

# Political Parties in Democratic Japan

By Alisa Gaunder

Whether fairly or not, Japanese political institutions in the postwar period have always been examined with some suspicion by outside observers, especially in the West. Some claim the fact that these institutions were imposed by the US Occupation calls into question their legitimacy or effectiveness. However, those who make such arguments have a limited view of Japan's history and of how the institutions of democracy have functioned in the postwar period. Japan's experience with democracy predates World War II and the Occupation. During the Taishō period (1912–1926), establishing a legitimate opposition was a priority. Political parties expanded, and, after the war, they became a crucial element of Japanese democracy. The party system is far from perfect but definitely upholds the basic standards of democracy.

The party system has gone through various stages in the postwar period. Following the US Occupation, a one-and-a-half party system emerged with the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in control of government and the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) a relatively close second, although never in serious contention for control of government. Eventually, a one-party pre-dominant system emerged with moderate parties occupying the ideological space between the Japan Communist Party (JCP) and the JSP on the far left

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and the LDP on the right. The LDP retained control of government, and its majorities grew slimmer, yet it remained the only party capable of winning national elections. The JSP increasingly seemed less of a practical alternative for most voters.

In 1992, the LDP split over the issue of political reform, and Japan's party system entered a realignment period. Many citizens hoped for the emergence of a stronger opposition party, but the first contenders, the Japan New Party and the Japan Frontier Party, quickly vanished from the scene. Then, beginning in 1996, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) slowly increased its internal strength and external appeal. In 2007, the DPJ had a strong performance in the Upper House election and in 2009 trounced the LDP in a landslide Lower House election victory, causing many pundits to assert that the Occupation officials' hopes for a viable two-party system were finally realized.

A discussion of critical, related questions concerning Japan's postwar political parties is important for better understanding: Did the 1955–1993 dominance of the LDP impede or even undermine democracy? Why, for many years, did opposition parties largely fail in seriously challenging the LDP? Did the 1994 electoral reform law democratize the party system? Why has it taken Japan so long to move to a two-party system? Does the DPJ's recent victory indicate sustainable future party alternation?

### One-Party Dominance and Democracy

What exactly constitutes "democracy" is often a subject of intense debate. Most scholars agree that a democracy encompasses representation and competition with some provision for civil rights and liberties. Broader definitions focus more specifically on participation, equality, stability, and the vibrancy of civil society. Successful party alternation is a key test of the viability of new democracies. The LDP's thirty-eight uninterrupted years in power raised the question of whether Japan was a "real" democracy. Even when the LDP lost power in 1993, this primarily occurred because of a split *within* the party. The LDP regained political power just ten months later and retained control of the government for fifteen additional years. Does LDP dominance of politics for over fifty years somehow taint Japanese democracy?

One-party rule is of concern if the dominant party is authoritarian. In contrast, voters repeatedly elected LDP candidates for decades in free and fair elections where ample alternatives were present.

The LDP was dominant for several reasons. Despite an often-ambiguous ideology and a relatively weak organization, the LDP was resilient and adjusted positions in response to new social, political, and economic developments, thereby retaining power.<sup>1</sup> Japan's electoral system and political funding regime favored large parties with significant resources. The LDP was also able to use government resources and regulations for the "pork" and patronage needed to fuel its political machine.

The LDP has never been an ideologically driven party. Created in 1955 when the Liberal and Democratic Parties came together in response to the merger of the left and right wings of the Socialist Party earlier that year, a major incentive for the LDP was to remain a viable contender for power. This drive to stay in power has held the LDP together more than any ideological commitment.<sup>2</sup> Still, the LDP can be characterized as a conservative party committed to promoting and preserving economic growth. The LDP is not a grassroots party, and it has always struggled to recruit new members with farmers and big businesses comprising its traditional support base. Increasing Japanese economic growth helped the LDP expand its base to include small businesses and the self-employed. LDP politicians cultivated ties with various constituents by exchanging favors for votes and pork-barrel projects for monetary support and votes. These practices have led many scholars and pundits to characterize the LDP as a political machine.<sup>3</sup>

