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Beyond winners and losers: trust and the occurrence of elections in a quasi-experimental setting

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the attitudinal consequences of election occurrence, focusing on political trust and efficacy. While prior research has examined how electoral outcomes shape citizens' views, less is known about whether elections themselves influence political attitudes. Leveraging the quasi-experimental variation created when some prefectures deviated from Japan's unified electoral cycle in 2023, we compare survey responses collected before and after the elections across prefectures that shared a nationwide electoral environment but differed in whether residents had the opportunity to participate. The findings show that elections do not significantly affect political efficacy but do enhance political trust when high-salience gubernatorial contests coincide with local council elections. Subgroup analyses reveal that these trust-enhancing effects are concentrated among lower-educated and lower-income citizens, suggesting that elections may narrow participatory inequalities, even if they do not generate a self-reinforcing cycle of participation. By shifting attention from electoral outcomes to electoral occurrence, this study advances understanding of how elections shape political attitudes and engages with debates on second-order elections that emphasize variation in the salience of contests. The results underscore the symbolic and substantive roles of elections in sustaining democratic legitimacy and highlight how the visibility of elections can reinforce political trust.

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1. Introduction

Elections have long been regarded as a cornerstone of democratic governance, serving as the primary mechanism through which citizens express political preferences and hold leaders accountable. Yet recent global developments have raised critical questions about their substantive meaning in contemporary democracies. Authoritarian leaders have manipulated electoral processes to legitimize their rule, while populist movements have used elections to erode democratic norms. At the same time, new forms of mobilization, particularly those facilitated by online platforms, have created alternative arenas for political participation. These developments challenge the traditional view of elections as the definitive channel of democratic representation and invite us to reconsider their role and impact on political attitudes.

This study addresses these emerging concerns by exploring the attitudinal consequences of elections, with a focus on political trust and political efficacy. While prior research has primarily examined how political attitudes influence electoral participation (Cancela and Geys 2016; Geys 2006; Kostelka and Blais 2021; Leininger, Rudolph, and Zittlau 2016), the causal influence of elections on political attitudes themselves remains less well understood. Existing studies have tended to emphasize the role of electoral outcomes (whether citizens find themselves on the winning or losing side) in shaping attitudes (Cancela and Geys 2016; Daoust and Nadeau 2023; Singh and Mayne 2023). This outcome-centered perspective, however, overlooks the possibility that the actual occurrence of elections themselves, independent of their results, may shape how citizens view politics.

To investigate this, we employ a quasi-experimental design that leverages the unique context of Japan's local elections. While most local governments participate in unified elections held simultaneously across the country, some have departed from this cycle due to unexpected resignations of political heads or unforeseen events like natural disasters. This institutional setting creates a natural opportunity to compare political attitudes across prefectures that are exposed to the same nationwide electoral environment but differ in whether residents have the opportunity to participate in elections (Fukumoto and Horiuchi 2011, 2016; Fukumoto, Horiuchi, and Tanaka 2020). This design allows us to identify the effect of electoral occurrence, more specifically, the opportunity to participate, under conditions of broadly shared, though not identical, exposure, an effect that is often difficult to disentangle in other contexts.

Through online opinion surveys conducted before and after the elections, this study examines the effects of elections on two key political attitudes: political efficacy and political trust. Political efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their ability to influence political processes, while political trust concerns their

confidence in political institutions and actors and is measured here through perceptions of corruption among local politicians. Our findings reveal that while elections do not significantly impact political efficacy, they have a significant positive effect on political trust.

This effect is particularly significant in regions where gubernatorial elections, often perceived by citizens as more consequential, are held simultaneously with local council elections. This distinction resonates with the classical framework of first-order and second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980), suggesting that higher-salience contests can amplify trust.

By shifting the focus from election outcomes to the occurrence of elections themselves, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how democratic processes can influence political attitudes (Lundmark, Oscarsson, and Weissenbilder 2020; Singh 2025; Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). It highlights the importance of considering not only who wins or loses in an election, but how the very act of holding elections can influence citizens' trust in the political system. Moreover, by examining heterogeneous effects across socioeconomic groups, the study shows that elections may bolster trust particularly among less-educated and lower-income citizens: groups traditionally less engaged in politics. In doing so, this research underscores both the symbolic role of elections in reinforcing democratic legitimacy and their potential to narrow participatory inequalities.

The study first reviews related literature to understand the effects of elections on political attitudes. We then detail our quasi-experimental design and data collection methods, followed by an analysis of how the occurrence of elections influences political efficacy and trust. In addition to these average effects, we also examine heterogeneous impacts across socioeconomic groups, thereby assessing whether elections widen or narrow participatory inequalities. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results, address the limitations of our study, and propose directions for future research.

2. Literature

Elections are widely regarded as essential procedures in democratic decision-making, with a strong tradition of research focused on understanding why people participate in them. The underlying assumption in much of this research is that greater electoral participation enhances democratic legitimacy. Scholars have explored various mechanisms to explain this phenomenon, including socialization through interactions with others who value elections and self-selection, where those who already find value in elections are more likely to participate. However, consensus on what specific attitudes promote electoral participation remains elusive. In addition to studies focusing on individuals, various studies have offered different explanations of turnout at the aggregate level of national and local governments (Cancala

and Geys 2016; Geys 2006; Kostelka and Blais 2021; Leininger, Rudolph, and Zittlau 2016).

