

The Electoral System and Japan's Partial Transformation: Party System Consolidation Without Policy Realignment

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*Japan's electoral system, which emphasizes first-past-the-post, single-member district rules, has led the country's party system to become consolidated around the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). At the same time, Japan's electoral rules also made it likely that the two parties would not differ markedly in their policy positions, as well as hinder the emergence of new partisan alignments that could offer more clearly distinct policy options. Put differently, Japan's electoral rules have encouraged the development of what is essentially a two-party system, but one in which party alternation in power need not produce sharp policy change. **KEYWORDS:** electoral systems, Japan, policy change, party realignment, party alternation in power, reform, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Downs, Duverger*

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, JAPANESE POLITICS HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED—but in a way that remains unsatisfying to a significant portion of the Japanese public that yearns for bold policy change. Once a party system dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) with only awkward opposition from a fragmented group of challengers, Japan now approximates a two-party system where party alternation is possible in any given election. Indeed, for the first time since its formation in 1955, the LDP lost its position as the largest party in Japan's House of Representatives (HR) when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) overwhelmingly won the 2009 election. Nevertheless, as highlighted in the article introducing this issue (Lipsy and Scheiner 2012) and in the specific article on transportation policy (Lipsy 2012), despite the transformation of the party system and three years of non-LDP government, the DPJ has not instituted a major shift away from the policies of the LDP.

I argue that the electoral system governing elections to the HR not only has played a significant part in promoting the transformation of the party system, but also has helped limit the impact on policy of these partisan changes. Japan's now defunct single nontransferable vote (SNTV) system in the HR had helped keep Japan's opposition parties fragmented. But the country's post-1993 electoral system—a “mixed-member majoritarian” (MMM) system, which focuses especially on first-past-the-post (FPTP), single-member district (SMD) rules—has helped the opposition come together around a single party. I highlight how the FPTP rules have led to a consolidated party system in which electoral competition in each district now tends to be between two principal candidates, and with those two candidates usually representing the LDP and DPJ. Moreover, the considerable power held by the central government in Japan, along with shifts in policy and campaign behavior by both the LDP and DPJ, has meant that the leading parties are nationalized parties (see McElwain 2012), genuinely competing throughout most of the country.

I also highlight two important reasons—related to the electoral system itself—that the new rules did not quickly push the DPJ to promote major policy change. First, Japan's SMD system did in fact appear to promote party efforts to make policy appeals to the Japanese median voter (see Rosenbluth and Thies 2010) as expected by the classic work of Anthony Downs (1957), but these efforts actually have made it likely that elections would be decided by “valence” issues rather than policy positions. More specifically, as I show in this article, LDP and DPJ candidates who compete in a given SMD are likely to converge in the policy appeals that they make to their constituents. However, this convergence actually has made it difficult for voters to distinguish between the two candidates/parties on policy. As a result, just as has been the case in other countries that use FPTP, such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the Downsian convergence has meant that since 2005, elections in Japan have centered not on policy positions, but rather on general notions of “party image”—including voters' sense of which party is most competent or most oriented toward reform (Reed, Scheiner, and Thies 2012).

Second, I argue that Japan's electoral system—especially the emphasis on plurality rules—has further restricted greater policy change by creating disincentives for partisan realignments that would promote both greater policy coherence within parties and differentiation between the leading parties. FPTP rules help permit variation in policy positions across the different politicians within any given party. Not surprisingly, therefore, in Japan many politicians within the two major parties share policy views more in line with members of the other party than with

members of their own. Nevertheless, Japan's electoral rules create significant electoral risks for politicians who might wish to switch parties. As a result, the electoral system need not promote a new, more ideologically coherent, partisan alignment that would promote significant differences between the leading parties and, in turn, greater policy change when there is party alternation in power.

Japan's MMM Electoral System and What Effects We Might Expect from It

Classic work by Maurice Duverger (1954) and Anthony Downs (1957) gives us good reason to expect Japan's MMM electoral system to produce two-party competition focused on policy programs and then, in turn, promote policy change when party alternation in power occurs. To be sure, the rules are well designed to lead to two large parties. However, the system is not necessarily well set up to bring about significant policy change when new governments come into power.

Theoretical Expectations About Two-Party Politics

The electoral system that is used to elect members of Japan's House of Representatives does offer some opportunities for the promotion of a multiparty system, but the strongest elements of the system promote relatively stable two-party politics.

In 1994, Japan enacted legislation to use the MMM electoral system to conduct House of Representatives elections. First used in 1996, the system gives voters two ballots for elections to the HR—one for a candidate in a first-past-the-post SMD and one for a party in proportional representation (PR). In Japan, the overwhelming share of seats—300 out of the 480 total—are allocated through the SMD tier.

The PR portion of Japan's electoral system creates some opportunities for a multiparty system to emerge in Japan, but it also introduces some constraints on party proliferation. PR rules tend to be "permissive"—they allow even parties that receive a small share of the vote to win seats. In this way, it is possible for even small parties such as Komeito and the Japan Communist Party (JCP) to win seats. At the same time, though, the lower the district magnitude—that is, the number of seats allocated within a given district—the less permissive an electoral system will be. Japan's 180 PR seats are divided into eleven blocs. PR blocs such as Kinki, which has twenty-nine seats, certainly promote party proliferation through the low vote share needed for representation, but five blocs have fewer than fifteen seats. The smallest, Shikoku with only six seats,

requires a substantially larger share of the vote and therefore reduces competition down to a small number of parties that will win seats.

Meanwhile, the SMD tier of Japan's system creates significant incentives for a two-party system. Perhaps the best-known theory within political science is Duverger's Law (Duverger 1954), which holds that FPTP systems tend toward two viable parties. Over the years, the law became more precise, arguing that FPTP systems tend to be capped at two parties per district (Cox 1997). The logic of the theory is that, since only candidates that win many votes can win under FPTP rules, voters and elites who prefer small parties will strategically transfer their support to a potentially competitive option. With SMDs being winner-take-all contests, this strategic winnowing-down process should continue until there are only two candidates: Candidate #1 (the ultimate winner) and Candidate #2, upon whom all those opposed to Candidate #1 strategically pin their hopes. The lack of information over who the top contestants are makes it likely that there will be more contestants in the initial election under FPTP rules, but as a result of learning and strategic behavior, over time the system should come to focus on no more than two candidates per district (especially in socially homogeneous societies).

In theory, the simultaneous existence of a PR vote may lead more parties to compete in SMDs in Japan, but there is only weak evidence to support such a point. Scholars such as Federico Ferrara, Erik Herron, and Misa Nishikawa (2005) argue that mixed systems like Japan's lead to a "contamination" effect:¹ weak parties continue to run candidates in SMDs in an effort to drum up votes for the party in PR. However, sophisticated analysis of vote patterns in Japan by Ko Maeda (2008) finds no support for this contamination argument. Moreover, cross-national analysis (Moser and Scheiner 2012, chap. 2; Singer, forthcoming) demonstrates no statistically discernible difference in the number of parties contesting elections under FPTP rules in MMM systems and in "pure" FPTP systems (although it is difficult to imagine that there is not at least some degree of influence of each tier on the other in mixed-member systems).

