

Manipulating Electoral Rules to Manufacture Single-Party Dominance

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This article argues that the LDP manufactured its parliamentary dominance in postwar Japan by strategically altering specific facets of the electoral system. More generally, I demonstrate that intraparty politics play a crucial role in determining when and how electoral rules are changed. Despite widespread evidence that the LDP would win more seats under an SMP electoral formula, party leaders were repeatedly blocked from replacing the postwar MMD-SNTV system by intraparty incumbents, who feared that such a change would harm their individual reelection prospects. However, party leaders had greater leeway in altering rules that generated fewer intraparty conflicts. Between 1960 and 1990, the LDP implemented approximately fifty changes to campaign regulations, most of which were aimed at enhancing the incumbency advantage of all rank-and-file MPs. Statistical tests confirm that absent pro-incumbent revisions to the electoral code, the LDP would have succumbed to declining public popularity and lost its majority at least a decade earlier.

Winning more votes and seats is the sine qua non of government longevity, and many scholars have analyzed how political parties manipulate regulatory and fiscal policies to increase their electoral popularity. This article explores the strategic manipulation of an altogether different set of tools—the electoral system. Electoral rules are subject to partisan manipulation precisely because they have nonneutral effects: larger parties generally prefer single-member plurality (SMP) electoral formulas, while smaller competitors do better under a proportional representation (PR) system. By altering the electoral system into one that best matches their vote distribution, political parties can maximize their electoral “bang for the buck” to win more seats with the same number of votes.

Theoretical predictions of frequent electoral rule manipulation do not, however, have strong empirical support. Changes to the electoral system—especially before the 1990s—appear to be rare in advanced industrialized democracies (Nohlen 1984), and the accepted wisdom in comparative politics is that electoral rules are, for a variety of reasons, “sticky” (Pierson 2000). Particularly puzzling are cases where electoral rules remain untouched *even*

though ruling parties can expect to reap significant benefits from altering the institutional framework.

Using the empirical example of Japan between 1955 and 1993, this article challenges two common assumptions in the literature on electoral system endogeneity and offers a more nuanced theory of how parties manipulate electoral rules. First, major changes to the electoral system are rare because of conflicts *within* political parties. Altering the electoral formula or district magnitude creates large-scale distributional asymmetries, such that even though the party as a whole may benefit, not all rank-and-file MPs will be guaranteed reelection. For the proposing party to successfully alter the electoral framework, party leaders must use carrots and sticks to convince backbenchers to support the legislation in a parliamentary vote. However, not all political parties are capable of enforcing internal compliance. Leaders of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—a classically “weak” party—put forth three separate bills to replace the existing MMD-SNTV formula during its single-party dominance between 1955 and 1993. Even though various simulations predicted that the LDP would win more seats under SMP, opposition from

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I would like to thank Dan Okimoto, Anne Wren, Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, Beatriz Magaloni, Ethan Scheiner, Rob Weiner, Barry Burden, Ray Christensen, Dick Katz, Jessica Weeks, and Catherine Duggan for their advice at various stages of writing this article. Steven Reed provided much of the electoral data used here. Earlier versions were presented at the APSA Annual Conference (2004), the Berkeley-Stanford Conference on Contemporary Japanese Politics (2004), and the Japanese Politics Workshop at Harvard (2006). Suggestions from the three anonymous reviewers were critical in tightening the arguments in this article. All errors are my own.

American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 52, No. 1, January 2008, Pp. 32–47

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ISSN 0092-5853

rank-and-file LDP parliamentarians forced the withdrawal of each bill and left a suboptimal electoral system intact.

Second, I argue that the literature serially undercounts the frequency of electoral reform because it defines the electoral system very narrowly. While “macrolevel” changes to the electoral formula and district magnitude do tend to be rare, political parties can successfully and repeatedly manipulate more “microlevel” features of the electoral system, particularly campaign finance and electioneering regulations. Microlevel rules are more malleable because they primarily discriminate between the campaign effectiveness of incumbents versus challengers, and thus can be designed to benefit all sitting MPs *symmetrically*. The LDP—despite being unable to change the electoral formula—altered campaign regulations 47 times between 1960 and 1990, and many of these revisions were targeted to strengthen incumbency advantage. Specifically, the LDP increasingly restricted electioneering activities to a prescribed official campaign period and then incrementally made this campaign period shorter, thereby minimizing the ability of nonincumbents to attract voters. Measures that improved reelection rates satisfied the two principal intraparty actors: party leaders, who could keep their jobs as long as the LDP maintained its majority, and party backbenchers, who supported any legislation that made it easier to win their seats. Crucially this article shows that microlevel manipulation enabled the LDP to manufacture repeated electoral majorities in the face of declining public popularity.

Japan under LDP single-party dominance is a useful case for analyzing electoral rule manipulation for two reasons. First, the LDP’s declining electoral margins generated strong incentives to implement policies which increased its odds of staying in power. Second, the LDP’s single-party majority between 1955 and 1993 allows us to observe how *intraparty* constraints may play a role in when and how electoral systems are altered, independent of interparty constraints inherent to coalition and minority governments.

This article thus argues that political parties have the option of manipulating a diverse set of electoral rules for partisan gain, but that the relative frequency of macro-versus microlevel reforms is a function of the ruling party’s ability to manage intraparty conflicts. The second section reviews the literature on political party decision making, electoral system effects, and institutional change more comprehensively, and discusses how the Japanese example fits into this broader framework. The third analyzes changes to Japan’s Public Office Election Law and demonstrates that the LDP implemented microlevel changes which weakened the electoral prospects of opposition

party candidates. The next section uses statistical tests to demonstrate that one type of microlevel manipulation—the incremental reduction in the legal length of the campaign period—significantly increased the reelection rates of LDP politicians. Importantly, I find that absent strategic electoral rule change, the LDP should have lost its majority at least a decade earlier than the watershed 1993 election. The last section concludes.

Distributional Asymmetries from Electoral Rule Change

What We (Think We) Know about Electoral Rule Endogeneity

Do political actors have strong incentives to manipulate electoral rules? Theoretically, any type of institution that has an asymmetrical impact on political outcomes should be unstable, because empowered actors will try to modify it to suit their particular interests (Riker 1980). The electoral system easily satisfies this criterion, as every electoral rule creates distributional asymmetries in how seats are allocated between parties. Studies have shown that differences between first-past-the-post and proportional representation, the specific *type* of PR rule, and perhaps most importantly, whether districts have single or multiple seats, all affect how party votes are converted into parliamentary seats (Reed 1991; Taagepera and Shugart 1989).

The benefits to altering electoral rules are fairly straightforward. Parties with larger vote shares win disproportionately more seats under SMP than they do in PR systems (Taagepera and Shugart 1989). However, large parties that fear electoral slumps in the future, as well as parties that are consistently small, prefer large-magnitude PR rules that minimize the chance of significant losses (Shvetsova 2003). As Sartori suggests, “[Electoral rules] are the most specific manipulative instrument of politics” (1968, 273).

Evidence is mixed on whether parties actually manipulate electoral rules to maximize their seats and votes. Many studies have documented that the *initial* choice in electoral rules—following civil war, national independence, or democratization—is influenced by the strategic calculus of the primary political actors (Boix 1999). Similarly, country case studies find that when rule changes *do* occur, they tend to reflect the preferences of parties in power (Bawn 1993; Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001). However, cross-national work on the frequency of electoral rule changes indicates that electoral systems appear to be relatively stable over time (Lijphart 1994).

