Outrage Against Corrupt Politicians?: Misperceived Social Norms and Political Accountability*

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Abstract

Do (mis)perceptions of social norms matter for political accountability? This paper examines how voters' perceptions of other voters' beliefs about political malfeasance influence their voting behavior against malfeasant incumbents. We document significant misperceptions: some voters, particularly those supporting the malfeasant incumbent's party, hold more lenient views (i.e., they believe that others are more tolerant of political corruption), while others, especially those who do not have a particular party support, hold more stringent views. Using a randomized experiment, we found that informing voters of social norms, on average, increased support for the incumbent candidate, which was mainly driven by those with lenient views. The treatment also increased voter turnout and the likelihood of voting for an alternative candidate, with these effects concentrated among voters who hold more stringent views. These findings underscore the crucial role of voters' perceptions of other voters' beliefs in political accountability, a factor that has been largely overlooked in the literature.

Keywords: Political accountability, social norm, corruption, misperception, information campaign

1 Introduction

Democracy is a crucial driver of modern economic growth (Acemoglu et al., 2019). However, its effectiveness depends on how well its institutions function. Elections, a core institution of

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democracy, serve multiple roles, including promoting political accountability. Understanding the conditions under which elections effectively fulfill this role is essential for sustaining democracy.

The political agency model predicts that voters can hold their political leaders accountable through elections (Barro, 1973; Ferejohn, 1986; Persson and Tabellini, 2000; Besley, 2006). For instance, if politicians engage in malfeasance while in office, voters may punish them by withholding their votes in the next election. Conversely, strong political performance can increase electoral support. These theoretical predictions give rise to empirically testable hypotheses about whether voters effectively punish or reward incumbents, thereby discouraging poor political performance while incentivizing strong performance.

Prior research has found that publicizing irregularities through audits lowers re-election rates for corrupt incumbents and reduces overall corruption levels (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Bobonis et al., 2016; Avis et al., 2018). However, recent research presents a more nuanced picture. For instance, Chong et al. (2015) found that while exposing corruption decreased support for incumbents, it also eroded trust in municipal government and politicians, leading to lower voter turnout and reduced support for the challenger party. In contrast, using seven randomized controlled trials across six countries, Dunning et al. (2019) found no overall effect of positive or negative information campaigns. Furthermore, Arias et al. (2022) showed that revealing politicians' malfeasance increased the incumbent's vote share, particularly among voters with unfavorable prior beliefs. These mixed results highlight the complexities of how voters process political information.

Our study builds upon this strand of literature, but it distinguishes itself by focusing on voters' perceptions of *other voters* in the context of political accountability. The political agency model typically assumes no strategic interactions among voters.[1] In reality, however, strategic voting is widespread. For instance, using structural estimation, Kawai and Watanabe (2013) found that a large fraction (between 63.4 percent and 84.9 percent) of voters in Japan vote strategically. This raises the question of how political accountability functions in the presence of strategic voting. In this study, we provide evidence that voters' perceptions of other voters' beliefs play a crucial role in political accountability.

[1] Instead, it generally assumes that representative voters choose to reelect the incumbent if the incumbent is expected to provide at least as much utility as the reservation utility (Persson and Tabellini, 2000).

Our study focuses on a major political funding scandal that unfolded in Japan between 2023 and 2024. Key factions within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), including one linked to former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, failed to disclose approximately 6.5 million US dollars (USD) in funds, allegedly used for personal slush accounts. This scandal deeply eroded public trust, causing approval ratings for both the LDP and the Kishida Cabinet to plummet. In the 2024 general election, the LDP and its coalition partner, Komeito, lost their Lower House majority for the first time since 2009.

Against this backdrop, we conducted a pre-registered online survey experiment to examine how voters' perceptions of others' intolerance toward political malfeasance influence their voting behavior. Specifically, we provided participants with social norms of intolerance and analyzed how they responded to this information in relation to their prior beliefs.

