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Ideals and Reality**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For decades, Japanese political pundits have loved to debate about political reform. However, little has come of all this talk, leaving the Japanese political institution a mess. Political leaders and parties have not conformed to changing times, and haven't been able to adopt a modern plan that would successfully push them into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Instead, they cling onto old, antiquated ideas.

Japan needs other outlets, or rather institutions, which would cultivate new and alternative ideas. The creation of think tanks, master's programs and other initiatives should be explored. The emphasis also should be on the need to change the relationship between the prime minister and his Cabinet, as well as between the politician and bureaucrat.

## Japanese Political Parties: Ideals and Reality

Gerald L. Curtis

There has been a remarkable continuity in Japanese thinking about what constitutes a modern and desirable political party system. This cherished model of party politics, however, stands in stark contrast to the realities of Japanese politics. Political reformers in Japan have repeatedly championed reforms that they claim would bring the reality of Japanese politics into closer alignment with the ideal model of what party politics should be. These reform efforts, however, invariably have failed to produce the promised results, thus creating a situation in which high expectations are followed by deep disappointment, along with the renewed conviction that Japanese politics is hopelessly backward. Despite repeated failure, however, it takes only a few years for the reform effort to gather energy once again. The process then repeats itself, only to end but one more time in failure.

The Japanese ideal model of a modern party was formulated in the 1920's during the Taisho Democracy period when British political practices were held as the model of modern parliamentary democracy. Ironically, the British themselves are far less wedded to this model today than are the Japanese. In Japan the model of the "modern" political party has been frozen in time. It has led many people to believe with what only can be described as a kind of religious conviction that if Japan would simply adopt the right reform it could turn that model into reality.

The model is familiar to virtually all Japanese. It is constantly being invoked by politicians, scholars and the mass media as a way to describe what is wrong with Japanese political reality. In this model, parties have mass memberships, clear principles, and social bases of support that differentiate them from other parties. In this ideal system, voters support parties on the basis of the policies they propose, rather than on the basis of the personalities of their candidates. Parties offer the voters clear alternative policy agendas and the parties themselves are well organized and centralized.

In this ideal model, there is no room for constituency service or for voter loyalty to candidates rather than to a party. Moreover, in this model of modern politics, a two-party system prevails and election campaigns are inexpensive and party controlled.

The reality of Japanese politics could hardly be at greater variance with this model. Election campaigns are expensive and they are dominated by the individual candidates and their *koenkai* rather than by the party. Party identification is weak and there is a notable absence of deep social cleavages to differentiate the social bases of the major parties. Party factions, though weaker today than they were in the past, continue to be important. The party organization at the local level is indistinguishable from the personal *koenkai* organizations of the party's elected politicians. A one party dominance

until 1993, and a coalition government since then, has characterized Japan rather than an alternation of power between two parties. Many Japanese seem to believe that this reality stands in stark contrast to what a modern party system should be, and that it is a uniquely Japanese problem.

In fact, the model itself is hopelessly outdated. The model of the programmatic party with many party members in competition with other similarly organized parties representing different social groups and proposing different sets of policies is a model of democratic politics of the early part of the twentieth century. It is not a model relevant to politics in the early part of the twenty-first century.

The first modern parties emerged a century ago, in the midst of industrialization; before the advent of the welfare state, and the invention of television and mass media. They organized voters for political participation in societies that were characterized by deep class conflicts and oftentimes by religious and regional conflicts. Parties on the left, lacking the financial resources of parties that had the backing of business, found their strength in the large number of people who joined them. This organizational model proved so effective that soon conservative parties were emulating it. Mass membership programmatic parties that reflected deep social cleavages of early twentieth century Europe became the model for “modern” parties.

By the 1920s, Japanese political parties were growing more powerful and the political system seemed to be moving in the direction of a European parliamentary democracy, and eventually reached its zenith. Almost all of the goals that Japanese political reformers espouse today were defined in that period: a two party system, a single member election district system, mass membership parties, a commitment to implement a clear party platform sharply differentiated from the platforms of other parties, a focus on issues of high national purpose rather than local constituency service, and so on.

There is much less need for the Japanese to define what the modern party is in the early part of the twenty-first century than a hundred years ago. Mass membership provided funds for the parties, but Japan and other countries today provide public subsidies to political parties. Many of them – with the notable exception of the United States –also make some political activities, such as candidate election campaign advertising in the mass media, free of charge to candidates and parties. In the first half of the twentieth century, political parties provided an important channel for communication between leadership and party members through party newspapers and meetings. There is much less need for a party to use its organizational apparatus as a means for communicating to the voters now that the mass media is so pervasive.