A significant portion of the literature has concentrated on how the outcomes of elections affect people's political attitudes. It is generally understood that, on an individual level, favorable election results strengthen positive attitudes toward elections and democracy, whereas unfavorable outcomes have the opposite effect. Specifically, when a candidate supported by a voter wins, there is often an increase in the voter's sense of external efficacy, defined as the belief that political actors are responsive to citizens' demands (Clarke and Acock 1989; Craig et al. 2006; Davis 2014; Davis and Hitt 2017; Hansen and Pedersen 2014). However, the impact of election outcomes on internal efficacy (understanding and effectively participating in politics) remains controversial, with a variety of research findings, including studies that attempt to identify the context in which the effects manifest (Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Banducci and Karp 2003; Kim 2021; Valentino, Gregorowicz, and Groenendyk 2008).

Beyond political efficacy, scholars have examined the relationship between elections and broader democratic attitudes, such as satisfaction with democracy (SWD) and political trust (Daoust and Nadeau 2023; Singh and Mayne 2023). Research indicates that election outcomes can significantly influence these attitudes, with those aligned with the winning side generally expressing higher satisfaction with democracy and greater political trust (Anderson et al. 2005; Blais and Gélneau 2007; Farrer and Zingher 2018; Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012). However, the negative attitudes of consistent "losers" in elections pose a potential threat to democratic stability, as dissatisfaction may erode trust in democratic institutions. This dynamic is particularly evident in majoritarian electoral systems, which clearly delineate winners and losers, as opposed to proportional representation systems where the distinctions are less stark (Banducci, Donovan, and Karp 1999; Hooghe and Stiers 2016).

While much of the existing literature has focused on the consequences of election results, there has been less attention to the impact of the electoral process itself on political attitudes. Some studies suggest that participation in elections, regardless of the outcome, can influence political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy (Finkel 1985, 1987). It has been proposed that elections reinforce the belief in the effectiveness of democracy, thus bolstering political efficacy. Moreover, exposure to electoral campaigns may increase political interest and engagement, leading to more positive political attitudes (Banducci and Karp 2003; Hansen and Pedersen 2014; Kostelka and Blais 2018). However, the challenge of distinguishing between the effects of self-selection into voting and the impact of the election itself complicates the analysis of these relationships. However, these studies primarily examine the effects of individual-level participation or campaign exposure. What remains

underexplored is whether the occurrence of elections, irrespective of whether one votes or engages with campaigns, can shape broader political attitudes such as trust and efficacy. Given the central role of elections in democratic life, it is plausible that merely living in a political context where elections are taking place has attitudinal consequences. This possibility calls for a shift in focus: from electoral participation to electoral presence.

Recent methodological advancements have addressed these challenges by isolating the impact of elections from pre-existing attitudes. For example, studies employing regression discontinuity designs, particularly those focusing on newly enfranchised young voters, have shown that the experience of voting can increase political engagement and support for democracy (Holbein et al. 2021; Khoban 2019). However, most of these efforts focus on the act of voting among specific subpopulations, often young first-time voters, which raises questions about the generalizability of their findings to the broader electorate.

A different line of research has relied on quasi-natural experiments to assess how electoral occurrence itself can shape political trust. Lundmark, Oscarsson, and Weissenbilder (2020) show that a failed election in Sweden undermined confidence in the election authority and reduced satisfaction with democracy, while Turnbull-Dugarte (2022) finds that the announcement of a snap election in the United Kingdom temporarily increased trust in political institutions.

More recently, Singh (2025) demonstrates that the occurrence of elections itself tends to increase satisfaction with democracy across several countries, even among electoral losers. Existing studies suggest several mechanisms through which elections may shape attitudes, including the informational and mobilizing effects of campaigns, increased public attention to politics, and the symbolic reassurance that democratic institutions are functioning and responsive to citizens' voice. These studies demonstrate that unexpected disruptions or opportunities in the electoral calendar can influence citizens' political attitudes, independently of outcomes, yet empirical evidence on these mechanisms remains limited. Sharing this quasi-experimental perspective, our study leverages a more systematic institutional context to identify the effects of electoral occurrence. Japan's unified local elections, in which most prefectures vote simultaneously but some depart from this cycle due to historical contingencies, provide a quasi-experimental setting that allows us to compare attitudes in regions with and without elections. Whereas previous research has focused on differences before and after unexpected elections, this study instead emphasizes cross-regional differences between areas where elections occurred and those where they did not during the period of the "Unified Local Elections," when exposure to elections increases nationwide. Amid highly visible nationwide election campaigns, a situation arises in which the ability to participate in elections and choose representatives

depends on historical contingencies. In this context, we examine the mechanism whereby the opportunity to participate in an election, rather than exposure to campaign activity itself, enhances trust and a sense of political efficacy, whereas the absence of such opportunities may weaken them. This study seeks to contribute to this literature by examining the impact of elections on political attitudes beyond the influence of electoral outcomes. Specifically, we focus on the occurrence of elections as a political event, irrespective of whether individuals vote or not. Leveraging the institutional context of Japan's unified local elections, where some prefectures deviate from the cycle due to contingent factors, we exploit naturally occurring variation in election timing to identify the effects of electoral occurrence on political trust and efficacy. In doing so, our approach complements existing studies that emphasize participation or outcomes, while extending the scope to consider the broader political environment created by elections.

