

Polls, Politics, and the Impact of Global Warming

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The Japanese public's support for Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda's cabinet has declined from a high of 47 percent in the October 2007 *Asahi Shimbun* poll listed on this website, to 29 percent in a survey conducted by the *Sankei Shimbun* and Fuji News Network on February 23-24, 2008. Perhaps more important, according to the *Sankei* poll, the Fukuda cabinet's disapproval rating hit 52 percent, up five points from the previous survey conducted by the two news outlets.¹

Such sinking poll numbers, coupled with projected economic weakness, continuing political scandals and concerns about the Fukuda administration's crisis management abilities, do not augur well for the Liberal Democratic Party. Indeed, the Democratic Party of Japan forcefully demonstrated its ability to compete with the LDP when the DPJ won a landslide victory in the July 2007 Upper House elections. In the preceding six years, the LDP had held the DPJ at bay in large part because of the personal popularity of then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

Under the leadership of the less telegenic Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, however, the LDP—which has ruled Japan since 1955 except for one brief period in 1993 to 1994—faces the very real prospect of losing its majority in the Lower House and thus its status as governing party. While a Lower House election need not be held until September 2009 when lawmakers' current four-year terms expire, most experts who follow Japanese politics expect the Prime Minister to call a snap election at some point in 2008.

In an effort to boost his administration's popularity in preparation for such elections, the Prime Minister appears to be looking for a successful G-8 summit, which Japan will host at Hokkaido's Lake Toya on July 7-9, 2008. The central focus of that summit will be global warming, an issue that has gained currency in all of the countries party to the summit, and one over which Japan has demonstrated leadership in the past as a prime mover in the formulation and completion of the Kyoto Protocol.

In recent years, however, Japan's edge as a leader on global warming has slipped. In January 2005, for example, the European Union launched its Greenhouse Gas Emission Trading Scheme, establishing the world's largest multi-country, multi-sector greenhouse gas emissions trading system. Under such cap and trade systems, reductions in greenhouse gas emissions can, in theory, be achieved at the lowest possible cost to society.

Meanwhile, the United States, which has long lagged most of the developed world in seeking to address global warming, is poised to take a more assertive role in coming months and years. The Congress is currently considering legislation to create a cap and

¹ Japanese Morning Highlights, American Embassy Tokyo, February 26, 2008

trade system for greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, the Bush administration, which long rejected the scientific consensus that global warming can be traced to anthropogenic causes, has recently accepted the science and become more openly supportive of dealing with the issue.

Most important, all three leading U.S. presidential candidates support a cap and trade system to lower greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, the top Republican candidate, Sen. John McCain, co-authored legislation in 2001 to create just such a system. In 2005, both Sens. Obama and Clinton voted for that year's version of the McCain bill. In the current presidential campaign, however, both leading Democratic presidential candidates have called for even stronger emissions limits than those advocated by Sen. McCain.

Beyond developments in Europe and the United States, a global spotlight will likely shine on climate change during the August 2008 Beijing Olympics if, as may be inevitable, pollution disrupts the games. And while the visible emissions may not consist of greenhouse gases, any disruption will bring into sharp focus human impacts on the environment, not least because the Olympics end one day before the Democratic presidential convention begins.

As the poll on this website conducted by the Committee of 100 shows, in China, concern over global warming is significant. Sixty-nine percent of the general public in China worries about global warming "a fair amount" or "a great deal." The numbers in China actually exceed those in the United States as only 61 percent of Americans expressed the same views. By comparison, in Japan, 93 percent of the general public expressed a fair amount or a great deal of concern over global warming in a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center and released in June 2006.²

Given the near consensus in Japan over global warming, as well as the other factors discussed above which make addressing global warming worth pursuing for the LDP, Prime Minister Fukuda has recently indicated a willingness to take on business leaders who have actively fought greenhouse emissions reductions mandates. In a speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on January 26, 2008, Fukuda said that "The G-8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit will take up discussions on the future of the planet, and it is an ideal opportunity to open perspective towards a bright future. Climate change is top priority."

In late February 2008, Japan's Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, which has long fought on the side of business leaders in the debate over how to address global warming, announced that it would launch a new study on the issue. An experts' group will assess a mandatory cap and trade system for greenhouse gas emissions as part of an overall review of steps to counter global warming in the aftermath of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol's expiration in 2012. The group will report to the government in June, in time to influence Japan's position at the G-8 summit.

² (<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252>)

In addition, Japan has begun exploring the possibility of holding a separate meeting in conjunction with the Lake Toya summit to focus on developing a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol. The meeting would not be limited to the member states of the G-8. Instead, it would include China, India and 14 other countries that together account for 80 percent of greenhouse emissions.

If polling shows that such a meeting and the G-8 summit gain sufficiently favorable views of the Japanese public, Prime Minister Fukuda may call a snap Lower House election. The LDP's hope would be that the boost in popularity the Prime Minister may derive from his leadership on global warming translates into votes for the party at the ballot box—sufficient for the LDP to retain its Lower House majority.

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