

A Research related to the Electoral Change in Contemporary Japan

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ABSTRACT

Two motives have combined to make us write a paper on recent electoral change. One is to round off the substances of research that have so far delivered the public lectures on election and voting behavior at each place. One more is to reexamine the voting behavior seen in the recent elections from the sociological point of view. Through the national and local elections carried out for the last decade, a considerable change has come on the attitude and behavior of the eligible voters, which is a matter worth to be considered as a subject of political sociology. The primary purpose of this paper is to throw light upon the relations between the collapse of the "political system of 1955" and the change in voting behavior. As for the process of this collapse, it is needless to say that the intense change in the political situation has influenced strongly. But, it can't be overlooked how a change in the voters' party choice has been concerned with the process at the same time. Then, we follow the transformation of turnout while inquiring into the trend of voting behavior. Turnout is closely related with the legitimacy of a parliamentary government. By the way, turnout had declined after around 1990, but a brake was applied to that declining trend. What can be the reason? What will happen hereafter? Furthermore, it is worth noting that the nonpartisan strata of voters are the power whose behavior would decide the election results. They seem to be more than half the electorate. We compare them with Independents in America in order to make their behavioral trait clear. Added to this, we place the focus on voting trend of the youth and gender, who are central to the nonpartisans. Lastly, we would like to make some suggestions regarding the nonvoting while examining a change in the standard for judgment of the eligible voters from the viewpoint of rational choice.

I . How are recent elections changing?

Some important elections, that is, the House of Representatives election (June 2000), the House of Councilors election (July 1998) and the Unification Local election (April

1999) were carried out in Japan towards the end of the 20th century. Some phenomena worthy of note were seen through these elections.

First, the Liberal Democratic Party (hereafter abbreviated as the LDP) as a Government party has greatly made the power retrogress. In brief, the LDP was defeated in the 1998 House of Councilors election, and the Hashimoto Cabinet in those days had to resign as a result. As for the 2000 House of Representatives election as well, the situation was the same. The LDP suffered from the defeat of losing 38 seats in this election. And, the Unification Local election brought about a growing change in the distribution of seats, too. To be concrete, the nonaffiliated members won 300 seats, which was in history the greatest. We may say that a sign of flowing has appeared in the party control to local politics.

At any rate, the various results of these three elections have introduced confusion into the political situation, yet they were the elections suitable for concluding Japanese politics in the latter half of the 20th century. Indeed, these election results put a period to the "political system of 1955". Then, although many argument battles were developed over the "structure reform" in the House of Councilors election carried out in July 2001, such a issue was even a conflict over the scheme that put an end to the interest politics of the "political system of 1955".

Second, turnout had declined through the 1990's, but a brake was applied to this declining trend.

Two doubts of "Was the LDP really defeated by these elections?" and "Was turnout recovered?" may be raised about the above summary.

We must draw attention to the following situation about the first doubt. The LDP won the seats that were almost the same number as the 1995 election in the 1998 House of Councilors election. Moreover, concerning the absolute number of votes polled rate, 5.9 points increased as compared with the 1995 election, too. It follows from what has been said that the LDP has succeeded to maintain the status quo. None the less, the election results gave it the impression of defeat.

That reason is as follows. The LDP won the majority of seats in the 1992 House of Councilors election. While the LDP made this winning a goal for the election in 1998, the seats actually won were greatly lower than independent majority. A gap in the results of both elections gave it the impression of defeat. To put it another way, the political process has changed greatly during the election years 1992 and 1998. While this change was drastic, the LDP didn't notice it. The LDP expected the reappearance of the past winning, but only a virtual image in the reality. In a word, we may say that it is impossible and rather meaningless to compare the status quo of the party powers with the power arrangement in the "political system of 1955".

Now then, the LDP obtained the majority of seats with the aid of high support rate to the Koizumi Cabinet in the 2001 House of Councilors election. This winning relates to a question of whether the LDP has really demodulated as a Government party. There was, however, a considerable gap between the popularity of Prime Minister Koizumi and the increase in seats won. Thus, it would be better to say that the election results can't be concluded as the winning by the real power of the LDP.

By the way, a little high level of turnout due to the positive evaluation about the economic development has been kept up in the "political system of 1955". As to the influence of economic evaluation, a myth to the growth of "The living standard will improve tomorrow" has acted on the support to the LDP. Added to this, the international strain of the East-West nations has given assistance to the persuasive power of the conservative ideology about the maintenance of Japanese peace.

