



Upper House Election in the Year of the Pig with No Losers—Opposition parties fought well, while continuing to lend a hand to the LDP

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No political parties were defeated

“Voters told us to advance policies firmly based on a stable political base.”

—Abe Shinzo, President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)

“We were able to achieve our goals.”

—Yamaguchi Natsuo, President of Komeito

“We fought desperately with no regrets.”

—Matsui Ichiro, President of the Japan Innovation Party (JIP)

“We made remarkable progress and were able to build a significant foundation for the next election.”

—Tamaki Yuichiro, Leader of the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP)

“We were able to increase our number of seats significantly.”

—Edano Yukio, Leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP)

“On the whole, we fought a good fight.”

—Shii Kazuo, Chairman of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP)

These remarks show how the leaders of the main political parties evaluated their election results on the night of the last House of Councilors election in July.¹ If you look solely at these remarks, you cannot tell at all which political party and camp won or lost the election. None of the main political parties made a clear concession speech.

The LDP lost the seats it had held in the House of Councilors before the election (Table 1). But because the last election was about electing the winners of the 2013 upper house election where the ruling party won a landslide victory, the LDP had allowed for losing its Diet seats. In proportional-representation constituencies, the LDP won 19 seats, a share of the votes of 35.4%. But these results were almost the same as those in the 2016 upper house election (share of votes 35.9%; 19 seats won). A simple comparison of seats merely shows that the LDP and Komeito camp won six consecutive victories in the national elections, counted from the 2012 lower house election.



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¹ Ref. *Asahi shimbun* and *Yomiuri shimbun*, July 22, 2019, and NHK Online

Table 1: Changes in Diet seats before and after the election

	LDP	Komeito	Independents (ruling party side)	JIP	DPFP	CDP	JCP	Independents (opposition party side)	Others
Up for election	57	14	0	10	6	17	7	9	4
Not up for election	56	14	3	6	15	15	6	5	1
New total	113	28	3	16	21	32	13	14	5
Total of pre- election	123	25	3	13	23	24	14	7	5

Source: Compiled by the author based on the totaled results by the Asahi Shimbun (asahi.com) as of 16:00 on 22 July 2019.

On the other hand, since the prime minister deliberately urged that the constitutional issue be taken up as an issue in the last election, a practical tug-of-war line was drawn on whether or not constitution-revision supporters, such as the LDP, Komeito and the JIP, would be able to gain more than two thirds of seats in the House of Councilors. No advance media reports about the election (even with seats to be reelected alone) mentioned the possibility of opposition parties winning a come-from-behind victory, and the main focus seemed to be on the tug-of-war line.

Because constitutional revision was a critical issue for every political party, it is understandable that pro-constitution opposition parties enjoyed a certain level of satisfaction in that the election results pushed back this line. After the election, in response to the fact that constitution-revision supporters fell short of achieving two thirds of the seats, Fukushima Mizuho, vice president of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), said, “I believe it is good that we strongly emphasized the importance of preventing revision supporters from gaining two thirds of the seats as the keystone of the joint struggle of opposition parties.” The SDP itself was able to gain just one seat in the last election. Her remarks cannot be said to be solely sour grapes, however.

