

The Two-Party System Meets a House of Councillors Election

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Elections to Japan's upper house, the House of Councillors, are 'secondary' elections, that is, elections that do not choose the government. Among the implications of this secondary status is that the party system is primarily determined elsewhere, by the system used in the general elections that do choose the government. From 1947 through 1993 the system used in general elections fostered a multiparty system that did not sit easily with the many single-member districts of the House of Councillors. Since 1996 general elections use a system based primarily on single-member districts, which is fostering a two-party system. As a two-party system emerges, we should expect the single-member districts of the upper house to become more and the multi-member districts to become less congruent with the party system. The 2004 House of Councillors election presented us with our first example of what two-party elections might look like in future upper house elections. The overall results do indeed indicate the advent of the two-party system with the major parties winning 96% of the seats in the district tier and 71% in the PR tier.

In 2004, the House of Councillors was elected from a nationwide PR tier and a district tier. The latter included 27 single-member, 15 double-member, four three-member, one four-member district. The emergence of a two-party system affected each type of election differently.

First, the single-member districts were dominated by the LDP between 1956 and 1993. As the two-party system develops, we should expect to find greater competition in the single-member districts and preliminary analysis indicates that to be the case. House of Councillors elections are held every three years but Councillors' terms are six years, meaning only half the seats are up for re-election at any given time. I will compare the 2004 election with the 1998 election six years earlier and the 1992 elections 12 years earlier and limit my comparisons to the 21 districts which were single-member in all three elections and excluding Okinawa because of its unique local party system. The 2001 elections featured the Koizumi boom and is an outlier (albeit an important one) among recent elections. If one were searching for a 'normal' upper house election under the old party system, 1992 would be as good as any. The 1998 election was the first in which the DPJ was the primary alternative to the LDP.

Table 1. Results of the 2004 House of Councillors election

	District tier %votes	District tier %seats	PR tier %votes	PR tier %seats
LDP	35.1%	46.6%	29.9%	31.3%
DPJ	39.1%	42.5%	37.7%	39.6%
KOM	3.9%	4.1%	15.4%	16.7%
JCP	9.8%	0.0%	7.8%	8.3%
SDP	1.8%	0.0%	5.3%	4.2%

(Note: Independents and other parties omitted.)

In 2004, the DPJ won 11 of the 21 single-member districts under consideration. More impressively, DPJ challengers defeated six LDP incumbents, a record second only to the 1989 Recruit Scandal election in which the Socialists defeated LDP incumbents in 14 of these districts. Perhaps more important was the number of close races. Closeness can be measured as the difference between the first and second finisher divided by the number of eligible voters. Using this measure the average distance between the winner and runner-up in 1992 was 12.6%, in 1998 8.9% and in 2004 6.2%. If we classify those districts with a gap of 5% or less as competitive, there were no competitive races in 1992, 7 in 1998 and 10 in 2004. The local newspapers in these districts document the LDP's shock at the results even in those districts which the LDP won.

Single-member districts seem to be becoming more competitive but the opposite may be occurring in double-member districts. The two-member districts all elected one candidate from the LDP and one from the DPJ. Six of the 15 two-member districts featured one LDP candidate, one DPJ candidate and one JCP candidate, making the election a foregone conclusion: the Communists had no chance of winning, leaving one seat to each of the two major parties. Though there are still too few cases to be confident, a two-party system in two-member districts may well produce non-competitive races.

The larger districts of the upper house were similar to the standard districts of the lower house and therefore produced similar results. The LDP might win two seats but the opposition parties were normally limited to one seat per district. In 2004, however, the only party to elect more than one candidate in the large districts was the DPJ. The DPJ won two seats in Tokyo, Kanagawa and Aichi prefectures and failed to do so only in Saitama and Osaka, where *Koumei* took the third seat. *Koumei* also won one seat in the four-member district of Tokyo and was the only party other than the LDP and the DPJ to win any district seats.

The multiparty system may survive in the three- and four-member districts but that will provide the smaller parties with no more than four seats total. If smaller parties are to prosper under the new party system, it will have to be in the PR tier. The Socialists, however, won only two (out of 48) seats in PR and seem doomed to a marginal existence or extinction. The Communists are also threatened with marginalization, winning only four seats, but the party has never depended on electoral success for its survival. *Koumei*,

however, is prospering under the new system, in both the upper and lower houses. How have they managed to do so?

Koumei has either invented or stumbled upon an unanticipated way of surviving under the new system: it trades its district votes to the LDP in return for LDP votes in PR. *Koumei* has long practiced electoral cooperation and has been effective in delivering votes to its allies, but has never received many votes in return. Since the 2003 general election, however, the LDP has become increasingly dependent upon *Koumei* support in the districts and increasingly effective at delivering LDP support to *Koumei* in the PR tier. The seemingly insuperable organizational problems involved in delivering PR votes to *Koumei* has been solved by giving *Koumei* lists of LDP supporters, allowing *Koumei* to contact them directly. An increasing number of LDP candidates depend upon *Koumei* votes to win their seats. *Koumei* is also becoming more dependent upon the LDP, though to a lesser degree. The resulting integration of the two parties' campaign organizations in many regions makes it more difficult for either to leave the coalition. If this trend continues, the LDP and *Koumei* may become inseparable partners that can be treated as one unit, completing the two-party system in an unexpected manner.