

Public Opinion and Its Impacts on the 2000 HR election

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This short note analyzes how the public in Japan evaluates the performance of the cabinet and the two major parties, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan (DP), and their impacts on the 2000 House of Representatives election held on 25 June.

On 30 July 1998, Mr Keizo Obuchi formed the cabinet succeeding Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto. Support rate for the Obuchi cabinet at the beginning was rather low; 24.8 per cent in August 1998. A year later, the support rate went up to 43 per cent and reached the highest in October 1999. Obuchi engineered the three-way ruling coalition (the LDP, Liberal Party, and Kōmeitō) and formed the coalition government in October 1999.

Using its tremendous numerical strength in the National Diet, Obuchi's administration secured the passage of a series of controversial bills, including legislation implementing the new Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation, bills formally designating the national flag and national anthem, and a measure authorizing wiretapping in investigations of organized crime. These were all ideologically sensitive pieces of legislation, and I believe that many voters felt they should not have been passed merely on strength of numbers but should have been handled cautiously, with more convincing arguments advanced in their support. The Obuchi administration was also free in its use of money for public works and other purposes. Leaving aside the question of whether this spending was appropriate in terms of economic policy, I would suggest that to many voters it looked like indiscriminate largesse. And, as the months passed, the administration's rate of support continued to fall.

When Obuchi had his stroke this April and was succeeded by Yoshirō Mori, a combination of sympathy for the deceased prime minister and hopes for his successor caused the level of support for the administration to pick up. But Mori blew this support with his remark referring to Japan as a 'divine country' and his crack shortly before the election that the LDP could expect to do well on election day if ' [independent voters] sleep in'. The election ended up being one in which the previous administration's low performance rating combined with doubts about the new prime minister's suitability for the job.

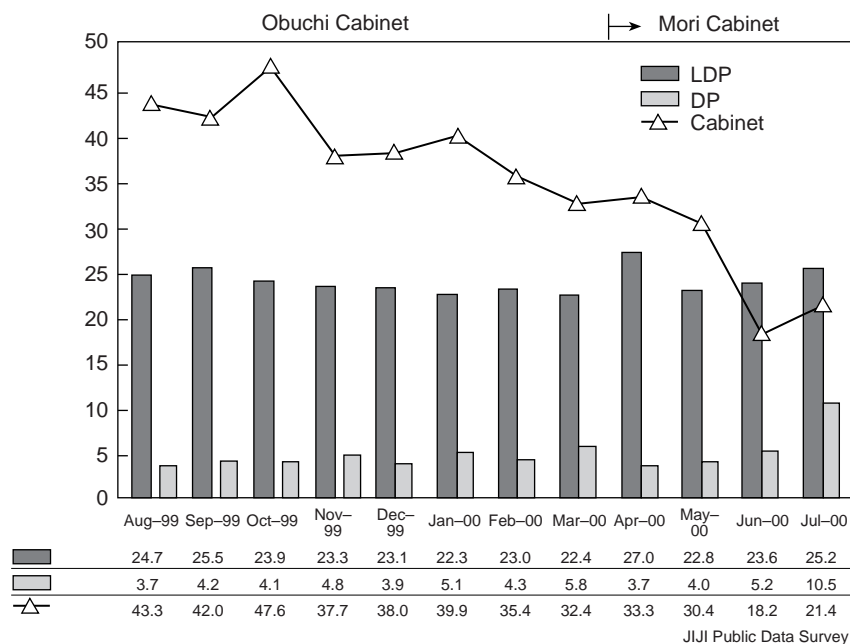


Figure 1 Support for Cabinet, LDP and Democratic Party

The result of the election of the House of Representatives held on 25 June are shown in Table 1. The ruling coalition, consisting of the LDP, New Kômeitô, and the New Conservative Party, won a total of 271 seats in the lower house, well above a majority (241 seats). The figure of 271, however, is a sharp drop from 335 seats that the ruling coalition commanded in the House of Representatives before the election. The LDP won only 233 seats, down 37 from its preelection strength. The Kômeitô came out with 31 seats, down 11, and the Conservatives also suffered a loss of 11 seats (including switches to the LDP), ending up with only seven.

