

## **Distrust in Politics: Will Voters Transform the Nature of Governance?**

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Within the past decade, various developments that had been until now unthinkable have taken place in politics and governance in Japan. In 1993, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost its single-party grip on power and was forced to collaborate with other parties in order to stay in power. As a result, political parties were forced to reexamine their perspective and their sense of direction for the nation. The various coalition governments entered into uncharted territory. All this has led to significant changes in the power once enjoyed by bureaucrats and the structure that has governed them.

These developments, however, do not mean that the system of government in Japan has changed. What has changed is the underpinnings of the system—the political parties, the bureaucracy, and other subsystems. And this is an indication that Japanese politics and administration—put broadly, the quality of governance—are beginning to change.

Another decade or two will be needed before we can see how these developments have left their mark. At this point, it is clear only that the changes did not take place gradually. What caused them was the demand of the times—a lingering, unprecedented recession that Japan has been enduring since the collapse of the bubble economy of the 1980s. The society felt stuck, unable to move on. Frustration led to anxiety and anger. In other words, distrust in politics. It is this distrust that has prompted changes in the political process and the media as well. It has rocked the political establishment. It is dismantling conventional ways of governing.

What is sought is a new politics, an escape from the inertia that has prevailed. Perhaps I overstate my case, but I believe the past decade has been a revolutionary period where unprecedented demands from voters have led to dramatic changes in the way this nation is governed.

In summer 2001, under Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro, the LDP scored its first major victory in ten years in the House of Councillors election. Support for the prime minister has remained strong since, and the media suggest that the LDP has regained power and popularity. Whether true or not, of more fundamental importance is the message sent by the voters in this election.

Koizumi was swept into power because of the desire among voters for change in politics. The victory of the Koizumi-led LDP was an indication that voters were willing to trust an LDP that pledged to deny its past and to change. Indeed, the changes in the past decade have transformed politics and governance in Japan to such a degree that it is impossible to expect a resurgence of the old-style rule by the LDP.

## **NON-PARTY AFFILIATION AND FLUID VOTER SUPPORT**

### **Voters with No Party Affiliation**

One of the biggest political changes in the last decade has been the emergence of a huge bloc of voters who claimed to endorse no political party.

After enjoying many years in power, the LDP in the early 1990s entered a period of intra-party strife stemming from battles between the various factions. This bickering eventually split the party and ended the LDP's one-party rule over the country. These changes coincided with changes in the economic and social fabric of Japan as the asset-inflated bubble collapsed and the economy continued to globalize. These factors created an environment where conventional policies no longer worked. Thus, after the LDP split, Japanese politics entered a period of confusion where lawmakers struggled to find new political visions and ways to achieve them.

New political parties emerged. While it was unclear where the nation was heading politically, the Japanese economy stagnated further. Not unexpectedly, voter frustration rose. Opinion polls showed an unprecedented 70 percent to 80 percent of voters dissatisfied with politics. This distrust translated into declines in voter turnout and indifference to political activity in general. Support for the LDP and other mainstream parties fell at the same time that the number of voters who endorsed no political party rose (table 1).

Table 1. LDP Supporters versus Voters with No Party Affiliation (%)

Year	LDP	Nonaffiliated
1990	47	29
1991	49	31
1992	36	42
1993	23	45
1994	24	50
1995	28	46
1996	31	44
1997	30	52
1998	27	48
1999	34	43
2000	28	50
2001	39	37

Source: *Asahi Shimbun*, from data compiled yearly in December based on polls conducted quarterly. Data for 2001 are through August.

Support for the LDP was highest in 1991, but the following year saw nonaffiliated voters outnumbering LDP supporters for the first time. What table 1 does not show is that, in some periods during the past ten years, nonaffiliated voters even exceeded 60 percent.

