



The impact of the media on voters' attitude toward Junichiro Koizumi and his policy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of mass media in people's perceptions of charismatic leaders. Using survey data collected immediately after Koizumi's 2005 landslide electoral victory, we empirically assess the influence of television (TV) and newspapers on individuals' support for Koizumi and for the most distinctive policy.

Estimation results based on combined sample of men and women indicate that the frequency of exposure to mass media is positively related to the support for Koizumi but not for his principal policy. After dividing the sample into men and women, the positive relationship between TV watching and support for Koizumi is only observed for females, whereas the positive relationship between reading newspapers and support for Koizumi is only observed for males.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary elections are built on a visual foundation (Grabe and Bucy, 2009). Candidates must appear telegenic enough to attract closer scrutiny by their audience, and electoral campaigns are devoted to strengthening candidates' personal appeal, often to a larger extent than proposals for policy initiatives and programs. The rise of TV as a political force has created incentives for political leaders to construct their image through deliberate strategies designed to promote intimacy with voters and to highlight engaging personal attributes.

Since the end of the 1980s, mass media, especially TV, has wielded a crucial influence on politics in Japan. According to Krauss and Nyblade (2005), this situation has led the Japanese public

to “consume” politics. This trend was considerably accelerated by the rise of Junichiro Koizumi, Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006.

Koizumi adopted a strategy of political populism to increase his exposure in the media and develop a public reputation (Kabashima and Steel, 2007). Although personalized media-oriented politics pre-date Koizumi, he represents a quantum leap in this long-term trend. He used television to appeal directly to people adopting a fresh, ordinary language, in contrast with the language usually favored by politicians and bureaucrats (Imai, 2009; Ohtake, 2003). Koizumi portrayed himself as a reformist engaged in a “civil war” with the anti-reformist on behalf of the people. As reported in Kabashima and Steel (2007), television broadcasts – especially non-news programs – eagerly reported on this drama. Media treated the electoral competition as a new form of entertainment with the purpose of increasing their audience. As a result, the frequency of Koizumi's media appearance was unusually high relative to his political opponents and to the historical average. “Koizumi's media honeymoon” is illustrated in detail in Kabashima and Steel (2007): the authors report how Koizumi's television appearances and the number of newspaper articles devoted to the PM were disproportionate in respect to his predecessors. In his 2005 electoral campaign, Koizumi deliberately and strongly drew the electorate's

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attention to his program of postal service privatization, and he won by a landslide.

Considered how mass media play a key role in enduring electoral support, it is important to assess how exposure to them influences voters' preferences for specific political actors and their economic agenda. In this paper we aim to explore whether the frequency of TV watching and newspapers reading influenced public support for Koizumi and his principal policy of postal service privatization.

Even if Shinzo Abe obtained a similar landslide win in 2014 political vote, the case of Koizumi remains emblematic and worth of investigation for a number of reasons. He was the first candidate who made a massive use of television to bridge the gap between himself and his audience by appearing on non-news broadcasts such as talk shows and televised sports ceremonies, and giving interviews to newspapers on non-political issues. Differently from Abe, Koizumi established with media a relationship of mutual manipulation that has no equal in Japanese politics (see for example Kabashima and Steel, 2007; Uchida, 2014). Despite both Koizumi and Abe obtained a landslide win, respectively, in 2005 and 2014 elections, Abe's success was partly driven by a dramatic drop in voter turnout (52.9%, which was the lowest level ever) and was associated with the spreading of a strong feeling of disappointment with politics among voters. The LDP received a smaller number of votes in respect to 2009 elections and a modest 25% of total polls (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2014). By contrast, Koizumi succeeded in catching the attention and enthusiasm of those who were usually uninterested in politics (Köllner, 2006) through a strategy that strongly – if not entirely – relied on the persuasive role of media. This led to an unprecedented, yet temporary, rise in Japanese people's interest in politics.

To reach our goals, we use individual-level data drawn from the "Social and Political Consciousness Survey in 21st Century Japan" (GLOPE) conducted in 2005. The GLOPE survey was conducted in Japan immediately after the 2005 election to determine citizens' perceptions about politics during an election period.

