

Voters' Political Awareness That Led to Two Changes of Government

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(Summary)

The 2009 House of Representatives election was a groundbreaking event, which resulted in the first full-scale change of government between Japan's two major parties, as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that had been in power since 1955 was ousted by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). However, LDP swept back into power in the 2012 election, just three years later. This article presents findings from nationwide public opinion surveys that NHK has conducted after each of the four national elections since 2009, using the placement method, based on which the author delves into the political awareness of voters, whose decisions led to the two changes of power.

(1) Both in 2009 and 2012, most of the voters casted their ballots with an awareness of possible change of power. In 2009, many of those who were "acutely aware" of the possible change of power were among DPJ voters, but, it was the other way round in 2012; many of such people were among LDP voters. The survey results also indicate that disillusion with the LDP administration and expectation for DPJ contributed to the change of power in 2009 and that many voters in the 2012 election placed emphasis on party's ability to control the government due to their distrust in DPJ's handling of the government. However, even after LDP returned to power, the majority of respondents answered that they highly evaluated the 2009 change of power to DPJ.

(2) In the course of the four elections, voters' awareness changed most drastically during the period between the 2010 House of Councillors election and the 2012 House of Representatives election. As for fields of questions, attitudes towards "administration" and "political parties" changed most, especially evaluations of LDP and DPJ. Nevertheless, the four elections shared a common attitude of voters: not many people answered they "trust" political parties and the vast majority of respondents answered they "do not trust" them.

(3) The 2009 election marked the highest voter turnout since the current election system had been introduced in the House of Representatives election in 1996, with 69.28%. However, in sharp contrast to this, the 2012 turnout plummeted by almost 10%. Whether the voter is old or young, with or without party affiliation, interested in politics or not was closely related to the turnout.

(4) The author compared the voting behavior of those who emphasized the "balance of seats after the election" and that of "entire voters" in terms of the use of the two ballots, one for the electoral district and the other for the proportional representation. Difference between them is not observed in 2010 when DPJ was in power, but in 2012 and 2013, when the predominance of LDP was reported, those emphasizing "balance of seats" had higher tendency to vote for DPJ than "entire voters." Meanwhile, the majority of those who used the two ballots differently, or voting for different parties, had "two or more" parties to support.

(5) Apart from the nationwide public opinion surveys, the author conducted an Internet survey on Internet election campaigns, which had been approved to introduce in 2013 for the first time in Japan's election history. It is revealed there were not many people who "drew on" Internet campaigns for their decisions on who to vote. Respondents were also asked about their opinions on the information available from the Internet campaigns. While those who "have not used such information" accounted for more than 50% in the all eleven question items, there were a little more positive responses than negative ones in terms of "Internet campaigns arouse interest in election" and "are useful for deciding who and which political party to vote."