

*Connectedness, Identity and Alienation and the Japanese 2012 Election*

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## **Introduction**

The most recent Japanese national election on December 16<sup>th</sup> 2012, for the Lower House of Representatives, saw a heavy defeat of the centre-right Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) [*Minshuto*], returning the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) [*Jiminto*] to power, with its leader Shinzo Abe unexpectedly becoming Prime Minister for a second time. Despite a sweeping electoral victory for the LDP, the results delivered by the electoral system, from a historically low voter turnout, were more a vote against the DPJ, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the previous Noda Government, rather than being an enthusiastic endorsement for the LDP. This remains reflected in the divide between LDP policy and popular opinion on issues such as nuclear power, consumption tax increases, and changes to the role of Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF).

The fate of smaller parties also demonstrates a sense of wider disappointment with electoral politics in Japan. For example, the third largest party, the ultranationalist Japan Restoration Party (JRP), was formed from an amalgamation by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, with former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara; however, Hashimoto's policy backflips to accommodate Ishihara following the alliance generated a great deal of public cynicism. Such political manoeuvrings have further generated disillusionment, as these blatantly opportunistic alliances were at the expense of consistent, well-thought out policy positions. The Upper House elections due in July 2013 will therefore test whether disconnectedness with Japanese politics will continue, as the various political parties reposition themselves for the next electoral contest.

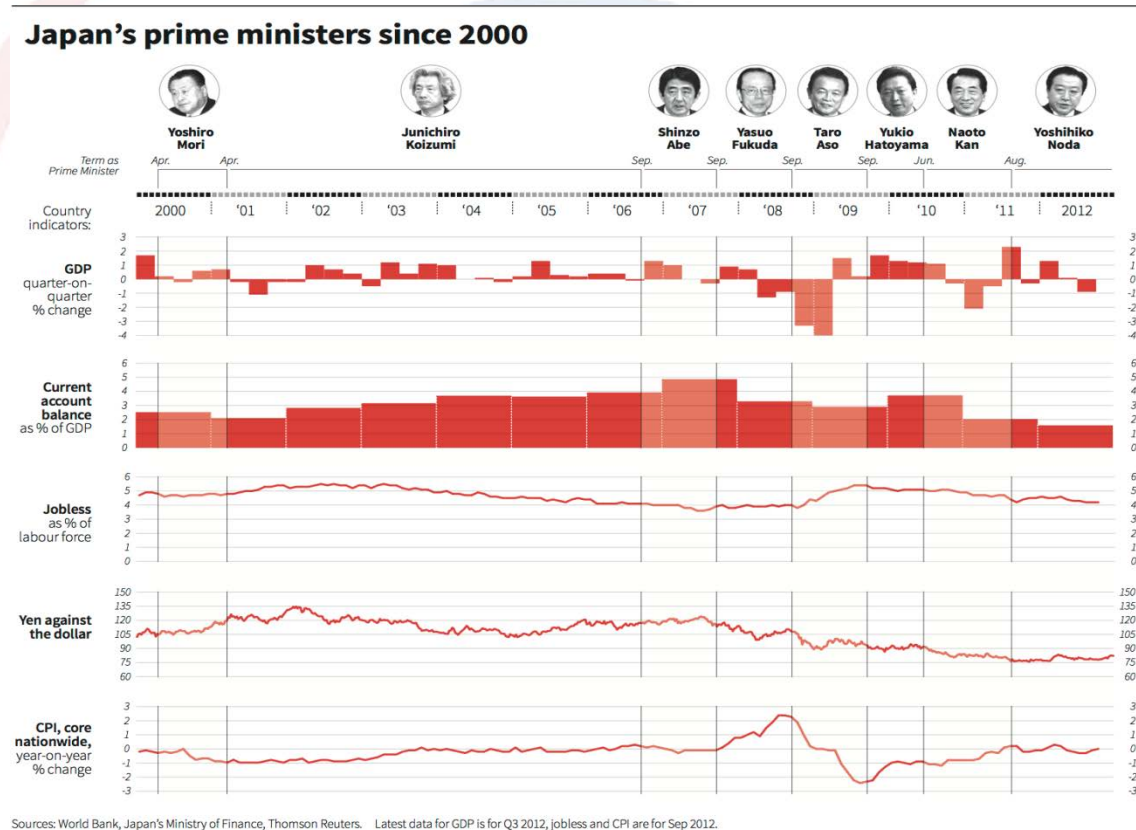
## **Lead-up to the 2012 Election**

The severe loss of the DPJ in the 2012 election, led by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, saw the LDP return to power after a three-year hiatus, retaining control of government (with the support of its traditional coalition partner, the New Komeito Party [NKP]), as it has done for the great majority of Japan's postwar democracy (briefly interrupted in 1993-94). (Bouissou, 2002: 284-288) LDP leader Shinzo Abe has again become Prime Minister, having served a previous term in 2006-07, before stepping down due to 'illness'.