3. Research design

A key challenge in studying the impact of elections on political attitudes is disentangling the effects of the various elements generated by the electoral process. During election periods, political parties and candidates conduct visible campaigns through the media, and voters' exposure to these campaigns may heighten their political interest. In addition, as previous research has shown, election outcomes are likely to shape voters' political attitudes. However, even when accounting for these factors associated with the electoral process, an important question remains: does the mere opportunity to participate in an election influence individuals' political attitudes?

To address this challenge, this study leverages the unique institutional setting of Japan's unified local elections. Introduced in 1947, these elections were designed to align the terms of office for governors, local council members, and other officials on a four-year cycle. This national character is also reflected in the broader informational and institutional environment surrounding the elections. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, which oversees local governance, does not routinely publish comprehensive results for most local elections. However, in the case of unified local elections, it compiles and disseminates results at the national level and conducts election awareness campaigns nationwide, thereby treating these elections as a single, coordinated national event (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2023). Major national media outlets further reinforce this shared context by launching dedicated election websites and providing regular coverage through nationwide television news programs, including election specials broadcast across the country by NHK (e.g. NHK 2023).

Furthermore, although these are formally local elections, national political parties are actively involved and substantial political resources are mobilized.

In particular, national political parties release policy platforms specifically tailored to unified local elections, thereby positioning these contests as part of a broader national political competition (e.g. Go2senkyo 2023). Since the Abe administration elevated regional revitalization as a key policy agenda in 2015, issues such as reducing overconcentration in Tokyo and addressing population decline in rural areas have been framed as national challenges, despite their local character. As previous research indicates, the discourse of national political parties in the run-up to these elections often emphasizes regional revitalization and demographic issues, thereby highlighting shared national concerns across local contests (Hijino 2024). While the intensity of election campaigns may vary across prefectures, these features suggest that, during unified local elections, voters are exposed to a broadly shared, though not identical, national electoral environment. While many prefectural assemblies have maintained this schedule, past events, including fiscal scandals in the 1960s (Tokyo and Ibaraki), the reversion of administrative authority in the 1970s (Okinawa), and major earthquakes in the 2010s (Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima), have led some elections to be held outside the regular cycle. In contrast, gubernatorial elections have deviated from the cycle for somewhat different reasons. In the early postwar period, governors frequently resigned, not only due to corruption or moves to national politics, but also to gain electoral advantage, as such strategic resignations were permitted until a legal amendment in 1956. This resulted in politically motivated resignations in 10 prefectures. After 1956, resignations due to health reasons (including death) became more common, although resignations to run for national office and those related to corruption continued. Most deviations from the electoral cycle occurred before 2000; more recent exceptions are limited to natural disasters (Iwate), national-level political developments (Tokyo), and the death of a governor (Fukuoka). Previous studies have demonstrated that this variation can be treated as plausibly exogenous and have used it to identify causal effects of elections (Fukumoto and Horiuchi 2011, 2016; Fukumoto, Horiuchi, and Tanaka 2020). Prior research has often used municipalities as the unit of analysis, taking advantage of their large number, whereas this study combines prefectural-level variation with survey data to assess the impact of electoral occurrence on political trust and political efficacy. A summary of these deviations and their underlying causes is provided in the Online Appendix (Table A1).

This study takes advantage of the prefectural-level elections held on April 9, 2023. While most prefectures adhered to the unified schedule, six did not hold elections that year due to external factors. This setting enables a comparison between voters in 41 prefectures exposed to elections and those in six prefectures without elections, thereby isolating the effect of election occurrence on political trust and efficacy among the general population. In addition, within the 41 prefectures holding elections, nine also held

gubernatorial elections concurrently with local council elections. Since gubernatorial contests are often perceived as higher-stakes events with greater influence on prefectural governance, this distinction allows us to further examine whether the significance of the election shapes its impact on political attitudes. This perspective resonates with the classic “second-order election” thesis (Reif and Schmitt 1980), which emphasizes that voters evaluate different types of elections in hierarchical terms of importance. By comparing voters in prefectures with and without gubernatorial contests, our design captures this variation in electoral stakes and its consequences for political attitudes.

This research design enables us to examine whether the mere occurrence of elections, independent of individual participation, affects political trust and efficacy. By exploiting naturally occurring variation in election timing across Japan’s prefectures, and comparing regions within the same nationwide electoral context, we can provide evidence on how the occurrence of elections shapes political attitudes beyond electoral outcomes. In this way, our study highlights the value of Japan’s institutional setting as a quasi-experimental opportunity to assess the broader attitudinal consequences of electoral presence itself.

