

Voters Who Choose Candidates Like

Japan's Changing Party Democracy

It is not at all unusual for consumers to buy something they like but replace it with something else if they are disappointed or when a more attractive product appears. This is market competition. Companies want to be the choice of consumers, and they compete on price, quality, and other factors. The understanding is that when this competition and selection mechanism functions properly, the conditions are desirable and efficient for both consumers and businesses.

In Japanese democracy today, voters select parties in the same way that consumers freely purchase goods. The two leading parties compete fiercely with their platforms under a system of small, winner-takes-all, single-seat constituencies. Voters cast their ballots based on the policies themselves, rather than giving fixed support to any given party. If one views voters as consumers, political parties as corporations, policies (platforms) as products, and votes as money, then elections are an exchange between votes and policies. In this sense, consumer purchasing behavior and the act of voting overlap, and this democratic model may be called “market competition” democracy.

The formation of market competition democracy in Japan began from the 1994 political reforms—specifically the passage of four laws related to political reform by the Hosokawa Administration, which was a coalition of eight parties not including the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) or the Japanese Communist Party. These reforms introduced a House of Representatives election system of single-seat constituencies combined with proportional representation. Party platforms were introduced assuming: (1) a two-party system based on single-seat constituencies, (2) a segment of independent voters who do not support any particular party over the medium to long term, and (3) political initiative centered on the prime minister. Those conditions were put into place by additional political reforms after 1994, and manifesto (policy platform) elections began from 2003. The result was the change of government from the LDP to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009.

Prior to that time, Japan had experienced an era of participatory democracy. Looking back, 1968 may be considered a representative year when political disputes intensified at universities and the social changes and contradictions from Japan's high growth emerged. This was followed by the birth of new social movements in such areas as ecology and feminism. As part of these developments, participatory democracy emerged to reform the nature of the existing representative democracy. The movement to reinstate direct democracy through grass-

roots citizen participation constituted a criticism of the concept that competition among parties in electoral districts is the essence of democracy. These efforts had repercussions on the LDP and the Japan Socialist Party, and systems were introduced whereby regular party members were given the right to vote in elections for party leaders.

As illustrated by this history, there have been diverse models of democracy in Japan which changed in response to the changing social context and values.

What Is the Problem with the Single-seat Constituency System?

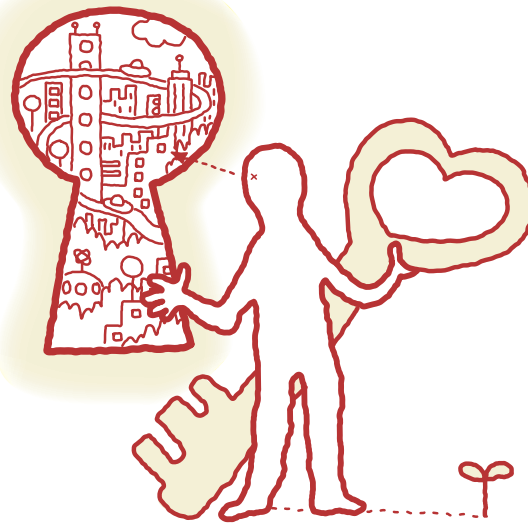
The recent general election at the end of 2012 laid bare the problems with the single-seat constituency system. The LDP, which won just 27.6 percent of the proportional representation vote, secured 61.3 percent of the seats for an overwhelming victory. For sure, one might ask if this is really democracy as expected, but this type of effect from the single-seat constituency system was already expected when it was introduced.

Be that as it may, the LDP landslide in the 2005 election on privatizing Japan Post, the sweeping victory by the DPJ in the 2009 general election, and the recent LDP victory all involved changes in large numbers of seats, exceeding initial expectations. The DPJ won 42.4 percent of the proportional representation vote in the previous election compared with 15.9 percent this time, showing a large increase in the number of swing voters. Those changes are amplified by the single-seat constituency system, which makes it difficult for political parties to have stability in developing personnel and drafting policies from

a medium to long term perspective.

