

Karol Żakowski (University of Lodz)

New Parties in Japan – In the Search of a “Third Pole” on the Political Scene⁸

1. Introduction

The victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ, Minshutō) in 2009 was just a beginning of a period of destabilization on the Japanese political scene. Due to the fact that the power stopped functioning as a glue for various ideological camps inside the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, Jiyū Minshutō), many parliamentarians left the former dominant party to create their own political groups. Analogically, the DPJ started falling apart before the parliamentary election in 2012 due to a diminishing support for the government among the public, as well as an opposition to the revision of electoral manifesto among the anti-mainstream politicians.

The wave of defections from the LDP was related to both ideological differences and the weakening of the dominant party. Although it culminated in 2009, the year of the historic change of power, it had started in 2005, when the LDP succeeded in gaining almost two thirds of the seats in the election to the House of Representatives. One of the main bones of contention was the attitude towards structural reforms conducted by Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō. Those who opposed privatization of Japan Post had no choice but to leave the LDP. In 2005 part of them created the People's New Party (PNP, Kokumin Shintō). However, when Koizumi stepped down from office in 2006 it was the anti-reform group that gradually regained influence within the LDP. In 2009 some of the politicians who supported structural reforms left the LDP and established the Your Party (YP, Minna no Tō). Contrary to these two groups, most of the other new parties created since 2009 were not coherent with regard to political programs.

The DPJ started suffering a similar wave of defections at the end of 2011. The defectors from the ruling party, who opposed revision of the 2009 electoral manifesto, established the New Party Daichi – True Democrats (NPD-TD, Shintō Daichi – Shin Minshu) in December 2011, the Kizuna Party (KP, Shintō Kizuna)

⁸ The article is a result of research conducted as a part of a project financed by the Polish National Science Centre (DEC-2011/01/B/HS5/00863).

in January 2012, and the People's Life First (PLF, Kokumin no Seikatsu ga Dai-ichi) in July 2012. Moreover, in September and November 2012 two more strong competitors appeared on the Japanese political scene – the Japan Restoration Association (JRA, Nippon Ishin no Kai) led by Osaka Mayor Hashimoto Tōru and the Tomorrow Party of Japan (TPJ, Nippon Mirai no Tō) led by Shiga Prefecture Governor Kada Yukiko.

The main aim of this paper is to compare the political stances of the conservative parties established since 2005 and to analyze to what degree they can become an alternative to the LDP and DPJ. Although many Japanese people were disappointed with both major parties, under the current electoral system it was very difficult for smaller formations to become a credible “third pole” on the political scene. However, the parliamentary success of the JRA in the December 2012 election showed that under special conditions even smaller groups could challenge the domination of the two major parties.

2. Anti-Koizumi Groups

When Koizumi Jun'ichirō was elected as the LDP leader and prime minister in 2001, he announced he would reform his party even if he had to destroy it. He wanted to abolish the old style of policymaking. Most of the LDP parliamentarians came from countryside constituencies and represented the interests of farmers and employees of the public sector. By providing funds for large construction projects in provincial regions, such as the building of dams, roads or railroads, and by maintaining state subsidies for farmers, the LDP could rely on the loyalty of countryside electorate. This clientelism constituted a cornerstone of the LDP rule (I. Kabashima and G. Steel, 2010, p. 18; E. Scheiner, 2006, pp. 68-89). As a partisan of neoliberal economic policy, Koizumi wanted to cut budget expenses and put an end to the pork barrel politics. To achieve his goal he had to challenge many influential politicians within the LDP.

One of the symbols of structural reforms became the privatization of Japan Post. In 2005 the bill on this matter was passed in the House of Representatives, but was rejected by the House of Councilors. Prime Minister Koizumi decided to dissolve the lower house and punish all the LDP parliamentarians who voted against the bill by expelling them from the party.⁹ Thanks to Koizumi's popularity the LDP achieved a historic victory in the election to the House of Representatives. By displaying a rare determination to conduct both political and economic reforms, Koizumi managed to substitute countryside voters for an even greater electorate from the big cities.