The accepted position in the literature is that electoral rules are inherently “sticky.” Shepsle (1989) writes that institutional stability is due to high transaction costs that outweigh any short-term advantages, while Pierson (2000) suggests that path dependency is at work, since electoral rules are explicitly designed to resist change by having supermajority requirements for revision. As Gerard Alexander (2001) posits, however, neither the transaction cost nor path dependency arguments are sufficient, since electoral rules do change periodically and, more importantly, are subject to frequent *attempts* at revision.

A case in point is the resilience of the multimember district, single nontransferable vote (MMD-SNTV) formula in Japan during the Liberal Democratic Party’s reign between 1955 and 1993. While the LDP held a single-party majority for close to four decades, it faced frequent threats of electoral defeat. The LDP’s vote share peaked in 1958—the first election after its formation—when it won 58%, but the party failed to win a majority after 1963. Perhaps more telling, fewer people identified themselves as LDP partisans over time. According to monthly polls by the *Jiji Tsushin* between 1960 and 1990, the LDP last had more than 50% public support in December 1960, and more than 40% in January 1970.

The possibility of electoral defeat was not lost on the LDP’s leaders, who resorted to various tactics to shore up the party’s declining popularity. The government boosted public works spending before elections to create the illusion of higher growth (Kohno and Nishizawa 1990) and gave policy benefits to key supporters during periods of economic crisis (Calder 1988). However, the manipulation of fiscal and regulatory policy was at best a stop-gap solution, especially after the 1980s when mounting public debt made irresponsible expenditures problematic.

A straightforward way for the LDP to ensure a continuing legislative majority was to alter the electoral system. Between 1947 and 1993, Japanese elections were held in medium-sized districts under SNTV, and various facets of this system helped the LDP maintain a bare parliamentary majority. It allowed smaller parties to win seats in larger districts, diminishing incentives for opposition parties to coordinate candidates against the LDP (Christensen 2000). The high degree of malapportionment in favor of rural areas—the LDP’s traditional support base—also helped the party garner more seats than warranted by their declining vote share (Christensen and Johnson 1995).

MMD-SNTV was not, however, the *optimal* system for the LDP. Indeed, there were three high-profile attempts by LDP leaders to alter the electoral formula: in 1956 under the Hatoyama Cabinet, in 1973 under the Tanaka Cabinet, and in 1991 under the Kaifu Cabinet

(Reed and Thies 2001). The Hatoyama plan (dubbed “Hato-mander,” combining “Hatoyama” with the English term “gerrymander”) called for single-member plurality, while the latter two proposed a mixed-member majoritarian system (MMM) with parallel single-member and proportional representation districts.

Widely cited contemporary simulations indicated that these disproportionate electoral formulas would have generated a substantial seat bonus for the LDP. The *Asahi Newspaper*—a major national daily—predicted in 1973 that the LDP could have increased its seat share from 55.2% to 78.9% under MMM, and up to 89% should SMP be adopted (Hrebenar 1986, 47). Similar *Asahi* simulations in 1989 found that the LDP stood to win up to 375 seats—an impressive 75% of the total—compared to the 59% that the party held at the time (*Asahi* 4/28/1990).

Despite such large, latent benefits under alternate electoral rules, the LDP never succeeded in implementing institutional change. In fact, only the first, Hato-mander bill was put to a legislative vote; the two MMM plans of 1973 and 1991 were withdrawn before parliamentary deliberations were concluded.

Why was the LDP unable to enact this obviously beneficial strategy? Studies of institutional endogeneity point to two crucial reasons why electoral rules might be stable. First, for electoral rules to change, they must be voted for through a defined legislative process, where conflicts *between* political parties come into play. The primary determinant of success in this parliamentary stage is the distribution of legislative power, particularly the composition of government. In a single-party majority system, one party can essentially push through (or block) institutional change as it sees fit. In contrast, rule change is harder under a minority and/or a coalition government, because the proposing party must negotiate with additional actors to get a bill passed (Benoit 2004). This logic fails to satisfactorily explain institutional stasis in Japan, however, since the LDP did have a single-party majority when party leaders proposed electoral reform. Although consensus-building was the norm, the LDP had a history of steamrolling legislation through the Diet when a time-sensitive bill was on the agenda, and there was no chance of getting other parties on board. Examples include the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (1960), the adoption of a consumption tax (1989), and most relevant, the adoption of the MMD-SNTV system itself in 1947.

A second set of factors contributing to institutional stasis is *constitutional* constraints. Reform initiatives can succeed only if a group of parties has the necessary legislative fiat to overcome any constitutional rules governing electoral rule change (Benoit 2004). Constitutions typically require higher hurdles for amendment than do

legislative statutes—often a supermajority in parliament, a national referendum, and/or an intervening election. If electoral rules are specified in the constitution, then changing them requires more than just a majority in the legislature, rendering the system more resistant to partisan manipulation. This constraint does not apply to Japan, however, as the postwar Constitution is relatively lax, allowing electoral rules to be changed at will by a parliamentary majority.¹

Both parliamentary and constitutional restrictions are prominent factors in explaining the stability of electoral rules generally, but they are by no means sufficient explanations, as epitomized by the resilience of the MMD-SNTV system in Japan. Instead, I argue that the fundamental reason for institutional stasis is *opposition within the LDP itself*, manifesting as conflicts between the party leaders and rank-and-file Diet members.

Intraparty Constraints to Electoral Manipulation

The literature's overestimation of the frequency of electoral reform derives from the theoretical tendency to treat political parties as cohesive, atomistic units. For electoral rule change to be even proposed in parliament, however, a political party must first decide to put forth a reform bill in the legislature, which *ex ante* requires internal consensus in favor of that proposal. Indeed, we generally observe parties behaving cohesively precisely because they have resolved internal conflicts over specific legislative provisions beforehand; bills that cannot garner intraparty consensus rarely reach a parliamentary floor vote.

Intraparty negotiations can pit different sets of actors against one another, but the critical disjuncture is between *party leaders*, whose goal is to maximize aggregate party seat share, and *rank-and-file politicians*, who are primarily concerned with their own reelection—and only secondarily with the performance of the party as a whole (Luebbert 1986). Rank-and-file members will reject any electoral rule change proposals which endanger their own survival; if a sufficient number of them vote against a bill, then that proposal is unlikely to secure a parliamentary majority.

Conflicts between party leaders and rank-and-file MPs arise when electoral reform entails internal *distributional asymmetries*. While a political party may win more seats in aggregate under a different electoral system, this does not mean that all incumbents are guaranteed reelection. This problem is aggravated in the case of changes to *macrolevel* features of the electoral system—

those that alter the translation of votes to seats. Examples include the district magnitude, which affects the level of proportionality within districts, and the electoral formula, which establishes the method by which votes are aggregated and mathematically converted into seats. Large-scale rule changes are divisive because they are extremely blunt weapons: although they may benefit the proposer party in aggregate, macrolevel changes are difficult to target to specific districts, and thus can catch some of the party's own incumbents in the crossfire. The larger the scale of the change, the more incumbents will be affected, and hence the greater the potential magnitude of distributional asymmetry.

The actual electoral costs from macrolevel rule changes arise because some candidates must move to different districts and develop a new personal vote base, which can weaken their chances for reelection. A significant portion of an MP's incumbency advantage is based on the reputation and network she has built up in her district over years of service, but these are ties that do not necessarily carry over to new constituencies. Looking at elections to the U.S. House of Representatives, Desposato and Petrocik (2003) find that incumbents can lose 5 to 8% of their vote base when redistricting incorporates a large number of new constituents.