Another feature of Japan's political system makes it likely that the district two-party competition becomes projected across the country, thus leading to two major *national* parties. In some countries, such as Canada, significant federalism allows for regionally based parties, which makes it possible for different parties to win FPTP seats around the country and could lead to a larger number of parties overall. However, other contexts promote the projection of district-level two-party competition to a national two-party system. Where there is a plurality-elected national presidency, elites in different districts will have a strong incentive to

coordinate in an effort to win the national presidency (Cox 1997). A similar incentive exists in countries like Japan in which government power is centralized (Chhibber and Kollman 1998, 2004).² In such systems, voters and elites in districts around the country have an incentive to join together with like-minded voters and elites in other districts to try to create a national majority party that can control the central government that makes the key policymaking decisions for most of the country. In this way, each of the two principal parties in each district is likely to join forces with one of the parties in each of the other districts in the country to try to gain the majority of seats necessary to control the powerful central government. Under such a scenario, it is likely that the same two parties will become the two leading contenders in most districts across the country.

In short, Japan's electoral system is well designed to elect a few parties under its PR rules, but the incentives generated by the SMD portion of the system should help lead to the consolidation of the party system largely around two principal parties.

Theoretical Expectations About Policy-based Elections

The switch to MMM was expected to promote greater competition over policy ideas between parties. The SNTV electoral system—which contained multiple seats per district and allowed candidates to win seats with a fairly small share of the vote—had forced large parties to permit significant intraparty competition between their candidates, and elections therefore hinged in large part on personal differences between candidates (especially within the LDP). In contrast, the PR component of MMM ought to promote more “issue”-oriented politics by creating a vote for political parties rather than for individuals. Moreover, the first-past-the-post component of MMM usually means that candidates need a large share of the vote in order to win an SMD and therefore gives candidates an incentive to appeal broadly within the district. The classic work of Downs (1957) leads us to expect that candidates will present centrist policy appeals designed to attract the support of the median voter in order to gain the majority of the vote needed to win in this FPTP setting.

Nevertheless, even if FPTP candidates seek to appeal to voters in a Downsian fashion, government policy need not necessarily reflect significant differences between parties. To begin with, when candidates converge on ideology, voters need to use other criteria, such as attention to valence issues—for example, the relative experience (quality) of the candidates, images of party competence, or views of the parties as agents of change—to make their vote decisions (Downs 1957, 44, 136).

It should not be surprising to find that valence-based voting is common in FPTP systems. In the United States, where primary elections (which determine party nominees) lead to more candidate-centered politics, voters tend to emphasize candidates' experience or quality in making their vote decision when candidates converge ideologically (Buttice and Stone, forthcoming). And voters' perceptions of party image, especially views of parties' relative competence, have become the center of elections when party issue positions converge in the more party-centered cases of the UK (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009; Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008) and New Zealand (Vowles 2009). As such, FPTP rules need not necessarily lead to significant differences between parties on the issues, and elections may therefore become about convincing voters regarding the relative valence qualifications of the different options. In these scenarios, with few significant policy differences between the leading parties, there is no reason to expect major policy change to accompany party alternation in power.

*Theoretical Expectations About Parties'
Ideological Consistency and Partisan Realignment*

In addition, FPTP does not require consistency across all members of a party, and different seat holders within a party may not hew to the same positions. If anything, the presence of multiple districts that use plurality rules allows parties to offer different signals about ideological stances, which in turn makes it harder for voters to identify parties' true positions (Aldrich, Dorabantu, and Fernández 2009). Parties frequently put forward national policy manifestos, but they need not match the positions of the individual candidates. As a result, there can be substantial variation in the policy positions across the different candidates and incumbent politicians within parties under FPTP, thus potentially hindering the ability of parties to stake out bold new policy positions.

Moreover, FPTP systems present obstacles to overcoming ideological diversity of this kind across a given party's candidates. First, FPTP makes it much more difficult to create new parties that might help realign the party system around more coherent policy positions by each party. The district-level logic involved in Duverger's Law and its projection to the national level imply stability in the two principal parties that contest elections in specific districts and across the country. Once a two-party system is established—whether within a given FPTP district or across the country in an FPTP system where government power is heavily centralized—the party system will be in a state of equilibrium that is difficult to alter. Voters and elites have little incentive to support a third party within most

districts. Within the district, drawing support away from one of the two main alternatives would likely lead to a spoiler effect, whereby the third-party candidate does not win enough support to take the seat but does shift enough votes away from another candidate so that the latter loses as well. Such an outcome would be the worst option for many voters and elites who then see their least favorite candidate elected as a result. Also, even if the third-party candidate is able to win enough votes to take the district seat, that single seat is unlikely to help a third party gain control over the national government. As a result, unless the third-party candidate becomes part of a national party coalition, the district would be left with a representative who is unlikely to be a major player in national policymaking. For these reasons, once the two-party system is established, it would take extraordinary circumstances for other parties to overcome the central position held by the two leading parties.

Second, FPTP systems create strong electoral incentives for incumbents not to leave one of the two leading parties (even if to join the other). To begin with, incumbents from the majority party should be less likely to leave the party because of the risk of losing access to the advantages of power—including, potentially, control over the government budget. Moreover, switching parties can create problems for incumbent politicians, since many voters may have supported them previously because of their party affiliation, and the politicians' previous party may marshal its resources to defeat any switchers from the party in the next election. Party switching is not common in most systems but has been especially widespread under Brazil's open-list PR system, which has promoted generally weaker partisan ties and a highly personalistic relationship between voters and politicians (Desposato 2006). Especially where party primaries are not used to select party nominees for office, FPTP systems tend to create incentives for less personalistic politics (Carey and Shugart 1995). Not surprisingly, then, party switching tends to be extremely uncommon in systems that use FPTP rules,³ with the largest amount of party switching among FPTP systems occurring in Canada (O'Brien and Shomer, 2012),⁴ where the heavily federal system creates weaker incentives for politicians to affiliate with parties that are strong in the national government (Scheiner 2006).

Japan's MMM rules may make party switching even more unlikely. In Japan, candidates can run in both an SMD and on a party list. In many cases, candidates lose the SMD race but then win office through PR, leaving a large number of districts represented by both an SMD incumbent and a PR incumbent. In these cases, an incumbent who wanted to leave his or her party even for policy reasons would face problems join-

ing the other major party, since it would already have an incumbent within that district.

In sum, parties under FPTP rules may contain politicians with significantly different policy positions, and Japan's MMM rules create disincentives for new party creation and switching that might otherwise "correct" policy differences between politicians within the major parties. With less consistent policy positions across the politicians within each party, it becomes less likely that Japan's parties will make dramatic policy shifts away from the status quo—especially since there may even be similarities across parties in the policy positions of many of their incumbents.

