

# Unveiling an Aloof Democracy: Voting Apathy in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japan

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## 1. Introduction

On April 10, 1946, when Japan held its first general election after the devastating World War II, 72.08 percent of eligible voters of the country that failed into the debris of war went out to cast their ballot (Nohlen et al., 2001). Since then, along with Japan's postwar development and prosperity, in the next 18 general elections until 1993, the turnout maintained high stably at around 70 to 75 percent. However, after the millennium's coming, the Japanese participatory attitude towards elections seemed to come to a changing point. The turnout in subsequent elections declined noticeably and then stagnated at lower than 60 percent, which was unmatched with the late 20<sup>th</sup> century's level (Nohlen et al., 2001). Even worse, the turnout of the previous three consecutive elections became the lowest three in the contemporary Japanese history of democracy (Tomoko, 2021). Much academic literature interprets the drastic drop and continuous low turnout as a typical sign of growing voter apathy, which means the constituents lack interest and motivation to vote when elections come (Shade & Teruelle, 2014).

But why are there so many Japanese voters who lost interest in voting in recent elections? What is the cause of the growing "voting apathy," and what could it mean to Japanese democracy and political development? Several factors could play critical roles, and they may compound and reinforce the effect of one another. The new electoral system could discourage some people from voting as it is institutionally disadvantageous to small parties and detrimental to political pluralism. The effect of institutional factors was amplified by the weakness of opposition parties from ideology to organization and internal unity, which then left voters with fewer feasible choices in elections. The increasing political alienation of young people should also be taken into account, as the drop in their turnout is the most significant in all age groups. Finally, the Japanese government, mostly led by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), could be likely to benefit from the status quo and therefore is reluctant to reform and actively encourage electoral participation.

## 2. Literature review

Low turnout in elections could reflect that voters lack concern about elections or underrate the difference that elections can make to the country's political landscape and the government's policymaking (Lijphart, 1997). If the public's lukewarm or even aloof attitude toward voting becomes persistent in consecutive elections, it can be considered voter apathy (Franklin, 2004; Lijphart, 1997). Voter apathy is not a unique phenomenon in Japanese politics. Scholars have identified it in multiple advanced democracies in recent years, from the United States to Western Europe (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Stockemer, 2017). All these democracies are witnessed a consistent decline in the turnout of elections from the local to national level. Some research found that the group that is most likely to refrain from voting is people who hold moderate political views and distaste the increasingly radical platform and rhetoric of parties of both sides (Ezrow & Krause, 2023).

Much academic literature has discussed the determinant factor of electoral turnout and the causes of voter apathy. Turnout studies found that the significance of elections, the size of the country, and the presence of a compulsory voting system are highly associated with electoral turnout (Fowler, 2013; Stockemer, 2017). Some literature also found that the electoral system could also influence turnout. A Proportional Representation system could encourage higher turnout, while majoritarian systems may discourage some voters from accessing ballot boxes if they are determined that candidates they support are destined to lose (Franklin, 1999). However, other studies disagree with the finding and contend that there is little statistical evidence to support the causal inference between divergent electoral systems and turnout (Stockemer, 2017).

In terms of voter apathy, some studies of the U.S. elections found that the demographic change and expansion of the election calendar led to a drop in electoral participation in the U.S. (Boyd, 1981). Others focused on more systematic and underlying causes that attributed the

decline in turnout to the decline of party affiliation and the diminishing public sense of political efficacy (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982). Despite the divergent account of voter apathy, scholars generally have the consensus that the phenomenon not only signals the diminishing of public trust in the political system and democratic institutions but is detrimental to the long-term and healthy development of democracy (Boyd, 1981; Lijphart, 1997).

Nevertheless, compared with rich studies of turnout and voter apathy in general and discussions in the U.S. context, much less literature is available on voter apathy in Japan. It could partly be because the decrease and stagnation of electoral participation was a relatively new issue in Japan that only became severe in most recent years (Nohlen et al., 2001; Tomoko, 2021). Some findings of voter apathy in previous studies could be applicable to Japan, like the impact of the electoral system on electors' voting incentives and the increasing disaffiliation of political parties. Other accounts may not be very persuasive in the Japanese context, like the demographic change and increased number of elections, which obviously did not happen in Japan. A comprehensive analysis focusing on the Japanese political system and circumstances are then necessary to understand the cause of voter apathy in this country that used to see high turnout.

