

# 5

## Political Realignment and Policy Conflict

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PARTY realignment in the classic sense was not a characteristic of the period of political transformation in Japan that began with the collapse of the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP's) one-party dominance in the summer of 1993. Party realignment commonly refers to a shift of voting behavior on a massive scale caused by social or economic crisis. Other types of transformations in party systems such as from the cadre party to the mass party are not necessarily accompanied by a policy reorientation among the mass public (Duverger 1951, chap. 2). In political theory party realignment is regarded as the result of a change in voters' attitudes toward critical issues. It occurs either swiftly in a serious crisis such as the Great Depression (Burnham 1970), or gradually through accumulating crises such as racial conflict in the United States since the mid-1960s (Carmines and Stimson 1989). In either case, the emergence of a new issue strongly felt by the masses is supposed to play a crucial role. The political realignment, or party system change, in Japan after 1993 lacked these characteristics.

One-party dominance by the LDP lasted for 38 years from 1955, institutionalizing a pattern of voting behavior among the mass public and a very stable party system comparable to the two-party systems in the United States and Great Britain. Although the 1993 Lower House election brought change to the party system, the change was not a result of voters' critical assessment of where parties stood on issues, a precondition of party realignment. Rather, political change in Japan was initiated basically by two groups of Diet members in 1993 and led to the breakup of existing parties and the creation of new ones. Unlike party

realignment in other countries, it did not start with a substantial shift in voter support induced by calamitous events such as economic collapse or defeat in war.

A series of scandals from the mid-1970s generated widespread mistrust of party politicians. Exploiting this opportunity, some party leaders intended to induce party realignment from the top by a new policy package that would force voters to realign along issues. Some politicians attempted to sustain anti-establishment and anti-party sentiment, which had evaporated quickly in previous scandals, and consolidate the temporal shift of support for a new party into permanent allegiance. Other leaders intended to build and consolidate a new party on neoliberal ideologies. Another group tried to align voters along the axis of new social and political issues by advocating women's rights, privacy, environment, decentralization, and participatory democracy, an agenda roughly similar to that of liberals in the United States in the 1960s. To turn temporal discontents into electoral support, realign along policy issues, and institutionalize a new party system proved to be a daunting task.

This chapter traces these attempts and analyzes why they ultimately failed and one-party dominance by the LDP, albeit in a modified style, seemed to reemerge after the 1996 House of Representatives (Lower House) election through the hectic reshuffling of Diet members. Before examining the attempts at top-down party realignment since the mid-1970s, however, I will offer a theoretical framework and then examine the structure of party conflict by which LDP dominance was sustained for almost four decades.

### *ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND*

The political ideologies of parties and voters are usually conceptualized along a left-right unidimensional scale. Political parties have attempted to attract voters by identifying themselves along this left-right dichotomy; voters have also been found to identify their political positions along a similar scale (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Ysmal 1990, chap. 3). Reflecting distinctive historical and social milieus, the specific issues that draw the line between left and right have differed significantly across nations, ranging from the political regime itself to economic policies, religious controversies, and foreign policy questions.

Within a single nation, a variety of political issues may arise that resist a simple left-right taxonomy. However, most often the lines of cleavage are drawn across issues deemed the most important; thus, the political system can still be viewed as revolving around a single issue dimension. The benefit to voters of interpreting the polity in such a simplified manner is that it significantly reduces the cost of gathering information on and evaluating the platforms and capabilities of political parties, the prerequisites for shaping party identification and voting decisions. Political parties often present a deliberately simplified image to the electorate in hopes of stabilizing voter support. That the mass media often depict political parties and policies as if they could be placed along a left-right scale further contributes to the persistence of such unidimensional interpretations of the polity.

Japan has been no exception. For historical reasons, the left and right have been identified as "progressive" and "conservative," respectively (Miyake 1985). Despite the emergence of issues since the late 1960s that cannot be classified along the standard progressive-conservative cleavage, such as the environment and the violation of human rights in China, studies have shown that the majority of Japanese voters still identify their political ideologies along a left-right axis (Kabasima and Takenaka 1996, chap. 5). Most voters also identify political parties along a unidimensional scale that has the Liberal Democratic Party at the far right and moves leftward with the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), the Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party), the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), and the Japan Communist Party (JCP). Survey results indicate that voters have interpreted the policy changes of the two parties with considerable accuracy. During the 1970s, the Kōmeitō sought to position itself as a centrist-progressive party, whereas the DSP began to lean to the right, particularly on national security. By the 1980s, the Kōmeitō, which was considered the more conservative in the 1960s, had reversed places with the DSP. The voters correctly perceived these shifts.

From the early 1950s to the 1980s, the main line of cleavage between the conservatives and the progressives ran through issues of defense, the status of the emperor, labor's right to strike, and revision of the Constitution.<sup>1</sup> Numerous opinion surveys have confirmed this division. Unlike many other countries, including the United States, economic policy has not been a significant issue between the left and the right. For example, according to a survey conducted in 1967 (the

so-called Michigan survey), while the Japanese electorate was divided over tax cuts or expanded welfare benefits, voter attitudes on welfare policy had no correlation with their positions on defense and the emperor (Kabashima and Takenaka 1996, 271–272). Among the major political parties as well, welfare policy has been virtually a non-issue; both progressive and conservative political parties have endorsed expanded welfare services. This is also true of government intervention in the economy. In addition, although Japanese voters are wary of inflation, they have never been explicitly forced to choose between it and unemployment.

In sum, throughout the LDP era, party support was structured around two closely interrelated issues—the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the status of the Self-Defense Forces—that separated LDP and JSP supporters, with other political parties, except the JCP, considered to lie between the two. The defense issue emerged in the early 1950s, and the pattern of conservative-progressive confrontation was institutionalized by the 1960 political crisis over the renewal of the Security Treaty, shaping Japanese politics for the next 30 years.

