

Chapter 2

Electoral Campaigning in Japan

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Japan is the oldest democratic polity in East Asia. Liberal democracy was introduced to Japan in 1945. The nation's electoral system and laws have been modified several times since then.

In this chapter, the author introduces the historical development of the nation's electoral system and campaign practices. In the early 1990s, major law revisions, societal and other factors brought about several notable changes in Japan's electoral campaigns and in the voting behavior of the electorate. In the final part of this chapter, the author explains how and why these manifold changes occurred, and how it affected the political parties' electoral campaign strategies.

The prewar era: The emergence of political ads and catchall parties

The first experience of Japanese politicians with electoral campaigning dates back to the 1870s when the Meiji government, which was led by ex-samurai political leaders primarily from the former feudal domains (*han-batsu*), was determined to promote industrialization and to build a modern nation state with a strong centralized bureaucracy. There was widespread resistance against the government's intentions and soon a powerful movement, the Freedom and People's Rights Movement, emerged. The movement was based in rural areas and led by wealthy, independent farmers and manufacturers (Watanuki, 1991: 50). In March 1880, some 100 representatives of over 87,000 supporters established the Union for the Establishment of a Parliament. In the same year, members of the union founded the Liberal Party and two years later the Constitutional Progressive Party (*rikken kaishinto*) (Inoue, 2001: 363–4). It was about that time that political parties began to use newspaper advertisements to communicate with the general population. The ads attacked government policies, announced party platforms, and asked the people to attend political gatherings. The number of political advertisements increased steadily. For instance, in March 1881, a few months after the formation of the Liberal Party, several dozen political ads could be found in daily newspapers, such as the Tokyo Daily News (*tokyo nichinichi shinbun*) (Lin, 1993: 9; Inoue, 2001: 356).

Not only political parties and organizations placed ads in newspapers attacking the government and requesting reforms; private companies too used ads to voice

their grievances and to ask the public to join their protests against government policies (Lin, 1993: 9).

The deflation policy of Matsukato Masayoshi, then minister of finance, improved the economic situation of the country at the expense of the farmers, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Small farmers were most affected by the policy: in 1883, more than 30,000 small farmers went bankrupt; a year later, the number doubled and in 1885 over 100,000 small farmers lost everything they possessed (Inoue, 2001: 374). The civil rights movement, consequently, gained in power. Large protests and unrest followed. In 1894, the movement lost momentum due to internal conflicts and government suppression.

In 1889, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan came into force. A year later, the first parliamentary elections were held. According to the constitution, the parliament (Imperial Diet) consisted of two chambers: the upper house, the House of Peers, comprised the members of the royal family, the orders of nobility, and those wealthy citizens directly appointed by the emperor. The lower house, the House of Representatives, consisted of 300 members who were supposed to represent the ordinary citizens. The election law stipulated that all members of the lower house be elected in single-seat constituencies by majority vote. Male taxpayers (more than 15 yen) aged 25 years or older were eligible to vote. The right to candidacy was restricted to male taxpayers aged 30 years or older. Thus, only 11 percent of the population had the right to vote. About 97 percent of the electorate were big landowners (Inoue, 2001: 413). In the first election, about 110 seats were taken by the Koin Club, which was founded shortly before the election by former members of the Liberal Party. The Progressive Party (*kaishinto*) and organizations thereof captured 50 seats, and the Kyushu Progressive Party (*kyushu kaishinto*) 19 seats (Inoue, 2001: 413). These parties were said to belong to the progressive forces opposing the Meiji government. Although they had a clear majority in parliament, cabinets were formed according to the wishes of the emperor and his advisors. The aim of the opposition was thus to amend the constitution requesting that the majority party forms the cabinet. Moreover, amendments should also have made the cabinet responsible to parliament rather than to the emperor as stipulated by the constitution. The government responded with new measures to curb the activities of the opposition. The publication of magazines, books, newspapers and pamphlets, the holding of political rallies, and the formation of political organizations required government approval. Political activities and electoral campaigns were thus severely restricted (Inoue, 2001: 414).

In 1900, the election law was amended. Suffrage was extended by lowering the amount of tax a voter had to pay from 15 yen to ten yen. Furthermore, candidates had to contest multi-member constituencies (single non-transferable vote).

Between 1900 and 1932, two newly founded political parties dominated the political scene: the Seiyukai and the Minseito. Both parties were conservative and consisted of notables in rural areas, bureaucrats in the government and newly emerging business leaders. In 1918, Takashi Hara of the Seiyukai became prime minister. It was the first time that a cabinet was formed based on a majority in the

lower house, which marked the beginning of the so-called Taisho Democracy. Until 1932, when Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai (Minseito) was assassinated, the lower house of parliament and the political parties were the de facto supreme bodies of government (Watanuki, 1991: 51). Under Hara, electoral reforms were carried out. Hopefuls now had to contest single-seat constituencies. Suffrage was again extended by lowering the amount of tax voters had to pay (from ten to three yen).