### 3. Causes of voter apathy

#### 3.1 Electoral system

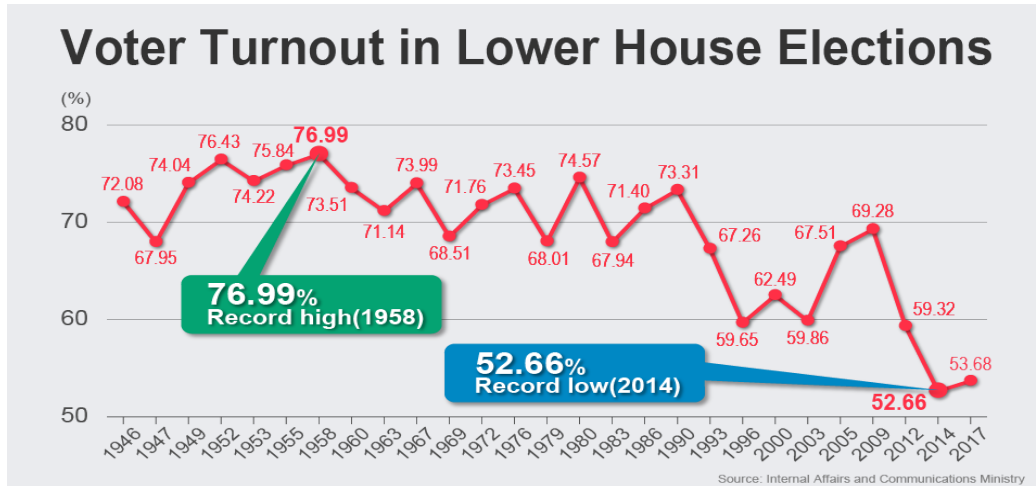
The causes of voter apathy in Japan are multi-dimensional. I will start with the electoral system as the major institutional reason. Before 1994, members of the Japanese House of Representatives were elected through a single non-transferable vote system of multi-member districts. The system became increasingly controversial in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as it was criticized as encouraging factionalism, enabling money politics, and distorting popular vote results (Gallagher, 1997). In response to the criticisms, the ruling Hosokawa coalition collaborated with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the biggest first-time opposition party in the Diet, and passed a new electoral reform bill that changed the old system to a mixed system of single-member districts and proportional representation (Stockwin, 2008).

Admittedly, the new system may weaken the influence of factions by transforming the campaign to a more party-centered orientation (Gallagher, 1997). However, the mixed electoral system has some critical limitations. On the one hand, as more than 60 percent of seats are now elected from single-member districts (SMD), it usually

determines general election results (Nohlen et al., 2001). However, this system could benefit the LDP more. As the representatives are elected through First-past-the-post voting, the LDP could use its existing resource acquisition and local connection advantage to win most districts even without getting a plurality of votes. As for small opposition parties, they could win the seats in the past by consolidating a small but loyal bloc in their constituencies, but now they have to rely on proportionate representation to hold their seats (Adams, 1996). So finally, the distortion of the popular vote in seat distribution deteriorated instead. For example, the LDP only won 47.82 percent of the popular votes of SMD in the 2017 general election but managed to get 75.4 percent of SMD seats (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2017). Thus, voters may feel their votes do not as important as they did in the past because the most competitive and resource-abundant candidate, usually the LDP candidate, will win regardless of their support. This finding is also supported by other research that argues the SMD system is usually associated with lower turnout (Pekkanen et al., 2018).

Proportionate representation (P.R.) was designed to remedy the vote distortion caused by the SMD system. The research argues it should increase the voting intention of those who support small parties because their choices are more likely to be reflected in the electoral outcome (Pekkanen et al., 2018; Adams, 1996). However, the P.R. element in the Japanese electoral system may fail to meet the expectation. First, unlike many democracies adopting P.R. like New Zealand, Japanese PR seats only constitute a rather small proportion of the House (Gallagher, 1997). Moreover, Japan's election system allows a candidate to be nominated both in SMD and P.R., which means even if the candidate loses in his/her contested SMD, he/she can still be "reelected" to the House through P.R. (Gallagher, 1997). For voters, they may feel the ballot they cast in P.R. cannot make a big difference to the election outcome, while the politicians who they want to hold accountable by voting them out in SMD can "revive" through the P.R. All these institutional factors could increase the voters' sense of alienation, lower their political efficacy, and decrease their willingness to vote.

Data could also show the effect of the 1994 electoral reform. Before the reform, the average turnout of the 19 previous elections was 72.21 percent. However, after that reform, the average turnout plunged to 60.24 percent in the next nine elections, while none of the nine subsequent election's turnout hit 70 percent (Tomoko, 2021).



