

Japanese Politics

By Takashi Kinoshita

Any discussion of Japanese politics today must begin with the simultaneous elections for both houses of the national Diet held this July. In these elections the ruling LDP made an unexpectedly strong showing, winning an unprecedented 304 seats in the powerful House of Representatives, including four seats belonging to conservative candidates who joined the LDP after the elections, and a comfortable majority in the House of Councillors as well. Before these elections, I had a very serviceable pat answer to explain the workings of Japanese politics to anyone who asked, but the election results have forced me to rework it considerably.

In the early years of its history, the LDP averaged a 60%-plus majority in the House of Representatives and close to 58% of the votes in general elections, but these ratios gradually slipped (with the exception of the 1980 simultaneous elections called by Ohira) dropping to their lowest point in the 1983 House of Representatives elections when the LDP won 48% of the seats with 45% of the vote. In the July 1986 elections, however, the LDP captured an overwhelming 59% of lower house seats and a respectable 49% of the vote (Fig. 1). What happened? How did the LDP win this stunning vote of confidence just when it appeared to be on the decline? Was this simply the result of clever electoral strategy, or has Japanese politics entered a new era?

Simultaneous elections

A more detailed analysis of the recent election results may give us some clues. Three years ago Prime Minister Nakasone was forced to call an election when his primary supporter, former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, was found guilty in the Lockheed case. Not

surprisingly, the LDP lost more than 30 seats in this election, and was only just able to hold onto its Diet majority with a coalition with the NLC splinter group.

Since then, Nakasone has been determined to win these seats back, and as soon as he felt the time was right, he took advantage of a procedural quirk to ram dissolution through and set the stage for the July double elections.

Precedent was one factor pushing Nakasone to go for broke with a double election. In 1980, Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira dissolved the Diet after losing a vote of confidence and called an election for the lower house on the same day as the upper house election. The LDP won a major victory in this election, giving rise to the myth that double elections worked to the LDP's advantage. Still, a single precedent is no guarantee, and Nakasone must have had other reasons.

Because so much hung on the outcome, and because there was so much campaigning concentrated into so short a time, double elections would at the very least attract more attention and interest, and it was felt that this higher interest level would mean a higher voter turnout. Since most sometime voters are conservative (as high as 75% according to one estimate), this interest, and the fact that the weather was good on election day, worked to the LDP's advantage. In addition the fact that parties run against each other for 50 national-constituency seats in the House of Councillors acts in the LDP's favor by making it more difficult for the opposition parties to cooperate in other races. Finally, the LDP has made a strong effort since 1983 to line up support for its many almost-wins, and these efforts finally paid off in 1986. Yet even granting all of these reasons, I do not feel that they are sufficient to explain the

LDP's victory. There has, I believe, been a fundamental change in voter attitudes.

Thirty-one years of LDP dominance

It might be helpful at this point to go back and take a look at Japan's postwar political history, including the growth of the LDP. Following its defeat in World War II, Japan began experimenting with a democratic political system under Occupation tutelage. Yet even in these early years, except for a brief Socialist coalition government, the conservatives ran the government with the conservative Liberal, Democratic and People's Cooperative parties competing for power. Yet the instability of frequent changes of government created an untenable situation, politically and economically, and in 1955 the right and left socialist wings merged to create the JSP and the two leading conservative parties merged to form the LDP. The basic pattern of the conservative LDP vs the socialist JSP has remained unchanged for more than 30 years since the 1958 general election, in which the new LDP won 57.8% of the vote and the JSP 32.9%.