During the following years, the two main parties developed into catchall parties that were financially supported by the prewar financial and industrial conglomerates, the *zaibatsu* (Watanuki, 1991: 51). Electoral support for the two parties in national elections accounted for about 90 percent of the vote, allowing them to capture about 95 percent of the seats in the lower house. Although various socialist parties emerged in the 1920s due to the increasing numbers of industrial workers and social problems caused by the government's pro-capitalist social and economic policies, the socialists could not turn this social cleavage into votes. In prewar Japan, class cleavages failed to affect the partisan alignment for several reasons: first, the electoral law prevented socialist parties from obtaining votes from their clientele, since only privileged people could vote. Second, even after universal manhood suffrage was introduced in 1925, socialist parties garnered less than 10 percent of the vote. Why? The two conservative parties controlled the expanding urban population and the lower-class in rural areas through community, kinship and extended family ties as well as the internalized, traditional value of deference (Watanuki, 1991: 53). Third, communists and all other left-wing socialists were the target of ruthless suppression by the state. When universal manhood suffrage was introduced in 1925, the Peace Preservation Law was passed shortly afterwards. The law imposed severe penalties for any attempt to overthrow the *kokutai*, the principal of the state. In 1928, the year in which the first election with universal manhood suffrage was held, the law was revised with the maximum penalty becoming capital punishment (Watanuki, 1991: 53). Fourth, apart from the societal networks, the two conservative parties made excessive use of Japan's print media. In 1928, candidates of the two parties placed an enormous amount of political ads in Japan's daily newspapers and ran a capital-intensive electoral campaign (Lin, 1993: 10). After the 1932 assassination of Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai, the influence of the military grew tremendously and, in 1940, all political parties were dissolved.

The postwar era

After Japan's surrender in 1945, a series of political reforms was carried out at the request of the Supreme Commander of Allied Power, General Douglas MacArthur. The House of Peers reopened sessions in the autumn of 1945 to pass revisions of the election law. Under the new law, every citizen aged 20 years or older had the right to vote. Moreover, the district magnitude of almost all electoral constituencies was enlarged, reducing the threshold for candidates to be elected. Political parties re-established themselves at the end of 1945 in preparation for the first national

election in postwar Japan. The liberal faction of the former Seiyukai formed the Liberal Party (*jiyuto*). Several politicians of the Seiyukai and Minseito established the Japan Progressive Party (*nihon shimpoto*). These two conservative parties were the predecessors of today's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Socialists founded the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), and the communists the Communist Party of Japan (Watanuki, 1991: 55). A new constitution and election law came into effect in 1947. The House of Representatives, the lower house, was given superior decision-making power. The House of Peers was replaced by the House of Councilors, which became the highest organ of state power. The new election law stipulated that members of the lower house be elected under single non-transferable vote in multi-member constituencies.

The first election was held in April 1947. The electorate favored conservative parties over the progressive JSP: out of 464 seats, the conservatives won 234 seats, whereas the socialists could only garner 92 seats and the communists two. Age was a significant factor in determining voting behavior. Older people still felt inclined to support conservative forces. There seemed to be an emotional attachment to the emperor and to traditional values, such as deference and group solidarity. Moreover, the war had tremendously changed the social structure. The damaged industry, demobilization of millions from the armed forces and the repatriation of overseas Japanese caused an expansion in the agrarian population to over 45 percent of the total gainfully engaged population, which was the highest proportion since the 1920s. The land reform (1946–1950) brought social justice to rural areas, significantly decreased the power of the Japan Farmers' Union, and thus caused the re-emergence of support for conservative values in rural areas (Watanuki, 1991: 56–7).

The 1950s: The rise of the socialists and the emergence of the Koenkai

The 1950s experienced a rise in popular support for socialist parties from 21.9 percent (115 seats) in 1952 to 31.2 percent (160 seats) in 1955. Moreover, campaigning as a unified party in 1958, the JSP garnered 166 seats and 32.9 percent of the vote. Support for the conservatives, on the other hand, declined from 66.1 percent (325 seats) in 1952 to 57.8 percent (287 seats) in 1958. This new trend was caused by a shrinking agricultural population (1950: 45.2 percent vs. 1960: 30 percent) and an increase in the number of white-collar and blue-collar workers, as a result of the Korean War boom of the early 1950s and a high economic growth centering on the heavy and chemical industries in the late 1950s. The increasing popularity of the socialists could be observed in various social strata, but was most remarkable among salaried employees (1952: 43 percent and in 1958: 56 percent), those in their 20s and 30s (1952: 37 percent and in 1958: 51 percent), and among the higher educated (1952: 33 percent and in 1958: 46 percent) (Watanuki, 1991: 57). In the 1950s, the confrontation between the conservatives and the socialists was neither a class struggle nor a dispute over capitalism versus socialism. It was merely a confrontation between the conservative forces, who favored 'traditional values of emperor worship, emphasis on hierarchy and harmony, and belief in a militarily strong nation,' and the

socialists, who defended 'modern values,' such as individuality, equality, and world peace (Watanuki, 1991: 60).