Despite the LDP winning with a large majority, the election still exposed the widespread extent of relative voter alienation, a weak sense of party identity, and a

general disconnectedness with politics among Japanese society. This political malaise has been effectively entrenched over the past couple of decades of relative economic stagnation, since the collapse of the ‘bubble’ economy (seen in a real estate and equity market crash) from 1989 (economic figures since 2000 shown in Table 1). Effective public policy and even genuine ideological contests over the future direction of Japan seemed to always be subservient to factional infighting and securing political patronage, often in league with entrenched interests in the corporate sphere and the bureaucracy, to the exclusion of the genuine interests of the ordinary members of the public. (Zakowski, 2011: 200-203)

Figure 1: Japan’s prime ministers since 2000 (with economic data)

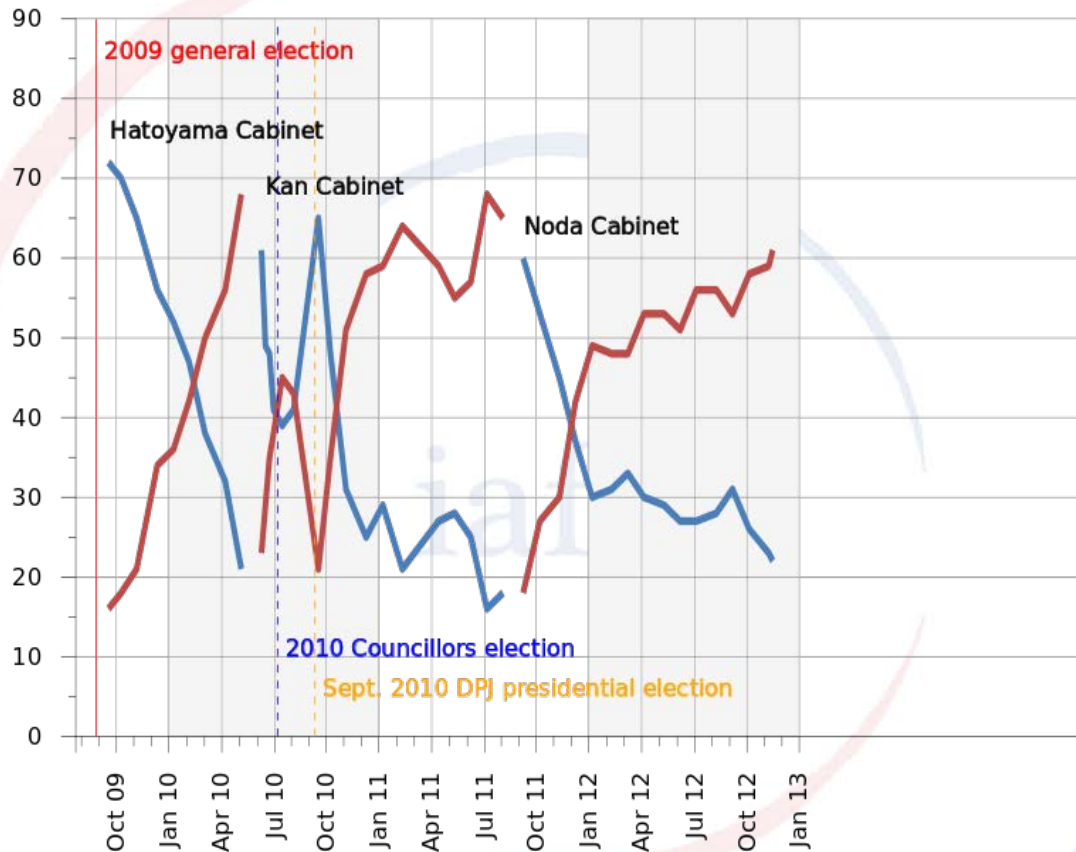


(source: Reuters)

The DPJ had won a sweeping victory in 2009, ending a long period of LDP dominance. LDP Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had been a relatively popular and long-serving leader, lasting for five years before stepping down in 2006. There has been a new prime minister every year on average since then, adding to the sense of instability and mistrust in politics, and the eventual disillusionment with the DPJ Government. While it had secured a commanding majority in the 2009 election, the DPJ failed to secure a majority in the Upper House of Councillors in its separate 2010 election, which hampered any ability to pass legislation. (Stockwin, 2012: 471-489)

This sense of disillusionment with the political process was further worsened following the Tohoku disaster on March 11, 2011. Each new DPJ Prime Minister (first Naoto Kan replacing Yukio Hatoyama, then Noda) had brought a temporary increase in approval ratings, before public disillusionment rapidly set in, as shown in Figure 2.