Whether the rank-and-file can actually veto (or credibly threaten to veto) party proposals depends on their degree of independence from the party leader. If party leaders control valuable resources that are crucial to reelection, such as campaign funds or cabinet portfolio, then rank-and-file members may have no choice but to accept electoral rule change. As others have noted, however, intraparty conflict frequently prevented the LDP from implementing divisive legislation, because party leaders lacked the coercive powers to enforce a party-line vote. The primary factor explaining rank-and-file autonomy is the electoral system itself: the traditional MMD-SNTV electoral formula made the personal-vote more important than the party-vote (Carey and Shugart 1995). Candidates campaigned based on their own credentials, often highlighting the amount of pork they returned to their districts, rather than on the programmatic profile of the party (Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1993). Bawn, Cox, and Rosenbluth (1999) find that the vote share of individual Japanese candidates is relatively unaffected by overall swings in their party's popularity, suggesting an electoral decoupling between individual and party performance. The primacy of candidate-based, local networks (*koenkai*) in electioneering made electoral rule changes that entailed redistricting particularly costly for incumbent MPs. Intraparty negotiation thus became all the more critical, and LDP leaders were constrained from initiating electoral rule changes that were likely to affect the reelection

¹ Article 47 of the Japanese Constitution writes, "Electoral districts, method of voting, and other matters pertaining to the method of election of members of both Houses shall be fixed by law."

prospects of a significant portion of the rank-and-file.

This article's contention, then, is that the type and frequency of electoral rule changes in postwar Japan were determined largely by divisions *within* the LDP, rather than strategic calculations with regard to other parties, as the existing literature tends to assume. A striking example is the breakdown in intraparty negotiations over adopting a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system in 1991. While opposition dissent complicated the passage of the bill, the ultimate veto to Kaifu's MMM plan ("Kai-mander") came from the LDP's own rank-and-file. The most contentious issue was the creation of new single-member districts, which required a significant reapportionment of seats and drew the ire of LDP incumbents. Yoshinobu Shimamura from the Watanabe faction argued that if the existing multimember districts were split into single-member districts, some incumbents would have to move to a different district altogether. He stated that "Leaving your district means death. There are those who strongly state that they will never leave their district, and will run as independents if necessary" (Asahi 1991/7/9; own translation). One of the "rebel" leaders, Junichiro Koizumi, argued that SMDs were not "temperamentally suited to the Japanese people" (Asahi, 1991/9/12). Koizumi's group (*Seiji Kaikaku Giin Renmei*—"Federation of Diet Members for Political Reform") claimed that based on their own internal survey, 48 out of 97 respondents wanted to keep the MMD-SNTV system. With the very real possibility of internal revolt should the MMM proposal come to a legislative vote, the Kai-mander attempt ended abruptly in September 1991, when the bill was withdrawn from the Diet and Prime Minister Kaifu resigned.

As a caveat, macrolevel electoral reforms did pass when there were countervailing pressures that outweighed concerns over distributional asymmetries. In many ways, these are exceptions that prove the rule that intraparty consensus is difficult to achieve. One set of cases involves the reapportionment bills of 1964, 1975, 1986, and 1992. Although the LDP, with a heavily rural base, benefited from the rapid urbanization and resulting malapportionment of the postwar period, the Supreme Court intervened in four instances by threatening to declare malapportionment levels unconstitutional (Ohmiya 1992). While the scope of proposed reforms was relatively small, dealing with fewer than 20 seats in each instance, specific factions mobilized en masse when districts with their incumbents were targeted for seat reductions. In the 1986 reapportionment debates, for example, the LDP's Kawamoto faction—which had one former and two current incumbents running in the six districts targeted for

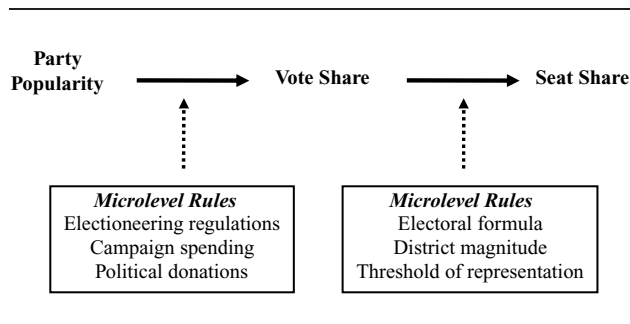
reductions—actually supported an alternate plan by the Socialist Party, which proposed redrawing district boundaries rather than changing seat apportionment. Seat reductions were particularly problematic for incumbents, who would have to compete against each other over fewer seats in a game of electoral musical chairs. In order to blunt internal opposition and get the reapportionment bill passed, LDP leaders were forced to forge an agreement with the opposition Komeito, an urban party which had no incumbents in the reduced-seat districts nor had any intention of nominating new candidates there.

A second example of countervailing pressures is the successful electoral formula change which occurred in 1993–94—just two years after the failure of the Kai-mander proposal. As Reed and Thies (2001) argue, politicians proactively take policy positions on institutional change when they perceive voters as taking an interest, i.e., when there is an overwhelming political cost to ignoring the issue. In the failed 1991 Kai-mander case, public opinion was not in the leadership's favor; a series of polls showed that over 70% of voters either disapproved, were indifferent, or professed ignorance about reform (Reed and Thies 2001). In contrast, the central issue in the 1993 election was electoral system reform itself, driven by the emerging public consensus (stoked by reform-minded politicians) that corruption was directly attributable to the personalistic politics inherent to the MMD-SNTV system. Forced to put forth competing proposals of their own, LDP leaders dragged their feet and advocated either minimal change or reforms that were disproportionately tilted in the LDP's favor. While this approach allowed the LDP to assuage intraparty critics who had opposed reform in previous episodes, it led to massive defections by electorally insecure, junior backbenchers and ideologically driven, senior politicians who sought to capitalize on the LDP's hesitance and make their name as "reformers" (Reed and Scheiner 2003). The lesson, perhaps, is that party leaders cannot satisfy everybody all the time, and that this condition can be critical for parties with weak internal discipline.

The LDP's Manipulation of Microlevel Electoral Rules

The fact that Japanese backbenchers were relatively independent of the leadership does not mean that the interests of the two sides never aligned in favor of institutional change. Indeed, incentives to alter electoral rules were shared by both groups when they affected all of the party's incumbents *symmetrically*. Preferences are

FIGURE 1 How Electoral Rules Affect Election Outcomes



symmetrical—and hence intraparty agreement is most likely—for what I call “microlevel” electoral rules. These are regulations that influence *campaign effectiveness*, or the ability of parties and candidates to (1) win over supporters, and (2) convince those supporters to vote for them. They include laws that define acceptable forms of campaigning, the length of time parties can campaign, the amount of money that can be spent, and penalties for violating these rules. Micro- and macrolevel rules affect elections in fundamentally different ways: the former affects the capacity to win new votes, while the latter deals with how those votes are converted into seats.

In terms of political impact, microlevel campaigning rules affect incumbents and challengers differently, but they affect members within each group similarly. This distinction is crucial to the success of institutional manipulation, because everybody who votes for a statutory or regulatory change is, by definition, an incumbent. Accordingly, microlevel revisions that benefit sitting MPs are more likely to receive unanimous support within parties, especially since microlevel changes do not involve redistricting or seat apportionment—the very elements that make macrolevel changes contentious. *Ceteris paribus*, most incumbents tend to prefer restrictive campaigning regulations, because they are better known by virtue of their regular legislative activities—and thus obtain lower marginal benefits from electioneering—than nonincumbent candidates. As such, parties with the most incumbents can consolidate their majority by making microlevel rules more restrictive. Figure 1 depicts the effect of micro- and macrolevel rules on the translation of popularity-to-votes and votes-to-seats, respectively.²

²Like most dichotomies, the distinction between macro- and microlevel rules is fairly broad, and there are alternate ways to separate out the effects of electoral rules which result in different coalitions in favor of specific regulations. For example, campaign finance rules that place caps on private donations or distribute public subsidies for election expenditures create cleavages that differentiate rich from poor parties. Similarly, redistricting can benefit some LDP

Japan’s regime of microlevel regulations is among the most stringent—and hence pro-incumbent—in the democratic world. The entire statutory handbook for Japan’s Public Office Election Law, circa June 2004, is an astounding 2,358 pages long (*Senkyo-Seido Kenkyuu-Kai* 2004). In contrast, the American “Federal Election Campaign Laws” (circa February 2005) spans a sparse 234 pages. POEL regulations include the number of posters allowed to be distributed, the size of the posters, the number of speaking engagements permitted, the number of politicians allowed to speak at each engagement, the number of cars that can be used for campaigning purposes, the number of newspaper advertisements that parties can buy, and so on.