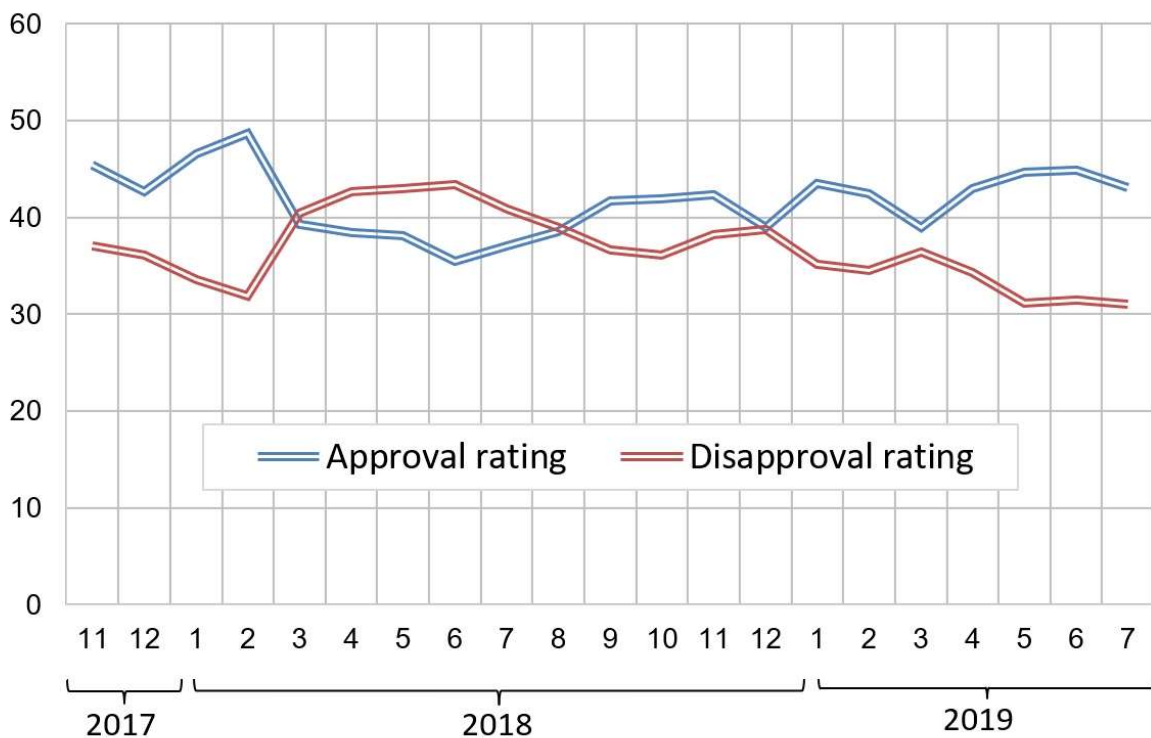
In the recent national elections in which constitutional revision was taken up as an issue and became somewhat realistic, two thirds of the seats necessary for the parliamentary proposal for revision constituted an important tug-of-war line between the ruling and opposition parties. Dual standard lines—one half and two thirds—exist in today’s Japanese party politics, which led to the non-concession speeches by each political party. This is similar to the pattern seen in the party competitions in the 1950s, when constitutional revision was an important issue.

No-competition election campaign

It can be said that the political situation developed stably for the LDP-Komeito coalition administration for one year until the last upper house election. The Kake Gakuen and Moritomo Gakuen scandals that erupted in 2017 persisted until around the summer of 2018, and fierce criticisms by the media and opposition parties led to the lowering of Cabinet approval ratings (see Figure 1 below). Probably because the general public became sick of the scandals in around fall, however, Cabinet approval ratings began to rise again. On the whole, Cabinet approval ratings subsequently fluctuated stably. In particular, probably because of the festive mood at the

beginning of the new era, Cabinet disapproval ratings began to decline noticeably in May 2019 according to a survey by JJI Press. In early 2019, the media gave major coverage to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s inappropriate monthly labor statistics scandal. In June, the Financial Services Agency’s report on post-retirement financing was essentially retracted after it was released. But Cabinet approval rating data indicate that these scandals did not have a major impact on the attitude of the electorate.