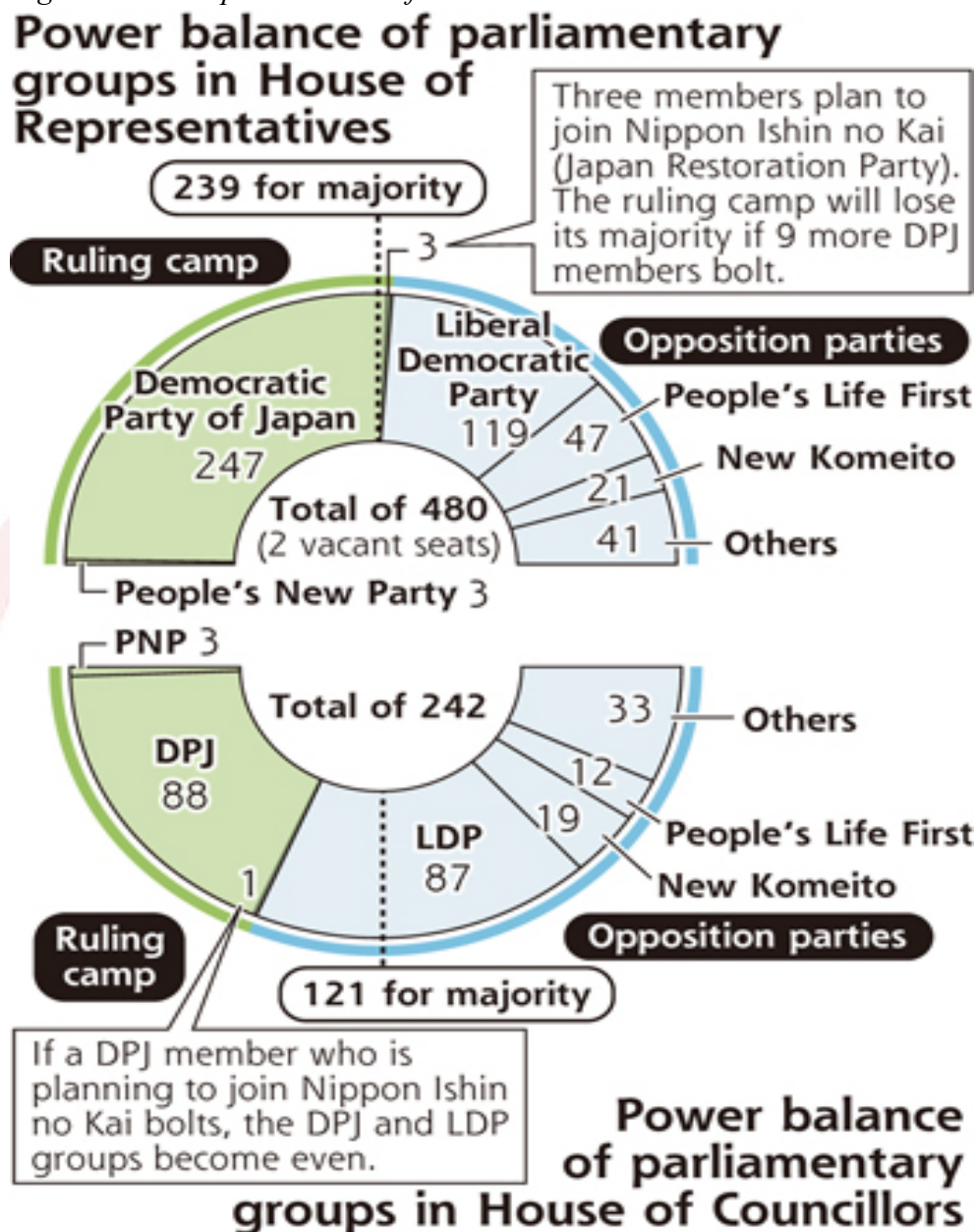
Figure 2: DPJ Cabinet Approval Ratings (Blue) & Disapproval Ratings (Red), 2009-12



(Source: NHK)

By the time the Noda Government was approaching the end of its term in 2012, its Lower House majority had already been badly narrowed by splits and defections, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The Japanese Diet before the 2012 election



(Source: The Japan Times)

[The House of Representatives has 300 Single Member Districts and 180 Proportional Representation seats. Half the House of Councillors (121 out of 242) faces re-election at each election; 73 from Prefectural Districts, 48 from national Proportional Representation.]

