Introduction

Since the early postwar period, the hopes and frustrations of Japanese consumer organizations have been conveyed through rich and revealing metaphors drawn from Japanese history. In one of the oldest and most colorful examples, housewives in their consuming capacity are compared with the distressed wives of feudal times who would seek refuge from their oppressive husbands and await divorces at special Buddhist temples known as *kakekomidera*.[1] Like the hapless wives of old who had been abused by their spouses, early postwar consumers frequently fell victim to the unscrupulous practices of powerful business interests. Unlike their historical counterparts, however, disgruntled consumers lacked a place where they could "run to" (*kakekomu*) for refuge.

The establishment of a consumer *kakekomidera* at the national governmental level[2] that would address the specific concerns of consumers while giving them routinized access to the policymaking system was one of the primary political objectives of early postwar consumer organizations. After a few halfhearted attempts to address their demands during the early 1960s, the government finally responded in 1968 with the institutionalization of a comprehensive system of consumer protection policymaking and administration that accorded consumer advocates opportunities to articulate the consumer interest at the national level. Advocates, however, roundly criticized the new system for being biased toward producers and providing consumers with little more than symbolic representation in the policy process. For all intents and purposes, they argued, consumers had been "turned away at the gate" (*monzenbarai*) of the national political system.

Although one must always discount the possibility of poetic license in such metaphorical appraisals of the political, it is well known that Japanese consumer representatives lack both direct inroads into the national policy-making system and the financial and political resources needed to open those inroads. It is also common knowledge—thanks in part to the laments of American trade officials intent on opening Japanese domestic markets to more foreign imports and investment—that consumers' economic interests have often been overlooked by the country's pro-producer political system. Consider Japan's inefficient distribution system, its notoriously high consumer and land prices, and, in many sectors, the high incidence of cartels, to cite just a few examples.

With evidence like this, it is small wonder that private consumer advocates often portray both themselves and their constituents as victims of businesses and their political and bureaucratic allies. Popular analysts of Japanese consumerism, meanwhile, have taken these views one step further by depicting the movement as beholden to producers. Karel van Wolferen, for example, argues in *The Enigma of Japanese Power* that consumer organizations operate against consumers' economic interests by "zealously working to keep food prices high and to limit consumer choice to domestic produce" in accordance with postwar state goals (1990:52–53). George Fields, a veteran Japan watcher and long-time Tōkyō resident, echoes these sentiments in *Gucci on the Ginza* by marveling at the absence of protest against high consumer prices and asking rhetorically, "Japanese consumer advocates, where are you?" (1989:134).

Japanese nationals, as well, are prone to movement bashing. In a *Chūō kōron* article, one critic likens consumer organizations to a bunch of clowns (*piero*), bumbling representatives of an otherwise sophisticated consuming public (Domon 1989). Even the country's leading politicians have been known to comment on the alleged failure of private consumer advocates to act on the best interests of their constituents, as I discovered for myself a few years ago at a meeting in New York between a top-ranking Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politician and a group of scholars. In a discussion on regulatory reform, this well-known conservative leader asserted that deregulation was proceeding slowly because consumer representatives had failed to openly support the process! "I invited consumer advocates to contact and work with the government on this issue," he remarked to the group while shaking his head in disbelief, "but nobody came!"

Clearly, the stereotypical view of Japanese consumer advocates is that they are either victims or handmaidens of powerful producers and politically

incapable of representing the consuming public in national political processes. Like all stereotypes, this one contains a few grains of truth. Japanese advocates do, for instance, behave in ways that appear downright inimical to the economic interests of consumers, as American critics are quick to point out. At the same time, however, these stereotypes blind us to the fact that consumer organizations have achieved some of their policy-related goals *despite* their resource deficiencies, limited presence in national policymaking circles, and idiosyncratic behavior. Over the past three decades, for instance, advocates were instrumental in tightening the country's antitrust regulations, introducing some of the world's most stringent food safety standards, and enacting a product liability law. If consumer representatives have indeed been victimized or co-opted by producers and "turned away at the gate" of the national policy process, how can we account for these policy-related achievements?

Consumers in Politics: The Literature

The literature on Japanese public-interest policymaking offers us few clues to this puzzle. Chalmers Johnson's "developmental state" model (1982), for example, dismisses societal interests as significant political actors in Japan by portraying an economic policy process in which pro-producer bureaucrats are firmly in control. According to this argument, we should expect the consumer policy process to be governed by prescient bureaucrats acting in the long-term best interests of the economy. While recognizing the leading role played by bureaucrats in the consumer policymaking system, I challenge this point of view with evidence that consumer policy is occasionally introduced *against* the wishes of some of Japan's economic bureaucrats and in ways that inflict costs—albeit modest—on producers.

