



# Japan

## Proxy Voting Guidelines

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Benchmark Policy Recommendations

**Effective for Meetings on or after February 1, 2019**

**Published December 6, 2018**

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## 1. ROUTINE/MISCELLANEOUS

### Approval of Financial Statements

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for the approval of financial statements, unless:
  - › External auditor expressed no opinion, or raised concerns; or
  - › Statutory auditors/audit committee raised concerns; or
  - › There are concerns about the financial statements presented or audit procedures used

### Income Allocation

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for approval of income allocation, unless:
  - › Payout ratio is consistently low without adequate justification; or
  - › Payout ratio is too high, potentially damaging financial health.

### Election of Statutory Auditors

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for the election of statutory auditors, unless:
  - › The outside statutory auditor nominee is regarded as non-independent based on [ISS independence criteria](#) for Japan; or
  - › The outside statutory nominee attended less than 75 percent of meetings of the board of directors or board of statutory auditors during the year under review; or
  - › The statutory auditor is judged to be responsible for clear mismanagement or shareholder-unfriendly behavior.
  - › Egregious actions related to a statutory auditor's service on other boards that raise substantial doubt about his or her ability to effectively oversee management and serve the best interests of shareholders at any company.

### Audit Firm Appointments

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for the appointment of audit firms, unless there are serious concerns related to changing auditors.

## 2. ELECTION OF DIRECTORS

### Voting on Director Nominees in Uncontested Elections

▶ **General Recommendation:** ISS has three policies for director elections in Japan: one for companies with a statutory auditor board structure, one for companies with a U.S.-type three committee structure, and one for companies with a board with audit committee structure<sup>1</sup>.

1. **At companies with a statutory auditory structure:** vote for the election of directors, except:
  - › Top executive(s)<sup>2</sup> at a company that has underperformed in terms of capital efficiency (i.e., when the company has posted average return on equity (ROE) of less than five percent over the last five fiscal years)<sup>3</sup>, unless an improvement<sup>4</sup> is observed;
  - › Top executive(s) if the board, after the shareholder meeting, will not include at least two outside directors;
  - › Top executive(s) at a company that has a controlling shareholder, where the board, after the shareholder meeting, will not include at least two independent directors based on ISS independence criteria for Japan;
  - › An outside director nominee who attended less than 75 percent of board meetings during the year under review<sup>5</sup>; or
  - › Top executive(s) who are responsible for not implementing a shareholder proposal which has received a majority<sup>6</sup> of votes cast, or not putting a similar proposal on the ballot as a management proposal the following year (with a management recommendation of for), when that proposal is deemed to be in the interest of independent shareholders.
2. **At companies with a U.S.-type three committee structure:** (In addition to the guidelines for companies with a statutory auditor structure) vote for the election of directors, except:
  - › Where an outside director nominee is regarded as non-independent based on ISS independence criteria for Japan, and the board, after the shareholder meeting, is not majority independent;
  - › Top executive(s) if at least one-third of the board members, after the shareholder meeting, will not be outside directors; or
  - › Where the company has a controlling shareholder, a director nominee sits on the nomination committee and is an insider, or non-independent outsider, when the board, after the shareholder meeting, does not include at least two independent directors based on ISS independence criteria for Japan.
3. **At companies with a board with audit committee structure:** (In addition to the guidelines for companies with a statutory auditor structure) vote for the election of directors, except:
  - › Where an outside director nominee who is also nominated as an audit committee member<sup>7</sup> is regarded as non-independent based on ISS independence criteria for Japan; or

<sup>1</sup> The director election policy for companies with a board with audit committee structure will be applied to the election of executive directors and supervisory directors at real estate investment trusts (REITs), to the extent that the information necessary to apply the policy is disclosed.

<sup>2</sup> In most cases, the top executive will be the “shacho” (president). However, there are companies where the decision-making authority also rests with the “kaicho” (executive chairman) or “daihyo torishimariyaku” (representative director).

<sup>3</sup> Exceptions may be considered for cases such as where the top executive has newly joined the company in connection with a bailout or restructuring. This policy will not be applied to companies which have been public for less than five years.

<sup>4</sup> Improvement is defined as ROE of five percent or greater for the most recent fiscal year.

<sup>5</sup> The attendance of inside directors is not disclosed in Japan. For companies with a three committee structure and companies with an audit committee structure, ISS will require attendance of 75 percent or more of audit committee meetings as well as 75 percent or more of board meetings.

<sup>6</sup> Many Japanese shareholder proposals are submitted as article amendments, which require supermajority support in order to pass.

<sup>7</sup> Outside director nominees who are not nominated as audit committee members are not subject to this policy.

