



International Perspective on Representation Japan's August 2009 Parliamentary Elections

By Pauline Lejeune with Rob Richie

The Japanese parliamentary elections in August 30, 2009 marked a turning point in Japan's political history. Since 1955, Japan has been dominated by one party, with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as the governing party for all but 11 months. But in these elections the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) defeated the LDP, winning 308 seats to 109 for the LDP in the 480-seat House of Representatives.

Journalists have touted the election as both a landslide victory of the DPJ and its leader, Yukio Hatoyama, and the worst defeat of a governing party in modern Japanese history. This stunning result is not merely the result of a shift in popular opinion, however, since the DPJ won only 42.4% of the popular vote. The magnitude of its landslide win was mainly due to the rules of the Japanese electoral system.

Mechanisms of Japan's Election System

The general election put at stake the 480 seats of the House of Representatives, the lower house of the *Diet* (the Japanese name for both houses of its legislature), for a four-year term. There were 1,374 candidates, including a record 229 women. In the midst of an economic crisis, voters rallied to give new leaders a chance to revisit policies established by one party for more than fifty years in one of the world's largest economies. Voter turnout was 69.3%, the highest turnout since 1990 and up from 67.5% in 2005 and just 59.9% in 2003. Although lower than the post-war high of 77.0% in 1958, it was one of the highest turnouts since 1953.

Japan today uses a parallel form of mixed-member voting for electing its House of Representatives. 300 members are elected from single-seat constituencies by a winner-take-all, plurality rule ("first-past-the-post") and 180 party list seats are separately elected by proportional representation, according to parties' percentages of the vote in different regions. Unlike mixed-member systems that are fully proportional, as in Germany and

New Zealand, the party list seats are not allocated to compensate for distortions in the plurality voting elections. As a result, the party that wins the most district seats also is likely to win the most seats elected by proportional representation.

In Japan's system, voters cast two votes: one for their local district representative and one for a party, with the latter represented by a list of candidates for each regional block district (which span several single-member districts). Instituted in 1994, this system replaced Japan's previous single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system. In the SNTV "one vote" system, each voter cast a vote for one candidate in multi-member districts electing several members. The districts were malapportioned to favor rural areas, with more voters per seat in the cities.

Japan's new mixed system provides a particularly clear opportunity to contrast how single-member districts can skew representation in comparison to a proportional voting system. It also suggests that at least some Japanese leaders may want to review their electoral system, although reform in the near future may well depend on voter perception of the DPJ and its use of the power it has won with less than a majority of the vote.

Over-Representation of the Democratic Party of Japan

The Democratic Party of Japan won 42.4% of the nationwide vote cast in elections for the proportional representation seats, yet won 308 seats overall in the 480-seat chamber – with those 208 seats representing 64.2% of all seats, or almost 22% more seats than the DPJ's share of the vote. Accordingly, the DPJ is now holding nearly two-thirds of seats with the support of barely two-fifths of voter.

The DPJ won its landslide thanks to the district seats; the DPJ captured fully 73.7% (221 out of 300) of the single-member seats, as compared to 48.3% of the total proportional voting seats (87 out of the 180 proportionally allocated seats). Compared to its share of the national popular vote, the DPJ received a highly disparate 31.3% more seats with the single-member system as compared to 5.9% more seats with the proportional system.

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Thus, the winner-take-all, single-member system skewed the election outcome and inaccurately reflected voter preference. Most voters sought change, to be sure, but their mandate is far more cautious than the results indicate. Without using the compensatory mechanism of proportional representation used in mixed-member proportional countries such as Germany, one political party now governs Japan on its own with 64.2% of the seats, despite being supported by fewer than half of the voters.

Under-representation for Mid-sized Parties

The skewed representation in single-member district seats adversely affected most other Japanese political parties, particularly mid-sized ones. Two parties with a combined 19% of the popular vote indeed would have been entirely shut out if all seats had been elected by plurality voting in single-member districts.

Despite winning 11.5% (or nearly one-eighth of the nationwide popular vote), the New Komeito Party did not win any single-member seats. In the party list seats, New Komeito won 21 seats, a more reflective outcome that represented 11.7% of all proportional seats. Due to being shut out in the district seats, however, the party only received 4.4% of the total seats, and the party overall is under-represented by 7.1% compared to its share of the national popular vote.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) also did not win any single-member seats, despite winning 7% of the national vote. With nine party list seats – 5% of the proportional seats available – the JCP earned 1.9% of the overall seats and is under-represented by 5.1%. The smaller Social Democratic Party was under-represented in both categories of seats, winning three (1%) of single-member seats and four (2.2%) of party list seats. Overall, it holds 1.5% of seats compared to 4.3% of the national vote.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the former ruling party, earned 26.7% of the popular vote and won 21.3% of the single-member seats (64 seats) and 30.6% of the proportional seats (55 seats). As a result, the LDP is only somewhat under-represented, with 24.8% of the total seats (a 1.9% skew).