⁹ Japanese prime ministers do not have the right to dissolve the House of Councilors. By dissolving the House of Representatives Koizumi wanted to gain two thirds of seats necessary to reject the veto of the lower house.

The politicians who opposed structural reforms established in August 2005 two small parties: the People's New Party (PNP, Kokumin Shintō) headed by Watanuki Tamisuke (in 2009-2012 by Kamei Shizuka, at present by Jimi Shōzaburō) and the New Party Nippon (NPN, Shintō Nippon) headed by Nagano Prefecture Governor Tanaka Yasuo. Although many of the politicians who had been expelled from the LDP lost their seats in the Parliament, some of them were so influential in their electoral districts that they managed to be reelected. The number of NPN parliamentarians decreased over time to only one member in the House of Representatives.

PNP's main goal was to oppose the privatization of Japan Post. According to Kamei Shizuka the structural reforms were nothing else but an attempt to "create a healthy forest by cutting down the weak trees and leaving only the strong ones." He claimed that the policy of supporting strong businesses could bring only temporary results, as the pauperization of the majority of the society meant a decrease in consumption, which was detrimental to the Japanese economy (Kamei Sh. and Namikawa E., 2003, p. 20). According to Kamei, not all public work projects could be called wasteful. He underscored that in many countryside regions people still did not have access to speedways or to a sewage system. He also claimed that Japan should protect its market by maintaining customs tariffs or quantity restrictions for commodities imported from abroad (Kamei Sh. and Namikawa E., 2003, pp. 70-93).

After the DPJ's electoral victory in 2009 the PNP entered a ruling coalition together with the Social Democratic Party (SDP, Shakai Minshutō) and Kamei Shizuka became the minister of state for financial services in Hatoyama Yukio's government. Because the DPJ needed the PNP to maintain a majority in the House of Councilors, Kamei was able to impose on the prime minister his own version of the revision of Japan Post's privatization bill. According to the new law, the government was to maintain control over postal services with one third of the shares. The maximum deposit in Japan Post Bank and the maximum insurance coverage offered by Japan Post Insurance were raised to 20 and 25 million yen respectively, and the number of full time employees was increased by 100 thousand (Hasegawa Y., 2010, pp. 149-156).

The PNP boasted a solid base of supporters, mostly composed of Japan Post employees. It was large enough to ensure having representation in the Diet, but too small to make the PNP a viable challenger for the two major parties. Indeed, the PNP's real goal was not to become as powerful as the LDP or the DPJ, but to represent the interests of postal employees. By focusing solely on one issue the PNP could not become anything more than a parliamentary representation of one social group, but it was at least sure of the loyalty of its electorate.

3. Partisans of Structural Reforms

In 2006 Abe Shinzō was elected as a new LDP leader and prime minister. Although he was regarded as Koizumi's follower, contrary to his predecessor he did not consider structural reforms a priority of his cadency. Instead of promoting the neoliberal economic policy he focused on implementing the aims of the right wing of the ruling party, which were important only to a marginal group of the Japanese society. Moreover, Abe allowed many politicians who opposed privatization of the post to return to the LDP, which was interpreted by the unaffiliated voters as a betrayal of Koizumi's neoliberal ideas (Sugawara T., 2009, pp. 104-115). An apparent lack of Abe's zeal in promoting structural reforms made the LDP less attractive to the inhabitants of big cities, which contributed to the scale of the defeat of this party in the election to the House of Councilors and Abe's resignation in 2007. During the premierships of Fukuda Yasuo (2007-2008) and Asō Tarō (2008-2009) the LDP gradually returned to its old practices of pork barrel politics. The policy of extensive public spending was aimed at regaining the support of the countryside electorate.

Nevertheless, the support for the ruling party kept decreasing. Public opinion polls indicated that the LDP could lose the election to the House of Representatives for the first time in its history. Under these circumstances centrifugal forces in the party became stronger and stronger. Eventually in January 2009 one of the supporters of structural reforms, Watanabe Yoshimi, left the LDP. In August 2009, just before the election, he established the Your Party together with four other parliamentarians. He managed to attract to his initiative unaffiliated Eda Kenji, former LDP politicians Yamauchi Kōichi and Hirotsu Motoko as well as Asao Keiichirō who used to be "next minister of defense" in the DPJ shadow cabinet.