MMM, Japan's Two-plus Party System, and Policy Convergence Without Differentiation

In fact, the electoral system has led to a two-plus party system in Japan, but the system has not promoted significant policy change with the DPJ's entry into the government. As expected by the work of Downs (1957), candidates within SMDs have converged on policy, and elections have come to be decided by valence considerations. As a result, there has not been major policy differentiation between the parties that could promote greater policy change with party alternation.

The New Two-plus Party System

Many Japanese had hoped that the new system would quickly bring an end to the LDP's dominance of the House of Representatives and that there would be a decline in the clientelistic politics that was common among many LDP politicians. The fact that the LDP continued to control the HR until 2009 and clientelism continued to play front and center in Japanese politics led many observers to be gravely disappointed by the reforms (Scheiner 2008; Scheiner and Tronconi 2011). Nevertheless, the new system actually changed Japanese party politics in precisely the way it should have—most notably, shaping the number of parties in the country in the ways that the electoral system literature would predict. The PR component of the system has helped keep a few small parties afloat, but the FPTP rules (combined with the fact that the central government is the primary policy mover) has led to what is largely a consolidated two-party system.

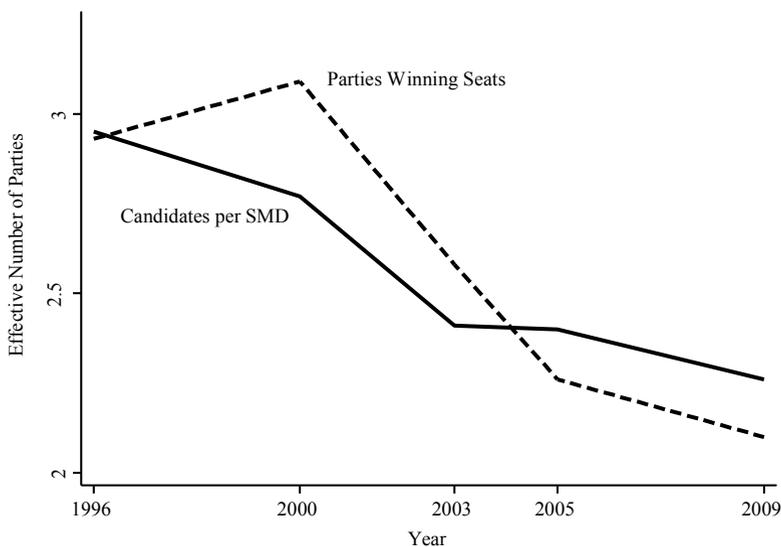
PR has played an important part in supporting the survival of a number of parties in Japan. Parties like Komeito, the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ), and the Communists, who had been a part of Japanese politics for years, and new ones such as Your Party (Minna no To) gained more seats under PR than they did under SMDs.⁵ The Laakso-Taagepera index of the effective number of parties is the most commonly used

measure of party fragmentation that takes into account the different shares of votes or seats won by each party (Laakso and Taagepera 1979).⁶ In each election under the HR mixed system in Japan, the effective number of parties score (measured by either votes or seats won by parties) in PR has been at least 3.0.

Nevertheless, as highlighted most clearly by Steven Reed (2005), the incentives created by the SMD tier of the system have played perhaps the dominant role in shaping the number of parties—principally in ways expected by the electoral system literature. As Figure 1 shows, SMDs did not lead immediately to a two-party outcome. In 1996, the average (i.e., mean for all districts) effective number of candidates score (measured by votes) was nearly 3.0. This substantial number of parties in SMDs is not surprising, in part because it was the initial election under a new electoral system that voters and elites were still learning to navigate. Moreover, the party system was very much in flux in 1996, as the opposition was divided principally between the DPJ and the then much larger New Frontier Party (NFP).

A key part of the logic behind Duverger's Law and the idea of two viable candidates per district is that voters and elites will turn away from

Figure 1 Number of Parties per Year: Mean Effective Number of Candidates per SMD and Effective Number of Parties (based on each party's share of SMD and PR seats)



candidates in third or worse place, but Japan's first election under its new system in 1996 showed no signs of such behavior. Gary Cox's (1997) analysis highlights "SF-ratios" as an opportunity to analyze strategic behavior. In districts under FPTP rules, the Second loser is the third-place candidate and the First loser is the second-place candidate. Where there is significant strategic behavior consistent with Duverger's Law, few votes will go to the third-place candidate (second loser) relative to the second-place candidate (first loser), and the SF-ratio in a district will be roughly zero. Figure 2 presents histograms that indicate the distribution of SF-ratios in SMDs across Japan in each election under the mixed system. As the figure shows, in 1996 there did not appear to be much Duvergerian strategic behavior: very few districts had SF-ratios near zero.

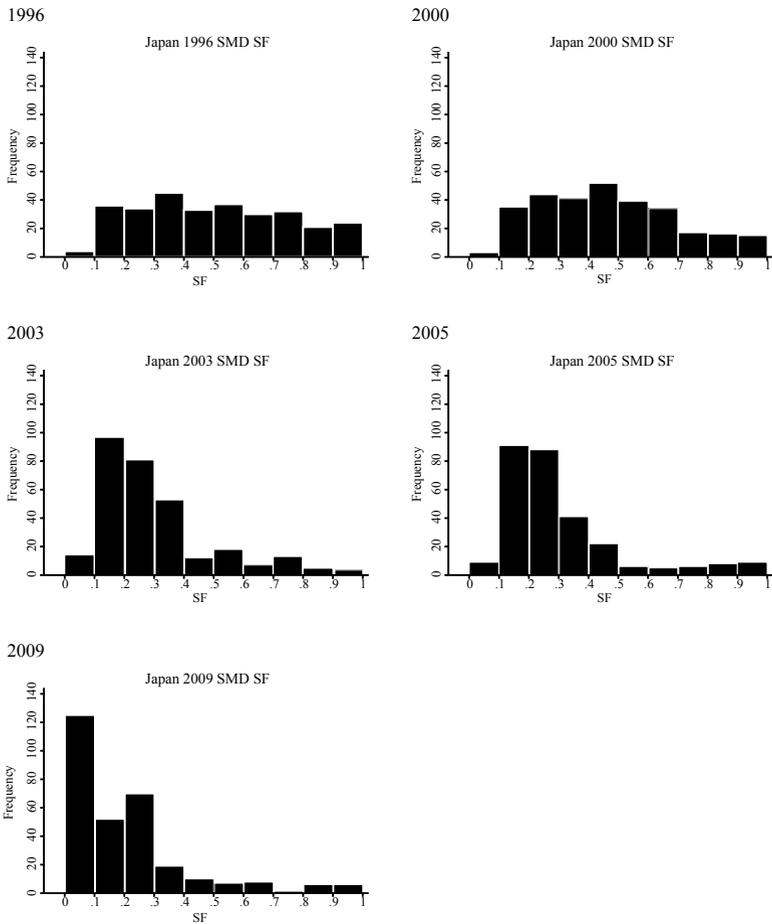
However, once the opposition consolidated around the DPJ in 2000, Japan's party system increasingly matched the expectations of Duverger's Law. In each election, a larger number of SMDs developed very low SF-ratios, thus indicating greater strategic behavior by voters and elites (see Figure 2). In addition, the average effective number of candidates dropped in each election (see Figure 1). By 2009, a majority of SMDs had quite low SF-ratios, and the average effective number of candidates score for the 300 SMDs was 2.26. The 2.26 figure is lower than the average effective number of candidates in most pure FPTP systems outside the United States (Moser and Scheiner 2012, chap. 2).

