

7 DPJ election strategy

The dilemma of landslide victory

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The DPJ contested elections through two fundamentally distinct, and in many ways inconsistent, electoral strategies. Party members who had belonged to the DPJ since its inception sought to win elections by appealing broadly to the average Japanese voter with a platform of open, reformist politics. Another group within the party, centered around Ichirō Ozawa, developed a pragmatic, meticulous election strategy that sought to capture the LDP's traditional support base—rural voters and concentrated interest groups—with promises of government largesse.

In the 2007 Upper House election and the 2009 Lower House election, these strategies meshed brilliantly. The DPJ sailed to victory by riding a wave of reform-minded urban swing voters, but the party also secured crucial support from traditional supporters of the LDP in rural districts. Once in power, however, the DPJ suffered from incoherence. The contradictions of the party's election strategies came to a head as the Ozawa group, which comprised many junior lawmakers elected from traditional LDP strongholds, repeatedly clashed with the party's reformist old guard. By the 2010 Upper House election, the DPJ had largely abandoned Ozawa's rural strategy. This proved fatal: despite winning a larger share of total votes, the DPJ lost control of the Upper House, which heavily over-represents rural districts. In the resulting divided government, or "twisted Diet," the LDP made it excruciatingly difficult for the DPJ to govern. The Ozawa group ultimately abandoned the party in 2012, and both groups were crushed in the 2012 Lower House election, putting an end to DPJ government after only three years and three months in power.

The DPJ's defeat was not simply the result of a conflict of personalities or political philosophy between the Ozawa and anti-Ozawa camps. Both major political parties of Japan, when in power, have struggled with seemingly endless interne-cine conflict. I will argue that this reflects basic features of contemporary Japanese politics that necessitate broad appeal in order to assemble legislative majorities in both houses of the Diet. As examined in the preceding chapters of this volume, the DPJ's various contradictions were reflected in its manifesto, budgetary policy, party governance, and lack of a coherent ideology. In this chapter, I will review the success and failure of the DPJ's election strategies, beginning with the 2007 Upper House election, in which the party unquestionably established itself as a credible alternative to the LDP, and concluding with the 2012 general election,

which marked the downfall of the DPJ government. For the sake of consistency with other chapters, I will avoid detailed theoretical discussions and empirical analysis of election data, which are available elsewhere, focusing instead on the firsthand perspectives and assessments of DPJ lawmakers.¹

The DPJ's success in 2007 and 2009

Swimming upstream: the DPJ's rural strategy

The July 2007 Upper House election was a major stepping stone for the DPJ as it sought to establish itself as a governing party. The DPJ became the largest party in the Upper House, and together with other opposition parties, controlled a majority of seats in the chamber. This created divided government, known in Japan as a "twisted Diet" (*nejire kokkai*), in which different parties control each house of the Diet. The DPJ used its control of the Upper House to stymie the LDP and New Komeito coalition government.

Until 2007, the DPJ had faced an uncertain future following its overwhelming defeat in the September 2005 election, in which Jun'ichirō Koizumi won on his platform of structural reform and postal privatization. The DPJ's fortunes began to change with the advent of the Shinzō Abe administration, which succeeded that of Koizumi in September 2006. Shortly after taking office, Abe allowed the "postal rebels," who had been expelled from the LDP for opposing the postal privatization bill in the Diet, to rejoin the party. In the eyes of the voters, this marked a retreat from the reformist policies of the Koizumi era. The Abe government was rocked by a series of scandals and resignations, and it emerged that the government was unable to locate over fifty million pension records. The DPJ seized upon this issue and successfully reclaimed its image as the party of reform, capitalizing upon deepening disillusionment and plummeting support for the LDP.

However, the DPJ did not win the Upper House election simply by reclaiming the mantle of reform. The election strategy of Ichirō Ozawa, often described as a "god of elections" in Japanese political circles, was critical. For several years following the DPJ's September 2003 merger with the Ozawa-led Liberal Party, Ozawa claimed to be nothing more than a "rank-and-file soldier" of the party. However, after assuming leadership of the party in April 2006, Ozawa began to target traditional supporters of the LDP, such as the agricultural cooperatives and the construction industry. Ozawa proposed generous government programs, such as a direct rural subsidy, which increased support for the DPJ in rural areas where the party had heretofore made little headway.

Ozawa also impressed upon DPJ lawmakers, who were largely inexperienced in locally-based campaign tactics, the importance of solidifying a support base through what he called the "upstream strategy" (*kawakami senryaku*). "Upstream" has a double meaning in this context. Interpreted literally, the upstream areas of Japanese rivers are the predominantly rural, mountainous regions of the country. However, Ozawa's strategy also viewed political investment in upstream regions as valuable because the effects would flow downstream, reinforcing support even

in densely populated coastal cities: "In the countryside, the speed of communication is remarkable. In particular, farming households far away from urban areas belong to a society marked by territorial and familial bonds, in which there is little in the way of entertainment, and many elderly people. People there are impressed if you come all that way to make a speech, and immediately call their children's families and acquaintances elsewhere, spreading the message in no time" (Masayuki Naoshima). Ozawa's approach introduced a new dimension to the DPJ's election strategy, which had up until this point been subject to the whims of mercurial urban voters.

The seeds of incoherence

Ozawa's targeting of rural voters and other traditional LDP supporters introduced crucial contradictions within the DPJ. There are enormous differences in the political interests of reform-minded urban voters on the one hand and rural voters and vested interest groups on the other. The LDP confronted this problem well before the DPJ, most glaringly during Koizumi's premiership. Koizumi captured the hearts of urban, floating voters by promising to "destroy the LDP," breaking fundamentally from old-style LDP politics, which was perceived as beholden to vested interests. Koizumi's election strategy resulted in an enormous victory for the LDP, but it also alienated the construction industry, the national association of commissioned postmasters (now the national association of postmasters), agricultural cooperatives, and other interest groups concentrated primarily in rural areas. Before long, criticisms of "regional impoverishment" and a "stratified society" emerged, and the LDP's traditional support base was up for grabs.