Fig. 1 Cabinet approval ratings after the 2017 lower house election by JJI Press



It is true that the Abe Cabinet has enjoyed stable approval ratings for many years since its second Cabinet was inaugurated. In the past, PM Koizumi Junichiro did not lose popularity easily, even if mistakes or scandals were revealed. Koizumi was known as the “Teflon prime minister” due to being less blemished. In this context, the Abe Cabinet approval ratings are so resilient that the Cabinet can be described as “shape memory alloy.” The Abe administration has been seriously damaged over the issue of approving the exercise of the right of collective self-defense and the Kake Gakuen and Moritomo Gakuen scandals. The administration recovered its approval ratings each time, however. This was an unprecedented pattern throughout the Heisei period, excluding the Koizumi Cabinet (including the 1st Abe Cabinet). Because Abe himself is less charismatic and popular than Koizumi as a leader, many Japanese politics watchers are puzzled by this phenomenon.

The fluctuations in political party approval ratings show more clearly how stable the Abe administration is. Fig. 2 depicts the approval ratings for the LDP and parties originating in the former Democratic Party of Japan (hereafter, former DPJ parties) after the inauguration of the 2nd Abe administration by JIJI Press’s monthly survey and the shares of independents. In this figure, the “Parties originating in the former DPJ” shows the DPJ, the Democratic Party (DP, renamed from DPJ in March 2016), the CDP (formed by secessionists from DP in October 2017) and the DPFP (renamed from DP in May 2018). Political party approval ratings of the former DPJ parties after October 2017 show combined approval ratings for the DP and the CDP or the DP and the CDP or the CDP and the DPFP. The Party of Hope, which was formed in September 2017, is not included in the framework of the former DPJ parties. But even if the Party of Hope is included in the framework of the former DPJ parties, because the approval ratings for the party were very low, except for a short period of time, the figure looks almost the same.

