Japan’s Abandoned Partisans:

Realignment After Electoral Reform

Kenneth Mori McElwain
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

kmcelwai@umich.edu

Prepared for the “Dominant Party Systems Conference”
May 9-10, 2014
University of Michigan
I. Introduction

Since its founding in 1955, the Liberal Democratic Party has been the plurality party in every election but one and in government for all but four years. However, there has been a spike in electoral volatility since the electoral system was revised in 1994, casting doubts about the durability of single-party dominance. The most remarkable change been in incumbency advantage: the average reelection rate has collapsed from over 80% pre-reform to under 50% in the last two elections (2009 and 2012).

This paper argues that electoral volatility can be traced to two related factors: a surge in the ratio of independent voters, and the growing salience of party labels to electoral victory. Until the 1990s, election outcomes were determined principally by constituency-level factors, such as sectoral composition (particularly the local economy’s dependence on fiscal transfers) and the quality of individual candidates. The LDP remained in power by soliciting good candidates—notably ex-local politicians—and ensuring that rural economies enjoyed expansive public works expenditures (for the construction industry) and insulation from foreign competition (for agriculture). Rural districts were vital to electoral success, because irregular seat reapportionment, coupled with rapid postwar urbanization, meant that those constituencies had fewer voters per representative than urban districts. In other words, it “cost” fewer votes to win a rural seat than an urban one.

Since the 1990s, however, elections have become highly “nationalized”. As McElwain (2012) shows, vote swings have increased in magnitude and are also more correlated across districts, suggesting that more voters are changing their ballots in the same pattern from election to election. This indicates two things: 1) voters are no longer strongly attached to a particular party or candidate; 2) instead, they are paying more attention to nationally salient cues, such as macroeconomic trends or the charisma of party leaders.

This shift towards party-focused-but-unstable elections has been prompted by a number of factors. For one, the reduction of seat malapportionment in 1994 has diminished the value of rural districts, prompting all parties to craft policies that appeal to voters around the nation. For another, two decades of economic malaise have reduced the LDP’s traditional valence advantage in macroeconomic management, making more votes up for grabs.

The overall trend towards electoral volatility, however, rests on changes in the partisan nature of Japanese voters. The 1994 electoral reform instituted a new system that prioritized victory in single-member districts. This prompted minor, progressive parties to (try to) amalgamate into a broader center-left front that could challenge the LDP head-to-head. This process of realignment took approximately three elections to sort out, with the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) eventually emerging as the center-left champion in 2003. During this time, however, more than ten parties were established, disbanded, or absorbed. This includes some minor parties that had been around since the 1960s and had a small but active base of partisan supporters. The elimination of these parties left their followers bereft of partisan attachments, producing a large cohort of what I call “abandoned partisans”—voters with ideological convictions but no partisan identification.

The inability of progressive parties to inculcate new partisans benefited the LDP, which suffered no major schisms in the early years after electoral reform. The rise of the DPJ, however, has been accompanied by a gradual increase in DPJ partisan voters, which has put both parties on a more equal footing. Nonetheless, there still remains a large cohort—approximately 35% of the
electorate—of “true independents”: voters who do not love any party. This ratio is not that different from the pre-1993 period, when the greater salience of local factors over national ones limited the size of uniform partisan swings in favor of one party. In the last two decades, however, the nationalization of elections has prompted the LDP and DPJ to solicit independent voters more aggressively. They have had mixed success, in large part because independents appear to be more sensitive to short-term cues, particularly the popularity of party leaders, when casting their ballots. This has increased the overall volatility of the electoral system, making sustained dominance in the future unlikely.

My analysis rests on a unique dataset of constituency-level surveys since 1979, spanning ten elections before and after electoral reform. In the next section, I will describe changes in electoral stability / volatility in the postwar period. Section III will focus on the ideological ramifications of electoral reform, which prompted a complete reorganization of the party system. Section IV will examine constituency-level variation in the realignment of abandoned partisans. I will show that parties that repeatedly compete in and nominate candidates are more successful at inculcating partisanship. Section V will link this finding to the determinants of election outcomes. While independent voters leaned towards the LDP until the 1990s, they are equally likely to support the DPJ today. This has made the DPJ a more viable competitor, but also reduces the likelihood that any party wins successive elections.

II. The Ideological Underpinnings of Single-Party Dominance (or the Lack Thereof)

The Liberal Democratic Party has dominated Japanese politics for much of the postwar period. It won a majority of seats in the powerful House of Representatives (HR; Lower House) in twelve consecutive elections, spanning 38 years. Bribery scandals in the late-1980s and early-’90s led to the party’s first defeat in 1993, but it quickly returned to power eleven months later, albeit in a coalition government. While the LDP lost once more in 2009, it has been in power for all but four years in the last sixty years.¹

That said, the LDP’s dominance is somewhat overstated. Figure 1 shows the LDP’s average district vote share (as bars; confidence intervals as capped lines) between 1958 and 2009. There has been a steady decline in the LDP’s vote margins, with a sizable dip in 1976 on the heels of PM Kakuei Tanaka’s arrest over the Lockheed bribery scandals. While the party recovered over the next decade, economic slowdown after the 1973 and 1979 Oil Shocks tarnished the LDP’s reputation as an effective manager of the postwar “economic miracle”.