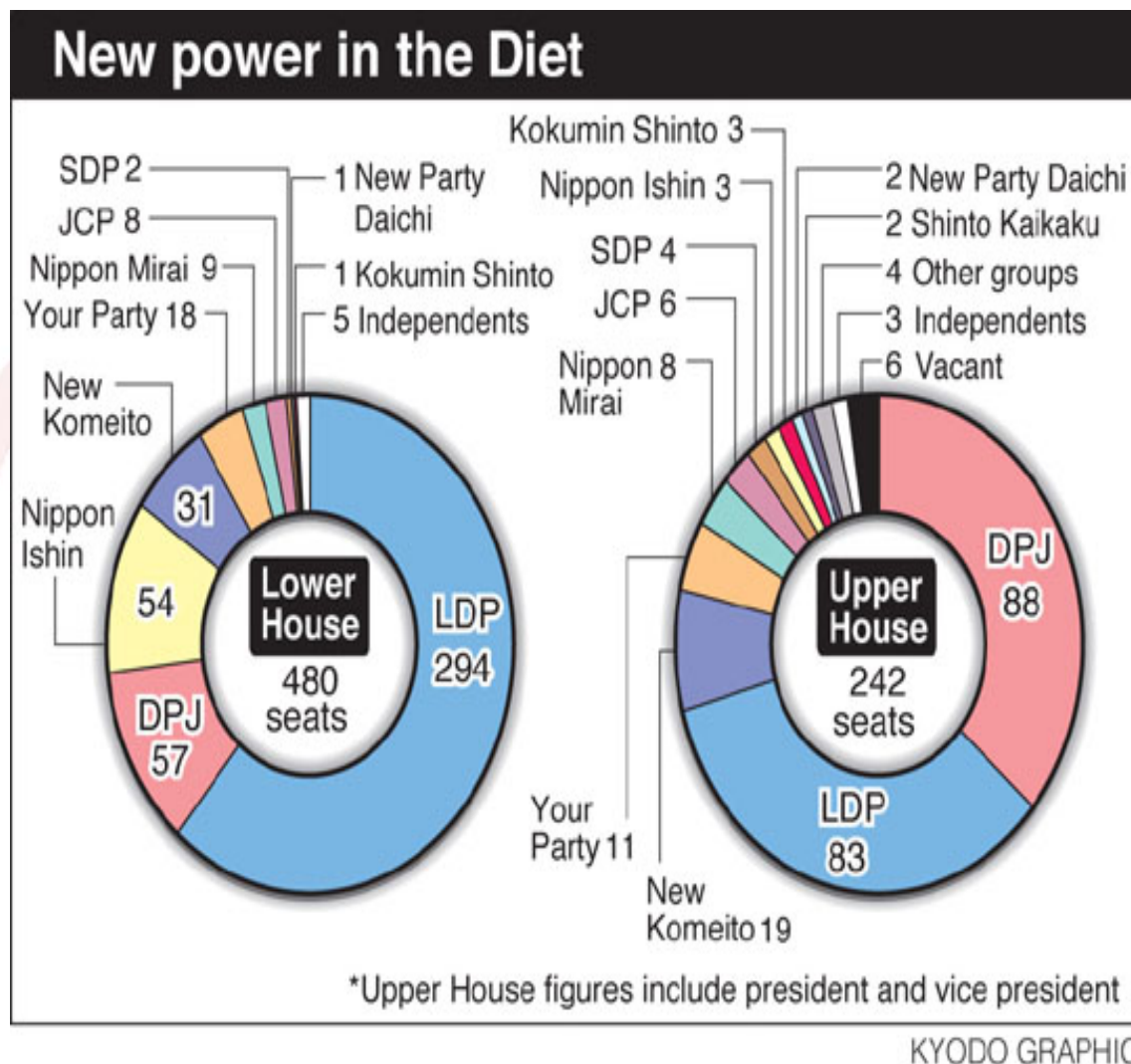
### The 2012 Election Defeat of the DPJ

Under increasing pressure, Noda promised to take dissolve the Lower House ‘soon’, in return for gaining support from the LDP and NKP, to pass legislation in August, to



increase the consumption tax rate. The election held in December 2012 delivered the results shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The Japanese Diet following the 2012 election:



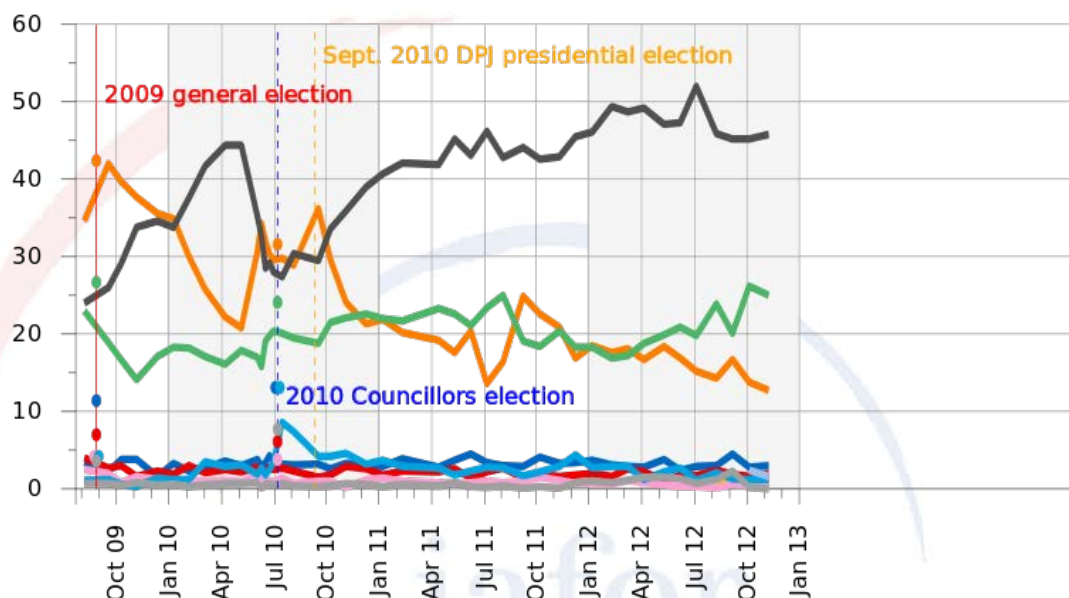
(Source: Kyodo News Agency)

The major reasons for the DPJ's huge loss included:

- The continuous sluggish performance of the economy;
- Lack of action on the DPJ's promise to reform the powerful and opaque bureaucracy;
- The unpopular hike in the consumption tax implemented by the Noda Government in August 2012 (even though this had the bipartisan support of the LDP, the DPJ took the electoral blame, as the presiding government);
- Factional disunity and splits within the DPJ, which included the defection of numerous DPJ members to new splinter parties, such as: the People's Life First

- Party (PLFP), led by factional powerbroker Ichiro Ozawa; and the ultranationalist Japan Restoration Party (JRP), among others;
- Overall dissatisfaction with the government response to the Tohoku disaster, which occurred during the DPJ's administration.

Figure 5: Japanese political party poll results, 2009-12



DPJ – Orange  
 LDP – Green  
 NKP – Dark Blue  
 Social Democratic Party (SDP) – Pink  
 Your Party – Light Blue  
 Communist - Red  
 Others - Gray  
 No party preferred – Black

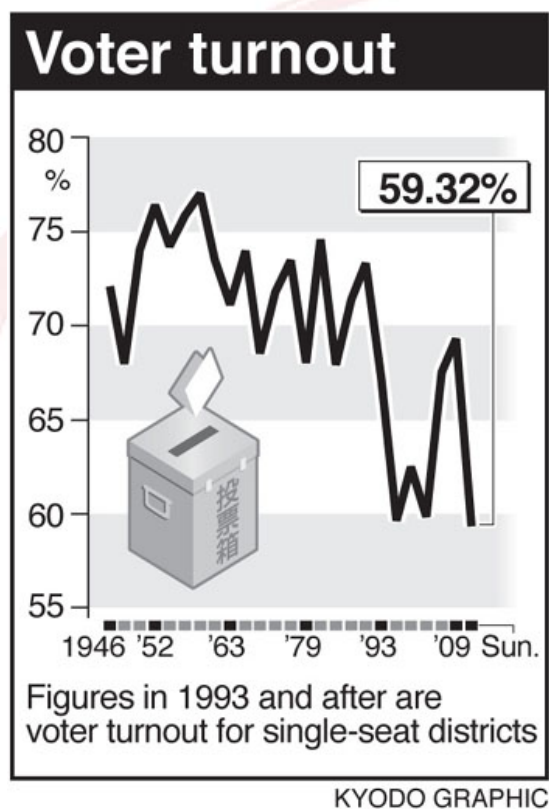
(Source: NHK)

