The Changing Party System in Japan 1993-2007:
More Competition and Limited Convergence

（日本の政党システム：1993-2007年の変化：競争の強まりと収斂の限界）

MURAKAMI Hiroshi[*]

Contents

The politics in Japan[1], especially its party system, had been characterized by the one-party dominance of the conservative LDP, which was exceptional among industrialized countries. But after the 1990s Japanese national election has been experiencing two remarkable changes. These changes are (A) the electoral system reform of the House of Representatives (the Lower House) in 1993, and (B) the party realignment and the trend toward a two-party system since 1996.

This article treats the changing party system (B), will observe and interpret this change according to the election data, and consider its relationship to both institutional change (A) and social structure. Institutions provide frames for people's ideas and activities and can determine the interest, idea and mutual influence of social actors. But institutions often leave certain freedom and plural possibilities, in which and sometimes beyond which social factors are affecting, and actors are trying to develop their ideas and activities.

Party system is defined as the set of all the significant parties in a country and their interactions (McLean/ McMillan 2003), and its important elements are the number, the relative size and power of political parties, and the distance and relationship among them.

1 Japan's New Election System and its Plural Possible Results

(1) The electoral reform in 1994

Under the short Hosokawa Government (1993-94), a coalition of non-LDP parties,

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[1] The literature in English on Japanese politics in general are (Allinson 2004), (Hayes 2005) and (McCargo 2004) among others.

the hottest issue was the 'political reform' after a big bribery scandal, which caused the split and defeat of the governing LDP. This political reform was then interpreted above all as a reform of the electoral system, which had required politicians to scatter benefit and money in the multi-member medium-sized constituency. In 1994, a totally new election system was introduced for the Lower House. It was a mixed system of the single-member constituency and the proportional representation, electing 300 seats by the former and other 200 seats by the latter method.

But, as the centre-left parties which were opposed to this reform insisted, the proportional representation is more rational in order to distribute seats reflecting the preference of the electorate.

The majority conservatives, who had been promoting a single-member constituency system, appealed with the justification that this will enhance government stability and leadership through the single-party government, and a sense of tension through the competition of two parties. This justification came to be accepted partly among the media and political scientists. Of course, in reality, the majority conservatives aimed by means of single-member constituency system to gain more seats than votes, to keep power monopoly, to seek the constitution amendment, or to make the leftist opposition party moderate. On the other hand, the centre-left parties hoped by means of proportional representation both to survive and to maintain their political positions (Ishikawa 2004: 171-182, Asano 2006: 9-22).

There is a lot of discussion about the effect of this new electoral system on politics and especially on party system (Asano 2006: 34-36).

Under the single-member constituency system, one seat is contested among candidates and/or parties in each constituency (district). It is a competition favourable for big parties. On the contrary, under the proportional representation system, the seats are distributed to parties in proportion to their received votes. This tends to create a multi-party system.

But it is too simple to assume that a single-member constituency system automatically produces a competitive two-party system like in the UK, Australia and the USA. There are two kinds of other possibility. First, in some countries what has been produced is a one-party dominant system, as one specific party which is structurally far stronger than other parties wins in almost all districts. For example, under the single-member constituency system and its variation, in the Singapore parliament the People's Action Party has been dominant, possessing 82 seats in total 84 seats in 2006. Second, it is possible, that two large parties have similar political positions and contest only in terms of small difference and personal factors or even by the distribution of interest.

Such deviations from the 'ideal' two-party system seem to be based on the homogeneous social or political structure of the country, if there is no state compulsion on the public opinion. Japanese society and politics has become pluralistic, but it is also true that the post-war party system continued to be one-party dominance of the conservative

LDP.

Therefore, when the present single-member constituency system, combined with proportional representation, was introduced, four opinions to predict the future party system under this new institution could exist.

— One-party dominance system, intensified
— Two-party system (both conservative)
— Two-party system (conservative and centre-left etc.)
— Multi-party system (two large parties plus small parties)

(2) The present institution

Japan's National Diet is "the highest organ of state power" according to the article 41 of the Constitution. The Diet, or the national parliament, is divided into the House of Councillors (Sangiin), the upper house, and the House of Representatives (Syugiin), the lower house. They share the power, but the latter dominates in the decisions on legislation, the nomination of the Prime Minister and the approval of budget and international treaties.

The electoral systems of these two Houses have lost major difference, after its reform for the House of Representatives in 1994. Today, both are the combination system of constituency and proportional representation. Therefore the House of Councillors is sometimes criticized as redundant and inefficient. But the existence of two chambers and their small institutional differences may be meaningful. Moreover the fact that the term of office and the interval of elections (basically 4 years for the lower, and 3 years for the upper house) differ between the two Houses gives more chances for the citizen to express their opinion, when Japan lacks the presidential election.

The House of Representatives contains 480 members. Among them, 300 are elected from single-member constituencies (districts), and remaining 180 are elected by the proportional representation in which the whole country is divided into 11 electoral blocs which are allocated between 6 and 29 members. Voters cast two ballots: one for a candidate in the single-member constituency, and another for a political party in the proportional representation election.

This mixed-type election system was adopted to replace the traditional multi-member medium-sized constituency election system, which was abolished in 1994 by a revision of the Public Offices Election Law. The new system was first used in the general election in 1996, in which 300 were elected from the single-member constituencies and 200 by the proportional representation. The number of seats for proportional representation was reduced to 180 since the 2000 election.

Besides, for the House of Councillors, 96 of the 242 members are elected by the proportional representation from a single nationwide electoral district. The remaining 146 are elected in 47 prefectural constituencies, each receiving two to ten seats. Voters cast

one ballot for a political party or a candidate in proportional representation and another for a candidate in a constituency. And the election takes place for half the members of the House every three years (Syugiin 2008, Web Japan 2008).