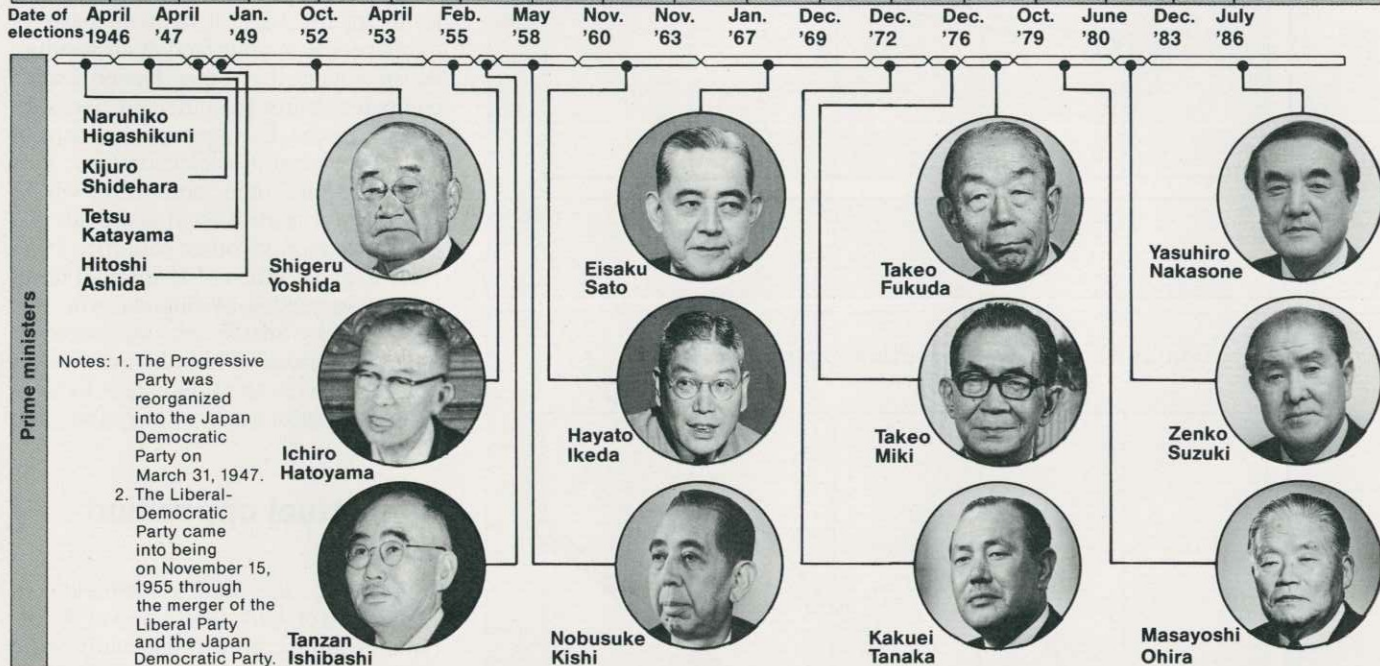
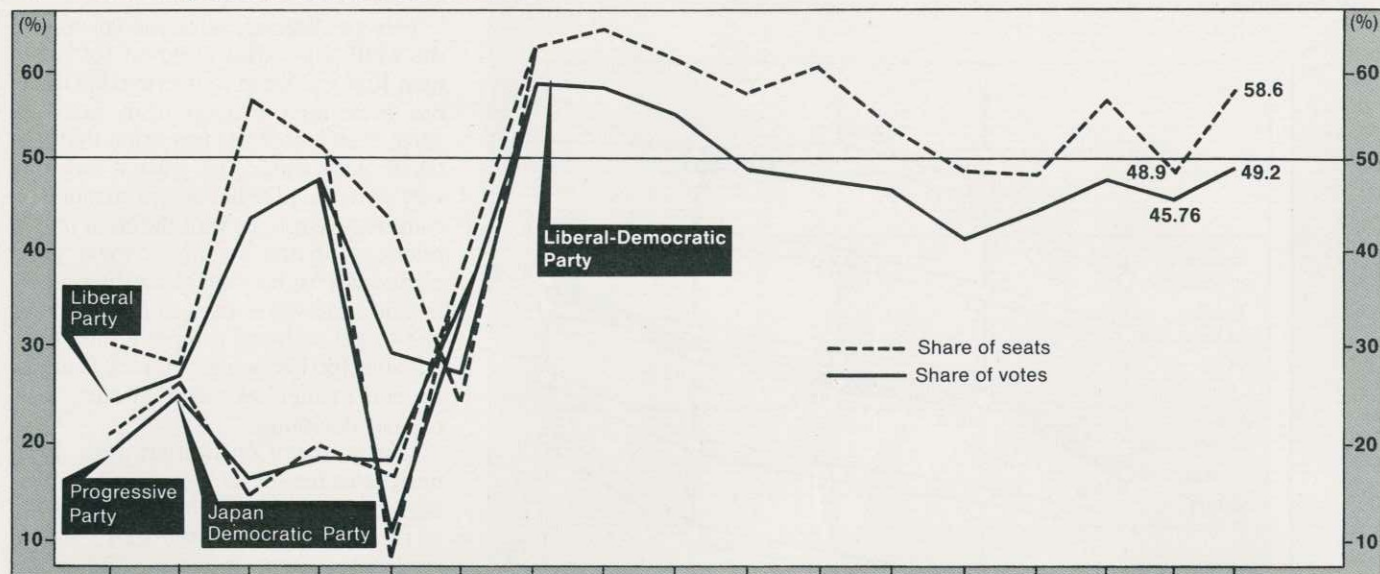
At its inception, the LDP was guided by two diverging policies: Shigeru Yoshida's emphasis on maintaining friendly relations with the United States and promoting economic development, and Ichiro Hatoyama's and Nobusuke