Just like Koizumi, Watanabe Yoshimi was a partisan of a "small government". According to him, everything that could be done by the private sector or local government should be entrusted to them respectively. He was convinced that state subsidies for all the ineffective companies, which he called "zombie businesses", should be abolished and substituted for the funds to promote high-tech enterprises which could stimulate economic growth (Watanabe Y., 2010, pp. 119-120). One of the main goals of the YP was to weaken the influence of the bureaucrats on the decision making process. According to Watanabe Yoshimi the bureaucrats became too egoistic – they focused only on defending the interests of their own ministries by maintaining the status quo and blocking any attempts of reforms (Watanabe Y., 2010, pp. 13-18).

According to Watanabe Yoshimi, both the LDP and the DPJ were unable to implement far-reaching reforms. He emphasized that although the DPJ had promised to cut budget spending, it only moved expenses from one field to another. He compared two major slogans of the new ruling party: introduction of a monthly child allowance and the abolition of tuition fees in high schools to Asō Tarō's

initiative of an anti-crisis benefit (Watanabe Y., 2010, pp. 30-31). Watanabe emphasized that both major parties relied on the support of interest groups – the LDP was dependent on bureaucrats and the DPJ on trade unions. Under these circumstances no reforms were possible. Watanabe called the DPJ's slogans a “false reform”, because despite electoral promises the new government proved almost as prone to the influence of the bureaucrats as the LDP. He also did not believe that the LDP could change after the electoral defeat due to the still strong influence of the older generation politicians, who were able to suppress any initiatives of younger reformers (Watanabe Y., 2010, pp. 31-40).

Watanabe Yoshimi claimed that as the only party whose activity was based on a coherent agenda the Your Party constituted a viable alternative for the LDP and the DPJ. According to Watanabe, instead of increasing the consumption tax the government should focus on conducting further budget cuts and privatizing the companies from the public sector, such as the Japan Post. The priority should be given to the elimination of deflation and the creation of a basis for a high-rate economic growth (Watanabe Y., 2010, pp. 44-62). Watanabe emphasized that Japan should conduct a new “restoration and opening of a country” (*ishin kaikoku*) to gain access to a growing Asian market. It could be achieved by establishing a regional free trade zone and by creating a yen currency zone in East Asia (Watanabe Y., 2010, pp. 80-101). Watanabe was also a partisan of deregulation and decentralization. He was convinced that Japan, which during the Meiji restoration abolished the feudal domains (*han*) system and introduced the prefectural administrative division, should go one step further – establish bigger provinces with stronger powers (Watanabe Y., 2010, pp. 130-131).

4. Mixed Parties

Besides the parties with clear political programs there also existed groups that were interesting mixtures of politicians from various ideological camps. In April 2010 former LDP parliamentarians led by Hiranuma Takeo, Yosano Kaoru, Ishihara Shintarō, Sonoda Hiroyuki, Fujii Takao and Nakagawa Yoshio created the Sunrise Party of Japan (SPJ, Tachiagare Nippon). Although all of them had belonged to the LDP, they left this party in different periods: Ishihara in 1995, Hiranuma in 2005 and rest of them just before the formation of the new group. Although small in size the SPJ was composed of various ideological camps in regard to both the economic and defense policy. Their common denominator was a critical stance towards the leadership skills of the LDP President Tanigaki Sadakazu as well as such slogans as: “overthrow the DPJ”, “revival of Japan” and “reorganization of the political world” (Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu, 2010, pp. 213-214).

The leader of the SPJ, Hiranuma Takeo, used to belong to the Kamei faction and was known for his opposition to structural reforms. He called Koizumi's

neoliberal policy a betrayal of social groups, which used to support the LDP, such as postal employees, farmers and physicians, and was convinced that the privatization of Japan Post contributed to the defeat of the former dominant party in 2009. Just as Kamei Shizuka, Hiranuma emphasized that structural reforms were conducted at the cost of the poor and made an already difficult life in the countryside even harder. He underscored that reductions in the number of post offices and post employees meant a great burden especially for older people in depopulated regions, who lost access to many services and were not even able to collect their pensions (Hiranuma T. et al., 2010, pp. 43-47).