2   Recent Election Data

At present, Japanese party system is composed of 5 stable parties (Table 1). The LDP and the DP are large, the Komeito (Komei Party) is middle-sized and the JCP and the SDP are small. There appear often spin-off groups from the conservative LDP, but they usually don't continue and often get absorbed again into the LDP.

Table 1 shows the result of the election in 2005, in which the LDP gained a historical victory. The relative size of each party is almost similar in the House of Councillors.

Now we observe and describe the change of this system in the 1990s and in the 2000s (Kawato/ Yoshino/ Hirano/ Kato 2001: Chap. 10, Hayano 2003, Ishikawa 2004, McCargo 2004: Chap. 6, Tanaka 2005), tracing the election data shown in Figure 1.

Until 1993, the LDP and the JSP (Japan Socialist Party), both founded in 1955, were Japan's two main parties. This party system was called the '1955 regime', which was characterized by the polarized ideological confrontation between the right and left, and by one-party dominance of the LDP, which was proud of twice as many seats as the JSP. This system was not a 'real' two-party system which is accompanied by government change. But the JSP could check the LDP and sometimes stop its nationalistic policy, because the JSP's leftist position was supported by media and public opinion, and the JSP and other opposition parties kept hindering the two-thirds majority of the LDP necessary for the constitution change. Meanwhile, JSP's vote had declined from the peak of 33% in 1958 to around 20% in the 1980s. This could be explained by the 'unrealistic' neutral demilitarization policy of this party, the weakening and fragmented labour movement, the growth of other parties like the JCP, the Komei Party etc.

In the 1993 election the LDP lost a lot of votes, because 'reformers' left this party to form new liberal conservative parties (Nihon Shinto etc.). But in this occasion the JSP could not win, rather lost its votes and seats.

In 1996, the second conservative party, the Shinshinto (New Frontier Party), became the second largest party. At the same time the DP, newly founded by the members from the SDP (renamed from JSP) and the reformist conservatives that year, obtained more votes than the diminishing SDP.

In 1997, the Shinshinto broke down from internal conflict. Its core members formed the Liberal Party, but others joined the DP. Later in 2003, also the Liberal Party joined the DP. This meant the end of the party realignment process since 1993, which was caused by the partial split of the LDP and the bigger split of the JSP under changing environment, and by the change of electoral system.

**Table 1　Strength of Political Groups in the House of Representatives**

	total	in single-member constituencies	in proportional representation
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	296	219	77
Democratic Party of Japan (DP)	113	52	61
New Komeito (Komei Party)	31	8	23
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	9	0	9
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	7	1	6
People's New Party and other parties	6	2	4
Independents	18	18	0
Total	480	300	180

Source: (Soumusyou)

Note: Seats gained in the 2005 election．The number of the seats of each party can change afterward.

　　 The official abbreviation for the Democratic Party is DPJ.

Figure 1　Votes aquired in the Elections for the House of Representatives
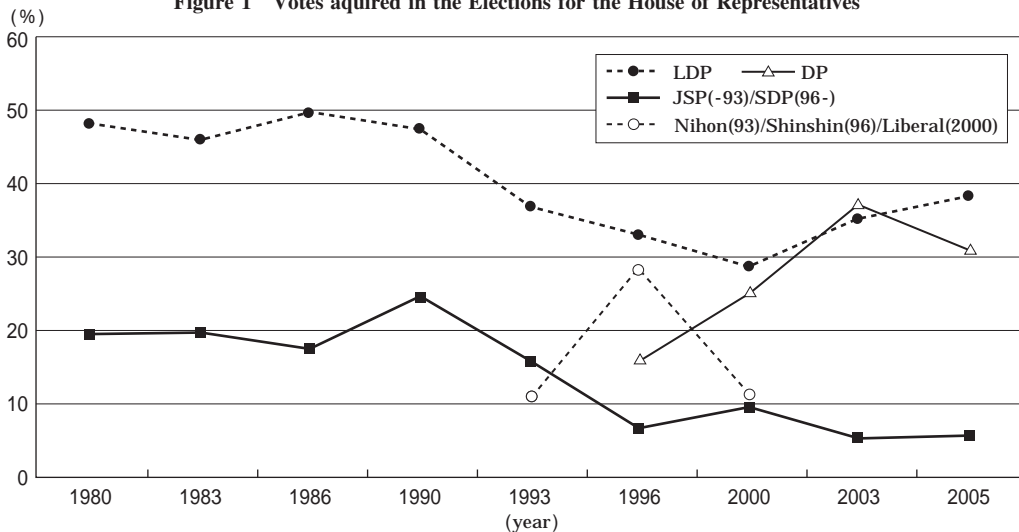
Source: Prepared by the author, based on the data (Ishikawa 2004) and other statistics.

Note: From 1996 the votes in proportional representation. Data for selected parties.

　　 Nihon=Nihon Shinto＋Sakigake　JSP=former Japan Socialist Party

　　It is remarkable from Figure 1, that the DP in 2000 obtained more votes than the former JSP, and in 2003 even exceeded the LDP in proportional representation, although the LDP could still acquire more seats in single-member constituencies．During this period, in the elections for the House of Councillors, the DP obtained 21.8% (1998), 16.4% (2001), 37.8% (2004) and 39.5% (2007) of total votes in proportional representation．Generally speaking, the power of the DP seems to have reached the level of 30 40% of votes.

　　Most recent result in Figure 1 is that of the 2005 lower house election, in which Prime

Minister Koizumi won a 'historical' victory with single issue campaign to privatise the postal service, promising better service and small government, namely less public servants. But after that the negative side of small government policy, social disparity, gradually attracted public attention, and in 2007 the LDP experienced a 'historical' defeat in the upper house election.

