

Japanese Political Parties: Ideals and Reality*

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Abstract:

Japanese political reformers embrace an image of the modern political party system that was modern in the early twentieth century but problematic in the early twenty-first century. The idea that politics should be conducted under a two-party format and that voters should ignore issues of candidate personality and constituency service and make their voting choices on the basis of party manifestos does not reflect political reality in any modern democracy. Political reformers would be better advised to focus on how to strengthen the prime minister vis-à-vis his own cabinet and own party and how to restructure the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians. Constantly chasing after a model of the modern party system that is unrealistic and unrealizable only contributes to reinforcing public cynicism about the political process.

Key words: political parties, political reform, SNTV system, catch all party, manifesto.

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Introduction

There has been a remarkable continuity in Japanese thinking about what constitutes a modern political party and a desirable political party system. Since this cherished model of party politics stands in stark contrast to the realities of Japanese politics, political reformers in Japan have repeatedly championed reforms that they claim would bring the reality of Japanese politics into closer alignment with the ideal model of what party politics should be. These reform efforts, however, invariably have failed to produce the promised results, thus creating a situation in which high expectations are followed by deep disappointment and by the renewed conviction that Japanese politics is hopelessly backward. Despite repeated failure, however, it takes only a few years for the reform effort to gather energy once again. The process then repeats itself, only to end but one more time in failure.

The Japanese ideal model of the modern party was formulated in the 1920's during the period of Taisho Democracy when British political practices were held up as the model of modern parliamentary democracy. Ironically, the British themselves are far less wedded to this model today than are the Japanese. In Japan the model of the "modern" political party has been frozen in time. It has led many people to believe with what only can be described as a kind of religious conviction that if Japan would simply adopt the right reform it could turn that model into reality.

The model is familiar to virtually all Japanese. It is constantly being invoked by politicians, scholars and the mass media as a way to describe what is wrong with Japanese political reality. In this model, parties have mass memberships, clear principles, and social bases of support that differentiate them from other parties. In this ideal system, voters support parties on the basis of the policies they propose rather than on the basis of the personalities of their candidates. Parties offer the voters clear alternative policy agendas and the parties themselves are well organized and centralized.

There is no room in this ideal model for constituency service or for voter loyalty to candidates rather than to party. Moreover, in this model of modern politics, a two-party system prevails and election campaigns are inexpensive and party controlled.

The reality of Japanese politics could hardly be at greater variance with this model. Election campaigns are expensive and they are dominated by the individual candidates and their *koenkai* rather than by the party. This remains the case even under the predominantly single member district system that Japan adopted in 1994. Party identification is weak and there is a notable absence of deep social cleavages to differentiate the social bases of the major parties. Party factions, though weaker today than they were in the past, continue to be important. The party organization at the local level is indistinguishable from the personal *koenkai* organizations of the party's elected politicians. One party dominance until 1993 and coalition government since then has characterized Japan rather than an alternation of power between two parties. Many Japanese seem to believe that this reality stands in stark contrast to what a modern party system should be, and that it presents uniquely Japanese problems.

In fact, however, the model itself is hopelessly outdated and the effort to make it reality in Japan doomed to fail. The model of the programmatic party with many party members in competition with other similarly organized parties representing different social groups and proposing different sets of policies is a model of democratic politics of the early part of the twentieth century. It is not a model relevant to politics in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Emergence of the “Modern” Political Party

The first modern parties emerged a century ago, in the midst of industrialization, before the advent of the welfare state and before the invention of television and the emergence of the mass media. They organized voters for political participation in societies that were characterized by deep class conflicts and oftentimes by religious and regional conflicts as well. Parties on the left, lacking the financial resources of parties that had the backing of business, found their strength in the large number of people who joined them. This organizational model proved so effective that soon conservative parties were emulating it. Mass membership programmatic parties reflecting the deep social cleavages of early twentieth century Europe became the model for “modern” parties.

