

Upper House Elections in Japan and the Power of the ‘Organized Vote’

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Introduction

Vote mobilization *qua* local and national organizations has played an important role in postwar Japanese elections for both Houses of Parliament. However, while there is an abundant literature on personal support organizations (*kôenkai*) of individual politicians in the Lower House, the role of national organizations for vote mobilization in Upper House elections has so far received only scant attention. The phenomenon of the ‘organized vote’ in postwar Upper House elections in Japan raises a number of questions. How important has it been in terms of voting behavior? What are the factors underlying organized voting? And how has the electoral clout of national organizations changed over time? This article tries to make a modest contribution to the debate on ‘organized voting’. In particular, it addresses the proposition that the ability of national interest groups to mobilize votes has declined significantly. The main empirical point of reference in this article are the 2001 Upper House elections.

The recent Upper House elections are of some interest for the analysis of voting behavior and political change in Japan. In 2001, a new voting system – the open-list system – was used for the first time in Upper House elections in Japan. As a consequence of this new system, voting for ‘group-supported’ candidates in the proportional district of the Upper House has become transparent again. The election results indicate that candidates backed by national organizations are still quite successful in terms of securing seats. This success, however, is based more on their getting nominated by political parties than on the actual ability of national organizations to mobilize votes for their candidates. Indeed, the 2001 Upper House elections suggest that the power of ‘the organized vote’ has declined substantially.

The period before the role of organizational support for candidates in the 2001 elections and its possible consequences will be discussed in some detail, two prior steps will be taken in order to put the issues of voter mobilization and electoral change in Japan into a broader context. First, the literature on voting behavior in

Japan with a view to identifying what it has say about the subject of ‘organized voting’ will be reviewed. Second, the changing electoral system for the Upper House in postwar Japan will be examined to set the stage for the subsequent discussion of the most recent revision of the voting system.

‘Organized voting’ in Japan

Vote mobilization and social networks

Contemporary studies of worldwide voting behavior are predominantly based on two different approaches. On the one hand, one finds a large number of studies grounded in sociological and socio-psychological models. On the other hand, there are by now many rational-choice studies which model voting decisions in terms of stylized ‘rational market behavior’ (cf. Wildenmann, 1992: 34-59). Both basic approaches have also been employed in numerous studies on voting behavior in postwar Japan. Indeed the literature is so broad that it has to suffice here to point to a few select contributions. Representative of the studies emphasizing social and psychological determinants of voting behavior are the contributions by Miyake Ichirô and his collaborators who have focused on influences such as party and candidate images, voters’ social status, the role of media, values, and social networks (see e.g. Miyake, 1989, 1995, 1998; Flanagan et al., 1991; Richardson, 1997: chapter 2). Mostly from a rational-choice perspective, other scholars have analyzed in theoretical and empirical terms strategic and tactical aspects of voting behavior in Japan (see e.g. Reed, 1990, 1999; Cox, 1994; Kohno, 1997; Fournier and Kohno 2000). Looking from the other side of the voter-political elite relationship, Cox et al. (1998) have also focused on the links between mobilizational efforts on the one hand, and election closeness and turnout on the other hand.

Regardless of whether sociological or rational-choice approaches have been involved, voter mobilization and role of social networks in mobilizing electoral support have been frequent themes in studies on voting and elections in postwar Japan. Drawing on Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 25), voter mobilization can be defined in general terms as the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate in voting. More precisely, the two political scientists (*ibid.*: 26) distinguish two types of mobilization. ‘Direct mobilization’ refers to personal contacts of political leaders with potential voters and their efforts to entice these persons to vote for them. Of interest to our discussion is the second type of mobilization, viz. ‘indirect mobilization’. Here, political leaders contact potential voters through primary (family, friends etc.) and secondary groups (organizations, associations). This is where social networks enter the picture: ‘Membership in social networks makes people available to politicians, organizations, and activists. Membership in social networks makes people responsive to mobilization. Social networks, that is, convert direct mobilization into indirect mobilization. Political leaders mobilize citizens for political action through social networks. . . .

Indirect mobilization promotes participation . . . by allowing political leaders to exploit citizens' ongoing obligations to friends, neighbors, and social groups' (ibid.: 27, 29).

What emerges when examining the literature on elections and voting in Japan is, to quote Richardson and Patterson (2001: 95), 'the picture of a highly mobilized electorate'. They note that '[p]arochial mobilization styles prevailed in most kind of elections in postwar Japan' (ibid., see also Cox et al., 1998: 456–460). This raises the question of how important mobilized voting *qua* social networks has been in Japan. Miyake (1998: 88) argues that while party identification in Japan is relatively low in comparative perspective, social networks have had the effect of stabilizing party support. Richardson (1997: 37) suggests that between a third to a half of all Japanese voters are linked to individual politicians by 'social networks and other organizational ties with a highly parochial focus'. He goes on to point out that '[m]obilization does not explain all voting in Japan. Candidate campaigns and secondary group mobilization directly explained 30–40 percent of the stable votes during the period of LDP [Liberal Democratic Party] hegemony. The remainder of the stable vote reflects some combination of occupational interests and psychological motives' (ibid.). Even if this estimate is on the high side, the degree of personal contacts between voters and the electoral support machinery of politicians is any case fairly high in the Japanese case (cf. Bruns, 1999: 198–202).

While political scientists in general have rarely analyzed in systematic terms how parties and candidates mobilize electoral support,¹ the literature on elections and voting behavior in postwar Japan abounds with references to vote-mobilizing strategies of individual politicians. Well-documented is in particular the role of personal support organizations (*kôenkai*) linking individual politicians and their supporters.² Functionally speaking, *kôenkai* help candidates running for the Diet to secure a stable share of the vote. Mobilizing votes *qua kôenkai* helps candidate to obtain a 'hard vote' (*koteihyô*), 'meaning a reliable or "fixed" vote for a certain politician based on enduring considerations such as communal or personal loyalties' (George Mulgan, 2000: 383, see also Curtis, 1971: 38).

Especially in the multi-member districts under the old electoral system for the Lower House, a well-functioning *kôenkai* was considered a necessity for obtaining the required number of votes.³ Survey data for the Lower House 1983 elections presented by Miyake (1998: 173–174) indicates that *kôenkai* and other group activities contributed most to the campaign exposure of voters. More than half of the voters of the

¹ For a pathbreaking study on electoral mobilization in the United States which also includes a broader theoretical perspective see Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).

² For good overviews of the functions and organizational shapes of *kôenkai* see Bouissou (1999) and Yanagihashi (1975).

³ See e.g. Grofman (1999: 381) and the literature cited there. According to data quoted by Miyake (1998: 77), between 20 and 30 percent of voters questioned in the election years of 1983, 1993, and 1996 said they were members of *kôenkai*.