4. Data

The key outcome variables in this study are political efficacy and trust in local politicians. Political efficacy is divided into two components: external political efficacy and internal political efficacy. External political efficacy is measured by respondents’ agreement with the statement, “Local government public officials don’t care much what people like me think.” (reverse coded). Internal political efficacy is measured by respondents’ agreement with the statement, “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing my neighborhood.” Political trust is measured by agreement with the statement, “There is widespread corrupt behavior in which local politicians abuse public power for their own benefit in my local government.” (reverse coded). The items measuring political efficacy are based on questions widely used in surveys such as the American National Election Studies, whereas the trust item is tailored to the Japanese context. In particular, given the frequent occurrence of corruption among local politicians, the trust measure focuses on respondents’ expectations regarding the behavior of local officials. All responses were collected on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The data were collected through two online surveys conducted on March 16–18, 2023 (before the elections) and April 15–17, 2023 (after the elections). Around 1,500 respondents participated in each wave. Although voting for mayoral elections in about 10% of cities and city council elections in

approximately 35% of cities began on the afternoon of April 16, more than two-thirds of the responses were collected before the start of municipal elections. The respondents were drawn from an online panel provided by Rakuten Insight Inc., which offers access to a diverse pool of individuals across Japan. Prior to participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and data handling procedures and provided informed consent. To enhance representativeness, respondents were selected using quota sampling based on gender, age, and region so that the distribution of each cell closely approximated that of the national census. The study received approval from the university’s institutional review board, and the research design was preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF), ensuring transparency and adherence to ethical standards.

Respondents were distributed across three groups: six prefectures without elections, 32 prefectures with only local council elections, and nine prefectures with both gubernatorial and council elections. [Table 1](#) summarizes the number of respondents in each group, and [Figure 1](#) provides a geographical overview of their distribution across Japan. These figures illustrate the natural variation in electoral exposure, which forms the basis of our research design.

While the survey design incorporated quota sampling to align the distribution of respondents with the national census in terms of gender, age, and region, the validity of our inferences does not depend solely on representativeness. The crucial point is that our empirical strategy compares individuals across groups defined by electoral exposure. Whereas previous studies have adopted designs that divide respondents into two groups, one before and one after an unexpected election (Lundmark, Oscarsson, and Weissenbilder [2020](#); Singh [2025](#); Turnbull-Dugarte [2022](#)), this study instead defines four groups based on the presence or absence of an election and whether respondents were surveyed before or after the election. In the context of nationwide unified local elections, accompanied by extensive campaign activity, some individuals are able to participate in elections while others are not. Exploiting this setting, we employ a difference-in-differences framework to estimate the effects of electoral participation or non-participation under conditions of broadly shared, though not identical, exposure to nationwide election campaigns.

Table 1. Survey sample distribution.

Group	March survey (N)	April survey (N)
No elections (6 prefectures)	292	270
Council elections only (32 prefectures)	856	869
Gubernatorial + council elections (9 prefectures)	355	372
All respondents	1503	1511

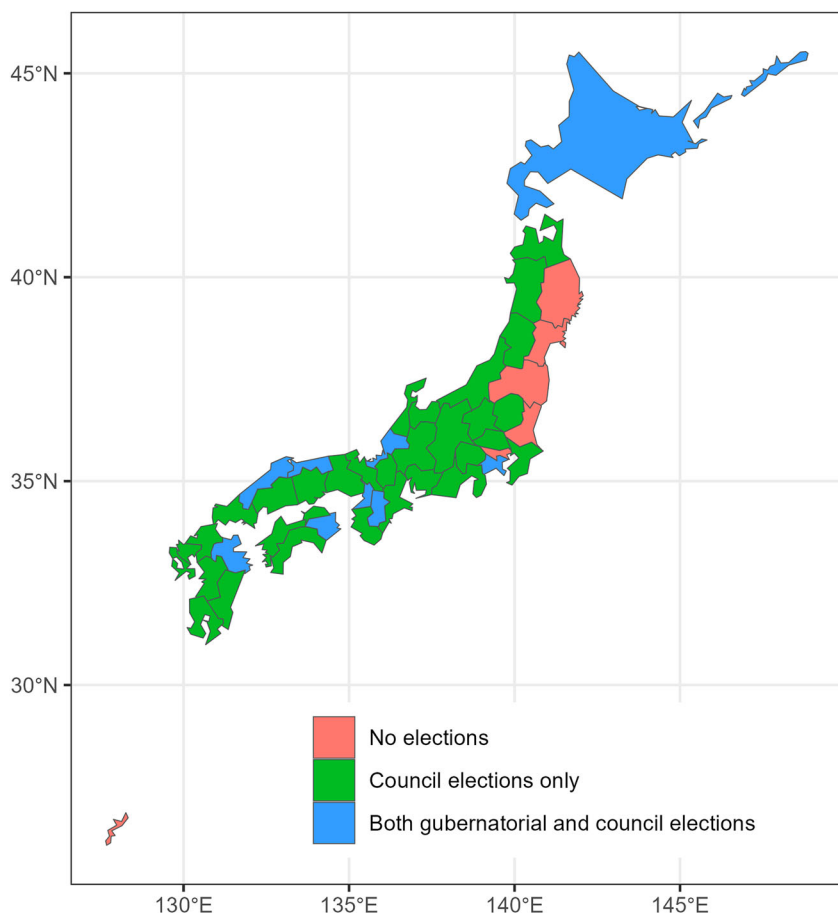


Figure 1. Elections on April 7, 2023.