Defense was not only debated in terms of the usual rhetoric of war, peace, and security, but was also closely linked to such issues as prewar militarism and the resurgence of fascism. Underlying this progressive-conservative cleavage was a social cleavage at the deeper level of political culture and the value system. Supporters of pacifism were well-educated, young, white-collar workers hostile to prewar Japanese political culture. On the other hand, the middle-aged, less-educated, elderly, and self-employed (including the agricultural sector) tended to support rearmament. The former group is characterized by a modern political culture, whereas the latter is more traditional. Both the conservatives and the progressives sought to capitalize upon this social cleavage, which Watanuki Jōji has labeled “cultural politics” or “value politics” (Watanuki 1967).

The nature of the defense question substantially changed from the 1960s to the 1970s. The LDP abandoned its hope of amending the Constitution and the link between defense and the political regime weakened significantly. As more information on political and economic circumstances in the Eastern bloc countries became available in the 1970s, the credibility diminished of socialist and nonaligned countries that had commanded widespread respect in Japan during the 1950s as

defenders of peace. As a result, the appeal of socialist ideology, which had indirectly inspired pacifism, waned and pacifism became disconnected from a political and economic system. Japanese voters gradually lost interest in the defense issue.

Meanwhile, a clientelistic pattern of distribution, both to local constituencies and vested interest groups, gained importance in electoral competition. The LDP represented the interests of local constituencies, or of the agricultural and the self-employed sector, and the functional interests of industries, and the JSP represented the functional interests of public servants in nationalized fields like railroads, post and telecommunications, as well as education and local government. Two major parties competed not on the basis of policies or principles but on which could win a greater share of the pie. Various studies have confirmed the displacement of "high politics" by patronage as the primary factor in the voters' decision-making process (e.g. Miyake 1995, chap. 1).

Concurrent with the rise of patronage in voter mobilization, distributive politics became increasingly important in both intra- and interparty politics. JSP Diet members are known to have acted as intermediaries for labor unions seeking parochial, short-term interests from as early as the late 1950s (Matsushita 1960; Taguchi 1958). While JSP Diet members sought to win the support of mass movements and the general electorate by harshly attacking LDP policies, they also acted as *de facto* interest groups and lobbied for the distribution of particularistic benefits, in a manner similar to LDP *zoku* Diet members. The term *zoku* (literally "tribe") refers to Diet members who specialize in a certain policy area, represent a particular interest such as agriculture or the construction industry, and wield influence within the party and in the Diet. The most prominent example of rent-seeking behavior was in public transportation, where certain Diet members spoke for management and others for the Japanese National Railways' (JNR) unions. Both lobbied for higher railroad fares and subsidies to cover JNR's swelling deficits. Beneath the rhetoric of class struggle and pacifism/anticommunism, both managers and union leaders tacitly colluded for the same benefits.

Patronage politics was not an explicit ideological cleavage, but developed parasitically alongside it, within the framework of left-right division.

On the other hand, the expansion of distributive politics alienated

groups that could not be reached through distributive channels. The white-collar middle class, youth, and urban housewives—the left wing of value politics in the ideological conflict over defense—found themselves without a party to defend their occupational and local interests. Distributive policies simultaneously bred an increasingly large group of voters who were potentially opposed to such policies and laid the groundwork for conflict between defenders of the status quo and vested interests versus groups demanding reform of the distributive apparatus as consumers or taxpayers.

This new pattern of conflict appeared intermittently, often in response to major political scandals, and profoundly affected electoral results and short-term partisan realignments. The founding of the New Liberal Club (NLC) shortly after the Lockheed scandal and its popularity in the 1976 general election of the Lower House, the anti-consumption tax movement that swept many female candidates into office—the “Madonna boom”—and gave the JSP a major victory in the 1989 election of the House of Councillors (Upper House), and the Japan New Party's success in the 1993 general election can all be accounted for as revolts by consumers and taxpayers. More recently, the personal popularity of Kan Naoto and Hatoyama Yukio, cofounders of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 1996, can be seen as a similar phenomenon.

The brief approval enjoyed by the NLC, which was also supported by young urban women and university students, closely paralleled the rapid decline in the fortunes of the JSP and the JCP from 1973 to 1978 (Mita 1980, 83). A number of new political parties had short-lived expansions thereafter, but all drew their support from essentially the same social strata.

Many new political parties owe their brief success to the hostility of the new urban middle class toward vested interests. At the core of this hostility lies a strong distrust of political parties (including the JSP), party politics, the bureaucracy, and the government; in short, toward professionals in politics and administration as a whole.

This pattern of conflict is between professionals and amateurs, or the government and citizens, and is independent of the traditional conservative-progressive cleavage.

However, political parties have been incapable of exploiting this clash and organizing it into a stable base of support. Because of this failure, this cleavage has not determined the partisan realignment in the early 1990s, remaining merely an occasional irritant to the established

party system. That the new political parties, without exception, have failed to sustain their momentum further illustrates this point.

Unlike other political parties that appeared prior to the 1993 Lower House election, the Japan New Party (JNP), the New Party Sakigake (*sakigake* means "pioneer"), and the Japan Renewal Party (JRP) all advocated policies that departed fundamentally from the old cleavage over defense that had shaped the pattern of party competition throughout the postwar era. Like the other new political parties, these three all came out strongly in favor of reform and of cleaning up Japan's money-ridden political system. However, what was singular about this trio was that they made no pretense about being conservative. They never claimed to be middle-of-the-road or attempted to distinguish themselves from the LDP by staking out a position to its left. Instead they urged a reinvigoration of the conservatives. The JNP and the JRP were particularly eager to propose policies in issue areas that cross-cut the old conservative-progressive cleavage over defense policy.<sup>2</sup>

The platforms of the JNP and the JRP, which signified a major break with the past in the nature of political competition in Japan, can be seen as the culmination of an evolving process. It is important to note that at the level of elites, conflict between economic (*laissez-faire*) liberalism and social democracy had significantly influenced Japanese politics and administration throughout the postwar era. There are many illustrations of this. First, ministries and the *zoku* Diet members who champion their objectives have consistently favored budget expansion. The demands of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Labor to expand the welfare budget represent a social democratic stream of thought among Japanese political elites. The ministries of agriculture and construction have also championed "big government," albeit from a more conservative perspective than health and labor.