The increase in swing voters who do not consistently support any particular political party is not only caused by changes in values but also results from the introduction of the single-seat constituency system. In the past, Japan had an easily understood political structure with the LDP backed by business circles and the Japan Socialist Party supported by labor unions. Like fans of the Yomiuri Giants and Hanshin Tigers baseball teams, supporters could not easily switch sides. Today, however, with the two main parties created by the single-seat constituency system each consisting of diverse interests, the differences between the parties has narrowed and the number of unaffiliated voters who support different parties at each election has increased.

While the idea was that swing voters could freely choose which party to vote for based on their policies each time precisely because these voters are not affiliated with any



Consumers Buying Goods



party, this is causing extreme fluctuations in the Cabinet approval rate and a pendulum effect each general election. The two-party system created by the single-seat constituency system has lacked cohesion and has repeated internal conflicts, as can typically be seen in the DPJ. This is one of the causes of voter distrust in the two major parties, and third-tier parties such as Your Party and the Japan Restoration Party have been emerging since the 2010 House of Councillors election. While the LDP won a resounding victory in the 2012 general election and regained power with its Abenomics platform, the party no longer has the type of stable voter support it enjoyed in the past.

The two main parties in the US and the UK, which have single-seat constituency systems, have far more solid social foundations than the political parties in Japan. In the US, the Republicans have a strong base in the southern and western states while the Democrats control the eastern states and the West Coast. In the UK, the Conservative Party predominates in the south while Labour holds the north. As a result, these countries have large numbers of stable seats where the result is a foregone conclusion, and elections are mostly fought over ballots in certain regions.

The question of how political parties and voters can draw closer together is important for Japan to free itself from political instability. One main factor in voters' strong distrust of politics is that their only interaction with political parties is the moment when they cast their votes during elections. How can Japan's political parties increase party members and supporters, and gain voters that will provide consistent support over the middle to long term? The single-seat constituency system will probably have to be revised as part of the answer.

Politics as the Art of the Possible

While I have explained the importance of thinking about politics in relation to society, at the same time the fact is that political leadership is what makes politics interesting. There is a well known quotation from Otto von Bismarck that "Politics is the art of the possible." Politics is the act of selecting one option from among multiple alternatives. The surrounding conditions are viewed as fluid rather than fixed, and the best selection is made from among diverse possibilities. When feasible, the range of possibilities itself is expanded. This is the nature of politics. Politicians are forbidden from saying that "there were no other alternatives."

The Koizumi administration election on breaking up Japan Post is an example of an election that broke through an impasse and expanded the range of possibilities. Just after bills to privatize the postal system were voted down in the upper house (which cannot be dissolved) and it seemed that the issue had been settled, Prime Minister Koizumi dissolved the lower house, set the framework for privatizing postal administration, and gave his support to "assassin" candidates running against rebel party Diet members who had refused to support the party's privatization plans. As a result, Koizumi's LDP won a landslide

victory and the privatization of Japan Post was achieved. While there is also strong criticism of Koizumi's neoliberalist reforms, the leadership he demonstrated in making the impossible possible showed exactly how politics is truly "the art of the possible."

Why Political Science Is in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Hitotsubashi

Political science is taught within the Faculty of Social Sciences at Hitotsubashi University. Political science is placed in the faculty of law at many universities, but that is the University of Tokyo model. The Faculty of Law of the University of Tokyo was established to train central government officials, and their politics course was set together with the study of law. The former Imperial Universities and many other universities follow that approach. In the Waseda University model, politics is tied to economics through the faculty of political science and economics.

Hitotsubashi University is one of the former national colleges of commerce, and has a mission to train personnel useful to the business sector rather than to the state. Here the politics course was attached to the social sciences after the end of World War II, when the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences was divided into the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Social Sciences. With this historical background, at Hitotsubashi University politics is not viewed as the study of state science for the exercise of government. Rather politics is taught in relation to sociology, philosophy, pedagogy, history, and other disciplines as a field of study for civil society.

Politics today must be considered in relation to diverse areas of society and analyzed from a variety of angles. Politics must be grasped from the citizen's perspective, and not the viewpoint of government administration or bureaucracy. This is the significance of placing political science within the Faculty of Social Sciences, and I also view this as our mission.

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