The overall decline of the fortunes of the DPJ Government can be seen in Figure 5: a steady decline in the opinion polls soon after its election in 2009 was followed by a brief resurgence in 2010, with the LDP contesting for advantage through 2011; from 2012, the LDP gradually gained ascendancy, although neither party polled support above 30% since 2011 (the numerous minor parties struggled to rise above a few percentage points). However, the sense of disconnectedness, weak identity and alienation with the party system can be seen in the polling for those preferring no political party: this rose sharply from around 25% after the 2009 election, to 45% by the 2010 election; another dip below 30% was again soon followed by a steady rise to around 40-45% since 2011, even exceeding 50% at one stage in 2012. This is one of the highest enduring 'no party preferred' rates of any democracy.

The clearest indication of disconnectedness, weak identity and alienation with

Japanese politics can be also seen in the historically low voter turnout shown in Figure 6. The 2012 election had the worst voter turnout in Japan's modern history, since the Meiji Restoration saw the inception of parliamentary democracy from 1890 (interrupted by the military-dominated imperialist period of the 1930s, until Japan's defeat in the Second World War, in 1945). (Paine, 2012: 44-46, 209-212)

Figure 6: Japanese postwar election voter turnout



(Source: Kyodo News Agency)

Voter turnout in Japan's voluntary voting system has fluctuated between around 70-80% for most of the postwar period; 2012 election saw a record low of 59.32%. With such a widespread level of dissatisfaction with the party system among the electorate, the defeat of the DPJ was therefore not due to an enthusiastic endorsement of the LDP, as can be further discerned by a closer analysis of the voting result (outlined in Table 1).



Table 1: Japanese Lower House Voting Results 2003-2012

Table 1: Percentage of Lower House Votes (top) and Seats (parentheses) by Party: 2003-2012

	2003			2005			2009			2012			Raw Number
	PR	SMD	Total Seats	PR	SMD	Total Seats	PR	SMD	Total Seats	PR	SMD	Total Seats	
<b>LDP</b>	35.0 (38.3)	43.8 (56.0)	<b>49.4</b>	38.2 (42.8)	47.8 (73.0)	<b>61.7</b>	26.7 (30.6)	38.7 (21.3)	<b>24.8</b>	27.6 (31.7)	43.0 (79.0)	<b>61.3</b>	<b>294</b>
<b>DPJ</b>	37.4 (40.0)	36.7 (35.0)	<b>36.9</b>	31.0 (33.9)	36.4 (17.3)	<b>23.5</b>	42.4 (48.3)	47.4 (73.7)	<b>64.2</b>	15.9 (16.7)	22.8 (9.0)	<b>11.9</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>JRP</b>										20.3 (22.2)	11.6 (4.7)	<b>11.3</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Kōm</b>	14.8 (13.9)	1.5 (3.0)	<b>7.1</b>	13.3 (12.8)	1.4 (2.7)	<b>6.5</b>	11.5 (11.7)	1.1 (0.0)	<b>4.4</b>	11.8 (12.2)	1.4 (3.0)	<b>6.5</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>YP</b>							4.27 (1.7)	.87 (.7)	<b>1.0</b>	8.7 (7.8)	4.7 (1.3)	<b>3.8</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>TPJ</b>										5.6 (3.9)	5 (0.7)	<b>1.9</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>JCP</b>	7.8 (5.0)	8.1 (0.0)	<b>1.9</b>	7.3 (5.0)	7.3 (0.0)	<b>1.9</b>	7.0 (5.0)	4.2 (0.0)	<b>1.9</b>	6.1 (4.4)	7.8 (0.0)	<b>1.7</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>SDP</b>	5.1 (2.8)	2.9 (0.3)	<b>1.2</b>	5.5 (3.3)	1.5 (0.3)	<b>1.5</b>	4.3 (2.2)	2.0 (1.0)	<b>1.5</b>	2.3 (0.6)	.7 (0.3)	<b>0.4</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Other/ Indep.</b>	0.0 (0.0)	7.0 (5.6)	<b>3.5</b>	4.7 (2.2)	5.6 (6.7)	<b>5.0</b>	8.1 (2.2)	6.6 (4.0)	<b>3.3</b>	1.7 (0.6)	3 (2.0)	<b>1.3</b>	<b>7</b>

**Party Abbreviations:** LDP = Liberal Democratic Party; DPJ = Democratic Party of Japan; JRP = Japan Restoration Party; Kōm = New Kōmeitō; YP = Your Party; TPJ = Tomorrow Party of Japan; JCP = Japan Communist Party SDP = Social Democratic Party. **Other** includes People's New Party, New Party Daichi, and New Party Nippon, as well as independents and minor party candidates who ran in SMDs.