Figure 1

¹ According to ParlGov’s database (N=3196 party-elections in established democracies), a party has won a vote / seat majority in only 0.9% / 3.7% of elections. Of these “dominant party” cases, the
Kent Calder (1988) has described the LDP’s tenure since the 1970s as “institutionalized insecurity”. The party increasingly relied on targeted fiscal redistribution and regulatory favors to cobble together enough votes to hold onto its legislative majority. The institutional environment made this strategy viable. First, Japan’s high degree of fiscal centralization made poorer, rural regions dependent on national government transfers to fund development and public works projects, making them amenable to clientelistic relationships. Second, rural votes were particularly valuable because of legislative malapportionment. Despite rapid postwar urbanization, seats were only occasionally reapportioned, leaving many rural areas under-populated / over-represented (Christensen and Johnson 1995, Thies 1998). This meant that as long as the LDP could maintain a stranglehold over its rural bailiwicks, it could continue to defend its seat majority, even in the face of declining popularity elsewhere (Scheiner 2006). This tactic was aided by a third institutional feature: the multi-member district, single non-transferable vote (MMD-SNTV) electoral system. With an average district magnitude of four, smaller opposition parties with 15-20% vote share remained electorally viable, diminishing incentives to coordinate behind a common label to challenge the LDP one-on-one (Cox 1997).

Electoral reform in 1994 stripped away many of these institutional advantages. The new mixed-member majoritarian system combines two parallel tiers: 300 single-member plurality districts, and 180 proportional representation seats (closed-list, D’Hondt) divided among eleven regional blocs. The exact mechanics of Japan’s MMM emphasize the district-level contests, producing stronger pressures for the opposition parties to coalesce.\(^2\) Despite some early meandering—more on this

\(^2\) Voters get two separate ballots, and winners for each tier are calculated separately. The MMM system in Japan has two twists. First, candidates can run in the SMD contest and be nominated on the party’s PR list. Second, parties can rank nominees on the PR list equally, as well as ordinally. If a candidate wins a plurality of votes in the SMD tier, then her name is taken off the PR list. Should she lose, however, she can be “resurrected” in the PR tier. If her ranking is above the cutoff point (e.g. she is ranked fifth and the party is awarded ten seats), then she is still elected. If she is co-ranked with other candidates (e.g. the party obtains five seats, but ten candidates are ranked equally), then seats are awarded based on those candidates’ winner-loser ratio, or their vote shares in the
below—the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) emerged in 2000 as the primary center-left champion. Importantly, a new reapportionment provision was written into the electoral code, requiring the maximum population disparity between districts to be less than 2:1, compared to highs of 5:1 in the 1970s. This has reduced the value of a rurally-oriented electoral strategy, and the LDP has been investing more heavily in building an urban support base (McElwain 2012).

While this brave new world of electoral competitiveness may seem to be an improvement, or at least a reprieve, from five decades of LDP dominance, it belies the extent to which the party system overall has destabilized. The LDP and DPJ have traded enormous electoral swings since the 2005 Lower House election, resulting in a significant drop in incumbent reelection rates. Figure 2 shows the mean reelection rates of incumbents from the LDP, the main opposition party (Japan Socialist Party before 1993, New Frontier Party in 1996, and DPJ afterwards), and the full sample average. While incumbents, regardless of party, were victorious in about 80% of races before the 1994 electoral reform, that ratio has dropped precipitously to below 50% in 2009 and 2012.

This electoral volatility runs counter to traditional explanations of Japanese elections. Much of the literature has pointed to the importance of candidate networks and clientelistic policy redistribution in fostering strong ties between individual legislators and their constituents (Curtis 1971, Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1993, Krauss and Pekkanen 2011). As McElwain (2012) shows, vote swings were weakly correlated across districts under the old electoral system, suggesting that constituency-level outcomes were best explained by constituency-level factors, not national trends in voter sentiment. After four decades of stable elections, why have Japanese voters grown more fickle?

Recent research points to the growing salience of party labels. Reed, Scheiner, and Thies (2012) argue that party popularity has become the primary determinant of victory since 2005, supplanting candidate quality. While I do not disagree with this diagnosis, it is important to note that the popularity of parties is highly volatile. No party has won successive Lower and Upper House SMD relative to the winner. As a result, a candidate’s fate—in the SMD directly, as well as for PR resurrection—depends on her performance in district races (McKean and Scheiner 2000).
elections in the last decade, and each election has produced large, alternating swings in favor of the LDP and DPJ. While Japanese voters may be using party evaluations to judge candidates, they lack enduring, affective partisanship or party identification. In other words, they appear to be “independent voters”.

Of course, there is significant controversy whether self-declared independent voters are truly non-partisan. Keith et al. (1992) argue, for example, that most independents in the United States lean in favor of a particular party and behave more or less like a typical “Democrat” or “Republican”. This is also consistent with studies of European elections, where many declared independents are better characterized as “weak partisans” who vote for the same party with remarkable consistency (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, Wren and McElwain 2007).

In the Japanese case, independents have traditionally leaned conservative, especially before the 1990s. Tanaka (2012), who has written extensively on Japanese partisanship, suggests that about half of independents (roughly 20-25% of the electorate) are politically engaged but mistrust all parties, due to high profile scandals in the 1970s and 1980s. Miyake, Nishizawa, and Kohno (2001) add that the LDP also suffered some partisan defection due to its slow response to the negative externalities of postwar industrialization, particularly urban over-crowding and environmental pollution. However, they also show that these disaffected independents tended to value retrospective pocketbook factors, and thus continued to vote for the LDP through the 1980s.

The emergence of these “disaffected conservatives” is confirmed by monthly opinion polls by Jiji Tsushin. Figure 3 shows responses to two separate questions: 1) “do you have an affinity for a particular party?” and 2) “if not, would you say you lean conservative or progressive?” The dotted black line shows the percentage of those who claim no affinity (scaled on the right vertical axis), while the two solid lines represent the ratio of those independents with some ideological leanings (left vertical axis). All of these lines are smoothed three-month moving averages. Unfortunately, the follow-up ideology question was only asked until the mid-1990s. However, it is clear that many self-identified independents leaned conservative.