Both the myth of economic growth and the structure of the Cold War, however, have collapsed from around 1990. To put the matter simply, Japanese economy has a way to the growth broken off due to the collapse of bubble prosperity. And, the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought about the development of a new international situation attendant on the end of the Cold War. These collapse phenomena were the crucial occurrences which put a period to the "political system of 1955". Japanese politics has entered a turbulent term in the 1990's, and the support bases of the LDP has followed a way to the reduction in the collapse process of the "political system of 1955"

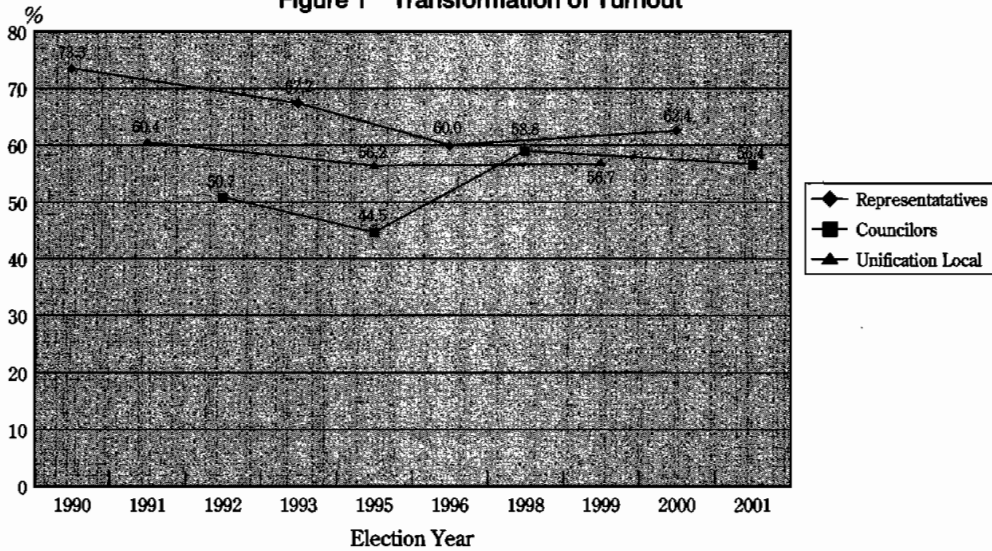
On the other hand, the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) was struck a disastrous blow, too. The decline of the JSP has made the "political system of 1955" nominal. Then, the power decline of both main parties has entailed the fall of will to voting of the electorate, the distrust of politics, and the increasing in the nonpartisans. Not only the collapse of the "political system of 1955" was the situation led to "Ending the LDP hegemony"¹⁾ but also the change that swayed a criterion for the party choice at the side of the eligible voters.

II. Was turnout recovered?

The second doubt relates to a question of whether the improvement of voting environment has shown effect on the rise in turnout. Figure 1 shows the relevant data on the transformation of turnout for the last decade.

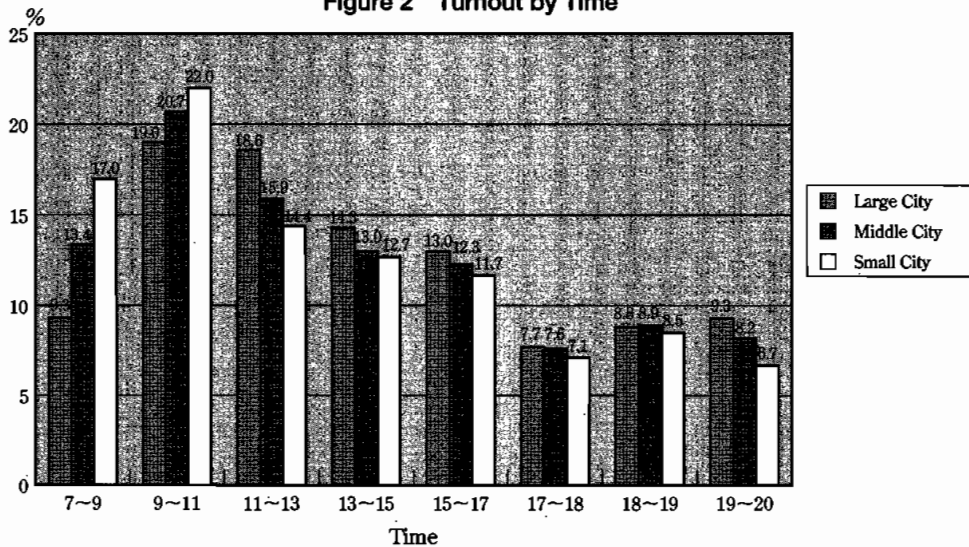
According to this figure, turnout of the national and local elections has clearly descended through the 1990's. As for the 1996 House of Representatives election and the 1995 House of Councilors election particularly, turnout recorded the numerical value of the past minimum. The Public Officers Election Act, however, was amended to cope with the decline of turnout in June 1998. That is, voting time was extended for two hours until

