

COVID-19 and the System of Representative Democracy

Harukata Takenaka

Research Member, Democracy for the Future

Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

COVID-19 is on the rampage. While the death toll in Japan has been some 200 or so, it runs high into the tens of thousands in the U.S. and Europe.

The basic method for preventing the spread of infection is to reduce the movement of people and lower the chances of close contact. If the spread of the virus does not abate, this could have serious implications on the nature of parliaments and elections, which are essential for representative democracy.

Let us consider the impact of the pandemic on the nature of the Japanese National Diet. If the pandemic continues, it could significantly change the way the Diet operates.

Members of the Diet have hitherto gathered in the assembly hall to hold debates and discuss policy matters. In view of infection risks, if the pandemic is not contained, it will no longer be safe for Diet members to have discussions in close quarters. The U.K. has already limited the number of members of Parliament allowed to enter the chamber, requiring others to attend via teleconference. For Japanese Diet Members, posing questions to the Prime Minister and other ministers indeed have an enormous significance in parliamentary debates. However, it surely is possible to use remote conference systems such as Zoom instead of debating in person as it also enables other members of the Diet to observe the debate. Voting could also be expedited using an electronic voting system. In fact, the adoption of an e-voting system could be momentous for a country like Japan where there are only few signed ballots.

Japan has four voting methods: signed ballots, standing votes (oral voting), no objection votes, and push-button votes. This fourth method of push-button voting is used only in the House of Councillors. Signed ballots and push-button votes allow records to be kept of how each Diet member voted. However, signed ballots are rarely used in the House of Representatives, and therefore in many cases the voting actions of each individual member are not recorded. If an e-voting system was adopted and became the norm, the voting action of each Diet member would likely be recorded. From an

electorate's point of view, this would be a significant reform in terms of enabling visualization of politics. Thus, social distancing bears the possibility of bringing about the deepening of democracy.

Let us next consider the impact the pandemic will have on the way elections will be conducted. It may no longer be feasible to gather large audiences for campaigning and holding debates as has been the case up until now. Election campaigns will most likely be conducted using TV and remote conferencing systems. This could involve candidates holding debates via Zoom, which could be watched by voters who are interested.

Even more important is the question of how actual voting can take place. If the spread of infection becomes more serious and a broad consensus emerges that going to the polling station can no longer be an option given the high risk of infection, it will be necessary to re-think how voting takes place.

More specifically, it is conceivable to introduce an e-voting system which would allow voters to cast a ballot without actually going to the polling station. However, if an e-voting system were to be introduced, it would have major implications for democracy in another sense. If an infrastructure for e-voting system were put in place, there will no doubt be calls to use this system for purposes other than elections. It is anticipated that there would be mounting calls to use the e-voting system to hold national referendums on a plethora of political issues since at present, a referendum is possible only for constitutional amendments.

From the perspective of democratic legitimacy, national referendums appear to be desirable given that they basically serves as a way to add legitimacy to policies by allowing all citizens to participate. However, national referendums are unfit in instances where multiple policies are being proposed for a single issue and where mutual coordination of policies as well as reconciliation between stakeholders are required. Political parties and members of the Diet are better-versed in such fine-tuning. With that said, national referendums still remain strong in providing legitimacy. If such referendums do indeed become feasible using an e-voting system, it will be necessary to carefully elucidate the strengths of representative democracy to continue having national referendums as an exception to the rule in the way currently positioned. And it would be necessary for every one of us to revisit the advantages of representative democracy.



Contact

Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE/Japan)
Meisan Tameike Bldg. 7F, 1-1-12 Akasaka
Minato-ku, Tokyo, Japan 107-0052

jcie-democracy@jcie.jp (Delete the space before @)