Most importantly, it is virtually impossible for political parties that seek parliamentary majorities to sharply differentiate their ideology and basic party positions from one another. The concept of the “catch-all party” emerged in the years following

the Second World War to describe the revolutionary political changes that resulted from the introduction of the welfare state and the amelioration of class differences in European democracies. The catch-all party does not identify a particular social group as its core constituency. It seeks the support of all the voters. In a party system characterized by the presence of two or more catch all parties, the major parties' basic policies will have a lot in common. Each will try to appeal to the floating voter, or the independent voter who is somewhere in the middle and potentially a supporter for either of the catch all parties.

This reality is why in Britain today, unlike a hundred years ago, sees subtle not fundamental differences between the Labour and Conservative Parties. Tony Blair, the voice of "new Labour," is a voice of moderation and a leader who claims to rule on behalf of all the people in Britain, not primarily the working class. A similar pattern can be seen in every European country, and in the United States as well.

In Japan, it is the model of party politics that is "backward" more than the reality. Japanese reformers are in a hopeless quest for the "modern" political party and party system that was modern seventy or more years ago. And as long as this model is held up as the goals of political reform, reform is bound to fail and Japanese cynicism about the country's political system bound to remain pervasive.

In modern Japanese political history, the primary target of political reform has been the electoral system. The chusenkyoku seido, which was introduced in 1925 and remained in effect until 1994 (with the exception of the first post-World War Two election), was long regarded as the source of Japan's political problems. Indeed criticism of the chusenkyoku seido has a history almost as old as the system itself, and with each succeeding political scandal the belief that this system was responsible for Japan's political problems grew deeper and deeper.

Advocates of reform argued that if Japan could replace the chusenkyoku seido with a shosenkyoku seido, those problems would be resolved. There would be no more factionalism, money politics, powerful special interests, candidate rather than party-oriented election campaigns, and an emphasis on personality rather than policy.

By the early 1990's, this view had become so widespread, and was so relentlessly promoted by the mass media, that it became nearly impossible to debate the merits of the case against the chusenkyoku seido. It was no longer possible to claim to be a proponent of reform without supporting the abolition of the chusenkyoku seido.

There were many reasons, however, to doubt that this system was the cause of Japan's political problems, and even more reason to question whether abolishing it would make things better. Personality and constituency service are important in US House of Representative elections. Factions have been important in Italian politics. Sweden, India and other countries have experienced long periods of one-party dominance. Yet not one of these countries ever had an electoral system even remotely similar to the chusenkyoku

seido. This suggests that there must be other causes for factionalism, one-party dominance, and candidate-oriented election campaigns. But Japanese reformers were not willing to consider that the election system might not be the culprit.

Even intra-party competition, supposedly the key feature and shortcoming of the chusenkyoku seido, had far more complex causes than the critics of the election system were prepared to consider. The truth is that the chusenkyoku seido, which combines single entry ballots and multimember districts, does not necessarily cause intra-party competition. It does so only when a party can reasonably expect to elect more than one candidate in a district. Even during the period of the Liberal Democratic Party's one-party dominance, there was no LDP intra-party competition and ran only one candidate in each district due to limited public support. Intra-party competition in the Japan Socialist Party ceased not because the system changed, but because public support for the JSP declined to the point where the party could not run more than one candidate per district.

Instead of abolishing the chusenkyoku seido, if political reformers had insisted on rectifying district imbalances to equalize the weight of every citizen's vote, then the representation of rural districts would have been substantially reduced and the LDP would have been able to run multiple candidates in relatively few districts. A one person, one vote apportionment amidst declining popular support for the LDP might have led to the emergence of a competitive, moderately pluralistic party system under the chusenkyokusei.

The change of the electoral system to shosenkyoku hirei daihyousei has brought about far less reform than the proponents of system change anticipated. Elections are still constituency-service oriented to a great extent and candidate dominated. Especially in the case of the LDP, the prevalence of the sons of retired Diet members who successfully win their fathers' seats is testimony to the power of personal connections in Japanese electoral politics. There is no longer intra-party competition, but candidates continue to rely on their personal koenkai to run their campaigns. Major parties continue to be umbrella-type organizations for politicians whose views on important policy issues vary. And the differences between the LDP and the Democratic Party, and the Komeito for that matter, are difficult to discern. The history of Japanese politics under the new election system suggests that the impact of electoral systems on party systems is less important than many people believe. At least it is fair to say that the impact of this particular change in the electoral system has had far less impact in curing the supposed ills of Japanese politics than its advocates argued.