First, we discovered substantial misperceptions: some voters believed that others were highly tolerant of corruption (lenient views), while others assumed they were very strict (stringent views). Next, we randomly provided information about social norms and examined how this affected participants' posterior beliefs and voting behavior. On average, the treatment increased support for the incumbent, particularly among voters with lenient views. These individuals also tended to perceive the incumbent candidates as more competent and trustworthy, and believed their vote had more influence on the election results. On the contrary, the treatment also boosted turnout and support for alternative candidates, although these effects were concentrated among those with stringent views.

To further understand the mechanism, we examined the interplay between perceptions of social norms and party identity. We found that individuals with lenient views tended to support the LDP, while those with stringent views were less likely to support any particular political party. Although the heterogeneous results with respect to prior beliefs about intolerance norms still hold within each subgroup, these findings suggest that individuals with lenient views engage in a form of defensive behavior, perceiving that others are less tolerant of the incumbent's malfeasance (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Jost, 2004), while those with stringent views are mobilized and vote for an alternative candidate upon realizing that others are more tolerant of malfeasance.

Related literature This study contributes to the extensive literature on political accountability. Prior research examines whether publicizing audits affects incumbent re-election rates and corruption levels (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Bobonis et al., 2016; Avis et al., 2018). Relatedly, other studies investigate the impact of randomly disseminating information about politicians' past performance through field or survey experiments (Banerjee et al., 2011; Chong et al., 2015; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, 2017; Buntaine et al., 2018; Adida et al., 2020; Cruz et al., 2020; Arias et al., 2022; Figueiredo et al., 2023). As noted earlier, these studies yield mixed results, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how voters respond to information.

Unlike previous studies, which typically present information about incumbents' past performance to voters, we instead provide information about other voters. In our study, voters' prior beliefs play a crucial role. The most closely related study, Arias et al. (2022), examines how voters' prior beliefs about political malfeasance shape their reactions to revelations of incumbents' misconduct. Using a field experiment in Mexico, they found that malfeasance revelations increased incumbent vote share on average, particularly among voters with low expectations. In contrast, our study focuses not on prior beliefs about corruption levels within the incumbent party but rather on how prior beliefs about social norms, or specifically, other voters' intolerance toward malfeasance, influence political accountability.

In this respect, our study examines the influence of perceived social norms related to corruption among voters. Prior research has shown that such perceptions shape individuals' beliefs and behavior. Using an overlapping-generations model with interactions, Acemoglu and Jackson (2015) demonstrate that social norms of high corruption can become self-perpetuating. Similarly, a field experiment in Costa Rica found that highlighting widespread corruption in the information treatment increased individuals' willingness to engage in bribery, illustrating how perceived norms can turn corruption into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Corbacho et al., 2016). Typically, corruption rates are higher in developing countries (Svensson, 2006; Olken and Pande, 2012; Fisman and Golden, 2017), often posing a significant challenge to economic development. Although our study focuses on a developed country, where corruption is generally low, our findings have policy implications for developing countries as well.

Finally, this study closely relates to the growing literature on social norms, which demon-

strates that perceptions of others influence behavior across diverse domains in politics, including political contributions (Perez-Truglia and Cruces, 2017), protest participation (Cantoni et al., 2019), political activism (Hager et al., 2023), and climate action (Andre et al., 2024).[2] Building on this strand of literature, this study demonstrates that perceptions of social norms about intolerance toward politicians' malfeasance play a crucial role in promoting political accountability.

2 Background

Between 2023 and 2024, Japan faced a significant political scandal involving the LDP. The scandal was initially uncovered by the communist newspaper *Akahata Shimbun*, which reported financial irregularities within LDP factions, including ex-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's faction (Akahata Shimbun, 2022). A year later, major media outlets, including *NHK*, revealed that the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office was conducting voluntary interviews with individuals responsible for the issue (NHK, 2023).