LDP and the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) in this particular election were exposed to *kôenkai* and other group activities. The more LDP and JSP candidates competed in one particular district, the higher was the exposure to such activities. Moreover, nearly two-thirds of all 'stable voters' were exposed to or participated in *kôenkai* and other group activities (ibid.: 175). While a number of observers assumed that the introduction of single-member districts in 1994 would lead to a strengthening of formal party organization at the local level and to making personal support organizations increasingly irrelevant, reports on electioneering for the Lower House elections of 1996 and 2000 have indicated that *kôenkai* are still seen as useful tools for mobilizing votes (see e.g. the case studies in Otake, 1998).

Large interest groups and vote mobilization in Upper House elections

Personal support organizations have, however, not been the only social networks used for mobilizing electoral support in Japan. From the perspective of 'conducting elections from an organizational base' (*soshiki senkyô*), virtually all organizations and associations with a mass membership have been of interest to Japanese politicians and parties. Secondary organizations such as trade unions, business associations, farmers' cooperatives, religious groups, and other interest groups have been obvious targets for politicians and parties looking for 'vote multipliers'. As noted by George Mulgan (2001: 406), '[t]he *sine qua non* of successful vote-mobilisation is mass membership of some kind because this determines the vote-gathering potential of the group'. Moreover, as Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 32) have suggested, 'people who belong to associations are more likely to be mobilized and more likely to participate than people who do not belong'.

In their discussion of the relevant literature on the Japanese case, Richardson and Patterson (2001: 95) state that '[s]econdary organizations were often cited as significant in the mobilization efforts of individual candidates at both the national (House of Representatives) and local levels. However, in the House of Councillors nationwide district, large organizations with a national base, such as trade unions, had advantages in gathering votes over most individual candidacies'.⁴ Especially the well-known absence of strong local party organizations on the part of most Japanese parties has made reliance on organizational support an attractive option for them.⁵ Indeed, George (1988: 112) goes so far as to argue that Japanese 'parties need interest groups to act as surrogate party organizations at the electoral level'.

Unfortunately, there are not that many detailed studies concerning the role and particular activities of secondary organizations in terms of mobilizing votes in Upper House elections. In an early study, Richardson (1967) analyzed support mobilization in the 1965 House of Councillors election. What emerged as distinctive patterns were

⁴ For a general discussion of the role of secondary groups in influencing voting behavior see Miyake (1989: 50-55).

⁵ A discussion of the reasons for these organizational weaknesses is beyond the scope of this study. The interested reader is referred to Köllner (1999) and the literature cited therein.

an 'emphasis by candidates upon cultivation of support prior to the formal campaign and search for some kind of organized base of support' (ibid.: 400). Reflecting the behaviorist thrust of the time, Richardson suggested that '[t]here is apparently an imperative in Japanese behaviour for seeking stability and avoidance of competition through dependence upon some kind of often relatively permanent structuring of support'.⁶

The importance of organizational support in Upper House elections was also underlined in Curtis' analysis (1976) of the 1974 House of Councillors election. Given the fact that a candidate in the national district needed at that time around 600,000 votes to get elected but faced, on the other hand, severe legal restrictions regarding the use of promotional material and the media, the LDP and also some of the opposition parties endorsed many candidates who enjoyed either the backing of one or more large interest groups or who possessed personal name recognition and popularity. As in earlier Upper House elections, three types of candidates figured prominently among the candidates in the national district: ex-bureaucrats, celebrities, and representatives of national organizations and pressure groups. The electoral advantage of ex-bureaucrats lay in the many personal connections built up during their former career. They could bank on a number of sources for organizational support and election funds. As Passin (1976: 21) explains, '[m]any corporations, pressure groups, business associations, and national organizations, as well as local entities, find it in their interest to have someone in the Diet who knows the bureaucratic ropes'. So-called *tarento*, i.e. celebrities such as entertainers, writers, athletes, and so on, were also popular as candidates in the national district because they were well-known due to their media appearances. In particular the LDP made good use of celebrities who appealed especially to floating voters (cf. Curtis, 1976: 58–64). Finally, representatives of large national organizations and associations, including the labor unions, used the mass membership of these groups for a 'vertical' (*tatewari*) strategy of vote mobilization in the national district of the Upper House. In contrast, the only two parties with strong local party organizations, the *Kōmeitō* and the Japan Communist Party (JCP), employed a 'horizontal' (*yokowari*) strategy in the national district, i.e. they divided the country into regions in which campaigning centered on only one assigned candidate (cf. Passin, 1976: 54, 57).

One of the few detailed empirical studies on the subject of vote mobilization in a particular sector is George Mulgan's recent work (2000) in which she devotes one illuminating chapter to the involvement of *Nōkyō* (Japan Agricultural Cooperatives) and its political arm *Nōseiren* in electoral politics in postwar Japan. She shows how farmers' associations assist vote-gathering efforts of individual candidates through

⁶ In contrast, scholars operating from a rational-choice perspective, emphasize the strategic considerations behind such organized vote-mobilization. Thus Cox et al. (1998: 471) suggest that '[w]hat has not been appreciated is that the extent of which social networks are engaged in mobilization is not a simple reflex of local social structure. Instead, it follows a straightforward instrumental calculus . . . ?'.

elections activities (*senkyô katsudô*) ranging from making recommendations (*suisen*) to supplying file activists, campaign workers, political funds, sponsoring political discussion meetings and other PR activities, and mobilizing votes *qua* personal connections and informal word-of-mouth campaigns. In a number of cases, the farmers' associations designated former high-ranking officials who would then be nominated as candidates by political parties, in particular the LDP (cf. *ibid.*: 384–404). Sometimes, as Richardson (1967: 391–392) has argued, such nominations can be a reward for long service or they can be used to make room for 'new faces' in the organization.

This leads to the question of why large interest groups support particular parties and candidates in the first place. Here the existing literature has emphasized that political parties provide interest groups with an institutionalized channel into the Diet. Steslicke (1973: 11), for example, has argued that many Japanese interest groups lack specialized goals and 'tend strongly to concentrate more upon pursuing positions of power and authority than upon seeking enactment and implementation of specific policies'. This explains, according to him, 'why many groups try to get their own members elected to the Diet, and why relationships between pressure groups and Diet members tend to be strongly personalized' (*ibid.*: 12). The result is a blurring of different roles: representatives of the labor unions or occupational associations such as the Japan Medical Association endorsed by the parties basically combine the role of legislator and lobbyist (*ibid.*: 13; Curtis, 1976: 64). George (1988: 120) has even suggested that in Japan 'the majority of parties are just as much "conglomerates of interest groups" as "federations of factions"'.

It has to be noted, however, that the LDP and the other parties tend to draw their 'organizational support' from different sectors. Thus it can be argued that ideological considerations and similar policy interests made unions the most important support organizations for the left-of-center parties and their candidates in postwar Japan. The LDP, on the other hand, could bank on a 'grand coalition' of different functional organizations. As Passin (1976: 32) noted many years ago, '[t]he LDP occupational and interest group representatives usually come from (or are supported by) corporations, religious, bodies, professional associations, and the more conservative civic associations. Opposition candidates, insofar as they stand in a representative capacity, tend to come from trade unions, mass movements, and anti-establishment public civic associations.' Not surprisingly, many interest groups gravitated to the LDP because it was for a long time the only party capable of formulating policy and rewarding those groups within the 'grand coalition' (George Mulgan, 2000: 423; Steslicke, 1973: 12). By and large, these differences in the parties' organizational support still exist today.

