

## The 2000 General Election

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The results of the 2000 general election can be interpreted in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, the coalition won a comfortable majority with 271 seats to the combined opposition total of 188. On the other hand, the coalition lost 64 seats while the opposition parties gained 35. Though either side could thus claim victory, it was clear from the expressions on the faces of the party leaders that the coalition had lost the election and the opposition had won. This result means, first, that the LDP's strategy of allying itself with *Koumei*, a religious party based on a particular Buddhist sect, has been called into question by both coalition partners and, second, that the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has been confirmed as the primary alternative to the LDP.

### Background to the election

Between the 1996 and 2000 elections, Japan experienced further reformation of the parties in the opposition camp. The primary opposition party in 1996 was the New Frontier Party (NFP) but it fell apart at the end of 1997. The DPJ picked up many NFP incumbents but many returned to the LDP. *Koumei* re-emerged from the NFP virtually intact while Ozawa Ichirou led the Liberal Party on an independent path.

The LDP managed to pick up enough NFP defectors and independents to gain a majority in the House of Representatives but not in the House of Councillors. In order to gain a working majority in the Diet, Prime Minister Obuchi decided to seek a coalition with *Koumei*. When he found *Koumei* unavailable, he coalesced with the Liberals, later adding *Koumei* to produce a government with an overwhelming majority. The coalition with *Koumei* was not popular with the public and was opposed by many within the LDP but it was based on what seemed an impeccable logic. First, only *Koumei* could solve the LDP's problem in the House of Councillors. Second, *Koumei* has a disciplined electorate concentrated in urban areas where the LDP is weak.

As the election approached, Ozawa led his Liberal Party out of the coalition, leaving half of the party behind under the Conservative label. This shock was followed by the hospitalization of Prime Minister Obuchi who had suffered what would turn out to be a fatal stroke. He was quickly and controversially replaced by

secretary-general Mori Yoshiro, who soon proved himself unprepared for the job by uttering a series of ‘misstatements’ that upset the public, the press, the international media, and his coalition partners. Support for the Mori cabinet fell below 20 per cent. Though the LDP entered the election on a low note, support for the opposition DPJ hovered around 10 per cent. The only party that entered the election with confidence was the JCP.

### The Issues

Public concern centered on the economy. All parties addressed the issue but no party was able to obtain a clear advantage.

The issue most likely to move votes was *Koumei*. The religious party arouses strong feelings on both sides and the *Koumei* vote was seen to be the key to most district races. Here too, however, both major parties were divided. Some LDP candidates ran against their coalition partner while in other districts *Koumei* honored long-standing cooperative arrangements with ex-Democratic Socialists now in the DPJ. In several districts where the LDP stood down in favour of *Koumei* candidates, the rejected LDP candidates ran as independents against both *Koumei* and their party leadership.

The coalition’s strongest issue was ‘stability versus confusion’. The coalition had delivered stable government but the DPJ had failed to provide a credible plan for an alternative coalition. The most dangerous issue for the LDP was ‘public works’, long a basis of LDP support. Public works had failed to generate economic growth, more often generating local opposition. Specific construction plans were the main issue in several districts.

### The Results

The basic result was that the coalition parties won a reduced majority, each party losing seats. The DPJ was the big winner gaining 32 seats. Many of these victories were achieved in urban areas at the expense of established LDP incumbents. The strategy of using *Koumei* votes to shore up the LDP’s urban base failed. Unexpectedly, the Communists lost seats while both the Liberals and the Social Democrats gained seats (Table 1)

LDP candidates in single-member districts fared somewhat better than in 1996 on the average. The LDP dominated many rural SMDs raising their average. In fact, the LDP was saved by the advantage SMDs give to the strongest party, winning 41 per cent of the vote but 59 per cent of the seats. The LDP vote in the proportional representation tier went down, leading the DPJ by only three percentage points. The DPJ was clearly the big winner but they did not do quite as well as the NFP had done in 1996. *Koumei* was the most disappointed with the results. LDP voters did not consistently vote *Koumei* even when LDP leaders campaigned vigorously for them to do so. LDP candidates ran against *Koumei* candidates and won even without the LDP nomination. The Diet now contains 15 conservative independents. The LDP has

**Table 1.** *The election results (previous result)*

	<b>SMD Votes</b>	<b>SMD Seats</b>	<b>PR Votes</b>	<b>PR Seats</b>
<b>LDP</b>	40.97% (38.63%)	59.00% (56.33%)	28.31% (32.76%)	31.11% (35.00%)
<b>DPJ</b>	27.61% (10.62%)	26.67% (5.67%)	25.18% (16.10%)	26.11% (17.50%)
<b>NFP</b>	– (27.97%)	– (32.00%)	– (28.04%)	– (30.00%)
<b><i>Koumei</i></b>	2.02% (–)	2.33% (–)	12.97% (–)	13.33% (–)
<b>Liberal</b>	3.37% (–)	1.33% (–)	11.01% (–)	10.00% (–)
<b>JCP</b>	12.08% (12.55)	0.00% (0.67%)	11.23% (13.08%)	11.11% (12.00%)
<b>SDP</b>	3.80% (2.19%)	1.33% (1.33%)	9.36% (6.38%)	8.3% (5.50%)
<b>Con</b>	2.02% (–)	2.33% (–)	0.41% (–)	0.00% (–)

vowed not to follow past practice and allow them back into the party but it may prove difficult to keep that vow because many of the independents are formal members of LDP factions.

Japan may be moving toward a two-party system, but has not arrived yet.