Hiranuma Takeo, just as Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō, held very rightist convictions. Hiranuma was convinced that the Japanese political scene needed “a third pole composed of real conservatives” who were absent in both the DPJ and in the LDP (Hiranuma T. et al., 2010, p. 5). During his whole political career Hiranuma eagerly promoted enactment of an “independent Constitution”. He also criticized the liberal education system, which “produced a masochistic vision of history” (Hiranuma T., 2005, p. 195-196). Hiranuma opposed interference of China or South Korea in such matters as the contents of the Japanese history textbooks (Hiranuma T., 2007, p. 154-156). He criticized the DPJ for their plans of introduction of a double citizenship system or suffrage rights for the permanent foreign residents. According to him such initiatives were a “policy of demolition of the country” (Hiranuma T. et al., 2010, p. 3).

Yosano Kaoru, who became a co-leader of the SPJ, as well as Sonoda Hiroyuki represented quite a different ideological camp. They were much more “dovish” with regard to defense policy, especially Sonoda who was considered a pro-Beijing politician. Moreover, contrary to Hiranuma, in 2005 both of them had actively worked for the passage of the Japan Post privatization bill. Nevertheless, Yosano was not a dogmatic partisan of neoliberalism. He emphasized that the Koizumi reforms had both good and bad sides – on the one hand they put an end to a Keynesian economic policy and limited wasteful budget spending on public works, but on the other hand they also contributed to an increase in income inequalities (Yosano K., 2010, pp. 164-167). Instead of further budget cuts he proposed to focus on increasing the consumption tax and allocating it to the social security system (Yosano K., 2010, pp. 176-190). At the time Yosano joined the SPJ he criticized both major parties. According to him the DPJ’s policy of introducing a generous welfare system without increasing burdens was deprived of a far-reaching vision and could lead to an economic disaster (Yosano K., 2010, pp. 26-57). Yosano was equally disappointed with the LDP. He deplored that the former dominant party was not able to conceive a viable alternative to the DPJ’s policy and seemed to be passively waiting for the failure of its main opponent to once again seize power (Yosano K., 2010, pp. 103-104).

As we can see, at the time of its establishment the SPJ was very incoherent with regard to the political convictions of its leaders. To a certain degree it

was a result of a desperate search for potential members without regard to their ideological leanings, just to secure five parliamentarians needed to receive state subsidies for political parties (Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu, 2010, p. 215). It is not surprising that Hiranuma Takeo and Yosano Kaoru could not achieve a compromise on many issues, and Yosano eventually left the SPJ in January 2011 after having failed to convince the rest of party members to enter the ruling coalition. Although Yosano had criticized the DPJ's economic policy, he agreed to become the minister of state for economic and fiscal policy in Kan Naoto's government.

Another party without a clear programmatic profile was the New Renaissance Party (NRP, Shintō Kaikaku). Just as the SPJ it was created in April 2010. There were two groups that initiated its foundation: the Reform Club (Kaikaku Kurabu), which had been created in 2008 by former members of the LDP and the DPJ, and Masuzoe Yōichi who similarly to Yosano Kaoru decided to leave the LDP protesting against the policy of its leader Tanigaku Sadakazu. Surprisingly Masuzoe, who used to support structural reforms, decided to enter into an agreement with such politicians as Arai Hiroyuki, who in 2005 voted against the Japan Post privatization bill, left the LDP and was a member of the NPN until 2007. Masuzoe's decision to merge with the Reform Club and become a leader of the NRP was so sudden that in the last moment he cancelled a symposium on the promotion of postal privatization which he had planned to host (Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu, 2010, p. 219).