Scholars who accord a greater role for politicians in the policy process also contribute to misunderstandings about consumer protection policymaking. Kent Calder (1988), for example, argues that public-interest policies are granted as concessions by LDP politicians during periods of political and economic crisis, whereas routine policymaking is dominated by private interests like industry. Although it is certainly true that Japanese politicians are more likely to give in to consumer and other societal demands when the political going gets rough, this model overlooks the fact that some consumer-related policy is introduced during periods of relative political stability and with significant input from consumer representatives.

Margaret McKean (1993), finally, contends that public-interest policies are the product of a pro-producer corporatist system consisting of bureaucrats, conservative politicians, and organized private interests. As a result of long-term time horizons and electoral and other incentives, these actors anticipate the demands of poorly organized societal groups by introducing policies that serve the long-term interests of those groups. While this model explains a great deal about who participates directly in the consumer policy process and why, it underestimates the extent of indirect consumer participation in the policy process, levels of conflict between consumer organizations and mainstream policymakers in that process, and the degree to which the politically "weak" can influence decision making.

The literature on the Japanese consumer movement also underestimates the role and impact of consumer advocates in the national consumer policy process. In a 1992 study of consumer-producer relations and their implication for Japan's external trade ties, for example, David Vogel notes that consumer representatives have allied with producers to promote agricultural protectionism at the expense of more competitive consumer prices at home. By arguing that "Japanese consumer organizations do not represent an important political challenge to the interests of . . . Japanese producers" and that "a disproportionate amount of their criticisms of business are criticisms of the practices of foreign businesses," Vogel ignores those many occasions when consumer representatives held domestic businesses to the very same product safety standards that were recently imposed on foreign producers (D. Vogel 1992:146). Put simply, consumer organizations may be much more willing to cooperate with business representatives than American organizations usually are, but they are not nearly as beholden to producers as David Vogel would have us believe.

Other studies of the movement make important contributions to our knowledge of Japanese consumerism while raising questions for further research. My own work (Maclachlan 1995) and Steven Vogel's 1999 study of the implications of movement behavior for rational-choice theories, for example, attack many of the stereotypes that shroud our understanding of Japanese consumer activism by showing that the movement's support for agricultural protectionism and the retention of regulatory controls over the economy are perfectly rational responses (S. Vogel 1999) to the movement's historical trajectories and alliances with other actors in the polity (Maclachlan 1995; Vogel 1999). Vogel also points out that in areas like food and product safety, consumer representatives have made substantial gains in the policy realm. He does not, however, explain exactly how those gains were made.

Other authors highlight the implications of consumer activism for grassroots citizen participation in politics. Maurine A. Kirkpatrick, for instance, correctly identifies the upsurge in consumer activism during the 1960s and early 1970s as a manifestation of a burgeoning political assertiveness among Japanese citizens and, by implication, a reflection of the general public's growing intolerance of the government's overwhelmingly pro-business policies (Kirkpatrick 1975). Kirkpatrick's work challenges the stereotypical view that consumer organizations do not reflect the wishes of the broader consuming public while complementing the research of scholars who have explored Japanese social movements as alternative channels of interest articulation for ordinary citizens (see Broadbent 1998; Huddle and Reich 1987; Krauss and Simcock 1980; McKean 1981; Upham, 1987). Kirkpatrick does not, however, explore the myriad ways in which the consumer movement articulates grassroots interests or, for that matter, influences national policymaking.

The subject of citizen participation in politics also permeates recent studies by Robin M. LeBlanc (1999) and Joyce Gelb and Margarita Estevez-Abe (1998) on the Seikatsu Club Cooperative, one of the most progressive local consumer cooperatives and politically active citizen movements in Japan. These works are among the first to examine this wing of the consumer cooperative movement and are fascinating contributions to the study of women in Japanese politics. Neither study, however, explains how consumer-oriented organs compete with mainstream interest groups in their efforts to influence government policy.

Whereas the Kirkpatrick, Gelb and Estevez-Abe, and LeBlanc studies concentrate on consumer organizations at the grassroots level, Sheldon Garon (1997) takes a more systemic view of Japanese consumerism. Garon analyzes the cooperation of both prewar and early postwar women's/consumer organizations with government authorities in order to abolish legal prostitution and to promote rational consumption patterns, high savings rates, and other state goals. By showing persuasively how consumer organizations have functioned as vehicles of social control by the state, Garon provides new and compelling insights into that gray area between state and society that has long intrigued Japan scholars. It is important to note, however, another dimension to the consumer story that falls outside the purview of Garon's research paradigm, a dimension marked by open and sustained conflict between representative organizations and state authorities when their goals diverge. The details of that dimension, I contend, are integral to understanding the contemporary consumer protection policymaking process and the movement's influence over that process.