In contrast, the Ministry of Finance has been the champion of "small government," staunchly defending the principle of a balanced budget. Senior big business executives active in politics, known collectively as the *zaikai*, particularly the top leadership of Keidanren (Japan Federation of Economic Organizations), represent the interests of large corporations, and have been the prime advocates of "small government" in the private sector (except for their support for counter-cyclical budget outlays in recessionary periods) and have opposed budget expansion, especially agricultural subsidies and welfare benefits. Moreover, in hopes of defending private initiative, the *zaikai* has favored a



"weak government" rather than the "strong government" espoused by the economic ministries (notably the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, MITI), and has strongly resisted attempts to reinforce government intervention in the economy. The *zaikai* often subverted MITI's attempts to gain greater control over corporate investments during the 1960s, for example. However, the conflicts between "big" and "small" government or "strong" versus "weak" government never became partisan issues. The major political parties were united in favor of welfare expansion and greater state intervention in the economy, particularly when scandals surfaced (Hiwatari 1995).

The emergence of neoconservatism among political elites in the late 1970s propelled this cleavage over broad economic issues—welfare, industrial, and fiscal policy—to the popular and partisan levels. Domestic policy (neoliberalism) and foreign policy are the two pillars of neoconservative thought in Japan. On the domestic side, neoconservatism expresses doubt over the social democratic "postwar settlement" or the Keynesian welfare state. Although the mass media, intellectuals, and citizens' groups had argued for curtailed distribution of particularistic benefits to local and functional interests on moral grounds, neoconservatism was the first set of ideas to provide a coherent policy prescription. The typical neoconservative policy program includes privatization, deregulation, and retrenchment, all policies that the Second Provisional Commission on Administrative Reform (Second Rinchō) proposed in the early 1980s. At the level of party competition, neoconservatism stimulated the rise of political parties that sought to represent the interests of the new urban middle class—consumers, salaried employees, and taxpayers—all of whom the established political parties had neglected in their mobilization strategies. This challenge also prompted the old parties to attempt to shift their support base to the new urban middle class.

Regarding foreign policy, from the mid-1970s neoconservatives argued for a greater Japanese contribution to the defense of the West, in the face of the arms buildup by the former Soviet Union; after the cold war, they favored a more activist role for Japan in the settlement of regional disputes. The neoconservatives simultaneously marginalized the right-wing and attacked LDP doves and JSP pacifists.

The seeds of neoconservative policies were in the New Liberal Club's platform, and the first fruits were in the Nakasone Yasuhiro administration's (1982–1987) more full-fledged neoliberal agenda. In the



following section, I will examine the NLC's intentions and political outcomes and Nakasone's policy proposals as the forerunners of neo-liberal efforts to realign parties after 1993.

### NEOCONSERVATIVE ATTEMPTS TO MOBILIZE NEW CLEAVAGES IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

#### *The New Liberal Club and the Nakasone Administration*

After a great leap forward in the 1976 general election, the NLC, led by Secretary-General Nishioka Takeo, focused primarily upon the new urban middle class. The economic policy prescriptions in the NLC platform included education, land-use regulation, and tax reform (especially ending preferential treatment for doctors). Although the platform was by no means a coherent or comprehensive neoconservative doctrine, many NLC policies were taken up by neoconservatives in the 1980s and 1990s. A prime example was the NLC's innovative proposals on agriculture, which included plans to reduce drastically the number of farm households by encouraging large-scale, professional farming (Hagiwara 1976, 146). While other opposition parties urged expanded pension outlays and welfare benefits during the deliberations on the budget for fiscal year 1979, the NLC advocated "small government," calling for a reduction of the budget deficit by curtailment of preferential tax treatment for doctors and a salary freeze for public employees. In a similar vein, the NLC approached Ushio Jirō, the president of Ushio Electronic Co. and a prominent member of the younger generation of the *zaikai*, to run as its candidate in the 1979 Tokyo gubernatorial election. The party said the capital's fiscal crisis "called for managerial talent" (Kawamura 1980, chap. 4). It is significant that Ushio's brain trust included the likes of Kōyama Ken'ichi, a professor at Gakushuin University, and the famous drama director Asari Keita. Both eventually played major roles in the administrative reforms of the Nakasone administration.

The NLC never went so far as to label itself explicitly as neoconservative. A major reason was that Kōno Yōhei, in hopes of forging an alliance among middle-of-the-road parties (including the Shaminren, or United Social Democratic Party), adopted a dovish stance on defense issues akin to the Kōmeitō and the JSP. Kōno sought unity by focusing on foreign policy and defense issues and attacking the Fukuda Takeo administration as dangerously right-wing. To this end, Kōno

deliberately situated the NLC as middle of the road in the conservative-progressive cleavage. Nishioka agreed with Kōno on defense and foreign policy, but not on the strategy of emphasizing those issues. Looking back today, this clash between Nishioka and Kōno can be viewed as one between neoliberals seeking to reinvigorate conservatism and dovish conservatives who are also sympathetic to the JSP.<sup>3</sup> However, the dispute led to the breakup of the NLC and its subsequent demise. The first attempt to reset the political agenda along neoconservative lines was not explicit and ended in abrupt failure.

Regarding foreign and defense policy, neoconservative thought first manifested itself in the Ōhira Masayoshi administration (1978–1980) when proposals for Japan to contribute more to defense of the West began to win popular approval, and was stated more coherently during the Nakasone administration. Neoliberal thought also came into full bloom under Nakasone, yielding the Second Rinchō and its programs. I have traced the evolution of neoconservatism in Japan elsewhere (Ôtake 1994; Ôtake 1997). Here I will merely state briefly that Nakasone's neoconservative policies were at least partly rooted in partisan motives.