Ozawa viewed this as an enormous opportunity for the DPJ. Just as Koizumi sought to attract urban, floating voters by broadening the appeal of his party, Ozawa's rural strategy was an attempt to expand the DPJ's support base beyond urban, floating voters by reaching out to the LDP's traditional support base.

The rural bias of the Japanese Upper House

Another factor in the DPJ's 2007 Upper House victory that must not be overlooked is the distinctive nature of the Upper House electoral system. The Upper House, which holds elections for half (121) of its members every three years, is made up of a nationwide proportional representation tier and prefectural electoral districts. In the prefectural electoral districts, 73 seats are divided among the forty-seven prefectures. After one seat has been allocated to each prefecture, only 26 seats remain. The remaining 26 seats are allocated to prefectures with the largest populations, creating eighteen prefectures with multi-member electoral districts with between two and five seats. In contrast, the twenty-nine less populated rural prefectures are single-member districts.²

As a result, the disparity in the weight of a single vote for the Upper House can be as great as five-fold, with a strong bias in favor of rural prefectures. This stands in contrast to the situation in the Lower House. In the Lower House, three

hundred seats are allocated to single-member districts, and the demarcation lines of these districts are easier to change, limiting the seat-vote disparity to just two-fold.

Moreover, multi-member districts tend to produce relatively stable allocations of seats among parties. For example, in districts with two members, it is very common for an LDP and DPJ candidate to secure one seat each. In contrast, election results in the single-member districts are volatile from election to election, since a modest swing in the vote can overturn the outcome. In recent years, swings in the predominantly rural, single-member districts of the Upper House have exerted an excessive influence on election outcomes. Ozawa, who was well-acquainted with the distortions of the Upper House electoral system, realized that the only path for the DPJ to secure control of both houses of the Diet was to develop an efficacious rural strategy.

The DPJ won a resounding victory in the 2007 Upper House election, capturing 60 of the 121 seats up for election, compared to the LDP's 37. Including party-held seats not up for election in that year, the DPJ secured a total of 109 seats. While not a majority, this outnumbered the total of 103 combined seats for the LDP (83) and New Komeito (20). Crucially, in the single-member districts of the twenty-nine rural prefectures, the DPJ crushed the LDP, winning in seventeen prefectures to the LDP's six. Ozawa's strategy had been a decisive success. Total votes cast for the DPJ also exceeded those for the LDP in both the proportional representation tier and the electoral districts (Table 7.1). This stunning loss led to Abe's resignation in September, and the DPJ began to lay the groundwork for the ultimate prize: victory in the Lower House.

Taking power

The DPJ, which had reduced the LDP to a minority party in the Upper House, cooperated with other opposition parties to undermine the LDP government. With authority nearly co-equal to that of the Lower House, the Upper House could obstruct government-sponsored legislation and personnel matters. The DPJ succeeded in bringing the LDP-New Komeito coalition government to a standstill.

Table 7.1 A comparison of DPJ and LDP vote and seat distribution in the 2007 Upper House election (58.6% voter turnout)

	Electoral districts (73 seats)		Proportional representation (48 seats)		Seats (of 121 open)
	Votes (1,000)	Seats	Votes (1,000)	Seats	
DPJ	24,007	40	23,256	20	60
	40.5%	54.8%	39.5%	41.7%	49.6%
LDP	18,606	23	16,545	14	37
	31.4%	31.5%	28.1%	29.2%	30.6%

Yasuo Fukuda, Abe's successor as prime minister, cited the difficulty of dealing with the "twisted Diet" as a key reason behind his resignation in September 2008, after just one year in office. The DPJ continued to increase its public support during the government of Tarō Asō.

The DPJ won the August 2009 Lower House election in a landslide, bringing a decisive end to more than fifty years of nearly continuous rule by the LDP. The DPJ won 308 seats in the Lower House to the LDP's 119 and New Komeito's 21. The total number of votes for the DPJ also greatly surpassed those for the LDP in both the proportional representation tier and the single-member districts (Table 7.2).

DPJ campaign slogans, such as "a total reorganization of the budget," and "from concrete to people" garnered support from urban, floating voters who saw the party as a force for political reform. Ozawa's 2007 Upper House election strategy was also maintained, attracting significant support from rural voters: of the one hundred least populated single-member districts, the DPJ won 49 seats to the LDP's 42.

In the general election, however, "the DPJ did not win so much as the LDP collapsed" (Katsuya Okada). LDP prime ministers Abe, Fukuda and Asō had all only remained in office for a year, and the LDP's approval ratings, which had been as high as 44 percent during the Koizumi government, fell to just 23 percent in the run-up to the election.³ In retrospect, the DPJ would likely have won the 2009 Lower House election even if it had not expanded its support base in such indiscriminate fashion. The overextension of the DPJ's base of support would come back to haunt the party as it assumed power.

The effects of the single-member district system

The 1994 electoral reform for the Lower House was a pivotal moment in recent Japanese politics. With its emphasis on single-member districts, the new system was intended to break away from the one-party dominant system of the LDP, and make alternations in power feasible by promoting the consolidation of opposition parties. While single-member districts generate a large number of "wasted"

Table 7.2 A comparison of DPJ and LDP vote and seat distribution in the 2009 general election (69.3% voter turnout)

	Electoral districts (300 seats)		Proportional representation (180 seats)		Seats (of 480 total)
	Votes (1,000)	Seats	Votes (1,000)	Seats	
DPJ	33,475	221	29,845	87	308
	47.4%	73.7%	42.4%	48.3%	64.2%
LDP	27,302	64	18,810	55	119
	38.7%	21.3%	26.7%	30.6%	24.8%

votes, they can amplify the electoral consequences of shifts in public opinion, thus facilitating alternations in power. The DPJ was the prime beneficiary of this new system.