By the 1920s, when Japanese political parties were growing more powerful and when the political system seemed to many to be moving in the direction of European parliamentary democracy, this European model of the modern party system was at its zenith. Almost all of the goals Japanese political reformers today espouse were defined in that period: a two party system, a single member election district system, mass membership parties, a commitment to implement a clear party platform sharply differentiated from the platforms of other parties, a focus on issues of high national purpose rather than local constituency service, and so on.

In the early part of the twenty-first century there is much less need for what Japanese define to be the modern party than there was a hundred years ago. Mass membership provided funds for the parties, but Japan and other countries today provide public subsidies to political parties. Many of them, with the notable exception of the United States, also make some political activities, such as candidate election campaign advertising in the mass media, free of charge to candidates and parties. Political parties in the first half of the twentieth century, with their party newspapers and party meetings, provided an important channel for communication between the leadership and party members. There is much less need for the party to use its organizational apparatus as a means for communicating to the voters now that the mass media is so pervasive.

Most importantly, in predominantly middle class societies where welfare state policies have dulled the sharp edges of earlier class conflicts, it is extremely difficult for political parties that seek parliamentary majorities to sharply differentiate themselves from each other in terms of their ideological and basic policy positions. A German political scientist, Otto Kirchheimer, writing in the 1950s, coined the phrase “catch-all party” to describe the fundamental change in political party organization and behavior that had resulted from the introduction of the welfare state and the amelioration of class differences in European democracies. The catch-all party does not identify a particular social group as its core constituency. It seeks the support of all the voters. In a party system characterized by the presence of two or more catch all parties, the major parties will have much in common in terms of their basic policies. Each will try to appeal to the floating voter, that is the independent voter who is somewhere in the middle and potentially a supporter for either of the catch all parties.

If parties in a two-party system take diametrically opposing positions on fundamental national and international issues then it is safe to assume that they are operating in a deeply divided and polarized society. This was the situation in Japan in the first decade of the '55 system. Japan was divided into antagonistic conservative and progressive camps led respectively by the LDP and the JSP. It was a polarized two-party system but that is hardly the image political reformers have in mind when they stress the desirability of two-party politics. But if the society is not deeply divided, then there is no reason to expect two parties, each of which is seeking majority support, to take decisively different positions on issues of major importance.

This reality is why in Britain today, unlike Britain a hundred years ago, differences between the Labour and Conservative Parties tend to be subtle rather than fundamental. Tony Blair, the voice of “new Labour,” is a voice of moderation and a leader who claims to rule on behalf of all the people in Britain and not primarily the working class. A similar pattern can be seen in every European country, and in the United States as well

In Japan it is this model of party politics more than the reality that is “backward.” Japanese reformers are in a hopeless quest for the “modern” political party and party system that was modern seventy or more years ago but that is not modern anymore. And as long as this model is held up as defining the goals of political reform, reform is bound to fail and Japanese cynicism about the country’s political system bound to remain pervasive.

Reforming the Electoral System

In modern Japanese political history the primary target of political reform has been the electoral system. From 1925 to 1993, with the sole exception of the first post-World War Two election, Japanese lower house elections were held under a multi-member district, single-entry ballot system, which in western usage is usually referred to as an SNTV (single non-transferable vote) system. Criticism of this system has a history almost as old as the system itself, and with each succeeding political scandal the belief that this system was responsible for Japan’s political problems grew ever deeper.

If only Japan could replace the SNTV system with a single member district systems, advocates of reform argued, those problems would be resolved. There would be no more factionalism, money politics, powerful special interests, candidate rather than party oriented election campaigns, and an emphasis on personality rather than policy.

By the early 1990s this view had become so widespread, and was so relentlessly promoted by the mass media, that it became nearly impossible to debate the merits of the case against the SNTV system. It no longer was possible to claim to be a proponent of political reform without supporting abolition of SNTV.

