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House of the Rising Sun

Election System and Political Landscape *Alexander Vogt*

On April 28, the ballot on three by-elections for the House of Representatives (Lower House) took place amidst a big turmoil in the political funding scandal of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s factions as they were not able to even field candidates for two out of the three constituencies. It meant disgracefully forfeited matches for the party. The LDP was not even able to secure the only by-election district where they fielded their own endorsed candidate in Shimane Prefecture. It turned to be a big blow to Prime Minister Kishida. Given this situation, the possibility of a rumored June snap election before his current term as the LDP president officially expires this September, has become very little. As a matter of fact, PM Kishida on the morning of April 30, during an extraordinary press briefing, commented on a snap election, "(I am) Not thinking (about it) at all." No one can foresee the destiny of his administration and his grand strategy for his political victory. The opposition parties remain divided and there is no viable

opposition. This gives the LDP a great advantage to win over them against the backdrop of general public's resentment feelings toward the party's financial mishandling.

With the LDP's long seasoned political skills and opposition in disarray, the chances are still high for the LDP to manage to win the next general election. Nevertheless, PM Kishida's close aide, LDP Acting Secretary-General Seiji Kihara, had expressed a grave concern for a possible change of government, this fear spread within the party as they could not win their stronghold constituency in Shimane, which they had secured consecutively since 1996, first time ever.

The results¹ of the three by-elections on April 28, 2024

Tokyo Dis. 15	CDP	LDP	Independent	JIP	CPJ
Voter turnout: 40.70%	49,476		29,669	28,461	24,264
Total of 9 candidates: The other results omitted.					

Shimane Dis. 1	CDP	LDP
Voter turnout: 54.62%	82,691	57,897

Nagasaki Dis. 3	CDP	JIP
Voter turnout: 35.45%	53,381	24,709

Note: Created by author based on NHK election²

Despite the abovementioned election results and looming uncertainties, the LDP has had a long history of electoral victory in Japan. However, what appears to be a strong democratic party yielding its historic victories to popular public support is actually a scheme rooted in calculative decisions and tactical campaigning. This paper explains and analyses how Japan's electoral system functions, and how the LDP has been so successful at snatching electoral victory in the Lower House, and why the LDP's biggest fear are their current supporters.

Japanese Election System

The Lower House officially holds elections every four years. However, as noted in Article 7 of the Constitution, the Lower House can be dissolved by the Emperor upon advice and approval by the Cabinet, resulting in early snap-elections. Since Japan's post-war democratic constitution was enacted, 48 out of 49 elections took place following a premature dissolution of the lower House. The 1976 general election remains the only election to date where a four-year term was held in accordance with the constitutional default layout. Thus, premature dissolution of parliament and subsequent general elections are the norm for Japan.

When a general election is held, voters throughout Japan have the right to cast two votes. The first vote is tied to the local constituency and translates into a direct vote of an individual candidate. Voters must write the name of the representative they wish to have elected to the Lower House. The second vote is tied to proportional representation in 11 electoral blocs, and the voters select a party. If a candidate fails to secure a seat through the single-seat constituency, the candidate may receive a seat if shortlisted by the party and admitted through proportional representation. In the 2021 general election, 176 seats were reserved for proportional votes, and 289 by direct mandate of constituencies.³

¹ CDP: Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan

² "NHK Election Web", <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/>, April 28, 2024

³ Kamata Tomoko, "Simple Guide for the 2021 Lower House Election: Part 1: NHK World-Japan News," [www.nhk.or.jp](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1794/), October 22, 2021, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1794/>.

As a result, political parties in Japan are keen on having strong candidates secure single seats, providing the party more seats through a subsequent win of both single seat and proportional representation, and simultaneously, politicians prefer being in a political party, as it provides them a higher chance of being elected in the event they fail to secure majority through the direct mandate. Thus, from 465 seats, only 10 candidates ran successfully as independents in the 2021 general election.⁴

Political Landscape Japan – an LDP’s Kingdom

Even though Japan has a diverse array of political parties and figures, the LDP has been the dominant force in Japan's electoral landscape since its establishment in 1955. With a brief interruption during the 1993-1994 and 2009-2012 legislative periods, the LDP either single-handedly, or in coalition with a fellow party, led the government and appointed the prime ministers. This cultural impact and legacy of the LDP is often referred to as “the 1955 system” or the “one-and-a-half party system”.^{5 6}

As the largest party in Japan and for nearly 50 years the sole political party holding power, membership in the LDP became a prerequisite for political clout. As a result, many politicians saw the need to become a member of the LDP to have a successful career in politics. Thus, the LDP carries a large spectrum of political views ranging from progressive to very conservative forces. Despite this apparent diversity, the LDP stands in the legacy of a conservative party largely promoting the status quo and a socially conservative platform.