Figure 3

3 For a more recent discussion of independent voters in the US, see: http://themonkeycage.org/2012/06/04/independents-are-mostly-partisans-chapter-gazillion/
If this pattern continues today, then we would expect most independents to continue to vote for the LDP, preserving the ideological status quo. However, the amplification of vote swings since 2005 suggests that the composition of independent voters has changed. As Figure 3 displayed, the overall proportion of independents has more than doubled since the early 1990s, and most surveys report that 60% of respondents claim no party affinity. One interpretation is that these “new” independents are similar to the pre-1990s cohort, i.e. they reject parties but remain politically engaged. If so, then they should also prioritize pocketbook factors and other national-level trends, but otherwise remain electoral free agents.

This hypothesis certainly has merit, and it is not inconsistent with survey data. Figure 4 plots the proportion of independents against the share of respondents who, when asked to give their opinion on future economic growth and their livelihoods, replied “become worse”. The correlation between these two lines is a sizable 0.60, indicating that Japan’s economic malaise has weakened partisan affinity significantly. However, this is not a fully satisfactory story, for two related reasons. First, if voters are evaluating parties by economic factors, how did the LDP remain in power until 2009, almost two decades after the 1991-92 bursting of the asset bubble? Second, why did the emergence of large partisan swings not begin until 2005—the fourth contest after electoral reform?

Figure 4
Instead, I argue that there has been a gradual but significant realignment of Japanese voters after the 1994 electoral reform. Progressive political parties rearranged themselves rapidly, but the process was entirely elite-driven: legislators changed teams regularly, but no party represented a genuine grassroots movement. This generated a large cohort of what I call “abandoned partisans”: former supporters of minor Leftist parties who lost their objects of affection when their parties disappeared or shrunk significantly. These abandoned partisans do not lack ideological convictions—after all, they used to support a party in the past—but they had limited opportunities to develop new affective attachments, due to rapid changes in the names, compositions, and platforms of post-reform progressive parties.

The new electoral system’s emphasis on programmatic competition suited the LDP early on, as the party retained many of its partisan supporters, even as chaos on the Left fragmented its challengers. The inability of opposition parties to offer a coherent, alternative policy agenda also insulated the LDP from public consternation with the bursting of the asset bubble. However, the realignment of progressive voters behind the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) began to reduce the proportion of “true independents”. As I will show in the next section, partisan support for the DPJ has steadily increased as the party has nationalized its campaigns, making the electorate more familiar with the party’s platforms and leadership.

With the realignment of abandoned partisans behind the DPJ, I argue that the proportion of “true” independent voters is about 30%—considerably smaller than the share of self-identified

---

4 Some parties that emerged and disappeared in this period include the Democratic Socialist Party, New Frontier Party, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, the Japan New Party, and Sakigake. Even the Japan Socialist Party—the largest progressive party and main challenger to the LDP through the 1980s—shrank significantly and rebranded itself as the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

5 An important corollary is that the emphasis towards party-oriented elections likely begun quite soon after electoral reform, contrary to Reed, Scheiner, and Thies’s (2012) contention that this only manifested in 2005. My interpretation is, however, consistent with Taniguchi (2004), who, writing on the 1996 election, shows that voters were already quite sensitive to party labels, especially in districts where the proliferation of candidates generated more informational uncertainty.
independents. Today, both the LDP and DPJ can rely on their partisan support base to win elections, making voter persuasion an integral component to victory. The remaining share of true independents remains big enough, though, that short-term factors—economic trends, party leader charisma, foreign policy crises—can generate sizable electoral swings, producing the LDP’s major gains in 2005 and 2012 and the DPJ’s victory in 2009.

III. Ideological Ramifications of Electoral Reform

During the LDP’s heyday between 1955 and 1993, the centrist and left-wing positions on the ideological spectrum were split between four parties. While I have described the emergence and strategies of these parties in other work (McElwain 2014), it is worth noting that each represented distinct segments of society. The Japan Communist Party (JCP) is the oldest party (est. 1922), but its popularity has largely been confined to dedicated Marxists and the academic intelligentsia. The largest progressive party was the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), whose presence expanded with the legalization of labor unions at the end of WWII. However, its ranks shrunk in 1960, when the party’s right-wing faction—backed principally by private sector unions—split off to form the smaller Democratic Socialist Party (DSP). A second new party, the Komeito (aka the Clean Government Party), was formed in 1964. Its primary support group is the Soka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist organization, although the party is not explicitly clerical. The Komeito has advocated a centrist policy platform that targets nonunionized workers and small business owners in urban areas.

While none of these progressive parties seriously challenged the LDP, each had its share of committed partisan supporters. However, electoral reform disrupted this multi-party status quo. In the late-1980s, senior LDP politicians and cabinet ministers were indicted for accepting bribes in exchange for regulatory favors in the “Recruit-Cosmos” and “Sagawa Kyubin” scandals (Schlesinger 1997). The stock market and real estate bubble popped in 1991-92, reducing voter confidence in the LDP’s economic stewardship. These crises led to the LDP’s ouster in the watershed 1993 election, and the succeeding eight-party coalition government altered the electoral system with the mandate to eradicate clientelistic politics. The new mixed-member majoritarian system, described above, was designed to encourage the merger of the non-LDP parties into a viable center-left alternative. Equally important, bipartism was expected to clarify and spotlight programmatic differences and induce greater government accountability and alternation. Figure 5 summarizes the dizzying reorganization of political parties since 1990. Realignment had a profound effect on supporters of smaller center-left parties, such as the Komeito and the DSP, which had won 69 seats and 12% of the votes in 1993 but were absorbed into the New Frontier Party (NFP) in 1994. Conservative voters were not completely spared: two LDP factions, accounting for 46 legislators, split off to form new parties (Sakigake and the Japan Renewal Party) prior to the 1993 election. The Renewal Party, along with the centrist Japan New Party (JNP), which had led the short-lived, post-LDP coalition government, also merged with the NFP in 1994, making it a broad centrist front to rival the LDP in the all-important single-member district races. However, the NFP

---

6 Japanese labor law prohibits public sector unions from engaging in strikes and other industrial actions. This lessened their bargaining leverage in the marketplace, and instead encouraged greater confrontation in the political area to win wage concessions. Private sector unions, by contrast, were more willing to work with the LDP and their big business backers.