3 Democratic Party——Election Success and its Explanation

Why could the Democratic Party push up the average strength of major opposition party from the 20% level of the former socialists (JSP) to the level of 30 40%?

In fact, in the first election (1996) under the new election system, the winner was the conservative Shinshinto, which became the strongest opposition party with votes almost equal to the LDP in proportional representation.

At that time, it was not possible for the centre-left SDP to maintain its ideological position and at the same time to keep its strength for two reasons. First, its election achievement around 20% could guarantee only a small share of seats under the single-member constituency system. Second, there was enough space between the LDP and the SDP which another party can fill and grow.

The DP shifted toward centre and filled this space, preparing to receive many politicians from both the SDP and the Shinshinto. The Shinshinto dissolved, and the SDP diminished.

Party support in one country can be explained by the social cleavage, the party identification and political ideology of voters, and the social network (Kawato/ Yoshino/ Hirano/ Kato 2001: Chap. 8). And this party support, namely the number of votes for each party, is 'translated' into the number of parliament seats through electoral system. Of course the electoral system can directly influence the votes, because voters consider the meaning of their votes in a given electoral system.

Here are three categories of factors which can explain the progress of the DP.

1) Electoral system

Without preparing complete data evidence, I mention here three logically possible effects of the single-member constituency system.

This system motivates party voting, as in each district usually one candidate runs from one party and competes. In the 2005 election, 50% of the voters answered that they considered the party more, while 35% the candidate more (Akaruisenkyo Suisinkyoukai 2006). The local network (Koenkai) of individual politician of the LDP, who can mediate the flow of budget and subsidy through the governing party, has weakened appeal, although it is still important. Besides the largest opposition party is highlighted in a framework of duel against the governing party. That was the Shinshinto in 1996, and is

the DP at present.

This system tends to weaken small parties, when it converts the number of votes into the seat. Further, voters wish to vote for the candidate who may win. Mass media sometimes tends to focus on the competition of two large parties. Actually the vote ratio of relatively small JCP and SDP has been decreasing, although they maintain some seats in proportional representation. From this process the DP is benefitting much, because in the 1970s and 1980s the fragmentation of party system had occurred mainly on the left and centre-left side. If we compare in Figure 1 the vote ratio in 1986 and in 2003, it seems that the DP has attracted a little more votes from the JSP (and from the JCP) than from the LDP.

Even the middle-sized Komei Party, based on a large, integrated religious organization, gives up putting up candidates in many districts and instead supports the LDP candidates to get welcomed in a coalition government led by the LDP.

And this system equalizes the conditions between the largest and the second largest party in a way. Before, under the multi-member constituency system, for example in a district to elect 4 seats, the LDP put up 3 candidates, and the largest opposition party (the JSP) put up often only 1 candidate, because 2 candidates would be both defeated by ones from the LDP and other parties. Already in terms of the number of candidates, the LDP was dominant. But now the LDP and the DP do not put up more than 1 candidate in each district.

By the way, it is sometimes forgotten, that another equalization effect between two large parties (and other smaller parties) arises from the proportional representation. In the 2005 election (Table 1), in single-member constituencies the LDP could gain 219 seats from 47.8% votes, while the DP gained only 52 seats from 36.4% votes. This disparity of big extra bonus for the winner and severe reduction for the loser seems unfair, although it can be claimed this is not so unfair because any winner can enjoy it. If we find the key of democracy in the check-and-balance system and pluralism, the overwhelming majority for four years which is produced by just one election is not appropriate. In reality, the proportional representation with dual candidacy[2] mitigates this problem, and produces a result which is both clear and harmless, avoiding the situation in which most opposition

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2) Dual candidacy between the proportional representation and the single-member constituency is permitted in the House of Representatives. In the case of large parties, a candidate who is defeated at a narrow margin in a constituency can usually enter the House via proportional representation. In the case of smaller parties, a candidate in the proportional representation can also stand in a constituency, to make appeal and to seek a small chance to win there.

　　This institution of dual candidacy is often criticized, because a candidate who is once refused in a constituency is allowed to become MP via proportional representation. But this criticism forgets the fact that the single-member constituency and the proportional representation are combined and equally legitimate. If the candidates above were unfair, the same criticism would apply to the candidates who are elected in a single-member constituency but are not approved in the proportional representation.

politicians are 'dismissed' for four years (see: Tanaka 2005: 224). There is an argument that this proportional representation system should be enlarged.

2) Political position and strategy of the DP

There have been some changes in leaders and policies during the 10 years' history of the DP (Shiota 2007).

DP's basic philosophy is officially expressed in the decision of the first party conference in 1998. Here are some quotations (Democratic Party 2008).

> 'We stand for those who have been excluded by the structure of vested interests, those who work hard and pay taxes, and for people who strive for independence despite difficult circumstances. In other words, we represent citizens, taxpayers, and consumers. We do not seek a panacea either in the free market or in the welfare state. Rather, we shall build a new road of the democratic center toward a society in which self-reliant individuals can mutually coexist and the government's role is limited to building the necessary systems.'

And among the five purposes of the party, it is stated that

> 'we shall embody the fundamental principles of the Constitution: popular sovereignty, respect for fundamental human rights, and pacifism' and
> 'we shall establish international relations in the fraternal spirit of self-reliance and mutual coexistence, and thereby restore the world's trust in Japan'.

If we try to pick up some characteristics, DP's basic political orientation is 'democratic center' and is somewhere between free market and welfare state. The DP declares that it will embody (a little different from 'protect') the Japanese Constitution. By the way, the words 'people' and sometimes 'citizen' are used, and 'worker' or 'labour' are avoided.