The changing Japanese voter and the subsequent drop in popular support, the increasing competition among LDP candidates contesting the same constituency, and the fact that the LDP could not rely on grassroots organizations (unlike the socialists who could rely on unions) brought about changes in electoral campaign strategies of LDP candidates. LDP candidates in the 1958 national election, for instance, began to set up their personal support organizations, the Koenkai. The Koenkai was the campaign invention of the decade and supplemented the LDP's strategy of attacking the JSP on their values. In the 1950s, these personal support organizations were at an experimental stage and an exclusively LDP campaign tool. Within a decade, the Koenkai became an indispensable part of almost any candidate's campaign in Japan. The Koenkai aims at securing long-term grassroots support, the *jiban* (Abe, Shindo and Kawato, 1994: 172–3). It gradually replaced the traditional structure of cultivating and defending the *jiban*. In the past, candidates running in national elections relied on local politicians to mobilize the vote. Local politicians cultivated grassroots support and gave parliamentarians access to it in exchange for supporting local infrastructure projects. Abe, Shindo and Kawato (1994: 173) pointed out that 'in the postwar period, the dependence of regional governments on the central government was high, and, for local politicians, obtaining subsidies and revenue-sharing funds has necessitated appeals to and liaison and cooperation with MPs.' The key difference between the Koenkai and the traditional system of grassroots support networks is that the former has a membership of tens of thousands, whereas the latter has much less. Within a short time, a second key difference emerged. The Koenkai gradually bypassed the local political middle men. It constituted a direct link between the candidates and the individual voters. The Koenkai, indeed, represented 'an innovation in campaign strategies and are to be contrasted with a strategy of reliance on local politicians and other community leaders' (Curtis, 1971: 129). A typical Koenkai has two layers. The core consists of tens of thousands of members. Around the core is an external organizational belt that comprises the leaders of occupational groups and the old structure of local politicians (Abe, Shindo and Kawato, 1994: 174). The core membership tends to be more loyal than the organizational belt. The loyalty of the external belt 'fluctuates sharply along the fortunes of the MP—whether or not he becomes a cabinet minister, whether or not his faction or party is excluded from the ruling coalition—and with the particular policies he tries to push' (Abe, Shindo and Kawato, 1994: 175).

The actions of the Koenkai are designed to strengthen and consolidate a politician's grassroots support. They are permanent institutions rather than ad hoc committees formed right before an election. One of the main activities includes the lobbying at national level to meet the interests of the local community. New streets, bridges, schools, and other facilities need budgetary assistance through the Koenkai. The politicians act as mediators between the community and the national political arena. In other words, Diet members have to make sure that local projects eventually appear in the following year's national budget. The Koenkai also offers

personal services to individuals. These may be political or non-political. Supporters of a politician's Koenkai expect assistance when they are looking for a job or trying to obtain their less gifted child's admission to college. Other services include gifts for weddings, condolence money for funerals, resolutions for traffic accidents, and mediation of quarrels between members of the Koenkai and governmental organizations. Moreover, the Koenkai has to entertain the electorate by organizing social activities, such as movies, baseball games, golf outings, and so forth (Abe, Shindo and Kawato, 1994: 178-9).

The 1960s: The emergence of celebrity politics and TV ads

In 1960, the Japan-US Security Treaty was revised, triggering off Japan's most serious political confrontation. The LDP pushed ahead with the revisions whereas the JSP was strongly opposed to it. The socialists mobilized several hundred thousand people to stage (partly violent) street protests. Diet members either boycotted parliamentary sessions or physically attacked LDP politicians. In some instances, police had to be called in to end the violent clashes in the Diet (Tasker, 1988: 196). Although the JSP succeeded in mobilizing substantial parts of society at that time, it failed to oust the LDP government in subsequent elections. On the contrary, a split within the party led to the formation of the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP). The party performed well in the 1960 national election (17 out of 467 seats and 8.8 percent of the vote) and increased its share of votes and seats throughout the decade. In the 1969 lower house election, the DSP garnered 31 out of 486 seats. Apart from the DSP, another new political party emerged in the 1960s, the Komeito (Clean Government Party). The party is affiliated with the Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist lay organization. In 1962, the Komeito took part in national elections for the first time. It garnered around 14 percent of the vote and 9 out of 127 seats in the upper house election held that year. At the end of the decade, the party obtained 13 out of 126 seats and 23 percent of the vote. In the lower house, the party could double its share of votes to 11 percent in 1969, and increase its share of seats from 25 seats to 47 out of 467 seats. To a large extent, women in their 30s and 40s and those who had previously abstained from voting supported the party (Watanuki, 1991: 63).

The JSP lost considerable support throughout the 1960s. In lower house elections, the share of votes dropped from 27.6 percent in 1960 to 21.4 in 1969. In 1960, the JSP captured 145 seats (out of 467) and in 1969 only 90 seats (out of 486). The JSP could not benefit from the old cleavages of the 1950s, the riots of 1960, the rapid expansion of the secondary and tertiary industries, and the numerous corruption scandals of LDP politicians that surfaced in the late 1960s. The JSP failed partly because the LDP was clever enough to adapt to the changing environment. The Koenkai was part of this adaptation. Moreover, a new campaign strategy developed by the LDP leadership under Hayato Ikeda proved successful: in the lower house election of November 1960, the LDP was aware that only the creation of new issues could minimize the unfavorable effects of the old cleavage (conservatism versus modernization). Ikeda, thus, announced two months before the election the party's

election promise to double Japan's national income. Subsequently, Japan's economy emerged as the issue in every electoral campaign. The party's image was from then on based on the belief that only the LDP could guarantee prosperity and a bright future. At that time, real economic growth was high and it was easy for the LDP to present itself as the party that understood economic issues.