The electoral system also facilitated the LDP's dominance, partially because the LDP responded effectively to the incentives and constraints of these institutional rules. In Japan, the electoral system for the Lower House from 1947 to 1993 was a multiple-member district system with a single, non-transferable vote. Under this system, the country was divided into 130 districts that elected anywhere from two to six representatives for 511 seats. Despite the fact that multiple candidates were elected from each district, voters could only cast ballots for one candidate. In order to win a majority, a party had to win at least two seats on average across districts, a circumstance that favored larger parties with significant monetary or organizational resources. Still, smaller parties performed well in larger districts or in areas where they enjoyed strong niche support since fifth-, or in some cases, sixth-place finishers still received a seat. As a result, this system was moderately proportionate and allowed for some representation of minority voices.

The electoral system also amplified the importance of money since it forced members of the same party to compete against one another if a party wished to receive a majority. Factions within parties emerged in response to this competition and played key roles in funding candidate campaigns. LDP factions in particular supported candidates financially in return for candidate loyalty to the faction leader in the party presidential election, which determined the prime minister during the era of LDP dominance. Candidates

from the same party found it difficult to differentiate themselves from one another because, as is the case in most parliamentary systems, party discipline is quite strong, and party members tend to vote down party lines. Unable to distinguish themselves based on policies, LDP politicians in particular created personal support groups (*kōenkai*) in order to compete based on personal favors. These mini-political machines were quite expensive to maintain, and the incentives to accept illegal campaign contributions were high.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, “money politics” scandals frequently emerged. Indeed, the LDP was the only party that was able to raise enough resources to win an average of two seats across districts and consequently benefit from holding political power and from government contracts, regulations, and “pork” in wooing support.

Were LDP machine politics and the resultant “money politics” and corruption indicative of a failing democracy? The charitable interpretation of the LDP machine is that it helped politicians respond more effectively to their constituents and LDP elected officials and provided some constituents with benefits, such as local construction projects or favorable regulations. The problem was unequal access to this largesse, and the LDP’s machine largely ignored consumers, city dwellers, and those without land. The LDP did not completely undermine Japan’s democracy, but there were frequent calls for reform throughout the period of one-party dominance. The LDP blocked attempts to change the electoral system status quo because it had the votes and the incentives to prevent electoral rule changes.

LDP party leaders also resisted changing the rules for political funding, campaigning, and reapportionment. In 1975, reform-minded prime minister Miki Takeo managed to change the political funding law by placing limits on individual and corporate contributions and strengthening system transparency. Still, one glaring loophole remained where donor contributions to political organizations were limited, while the *number* of political organizations politicians could establish was not capped, rendering the reform ineffectual.<sup>5</sup>

Campaign rules were and are quite restrictive. Candidates are limited in the number and type of handbills, posters, and media coverage and cannot canvas door-to-door. The extensive legal code is often ignored, as monitoring and enforcement costs are high, but the LDP (and now the DPJ) have not enforced the code even though many politicians ignore the law. Limited publicity favors incumbents and hurts newcomers with more limited name recognition.

The LDP, with strong support from farmers, resisted reapportioning districts experiencing population shifts accompanying rapid urban growth. The LDP opposed reducing representation in rural areas with declining populations but instead supported adding seats in urban areas. The result was severe malapportionment with rural areas overrepresented in the Diet.

That the rules of the game favored the LDP does not completely explain why opposition parties were unable to present a stronger front during the period of LDP dominance. The organizational weaknesses and ideological inflexibility of the largest opposition party, the JSP, is also part of the story, as is the inability and unwillingness of many opposition parties to work together.