As for the political strategy, this party introduced in the 2003 election the 'manifesto', i.e. detailed and concrete policy promises, learning from the British style of election, and could appeal much, perhaps more by the fresh image of 'manifesto' than by the policy contents. The DP also tries to show a critical and sometimes confrontational stance to the governing LDP. The present party leader Ozawa uses sharp criticism, but on the other hand favours the idea of a grand coalition with the LDP to promote common policies, although this idea is strongly criticized in the party.

In sum, the DP seems to be presenting a balanced position and to avoid either coming too close to the LDP or behaving in a social democratic style. Such a middle way is often blamed to be ambiguous, but the DP has tried to evade that by showing concrete policy manifesto and by bringing their own bills on controversial issues in the Diet, instead of just criticizing the government. These party activities may have succeeded in attracting support from a wide range of voters.

Of course sometimes their policy packages are opportunistic, or may contain a difficult trade-off for example between 'free market and welfare state', or between 'self-reliance and mutual coexistence' in international policy. Especially the proper balance between the public service for people, the number of public officials and the tax level to levy from people and companies is a theme which must be discussed enough and clarified.

3) Stagnation and decline of the LDP

The LDP governs Japan since its foundation in 1955 except the short interruption in 1993-1994. This remarkable one-party dominance system has been often criticized and sometimes defended. And political scientists have found out many causes for this unusual party system (Muramatsu/ Ito/ Tsujinaka 2003: 141-167). Former multi-member constituency electoral system, in which candidates were more important than parties and rural areas were overrepresented compared with urban areas. Local networks and many social organizations which support the LDP, rewarded through clientelistic interest mediation of this Government party. LDP's centre-right position which incorporates the legitimacy of regime and at the same time permits incremental policy improvement. Decline of socialist countries. The bias of the JSP towards socialism, idealism and labour unions.

However, as shown in Figure 1, the ratio of votes obtained by the LDP declined sharply in the 1990s from the level around 50% in the 1980s. Of course, this is partially due to the entrance of other conservative parties like the Nihon Shinto (1993), the Shinshinto (1996) or the Liberal Party (2000). But even after their disappearance, in 2003, the votes of the LDP recovered only up to 35%, which is regarded as the average power of the LDP today. Even in 2005 under the excellent leadership of Prime Minister Koizumi, the result in proportional representation was 38%, although the LDP recorded, supported by the Komei Party, the lead of 11% against the DP in the single-member constituency and realized a historical victory (Table 1). The general decline of the LDP is partially the effect of single-member constituency system, the reverse side of the explanation above about the growth of the DP. And what is often pointed out is the loosening social network of rural community and interest groups, which works as the LDP's political machine in elections. Of course such a loosening of group integration is occurring almost anywhere in contemporary Japanese society, perhaps has occurred earlier in labour movement.

Another reason may be LDP's leaving from the post-war consensus, namely big government and budget expansion which satisfied a wide range of social groups (Nonaka 2008). And the exclusively defense-oriented military policy under the article 9 of the Constitution seems to belong to that consensus, which the right wing of the LDP is trying to change. Such new orientations in the 2000s are a reflection of LDP's dominance, but at the same time a factor to cause electorates' anxiety.

Besides another data seems worth mentioning that shows the quick fall from

expectation to disappointment of the electorate.

For the recent three Prime Ministers (Abe, Fukuda, Aso) and their cabinets, according to the newspapers' public opinion poll, the support rate started from the high level of 40 70% but soon decreased to 20 30% level, and the disapproval rate easily jumped up to more than 50%. Before, until the late 1990s, this 50% disapproval to Prime Minister was an exception (Mainichi Shinbun, 8 Dec. 2008). This severe judgment of public opinion can be interpreted in several ways. There may be a problem in the quality of Prime Minister and cabinet members, who are now elected in a small district, in some cases easily by inheriting their fathers' legacy as a politician. There may be the growing demand and dissatisfaction of citizen in affluent society and in the increasing difficulty for policy-making. The last difficulty is often felt in today's politics and administration, as social problems are more complicated and the resources to tackle them are more limited. Also the DP, if in office, would encounter at least the last two sorts of difficulties.

4   Democratic Party——Between Neo-liberalism and Centre-left

The question to examine here is whether and how much this Democratic Party can keep distance from the LDP, and can provide an effective alternative to the LDP.

When two large parties share a similar political position, the two-party system can still function, but little substantial policy change nor discussion can be expected, and there will be even a danger of excessive convergence and cooperation ignoring public opinion.

(1) Pluralistic party structure

The DP has been formed through a massive and complex party realignment process as a coalition of several political groups: ex-LDP, ex-Democratic socialists, ex-Social democrats (SDP). It is even said that the DP includes 8 factions from the conservative to the social democratic, and sometimes they are based on personal leader-follower relations (Itagaki 2008, Ito 2008). Main positions in the party executive are occupied by politicians from different intra-party groups.

This party is nevertheless united, partly in order to win in the single-member constituencies, although as to the issues like government-market relationship or defense policy there exists a wide range of opinions, as was seen before, and will be seen later (Table 7). And some leading politicians of the DP including Ozawa are interested in the collective self-defense policy, in public expenditure cut or in the plan 'Do-Shu-sei' to integrate prefectures (and municipalities) for more efficiency at the cost of local democracy (Murakami 2008A). Such positions are almost similar to those of the LDP's right wing. Therefore it is not impossible to call this party 'centre-right' (Shinkawa/ Oonisi 2008: 25). But other liberal DP politicians emphasize the issues like welfare, working conditions, arms

reduction and gender equality. This coexistence of various political positions in the party is sometimes criticized for being ambiguous, but is sometimes useful to collect wide support. And we will consider later whether there is some prospect about this intra-party debate.

(2)　Left-right scale in Japanese politics

The left-right scale or dimension is almost indispensible to describe a party system, because not only the size but also the interactions of parties are of importance.