### 3.2 Weak Opposition Force

Nevertheless, only the electoral system's defect is insufficient to explain Japanese voter apathy. As data shows, the turnout rebounded once in 2005 and 2009's general elections. Although both were still lower than 70 percent, their turnout almost reached the pre-millennium level (Tomoko, 2021). So why the turnout rebounded in the two elections and then sink quickly? The common character of the two elections is that they are highly competitive, as the opposition camps are strong and competitive enough to pose real challenges to the LDP. In 2005's case, the election was triggered by the privatization of the Japanese Post, which caused the LDP's internal division (Christensen, 2006). The opposition force seemed to be much stronger as some former LDP representatives left the party and ran against the premier's privatization policy (Christensen, 2006). Although the LDP finally triumphed by tactically running candidates with high profiles and benefiting from the opposition's failure to unite, it was not that lucky again in the 2009's election. As the LDP stagnated in low popularity amid the economic crisis and difficulty in maintaining the balance between economic productivity and domestic industrial protection, the opposition parties were more united by putting forward a single candidate in the SMD. At the same time, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) clearly has the advantage of taking over the regime (Pempel, 2010). As predicted, the DPJ successfully achieved power transformation with the highest turnout since electoral reform in that year's election.

However, after taking over the power, the DPJ quickly failed into intra-party conflict and demonstrated insufficient ability and experience to effectively rule the state. The new government, led by the DPJ, changed three premiers but still cannot save its plumped supporting rate (Hamzawi, 2021). Instead, it was entangled with

multiple scandals and was criticized for failing to respond appropriately to the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (Pekkanen et al., 2020). So, after losing power shortly, the LDP regained power in the 2012 general election with a landslide victory, while the opposition camp since then failed to unite again but became fragmented and separated into conservative and liberal camps (Pekkanen et al., 2020). The separation of opposition parties not only cost them their election in 2017 but characterized themselves as weak and inability to rule the country with a clear and consistent governing route.

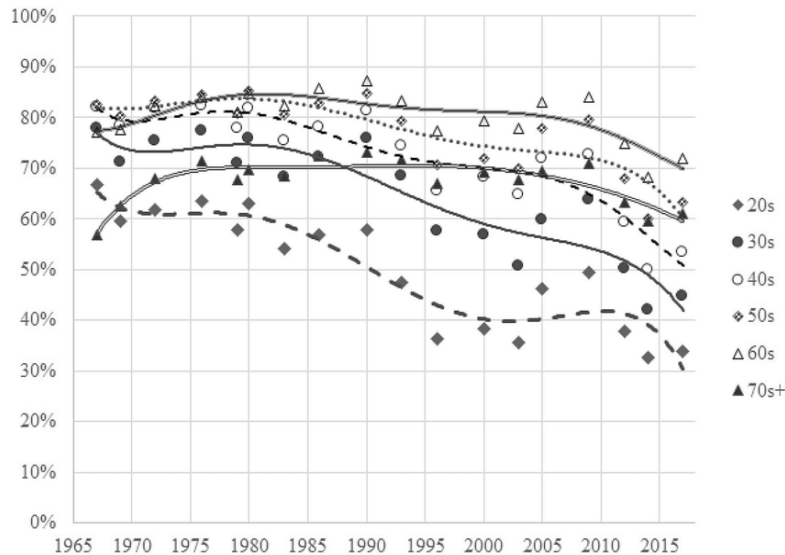
Therefore, even if the voters were dissatisfied with the LDP's policy or scandals, they may regard the opposition parties as having worse choices that are incapable of delivering stable governance and consistent policy (Umeda, 2019). Thus, even though many voters are reluctant to see another LDP-led government, considering the weakness and fragmentation of the opposition, they would rather choose not to vote to protest instead of voting for the opposition parties. It is because many people can neither see a real chance of the opposition's victory nor their likelihood of fulfilling their promises made in the election together (Hamzawi, 2021; Umeda, 2019).

### 3.3 Alienation of young voters

Although the two factors mentioned above could partially explain the Japanese population's voter apathy, they cannot illustrate which population group is more apathetic to voting. By analyzing different age groups' turnout in each election in detail, we can find the turnout of the older population is constantly higher and relatively stable. In contrast, young voters' voting rate has dropped drastically since the 1990s and remained low until now (Umeda, 2020). The turnout gap between the age group of the 20s and 60s widen from less than 20 percent in the 1969 election to nearly 40 percent in the 2017 election (Umeda,

2020). So, if we want to understand why voter apathy became increasingly serious in Japan after the 1990s,

we need to pay more attention to the young electorates' attitude change in voting.



