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Japan’s Upper House Election: Last Swing of the Pendulum?

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For the first time in at least eight years, Japanese citizens seem poised to affirm the winners in a national election rather than reject the losers. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), after winning a Lower House majority by default in late 2012 amid disarray in the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government, stands to gain an Upper House majority on its own merits this weekend.

More than Lower House elections themselves, Japanese Upper House elections are referenda on the prime minister and the governing party. Candidates are more distant, running for election only every six years in large constituencies and rotating out of office more frequently. This leaves voters clear to register an unmediated verdict on the current administration without the responsibility of kicking that administration out. This often pushes Upper House elections in an antigovernment, or at least check-on-government, direction, similar to “off-year” elections in the United States. But in 2013, second-time LDP prime minister Shinzo Abe has won public praise for his “Abenomics” economic policies and apparent general governing competence (the LDP also enjoys the resources to fight two successful national campaigns inside of a year). In a reversal of the trend he himself inaugurated six years and six administrations ago, he has gone six months in office without making the Japanese public so regret having chosen him that they drag his support rate below 30 percent. This is a heartening sign for Japanese politics at the systemic level, even for those who disagree with Abe’s particular policies. Less heartening is that the LDP’s popularity partly reflects—and prolongs—a continuing fragmentation of the opposition.

Half of the Upper House’s 242 seats are up for election every three years. Each prefecture serves as an election district with up to five seats at stake, for a total of 73 seats, and one nationwide proportional representation (PR) contest determines the remaining 48 seats. The LDP always starts out with about 30 safe seats in its pocket. The PR results faithfully and soberly reflect nationwide levels of party support, with no built-in tendency to amplify party booms and busts. From 1989 on, the LDP has won no fewer than 14 PR seats and no more than 20, and it should reach the high end of that range this year. The 16 multi-seat prefectural districts, meanwhile, produce a blunter and simpler version of the same output: the top two parties usually uneventfully claim one seat each in each district, and in the few prefectures with three or more seats, smaller parties can also glean a seat in third or fourth or fifth place. This dynamic is disrupted if either main party aggressively runs more than one candidate, a strategy that can lead to counterproductive vote splits, as the LDP learned painfully in 1998. Each election year since then, the LDP has somewhat uncharacteristically pursued a conservative nomination strategy, and this has yielded it between 41 and 46 percent of the multi-seat prefecture seats every time. This year, out of 16 multi-seat prefectures, the LDP is running two candidates, likely successfully, only in three-seat Chiba and five-seat Tokyo and one candidate each in the rest. The LDP knows—or, at least, is behaving as if it knows—that while it does need to win its one “reserved seat” per district, gains beyond this aren’t worth the risk this year, since they wouldn’t push the party’s delegation over any meaningful supermajority threshold. This approach should net the party 18 seats in the multi-seat prefectures; again, 43 percent of those available.
The make-or-break portion of the election -- whether the LDP gets the additional 15-odd seats needed to secure a majority -- comes in the smaller, single-seat prefectures whose results are most sensitive to swings in party fortunes. When beaten badly, as in 1989 and 2007, the LDP has won as few as three or six of the single-seat prefectures, or only 10 to 20 percent. This year, as in 2001 under Junichiro Koizumi and 1992 and 1986, the LDP is likely to win upwards of 90 percent. This is thanks mostly to its simple popularity, but also to the non-Communist opposition’s failure to coordinate on a single anti-LDP standard-bearer in eight of the contests (similar but less damaging coordination problems hamper the opposition in the multi-seat prefectures as well). The LDP is poised to win 29 of 31 single-seat prefectures—all but Iwate, the home base of Ichiro Ozawa, and Okinawa. Many of these will be taken back from the DPJ, which won them in 2007 thanks to a sincere but short-lived campaign by then-DPJ-leader Ozawa to sincerely and ostentatiously target rural prefectures.

Thanks to shrinking populations in smaller prefectures, the number of single-seat districts is only increasing. This year, the geographically large but less-urban prefectures of Fukushima and Gifu dropped from two to one seat, ceding one each to hyper-metropolitan Kanagawa and Osaka. More single-seat prefectures mean more volatility of Upper House results from year to year, but they also advantage the LDP since most small prefectures are also rural LDP strongholds. Meanwhile, the seats that “migrate” to become the third or fourth or fifth seat in metropolitan prefectures can just as easily be won by third parties or the LDP itself as by the LDP’s major party rival.

Even if the LDP were only to win half of the single-seat prefectures, this, combined with its likely finish on the high end of the narrow normal range in both PR and multi-seat prefectures (plus 10 seats likely held steady by coalition partner New Komeito) would give the LDP an Upper House majority. More likely is a romp in the single-seat prefectures and a “stable majority” (antei tasuu) of 129 members that allows the LDP to control all chairs and rank-and-file majorities in each of the Upper House’s standing committees.

This would immediately give the LDP control of both houses of the Diet and rid Japan of divided government, or nejire, paving the way for more decisive execution of LDP policies (though not trouble-free execution, as Jeffrey Hornung has previously noted in Japan Chair Platform). And thanks to the electoral calendar, the LDP needn’t relinquish its unified control of both houses for at least three more years. This may not seem like a long time, but three years would be the longest run of unified Diet control uninterrupted by a new Diet election since the late 1980s.

Less remarked upon is the fact that a resounding Upper House victory would lock in LDP control of at least one House of the Diet for the next six years—just as the DPJ’s strong showing six years prior, in 2007, remains responsible for the nejire that has dogged the LDP to this day. If, on Sunday, the LDP and New Komeito gain the 77 seats predicted above, then only a disastrous showing of 44 seats in the next Upper House election (that is, a worse combined showing than the LDP and New Komeito have ever suffered before) could undercut the two parties’ Upper House control any time before 2019. In other words, Sunday’s election will not only resolve nejire in the LDP government’s favor right now, but also ensure that nejire will survive in the LDP’s favor and give it blocking power should any non-LDP government emerge over the next six years.

For the DPJ, such a long stretch of time without any hope of unified government—or, perhaps, of regaining government at all—could deprive it of crucial political oxygen, especially for its more conservative elements. This long waiting period should be included alongside the various other factors imperiling the DPJ’s survival as half of a genuine two-party system. A return to a long stint as an opposition party could wither its ability to recruit new candidates (or retain incumbents), especially the young conservatives who have driven the party’s growth over the last decade, who rely more on pork barrel and a “pipe” to the state to satisfy their supporters, and who are often just as likely to join the LDP as the DPJ when opportunistically looking to satisfy their political ambitions (even now, in Sunday’s election, the DPJ has mustered only 35 official candidates in the 47 prefectural districts). This could also push the DPJ in an unpopular leftward direction, as labor unions are a
more reliable source of less-demanding candidates. Even in Sunday’s election, nearly half the DPJ’s PR candidates have been supplied by unions, about double the proportion seen three and six years prior. More generally, while individual DPJ politicians might be more willing and conditioned than their LDP counterparts to reside in the opposition wilderness, they enjoy fewer organizational resources to help them survive and eventually bounce back from electoral failure. Their party organization is much more skeletal and they lack the experience and political capital that might persuade Japanese voters to give them a second chance at governing. In the longer term, the voters’ affirmation of the LDP might amount to an even more decisive rejection of the DPJ after all.

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