(Source: Yomiuri)

Table 1 shows the shifting electoral fortunes of the major parties: the LDP managed relatively small majorities in 2003 and 2005, before suffering a large defeat to the DPJ in 2009. While the LDP secured a large majority of seats in 2012, this was largely due to the high number of Single Member District (SMD) seats won. These are contested through a First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system, where the party with the highest number of votes wins the seat, but this may not be the majority of votes, or the preference of the majority of voters in that electorate. This can be seen in the relatively skewed results; the LDP won 79% of SMD seats, with only 43% of the vote, not even a simple majority.

A more accurate depiction of voter sentiment is reflected in the Proportional Representation (PR) seats, elected by proportional voting based on regional districts, where the numbers of seats won aligns more closely with the number of votes cast. For the PR seats, the LDP secured 27.6%, winning 31.7% of the seats, the largest number of any party, but still far short of a simple majority. The position is somewhat improved once the LDP's partner the NKP is included, adding 11.8% of the PR vote, and 12.2% of the PR seats, although even this still does not deliver a simple majority

of the PR vote to the ruling coalition. Once the SMD seats are included though, the LDP-NKP coalition enjoys over a two-thirds majority in the Lower House, 325 out of 480 seats.

For its part, the extent of the DPJ's decline is reflected in its poor results: 22.8% of the SMD vote, and 15.9% of the PR vote, resulting in only 57 seats, down from 247, a dramatic loss of *over three-quarters* of its Lower House representation. This placed the DPJ behind the new nationalist JRP in its PR vote of 20.3%, with 11.6% of the SMD vote, winning 54 seats in its national election debut. The remaining 9.1% of seats were shared between the small parties and independents; the best performing of these was the neoliberal Your Party (YP), with 8.7% PR vote, and 4.7% SMD vote, winning 18 seats.

Another factor in the Japanese electoral system that has been undermining its legitimacy is the voter-value disparity in numerous electorates, particularly where rural areas have greater weightings per voter than in urban ones. Such was the extent of these disparities (which have traditionally tended to favour the LDP, which receives more support in the more socially conservative and economically protectionist countryside), that the High Court found the 2009 election results to be unconstitutional. Rather than overturn the election result, or demand a new election, the High Court directed that the necessary redistricting reforms be carried out, but no progress was made by the beleaguered DPJ government.

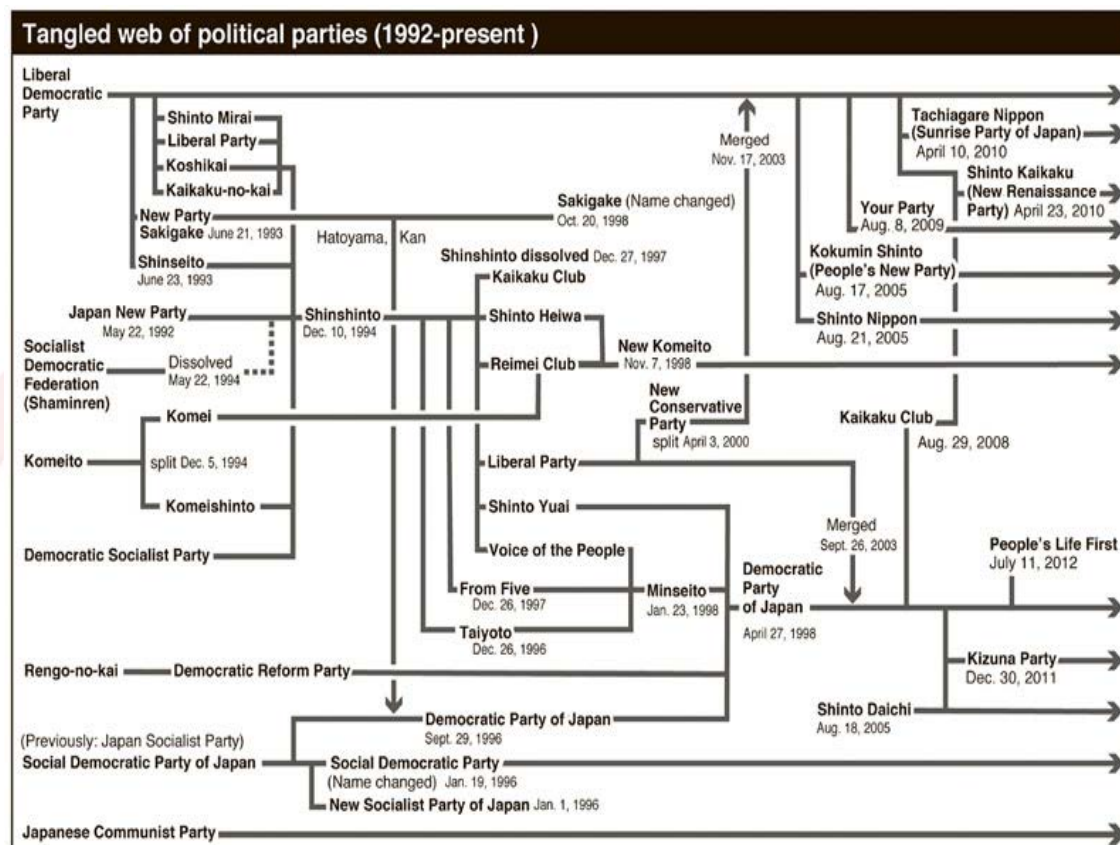
Following the 2012 election, the High Court has again ruled that the results in numerous constituencies were again unconstitutional. To finally resolve the issue, the LDP has proposed cutting the proportional representation section of Lower House from 180 to 150 seats, with 60 seats going to parties other than the highest vote-getter. It remains to be seen whether these proposal will be followed through, however; while the unconstitutional voter-value disparities remain unresolved, it will be just another underlying issue that erodes voter confidence in the political system. (Soble, 2013)

### **The Fate of Smaller Parties in 2012**

The political machinations of the smaller parties during the 2012 election would have further contributed to a sense of alienation and disconnectedness with the Japanese political system. Japan's party system has become more fractured since the 1990s; the major parties have been commonly subject to splits and reformations, with smaller

parties forming, and then often themselves splitting and reforming, in an often confusing *mélange* of factional mergers and realignments, as portrayed in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Japanese political party changes 1992-2012



(Source: Japan Times)

## The JRP

These frequent changes have not only confused the electorate, but have entrenched the image of politicians as self-centered factional powerbrokers, covertly making deals and alliances for their own interests, with the public having no real say or involvement in determining the leadership of these parties, or in any direction of their policy platforms.