The investigation revealed that the Abe, Nikai, and Kishida factions failed to report over 970 million Japanese yen (JPY) (approximately 6.5 million USD, at an exchange rate of 1 USD = 150 JPY) in their political funding reports over five years, up to 2022 (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2024). It is alleged that in the Abe and Nikai factions, participating politicians were assigned quotas to sell tickets for political fundraising events. Any revenue exceeding these quotas was allegedly refunded as kickbacks to those who collected the funds. These refunded amounts were not recorded in the politicians' political funding reports, leaving their use unclear and drawing criticism that they may have been turned into personal slush funds.

The public reacted with widespread disapproval, as evidenced by the LDP's approval ratings plummeting to 21% by February 2024—the lowest for the party since its return to power in 2012 (Asahi Shimbun, 2024). The scandal had profound electoral consequences. In the October 2024 general election, the LDP, along with its coalition partner Komeito, lost its majority in the House of Representatives. The LDP's seat count dropped from 237 to

[2] Bursztyn and Yang (2022) provides a comprehensive review of this literature. Although not necessarily focused on social norms, prior research in political science has documented misperceptions among peers, such as partisan differences in political opinions (Chambers et al., 2005; Ahler, 2014; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016), the proportion of party-stereotypical groups within parties (Ahler and Sood, 2018), perceptions of election competitiveness (Gerber et al., 2020), and others' voting behavior (Carlson and Hill, 2022).

191, marking its first failure to secure a Lower House majority since 2009. Of those involved in the fraud issue who ran for office in this election, 28 out of 46 lost. This outcome was a severe blow to Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who had assumed office on October 1, 2024.

3 Experimental Design

3.1 Sample

The pre-registered experiment (AEARCTR-0014635) took place between October 18th and 28th, 2024, while the election occurred on October 27th. We conducted the experiment in collaboration with *Myvoice Inc.*. The target population consisted of 2,800 registered individuals aged between their 20s and 60s in target constituencies in Japan.

These constituencies fall into two types, both of which had incumbent candidates from the LDP: *Fraud Districts*, where the incumbent politicians were involved in the slush fund issue, and *Clean Districts*, where the incumbent politicians were not involved. We determined this target sample size through a power calculation described in the Pre-Analysis Plan (PAP). The final sample includes 10 Fraud Districts and 15 Clean Districts. The details of the selection process for the target constituencies are provided in Section A.1 of the Online Appendix. As shown in Figure A.1 in the Online Appendix, these constituencies are distributed across various regions.

Due to limitations in the demographic characteristics of the survey company's registered sample pool, we conducted stratified sampling based on constituency types. Table A.1 in the Online Appendix compares these constituencies with others, demonstrating that they are comparable to each other as well as to non-targeted constituencies where incumbent candidates were implicated in the slush fund issue or to non-targeted constituencies in general.

3.2 Survey procedures

This study involved three surveys: the baseline, post-treatment, and endline surveys. We conducted the baseline survey between the 18th and 23rd, the information intervention and post-treatment survey between the 25th and 26th, and the endline survey between the 28th and 31st. The election took place on the 27th (Sunday). Participants were informed at

the outset that the surveys were related to the upcoming election, conducted for academic research by university researchers, and that no moral judgment would be made based on their responses. To avoid the experimenter demand effect, the general but specific purpose of the surveys was disclosed. Participant anonymity was guaranteed, and they were free to withdraw from the experiment at any time.

To incentivize completion, we limited the number of survey questions as much as possible and kept the questions clear and straightforward to avoid complications or confusion.[3] Furthermore, in addition to a baseline participation reward, payments increased toward the end of the experiment. By completing all surveys, participants could earn up to 65 points (one point is equivalent to one JPY).

We also incentivized certain questions, including primary outcomes, to encourage truth-telling and minimize the experimenter demand effect. Questions were incentivized by informing participants in advance that questions with a special icon were bonus questions, and 100 participants who answered them correctly would receive an additional 100 points.

Screening & Baseline survey (October 18th) Before conducting the baseline survey, screening questions were administered. The screening questions included postal code, whether the respondent had already voted in early voting, and an attention-check question. Those who did not live in the target constituencies, had already voted, or did not pass the attention-check question did not continue to the baseline survey. For those who proceeded to the baseline survey, we asked about their demographics and questions related to politics and policy. Importantly, one question asked about respondents' perceptions regarding the proportion of other voters who consider the fraud issue unacceptable. Its responses were used in the information treatment. The baseline survey included a total of 11 questions.