One of the main reasons is the dominant LDP's reluctance to reform and rebrand itself. On the one hand, it failed to respond to the youngsters' concern about “bread and butter.” The Japanese economy has stagnated since the 1990s as the country is facing an aging population, declining birthrate, and freezing income level (Stockwin, 2008). All these difficulties hit the young population harder as many of them are under greater economic and living pressure (Maruyama & Lies, 2021). However, the LDP's policy is still seen as more favorable to the rural elders as their main voter base. Its industrial policy is also largely pro-business but neglects the hardship of the young working class (Richardson, 1997). On the other hand, the LDP also has difficulty in following the progressive social change trend and being more open on culturally liberal issues like the generational gap, gender equality, and climate change. For example, more than 90 percent of LDP members of the House are males, and most are above 50 years old. The party also rejected the notion of same-sex marriage, which is popular among youths (Maruyama & Lies, 2021). As a result, many young voters feel the issue they care about is increasingly marginalized and even absent from the government's agenda, while their voices remain unheard regardless of whether they vote in recent elections.

As for the opposition parties, although their platforms usually include more policy proposals favorable to the youth and are more willing to accept socially progressive values, they also have a hard time getting young voters' trust. Many of their platforms are seen as only symbolic slogans or electoral tactics to gain youngsters' votes but lack clear and practical routes (Pekkanen et al., 2020). When it comes to the election, the debate always focuses

rapidly shift to conventional issues like consumption tax, constitutional amendment, and foreign policy while leaving the issues youths care more about largely untouched, like distributive inequality, social mobility, labor rights, and gender discrimination (Maruyama & Lies, 2021). So, for many young voters who are under living pressure, trapped by economic stagnancy, and embracing progressive values, their sense of alienation from national politics would accumulate and become widespread voter apathy in elections.

### 3.4 The LDP benefits from the status quo

Considering all the institutional and social factors that lead to voter apathy, why the Japanese government, mostly held by the LDP, seem reluctant to adopt necessary steps to remedy the problems? For example, the LDP-controlled Diet could lower the voting age from 20 to 18 much earlier and reform the current electoral system to reflect the popular will better. The party could also pay more attention to social justice issues, rebrand its platform, dilute right-wing ideology's influence, and encourage pluralism to attract young voters (Maruyama & Lies, 2021; Regalado & French, 2021). However, from the LDP's perspective, all these changes are not rational because the party could benefit from the current system and ideology. On the electoral system, although the P.R. system is better for increasing plurality and reflecting the proportion of votes, the LDP usually secures its majority through its local connection advantage in the SMD. For instance, in the 2017 general election, although the SMD only constituted 62 percent of the seats in the House, the LDP gained nearly 77 percent of overall seats from it, compared with only 33 percent of the largest opposition



party's seats (MIAC, 2017).

As for attracting the youth, it may not be the LDP's primary concern. In contrast, the core voter base of the LDP has been older people, especially those who live in rural areas (Richardson, 1997). These voters are the group with the highest turnout rate in most elections and are highly loyal to the LDP as the party has established stable channels to convey economic interests to them and protect their industry from foreign competition (Stockwin, 2008). Thus, the low turnout overall would actually benefit the LDP as the proportion of votes from its concrete electoral base of older people and rural areas can be maximized. The pattern is still clear in the recent elections. The high turnout (69.2 percent) of the 2009 election inflicted a historic failure on the LDP, but it quickly returned to power in the 2012 election with a 10 percent lower turnout (Umeda, 2020). Moreover, in that election, the voting rate of the 60s only reduced by 8 percent, while the 20s and 30s dropped 11 and 13 percent, respectively (Umeda, 2020). So, based on that analysis, the LDP is unlikely to actively promote systematic change to address voter apathy because it benefits from the status quo of low turnout.

### **3.5 The cumulative effect of various factors**

All the factors analyzed above not only take effect on voter apathy independently, but they also interact with and mutually reinforce each other's effect. First, the parallel voting system benefits the LDP while setting barriers (SMD) to the frequently fragmented opposition parties from competing with the LDP. Without the chance to run government and due to the lack of administrative experience and local resources, the opposition party is impressed as weak and incompetent. The voters then always have to make the "less evil" choice that could reduce their intention to vote. The weakness of opposition parties and the conservative stance of the LDP then alienated many young voters who did not deem voting in the elections as necessary but instead wanted to find representatives who cared about the issues they cared about (Regalado & French, 2021). As the turnout of youths is significantly lower than the elders, their interest is less represented in the parliament and the LDP, which causes the ruling party to be less motivated to change the status quo that benefits itself and, in return, increasingly marginalizes the youths' voices and intensify their voter apathy (Regalado & French, 2021).