The proportional representation tier of the Lower House, which constitutes 180 of the 480 seats, was designed to benefit smaller parties and reduce the overall volatility of the system. However, in the ten years since the adoption of this new system, there has been a striking rise in the volatility of Lower House election outcomes. Focusing only on single-member districts, the LDP won 73 percent of Lower House seats with 48 percent of the vote in the 2005 general election. In 2009, it was the DPJ that captured 74 percent of the seats with 47 percent of the vote. And in 2012, the LDP once again took 79 percent of the seats with 43 percent of the vote.

As David Mayhew (2005) has noted in his work on divided government in the United States, overwhelming victory by a single political party does not necessarily increase legislative productivity. This is because landslide victories substitute intra-party conflict for inter-party conflict. Representing a full three-fourths of electoral districts nationwide, the DPJ was fundamentally transformed. The moment it ascended to power, the party was confronted with a surge of newly minted lawmakers representing a vast range of constituents and interest groups. This made it extremely difficult to maintain a coherent policy agenda.

Furthermore, Japanese elections are increasingly subject to partisan swings: a candidate's fortunes are swayed heavily by party affiliation, rather than by individual ability or accomplishments. As a result, even powerful, veteran lawmakers can easily lose their seats in a sweeping electoral defeat for their political party. Conversely, inexperienced freshman lawmakers are elected in large numbers courtesy of their party label, as symbolized by the Koizumi and Ozawa "children," who came to power en masse respectively from the LDP and DPJ—only to be decimated as the political pendulum swung away from their party.

Above all, after the 2009 election, the fact that a majority of the DPJ's 143 freshman lawmakers were elected with campaign or fundraising assistance from Ozawa cast a cloud over party governance. Most joined the Ozawa group within the party and grew dissatisfied with their lot as rank-and-file lawmakers: another consequence of overwhelming majority status is that there are not enough formal government and party posts to go around. Novice lawmakers in the Ozawa group grew deeply frustrated with other members of their own party.

The fact that the DPJ had not effectively solidified its support base also contributed to turmoil and conflict within the party. Most DPJ freshman lawmakers "were elected due to prevailing political winds, and had not really interacted with local voters" (Okada). When the political winds began to change direction, these freshmen grew nervous about their re-election prospects. This heightened the attraction of interest groups capable of delivering organized votes. "These were people without a support base of their own, so if an organization promised to deliver support, they would focus entirely upon advocating for that organization. Real reform is impossible with this type of freshman lawmaker" (Jun Azumi).

This was a major source of friction that contributed to antagonism between the reformist and Ozawa camps, mass party defections, and the party's reputation for indecisiveness.

The incoherence of the DPJ manifesto

Beginning with the 2007 Upper House election, Ozawa's electoral strategy heavily influenced the DPJ manifesto. Reference to a consumption tax hike disappeared from the document, while financial commitments to the party's proposals, such as the income compensation system for farming households and the child support allowance, increased sharply.

Within the party, there was deep-seated criticism of Ozawa's election strategy on the grounds that it lacked principles. Ozawa's strategy seemed to ape the LDP's playbook, and ran counter to the reformist sensibilities of many DPJ members. "It was all about enticing the LDP's support base over to the DPJ. There was no effort to confront or challenge Japan's old vested interests. Rather, the strategy was to give financial paybacks to any group willing to support the DPJ" (Azumi).

These disagreements over basic principles lay at the heart of the reformist camp's ultimate rejection of the Ozawa group. Former Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation Seiji Maehara says "the Ozawa group had close ties with interest groups like the trucking association, and the chairman of the Lower House Committee on Land, Infrastructure and Transportation was also an Ozawa ally. When we refused to follow their marching orders, they sabotaged government bills by halting deliberations, even though they were members of the same party."

The party manifesto, which was designed to expand the party's support base through promises of financial rewards, was an important element in the DPJ's 2007 and 2009 election campaigns. At the same time, as explained in detail in Chapter 1, it also became a decisive factor in the DPJ's struggles once in power.

Was the 2003 merger between the Liberal Party and the DPJ, which brought Ozawa into the party, fundamentally flawed? While it is easy to criticize Ozawa in retrospect, it is striking that his rural strategy continues to be acknowledged as "exceptionally effective" (Gōshi Hosono). Without Ozawa's rural strategy, the DPJ might have been able to pull off a victory in 2009, but control of the Upper House would have likely proved elusive. In any case, the DPJ achieved victory through a hasty, somewhat uncoordinated embrace of interest groups, and came to include a large number of freshman lawmakers elected from rural districts that were traditional LDP strongholds. This was a crucial cause of the incoherence and internecine conflict that characterized the DPJ government.

The 2010 Upper House election and the "twisted Diet"

The waning fortunes of the DPJ government

In response to our survey, a majority of DPJ lawmakers cited the party's defeat in the July 2010 Upper House election as the most important turning point during the party's three years and three months in power. A number of factors contributed to

this defeat. The party's reformist image had been badly damaged by the campaign finance scandals of Ozawa and Yukio Hatoyama. Many DPJ campaign pledges were being downgraded or abandoned as they proved financially unrealistic. Hatoyama mishandled the Futenma base relocation issue and resigned abruptly as prime minister in June.

However, 82 percent of DPJ lawmakers cited Prime Minister Naoto Kan's decision to propose a consumption tax hike immediately after taking office, and his subsequent mishandling of the issue, as the primary factor in the DPJ's 2010 defeat. During the 2009 general election, Hatoyama had declared that the consumption tax would not be raised for at least four years, and the 2009 manifesto had omitted any mention of a tax hike. Kan hastily modified the Upper House election manifesto, however, describing the consumption tax hike as an issue that must be confronted immediately. Kan also alluded to a plan to raise the tax rate to 10 percent during a press briefing.