The electoral clout of large interest groups called into question

How many votes national organizations could actually deliver has always been a subject for speculations and 'guesstimates'. At least, as will be shown in the next

section, the number of votes for individual candidates in the old national district of the Upper House provided some clues about the national vote-gathering ability of large interest groups. With the abolition of the national district in the early 1980s, however, this 'window of transparency' was gone. Though it can be safely assumed that even today most votes for the (New) *Kômeitô* come from members of the Buddhist mass organization *Sôka gakkai* (cf. Hrebendar, 2000; Wiczorek, 2000), in most other cases parties depend on rough estimates which are based on the number of members of the organizations in question.

It is generally assumed however that the vote-mobilization ability of national organizations has gone down due to a host of factors. Firstly, membership in a number of organizations has declined in recent years. To take just one example from the unions, the number of members of the Confederation of Japan Automobile Workers' Unions (*Jidôsha sôren*) went down from 831,000 in 1993 to 744,000 in 2000. In addition, it can be noted that the share of union members under the umbrella of the Japanese Trade Union Council (*Rengô*) declined from around 15 percent of the total workforce in 1991 to 13 percent in 2001 (*Nikkei Weekly*, 23 July 2001; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 17 January 2002). Secondly, a number of organizations are experiencing a 'greying' of their members. This reflects general demographic trends in Japan and is, of course, more pronounced in organizations representing older people such as the Japan Association of Bereaved Families (*Nihon izokukai*). Thirdly, societal changes have led to a lessened effectiveness of vertical authority structures. To start with, value change in Japan is said to have led to a reduced acceptance of community pressures and instructions from superiors (cf. Flanagan and Lee, 2000). Moreover, changes in the structure of employment and occupational diversification have especially in rural areas worked to undermine the effectiveness of the traditional recommendation system (cf. George Mulgan, 2000: 455–458). Fourthly, the rise of floating voters (*mutôhasô*) has often been mentioned as a factor linked to the perceived decline in the organized vote, though it is not quite clear whether the increase in the floating vote represents a cause or a consequence of that decline. In summary, while there is some reason to suspect that the vote-mobilization ability of national support groups has indeed declined, it is unclear to what degree organizational support is no longer effective in terms of mobilizing votes.

Against this background, the recent change in the electoral system for the Upper House is of much interest. A new voting system, first used in the July 2001 elections, enables voters to cast their votes for individual party-list candidates. As a consequence of this new system, voting for 'group-supported' candidates has become transparent again. Thus the recent Upper House election results should offer some indications about the current vote-mobilization ability of these groups. The new electoral system will now be discussed in the context of an overall examination of the changing electoral system for the Upper House in postwar Japan.

The changing electoral system for the Upper House

Electoral systems in use between 1947 and 1998

Japan's first parliament, the Imperial Diet, was composed of a House of Peers (*Kizokuin*) and a House of Representatives (*Shûgiin*). While the members of the House of Representatives were – with all the restrictions of the time – popularly elected, the House of Peers consisted of members of the royal family, the aristocracy and parliamentarians chosen by the Emperor. After World War II, it was decided to keep a bicameral parliamentary system but the second chamber, now called House of Councillors (*Sangiin*), was made elective.⁷ Since 1950, both the electoral systems of the House of Representatives (Lower House) and the House of Councillors (Upper House) have been governed by the law on elections for public offices (*kôshoku senkyôhô*).

Elections for the Upper House are fixed and staggered. Every three years, half of its members are elected for a renewable term of six years. Originally, the Upper House had 250 seats but after the return of Okinawa in 1970 the number was increased to 252. Until the electoral reform in 2000, 152 seats were filled from 47 prefectural election districts whose number of representatives in the Diet ranged from two to eight.⁸ Upper House members from prefectural districts were (and still are) elected under the same single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system that was used until 1993 in Lower House elections. The remaining 100 members of the Upper House were individually elected until 1980 in a nationwide election district for which also the SNTV system was used (cf. Kevenhörster, 1969: 55–56).⁹ From the beginning, voters thus had two votes: one for a candidate in their prefectural district and another for a candidate in the national district (see table 1).

The original idea behind the national district was to have Diet members in the Upper House who were more interested in the larger national interest than in parochial local interests. Moreover, the national district was seen to provide an opportunity for representation of diverse functional and occupational interest groups (Passin, 1976: 6–8). As discussed above, candidates with nationwide reputation and those with the support of national organizations were indeed in an advantageous position in terms of their chances of getting elected in the national district.

In the course of time, however, the setup of the national district drew frequent criticism. For example, it was criticized that candidates who were not that well-

⁷ On the constitutional discussions about the reorganization of the second chamber and its electoral system see McNelly (1972: 134–135), Miyazawa (1986: 178–179), and Passin (1976: 4–6).

⁸ There were 2 eight-seat districts, 4 six-seat districts, 15 four-seat districts and 26 two-seat districts. Because of the staggered nature of the Upper House elections, only one to four candidates were elected from every prefectural district in one election.

⁹ Thus, every three years the fifty candidates obtaining the most votes were elected in the national district.

Table 1. Comparison of the electoral systems for the Upper House in postwar Japan

	1947–1980	1983–1998	Since 2001
Number of votes per voter	2 (prefectural district/ national district)	2 (election district/ proportional district)	2 (election district/ proportional district)
Total number of seats	250 (252 since 1970) 150 (152) from 46 (47) prefectural districts, 100 from national district	252 152 from 47 election districts, 100 from proportional district	242 146 from 47 election districts, 96 from proportional district
Type of electoral system	Single non-transferable vote (SNTV) in both kind of districts	Hybrid (SNTV in election districts/ Closed-list PR in proportional district)	Hybrid (SNTV in election districts/ Open-list PR in proportional district)
Period between elections	6 years (every 3 years one half of the MPs gets elected, no prior dissolution possible)	6 years (every 3 years one half of the MPs gets elected, no prior dissolution possible)	6 years (every 3 years one half of the MPs gets elected, no prior dissolution possible)
Active/passive voting right	20/30 years of age	20/30 years of age	20/30 years of age

Note:

All 250 members of the Upper House were elected in the first elections of 1947.

Source: Own compilation.

known at the national level and who were not supported by a national organization or association were forced to undertake exhausting national campaign tours. Moreover, they had to collect large amounts of money for their nationwide election campaign. In the press the national district (*zenkokoku*) was therefore referred to as the 'cruel district' (*zankokoku*) or the 'money-gobbling district' (*senkokoku*). 'Five wins, four loses' was a well-known rule of thumb until 1980. It meant that candidates who spent five-hundred million yen on campaign activities in the national district would win while candidates who would 'only' spend four-hundred million yen would lose (*Tôkyô Shimbun*, 20 October 2000).