As the largest opposition party throughout this period, the JSP was a leftist party with significant support from public sector labor unions, and its policy agenda included some of the postwar era’s most important issues. It opposed the US-Japan Security Treaty and revision of Article Nine in the Japanese constitution, the renunciation of war clause. While these issues were quite important in the 1950s–60s, they had faded in importance by the late 1980s. The JSP’s unwillingness or inability to adjust its policy stance to better respond to more pressing topics, including political reform, declining economic growth, and Japan’s appropriate foreign policy, hurt its ability to

compete with both the LDP and smaller opposition parties that emerged. Consequently, the JSP experienced declining support.

The JSP, like the LDP, suffered from weak party organization. Unlike the LDP, JSP difficulties did not stem from factions competing for government control but from ideologically warring internal groups. Its first major schism led to the creation of the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), a splinter party that, like the British Labor Party, accentuated social democracy. Remaining JSP factions were based on both personal ties and differing ideological perspectives.<sup>6</sup> While some in the JSP sought to expand the base beyond labor, unions remained the party’s dominant voice, and they are partially responsible for the JSP’s inability to adjust policy positions.

Several niche parties existed during the years of LDP dominance, but were too small to pose a serious challenge. They needed to join forces to challenge the LDP, but parties’ differences proved too divisive, at least until the 1993 LDP split. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP), similar to European variants in its commitment to Marxism within the context of democracy, constituted a major barrier to coalitions because of an unwillingness to compromise. It ran one candidate in every Lower House district to foster electorate education rather than seriously compete. The party’s newspaper, *Akahata (The Red Flag)*, funded its activities, enhancing party independence from special interests.

The Kōmeitō, a center-right party supported by the Sōka Gakkai, a Buddhist lay organization, also proved a nonviable alternative to the LDP because its exclusive tendencies made it unpopular with the general public and incapable of broad support. Separation of church and state implications of the party’s Sōka Gakkai connection also decreased its appeal. Nevertheless, the Kōmeitō did well in areas where its supporters, mainly members of the Sōka Gakkai, resided. Unlike the LDP and JSP, the Kōmeitō had a strong organization capable of consistent mobilization of supporters. Still, its connection to the Sōka Gakkai ultimately has limited the Kōmeitō’s broad appeal. Party leaders were not completely opposed to joining forces with other opposition parties on some policy questions but never initiated broader coalition efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, during the years of LDP rule, other parties realized some democratic ideals, such as winning some representation and freely entering opposition coalitions to specific majority party policies. Despite its primacy, the LDP was responsive to some public demands and adjusted policies accordingly. Opposition parties minimally influenced policy, mainly through backroom deals with the LDP, but as the LDP’s majority contracted, opposition parties gained control of some Diet committee chairmanships.<sup>8</sup> The LDP never made egregious changes to the rules of the game to maintain power, and the voters always had choice at the polls. In many ways, the LDP retained power because no other party seemed capable of governing, and the public was unwilling to gamble, especially during a period of strong economic performance.

### Political Reform and the

#### Gradual Emergence of a Two-Party System

Party system weakness did take its toll. With nearly continuous “money politics” scandals, despite lingering economic growth, the voices for reform grew louder, even within the LDP where junior politicians in particular were discontent with the status quo, since they had the least-developed support groups and consequently the most vulnerable seats. Given the strict seniority rule, LDP politicians with few years’ experience were forced to wait a long time before gaining power. Over time, the struggle within the LDP changed from one between factions in and out of power to one where pro-reformers and anti-reformers clashed—a split that transcended factional affiliations.<sup>9</sup> This division became irreconcilable following the outbreak of the Sagawa Kyūbin scandal, involving company bribery of elected officials, and Prime