Figure 1 Transformation of Turnout



20 o'clock. Figure 2 illustrates that turnout draws a rising curve in the large cities and those circumference areas after 18 o'clock. Indeed, there was an answer of "Because voting time was extended, it became easy to go to the polls" no less than 27 percent in the public opinion poll done about the motivation of voting. (The *Asahi Shinbun* Polls, July 15, 1998)

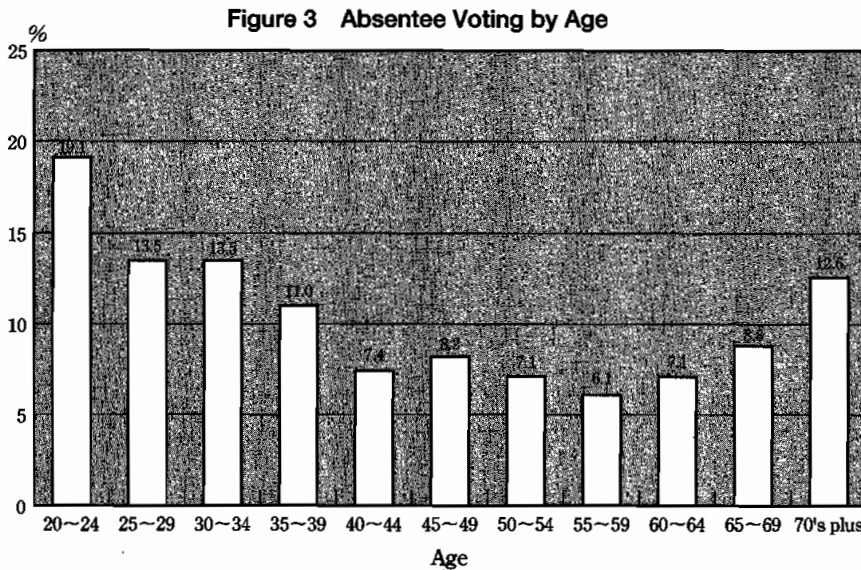
Figure 2 Turnout by Time



Moreover, the various conditions of absentee voting were deregulated drastically, and the procedures necessary for the voting were simplified. In fact, the number of voters increased certainly due to the relaxation of voting conditions.

Then, as shown in Figure 3, it is worth noting that turnout shows a trend of being

higher as much as younger generations in the age composition of absentee voters. The fact that absentee voting is abundant in the youth, whose turnout is usually low, seems to contribute to the rise in total turnout.



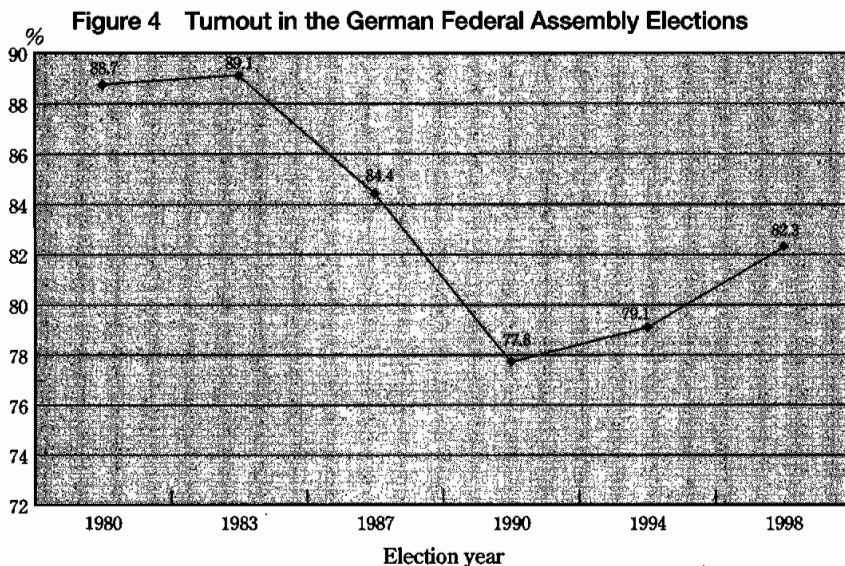
Well, it seems that a brake was applied to the descending trend of turnout somehow, but only the improvement of voting environment can't be expected rise in turnout. Because there were some elections that turnout decreased even in the same condition. Although the Gubernatorial election of Nagano Prefecture on October 2000, for example, became a topic by the winning of nonaffiliated candidate, yet 1.14 points declined from the last time as to turnout. Or, as for the 2001 House of Councilors election as well, turnout declined 2.2 points in spite of the popularity of Prime Minister Koizumi again.