In contrast to the failure of macrolevel electoral reform bills, over 40 changes to campaigning regulations were made between 1960 and 1993. For the purposes of understanding the motives behind institutional change, the crucial question is whether these reforms disproportionately benefited the LDP over the opposition.

With a majority in the Diet, any regulatory changes (or nonchanges) that increased reelection rates would allow the LDP to extend its dominance *and* benefit all of its backbenchers. There are roughly two types of election regulation which enhance the incumbency advantage of LDP Diet members. First, the party benefits from *increased restrictions on campaign activities and media advertising*. When candidates have less time and flexibility to campaign, voter choices turn increasingly on preexisting name recognition, which lies in the incumbent’s favor. At the same time, the LDP has been significantly better at recruiting “quality candidates,” particularly those with local government experience and established constituent networks (Scheiner 2005), who can be electorally effective even in curtailed campaigns. A second option is to *remove restrictions on campaign finance*, especially on donations from private organizations and corporations. Since the LDP was perennially in government and maintained a stranglehold over the policymaking process, it received significant support from the financial community, construction companies, and agricultural cooperatives (Okimoto 1989). This money could, in turn, be rolled over into extra-electoral expenses, such as paying for local office staff and hot spring trips for *koenkai* members. In

factions more than others (generating intraparty cleavages) or pit urban against rural parties (generating interparty conflict). However, the distinction I make between micro- and macrolevel rules, based on the capacity to win votes versus seats, establishes a more basic differentiation between those in and out of power. Because microlevel rules engender fewer intraparty conflicts, they provide the best forum in which to observe how the partisan motives of political parties drive institutional manipulation.

contrast, the LDP opposed public subsidies of elections, since this would put the opposition, particularly minor parties such as the Democratic Socialists or the Komeito (“Clean Government Party”), on a more equal financial footing with the LDP.

Does the pattern of POEL changes in Japan match the LDP’s preferences? From an epistemological perspective, the purposive *manipulation* of electoral systems is difficult to prove definitively, since we must discern the private motives that underlie legislators’ public behavior. There is, however, a preponderance of evidence that points to partisan intent in the timing and content of electoral rule change. First, the pattern of pro- versus anti-incumbent regulatory changes departs from more neutral recommendations made by a nonpartisan electoral reform council. Second, the number of microlevel changes increased as the proportion of beneficiaries—LDP incumbents—increased. Third, the exact content of new regulations demonstrates a consistent bias in favor of LDP incumbents. The following sections examine each of these points in greater detail.

Ignoring Recommendations for More Open Elections

Revisions to the Public Office Election Law, which governs all elections in Japan, were rare until the late 1950s, when popular criticism mounted over the perceived dominance of patronage politics and corruption. The number of electoral law violations increased from 10,921 cases in the 1958 election to 17,177 in 1960 and 17,941 in 1963. If we restrict these violations to incidences of electoral bribery, the number of cases increased from 8,209 in 1958 to 13,346 in 1960 and 14,538 in 1963 (*Shuugiin Chousa-kyoku* 2002). In order to review the causes of money politics and restore public trust, Prime Minister Ikeda established the Electoral System Deliberation Council (*Senkyo-Seido Shingikai*) in 1961. This Council was a nonpartisan body whose mission was to recommend both macro- and microlevel electoral rule changes which would eliminate corruption and make elections “freer and fairer.” Seven such Deliberation Councils were eventually established between 1961 and 1970, each with a one-year mandate.³ While the scope and magnitude of the Council’s reform proposals changed over time, the issues covered—eliminating corruption and increasing fairness—remained relatively consistent (*Jichisho* 1980).

The salience of the Electoral System Deliberation Council lies not in the fact that they made many recommendations, but that much of the subsequent debate on

³For the most part, the Council was successful in remaining neutral, although a small number of politicians were always included along with academics, journalists, and other public thinkers.

microlevel rule changes followed their guidelines. For example, recommendations that dealt directly with bribery and electoral violations were generally accepted with little debate, although not necessarily in a timely manner.⁴ More contentious, however, were the Deliberation Councils’ anti-incumbent proposals to restrict campaign donations from corporate entities and deregulate the range of campaigning activities allowed—both of which were anathema to the LDP.

In addressing these recommendations, the LDP’s primary tactic was to accept these changes in principle, but dilute their actual content in the final legislation. For example, the 5th Council (1966) advised stringent cuts in private campaign funding, suggesting a ceiling of ¥10 million (approximately \$91,000) on individual contributions, and ¥20 million (\$182,000) on corporate/union donations.⁵ Subsequent Councils went further and argued that the reliance on corporate donations produced perverse policy incentives for politicians and that political parties should be financed primarily by individual donations and membership dues. No significant restrictions were enacted until 1975, however, when the Miki Cabinet passed a Political Financing Reform Law (*Seiji-Shikin Kaisei-Ho*) that capped corporate donations at a much higher ¥150 million (\$1.4 million), with a promise to revisit the issue in five years (a promise that was not kept until 1993). Even this bill was highly controversial, and only passed with a bare majority in the House of Councilors by virtue of a tie-breaking vote by the Speaker. While this seemed to be a step in the right direction and somewhat assuaged public concerns, the only actual result was to shift financing to other unregulated sources, such as private fundraising parties (Cox and Rosenbluth 1993).

Debates over deregulating campaign activities, such as lifting restrictions on door-to-door campaigning and mass-media advertisements, are equally informative. Door-to-door campaigning was prohibited in 1950, but recommendations to remove this constraint were made from the 3rd Council onwards. Criticism of door-to-door campaigning came for various reasons: it would lead to bribery; people could be intimidated into voting; Japanese people can’t say no when directly approached. Permitting door-to-door campaigning would have put the LDP at a disadvantage, since it lacked the manpower to successfully compete in labor-intensive electioneering compared

⁴The suggestion to strengthen guilt-by-association rules (1st and 5th Councils; 1962, 1967), whereby candidates could be penalized for illegal campaigning by their family members or campaign managers, was adopted incrementally in 1975 and 1981. A related proposal to increase penalties for electoral fraud (4th and 6th Councils; 1967, 1970) was enacted in 1989.

⁵Exchange rates conversions are based on figures from July 2005, when \$1 ≈ ¥110.

to more grassroots-based parties, such as the Communists or the Komeito. At the 4th Council Meeting, however, representatives from the Justice Ministry and the National Police Agency gave provisional approval, and many council members seemed resigned to the fact that this ban was already impossible to enforce. The LDP ignored calls for deregulation, however, and the prohibition remains in the books to this day. Indeed, Ramseyer and Rosenbluth (1993) find that judges who supported overturning this ban were sanctioned by the LDP, often finding themselves at the bottom of the promotion ladder.