7 For more on this episode, see Curtis (1999), Reed and Thies (2001), and McElwain (2008).
fell apart in 1998 after just one election, due to ideological tensions between its progressive and conservative legislators. The Komeito split off to compete on its own, while many leftist legislators from the former DSP and JNP moved to the Democratic Party of Japan. By 2000, the DPJ had become a more robust LDP alternative, while the JSP—the LDP’s historical rival—had renamed itself the Social Democratic Party and had shrunk to less than 5% of HR seats.

The reorganization of the party system does not necessarily denote a collapse in voter partisanship. For example, new parties may mobilize and inculcate voters who were marginalized under the status quo. If parties were too internally divided on political goals, splitting into separate groups can improve ideological coherence. In the Japanese case, however, the process of realignment, especially until the emergence of the DPJ, was entirely elite-driven. Incumbents changed parties regularly as they tried to figure out which mantle or label to unite behind. Crucially, this gave voters limited opportunities to form new partisan attachments.

The disruption of the party system produced a new group of self-identified independents, whom I call “abandoned partisans”. These are voters whose preferred parties folded or merged in response to electoral reform. Their provenance is indicated by the inverse relationship between the shares of minor party supporters and independent voters since 1994. Figure 6 plots these ratios, based on responses to *Jiji Tsushin’s* monthly questionnaire. What is striking is the significant discontinuity after the fall of the 1993-94 (non-LDP) coalition government. The share of minor party supporters shrank by 20%, while independents rose by the same amount. While we cannot diagnose individual motives from aggregated national data, it appears that many supporters of minor parties began to call themselves “independents” after their parties disappeared and never realigned behind an alternative party.
The *Jiji* data paints the pessimistic picture that abandoned partisans have remained ideologically aloof. This poses a problem for the restabilization of the party system if—as argued by Reed, Thies, and Scheiner (2012) and McElwain (2012)—Japanese voters are paying increasing attention to party cues. The lack of strong party identification can magnify the effect of short-term factors, such as recent economic trends or party leader charisma, on voter behavior. This, in turn, can prompt legislators to continue to change party affiliations regularly, as they will not face a penalty for disavowing party principles if voters do not value these either.

However, I argue that Japan has actually been on a slow road towards partisan realignment. The reacquisition of party affinities is pronounced among abandoned partisans, who used to support minor center-left parties—and thus do not necessarily lack ideological leanings—but were left bereft after electoral reform. The emergence of the DPJ has been particularly important in establishing a new social democratic focal point for progressive legislators and voters to coalesce around.

This trend is indicated by an original dataset of *constituency-level* pre-election surveys, based on pre-election surveys conducted by the Asahi Newspaper between 1979 and 2009. Even a casual look at descriptive data suggests that many purported independents *do* have some partisan leanings. Figure 7 displays the mean district-level percentage (with 5th and 95th percentiles) of self-identified independents, LDP partisans, and JSP/DPJ partisans. As suggested by the *Jiji* national trend in Figure 6, the ratio of independents rose in 1996 when the party system unraveled. However, the constituency polls show that independents have *decreased* in every subsequent election, down to 40% in 2009.

That the ratio of independents has fallen to pre-reform levels does not indicate a return to LDP-era clientelistic politics, given the new electoral system’s emphasis on programmatic competition.

---

8 Due to the unexpected early election of Dec. 2012, the Asahi only ran surveys in 100 districts that year. Understandably (at least for journalistic purposes), the 2012 surveys focused on “battleground” districts, and so oversamples urban areas. I will extend my analysis to this election in future versions.
Instead, it represents the realignment of abandoned partisans behind the DPJ, even though their affective identification may not be as strong as they were for their favored pre-reform minor parties. These weak partisans may be dissatisfied with all parties most of the time, as indicated in the national Jiji surveys. However, their underlying conservative or progressive leanings come to the fore as Election Day approaches. Election campaigns serve a crucial function in focusing voters’ attention on actual electoral alternatives, when the abstract question of whether one genuinely “loves” a party gives way to the reality of elections—whether one “likes” a particular party more than others (Gelman and King 1990).

Figure 7

![District-Level Variation in Partisanship (Asahi)](image)

So far, I have mainly focused on comparing national trends in voter partisanship before and after electoral reform. To examine whether the new cohort of independents are, in fact, “abandoned partisans”, I will use Asahi’s constituency surveys to examine regional variation in the acquisition of partisanship. Earlier research suggests that independents, especially before electoral reform, tended to vote for the LDP, largely because of pocketbook concerns. But given two decades of economic malaise, it is not clear if this pattern has continued, especially if “recent” independents are—as I postulate—ex-partisans of defunct minor parties.

IV. The Realignment of Abandoned Partisans

While “abandoned partisans” may no longer support a particular party, they are not non-ideological: after all, many were sufficiently committed to another party in the past. As such, they may be amenable to realigning behind a new party that offers programmatic policies that are similar to that of their previous party. What, then, determines the development of party identification?