According to Ramseyer and Rosenbluth (1993: 206, note 29) the biggest problem of the LDP before the change in the electoral system in 1982 (see below) lay in dividing the vote among candidates in the national district. While incumbents wanted to keep the number of candidates low in order to avoid possible defeat at the hands of other LDP candidates, faction leaders interested in increasing the size of their groups demanded the endorsement of new candidates. Finally, a number of interest groups supporting the LDP urged the endorsement of their candidates (Curtis, 1976: 58). While, as a rule, all LDP incumbents were endorsed, many other

endorsements went in the end to candidates ‘sponsored’ by national organizations and associations. Likewise the JSP, the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), and the JCP fielded candidates backed by the larger unions (cf. *ibid.*: 99–100; Matsushita 1960: 97–98; Fukui and Fukai 2000: 36–38). How successful the vote-mobilization of national organizations and associations was, can be deduced from the results of the Upper House elections in 1977 and 1980. In both elections ten ‘group-supported’ candidates received more than 900,000 votes each. In the 1980 elections, i.e. at a time when the total electorate numbered around 80 million, more than half a dozen candidates were even able to collect more than one million votes (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 14 July 2001).¹⁰

However, not only candidates backed by large interest groups managed to obtain a sufficient number of votes in the national district. Also a number of independent candidates or candidates of citizens’ movements were able to gain some of the 100 seats (cf. Pohl, 1983: 26).¹¹ This, however, was made more difficult by a change in the electoral system for the Upper House in 1982. The main point of the revision of the election law was the abolition of individual candidacies in the national district.

Starting with the 1983 Upper House elections, candidate lists had to be presented in the nationwide district and only parties and political groupings fulfilling a number of conditions were allowed to put up such lists. The newly introduced lists were of the closed type, i.e. parties had to rank their candidates on the list. Voters could now just vote for a party list *en bloc*; no preferences for individual candidates on the list could be indicated. Closed-list systems are said to have advantages for party elites as ‘[t]hey can draw up their list in such a way as to maximize the chances for their preferred candidates to be elected’ (Farell, 1997: 73).¹² However, as we will see below, in the Japanese case party elites relied more on external interest groups to determine the rank-order of individual candidates.

Under the new electoral system for the Upper House the seat-allocation rule for the list candidates became proportional representation with d’Hondt divisors. Thus for the first time an element of proportional representation was introduced into the Japanese electoral system. Accordingly, the national election district was renamed proportional district (*hireiku*) while the regional (i.e. prefectural) elections districts (*chihôku*) were renamed election districts (*senkyôku*) even though their boundaries remained unchanged.

The 1982 revision of the election law was passed by the governing LDP against the resistance of most opposition parties. It was argued by the LDP that the new

¹⁰ An ‘all-time high’ vote-gathering record in the national district was reached in 1968 when popular writer Ishihara Shintarô, today’s governor of Tokyo, received three million votes.

¹¹ In fact, independents constituted the largest group of politicians (113) elected to the Upper House in 1947. In the following three decades, however, their number decreased steadily. In the 1970s, only a single-digit number of independents managed to get elected to the Upper House. See Passin (1976: 12–16) and the data in the appendix of the volume edited by Blaker (1976) for details.

¹² For a general discussion of the various types of candidate lists see also Nohlen (2000: 93–55).

electoral system would promote more party-centered elections and would also help to reduce the high costs of individual candidacies. Many observers were however convinced that hardly anything would change with regard to the amount of money spent on campaigning. Rather it was believed that these funds would now be channeled through the parties. The real reason behind the revision of the election law was in all likelihood the desire of the LDP to reduce the number of independent Upper House members, thus strengthening its own position (cf. Pohl, 1983: 26).

The abolition of individual candidacies in the national election district led to a coordination problem for Japan's political parties. Until 1980, securing a seat was simply a question of receiving the necessary number of individual votes. After the change in the electoral system, the ranking of individual candidates on a given party list predetermined to quite a degree whether a seat would be won or not. Candidates who ranked high on the list obviously had a much better chance to get elected than those further down the list. Accordingly, some kind of mechanism had to be found to allocate the slots on the party lists. In the case of the left-of-center opposition parties, candidates were henceforth given a position in the parties' lists on the basis of the membership power of the respective unions backing them.¹³

The LDP chose another way to solve the coordination problem. In deciding which rank on the list should be given to a certain candidate, the party considered his success in terms of recruiting new party members. The more paying members a candidate could present, the better were his prospects for a high position on the party list. According to Fukui and Fukai (1999: 142), a LDP candidate in the proportional district had to recruit 'at least 20,000 new party members or new "friends of the party", each of whom would be counted as equivalent to three party members, and ¥ 1 million for his or her own campaign organization. These were the minimum requirements for party endorsement; ranking on the party list depended on how many additional new members over and above the minimum number in either category the candidate would recruit' (see also *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 6 October 2000; Takahara 2001). This resulted, as Abe et al. (1994: 144) have noted, in 'a furious competition' among LDP candidates to recruit new party members. Before the introduction of the closed-list system, huge amounts of money were spent on individual campaigns in the national district of the Upper House elections, now similar amounts were spent on intra-party competition for endorsement on the party list (Fukui and Fukai, 1999: 142). Evidently this intra-party competition ran counter to one official goal of the 1982 revision of the electoral system, viz. to make Upper House elections less candidate and more party-centered.

¹³ More precisely, the individual unions presented lists of 'supporters' (*shijisha meibo*) of a certain candidate. For example before the Upper House election of 1998, the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers' Union (*Jichirō*) handed the DPJ a list with two million names of supporters which secured the particular candidate a promising position in the middle of the party list (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 14 July 2001). See also the discussion on the nomination process in the JSP in Fukui and Fukai (1999: 143–144).

By far not all Liberal Democratic MPs and candidates were able to recruit such a large number of party members and ‘friends of the party’ just by themselves. What happened was that LDP politicians turned to various interest groups which could ‘supply’ the needed party members and pay their membership fees. In many cases, these organizations and associations simply used the names of their own members – often without the explicit consent of the members concerned. This collusive – some would say corrupt – nexus between LDP politicians and interest groups was an open secret that now and then, mostly in the context of particular scandals, was brought to the attention of the broader public.¹⁴

The revision of the electoral system in 2000

One such scandal involving LDP politician Kuze Kunitaka apparently triggered the latest revision of the electoral system for the Upper House. In June 2000 Kuze assumed the chairmanship of the Commission for the Reform of the Financial Sector. However, after only four weeks Kuze had to resign when it became known that he had accepted for years undeclared funds from companies, thus breaking the law regulating the financing of political activities (*seiji shikin kiseihô*). *Inter alia*, Kuze had received 100 million yen from a construction company in order to pay the membership fees of new party recruits (cf. *Shimbun Daijeto*, No.413 (10/2000), p.17–18).¹⁵ The Kuze affair underlined again that the 1982 revision of the election law had hardly led to a reduction of the costs for candidacies in the proportional district. Rather, huge amounts of money were now needed in the endorsement stage.