Two Nationalized Parties

Moreover, the district-level two-party system has become nationalized. In the first election under the mixed system, the effective number of parties winning seats of any kind across the country was nearly 3.0 (see Figure 1). That number even increased in 2000, as the NFP had splintered. However, from that point on, the number of parties winning seats in Japan dropped dramatically in each election. Even including PR seats won by each party, by 2009 the effective number of parties score (measured by parties' share of all seats) was a mere 2.1.

Accompanying (and possibly helping cause) the shift in the number of parties was a change in what drove district-level electoral success in Japan. Prior to 2005, perhaps the leading predictor of whether a candidate would win a given SMD was the political experience of the candidate: incumbents and new candidates with substantial experience in political office were more likely to win an SMD race than less experienced candidates (Reed, Scheiner, and Thies 2012; Scheiner 2006). However, beginning in 2005, candidates' party affiliation became at least as important a predictor of SMD success (Reed, Scheiner, and Thies 2012).

Figure 2 Histograms of SF-Ratios in SMDs



Note: SF-ratio = The (district-level) third-place vote divided by the second-place vote.

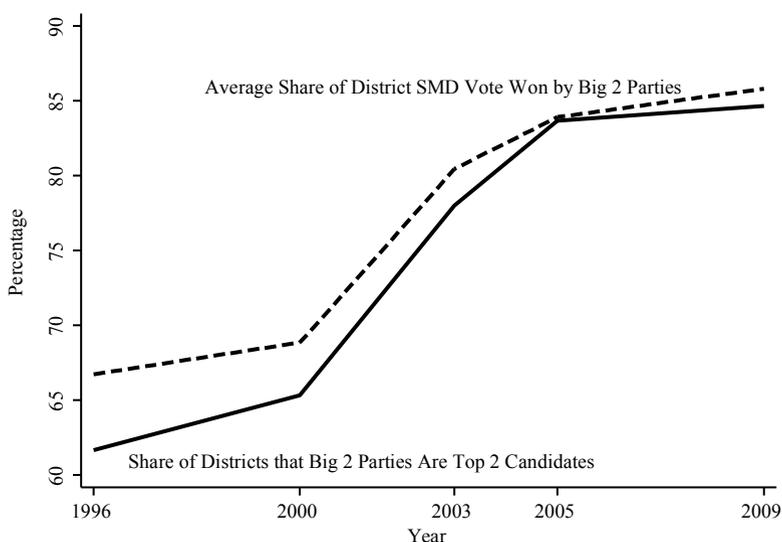
Probably the best predictor of an SMD victory in 2005 was if the candidate was a member of the LDP, and in 2009 it was if the candidate was a member of the DPJ.

This shift was undoubtedly due in part to moves by the leading parties to respond to the incentives created by both the FPTP system and the centralized government structure. The shift was also very much a re-

sult of LDP prime minister Koizumi's efforts in the 2005 election to focus politics nationally on himself and his own proposed reforms, thus increasing the nationalization of electoral politics. Whatever the reason, though, there were big vote swings across much of the country to LDP candidates in 2005 and to DPJ candidates in 2009.

In the process, the party system clearly came to focus on only two specific parties—the LDP and DPJ—and their candidates across the country's SMDs. Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of all SMDs in the country in which the top two candidates in the district were both from the "Big 2" parties—that is, the LDP and NFP in 1996 and the LDP and DPJ in later years. The figure also illustrates the average share of each SMD's vote that was for candidates from the Big 2 parties. As Figure 3 shows, there was a marked increase over time in the focus of the system on the Big 2 parties. In 1996, only in 185 SMDs were the top two candidates from the Big 2 parties, and Big 2 party candidates won on average only 67 percent of the SMD vote. However, the concentration of SMD competition on the LDP and DPJ increased substantially over time, especially once Ichiro Ozawa's Liberal Party merged with the DPJ in 2003. By 2009, the LDP and DPJ took first and second place in 254 out of Japan's 300 SMDs and accounted for, on average, 86 percent of the SMD vote.⁷

Figure 3 Dominance of the Big 2 Parties in SMDs (LDP and NFP in 1996, LDP and DPJ, 2000–2009)



Moreover, there was good strategic reason—consistent with district-level Duvergerian analysis—for many of the cases in which the Big 2 parties did not take both of the top two places in the SMD race: voters and elites ought only to remove their support from a candidate who is unlikely to do well. Incumbents are especially likely to be successful and so ought to be especially likely to retain support, even if not from one of the top two parties. In a significant share of districts in which candidates outside the LDP and DPJ were among the top two competitors, the non-Big 2 party candidate was the incumbent within the SMD. Out of all the districts in which the LDP and DPJ did not grab the top two spots, a non-Big 2 party candidate was the incumbent in 39 percent of districts in 2000, 30 percent in 2003, 69 percent in 2005, and 35 percent in 2009.⁸ Indeed, this entire discussion of the nationalization of Japan's leading parties is consistent with the findings presented in this issue by Kenneth McElwain, who shows that Japan's national parties gained importance after reform and the vote in each district swings in line with the vote in other districts across the country (McElwain 2012).

*Convergence—but Also Greater
Emphasis on Party “Image”*

As expected by the first analyses of the new system (see especially Reed and Thies 2001), the FPTP system does seem to have encouraged campaign appeals designed to attract the median voter on issues, and candidates do appear to have responded to the incentives from FPTP to converge on policy. However, convergence under FPTP appears to have led voters to make their vote choice on the basis of valence considerations—most notably, the “image” of the parties.

There are mixed views on whether more issue-based politics have accompanied the introduction of the new electoral system. Shigeo Hirano (2006) demonstrates convincingly that the new rules led candidates to broaden their campaign appeals beyond just a small geographically based constituency, but the most common view is that this broader-based campaigning has not been more issue-oriented (see Steel 2008). However, it seems certain that the reduced intraparty competition under the new electoral system encouraged parties to put forward more coherent official party policy manifestos, which the DPJ did in 2003, with the LDP immediately following suit. In addition, Sherry Martin (2011) argues that there has become greater party competition over issues of security and defense, and Frances Rosenbluth and Michael Thies (2010) argue that the LDP and DPJ both use issues to appeal to the median voter, especially in the area of political economy.