In short, the improvement of voting environment doesn't always bring about the rise in turnout. It goes without saying that turnout is swayed by electoral concern of the eligible voters. This is a fundamental requisite for the rising or declining in turnout. The improvement of voting environment is a means, which gives it convenience to vote for the voters easily. In other words, the effect of improvement can't be separated with the electoral concern, or it perhaps would be more accurate to say that improvement is a means, and its relations with the concern are never contrary. What matters is rather that the elections would become active when the intense campaign of parties or candidates and the electoral concern of voters cross each other.

A. Campbell et al. give an account of the electoral change on two factors, a short-term and a long-term component, which have an effect on voting.²⁾ A long-term component means "a simple reflection of the distribution of underlying party loyalties, a distribution that is stable over substantial periods of time." On the other hand, a short-term

component consists of the political forces that become important for the voters at election time. The latter moves the turnout by adding stimulation to the former. Electoral stimulation derives from "the candidates, particularly those leading the ticket; the policy issues, foreign and domestic; and other circumstances of the moment." In case of low-stimulus election, to quote A. Campbell et al, "turnout would be low, and the division of the vote would approximate the underlying distribution of party identification." As for high-stimulus election, turnout would be high, and the voting differentiation would be promoted. The same observation applies to the Japanese voters, provided that we cannot but reserve an impact of the long-term factor on turnout due to the instability of party support. In any case, judging from the above, we may say that the proposition of "Turnout is a function of the stimulation in the election" is suitable.

Well, turnout has shifted to the rise, but it's never high as compared with the various foreign countries. As compared the Japanese turnout with one in the German Federal Assembly elections, a gap in both countries is remarkable. [Figure 4] The higher level of turnout in Germany reflects the situation that party politics has been established more than the influences from the electoral system. All of this amounts to saying that the activation of elections and the establishment of party politics are in the close relations each other.



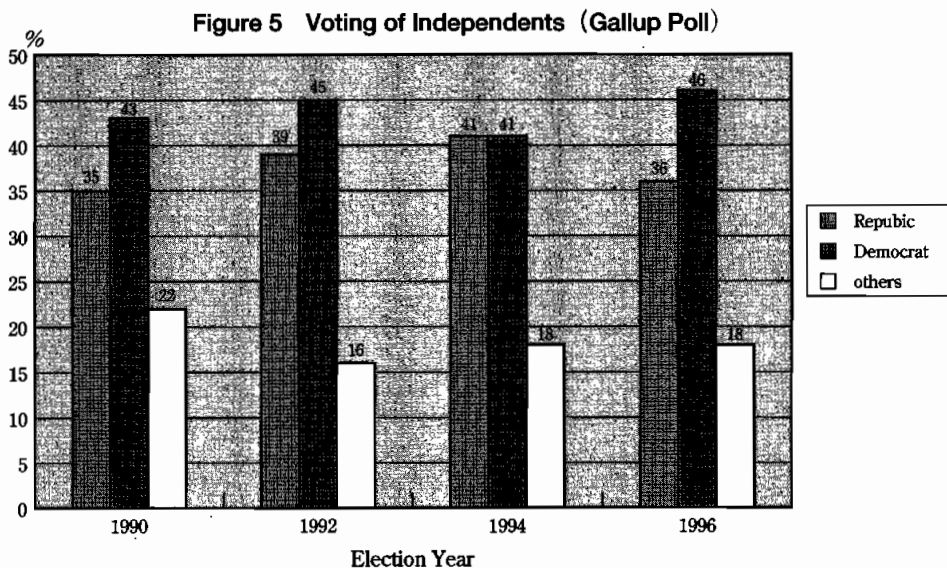
By the way, turnout in the 2001 House of Councilors election decreased a little from the last time. Although the popularity of Prime Minister Koizumi raised interest in politics, this popular boom didn't connect directly with the voting for the LDP. It appears that a gap between the low party support and the high electoral concern produced non-voters as a result. Furthermore, because the policies of the "structure reform" weren't definite, a