If the chusenkyokuseido had not been abolished, however, people to this day would be arguing that it's the cause of Japan's political ills. Now that it has been changed, there seems to be little support for changing it once again, even though many people who had argued for the introduction of the shosenkyoku hirei daihyousei appear to

have lost their enthusiasm for it. For better or worse, Japan is likely to live with the shosenkyoku hirei daihyousei for some years to come.

It is hard to forecast how this system will affect political behavior in the long run. As more and more politicians with no personal experience in the chusenkyoku seido enter the Diet, campaign practices may change. Elections probably will become more policy oriented. But that would have happened under the chusenkyoku seido as well. It is not the electoral system, but rather the basic changes in Japanese society and people's attitudes and values that are driving changes in voting behavior.

Ten years after the introduction of electoral reform in 1993, political reformers, still chasing the elusive goal of political reform, championed a new approach to bring about the kind of party system that the elimination of the chusenkyoku seido was supposed to create. It was the introduction of the so-called manifesto.

Manifesto is another term for seiken kouyaku, but by writing it in katakana it seems to suggest something new, foreign and profound. According to the proponents of the manifesto movement, if the parties and party leaders adopt manifestos, then the voters would be able to decide what party to vote for based on concrete policy promises. Elections would become battles between parties proposing different manifestos. At the next election, voters would be able to judge how true the party in power had been to its manifesto. And if it had failed to carry out its promises, then the voters could hold it accountable.

In other words, once political parties and party leaders issue their manifestos, politics will become party-, rather than personality-centered. In addition, issues and principles, not constituency service and opportunistic compromise, will dominate political debate. If this sounds familiar, it is because it is the same goal that political reformers tried to reach back in the Taisho period. The thought is that since electoral system reform did not accomplish that task, now manifestos will.

It is important to emphasize that there is not one democracy in the world that operates this way. In the United States, when the Democratic Party or the Republican Party holds its national convention to nominate its presidential candidate, it also convenes a platform committee to prepare the party's policy agenda. This platform is always a product of compromise. Party zealots try to get extreme demands into the platform. The presidential candidate's supporters often try to get more centrist language into it in order to appeal to floating voters or they play up some demand for radical change that is popular with the voters, knowing fully well that it has little chance to become government policy. The idea that the party's presidential candidate decides what his party's platform is going to be and members in Congress then simply implements his promises has no base in political reality.

During discussions of party politics in Japan, and especially of how to strengthen

the power of the party president, tends to exaggerate the power of the American president. The president is not nearly as powerful as many Japanese seem to believe he is. Indeed, the writers of the American Constitution endeavored to devise a system that would prevent a concentration of power in the presidency. The president's power, in the words of Richard Neustadt, whose book *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* is the authoritative study on the American presidency, is the "power to persuade." A leader in a democracy needs to persuade his party, his parliament, and his public of the need for the policies he is advocating. Persuasion takes many forms and the president or prime minister has access to many different techniques to persuade others to do as he wishes. Arm twisting, legislative compromises, *nemawashi*, the effective use of the mass media, and the firing of disloyal cabinet ministers are some of them. A platform or manifesto may also be part of the process of persuasion, but it is not the end of it.

Modern party politics, whether in Japan, the United States, or elsewhere, are dominated by parties that cater to diverse constituencies which seeks the widest possible support. The major parties in modern democracies agree far more than they disagree on basic policy issues. And if they are after majority support, their supporters invariably seek to serve plural and in some ways contradictory interests.

In other words, modern parties in Japan and elsewhere are teams of individual political entrepreneurs that have banded together to seek political power. Their candidates are elected by voters from different kinds of constituencies, different ages, different levels of income, and so on. When voters go to the polls in a national election, they are not engaging in a policy referendum. They are choosing a team to rule in the best interests of the people who elect them.

Many factors go into making that choice. Issues include the candidate's personality, party leader image, the performance of the incumbent government, and the existence or absence of a credible alternative. Knowing what policies the party wants to adopt is also one issue. So to that extent, the manifesto movement may get parties to be more explicit in defining their policy goals and provide information that the voters can take into account at election time. However, it is unrealistic to think that it can amount to more than that.