Kan was searching for a signature policy to set the tone for his new government. However, the announcement of the consumption tax hike was abrupt, and had not been thought through carefully. "In just three days and on almost no sleep, we converted the Hatoyama Manifesto into the Kan Manifesto. Kan felt it was wrong to focus only on reviewing the past; we also had to do something for the future. To that end, Kan came up with the consumption tax hike and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)" (Hosono).

Kan's attraction to the consumption tax issue can be traced to his tenure as finance minister under Hatoyama. In February 2010, as the Greek debt crisis unfolded amid a worldwide recession, Kan attended a G7 summit in Canada. The Greek debt crisis and the country's enormous budget deficit left a strong impression on Kan, who saw parallels to Japan's predicament. "I was shocked when Kan returned from that one-week trip. For the first time, I heard the words 'sovereign risk' come out of his mouth, and that evolved into the consumption tax proposal. I have heard bureaucrats say that overseas trips are a great opportunity: this was a classic example of brainwashing by Ministry of Finance bureaucrats" (Seiji Ōsaka).

Kan was also overconfident. Initial public opinion polls gave the Kan government an approval rating of 60 percent, and an independent survey conducted by the DPJ a month before the election predicted the party would win sixty seats. "If approval ratings had been 40 percent instead, or if it looked as if each electoral district would be fiercely contested, Kan would probably not have attempted something so risky" (Azumi).

Yet it is also worth contemplating how Kan could make such an unexpected and abrupt policy shift that would sway the result of a national election upon which the party's fortunes depended. The DPJ's loose governance structure imposed few constraints on the ability of prime ministers to adopt policy proposals almost unilaterally, even when they had weak support from the rest of the party: this is also illustrated by Hatoyama's handling of the Futenma issue and Noda's single-minded focus on the consumption tax hike. All of these episodes diminished the DPJ's popularity and exacerbated rifts within the party.

Kan's mishandling of the consumption tax issue

At a press conference announcing his intention to stand for the party leadership, Kan set out an anti-Ozawa line, announcing that Ozawa "should keep quiet for a while" following his resignation as secretary-general due to involvement in a campaign finance scandal (*Asahi Shinbun*, June 4, 2010). While this emphasized the DPJ's roots as a party of reform, it also exacerbated internal conflict. In the September following the Upper House election, Ozawa challenged Kan for the party leadership, severely criticizing Kan's stance on the consumption tax hike as "a violation of the manifesto." While Ozawa lost the party leadership contest, the rift within the party only grew larger.

The proposal to raise the consumption tax to 10 percent had originally been put forth as an Upper House election campaign pledge by the LDP. During a press conference to announce the government's platform for the upcoming Upper House election, Kan made an impromptu reply to a question regarding the scope of the proposed tax hike, saying he would consider the 10 percent consumption tax proposed by the LDP. In this way, the 10 percent consumption tax became a campaign pledge of the Kan administration. According to Naoshima, Kan believed that "if he proposed the same policy as the LDP, the issue would be neutralized ('plus minus zero')."

Flustered as his support rates began to drop precipitously following mention of a consumption tax hike, Kan began alluding abruptly to tax refunds for low-wage earners, but the details of the scheme changed with each statement. "I was asked for my opinion before the consumption tax hike announcement, and I replied that Kan could bring it up as long as he didn't waver on the issue. But he wavered continuously [ahead of] the Upper House election. If Kan hadn't prepared sufficiently, he should not have made the announcement" (Maehara). Cabinet approval ratings, which had been at 60 percent, fell to 40 percent in the lead-up to the election. The election climate "grew worse with each poll we conducted" (Hosono).

As can be seen from Figure 7.1, there was a common trend in the cabinet approval ratings for Abe, Fukuda and Asō, the three preceding LDP prime ministers, and Hatoyama, and Noda, the two other DPJ prime ministers: high initial approval ratings followed by a rapid decline. However, the decline in Kan's cabinet approval ratings immediately after taking office and leading up to the election is particularly pronounced when compared to the trends for other prime ministers. Kan's approval ratings also temporarily recovered to the common trend after the election. Kan's mishandling of the consumption tax hike issue brought about the worst-case scenario in terms of election strategy: a temporary, drastic suppression of government approval on the eve of a major election.

The return of the "twisted Diet"

The Upper House election resulted in defeat for the DPJ. While the party entered the election with 54 seats to be contested, this total fell to 44. Including seats not up for re-election in 2010, the DPJ's total number of seats dropped to 106—falling

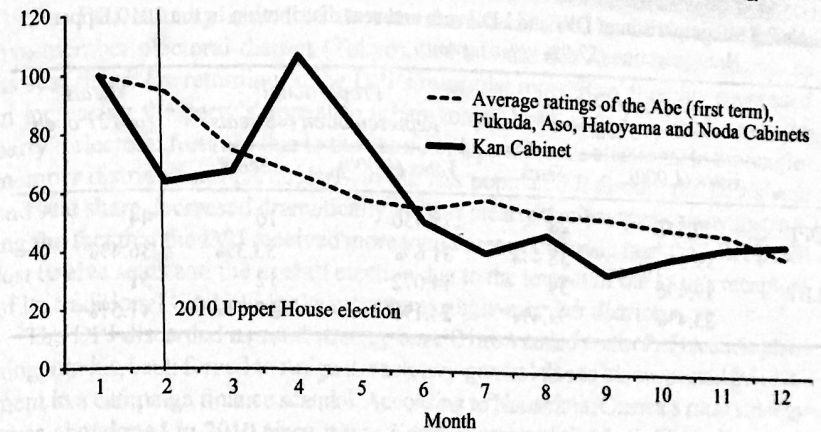


Figure 7.1 Trends in cabinet approval ratings.