There were many reasons, however, to doubt that this system was the cause of Japan's political problems. There was even more reason to question whether abolishing it would make things better. Personality and constituency service are important in US House of Representative elections. Factions have been important in Italian politics. Sweden, India and other countries have had the experience of long periods of one party dominance. Yet none of these countries used the Japanese SNTV system. This suggests that there must be other causes for factionalism, one party dominance, and candidate oriented election campaigns. But Japanese reformers were not willing to consider that the election system might not be the culprit.

Even intra-party competition, supposedly the key feature and shortcoming of the SNTV system, also had far more complex causes than critics of the election system were prepared to consider. The truth is that a system that combines single entry ballots and multimember districts does not necessarily cause intraparty competition. It does so only when a party can reasonably expect to elect more than one candidate in a district. Even during the period of LDP one party dominance there was no LDP intra-party competition in those urban districts where the party, because of limited public support, ran only one candidate. Intraparty competition in the Socialist Party ceased not because the system changed but because public support for the JSP declined to the point where the party could not run more than one candidate per district.

If instead of abolishing the SNTV, political reformers had insisted on rectifying district imbalances to equalize the weight of every citizen's vote, then the representation of rural districts would have been substantially reduced and the LDP would have been able to run multiple candidates in relatively few districts. A one person one vote

apportionment amidst declining popular support for the LDP might well have led to the emergence of a competitive, moderately pluralistic party system under the SNTV system.

The change of the electoral system to a mixed system of single member and proportional representation districts is moving Japan toward a two party system, but it has brought about far less in the way of reform than the proponents of system change anticipated. Elections are still constituency-service oriented and candidate dominated. Especially in the case of the LDP, the prevalence of the sons of retired Diet members who are successful in winning their fathers' seats is testimony to the power of personal connections in Japanese electoral politics. There is no longer intraparty competition, but candidates continue to rely on their personal *koenkai* rather than on party organization to run their campaigns. Major parties continue to be umbrella-type organizations for politicians whose views on important policy issues vary. And the differences between the LDP and the Democratic Party, and the Komeito for that matter, are difficult to discern. The history of Japanese politics under the new election system suggests that the impact of electoral systems on party systems is less important than many people believe. At least it is fair to say that the impact of this particular change in the electoral system has had far less of an impact in curing the supposed ills of Japanese politics than its advocates argued it would have.

If the SNTV system had not been abolished, however, people to this day would be arguing that it is the cause of Japan's political problems. Now that it has been changed, there seems to be little support for changing it once again, even though many people who had argued for the introduction of the mixed system of single member and proportional representation districts appear to have lost their enthusiasm for it. For better or worse, Japan is likely to live with this system for some years to come.

How it will affect political behavior in the long run is hard to forecast. As more and more politicians with no personal experience in the SNTV system enter the Diet, campaign practices may change. Elections may become more policy oriented. But that would have happened under the SNTV system as well. It is not the electoral system but rather basic changes in Japanese society and in Japanese people's attitudes and values that are driving changes in voting behavior. The declining importance of factions and the

growing importance of the popularity of the party leader in affecting voting behavior were observable phenomenon in the 1980s when the SNTV system was still in effect.

The Manifesto Boom

The most recently popular issue for political reforms chasing the elusive goal of party dominated and policy focused elections is the introduction of the so-called party manifesto.

Manifesto is another term for political platform or election promises but by writing it in katakana it seems to suggest something new and foreign and profound. If parties and party leaders adopt manifestos, according to the proponents of the manifesto movement, then voters would be able to decide what party to vote for based on concrete policy promises. Elections would become battles between parties proposing different manifestos. At the next election voters would be able to judge how true the party in power had been to its manifesto. And if it had failed to carry out its promises, then the voters could hold it accountable.

In other words, once political parties and party leaders issue their manifestos, politics will become party rather than personality centered, and issues and principles rather than constituency service and opportunistic compromise will dominate political debate. If this sounds familiar, it is because the goal of the political reformers who champion the manifesto movement is to realize the ideal model of party politics that has been the goal of political reform back to the Taisho period. Since electoral system reform did not accomplish that task, now manifestos will.

