Japan Information

1. Japan is a bicameral, unitary state.

The lower house or House of Representatives is the more important of the 2 houses of parliament as it can override the "upper" House of Councillors decisions. Also, typically, most cabinet appointees are from the lower house.

Although most Japanese local governments are very dependant on funding support from the central government, political pressures often flow from the bottom up on issues involving local public works, farm subsidies/protection, and small business issues.

"Local" governments include 47 prefectures and 3000+ cities, towns and villages.

2. The HR electoral law in effect when the CNEP survey was conducted provided for 130 electoral districts ranging in size from 265,000 to 1,300,000 enfranchised voters (most were in the 400-500,000 range).

Seats were filled on the basis of simple pluralities of the vote in each constituency; all but one constituency elected multiple members of Parliament, with populous districts having more representation.

The long ruling (1955-93) Liberal Democratic Party was favored by this system, because of over-representation of rural districts although most commentaries on this phenomenon focused on a handful of worst case districts and failed to appreciate that many rural districts did not over-represent the popular vote.

The electoral law as described was changed in 1994 to a mixed 9 region-PR district arrangement electing 200 members of the Diet plus 300 single-member districts.

3. Japan has a relatively homogeneous society. Although unions and Socialist and Communist parties tried to mobilize a class vote, most unions are organized on an enterprise basis and include white- as well as blue-collar persons, which means that well-educated white collar workers in large firms often voted for "working class" parties while owners and employees of small firms, which constitute about 70% of employment in Japan, more often than not voted for the "conservative" Liberal Democrats.

There is one religious party supported by a sect's members, but no religious divide as such -- i.e. no large, society-wide church-related issues.

4. Japan has five large national newspapers which account for about half of the newspapers sold in the country on a regular basis. They are generally neutral politically with only slight conservative or liberal tinges depending on the newspaper
in question. The political bias of the local press is not discussed. Many of these "local" papers serve a whole prefecture or even region, so local newspapers in the US sense are rare.

Japan has one public television channel and five private channels, most of which are owned by newspaper companies or news services. All are seen as politically neutral, although, again, there may be slight biases depending on ownership/company policy.

There is only very limited regulation of the electronic and print media.

Generally, the national newspapers provide very high quality news coverage, although there are slight qualitative differences between individual papers. Asahi newspaper is recognized as the highest quality and most "intellectual" by most observers. There are sports newspapers and some other equivalents of the tabloid press elsewhere, but the numbers are very small. On television, talk shows have existed forever and were of mixed quality but had no particular bias; more recently some more biased shows have appeared and become very popular. Having read vernacular newspapers in all five CNEP 1 countries, I would rate the top five on par with Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, El Pais, the Financial Times and the New York Times, although perhaps the top Japanese newspapers are slightly less analytical than some Western equivalents. There are no "op-ed" or similar pages.

5. Japan has a very complicated electoral law in 1993 as regards campaign advertising. Individual candidates could not advertise anywhere. Parties were permitted to make advertisement-like statements in newspapers although the number of "ads" was very small and all parties were given an equal opportunity. There was also (and still is) a pamphlet which contains all candidates' statements (appeals/programs) which is distributed to every household in the country; the same information also appeared on television.

Generally, election campaigns are very strictly regulated in regards to such things as the number of vehicles to be used, how many campaigners can be compensated, gifts to voters (illegal), visits to voters' homes (illegal), numbers of posters, etc.; all of this is overseen by a national system of election "committees" appointed by prefectural and local governments and supervised by the Home Ministry. My impression is that regulations are enforced with different degrees of rigor in different places; there are endless rumors of violations and many prosecuted cases of alleged violation of the campaign laws after each election, but there are so many regulations that I doubt if supervision is very strict given the limited numbers of election supervisory staffs. On the other hand, I also think that actual campaign infractions are pretty small change, whereas corporate giving to parties, factions and candidates, which is also regulated, appears to have been out of control at times, at least that's the way it is treated in the Japanese media.
6. For 20 years of electoral history, please see the attached table. There is no general practice of blank ballot "voting" in Japan. I will also bring xeroxed copies of turnout data and seats to Budapest, as typing all of this information is very time consuming.

7. In 1996, 62% of Japanese women between the ages of 15 and 64 were economically active. This represented an increase of 5% in the decade between 1986 and 1996. Newspapers in this same period have often called attention to the numbers of middle-aged women who re-entered the workforce on a part-time basis after their children had reached high school age.

8. Unions. Most private sector unions in Japan are based on the workforce of specific corporations; rather than a strong federation (although federations exist) of auto workers, there is a Toyota union, Honda union, Nissan union, etc.. These are essentially closed shops by virtue of custom rather than law. The private sector union federations were until recently members of a federation called Domei, which supported the moderate left Democratic Socialist Party. Public sector unions were part of a federation called Sohyo and supported the traditionally more Marxist Social Democratic Party (or before the 1990s, the Japan Socialist Party), which was the main opposition to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party from the 1950s until recently. Since the late 1980s the two federations have been merged under an umbrella organization called Rengo. The ostensible motivation for this change was to create a single powerful union structure, but Rengo -- which ran candidates in some national elections and supported candidates in others -- has been perennially fragmented and divided over political strategies. Union membership has declined an estimated 5 percent between 1986 and the mid-1990s; at that time union membership was 24 percent of the labor force.

Business. The Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren) is Japan's main business interest group representing large business. It is a peak organization, i.e. a federation of federations such as the Iron and Steel Association and the Japan Automobile Manufacturers' Association. Keidanren bankrolled the Liberal Democratic Party from the 1950s until recently, when individual corporations have more often made their own independent strategies regarding support of political parties (which up until 1994 did not receive government funding, but which now do.)

Small business is fragmented organizationally although small retailers are represented via the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry and small businesses in general are represented by the Federation of Medium and Small Business. Small businesses were generally pro-LDP but in certain places had Democratic Socialist ties, and in the 1970s the Communist Party for awhile had small business support via an organization set up by the party for that purpose.

Religion. Japan is unusual among modern nations for its lack of religious activity. Many households are enrolled as "members" of local Buddhist and Shinto parishes, but religious observance is almost non-existent except among the very elderly. The Soka Gakkai, an activist Buddhist sect, formed and continues to provide support for the Clean Government
Party, but there is no pervasive, society-wide cleavage based on religion.


1. 52% of the Japanese is economically active, of which 3% are in agriculture, 22% are in manufacturing, 10% are in construction, 23% are in commerce, 6% are in transportation/communications, 9% are in finance/insurance/real estate and 23% are in "services."

2. Unemployment was 2.9% at the time of the CNEP survey, but is now close to 5%. Most specialists feel that Japanese unemployment is 2-3% higher than the reported figures due to distortions in the calculation of Japanese labor statistics compared with U.S. practice.

3. Calculation of urban-rural population distribution is very difficult in Japan because urban administrative units usually include some rural areas. A more accurate estimate based on population densities would put roughly 27% of the population in metropolitan districts, another 20-30% in regional large cities (200-500K), and the remaining third to 40% of the country in provincial cities, towns and villages. Finally, since mountains occupy 80% of the California-sized Japanese land mass, Japanese population densities are in many parts of the country some of the highest in the world. This also makes comparisons difficult, since seemingly sparsely populated villages and towns usually have several times the population of similarly appearing places in Western countries. Putting it differently, Japanese houses are closer in size to counterparts in most European countries (although much smaller the case in Germany), which means that they are half or less the size of American family dwellings.