### **Fluidity and “Wind”**

Nonaffiliated voters have several characteristics. Research conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* found that, in the period 1993–1996, among voters classified as without party affiliation, 70 percent had endorsed a political party. A 1999 survey by the *Asahi Shimbun* had similar findings, with a little over 60 percent of nonaffiliated voters having endorsed a political party in national elections within the previous three years. Thus, nonaffiliated voters do not necessarily mean voters who do not support political parties at all. Rather, they are voters who will frequently shift their support among various political parties, depending on the circumstances.

At the same time, voters who do support a particular political party appear to be changing their allegiances more often. According to a 1995 study, only 20 percent to 30 percent of voters with a party affiliation indicated they had continuously supported that party over the previous year. Together with the rising number of nonaffiliated voters, this finding would suggest that a

large mass of voters no longer feel that support for a certain political party is binding. These are the “fluid” or “floating” voters.

It should be noted that a conspicuously large number of voters who had no strong party affiliation during the 1990s still maintained a keen interest in politics. This new breed of nonaffiliated voters, in contrast to nonaffiliated voters of the past who were indifferent to politics, keeps abreast of political events through newspapers and television. In a way, then, they may have been disillusioned and seeking a party to support but were unsuccessful at finding one. These nonaffiliated voters tend to respond quickly to the mood of the times, the swings of which are reflected in their voting patterns. This phenomenon has come to be called the “wind” of nonaffiliated voters.

The first such wind blew in 1995 when voters in Tokyo and Osaka, the country’s two largest cities, elected as their governors candidates who were comedians and who ran without the backing of any political party. In national elections for the House of Councillors in 1995 and 1998 and the House of Representatives in 2000, the results were similarly affected by the wind of nonaffiliated voters. The June 2000 general election saw the unexpected rise of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which one survey found 30 percent of nonaffiliated voters to have supported.

The wind picked up speed as politicians depended more on the mass media to communicate their message. From the politically chaotic early 1990s, political talk shows and news programs started to have a strong influence on voters as well, and the government of Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro is said to have come into being from an anti-LDP mood generated by such television programs. Broadcasters have used dramatic political developments as fodder for new programs, which drives public sentiment further. The same can be said of tabloid shows on television when they pick up political topics. In Japan, as elsewhere, “tele-politics” has sped up the dissemination of political news, generating support or opposition almost instantly. This has pushed Japanese politics into a more volatile period.

The easily changeable wind has sharply reduced the ability of pollsters and lawmakers to predict the response of the public or the outcome of elections. While Japanese media organizations have developed what they say are scientific methods for predicting public opinion

based on data of voter patterns and opinion polls, since 1995, however, there have been many instances where their predictions have been completely wrong. Predicting voter turnout and voter reaction has also become increasingly difficult. One example is during the 1998 House of Councillors election, in which the media expected that the LDP would win more than 60 seats; it won just over 40 seats, resulting in a dramatic defeat for the party.

### **The Koizumi Phenomenon**

The Koizumi phenomenon that has dominated Japanese politics since spring 2001 is a direct result of a more fluid voter sentiment driven by the media.

In the LDP presidential election in April, general voters were drawn to Koizumi, who came across to the public as an independent politician within the party. The public was impressed by his pledge to bravely implement political and economic reforms. Koizumi generated a sense of urgency among voters by making it clear that unless he was elected as LDP president, the future of the LDP would be uncertain. This in turn helped Koizumi, who had little support within the party, to create a sense within the party that it was necessary he be elected.

Koizumi's populism did not stop there. As the head of the ruling LDP, Koizumi took over as prime minister. After setting up his administration, he skillfully used the media to get his points across, and as a result, his cabinet has consistently maintained an unusually high support rating of around 80 percent. Against this backdrop, a huge mass of nonaffiliated voters shifted their support to the LDP.

Thanks to the strong support for the Koizumi cabinet, the LDP scored a major victory in the July 2001 election for the House of Councillors, winning a majority of the contested seats for the first time in nine years. Koizumi's popularity has continued. A survey by the *Asahi Shimbun* in August 2001 showed that support for the LDP had increased since the election, while the percentage of nonaffiliated voters had declined. For the first time since 1992, LDP supporters outnumbered nonaffiliated voters, suggesting a return of power to the LDP (see table 1).