Based upon initial approval rating normalized to 100 at the beginning of each administration.

Compiled using data from NHK's monthly political opinion surveys.

well short of the majority the party had hoped to achieve. By comparison, the LDP captured 51 seats, for a total of 84. Including seats held by New Komeito, an LDP ally, the total rose to 103. As the Social Democratic Party had withdrawn from its coalition with the DPJ at the end of the Hatoyama administration, and DPJ coalition partner the People's New Party captured just three seats, opposition parties became the majority in the Upper House. It was now the DPJ government's turn to confront a "twisted Diet."

The election results appear quite differently, however, when one compares the total number of seats captured to the number of votes cast. In the proportional representation tier, the DPJ received 18,450,000 votes, or 32 percent of the vote, compared to the LDP's 14,070,000 votes (24 percent). In the prefectural electoral districts, the DPJ received 22,760,000 votes (39 percent) to the LDP's 19,500,000 (33 percent). The DPJ led the LDP in both the proportional representation tier and the electoral districts (Table 7.3).

As discussed in the preceding section, this disjuncture between the number of votes won and seats captured is due to the distortions in the Upper House electoral system. In the 2010 election, it was the DPJ's turn to suffer due to these distortions, in which outcomes are heavily influenced by rural, sparsely populated prefectures. The LDP captured 21 of the 29 rural, single-member district seats, while the DPJ won just 8. This was a complete inversion of the 2007 Upper House election results, in which the LDP won 6 seats to the DPJ's 17.

The difference between the DPJ's total vote and seat shares in the 2007 and 2010 Upper House elections is depicted in Table 7.4, using the total number of voters in a given electoral district. As illustrated by population density and the ratio of full-time farmers in a district, the five-member district (Tokyo) is the most urban, while the single-member districts are the most rural. For illustrative purposes, the single-member districts are further split equally into the relatively densely populated Group (A) and the less densely populated Group (B).

Table 7.3 A comparison of DPJ and LDP vote and seat distribution in the 2010 Upper House election (57.9% voter turnout)

	Electoral Districts (73 seats)		Proportional Representation (48 seats)		Seats (of 121 open)
	Votes (1,000)	Seats	Votes (1,000)	Seats	
DPJ	22,756	28	18,450	16	44
	39.0%	38.4%	31.6%	33.3%	36.4%
LDP	19,496	39	14,072	12	51
	33.4%	53.4%	24.1%	25.0%	41.5%

Table 7.4 Changes in voter support for the DPJ and DPJ seat totals: a comparison of the 2007 and 2010 Upper House election results

	All districts	5-member district	3-member districts	2-member districts	Single- member districts A	Single- member districts B
Population density	—	6016	2590	387	283	205
Ratio of full-time farming households	—	1	11	43	51	69
Average percentage of votes for the DPJ in 2007	40%	32%	43%	46%	51%	50%
Average percentage of votes for the DPJ in 2010	39%	39%	36%	41%	41%	37%
Changes in voter support for the DPJ	-1%	7%	-7%	-5%	-10%	-13%
DPJ-captured seats in 2007	40	2	9	12	9	8
DPJ-captured seats in 2010	28	2	6	12	6	2
Change in DPJ seat totals	-12	0	-3	0	-3	-6

Population density is measured by the number of people per square kilometer (in 2010).
Ratio of farming households is normalized so that Tokyo = 1 (in 2010).

The DPJ actually increased its vote share from 2007 to 2010 in the urban, five-member electoral district (Tokyo), but this did not result in any change to its seat share. By returning to the DPJ's reformist roots, Kan arguably succeeded in increasing the party's appeal to urban voters, but this had little effect on the party's electoral fortunes due to the nature of Upper House elections. In the single-member districts, and particularly in the less populated B Group, the DPJ's vote and seat share decreased dramatically. As this clearly demonstrates, notwithstanding the fact that the DPJ received more total votes nationwide than the LDP, it still lost twelve seats and the overall election due to the impact of the LDP's recapture of its traditional foothold in the most rural single-member districts.

The DPJ discarded its rural strategy once Ozawa ceded control of election planning, having been forced to resign as secretary-general due to his suspected involvement in a campaign finance scandal. According to Naoshima, Ozawa's rural strategy "was abandoned in 2010 since it was Kan's government." Much like policy positions, which changed abruptly with each DPJ prime minister, the party's electoral strategy was never firmly institutionalized, and essentially changed at whim.

To be sure, Ozawa himself was not without blame. Ozawa kept detailed historical data on every electoral district in his secretary's briefcase, including measures such as voter turnout rates, party support rates, and public opinion polls. However, Ozawa refused to share this information or the logic behind his strategies with others in the party, preferring to play the role of electoral mastermind. This meant that Ozawa's election strategy was never fully grasped by many DPJ members, and the DPJ's rural strategy ebbed and flowed along with Ozawa's stature within the party.

As the main opposition party and now the largest party in the Upper House, the LDP employed every conceivable tactic to tie the hands of the DPJ government. As legislation could not be passed without the support of the LDP and the New Komeito in the Upper House, in most cases the DPJ was forced to abandon its manifesto. "The LDP would always tell the mass media that we were not making progress on our campaign pledges, but we had no choice in the matter. The LDP completely obstructed every bill we wanted to pass. Not one got through" (Hosono).

The DPJ was now on the defensive, as the LDP employed the DPJ's old opposition techniques in the Upper House to put pressure on the government, rejecting government-sponsored bills and passing motions to censure cabinet ministers. These unproductive power struggles brought national politics to a standstill, leaving the public disillusioned with the DPJ government and, amid a deepening disappointment in party politics itself, exacerbated popular distrust of politics.