For partisanship to materialize, abandoned partisans need to come into contact with and be wooed by another party repeatedly and consistently. A series of experimental studies by Brader, Tucker, and Duell (2013) shows, for example, that newer parties suffer from lower partisan support than older ones, because their labels offer fewer reliable cues about programmatic goals. In the Japanese context, the demise of minor parties and the rise of the DPJ should produce a steady but measurable
increase in the latter’s partisan base. Figure 8 shows the absolute number of LDP, DPJ, and other-party candidates per election.\(^9\) With each successive election, the number of DPJ candidates rise as the party becomes more competitive nationally. This trend is mirrored by a rapid decline in the number of minor party candidates, to less than one per district in 2009.\(^{10}\)

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8**

We can use the Asahi’s constituency level polls to determine whether partisanship increases with the number of times that a party has run candidates in that district. This effect should be stronger for the DPJ than the LDP for two reasons. First, the DPJ was newly created after electoral reform, although many of its legislators originally hailed from minor progressive parties. Lacking a partisan base, the DPJ should benefit more from repeated candidacies than would the LDP, which already had an established track record in 1996. Second, since the Left suffered greater fragmentation as a result of electoral reform than the Right / LDP, we should observe stronger realignment behind the DPJ, as there are more abandoned partisans up for grabs. This leads to my first set of hypotheses:

\[Hypothesis 1A: \text{The share of DPJ partisans should increase with the cumulative number of candidates that the DPJ has run in that district.}\]

---

\(^9\) “Minor parties” include candidates from the JCP, Komeito, Sakigake, Liberals, JCP, and ‘other’ parties.

\(^{10}\) There are 300 single-member districts after electoral reform. However, the total number of LDP candidates can exceed 300 (i.e. more than one per district), because where the party could not agree on which specific candidate to endorse, it would allow multiple candidates to compete head-to-head. This practice was more common in rural constituencies, where the LDP had long been dominant. Even if co-partisan candidates split the conservative vote, one of them was still likely to defeat any other party’s candidates. The DPJ occasionally employed this tactic as well. As a result, the cumulative number of candidates per district for either party can be greater than five, although only five elections are analyzed here (1996, 2000, 2003, 2005, and 2009).
Hypothesis 1B: The share of LDP partisans should not vary with the cumulative number of LDP candidates.

There is an obvious endogeneity problem with estimating this relationship: parties should be more likely to run candidates in districts where they are already popular, i.e. partisanship may drive candidacies, not the other way around. I control for this by interacting the number of cumulative candidates with the distribution of partisanship before electoral reform. The DPJ is a logical haven for progressive voters who are reorienting behind a new center-left alternative to the LDP. As such, the DPJ’s popularity should be greater in districts where the Japan Socialist Party—the LDP’s traditional foil—used to have strong backing.\(^{11}\) We would not expect to see a similar conditional effect of LDP candidacies, given that, again, the party is already well-known to voters.

The rise of the DPJ also has important implications for the size and composition of independent voters. I have posited that the spike in independents in 1996 represents a new cohort of abandoned partisans. If these voters were adherents of progressive minor parties, then we would expect their ranks to shrink gradually as the DPJ expands its reach nationally. Put differently, the expanding partisan base of the DPJ also implies a reduction in the share of independents. A more subtle implication is that the effect of DPJ candidacies should be greater in districts where there were more minor party partisans before electoral reform.

Hypothesis 2A: The share of independent voters should decrease with the cumulative number of DPJ candidates.

Hypothesis 2B: The marginal effect of cumulative DPJ candidates on the share of independents should be greater where the share of minor party partisans was larger before electoral reform.

I test these hypotheses with three separate random effects GLS models.\(^{12}\) Each case in the dataset is a single-member district (out of 300) in a given election (1996, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2009). Distinct dependent variables are analyzed in each model, based on responses to the Asahi’s constituency polls regarding affinity to a particular party. \(LDP\) Partisans is the share (0-1) of respondents who listed the LDP as their preferred party; \(DPJ\) Partisans is that for the DPJ; \(Independents\) is that for no affinity.

The main explanatory factors are \(DPJ\) Candidates and \(LDP\) Candidates, the cumulative count of each party’s nominated candidates in a particular district.\(^{13}\) I also control for the partisanship of each district in 1993, which is the last election before reform. \(LDP\_93\) is the district’s share of Asahi respondents who listed the LDP as their preferred party in 1993. \(JSP\_93\) is the JSP’s share of the same. As discussed above, I also include the interaction terms \(DPJ\) Candidates*\(JSP\_93\) and \(LDP\) Candidates*LDP_93 to control for endogeneity concerns regarding the causal arrow between

---

\(^{11}\) The district-level correlation between the cumulative number of DPJ candidates and the popularity of the JSP in 1993 is \(-0.08\).

\(^{12}\) Many of the independent variables are time-invariant measures of voter partisanship in 1993, the last contest before electoral reform. Random effects is better suited than fixed effects models when incorporating explanatory factors that do not vary over time. However, I also include fixed effects for each year, with 1996 being the baseline value.

\(^{13}\) For example, \(DPJ\) Candidates in 1996 is the number of DPJ candidates in 1996; in 2000 it is the sum of DPJ candidates in 1996 and 2000; in 2003 it is the sum of 1996, 2000, and 2003.
partisanship and candidacies. As per Hypotheses 1A and 1B, I expect the net effect of DPJ Candidates with respect to DPJ Partisans (Model 1) to be positive, while LDP Candidates should have minimal impact on LDP Partisans (Model 2).