Table 1. Results Analysis

Party	% Popular Vote	SMD* Seats received	% SMD* Seats received	% SMD* Skew	PR** Seats won	% PR** Seats won	% PR** Skew	Total Seats received	% Total Seats received	% Total Skew
Democratic Party of Japan	42.40%	221	73.67%	31.27%	87	48.33%	5.93%	308	64.17%	21.77%
Social Democratic Party	4.30%	3	1.00%	-3.30%	4	2.22%	-2.08%	7	1.46%	-2.84%
People's New Party	1.70%	3	1.00%	-0.70%	0	0.00%	-1.70%	3	0.63%	-1.08%
Liberal Democratic Party	26.70%	64	21.33%	-5.37%	55	30.56%	3.86%	119	24.79%	-1.91%
New Komeito Party	11.50%	0	0.00%	-11.50%	21	11.67%	0.17%	21	4.38%	-7.13%
Jap. Communist Party	7.00%	0	0.00%	-7.00%	9	5.00%	-2.00%	9	1.88%	-5.13%
Your Party	4.30%	2	0.67%	-3.63%	3	1.67%	-2.63%	5	1.04%	-3.26%
Others (combined)	2.10%	7	2.33%	0.23%	1	0.56%	-1.54%	8	1.67%	-0.43%

* Single Member District

** List seats

300

100%

-

180

100%

-

480

100%

Election Administration: A More Accessible Electoral Process

Japan's 69.3% voter turnout in the 2009 election suggested strong voter interest in the election. This relatively high level of participation is primarily due to the clear opportunity for voters to change control of the House of Representatives, unlike most Japanese elections held since 1955. But changes that increased accessibility to voting were also a factor.

A record 13.98 million people (13.4% of all eligible voters), including overseas voters, cast early ballots. This was the first national election in which expatriate Japanese were allowed to vote in single-seat districts. In 2005 Japan's Supreme Court found that limiting voting rights for Japanese living overseas to only the party list seats was unconstitutional. Consequently, in 2009, expatriates were allowed to vote for candidates in districts where they last lived in Japan or from their registered Japanese address.

A record 14 million people (13.4% of all eligible voters) cast early ballots

In addition, most of the nearly 51,000 polling stations had extended hours, from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Election Day. Other changes included election boards spreading black fabric over tables to make voting slips easy to read, having sweat bands available for staffers and having table heights adjusted for comfort.

Vote tabulation was streamlined. The paper ballot design used for the election sharply reduced the amount of time and cost of ballot counting. Ballots were automatically unfolded in the ballot box and then processed by automatic ballot counting machines. For example, the election board of Hachioji, western Tokyo, was able to count almost 2,500 votes per minute. Election boards reduced the number of election staffers while speeding up counting and reducing election expenditures

Record Number of Women Elected

Of the 1,374 candidates, a record 229 were women, 54 of whom won seats. For the first time in Japan, female representation exceeded 10%; 40 of the elected women were from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), eight from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), three from New Komeito Party, two from the Social Democratic Party and one from the Japanese Communist Party.

In the 2005 election, women were elected to 43 seats, a record at the time, thanks in large part to the media-savvy campaign of the then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi from the LDP. His "female ninja" strategy ensured the success of all the LDP's female candidates by giving them priority treatment on both directly elected districts and on the LDP's proportional representation lists.

In order to block heavyweights of the LDP and its coalition partner the New Komeito Party, the DPJ in 2009 deployed 46 female candidates (16% of their total) that the media dubbed the “Princess Corps.” The DPJ strategically used the cleaner image of women in politics by effectively staging the Japanese ideal of brave, cute samurai princesses fighting big, corrupt bureaucratic lords. Thus, it has been able to score major victory in constituencies such as Tokyo with the former singer and TV reporter Ai Aoki.

The improvement in female representation is also due to the proportional voting party list system, which enabled the DPJ to place women up on their lists in order to give them seats before their male counterparts, who were placed lower on the list.

Even with this step towards greater representation of women in Japan’s parliament, women’s 11.3% share of House seats still remains low by the developed world’s standards. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Nordic countries’ average is 42%, the average of members countries of the OSCE (the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which includes the U.S. and Russia) is 21.3%, the worldwide average is 18.5% and the United States’ is 16.8%. With eight out of nine members of the House still men, Japan will need to elect far more women to achieve parity or even match global norms of female representation.

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Toward a New Japanese Party System?

One party had dominated Japan for more than 50 years, with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) holding power almost without interruption. However, with the significant victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009, Japan could move towards a more traditional democratic system with somewhat regular rotations in power. The question is whether it has done so at excessive cost to fair representation and whether a more appropriate balance can be achieved in the future.

The Japanese combination of a simple plurality system for most seats with a separate proportional voting system for a third of seats can be disadvantageous when combined with a multi-party system, as exists in Japan – since districts typically heavily skew representation, most parties have difficulties winning their fair share of seats overall.

However, this 2009 electoral upheaval also will allow the Japanese electorate to experience government under a new set of philosophies. It may accustom them to the idea of a competitive legislative arena, as opposed to one in which one party holds power for decades. Such a change might result in further moves toward a winner-take-all model and a de facto two-party system or, based on a broader understanding of competitiveness,

toward a more fully proportional voting system that still can allow one coalition of parties to oust the governing coalition.

As in many democracies, Japan at least is sure to engage in this important debate – providing a lesson for Americans concerned about the state of their politics and functioning of its representative institutions

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