The Argument in Brief

If the popular and academic literature proves any one thing in common, it is that we still know very little about the nature of consumer movement activism in the policy process and the impact of constituent organizations on policies relating to the consumer. What, for example, do consumer activists do in order to influence policymakers, and why do they do it? Under what circumstances can consumer activists expect to wring concessions from a policy process that is clearly biased in favor of producers? When, in other words, do consumer strategies fail, and when do they succeed?

The key to both questions, I believe, lies not so much in access by movement leaders to financial and political resources as in the nature of political institutions at both the national and local levels. Strategically, consumer representatives have learned to compensate for their resource deficiencies and lack of direct influence over national policymaking by forging alternative, nonelectoral channels of interest articulation at the local level, where institutional opportunities for political participation are more numerous. Movement representatives activate these channels at various stages of the national policymaking process to mobilize public opinion behind specific policy options and then direct the indicators of that opinion to the center in an effort to sway national policymakers. As such, the localities can be viewed as modern-day "temples for seeking refuge" (*kakekomidera*) that serve as political and bureaucratic havens for disgruntled consumers who have been "turned away at the gate" (*monzenbarai*) of national officialdom, as well as back channels to national corridors of decision-making power.

When the political conditions are right, mobilizing public opinion through local institutions can have a positive impact on national policy outputs. Put simply, movement strategies succeed in the face of political opposition when the alliance of conservative politicians, bureaucrats, and business representatives—the movers and shakers of Japanese consumer protection policymaking—is diffuse and fraught with dissension. But when that alliance is limited in size and based on consensus, consumer representatives fail in their objectives no matter how well endowed in political and financial resources they may be. While the long-term configurations of both local and national institutions may shape the strategies adopted by consumer organizations, in other words, the overall effectiveness of those strategies is ultimately a function of short-term changes in those configurations at the national level.

The story of consumer politics in postwar Japan is replete with examples of how the politically disadvantaged can leverage small but significant concessions from state and economic interests, that is, how diffuse societal interests are incorporated into Japan's pro-producer polity. Accordingly, this study identifies new and innovative ways in which those interests can influence the outcomes of Japan's policymaking process, paying particular attention to local opportunities for citizen activism. In the process, it depicts a style of public-interest policymaking that, though rooted in corporatist arrangements encompassing state and economic interests, is more vulnerable to pluralist pressures from below than previously thought.

The Plan of the Book

For purposes of analysis and simplicity, I have divided the chapters of this book into two parts, the first of which explores the sources and evolution of Japanese consumer movement strategies from institutional, comparative, and historical perspectives. In chapter 1, I critique both the resource mobilization and the political opportunity structure approaches to social movements on the grounds that neither gives us enough analytical tools to assess the behavior and influence of consumer advocates in policymaking systems. I then combine aspects of these two approaches with insights gleaned from historical institutionalism to fashion an inductive analytical framework through which I address the major questions of this study and illuminate the rich details of postwar Japanese consumer advocacy. This approach assesses the behavior and impact of consumer movement organizations in the policy process largely—but not exclusively—from the perspective of the institutions making up that process. More specifically, it views institutions as filters through which socioeconomic and political developments and policy change can affect the resource configurations and hence strategies and policy-related impact of consumer organizations. This approach also assumes that institutional configurations are themselves subject to changes—changes that in turn can influence a movement's access to resources and its subsequent behavior in the policy process. Chapter 2 applies this framework to the American and British consumer movements and, in the process, proposes two contending models of consumer protection policymaking that serve as points of comparison for the Japan-specific chapters that follow.

In keeping with the historical focus of my analytical framework, chapters 3 and 4 trace the early postwar evolution of Japanese consumer organizations

and show how shifting institutional contexts have influenced the resources at the movement's disposal and hence the nature of consumer participation in both national and local politics. I also use this opportunity to explore Japan's distinctive consumer identity and to explain some of the idiosyncratic features of the organized movement that have intrigued Japan watchers over the years, including the predominance of women, the willingness of consumer activists to cooperate with both government and producer groups, the movement's support of agricultural protectionism, and opposition to deregulation, to cite just a few examples. The section ends with a chapter on the post-1968 consumer protection policymaking process and a detailed outline of the strategies employed by consumer representatives over the past three decades in their efforts to influence the direction of national policy. These strategies focus primarily on the activation or manipulation of public opinion through the institutions of local government. Throughout these last three chapters, I measure movement developments against broader trends in Japanese politics and compare them with those of consumer movements abroad and environmental organizations at home.

