

ELECTION

by Leonard Schoppa

A campaign memoir

Why now?

Leonard Schoppa, a professor of political science at the University of Virginia, has written several books on Japan, most recently *Race for the Exits: The Unraveling of Japan's System of Social Protection*. He spent ten years of his childhood in Tokyo and Hokkaido, where his father was a missionary. He returned in 1984 as a teaching fellow in Kumamoto.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has supposedly been in terminal decline for the entire period I've been following Japanese politics. Its demise was first forecast in the early 1960s when party leaders worried they could not attract the votes of the large numbers of Japanese moving into the cities. In the early 1980s, when I returned to Japan to teach English, the LDP was still having trouble in the urban areas. In 1989, the year before I started teaching college, the LDP lost its majority in the Upper House in the aftermath of corruption scandals, and for most of the "lost decade" that followed, the LDP struggled to win the support of "floating voters," leading to Upper House election defeats in 1995 and 1998.

Yet each time, the party was able to hang onto power. It successfully turned to new leaders (Yasuhiro Nakasone in the 1980s, Toshiki Kaifu in 1990, Junichiro Koizumi in 2001). It engineered economic turnarounds just in time for Lower House (LH) elections (1996, 2000, and 2005). It allied with Komeito. All the while, the LDP relied on its organized support networks in the provinces to help it win a large majority of the seats in the rural parts of Japan, enough to offset inroads that other parties might make in the cities and suburbs.

When polls started predicting that the LDP might actually lose this year's election, I decided to see for myself by visiting Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Kumamoto for two weeks in late July to mid-August. Everyone I spoke to confirmed that it looked like an LDP defeat was actually going to happen this time. When *AERA*, a respected magazine, predicted on July 27 that the DPJ would win 247 seats, colleagues following the election from abroad couldn't believe it. Their models said the DPJ still did not have enough quality

candidates in rural areas. But on the ground, you could already see the electoral tidal wave starting to build.

The LDP had lost its past tricks. Failing to time the election to the rhythms of the economy, it found that its term ran out at the very bottom of a deep recession. Nor could it come up any standard-bearer with the appeal of Koizumi or even Nakasone.

Aso: the man who wasn't there

The LDP's real problem was that it finally lost the legendary "floating voters." Ever since the LDP's split and short-lived defeat in 1993, 30-50% of voters have told pollsters that they support no specific party. These voters, especially numerous in the large cities, have been consistently unhappy with the LDP "old guard" and its friends in the bureaucracy. They favor "reform," and have shown themselves willing to swing in large numbers toward any party that convinces them that it can deliver change.

In 2005, the LDP won a landslide victory, including most urban seats, by appealing to this group through "Koizumi Theater," in which Koizumi took on the postal rebels in his own party and deployed electoral "assassins" against them. While 2005 was all about Koizumi, this year, the LDP kept Taro Aso hidden. Everywhere I looked, the DPJ posters prominently featured the image of Yukio Hatoyama. But the LDP candidates' posters, which by law must include at least one other face in the period before the 12-day official campaign begins, displayed anybody but Aso, such as Health and Welfare Minister Yoichi Masuzoe, a local politician, or even a local television celebrity.

In Kanagawa, an urbanized prefecture near Tokyo, where I spent a day shadowing Taro Kono, the son and grandson of leading

LDP politicians, the candidate explained that his campaign decided quickly not to feature Aso on his posters. The speeches he gave in front of Hiratsuka station and at local grocery stores that day never once mentioned the prime minister or the LDP. Instead, they were about the need for pension reform, and the reform he advocated was identical to the DPJ's. In the evening, he spoke to an audience responding to invitations from his campaign, blasting the bureaucracy for favoring public corporations into which they placed retiring officials. Kono had realized that, to win, he would have to distance himself from the LDP and Aso. In fact, in one speech, he urged a group of workers assembled at a small local factory to vote for him even if they thought the LDP might lose, because Kono could then change the party and help it come back next time.

Kono also depended heavily on his local support network, his *koenkai*. He told me his operation had 30,000 members in Hiratsuka alone and another 20,000 in Chigasaki, most of which he had built up since taking over a piece of his father's district in 1996. The challenge of building a support organization in suburban Japan became clear as I tagged along as he went door-to-door in a 700-home subdivision that had been built since the last election in 2005. His staff had walked the area before, but this was his first visit to these homes. At many homes, no one was home, or a housewife answered the doorbell only to ask him to leave his materials in the box. Only one person, in two hours, engaged him in a conversation of any length. It was clear that much work would be required before any became loyal supporters.

Kono admitted this was hard work and told me that many senior LDP politicians had not done much of it lately. His own father, he said, had not done this since 1976 when he launched the New Liberal Club. Instead, his powerful father spent campaign periods giving speeches for other candidates. As I began to hear of many veteran LDP politicians fighting for their lives, I had to wonder if some of them, too, had neglected the hard work of identifying new "favorables" in urbanizing areas like this one.

While Kono survived, few of his colleagues did. That's because Ichiro Ozawa and the DPJ succeeded in making the election a referendum on Aso and the LDP. Aso may not have been visible on posters, but he was the face of the LDP in television news coverage. Ozawa and Hatoyama chose a slo-

gan that would convince the floating voters that they were the true party of reform. In any other parliamentary system, the phrase they chose (*seiken kotai* or “change of government”) would have been redundant. But in Japan, which had never seen an election deliver a change in government, it was a radical idea that succeeded in capturing the attention of the media and voters. The slogan was on the DPJ manifesto, the party website, and virtually every poster across the country.