Koizumi's popularity has indeed moved nonaffiliated voters. Exit polls during the House of Councillors election showed that nonaffiliated votes for the LDP nearly tripled in comparison to the election three years before. This rise in support for the LDP was *not* attributed to former LDP

supporters coming back to the party. It is premature to suggest that the LDP has regained voter confidence because there is no guarantee that fluid voters will stay with the LDP. Opinion polls before the July 2001 House of Councillors election showed that 70 percent of nonaffiliated voters supported Koizumi. But among these Koizumi supporters, there were more who wanted to see the opposition DPJ take power than who wanted the LDP to lead. Another point worth noting is that more than half the supporters of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) back Koizumi. Thus, it appears that Koizumi is supported by voters who would promptly ditch the LDP if they became dissatisfied with the course of politics and governance.

Simply put, Koizumi's popularity stems from the anti-LDP sentiment that characterized the distrust of politics during the 1990s. This point should not be overlooked. Koizumi never hesitated to say publicly that he would break up the LDP if he had to. The bold decisiveness of this statement helped to attract many fluid voters. In this sense, the Koizumi phenomenon was brought on by swings in voter support, something that has grown over the past decade. How this trend will evolve is uncertain.

In the age of tele-politics, mass media play a large role. But voters, as consumers of mass media, are often fickle. Nonaffiliated voters in Tokyo, for example, viewed Aoshima Yukio as a hero and elected him governor in 1995. But Aoshima could not sustain that momentum and did not even run for a second term. Is the Koizumi phenomenon solid enough to allow him to build a stable Koizumi era? The answer to this question will perhaps be seen in the not-so-distant future.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF DISTRUST**

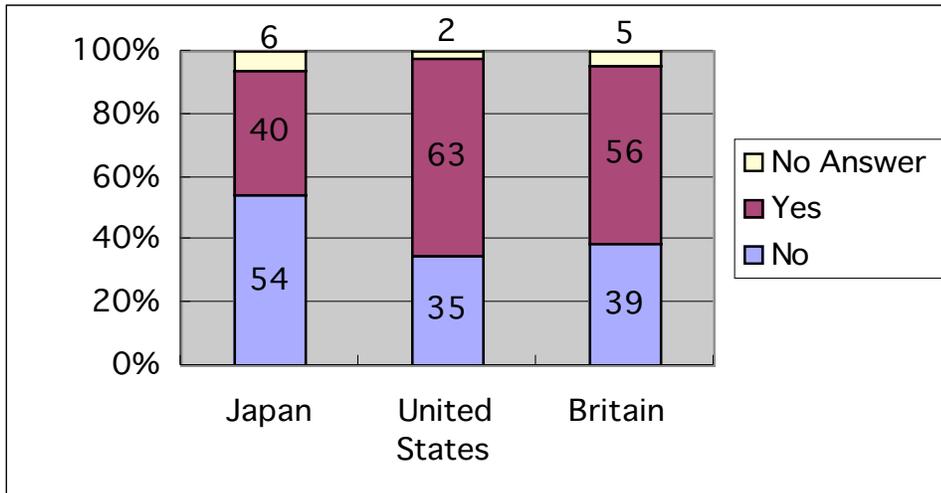
### **The Quality of Politics**

It was distrust of politics that caused instability in Japanese politics and fluidity of voter support. What was the nature of this distrust? What is the message of this distrust?

In the 1990s, distrust in politicians and political systems was brewing not only in Japan but also in Europe and the United States. In other countries, the issue was more about voter isolation from the political process. The degree of distrust in Japan, however, is higher than in other countries, and the type of distrust is comparably peculiar in Japan.