We conducted two rounds of quota sampling – one before and one after the election – and assessed whether respondents in prefectures with and without elections were balanced in terms of observable characteristics. To evaluate this balance, we compared demographic and attitudinal variables across groups (see Online Appendix Figure A2). Specifically, we calculated standardized bias (standardized difference), expressed as a percentage, for the following covariates (Rosenbaum and Rubin 1985): gender, age, educational attainment, income level, residential area, political ideology (10-point scale), and risk tolerance (10-point scale). Educational attainment was categorized into five levels based on the highest level of schooling completed, with corresponding standard years calculated for each category; income was categorized into 15 levels. Residential location was classified into three groups: metropolitan areas (including the 23 special wards of

Tokyo and government-designated cities), other cities, and towns and villages. In addition to comparing pooled data from prefectures without elections (six prefectures) and those with elections (41 prefectures), we further distinguished between prefectures with only local assembly elections (32 prefectures) and those with concurrent gubernatorial and assembly elections (nine prefectures). Following Ho et al. (2007), standardized bias values below 25 are generally considered acceptable, and in both cases, most covariates fall within this range.

5. Results

This analysis examines whether participation in elections influences political attitudes under conditions of broadly shared, though not identical, exposure to nationwide election campaigns. The main independent variables are a binary indicator for whether an election was held and a time indicator distinguishing between pre-election and post-election surveys. The interaction between these variables captures the causal effect of the opportunity to participate in elections within a difference-in-differences framework.

In addition to these core variables, we include two substantive variables that capture specific features of the electoral context. The first is whether the respondent resides in an uncontested electoral district. Under Japan's Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system, when the number of candidates does not exceed the number of seats, candidates who have filed nominations are elected without a vote. In recent prefectural elections, the number of such districts has increased. Because uncontested elections eliminate voters' opportunity to participate, this variable accounts for a potential dampening effect on attitude formation. In the April survey, respondents were asked whether the prefectural assembly election in their district had been uncontested, allowing us to identify such cases at the individual level.

The second covariate is whether respondents support the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Given the LDP's long-standing dominance in national politics and its frequent success in prefectural elections, support for the party may systematically shape political attitudes. In contrast, although other parties may secure a limited number of seats, they fall far short of the LDP in terms of overall representation, a pattern that is particularly pronounced at the prefectural level (Sunahara 2024). Previous research has shown that electoral victories and defeats influence citizens' political evaluations (Anderson et al. 2005; Blais and Gélneau 2007; Farrer and Zingher 2018; Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012). Accordingly, we estimate models that additionally control for support for the LDP.

The regression models are estimated using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). While the dependent variables are measured on a seven-point Likert scale, OLS offers straightforward interpretation of coefficients and facilitates

comparison across models. Our primary interest is in identifying differences between individuals with and without the opportunity to participate in elections under conditions of nationwide campaign exposure. Specifically, we estimate the interaction between an indicator for electoral occurrence and a post-election indicator within a difference-in-differences framework. As noted above, we conducted balance checks for observed covariates. However, variables such as political ideology and risk tolerance may independently influence political efficacy and trust, and excluding them could lead to biased estimates (Mutz, Pemantle, and Pham 2019). Accordingly, we report results from models that include all available covariates, with the exception of income, which contains a substantial number of missing values (see the Appendix Table A5 for results including income). To ensure robustness, supplementary analyses with ordinal logit models produce substantively similar results.

The analysis first examines the effect of elections on political efficacy, distinguishing between external and internal components. Standard errors are clustered at the prefectural level. As shown in Table 2, the coefficients on the interaction between the electoral occurrence indicator and the post-election indicator are consistently insignificant (see Appendix Table A3 and A4 for full results). This indicates that the occurrence of elections, whether involving local council contests alone or combined with gubernatorial elections, does not meaningfully alter citizens' perceptions of their influence over political processes (external efficacy) or their understanding of political issues (internal efficacy). Existing research has shown that election outcomes can strengthen voters' sense of efficacy, particularly external efficacy. The null findings here therefore suggest that efficacy is more closely tied to electoral results and personal experiences than to the mere occurrence of an election.

In contrast to political efficacy, the occurrence of elections shows a more discernible effect on political trust. As reported in Table 3, the interaction between the electoral occurrence indicator and the post-election indicator is positive and statistically significant when gubernatorial and local council elections were held concurrently. This suggests elections with higher salience, particularly those involving gubernatorial contests, increase trust in political institutions. By comparison, local council elections alone exhibit a positive but statistically insignificant effect. Taken together, these results suggest that routine local elections may provide only a limited gain in political trust, whereas more salient electoral contests generate a clearer increase in citizens' confidence in political institutions. Figure 2 further illustrates these patterns by presenting predicted values of political trust before and after the election across different electoral contexts. While trust declines in prefectures without elections, it increases in prefectures holding concurrent gubernatorial and council elections, with little change observed for council-only elections. This visual evidence reinforces the regression results, highlighting the

Table 2. Comparison between council elections and non-elections.