Similarly, TV campaigning was only partially deregulated in 1969, when parties were permitted to make limited policy-based speeches (*seiken housou*) on the national television station (NHK), and again in 1983, when candidates were allowed to read out their resumes (literally) in a staid newscast (*keireki-housou*). In both cases, the number and length of TV appearances were heavily regulated by the government, limiting the ability of challengers to champion their views nationally. Political parties were not allowed to purchase advertising time on commercial broadcasts until the 1990s.

Table 1 lists all changes to the Public Office Election Law between 1950 (when the law was established) and 2000.⁶ Two points deserve particular notice. First, a stark contrast can be drawn between the origins of pro- and anti-incumbent revisions to the electoral code. While all anti-incumbent, deregulatory reforms were based on recommendations by the Deliberation Council (*italicized*), most pro-incumbent changes were autonomous creations of the LDP. We can also observe that anti-incumbent reforms were initiated only after 1961, when the Deliberation Councils began to recommend changes. Pro-incumbent revisions to the POEL, on the other hand, were enacted from its inception in 1950, although the scope of changes increased as the popularity of the LDP began to wane in the late 1960s and the need for incumbency protection increased.

Increasing Marginal Utility of Pro-Incumbent Changes

Two factors affect a party's preferred *magnitude* of pro-incumbent bias in electioneering rules. First, the marginal benefit of tighter campaign rules is higher when the party has a large number of incumbent candidates. In this case,

⁶POEL changes in Table 1 also include revisions to the Political Funds Control Law (*Seiji Shikin Kisei Hō*). There were two major changes to the PFCL: in 1975, when private donations to candidates were weakly capped, and in 1993, when public subsidies were granted to parties. Minor changes in 1980 and 1995 altered reporting requirements for campaign donations.

a governing party can stay in power by simply holding on to the seats it already controls. Second, tighter campaign rules are useful when the popularity of the party is low. If opinion polls leading up to the election exhibit declining public support, then the party has poorer odds of winning new seats in contested districts. As such, it would gain more from defending current seats than trying to win new ones.

These two points explain why pro-incumbent biases to Japan's Public Office Election Law were adopted incrementally over 30 years, rather than implemented wholesale in 1955. For the first decade of LDP control, the party's public support ratings were fairly high and the party's ratio of incumbents-to-candidates was relatively low. Armed with high ratings, the LDP stood a good chance of defeating opposition incumbents and capturing new districts, while holding on to its current seats. The low incumbent-to-candidate ratio meant that the proportion of LDP candidates who would benefit from tight campaign regulations was relatively small. In other words, initial demand for pro-incumbent rules within the LDP was low.

Over time, however, the LDP's support ratings fell while the party's ratio of incumbent candidates rose to above 80%. Figure 2 shows time-series electoral data between 1953 and 1993. We see a clear increase in LDP incumbents and their victory rates over time, while the LDP's public opinion ratings in the month of the election mirror the trend downwards. The falloff in support ratings made it less likely that the LDP's nonincumbents would win, while the higher incumbent-to-candidate ratio increased the utility of—and intraparty demand for—pro-incumbent electoral rules.

Also interesting is the steady rise in the reelection rates of Japanese incumbents. Something in the political environment—voter preferences, public policies, or electoral rules—must have changed to improve incumbency advantage over time. The following section teases apart the precise content of POEL changes to demonstrate the creeping pro-incumbent bias.

Pro-Incumbent Changes as Counteractive Reforms

Given declining public support, the LDP could not completely ignore anti-incumbent proposals by the Electoral System Deliberation Council. The LDP was periodically plagued by corruption and bribery scandals, most notably the Black Mist and Lockheed Scandals of the 1960s and 1970s and the Recruit Cosmos and Sagawa Kyubin Scandals of the late 1980s to early 1990s. By reducing rent-

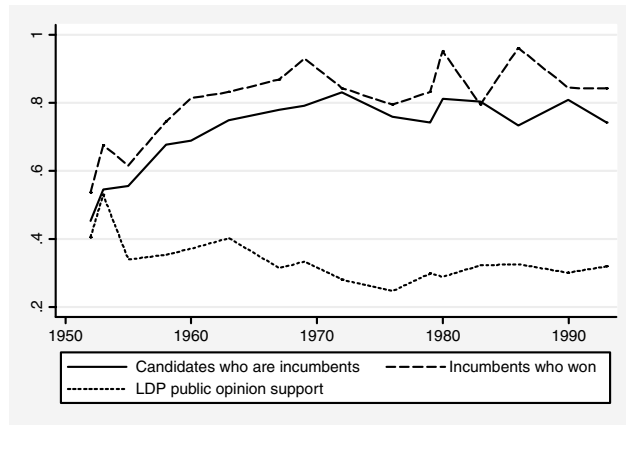
TABLE 1 Changes to Japan's Public Office Election Law by Effect (1950–2000)
(Italicized if based on Recommendations from the Electoral System Deliberation Council)

Year	Pro-Incumbent	Anti-Incumbent (Pre-Campaign Period)	Anti-Incumbent (Post-Campaign Period)
1950	Abolish door-to-door campaigning		
1952	Decrease HR Kōji to 25 days; <i>Increase HR campaign deposits to ¥100,000</i>		
1954	No free drinks/food to voters after Kōji		
1956	Limit opinion polls during campaign period; Decrease HC Kōji to 25 days		
1958	Decrease HR Kōji to 20 days		
1962	<i>Increase HR deposits to ¥150k;</i> Decrease HC Kōji to 23 days	<i>Allow town hall meetings, speeches;</i> <i>Prohibit donations from companies receiving public subsidies</i>	<i>Allow more posters, designate public poster boards; Increase spending limits; Restrict campaigning by civil servants</i>
1963			<i>Allow more newspaper ads, posters;</i> <i>Establish more poster boards</i>
1969	<i>Increase HR deposits to ¥300k</i>	<i>Allow more town hall meetings, speeches</i>	<i>Allow more newspaper ads; Free TV time allocated</i>
1975	<i>Increase HR deposits to ¥1 million</i>	<i>Weak ceilings on corporate donations;</i> <i>Prohibit giving money to constituents; Allow greeting cards</i>	<i>Allow more ads, posters</i>
1981	Restrict distribution of pamphlets		<i>Establish more poster boards</i>
1982	<i>Increase HR deposits to ¥2 million</i>		
1983	Reduce HR Kōji to 15 days, HC to 18 days; abolish joint campaign speeches		<i>Allow one extra televised speech</i>
1989	Prohibit cards, advertisements before Kōji		<i>Increase campaign spending limits</i>
1992	<i>Increase deposits to ¥3 million;</i> Reduce HR Kōji to 14 days, HC to 17 days		<i>Expand public funding for greeting cards, signs; increase spending limits</i>
1994	Reduce HR Kōji to 12 days	<i>Parties eligible for public subsidies for all expenses</i>	<i>Allow more private advertisements</i>
1995		<i>Greater limits to campaign donations</i>	
1997	Abolish public funding of policy advertisements by HC candidates, organizations		
1999	No posters with candidate names prior to campaign period	<i>Abolish corporate donations to candidates (OK to parties)</i>	
2000			<i>Expand public funding for advertisements</i>

Data taken from *Shuugiin Chousa-kyoku* (2002); rule changes with minor or neutral partisan effects, such as increased penalties for electoral fraud or allowing fishermen to vote by fax when at sea, are excluded from the table.

* Kōji = day elections are called and marks beginning of the campaign period; HR = House of Representatives; HC = House of Councillors (Upper House).

FIGURE 2 LDP's Candidate Profile and Electoral Success



seeking incentives in the POEL, such as prohibiting firms which received public funds from giving donations to political parties, the LDP could stage a public mea culpa and halt the steady decline in public support.