Nakasone sought to spark a political realignment through a multifaceted strategy of "expanding the LDP to the left." First, Nakasone wanted to reset the political agenda on defense by emphasizing close cooperation with Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and other Western leaders. Defining Japan's international role as a champion of liberty and democracy justified stronger military forces. This signified abandonment of the nationalistic, right-wing elements of Japanese conservatism or, seen another way, the liberalization and Americanization of Japanese conservatism. Nakasone was reaching out to the new urban middle class and young voters who were attracted to the LDP, primarily because of its reliable management of the macro-economy.

Second, by attacking public-sector labor unions for clinging to narrow self-interests, Nakasone sought to drive a wedge between them and private-sector unions, simultaneously striking a blow at the JSP's support base and marginalizing the peace movement.

Third, Nakasone hoped to reduce the LDP's dependence upon less competitive sectors of the economy, such as retail shop owners and agriculture, and attract the urban new middle class and blue-collar workers in the private sector. He advocated consumers' interests, pushing for lower food and distribution costs, and appealed to taxpayers by

proposing a cut in agricultural subsidies and outlays for retail shop owners.

Nakasone personally took the initiative on defense and the Second Rinchō was the engine driving the other two. The LDP's landslide victory in the 1986 Upper and Lower House elections shows that the prime minister scored at least a partial success.

The two opposition parties were also eager to ride this wave of partisan realignment. The DSP, which was backed by private-sector labor unions, strongly endorsed the Second Rinchō's policies on the grounds that they promoted taxpayer interests. Kōmeitō support of administrative reforms stemmed from its preference for "small government," partly because its membership embraced the value of self-help and partly because of its critique of the political system as heavily skewed in favor of special interests. (Cooperation between the DSP and the Kōmeitō on administrative reforms in the 1980s was an important factor leading to formation of the New Frontier Party in 1994.)

As mentioned earlier, Nakasone's strategy undermined the JSP's electoral support and led to the LDP's landslide victory in 1986; however, his policies never sparked a major political realignment. The immediate reason for this failure lay in massive protests against his bid to introduce a consumption tax after the election.<sup>4</sup> Although the policies enhanced Nakasone's personal luster, they did not translate into greater support for the LDP (Kawato 1988). In Carmines and Stimson's terms, Nakasone's policies, which were modeled after American neo-conservatism, were too "hard," i.e., difficult to understand, to exert a significant impact on the Japanese mass belief system (Carmines and Stimson 1982).

The issue of whether Japan should play a more activist role in world politics did not arise from a major international crisis, and it could not drastically alter the conservative-progressive cleavage, at least in the short term. The division over foreign policy and national security was not only a relatively easy issue for voters to comprehend, being closely related to the experience of World War II, but four decades of strife over the Constitution, especially Article 9, had made it readily identifiable to the electorate. Educated in the prewar era, Nakasone could not always conceal his traditionalist sentiments, limiting his capability to be the spokesman for a new ideology. His popularity stemmed more from skillful use of the media, especially televised coverage of summit conferences that showcased an equal partnership between the United

States and Japan, and his personal friendship with Ronald Reagan than the elucidation of foreign policy. Nakasone's diplomatic endeavors enhanced his standing in the polls but failed to stimulate a major political realignment.

Nakasone's emphasis on foreign policy and defense was rare for a Japanese prime minister, but neoconservatism in Japan was essentially a matter of economics. When it initially surfaced in Japan, neoconservative thought was not widely accepted. For instance, a 1983 survey asked voters if they agreed with these statements: (1) Small government is desirable, even if it brings a decline in the quality of government services, and (2) Pensions and medical care for the elderly should be expanded. The largest proportion of responses was, "Don't know." The pattern was almost the same among supporters of conservative and progressive parties (Miyake 1995, 106; Kabashima and Takenaka 1996, 255-256). More surprisingly, many voters answered affirmatively to both questions. The responses to question 2 were virtually the same in 1976 and 1983.

The average Japanese voter believed that liberalizing policies were necessary mostly because he or she distrusted bureaucrats. Administrative reform in Japan meant not just streamlining the government, but included policies ranging from deregulation, which was expected to reduce cartel-like behavior in the private sector, to revision of welfare policies. Neoliberalism was not an effective ideological symbol for far-reaching reforms.

Even Nakasone was not prepared to abandon completely the agricultural sector and retail shop owners, staunch LDP supporters; the rest of the LDP Diet members were even less willing. As long as "expanding the LDP to the left" stopped short of offending farmers and retail shop owners, Nakasone's attempts to reach the urban new middle class remained at best halfhearted.

The JSP had evolved by this time into a rural-based party. As support for the JSP steadily declined in the cities, it relied primarily for votes upon the network of unionized workers in the postal system, national railways, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation, and local governments. Thus, the JSP opposed liberalization of the rice market and relaxation of the Large-Scale Retail Stores Regulation Law, changes beneficial to urban voters. For the LDP to adopt policies attractive to urban salaried voters would have pushed dissatisfied rural votes and the traditional urban middle class into the JSP camp. In fact,

this was precisely the reaction to the consumption tax and LDP agricultural policies, leading to the JSP's short-lived surge in popularity during the 1989 Upper House election (Mizusaki 1992; Yomiuri Shimbun-sha 1990).

It should be noted that for neoliberalism to influence voting behavior, the interests of consumers and taxpayers must be activated—voters must perceive their interests. Compared with American and European consumers, however, Japanese consumers are not particularly price conscious. It is often said they accord higher priority to courteous, obliging treatment such as prompt delivery and follow-up service. Symbolic elements such as brand name and packaging are also important. Consumers have not felt disadvantaged by the inefficient distribution system that raises prices. By the same token, because of the withholding tax system, most salaried workers do not grasp how much they are actually paying. On the whole, Japan's socioeconomic culture and institutions are relatively uncondusive to neoliberal economic reforms.

This was a major reason why the consumption tax, which was accompanied by a cut in income taxes, met such severe opposition. The consumption tax was felt directly by the individual voter, whereas the income tax reduction was indirect and less visible.

Conversely, the practice of life-long employment coupled with inadequate unemployment benefits has made workers very averse to layoffs and fearful of bankruptcies. Voters readily support policies that promote the interests of producers over those of consumers and taxpayers.