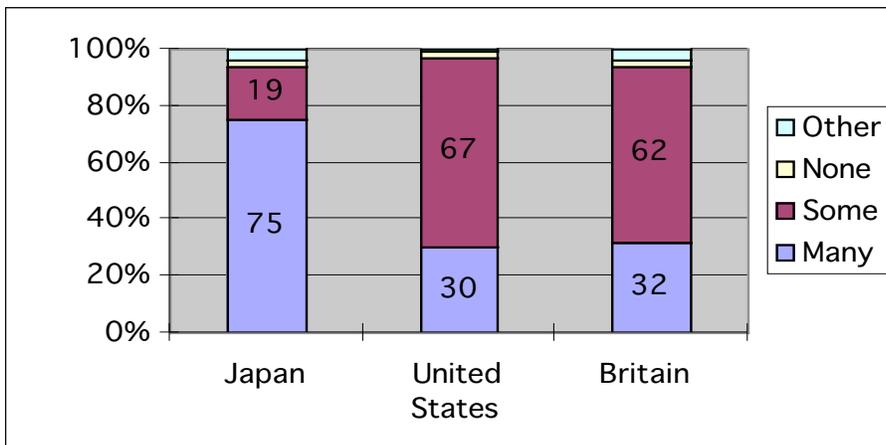
Figures 1 and 2 show results of polls conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* to gauge the trust in politics of voters in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. What distinguishes Japan from the other two countries is the particularly strong sense of voter cynicism and powerlessness.

Figure 1. "Do you believe that your vote counts?"



Source: *Asahi Shimbun* 29 December 1998.

Figure 2. "How would you characterize the number of politicians who are dishonest? (possible answers: many, some, none)"



Source: *Asahi Shimbun* 29 December 1998

In response to the question, “Do you believe that your vote counts?” an overwhelming majority of U.S. and U.K. voters said yes; in Japan, an overwhelming majority said no. In response to a question to gauge the quantity of politicians that voters believed were engaged in dishonest acts, in Japan a staggering 75 percent answered “many”—more than twice the number who answered similarly in the United States and the United Kingdom. In all three countries, politicians are often the butt of jokes, “the bad guys,” but voters in Japan see their politicians as more untrustworthy than do voters in other countries.

The results of this poll are telling and alarming both. Such strong distrust does not come from voters feeling isolated, but rather from voters being shut out for so long and harboring no hope of being involved in the political process in the future. As has been borne out by research as well as election results, this deep distrust cannot be healed through mere technical reforms that aim to include voters in the ballot box. Healing can only result through bold reforms that change the quality of politics in Japan.

Yet, what are the roots of this discontent? While there are no data to draw from, we might offer these possible explanations. One is the conventional view: politics and governance have nothing to do with voters and are done by someone else somewhere else. This sense of remoteness from government may have emerged in postwar Japan as voters came to understand that one vote does not always mean one vote. Rather, the weight of one vote can differ sharply, depending on constituency and geography—an imbalance that has been long left unaddressed.

Another is the fair possibility that voters may be finally waking up politically, with the reality that Japan’s affluent society, which was created almost in inertia after World War II, now faces a crisis. But whatever the explanation, what is clear is that public distrust in politics first emerged in the form of voters shunning established parties—in particular, the governing LDP.

### **The LDP in a Corner**

Even after the confusion during the 1990s, the LDP still appears to believe it is the champion of Japanese politics. But there are many concerns it faces: the fluidity of voters, which dismantled the party’s support base, and the fact that the pork barrel cannot be counted on to bring in the votes.

In fact, the decade witnessed the party rapidly losing its grip. In the proportional representation section of the House of Councillors elections in 1995 and 1998, voters deserted the LDP en masse. Only one in seven or eight voters, including those who abstained, cast ballots for the LDP. The ruling party came to a crisis of losing its legitimacy.

