

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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A Vote against the DPJ, Not in Favor of the LDP

Leonard Schoppa

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) returned to power with a landslide win on Sunday, December 16, after just three years and three months in opposition. The party won 294 seats (out of 480 total) under party leader Shinzo Abe, who will take over shortly as the new prime minister. Together with its long-time coalition partner, the New Komeito Party, which won 31 seats, the partners now have enough seats in the Lower House (over two-thirds) to override attempts by the Upper House to block their legislative initiatives.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda will be stepping down, not only as prime minister, but also as leader of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) after that party won just 57 seats, down from the 308 it won in 2009. Noda did manage to win his seat, with a strong showing in his own district.

The election result should be seen primarily as an expression of voter disillusionment with the DPJ. In three years, the DPJ burned through three prime ministers, each of whom disappointed voters in his own way. The party's first prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, picked an unnecessary fight with the United States over basing arrangements in Okinawa, putting the nation through an agonizing year of tension with its most important ally, only to have the Japanese government accept the same base realignment plan that had existed at the start of his term. Hatoyama did not even stand for reelection in his constituency in this election.

Naoto Kan, who served from 2010 to 2011, was already dealing with low opinion poll ratings when he faced the incredible challenge of coping with the Tohoku earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster. Delays in the release of information about how bad the radiation leaks were and where the winds were blowing wounded Kan. He was further hurt by delays in the passage of earthquake-recovery legislation, due to his inability to secure cooperation from opposition parties who held a majority in the Upper House. He secured their consent only by resigning. Kan lost the vote in his single member district in suburban Tokyo and had to rely on the proportional representation (PR) vote to secure his seat in the next Diet.

Yoshihiko Noda, ironically, was the DPJ's most effective leader. He was able to maneuver the LDP into supporting his plan to double the consumption tax in two stages, to 10 percent in 2015, after similarly out-foxing Osaka governor Toru Hashimoto, who had attempted to exploit voter anxiety about nuclear power by opposing the restart of reactors in the Kansai area. Noda was able to restart two reactors and help the nation avoid brownouts this summer.

These pragmatic successes won Noda little credit, however, for neither of these steps was popular. They also left voters completely confused about what the DPJ stood for. In 2009, the DPJ had promised voters it would *not* raise the consumption tax until it won a second mandate from voters. Yet here was Noda leading the charge. Just a year before Noda restarted the Osaka-area reactors, Prime Minister Kan had adopted a staunchly antinuclear position, and the DPJ government paired its restart decision this summer with a plan to phase out nuclear energy by the 2030s. Which side of the debate was the DPJ on?

The DPJ fared little better in implementing the most prominent promises it made in 2009. It passed only the first half of the generous child allowance it promised and agreed to scale back the program after earthquake recovery spending drove the budget deep into the red. Neither did it deliver on its promise of toll-free expressways. Finally, after winning many seats in rural areas in 2009 on a platform calling for increased aid to farmers, the DPJ was now led by a prime minister who planned to bring Japan into the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which promised sharp reductions in farm protection.

The backtracking and reversals of positions also caused worsening divisions within the DPJ. A large contingent left the party this summer after Noda pressed forward with his plan to raise the consumption tax. Others left after he advocated for

TPP. By the start of the official campaign period on December 3, the DPJ had already seen its Lower House strength fall to 230 (from 308 in 2009). Noda faced a vote of no confidence had he failed to call an election when he did.

Party	2000	2003	2005	2009	Prior to Dissolution (Dec 3)	After the Election (Dec 16)
Liberal Democratic Party	233	237	296	119	118	294
New Komeito Party	31	34	31	21	21	31
Democratic Party of Japan	127	177	113	308	230	57
Japan Restoration Party	--	--	--	--	11	54
Tomorrow Party of Japan	--	--	--	--	61	9
Your Party	--	--	--	5	8	18
Social Dem Party of Japan	19	6	7	7	5	2
Japan Communist Party	20	9	9	9	9	8
Independents and Others	50	17	24	11	16	6

The fact that LDP positions on the issues differed little from Noda’s adds more credence to the view that the election was mostly about disillusionment with the DPJ. **The vote swing could not have been the product of a shift in voter preferences toward the LDP position on the issues because there was actually little to distinguish between them on the most important issues.** Both parties, after all, had voted to double the consumption tax. Several other parties pledged to repeal the tax increase (Your Party on the right and the Social Democrats, Communists, and Tomorrow Party on the left), but these parties won just 37 seats.

On the high-profile nuclear power issue, the LDP position differed only in nuance from the DPJ’s. The DPJ favored restarting some plants as safety concerns were addressed, followed by a phaseout by the mid-2030s. The LDP also favored restarting power plants, only preferring a later phaseout. It is doubtful that large numbers of voters switched to the LDP due to this modest difference in their positions on this issue. The parties that took more explicitly antinuclear positions did even worse than the DPJ, with the Tomorrow Party (under Shiga governor Yukiko Kada and the leader of the breakaway faction from the DPJ, Ichiro Ozawa) falling from 61 seats before the election to just 9 seats.