In addition, administrative reforms coincided with a period when the Japanese economy was performing much better than those of the other major industrialized countries. Drastic changes in the agricultural and distribution sectors, with the danger of unemployment and bankruptcies, did not seem critical to the average voter. With some successes in deregulation and privatization and a dynamic economy—the “bubble” years from 1987 to 1990—the fiscal picture improved and the need for reform subsided. A fiscal crisis had put economic reforms on the political agenda in the early 1980s; the eased fiscal deficit doused the enthusiasm of political elites for economic changes.

As noted, the consumption tax issue in 1987 threw the debate on neoconservatism into utter confusion, both at the level of intellectuals and voters. After 1988, a wave of scandals over political funds revived

the cleavage between parochial/professional interest group politics versus "clean politics," which became the prime determinant of party support until political reforms in 1994. After a ten-year hiatus, the debate over neoconservatism had reemerged, and the Japan New Party and the Japan Renewal Party were formed.

### NEOCONSERVATIVE ATTEMPTS TO MOBILIZE NEW CLEAVAGES IN THE 1990S

#### *Ozawa Ichirō and the Japan Renewal Party*

Ozawa Ichirō rose to power within the LDP as a young leader in the Tanaka Kakuei faction and as Kanemaru Shin's protégé. Ozawa was a key political figure in the Takeshita administration as deputy chief cabinet secretary and in the Kaifu administration as LDP secretary-general. During this period, he had chief responsibility for managing trade friction with the United States and Japan's response to the Gulf War, experiences that shaped his views on a fundamental reappraisal of the political system in the 1990s. The late 1980s and the early 1990s were a time of highly optimistic forecasts for Japan's economy and polity. The fiscal and welfare crises that haunted the Nakasone administration had eased, at least for the time being. A major reform of the health care system integrated fragmented health insurance programs and resolved the welfare funding crisis. The Ministry of Health and Welfare, on the assumption that a consumption tax would be introduced sooner or later, was preparing the "Gold Plan," an ambitious welfare scheme for the elderly. It was widely assumed that strong economic growth would enable Japan to continue current levels of expenditures and undertake new obligations. Based on these assumptions, Ozawa argued for a more activist role in the international community.

Ozawa apparently decided that to push sweeping changes in the absence of the electorate's explicit consent required reform of the entire party system. His goal was to replace, through electoral reform, one-party dominance by the LDP with a two-party system, comprised of the LDP and a new, neoconservative party. Ozawa's *Blueprint for a New Japan* is the prime expression of his neoconservative thinking (Ozawa 1993). Ozawa's strategy was threefold. First, strike a fatal blow at the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ, the new name of the JSP from 1991), which had been reduced to defending the interests of

public-sector labor unions and had barely managed to win seats in many electoral districts, by creating a single-seat electoral system. Second, eliminate the competition for pork-barrel funding of parochial and functional interests. Single-seat constituencies would encourage campaigning on issues and allow voters to choose between policy options, change or the status quo. The new system would also alleviate overrepresentation of the farming and self-employed sectors, centralize the political parties, and strengthen party leaders. Third, reapportion Diet seats to reduce the number of agricultural districts.

Ozawa's objectives were to abolish, through electoral reforms, the system of functional and parochial representation that had developed behind the conservative-progressive cleavage, and to realign the party system along the issue of neoliberalism versus big government.

The political scandals that surfaced from 1988 brought Ozawa's reform proposals widespread support from the mass media, intellectuals, big business, and private-sector union leaders. Ozawa wanted British-type party politics where the party leadership would be insulated from the rank-and-file Diet members, who single-mindedly sought funds for pet local projects, and have a stronger hand in policy making. Although Ozawa and leftist intellectuals wanted a two-party system, most intellectuals envisioned it as the LDP and the SDPJ, not a conservative and neoconservative party. The British party system was a model for historical reasons. Intellectuals had long advocated a coalition of the JSP, Kōmeitō, and the DSP to replace the LDP. The JSP's landslide victory in 1989 renewed hopes that it could attain power. The SDPJ suffered a major defeat, however, in the 1993 general election, while the new JNP gained substantial seats. Political realignment seemed to be unfolding according to Ozawa's blueprint. The SDPJ had suffered a fatal setback, and the chances of a second LDP breakup and the end of its dominance seemed quite good.<sup>5</sup>

However, the New Frontier Party, which Ozawa pieced together out of the JRP, the JNP, Kōmeitō, and the DSP at the end of 1994, failed to convert previous electoral support, which was primarily motivated by hopes for political reform, into support for neoliberal reforms. Ozawa triggered a reshuffling of Diet members among political parties, but accomplished little in realigning the electorate. The LDP's return to power in 1994 brought back business-as-usual pork barreling. And the NFP had no choice but to rely on the support organizations of individual



Diet members, the Sōkagakkai (an exclusionary religious sect), and labor unions formerly affiliated with Dōmei (Japan Confederation of Labor) in subsequent elections.

The NFP failed to project a clear image to the voters, who saw it as simply a coalition of parties, which it was. The NFP alienated urban voters who regarded the former Kōmeitō as the political wing of the Sōkagakkai. Having positioned itself to the left of the LDP by advocating welfare, as the party of the weak and poor, and peace, the Kōmeitō's abrupt reversal of these policies through joining the NFP perplexed both former Kōmeitō voters and Sōkagakkai activists. Neoliberalism lacked the symbolic power to expunge the Kōmeitō's image as a middle-of-the-road party.

The DSP had long represented a complex hybrid of interests—moderate labor unions and small and medium-sized enterprises. Within the party, support for administrative reforms had strengthened the position of the former; however, in many election districts the latter were still the core of its electoral support. Rengō (Japanese Trade Union Confederation) was in disarray during this period; the collapse of the "bubble" economy from 1990 left private-sector labor unions no time for politics or elections. The long recession in the 1990s forced them and public employee unions alike to protect jobs and abandon neoliberal economic reforms. Former DSP members were in no position to champion the interests of taxpayers and consumers in the NFP, as they had a decade earlier.