Before progressing, an important caveat is in order. With more than 4,600 consumer organs at the national and local levels and almost 1,200 consumer cooperatives (Keizaikikakuchō 1997:3), the contemporary consumer movement is an extremely large and varied network of consumer groups and organizations.[3] Since my purpose in this book is to assess the behavior and impact of consumer *advocates*[4] in the national policy process, I concentrate on the activities of private national and prefectural organizations that regularly participate in policy processes and legislative campaigns. Although I offer a few snapshots of local and other types of consumer organs, this book does not systematically address this vibrant and eclectic dimension of the organized movement except when national organizations link up with those organs in pursuit of common goals.

Whereas part 1 explores the evolution of consumer movement strategies in the political sphere, part 2 explains variations in the impact of post-1968 strategies on national policymaking. To that end, chapters 6 through 8 show how the strategies outlined at the end of chapter 5 were applied in the following issue-specific cases: the revision of the Antimonopoly Law during the mid-1970s, the 1983 deregulation of safety standards governing synthetic food additives, and the 1994 enactment of a product liability law based on the concept of strict liability. I chose these cases for several reasons. First, since each is characterized by open and protracted conflict between con-

sumer organizations and business interests over how best to fulfill the consumer interest,[5] they serve as ideal laboratories for studying the circumstances in which private consumer organizations can wrest concessions from powerful business and government actors.[6] Second, since the cases involve variations in both access to movement resources and political power alignments at the national level, they enable us to test the proposition that politics in specific institutional contexts, rather than access to resources, ultimately determines the impact of movement organizations on policymaking. In the product liability and antimonopoly movements, for example, consumer organizations mobilized much smaller movements than they did in the anti-deregulation movement, yet they managed to accomplish considerably more in terms of policy outputs. To repeat, the key to this divergence in outcomes lies in the level of cohesiveness in pro-business power alliances: in the antitrust and product liability cases, the decision-making processes were diffuse and disorganized and hence vulnerable to outside influence in the form of movement-activated public opinion, whereas in the deregulation case, power was concentrated in a relatively small group of like-minded policymakers who were able to control the procedures and outcomes of the decision-making process despite the onslaught of public opposition.

Finally, these cases speak volumes about the structure of the consumer protection policymaking process and the quality of democratic participation in that process. In keeping with this latter point, and as befits a movement that places great store in political symbolism, consumer organizations have been careful to package all their political campaigns in the language of five universal consumer rights: the right to safety, the right to choose, the right to be informed, the right to redress, and the right to be heard. The campaigns chronicled here are a representative cross section of those rights, each of which has been overlooked—if not blatantly abused—by industry and governmental officials at specific points during the postwar period. The antitrust case, for example, involved movement efforts to enhance the right to a range of product choice at competitive prices in the marketplace, and the anti-deregulation and product liability cases addressed the right to product safety. The right to redress was a key objective in the product liability campaign, while the right to be informed was upheld to varying degrees in all three cases.

Last but not least, advocates in each of these cases pursued an objective that many regarded as a precondition for all other consumer rights: the institutionalization of the right to be heard in both business and governmental circles. In every case, consumer organizations articulated their demands with

reference to the virtues of participatory democracy and chastised their national government for colluding with business interests during decision-making processes and excluding private representatives of the consumer interest from the corridors of national power. In this way, the politics of consumer protection in Japan is as much a normative statement on the condition of the political process itself and the representation of diffuse societal interests in that system as it is competition between consumer organizations and their business-oriented opponents for policy-related concessions.

And with this, we return full circle to the opening theme of this chapter. The significant postwar accomplishments of the organized consumer movement notwithstanding, advocates and their allies are still frustrated by the manner in which the interests of consumers are reflected in the Japanese public policy process. Accordingly, advocates continue to demand the introduction of a more responsive consumer-oriented bureaucratic space in the preexisting public policy process—a *kakekomidera*, in other words, that would guarantee consumer representatives direct access to decision-making processes. As I argue in the ninth and concluding chapter, at the turn of the century there are signs that a few of the movement's demands are finally being met, a development that bodes well not only for the future representation of consumers in the Japanese political system but for other diffuse societal interests as well.