Ozawa’s female “assassins”

The DPJ needed more than a slogan to seize the banner of “change.” Just as Koizumi had deployed attractive well-known woman as “assassins” in the 2005 election, so too Ozawa recruited attractive, young female candidates to run for the DPJ against elderly male candidates from the ruling coalition, including Fumio Kyuuma in Nagasaki and the Komeito’s top leader, Akihira Ohta in Tokyo. As I watched TV, it became clear that Eriko Futada and Ai Aoki, the women taking on these old men, had become the face of “change.” Both women won.

The female candidate Ozawa recruited to run against former Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) Yuya Niwa in Ibaraki wasn’t young, but TV Asahi featured this story anyway because the challenger, Hiroko Ooizumi, was a former MHLW bureaucrat who had served under Niwa. She was shown campaigning vigorously to reverse the cuts in health expenditure supported by Niwa. The reporter added that she had even won the support of local doctors who had long been part of Niwa’s support network. Niwa had previously made only token appearances at neighborhood festivals during campaigns, but this time he was participating (awkwardly) in festival activities in a desperate attempt to hold onto his seat (he failed).

On another evening TV Asahi covered the story of how Nobutaka Machimura, a former foreign minister and LDP faction boss, faced a strong (and successful) challenge from Chiyomi Kobayashi in Hokkaido. NHK covered the struggle of ex-chief cabinet secretary and prominent LDP reformer Yasuhisa’s Shiozaki to beat back a challenge by Takako Nagae in a district that had been in his family for generations (he eked out a tiny victory).

The message could not be more clear: voting for the DPJ would finally usher the old men off the stage and allow a new

younger generation to take over. Change would finally come to Japan.

Minding the Gap

Japanese voters told pollsters from *Nikkei* that the most important issues were “social insurance programs like pensions” (36%), “the economy and unemployment” (27%), and “declining fertility and child rearing” (10%). These concerns about social welfare were no doubt aggravated by the recent economic downturn, but voters have been prioritizing these issues for several years as they have experienced a rising “gap” (*kakusa*) in society that has been blamed on Koizumi’s market-oriented reforms.

The DPJ targeted its media campaign at these very concerns, blaming the LDP for causing many Japanese to feel anxiety (*fuan*) about their futures. One television ad lingered on an old person, sitting alone on a bench on a gray day, staring at a river, evoking voters’ worries about whether pension, health, and eldercare programs would still be around for them as they aged. The DPJ’s positive ads featured images of families playing with their children and busy medical waiting rooms as the narrator explained that the DPJ was for “a politics for living” (*kurashi no tame no seiji*).

The party’s five-point “manifesto” also focused on these concerns. While point one called for eliminating wasteful government expenditures, the rest called for increased spending and other policy changes aimed at expanding the social safety net. Among the headline proposals were an expanded child allowance of \$276 per child per month for the first 13 years of a child’s life; elimination of public high school fees; scholarships for college students; fixing the pension system; restoring social insurance cuts; and revitalizing the regions by providing income supplements to farmers, reducing expressway tolls, and lowering gas taxes.

Capturing the swingers

The DPJ won because its image of change captured the floating voters. Sankei exit polls showed that 51.6% of floating voters cast their proportional representation (PR) ballots for the DPJ, compared to just 38.2% in 2005. The party’s stronger base in the metropolitan regions, combined with this success in attracting floating voters helped it virtually sweep the single-member districts (SMDs) in the densely populated Pacific Coastal zone

But if this were only a story of urban

floaters, the 2009 election would not have been an earthquake. The big story is that the DPJ succeeded in “nationalizing” the election, even in rural areas where the bulk of votes had long been delivered by the LDP’s clientelistic support networks. I saw this happening on my visit to Kumamoto—where I had taught English two decades ago—which I had chosen as a destination because it was solid LDP country.

Even here, the chief editorial writer for the *Kumanichi Shimbun* told me, constituencies that had long been solidly LDP were flirting with “giving the DPJ a try.” Officials from the LDP-linked Agricultural Cooperative (*Nokyo*) were seen as prioritizing their own political careers and salaries over the interests of farmers. Many rank and file farmers were tired of depending on Nokyo for everything and being directed to vote for the LDP. Ozawa was offering direct income supplements to farmers, by-passing Nokyo, and this sounded attractive to at least some farmers.

My informants in Kumamoto, who included Governor Ikuo Kabashima, pointed to other changes that were opening up rural areas to DPJ inroads. Koizumi’s cuts in public works spending meant fewer beneficiaries of construction spending. Municipal mergers had reduced the number of local assembly members who were important links in the LDP’s networks. And even in the countryside, voters now cared about quality of life concerns. In Kumamoto, groups opposed to building a dam had succeeded in convincing Kabashima to freeze construction, and others were pushing for him to approve destruction of another dam.

In 2005, the LDP had won four seats in Kumamoto handily and almost won the fifth (in the prefectural capital). This time, the DPJ candidate won solidly in Kumamoto City, picked up one additional seat, and came close in two other districts. The DPJ was even more successful in other parts of Kyushu. On that island and in Tohoku, two relatively rural regions where the LDP once had a virtual lock, the DPJ picked up 31 new SMDs. The upswing in the DPJ’s PR vote share was as large or larger in rural Tohoku, Hokuriku, and Chugoku as it was in urban Tokyo. It was this unexpected success in the countryside that turned what many expected to be a bare-majority win for the DPJ into a landslide.

I’m eager to see if the DPJ can be as good at ruling as it was in campaigning.