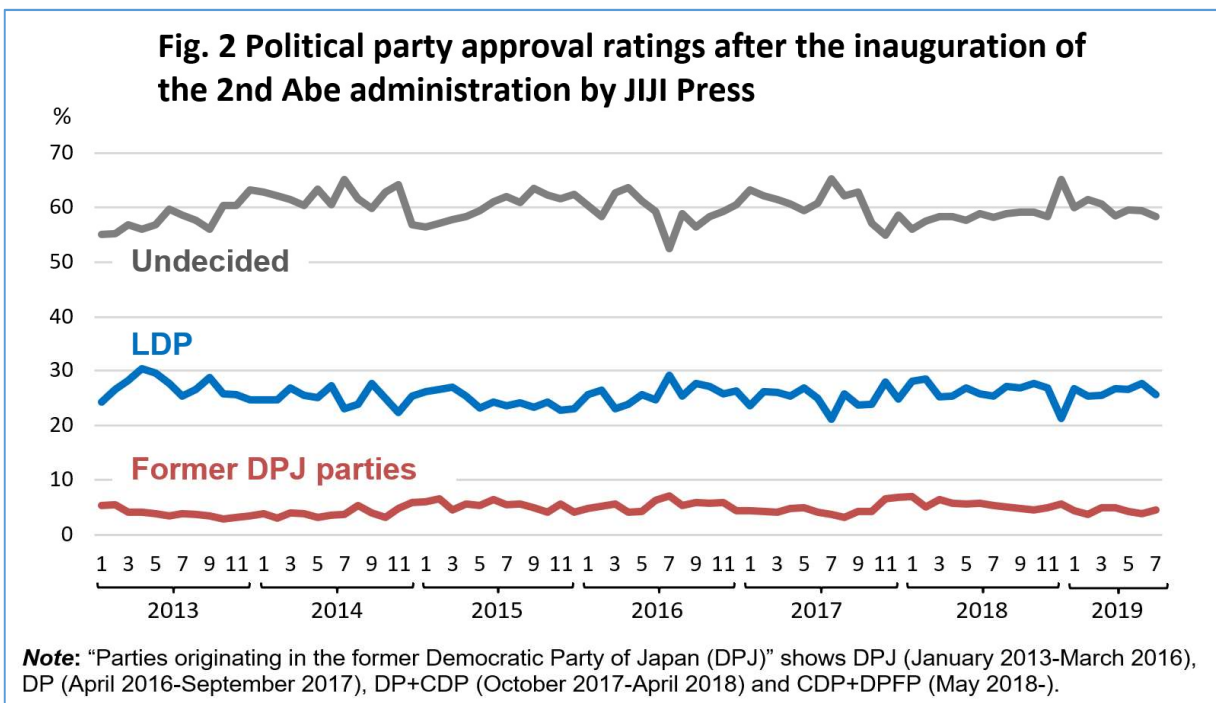
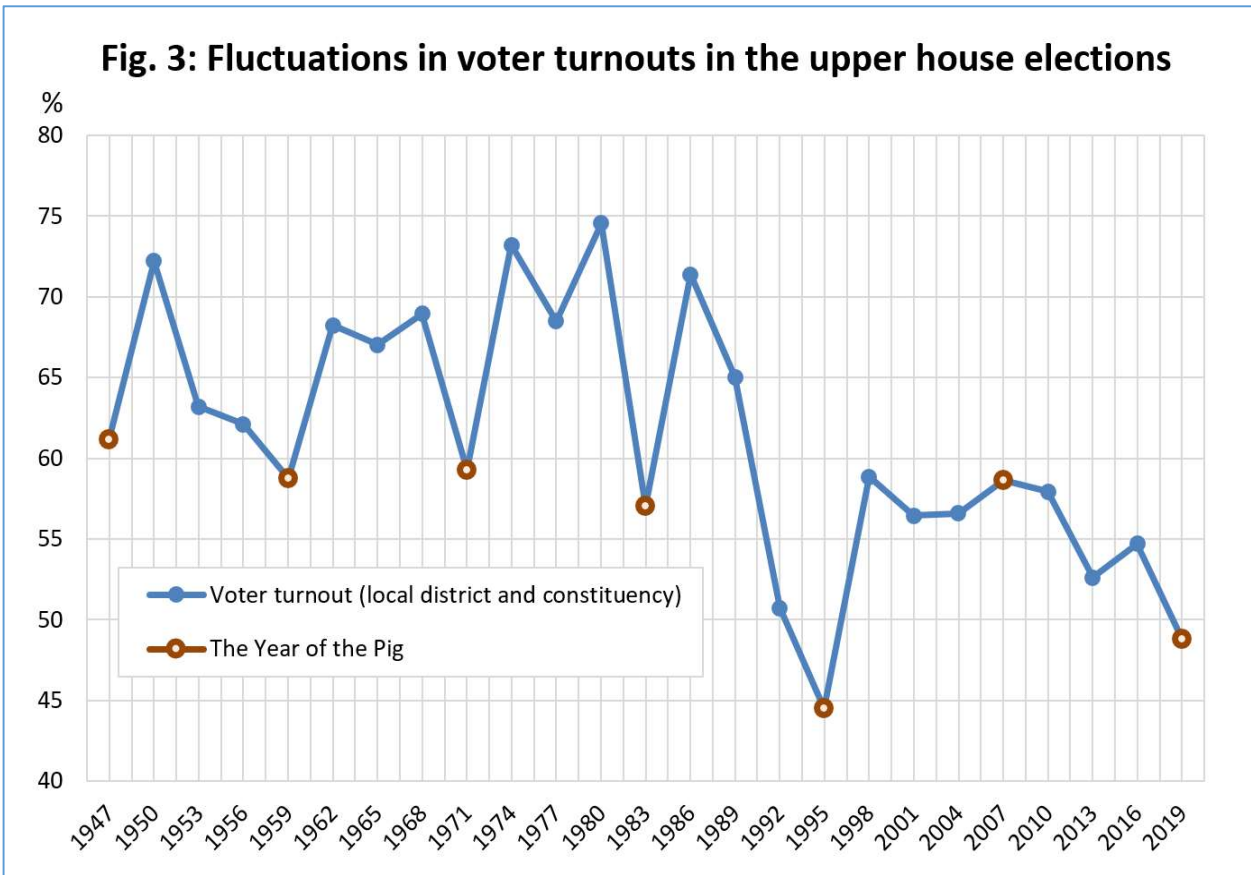


