

Examining Political Behavior and Economic Performance
via National Experiments in Japanese Local Elections

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Note to Organizers

We have been working on a series of political-economic papers with a focus on a unique natural experimental setting in Japanese local elections. Due to some historical reasons, we argue, whether or not a municipal election is held during “unified local elections” (toitsu chiho senkyo), which are held in April once every four years, can be regarded as a randomly assigned treatment. Using this as-if random treatment variable (i.e., whether or not an election was held), we estimate the impact of having an election on voter turnout (in other levels of elections), electoral fraud, and fiscal policy outcomes. The paper we tentatively submit for the presentation is a under-review paper on electoral fraud. We are, however, in the process of estimating the impacts of local elections on fiscal performance in local economy. Depending on what we find for this work-in-progress by March, we may present an alternative paper.

Abstract

In Japan, there is a popular belief that candidates and their supporters mobilize voters outside the district: they ask outsiders to bring their registered address to the district and to vote for the candidates, even though those “new” voters may continue to live at their original address. We call this under-investigated type of electoral fraud “pre-electoral residential registration” and detect it by taking advantage of a natural experimental setting in Japanese municipal elections. We argue that whether or not a municipal election was held in April 2003 can be regarded as a randomly assigned treatment. Using detailed municipality-month panel data, we then show that an increase in the new population just prior to April 2003 is significantly larger in treatment municipalities (with an election) than in control ones (without an election). The effects estimated by a difference-in-difference model are significant and decisive enough to change the electoral results.