In many aspects Masuzoe Yōichi's ideological leaning resembled the political stance of Watanabe Yoshimi. Masuzoe vehemently criticized the practices of the "old LDP" such as factional struggles, pork barrel politics, corruption and the connections between politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats. He claimed that the DPJ was used to the same practices as the LDP, because many of its leading members, such as Ozawa Ichirō, came from the former dominant party (Masuzoe Y., 2010, pp. 18-27). Masuzoe was convinced that the economic crisis in Japan was caused not by structural reforms, but by the fact that they were only partially implemented. (Masuzoe Y., 2010, pp. 164-170). To overcome the economic problems Masuzoe proposed deregulation, reduction in budget spending on public works, a decrease in corporation tax, a fiscal policy oriented on the depreciating yen and eliminating deflation as well as internationalization of Japanese enterprises to become competitive on the global market. He was also a partisan of decentralization and the creation of strong provinces instead of prefectures (Masuzoe Y., 2010, pp. 140-265).

Masuzoe Yōichi decided to form a new party because he believed that his popularity among the Japanese public would suffice to gain a good electoral result. Indeed, Masuzoe was a very well-known and highly evaluated politician. In the 1990s he used to be a TV commentator, and in the years 2007-2009 he was a very popular minister of health, labor and welfare. Not only did he receive one of the best results in history in the 2001 election to the House of Councilors

(1.58 million votes), but he was also leading in many opinion polls on the most suitable politician to become prime minister (*Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu*, 2010, p. 218). Nevertheless, the decision to establish a new group together with the Reform Club, probably caused by the need to secure five parliamentarians to be able to use state subsidies for political parties, was not evaluated well and Masuzoe started losing public support. Although in the *Yomiuri Shinbun* opinion poll from May 2010 on the most suitable politician to become prime minister he maintained first place with 19% of respondents, his result was much worse than in the opinion poll from April 2010 (29%) (*Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu*, 2010, p. 222). It became evident that the popularity of one politician was not enough to ensure high rates of support for his party, especially if this party was nothing more than a mixture of politicians from various ideological camps.

5. Prospects for the Creation of a “Third Pole”

The establishment of new parties in the 1990s eventually led to the creation of the DPJ, which gradually became a viable “second pole” for the LDP rule. However, when the DPJ came into power in 2009 it turned out that it did not bring a new quality to the Japanese political scene.¹⁰ Instead of limiting the budget deficit, the Hatoyama government only moved budget expenses from the public works projects to the welfare system. Although the DPJ had presented itself as an alternative to the money politics of the LDP, it proved as prone to corruption practices as the former dominant party, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio in June 2010.¹¹ Both Hatoyama and his successor Kan Naoto were criticized for their lack of leadership skills, especially in managing the crisis situation after the great Tōhoku earthquake of March 11th, 2011, and conducting negotiations with the United States on the relocation of the Futenma military base in Okinawa.¹² The frequent changes of party leaders, which were fueled by inter-factional competition for this post, also resembled the power mechanisms inside the LDP. In September 2011 Noda Yoshihiko became the third prime minister from the DPJ in only two years after the historic alternation of power.

The DPJ proved as prone to internal frictions as the LDP. The biggest anti-mainstream faction led by Ozawa Ichirō opposed the government’s ideas of an

¹⁰ More on the similarities between the DPJ and the LDP see: K. Zakowski, 2011, pp. 186-207.

¹¹ Accusations of illegal donations concerned both Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio and Secretary General of DPJ Ozawa Ichirō. In March 2009 mass media revealed that Ozawa’s political organization Rikuzankai had received bribes from Nishimatsu Kensetsu company. In 2009 it also turned out that Hatoyama Yukio’s political activity had been financed by illegal donations from his mother.

¹² During the electoral campaign in 2009 Hatoyama had promised to relocate the American military base from Futenma outside the Okinawa prefecture, but he was unable to convince the United States to this idea.