It is important to emphasize that there is no democracy in the world that operates in this way. In the United States when the Democratic Party or the Republican Party holds its national convention to nominate its presidential candidate, it also convenes a platform committee to prepare the party's policy agenda. This platform is always a product of compromise. Party zealots try to get extreme demands into the platform. The presidential candidate's supporters often try to get more centrist language into it in order to appeal to floating voters or they play up some demand for radical change that is popular with a core constituency, knowing fully well that it has little chance to become government policy.

The idea that the party's presidential candidate decides what his party's platform is going to be and the party's members in Congress then simply implement his promises has no base in political reality.

Discussions of party politics in Japan and especially of how to strengthen the power of the party president tend to exaggerate the power of the American president. The president is not nearly as powerful as many Japanese seem to believe he is. Indeed, the writers of the American Constitution endeavored to devise a system that would prevent a concentration of power in the presidency. The president's power, in the words of Richard Neustadt, whose book *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* is the authoritative study on the American presidency, is the "power to persuade." A leader in a democracy needs to persuade his party, his parliament, and his public of the need for the policies he is advocating. Persuasion takes many forms and the president, or prime minister, has access to many different techniques to persuade others to do as he wishes. Arm twisting, legislative compromises, the effective use of the mass media, and the firing of disloyal cabinet ministers are some of them. A platform or manifesto may also be part of the process of persuasion, but it is not the end of it.

Modern party politics, whether in Japan or the United States or elsewhere, are dominated by parties that cater to diverse constituencies and that seek the widest possible support. The major parties in modern democracies agree far more than they disagree on basic policy issues, and if they are after majority support, their supporters invariably seek to serve plural and in some ways contradictory interests.

Modern parties, in other words, in Japan and elsewhere, are teams of individual political entrepreneurs banded together to seek political power. Their candidates are elected by voters from different kinds of constituencies, of different ages, with different levels of income, and so on. When voters go to the polls in a national election, they are not engaging in a policy referendum. They are choosing a team to rule in the best interests of the people who elect them.

Many factors go into making that choice. They include issues of candidate personality, party leader image, the performance of the incumbent government, and the existence or absence of a credible alternative. Knowing what policies the party wants to adopt is one of them, and to the extent that the manifesto movement may get parties to be

more explicit in defining their policy goals, it will provide information that voters can take into account at election time. But it is unrealistic to think that it can amount to more than that.

Politicians and parties have to stand for something to be sure. As a politically savvy US Senator, Everitt Dirksen of Illinois, said many years ago, only half tongue in cheek, it is absolutely critical for politicians to have principles. “And my first principle,” he quickly added, “is flexibility.” Prime Minister Koizumi made a campaign promise to keep the ceiling on deficit financing of the government budget to under 30 million yen. And he was right when he dismissed criticism that he had failed to keep his promise by saying well, it is no big deal, it was only an election promise after all. The question that should be asked about Koizumi is not whether he kept his promise on the deficit ceiling but whether he has performed adequately as prime minister in dealing with Japan’s economic problems. Leaders need to be judged not by their fidelity to their election promises but by how well they govern.

Japan’s “Anti-Politics” Tradition

Democratic politics is a messy and contentious business. It involves compromise. It involves struggle between interest groups seeking access to the public purse, between bureaucrats who believe they know what is in the national interest and politicians who know what is in their reelection interest, between the party or parties in power and the political opposition.

Democratic politics is frustrating and rather inefficient since it is based on compromise among contending political forces, a process that takes time and usually results in policies that leave everyone somewhat dissatisfied. But in Japan this essence of politics is often dismissed as “backward” and even immoral.

There is a long tradition of what amounts to a kind of “anti-politics” in Japan. This often results in reformers putting forth an idealized, antiseptic model of modern politics as a yardstick against which to measure Japanese performance, which of course always comes up short. Thus some new dramatic, fundamental reform is needed to purge the

system of politicians who focus on constituency rather than national issues, on parties that appeal to personality rather than policy, and so on and so forth.