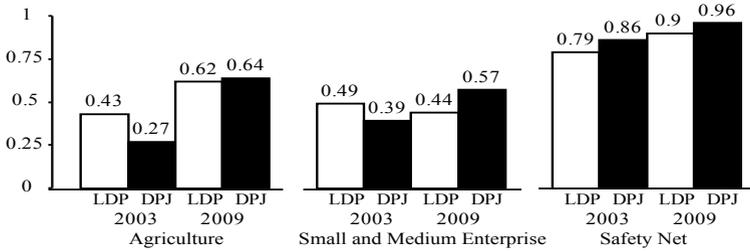
Most analyses examine differences in the appeals made in party manifestos and general party statements, but FPTP affects district-level candidates most directly, and we can analyze the types of appeals individual candidates make. Japan has an excellent source of data for the analysis of legislative candidates' electoral appeals: at the beginning of the twelve-day campaign period for each HR election, all SMD candidates are allocated advertisement space to present their individual platform (*senkyo koho*) in a publicly funded newspaper within their districts. Along with my collaborators Jed Kawasumi and James Adams, I have coded the issues that individual FPTP candidates from the LDP and DPJ discussed in these platforms in the 2003 and 2009 electoral campaigns (Adams, Kawasumi, and Scheiner 2010). We create a series of dichotomous dummy variables indicating, for each of a large number of specific policy areas, whether the candidate took a specific position.

Because we do not have data on the SNTV period, we cannot make statements about how the change in electoral rules affected campaigning, but with data from the two elections we can suggest how campaigning changed over time under the FPTP rules and the consolidation of the party system around two parties. To begin with, we find a sharp increase from 2003 to 2009 in the proportion of candidates from both parties who took specific positions on policies. In 2003, only 69 percent of all candidates made specific issue appeals in at least one policy area, but the number jumped to 85 percent in 2009. Moreover, position taking increased for *both* major parties—going from 82 to 90 percent of DPJ candidates, and from 56 to 82 percent of LDP candidates.

Voters and parties alike became greatly concerned about the effects of the weakened economy on potentially vulnerable groups, and large numbers of candidates made specific policy proposals in these areas.⁹ As Figure 4 indicates, overall there was a substantial increase in the proportion of candidates mentioning specific policies to promote agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the economic safety net.¹⁰

However, even more striking is the convergence of candidates on these issues over time. As Figure 5 shows, there was a big jump between 2003 and 2005 in the number of districts in which candidates from both the LDP and DPJ mentioned specific policy positions: Candidates from both parties mentioned specific positions in the area of agriculture in 36 percent of districts in 2003, and in 58 percent of districts in 2009. On SME policy, there was a jump from 26 to 40 percent; and on safety net issues, there was a jump from 70 to 87 percent of all districts in which both candidates took specific positions. To be sure, the data do not permit us to recognize differences in the positions taken by the candidates,

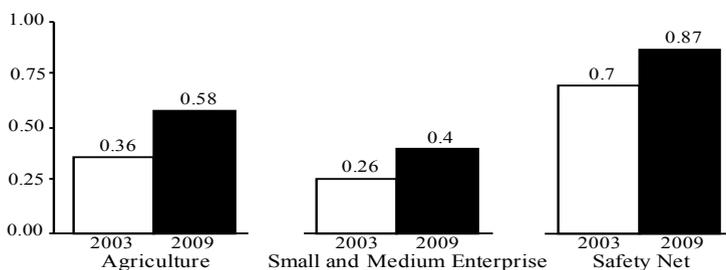
Figure 4 Proportion of Candidates in Each Party Mentioning Certain Key Issues in Their Campaign Platforms (by party, by year)



but the key point here is that over time under the new electoral system, candidates appeared to be more likely to state their issue positions openly and stated positions that were at least roughly similar to those of their district opponent on a number of different policy areas.

What is equally noteworthy, as candidates came to highlight issue positions and converge on them, there was a shift in what determined victory in FPTP races. During the earlier years of elections under Japan’s MMM system—such as 2003, when candidates were less likely to highlight their policy positions in their campaign platforms—the most important determinant of electoral success by candidates in FPTP elections was a valence consideration related to the candidates—that is, how politically experienced the candidates were (Reed, Scheiner, and Thies 2012). However, once parties became nationalized—partly a result of the FPTP system—elections were no longer first and foremost about individual district candidates. Parties converged on their issue positions, as did candidates facing each other in most districts, but elections did not seem to become about parties’ relative policy positions. Instead, with nationalized parties and district candidates who largely shared issue positions with one another, voters’ valence concerns with respect to the parties—in particular, a sense of which party was most committed and competent to address reform (Rosenbluth and Thies 2010)—drove electoral outcomes in 2005 and 2009.

The 2005 election became a referendum on LDP prime minister Koizumi’s reform agenda. In 2009, the LDP lost all credibility to handle either reform or the economy, and the DPJ successfully took up the mantle of reform. Interestingly, as highlighted by Alisa Gaunder’s analysis in this issue, the LDP in 2005 and the DPJ in 2009 were able to use their

Figure 5 Proportion of Districts Mentioning a Specific Issue in Which Both an LDP and a DPJ Candidate Discuss the Issue

support for female candidates as evidence of their reform bona fides (Gauder 2012). The result of all these changes was that, beginning in 2005, the personal qualities of individual candidates mattered far less in shaping victory in FPTP races. Instead, and much like elections in FPTP systems like those of the United Kingdom and New Zealand, party image became the key to candidate success: irrespective of individual candidates' political experience, LDP candidates were more likely to win FPTP races in 2005, and DPJ candidates were more likely to win in 2009 (Reed, Scheiner, and Thies 2012).

This new emphasis on party image made party alternation in power more likely, but the lack of differences in the parties' issue positions made it less likely that party alternation in power would actually produce markedly new policies.

Intraparty Divisions and the Impediments to Party Realignment

There are divisions within the LDP and DPJ, and many observers and politicians have hoped and expected to see new party switches and party realignment that could create more ideologically coherent parties (Sato 2011). The hope has been that new parties emerging through a realignment based on shared ideology would promote their significant policy differences. With such realignment, significant policy change would be more likely to occur in conjunction with party alternation in power.

Nevertheless, even despite intraparty divisions within the DPJ, during the party's first three years in power, incumbents were generally reluc-

tant to jump ship from the new ruling party. Especially given the unpredictability of individual politicians—such as the DPJ’s former president Ichiro Ozawa, who, in July 2012, left the DPJ with nearly forty of his supporters in the House of Representatives (and a dozen supporters in the House of Councillors)—it is certainly not outside the realm of possibility that major splits could occur in either the LDP or DPJ, thus leading to significant party realignment. However, Japan’s FPTP system—especially in conjunction with the dual candidacy rules used in Japan’s MMM system—produces disincentives for politicians considering leaving the two leading parties. In these ways, although major changes are possible, the FPTP system creates significant obstacles to successful party realignment. It is, of course, possible that larger numbers of sitting politicians could leave their parties despite these disincentives, but typically their chances of success would be relatively small.

In this section, I highlight divisions that have emerged within the LDP and DPJ and indicate significant obstacles that Japan’s electoral rules place in the way of party realignment—whether realignment through the birth of entirely new, relatively large parties or from significant splits in the two major parties—that might otherwise create greater internal party coherence.