- › Top executive(s) if at least one-third of the board members, after the shareholder meeting, will not be outside directors.

Regardless of governance structure, under extraordinary circumstances, vote against individual directors, members of a committee, or the entire board, due to:

- › Material failures of governance, stewardship, risk oversight, or fiduciary responsibilities at the company;
- › Failure to replace management as appropriate; or
- › Egregious actions related to a director's service on other boards that raise substantial doubt about his or her ability to effectively oversee management and serve the best interests of shareholders at any company.

### Requirement for multiple outsiders

Corporate governance in Japan has long been criticized for lack of outside director oversight, which has led boards to take shareholder-unfriendly actions such as hoarding cash, tying up assets in cross-shareholdings and other unproductive investments, and resisting value-enhancing transactions. However, the situation has improved in recent years. Japan's Corporate Governance Code (which went into effect in June 2015) encourages companies to appoint at least two independent outside directors based on the independence criteria developed by the Tokyo Stock Exchange.

In addition, the corporate law now requires companies without any outside directors to explain why the appointment of outside directors is inappropriate. As a result of these regulatory changes, there is a noticeable trend of accepting outside oversight. ISS data as of the end of June 2017 shows that 85 percent of companies already have at least two outside directors. The policy on board composition is expected to further accelerate the trend to improve Japanese corporate governance.

### ISS Independence criteria for Japan

Those outside director candidates falling into any of the following categories should be regarded as non-independent:

- › Individuals who work or worked at major shareholders of the company in question;
- › Individuals who work or worked at main lenders/banks to the company in question;
- › Individuals who work or worked at the lead underwriter(s) of the company in question;
- › Individuals who work or worked at business partners of the company in question and the transaction value is material from the recipient's perspective or is not disclosed;
- › Individuals who worked at the company's audit firm;
- › Individuals who offer or offered professional services such as legal advice, financial advice, tax advice or consulting services to the company in question;
- › Individuals who have a relative(s) working at the company in question; or
- › Individuals who work or worked at companies whose shares are held by the company in question as "cross-shareholdings<sup>8</sup>."

### Voting on Director Nominees in Contested Elections



**General Recommendation:** Vote case-by-case on the election of management and shareholder nominees in contested elections, considering the following factors:

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<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, Japanese companies have often held shares of other companies for reasons other than pure investment purposes, for instance, in order to strengthen a business relationship. Cross-shareholdings here refer not only to mutual shareholdings but also unilateral holdings. *Note: In order to give companies time to revisit the rationale of holding such shares, this criteria won't be implemented until February 2020.*

- › Long-term financial performance of the target company relative to its industry;
- › Management's track record;
- › Background to the contentious situation;
- › Nominee qualifications and any compensatory arrangements;
- › Strategic plan of dissident(s) and quality of critique against management;
- › Likelihood that the proposed goals and objectives can be achieved (both slates); and
- › Stock ownership positions.

These factors will be considered whether the combined number of management and shareholder nominees exceeds the number of available board seats, or whether there are sufficient open seats that all management and shareholder nominees could be elected. In the latter case, the election will still be treated as "contested" if management opposes the election of the shareholder nominees.

### 3. ARTICLE AMENDMENTS

Amendments are nearly always bundled together as a single voting resolution, and ISS' general approach is to oppose article amendments as a whole when they include changes ISS opposes. The following are some of the most common or significant types of changes to articles.

#### Expansion of business activities

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for an expansion of business activities, unless a company has performed poorly for several years and seeks business expansion into a risky enterprise unrelated to its core business.

#### Adoption of a U.S.-style three committee board structure

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for the adoption of a U.S. style, three-committee board structure.

#### Adoption of a board with audit committee structure

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for an article amendment to adopt a board with audit committee structure. However, if the adoption of the new governance structure would eliminate shareholders' ability to submit shareholder proposals on income allocation, vote against the article amendments. Vote case-by-case if the board currently has a three-committee structure.

#### Increase in authorized capital

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote case-by-case on this request if the company explicitly provides reasons for the increase.

If the company does not provide reasons for the increase, generally vote for proposals to increase authorized capital, unless:

- › The increase in authorized capital exceeds 100 percent of the currently authorized capital; or
- › The increase leaves the company with less than 30 percent of the proposed authorized capital outstanding; or
- › The increase is intended for a poison pill, which ISS opposes.

### Creation/modification of preferred shares/class shares

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote case-by-case on this request.

### Repurchase of shares at board's discretion

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Vote case-by-case on article amendments to give the board discretionary authority over share repurchases, taking into account the company's:

- › Balance sheet conditions;
- › Capital efficiency and return on equity;
- › Past share buybacks and dividend payouts;
- › Board composition;
- › Shareholding structure; and
- › Other relevant factors.