The decline was so sharp that the party could not arrest it with technical tactics, try though it did. In 1996, the government introduced a single-seat constituency system (to be combined with a bloc of seats chosen by proportional representation) in the House of Representatives election. This was a system that from its inception favored the ruling party, but the tactic was to no avail. In the 1996 election, support for the LDP fell further, and the party was met with strong competition from the opposition New Frontier Party (Shinshinto). LDP members expressed concern that the single-seat constituency system would in fact undermine the LDP if the number of fluid voters increased further.

Worse yet, the rising tide of nonaffiliated voters proved to be basically anti-LDP, as indicated before. After 1995, whenever there was a large turnout of nonaffiliated voters, the LDP lost badly. This was the obverse of what the LDP had been used to. Previously, if the LDP mobilized voters and boosted voter turnout, the LDP could expect to win. But by the mid-1990s, the LDP started to realize that the lower the voter turnout, the better the party did.

A good example of this was the House of Councillors election in 1998. The LDP calculated that it could win if it mobilized what was left of its support base, provided that voter turnout was low. It was an attempt to preserve the old political system using old political techniques. Election day, however, saw a huge number of nonaffiliated voters flocking to polling stations and casting their ballots for the DPJ. The LDP suffered a historic loss.

### **The Ongoing Revolt**

The LDP persevered, but so did voters. As they shunned the LDP, they were sending this message to politicians: “Political parties are not important; what is important is what politics can be delivered.” Essentially, voters wanted a new political system. The message became abundantly clear in the local gubernatorial elections in 1995.

As stated earlier, the elections in Tokyo and Osaka were the debut of the nonaffiliated voter. Elected as the governors of Japan's two largest cities were two comedians, each without the backing of a party. In the 1999 election for the governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro was the winner, drawing support from nonaffiliated voters and defeating candidates backed by the LDP and the DPJ. After Ishihara was elected, he was moved to say: "People think the current political parties have almost no value. Ironically, those political parties are unaware of it."

The number of voter revolts has increased as the chasm between voters and political parties widens: In fall 2000, Tanaka Yasuo, a writer without political background, ran as an outsider for the governorship of Nagano Prefecture. For forty years, former officials from the prefectural government had held this post, but local businesses and private citizens backed Tanaka and an overwhelming number of nonaffiliated voters climbed on board the bandwagon. Tanaka won, attacking the political machine that tried to lure votes by promising public works contracts.

In Tochigi Prefecture, a political novice claiming to represent the ordinary citizen on the street beat the incumbent governor running for his fifth term.

In March 2001, in Chiba Prefecture, nonaffiliated civic and volunteer groups threw their support behind a female candidate who promised to work for environmental preservation and quality-of-life issues. She beat out a candidate supported by political parties, including the LDP, to become the first female governor of the prefecture.

With just months to go before the national House of Councillors election, the upset in Chiba tolled a bell within the LDP. So grave was the sense of this crisis that the country saw the sudden emergence of Koizumi and his rise to the premiership.

Of course, the election in Chiba Prefecture was not the first time the LDP saw the growing demand for new politics. During the past ten years, there have been occasional calls for an overhaul of politics. The first such call may have been the formation of a new party in 1993 by a splinter group from the LDP. In fact, each time it loses an election, the LDP has a heated discussion on how to reform the party. "Unless we include civic energy such as nonprofit organizations in the party, there will be no rebirth of true conservative politics," Kato Koichi, former secretary-general of the LDP, once said.

As this remark indicates, the LDP leadership was already well aware of the need for change. Yet, the soul searching never led to any major action, and any attempt to change the party was smothered by the complacency and inertia of several decades. In fall 2000, Kato, who led a faction advocating reform within the party, started a revolt against then Prime Minister Mori. Although Kato had the support of many nonaffiliated voters, his move to split from the party was quelled. Koizumi was behind the move to silence Kato's rebellion. It was not until Koizumi, the man who helped thwart Kato's rebellion, took center stage that calls for specific action to reform politics became an official issue in the LDP.