The actions around of two of these new parties, the Japan Restoration Party (JRP) (*Nippon Ishin no Kai*), and the Tomorrow Party of Japan (TPJ) (*Nippon Mirai no To*), during the 2012 election clearly demonstrate an example of such behavior, which generated extensive cynicism among the electorate.

The JRP was formed through an amalgamation by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, with former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara. Before the election, the relatively

youthful Hashimoto (aged 43) was often considered one of the most popular political figures in Japan, having also served as Governor of Osaka, and often polling approval ratings of over 70%. His populist policies have included recommendations for abolishing the Upper House, direct elections for Prime Minister, and overall deregulation of government powers and services from the national government in Tokyo, to the regional prefectures. (McCurry, 2012)

Ishihara has been an even more controversial political figure, espousing ultranationalist views, often being accused of xenophobia against foreigners, and other minority groups. In April 2012, he attempted to purchase the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, on behalf of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. This was widely blamed for escalating the ongoing tensions with China over these disputed territories. After resigning as Governor of Tokyo in October, Ishihara merged his briefly-enduring Sunrise Party (*Taiyo no To*) with Hashimoto's regionally based party, the Osaka Restoration Association, to form the JRP in November 2012, in order to contest the national elections, with the older Ishihara (aged 80) formally leading the party, and Hashimoto as 'co-leader', while retaining his position as Mayor of Osaka. (Aoki, 2012)

However, to accommodate Ishihara following the alliance, Hashimoto engaged in a number of major policy backflips, in order to accommodate Ishihara. In the most prominent of these, Hashimoto had previously opposed restarting Japan's nuclear reactors, following the 2011 Fukushima power plant disaster; he then reversed this decision, following the merger, as Ishihara strongly advocated nuclear power. Hashimoto had also previously supported Japan joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade talks; he again reversed his position, as the strongly protectionist Ishihara opposed it. (Johnston, 2012)

While this sudden policy reversal worsened public cynicism overall, and damaged Hashimoto's popularity and credibility in particular, the JRP was nevertheless able to make a fairly successful debut in the 2012 election, effectively becoming a 'third force' in the Diet (to which Ishihara was elected). However, the large size of the LDP's majority has meant the JRP has been denied the chance to play any power-brokering role with the government, which had been its hope before the election.

### **The TPJ**

An even more blatantly cynical exercise was the unfortunate experience of the TPJ,



which also was hurriedly formed in November 2012. The TPJ began when the Governor of Shiga prefecture, Yukiko Kada, allied her political support base with the People's Life First Party (PFLP). The PFLP had itself only formed in August 2012, when faction leader Ichiro Ozawa split his bloc from the DPJ, in protest at the increase in the consumption tax by the Noda Government. As well as opposing the consumption tax hike, the TPJ portrayed itself as a pro-environment, anti-nuclear party, hoping to ride the wave of sentiment against nuclear power, which had swept Japan following the Fukushima crisis. (Asahi Shimbun, 2012)

However, Kada's fateful decision to join forces with Ozawa, seemingly out of desperation to increase the TPJ's potential support base, turned out to be a severe political error. A Diet member since 1969, starting out with the LDP, Ozawa has long been regarded as a symbol of the shadowy, 'backroom' factional machinations that have persistently damaged the image of Japanese politics. After quitting the LDP in 1993, Ozawa established, then split and reformed three new political parties over the next ten years, before merging with the DPJ in 2003. He served as DPJ leader from 2006 to 2009, stepping down before the election due to a financial property scandal. While being credited for organizing the DPJ's election campaign victory in 2009, his career has long been dogged by scandals, the most recent of which was an indictment in 2011, over again misusing political funds (although he was acquitted in 2012, largely on a technicality). (Tabuchi, 2012)

Given this dubious political record, voters had good grounds to regard the TPJ merger as a typically opportunistic ploy by Ozawa. He embraced the pro-environment platform of the TPJ, despite having no real previous policy inclinations towards the issue, attempting another openly populist appeal for electoral support. He also hoped to benefit from latching onto Kada's image as a relative 'cleanskin', who was firmly against waste and corruption.