The DPJ's second resounding defeat and prospects for the future

The timing of the 2012 general election

Many DPJ lawmakers are critical not only of Prime Minister Noda's pursuit of a consumption tax hike, which is discussed in Chapter 3, but also his timing in calling for an election in December 2012. By the autumn of 2012, the Eurozone

crisis had become less acute, and the Japanese economy showed nascent signs of recovery. Several lawmakers believed that the conditions for a general election would improve for the DPJ by mid-2013. In the words of Hirohisa Fujii: "It's a huge lie to say that we lost over the consumption tax. Both the LDP and the New Komeito also supported the tax hike, and they won. We lost because of timing. That is why I pushed for elections at the end of our term in office." Why, then, did Noda call for an election when he did?

Because Japanese prime ministers have the exclusive authority to dissolve the Lower House, the timing of the 2012 election is widely believed to have been the personal choice of Noda. During the tri-party agreement between the DPJ, LDP and New Komeito that secured passage of legislation relating to the comprehensive reform of social security and taxation systems, Noda promised to "appeal to the confidence of the people in the near future" (*Asahi Shinbun*, August 8, 2012). Noda felt the consumption tax hike was necessary for the national interest, and believed it was important to keep his promise of an election "in the near future."

Moreover, Noda had very little room to maneuver. "Without clearly specifying what we meant by committing to hold an election in the 'near future,' all the legislation surrounding the consumption tax hike would have fallen through. In consultation with Prime Minister Noda, I informed the LDP that we would not wait beyond the end of the year. We promised this much in order to pass the legislation, and so as a matter of good faith, we had no choice but to hold the election when we did" (Maehara).

The LDP was not the only party bringing pressure to bear. The DPJ was also confronted by another opposition party: the forty-nine member Ozawa group, which had defected in July 2012 after voting against the consumption tax legislation. "Only three more defections were needed before we lost our majority in the Lower House, and with that sort of momentum, a motion of no-confidence would have passed if it had been introduced. In response to those who wanted to wait, what I wanted to ask was how could we make it through the year, much less hold out for a double election?" (Azumi). Noda also had to take into account the rise of third parties such as the Japan Restoration Party, led by Toru Hashimoto. "I determined that it was better to call an election before third parties had a chance to prepare. I also felt that the DPJ could suffer a fatal blow if we suffered deep losses in a double election" (Noda).

An inadequate electoral strategy

Having lost both its image as the party of reform and the pragmatic electoral strategy of Ozawa, the DPJ found itself in an extremely difficult position. The party had also made little effort to learn from previous mistakes or develop a new strategy: "There was almost no recap of the 2010 Upper House election within the party. If we had made a more serious attempt to learn some lessons, we might have been better able to debate the consequences of the consumption tax issue.

An odd logic prevailed in the party: many believed the fact that the LDP had also promised to raise the consumption tax meant the issue had not cost us the election" (Banri Kaieda).

In Azumi's words, "the DPJ, unlike the LDP, had never experienced the fear of holding an election after a tax hike." Therefore, DPJ members believed raising the consumption tax would not prove fatal. Ozawa left the party in large measure because he anticipated a difficult election following the consumption tax hike. However, the party did not discuss other policies that could improve their standing. The DPJ approached the election with essentially no strategy.

Prime Minister Noda's announcement, made shortly before he dissolved the Lower House, that Japan would join the TPP trade agreement similarly reflected the lack of a coherent election strategy. There was particularly strong opposition to the TPP, which was strongly associated with the liberalization of agricultural products, in rural prefectures with numerous agricultural communities. There were many lawmakers opposed to the TPP not only in Ozawa's breakaway group, but also within the DPJ. The issue served to highlight the continued incoherence within the DPJ's ranks.

On the other hand, with Abe once again at the helm as party president, the LDP had proposed bold macroeconomic policies in an effort to recapture control of government. The DPJ governments of Hatoyama, Kan and Noda had tended to focus on social welfare policies, rather than upon a coherent economic growth policy. Internal disagreement over the consumption tax hike and participation in the TPP enervated the party as it approached the 2012 election, and it failed to outline a clear strategy for growth. Abe and the LDP made this their point of attack, appealing to the public with policies aimed at economic recovery: "Abenomics," which featured aggressive monetary and fiscal policies to combat deflation, combined with structural reforms. By comparison, "the DPJ's economic policy was difficult to understand. It should have been set out differently" (Hosono).

The fall of the DPJ government and advance of third parties

As predicted, the December 2012 Lower House election brought DPJ government to an end. The DPJ lost 174 seats, dropping from 231 seats to just 57. By contrast, the LDP gained 176 seats for a total of 294. When combined with the New Komeito's 31 seats, this rose to 325, a two-thirds majority in the Lower House.

Meanwhile, the election outcome called into question the DPJ's status as the principal opposition party. Not only did the LDP leave the DPJ in the dust (as shown in Table 7.5), but the Japan Restoration Party surpassed the DPJ in the proportional representation tier, securing 12,260,000 votes (or 20 percent) and capturing 54 total seats compared to the DPJ's 57. Unlike the 2010 election, the DPJ's defeat in 2012 was decisive, and could not be attributed to distortions of the electoral system.

The 2012 Lower House election was a referendum on the performance of the DPJ, much as the 2009 election had been a referendum on the LDP. For example,

Table 7.5 A comparison of DPJ and LDP vote and seat distribution in the 2012 general election (59.3% voter turnout)

	Electoral Districts (300 seats)		Proportional Representation (180 seats)		Seats (of 480 total)
	Votes (1,000)	Seats	Votes (1,000)	Seats	
DPJ	13,599	27	9,629	30	57
	22.8%	9.0%	15.9%	16.7%	11.9%
LDP	25,643	237	16,624	57	294
	43.0%	79.0%	27.6%	31.7%	61.3%

in the 2012 Lower House election, ostensibly a landslide victory for the LDP, the party actually received *fewer* votes than in 2009, the year of its historic defeat. Voter support for the LDP was clearly halfhearted.

