at the time of the pandemic—were seen to adopt certain aspects of conspiracy theory rhetoric around COVID-19. These may include promotion without evidence of the "lab leak" hypothesis, dog-whistle messaging on vaccine safety, repeating debunked claims about mask-wearing, and so on. In some cases ruling parties even alluded to pandemic conspiracy theories even as their own public health authorities were trying to persuade citizens to get vaccinated—this was the case in the United States in the closing months of the Trump administration, for example. In such cases, parties arguably felt free to "play both sides" because they were aware that the cyclical nature of politics would find them in opposition relatively soon—so in experimenting with such conspiracy theories, they were testing the waters for opposition messaging. Moreover, the public in most countries see clear divisions between the party in charge and the mechanisms of government itself, as expressed clearly by conspiracy theorists' use of the term "Deep State" to refer to government agencies and workers they consider to be acting beyond the control of elected officials.

Japan is an unusual outlier in this regard, precisely because of the long-term dominance of the LDP mentioned above. The LDP has no expectation of being in opposition at any point in the future, and certainly does not plan for such an eventuality in the near future, so its messaging must be consistent with the idea that it will be the party of government for the long term. Moreover, very long-term rule by the LDP has effectively made the party synonymous with government functions, and while some political leaders have attempted to use populist rhetoric to mobilise anti-elite sentiment against government bureaucrats (Fahey, Hino, and Pekkanen 2021), it is not clear that Japanese voters accept the distinction between the ruling party and the functions of its government. Consequently, LDP lawmakers hinting at anti-vaccine conspiracies while the government pushed an extensive public vaccination program would risk being seen as disloyal

and off-message to an extent that was not necessarily true for ruling party lawmakers in other countries.

This combination of factors created a natural sense of message discipline over the pandemic within the LDP, which consequently left the issues focused on by Sanseitō—i.e., pandemic conspiracy theories—almost completely untouched by mainstream parties. This contrasts with cases like the USA or UK, where mainstream right-wing parties at least hinted towards sympathies with conspiracy beliefs—a problematic fact in many ways, but with the effect of denying completely untouched ground to would-be issue innovators seeking to build a political force around the burgeoning conspiracy theory communities that sprang up during that era.

4.4 Parallels with Overseas Cases

Although we have highlighted some factors above which we believe to explain the different background context to Sanseitō compared to overseas niche parties in this sphere, it is worth pointing out that there are also a large number of factors in common between these cases. Declining trust in public institutions and mass media is common around the world, with Japan only being an outlier in terms of the slow pace of this process, not its inexorable direction of movement. The Balkanisation of online media spaces that has created alternative media ecosystems in which ideas like conspiracy theories can spread unchecked is also universal; as, of course, is the anger felt among some groups at perceived government overreach in pandemic-era policies. Consequently, it is not the belief of the populace in pandemic-related or anti-globalist conspiracy theories that we posit to be different between Japan and other countries—this core aspect appears, unfortunately, to be quite universal, albeit with significant local differences in the exact content of the theories themselves. Rather, it is the context for right-wing niche party formation that shows important differences; and even in that regard, it may be Sanseitō's choice of strategy, rather than the context itself, that has been the most important factor in its success and its ability to openly use conspiracy beliefs in its messaging.

5 Conclusion

The idea that online conspiracy theory movements may coalesce as political parties capable of mounting effective campaigns, growing their membership, and winning elected representation, is undoubtedly a troubling one to many people. The ideas and viewpoints espoused in the

542 worldviews of such groups are not only paranoid; they are often extremely racist, anti-semitic,
543 and bigoted, and provide frameworks of belief which are designed to justify various forms of
544 violence against out-groups. While the use of conspiracy theory rhetoric by political actors has
545 risen in recent years, there have been a number of constraints and limitations placed on this
546 by the costs of such a strategy—including rejection by a majority of citizens and the risk of
547 other political actors placing a cordon around parties or individuals seen to endorse extremist
548 conspiracy theories.

549 Sanseitō presents a case of a party that has bypassed some of these limitations both through
550 its own strategic approaches and due to certain specific features of the context in which the
551 party was created. Through the creation of an alternative media ecosystem based on influ-
552 encer marketing strategy, the weaponisation of platform attempts to combat misinformation,
553 and the construction of a membership pipeline and volunteering system designed to capitalise
554 upon conspiracy believers' sense of imminent threat and mission, Sanseitō has innovated on
555 existing digital party structures and turned aspects of its conspiracy worldview to its advantage.
556 While the contextual elements of Sanseitō's founding—the weakness and strategic restrictions
557 placed on the right-wing mainstream party, the LDP, and the Japanese electoral system which
558 allows small niche parties with distributed support bases the possibility of winning electoral
559 representation—may not be replicated elsewhere in full, many of the strategies the party has
560 pursued could be replicated in other national contexts by a similarly well-organised and moti-
561 vated party.

562 The story of Sanseitō remains in its early stages, however, and it remains to be seen whether
563 the party will be able to turn its fundraising and volunteering successes into further electoral
564 success down the line. Interest in conspiracy theories may naturally wane in a post-pandemic
565 environment, and the next electoral contest it is likely to face—a Lower House election—has
566 a higher bar for winning seats, which Sanseitō may struggle to surmount. Like many political
567 movements based in online organising, there is also an ever-present risk of splinter and schism,
568 with many of the party's original founders already having left due to conflicts with Kamiya and
569 other senior members. The possibility remains that despite Sanseitō's unusual trajectory thus
570 far, its story will end in the same way as Japanese niche parties generally do—in obscurity, either
571 through collapse or through absorption into a mainstream party, although given the overtly
572 conspiratorial nature of its rhetoric even the latter possibility, absorption, would be a significant

event. With a Lower House election likely to be held later in 2024, the next chapter in this unusual niche party's development should become clear in the coming months.

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