List of Abbreviations Used

DSP	Democratic Socialist Party
JCP	Japan Communist Party
JSP	Japan Socialist Party
LDP	Liberal-Democratic Party
NLC	New Liberal Club*
SDF	Social Democratic Federation

*The New Liberal Club decided to disband on August 15, 1986.

Fig. 1 Postwar Japan's Conservative Course



Kishi's emphasis on rewriting the post-war Constitution, rearming and regaining independence. Although the LDP was formed after Yoshida stepped down in 1954, his legacy lived on in Prime Ministers Hayato Ikeda, Eisaku Sato and others who guided Japan's rapid growth, negotiated the reversion of Okinawa and did so much to shape the LDP's golden age.

In all these years, the sharpest confrontation between right and left occurred over the 1960 revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. This clash, which ultimately brought down the Kishi government, was a traumatic event that has influenced U.S.-Japan relations ever since.

The LDP's history can be broadly

divided into five periods. The first was the formative period under Hatoyama, Tanzan Ishibashi and Kishi; the second the LDP's golden age under Ikeda and Sato; and the third the years dominated by Kakuei Tanaka. It was in this third period that the economic and international climate that had been so good for the party's fortunes began to change, leading to changes within the LDP itself.

The fourth period covered the cabinets of Takeo Miki, Takeo Fukuda, Ohira and Zenko Suzuki. Reflecting the multipolarization on the international scene, including the North-South confrontation, there was also a multipolarization in Japanese politics that weakened the LDP's hold on government. This was particularly evident in the 1976 general elec-

tion called by Miki, in which the LDP did very badly and all the opposition parties except the JSP made significant gains. This fourth period was thus a period of steady decline in the LDP's voter support and Diet representation.

Finally, the fifth period has been marked by the Nakasone Cabinet. Prime Minister Nakasone's personal appeal has been a major factor enabling him to maintain a 50%-plus voter approval rating. Although the LDP fared poorly in the 1983 election, Nakasone proved strong enough this time to lead the LDP to a stunning victory. He appears to have almost single-handedly restored the LDP's fortunes, and this fifth period may well mark the start of a new era of growth for the LDP.