There are several partially different frameworks for the left-right scale, but in general the left position is characterized by 'egalitarianism, support for the working class, support for nationalization of industry, hostility to marks of hierarchy, opposition to nationalistic foreign or defense policy' (McLean/ McMillan 2003). The right tends to take opposite positions. Of course in the 1990s, European social democrats have abandoned especially the excessive egalitarianism and the nationalization of industry, by recognizing the merits of market mechanism.

These differences between right and left can be categorized in two themes or axes, which are understood in a historical context (Sato/ Murakami 2009: 1-I).

The first axis is 'welfare or market economy' and discusses the extent of public intervention into private economy for redistribution. This theme arose in the class conflict between employers and employees since the 19th century. In the 20th century, this conflict was expanded between capitalism and socialism, and on the other hand was moderated by the welfare state consensus in the middle of the century. But it intensified again when the conservatives partially headed for the neo-liberalism and began to criticize the big government, in the economic stagnation after the 1980s. Today the slogan 'reform' is declared from the both sides, although this means for example a budget cut for the right, policy improvement and more participation for the left.

The second axis has been, in a general concept, the tension between liberalism and authority. In the late 18th and the 19th centuries this tension existed between the absolute monarchy and the revolutionists in France, America and other countries, who finally could declare a series of principles for democratic polity. In the 20th century, this liberal democracy had to confront nationalism and fascism in capitalist countries, and also confront the totalitarian socialist regime.

Similarly, the Japanese post-war "1955 regime" was characterized by two or three main axes of ideological and policy conflict (Kawato/ Yoshino/ Hirano/ Kato 2001: 159-161, Shinkawa/ Oonisi 2008: 12-13) between right and left, namely between the 'Hosyu' (conservatives) and the 'Kakushin' (progressives)[3].

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3)　In Japan the words 'left-right' are too direct and not very popular, instead the words 'progressive' (Kakushin) and 'conservative' (Hosyu) have been often used. But the concept 'Kakushin' used to be put up by the JSP and the JCP, and therefore the DP feels some difficulty in finding a proper word for its identity.

If we set two axes, one of them will be 'welfare or market economy'. The conservative LDP focused more on economic development including business interest than social welfare and environment protection at least until the 1970s. The left and progressive JSP and JCP emphasized rather the equal redistribution of wealth and the environment protection, and often criticized big corporations. After the 1970s the LDP learned to redistribute through not only welfare but also public works (roads, Shinkansen etc.) and agriculture subsidy. But in the 2000s, under the huge deficit in public finance partially because of tax reduction policy, some leaders of the LDP turned to the position of small government and neo-liberalism.

Another axis 'liberalism or authority' contains various issues: domestic pluralism and international coexistence versus nationalism (Murakami 2008B:373-383), more or less citizen participation in politics; apology or justification about Japan's past war and colonization; peaceful or military settlement of international conflict etc . .

To confirm these two axes, we can interpret the values declared in the Constitution of Japan (1946). This completely renewed post-war constitution is based on three principles: sovereignty of the people, respect for fundamental human rights, and renunciation of war. Among these principles, people's sovereignty, the human rights related to liberty and the renunciation of war are interpreted as the declaration to support liberalism and to oppose authoritarianism. People's sovereignty as well as the human rights related to welfare, education and labour, which sometimes contradict the human rights related to property and economic activities, are placed along the 'welfare or market economy' axis.

In addition, we should note some factors which may influence or alter these two axes.

First, it seems specific to Japan, that the collective defense policy became an important dividing line between right and left. This phenomenon is understandable, if we consider the destructive militarism in Japan's modern history, the idealistic pacifism in the Constitution and the military dominance of the USA, who maintains many bases in Japan for its worldwide strategy.

Second, especially from the conservative side, it is sometimes insisted that these axes have weakened and even disappeared after the end of the '1955 regime', namely the decline of the JSP. But, decreasing in intensity, these axes can be observed in political debates and in the diversity of political opinions (Table 4, 5 and 7). While the SDP and the DP have shifted towards centre, the LDP partially took a right position under the Prime Ministers Koizumi and Abe, strengthening the orientation towards small government, nationalism and positive defense. So the post-war left-right scale as a whole has shifted to the right, but the distance between the opposite poles still remains.

Third, recently the concept 'reform' is emphasized from many parties and became a new axis to compete along. This concept is important but can include various meanings which are sometimes contradictory: the reduction of policy in the name of small government and the improvement of underdeveloped public policy areas; citizen

Table 2 Political positions and main issues in left-right scale

	social democracy liberal		conservative neo-liberalism	
left ····················	centre-left ····················	centre ····················	centre-right ····················	right
			(Shinshinto)	
	JCP (JSP) SDP	DP Komeito	LDP	

◆ axis 1: welfare or market economy ◆

redistribution and equality through big	market economy and small
government	government
welfare state, social human right	economic development

◆ axis 2: liberalism or authority ◆

passive defense policy	active defense policy
limitation of state's power	strong state
social tolerance, liberty	duty and social order
	(sometimes) nationalism

Source: Prepared by the author. The location of each party is based on general observation.
Note: LDP=Liberal Democratic Party   DP=Democratic Party of Japan,
     Komeito=(New) Komei Party   JCP=Japanese Communist Party,
     SDP=Social Democratic Party
     JSP=former Japan Socialist Party   Shinshinto=former New Frontier Party

participation and the strong leadership of political leaders[4].

After these considerations, in the following analysis, the left-right scale will be used to express the difference between welfare state/ market economy and between liberalism/ authority (Table 2).

(3) Location of the DP in the left-right scale

The next step is to examine several factors which can determine the political orientation of the Democratic Party.

This Table 3 enumerates important factors which can affect the political position of the DP. They are helpful, when we wish to predict the future course of this party.

First, the factors promoting the centre-left orientation are shown on the left side of the table.

a) The pluralistic structure of Japanese society is the basis for a multi-party system.