As voter turnout fell 10 percentage points to just 59 percent, the lowest turnout in the postwar period, the LDP won amid an overall reduction in the number of votes cast. The failures of the DPJ government turned excessive expectations into excessive disappointment, as voters who had supported a change in government in 2009 stayed away from the polls. Indeed, the election results can also be described as a vote of no-confidence in politics as a whole. Third parties fielded numerous candidates in single-member districts, splitting the vote with DPJ candidates and further advantaging the LDP. In the one hundred least populated rural districts referenced earlier, the LDP increased its seat total from just 42 to 82.

Third parties were able to increase their influence as the DPJ lost credibility as the political party of reform. Both the Japan Restoration Party and Your Party brought issues of administrative and fiscal reform to the forefront in order to appeal to reform-minded urban voters. As the DPJ's reform program stagnated amid internal discord and resistance from the LDP, voters seeking reform shifted their hopes to third parties. The crushing defeat of the DPJ was, to a non-trivial degree, self-inflicted.

The DPJ support base and fundamental principles

Unable to change its essential nature as a party reliant upon favorable political winds, the DPJ failed to establish a distinct base of support. The reformist, anti-Ozawa group within the party was unable to develop a significant alternative to the Ozawa group's interest group-based electoral strategy.

The DPJ's efforts to establish a support base were clearly insufficient. In response to our survey, 42 percent of DPJ politicians responded that the DPJ's weakness in national elections was due to the insufficiency of daily campaign activities in electoral districts. "It's not as simple a matter as receiving support for handling a policy

in a certain way. In human society, it's important to have face-to-face relationships. You can't seek the support of the Japan Medical Association or the postmasters' association without knowing anyone within these organizations" (Hosono).

Moreover, after coming to power, little was done to expand the party's standing at the local level. The second most common answer to the survey question (24 percent) was the scarcity of local DPJ assembly members. "The LDP has a clear pyramid structure in which there are local LDP assembly members and, above them, national assembly members. But the DPJ is an inverted pyramid, with a wide top and narrow base. There are hardly any local assembly members to support [the upper tier]" (Chinami Nishimura).

However, the DPJ was founded as an alternative to the traditional, interest group-oriented politics of the LDP. "We had called for an end to transferring money to *amakudari* organizations and entrusting policy to interest groups in favor of a method of direct payment. We would stop wasting taxpayers' money and create a system that supported the livelihoods of the people. This was the same idea behind the income compensation system for farming households, the high school tuition waivers and the child allowance. This idea is still alive as the doctrine of the DPJ" (Hosono). "When we founded the DPJ from our three parties, Edano, (Tatsuo) Kawabata and I emphasized that this would not be a party that catered to industry associations. We defined the DPJ as the party of consumers, taxpayers, and ordinary citizens, and later added the word 'workers' when we revised our platform. I think these terms still describe the essence of the DPJ" (Okada).

Upon taking power, the DPJ faced a dilemma: adhering to their foundational, reformist principles would limit the expansion of their support base, diminishing their ability to remain in power over the long term. The following quote from Azumi vividly underscores the difficulty of challenging the LDP without support from organized interest groups: "Putting an end to the LDP government was as historic an accomplishment as bringing the Tokugawa era to an end. It was no easy task to contest an election after making enemies out of every industry association receiving subsidies from the government."

Ultimately, the DPJ government ended before it could resolve these questions about how to deal with interest groups, or how to constitute a stable support base. Aside from preexisting support from labor unions, the DPJ was unable to expand its network of reliable political supporters. This is demonstrated clearly by the DPJ's inability to fully implement its new child allowance, which could have attracted women and child-rearing families into the party's support base. The party is in dire need of a clear electoral strategy as it attempts to recover from resounding defeats at the hands of the LDP. This is not an issue that will be resolved by the departure of the Ozawa group. It remains an essential issue for the DPJ today.

A changing of the tide

The results of the July 2013 Upper House election were largely as predicted. The LDP captured a total of 56 seats: 47 seats in the electoral districts, including 29 of the 31 single-member electoral districts,⁴ and 18 seats in the proportional

representation tier. Including seats not up for re-election, the LDP claimed a total of 115 seats, or 135 in combination with the New Komeito, thus allowing the LDP to resolve the matter of the “twisted Diet.”

By contrast, the DPJ lost in every single-member electoral district, winning 10 seats in multi-member districts and 7 seats in the proportional representation tier. This was an overwhelming defeat. Together with its Upper House seats not up for re-election in 2013, the DPJ claimed a total of just 59 seats (Table 7.6). Combined with its 57 Lower House members, the DPJ had a total of 116 Diet members—falling short of the 131 Diet members it had at the time of the new DPJ’s formation. Banri Kaieda, who assumed the party leadership following the December 2012 Lower House election, attributed this most recent loss to the fact that “during our three year and three month administration we disappointed the people, and their distrust has not yet been dispelled.”