Eliminating the pro-incumbent bias of the POEL, however, posed a challenge to the continuing electoral majority of the LDP. To protect its single-party dominance, the LDP counteracted anti-incumbent reforms with pro-incumbent changes that limited the former's scope. The most important change involved a separation of rules that applied before and after the start of the official campaign period. Under the POEL, politicians are generally prohibited from canvassing voters in any way before the day elections are called (*Kōji*)—including asking constituents to vote for them, distributing flyers and pamphlets, or placing newspaper advertisements—but may do so in a limited fashion afterwards. The LDP could diminish the effects of electoral deregulation by first, allowing more flyers and posters to be distributed after *Kōji* but not before, and second, shortening the actual campaign period itself. As Table 1 indicates, the bulk of anti-incumbent, deregulatory changes between 1955 and 1993 applied after campaigning began, leaving precampaign restrictions disproportionately stringent. While all major elections (both houses of parliament and prefectural leadership positions) started with 30 days of campaigning in 1950, the post-*Kōji* period for Lower House elections gradually dropped to 20 days in 1958 and 15 in 1983, until by 1994, candidates could only campaign for 12 days. In the same span, the campaign periods for Upper House and Gubernatorial elections fell to 17 days, and that for the Prefectural Assembly to nine days.

LDP proposals to raise candidacy deposits, which can be reclaimed only if candidates win more than a spec-

ified proportion of the votes, are another example of counterreform. Although the Electoral System Deliberation Council initially recommended an increase in deposits to reduce frivolous candidates, the LDP took this suggestion to extremes. While GDP per capita only increased tenfold between 1950 and 1992, deposit rates for Lower House, Upper House, and Gubernatorial elections increased a *hundredfold*, from ¥30,000 per candidate to ¥3,000,000. If a political party wanted to run just one candidate in all 129 districts in 1992, it would have had to pay ¥387,000,000 (\$3.5 million). Higher deposits make it difficult for financially poorer candidates and parties to run in elections, thereby limiting opportunities for entry by nonincumbents. Because fluctuations in election results are correlated with the number of fringe party entrants and spoiler candidates (Johnston et al. 1999) minimizing new competitors allows incumbents to make more accurate predictions about the next election—and thus formulate better strategies for how to win. At the same time, higher deposits increased the electoral salience of LDP factions, which leveraged financial aid to woo neophyte LDP candidates who lacked personal wealth (Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1993).

A simple analysis of the timing of microlevel changes confirms the counterbalancing hypothesis. First, anti-incumbent rule changes were more likely when government popularity was declining, and hence the need for face-saving measures was greater. The correlation between the enactment of an anti-incumbent regulation in Diet session (t) and public opinion swings in government disapproval from the last to current Diet sessions ($t-1$ to t) is 0.214. Passage of pro-incumbent bills, on the other hand, is not significantly correlated with fluctuations in government disapproval rates (0.093), but it is highly correlated with the enactment of an anti-incumbent bill in the same Diet session (0.682).⁷

The incrementalism in pro-incumbent biases also staved off public perceptions that the LDP was drastically

⁷These intuitions are confirmed by a logistic regression model analyzing the probability that pro-incumbent rule changes (the dependent variable) are enacted during a given parliamentary session. The regression restricts the data to the LDP's heyday between 1960 and 1991, i.e., beginning after the initial intraparty squabbles following the party's formation and ending before the factional defections which marked the end of the LDP's single-party dominance. I control for fluctuations in public opinion support for the LDP, the Japan Socialist Party, and the Cabinet more generally, as well as the number of months till the next election and the length of the Diet session itself. I find that the probability of pro-incumbent legislation increases by 44.9% in Diet sessions where an anti-incumbent bill was also passed. In other words, the strongest incentive to restrict electioneering regulations obtains when the LDP seeks to counteract an anti-incumbent rule change. Results from this logistic regression are available from the author upon request.

altering the electoral framework in its favor. The average shift in Cabinet or LDP approval rates in the month after pro-incumbent revisions is less than 0.5%. This is in stark contrast to the consternation raised by attempts to alter macrolevel rules. In 1973, when Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei proposed the adoption of a mixed-member electoral system, the opposition parties immediately took to the streets, disparaging the plan as “Kaku-mander” and accusing the LDP of circumventing the will of the people. On May 11, the Socialists, Communists, and Komeito publicly committed to stifling any debate on the measure and threatened to block all 100 government bills that the LDP hoped to present during that Diet session. The three parties also began to distribute pamphlets criticizing the reform plan, and on May 15, orchestrated a public demonstration in 565 locations that mobilized 320,000 protestors (Asahi Chronicle 2000).

Explaining the Effects of Microlevel Rule Changes

While the level of symmetry in benefits determines the content and timing of microlevel electoral rule changes, what remains to be explained is their substantive effect on election outcomes. Here, I examine the impact of gradual reductions in the official campaign period on the probability of victory of individual candidates. While the Japanese Public Office Election Law is complex, a distinctive characteristic is the separation of campaigning tactics that are permissible before and after *Kōji*, the day elections are called and when the official campaign period begins. One of the LDP’s most effective tactics was to reduce this campaign period over time, making it more difficult for challengers to compete effectively against incumbents. Notably, because the post-*Kōji* period was shortened gradually, we can operationalize it as a continuous variable and measure the effect of each reduction on the election prospects of LDP candidates. This avoids methodological problems that complicate the analysis of other microlevel rules, which were either never changed, such as the prohibition on door-to-door campaigning, or were changed only once, such as restrictions on campaign donations.

Specification of Variables

To test the effect of reducing the campaign period on election outcomes, I use a logistic regression model where the dependent variable is whether *a given candidate wins a*

seat in her district. The dependent variable is coded as “1” when the candidate wins a seat and “0” when the candidate loses. The dataset is limited to candidates who have run in at least one previous election to accommodate explanatory factors relating to prior performance; the time frame is restricted to the LDP’s single-party majority between 1955 and 1990.⁸ This yields a total sample size of 9,375.

The independent variables include the factor of interest—*length of the campaign period*—as well as other measures predicting election outcomes, such as party affiliation and district characteristics. *Kōji* is a continuous variable that measures the number of official campaign days leading up to the election (25 days = 1,873 cases; 20 days = 5,938 cases; 15 days = 1,564 cases). *Incumbent* is a dichotomous variable that takes the value of “1” when the candidate is an incumbent, i.e., had won a seat in the previous election (6,278 cases). Incumbents should have a higher chance of reelection based on greater name recognition as sitting parliamentarians, as well as the policy tools they have at their disposal to win over additional voter support. I also include an interactive term, *Incumbent* Kōji*, to measure whether the length of the campaign period has different effects for incumbents versus challengers. Given my hypothesis that longer campaign periods benefit challengers more than incumbents, the coefficient for *Kōji* should be positive, while that for *Incumbent* Kōji* should be negative.

The model incorporates four party-level variables—*LDP*, *JSP*, *JCP*, and *Independent*—which are dichotomous measures that take the value of “1” when the candidate is an official nominee of the Liberal Democratic Party, the Japan Socialist Party, the Japan Communist Party, or is unaffiliated (4,654; 1,863; 1,144; and 140 cases, respectively). Since the LDP and JSP were the dominant parliamentary groups of the postwar period, their candidates should have a higher probability of winning, due to greater name recognition and funding. The Communists, on the other hand, have historically run at least one candidate in every district regardless of their electoral prospects, and thus should have a lower likelihood of winning a seat as a group. Similarly, political independents lack the financial resources or name recognition to compete effectively, and thus should be more likely to lose.⁹ An interaction term, *LDP* Kōji*, is incorporated to test whether LDP candidates do better when campaign activities are limited.