## THE "NEW POLITICS"

### Accountability and Responsiveness

What in essence are nonaffiliated voters after when they seek a "new politics"? This is a difficult question to answer. Nonaffiliated voters are often described by what they are anti-: anti-LDP, anti-incumbent, wanting an anti-establishment party. Accordingly, it is difficult to pinpoint what they are for; yet, looking at the issues they are repeatedly negative about should offer some clues.

If we consider the turbulent changes to the confusion-filled process of policy formulation during the past ten years, we observe many attempts to acquire two new qualities. One is accountability, and the other is responsiveness. These two qualities have emerged as key concepts every time Japanese politics has reached a crucial juncture.

The Japanese phrase *leaving matters up to the superior* captures the traditional view of politics, shared by many, that politics in Japan belongs to those in power. Democracy, introduced to Japan upon the end of World War II, is somewhat antithetical to this concept, however. The essential theory behind democracy is that political authority is accorded to those who win a mandate from voters. Put another way, what politicians in Japan seem not to grasp is that in order to govern effectively in a democratic society, politicians must have a sustained understanding of what the governed want. So they often do not respond to what voters have to say.

One reason for this may be that in Japan the concept for accountability does not exist, as has often been pointed out by Japan specialists in Europe and the United States. Instead of accountability, the Japanese postwar political process has been concerned with determining how to share the fruits of economic growth. Such a process was well met by the old way of politics, but those fruits began to shrivel about the time Japanese society began to turn gray. Politicians thus can no longer talk about the future without explaining the greater burden and pain that society must bear.

In the mid-1990s, there was a period when accountability became the buzzword in Japanese politics, used with regard to government intervention in the liquidation of nonperforming loans held by housing loan corporations. The word stressed the overlooked rights and feelings of taxpayers. It was used frequently in the media, was translated into Japanese, and was even widely referred to in official government documents.

Accountability was not limited to housing loan corporations. After that it came up frequently, and in the late 1990s led to an information disclosure act and the establishment of a law governing the ethical conduct of public servants. The importance of accountability has loomed so large that politicians cannot now ignore it. When the LDP suffered an unexpected setback in the 1998 House of Councillors election, politicians concluded that it was the issue of accountability that turned voters against them, ascribing the defeat to their inability to fully account for the needs of voters.

If accountability means keeping information flowing to voters, responsiveness means receiving feedback from voters and listening to their demands. These days, politicians discuss the need for responsiveness all the time, regardless of whether they are in the government or the opposition. Such discussion has focused on party reform and election strategy. As discussed earlier, since the 1990s tele-politics has increased the pressure on politicians to be ever more responsive.

In the past, the lack of responsiveness was highlighted in public debate at a meeting of LDP executives after defeat in the 2000 general election. Candidates were criticized for their lack of responsiveness and the party for its inability to address voter needs. Yamasaki Taku, the current secretary-general of the party, declared: "The LDP should seriously listen to the voice of the

nation, which sees the LDP serving its purpose in the twentieth century.” Junior members, meanwhile, went so far as to say that if matters were left unattended, the LDP would destroy itself; as it was, half the voters believed the LDP to be a thing of the past, incapable of meeting challenges in a new age. They lamented the fact that the LDP was too shielded from voters.

But whether it is accountability or responsiveness, each is essential to democracy because it offers a venue for continuing dialogue with voters. The lack, or inadequacy, of accountability or responsiveness has seen its consequences in the long, sharp decline in voter turnout. By the time Japan entered the 1990s, this was clear. Yet, the governing party needed ten years to figure it out—a symptom of the inertia that has plagued Japanese politics under many years of one-party rule.

### **Governance in Transformation**

Is Japanese society changing? Or has it changed as a result of the incorporation of elements of accountability and responsiveness?

As stated at the outset, the calls for change have been loud, though the total picture has been hard to see. Yet, the results of gubernatorial elections and certain shifts in central government policy give us hope. As contact between politicians and voters improves, defective aspects of Japanese governance start to crumble. One such feature is the “bureaucratic” society.