	External efficacy		Internal efficacy		Political trust	
	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b
Uncontested	0.097 (0.128)	0.067 (0.124)	-0.067 (0.115)	-0.091 (0.105)	0.037 (0.126)	0.028 (0.128)
LDP support	0.225*** (0.053)	0.262*** (0.062)	0.287*** (0.036)	0.188*** (0.039)	0.191*** (0.057)	0.213** (0.065)
Council * Time	0.012 (0.103)	0.014 (0.094)	-0.074 (0.082)	-0.073 (0.088)	0.203* (0.100)	0.179+ (0.107)
Num.Obs.	2759	2746	2763	2750	2766	2753
R2	0.005	0.018	0.010	0.058	0.005	0.011
R2 Adj.	0.003	0.014	0.008	0.054	0.002	0.007
Std.Errors	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref
Control	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Separate gubernatorial elections from council elections.

	External efficacy		Internal efficacy		Political trust	
	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b
Uncontested	0.120 (0.128)	0.086 (0.125)	−0.052 (0.121)	−0.080 (0.111)	0.052 (0.130)	0.043 (0.132)
LDP support	0.227*** (0.054)	0.263*** (0.062)	0.287*** (0.036)	0.188*** (0.039)	0.191*** (0.057)	0.213*** (0.065)
Council * Time	−0.042 (0.108)	−0.035 (0.100)	−0.115 (0.094)	−0.107 (0.097)	0.160 (0.105)	0.135 (0.112)
Gubernatorial * Time	0.137 (0.136)	0.129 (0.128)	0.022 (0.082)	0.005 (0.095)	0.304* (0.118)	0.283* (0.123)
Num.Obs.	2759	2746	2763	2750	2766	2753
R2	0.006	0.019	0.011	0.058	0.005	0.012
R2 Adj.	0.003	0.014	0.008	0.053	0.002	0.007
Std.Errors	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref	by: pref
Control	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

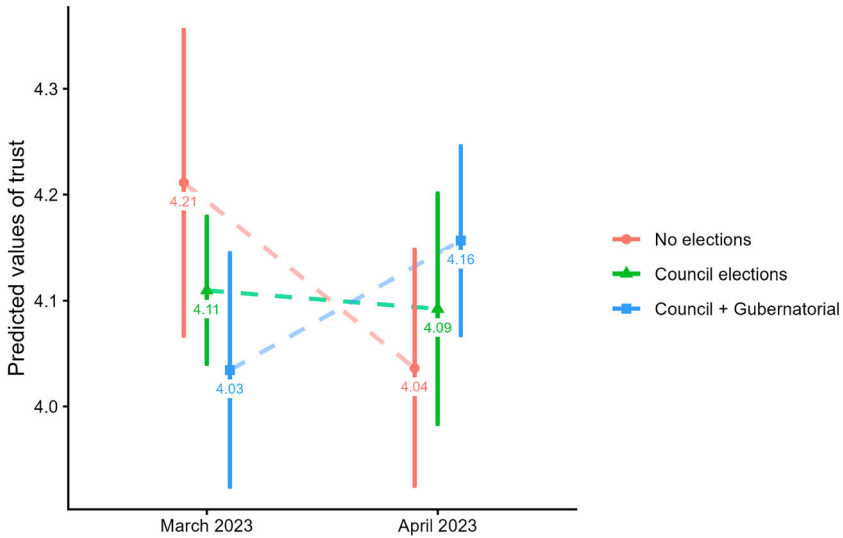


Figure 2. Changes in predicted political trust before and after elections across electoral contexts.

importance of electoral salience in shaping political trust. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing that citizens' political trust is shaped not only by electoral outcomes but also by the symbolic role of democratic institutions and processes themselves (Easton 1975; Norris 2011).

While the presence of uncontested districts does not significantly affect political efficacy or political trust, the inclusion of the LDP support variable in the models confirms its strong association with political trust, consistent with previous findings that electoral outcomes (especially supporting a party that repeatedly wins) reinforce confidence in political institutions. Given the LDP's long-standing dominance at both the national and local levels, individuals who identify with the party are more likely to express higher levels of trust regardless of contemporaneous election events. Importantly, however, even after controlling for LDP support, the positive effect of holding gubernatorial elections remains statistically significant. This suggests that beyond outcome-driven reinforcement, the salience and visibility of gubernatorial elections themselves exert an independent influence on political attitudes.

The results of this study contribute to our understanding of the relationship between elections and political attitudes. While elections do not appear to significantly influence political efficacy, they do enhance political trust, particularly when the elections involve high-stakes positions such as governors. Figure 2 further suggests that, under conditions of nationwide campaign exposure, trust declines in regions without elections, where

individuals are unable to participate while others elsewhere exercise their right to vote. This pattern indicates that the opportunity to participate in elections, rather than campaign exposure alone, plays a key role in shaping political trust. This finding suggests that the mere occurrence of an election can serve as a symbolic mechanism influencing trust in the political system, even if it does not directly empower individuals through increased political efficacy.