## PARTIAL LIST OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN JAPAN

	Diet Representation		Party President or Founder
	Representatives August 2009	Councillors July 2010	
<b>Major Parties</b> (founding year)			
Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) (1998)	308	106	Naoto Kan PM Reps.
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) (1955)	119	84	Sadakazu Tanigaki Reps.
<b>Third Parties</b> (founding year)			
New Kōmeitō Party (NKP) (1998)	21	19	Natsuro Yamaguchi Coun.
Your Party (YP) (2009)	5	11	Yoshimi Watanabe Reps.
Japanese Communist Party (JCP) (1922)	9	6	Kazuo Shii Reps.
Social Democratic Party (SDP) (1945, 1996)	7	4	Mizuho Fukushima Coun.
People's New Party (PNP) (2005)	3	3	Shizuka Kamei Reps.
Sunrise Party of Japan (SPJ) (2010)	3	3	Takeo Hiranuma Reps.
New Renaissance Party (NRP) (2010)	0	2	Yōichi Masuzoe Coun.
<b>Other Minor National Parties that have, or have had, representation in the Diet</b> (founding year)			
New Party Nippon (NPN) (2005)	1	1	Yasuo Tanaka (Founder)
New Party Daichi (NPD) (2005)	1		Muneo Suzuki (Founder)
Happiness Realization Party (2009)		1	Ryuho Okawa (Founder)
Japan Renaissance Party (2010)			Yōichi Masuzoe (President)
Rikken Yōseikai (1900, see <a href="http://www.ndl.go.jp/modern/e/cha2/description19.html">http://www.ndl.go.jp/modern/e/cha2/description19.html</a> )			
Dainin Club (1983)			
New Party for Salaried Men			
Liberal League (2001)			Takeshi Tokuda (President)
New Socialist Party (1996)			
Sports and Peace Party (1989)			Antonio Inoki (Founder)
Takeru			

Source: *Wikipedia Politics of Japan* page at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics\\_of\\_Japan#cite\\_note-11](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Japan#cite_note-11).

Minister Miyazawa's 1993 withdrawal of a reform proposal meant to remedy "money politics." When Miyazawa backed away from reform, two separate groups left the LDP, with most defectors joining opposition parties in a vote of no confidence against the government.

No party received a majority in the election that followed. Significantly, the LDP was not voted out of office due to a challenge from an opposition party but lost power because of the split. Most LDP politicians returned to office. In fact, compared to other parties, the JSP received the largest voter backlash during this election due in part to its antiquated policy positions. With no party holding a clear majority, LDP splinter groups worked with other parties to form an anti-LDP coalition under the banner of political reform. Indeed, reform was the only point upon which the eight-party coalition agreed, and it fell apart shortly after the 1994 political reform package passed. However, those electoral system and political funding reforms have significantly impacted the party system.

Electoral system reform only encouraged the party realignment that began with the LDP split. The new system is a combined system that currently contains 300 single-member districts and 180 proportional representation (PR) seats. This combined system supports large parties in the single-member districts and allows for survival of smaller parties through PR in the proportional seats. As the political actors adjusted to the new "rules of the game," new parties emerged; and existing parties split, merged, or dissolved. All the parties that came on the scene in the 1990s tried to connect their message to

reform, and virtually every new party had the Chinese character for "new" in its party name.

However, the only truly "new" party in the anti-LDP coalition in 1993–94 was the Japan New Party (JNP), formed in 1992 under the leadership of Hosokawa Morihiro. It pushed for broad political, administrative, electoral, and political funding reforms. The JNP did quite well in the 1993 Lower House election and was viewed, unlike two splinter parties—the New Renewal Party led by Ozawa Ichirō and Hata Tsutomu, and Takamura Masayoshi's New Harbinger Party—as a new conservative alternative to the LDP. In 1994, though, JNP politicians joined members of other parties, including the New Renewal Party, the Kōmeitō, and even some former Socialists, in the creation of the New Frontier Party led by Ozawa. This party attempted to present itself as the new alternative to the LDP, but split after a few years due to internal disputes, partially related to both Ozawa's dictatorial leadership style and to the Kōmeitō's unwillingness to merge completely with the party.