The TPJ started the election with 61 members in the Lower House, and 12 in the Upper House, predominantly former members of the PFLP who were already in the Diet. Led by Kada, with Ozawa as deputy leader, the performance of the TPJ in the election was dismal, only gaining 5.6% of the PR vote, and 5% of the SMD vote, resulting in only 9 seats (see Table 1). Showing his utter political cynicism, Ozawa split the TPJ immediately afterwards, taking what remained of his former PFLP bloc to form the Lifestyle Party (LP) (*Seikatsu no To*), leaving behind just one lone TPJ member. Kada resigned as TPJ leader, remaining Shiga Governor, but under pressure from the prefectural assembly. (Japan Times, 2013)



## **‘Abenomics’**

Having achieved dominance of the Lower House, the next challenge and ambition for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the LDP is to replicate this success in the Upper House of Councillors election, due in July 2013. Abe is hoping this will be achieved on the back of his economic policy, popularly termed ‘Abenomics’, which has so far proved to be politically successful. (Aso, 2013: 2-3)

Abenomics is the LDP government’s attempt to stimulate the economy, aiming to finally drag Japan out of its almost quarter-century long stagnation. The plan is commonly considered to comprise three parts:

1. ‘Unlimited’ Quantitative Easing (QE) conducted by the Bank of Japan (BoJ), selling government bonds to effectively ‘print’ money and at least double the money supply, with the aim of achieving a 2% inflation target, ending decades of deflation. This also aimed at devaluing the yen, making export industries more competitive;
2. Fiscal Stimulus spending (¥13.1 trillion in the initial government budget for FY2013, up to ¥200 trillion over ten years), particularly through infrastructure repair and public works construction, and increased defense and education spending; although this will be largely funded through increased public debt, which at over 240% of GDP, is already the highest of any developed country;
3. Various structural reforms, including encouraging greater R&D in science and technology, promoting higher levels of English literacy, and encouraging more workplace participation by women, among other proposed regulatory improvements aimed at raising productivity in the economy. Related to this is participation in regional free trade talks to open up the economy to greater international competition. Most prominent of these is the TPP, but it also includes the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) talks, and potentially a trilateral China-Korea-Japan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) (although the latter seems unlikely at this stage, given the other diplomatic disputes Japan currently has with its neighbours). (Stiglitz, 2013)

Abenomics seems so far to be delivering required results: the Nikkei Index has lifted over 40% following the election (but still remains well below the peak of the 1989 ‘bubble’); Government bond yields are at 10-year lows, near their lowest ever (0.56% for 10-year bonds, 0.13% for 5-years); the yen has depreciated against the US\$ by at

least 18%; manufacturing and services output has risen, with an overall increase in business and consumer confidence. The corresponding relative political success of the LDP Abe government is indicated by recent opinion polls, with approval ratings for the Abe cabinet and Abenomics trending at over 70%. The Abe government has thus so far enjoyed a longer 'honeymoon' period than its DPJ predecessors, which tended to start out with high approval ratings, before rapidly dropping. (Takenaka, 2013)

A big test for the Abe administration will be whether it can transfer this high level of support to achieve progress towards more controversial issues, which enjoy far less public support. For example, 70% oppose re-starting nuclear power plants, which the LDP regards as a vital economic necessity, to secure the nation's energy supply. Even potentially more contentious, and certainly far-reaching for Japanese foreign policy, are proposals for constitutional reform allowing wider use of the Self Defense Forces. This issue has gained more traction in the wake of the escalating Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands dispute with China, tensions over North Korea's missile and nuclear tests, and the hostage crisis in Algeria in January 2013, which saw several Japanese hostages killed. (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2013)

However, only around 50% polled support changing Article 9 of the Constitution, which limits Japan to maintaining 'Self Defense' Forces, with a purely 'defensive' doctrine and structure. The LDP has long desired to restore the SDF to a 'National Defense' Force, able to operate as a regular military, in particular being able to participate in 'collective security' with its allies, namely the US. While the LDP justifies this policy as reflecting the more uncertain and unstable security environment Japan faces in the region and the wider world, such a historic change would be highly controversial, both domestically and internationally; many of Japan's neighbours, especially China, but also the Koreans, would be fiercely opposed, to say the least. (Asahi Shimbun, 2013)

### **The 2013 Election**

The Upper House elections due in July 2013 will therefore be the next test of whether the long-running pattern of disillusionment with Japanese politics continues, or if the LDP under Abe has finally managed to reinvigorate a higher level of engagement with and enthusiasm for the political system (an example of forthcoming campaign material can be seen in Figure 8 below). The ultimate achievement for the LDP will be whether it can secure a two-thirds majority in Upper House, either in its own right, or at least with legislative cooperation from the JRP and Your Party. This would

allow the Abe government to enact widespread constitutional and legislative change. While having over a two-thirds majority in the Lower House does allow the Government to overturn any legislation that is blocked in the Upper House, this process is cumbersome and virtually untested, and would certainly be politically challenging.

However a two-thirds majority in both Houses could allow change to Article 96 of the Constitution, which itself authorizes the procedure for Constitutional change. Reforming the Constitution currently requires a two-thirds majority in both houses, followed by a national referendum, requiring a simple majority of the public's vote to pass (Abe reduced this from a two-thirds majority required in referendums, in legislation passed in his first term, in 2006-2007). The LDP favours altering Article 96, to allow legislation to change the Constitution to pass with a simple majority in both houses of the Diet. This would allow controversial measures such as altering Article 9 to potentially be achieved more easily. (Kersten, 2013)

The 2013 Upper House election could therefore prove to be even more decisive in the long term than that of 2012. If Shinzo Abe is able to transfer the current popularity of the LDP, based on its economic policies, to a commanding majority in the Upper House, then more confronting and unpopular legislation and policies may then be implemented, particularly on constitutional change and foreign and defense policy. Should this come to pass, the LDP may then find its present popularity under challenge; the long-standing sense of voter alienation, weak party identity, and a fragile sense of connectedness with the political system in Japan could then return to the overall malaise it has suffered for the past generation.

*Figure 8: Campaign Mascots of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (left) and LDP Secretary-General Shigeru Ishiba:*



(Source: Kyodo News Agency)

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