Hypotheses 2A and 2B posit that the effect of DPJ Candidates on Independents should vary with the popularity of pre-reform minor parties. I operationalize this first as Minor_93, the share of respondents who listed a party other than the LDP or JSP as their preferred party in 1993. In Model 3, I interact this with DPJ Candidates, and expect Independents to decrease when DPJ Candidates*Minor_93 is greater.

I also distinguish post-reform abandoned partisans from the pre-reform cohort of independent voters in two ways. First, I control for Independent_93, the share of respondents in 1993 who declared no partisan affinity. I also account for the socioeconomic composition of the district with Urban (0-1), which is the census calculation of the number of people who live in densely-inhabited districts (DID; higher values indicate greater urbanization). Urban districts have historically housed more floating voters, due to weaker social networks and lower economic dependence on clientelistic linkages, making them an attractive target for progressive parties {Scheiner, 1999 #569}. I expect that as Urbanization increases, the share of Independents and DPJ Partisans should increase, while that of LDP Partisans should decrease.

The detailed results from these regressions can be found in Appendix A, Table 1. Given the interaction terms in the three models, the marginal effect of each variable takes some care to calculate. To facilitate interpretation, I show the statistical and substantive significance of key variables graphically. Figure 9 depicts the results regarding the magnitude of DPJ and LDP partisanship. The cross-party differences are striking. For the LDP, there is virtually no effect of running more candidates on the district’s share of LDP partisans (Hypothesis 1B). This is not surprising; after all, the LDP is not a new party, and its candidates have staked out support networks in most districts since the 1960s. By contrast, the share of DPJ partisans steadily increases as the party expands its candidate base (Hypothesis 1A). In 2000, the DPJ’s first year as the primary progressive party, the median district had only had one cumulative DPJ candidate. By 2009, this had risen to four candidates. While many DPJ legislators had been in politics for decades as representatives of other parties, they had not campaigned under the DPJ’s brand and policies until switching parties more recently. The predicted difference in DPJ Partisans between having one and four DPJ Candidates, holding all other covariates at mean values, is 3.8%.

Figure 9
Figure 10 replicates this exercise for the share of Independents. The left panel shows the net effect of increasing the number of DPJ Candidates (Hypothesis 2A), while the right panel shows the average marginal effect of an additional DPJ candidate conditional on the underlying share of minor party partisans in 1993 (Hypothesis 2B). The net difference between having one versus four DPJ candidates is -2.2% in Independents. More interestingly, we can see that the reductive effect of DPJ candidacies is greater when Minor_93 is larger. When the share of minor party partisans in 1993 is 15%, each DPJ candidate is predicted to reduce the share of independents by 0.6%. If minor partisans comprise 35% of the district, however, the marginal effect doubles in magnitude to -1.1%.

The main findings confirm my thesis that many post-reform partisans are, in fact, “abandoned partisans”. DPJ partisanship is greater in districts where the DPJ runs more candidates, controlling for underlying voter ideology prior to electoral reform. By contrast, LDP candidacies do not significantly impact LDP partisanship. DPJ candidates also reduce the share of independents, and
this effect is particularly strong where minor party supporters were more numerous. In other words, the rise of the DPJ has played a major role in post-reform voter realignment.

V. The Electoral Consequences of Partisan Realignment

Given the stabilization of partisanship, especially on the Left, how have independent voters impacted actual elections? First, to the extent that the LDP has historically had better candidates (Scheiner 2006), we would expect LDP vote share to increase with the proportion of independents, both before and after electoral reform. While strong partisans will consistently back the same party, “true” independents may be swayed by factors that become more visible closer to the election, such as the personalities and accomplishments of the actual candidates running in the race.

*Hypothesis 3:* LDP vote share should be *positively* correlated with increases in the percentage of independents.

By contrast, we should observe pre- and post-reform differences in the effect of independents for progressive parties. As Figure 3 showed, the bulk of independents before 1993 leaned conservative. Since then, however, the ranks of independents swelled to include progressive “abandoned partisans”, who should be amenable to voting for the DPJ.

*Hypothesis 4:* DPJ (post-reform), but not JSP (pre-reform), vote share should be *positively* correlated with increases in the percentage of independents.

Third, both LDP and opposition party vote share should be influenced by changes in the proportion of *partisans.* This is (hopefully) an uncontroversial point: voters who feel a strong affinity to a particular party should be more likely to vote for candidates from that party.

*Hypothesis 5:* LDP and JSP/DPJ vote share both be *positively* correlated with increases in their percentages of partisan supporters.

My statistical tests are designed to ascertain how the ratio of declared independents influence the vote share of political parties. I analyze two competing sets of parties: the LDP on the one hand, and the JSP/DPJ (pre-/post-electoral reform) on the other. *Vote Swing,* is the change in the district vote share of each party from the previous to current elections. This measure is fairly self-evident after electoral reform, as each party simply nominates one candidate in the SMDs. During the MMD-SNTV period, however, the LDP and JSP frequently endorsed multiple candidates. In this latter case, I sum the vote shares of all candidates from each party to calculate their respective district vote shares.

The Asahi district surveys are available for every election since 1979. I run separate models for MMD-SNTV (1980-93, five elections) and SMD / MMM periods (2000-09, four elections). The LDP and JSP/DPJ’s vote shares are analyzed separately, and I include each party’s vote share in the preceding election as a baseline (*Lag_Vote*). Because vote shares tend to revert to a baseline popularity value, I expect higher vote shares in the previous election to reduce vote shares in the

---

14 I use vote swings instead of absolute vote share levels as the DV, because there is less autocorrelation in the former than in the latter, making the results less biased.
next. Each model is analyzed via a random-effects GLS regression with year fixed effects and robust standard errors.