Although our paper deals with a so far unexplored research questions in a new case study, it follows a recent literature that analyzed the relationship between exposure to media and specific political outcomes. Based on US historical data, Strömberg (2004) found that larger relief funds were allocated to counties where higher shares of households listened to the radio. Gerber et al. (2009) used a field experiment conducted in Washington to analyze the effect of newspapers' slant on readers' political knowledge, stated opinions, and voter turnout. The authors found that reading a liberal newspaper significantly increased support for the Democratic candidate for governor. Another study reported that the introduction of the conservative Fox News Channel in 20% of US towns led its viewers to vote for conservative Republican candidates (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007). Spanish-language news programs on TV also contributed to a substantial boost in voter turnout (Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel, 2009). Researchers have increasingly investigated the mass media and their political influence in other countries such as Italy (Durante and Knight, 2012; Sabatini, 2012; Barone et al., 2015). These studies have revealed mass media's critical role in establishing trends in public opinion.

Our paper makes several contributions to this literature. This is the first study empirically assessing the role of mass media in voters' behavior in an Eastern country. We try to disentangle the possibly competing roles of different mass media in popularizing a charismatic leader's image and attracting political consensus. The GLOPE data also allow us to illustrate how citizens' votes for Koizumi were virtually disconnected from their support for the candidate's program of public sector reforms. Together with Sabatini (2012) who analyzed the role of TV in building Silvio Berlusconi's consensus in Italy, we are the first to

Table 1
Duration of each government (from 1989 to 2012).

Government	Months	Highest support rate (%)	Lowest support rate (%)
Uno	2	28	28
Kaifu	27	56	35
Miyazawa	21	54	20
Hosokawa	8	71	57
Hata	2	47	47
Murayama	19	42	33
Hashimoto	30	53	31
Obuchi	21	49	23
Mori	12	39	7
Koizumi	60	85	39
Abe (First government)	12	65	29
Fukuda	12	58	20
Aso	12	49	15
Hatoyama	9	72	21
Kan	15	65	16
Noda	15	60	20
Average	17.3		

Note: From Uno to Obuchi administrations, the data is collected from Hayashi and Sakuraba (2002). After Mori administration, the data is gathered from annual investigation about political view conducted by Nippon Hoso-kyokai. Source: <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/5236a.html> (accessed on April 26, 2014).

analyze how exposure to media relates to support to a specific candidate.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides the political background and overview of Koizumi's policies and strategies of communication. Section 2.3 presents two testable hypotheses about citizens' views on Koizumi's administration and platform. Section 3 describes the dataset and provides a simple econometric framework to examine the hypotheses. Estimation results are reported in Section 4. The final section offers concluding remarks.

2. The setting and hypotheses

2.1. Political background

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been Japan's dominant party for more than 50 years after it was founded in 1955 (apart from two short periods in 1993–1994 and 2009–2012). It is a major conservative party, whose economic policies have historically been shaped around the goals of free trade, market competition, and export-based economic growth¹. Junichiro Koizumi is known as the LDP's most popular PM. At the helm from 2001 to 2006, he was the fifth longest-serving PM in Japanese history. Table 1 shows that in the 1989–2012 period, Koizumi's government lasted for 60 months, which was longer than any other recent administration (the second longest one was Hashimoto's 30-month administration, half the length of Koizumi's). In 2005, Koizumi led the LDP to win one of the largest parliamentary majorities in modern Japanese history. According to opinion polls, public support for Koizumi peaked at 85%, the highest rating since 1989. The lowest support rate during the Koizumi administration was 39%, with only those of the Hosokawa and Hata governments being higher. Considering that the Hosokawa and Hata governments only lasted 8 and 2 months, respectively, the lowest rating received by Koizumi was in fact quite high, compared with that of any other administration². To understand the reason why Koizumi garnered such high levels of

¹ The LDP must not be confused with the now-defunct Liberal Party, which merged with the Democratic Party of Japan, the main opposition party, in November 2003.

² The Hosokawa and Hata regimes were the first non-LDP regimes after World War II. They only received support for a brief period in 1993–1994.

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