Divisions Within the Parties

Scholars such as T. J. Pempel (1998) have long expected significant policy changes to emerge in Japan because of the divide that has grown within the LDP between politicians who represent the interests of urban residents and competitive sectors of the economy on one side, and rural residents and weaker sectors of the economy on the other. In addition, there was a widely held view that the DPJ was a mishmash of largely incompatible groups, put together only for the sake of trying to win elections (Scheiner 2006, chap. 9), and that it remained internally divided even after victory in 2009 (Pempel 2010). Indeed, the view of many was that “conservative” members of the DPJ actually had more in common with the LDP than with the rest of the DPJ (Scheiner 2006, chap. 9), and that politicians like Koizumi in the LDP had more in common with the DPJ than with many in the longtime ruling party. As John Aldrich, Sinziana Dorabantu, and Marco Antonio Fernández (2009) suggest, plurality rules help permit greater variation within parties, because seat holders are ultimately chosen by voters in their local constituency. In this way, divisions within the LDP and DPJ are likely to remain for some time.

In fact, as the DPJ came to represent a more diverse set of districts—because of its recent success in gaining rural seats in 2007 (House of Coun-

cillors) and 2009 (House of Representatives)—the new ruling party faced conflicting pressures from its seat holders over its policy programs. Most notably, the DPJ's growth in rural areas emboldened the portion of the party led by Ozawa, who strongly promoted rural interests and opposed the leadership's efforts to raise the country's consumption tax rate.¹¹

Emergence of a New Party?

Party realignment need not emerge from splits in existing parties but could come from the rise of a new party. Beginning in 2010 in Japan, efforts by Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto to develop a new party, Osaka Ishin no Kai, gave observers yet another reason to anticipate party realignment. In 2012, the party announced plans to challenge the DPJ in elections, and Hashimoto and Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara began to discuss working together to form a larger political force.¹²

Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, FPTP rules—especially when part of a strongly centralized political system—create significant obstacles to new parties that seek to gain strength in established party systems. Under FPTP, candidates outside the top two parties typically achieve little, apart from perhaps creating a spoiler effect. New parties usually have great difficulty starting up in plurality systems (see, e.g., Pridham 1988). Indeed, even in 2010 in the UK, during a period when voters were unhappy with both Labour and the Conservatives and there was also tremendous policy convergence by the leading parties, the leading third party, the Liberal Democratic Party, still took less than 10 percent of all seats.

It is impossible to rule out completely the possibility of displeasure with the existing options becoming so great that parties like Osaka Ishin no Kai can challenge the leading two, but there is little precedent for such success by new parties under FPTP rules like Japan's.

Could Realignment Form from Splits in the LDP and DPJ?

Realignment is most likely to occur out of splits within the existing parties, but here too Japan's electoral rules place roadblocks in the way of the successful development of new party arrangements.

From the time of the LDP's loss in 2009, analysts considered the possibility of the party splitting, but in reality the Japanese context creates little incentive for a major split of the party. Even for LDP members who might wish to join the DPJ, there would be few job openings. In the 2009 election, the DPJ won 221 SMDs, and in another forty-three the DPJ candidate lost the SMD but then won a PR seat. As a result, there were a mere thirty-six SMDs with no DPJ incumbent occupying the seat, thus creating few available landing spots for anyone wishing to try to join the DPJ.

It is also unclear what sort of division within the LDP might drive a wedge that could split the party into major groupings at this point. The LDP was long divided between urban and rural politicians (Scheiner 2006). However, in the 2009 election, of the sixty-four SMDs won by the LDP, only ten were in urban areas. As a result, after 2009 there was no meaningful urban wing of the LDP that might necessitate separate urban and rural parties for LDP members.

To be sure, splits in the LDP did occur, but the LDP did not appear on the verge of serious fracture. Most notably, in April 2010, a few high-profile members left the LDP to form the New Sunrise Party (Tachiagare Nippon) and the New Renaissance Party (Shinto Kaikaku). Ultimately, though, a mere handful of LDP incumbents left the party to join these new alternatives, and neither new party won more than three seats in the ensuing 2010 upper house election. Moreover, the LDP's victory in the 2010 upper house election even helped the party to regain its traction to a degree and stemmed the tide of further potential defections. And, as is usually the case for small parties, no existing party is likely to supplant the longtime ruling party or act as a likely outlet for many LDP incumbents to defect to or merge with.

In short, for the LDP to really dissolve or significant realignment to occur, the DPJ would most likely need to split first. There are a number of potential lines of division within the DPJ. There are large numbers of both urban and rural politicians. However, especially since leadership within the DPJ shifted from Yukio Hatoyama to Naoto Kan in 2010, the sharpest split within the party was between forces that supported and opposed Ozawa. This divide became particularly evident in the 2010 campaign and election for the party's presidency, which pitted Ozawa against Kan. Of 406 Diet members casting valid votes in the presidential election, 200 voted for Ozawa. In theory, therefore, many speculated that if Ozawa left the party—which was considered a possibility because of both his legal problems and his clashes with other leaders of the party—a large number of DPJ members might leave with him. Nevertheless, electoral incentives related to Japan's electoral rules create a strong inducement for most politicians—even those who support Ozawa—to remain within the DPJ. Strategic electoral considerations appeared to play an important part in shaping HR members' willingness to support Ozawa (see Scheiner 2011). And, as I discuss in this section, electoral considerations growing out of the imperatives of Japan's FPTP and dual-candidacy rules were not favorable for most candidates to leave the DPJ in support of Ozawa.

Among the DPJ Diet members, the vote for the party presidency was secret ballot, but a number of members made their vote public.¹³ Of the

263 DPJ HR members listed as supporting one of the two candidates or remaining undeclared, eighty voted for Kan, seventy-four voted for Ozawa, and 109 did not declare their support.¹⁴ I should note also that it is one thing to vote for Ozawa in the DPJ presidential election, but it is quite another to actually leave the party on Ozawa's behalf when doing so means leaving the party that controls the government. Presumably, it would take someone with very good reasons to actually leave the party that controls the reins of the national government.

Perhaps most important, it was unlikely that most of the Ozawa supporters would simply leave the DPJ with Ozawa without considering how it would affect their future electoral chances, and few of Ozawa's supporters faced district conditions that would give them a strong position on which to leave the party. Of the seventy-four HR members who openly supported Ozawa in the DPJ presidential election, fourteen had run in an SMD in 2009, lost the SMD race, and then won in PR. These "zombie" politicians would face a very unwelcoming district environment in which to leave the DPJ. If these HR members left the DPJ, it would undoubtedly be to a party that would win fewer seats of any kind, including PR seats. As a result, it would be much harder for them to gain PR seats in future elections. In addition, the district race would be even more difficult: Of the fourteen PR HR members who openly supported Ozawa, thirteen had their districts won in 2009 by the LDP, and the DPJ would undoubtedly run a challenger as well, thus making victory in the SMD very unlikely for any of these Ozawa-supporting zombies.¹⁵ In short, the winner-take-all nature of FPTP rules gave even the staunchest of Ozawa-supporting zombies little incentive to leave the DPJ. If they left the party, they would be very likely to lose their seat in the next election.