The emergence of new political parties and issues intensified the electoral competition and led to new trends in campaigning. One of these was the involvement of television and the growing importance of the candidate's appearance. The 1967 mayoral election in Tokyo marked the beginning of image politics in Japan. Minobe Ryoukichi (jointly nominated by the LDP and DSP) received overwhelming support at the polls, especially from female voters. Local political analysts attributed most of his electoral success to the fact that he was a very attractive politician with 'a nice smile on his face' (Lin, 1993: 37). Moreover, Minobe Ryoukichi and his campaign team understood very well how to attract mass media outlets. Mass media coverage not only helped him to boost his popularity but also created the belief (image) that he was a national leader rather than only the mayor of Tokyo. Political commentators at that time referred to him as the shadow prime minister who 'could save the world' (Lin, 1993: 38).

In the 1968 upper house election, numerous candidates relied on appearance and their popularity to win the election. In other words, celebrity politics entered Japan's political arena. Ishihara Shintarou, Aojima Yukio, Daimatsu Hirobumi, and Konn Toko are some excellent examples here. Daimatsu Hirobumi was well known to the electorate due to the fact that he led the female Japanese volleyball team to victory in the 1964 Olympic Games. When Daimatsu contested the 1968 election, the electorate associated his candidacy with the victory in 1964 and saw in Daimatsu a national hero. Ishihara Shintarou, a well-known author, adopted a market-segmentation strategy to be successful in elections. He targeted young female voters in his campaign. Whenever he appeared in public, he would be dressed in a white suit with a sticker featuring a yellow sun. Young women described him as 'extremely handsome' and his suits as 'very fashionable' (Lin, 1993: 39). His newspaper ads and posters were very simple. The background color was white, and the only message contained in the ads and posters was that Ishihara Shintarou was contesting the election. His simple ads and posters were eye-catching. This was especially true of the posters since Japanese politicians tend to use a large variety of different colors to attract the attention of the electorate. Thus, among all the colorful posters of the other candidates, Ishihara Shintarou's two-color print was most noticeable. His strategy paid off. He received three million votes, the highest number of votes ever obtained by any politician in Japan. He repeated his success story in the 1972 lower house election (Lin, 1993: 39). In this election, young female voters stated that they supported him because they were attracted to one of his campaign posters featuring him steering a yacht. Ishihara Shintarou was the first politician in Japan who hired professionals from marketing agencies and TV stations to design his entire electoral campaigns.

In the 1969 national election, more and more candidates hired professionals to instruct them on how to look attractive in front of TV cameras. The election was the first to experience political TV commercials. Although the format of political TV ads at that time (actually until the mid-1990s) was rigid and politicians could only introduce themselves to the electorate, the utilization of TV for airing political ads was something new and attracted the electorate (Lin, 1993: 39).

The 1970s and 1980s: The decades of corruption

The 1970s brought about several changes in Japan's political environment. First, the LDP got increasingly involved in serious corruption scandals that even led to the downfall of Kakuei Tanaka's cabinet in 1974, his arrest two years later, and his lower court conviction in 1983. Second, in 1976, the party experienced internal strife that led to the formation of the New Liberal Club (NLC). The LDP lost its majority in the lower house in elections held that year. It captured 249 seats (out of 511 seats). The NLC garnered 4.1 percent of the vote (17 seats). Third, throughout the 1970s, the JSP and DSP could not increase their popularity. The number of elected candidates increased, though. In 1976, the JSP captured 123 out of 511 seats and the DSP 29 seats. A decade earlier, the JSP only garnered 90 seats (out of 486) and the DSP 31 seats.

After the LDP's poor performance in the 1972 lower house elections (1962: 60 percent of seats; 1972: 55 percent of seats), the LDP openly appealed to big business for help, triggering off the *kinken senkyo* (money-dominated elections) syndrome. The nation's largest conglomerates mobilized their employees, their employees' families, their subcontracting companies and so forth to boost support for the LDP. National elections in 1976 marked the beginning of what political analysts termed *kigyo-gurumi senkyo* (campaigning with the total involvement of big business). The involvement of the conglomerates and the mobilization of networks helped the LDP to win back its majority in the lower house. In 1986, the LDP obtained 300 out of 512 seats. Three years earlier, the party captured 250 out of 511 seats. The success did not last long. Japan's political system was once more shaken by an LDP corruption scandal, the Recruit scandal. Recruit was a newly established information company that sold the unlisted shares of a real estate subsidiary to influential figures in political, bureaucratic and business circles in exchange for favors. The public was outraged when it was revealed that high profits were made after the shares had been listed. Japan's cash-consuming political system once again came under severe criticism.

In 1989, a year after the scandal, upper house elections proved disastrous for the LDP. The LDP lost half of the number of seats it had obtained in the previous election, whereas the JSP doubled its share. What is more important here is the fact that the LDP lost its majority in the upper house. The Recruit scandal was one reason for the LDP failure. Another was the intention of the LDP government to introduce a 3 percent consumer tax. The opposition as well as the public was opposed to the government's plan. In April 1989, nationwide protests took place and the anti-

LDP voices got louder. The 1989 defeat caused the LDP leadership to launch an image campaign to present the LDP as the number one party to the electorate. The image campaign stressed the party's economic expertise, and the fact that only the LDP was a national party since it was supported by all segments of society. In the 1990 electoral campaign, the LDP used newspaper ads and posters to convince the electorate to be reasonable rather than blindly follow the anti-government sentiments spread by the JSP. Several ads argued that the consumer tax was necessary to finance the people's welfare programs. The LDP and JSP ran a highly focused campaign and there was some sort of polarization between these two parties. Minor parties consequently performed poorly. The JSP was the winner of the election. The party increased its number of seats in the lower house from 85 to 136 seats out of 512 seats, and from 17.2 percent of the vote to 24.4 percent. The LDP lost 25 seats and about 3 percentage points of the vote compared with the previous election. Given the Recruit scandal and the unpopular income tax, the party performed quite well.