Intervention & Post-treatment survey (October 25th) We first provided the treatment group with information about social norms regarding intolerance toward politicians' malfeasance (the details are explained in Section 4.2). In contrast, the control group proceeded without receiving any additional information. The post-treatment survey was administered immediately afterward and included three primary outcomes of interest. The first

[3] The baseline survey, which includes the most questions, contains only 11 questions and is designed to be completed within 5 minutes.

two questions assessed the respondent's posterior beliefs about others' voting behavior in the same constituency: the respondent's posterior belief about the proportion of other voters who *will* vote for the incumbent candidate, and her posterior belief about the proportion of other voters who *should* vote for the incumbent candidate. These questions are asked separately because descriptive and injunctive norms are widely recognized as distinct constructs in psychology (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990). Lastly, the third question asked about the respondent's voting behavior, particularly the likelihood of voting for the incumbent candidate in her constituency.

In addition, as intermediate outcomes, we asked questions about the respondent's perceptions of the incumbent candidate's competence and trustworthiness, as well as the perceived pivotability of their own vote. Finally, we also asked about the respondent's support for policies or NGOs aimed at increasing transparency in political funding.

There were a total of eight questions, of which those about posterior beliefs regarding others' voting behavior and the valence and trustworthiness of the incumbent candidate were incentivized. The same set of questions was asked of both treatment and control groups.

Endline survey (October 28th) The endline survey asked two questions: whether the respondent voted, and if so, which political party candidate she voted for.

All survey questions (originally in Japanese) and their English translations are provided in the Online Appendix.

3.3 Balance and attrition

We conducted a statistical test (t-test) to check the balance between the treatment and control groups. The variables used to check the balance were pre-specified in the PAP. Table A.2 in the Online Appendix shows that all variables, except for education attainment, are balanced at a false discovery rate of 0.05. Following the PAP, we included this variable as a baseline control in the subsequent regression analyses.

We also checked the balance between attritors and non-attritors using the same set of variables. Table A.3 in the Online Appendix shows the result. First, the number of attritors

after the treatment is minimal (95/2280 or 4%). Second, the table shows that all variables, except gender and marital status, are balanced at a false discovery rate of 0.05. As pre-specified in the PAP, we computed bounds using the method proposed by Lee (2009).

The summary statistics of the final sample are provided in Table A.4 in the Online Appendix.

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Empirical model

In the main regression analyses, we estimate the following model using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS):

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + \mathbf{X}_i \gamma + \varepsilon_i, \tag{1}$$

for individual i, where y_i is the outcome, T_i is the treatment indicator, $\mathbf{X}_i$ is a vector of control variables, and ε_i is the error term. The control variables include the baseline control variable and prefecture fixed effects. We use a randomized experiment to estimate the causal effect β. We use robust standard errors in the main analyses and conduct robustness checks using the Wild bootstrap and randomized inference.

4.2 The information treatment

As mentioned in Section 3.2, to measure respondents' prior beliefs about intolerance norms, we asked about the proportion of other voters who are intolerant of the slush fund issue in the baseline survey. The answers to this question were used to create the intervention screen.

We intentionally designed the questionnaire to incentivize respondents to provide their best estimate of social norms, regardless of their personal beliefs (i.e., voters make their best guess, even if they personally believe that the slush fund issue is acceptable or unacceptable). We then took the average of their perceptions (67%) to define social norms in the following analyses.

Figure 1 shows the intervention screen. We provided this information to the treatment group at the intervention stage, while the control group proceeded without receiving any

additional information.

5 Results

5.1 Perceptions of social norms

Panel (a) in Figure 2 shows the actual distribution of respondents' prior beliefs about other voters' corruption intolerance, with the vertical line indicating the average value, or our definition of social norms.