According to the recent public opinion research (Table 4), citizen's political consciousness is fairly symmetrically distributed, most concentrated on the centre position and thinner on the progressive side than on the conservative side. The ratio of the progressive position increases in proportion to the education level. Anyway this distribution curve is not

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4) An analysis (Machidori 2006) of a survey research to the MPs confirms that the most salient theme among them was 'big government or small government' in the 1980s. In the 2000s, the theme 'interest groups and bureaucracy versus congress and populism' in the political process became important. By the way, the theme 'liberalism or authority' seems not to be included in this survey.

Table 3   Factors affecting the political orientation of the Democratic Party

centre-left orientation	possible in both orientations	centre-right orientation
— election competition in pluralistic society		— structural restriction of economy
— support of the unified labour union 'Rengo'		— dominance of the neo-liberalism
— ex-socialists group in the party		ideology in society
— public subsidy: independence from big business		— conservative group in the party
— remaining two small centre-left parties		— international tensions
under proportional representation		
	— voting behaviour of citizen	
	— position of party leaders	
	— candidates and party members	
	— strategy of local DP	

Source: Prepared by the author

Table 4   Distribution of the political ideology of citizen

(%)

	conservative	a little conservative	centre	a little progressive	progressive	DK
2005	13.2	21.8	36.7	12.8	3.1	12.5
2007	15.0	20.9	38.3	11.6	3.3	10.8

Source: (Akaruisenkyo Suisinkyoukai 2006 and 2008)
Note: This research uses the expression 'progressive-conservative' instead of 'left-right'.
    Opinion polls at the time of the election for the House of Representatives (2005), and for the House of Councillors (2007)

'one-party dominant'. One large party can find a suitable location in the conservative area, but for another large party it is rational to find another area. Of course, it depends on if political parties can keep and create the diversity of social opinions on the other hand.

This public opinion structure seems sensitive to political balance and can turn critical of the LDP, when the LDP makes mistakes or takes the right-wing course, for example military expansion, nationalism or excessive neo-liberalism. But it is not so simple. If the LDP succeeds in showing such courses as a reform and a progress from the status quo, it can attract also the centre and the progressive voters. It is remarkable in recent politics that the LDP, typically Prime Minister Koizumi and some conservative governors in Osaka etc. appeal their 'reforms' when they cut the personnel cost and welfare budget, and are often applauded by the public opinion.

We can also imagine a rational choice for the DP between the centre-right or the centre-left courses. If this party moves to centre-right, it can get a part of the conservative voters, but the cost will be to lose the centre and centre-left voters, who may then support the JCP, the SDP or abstain from voting.

Table 5 shows the relationship between voters' ideology and voting for parties. In the 2007 election, the DP gained more support than the LDP in four categories from 'a little conservative' to 'progressive'. From this data, we can infer that the DP has widened its supporters from centre-left to centre-right, while 'conservative' people are out of reach,

Table 5   Relationship between the political ideology and the voting of citizen

(%)

	ideology voted for	conservative	a little conservative	centre	a little progressive	progressive	DK
2005	LDP	77.6	53.9	36.5	23.3	26.8	35.2
	DP	6.0	20.6	28.9	42.8	36.6	9.0
2007	LDP	52.9	32.5	17.2	7.9	1.6	21.0
	DP	16.9	34.5	35.4	51.6	48.4	17.5

Source: (Akaruisenkyo Suisinkyoukai 2006 and 2008)

Note: Voting ratio of each ideological category for each party in the proportional representation. See also Table 4.

and 'progressive' people support also the JCP and the SDP. The two-party system in Japan is not a temporary phenomenon, but is based on the social pluralism to some degree. Of course it should be noted, that the 'progressive' voters are smaller in number, and the LDP has proven its chance to attract 'centre' and 'a little progressive' groups in 2005. In other words, the borderline between centre-left and centre-right is fluctuating, depending on political leadership or agenda-setting.

b) The labour union national centre 'Rengo' (Japanese Trade Union Confederation) is supporting the DP mainly, and the SDP partially. Although the organization ratio of workers in Japan has been declining to below 20% and is lower among industrialized countries, 'Rengo' is still one of the largest social organizations with about 7 million members. Labour unions are reliable organizations for election campaign for the DP and for the DP politicians, who find their own personal Koenkai organization in the constituency insufficient. Recently Rengo and the DP enter a policy agreement before each election. 'Rengo' was formed in 1987, as the pro-business private sector unions and the leftist public sector unions were unified, and afterward maintains a relatively balanced position to 'effort for the comprehensive improvement of living, with the specific goal of raising working conditions' (Rengo 2008).

c) Ex-socialists group in the party expresses centre-left policies and will resist if the party takes the neo-liberalism or the positive defense policy.

d) State's subsidy to political parties was introduced in 1995 to weaken the financial connection between politics and interest groups or companies, as one of the political reform measures. On the other hand, financial contributions from companies and other organizations remain legal. But the remarkable change is that parties are now less dependent on financial contributions and therefore can promote policies which differ from the interest of powerful organizations. Logically, if a party can increase its votes and seats, the public support to party finance will increase proportionally, even if some contribution from big business and interest groups is cancelled.

e) The remaining two small centre-left parties, the JCP and the SDP[5], can still

5) The JSP (Japan Socialist Party) renewed itself in the mid 1990s, including the approval of the Self Defense Force and the Japan-US security pact, and changed its name to SDP (Social Democratic

influence the larger DP to some extent. They can set the political agenda. For example in the constitutional reform debate, only these two parties clearly represent the viewpoint to protect the present Constitution including renunciation of war. Besides they can compete or cooperate with the DP in elections and in Diet activities, and can cooperate in a coalition government if opposition parties win an election. If the DP comes nearer to the LDP, such cooperation may be difficult and some supporters may leave the DP towards the JCP and the SDP.