In short, the problem with a lot of the reforms that are regularly proposed to improve Japanese politics is that they deny politics itself. In the end, the model of political behavior that seems to be so popular in Japan is the model of an idealized bureaucratic state. It is a state in which the push and pull of politics, in which conflict itself is largely missing.

In democracies, however, politicians have an obligation to serve the interests of their constituents. The parties to which they belong embrace a variety of viewpoints. The leaders they elect are not all-powerful but have to convince their parties' members to support their policies. Political reform that seeks to deny these realities of modern politics is doomed to fail.

In thinking about political party reform in Japan, it is important to consider how party politics has changed since the early years of the twentieth century. When political parties first emerged as important political institutions, more or less at the beginning of the last century, they represented the interests of particular groups in society. Political parties were the representatives in the political realm of the interests of the working class, the bourgeoisie, and so on.

The political history of the past century in modern democracies has been a history of the movement of political parties away from representing discrete social groups to occupying an intermediate position between society and the state. Political parties do not belong to any particular societal groups; they "belong" to the politicians who run them, and these politicians use the party to appeal to voters for support so that they can obtain political power.

In other words, there is a political market in which politicians are entrepreneurs and voters are consumers. Politicians are in the business of politics, and politics is a business. When voters go to the polls they are acting as consumers in the political marketplace. Political parties are organizations that compete in this marketplace for voter support. Some parties are niche parties. They are not after majority support but want to maximize their support among a relatively small group of people. They are something akin to a

boutique or speciality shop as contrasted with a supermarket or department store. In Japan, the Komeito and the Japan Communist Party, are such niche parties.

But parties, such as the LDP and the Democrats, that seek majority support, must have a marketing strategy that can appeal to large numbers of voters who have diverse interests and values. They try to do so in various ways. Presenting attractive leaders is obviously one, and it is of growing importance in Japan. The ability of a candidate to convince voters that he can do more for the constituency than can the candidate of another party is another important sales technique. The continuing strength of the LDP is precisely that so many of its candidates are able to convince voters that their election will bring more benefits to the constituency than could be expected if someone else were elected.

The point is not whether the emergence of the catch-all party is a good thing or whether it is desirable that being a professional politician has become a business. The point is that, whether one likes it or not, this is the political reality of modern democracies. Political reform to be relevant should be aimed at making this system work in as even handed and transparent a manner as possible.

Who Governs?

In this context there are two issues that are especially important areas for reform in Japan. One is the relationship between the ruling party and the government. The other is the relationship between the parties and the bureaucracy.

It is obviously difficult for voters to decide whether or not to vote for a particular party if the leader of that party commits himself to policies that the majority of the party's Diet members oppose. The lack of unanimity within parties and the need for the party leader to deal with opposition from within his own party is a feature of politics in the United States and other countries as well as Japan. But what makes the Japanese situation unique is that the prime minister's own team - the cabinet and the party's top officials - are not necessarily loyal to the prime minister and his policies. In the United States Republican President George Bush cannot simply announce his policy goals and expect that the Republican majorities in the Senate and the House will make them law. He has

to negotiate and compromise with the legislative leaders of his own party. But if any member of President Bush's cabinet or key officials in the White House were to publicly criticize the President's policies, that person would be out of his job that same day. This is not, however, how things work in Japan.

The idea that the ruling party and the government are somehow equal and separate has a long history in Japan. In the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, when a party comes to power its key members join the government. Those who do not agree with the prime minister's policies stay out of the government or they suppress their criticism and accept the prime minister's policies as their own. When the government submits legislation to the parliament, the party's members vote for it.

In Japan the situation is not quite the same. The obligation of the party's Diet members to support the government in the Diet is recognized, and in this sense is very much in accord with the Westminster model. There is strict party discipline in Diet voting and it is rare for a party member to go against the party. But what makes Japan unique is the role played by the party's Executive Council and Policy Affairs Research Council before legislation reaches the Diet.