Historically, the LDP has been a strong defender of US-Japanese relations advocating in generally supporting US foreign policy goals, economic cooperation, and political ties. Often mirroring US policies, the LDP nevertheless finds grounds to disagree with certain points by showing strong advocacy over nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The LDP advocates for a reformation of Japan’s Pacifist Article 9, wishing to maintain the first and second clauses, advocating for peace and banning offensive warfare, but wishing to clarify the possession of Japan’s Self-Defense-Forces (SDFs). The LDP supports the use of nuclear power aiming for the goal of 2050 carbon neutrality. In the 2021 general election, the LDP managed to secure 259 seats, constituting a loss of 25 seats compared to the previous election.

From 1999-2009 and since the 2012 election cycle, the Komeito Party formed a coalition government with the LDP. The Komeito was originally established in 1964 and traces its roots to one of Japan’s new Buddhist religious movements – the Sokka Gakkai. The party, which was originally categorized as center-progressive, however, turned increasingly more conservative in the 1990s leading to a political realignment and its revival by 1998. Today’s Komeito was re-founded in 1998 on a conservative platform. In line with many Japanese political parties, the Komeito denounces the use of nuclear weapons. Whilst politically being conservative, the LDP is often characterized as the political party of big business, the Komeito tries to represent small business owners by advocating for higher wages through subsidies specifically targeting local, family-owned enterprises. Contrasting the LDP, Komeito advocates for married couples to carry different surnames. Under Japan’s current controversial legislation, women adopt their husband’s last name following marriage or the husband takes his wife’s.

⁴ “House of Representatives Election 2021 Special Site,” www.nhk.or.jp, October 31, 2021, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/database/shugiin/2021/>.

⁵ Junnosuke Masumi, “The 1955 System in Japan and Its Subsequent Development,” *Asian Survey* 28, no. 3 (March 1, 1988): 286–306, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644488>.

⁶ Alisa Gaunder, “Political Parties in Democratic Japan,” *Association for Asian Studies*, Spring 2011, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/aaa/archives/political-parties-in-democratic-japan/>.

As a major political opponent of the LDP, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) was originally formed in 2017 through a split from the Democratic Party and refounded in 2020 through a merger with the majority of then-Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) and the Social Democratic Party. The CDP has been Japan's second-largest party and largest opposition to the LDP. In the 2021 general election, the CDP secured 96 of the 465 seats. Despite having incorporated many conservative party members from the DPFP merger, the CDP stands in its progressive tradition. Marketing itself as the party for the ordinary people. The CDP stands for marriage equality, and LGBTQ+ equality laws, a progressive tax system with raised capital gains tax, and more governmental support for housing. Additionally, the CDP is advocating for green energy reforms, generally rejects an amendment to Article 9, and aims for a revision of the US-Japan Status of Forces agreement and the presence of US military bases in Japan.

Another relatively large opposition is the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), originating in Japan's Kansai region. As a libertarian and conservative party, the new JIP targets multiple social, political, and fiscal issues in Japan.⁷ One of its most controversial aims is a constitutional revision to permit Japan to have an official military in opposition to Japan's current defense-restricted SDF. Fiscally, the party advocates for deregulation to ease progress in business creation and reform of tax and social security systems. Politically, the JIP advocates for stronger regional autonomy, transforming prefectures into states and decentralizing power away from the central government by also reducing the number of Diet members and their wages. Furthermore, it advocates for same-sex marriage, and the right for spouses to keep their maiden name. The JIP has strong support from the Osaka region and sets itself apart through local political advocacy in grassroots-like structures. Since its original debut, the party has grown to be the third largest in Japan, securing 41 seats in the 2021 general elections.⁸

Understanding the Votes from the Recent Elections

In the 2021 general election, the LDP secured 34.6 % of the proportional vote and 48% of the direct constituency seats. The LDP's coalition partner, Komeito obtained 12.4 % of the proportional votes and 1.5% of the direct mandates. The CDP secured 20% of the proportional votes and 29.9% of the direct constituency. The JIP obtained 14% of the proportional votes and 8.4% of the direct constituency votes. Even when factoring in the 60% difference between the available seats for proportional votes and direct constituency mandates, 34.6% is a rather low number to assert political dominance over.