As I will discuss below, Hosokawa's personal image was tarnished by scandals, and the JNP lacked leaders who could take his place. No former JNP Diet members could fill the vacuum.

Many former Diet members of the JRP were dependent upon support groups and local interests; a significant proportion were from rural, agricultural districts.<sup>6</sup> They had joined the JRP not from sympathy with Ozawa's policies nor because of the nature of their election districts, but because of personal and factional ties with Ozawa (Ôtake 1996, 289). Many could not risk running on a neoliberal platform.

Ozawa was often seen as an old-fashioned party boss, reminiscent of the organizational culture of the Takeshita faction, a reputation reinforced by his penchant for maneuvering behind the scenes. In the eyes of the voters, Ozawa and other NFP leaders lacked Nakasone's charisma.

One reason the NFP failed to win support for its neoconservative

goals was that Ozawa was unwilling to present his policies directly to the electorate. He chose to change voting behavior through institutional reform, a new electoral system, and realignment of the political parties. By contrast, Nakasone recognized the mass media's power to generate momentum for administrative reform; toured the country with Dokō Toshiwo, chairman of the Second Rinchō, to gain grass-roots support; and closely watched the opinion polls. Ozawa's leadership style was rooted in his personality. His ultimate goal was a centralized political party whose leaders would be free of particularistic groups; he had little interest in mobilizing voters for the "high politics" to be practiced in the new system.

In sum, no NFP politicians were prepared to campaign on a neo-conservative platform. Even if they had, it is doubtful the party would have gained many more votes.

The Hosokawa and Hata administrations accomplished substantial neoconservative policy outcomes. The Hosokawa cabinet approved partial liberalization of the rice market, a major issue of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Toward the end, the administration expressed its intention to launch a second attempt at administrative reform; the targets included ineffective quasi-public corporations. The Hata cabinet announced Japan's candidacy for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, demonstrating a willingness to assume a greater international role. There is no evidence that voters were impressed by these policy initiatives. The neoconservative agenda remained "hard" issues, as they had been under Nakasone, and did not affect party competition. Hosokawa's ambitious tax reform proposal also elicited little response from the public.

The majority of Japanese voters remained skeptical about promoting the interests of consumers and taxpayers over those of producers, and politicians lacked both the will and the capability to change this attitude.

#### *Hosokawa Morihiro and the Japan New Party*

It is important to note that there was a huge gap between voter expectations and the reforms Hosokawa Morihiro hoped to accomplish. The JNP was launched in May 1992, and Hosokawa quickly became the darling of the media and enjoyed nationwide popularity. In March 1993, the JNP's popularity rating rose to nearly 10 percent, putting it in third place behind the LDP and the SDPJ. Despite severe difficulties in

recruiting candidates,<sup>7</sup> the JNP won 35 seats in the 1993 Lower House election (including 17 first-place winners) in its initial bid for the Lower House, doing particularly well in urban districts. In these respects, the JNP's early history closely resembled that of the NLC. The JNP benefited from voter distrust of the existing parties and professional politicians. Although Hosokawa adeptly projected an amateurish image through his urban lifestyle—affluence, fashionable casual attire, playing the piano—and relaxed informal manner, this appeal quickly faded. The JNP's popularity deteriorated within six months after Hosokawa became prime minister—the fall was accelerated by a scandal involving Hosokawa himself—leaving the party with no choice but to join the newly formed NFP if its Diet members were to survive.

The JNP rode the wave of political reform, but Hosokawa himself was not especially enthusiastic about the issues. He was reluctant to introduce electoral reforms or the single-seat constituency system, preferring neoliberal administrative and economic reforms (Nakai 1997, 54–58).

Although Hosokawa had espoused decentralization as governor of Kumamoto Prefecture, service on the Third Provisional Council for Promotion of Administrative Reform made him a convert to neoconservative thought. According to Hosokawa, the commission deliberations allowed him to see firsthand the symbioses (“iron triangles”) among the ministries, *zoku* Diet members, and interest groups, and he understood the need for reforms from outside the system.

Many neoliberal intellectuals from Nakasone's brain trust helped draft the JNP's policy platform. It included decentralization to vent the collusive relationship between the central ministries and industries, deregulation to promote consumer interests, and opening Japanese markets to foreign enterprises. Particularly significant was the fact that during the 1993 election campaign Hosokawa called for the opening of the Japanese rice market, hitherto regarded as a taboo by political parties. Hosokawa was also explicitly neoconservative in foreign and defense policies, advocating Japan's participation in a standing UN military force as well as greater involvement in peacekeeping operations, although he was committed to Article 9.<sup>8</sup>

That Hosokawa chose to join forces with Ozawa, the Kōmeitō, and the DSP indicated he could not garner much voter support solely from his policies. Hosokawa recognized that neoconservatism by itself

would not trigger a major voter realignment, his personal appeal and amateurish image aside. Unlike the NLC, the JNP did not waver between middle-of-the-road policies and neoconservatism, but in the end its policy platform also failed to maintain support. The most contentious issue during the Hosokawa cabinet was political reforms. When electoral changes were finally accomplished, Hosokawa's scandal forced his resignation in April 1994. The attempts by both Hosokawa and Ozawa to realign Japanese political parties and voters ultimately ended in failure. Although the two leaders launched a much more conscious effort than the NLC to reframe the political agenda along a new political cleavage, they accomplished little more than it had. These setbacks illustrate the difficulty of transforming a historically rooted political cleavage.

For the average voter to perceive that a new political party stands for a new political cleavage is no simple task. Accurate interpretation of a new platform requires voters be knowledgeable about the issues in question and the party's ability to accomplish its policies (Miyake 1985, 204). Had the new political parties identified themselves along the existing conservative-progressive cleavage over defense policy, voters might have more easily comprehended their policy stances. However, both the JNP and the JRP sought to introduce a completely new issue dimension into Japanese politics—administrative and economic reforms. National elites, perceiving Japan's position from an international perspective, saw administrative and economic reforms as crucial for the country's future, an understanding not necessarily shared by the population at large.