⁸Candidate and district data were provided by Steven Reed.

⁹*Independent* does not include candidates who were tacitly supported by one of the parties but were never officially nominated. Regression results do not change significantly even when these “par-tisan independents” are included; results are available from the author upon request.

Much as incumbents benefit from shorter campaign periods, LDP candidates should do better when opposition parties cannot criticize the LDP and sway the minds of voters effectively. In other words, while *Incumbent* $Kōji$* measures the effects of campaign period length on the personal vote, *LDP* $Kōji$* measures its effect on swings in the party vote.

To take into account the electoral context of each district, I also include *M*, a discrete variable signifying the number of seats in that district (median = 4; range = 2, 6). *Ceteris paribus*, candidates have a better chance of winning when district magnitude is high, since the proportion of votes needed to win a seat is lower. *Urbanization* is a discrete variable where “1” indicates the most rural and “4” signifies the most urban districts (median = 2). While many rural districts are personal bailiwicks of LDP (and sometimes JSP) candidates, urban areas have historically housed more swing voters and thus enable a greater range of candidates to win (Scheiner 2005). Fixed effects for *Year* are also included to control for time-specific fluctuations that affect all candidates.

To measure the past performance of each candidate, the model incorporates *Previous Vote Share*, a continuous variable that measures the candidate’s vote share in the previous election (median = 0.16; range = 0.00, 0.84). Previous vote share establishes a baseline popularity level for each candidate which should correlate with the number of votes—and hence the probability of winning—in the current election. While *Incumbent* captures this baseline popularity to some degree, including *Previous Vote Share* disaggregates a pure incumbency advantage—namely control over public policy at time (t)—from the factors that may have allowed that candidate to win previously at time (t-1). Finally, as a measure of overall party performance, I include a continuous variable for *GDP Growth*, which is the change in GDP per capita from the previous year to the current, as well as an interaction term, *LDP* $GDP Growth$* . *Ceteris paribus*, incumbent parties tend to do better when the economy is performing well (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000); the prospects for LDP candidates should improve when GDP growth is high, while non-LDP candidates should do better during periods of low growth.¹⁰

Regression Analysis

I analyze the effects of campaign period length on the probability of being elected using two related logistic re-

gression models, and the results are shown in Table 2. The first model incorporates party and district variables but leaves out *Kōji* and related interaction terms, while the second model includes all independent variables. Model 2 is obviously the more complete model and includes our factor of interest, but the sign and statistical significance of the independent variables remain consistent across specifications, signifying the robustness of the models overall. The ensuing discussion is based on Model 2.

The results mirror the stated expectation that shorter *Kōji* benefits LDP incumbents. Unsurprisingly, the strongest predictor of winning is *Previous Vote Share*: the better the candidate’s performance in the last election, the higher the probability of winning in the current one. The other coefficients are also in line with our intuitions. Holding all variables at their median values,¹¹ an LDP *Incumbent* candidate wins 78% of the time, compared to 61% for LDP nonincumbents. As for party affiliation, the victory rate of nonincumbent JSP candidates is 59% (almost identical to LDP nonincumbents), and for both Communist Party and Independent candidates, a lowly 4%. District characteristics also matter: candidates running in larger districts have a higher probability of winning than candidates running in low *M* districts, while the overall odds of winning are also higher in urban districts. Similarly, *GDP Growth* has a positive effect on LDP candidates but a negative effect on all other candidates, although the substantive effects are small: a one standard deviation increase in GDP from 5 to 9% only increases the victory rate of LDP candidates by 0.1%.

The key result, however, concerns the effects of reducing the official campaign period, as captured by the variables *Kōji*, *Incumbent* $Kōji$* , and *LDP* $Kōji$* . As hypothesized, challengers generally do better when *Kōji* is longer, while incumbents have a higher chance of winning when *Kōji* is shorter (as evinced by the negative coefficient on *Incumbent* $Kōji$*). Similarly, LDP candidates do worse when the campaign period is longer, when compared to opposition party hopefuls (negative coefficient on *LDP* $Kōji$*). To better depict how variance in campaign lengths helped the LDP stave off challengers from opposition parties, Figure 3 plots the predicted *difference* in the probabilities of victory between *LDP incumbents* and *JSP challengers*. A larger differential signals the relatively greater winning prospects of LDP incumbents. LDP incumbents were chosen as the baseline because their victory is what guarantees the LDP its majority in the Diet. The JSP, on the other hand, was the main opposition party prior to 1993, and

¹⁰Models including other macroeconomic variables, such as inflation and unemployment, did not affect the coefficient or standard error of other variables; they are excluded here to simplify the analysis.

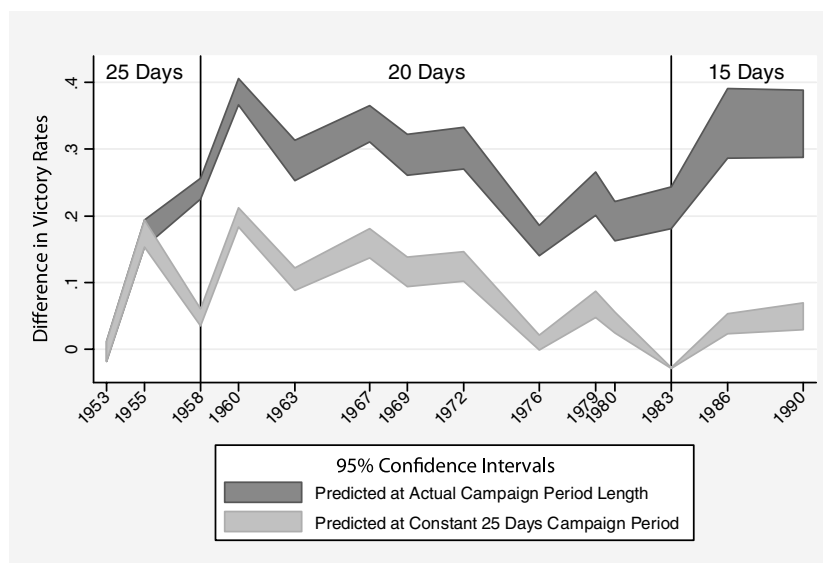
¹¹*M* = 4; *Urbanization* = 2; *Year* = 1969; *Legal Days* = 20; *Previous Vote Share* = 0.155; *LDP, JSP* = 0; *GDP Change* = 5.207.

TABLE 2 The Effect of Campaign Length on Japanese Elections

N = 9375	Model: Logistic Regression, Robust Standard Errors			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient	Std. Er.	Coefficient	Std. Er.
Constant	-6.681	0.307***	-8.895	0.513***
LDP	0.391	0.120**	2.622	0.396***
JSP	0.680	0.086***	0.679	0.085***
JCP	-0.858	0.108***	-0.830	0.107***
Independents	-1.192	0.308***	-1.585	0.306***
Incumbent	0.006	0.077	0.840	0.367*
M	0.857	0.043***	0.852	0.043***
Urbanization	0.076	0.027**	0.077	0.027**
GDP Change	-0.038	0.015*	-0.078	0.015***
LDP* GDP Change	0.049	0.016**	0.079	0.017***
Previous Vote Share	22.416	0.966***	22.224	0.971***
Kōji			0.134	0.020***
Incumbent*Kōji			-0.042	0.018*
LDP*Kōji			-0.121	0.019***
Not displayed: fixed effects for "Year"				
Pseudo-R ²	0.297		0.301	
% Correctly Predicted	79.53%		79.62%	
Area under ROC Curve	0.821		0.825	

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.