Throughout the past three general elections, Japan's voter turnout has been historically low, plummeting to 52.6% in 2014, and slightly recovering to 53.68% in the 2017 general election. The 2021 general election reached 55.93% of voters, being categorized as the third lowest postwar voter turnout in Japanese history.⁹ Contrarily, nearly 44% of eligible Japanese voters were not reached.

Adjusting the obtained votes to the actual voter turnout in 2021 yields that the LDP only obtained approval of just short of 20% of Japan's eligible voters in the proportional election and roughly 26% of the direct mandates. Even when examining the direct mandates of the 2021 general election, it becomes

⁷ "2022 Policy Recommendations Japan Innovation Party," www.o-ishin.jp, June 16, 2022, <https://o-ishin.jp/sangiin2022/ishinhassaku2022.pdf>.

⁸ Kiyoshi Takenaka and Yu-min Park, "Dark Horse Right-Wing Party Emerges as Third-Largest in Japan Lower House | Reuters," www.reuters.com, November 1, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/dark-horse-right-wing-party-emerges-third-largest-japan-lower-house-2021-11-01/>.

⁹ "Japan's Election Turnout Third Lowest in Postwar Era," www.nippon.com, November 2, 2021, <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01156/>.

evident that 46 of the 189 seats were won by the LDP, not through majority but plurality votes.¹⁰ Furthermore, in 17 of the 143 majority-won seats, the victory margin was lower than 5%.¹¹ Nearly one-third of the LDP's obtained seats could be easily lost if opposition forces succeed in mobilizing voters, of which over 40% currently lie dormant.

The LDP is highly conscious of its vulnerable position, which is why elections are highly strategic events in which sways in public opinion can result in phenomenal gains or paramount losses for the LDP.

Discouraging Voters

Some political experts categorize the LDP's election philosophy as "LDP voters vs. non-voters" rather than the typical "LDP voters vs. opposition party voters".¹² Since people abstaining from voting typically prefer independent or opposition parties, preventing non-voters from casting their ballots raises the chances that the LDP can obtain a majority. Decentivizing voters does not mean asking people to abstain from voting, but placing elections into times when people tend to not vote.

In 2023, five constituencies of the Lower and Upper Houses became vacant in Japan. In Oita Prefecture, the LDP won the vacant seat, but only by a marginal success. The LDP managed to obtain 50.04% of the votes by receiving 341 more votes than the opposition runner-up. Voter turnout played a decisive role in reaching this victory. Oita City, the most populous city of Oita Prefecture in Kyushu region, only reached 33.24% of the voters. In contrast, Beppu City, Oita Prefecture's second largest city reached 54.22% of voters. The LDP was able to keep voter participation in Oita City low by disincentivizing voters. At the time of the Upper House By-election, Oita City was to simultaneously hold mayoral elections. Oita City, being known for left-leaning sympathies translates to a large portion of non-LDP support. Knowing that voter turnout would be higher in mayoral elections, the LDP decided to cancel their participation in the mayoral election by not placing any candidate to run, ultimately preventing the high mayoral voter turnout from participating in the Upper House By-Election. With no competition, no election was held in Oita City. The LDP thus backed the opposition in the mayoral race but prevented 20% of eligible voters from coming to the polls. The LDP's success and subsequent domination is a result of tactile election policies, by incentivizing voters in cities and regions with high LDP support rates and discouraging swing voters in constituencies with low LDP support.¹³

Tracking the Polls

Due to the LDP's marginal success in elections, often winning only a few votes over the opposition, the LDP has a high interest in tracking its approval rating to calculate the possibility of an election in its favor. When approval ratings among the public are high, the LDP might successfully convince a few of the large group of swing voters to cast their ballot in favor of the LDP.

Following PM Kishida's inauguration in October 2021, PM Kishida's approval rating started off at 59%, making it lower than Suga's or Abe's post-inauguration approval ratings. Approval ratings continued to

¹⁰ Yuko Nakano, "Resolved: The Lower House Election Is a Warning Sign for the LDP," CSIS, November 29, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/resolved-lower-house-election-warning-sign-ldp>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Taku Oishi, "3rd House of Representatives By-Election - Where Will the LDP Vote Go? ," [www.nikkei.com](https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOCD2833E0Y4A420C2000000/), April 29, 2024, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOCD2833E0Y4A420C2000000/>.