Under the name of maintaining continuity, a number of career bureaucrats have long controlled information and written the policy of government. They have manipulated politicians and policy. Whereas politicians were viewed as power seekers interested in private interests, bureaucrats enjoyed the image of fair, neutral administrators (an image consistent with the tendency to view the public sector highly but to look down on the private sector). In this sense, Japan has been led by bureaucrats accorded a superior position in society.

But starting in the 1980s, it became evident that bureaucrats were seeking to maintain continuity of the status quo rather than pushing for necessary economic and social reform. Public awareness was helped by scandals involving bureaucrats at the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other agencies. The distrust of politics of the 1990s emerged against the backdrop of a dysfunctional bureaucracy. There was

also a sense that the public wanted not bureaucratic leadership but political leadership. This has increased expectations for societal restructuring centered on the private sector.

It has accelerated the dismantling of a bureaucratic society. During a 1998 Diet session to discuss ways to weather a financial crisis, politicians relied on private-sector experts in formulating policies for parliament; this was in contrast to the usual session where bureaucrats prepared policies. The young politicians particularly keen on drafting their own bills were called *seisaku shinjinrui* (a new breed of policymakers). In 2001, after many years of debate, several central government offices were finally merged, creating less bulky organizations. All of this was a challenge for bureaucrats dependent on vested interests surrounding the old structure.

In this atmosphere of a society moving beyond its reliance on the bureaucracy, the Koizumi administration emerged. This sense of the times has helped him to maintain very high support ratings. In May 2001, a district court found the government was liable for damages to leprosy patients who had been treated unfairly for many years through social segregation. As they had in similar lawsuits against the government, bureaucrats insisted on appealing the ruling, but Koizumi did the unexpected: he opposed the bureaucrats, and he acknowledged the responsibility of the government. This drew applause from the public, which saw Koizumi as an individual with both honor and authority.

Koizumi is also challenging the power of the bureaucrats who have cultivated vested interests linked to government-affiliated organizations and public corporations. As his reform programs involve, among other things, privatization of these organizations, Koizumi is attacking the backbone of the bureaucracy. A society characterized by the supremacy of bureaucrats is thus being transformed into a society where the power of bureaucrats has been put more properly in its place.

Changes in Japanese society will not be limited to the bureaucrats. Not only is the structure of governance built around centralized authority crumbling, but there also have been rapid shifts in policy with regard to public works, which had been used to feed the LDP political machine and traditional links among politicians, bureaucrats, and businesses. As distrust in politics rose in the 1990s, the LDP first attempted to guard public spending and to weather the difficulty with the conventional pork barrel. How can one forget the 1996 statement of LDP leader Kamei

Shizuka, who was later to become the construction minister: “We will not allocate public works projects to those constituencies that will not cast ballots for LDP candidates.” The lesson was to be learned the hard way: the LDP lost the 1998 House of Councillors election and was effectively defeated in the 2000 general election.

“Politics that provides benefits to only a limited number of groups will not last,” Koizumi has stated unequivocally. Under his administration, there have been open debate and fundamental reviews of public works projects.

### **BEYOND COMMON SENSE**

With these dramatic changes, the state of Japanese governance is entering a completely different world. One of the forces that brought this about is, without a doubt, voter distrust.

The distrust generated a tension both in politics and society. As a result, there was transformation. Politicians have begun to communicate directly with voters, to hear their voices, and to respond—all of which activities are essential to the dynamism of democracy.

This transformation has occurred even as, in the 1980s, revisionist views of Japanese society from abroad suggested that Japan was incapable of reforming itself because it functioned under different principles from those of Europe and the United States and that foreign pressure was therefore necessary. This argument found many even in Japan who would agree that Japanese society has been stubborn. Yet, if the changes described here are any indication, Japan is by itself beginning to find the solutions needed for it to move forward.