part of the eligible voters may have hesitated to vote for the LDP. It amounts to this, that the election was dull substantially.

III. Who designs the politics of new age?

1. The attitude and behavior of the nonpartisans

According to the public opinion polls, the nonpartisan strata of voters seem to be more than half the electorate. As for the *Asahi Shinbun* polls (July 25, 2001), for example, they reach 44 percent of the electorate, and amount to 53.7 percent in the *Japanese Broadcasting Corporation* polls (June 11, 2001). The increase in nonpartisans, however, is not a phenomenon particular to Japan. Independents, for example, are shifting in a level, high percentage of around 30 percent in America after the early 1970's. (*The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1989, 1992, 1994*, Scholarly Resources Inc.) Their voting behavior is floating, which lacks consistency in the vote for party at each election. Although their voting behavior is a little favorable to the Democratic Party in the Member of the Upper House elections, as illustrated by Figure 5, there are those who voted for the Republican Party very much, too.



Their behavioral trait appears to be different from the pattern that the voting party corresponds to the support party. Especially, as for the elections whose levels are different, the "ticket splitting" of lacking consistency of the voting has increased. The word "Ticket splitting" can be defined as "the difference between the vote for candidates for President and the U.S. House of Representatives."³⁾ Therefore, increase in Independents and their behavior can't be ignored for either of the Democratic Party and the Republican

Party.

Strictly speaking, the nonpartisans aren't the same as Independents, but the two have much in common. In other words, even without examining the two concepts, Independents and nonpartisans, in detail here, the similarities to be observed in all those who are moving away from an adherence to any particular party are providing an meaningful subject for debate in research on the nonpartisans.

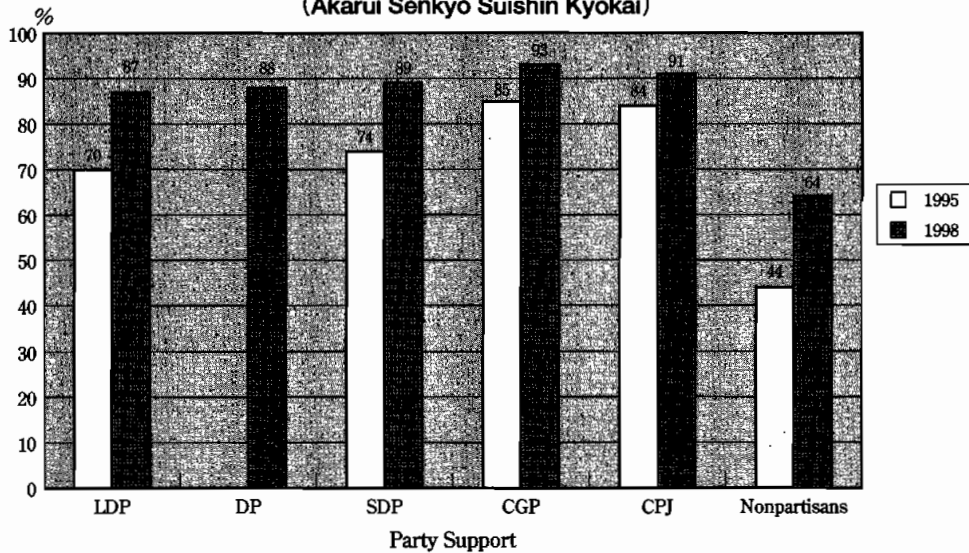
And now, why are the nonpartisans increasing in Japan? First, it can be pointed that the mobilizing power to voting through the various political networks has been on the wane. In Japanese political society, one of the strong political networks is the supporting groups for politicians in communities and workplaces, which are based on individual human relations centering around a particular representative or candidate. As the pulling capacity of these networks, however, has grown weak gradually, the role as a contact point connecting the voters with the politicians seems to be lost.