Fig. 2 illustrates the surprising absence of fluctuations in approval ratings for the LDP and the former DPJ parties after the inauguration of the 2nd Abe administration. According to a survey by JIJI Press, the approval ratings for the LDP consistently stood at around 25% during this period, while the approval ratings for the former DPJ parties consistently stood at around 5%. The former DPJ parties (even including the Party of Hope) never reached an approval rating of 10%, even combined, during the same period of time. In short, the former DPJ parties as a whole did not see any increase in the total public approval, or the pie, even if they renamed themselves or divided into other political parties. What happened during this time period was that the small pie was divided by multiple groups, which was just a more miserable situation created by the former DPJ powers.

The last upper house election that took place in this stable political situation lacked the expected enthusiasm, and the voter turnout was just 48.8% in the constituencies (Fig. 3). From the beginning, it has been thought that the voter turnout tends to be lower in the upper house election in the Year of the Pig when nationwide local elections are held in spring, because local politicians are inactive in terms of gathering votes. The voter turnout dropped about 6% in the last election as well, compared with the upper house election three years ago. After the inauguration of the 2nd Abe administration, however, the voter turnout was in the first half of 50% in both the upper house elections three and six years ago. It is appropriate to think that lower voter turnouts are often seen in upper house elections, regardless of whether or not nationwide local elections are held.



It was not because of the absence of issues that the last election lacked enthusiasm.² There were clear significant issues that would influence the future political and economic framework of Japan at the level of the elites, such as the constitutional issue that the prime minister took the initiative in stirring up and the consumption tax hike issue that opposition parties emphasized. In addition, the ruling and opposition parties were clearly split regarding these issues. In such a situation, there

² The last upper house election did not attract public attention to either itself or its results. It was highly symbolic that commercial broadcasters' TV news shows that were run the morning after the day of the election spent a lot of time on comedians' apologies at a press conference, not the upper house election.

are likely to be many voters who vote based on their opinions regarding short-term issues, as well as voters who are emotionally attached to particular political parties or candidates, which can lead to higher voter turnouts. As an old example, in the upper house election in 1989, opposition parties called for the abolition of consumption tax, which was introduced immediately before the election. In that situation, votes were concentrated on the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ), which created the first “divided Diet” under the 1955 system. The voter turnout in this election was 65% in local districts (although lower than in the double elections in 1980 and 1986), higher than the other upper house elections that followed. This positive action by voters could not be seen in the last election. The serious disagreement among the elite and the electorate’s dispassionate attitude are quite asymmetrical.

Pent-up votes against the administration

If the ruling party wins an election with a low voter turnout, the opposition parties usually look ahead to the political situation, warning, “Because only a minority voted for the ruling party as an absolute number, they cannot say that they received a mandate from the people for their administration’s policies.” In the last election as well, it cannot be said that absolute voter turnout numbers in proportional-representation constituencies show that a majority of the general public expressed their positive approval of the LDP administration’s policies, such as constitutional revision and the consumption tax hike.³ The fact that the number of people who voted for four opposition parties that voiced opposition to constitutional revision and called for a freeze to be put on the consumption tax hike was much smaller than that of those who voted for the LDP and Komeito cannot be ignored, however. If the low voter turnout matters, the opposition parties should consider why they failed to gain more votes against the administration.

Since the former DPJ administration was broken up in late 2012, there have been no opposition parties that most people recognize as being able to replace the functions of the LDP. The former DPJ received votes against the LDP-Komeito coalition, which resulted in a change of government in 2009. Many of the reform-minded voters who voted for Koizumi-LDP in the postal privatization election in 2005 became fed up with the LDP-Komeito coalition after the resignation of Koizumi and shifted to the DPJ in the 2009 general election.⁴ At that time, many people believed that the DPJ was a political party that could replace the functions of the LDP or that had greater potential than the LDP. But the DPJ administration could not meet the expectations of the people, although it faced difficult situations, such as dealing with the Lehman shock and the Great East Japan Earthquake. As a result, as shown in Fig. 2, the approval ratings for the former DPJ parties have been consistently low.