The 1990s: Reforms and impacts

In January 1989, then Prime Minister Takeshita announced in a press conference his intention to reform Japan's political system. The electoral system applied in lower house elections and the financing of political parties were the two pillars of such a reform. The LDP was, however, unable to implement reforms affecting these two areas due to internal strife and disagreement with the opposition parties. In the 1993 parliamentary election, the LDP failed to win a majority of seats and a seven-party coalition government excluding the LDP and the JCP was formed. Prime Minister Hosokawa, after negotiations with the LDP, succeeded in pushing through reform bills that changed the electoral system and aimed at cleaning up campaign finance practices.

In 1994, after six years of talking about reforms, the SNTV electoral rule was history. The new election system originally combined 300 single-seat districts (SSD) and 200 seats allocated to political parties by a proportional representation formula. These latter seats were distributed among eleven geographic blocs varying in magnitude from 7 to 33 seats. In January 2000, the Obuchi government cut the number of PR seats by 20. Thus, there are now only 180 seats in 11 regional blocs with a district magnitude ranging from 6 to 30. SSD and PR seats are allocated independently, which means that each party receives its PR seat share in each bloc and as many SSD seats as it wins outright. Under the new system, each voter casts two ballots, one for the local constituency and one for the regional bloc.

The reforms of the Hosokawa cabinet should also affect campaign finance practices. The first law regulating financial activities of political organizations was passed in 1948. The law, however, proved ineffective since most regulations stipulated in the law were too vague. In 1975, the government under Takeo Miki revised the law. The law restricted the amount of money individuals and organizations could donate to politicians and their support organization. The revisions improved the

overall situation, but still could not guarantee more transparency and clean politics (Köllner, 2000: 149–50).

The 1994 revision was designed to reduce the fundraising activities of candidates and strengthen the role of political parties. According to the law, corporate donations to fundraising organizations of politicians are illegal (between 1994 and 2000 they were only restricted in scope). Such organizations can now only obtain financial contributions from individuals to the tune of 1.5 million yen per annum. Political parties, on the other hand, are now entitled to receive state subsidies if they either garnered at least 2 percent of the vote throughout Japan in the previous parliamentary election or hold five seats in parliament. The law also prohibits corporate donations to the Koenkai, which was intended to marginalize their role in electoral campaigns and to create and consolidate local party branches through which corporate donations may still be channeled. The number of party branches did indeed increase dramatically, but could not replace the traditional function of the Koenkai. One reason is that local party branches lack the professional expertise necessary to provide services to the community. Furthermore, about 30 percent of Koenkai members in the countryside do not support the party to which the candidate belongs. In urban areas, this figure may be well over 50 percent. Candidates, thus, need the support of their Koenkai; they cannot rely on party branches (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2004: 10–13).

In the long run, the new electoral system was expected to create a stable political system with an effective number of parties close to two, and a gradual move from candidate-centred election campaigning to one guided by the party headquarters. SSDs naturally have the effect of reducing competition within each district and stimulating cooperation between party factions. It was thus believed that factions would finally disappear once candidates had to compete in SSDs. In fact, factions have not disappeared, but some of their functions have. In the past, factions were crucial in determining the nomination of party candidates. They also provided financial assistance to a candidate's Koenkai. Under the new system, this function has become obsolete. Candidates are 'making their own connections to business to raise funds directly, even if those connections are often made with the help of the faction leader' (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2004: 15). Factions are still important in the allocation of party and Diet posts, though.

Another expectation of the new system was the emergence of two strong parties that would rule alternately. In fact, the average effective number of parties dropped from over 4.1 in 1993, when the last election under SNTV was held, to 2.95 in 1996, when the first election under the electoral formula took place (Reed and Thies, 2000). The electoral successes of the Democratic Party (DP) may bring Japan's party system closer to a system dominated by two parties. The DP captured 26 percent of the 480 seats at stake in the 2000 lower house election and 37 percent in 2003. The LDP captured 49 percent in 2000 and 50 percent in 2003.

The electoral reforms also influenced the donation practices of key pressure groups, such as the Keidanren and Nikkeiren. Both of these business organizations were founded after World War II. The first was established in August 1946 to help to reconstruct the war-devastated Japanese economy, and the latter in April 1948 as

an umbrella organization of industrial and regional employers' associations with the aim of creating a sound labor-management relationship in Japan. In May 2002, the two organizations merged into the Japan Business Federation (*nippon keidanren*). In the 1950s, business organizations such as the Keidanren began to donate financial contributions to the LDP and its candidates. In the 1970s, these donations reached an all-time high: in the 1974 House of Councilors election, enterprise-promoted election campaigning was most evident. Business groups vigorously sponsored any LDP candidate with the slogan 'Defend the Liberal Democracy' (Indo, 1979: 18). The end of the Cold War, the fragmentation of Japan's party system, several highly publicized corruption scandals, and the worsening economic climate at the end of the 1980s caused the Keidanren and other pressure groups to stop pooling campaign donations from its members on behalf of the LDP. Almost a decade after the electoral reforms, the Keidanren resumed its support for business-friendly parties and candidates. In the 2003 elections, about one third of the Keidanren's member firms donated money with the combined amount reaching 1.9 billion yen.¹ This change in policy was mainly caused by a polarization between business-friendly parties, such as the LDP, and the pro-welfare parties, such as the DP.