Second, the parties seem to lose their appeal viewed from the voters. A deviation exists between a matter of concern for the politicians controlled by "the logic of Nagatacho" and the citizens' political sense. This deviation has been amplified by the frequent occurrence of the corruption and scandalous events. The word "distrust of politics" points at such a situation. Most of the voters can't have a sense of affinity for the party politics.

Third, we should not overlook that the eligible voters are making their attitude fluid in the direction and strength of party choice. Political ideologies have greatly influenced the voters' party choice in the "political system of 1955". While the latitude of the party choice has spread out along with the end of ideological confrontation, a criterion of the choice in place of ideology cannot be found for the voters. One of the new criteria will be an alternative of the ruling party vs. opposition party. This alternative, however, may be vague for the voters as a criterion because of the meeting and parting among the parties. In short, the primary significance of the "election" seems to be lost because a distance between "election" to choose a representative and "decision-making process" expected by the voter spreads out too much. The responsibility for politics cannot but become vague so far as the politics isolated from the voters are reproduced in such conditions.

As to such a situation, it is sometimes pointed out that there are some problems in the behavior of the electorate as well. One of the grounds is the fact that the nonpartisans would show a marked trend toward nonvoting. Their electoral participation, however, isn't always passive. As the case may be, they sometimes show higher turnout. [Figure 6] In brief, they seem to be the floating voters with the shake of voting- nonvoting. We shall try to give a more precise account of their behavior and standard for judgment later on.

**Figure 6 Party Support and Voting Orientation: Councilors
(Akarui Senkyo Suishin Kyōkai)**



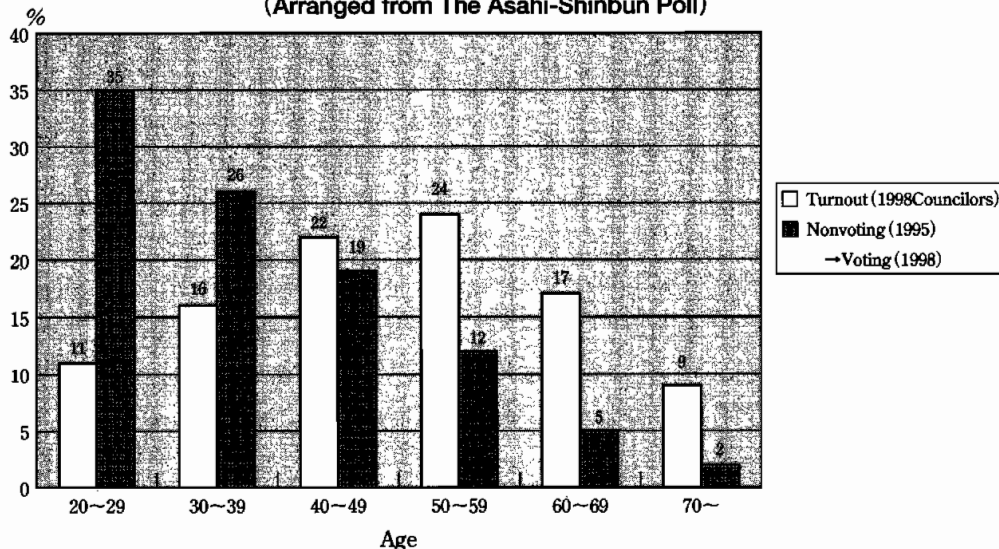
2. Political attitude and voting behavior of the youth

The electorate whose turnout is the lowest in recent elections is those in their twenties. The results of various elections show that turnout tends to decrease as much as an age becomes low except for the aged of 70 years old and over. Certain researchers point out that "When those in their twenties increase 1 percent in the composition of the electorate, turnout shows a tendency of decreasing 1.246 percent as a whole."⁴⁾ Thus, turnout of the large cities whose ratio of the younger population is higher shows a trend of being lower than the county parts. Knowing the low turnout of the same generation, they lose an interest in the election, and thus fall into such a vicious circle as their turnout decreases all the more consequently. And, because their sense of affinity to the residence areas is weak on an average, it seems that they don't take interest in the elections of the areas concerned very much. And yet, their electoral participation isn't always low. From Figure 7, it is clear that their rising rate of turnout is higher than other generations according to the electoral situation.