³ The LDP’s absolute voter turnout in proportional-representation constituencies was about 17%. (*The Asahi Shimbun* [evening edition], July 22, 2019)

⁴ Taniguchi Masaki, Uenohara Hideaki and Sakaiya Shiro “The 2009 general election: Who put an end to the LDP administration?”, *Sekai*, December 2009

What is important in this context is that there are few correlations in the fluctuations between the approval ratings for the LDP and the approval ratings for the former DPJ parties. Of course, the approval ratings for the LDP declined at some points during that period of time, even with relatively small margins. But these temporary declines in the approval ratings for the LDP were hardly linked to support for the former DPJ parties. The correlation coefficient between the approval ratings for the LDP and the approval ratings for the former DPJ parties was 0.02. A correlation coefficient is an indicator that shows the degree of correlation between two data series. The greater the correlation is, the closer the coefficient gets to 1 or -1; the smaller the correlation is, the closer the coefficient gets to 0. The value 0.02, which is close to 0, means that there is little correlation in the fluctuations between the approval ratings for the LDP and the approval ratings for the former DPJ parties.

Meanwhile, the correlation coefficient between the approval ratings for the LDP and the approval ratings for no particular parties was -0.72. This value shows a sufficiently strong correlation. The fact that the sign of the coefficient is negative means that the higher the approval ratings for the LDP are, the lower the approval ratings for no particular parties are, and the lower the approval ratings for the LDP are, the higher the approval ratings for no particular parties are. In short, if the approval ratings for the LDP are low, the voters who gave up on the LDP often become independents instead of becoming opposition party supporters. Those voters who temporarily become independents come back to support the LDP after waiting for things to cool down.

What was symbolic was the data fluctuations around June 2017, when the media gave the Kake Gakuen scandal major coverage. According to a survey in May 2017, the approval rating for the LDP was 26.9%. After this survey, however, the media reported problems related to the scandal, which caused the Cabinet approval rating to drop sharply. The approval rating for the LDP also declined to 21.1% in July. This approval rating was the lowest throughout the entire time period of Fig. 2, with a margin of 5.8 percentage points from May. During the same period of time, however, the approval rating for the DP did not increase, but fell from 5.0% to 3.8%. Meanwhile, the approval rating for no particular parties rose from 59.5% to 65.3%, 5.8 percentage points during the same period of time. This margin of increase coincided perfectly with the margin of the decrease in the approval rating for the LDP.

In the current political system, there are political parties with different policies from those of the LDP, but there are no political parties that (many of the electorate think) can replace the functions of the LDP in terms of administration management. Even if quite a few people are dissatisfied with the LDP-Komeito coalition, because there are no alternative political parties that they want to support actively, they have no choice but to abstain. In addition, a considerable number of votes against the administration go to minor parties. For example, in the case of the last upper house election, the total votes for the Reiwa Shinsengumi Party, the Party to Protect the Public from NHK [Japan Broadcasting Corporation] and the Political Group of Consideration for the Euthanasia System in their proportional-representation constituencies were larger than votes

for the DPFP.⁵

This “anti-DPJ” attitude appears to be particularly noticeable among young people who became politically aware during the period when the DPJ was in power. In fact, according to public opinion polls, young people’s support of former DPJ parties has been hopelessly scarce in recent years. Generally speaking, as people grow older, they become more willing to vote. The younger generation will gradually increase their presence as voters. This means that it is even possible to predict that a change of government based on the current political party system is even less likely to eventuate.