¹³ Taku Oishi, "3rd House of Representatives By-Election - Where Will the LDP Vote Go? ," [www.nikkei.com](https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOCD2833E0Y4A420C2000000/), April 29, 2024, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOCD2833E0Y4A420C2000000/>.

decline, which is not atypical, but troubled political situations following the Omicron wave, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, growing security threats through China, and the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July 2022 placed significant pressure onto PM Kishida's administration. Despite the low approval ratings, the LDP secured a majority in the 2022 Upper House elections by winning 63 seats and in coalition with the Komeito secured a majority of 76 seats.¹⁴ Despite what was interpreted as a fresh start for PM Kishida's cabinet, approval ratings continued to decline, and his disapproval rating reached 50% in October 2022 with only 33% of the population viewing PM Kishida positively.¹⁵ The troubling inflation rate, with the yen dropping to its record low in 32 years coupled with the evolving Unification Church scandal in the wake of Abe's assassination left PM Kishida in an unfavorable light. Following numerous cabinet resignations in November 2022, approval ratings continued to drop.¹⁶

With Japan hosting the G7 summit in PM Kishida's constituency, Hiroshima, in May 2023, his cabinet was able to turn what appeared to be a downward spiral around with global attention on Japan, and an improved relationship with bordering South Korea and the focus on addressing Chinese aggressions in the Indo-Pacific, PM Kishida's approval ratings climbed to 56%, the highest it had been since PM Kishida's inauguration.^{17,18}

However, this high atmosphere did not last long, as his son who was functioning as PM Kishida's executive policy secretary was exposed for using the prime minister's residence for private parties causing Kishida's approval rating to drop to 52%. As a consequence of the scandal, PM Kishida's son was forced to resign from his position in late May 2023.¹⁹

In July, a series of data leaks connected to Japan's multi-purposed social security *MyNumber Card System* raised public distrust in the government and LDP's efforts to digitize the country, further lowering PM Kishida's approval rating to below 40% at 34%.²⁰ This low number also is connected to the Japanese government's decision to release nuclear processed water from the disaster-struck Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant into the ocean. Despite authorities and experts highlighting the safety of the procedure, the population feels that insufficient information was provided to the public.

In August 2023, PM Kishida's approval rating levelled off at 40%, showing an increase from the previous months but no significant positive change.²¹

¹⁴ Will Fee and Kanako Takahara, "Sweeping LDP Upper House Victory Heralds Fresh Start for Kishida," *The Japan Times*, July 10, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/07/10/national/politics-diplomacy/2022-upper-house-election-result/#:~:text=In%20an%20election%20held%20in.for%20grabs%20in%20voting%20Sunday>.

¹⁵ Despite what was interpreted as a fresh start for PM Kishida's cabinet, approval ratings continued to decline, and his disapproval rating reached 50% in October 2022 with only 33% of the population viewing PM Kishida positively.

¹⁶ "Japan PM Kishida's Approval Hits New Low after Ministers Resign | Reuters," *reuters.com*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-pm-kishidas-approval-hits-new-low-after-ministers-resign-2022-11-27/>.

¹⁷ Alexander Vogt, "G7 in Hiroshima - A Critical Juncture," *www.kas.de*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/g7-in-hiroshima>.

¹⁸ "G7 Summit Helps Boost Approval Rating for Kishida Cabinet," *www.japannews.yomiuri.co.jp*, May 22, 2023, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/politics-government/20230522-111287/>.

¹⁹ "Kishida's Son to Resign after Public Outrage over Private Party at Official Residence," *www.asahi.com*, May 29, 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14919811>.

²⁰ "My Number, Fukushima Concerns Push Kishida Cabinet Support Rate Down," *www.japantimes.co.jp*, July 16, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/07/16/national/politics-diplomacy/kishida-cabinet-survey-july/>.

²¹ Ryuto Imao, "Kishida's Approval Rating Roughly Flat at 40%," *www.asia.nikkei.com*, July 31, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Kishida-s-approval-rating-roughly-flat-at-40>.