The party realignment in the United States since the 1960s unfolded along an issue—race—that is relatively easy for voters to comprehend (Carmines and Stimson 1989) and only involved the realignment of existing political parties. For a new party to spark a major party realignment along a completely new issue dimension, as the JNP and the JRP attempted to do, is a far more difficult task. It was an almost hopeless endeavor given that they had to enlist the support of the urban new middle class, certainly not known for their loyalty to political parties. What percentage of the population actually recognized that the JRP, the JNP, and the NFP stood for neoconservatism is uncertain (Kabashima 1998, 173–177); even if the voters had correctly perceived the three parties as neoconservative, it is doubtful what percentage would actually have cast their ballots for them because of their ideology.

The same can be said of the New Party Sakigake and the Democratic Party of Japan, considered next, which championed themselves as the "third force" or "liberal."

### *THE LIBERALS AS A THIRD FORCE*

Within the LDP, conflict began early on between the so-called reform groups led by Takemura Masayoshi and Ozawa (Suzuki 1995, chap. 1). One area of contention was the new electoral system. Whereas Ozawa advocated a two-party system with centralized parties, Takemura's followers favored arrangements more accommodative of smaller parties that would preserve the characteristic decentralized structure under the single, nontransferable vote system in multiseat districts. These differences repeatedly surfaced in disputes over whether the Hosokawa cabinet's political reform bill should allow candidates to stand for both the proportional representation and single-seat constituency districts, how to decide the winner among several co-ranked candidates on the proportional representation list, and adoption of a one-ballot or a two-ballot system.

Ozawa and Takemura also clashed over security and foreign policy. Takemura's catch phrase and the title of his popular political manifesto, "Japan, a small resplendent country," symbolized a modest exemplary role and was an implicit criticism of Ozawa, who allegedly advocated great power status for Japan similar to its prewar standing (Takemura 1994).

Hostility toward Ozawa motivated young Diet members to found the New Party Sakigake and it is questionable that they seriously sought an original policy program. Passage of the political reform bill left Sakigake without a *raison-d'être*, a strange irony for a party that had called for elections based upon political parties and issues.

Sakigake was thus reduced to identifying itself along the existing conservative-progressive cleavage and advocating primarily backward-looking policies. These included a June 1995 Diet resolution on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II to renounce Japan's aggression and wartime crimes and opposition to Japan becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Party leaders attacked the idea of a greater Japanese contribution in international affairs as a disguised bid to make the country a military power, treating neoconservatism as if it were traditional, nationalistic conservatism to spark

opposition to Ozawa and his allies. This strategy worked because the old conservative-progressive cleavage still wielded substantial symbolic power over politicians and party activists, if not over the electorate in general. Sakigake formed an alliance with the SDPJ, then on the ideological defensive, and cooperated with the LDP in the LDP-SDPJ-Sakigake coalition government against Ozawa's NFP.

However, in terms of distinguishing Sakigake's policy platform from other parties, participation in the new coalition backfired. After formation of the Murayama cabinet in June 1994, the SDPJ promptly reversed itself on the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the Self-Defense Forces, and the LDP, under Kōno Yōhei's leadership, subtly shifted to a dovish position on national security to accommodate the Murayama cabinet.

One of the few areas where Sakigake could distinguish itself from other parties was Japan's responsibility for the Pacific War (Ōtake 1995). However, this was not a topic that could garner widespread support. On the one hand, the elderly generation tends to deny Japan's responsibility for war crimes and aggression, if only to avoid guilt over their own past. On the other hand, the more cosmopolitan younger generation, which has never experienced war, does not deny Japan's responsibility *per se*, but finds Sakigake's policies are remote from their own experiences. Because the appeal of nationalism has almost disappeared in contemporary Japan, Sakigake's proposals often did not address the daily concerns of the average voter, who is also indifferent to many of the nationalistic proposals of prewar-generation LDP Diet members. Although the Diet resolution passed with little open opposition, the debate over Japan's responsibility for the conflict faded away.

Sakigake's next opportunity to take a bold policy initiative came at the founding of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 1996. Most Sakigake members joined the new party, recruiting many SDPJ Diet members as well, and they tried to establish themselves as a third force, ideological equals with the LDP and the NFP, implicitly rejecting a middle-of-the-road position on the old conservative-progressive scale. However, this endeavor by former Sakigake Diet members to give substance to their liberalism again ended in failure. Rather than presenting a specific policy program, DPJ leaders criticized Murayama and Takemura and tried to project a "young" amateurish image through the party's two leaders, Hatoyama Yukio, scion of a distinguished political family (as were Kōno and Hosokawa) and Kan Naoto, who personified

antibureaucratic sentiment for his forthright handling of a Ministry of Health and Welfare scandal involving the use of HIV-contaminated blood plasma products.

Although the specific meaning of "liberalism" does not seem to have been clear even to those who advocated it, here is a summary of what they theoretically stood for. Foremost was personal freedom and tolerance on social and moral issues, in other words acceptance of diverse lifestyles. Specifically, they would champion the rights of gays, women, and youth. Multiculturalism, or the encouragement of minorities—the Ainu and Japanese citizens of Korean descent—to preserve their ethnic identities, would be another example. This sense of liberalism is similar to that of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the United States or the Green Party in Germany.

Since the Hosokawa cabinet, numerous "liberal" issues of personal freedom and autonomy have emerged. Organ transplants relate to how society and the individual define death. Revision of the civil code permitting married couples to use different surnames and allowing illegitimate children to inherit their parents' property relates to individuality. Care for the elderly revolves around the question of whether the family or society at large should assume chief responsibility. Whether the Japanese army's forced prostitution of non-Japanese women during World War II should be taught in junior high schools, a contentious matter, can also be viewed as a liberal issue.

As noted earlier, it is doubtful that the DPJ leadership understood these questions to be the crucial litmus test of their self-proclaimed liberalism. Even if they did, these subjects are unlikely to replace defense as the primary cleavage between political parties.