Generally vote against these amendments if shareholders will lose the ability to submit shareholder proposals on share repurchases.

### Allow company to make rules governing the exercise of shareholders' rights

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against this change.

### Limit rights of odd shareholders

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for this change.

### Lower quorum requirement

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against this proposal.

### Amendments related to takeover defenses

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for this proposal, unless ISS opposes or has opposed the poison pill proposal by itself.

### Decrease in maximum board size

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for this proposal, unless the decrease eliminates all vacant seats, leaving no flexibility to add shareholder nominees or other outsiders to the board without removing an incumbent director.

### Supermajority vote requirement to remove a director

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against proposals seeking a supermajority requirement to remove a director.

### Reduce directors' term in office from two years to one year

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for proposals to reduce a director's term to one year.



### Remove language preventing classification of board

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against proposals seeking to remove language preventing classified boards.

### Creation of Advisory Positions (Sodanyaku or Komon)

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against amendments to articles of incorporation to create new advisory positions such as "sodanyaku" or "komon," unless the advisors will serve on the board of directors and thus be accountable to shareholders.

### Limitations of liability for directors/statutory auditors

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for this proposal.

### Limitations of liability for external auditors

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against proposals limiting liability for external auditors.

### Payment of dividends at the board's discretion

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against proposals allowing the board to pay dividends at its discretion. However, if the company employs board with committee structure and the proposal would not eliminate shareholders' ability to submit shareholder proposals on income allocation, vote for the article amendments.

### Management buyout related amendments

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote case-by-case on management related buyout amendments.

## 4. COMPENSATION

### Annual Bonuses for Directors/Statutory Auditors

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Vote for approval of annual bonuses, unless recipients include those who are judged to be responsible for clear mismanagement or shareholder-unfriendly behavior.

### Retirement Bonuses

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for approval of retirement bonuses, unless:
  - › Recipients include outsiders<sup>9</sup>; or
  - › Neither the individual payments nor the aggregate amount of the payments is disclosed; or
  - › Recipients include those who are judged to be responsible for clear mismanagement or shareholder-unfriendly behavior.

### Special Payments in Connection with Abolition of Retirement Bonus System

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<sup>9</sup> However, in rare occasions, ISS may support payment to outsiders on a case-by-case basis, if the individual amount is disclosed and not excessive.

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for approval of special payments in connection with abolition of retirement bonus system, unless:
- › Recipients include outsiders<sup>9</sup>; or
  - › Neither the individual payments nor the aggregate amount of the payments is disclosed; or
  - › Recipients include those who are judged to be responsible for clear mismanagement or shareholder-unfriendly behavior.

## Stock Option Plans/Deep-Discounted Stock Option Plans

### Stock Option Plans

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for approval of stock option plans, unless:
- › Total dilution from proposed plan(s) and previous option plans exceeds 5 percent for mature companies, or 10 percent for growth companies; or
  - › Recipients include individuals who are not in a position to affect the company's stock price, including employees of business partners or unspecified "collaborators;" or
  - › The maximum number of options that can be issued per year is not disclosed.

### Deep-Discounted Stock Option Plans

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for approval of deep-discounted stock option plans<sup>10</sup>, unless:
- › Total dilution from proposed plan(s) and previous option plans exceeds 5 percent for mature companies, or 10 percent for growth companies; or
  - › Recipients include individuals who are not in a position to affect the company's stock price, including employees of business partners or unspecified "collaborators;" or
  - › The maximum number of options that can be issued per year is not disclosed; or
  - › No specific performance hurdles are specified (However, if the vesting period before exercise lasts for at least three years, this policy may not apply).

## Director Compensation Ceiling

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for proposals seeking to increase director fees, if:
- › The specific reason(s) for the increase are explained; or
  - › The company is introducing or increasing a ceiling for performance-based compensation.

Vote case-by-case on proposals seeking to increase director fees, taking into account the company's stock price performance and capital efficiency if:

- › The proposals are intended to increase fixed cash compensation or do not specify whether it is fixed or performance-based compensation which will be increased.

Generally vote against proposals seeking to increase director fees if there are serious concerns about corporate malfeasance.

## Statutory Auditor Compensation Ceiling

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<sup>10</sup> The same policy will be applied for "trust type" equity compensation plans, restricted stock plans, performance share plans, and other types of equity compensation plans which have similar economic effect as deep-discounted stock option plans.

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote for proposals seeking to increase statutory auditor compensation ceiling, unless statutory auditors are judged to be responsible for clear mismanagement or shareholder-unfriendly behavior.