The government has an obligation, not by law but by custom, to get the approval of the LDP's Executive Council before submitting legislation to the Diet. Apparently this convention was introduced originally to increase the party's power vis-à-vis the bureaucracy. But in recent years, especially after Koizumi came to power, it has become a mechanism to increase the party's power vis-à-vis its own leader, the prime minister.

The result has been the emergence of a dual power structure between the prime minister's office and the LDP. This not only makes governance almost impossibly difficult. It also makes it very difficult for the public to hold the government accountable for its policies. If people believe that Prime Minister Koizumi is trying to do the right thing but is blocked by the opposition forces in his own party, then the inclination is to continue to support Koizumi even though he has failed to achieve his goals. If people are opposed to what Koizumi is trying to do and support the views of the opposition forces, then the inclination is to continue to support the LDP in order to prevent Koizumi from carrying out his reforms. In either case the end result is a vote for the LDP.

There is no easy solution to this problem, in part because the tradition of regarding government-ruling party relations as somehow relations between equals has such a deep history in Japan. It is actually somewhat analogous to the relationship between the President and the Congressional members of the President's party.

The answer to this problem is not to make unrealistic demands for unanimity among all LDP Diet members. It is understandable why politically Koizumi would argue that if the party elects him as president it is committed to support his policies. But electing a president is not the same thing as giving up all control over policy making to the president. A strong political leader is someone who has the ability to convince his party to support his policies. An inability to do so amounts to a failure of leadership. It cannot be overcome by making unrealistic demands on party members to do whatever the party president wants to do. The prime minister should be able to insist, however, that every member of his governing team, which includes cabinet ministers, vice ministers, parliamentary secretaries and the key party officials, be loyal to him and to his policy agenda.

In Japan the tradition of collective responsibility of the cabinet is deeply rooted. Cabinet decisions are made on the basis of unanimity. Cabinet ministers tend to see themselves rather than the prime minister as the ultimate decision maker on issues that fall within their ministries' jurisdiction. Moreover, vice ministers and parliamentary secretaries are not even chosen by the prime minister or by the minister but by the party's secretary general. Decisions as to who gets appointed to these posts remain based on considerations of seniority and factional affiliation. It is obviously exceedingly difficult for a prime minister to govern if his ministers do not believe they have an obligation to be loyal to the prime minister's policy agenda and if the vice ministers and parliamentary secretaries do not regard themselves as part of the prime minister's team to begin with.

Even more problematic is the relationship between the party's three top officials and the prime minister. It is not unusual for the head of the Executive Council or the Policy Affairs Research Council to openly criticize the prime minister's policies and his cabinet appointments. Nor is it unusual for these party leaders to use their positions to block the prime minister from submitting legislation to the Diet. In other parliamentary systems the party leader being the prime minister would not tolerate such behavior and would

summarily remove these party officials from office. Even more importantly, in other parliamentary democracies, party members who have fundamental differences over policy with the prime minister would not want to stay part of his government.

There have been suggestions made in Japan that key party officials should hold simultaneously positions in the cabinet. Given the history of relations between government and ruling party in Japan, this proposal seems to make a great deal of sense. If the head of the Policy Affairs Research Council and the Executive Council and the Secretary General were in the cabinet, then when they spoke out on policy issues, they would have to represent the views of the cabinet. If they did not do so and took a contrary position, the prime minister would have little choice but to dismiss them from the cabinet, and thus from their party post as well.

Restructuring the relationship between the prime minister's office and the ruling party is one of the most important tasks for political reform in Japan. Once a party comes to power, the capable leaders in it should become part of the government. Until this rather common sense feature of parliamentary democracy becomes practice in Japan, the kind of stand-off between Prime Minister Koizumi and the opposition forces in the LDP and the blurring of the lines of responsibility and accountability will continue.