In brief, they don't always react to politics or election. They participate actively in the elections of taking a growing interest. As for the 1998 House of Councilors election, for example, there was a depression in the background that turnout raised greatly in large cities. The bankruptcy of the banking agencies and the small enterprises due to the depression induced the youth living in the cities to raise their electoral concern. Their concern to the economic problems was connected with the electoral participation, which became the motive power raising their turnout.

We conducted a research with regard to party support on the electorate in the Kinki

Figure 7 Shift of Nonvoting-Voting: Councilors
(Arranged from The Asahi-Shinbun Poll)



area before. According to our research, an important factor discriminating the nonpartisans from the party supporters is age.⁵⁾ [Table 1] It follows from what has been said that the floating attitude of the youth seems to represent the political one of the nonpartisans, whose party allegiances would change at each election.

Youth culture has greatly changed after 1980's. Value and life style of younger generation have been diversifying year by year. Thus, the various usual electoral campaigns have no appeal to them. It is the electoral drama that they take an interest in. If not so, they don't try to take an interest in the election, and voting isn't done, either. But, the youth can't be believed to be a generation of nonvoter.

In a word, a matter of their concern is different from other generations. And yet, politics is not only the practice of the policies to solve the matters in hand but an act of aiming at the choice of future. According to the significance of the future-oriented act, an important point to emphasize is the fact that politics is a sphere of the closer activities for the youth.

3. Electoral participation and gender

As for which election as well, female turnout shows a trend of being higher to fifty years old than male one. Nevertheless, there are a few female representatives very much. Taking up the 2000 House of Representatives election as an example, female candidates are 14 percent of the total in the single-member constituencies, and only 11 percent with the proportional representatives. It is actual circumstances to say that even this numerical value is high second only to the first election of postwar days. And besides, the elected is

Table 1 Weight of Discriminants (LDP vs. JSP vs. Nonpartisans)

Item-Category	1 st dimension Weight Range (Order)		2 nd dimension Weight Range (Order)	
Age				
20's	-0.055		-1.332	
30's	-0.549		0.126	
40's	-0.337	1.257 (2)	-0.090	1.887 (1)
50's	0.325		0.554	
60's	0.326		0.203	
70's plus	0.707		0.389	
Occupation				
Primary industry	0.75		0.188	
Self-employment	0.460		-0.054	
Company executive	0.930		-0.379	
Sales	0.124		0.834	
Transport/Communication	-0.033		0.445	1.417 (3)
Professional/Free lancer	-0.091	1.480 (1)	-0.059	
Public servant/Corporation	0.159		0.240	
Cottage industry/Part-time	-0.0550		-0.034	
Housewife	-0.214		-0.582	
Others	-0.313		0.084	
Unemployed/Student/Pensioner	-0.487		0.183	

Demographic factors that denote the attributes of the voters who responded to our questionnaire are as follows, 1) Age, 2) Gender, 3) Occupation, 4) Size of workplace, 5) Education, 6) Place of birth, 7) Length of residence in present abode, 8) Income. Table I reports only age and occupation.

only 7.3 percent of all the members. For all that, female members are increasing steadily in the various local elections, especially remarkable in the large cities.

Now then, as for the Western countries, the ratio of female members is far high in comparison with Japan. The number of them amounts to 25-40 percent of all the members in Sweden, Finland and Norway. While, female political participation is still passive in Japan, and yet the gender role-feeling survives firmly at the everyday life. The traditional attitude of "Men work in the workplace" and "Women are made for the hearth" is still deep-rooted. And yet, whichever of care insurance, child care, work, education, medical treatment and environmental problem are taken, it is an inevitable trend that men and women cooperate with each other in the various spheres of social activity.

Let's try to take up a concrete example of female electoral participation here. The election without racial discrimination for the first time was done in 1993, and female members won 25 percent of all the seats in the Republic of South Africa. But, Mrs. Frene Ginwala, the Lower House chairwoman, says that this is an ideal half. An ideal is that female members hold half of the total. And she regards the female electoral participation as a part of the movement aiming at the perfect abolition of the social and political discrimination by male control. What matters is rather that the electoral participation isn't

just taken up as a problem of the male and female ratio, but as one concerned with the quality of politics, that is, gender politics.