The table also presents a comparison of the results of the June 2000 election and the October 1996 election that preceded it, for both the single-seat local constituencies and the regional blocks of proportional-representation seats. It is possible to compare these two sets of results directly because both were conducted under the current electoral system, adopted in 1994, which combines single-seat districts at the local level and proportional-representation voting at the regional level. In 1996 the LDP got 38.6 per cent of the vote in the local districts and won 169 of the 300 seats; this year it got 41.0 per cent of the vote and won 177 seats. So if one considers only the single-seat districts, the LDP did better this time than last.

In the proportional-representation balloting, however, the LDP got 32.8 per cent of the vote and 70 seats in 1996, but this time its vote share was 28.3 per cent and it secured only 56 seats. Part of the loss of seats was due to the cut in the size of the total

Table 1. Election results by party, 1996–2000

	Single seats		Proportional representation		
	Seats won, vote share (%)		Seats won, vote share (%)		200-seat share*
	1996	2000	1996	2000	
LDP	169 (38.6)	177 (41.0)	70 (32.8)	56 (28.3)	62
NFP	96 (28.0)		60 (28.0)		
Kômeitô		7 (2.0)		24 (13.0)	26
NCP		7 (2.0)		0 (0.4)	0
LP		4 (3.4)		18 (11.0)	21
DPJ	17 (10.6)	80 (27.6)	35 (16.1)	47 (25.2)	54
DSP	4 (2.2)	4 (3.8)	11 (6.4)	15 (9.4)	16
JCP	2 (12.6)	0 (12.1)	24 (13.1)	20 (11.2)	21
Other	12 (8.1)	21 (8.1)	0 (3.6)	0 (1.5)	0
Total	300	300	200	180	200

Notes:

- LDP: Liberal Democratic Party
 NFP: New Frontier Party (Shinshintô)
 Kômeitô: New Kômeitô
 NCP: New Conservative Party
 LP: Liberal Party
 DPJ: Democratic Party of Japan
 SDP: Social Democratic party
 JCP: Japanese Communist Party

* For the simulated results based on a hypothetical 200 proportional-representation seats I referred to the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, June 26, 2000, evening edition.

proportional-representation contingent from 200 last time to 180 in this year's election, but even if this cut had not been made, we can calculate that the LDP would still have won only 62 seats, or eight fewer than last time.

How should we interpret the top party's gains at the local level and decline in the proportional-representation voting? This is the key to understanding the re-

sults of the June election. To present my conclusion, it is that the proportional-representation vote reflects the real level of approval for the cabinet and the LDP and that in the local districts the party did well thanks to the success of its joint campaigning with the Kōmeitō. The favorable outcome was also made possible by the strength of the LDP's local organizations in the non-metropolitan regions. To put it another way, the 'bare' LDP clearly did less well this year than in the previous election.

The impact of performance ratings and the prime minister's image differs considerably in the proportional-representation voting and the local district voting. In the proportional-representation ballot, where voters select a party by name, the effect of these factors is relatively direct. In the local districts, however, voters pick an individual candidate by name. For voters who do not support the LDP but who like the party's candidate in their local district, the impact of the performance rating they give the party and of their image of the prime minister (the head of the LDP) is indirect and attenuated. Furthermore, in many cases the LDP candidates this time were running with the support of the Kōmeitō. Since there is only one seat per local district, the candidate fielded by the number-one party naturally starts out with a stronger advantage than under the pre-1994 system of multiple-seat districts, where candidates from the smaller parties also had a fair shot at winning a place among the victors. The reason the LDP – or, more precisely, its individual candidates – did well in the local districts this time is that, on top of enjoying this normal advantage, the candidates were able to hold on to their existing personal support at the local level and also benefited from the votes the Kōmeitō directed toward them.

The situation tended to differ, however, in the case of metropolitan-area districts, where the LDP's support base is small and the ties between candidates and voters are relatively weak; there the party's performance rating and the prime minister's image had a rather greater effect. And in many cases LDP candidates were unable to overcome this negative impact, even with the support of the Kōmeitō.