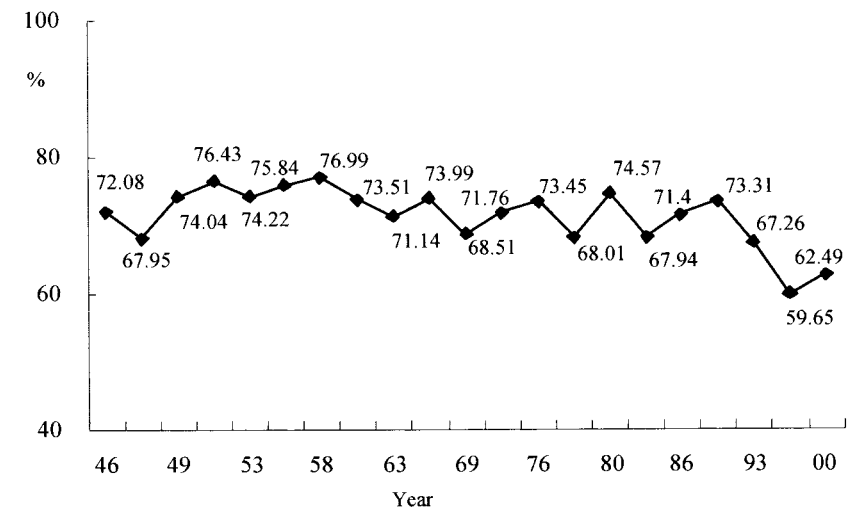


Figure 2.1 Change of voter turnout (House of Representatives)

The independent voter

A common phenomenon among advanced liberal democracies is the steady increase in the number of people dissatisfied with politics and those deciding not to vote. In Japan, political participation has decreased over the years. In upper house elections,

¹ *Japan Times*, April 27, 2004.

voter turnout was the lowest in 1995 with less than 50 percent of the electorate casting their votes. In the lower house, turnout has generally been higher, but has also decreased over the years (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). In the 1990s, NHK surveys showed that the turnout rate increased with age. In the 1996 lower house elections, for example, only about 30 percent of male voters in their 30s went to the polls. Female voters had an even lower turnout (approximately 5 to 8 percentage points lower) across all age groups. The highest turnout was found among those aged 60 years or older. Here almost eight out of ten people went to the polls (Kono and Aramaki, 1997: 27). Thus it is the younger people who are most unlikely to go to the polls.

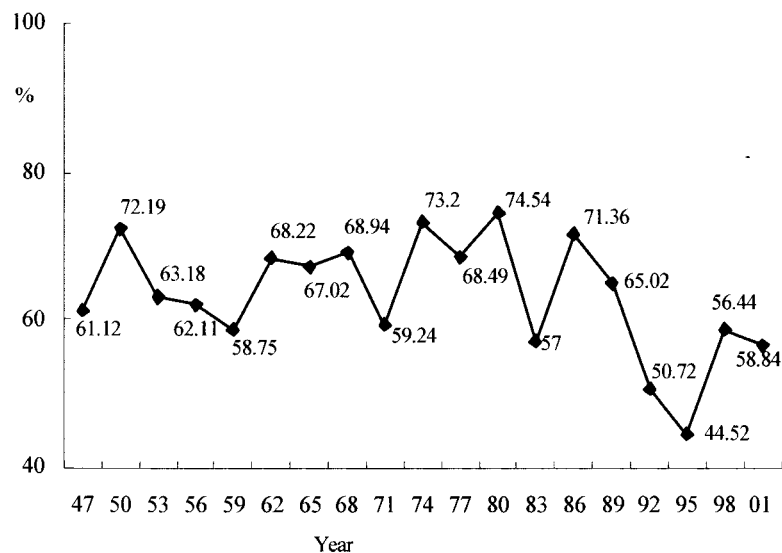


Figure 2.2 Change of voter turnout (House of Councilors)

Another observable trend has been the steady increase in the number of unaffiliated voters. According to NHK surveys, one tenth of the electorate was unaffiliated in the early 1960s. At the end of the 1990s, more than half of the voters could not identify themselves with a political party (Kono, 1999). The group of independent voters consists of several subgroups: an NHK survey conducted in the mid-1990s revealed that about 12 percent of the unaffiliated voters did not feel attached to any political party because they simply lacked interest in politics. Another 25 percent stated that they could not expect any change. About 21 percent said that there was not a reliable party. Some 12 percent complained that the policies of the party were too vague. Approximately 16 percent were of the opinion that none of the parties was attractive enough (Kono, 1999).

Political corruption and other forms of misbehavior are certainly one of the causes behind the increasing number of unaffiliated voters. The stagnating economic growth and the resulting inability of politicians to deliver the expected 'pork' to the electorate can be listed as another reason. Moreover, the increasing instability of Japan's party system in the early 1990s, the party boom and the changing affiliation of several politicians further contributed to the rise of the independent class.