To be sure, politicians and parties have to stand for something. Many years ago, Everitt Dirksen, a politically savvy US Senator from Illinois, said only half tongue in cheek, that it was absolutely critical for politicians to have principles. "And my first principle," he quickly added, "is flexibility." Prime Minister Koizumi made a campaign promise to keep the ceiling on deficit financing of the government budget to under 30 million yen. And he was right when he dismissed criticism when he failed to keep his promise and said that well, it is no big deal since it was only an election promise after all. The question that should be asked about Koizumi is not whether he kept his promise on



the deficit ceiling, but whether he has performed adequately as prime minister in dealing with Japan's economic problems. Leaders need to be judged not by their fidelity to their election promises but by how well they govern.

Democratic politics is a messy and contentious business. It involves compromise. It involves struggle between interest groups seeking access to the public purse. There are bureaucrats who believe they know what is in the national interest, and politicians who know what is in their reelection interest. There's the party or parties in power and the political opposition. Democratic politics is frustrating and rather inefficient since it is based on compromise among contending political forces, a process that takes time and usually results in policies that leave everyone somewhat dissatisfied. But in Japan, this essence of politics is often dismissed as "backward" and even immoral.

There is a long tradition of what amounts to a kind of "anti-politics" in Japan. This often results in reformers putting forth an idealized, antiseptic model of modern politics as a yardstick against which to measure Japanese performance. This, of course, always comes up short. Thus some new dramatic, fundamental reform is needed to purge the system of politicians who focus on constituency rather than national issues, on parties that appeal to personality rather than policy, and so on and so forth.

In short, the problem with a lot of the reforms that are regularly proposed to improve Japanese politics is that they deny politics itself. In the end, the model of political behavior that seems to be so popular in Japan is the model of an idealized bureaucratic state. It is a state in which the push and pull of politics, or conflict, is largely missing.

In democracies, however, politicians have an obligation to serve the interests of their constituents. The parties to which they belong embrace a variety of viewpoints. The leaders they elect are not all-powerful but have to convince their parties' members to support their policies. Political reform that seeks to deny these realities of modern politics is doomed to fail.

When thinking about political party reform in Japan, it is important to consider how party politics has changed since the early twentieth century. When political parties first emerged as important political institutions around the beginning of the last century, they represented the interests of particular groups in society. Political parties were the representatives of the interests of the working class, the bourgeoisie, and so on.

The political history of the past century in modern democracies has been one of political parties moving away from representing discrete social groups to occupying an intermediate position between society and the state. Political parties do not belong to any particular societal groups; they "belong" to the politicians who run them, and these politicians use the party to appeal to voters for support so that they can obtain political power.

In other words, there is a political market in which politicians are entrepreneurs and voters are consumers. Politicians are in the business of politics, and politics is a business. When voters go to the polls they are acting as consumers in the political marketplace. Political parties are organizations that compete in this marketplace for voter support. Some parties are niche parties. They are not after majority support but want to maximize their support among a relatively small group of people. They are something akin to a boutique or specialty shop as contrasted with a supermarket or department store. In Japan, the Komeito and the Japan Communist Party are niche parties.

But parties--such as the LDP and the Democrats--that seek majority support, must have a marketing strategy that can appeal to large numbers of voters who have diverse interests and values. They try to do so in various ways. Presenting attractive leaders is obviously one, and it is of growing importance in Japan. The ability of a candidate to convince voters that he can do more for the constituency than the candidate of another party is another important sales technique. The continuing strength of the LDP is because so many of its candidates are able to convince voters that their election will bring more benefits to the constituency than could be expected if someone else were elected.

The point is not whether the emergence of the catch-all party is a good thing or whether it is desirable that being a professional politician has become a business. Whether one likes it or not, this is the political reality of modern democracies. For political reform to be relevant, it should be aimed to make this system work in an even-handed and transparent manner.

In this context, there are two reform issues that are especially important areas for Japan. One is the relationship between the ruling party and the government. The other is the relationship between the parties and the bureaucracy.

It is obviously difficult for voters to decide whether or not to vote for a particular party if the leader of that party commits himself to policies that the majority of the party's Diet members oppose. The lack of unanimity within parties and the need for the party leader to deal with opposition from within his own party is a feature of politics in the United States, Japan and other countries. But what makes the Japanese situation unique is that the prime minister's own team -- the cabinet and the party's top officials -- are not necessarily loyal to the prime minister and his policies. In the United States, Republican President George Bush cannot simply announce his policy goals and expect that the Republican majorities in the Senate and the House will make them law. He has to negotiate and compromise with the legislative leaders of his own party. But if any member of President Bush's cabinet or key officials in the White House were to publicly criticize the President's policies, that person would be out of his job that same day. This is not, however, how things work in Japan.