## 5. SHARE REPURCHASE PLANS

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Vote for the share repurchase plans, unless:

- › The proposed repurchase plan exceeds 10 percent of issued share capital without explanation; or
- › There are serious concerns about a possible adverse impact on shareholder value.

## 6. TAKEOVER DEFENSE PLANS (POISON PILLS)

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote against the approval of takeover defense plans (poison pills), unless:  
(Necessary conditions)

- › Independent directors who meet ISS guidelines on attendance comprise at least 1/3 of the board after the shareholder meeting;
- › The number of independent directors who meet ISS guidelines on attendance is at least two after the shareholder meeting;
- › The directors are subject to annual elections;
- › The bid evaluation committee is composed entirely of independent directors, or independent statutory auditors, who meet ISS guidelines on attendance;
- › The trigger threshold is set at no less than 20 percent of shares outstanding;
- › The duration of the poison pill does not exceed three years;
- › There are no other protective or entrenchment tools that can serve as takeover defenses, including blocking stakes held by management-friendly shareholders, or setting the maximum board size to the actual board size to eliminate vacant seats, or tightening of procedures for removing a director from office;
- › The company posts its proxy circular on the stock exchange website at least four weeks prior to the meeting, to give shareholders sufficient time to study the details of the proposal and question management about them; and
- › The pill's total duration<sup>11</sup> does not exceed three years.

(Second stage of analysis, to be applied only when all necessary conditions are met)

- › The company has disclosed in its proxy circular specific, credible steps it is taking to address the vulnerability to a takeover by enhancing shareholder value, and explained how the temporary protection afforded by the pill will help accomplish this goal.

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<sup>11</sup> The pill's total duration is defined as the sum of the number of years the company has had a pill in place and the number of years the proposed pill will be effective.

## 7. MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS, THIRD-PARTY SHARE ISSUANCES (PRIVATE PLACEMENTS)

For every M&A and Third-Party Placement analysis, ISS reviews publicly available information as of the date of the report and evaluates the merits and drawbacks of the proposed transaction, balancing various and sometimes countervailing factors including:

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote case-by-case on mergers, acquisitions, and third-party placements, taking into account the following:
  - › Valuation – Is the value to be received by the target shareholders (or paid by the acquirer) reasonable?
  - › Market reaction – How has the market responded to the proposed deal? A negative market reaction will cause ISS to scrutinize a deal more closely.
  - › Strategic rationale – Does the deal make sense strategically? From where is the value derived? Cost and revenue synergies should not be overly aggressive or optimistic, but reasonably achievable. Management should also have a favorable track record of successful integration of historical acquisitions.
  - › Conflicts of interest – Are insiders benefiting from the transaction disproportionately and inappropriately as compared to non-insider shareholders? ISS will consider whether any special interests may have influenced these directors and officers to support or recommend the merger.
  - › Governance – Will the combined company have a better or worse governance profile than the current governance profiles of the respective parties to the transaction? If the governance profile is to change for the worse, the burden is on the company to prove that other issues (such as valuation) outweigh any deterioration in governance.

## 8. SHAREHOLDER PROPOSALS

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Vote all shareholder proposals on a case-by-case basis.

Generally vote for proposals that would improve the company's corporate governance or business profile at a reasonable cost.

Generally vote against proposals that limit the company's business activities or capabilities or result in significant costs being incurred with little or no benefit.

## 9. SOCIAL/ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

### Global Approach

Issues covered under the policy include a wide range of topics, including consumer and product safety, environment and energy, labor covered standards and human rights, workplace and board diversity, and corporate political issues. While a variety of factors goes into each analysis, the overall principle guiding all vote recommendations focuses on how the proposal may enhance or protect shareholder value in either the short term or long term.

- ▶ **General Recommendation:** Generally vote case-by-case, examining primarily whether implementation of the proposal is likely to enhance or protect shareholder value. The following factors will be considered:
  - › If the issues presented in the proposal are more appropriately or effectively dealt with through legislation or government regulation;

- › If the company has already responded in an appropriate and sufficient manner to the issue(s) raised in the proposal;
- › Whether the proposal's request is unduly burdensome (scope or timeframe) or overly prescriptive;
- › The company's approach compared with any industry standard practices for addressing the issue(s) raised by the proposal;
- › Whether there are significant controversies, fines, penalties, or litigation associated with the company's environmental or social practices;
- › If the proposal requests increased disclosure or greater transparency, whether reasonable and sufficient information is currently available to shareholders from the company or from other publicly available sources; and
- › If the proposal requests increased disclosure or greater transparency, whether implementation would reveal proprietary or confidential information that could place the company at a competitive disadvantage.

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