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Early Action Needed to Reform House of Representatives Electoral System to Rectify Vote Disparity

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1. An early agreement necessary to solve the issue of vote disparity following the March 2011 Supreme Court ruling.

On March 23 2011, the Supreme Court's full-member bench ruled that a House of Representatives election held in August 2009 - the 45th election for the lower chamber - was "in a state of unconstitutionality" and urged repeal of the seat distribution system through which one seat is allocated to each of Japan's 47 prefectures before the remaining 253 seats for single-seat constituencies are distributed in proportion to voter population. Already about 11 months have passed since that historic ruling but discussions being continuously made at a consultative body consisting of lawmakers from the various political parties for the reform of the House of Representatives electoral system have made little progress and come to a standstill. This is extremely regrettable.

Rectifying the vote disparity is an issue that should be given the highest priority as it affects the basis of democracy. At present, the ruling and opposition camps are moving toward agreement on a proposal to simultaneously settle three pending issues – correction of the vote disparity, reducing the number of seats and drastic reform of the electoral system. But these issues should be resolved in two stages – correcting the more urgent issue of vote disparity first and solving the remaining two issues later – given that time is limited.

The Diet (parliament) should try to strike a deal that realizes the repeal of the seat distribution system in which one seat is allocated to each of the 47 prefectures and demarcate all single-seat constituencies purely according to

voter population to eliminate any vote disparity. Based on the deal, the Council on the House of Representatives Electoral District (a council tasked with dealing with the demarcation of single-seat constituencies for the House of Representatives) should come up with a conclusion within six months. We strongly urge the council to make efforts to realize a state which is the closest to vote parity in House of Representatives elections.

A question has been also raised about the disparity in the weight of votes in House of Councillors elections. Plaintiffs have filed a lawsuit demanding that the House of Councillors election held in July 2010 – the 22nd upper house election – be invalidated. The case was referred to the Supreme Court's full-member bench in December last year. The top court is expected to hand down a stern ruling in this case, given the fact that the vote disparity has expanded to as much as a 4.99 times difference in the weight of votes in a House of Councillors election. As a temporary measure, we propose that the number of upper house seats assigned to each prefecture be changed by the time of the upper house election set for the summer of next year as a way to reduce the gap as much as possible even under the current house seat-distribution system.

2. Early establishment being necessary of the 9th council on the electoral system and promotion of discussions on the integrated and drastic reform of both the upper and lower house electoral systems with an eye toward envisaging how the Japanese political system should be in the future

We think that not only politicians – those most directly affected by the discussions – but also parties from various other quarters should participate in the debate aimed at reducing the number of seats and fundamentally reforming Japan's electoral system. Therefore, we urge that the 9th council on the reform of the electoral system should be established at an early date and people from various quarters of society should start discussions on a wide range of issues in a bid to reform the electoral system drastically.

The current political infrastructure, such as the electoral system and the political funding system, was established based on four bills signed into law in 1994 to promote political reform. In the almost 20 years since these systems were established, Japan's economic and political conditions have deteriorated. In light

of these changes, it is necessary to reexamine the current systems from the viewpoint of whether or not these systems have produced the intended outcome and find out where any problems exist. By doing so, it is necessary to devise new proposals for reforming the upper and lower house electoral systems in an integrated manner.

In addition, it is necessary to set up a separate forum for discussions where how Japan's parliament should function can be reviewed, including the division of responsibilities between the House of Councillors and the House of Representatives and the possibility of changing the current bicameral Diet system into a unicameral system as these issues concern the governing function set under the Constitution. By creating a forum for such discussions, it is necessary to urgently tackle these issues from a viewpoint of reforming the Constitution.

The electoral system is an important political infrastructure for democracy. If a political party is found not to be serious when dealing with the drastic reform of the electoral, what the party proposes in regard to the reform will end up being seen as merely serving parties' own interests, making it difficult for them to win the general public's trust and understanding. We hope that each party will fully discuss what the future structure of the Japanese political system should be.

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