These issues do not shape the fundamental pattern of political competition. Japanese political parties have chosen not to enforce strict party discipline on bills concerning brain death, elderly care insurance, and the use of birth names by married women, not because the correspondence between parties and issues has yet to be reestablished, but because these particular issues are not definitive. It is impossible for Diet members to decide their positions according to the view of their constituencies. They have little choice but to vote according to their own personal beliefs. In any case, these separate (or loosely related) "single issues" are not likely to determine the direction of political realignment in Japan.

The new liberalism was possibly the offspring of modernism in



postwar Japan. As noted above, the modern value system lay deeply below progressive political beliefs, and constituted, together with the traditional value system, the fundamental cultural conflict in Japanese society and politics. However, as rapid economic growth modernized Japanese society and democracy appeared increasingly stable, making antifascist and pacifist positions irrelevant, the linkage between social conflict evolving around modern and traditional attitudes and political conflict over national security issues and revision of the Constitution was lost. Liberal issues became insulated from other political issues. Without renewed linkages with other agendas, such as social democratic policies, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for left-wing liberals to become a significant political force in Japan, at least for the moment.<sup>9</sup> The greater success of liberals in Germany and France seemed due not to the inherent appeal of liberalism, but to their focus upon environmental causes, widely regarded as urgent questions at the time. There is no reason to believe that liberalism will, by itself, enjoy greater popularity in Japan.

The other components of liberalism were decentralization and participation. Whether they are really liberal principles deserves closer scrutiny, yet for Diet members of Sakigake and the DPJ (and also of the JNP), these were an important policy agenda that accounts for their emphasis upon the "citizen."<sup>10</sup> However, in the 1990s interest in private (personal) life as opposed to interest in public activities was increasingly important in Japan and the desire to participate was on the decline, rendering a participatory policy platform somewhat unrealistic. Rather than the voluntaristic forms of participation liberals hoped for, the support groups of individual Diet members continued to be the common form of political participation (Ōtake 1998, Overview). Personal trust and a sense of camaraderie between the candidate and the *kōenkai* (personal support group) member were the primary motivation in voting. Although the antithesis of pork-barreling, it was far from the issue-oriented voting behavior that many liberals hoped for.

## CONCLUSION

Political realignment in Japan began not with a change of voters' policy orientation nor with a massive shift in party support but with splits and mergers of the parties at the level of Diet member groupings. The ideology of individual politicians undeniably played a certain role in

this reshuffling. In addition, because when politicians decided to leave or join a party, they assessed voter preferences based on media reports of popular support for the cabinet and parties, the voters' shifting policy choices may have substantially affected realignment. More importantly, however, the new parties tried to attract voters by espousing a policy package and consolidate their support by making a clear axis of policy conflicts vis-à-vis other parties.

This chapter analyzed the ideological policy packages and their efficacy. The parties all clearly failed to gain and stabilize support through policy packages. The traditional left-right scale was not replaced by a new stable left-right scale, leaving interparty conflicts over issues quite confused. The result seems to have been the reemergence of the previous form of voter mobilization—the distribution of patronage to and preferential treatment for particular occupational and regional groups. Although in a different form, one-party dominance by the LDP apparently has been revived and seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future, although the fact that nearly 50 percent of the electorate do not support any party or vote in elections poses a potential threat to LDP dominance, as was clearly shown in the July 1998 Upper House election.

## NOTES

1. Japanese labor unions, particularly mainstream ones, often struck over such politically divisive issues as revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Article 9 of the Constitution, which renounces war and prohibits full-fledged rearmament, has always been the focal point of controversy about revision of the Constitution.

2. As will be explored in detail subsequently, the New Party Sakigake gradually espoused traditional leftist positions on foreign policy issues because it suffered an ideological vacuum after political reforms were achieved.

3. Kōno later returned to the LDP, became its president in 1993, and was the driving force behind the alliance with the JSP and formation of the Murayama administration. Nishioka allied with Ozawa Ichirō and became secretary-general of the NFP. The conflict between Kōno and Nishioka within the NLC foreshadowed competition between the two conservative parties in the 1990s.

4. The emergence of taxes as a major issue in Japanese politics threw the debate over neoliberal reforms into utter confusion. As Prime Minister Nakasone stated, the consumption tax was initially designed to relieve the burden

on salaried employees, who were treated unfairly under a system that favored the agricultural and self-employed sectors. In other words, lawmakers sought to aid the new middle class and urban housewives, but ran into unexpected resistance from the very groups that were supposed to benefit. One reason was that the Finance Ministry failed to conceal its long-term ambition of increasing the overall tax base; a greater reason was the skepticism of the urban salaried class and housewives toward the government. Thus the consumption levy, like public outrage at political scandals, enabled voters to articulate their distrust of government and professional politicians. Scandals and the cleavage between amateurs and professionals became the primary determining factors of party support.

5. Many Sakigake Diet members, who played major roles in forging the LDP-SDPJ-Sakigake coalition, confessed to this writer that this was their fatal error. They overestimated Ozawa's power and underestimated the LDP's.

6. Survey research found that the largest groups of JRP supporters were in rural areas, while the bulk of JNP backers came from metropolitan areas.

7. Like the NLC years earlier, the JNP could not recruit attractive, talented candidates and drew from the usual pool of aspiring politicians, many of whom had failed to win LDP endorsement or had already lost several campaigns. This proved disastrous when Hosokawa was forced to step down—there was no successor.

8. The premise behind Hosokawa's proposals on the environment is elusive. The policy can be categorized as "liberal" and similar to that advocated by the New Party Sakigake, whose leader Takemura Masayoshi began his political career by cleaning up Lake Biwa.

9. Since the NFP's collapse at the end of 1997, the DPJ seems to be attempting to make itself the "second pole" through an alliance with social democratic forces and "liberal" forces, whatever the latter may mean.

10. Kan Naoto, one of the founders of the Socialist Citizens' League in 1977, had strong ties to citizens' movements and epitomized this form of activism. The Socialist Citizens' League reorganized as Shaminren in 1978. Established around the same time in the mid-1970s, the NLC also often used the word "citizen." Hatoyama Yukio, too, employed it frequently ("Citizens' Party") when he and Kan created the DPJ in 1996.

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