The main independent variables conform to the three hypotheses detailed above. The most important covariates are derived from the Asahi's district-level polls. For each model, I include $Ch_{\text{Independents}}$, which is the change in the ratio of survey respondents who claimed no partisan affinity (Hypotheses 3 and 4). This measure sums the responses “no party”, “other”, or “no answer” in the Asahi survey question regarding partisanship. I also use $Ch_{\text{Partisans}}$ to capture changes in the district ratio of LDP partisans versus JSP / DPJ partisans (Hypothesis 5).

I incorporate additional covariates that can influence the electorate’s interest in the contest, and hence the vote shares of each party. (I do not discuss their statistical or substantive significance below, but comments are available from the author upon request.) $Ch_{\text{Turnout}}$ is the change in the share of the electorate who cast a ballot, from the previous to current election. Higher turnout, caused by short-term exogenous factors (scandals, foreign policy crises), could temporarily inflate either party’s vote share. $Ch_{\text{Candidates}}$ is the change in the number of candidates from that party from the preceding to current elections. This can increase the mobilization of partisan voters.

Finally, I add two variables that capture the district’s electoral environment, similar to what was used in the previous regression analyses. $M$ is the district magnitude or the number of seats per district, which ranges from two to six under MMD-SNTV and equals one in the SMDs after electoral reform. As the district magnitude increases, the percentage of votes needed to win a seat decreases. This, in turn, can incentivize less popular parties and candidates to enter the race, thereby reducing the vote share of the major parties (Kohno 1997). $Urbanization$ codes the population density of each district. Historically, there have been more independent votes up for grabs in urban districts, making vote swings potentially larger (Scheiner 1999). During the MMD-SNTV period, $Urbanization$ is operationalized as Asahi’s four-part categorical variable, where four equals metropolitan and one equals rural districts. After 1993, however, $Urbanization$ is the ratio of voters (0-1) living in densely-inhabited districts (DID).

Table 2 in the Appendix lists the regression results from four models. Models 1 and 2 estimate the LDP and JSP’s vote swings under the MMD-SNTV period. Models 3 and 4 do so for the LDP and DPJ after electoral reform. Figure 11 shows the substantive significance of a one-unit change in two key variables—$Ch_{\text{Independents}}$ and $Ch_{\text{Partisans}}$—for all four models. Note that the unit change indicates a shift from 0 to 100%, which does not occur empirically. As such, I reinterpret the substantive effects below (in the text) as a change in the value of the covariate from one standard deviation below to above the mean values.

Figure 11
Models 1 and 3 and confirm Hypothesis 3: an increase in the ratio of independents boosts LDP vote share both before and after reform, likely due to its continuing valence advantage and higher quality candidates. Under MMD-SNTV, a swing in the ratio of independents (from one st. dev. below the mean to one st. dev. above) improves the LDP’s vote swing by 2.8%; under single-member plurality, the effect is equally strong at 2.4%. For the opposition parties, however, we see that changes in ratio of independents are only statistically significant after reform. The DPJ’s vote swing increases by 1.9% for a two standard deviation change in independent voters, but the JSP’s swing is indistinguishable from zero (Hypothesis 4).

Hypothesis 5 is confirmed as well. Changes in the share of LDP partisans increases the party’s vote swing by 9.2% before reform, and 9.8% afterwards. For the JSP, the effect is +4.9%, and for the DPJ, +8.7%.

What is the collective significance of these findings as it relates to the nature of Japanese elections? As demonstrated in Section IV, the transition to single-member districts initially pushed supporters of progressive, minor parties into becoming politically independent. However, the gradual coalescence of the two-party system and the growing viability of the DPJ has transformed many abandoned partisans into DPJ followers or leaners. To the extent that voters are paying more attention to party cues, the ranks of independents should be thinning—something confirmed descriptively in Figure 7. As a result, election outcomes should increasingly depend on the relative support that parties receive from partisan supporters. This, in turn, should strengthen the DPJ, whose growth has been tied to its ability to cultivate new partisans in a way that the JSP could not.

To examine the changing substantive significance of independents, I rerun Models 2 and 4 (Vote Swing for the LDP and DPJ) separately for each election, i.e. different models for 2000, 2003, 2005, and 2009. I do not report the coefficients here, but Figure 12 plots the marginal effects of Ch_Independents on Ch_Voteshare. (Note the differences in the y-axis scales in each panel.) Up till the 2003 election, changes in independents benefit both parties. However, we see a radical break in their substantive significance in 2005 and 2009. While the effects of independents is still positive for both parties, the intercept for the LDP drops significantly in 2009, while the DPJ experiences its own falloff in 2005. This reflects a substantial change in the composition of partisans from 2005 to 2009:
the LDP suffered an 11% drop, while the DPJ’s share increased by 13%. This effectively meant that even with a positive slope for $Ch_{Independents}$, changes in the number of partisans ultimately swung the outcome of elections. The greater salience of partisans is in line with Reed, Scheiner, and Thies’s (2012) argument that party labels have become more the strongest predictor of electoral victory since 2005.

![Declining Salience of Independents to LDP](image)

![Growing Salience of Independents to DPJ](image)

**VI. Discussion**

Party system stability rests on some durable attachment between voters and representatives. The LDP’s single-party dominance until 1993 relied on strong clientelistic linkages between voters and individual legislators, which produced extremely high reelection rates even as the party’s national popularity slowly sank. Electoral reform in 1994 altered the status quo by placing a primacy on programmatic ties between voters and political parties. This has led to the growing competitiveness of
the DPJ as it corrals the support of progressive voters and abandoned partisans. However, there still remains a sizable cohort of non-partisan / independent voters, suggesting that electoral volatility will be the rule, not the exception, for the foreseeable future.

