

Public Opinion and the July 21 Election

Matthew Penney

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

Matthew Penney

The Japanese House of Councillors election will be held on July 21, 2013. It now seems certain that PM Abe Shinzo's Liberal Democratic Party will follow its landslide win in the December 2012 House of Representatives election with another overwhelming victory. This essay summarizes the results of recent Japanese opinion polls in order to identify major election issues and assess what it is about the new iteration of Abe's LDP that has made them so popular with the public.

The Abe Cabinet

A Jiji [poll](#) carried out in mid-June placed Abe's support rate down slightly for two months in a row at 57.4%. A July [poll](#) has the cabinet's support rate slipping further to 53.6%. Despite this slip, however, the LDP is expected to easily win the upcoming election. Only July 7, the

Asahi Shimbun released the results of a [poll](#) measuring levels of support for various political parties. While nearly half of the electorate does not indicate a preference, the LDP captures 32% support compared to just 3% for the Democratic Party. Other [polls](#) suggest that this lead will translate into an easy electoral victory next weekend and the LDP is expected to take a majority in the House of Councillors, a win that will put the party in charge of both houses of government.

Nuclear Power

The Abe Cabinet is treading lightly on nuclear power, supporting nuclear policies with vague rhetoric but avoiding discussion of long term plans. Restarts of idle reactors in the short term, however, seem certain. A February 17 public opinion poll in the *Asahi Shimbun* [no longer online] indicated:

13% of Japanese want nuclear power done away with as soon as possible

24% want complete de-nuclearization by 2030

22% want to see it done away with by 2040

12% desire an end to reliance on nuclear energy sometime after 2040

18% believe that Japan should continue to use nuclear power

The portion of the Japanese population which

expresses unqualified support of nuclear power has shrunk to a small minority. A full 71% express a desire to see nuclear power abolished. As with many political issues, however, economic growth seems central in the minds of Japanese voters.

Diamond magazine links the overall high support rate for the Abe Cabinet to economic optimism generated by “Abenomics”. The 3.5% rate of annualized GDP expansion in the January to March quarter is being hailed as exceptional performance for a Japan used to anemic growth. Economic hopes are also driving support for short or medium term use of nuclear power and restarts of currently idled plants. Political analyst Tanaka Shusei argues, however, that the LDP’s nuclear restart plans could prove to be a disaster for the party. In his view, skepticism about nuclear power and a desire to see it eliminated, in the medium term at least, is not going away. We should recall that the years of LDP rule leading up to their loss to the Democrats in 2009 elections saw numerous accidents such as explosion and criticality incidents at Tokaimura in 1997 and 1999, and fires and ruptures at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Plant after the Niigata earthquake of 2007. Any similar accident, even if it is not close to the scale of Fukushima, could cause support for the pro-nuclear LDP to crumble. It has been all but forgotten that the Niigata incident took place during Abe’s first term as prime minister. A similar incident is by no means “out of the realm of possibility” and this time, the LDP, which stewarded Japan’s nuclearization from the 1950s, will not be able to push responsibility onto the Democrats. A Kyodo [survey](#) also highlights the public opinion risks of the Abe Cabinet’s decision to push nuclear exports. 41% approve of nuclear exports while 46.2% oppose. As experts and progressive media have argued, apart from ethical concerns, an accident involving Japanese

technology abroad could have implications far outside the nuclear industry, potentially doing catastrophic damage to Japan’s overall “brand”.

Hashimoto and the Comfort Women

Japan Restoration Party icon Hashimoto Toru’s May comments to the effect that military prostitution is always necessary and that Korean comfort women were a type of well-deserved “reward” for Japanese soldiers who risked their lives for the nation, have been devastating for his party. In a [public opinion survey](#) carried out by Kyodo on May 18 and 19 the party lost almost one-third of its support – from 8.5% of the electorate to 5.7%. Other polling results are even more dramatic. A *Nikkei* [survey](#) has the percentage of voters who indicate that they will support Ishin no Kai candidates in the July House of Councilors election dropping by two-thirds, from 9% to 3%, following Hashimoto’s comments. Some media sources are describing this as the “annihilation” of the party. Support for the Ishin no Kai has now slipped behind support for the Democratic Party. During the DPJ collapse and before the LDP found a populist revival narrative in “Abenomics”, Hashimoto frequently topped the list in [polls](#) of politicians Japanese voters would like to see as prime minister. His comfort women comments may have ended his national-level political ambitions. At least some of the backlash is coming from conservatives. A Fuji-Sankei [poll](#) reports that in the wake of Hashimoto’s comments, the percentage of voters who desire a LDP / Restoration Party linkup on issues of shared concern such as constitutional revision has plunged by almost 50% - from 20.7% to 10.7%.

Constitutional Revision

Polls on constitutional revision, one of Abe's avowed priorities, show contradictory results that are difficult to interpret. In early May, the Nikkei reported the results of a [poll](#) indicating that 56% of Japanese support constitutional revision with only 28% expressing a belief that the current constitution should be maintained in its current form. By contrast, an Asahi [poll](#), also carried out in early May, indicated that 54% oppose reducing the threshold for constitutional revision from a 2/3 vote in both houses of government to 1/2. 38% are in favor. An *Asahi* [poll](#) has this number slipping to 31% in July, a result that can be read as a loss in momentum for the revision camp. While it appears that a majority of the Japanese population support constitutional revision, they apparently do not want to make it easier to achieve. The same poll has 52% opposing revision of Article 9, the "peace clause", with 39% supporting revision. Even among conservatives, concern for the economy seems to far outstrip the longstanding project of constitutional revision. When voters were [asked](#) about what issues they believe are important for the July House of Councilors election, the constitution came dead last.

Conclusions

It seems almost certain that the July 21 House of Councillors election will end in an Abe landslide and he will soon wield solid majorities in both houses of government. As diverse poll results suggest, however, this does not necessarily mean that Abe will have a free hand to push his conservative nationalist priorities. Support for Article 9 outstrips support for revision, the cornerstone of current conservative discourse, by a solid margin. The public drubbing that Hashimoto received after his comfort women comments suggests that

Abe will meet resistance if he attempts to push more revisionist history on the public. Abe's plans to go ahead with nuclear restarts are a potential minefield for his government. The Japanese public seems to view nuclear restarts as a pragmatic move in support of economic growth. If that growth does not materialize, if export-driven profits fail to trickle down to ordinary consumers who are now facing "Abenomics"-driven inflation, or if there is a nuclear accident, no matter how minor, Abe and the Liberal Democrats, who are now reaping the credit in the form of electoral gains, will be there to take the fall. Even if Abe's expected election landslide materializes next week, the Japanese political environment is still far from stable. An *Asahi* [poll](#) carried out on July 13 and 14 tells an interesting story. While Abe's electoral success is undeniable, only 36% of those polled wish to see the LDP gain a majority on July 21. Other [polls](#) show support for key Abe policies such as participation in the TPP free trade agreement slipping steadily since March. Landslide or no, the public still has many questions, and it remains to be seen whether Abe and the LDP have the answers.

Matthew Penney is an Assistant Professor at Concordia University, Montreal. He is an Asia-Pacific Journal Coordinator. His research focuses on war memory, nationalism, and anti-militarism in Japan.

Asia-Pacific Journal articles on related themes include:

Andrew DeWit, [Green Shoot: Abenomics and the 3rd Arrow](#)



Matthew Penney, [Abe and History - The Kobayashi Yoshinori Interview](#)

Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21 and Matthew Penney, [The Abe Cabinet - An Ideological Breakdown](#)