Fig. 2
LDP Support as Shown in Preelection Opinion Surveys

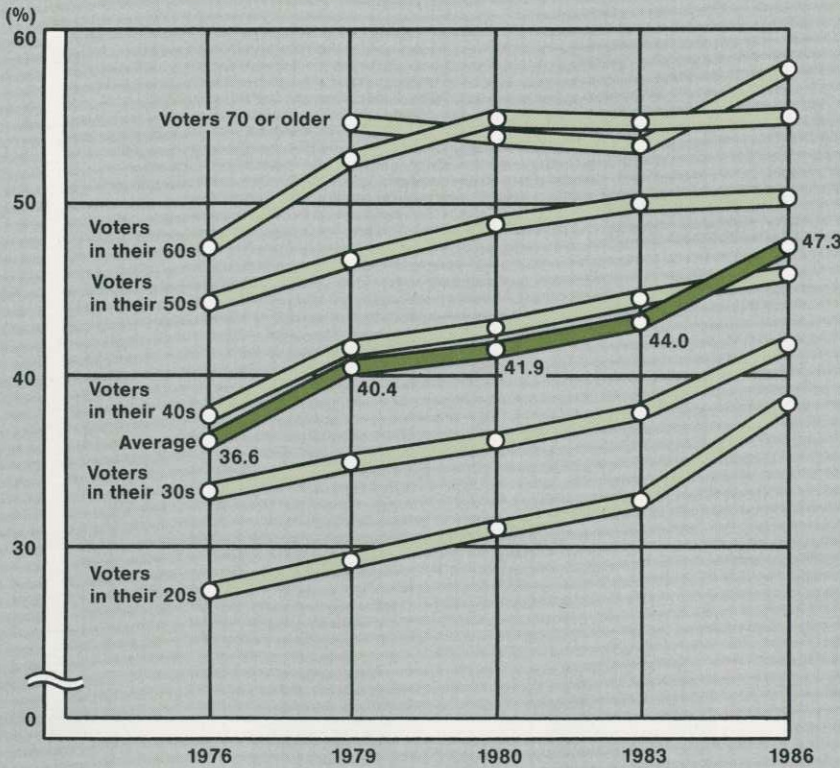
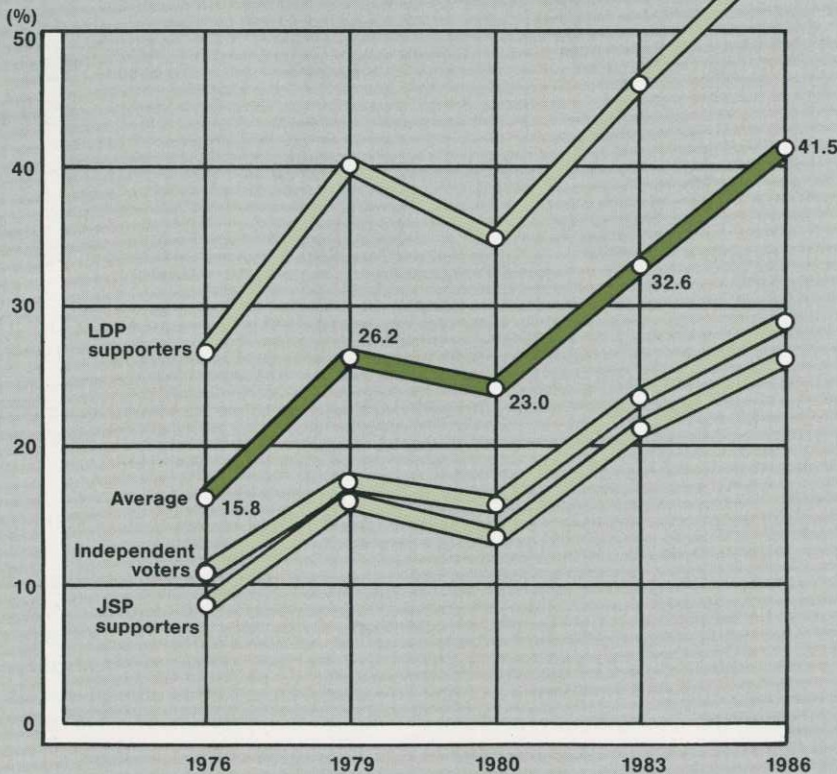


Fig. 3
Voter Satisfaction as Shown in Preelection Opinion Surveys



The role of factions

Foreign observers often marvel at how the LDP has stayed in power for more than 30 years. Yet in wondering that there has been no transition from party to party, they ignore the transition that has taken place within the party. From the very start, the LDP has been a coalition of conservative groups with different policy priorities. In the beginning there were eight factions, now there are five. Each faction head works hard to collect funds and to get as many cabinet positions as possible for his people, hoping thereby to gain greater influence in party and cabinet decisions.