FIGURE 3 Electoral Prospects of LDP Incumbents vs. JSP Challengers at Varying Campaign Period Lengths

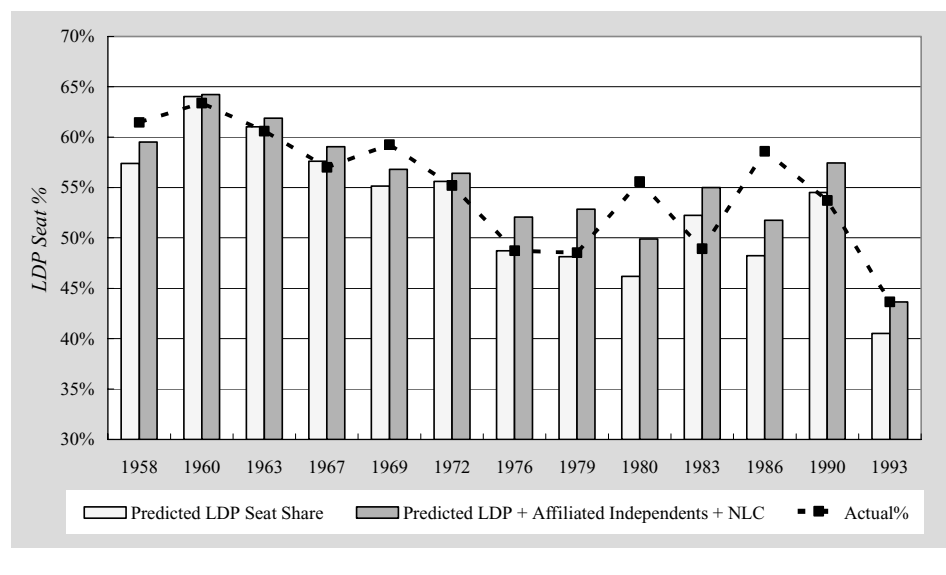


its electoral success would have contributed most directly to the LDP's dethronement.

Two separate values are calculated: (1) the predicted victory differential as the official campaign period fluctuates in length, and (2) the predicted victory differential had the campaign period remained constant at 25 days. The shaded regions correspond to the area between the upper and lower confidence bounds at the 95% level.

Two separate values are calculated: (1) the predicted victory differential as the official campaign period fluctuates in length, and (2) the predicted victory differential had the campaign period remained constant at 25 days. The shaded regions correspond to the area between the upper and lower confidence bounds at the 95% level.

FIGURE 4 Predicting LDP Seat Share at Constant Campaign Period of 25 Days



Predicted values are calculated using median values for each type of candidate in that given year (i.e., median LDP incumbent vs. median JSP challenger characteristics in 1955, 1958, and so on). Since 1955, the average difference in the predicted victory rates of LDP incumbents and JSP challengers stays between 20 and 40%. The simulation for victory differentials had the *Kōji* length always been 25 days, however, illustrates the extent to which microlevel electoral manipulation helped the LDP. If *Kōji* had stayed at 25 days—the mandated period in 1952—for the duration of the LDP’s tenure, the victory differential would have been about 20% lower. In both 1976 and 1983, JSP challengers would have actually had a *better* chance of winning than LDP incumbents.

Figure 4 goes one step further and simulates LDP seat share had *Kōji* remained at 25 days. Based on the logistic regression coefficients from Table 2, I calculate predicted probabilities of victory for every candidate, and then rerank candidates within each district in order of that victory rate. The top M vote-getters, where M = district magnitude, are classified as new winners. Two separate simulations are conducted: first, where only seats won by official LDP candidates are tabulated, and second, where seats captured by LDP-affiliated independents and candidates of the New Liberal Club—an LDP splinter party that nevertheless supported the LDP in parliament—are also included. The actual seat share of the LDP (including only official LDP candidates) is depicted by the dotted line, while the simulated results are indicated by bars.

Of the 4,903 LDP candidates whose victory rates are calculated, 3,320 who actually won would have remained

victorious even with *Kōji* at 25 days long, and 363 who actually lost would still have lost. However, the simulations indicate that 490 actual victors (10% of the total) would have lost under a constant campaign period of 25 days. As Figure 4 shows, this reversal in victory is concentrated in two election years, 1980 and 1986, when the LDP would have won 46.2% and 48.2% of the total seats, respectively.¹² The LDP *did*, of course, actually win less than a majority in 1976, 1979, and 1983, but in all three occasions, the LDP wooed conservative independents into their fold after the election or ruled in conjunction with the New Liberal Club. The simulations are less dire when including these two groups in the calculations, since the LDP’s seat share increases by an average margin of 3–5%. However, the simulations also indicate that even with these bonus seats, the LDP *should have lost its majority in 1980*, where the LDP en masse would have won 255 seats, or 49.8% of the total. While the LDP ultimately fell from grace in 1993, postwar Japanese politics may have reached its watershed moment a decade earlier had the LDP not altered microlevel electoral rules strategically.

Conclusion

The larger contributions of this article are twofold. First, it analyzes the endogeneity of electoral rules

¹²The 1980 and 1986 elections were “Double Elections,” where Lower and Upper House elections were held concurrently. As Inoguchi (1986) writes, public interest in these elections was stronger than usual, and the LDP benefited from the higher-than-expected turnout by conservative voters.

comprehensively by expanding the definition of the electoral system to include microlevel rules that are typically ignored in the literature. At the same time, by comparing incidences of both successful and failed electoral reform, this article gets better traction of the decision-making process *within* political parties. Existing studies have long recognized that the asymmetrical distribution of costs and benefits from electoral rule change create potential conflicts between parties, but they have downplayed how the same asymmetries may pit members of the same party against one another. The first half of the article shows that intraparty consensus over macrolevel changes is rare because benefits from reform are asymmetrically distributed; the second half argues that this problem is mitigated in the case of microlevel changes which generate symmetrical benefits.

Second, the article demonstrates how difficult it has become for Japanese voters to “throw out the rascals,” precisely because of the prohibitive electoral hurdles facing new candidates with low name recognition. While party affiliation matters for the electoral prospects of each candidate, a greater distinction is whether she is an incumbent or a challenger. For a party on the wrong end of public approval fluctuations, tactics which protect incumbents are an effective means for holding on to power, even if they reduce the electoral prospects of the party’s own nonincumbent candidates.

The shortness of the POEL’s campaign period is of particular importance in understanding the long-term electoral dynamics of Japanese politics. Despite the promise of programmatic politics under the new mixed-member majoritarian system of 1994, abbreviated electioneering continues to make it easier for voters to evaluate retrospective performance than prospective policy platforms. This generates continued electoral pressures for candidates to build up local support networks (*koenkai*), and this in turn benefits the LDP, which is better at recruiting local politicians who already have an established vote base (Scheiner 2005).

In fact, most of the POEL’s restrictive regulations have remained intact despite the fundamental change in the electoral formula. *Prima facie*, there have been some changes which open up the election process, such as allowing privately funded campaign commercials on TV, granting public subsidies to parties to defray overhead costs, and lower ceilings on private donations. These reforms reflect the increasing clout of non-LDP parties after 1994, when LDP-led coalition governments have become the norm. What the LDP giveth with one hand, however, it quickly taketh away with the other: new rules since 1994 require any political posters advertising candidate names to be torn down prior to *Kōji* (enacted 1999), limit

the usage of official campaign cars in distributing written pamphlets (enacted 2000), and most importantly, reduce the *Kōji* period for Lower House elections to 12 days (enacted 1994). Electoral rule changes allowed the LDP to survive economic downturns, corruption and bribery scandals, and declining demographic advantages, preserving its single-party dominance for 38 years. These same rules may help safeguard the LDP’s reign even further into the future.

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