Inter-party competition in the post-reform era

In the last upper house election, the CDP, the DPFP, the JCP and the SDP presented an eager united front against the LDP-Komeito coalition. More specifically, these four parties unified non-LDP candidates in the single-seat constituencies. The unification of non-LDP candidates was certainly effective. Because it was a tight race in many of the single-seat constituencies where LDP candidates were defeated, if the four parties had not coordinated candidates, the opposition parties would have suffered a more miserable crushing defeat, just like in the 2013 upper house election. The four party leaders’ evaluation that the opposition parties’ joint struggle was effective is correct in this sense.

However, the opposition parties’ results obtained from this joint struggle were just ten wins (22 losses) in the single-seat constituencies. Four opposition parties, including the DP and the JCP, cooperated in the upper house election three years ago as well. Some argued that these parties fought a good fight in the single-seat constituencies.⁶ In terms of seat distribution, however, the opposition parties lost the election, with 11 wins and 21 losses. These results can prevent constitutional revision but can never open new prospects for a change of government. In whatever way the supporters of each of former DPJ parties, the JCP and the SDP are combined, they will not be sufficient to overwhelm the LDP-Komeito government.

Inter-party election cooperation is costlier and less efficient than intra-party coordination. In the last election, with the DP splitting into the CDP and the DPFP, it is easy to imagine that it was more difficult to build a relationship of cooperation including the JCP than it was in the previous election. According to newspaper reports, there were differences in the degrees of enthusiasm among parties and party support groups with regard to how actively they should support unified candidates’ election campaigns at the level of the electoral districts.⁷

⁵ In terms of shares of the votes obtained, Reiwa Shinsengumi accounted for 4.6%, the Party to Protect the Public from NHK accounted for 2.0% and the Consideration for the Euthanasia System accounted for 0.5%, while the DPFP accounted for 7.0%.

⁶ Sugawara Taku “Opposition parties’ united front gave politics a feeling of tension,” *Chuokoron*, September 2016

⁷ According to an exit poll, in the single-seat constituency system (Miyagi and Aomori) in which CDP-endorsed candidates ran for office, it was revealed that the shares of DPFP supporters’ votes for unified candidates were relatively low. In the Fukui district, where JCP-endorsed candidates ran for office, around 60% of CDP supporters

Another important issue is the fact that the JIP could not be incorporated into the framework of joint struggle, although this was not limited to the last election. If you refer to the powers that call for the breaking down of vested interests and a realistic security policy as “reform-minded conservatives,” those powers were included in (the LDP and) the DPJ until prior to the establishment of the DPJ administration. In the first place, the DPJ can be traced back to reform-minded Diet members from the LDP represented by Hatoyama Yukio.⁸ The DPJ can also be traced back to leftist Diet members from the old SDPJ. But as long as they carry the banner of reform, reform-minded conservatives and leftists can coexist. The DPJ that gathered non-LDP and non-Communist Party members was able to achieve a change of government in 2009. Even today, even if it is impossible to unify the opposition parties, if the JIP joins the framework of the opposition parties’ united front, it is certain to give politics an even greater feeling of tension than in the present situation.

However, it is quite inconceivable in the current political situation that these reform-minded conservatives and the CDP (the JCP, of course) will cooperate. This is because it is now the post-reform era. It was often pointed out that the DPJ was disunited within itself. But the party was able to be united while the issue of the political world was reform. However, the era in which individual parties competed for the results of reforms was over with the Koizumi reform and the establishment of the DPJ administration. Ideological issues, such as the issue of the right of collective self-defense and the issue of the revision of Article 9 of the Constitution, emerged instead of reform. After these different issues emerged, the DPJ/the DP that are disunited in terms of ideology could no longer be united. In this situation, the party split into the leftist CDP and the rightist DPFP. As long as ideological issues are the focus in the political situation, the JIP and the CDP, which are positioned further to the right than the DPFP, are mutually exclusive. The ruling party side is very familiar with this structure. Newspaper reports pointed out that the prime minister stirred up the constitutional issue in the last election in view of the division of the opposition parties.⁹