The idea that the ruling party and the government are somehow equal and

separate has a long history in Japan. In the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, when a party comes to power its key members join the government. Those who do not agree with the prime minister's policies stay out of the government or they suppress their criticism and accept the prime minister's policies as their own. When the government submits legislation to the parliament, the party's members vote for it.

The situation is not quite the same in Japan. The obligation of the party's Diet members to support the government in the Diet is recognized, and in this sense is very much like the Westminster model. There is strict party discipline in Diet voting and it is rare for a party member to go against the party. But what makes Japan unique is the role played by the party's Executive Council and Policy Affairs Research Council before legislation reaches the Diet.

The government has an obligation, not by law but by custom, to get the approval of the LDP's Executive Council before submitting legislation to the Diet. Apparently this convention was originally introduced to increase the party's power vis-à-vis the bureaucracy. But in recent years, especially after Koizumi came to power, it has become a mechanism to increase the party's power vis-à-vis its own leader, or the prime minister.

The result has been the emergence of a dual power structure between the prime minister's office (*souri kantei*) and the LDP. Not only does this make governance almost impossibly difficult, it also makes it very difficult for the public to hold the government accountable for its policies. If people believe that Prime Minister Koizumi is trying to do the right thing but is blocked by the opposition forces (*teiko seiryoku*) in his own party, then the inclination is to continue to support Koizumi even though he has failed to achieve his goals. If people are opposed to what Koizumi is trying to do and support the views of the opposition forces, then the inclination is to continue to support the LDP in order to prevent Koizumi from carrying out his reforms. In either case the end result is a vote for the LDP.

There is no easy solution to this problem, in part because the tradition of regarding government-ruling party relations as somehow being equal has such a deep history in Japan. It is actually somewhat analogous to the relationship between the President and the Congressional members of the President's party.

The answer to this problem is not to make unrealistic demands for unanimity among all LDP Diet members. It is understandable why politically Koizumi would argue that if the party elects him as president it is committed to support his policies. But electing a president is not the same thing as giving up all control of policy making to the president. A strong political leader is someone who has the ability to convince his party to support his policies. An inability to do so amounts to a failure of leadership. It cannot be overcome by making unrealistic demands on party members to do whatever the party president wants to do. The prime minister should be able to insist, however, that every

member of his governing team, which includes cabinet ministers, vice ministers, parliamentary secretaries and the key party officials, be loyal to him and to his policy agenda.

The tradition of the cabinet's collective responsibility is deeply rooted in Japan. Cabinet decisions are made on the basis of unanimity. Rather than the prime minister, cabinet ministers tend to see themselves as the ultimate decision maker on issues that fall within their ministries' jurisdiction. Moreover, vice ministers and parliamentary secretaries (*seimu jikan*) are not even chosen by the prime minister or minister, but by the party's secretary general. Decisions as to who gets appointed to these posts remain based on considerations of seniority and factional affiliation. It is obvious that it is exceedingly difficult for a prime minister to govern if his ministers do not believe they have an obligation to be loyal to the prime minister's policy agenda and if the vice ministers and parliamentary secretaries do not regard themselves as part of the prime minister's team to begin with.

Even more problematic is the relationship between the party's three top officials (*tousanyaku*) and the prime minister. It is not unusual for the head of the Executive Council or the Policy Affairs Research Council to openly criticize the prime minister's policies and his cabinet appointments. Nor is it unusual for these party leaders to use their positions to block the prime minister from submitting legislation to the Diet. In other parliamentary systems, the prime minister as a party leader would not tolerate such behavior and would summarily remove these party officials from office. Even more importantly, in other parliamentary democracies, party members who have fundamental differences over policy with the prime minister would not want to stay part of his government.

There have been suggestions made in Japan that key party officials hold simultaneous positions in the cabinet (*kokumu daijin*). Given the history of relations between government and ruling party in Japan, this proposal seems to make a great deal of sense. If the head of the Policy Affairs Research Council and the Executive Council and the Secretary General were in the cabinet, then when they spoke out on policy issues, they would have to represent the views of the cabinet. If they did not do so and took a contrary position, the prime minister would have little choice but to dismiss them from the cabinet, and thus from their party post as well.