Under the Constitution, the Diet designates one of its members as prime minister, with the result that the leader of the majority party (the LDP) is normally also prime minister. And to be leader of the LDP, it helps to have as many people in your faction as possible, which means that every faction leader competes against the others to elect supporters to the Diet, providing financial and other support at election time. It is these factions, then, competing within the LDP for leadership, that provide the transition seen in other countries from party to party. When Miki fell from favor, he was succeeded by Fukuda, who was succeeded by Suzuki, who was succeeded by Nakasone. This turnover within the LDP serves to some extent to salve voter frustrations and to keep the LDP in power.

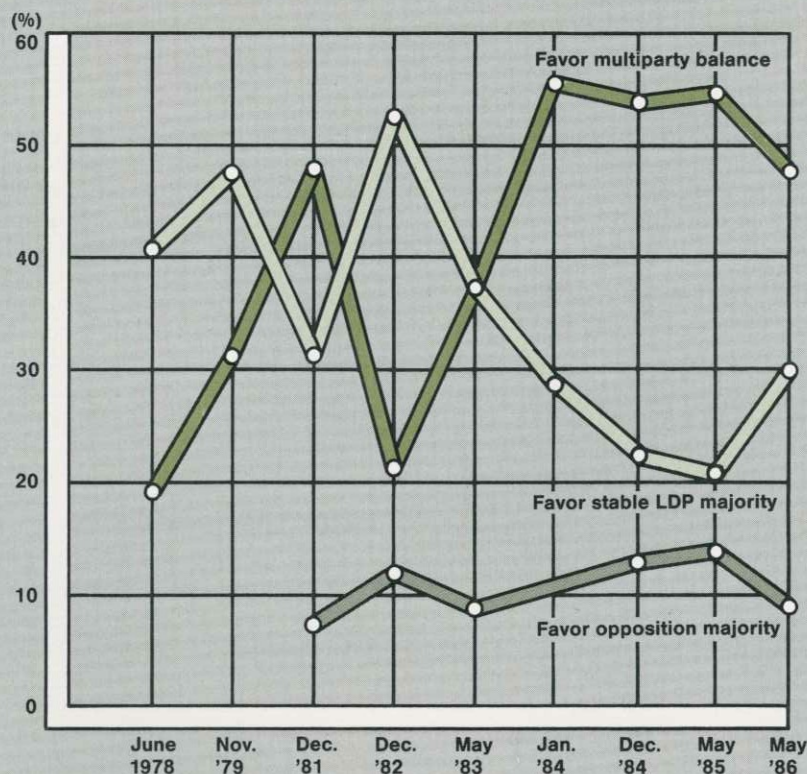
Ineffectual opposition parties

Following the LDP's formation in 1955, Japan embarked on a period of very rapid economic growth and hefty wage increases that took the edge off the JSP's militancy and lulled it into complacency by largely satisfying its main body of supporters within the General Council of Trade Unions (Sohyo). This showed up in the July 1986 election as the JSP ended up running large numbers of union leaders even though organized labor's power has been greatly diminished.

In contrast, the LDP has been able to encompass a wide range of policy stances and issue positions. There are pro-Soviet, pro-China and pro-U.S. LDP spokesmen, and the LDP has been able to shift its international outlook with the times. At home, the party has also been sensitive to social welfare's appeal and quick to borrow from the opposition platform on these issues.