The successes and failures of the DPJ’s electoral strategy reflect the broader context of Japanese politics in recent years. Above all, the electoral reforms of the 1990s, which introduced the single-member district system for the Lower House, have made alternations in power more feasible, creating strong incentives for the consolidation of opposition parties and making it possible to defeat the LDP without a strong, reliable support base. It was the DPJ that raced to the forefront under this new system. Scholarly work on electoral politics in Japan had predicted the emergence of an urban-rural cleavage under these arrangements, with the DPJ responding to the expectations of the urban, floating voters and the LDP catering to conservative rural voters and the organized vote of interest groups.⁵

The Koizumi government’s emphasis on structural reforms complicated this trajectory. “[Issues like] eliminating wasteful spending and free competition were completely taken away from us. To reconstruct the party, the DPJ had no choice but to steer itself leftwards” (Junya Ogawa). What is more, from the end of the Koizumi government and throughout the first Abe government, structural reform began to draw criticism for its role in “rural impoverishment” and creating a “stratified society.” Together with the pension records scandal, they provided the DPJ with ammunition to go on the offensive. This is the context in which the DPJ

Table 7.6 A comparison of DPJ and LDP vote and seat distribution in the 2013 Upper House election (52.6% voter turnout)

	Electoral Districts (73 seats)		Proportional Representation (48 seats)		Seats (of 121 open)
	Votes (1,000)	Seats	Votes (1,000)	Seats	
DPJ	8,641	10	7,134	7	17
	16.3%	13.7%	13.4%	14.6%	14.0%
LDP	22,644	47	18,460	18	65
	42.7%	64.4%	34.7%	37.5%	53.7%

developed the idea of “prioritizing peoples’ livelihoods,” even as it continued to champion itself as the party of reform.

At the same time, the DPJ began to change its election strategy. “The DPJ, which had been an urban party, started to change considerably from around 2003 in order to win even in Upper House single-member districts” (Hosono). In order to form a stable government, it is necessary to control both houses of the Diet, and the DPJ needed to focus upon rural areas to capture seats in the single-member districts of the Upper House. Ozawa’s rural strategy made this possible: without Ozawa’s emphasis on rural regions, the DPJ ran the risk of winning more votes than the LDP but fewer seats, as it did in 2010. The fact that even today, 73 percent of DPJ survey respondents believe that election strategy and campaign pledges must take into consideration the interests of rural areas is a vivid demonstration of this electoral reality.

The dilemma of ruling party conflict

The DPJ government was formed from the newly swollen ranks of DPJ Diet members. The new single-member district system for the Lower House elections had thinned out the ranks of veteran lawmakers, while producing a massive number of newly minted freshman lawmakers, such as the Ozawa “children.”

The scope of the party manifesto also expanded rapidly. As demonstrated by the “twisted Diet,” the two houses have nearly co-equal status. For government to operate effectively, a platform that appeals to both urban, floating voters and local, rural constituencies becomes imperative. As a result, the manifesto extolled fiscal discipline and a reformist orientation, but simultaneously included a growing number of policies addressing rural interests, such as an increase in the local government allocation tax or the income compensation system for farming households.

According to one former DPJ cabinet minister, many party members shared a starting point as “a liberal party in opposition to conservatism.” Indeed, following the initial advances by the DPJ, many predicted that Japanese politics would evolve towards competition between a neoliberal LDP and a social democratic DPJ.

However, the DPJ’s new platform heralding “rebirth,” adopted at the February 2013 party convention, made no mention of the term “liberal,” and even references to centrism (*minshu chūdō*) were nowhere to be found. Meanwhile, the DPJ’s original slogan as “a reform party that fights against vested interests and collusion” has lost its credibility. This is reflected in the DPJ’s loss of seats in the symbolic urban electoral districts of Tokyo and Osaka during the July 2013 Upper House election.

In retrospect, support for the DPJ was heavily dependent upon voters’ hopes—growing since the 1990s—for an opposition force capable of breaking away from the one-party dominant system of the LDP, and achieving a change of government. The DPJ was unable to transform these hopes into a stable base of support, or to establish a clear guiding doctrine for the party.

At the same time, the many inconsistencies of the DPJ government are also more general issues for Japanese politics as a whole. From the 1990s onwards, the LDP had worried about the growing post-bubble deficit and the disaffection of urban voters. Koizumi's structural reforms, intended as a solution to these problems, intensified the divide between the LDP's reformists and reactionaries, generating many new lawmakers in the form of the Koizumi "children," but also eroding the party's traditional support base. There is not a clear divide between the DPJ and the LDP. Severe conflict exists *within* both parties.

After its overwhelming victories in the 2012 Lower House and 2013 Upper House elections, the LDP included more than 400 Diet members with a variety of opinions and ideas. It will be challenging for the LDP to reconcile the party's diverse members—the party leadership, newly minted lawmakers (who now comprise 38 percent of the total), those elected on Abe's promise of structural reform, and those elected with the support of interest groups—under a single guiding principle.

Regardless of whether the LDP remains in power or whether the DPJ—or another opposition party—again takes control of government, the question remains of how to overcome the dilemma of intra-party competition, which is a product of Japan's current electoral arrangements. The future direction of Japanese politics depends on whether or not adequate lessons can be learned from the failures of the DPJ's three years and three months in power.

Notes

- 1 I provide a more academic treatment of the DPJ's rise to power and governance in Lipsky and Scheiner (2012) and Kushida and Lipsky (2013). Useful Japanese-language sources on DPJ politics include Ishikawa (2011), Uekami and Tsutsumi (2011) and Yakushiji (2012). For excellent, detailed empirical analysis of election outcomes, see Pekkanen et al. (2013, 2015) and Sugawara (2013). Those interested in theoretical discussion of electoral politics should consult, among others, Duverger (1954) and Cox (1997). For an overview of Japanese politics prior to the DPJ's coming to power, see e.g. Noble (2010), Pempel (2010), Rosenbluth and Thies (2010), Hiwatari and Saito (2011), Krauss and Pekkanen (2011), Kobayashi (2012), and Reed et al. (2012).
- 2 Due to reforms passed in 2015 and implemented starting with the 2016 Upper House election, the precise numbers cited in this section are no longer current, although the basic issue of rural overrepresentation largely remains.
- 3 Public opinion data used in this chapter are from NHK's monthly surveys of political attitudes, available at: <https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/yoron/political/>.
- 4 Beginning with the 2013 election, the total number of single-member electoral districts was increased to thirty-one.
- 5 See extensive discussion in Kushida and Lipsky (2013).

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