increase in the consumption tax or entering the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement, which could be detrimental to the Japanese farmers. At the turn of 2011 and 2012 two new parties were formed mainly by the former members of the DPJ. The New Party Daichi – True Democrats (NPD-TD, Shintō Daichi – Shin Minshu) was established in December 2011 by such politicians as Suzuki Muneo (formerly in the LDP) and Ishikawa Tomohiro – Ozawa's ex-secretary implicated in a corruption scandal. The Kizuna Party (KP, Shintō Kizuna), led by Uchiyama Akira, was created in January 2012 by nine former politicians from the DPJ. An even bigger split occurred in July 2012 after the passing of a bill that increased the consumption tax. Nearly 50 DPJ parliamentarians led by Ozawa Ichirō established a party named People's Life First (PLF, Kokumin no Seikatsuga Daiichi), which became a new competitor in becoming the “third pole” on the Japanese political scene. In mid-November 2012, when Prime Minister Noda confirmed his plans of dissolving the House of Representatives, the PLF absorbed the KP, and soon announced the merger with the Tomorrow Party of Japan (TPJ, Nippon Mirai no Tō) established by Shiga Prefecture Governor Kada Yukiko. Their common goal was the opposition to increasing taxes as well as plans for closing all the nuclear plants.

Meanwhile the Japanese public became tired of the necessity of choosing between two parties which did not differ too much. According to a survey conducted by *Yomiuri Shinbun* in June 2009, even two months before the historic victory of the DPJ as many as 64% of the respondents could not see clear programmatic differences between this party and the LDP. Moreover, 59% were convinced that the Japanese political scene would not change at all after the alternation of power (*Yomiuri Shinbun Yoron Chōsabu*, 2009, p. 90). According to an opinion poll conducted by *Asahi Shinbun* in April 2012, the DPJ was supported by only 10% and the LDP by 14% of the respondents. The rest of the parties received support equal to a statistical error. The most interesting in this opinion poll is that the biggest group of voters – 57% – responded that they did not support any party at all (12% refused to answer) (*Yoron Chōsa – Shitsumon to Kaitō, 4 gatsu 21, 22 nichi Jisshi*, 2012). It only proved that there was space for a new party provided that it could effectively appeal to the unaffiliated electorate.

Until 2012 only the YP seemed to have the potential to challenge the LDP and DPJ rule from among the newly formed parties. The election to the House of Representatives in August 2009 was a considerable success for the YP – it managed to acquire 3 million votes and five seats in the Diet. It was a good result for a party established only three weeks before the election, which could not even afford running candidates in all electoral blocks. The YP performed even better in the election to the House of Councilors in July 2010 – it received almost 6 million prefectural votes (10.24%), almost 8 million proportional votes (13.59%), and won 10 seats (the LDP won 51 seats and the DPJ 44 seats). As shown in Table 1,

before the establishment of the PLF all the other new parties had much smaller representations in the Diet than the YP.

Table 1. Number of members in political parties of the Japanese Diet in September 2012 and after the election to the House of Representatives in December 2012 (new parties are in bold font)

Party name	House of Representatives (480 members)		House of Councilors (242 members)		Together (722 members)	
	Sept.'12	Dec.'12	Sept.'12	Dec.'12	Sept.'12	Dec.'12
DPJ	247	57	87	87	334	144
LDP	117	294	82	84	199	378
PLF	37	-	12	-	49	-
Kōmeitō	21	31	19	19	40	50
TPJ	-	9	-	8	-	17
Communist Party	9	8	6	6	15	14
YP	5	18	8	8	13	26
SDP	6	2	4	4	10	6
KP	9	-	0	-	9	-
JRA	3	54	4	4	7	58
PNP	2	1	3	3	5	4
NPD-TD	3	1	2	2	5	3
SPJ	2	-	3	-	5	-
NRP	0	0	2	2	2	2
NPN	1	0	0	0	1	0

Source: based upon many sources, including: *Kokkai Giin Yōran, Heisei 24 nen 8 Gatsu Han*, 2012.

Nevertheless, in July 2012 the PLF was formed, and in September 2012 another new strong competitor emerged on the Japanese political scene. Initially the Japan Restoration Association (JRA, Nippon Ishin no Kai), established by Osaka Mayor Hashimoto Tōru, managed to attract three parliamentarians from the DPJ, three from the YP and one from the LDP. The neoliberal profile of this newest party was very similar to YP's, and it could count on considerable support among the inhabitants of big cities. On the other hand, in November 2012 the JRA merged with the Party of the Sun (PS, Taiyō no Tō), established only five days earlier by former Governor of Tokyo Ishihara Shintarō on the base of the SPJ. The alliance of Hashimoto and Ishihara, enforced by a sudden dissolution of the lower house by Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko, was a result of a difficult compromise on many issues – while the JRA represented economic neoliberalism, the PS was closer to the welfare state policy. Because of that the JRA lost a clear ideological leaning.