This distinction between the effects on efficacy and trust highlights the nuanced role that elections play in democratic societies. Although the impact of election outcomes on political trust is well established, recent research suggests that this effect may be diminishing in highly developed democracies (Nadeau, Daoust, and Dassonneville 2021). Consistent with this perspective, our findings underscore that political trust is shaped not only by electoral outcomes but also by the salience and visibility of the electoral process itself. Moreover, these findings suggest that efforts to improve political trust could benefit from emphasizing the significance of elections, rather than focusing exclusively on turnout or participation rates.

Although the empirical focus here is Japan, the implications extend beyond this case. Japan's electoral calendar, with its frequent simultaneous elections, provides a useful setting to identify the independent effects of electoral events. Future research should investigate whether such effects persist over time, and whether similar dynamics emerge in different institutional and cultural contexts.

6. Exploratory analyses of the heterogeneous effects

The main findings of this study suggest that while the occurrence of high-salience elections can enhance political trust, they do not affect political efficacy. To further probe these results, we conduct exploratory analyses examining whether the effects of elections vary across social groups.

Previous research has established that socioeconomic status (SES) plays a central role in shaping voter participation (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). The classic SES model emphasizes that individuals with greater resources are more likely to participate in politics than those without. Education in particular has been shown to exert a systematic influence, with higher levels of education consistently associated with greater participation across countries (Gallego 2010). Although findings are less consistent, higher-income individuals are generally more likely to vote.

If the effects of elections vary across social attributes, their occurrence may either widen or narrow inequalities in political participation. For example, among individuals with higher levels of education, elections may increase political trust and a sense of efficacy, thereby encouraging further

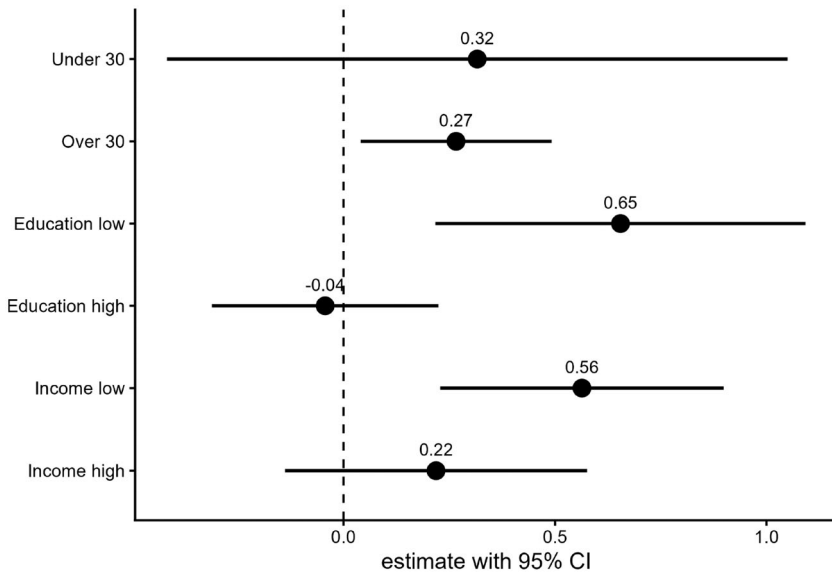


Figure 3. Subgroup effects of elections on political trust.

participation and exacerbating the gap between those with high and low levels of education. Conversely, if elections primarily raise trust in politics among less-educated citizens, the gap may narrow, even if only modestly.

Figure 3 presents subgroup analyses by age (under/over 30), education (university degree or not), and income (above/below 5 million yen annually). The coefficients represent the interaction between gubernatorial elections and the post-election survey wave within each subgroup. The results show that elections significantly increased political trust among individuals with lower levels of education and, to a lesser extent, among those with lower income. By contrast, no significant effects are observed among higher-income or higher-educated respondents. For age, the estimates are positive but not statistically significant. Parallel analyses using political efficacy as the outcome reveal no comparable effects, reinforcing the earlier finding that electoral occurrence does not influence political efficacy. Full regression tables are provided in the appendix (Table A6–A8).

These results should be interpreted with caution, as we do not find statistically significant differences in effect sizes between higher- and lower-education groups or between higher- and lower-income groups. Accordingly, we do not claim heterogeneous effects in a strict statistical sense. Instead, we view these patterns as exploratory. While differences across income groups appear limited, the results for education are more suggestive, with the increase in political trust concentrated among respondents with lower levels of education. One possible interpretation is that individuals with

higher levels of education or income are already more likely to participate in elections and adjust their political trust depending on electoral outcomes. By contrast, among those with lower levels of education or income, political trust may improve modestly simply through the occurrence of elections, regardless of actual participation. This implies that the mechanisms through which elections shape political trust differ between more electorally engaged groups and those that are less engaged. For age, the estimates are positive across groups but do not reach statistical significance, suggesting that any trust-enhancing effect of elections is not clearly differentiated by age in this sample.