For the transformation of postwar politics

From the 1980s, political scientists dreamed of creating a political party system that would enable a change of government or a highly competitive political party system by changing the political institutions. It appeared as if their dream had come true through the Electoral System Reform in

even voted for unified candidates. (*The Yomiuri Shimbun*, July 22, 2019)

⁸ Hatoyama argued fervently for constitutional revision, including Article 9, at least in the late 1990s. (Hatoyama Yukio “New liberal constitutional revision theory: Recognize the Self-Defense Force as the military”), Bungeishunju, October 1999 (Special number)

⁹ For example, in a party leader’s debate on the day before the official announcement of the election campaign, the prime minister expressed his wish for the DPFP’s cooperation in constitutional revision. *The Asahi Shimbun* of July 4, 2019 pointed out that this remark made by the prime minister was “intended to drive a wedge into opposition parties’ united front.”

1994 and the establishment of the DPJ administration in 2009. Subsequently, however, the development of real politics went in a direction that political scientists did not expect, and it looks like the political world reverted to the 1955 system in which the LDP is dominant after 2013. The last upper house election did not change this trend either.

It is necessary to constantly review the political institutions. However, I do not think that today's LDP dominance can be attributed mainly to the shortage of institutional reform. It is now clear what will prevent non-LDP powers from aiming to seize power: the bipartisan division of non-LDP powers and the non-cohesion that causes the division with regard to security policy. Ironically, the success of political reforms during and after the 1990s put an end to the era of reform and revealed the postwar politics' true character of ideological rivalry between the rightists and the leftists regarding security policy. The LDP and the largest opposition parties are in confrontation with each other over the issue of the revision of Article 9 of the Constitution and the security issue. Because the opposition parties are split over these issues, however, the LDP results in advantage being taken of the disagreements between the opposition parties. This structure is the basic pattern of Japanese politics that has lasted throughout the postwar era, and the results of the last election were merely a symbolic representation of that structure of postwar politics.

To look at the abovementioned discussions from the opposite point of view, the prescription for transforming the structure of postwar politics and making party politics more competitive is clear. It is neither renaming opposition parties nor preaching about the spiritualism of becoming more obsessed with power to the Diet members of opposition parties. What is necessary is to remove a basic security policy from the agenda; that is, symbolically, to settle the Article 9 issue in one way or another. Preventing Article 9 from being revised has been a focus of leftist powers since the 1950s, and it has also been a brilliant achievement. Ironically, however, the success of the constitutional protection movement resulted in leaving the constitutional issue at the elite level and preventing non-LDP powers from rallying, which ultimately contributed to helping the LDP administration to last. In addition, just as in the last upper house election, winning a third of Diet seats was an important line that would define opposition parties' victory or defeat. That is, the fact that winning over a third of Diet seats gave a sense of satisfaction to leftist Diet members and intellectuals (despite being far from a change of government) worked to make opposition parties less motivated to unite and cooperate.

Throughout the postwar era, the LDP has given a "name" to opposition parties in regard to the constitutional issue and has taken "substance" in terms of maintaining the administrations and realizing the administrations (other than constitutional revision). As constitution-revision supporters fell short of two thirds of Diet seats in the last election, pro-constitution opposition parties may find it easy to continue to take the "name" of preventing constitutional revision. But this will help a conservative administration to last further at the same time, and it will continue to give "substance" to the LDP in every domain of social and economic policies, such as tax, social security, nuclear power, immigration and the issue of the dual-surname system.

Translated from “Haishanaki idoshi no sangiin senkyo-jiminto ni shio wo okuritudukeru zensenshita yato (Upper House Election in the Year of the Pig with No Losers—Opposition parties fought well, continuing to send salt to the LDP),” Chuokoron, September 2019, pp. 130-139. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [September 2019]

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