Electoral volatility has been tied to a number of ills in Japanese politics. Low voter attachment has made the costs of legislative party-switching low, insofar as leaving a party does not mean that a candidate will anger or leave behind a large number of core voters. Party switching can be attributed more generally to considerable uncertainty about ideological cleavages in Japan today: what issues do voters care about most, and what should be adopted in party manifests? In the early 2000s, many voters rallied behind PM Jun’ichiro Koizumi’s call for privatization and neoliberal reforms, but the LDP has rolled back many of these principles today, due to public consternation about growing economic inequality.

The weakness of Japanese partisanship has vaulted the electoral salience of party leaders. Krauss and Nyblade (2005) argue that Japanese voters are increasingly judging parties by the quality of their leaders. This phenomenon is not unique to Japan (Poguntke and Webb 2005), and it can benefit parties when a popular leader generates electoral coattails that improve the prospects of co-partisan candidates (Imai and Kabashima 2008, McElwain 2009). Both the LDP and DPJ have responded by allowing grassroots members to have input in leader selection, thereby ensuring that the victor has a modicum of grassroots popularity (McElwain and Umeda 2011). However, it has also made parties more trigger-happy in replacing leaders who lack public support. While Japanese prime ministers have never had long tenures, their longevity has diminished since electoral reform. Figure 13 shows the average duration (in days) of cabinets and prime ministers in Japan, broken up into three periods: before the LDP forms (1946-54), during its heyday (1955-93), and after electoral reform (1994-2009). This is juxtaposed with the mean durations for other established democracies, utilizing data from the ParlGov database. Between 1955 and 1993, the average Japanese prime minister served for 1180 days, although ministerial reshuffling produced shorter Cabinets lasting 540 days. Since the adoption of MMM, however, this pace has accelerated, with PMs being in office for an average of 622 days. This number actually overstates the longevity of post-reform PMs, as it includes Koizumi’s tenure from 2001-06. The median PM since 1993 has lasted 384 days—just over one year.

![Figure 13: Average Cabinet & PM Duration (Post-1945)](image-url)
To the extent that independent voters are truly non-partisan, they will switch their support to whatever party appears most responsive to their demands. This type of accountability is not a bad thing, of course, but it encourages parties to offer short-term benefits, whether in the form of trade protections or expanded transfer payments, instead of seriously deliberating structural reforms that offer better long-term payoffs but entail short-term costs. As such, while the proximate goals of electoral reform—more electoral turnover and more programmatic competition—have been met, it is not clear if the new status quo promises better governance.
## Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV:</th>
<th>Model 1 DPJ Partisans</th>
<th>Model 2 LDP Partisans</th>
<th>Model 3 Independents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DPJ Candidates</strong></td>
<td>0.006**</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LDP Candidates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.011***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JSP_93</strong></td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.060)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DPJ Cand * JSP_93</strong></td>
<td>0.081***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LDP_93</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.731***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LDP Cand * LDP_93</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.038***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minor_93</strong></td>
<td>0.079***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DPJ Cand * Minor_93</strong></td>
<td>0.298***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.049)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent_93</strong></td>
<td>0.119***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DID</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.024**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R^2</strong></td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.692</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observations</strong></td>
<td>1,463</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,463</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of districts</strong></td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year fixed effects</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Random Effects GLS. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV:</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ch_LDP Vote</td>
<td>Ch_JSP Vote</td>
<td>Ch_LDP Vote</td>
<td>Ch_DPJ Vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lag_Vote</td>
<td>-0.134***</td>
<td>-0.183***</td>
<td>-0.365***</td>
<td>-0.426***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0181)</td>
<td>(0.0258)</td>
<td>(0.0317)</td>
<td>(0.0254)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch_Candidates</td>
<td>0.0393***</td>
<td>0.0512***</td>
<td>0.104***</td>
<td>0.0539***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00406)</td>
<td>(0.00635)</td>
<td>(0.0102)</td>
<td>(0.0137)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch_Partisans</td>
<td>0.602***</td>
<td>0.381***</td>
<td>0.642***</td>
<td>0.730***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0808)</td>
<td>(0.0699)</td>
<td>(0.0726)</td>
<td>(0.0877)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch_Independents</td>
<td>0.172**</td>
<td>-0.00995</td>
<td>0.252***</td>
<td>0.191***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0749)</td>
<td>(0.0356)</td>
<td>(0.0643)</td>
<td>(0.0517)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch_Turnout</td>
<td>-0.0619</td>
<td>-0.246***</td>
<td>-0.337***</td>
<td>-0.532***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0791)</td>
<td>(0.0404)</td>
<td>(0.106)</td>
<td>(0.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization (DID)</td>
<td>-0.00261</td>
<td>-0.00551***</td>
<td>-0.0455***</td>
<td>0.0275***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00209)</td>
<td>(0.00157)</td>
<td>(0.0115)</td>
<td>(0.00949)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Mag</td>
<td>-0.00511</td>
<td>0.00353</td>
<td>-0.00551***</td>
<td>0.00751***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00646)</td>
<td>(0.00287)</td>
<td>(0.00288)</td>
<td>(0.00328)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization (2)</td>
<td>-0.0222***</td>
<td>0.00288</td>
<td>-0.0384***</td>
<td>0.00141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00775)</td>
<td>(0.00328)</td>
<td>(0.00911)</td>
<td>(0.00315)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.122***</td>
<td>0.0738***</td>
<td>0.237***</td>
<td>0.201***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0172)</td>
<td>(0.0101)</td>
<td>(0.0215)</td>
<td>(0.0121)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
<td>0.626</td>
<td>0.766</td>
<td>0.628</td>
<td>0.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>1,086</td>
<td>878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Districts</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Fixed Effects</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Bibliography