However, this pattern should not be interpreted too optimistically. Recent research shows that political efficacy, particularly among lower socioeconomic groups, is a key driver of participation (Garritzmman et al. 2025). In the present study, we do not find evidence that elections enhance political efficacy. Without such effects, it is unlikely that elections alone can generate a positive feedback loop that continuously reinforces political participation. At the same time, the increase in political trust among less-educated and lower-income groups suggests a potential narrowing of participatory inequalities, contrasting with the common expectation that elections primarily reinforce the advantages of resource-rich citizens. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for future comparative research to examine whether similar trust-enhancing effects among disadvantaged groups also emerge in other political and institutional contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the broader attitudinal consequences of elections, focusing on political efficacy and political trust in the context of Japan's local elections. Exploiting the quasi-experimental setting of Japan's unified local elections, in which some prefectures did not hold contests due to contingent factors, we identify the effect of the electoral occurrence itself, independent of electoral outcomes.

The findings reveal a clear contrast in how elections shape political attitudes. The occurrence of elections does not significantly affect political efficacy, whether external or internal, but it does enhance political trust. In particular, simultaneous gubernatorial and local council elections significantly increase trust in political institutions, reflected in lower perceptions of corruption among local politicians, indicating that high-stakes contests with greater visibility and perceived importance play a crucial role in fostering public confidence. By contrast, council elections held alone produce only modest and statistically insignificant effects, underscoring the differential impact of elections depending on their salience. To further probe these results, we examine whether the effects of elections vary across

socioeconomic groups, where differences in resources and participatory patterns may condition the attitudinal impact.

The subgroup analyses show that the trust-enhancing effect of elections is concentrated among individuals with lower levels of education and income. In these groups, the occurrence of elections, particularly gubernatorial contests, significantly increases political trust, whereas no comparable effects are observed among higher-educated or higher-income respondents. This pattern suggests that elections may modestly narrow participatory inequalities by bolstering trust among citizens who are generally less likely to engage in politics. At the same time, the absence of any effect on political efficacy implies that this increase in trust is unlikely to generate a self-reinforcing cycle of participation. Overall, these findings point to differentiated mechanisms through which elections affect citizens, depending on their socioeconomic resources.

These results contribute to the broader literature by shifting attention from electoral outcomes to the significance of electoral occurrence itself. They are consistent with recent quasi-natural experiments showing that unexpected opportunities in the electoral calendar can shape political trust (Lundmark, Oscarsson, and Weissenbilder 2020; Singh 2025; Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). While these studies focus primarily on European contexts, our findings indicate that similar effects can also be observed in an Asian democracy. Moreover, prior research suggests that in high-quality democracies, electoral victories do not serve as a direct source of political trust to the same extent as in lower-quality democracies (Nadeau, Daoust, and Dassonneville 2021). In this context, our results highlight the importance of electoral occurrence itself as a mechanism shaping political trust. In a global environment where trust in political institutions is often in decline, these findings suggest that enhancing the visibility and salience of elections may provide a viable strategic for reinforcing democratic legitimacy.

Building on these findings, our study indicates that elections, particularly those with greater visibility and perceived importance, can bolster political trust even without directly enhancing citizens' sense of political efficacy. This highlights the importance of considering not only whether elections are free and fair, but also what types of elections are held and how salient they are when assessing their broader democratic impact. Existing research shows that the results of national elections, which are generally more consequential, have a stronger impact on political trust than those of local elections (Daoust et al. 2023). Consistent with this perspective, our findings suggest that gubernatorial elections, which attract greater public attention than local assembly elections, exert a larger effect on political trust. This underscores the importance of electoral salience in shaping citizens' political attitudes, consistent with the "second-order election" framework, which emphasizes that voters evaluate different types of elections in hierarchical terms of importance (Reif and Schmitt 1980). However, this study also has

its limitations. The analysis is confined to local elections in Japan, and while the research design exploits natural variations in election timing, the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or types of elections remains uncertain. Moreover, the study focused on the short-term effects of elections on political attitudes, leaving the long-term sustainability unexplored.

Future research should build on these insights by examining the long-term impact of elections on political attitudes and by replicating the analyses in different institutional and cultural settings. In addition, further investigation into the mechanisms underlying political efficacy, and whether these can be strengthened through electoral or non-electoral means, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of elections in sustaining democratic governance.

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of how elections influence political attitudes, showing that while they do not significantly affect political efficacy, they can enhance political trust, including citizens' perceptions of corruption among local politicians. By emphasizing the importance of the type and salience of elections, it provides insights into the symbolic and substantive roles elections play in sustaining democratic legitimacy. As democracies around the world face increasing challenges, these findings underscore the need for careful consideration of how elections can be designed and leveraged to sustain and strengthen public trust in political institutions.

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Disclosure statement

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Ethical approvals

The survey conducted in this paper is approved by the institutional review board of Kobe University Graduate School of Law (#040001).

Data availability statement

All the data and code are available from the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RXNSMD>. The pre-registration is available at <https://osf.io/73z9g/overview>.

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