To these self-induced problems the LDP reacted in the fall of 2000 with a bill on the revision of the election law. The proposed revisions concerned mainly the voting system used in the proportional district of the Upper House. In preparing the bill, the LDP took up some suggestions tabled in 1990 by the 8th Commission for the Electoral System (*senkyô seido bangikai*). Back then this advisory organ had recommended to replace the closed candidate lists (*kôsoku meibo*) used since 1983 by open candidate lists (*hikôsoku meibo*, cf. *Asahi Shimbun*, 12 October 2000). As noted above, under the closed-list system individual candidates on a given party’s list are ranked before the elections. In the case of the open-list system, however, the final positions depend on the actual number of votes that individual candidates obtain in

¹⁴ Most recently, the scandal centring on the Upper House ‘don’ of the LDP, Murakami Masakuni, and his former secretary Koyama Takao put such practices into the limelight again (see Kohno with Kobayashi, 2001: 253–254).

¹⁵ After the 2001 Upper House elections it also became known that the political arm of the Japanese Dentists’ Association had secured safe list positions for their candidates in the 1995 and 1998 Upper House elections by paying for the relevant number of party members (see *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 August 2001). According to the *Asahi Shimbun*, 30 percent of the membership fees acquired in this way went to the candidates responsible for the fundraising while the rest went to the headquarters and the regional sections of the LDP (*Asahi Shimbun*, 27 October 2000).

Table 2. Example for the operation of the open-list system (with vote for party option)

Party A	Party B	Party C
Candidate A: 3 million votes	Candidate A: 500,000 votes	Candidate A: 100,000 votes
Candidate D: 150,000 votes	Candidate B: 450,000 votes	Candidate B: 80,000
Candidate C: 100,000 votes	Candidate C: 400,000 votes	Other Candidates with a total of 650,000 votes
Candidate D: 50,000 votes	Candidate D: 350,000 votes	
Votes for party: 100,000	Votes for party: 800,000	Votes for party: 10,000
Total votes: 3.4 million	Total votes: 2.5 million	Total votes: 850,000
Result: 4 candidates of the party get elected thanks mainly to the popularity of candidate A.	Result: 3 candidates of the party get elected. The popularity of the party itself plays a role in bringing about the result.	Result: 1 Candidate of the party gets elected on the basis of the total of votes garnered by all candidates.

Source: *Asahi Shinbun*, 12 October 2000, p. 4.

the elections. On the ballot paper the names of the candidates of a given party appear only in alphabetical order.

The proposed system thus resembled the personalized vote system which was used until 1980 in the national district of the Upper House. There were however differences insofar as (a) under the newly-proposed system individual candidates would have to be endorsed by political parties and political groupings and (b) voters would now have two options in the proportional district: either they could vote for a particular candidate of a given party or they could vote for the party itself. The latter option was not available in the old national district. Under the new system, the number of successful candidates of a given party would be determined by the sum of the two types of votes. Table 2 shows a hypothetical case in which only three parties present candidate lists in the proportional district.

The LDP put forward a number of arguments in support of the open-list system. According to the chairmen of the Upper House Committee for Parliamentary Affairs, Katayama Toranosuke, the new system would firstly lead to elections in which voters would come to 'see the faces of the candidates' (rather than being just presented with a list of names). Secondly, the ranking of the candidates would be easier to comprehend for both the voters and the candidates. Thirdly, there would finally be an electoral system for the Upper House which would be completely different from the one used for the Lower House (*Asahi Shimbun*, 12 October 2000). From the perspective of the voters, the open-list system certainly has the advantage that it gives them a say over who represents them. This decision is only insofar constrained by the parties as they decide who is put on the list in the first place. It has also been argued that candidates who get elected under the open-list system can feel more independent as they have received not only the backing of their party but also the personal and political backing of the citizens who voted for them (Farell, 1997: 73; Nohlen, 2000: 93).

Still, the opposition parties in the Japanese parliament assumed a negative attitude towards the proposed revision of the election law. For example, the Democratic Party (DPJ) criticized that there would be no comprehensive reform of the electoral system as had originally been planned.¹⁶ The opposition parties also expressed the fear that the old problem of cost-intensive and exhausting campaigns of individual candidates would reappear in the proportional district. Moreover, they argued that the new system would trigger an intensification of intra-party competition. Finally, they regarded it as problematic that highly-popular candidates – for example well-known TV personalities – could garner lots of votes which would also enable other candidates of the same party to gain seats (cf. the example of party A in table 2). Regarding the last point, the LDP retorted that the new system would not call into question the general principle of party-orientation in the proportional district. Therefore it would not matter if ‘excessive’ votes for a particular candidate benefited other candidates of the same party (*Asahi Shimbun*, 12 October 2000; *Tōkyō Shimbun*, 20 October 2000).

It can be argued that the discussions about the merits and problems of the proposed electoral system constituted only a sort of *tatemae* debate. There were certainly other factors behind the LDP’s wish to change the electoral system. At least two factors can be suggested. First, the LDP had fared badly in the PR segment of the 2000 Lower House elections. In the elections the LDP had gained only 28.3 percent of the votes while the oppositional DPJ managed to reach a new height with 25.2 percent of the votes in the PR segment (cf. Reed 2000b). Secondly, the LDP had to take note of the awkward fact that the popularity of then Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō reached ever new lows. In sum, the LDP faced the real possibility of significant losses at the polls in the summer 2001 Upper House elections.

Several media and other reports suggest that the LDP wanted to contain the expected losses with the aid of the new electoral system. The party apparently banked on recruiting a number of well-known candidates, for example medal-winners from the Olympic Games in Sydney, who could help to boost the number of seats won in the proportional district. More importantly, proponents of the new system such as the leader of the LDP in the Upper House, Aoki Mikio, believed that it would force national support groups of the LDP to campaign more vigorously. Under the closed-list system, candidates backed by large organizations and associations were assured of relatively high positions on the party list. Once the party list had been put together, however, there was hardly an incentive for the relevant support groups to put all their energy into mobilizing votes. Under the open-list system, support groups could not afford such a relaxed attitude because only candidates who secured enough votes on election day would gain a seat. Thus, for the organizations and associations supporting LDP candidates (and of course candidates running for other parties) the

¹⁶ In fact, the DPJ tabled an alternative bill which foresaw the introduction of an electoral system based on regional blocs in which voters could vote for individual candidates (cf. Takahara, 2000).

2001 Upper House elections would become a litmus test for their vote-mobilization abilities – just as Upper elections had been until 1980. The more the LDP's national support groups fought for their candidates, the better were the election prospects of the governing party (*Asahi Shimbun*, 12 October 2000; *Daily Yomiuri On-line*, 6 June 2001; Reed, 2000a; Takahara, 2001).