The FPTP rules also gave the sixty SMD winners from the HR who openly supported Ozawa in 2010 little incentive to leave the DPJ. Nearly any politician who would leave the DPJ would face a DPJ challenger in the SMD in the next election. Moreover, of the sixty SMD winners who openly supported Ozawa in the presidential election, many were likely to face a difficult electoral environment in the next election, especially if they were to leave the DPJ:

- Eleven saw their LDP opponent in 2009 win a PR seat after losing the SMD race. These PR incumbents would be a powerful challenge in the next election—and they would make the LDP less interested in accepting a politician from the DPJ in that same district.
- Nine won their SMD by less than 5 percentage points in 2009. Such candidates would face great uncertainty in the next election about their chances of getting reelected.

- Twenty won their SMD by less than 10 percentage points in 2009. Such candidates would also face great uncertainty about their chances of success in the next election, given the large number of “extra” votes that went to DPJ candidates in 2009 with the wave of national support for the party that year.

- Thirty-eight won their seat in a district whose rank and file supported Kan over Ozawa in the presidential race in 2010. Defectors from the DPJ would be likely to face a strong challenge from the DPJ in the next election.

In sum, a large share of the sixty SMD-incumbents who were strong supporters of Ozawa faced a context in which the next HR election would likely be hard fought, and a very large share were likely to be strongly opposed by the DPJ rank and file in the district if they left the DPJ. Ultimately, out of this sixty, there were forty-two who (a) in the next election would be likely to face a PR incumbent from the LDP or an LDP candidate who had lost to them by less than 10 percentage points in 2009, or (b) came from a district that supported Kan by more than 10 percentage points over Ozawa in the 2010 presidential election.¹⁶ In other words, *of Ozawa’s strong supporters, only eighteen faced a relatively “safe” environment for leaving the DPJ.*¹⁷ The winner-take-all, head-to-head competition of FPTP rules gave incentives to very few supporters of Ozawa to actually leave the DPJ.¹⁸

Indeed, prior to summer 2012, the most significant defections from the DPJ were consistent with the logic laid out in this article and did not involve a major split of the party: in February 2011, sixteen HR members of the DPJ left the party’s parliamentary caucus in support of Ozawa (and opposition to Kan).¹⁹ However, strikingly, these defectors were principally first-term politicians (with strong ties to Ozawa) who were pure PR candidates in 2009. Most were so poorly ranked on the lists that it took an enormous DPJ landslide for them to win their seats in 2009. As a result, they had little chance of winning seats in future, more competitive elections. To be sure, these moves suggest that other DPJ members who were elected from poorly ranked positions on the party’s PR list in 2009 might have had some reason to leave the party in the hope of gaining a better slot on, for example, the LDP’s list (or even winning one of the few seats of a small new party) in the next election. However, this logic really applies only to a very small number of HR legislators from the DPJ: of the 308 candidates who won office for the DPJ in 2009, 264 were the party’s candidate in a single-member district. Given the dangers of having to run against a new DPJ candidate if they left the party, the incentives were much weaker for these SMD candidates to switch out of the DPJ.

Indeed, when Ozawa finally bolted from the DPJ to form a new small party in July 2012 in response to the party's efforts to raise Japan's consumption tax, relatively few politicians left with him.²⁰ Recall that Ozawa won the votes of 200 Diet members in the 2010 DPJ presidential election. Moreover, Ozawa's House of Representatives faction within the DPJ contained roughly 80 members.²¹ Nevertheless, only roughly 40 House of Representatives members—along with a dozen in the House of Councillors—joined Ozawa in leaving the ruling party.²² Ultimately, despite the presence of a number of politicians aligned with Ozawa, it appears that the incentives growing out of Japan's electoral rules constrained many from joining Ozawa in splitting the party, thus hampering significant party and policy realignment.

Conclusion

The heavy emphasis on the FPTP rules that govern the election of 300 out of Japan's 480 House of Representatives seats has promoted a two-party system that has become consolidated around the LDP and DPJ at both the district and national levels. At the same time, these very FPTP rules have promoted policy convergence by the leading parties, which has therefore led to an emphasis in Japanese elections on the image of the parties, with elections decided by which party voters deem to be most likely to address the issue of reform competently. FPTP has also permitted ideological variance across the incumbents in each major party, and FPTP has created disincentives for major new party formation or realignment that might create more ideologically cohesive parties. As a result, Japan now has roughly a two-party system, but the parties do not differ markedly on the issues, and the advent of party alternation has thus far not introduced a sharp break from previous government policies.

To be sure, it is possible to imagine other outcomes occurring in Japan's FPTP system. Following the lead of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party three decades ago in the UK, one party could seek to gain victory by creating a sharper distinction between itself and its opposition. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine the LDP, which is almost entirely a rural party at this time, proposing a major policy initiative that could appeal widely in Japan right now. And it remains difficult to imagine the DPJ proposing such a bold and sustained policy effort unless it gained greater policy coherence in areas where it differs from the LDP. In theory, new party realignment could promote significant changes in the two leading parties, which would in turn make such bold and broadly appealing policy initiative more likely for the parties. Wherever individual politicians can exert significant clout,

it is certainly always possible for party defections to occur that would lead to a new round of party realignment.

In fact, the possibility of significant party realignment is even greater in a world in which Ichiro Ozawa plays a significant role in politics, but Ozawa's summer 2012 split from the DPJ did not promise to lead to major party or policy realignment. Large-scale defections from the DPJ run counter to the incentives created by Japan's electoral system, and the relatively small number that left with Ozawa may have been the result of politicians who were simply devoted to their leader or faced little chance of victory no matter what party they ran for. In either case, with their relatively small numbers and likelihood of losing the next election, Ozawa supporters were unlikely to be the foundation of a successful new party. In an effort to create a strong new party to challenge the DPJ and LDP, Ozawa sought to create a loose "Olive Tree" party alliance with regional groups such as those led by politicians including Osaka mayor Hashimoto and Tokyo governor Ishihara. However, Hashimoto and Ishihara both expressed distaste at the idea of a tie-up with Ozawa.²³ In addition, as well as being unlikely, with Ozawa's rural focus and the clear urban foundation of Hashimoto and Ishihara, such an alliance would hardly create a party realignment founded on coherent policy programs.

The hope for many observers and politicians was that the departure of these politicians would "purify" the DPJ and conceivably lead to a DPJ that would be freer to move away from current policymaking patterns, but it was not clear that such a split would lead the DPJ to make a major break from LDP policies (unless also accompanied by a split in the LDP, whereby some LDP defectors joined with Ozawa's new group and others merged with the DPJ). The DPJ's most significant policy effort was on raising Japan's consumption tax, a policy position opposed by Ozawa, and the final straw that led to his split from the party. However, the consumption tax increase was in fact a policy largely supported by the LDP, thus making it unclear just how much Ozawa's departure would actually lead to the promotion of greater differences between the LDP and DPJ. Nevertheless, as of summer 2012, the impact of Ozawa's defection remained an open question, with the possibility still of a DPJ that would become less beholden to rural interests and traditional LDP policies.