In December 2023, however, large scale investigations into alleged misuse of fundraising funds upward of 500 million yen, by high ranking LDP officials hit the LDP's rating hard. In December, PM Kishida's administration's approval rating fell to 20%, marking its all-time low since PM Kishida's Cabinet came to power in October 2021.

Despite the strong decline, approval rating stabilized at a higher but still historic low of 23.8% in April 2024. Considering the approval rating standing below the critical 30% threshold, it does not appear questionable why PM Kishida would hold off a snap election at this moment. However, when taking into account the approval ratings for opposition parties, the decision does take on a calculative chance. With the approval rating for the CDP standing at only 6.8% and the JIP at 3.8% the LDP stands out as the stronger party.

This April's by-election results showed a strong resentment towards the LDP, according to an NHK survey on the by-election in Shimane, 76% considered the political funding scandal while casting their ballot. Of those, approximately 70% said they voted for the opposition candidate. Meanwhile, it is somewhat surprising that the LDP, which normally benefits from low voter turnout, has not fared well in a conservative stronghold like Shimane. This indeed is a point that has to be taken into consideration when the Lower House is dissolved.

Recent analysis by Itaru Oishi of Nikkei Shimbun on Shimane prefecture's election results cast an interesting picture.²² Whilst in the 2021 election, the LDP candidate for Shimane received roughly 90,000 votes, the LDP candidate for this year's election only received 55,000 votes. Experts have estimated that when dissecting the 2021 results of 90,000 voters one can assume a 75,000-strong LDP core supporter base in Shimane Prefecture. Kyodo News Agency's exit polling estimated that roughly 26% of LDP supporters cast their vote for the opposition party.

As such, in Shimane, a large portion of the LDP supporters decided to vote for the opposition. Some argue, however, that this step away from the LDP was not too hard since the opposition candidate, Akiko Kamei, is viewed as standing in the tradition to her conservative LDP father, who left the LDP during Koizumi's cabinet in opposition to his Post Services privatization efforts. In Shimane, the LDP's biggest loss was not opposition supporters voting, but LDP supporters voting for the opposition.

In Nagasaki's third district, the number of voters who voted for the LDP in the previous election in 2021 and the decrease in voter turnout for this year's election were estimated to be the same. As such, it can be assumed that the 59,000 voters who abstained in this election, are LDP supporters. Instead of casting their ballot for an opposition candidate, a large supporter base of the LDP abstained.

In Tokyo's election voter turnout of LDP supporters cast a more scattered picture and undivided vote. Despite dissatisfaction among LDP voters in Tokyo, voting for the supporting the progressive Natsumi Sakai was a harder and more unlikely choice than conservative-leaning Kamei in Shimane.

What the recent elections reveal is a shift of the threat from the mobilization of non-supporters, to the disincentivizing of their own supporter base. What is concerning the LDP is the large dissatisfaction among their own supporters. With the opposition generally weak, the LDP and PM Kishida do not have to fear a mobilization of the opposition at this point, but what PM Kishida must do is regain trust among the LDP core.

²² Itaru Oishi, "3rd House of Representatives By-Election - Where Will the LDP Vote Go?" [www.nikkei.com](https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOCD2833E0Y4A420C2000000/), April 29, 2024, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOCD2833E0Y4A420C2000000/>.

Conclusion

Over the past three years, numerous scandals, and national and international crises have strained and weakened the LDP and public support for PM Kishida in Japan. Despite a long history of electoral victory and domination of the Japanese political landscape, the LDP's recipe for success lies in its strategic considerations when to hold elections by closely monitoring the polls, disincentivizing opposition voters in elections, and tracking the opposition's next steps. As the opposition remains divided and weak, the LDP's current threat to success is their very own supporters, who are largely unimpressed by PM Kishida's performance and upset at their own party's involvement in numerous scandals, the last one being the funding scandal and PM Kishida's relevant self-righteous decision-making and political compromises to Komeito and JIP. The next step for PM Kishida is to regain the trust of the LDP core supporters by adequately dealing with the evolving crisis, whilst keeping the opposition at bay. Only if PM Kishida can pacify his own voters, a snap election becomes a likely scenario for another term of the LDP. The current legislative period is officially set to end on October 30, 2025, meaning that PM Kishida strategically has a very limited time to hold a snap election if he wants to be victorious. The more time passes, the more time the currently weak opposition has to reorganize and mobilize its supporters.

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