Finally, being in power 31 years has en-

Fig. 4
Strong LDP Majority vs Multiparty Balance



Note: Survey of 3,000 voters selected at random nationwide

abled the LDP to build up a formidable wealth of experience and know-how among its members and led to the forging of strong bonds with business and the bureaucracy. In the July elections, for example, 74 of the LDP's winning candidates were former government bureaucrats. As LDP politicians have gained policymaking experience and the party has coopted experienced policymakers, the party has supplanted the bureaucracy as the main force in Japanese policymaking—a role that the opposition parties are clearly incapable of performing.

The July 1986 victory

Prior to the July 1986 elections, it was predicted that the LDP would score marginal gains, the JSP would continue its downward slide, the Komeito would hold its own with its strong organizational backing, and the DSP would suffer minor erosion. The final results, however, have astounded everyone and forced a rethinking of Japanese politics.

One unexpected trend is the rising popularity of the LDP among young Japanese, especially those in their 20s (Fig. 2). LDP support from this age group has increased 11% over the past decade. No longer can the young be equated with radicalism and the old with conservatism.

This new conservatism appears to be firmly rooted among young Japanese, and it is reflected in the way they vote. While LDP support among people in their 50s and 60s is tapering off, it is rising among young Japanese. This is certain to have a major effect upon Japanese politics in the future. The JSP's support is not only dropping overall, it has gone down 3.9% among Japanese in their 20s.

Satisfaction with the status quo

In the immediate postwar years, both the LDP and the JSP were able to grow as the nation worked to restore a decent standard of living and revitalize the economy. But today Japan has the second-largest GNP in the world, an overwhelming majority of the Japanese people consider themselves middle class, and conservative sentiment prevails. There is widespread satisfaction with the government and the way it is functioning. This was clearly evident in a *Yomiuri Shimbun* survey of 100,000 voters during the election (Fig. 3) in which 41.5% of the respondents professed themselves "satisfied" or "more or less satisfied."

Not surprisingly, 57.3% of LDP supporters expressed satisfaction with the present government. Nor is the 35.0%

satisfaction among NLC supporters very surprising, since the NLC had joined with the LDP in the last government to give it a majority coalition. What had been unexpected were the relatively high percentages of other voters who say they are satisfied with the present government: 37.3% of DSP supporters, 28.9% of independent voters and a remarkable 26.1% of JSP supporters. These figures and the general satisfaction they indicate do much to explain why the JSP, DSP and NLC together lost 1.1 million votes in the July elections. Since it is the LDP that has been in power, satisfaction with the way things are going is clearly to the LDP's advantage.

The balance tips toward one-party rule

While few people expect the opposition to win a majority, the LDP argues that it needs a strong mandate for stability and the opposition that they need enough seats to check the LDP's despotic tendencies. This time the voters appear to have bought the LDP's stability argument. Over the past few years, more than half of the respondents in *Yomiuri Shimbun* opinion polls have said they preferred a nearly equal balance between the opposition and government parties (Fig. 4). Yet a major change took place in May 1986, with advocates of multiparty balance dropping below 50% and advocates of a strong LDP majority going up to 30% from 20%. Of special note is the fact that small but increasing numbers of opposition supporters (except in the Komeito and the JCP) have come to favor an LDP majority. It is on such small shifts in voter perceptions that elections turn.

Still, it is too early to tell whether or not the LDP's current strength is a permanent fixture or a passing fluke. Japanese politics are extremely sensitive to international developments, and Prime Minister Nakasone himself admits that the current price stability was a major factor in the LDP's victory. Except for exporters, who have been hit hard by the yen's appreciation, most Japanese are quite satisfied with the LDP's stewardship over the economy.

The LDP under Prime Minister Nakasone seems to be settling down for an extended period of stable one-party rule. The voters clearly want stability, and the Japanese government is unlikely to undergo any sudden or sweeping change. Just the same, major changes in the international situation or Japan's economic fortunes may yet upset the LDP's appellation.