

The Japanese People Welcome the Hatoyama Government — Cautiously

Tobias Harris
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

By any measure, Japan's August 30th general election was a milestone in Japan's political development. Not only did the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lose the general election to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) — the DPJ won the largest majority in the House of Representatives won by a party during the postwar era. The DPJ won 308 of 480 seats, including 221 of 300 single-member districts (SMDs), and little over two weeks following the general election the DPJ took power in coalition with the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) and People's New Party (PNP) under the leadership of Hatoyama Yukio.

While the DPJ's victory was historic, analysts are divided over the significance of the transition to DPJ rule. For example, Okamoto Yukio, a retired diplomat and onetime adviser to several LDP prime ministers, has argued that the DPJ does not in fact have a mandate for radical change because the Japanese public was voting against the LDP, not for the DPJ. "Last month's electoral upset was not a DPJ victory. It was an LDP defeat, brought about by the Liberal Democrats' incredible self-destruction," he wrote in the *Washington Post*.¹ Similarly, writing at the website of the magazine *Foreign Policy*, Paul Scalise and Devin Stewart argued against the idea that the DPJ's victory was a "revolution," writing that "in polls, Japanese voters said they weren't electing radical change as much as expressing dissatisfaction with the LDP."²

Karel van Wolferen, author of *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, was more optimistic about the prospects for a DPJ government to change how Japan is governed, noting in particular that "the individuals of the inner core of the party are deadly serious" about changing the relationship between elected officials and bureaucrats and introducing social and economic reform.³

But what about the Japanese people, who for the first time since the LDP's creation in 1955 have given a clear majority to a party other than the LDP?⁴ Are Scalise and Stewart correct in concluding that despite the tremendous scale of the DPJ's victory the general election was simply about the LDP and that the public has low expectations for what Prime Minister Hatoyama and the DPJ will be able to achieve?

Recent polls suggest otherwise, that while the public clearly had abandoned the LDP during the months leading up to the general election, it increasingly embraced the DPJ not just because it was not the LDP but because of many of its key policy proposals.

Concerning the shift from the LDP to the DPJ, it is remarkable just how stable support for the DPJ became well before the general election. A poll published in the *Asahi Shimbun* on August 18th,⁵ the day campaigning officially began, shows that in four consecutive polls beginning in early July support for the DPJ and the LDP was holding steady in both SMDs and proportional representation races, with the DPJs consistently receiving around 40% in both categories and the LDPs hovering

¹ Yukio Okamoto, "An Opening in Japan's Election," *The Washington Post*, 18 September 2009.

² Paul J. Scalise and Devin T. Stewart, "Think Again: Japan's Revolutionary Election," *Foreign Policy*, 1 October 2009. <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/01/think_again_japans_revolutionary_election?page=0,0>.

³ Karel van Wolferen, "What Can the DPJ's Overwhelming Victory Mean for Japan?," *Karel van Wolferen*, 31 August 2009. <<http://www.karelvanwolferen.com/index.php?h=1&s=70&sn=26%20E2%80%93%20What%20Can%20the%20DPJ%20E2%80%99s%20Overwhelming%20V&t=2&v=1&a=1>>.

⁴ The LDP, briefly out of power 1993-1994, remained the largest party in the House of Representatives.

⁵ "Asahi Shimbun August 2009 Emergency Public Opinion Poll #2," <<http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/polls/2009/poll-09-21.htm>>.

around 20%. Support for Hatoyama versus then-Prime Minister Aso Taro closely tracked support for their parties in the forthcoming election. An even larger proportion of respondents in that poll favored an “administration centered on the DPJ,” 49% to only 21% for the LDP. The respondents were overwhelmingly in favor of a DPJ-centered government despite clear skepticism about the DPJ’s proposals and its ability to pay for its promises. Most remarkably, the same proportion of respondents — 83% — said they felt “unease over insufficient financial resources” in response to both question 13 (“Do you think there are financial resources available to achieve the various policy promises made by the LDP?”) and question 14 (“Do you think there are financial resources available to achieve the various policy promises made by the DPJ?”). Respondents were equally skeptical about the DPJ’s plans for monthly child allowances (55% opposed, 33% in favor) and lifting highway tolls (67% opposed, 23% in favor).