The independent class, on the other hand, was very beneficial to the new parties. NHK surveys on the voting behavior of the electorate in the 1993 national election revealed that most independent voters supported the newly founded parties, the Japan New Party, the Japan Reform Party, and the New Party Sakigake, that made reform the campaign issue. In upper house elections held in 1995, the newly founded New Frontier Party attracted huge numbers of independent voters and the party obtained more votes than the LDP. After the formation of the Democratic Party (or Democratic Party of Japan) in 1996, independent voters supported this promising new party in large numbers. Support is strongest in urban areas. In the 1998 upper house election, votes in urban areas even exceeded those garnered by the LDP.

The media and voting behavior

What influences voting behavior in Japan? NHK surveys reveal that about 30 percent consider election news coverage on television and radio as the most important factor in their decision-making process. Another 30 percent said that newspaper editorials influenced their voting behavior. About 19 percent claimed that their decision to vote for a specific candidate was influenced by political advertisements on radio and television. The media has thus become a very influential force in Japan's elections. In the past, political analysts attached little importance to Japan's media in their analyses of voting behavior. The focus was on societal networks (Curtis, 1971; Abe, Shindo and Kawato, 1994). With an increasing number of independent voters, the role of organizational votes has been minimized.

Although the media obviously has an increasing impact on voting behavior in Japan, the question is whether the media itself uses this power to influence the outcome of elections. Takeshita and Mikami (1995), Flanagan (1991), Kim (1981), Abe, Shindo and Kawato (1994) and others have pointed out that the Japanese media is generally neutral. Flanagan (1991: 302), for instance, noted that 'the leading national dailies and television networks in Japan have adopted a position of strict partisan neutrality.' Kim (1981: 107) has observed that Japanese newspaper editorials 'are unusually ambiguous, making it difficult to ascertain the position of a newspaper on a given issue.' Takeshita and Mikami point out that the only exception was the 1993 lower house election, which resulted in the defeat of both the LDP and the biggest opposition party, the SDP. The former lost its majority and the latter almost half of its seats. On the other hand, the newly founded parties, such as the Japan New Party, the Japan Renewal Party, and the New Party Sakigake, made remarkable advances. Political observers commented that there was media bias during and right after the election. The media 'treated members of the new

parties as if they were heroes' (Takeshita and Mikami, 1995: 27). The suspicion was further stirred when it was revealed that Sadayoshi Tsubaki, managing director and news bureau chief of a commercial TV network, had stated in a closed meeting of the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan that he wanted to produce programs unfavorable to the LDP. Research by Takeshita and Mikami (1995) 'revealed some imbalance in the campaign news which would benefit the non-LDP forces.' They added, however, that impact on voting behavior 'seemed to be generally modest and weak' (Takeshita and Mikami, 1995: 38). Since then, no claims of media bias have been made. The unbalanced reporting in the 1993 election seems to be an isolated case.

The increasing number of unaffiliated voters and the new election law brought about changes in the utilization of TV for campaign purposes. Before the 1994 electoral reforms, political ads on TV were rare and had to be produced by NHK. Moreover, candidates could only introduce themselves to the electorate. This set format was widely regarded as boring. Under the new law, political ads can be produced by the candidates themselves and do not have to follow a given format. Several restrictions still apply, though. First, the number of ads is restricted depending on the number of candidates a party nominates (see Chapter 6). Second, independent candidates are disadvantaged since their ads are only aired once on NHK television and they are only a self-introduction to the electorate. Third, candidates are only allowed to place ads during the official campaign period of 12 days in lower house elections and 17 days in upper house elections. Political parties, on the other hand, may solicit votes whenever they want. They may place an unrestricted number of political ads in Japan's mass media. There is only one restriction, namely the ads may not specifically mention an election candidate. The ads may feature a candidate but must not mention his name or the fact that he or she is an election candidate.

Since the 1994 election reform guaranteed funding for political parties, a proliferation of political ads in Japan was a foregone conclusion. In the 1995 upper house election, political parties began to utilize mass media outlets far more than in the past. In this election, the LDP and the largest opposition party, the New Frontier Party (NFP), used abundantly the relatively cheap radio commercials. TV ads were still rare. The LDP emphasized the rightness of its policies in quiz form in their ads, whereas the NFP aimed at party name recognition.

A year later, members of the lower house were elected. The election was crucial for the future of the LDP and the NFP, since the first had suffered a severe setback a year earlier and the latter made substantial progress. The election was the first media war in Japan's electoral history. Political ads were used to attack and counterattack the opponent. It seemed as if the two parties were communicating through political ads. The New Frontier Party, for instance, placed ads urging the LDP to drop its plans to introduce a 5 percent consumer tax. The tax became a major election issue. The LDP reacted with an advertisement in one of the national newspapers: 'Hosokawa insisted on 7 percent tax, Ozawa insisted on 10 percent tax, Hata insisted on 15 percent tax. What percentage of tax does the New Frontier Party insist on?' Hosokawa, Ozawa and Hata were all leading figures of the New Frontier Party and

had made reference to raising the rate of the consumer tax before joining the NFP. The advertisement made headlines and it was the first time that a political ad became part of editorials and news programs. It was a successful electoral strategy.

As to the total amount of money spent on political ads in the 1996 lower house election, the NFP surprisingly outdid the LDP. The former spent 2.3 billion yen and the latter 1.1 billion on newspaper, magazine, TV and radio ads. The newly founded Democratic Party spent about 500 million yen. The nation's first media war cost Japan's political parties a total of four billion yen.