Of course the opposition parties also knew this. Thus they did everything they could to derail the election-law bill – including boycotting some sessions of the parliament. The joint efforts of the opposition, however, did not bear fruit: with the votes of the Diet members of the governing coalition the new election law was passed in both Houses of Parliament in October 2000 (cf. *Asahi Shimbun*, 27 October 2000; Foreign Press Center, 2000).¹⁷ The nomination of candidates in the proportional district of the Upper House for the elections in 2001, the first under the new voting system, will be discussed in the next section.

Group-supported candidates in the 2001 Upper House elections

The nominations

Before the 2001 Upper House elections both the LDP and other parties including the DPJ, the SDP, and the (New) *Kômeitô* approached once more the organizations and associations close to them in order to discuss the issue of candidate nomination. In the end, 15 out of 27 candidates on the LDP's list for the proportional district were backed by large interest groups. Even though the final endorsement of LDP candidates lies with the national leadership of the party, in practice factional jostling has always played an important role in this process. This was also the case before the 2001 Upper House elections. In particular the Hashimoto faction used its well-established links to large interest groups and endorsed seven 'group-supported' candidates who were backed, *inter alia*, by the Postmasters Association (*Taijû*), the Japan Association of Bereaved Families (*Nihon izokukai*), the Japanese Medical Association (JMA), and the Japanese Dentists' Association. The conservative faction of Etô Takami and Kamei Shizuka was also fairly active: it endorsed three such candidates. The factions of Mori Yoshirô and Horiuchi Mitsuo endorsed two group-supported candidates each. Finally, one candidate who was supported by the four large business associations leaned towards the faction of LDP secretary-general Yamasaki Taku but who not say so publicly because of Prime Minister Koizumi's

¹⁷ Apart from the introduction of the open-list system in the proportional district of the Upper House the revised election law also introduced new regulations governing campaign activities and candidate deposits. Moreover, the number of seats in the Upper House will be reduced by five each in the Upper House elections of 2001 and 2004 (two seats less in the proportional district and three seats less in the election districts). As these changes are not of primary importance to the discussion in this article, they will not be discussed in detail. For details of the revised election law see the *Yomiuri Shimbun* or the *Tôkyô Shimbun* of 20 October 2000.

(large unsuccessful) plea for a campaign without factional involvement (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 July 2001).¹⁸

The factionalized endorsement process in the proportional district resulted in different messages being sent out by LDP party leaders and candidates during the campaign. As discussed above, many large interest groups have an interest in getting their candidates into the Diet because they want to make sure that their interests are reflected in policymaking, budget decisions, and so on. Sometimes these interests can be in conflict with the policy agenda of party leaders. In the Upper House elections of 2001 such conflicting agendas became apparent in the case of the LDP. For example the media reported one telling incident where during the official campaign period Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirô called in one campaign speech in Tokyo once more for 'structural reforms without sanctuaries' (*seiikinaki kôzô kaikaku*) while in another part of the capital a LDP candidate supported by the construction industry emphasized his opposition against plans to reallocate income derived from road-related taxes (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 14 July 2001).

Before the elections, leading figures of the 'old guard' of the LDP, such as the already mentioned Aoki Mikio, made clear to representatives of large interest groups what was at stake. If these groups wanted to have a say in relevant policy issues after the elections, they had to make sure that their candidates would get the necessary number of votes. In this context the figure of one million votes was mentioned a couple of times (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 13, 14 July 2001). Interest groups were also expected to come up with funds for their candidates. In response, the Japanese Medical Association for example asked its members to donate 10,000 yen per head for the candidate backed by the JMA (Takahara, 2001).¹⁹ Interest groups like the JMA had however to be careful to keep their vote-mobilization activities within legal limits.²⁰

Again, the LDP was not the only party relying on organized votes for its candidates. The biggest opposition party, the DPJ, engaged in negotiations with *Rengô* about group-supported candidates. Publicly the party showed great confidence in the vote-mobilization ability of the unions. DPJ officials argued that each of the seven most important sectoral unions of the *Rengô* would be good for 1.5 million votes. However, in private conversations some party officials suggested that the DPJ

¹⁸ In total 52 of the 76 LDP candidates running for a seat in the Upper House laid open their links to particular factions within the party (Kyodo/Internet, 30 July 2001).

¹⁹ The *Asahi Shimbun* reported after the elections that the Japan Dentists Association, another support group of the LDP, had borrowed 1 billion yen from banks before the 2001 Upper House election to pay, among other things, for the campaign activities of its candidate, a former chairman of the association (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 August 2001).

²⁰ After the elections one of the successful candidates of the LDP in the proportional district, a former high-ranking bureaucrat in the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, was forced from within the party to give up his seat after 16 current or retired post officials had been arrested under the suspicion of having illegally gathered votes for him (cf. *Japan Times*, 26 September 2001; *Nikkei Weekly*, 1 October 2001).

could call itself lucky if just 4 (out of the total 7.5) million union members under the roof of *Rengô* would vote for the DPJ. The unions were also quite conscious of the fact that they also had to prove their vote-mobilization ability in order to demonstrate their political importance. However, they were unsure how many voters' decisions they could actually influence. After all, the last elections under comparable circumstances had been 20 years ago. In the meantime the membership levels of some unions had declined while other unions such as the telecommunications union *Zentsû* had been founded (*Asahi Shimbun*, 27 October 2000; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 14 July 2001). In the end, the unions and the DPJ settled on eight union-supported candidates. In addition, regional sections of *Jichirô*, the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers' Union, supported a candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 5 August 2001).

The (New) *Kômeitô* relied for electoral support again on the Buddhist mass organization *Sôka gakkai*. The party predicted 10 million votes for its candidates in the proportional district. This should have guaranteed approximately ten candidates a seat in the Upper House. Finally however, the (New) *Kômeitô* chose a safer course by concentrating its vote-mobilization activities – which were coordinated along regional lines²¹ – on eight candidates (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20 July 2001). The JCP asked its supporters to cast their votes in the proportional district for the party itself rather than for its individual candidates (Hironaka, 2001a).

What nearly all parties had in common was the search for well-known personalities who could function as 'vote magnets'. For example, the LDP nominated, among others, a former professional wrestler while the DPJ could persuade a former TV anchorman to run for office. In total 50 out of the 500 candidates running in the elections were *tarento*. Most such candidates – 25 in total – were fielded by the political grouping *Jiyû Rengô* (Liberal League) (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 13 July 2001; Takahara, 2001). Summing up this section, it can be noted that Japan's political parties reacted to the introduction of the open-list system by relying on established practices. They responded to the uncertainty resulting from the change in the electoral system by endorsing numerous group-supported candidates and celebrities.