Irrespective of the potential effects of hypothetical party splits, electoral systems like Japan's make it difficult to bring about significant party realignment unless the new party arrangements involve significant advance coordination. Incentives to defect from a ruling party are much weaker if there is great uncertainty over who would be in the new government, and especially if the party splitters would find themselves out

of power. Furthermore, any new party formed out of such defections would have to work out in advance which of its incumbents would be the sole representative of the party in each district and ensure that its incumbents did not face too many strong incumbent challengers in the district. Among other things, a DPJ SMD seat holder would be unlikely to create a new party with an LDP PR seat holder who also sought to contest the same single-member district seat.

Put differently, many observers and politicians had hoped and expected to see party realignment that would lead to more ideologically coherent parties (Sato 2011), but realignment of this kind is unlikely to occur gradually and without significant planning. Given Japan's strong central government and the heavy emphasis on SMD races, most incumbents will be unlikely to realign unless doing so neither hurts their electoral chances nor leads them to be in a dramatically smaller party. For example, should only a small number of incumbents leave the DPJ, such defectors would probably find themselves no longer playing a significant part in policymaking (unless they somehow were a part of a convoluted new coalitional arrangement) and would also face a strong challenge from another DPJ candidate in the following election.

For all these reasons, Japan is now well established to be a competitive two-party system, where alternation in power between the LDP and DPJ is a common practice but where party alternation in power need not necessarily introduce significant policy change.

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Notes

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1. Another type of possible contamination effect comes from the House of Councillors (HC), where the more permissive rules (high district magnitude national PR races and multimember district SNTV for each prefecture) have helped small parties remain afloat. It is conceivable that the existence of these parties in the HC has allowed some to continue to contest House of Representatives races.

2. As Shimizu (2012) discusses in detail, since the early 2000s, Japan has become somewhat more decentralized, giving its prefectures slightly greater government fiscal authority, but overall most power remains in the hands of the central government.

3. In the United States, it is striking that two of the highest-profile party switches in recent years—the cases of Joseph Lieberman and Arlen Specter—in the Senate occurred when the incumbents faced difficulty gaining their party's nomination.

4. Interestingly, O'Brien and Shomer (2012) find only weak evidence of a link between personalistic electoral rules and party switching. But they do find a strong negative correlation between legislative party unity and party switching—and research by Carey (2007, 2009) shows a strong link between personalistic electoral rules and low levels of legislative party unity.

5. In 2009, Komeito won twenty-one PR seats and no SMDs. The SDPJ won four PR seats and three SMDs. The JCP won nine PR seats and no SMDs. Your Party won three PR seats and two SMDs.

6. The effective number of parties index is calculated by squaring the proportion of the vote or seat shares of each party, and then dividing 1 by the sum of all the squares:

$$N_v = 1/\Sigma(v_i^2) \text{ or } N_s = 1/\Sigma(s_i^2)$$

7. In addition, of the districts that did not have the top two candidates from the Big 2 parties, only a small number had neither party in the top two: 20 districts in 1996, 17 in 2000, 5 in 2003, 2 in 2005, and 3 in 2009.

8. The particularly high number in 2005 is due to the fact that prior to the election, Prime Minister Koizumi had pulled the LDP nomination from a number of high-profile politicians. Most of these politicians continued to run in 2005 but under a new party banner (or as independents).

9. Our coding does not indicate whether candidates took positions in support of groups in these areas, but, in fact, nearly every policy proposal was in support of the groups.

10. The proportion of LDP candidates proposing specific policies to support SMEs dropped slightly, but there was an overall increase in proposals to support them, thanks to the big increase in the number of DPJ candidates doing so.

11. The divisions between Ozawa and the leadership were hardly restricted to policy. Issues relating to the party's organization and leadership were at least as important.

12. See, for example, the May 20, 2012, *Daily Yomiuri* article, available at www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T120519003542.htm.

13. I am very grateful to Steve Reed for sharing his data on publicly stated support for Kan versus Ozawa by HR members. Much of the data on the Kan-Ozawa vote is drawn from the *Yomiuri Shimbun* (September 15, 2010, and December 1, 2010).

14. Because of the secret ballot, it is difficult to know precisely the number that voted for Ozawa in the HR, but the fact that roughly three-fourths of the DPJ's total Diet membership is made up of HR members gives us a rough clue

as to how many voted for each candidate in each house. Most likely, no more than roughly half of the undeclared group supported Ozawa.

15. Similarly, of the eighteen zombies that did not openly declare their support for Kan or Ozawa, seventeen had their SMD won in 2009 by LDP candidates.

16. If we count any candidate whose district voted for Kan over Ozawa, rather than just those where Kan won by more than 10 percentage points, there were forty-eight HR members who faced a difficult environment in which to leave the DPJ.

17. Out of the 88 SMD winners who did not openly declare support for any candidate in the election, 17 had a PR incumbent from the LDP in their district, 9 won by less than 5 percentage points, 26 won by less than 10 percentage points, and 77 were in a district in which Kan defeated Ozawa. To put it all together, out of the 88, there were 80 who (1) in the next election would be likely to face a PR incumbent from the LDP or an LDP candidate who had lost to them by less than 10 percentage points in 2009, or (2) came from a district that supported Kan by more than 10 percentage points over Ozawa in the 2010 presidential election.

18. In many ways, the type of candidate who was best set up to leave the DPJ was one who faced no strong LDP candidate in the SMD. Such candidates might have faced less of a challenge from all sides or might have been able to link up with the LDP. However, of the DPJ "zombies," none ran in a district that had no LDP candidate in 2009. Of the SMD winners in the DPJ, eight did not face an LDP candidate in 2009. Of these eight, two openly supported Kan in the DPJ presidential election, two openly supported Ozawa, and four did not declare.

19. This "split" did not involve the members actually leaving the party but did reduce their likelihood of supporting DPJ policy.

20. Ozawa led a group that voted against the DPJ's proposed consumption tax increase. In response, the DPJ expelled Ozawa and his followers in the vote, and Ozawa and his group resigned from the DPJ nearly simultaneously.

21. See "50 Ozawa Backers May Vote Against Tax Bills," *Daily Yomiuri*, June 20, 2012, available at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T120619004682.htm>.

22. "DPJ Splits as Ozawa, Others Depart," *Daily Yomiuri*, June 3, 2012, available at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T120702005371.htm>; "New Ozawa-Led Party to Launch July 11," *Daily Yomiuri*, June 5, 2012, available at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T120704005099.htm>.

23. See, for example, "Ozawa's Envisaged Party Faces Three Hurdles," *Daily Yomiuri*, July 4, 2012, available at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T120703004048.htm>.

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