### **4. Evaluation of the elections' ability to reflect people's will under the low turnout**

Now we come to the question that since a variety of

negative factors discourage voters (especially young electorates) from voting, could the stagnated voting rate really reflect the will of Japanese citizens, or could it mean democratic backlash is happening in Japan?

Before answering the question, we must notice the function which a feasible electoral system shall perform. Under a good electoral system, the seat distribution may not necessarily be a translation of the exact share of popular votes each party or coalition gained in the election. However, it should accurately reflect the policy preference of voters (Dalton, 2006). Moreover, turnout is also not the higher, the better, but those who come out to vote desirably should constitute a large and representative proportion of all citizens eligible to vote (Ezrow & Krause, 2023). In contrast, if a certain group of electors with a uniform kind of policy preference are constantly absent from elections, then the democratic character of the regime could compromise. It is because the results of elections deviate from the public will and may be biased towards certain interest groups with a higher turnout asymmetrically (Ezrow & Krause, 2023).

Against that background, I will argue that the Japanese electoral system may not desirably reflect people's will, but it is primarily because of the built-in features of the electoral system and the dynamic of party politics instead of low turnout. First, I reviewed the statistics of several most recent elections in the 2010s and 2020s. Obviously, the conservative ruling coalition (LDP-Komeito) won every election with a huge margin of seats in Diets and even met the two-thirds threshold in two of the four elections (MIAC, 2017; 2021). However, regarding the share of the popular vote, the ruling coalition was actually outnumbered by the opposition parties in every election except 2014 (MIAC, 2017; 2021). The reason why the ruling coalition could win every election in a landslide is that it could uniformly support a single candidate in almost every SMDs. On the contrary, the opposition camp could hardly unite against the LDP coalition, which put them at a disadvantageous position in SMD races that the candidate who could secure the largest share of votes win (Umeda, 2019).

Meanwhile, many voters seem to trust the LDP coalition not because they enthusiastically endorse their platform. Instead, the reason that drove them to vote for the LDP could be they simply want stable governance and distrust the opposition parties more (Hamzawi, 2021; Umeda, 2019). It could be seen in the stagnated voting share of every opposition party in elections. Multiple polls also pointed to the same conclusion. For example, the poll conducted by Asahi News before the 2021 general election found that while the LDP only had a net positive rate of favorability by one percent (32% - 31%), the biggest

opposition party (Constitutional Democratic Party) had an unfavorable rate of negative 27 percent (15% - 42%) (Asahi Shimbun, 2021). The finding again indicates that the special environment of party politics plays a more significant role in the distortion of election results than low voting rates.

Nevertheless, the discussion by no means indicates that voter apathy itself is not detrimental to the long-term development of Japanese politics. The meaning of democracy is far beyond the results of elections and the distribution of political interests. A functioning democracy with good health implies a participatory political culture and dialogical social environment (Ezrow & Krause, 2023; Lijphart, 1997). Although an election does not represent all aspects of democracy, it is undoubtedly the most crucial stage for a democracy to function and make collective decisions (Lijphart, 1997). Therefore, voter aloofness in itself could be a very worrisome sign of the decline of Japanese democracy. It could reflect the diminishing confidence of Japanese electors, especially young people, in the political system that is supposed to incorporate diverse public wills and interests (Umeda, 2020). With low political efficacy, being absent from polls could be a protest against the government in itself without voting for the opposition that is perceived to be worse (Umeda, 2019). Therefore, voter apathy not only negatively influences the legitimacy of the incumbent LDP regime but also calls the general situation of Japanese democracy into question.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the voting apathy of the Japanese, especially of the young generation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is caused by various factors, from the electoral institutional design to the weak and uncompetitive opposition forces and to ignoring the youths' demands. The LDP has little motivation to initiate major changes to address this systematic problem that it benefits from. Although voter apathy may not directly influence the electoral outcome and power-sharing configuration in the short term, it certainly could be detrimental to Japanese democracy from the perspective of legitimacy and political participation. However, although voter apathy in Japan is multi-dimensional and institutionalized, it does not mean that various stakeholders, like opposition parties and civil society, can do nothing to change that. Reformists could still explore multiple approaches to alleviate voter apathy, like introducing a New Zealand-like “compensatory system” that the only determinant of the seat distribution is the popular vote share (Gallagher, 1997). Even though such institutional reforms may not be likely in the short

term to achieve systematic change, only the discussions for change could help raise public awareness of the problem and create a participatory political atmosphere promising to bring about meaningful changes.

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