The electoral fate of group-supported candidates and its consequences

For the large majority of the group-supported candidates the Upper House elections in July 2001 were a big success. While 12 out of 15 such LDP candidates gained a seat in the Upper House, 6 of the 8 union-supported candidates of the DPJ were elected. In addition the SDP candidate supported by parts of the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers' Union also won a seat (see table 3). In total, out of the 27 candidates backed by large organizations and associations (excluding the

²¹ As noted above, the same strategy was employed by the *Kômeitô* in the old national district. For details see Curtis (1976: 54–57) and Passin (1976: 27–28).

Table 3. Votes for group-supported candidates of the LDP and the DPJ

Support organisation	Number of votes 2001 (1980)	Successful candidacy?	Party members
LDP			
<i>Tajjû</i> (Former postmasters)	470,000 (1,030,000)	Yes	230,000
<i>Gunon renmei zenkoku rengôkai</i> (War veterans)	290,000 (990,000)	Yes	150,000
<i>Zenkoku kensetsu gyôkai</i> (Construction industry/real estate)	270,000 (1,740,000)	Yes	180,000
<i>Nihon izokukai</i> (War-bereaved)	260,000 (920,000)	Yes	110,000
<i>Nihon ishi renmei</i> (Doctors)	220,000 (830,000)	Yes	110,000
<i>Zenkoku tochi kairyô seiji renmei</i> (Rural construction industry)	200,000 (1,160,000)	Yes	90,000
<i>Nihon kango renmei</i> (Nurses)	170,000 (520,000)	Yes	120,000
<i>Zenkoku nôseikyô</i> (Agricultural cooperatives)	160,000 (1,120,000)	Yes	10,000
<i>Keidanren/Nikkeiren</i> (Business associations)	160,000 (n.a.)	Yes	n.a.
<i>Jichi shinkô kankei</i> (Local orgs./firemen)	150,000 (800,000)	Yes	20,000
<i>Nihon yakuzai shi renmei</i> (Pharmacists)	150,000 (n.a.)	Yes	n.a.
<i>Nihon shika ishi renmei</i> (Dentists)	100,000 (930,000)	Yes	20,000
<i>Tokiwakai rengôkai</i> (Former JR employees)	90,000 (760,000)	No	70,000
<i>Nihon jidôsha seibi seiji renmei</i> (Auto repair shops)	90,000 (820,000)	No	20,000
<i>Bôei kankei</i> (Former SDF personnel)	70,000 (900,000)	No	1,000
DPJ			
<i>Denryôku sôren</i> (Electricity generation)	250,000 (890,000)	Yes	250,000
<i>Jidosha sôren</i> (Automobile industry)	230,000 (1,100,000)	Yes	740,000
<i>Jichirô</i> (Local public employees)	210,000 140,000 (1,410,000)	Yes Yes (SDP)	1,000,000
<i>Denki rengô</i> (Electronics industry)	200,000 (840,000)	Yes	720,000
<i>Zentsû</i> (Telecommunications industry)	190,000 (-)	Yes	150,000
<i>Nikkyôso</i> (Teachers)	170,000 (660,000)	Yes	340,000

Table 3 *continued*

Support organisation	Number of votes 2001 (1980)	Successful candidacy?	Party members
<i>Zensen dômei</i> (Textile industry)	150,000 (680,000)	No	580,000
JAM (Metals and machinery)	100,000 (-)	No	450,000

Notes:

- 1 In parentheses total number of votes gained by relevant group-supported candidates in the national district 1980. In the case of the DPJ the numbers refer to union candidates put up by the JSP and the DSP.
- 2 All figures are rounded off to the next lower ten thousand digit.
- 3 Until 1980 it was only possible to vote for individual candidates in the national district. A direct comparison of the 1980 and the 2001 results is thus not possible.
- 4 In the 1980 Upper House elections the political arm of the construction industry and the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers' Union endorsed two candidates each. All four were elected.
- 5 The lower figure in the Jichirô column refers to the total of votes gained by both candidates of the union in the 1980 elections.

Source: *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 5 August 2001, p.2.

Sôka gakkai) 20 got elected. Group-supported candidates thus constituted over 40 percent of the successful candidates in the proportional district. If one includes the eight successful list candidates of the (New) *Kômeitô* who were backed by the *Sôka gakkai*, the share of group-supported candidates rises to nearly 60 per cent. It was therefore hardly surprising that shortly after the elections there was talk of the renewed power of the 'organized vote' (see e.g. *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 31 July 2001).

Looking more closely at the election results, however, it becomes clear that the newly introduced open-list system has in fact helped to lay bare the limits of organized voting for individual candidates. If one compares the number of votes for group-supported candidates in the 2001 and the 1980 Upper House election, one finds that many of the candidates in the 2001 election got only around 20 percent of the votes won in the 1980 elections. Even the candidate of the LDP's biggest 'vote-machine', the Postmasters Association, managed to get only 45 percent of the votes his 'predecessor' had gathered in 1980 (see table 3 and *Asahi Shinbun*, 9 August 2001). None of the group-supported candidates of the LDP and the DPJ came even close to the 'magical threshold' of one million votes.²²

In can, of course, be argued that a direct comparison between the 1980 and 2001 election results is not possible since the option of voting for a party did not exist in the old national district. It might therefore be possible that in the 2001 elections an

²² It also has to be borne in mind that the number of eligible voters had increased from around 80 million in 1980 to 100 million in 2001.

unknown number of ‘organized voters’ voted for parties rather than for the candidates of ‘their’ organizations and associations. If this was indeed the case – an issue that further research will hopefully clarify – then the decline in the organized vote would not be as substantial as the above-mentioned figures suggest. If we accept, however, that the primary aim of large interest groups lies in getting their candidates elected, votes for a given party are only of secondary importance (but of course not irrelevant). Moreover, as national organizations and associations knew that only a high number of votes for individual candidates could indicate their current electoral clout, the main emphasis of the interest groups lay in campaigning for their candidates and not for the parties who endorsed them. Seen from this perspective, the significant decline of votes for individual candidates is indeed meaningful and certainly constituted a big disappointment for the national organizations concerned.

Most of the group-supported candidates – on the part of both the LDP and the DPJ – could only garner 100,000 to 250,000 votes. For gaining a seat in the proportional district, however, slightly more than one million votes were necessary in the 2001 Upper House elections. Accordingly most votes were not cast for individual candidates but for the parties themselves. Thus 71 percent of the votes cast for the LDP and its candidates were obtained by the party. In the case of the DPJ, 68 percent of its votes in the proportional district went to the party itself. For the Liberal Party and the JCP the party-vote share was with 86 percent and 94 percent, respectively, even higher. The average share of party votes in the proportional district was 64 percent. Only in the case of the (New) *Kômeitô* there was a different pattern: 77 percent of its total votes in the proportional district was actually cast for the party’s candidates (Hironaka, 2001b). In summary, the fact that many group-supported candidates gained a seat in the last Upper House elections was based more on the popularity of the political parties themselves. The success of group-supported candidates to get elected thus hinged mainly on the ability of these groups to get their candidates endorsed by the parties.