Not surprisingly, in the aftermath of the general election the public was pleased with the results. An *Asahi* poll conducted over the two days following the election found 69% of respondents saying that the change of government was good (compared with only 10% who said it was bad) and 54% saying that the size of the DPJ’s victory was a good thing (compared with 25% who said it was bad). Seventy-four percent said that they “have expectations” for the Hatoyama government, and 63% of respondents said they have expectations for Hatoyama himself. But respondents were skeptical of the notion that the DPJ won on the basis of its policies as opposed to the public’s desire for a change of government: 81% of respondents said “hope for a change in administration was a big reason” for the DPJ’s victory, while only 38% of respondents said “support for DPJ’s policies was a big reason” (compared with 52% who said it was not). Respondents were still largely opposed to the DPJ’s plans for child allowances and toll-free highways.

But in the weeks leading up to the September 16th launch of the Hatoyama government public expectations about the DPJ’s policies rose. *Asahi*’s September 18th poll, conducted on the 16th and the 17th,⁶ showed that the Hatoyama government was supported by 71% of respondents — and that the leading reason for supporting the new government was its policies, the choice of 46% of those who said they supported the government and 33% of all respondents. A majority of respondents approved of the prime minister’s personnel choices for his cabinet (52% in favor, 14% opposed), although many were skeptical of Hatoyama’s choice to name Ozawa Ichiro, his predecessor as DPJ leader, as the DPJ’s new secretary general (45% approved, 40% disapproved). More remarkable than the support for the new government, however, which is after all not atypical for new governments in Japan, is that respondents were favorably disposed to the government’s policy programs. While a sizable majority continued to oppose the policy of lifting tolls on public highways (67% of respondents said it should not be realized, compared with only 24% who said it should), 60% of respondents supported child allowances, 75% supported the government’s plan to “standardize” the pension system and provide a minimum annual payment of 70,000 yen, and 56% supported the government’s plan to abolish the gasoline tax.

Most significantly, the poll showed that the public is confident in the DPJ’s ability to deliver on what is unquestionably the centerpiece of the new government’s program, changing the relationship between the cabinet and the bureaucracy, especially in budgeting. When asked whether politicians will play a greater leadership role over the bureaucracy, 49% responded that they would, compared with 32% who said they would not. Sixty-one percent said that the new government would be able to deliver on its plans to cut wasteful spending.

It is this portion of the DPJ’s agenda that marks the most significant break with the LDP style of rule. LDP governments were characterized by weak cabinets forced to contend with strong

⁶ “Asahi Shimbun September 2009 Emergency Public Opinion Poll - The Start of the Hatoyama Cabinet,” <<http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/polls/2009/poll-09-23.htm>>.

bureaucrats and strong LDP backbenchers who collaborated to make policy. The result, especially in the years since the end of the bubble economy in the late 1980s, has been stagnation and inaction on the part of the Japanese government — with former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s campaign against the “old” LDP the exception that proves the rule. During the general election campaign the DPJ promised a new form of government modeled on Britain’s Westminster system in which the cabinet and the prime minister would control the agenda (and the budget) and make the difficult decisions necessary to set Japan on the road to prosperity again. Whatever doubts the public has about the DPJ’s campaign promises, there is widespread support for the DPJ’s plans to change how the country is governed. For example, a poll conducted by the *Sankei Shimbun* in early September found that more than 87% of respondents voiced their approval of the DPJ’s plans to reform the process of compiling and executing the budget and its plans to transform the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats.⁷

It is for this reason that it is a mistake to see the DPJ’s victory as nothing but a vote against LDP rule. The Japanese public believes that the DPJ has promised genuine change in how Japan is governed and expects the Hatoyama government to deliver. The DPJ has a mandate to implement sweeping changes in how Japan’s government functions, even if the public is skeptical about what the DPJ plans to do with a newly empowered cabinet.

⁷ *Sankei Shimbun*, <<http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/090907/stt0909071754008-n1.htm>>.