On the contrary, the DP can be pulled to centre-right under the following conditions.

f) If a certain policy or ideology gets booming, parties may be inclined to adopt that, even if it originated from the contrary side, to maximize their votes. For example, in the early 2000s, under the stagnating economy and the political tension in northeastern Asia or caused by terrorism, the idea of neo-liberalism and active military policy became relatively accepted in Japanese society. During such a boom, the political issue axes mentioned before can be blurred for a while. Political parties are acting in a given set of political issue axes or frame of reference, but at the same time can contribute to form or blur them. In other words, the DP has the choice either to try to emphasize the axes, or to conform to the blurred axes and to compete with the LDP in advocating the popular positions of neo-liberalism and military activism, in the context mentioned above.

And lastly, there are several variable factors.

g)   Voting behaviour of citizen is changing in every election. Today, more than 30% of the electorate are 'nonpartisan' who are ready to switch their support from one party to another, depending on their judgment or feeling in each election. We have seen that the distribution of political ideology is rather balanced between right and left (Table 4). According to the recent opinion polls before and after elections, the most appealing issues are welfare, and economy/ employment. But additionally certain issues can attract attention in each election, for example the privatisation of postal service (19% of the respondents regarded this as most important) in 2005, and 'social disparity' (16% did so) in 2007 (Akaruisenkyo Suisinkyoukai, Mainichi Shinbun 9 Sept. 2005 and 27 July 2007). This affected the election result on a large scale, beneficial to the LDP in 2005, and to the DP in 2007.

Party) in 1996. There is an argument that this change from an idealistic (ideological) to a realistic party caused the massive loss of its supporter and the party's decline. But this is not logical when we see the New Socialist Party (Shin Syakaitou), formed by the left wing members of the JSP, declined more quickly. Rather the SDP suffered from the loss of its members and supporters to the moderate and large Democratic Party, and this process was accelerated through the effect of the single-member constituency system. Besides, despite this decline, the JSP Prime Minister Murayama, whom the LDP supported in order to return back to the government party, made an important contribution by his statement (1995) in which he apologized for Japan's invasion and colonization in the past. This statement is often quoted by today's LDP government to explain briefly Japan's attitude to the international public.

ｈ） The DP has elected five party leaders since its second foundation in 1998: Kan, Hatoyama, Okada, Maehara and Ozawa. Their carrier and position are diverse, from conservative to centre-left, reflecting the pluralistic party structure (Itagaki 2008, Ito 2008).

Present party leader Ozawa was once a chief secretary of the LDP, but entered in the DP via Liberal Party and was elected as top leader of this party after he promised to change himself in 2006. After that he nevertheless suddenly proposed a grand coalition with the LDP in 2007, and was strongly criticized in the party for depriving the DP of the identity. So his political attitude may sometimes return back to his conservative origin, but as far as he wishes to stay in his party leader position, he will probably behave in a correct manner. He is famous as a political strategist and is expected to lead the party in the battle against the powerful LDP.

ｉ） Recruitment and composition of candidates and members, which will be a topic below in (4).

ｊ） Local politics is a basis for the development of political parties. But this used to be a weak point for the former JSP, and is so for the DP. Local DP organizations possess a limited number of seats in prefecture and city councils, and partially therefore prefer the coalition to the competition with the majority LDP in the election of governors and mayors (Murakami 2003: 40‑52). However, this situation began to change, when the DP, in the nationwide local election in 2007, gained for example 375 seats in the prefecture councils, still smaller compared with 1212 seats of the LDP, but almost twice as many as before.

From this long list of factors, a little more reasons can be found that the Democratic Party keeps distance from the LDP and moves a little toward centre-left. This limited convergence of the DP and the LDP is a reflection of the pluralistic society of Japan, and is supported by some institutional setting such as the proportional representation and the public subsidy to parties.

DP's clear liberal or centre-left position can be further fostered, if this party can
— construct an alternative policy package, not neo-liberalistic, but liberal or somewhat social democratic, which must include the proper tax increase if the party will promote welfare and equality, and
— increase citizen members in local councils.
On the other hand, the DP can be pulled towards the conservative side, if
— two small centre-left parties disappear for example as a result of introducing a "pure" single-member constituency electoral system, or
— the economic, social or international crisis forces the party to cooperate firmly with the LDP.

(4) Composition of the Members of Parliament

Further we have to examine one of the important factors, the social composition of DP's politicians in national parliament and local councils. We observe here as an example

Table 6   Career of MPs of the House of Representatives, elected in recent elections

	party	local politicians	bureaucrats	MP's secretaries	employees	total	(female)
2003	LDP	73	50	52	17	237	(9)
	DP	46	13	31	17	177	(15)
2005	LDP	89	51	54	30	296	(26)
	DP	28	15	16	16	113	(7)

Source: Extract from Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 10 Nov. 2003 and 12 Sept. 2005
Note: Number of the members of parliament. This career classification seems incomplete, lacking the categories such as business owner and professionals. The same article (10 Nov. 2003) reports that among the DP's members of parliament, 9 come from labour unions, 14 from the mass media and 15 are lawyers.

Table 7   Opinions on policies of the MPs of the House of Representatives, elected in 2005

(%)

method to balance public pension deficit				constitution reform			
	LDP	DP	SDP		LDP	DP	SDP
reduce payment	8	2	0	yes	93	69	0
raise premium	4	1	0	no	1	14	100
postpone the start of payment	28	7	0				
support from budget	32	58	86				

collective self-defense				PM Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni shrine			
	LDP	DP	SDP		LDP	DP	SDP
yes	75	39	0	yes	41	2	0
no	11	50	100	no	10	72	86

Source: Extract from the opinion poll to the MPs (Mainichi Shinbun, 14 Sept. 2005)
Note: The percentage of DK answers is omitted. The result of SDP is included for comparison.

the career composition of politicians elected in the 2003 and 2005 election for the House of Representatives (Table 6). The DP is now recruiting various parliament members from the local councils, employees, labour unions, the mass-media, lawyers and bureaucrats.