Before 1998, the LDP did not show much concern about the rising number of unaffiliated voters, who mainly live in urban areas. In the 1998 upper house election the LDP changed its strategy and tried to attract this group of voters by using the slogan 'Reform Japan.' Unaffiliated voters tend to vote for those parties that promise reform. The LDP in its commercials tried to address that issue. The Democratic Party (DP), Japan's largest opposition party at that time (the NFP dissolved after the 1996 election) also tried to attract this part of the electorate. The most popular ad of the party was entitled 'Kan can compete with Kan.' The former 'Kan' means the leader of the DP and the latter the bureaucracy.

The LDP was extremely successful in adapting to the new media-led electoral campaigning. In the 2000 lower house election the quality of the party's commercials was outstanding and one of them was chosen by the CM Research Institute as one of the best ads of that year.

After Koizumi Junichiro took over the LDP leadership in April 2001, he tried to attract the independent voters by announcing that he would 'destroy the Liberal Democratic Party,' and asserted large-scale structural reforms. The LDP under Koizumi developed a skillful media strategy, and soon Koizumi was at the center of every media report. There was a Koizumi boom. Political commentators referred to Koizumi's cabinet as the 'variety show cabinet.' Koizumi put great emphasis on cooperation with the media. Observers noted that his habit of speaking clearly in his own words, instead of simply presenting texts prepared by bureaucrats in monotone, helped him to gain popularity. Others said that the prime minister was a master of sound bites and that he could capture his audience in the first five to ten seconds. Koizumi's *Cabinet Mail Magazine* won about 780,000 subscribers for its inaugural issue and the number increased to 1.82 million in just two weeks, thereby earning a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.² E-magazines of other political parties, on the other hand, only have a circulation of between 10,000 and 30,000.

The new LDP chair more and more resembled a TV celebrity rather than a prime minister. Posters, T-shirts, cellphone straps and other campaign merchandise featuring Koizumi were sold. People queued for hours in front of the LDP party headquarters to get some of the popular items. The Koizumi boom left the opposition speechless. Some opposition leaders tried to imitate the prime minister's unique campaign style. Hatoyama Yukio, the leader of the Democratic Party, for instance, marched through a shopping district, dressed in an oversized red shirt and bermudas,

² *Broadcasting, Culture and Research*, No. 17 (Summer 2001).

and handed out name cards to shoppers. He greeted his future supporters by saying: 'I'm Yukio Hatoyama, but please call me spaceman Yuki.' The alien-like caricature designed for his campaign made its appearance not long after Koizumi had unveiled his own mascot—a lion bearing the likeness of the prime minister.³

Koizumi's media strategy also involved the abundant use of political advertisements and the LDP reportedly spent 1.9 billion yen on ads in 2001. The Komeito spent about the same amount, the Democratic Party 1.7 billion yen, the Liberal Party 1.2 billion yen, the Communist Party 350 million yen, and the Social Democratic Party 300 million yen. The total amount spent on commercials by all parties (including minor parties) amounted to eight billion yen—double the amount spent in 1996.

According to a survey conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun Network Monitor on political advertising in the 2001 lower house election, over 40 percent of the respondents said that the LDP's commercials were the most impressive. The Liberal Party was second with 19 percent, followed by the Komeito with 9 percent. Only 3 percent were most impressed by the ads of the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party. Figure 2.3 shows the result of the Yomiuri survey in detail.

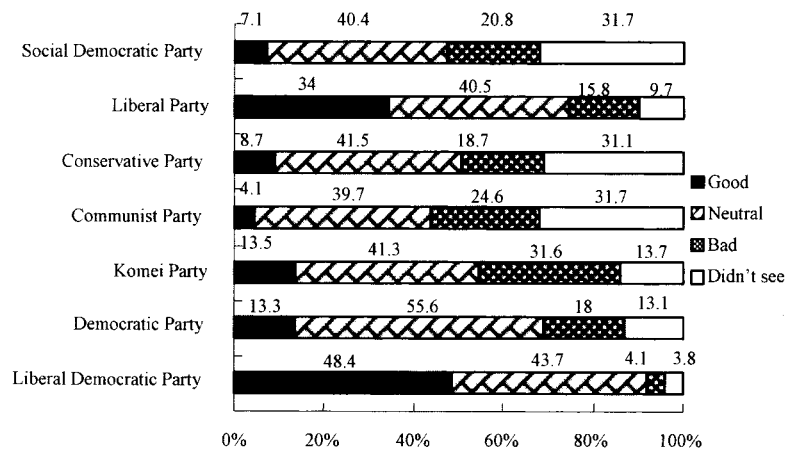


Figure 2.3 Evaluation of political ads in the House of Councilors election, 2001 (Yomiuri Shimbun Network Monitor Investigation)

Variety show politics, however, has its limits as the 2003 local and national elections have shown. Party manifestos became popular in these elections. The Japanese electorate was more interested in concrete party policies than in political shows. Schaap (2005: 139) noted that 'while the three elections since the reform may constitute too small a sample from which to draw firm conclusions, there is

³ *Asahi Shimbun*, July 30, 2001.

evidence that party programmatic appeals have increased. However, personalism endures, especially among those politicians who still maintain the political machines that were so effective in the past.' Is the Koizumi boom over?

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