IV. Change in the standard for judgment of the electorate

How will the election change hereafter? First, it is quite likely that the standard for judgment of the electorate is changing in the direction to aim at a rational choice. The election is a kind of game. So far as a game, the person concerned would refrain from an act with disadvantage. An advantage or a profit is a feeling of satisfaction got by the winning of supporting candidate or party. Voting is an act with cost at the same time. Cost is such a case as time to go the polls, weather conditions, circumstances of work, physical conditions, or annoyance contingent to candidate choice.

Well, the balance of a profit and a cost influences the voting behavior. If a cost to spend on the voting is well over a profit, it may well be that the electorate abstains from voting. The election whose outcome is known in advance is a case in point. Or, the election dickered by the parties may be rejected by the electorate. At any rate, such a usual electoral campaign as a sense of duty or the personal request or the organizational mobilization to voting won't show effect very much. More noteworthy is that the eligible voters are tending to evaluate the achievement of parties or candidates from the viewpoint of rational choice. We may call this pattern an achievement voting. In brief, we may say that they have matured in respect of judgment of the achievement.

Second, it is necessary to pay attention to various media's impact on a change in the standard for judgment. The coinage of "mediacracy" points at this situation. It need scarcely be said that various media are important as an information source of electoral campaigns. The relations of media and the electorate, so far, have been discussed as ones of communicator and audience. However, media are changing, too. Diffusion of Internet and homepage are making these relations change.

To be concrete, through accessing to the homepage of candidates or parties, it is possible that the voters shift from passive audience to active communicator. In other words, it may safely be assumed that the mutual communication of voters and politicians advances toward realization through transmitting the voters' opinion to the candidates directly. Assuming that a way to the election of having leadership done by various more advanced technologies will be developed hereafter, we can say that the progress of such a situation changes the Japanese political sense.

We would like to refer to a subject of the eligible voters themselves at the end. On earth, is politics the world we can't control? As the ideological barriers in party choice have almost disappeared, the latitude of choice is expanding in the post "system of 1955".

The choice of the voters would gain in importance all the more. That current of the times isn't irrelevant to the sprout of a new public consciousness. Volunteer activities and information disclosure, for example, are the movements, which raises the problems of publicity sharply. If so, "Now, what tries to be finished, and what is beginning?" How does politics answer this question? Falling short of the voters' expectation, both interest in politics and turnout in election will decrease.

On the other hand, the electorate must realize that nothing is born from nonvoting. Electoral participation is an act of choosing a politics toward the future. Without the best choice, what kind of one will have to be made? Needless to say, we must have always confronted with the various choices in the process of life-course. What kind of choice, for example, have we done on the occasion of entering a school, getting a job, marriage, child care and so on? Perhaps these choices must have been accompanied with perplexity and hesitation. The choice of politics is the same, too. Professor T. Sasaki acutely pointed out that "We must say that rather a serious crisis would lurk there if the situation that a specific politician or a party is trusted at all arises." (The *Mainichi Shinbun*, July 2000) We may say that his proposal raises an important problem about the electoral behavior.

1) R. Christensen, 2000, *Ending the LDP Hegemony : Party Cooperation in Japan*, University of Hawai'i Pr.

2) A. Campbell, P. E. Converse, W. E. Miller, and D.E. Stokes, 1967, *Election and the Political Order*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., pp.14-16 and pp.41-42.

3) W. De Vries and L. Tarrance, Jr., 1972, *The Ticket-Splitter: A New Force in American Politics*, William B. Eerdmans, Pub. Co. For further details of "Ticket-Splitting", see *op. cit.* and H. A. Bone and A. Ranney, 1976, *Politics and Voters*, McGraw Book Co.

4) I. Kabashima and M. Yamada, 1992, Community Character and Turn-out Rate: An Analysis based on an Aggregate Data, *The Election Research*, No.10, p.9.

5) Table 1 is the data calculated in accordance with Hayashi's Quantification Model 2. This model is used to quantitatively reduce errors to a minimum, which are produced when describing external criterion by item-categories. In a word, it is a technique for measuring how an external criterion is discriminated by giving a value to each item-category. External criterion is divided into three groups consisting of the LDP supporters, the JSP supporters and the nonpartisans in Table 1. Judging from the values of range, it need scarcely be said that age and occupation have a strong effect on discriminating the nonpartisans from party supporters.

