

# JAPAN ECONOMIC CURRENTS

A COMMENTARY ON ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS TRENDS

## Has Japanese Politics Really Changed?

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In the year since the "Koizumi Revolution" in Japanese politics ended, one question keeps recurring: has anything really changed in Japanese politics or was the Koizumi era an aberration, a "blip" on the radar with few permanent political consequences? The Japanese and Americans who seem to ask that question a lot these days have good reason to wonder whether the electoral reform of 1994 and then the Koizumi era really changed anything. After all, at least until the next general election, the LDP is still in power; factions, *kōenkai*, and *seisaku zoku* still exist; prime ministers, most recently Abe, have only short-lived terms, sunk by their own or their cabinet's gaffes and financial scandals. An alien from another planet who had observed Japanese politics in the 1970s and '80s under the "55 system" who came back today for a visit, might find the political news rather similar.

This would be a superficial examination of Japanese politics,

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however. Under the surface of the apparent "back to the future" scenario, real and fundamental changes have transformed Japanese politics. The "94 system" (or "2001 system" or "2005 system") is very different from the "55 system," in large part because of the new electoral system, as I and other American political scientists who study Japanese politics are discovering in our research and analyses.

The electoral reform has had the biggest impact in several ways, albeit gradually. First, the number of political parties now conforms almost exactly to what political scientists

would have expected from the new electoral system. Small constituencies with single-member districts over time induce voters to concentrate their votes for two parties (this is called "Duverger's Law" after a famous French political scientist who discovered the principle). However, the reformers in the 1990s who thought that only two parties would emerge because of the new system forgot that proportional representation systems tend to produce multiple parties as they make it possible for small parties to get representation. With the 300-seat small district and 180-seat proportional representation portions in Japan,

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political scientists like Steve Reed at Chuo University predicted at the time of reform that eventually about four parties would emerge, two large ones, and two smaller ones. If we discount the very small and ineffectual Social Democratic Party, that is exactly what has happened.

Another change has been exactly what the reformers of the 1990s hoped for: elections under the new system are much more about policy and issues than under the old system. Previously, policy differences among the parties hardly mattered in deciding elections—the LDP was always going to win, the Socialists always come in second, and those who voted for each party would not be swayed very much by particular issues to vote for the other; today, policy issues matter a great deal, as

the popularity of Democratic Party manifestoes and the 2005 general election about postal privatization and reform indicated.

Of course, the new electoral system didn't completely change everything. It did not eliminate *kōenkai*, for example, because even in small constituencies with one representative, a "personal vote" for the individual rather than the party is still important. *Kōenkai* post-reform, however, are not the same organizations as pre-reform: they perform different functions today than before. Robert Pekkanen of the University of Washington and I discovered in many interviews with Diet Members these last few years that *kōenkai* of LDP candidates today now mobilize more non-LDP supporters than under the old system where it

was an organization primarily for mobilizing conservative voters only. This is because such voters can now vote for the party of their choice in the proportional representation portion but have only two options (LDP or DPJ) if they want representation in the smaller constituencies. And because some voters may not like the LDP as a party or join the local LDP branch, but think their own incumbent LDP Diet Member is ok, they will join his or her *kōenkai* and support them with their vote in the small constituencies.

The reform did change LDP factions even more than *kōenkai*, however, as they lost most of the major functions they had had under the '55 system and were greatly weakened in influence. Electoral reform and campaign finance reform mostly eliminated factional influence in nominations and in funding candidates. Koizumi's refusal to balance factions in choosing cabinet members has also eliminated their influence in appointments at that level. They continue to exist and retain some lesser influence now only because they still control the distribution of sub-cabinet positions. But they are much less important and very different today.

We can see this in both the Abe and Fukuda selection processes. Under the '55 system, the selection of the LDP President was determined by some of the five major factions forming a minimum-winning coalition ("the mainstream") against the losing coalition (the "anti-mainstream") in a power struggle among faction leaders for the prime ministership who controlled their loyal followers in a hierarchical and seniority-based organization. Both Abe and Fukuda, neither leaders of a faction, were chosen by a *trans-factional* alliance in which the views of faction followers were determining in the vote, not all members of a faction supported the same candidate, and policy differences mattered, not just loyalty to faction leaders. The weakening of factions also undermined one of the largest obstacles to a prime minister exercising more power himself.

This brings us to the final and perhaps most important consequence of electoral reform: the changed role of the prime minister and cabinet. With only one representative in the small constituencies and others elected via party vote in the proportional representation portion, voters and elections now focus more on the image of the party and party leader

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than almost entirely on the "personal vote" for the individual candidate in a district as under the previous multi-member system. The electoral reform intensified the burgeoning influence of television in politics. Benjamin Nyblade and I found, using analysis of monthly Jiji Press polling data since 1960 that the image of the prime minister and cabinet began separating from the image of the LDP as a party as early as the Nakasone administration, when he used television to gain direct popularity with the public and supplement his small faction's influence in the party. It continued further with opposition coalition Prime Minister Hosokawa in the 1990s. Even the less charismatic prime ministers like Hashimoto and Obuchi used their television image to some extent, but of course the separation between leader

image and party image reached its peak with Prime Minister Koizumi. In this sense, Koizumi was the culmination and most skillful example of this long trend of television's influence on leadership image, not its creator.

Cabinets have changed too. Instead of cabinet members being selected merely as the reward for seniority and service to a faction leader, today, according to statistical analyses by Robert Pekkanen, Benjamin Nyblade, and me, women, policy experts, and hereditary Diet Members are much more likely to be chosen than pre-1994. This is because the LDP under the new system now needs more well-known and popular appointees and more policy experts as the "face of the party" to appeal to voters in elections and to govern under the new system.

This trend has given the LDP prime minister and cabinets far more importance, both in elections and more generally with his party, in governing. An Australian political scientist, Aurelia George Mulgan, once called the '55 system an "Un-Westminster" system, meaning that Japanese politics was a totally different parliamentary system in practice than Britain's strong prime minister, strong cabinet, centralized and policy-driven form of government.

With the 1994 electoral reform, as we have seen, Japan has moved somewhat closer to the British model.

Thus, despite the superficial similarities to the past, Japanese politics has changed profoundly in the past fifteen years. There is a famous saying in the West, when things appear different but really are only a continuation of the past: "Old wine in new bottles." In the case of Japanese

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