The DP includes also a considerable number of politicians graduated from the Matsusita Seikeijuku (political-economy school), who sometimes advocate 'reform' in the neo-liberalism style. They are often young, eloquent, smart and valuable candidates both for the DP and for the LDP. But as the DP grows larger, more various candidates can be recruited from the mass-media persons, lawyers and citizen organizations, who are often liberal and support democracy and equality, and also from bureaucrats, who before stood as candidates only from the LDP. It may be possible that the share of the Seikeijuku politicians decreases.

The next question is the distribution of political opinions among the DP politicians. Recent detailed researches by Mainichi Newspaper to the elected MPs (Table 7) are interesting.

From this table we can compare the locations of the two large parties. In all the questions cited here, the answer trend of the DP members is between the conservative LDP and the centre-left SDP. The pluralistic structure of the DP is confirmed here. But, more interestingly, the locations of the DP differ according to questions.

To the question 'method to balance the public pension deficit', the option to subsidize from the budget is favoured, which corresponds to the idea of welfare state. Concerning the military and foreign relation affairs, three levels of the orientation toward activism and nationalism can be distinguished. The support to that orientation is high in the case of the constitutional reform in general. Nevertheless the support for the collective self-defense policy, which is prohibited by the present Constitution, is lower than the opposition to that policy. Lastly, the Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine, where also the leaders responsible for Japanese war are enshrined, is widely criticized among the DP politicians. This data implies that the policy and ideological orientation of the DP members is liberal to some extent and significantly different in comparison with those of the conservative LDP.

5 An Outlook for the Japanese Party System

This article has tried to describe and to analyse the change of Japan's party system in this decade. The main topic here is the competition and convergence in the party system, which is largely determined by the activity and performance of the first opposition party, the Democratic Party.

Although two important theoretical frameworks, the relationship between electoral system and party system (ex. Kawato/ Yoshino/ Hirano/ Kato 2001, Sartori 2005, Bale 2008), and the formation, stabilization and modernization of social democratic (centre-left) parties (Powell 2004), are not treated here, four types of development could be expected as for the new party system under the new electoral system in 1994, which is basically a single-member constituency system, but is softened by means of proportional representation.

a) One-party dominance system, intensified
b) Two-party system (both conservative)
c) Two-party system (conservative and centre-left etc.)
d) Multi-party system (two large parties plus small parties)

In reality, in the first election in 1996 in the frame of this new electoral system, the two large parties were the LDP and the conservative Shinshinto. Some people predicted a two-conservative-party system (scenario b) and the decline of the centre-left and liberal parties.

But after the split of the centre-left SDP, and the breakdown of the Shinshinto, the 'democratic centre' DP could assemble politicians and voters. In terms of the political

orientation, the DP could fill the space between the LDP and the SDP. The DP is supported by trade unions and by the centre or progressive-oriented citizen, from which also many candidates can be recruited. The DP is also helped by several institutional arrangements such as the state's subsidy to parties, the proportional representation system which allows small centre-left parties to survive, and the dual candidacy which allows large parties to maintain certain power even if their candidates are defeated in the single-member constituency system.

Japanese party system today can be regarded as a type among b), c) and d).

The question whether the policies of this DP have been proper and appealing, was not treated in this article, as it still has not been in charge of the government, except in many local governments. But for example, the DP's efforts to bring original bills in the Diet have been highly regarded, and the criticism to the social disparity under the LDP's neo-liberalism reforms appealed much in the 2007 election and can stimulate some policy improvement.

Not only the strength, but also the political position of this new opposition party is an important theme. This article tried to analyse the factors which may influence the DP's political course, and to observe the career and opinions of its MPs, and came to the conclusion that the DP has both reasons to turn to the centre-left and to the centre-right. As a whole, under the present conditions, the push towards centre-left and liberalism seems a little larger, although this can be limited by the pluralistic party structure and the voter's centre-oriented attitude. This observation gives an outlook for the working two-party system like in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the DP is criticized for being too confrontational by the conservatives and the business organizations, especially after it took control of the House of Councillors in the 2007 election. Whether confrontation is sound or destructive is a matter of value judgments, but at least from the analysis in this article we could consider that the confrontational behaviour of the DP is not only mere tactics, but also is based on the political and policy orientation of the MPs and supporters of this party.

At least, the dream for someone and the fear for others that the single-member constituency system would establish the dominance of the LDP, or a regime of two conservative parties, was not realized hitherto under the various conditions of contemporary Japan. Japanese social and political structure has proved to be pluralistic at least to some extent, and contains much similarity with other industrialized countries. But it should not be forgotten that this plural-democratic result was helped by some accidental factors such as the unification of labour movement, the political leadership to form the DP, the breakdown of the second conservative party, and the institutional setting mentioned above. Moreover there still remains a 'risk' that this DP shifts towards the conservative direction, brought by the strategy of the party leaders who are often originally conservative, by the composition change of parliament members, or by the institutional

change, especially the reduction of the proportional representation which now enables the centre-left partner/ competitor parties to continue their activities. Further the well-organized Komeito is supporting the LDP.

　　And of course a two-party system is not a goal, but a start of the functioning democracy and of policy discussion, for example about the balance of public finance including the revenue side, or about the improvement in 'underdeveloped' policy areas like welfare, health, education, birth rate and working conditions. These discussions need to be realistic but at the same time need to be open to various ideas and critics, which would be provided partially by other small parties in the party system.

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    ＊   Newspapers referred to are mentioned in the text.