Politicians and Bureaucrats

The second important area for reform involves relations between political parties and the bureaucracy. This is far too complex an issue to discuss in detail here. The basic points are these. In the past the bureaucracy served as the ruling party's think tank. Political leaders had a great deal of confidence in the bureaucracy's competence and were able to coordinate policy making to insure that their political interests would be met. For a variety of reasons, confidence in the bureaucracy has declined and the coordination mechanism that smoothed relations between the LDP and the bureaucracy has largely collapsed. As a consequence, the issue of how to structure relations between politicians and bureaucrats has taken on a new urgency.

The idea that politicians rather than bureaucrats should make policy is regarded as a truism in contemporary Japan. There are many politicians who pride themselves on

being policy experts and knowing more about complex issues than bureaucrats themselves. However, there are two fundamental problems with the argument that politicians rather than bureaucrats should make policy.

One problem is that most policy is technical and politically uninteresting. Politicians should be spending their time dealing with and thinking about bigger issues. It is important to have a bureaucratic system in which the day to day business of running government is handled efficiently and without political prejudice by professional bureaucrats. This requires high morale, competent people, and political support. Constantly bashing the bureaucrats and reducing their numbers is hardly a way to make such a system work.

Even more important is the point that for politicians to make policy they need to have expertise on a wide variety of issues. If they are not to rely on bureaucrats to provide it, they need to get it elsewhere. In the United States, the Congress has its own bureaucracy which in effect competes with the bureaucracy in the executive branch under the President. In the US and in European countries as well, there is a well developed array of think tanks that provide alternative policy ideas to the bureaucracy.

Moreover, in several European countries political parties have their own think tanks that are a source of policy ideas for the prime minister and for the party in opposition as well. In Japan each Diet member is provided with a budget to hire one policy secretary, but one has to wonder how useful it is for each member of the Diet to have one staff member responsible for policy when the issues the Diet votes on are so various and when how one votes is so severely constrained by party discipline. It would seem to make more sense to take the money being spent on policy secretaries and divide it among the parties to be used for hiring a professional policy staff to be attached to the party's policy affairs council.

In any event, political leadership does not mean that politicians should be doing what bureaucrats normally do. Political leadership means setting direction, identifying priorities, making critical decisions, and explaining to the public why particular policies are needed. And it is to this end that political reform should be directed. Changing for example the law regulating public subsidies to parties so that at least part of the subsidy would have to be used at party headquarters to support the party's research staff might be

worth considering. Strengthening the professional staffs of Diet committees by bringing in experts from the private sector on a rotating basis might contribute to make the Diet more important as a site for policy making rather than just policy approval.

In the end, however, probably the most significant reform in terms of transforming Japanese politics would be the adoption of an election districting system for the lower house that strictly followed a one person one vote apportionment. The imbalance in the weight of the vote between urban and rural districts is a major source of the problems Japanese politics face. If the lower house were to more accurately reflect the Japanese voting public, it would provoke party reorganization and it would change the policy agenda.

Conclusion

My purpose here is not to lay out an agenda for political reform. My objective has been to describe how the ideal model of modern party politics that is so fervently embraced in Japan is a relic of the past with surprisingly little relevance to the real world of politics in twenty-first century Japan. Japan faces serious political problems. Reform to be successful has to be rooted in Japan's historical and institutional realities and has to focus on concrete, incremental, realistic goals. Party politics in Japan, after all, have a hundred year history. The democratic tradition goes back beyond the American Occupation to the period of Taisho democracy. Reforms that deny the power of this history and that seek to change Japan's political culture in a day are bound to fail.

The history of party politics in Japan until recently has been a history of adaptability to changing circumstances. For the past decade, however, the political system's capacity to adapt has been insufficient, to say the least. Whether it is able to demonstrate once again that adaptability and flexibility depends in large part on whether political reformers will let go of an outdated model of modern party politics and focus on concrete ways to strengthen the Japanese system rather than seek to fundamentally replace it.