The election results of their individual candidates were also closely scrutinized by the political parties. A first lesson drawn from the Upper House elections is that the use of celebrities does not automatically guarantee good results. While for example a professor-cum-commentator and a former TV anchorman obtained the best results for the SDP and the DPJ, many other celebrity candidates failed to gain a seat. In contrast to Upper House elections until 1980, no TV personality managed to come close to one million votes. A second lesson from the Upper House elections derives from the remarkable vote pattern of the (New) *Kômeitô*. Even though the Party gathered ‘only’ 8.2 million instead of the targeted 10 million votes, the (New) *Kômeitô* managed to concentrate its votes on eight particular candidates by means of dividing vote-mobilization activities along regional lines. None of these eight candidates gained less than 660,000 votes while the next-placed (New) *Kômeitô* candidate got only 10,000 votes. It seems to have paid off for the party that campaigning in the different regions centered only around one candidate. Thus it

was easier for voters to remember the name of this particular candidate (Hironaka, 2001b).²³ In view of the great demands that nationwide campaigns place on candidates and funding, all parties will have to consider whether it makes more sense to coordinate vote mobilization along regional lines.

Apart from the these lessons common to all parties, there have also been different reactions to the election results of group-supported candidates. It is clear that both the LDP and the DPJ were disappointed about the meager results of their particular candidates. But first reactions after the elections pointed in different directions: while the LDP seems likely to continue to put much weight on the cooperation with national interest groups, the leadership of the DPJ might reconsider the party's links with the unions. For example, some LDP politicians suggested that preparations for future Upper House elections would only have to be started at an earlier date in order to tap the 'real' vote-mobilization potential of large national groups (Hironaka, 2001b; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 5 August 2001). Countering criticism from within the party about the nomination process of Upper House candidates, members of the 'old guard' of the LDP such as former secretary general Nonaka Hiromu were also at pains to emphasize the importance of having special interests groups represented in the Diet (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 26 September 2001; *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 January 2002). It might be suggested that parts of the LDP do not want to abandon national interests groups because these groups are still of great importance in terms of financial support for a significant number of Diet members.²⁴

Things seem to be different for the DPJ. Hatoyama Yukio and other leaders of the party have been worried for some time about what they perceive as an 'excessive' reliance of the party on the unions. The line of thought of Hatoyama and others is as follows: if the DPJ wants to present itself as a genuine alternative to the governing LDP, the party must loosen its links with the unions in terms of campaigning, if not policy. In short, the party (which numbers only around 300,000 members) needs a solid organization in order to gain a firm basis for nationwide support. Solely relying on *Rengô*, the DPJ can hardly win elections. In the 2001 Upper House elections, the total number of votes by the eight union-backed candidates totaled 1.55 million, i.e. just seven percent of the nine million votes the DPJ obtained in the proportional district. According to Hatoyama, the election results signal that it makes more sense to campaign for individual candidates in given regions than to put one's faith in union-supported candidates (Hironaka, 2001c; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 5 August 2001, 17 January 2002). The big question, however, is whether the party circles around

²³ In addition it was noted that two successful LDP candidates in the proportional district gained half their votes in their respective home prefectures.

²⁴ Another development in the LDP is worth to be noted in passing. Apparently, the introduction of the voting system has indirectly led to a substantial decline in the number of LDP party members: according to some estimates the party membership which stood at 2.4 million at the end of 2000 dropped by some 40 percent in 2001. This drop seems to be due to the fact that candidates in the proportional district of the Upper House no longer have to recruit large numbers of party members (cf. *Asahi Shimbun*, 16 January 2002).

Hatoyama can prevail with their views against the union-oriented former Social Democrats within the party.²⁵

Conclusions

The 2001 Upper House elections were a litmus test for the vote-mobilization abilities of large interest groups. In addition to celebrities, most parties fielded a large number of candidates who were either representatives of national organizations and associations, or former bureaucrats with various interest groups behind them. In the end, most candidates in the proportional district who were backed by large interest groups gained a seat in the Upper House. However, the election results were sobering for both for the parties and the organizations supporting them. None of the interest groups was able to mobilize as many votes for individual candidates as it had done in the old national district. In this sense, the thesis about the declining vote-mobilization ability of large interest groups has received further backing.

Even though the 2001 Upper House election were influenced by special factors – most notably the famous ‘Koizumi boom’²⁶ – general lessons can still be drawn. First, expectations *vis-à-vis* the parties’ organizational support have to be lowered. The power of the ‘organized vote’ seems to have passed its highest point. Second, the elections have also shown that the use of celebrities as candidates does not guarantee a high number of votes. Third, the elections have signaled that it can pay off to coordinate the campaigning for list candidates along regional lines.

What consequences the results of the 2001 Upper House elections will have for the electoral cooperation between individual parties and large interest groups remains to be seen. On the one hand, reliance on such organizations and associations continues to offer at least a certain pool of votes. This can be of great importance in times of low voter turnouts. On the other hand, vote mobilization by large interest groups can be no substitute for other linkages between political parties and voters. Moreover, there is the danger that policy concessions to particular interest groups might deter other, increasingly important voter groups from voting for the parties concerned. At least the leadership of the DPJ seems to have understood these dilemmas. Whether and, if so, what kind of consequences will be drawn from this, however, seems to be primarily a question of intra-party power arithmetic.

²⁵ The unions and their backers in the party have argued that the DPJ will become subject to the whims of swing voters if it neglects its organized supporters. On the controversies surrounding the direction of campaign activities see e.g. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 6, 20, 21 August 2001.

²⁶ It is not quite clear yet how the unprecedented approval rates for the prime minister – hovering between 70 and 80 percent in 2001 – translated into electoral backing for the LDP. According to regular polls by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, the support rate for the LDP rebounded from 31 percent in the last months of the premiership of Mori Yoshirō to an astounding 51 percent in September 2001 (cf. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 27 November 2001). Post-election polls undertaken by the *Asahi Shimbun* after the Lower House elections of June 2000 and the Upper House elections of July 2001 indicate that in particular uncommitted voters, mostly young people, urbanites, and women, were drawn to the LDP as a consequence of the ‘Koizumi boom’ (cf. *Asahi Shimbun*, 17 December 2001).

Finally a last word on the new electoral system for the proportional district of the Upper House. Ironically, this system – just as the preceding one – was based on claims about more party-centered elections, less collusive links between individual candidates and interest groups and a reduced importance of the 'money factor' for candidacies. At least during the first elections under the new system, these claims did not hold up to reality. Close links between national interest groups and individual candidates (in the case of the LDP also individual factions) remained important. The involvement of national interest groups in the elections was again a significant factor underlying vote-mobilization activities bordering on the illegal and the huge amounts of money spent on individual campaigns. If, however, the visible decline in the vote mobilization for group-supported candidates leads to reduced electoral cooperation between political parties and large interest groups in the future, the claims underlying the new electoral system might still receive some vindication. Future Upper House elections will provide further indications about how Japanese parties adjust to the new electoral system.

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