The election to the House of Representatives held in December 2012 put an end to the DPJ rule. The LDP clearly won, gaining 294 seats in the lower house. However, the most interesting was the great electoral success of the JRA, which managed to gain 54 seats in the Diet. Although the DPJ maintained second place with 57 seats, the scale of its defeat seemed to exceed the framework of the two-party system. The election proved that under special circumstances the “third pole” was able to perform almost as good as one of the two major parties.

Nevertheless, the JRA probably would have not achieved such a good electoral result without a major split in the DPJ – nearly one hundred parliamentarians from the ruling party decided to join the “third pole” before the election. The current electoral system to the House of Representatives favors big parties. During the Cold War the electoral law was based on middle-sized constituencies and single non-transferable votes. Because it incited factionalism in the LDP and gave this party leverage over the opposition parties, it was increasingly criticized by the public opinion and replaced in 1994 with a mixed system in which 300 seats came from single-seat constituencies and 200 (currently 180) were distributed among party lists for 11 big regions. As stipulated by the so-called Duverger’s law, a single-majority voting system leads to the formation of two-party systems (L. J. Disch, 2002, p. 74). Although the Japanese electoral system is partly proportional, most of members of the House of Representatives are elected in single-seat constituencies, which compel the two major parties to appeal to a median voter and blur their ideological leanings. Smaller groups can still enter the Diet, but they have small chances to compete with the biggest parties.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that many politicians from the new parties were partisans of revision of the current electoral system. According to Masuzoe Yōichi the single-seat constituencies contributed only to the deterioration of the politicians’ quality and creation of non-issue-oriented parties. He emphasized that the people who wanted to start their political careers did not choose their party affiliation based on its program, but on the availability of vacant constituencies they could run in. According to Masuzoe, the middle-sized constituencies were better, because the politicians competed on the level of factions, not parties, and by having a loyal electorate they could relatively easily leave a party which did not suit their convictions (Masuzoe Y., 2010, pp. 118-120). The SPJ held a very similar stance to Masuzoe and claimed that the best for Japan would be middle-sized constituencies, each with 2-4 seats in the House of Representatives (Tachiagare Nippon, 2010). The YP also proposed the abolition of single-seat constituencies, but instead of returning to the old system they promoted the creation of a fully proportional voting system (Your Party, 2011). It is evident that the politicians of smaller parties were aware it would be difficult to form a strong “third pole” until they succeeded in conducting another electoral reform.

6. Conclusions

Until 2012 the prospects for the creation of a “third pole” on the Japanese political scene were rather dim. In the 1990s opposition politicians strived for the creation of a “second pole”, but it took them 15 years after the electoral reform of 1994 to achieve this goal and defeat the LDP in the election to the House of Representatives. It is natural that together with the loss of power in 2009 centrifugal forces in the former dominant party increased and some of the LDP politicians once again decided to try their chances by forming new political groups. However, contrary to the situation in the 1990s there already existed a main contender against the LDP rule. Even if the Japanese were disappointed with the fact that both major parties were so similar to each other, because of strong incentives for a two-party system under the current electoral law it was extremely difficult to create a “third pole” which could be a match for the DPJ or the LDP. Moreover, some of the new parties, such as the SPJ or the NRP, were just as incoherent with regards to their political programs as the two major parties. The PNP and the YP had much clearer programmatic profiles, but they tended to focus on only one axis of the struggle – the former represented the policy of “big government” and the latter held a neo-liberal approach to the economy. Nevertheless, the situation changed dramatically in 2012. Due to a series of defections from the DPJ the ruling party lost about one third of its members in the House of Representatives, who in turn strengthened the new groups, especially the JRA. The parliamentary election in December 2012 showed that the two-party system was not yet strongly embedded in Japan and that there still was place for a strong “third pole” on the political scene.

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