Restructuring the relationship between the prime minister's office and the ruling party is one of the most important tasks for political reform in Japan. Once a party comes to power, the capable leaders in it should become part of the government. Until this rather common sense feature of parliamentary democracy are practiced in Japan, the stand-off between Prime Minister Koizumi and the opposition forces in the LDP and the blurring of the lines of responsibility and accountability will continue.

The second important area for reform involves relations between political parties and the bureaucracy. This is far too complex an issue to discuss in detail here. The following outlines the basic points. In the past, the bureaucracy served as the ruling party's think tank. Political leaders had a great deal of confidence in the bureaucracy's competence and were able to coordinate policy making to insure that their political interests would be met. For a variety of reasons, confidence in the bureaucracy has declined and the coordination mechanism that smoothed relations between the LDP and the bureaucracy has largely collapsed. Consequently, the issue of how to structure relations between politicians and bureaucrats has taken on a new urgency.

The idea that politicians, rather than bureaucrats, should make policy is regarded as a truism in contemporary Japan. There are many politicians who pride themselves on being policy experts and knowing more about complex issues than the bureaucrats. However, there are two fundamental problems with the argument that politicians should make policy.

One problem is that most policy is technical and politically uninteresting. Politicians should be spending their time dealing with and thinking about bigger issues. It is important to have a bureaucratic system in which the day to day business of running a government is handled efficiently and without political prejudice by professional bureaucrats. This requires high morale, competent people, and political support. Constantly bashing the bureaucrats and reducing their number is hardly a way to make such a system work.

Moreover, for politicians to make policy, they need to have expertise on a wide variety of issues. If they are not to rely on bureaucrats to provide it, they need to go elsewhere. In the United States, Congress has its own bureaucracy which, in effect, competes with the bureaucracy of the executive branch under the President. In the U.S. and Europe, there is a well developed array of think tanks that provide alternative policy ideas to the bureaucracy. There is nothing in Japan that's comparable to the U.S.' Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, the Council on Foreign Relations or Britain's International Institute of Strategic Studies or the Royal Institute of International Affairs, or other comparable institutions in France, Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

Moreover, in several European countries, political parties have their own think tanks that are a source of policy ideas for the prime minister and even for the opposition party. The Japanese apparently took the idea of the *seisaku hisho* from the United States, but one has to wonder how important it is for each member of the Diet to have one *seisaku hisho* when the issues the Diet votes on are so varied and when votes are constrained by party discipline. It would seem to make more sense to take the money being spent on *seisaku hisho* and divide that among the parties to be used for hiring a professional policy staff to be attached to the party's policy affairs council.

In any event, political leadership (*seiji shudou*) does not mean that politicians should be doing what bureaucrats normally do. Political leadership means setting direction, identifying priorities, making critical decisions, and explaining to the public why particular policies are needed. And it is to this end that political reform should be directed. Changing, for example, the law regulating public subsidies to parties (*seitou joseikin*) so that at least part of the subsidy would have to be used at party headquarters to support the party's research staff might be worth considering. Strengthening the professional staffs of Diet committees by bringing in experts from the private sector on a rotating basis might contribute to make the Diet more important as a site for policy making, rather than just policy approval.

In the end, however, the most significant reform in terms of transforming Japanese politics would probably be the adoption of an election districting system for the lower house that strictly followed a one-person one- vote apportionment. The imbalance in the weight of the vote between urban and rural districts is a major source of the problems Japanese politics face. If the lower house were to more accurately reflect the Japanese voting public, it would provoke party reorganization and would change the policy agenda.

My purpose here is not to lay out an agenda for political reform. My objective has been to describe how the ideal model of modern party politics that is so fervently embraced in Japan is a relic of the past with surprisingly little relevance to the real world of politics in twenty-first century Japan. Japan faces serious political problems. Reform to be successful has to be rooted in Japan's historical and institutional realities and has to focus on concrete, incremental, realistic goals. Party politics in Japan, after all, have a history nearly one hundred years old. The democratic tradition goes back beyond the American Occupation to the period of Taisho democracy. Reforms that deny the power of this history and seek to change Japan's political culture in a day are bound to fail.

Until recently, the history of party politics in Japan has been one of adaptability to changing circumstances. For the past decade, however, the political system's capacity to adapt has been insufficient, to say the least. Whether it is able to demonstrate that adaptability and flexibility once again depends in large part on whether political reformers will let go of an outdated model of modern party politics and focus on concrete ways to strengthen the Japanese system rather than to try and fundamentally replace it.