In 1996, the Democratic Party emerged and then reorganized in 1998 as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). It subsequently became the largest opposition party. The DPJ's ascent narrowed the political spectrum. Even though some former

Socialists are members, the DPJ, unlike the JSP, is not a progressive party, but rather a centrist alternative to the LDP.<sup>10</sup> With many former LDP members serving in leadership roles, the DPJ has struggled to differentiate itself from the LDP, a process that became increasingly difficult when the LDP selected Koizumi Junichirō as prime minister. Koizumi, a vocal critic of the iron triangle of bureaucrats, elected officials, and key constituencies that supported the LDP machine, sought to reform the LDP from the inside. In doing so, the popular Koizumi co-opted much of the opposition's agenda.

In its attempt to better articulate its policies and message, the DPJ began to release party manifestos prior to elections. This new tactic proved to be an effective electioneering tool. The LDP responded by releasing their own manifestos, though often the LDP's documents were not as bold or clear as DPJ manifestos. Through its manifestos, the DPJ highlighted differences with the LDP and positioned itself as a party characterized by both ideas and a commitment to change. This message increasingly resonated with the electorate following Koizumi's departure and the new LDP prime ministers' inability to match his predecessor's charismatic style. The LDP returned to old guard politicians and reinforced a public perception that, despite Koizumi, nothing had changed. In 2007, the DPJ won a majority of the Upper House and secured a landslide victory in the 2009 Lower House election with a platform of economic reform and welfare state-oriented policies. Most notably, it promised and subsequently passed a child allowance to encourage couples to have children.



Naoto Kan, Prime Minister of Japan, delivers a special address during the session "Vision for Japan" at the Annual Meeting in 2011 of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, January 29, 2011. Copyright by World Economic Forum. Swiss-image.ch/Photo by Remy Steinegger. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/15237218@N00/5398662756>.

### The 2009 Lower House Election and Beyond

The 2009 Lower House election appears quite significant for democratic politics in Japan. When the LDP lost power in 1993, the cause was a party split and not voters' choice of a new alternative. The DPJ "threw the rascals out" in the 2009 Lower House election. After a decade-long recession, followed by a brief recovery before the outbreak of the global financial crisis, the public was fed up with old LDP politics and decisively called for change. The 2009 election not only signifies party alternation, but also suggests the fulfillment of one of the major goals of the 1994 electoral reform—the creation of a two-party system. The LDP and DPJ are now the major competitors in single-member district contests. The PR rule ensures that some smaller parties will remain, but none currently has a chance of challenging the LDP or the DPJ.

A major factor that may influence long-term viability of the two parties is their respective cohesiveness. Many analysts think there is high potential of yet another LDP split. Such an occurrence seemed less likely in the DPJ following the 2009 election, but after its first year in power, DPJ internal cohesiveness is weaker, mainly due to power struggles among groups tied to Prime Minister Kan, former Prime Minister Hatoyama, and former party president Ozawa. The DPJ's poor performance in the 2010 election meant the LDP regained a majority in the Upper House. Kan managed to hold onto the reins of power in the DPJ's party presidential election, despite a challenge from Ozawa. Ozawa's loss, however, could increase the likelihood of a future split. In retrospect, beginning shortly after the implementation of the 1947 constitution, Japanese political party activity, even during the long years of sustained LDP rule, contributed to democratization, and with the seeming advent of serious two-party competition, the party system has now embarked upon a new role in Japan's democracy. ■

### NOTES

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*Kan managed to hold onto the reins of power in the DPJ's party presidential election, despite a challenge from Ozawa. Ozawa's loss, however, could increase the likelihood of a future split.*



2010 photograph of Ozawa Ichiro.

Source: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/01/21/japans-ozawa-ichiro-the-power-of-one/>.

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ALISA GAUNDER is Associate Professor of Political Science at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. She received her PhD in political science from the University of California, Berkeley in 2001. Her research interests include comparative political leadership, campaign finance reform in Japan and the United States, and women and politics in Japan. She is the author of *Political Reform in Japan: Leadership Looming Large* (Routledge, 2007) and editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics* (Routledge, 2011).