The economy was a big issue in this election, as it always is. Japan has fallen back into negative growth and deflation, so Noda and the DPJ clearly lost support due to their inability to reinvigorate growth in Japan. But it was not at all clear that voters saw the LDP as offering economic policies that were any better. Both parties favored continued spending on public works in the Tohoku region, combined with a more aggressive antideflationary monetary policy. Given that the LDP had steered the economy into a steep decline in 2008 and presided over economic stagnation for many years, voters cannot have had much optimism that the party would suddenly rediscover the *mojo* that had brought Japan an economic miracle in earlier decades.

In the area of economic policy too, third parties offered the promise of more far-reaching change. Yoshimi Watanabe’s Your Party offered a consistent neoliberal prescription of tax cuts, free trade, and budget cuts, but it won just 18 seats. The brand new Japan Restoration Party, under the twin leadership of Tokyo’s governor Shintaro Ishihara (who retired to lead the party into the election) and Osaka governor Toru Hashimoto (who stayed on as governor but lent his support to the new party), promised decentralization and radical reform across a wide range of areas. Many expected this party to eclipse the DPJ in seats, but in the end, it won just 54 seats.

The issue area where Abe worked the hardest to distinguish the LDP from the DPJ was on foreign policy. The last time Abe served as prime minister, from 2006 to 2007, he had focused on expanding Japan’s military and diplomatic profile. The Defense Agency was upgraded to ministry status, and the LDP passed a law creating the referendum framework needed to conduct a popular vote on any future revision of Article 9 that might be put forward. He also was known for his strong position against any compromise with North Korea.

With the standoff over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands causing a spike in tension with China this summer and North Korea carrying out a long-range missile test on the eve of the vote, Abe naturally showcased his credentials as a long-time advocate of a more muscular security policy for Japan. The LDP platform for this election called for a “National Security Basic Law” that would make it clear that Japan has a right to act in collective self-defense—something that would enable Japanese and American military forces to work more closely in concert, with Japan taking on roles that would call on it to come to the aid of U.S. ships, for example, if they came under attack. Such action has been seen as contrary to Article 9 in Japan’s “Peace Constitution.”

Nevertheless, the fact that Noda himself took an uncompromising stance on the island dispute, and other parties

(especially the Japan Restoration Party) were also calling for an expanded security role for Japan, suggests that Abe's foreign policy views were not the reason for the LDP's strong win.

Party	PR Vote Share	PR Seats	Single Member District Seats	Total Seats
Liberal Democratic Party	27.6	57	237	294
New Komeito Party	11.8	22	9	31
Democratic Party of Japan	16.0	30	27	57
Japan Restoration Party	20.4	40	14	54
Tomorrow Party of Japan	5.7	7	2	9
Your Party	8.7	14	4	18
Social Dem Party of Japan	2.4	1	1	2
Japan Communist Party	6.1	0	8	8
Independents and Others	1.2	0	6	7

To reiterate, this election was first and foremost a repudiation of the DPJ. The fact that the voters were not in fact embracing the LDP or its positions on the issues can be seen in the complete absence of support in preelection opinion polls for the party or the prime minister. In a variety of polls, the proportion of voters telling pollsters they would cast their PR vote for the LDP fell over the two-week period after the election was announced and stood somewhere between 15 percent (Asahi) and 19 percent (Yomiuri) in the first week of December. At that late date, just two week before the vote, 41 percent (Asahi) of voters remained uncertain how they would cast their PR ballot. Many simply decided not to show up at the polls. Turnout fell from 69.3 percent in 2009 to an estimated 59.3 percent this time.

The breakdown of election results between the proportional representation and single-member district section also shows the weakness of the LDP's support. In PR, the party won just 27.6 percent, up only slightly from 2009 when it won 26.7 percent. It therefore secured just 57 PR seats (out of 180). The party won a majority of seats overall only because in many single member districts it needed only 30 to 40 percent of the vote to win the seat over a scattered opposition.

In the first Tokyo district, for example, the LDP candidate won with 29.3 percent of the vote over the DPJ candidate, who won 28.9 percent, the Japan Restoration Party candidate, who won 17.2 percent, and the Your Party candidate, who won 11.3 percent. Such results multiplied across the country helped the LDP convert a relatively modest vote share in the single-member districts into a landslide in which LDP candidates won almost 80 percent of these seats.

Looking Ahead

Before the election, many observers expected the LDP-Komeito coalition's lack of a majority in the Upper House to be a major constraint. If they had fallen short of a two-thirds majority in the Lower House, they would have had to draw another party or breakaway group into their coalition to manage Diet affairs and expend a great deal of energy between now and next summer Upper House election on an effort to win a majority there. Winning that election remains a goal, but the two parties are freer to start implementing policy immediately, starting with the budget due to be adopted in March. Expect increased spending on public works as Abe attempts to use fiscal and monetary stimulus to get the economy growing again.

There is a risk, however, that Abe will read the two-thirds supermajority in seats as an endorsement of his foreign policy agenda and overreach in this area. He is most likely to wait until after the Upper House election to press forward with his plan to establish Japan's right to collective self-defense, but if this policy push coincides with continued tension over the island dispute, there is a risk that Sino-Japanese relations will reach new lows.

Leonard Schoppa is a professor of politics at the University of Virginia.

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