First, the distribution is widely dispersed. Second, it is skewed, with many respondents perceiving other voters as less tolerant of corruption. However, importantly, some respondents view other voters as more tolerant of corruption. We will later use this distribution to estimate heterogeneous effects.

5.2 Effects of the information treatment

5.2.1 Correlation between beliefs and voting behavior

As observed, prior beliefs about intolerance norms vary substantially across voters. We anticipate that providing social norms may influence respondents' posterior beliefs and voting behavior.

As detailed in Section 3.2, we measure beliefs about others' voting behavior using two variables: the respondent's posterior belief regarding the proportion of other voters who *will* vote for the incumbent candidate, and their posterior belief regarding the proportion who *should* vote for the incumbent. We also examine the respondent's own voting decision. While we incentivized questions about others' voting behavior, the nature of self-reported voting decisions made incentivization impractical.[4] To mitigate self-reporting bias, we conducted surveys immediately after the election, allowing participants to provide responses that accurately reflected their election experiences. Although post-election survey responses (collected

[4] We considered methods such as the Bayesian Truth Serum (Prelec, 2004) to incentivize belief reporting in unverifiable contexts. However, we opted against this due to concerns that its complexity might increase participant attrition. Charness et al. (2021) provides a discussion of belief elicitation strategies addressing this concern.

the day after the election) are considered a closer approximation of actual voting behavior, we also present results based on participants' pre-election declared choices.

If a respondent bases her voting decision on her perception of others' voting decisions, we should expect these variables to be highly correlated. The relationship between respondents' perceptions of others' voting behavior and their decision to vote for the incumbent candidate, as shown in Table 1, indicates strong correlations. The results in the second row suggest that voters with strong posterior beliefs that others should vote for the incumbent candidate are more likely to do so themselves. Similarly, the results in the first row indicate that voters with strong posterior beliefs that others will vote for the incumbent candidate are also more likely to vote for her. One possible interpretation of this finding is that the two variables (will and should) are highly correlated, with a correlation coefficient of 0.69, making it difficult to disentangle their effects.

Table A.5 in the Online Appendix also presents the correlation between the same posterior beliefs (i.e., the proportion of other voters who will/should vote for the incumbent candidate) and the decision to vote for an *alternative* candidate. In that table, we find that the relationship between these beliefs and voting behavior is generally negative, although the correlation between voting behavior and beliefs about the proportion of voters who will vote for the incumbent is statistically insignificant.

5.2.2 Treatment effects

Posterior beliefs about others' voting behavior Table 2 shows the effects of the information treatment on posterior beliefs about others' voting behavior. It indicates that providing social norms, on average, *increases* respondents' posterior beliefs about others' voting behavior. The estimated coefficients indicate that the information treatment leads individuals to believe that 6% more people will vote for the incumbent candidate (Column (4)) and 7% more people should vote for the incumbent candidate (Column (8)), relative to the control group means.

As discussed in Section 5.1, voters hold varying perceptions of others' intolerance levels. Next, following the PAP, we examine whether the treatment effect varies depending on how individuals perceive these social norms.

Figure 3 presents the conditional marginal effects of our treatment. Panel (a) uses the measure of beliefs that others will vote for the incumbent candidate as the dependent variable, while Panel (b) uses the measure of beliefs that others should vote for the incumbent candidate as the dependent variable. The figure illustrates that the positive main effects observed earlier are primarily driven by individuals with lenient views—those who tend to believe that others are more tolerant of corruption. In contrast, no discernible effect is found for individuals with stringent views.

Columns (1), (3), (6), and (8) in Table 3 present the estimation results from the subsample analysis, where the sample is divided into two groups based on the average value. Columns (1) and (6) show that the treatment effect is absent for individuals who believe others are less tolerant of corruption, i.e., those scoring above 67 in Figure 2. In contrast, Columns (3) and (8) indicate that the positive main effects are observed only among those who perceive others as more tolerant of corruption. The treatment increases beliefs about others' voting behavior by 13 to 14 percent of the control mean.

Voting for the incumbent candidate Next, we investigate whether the treatment affects voters' decision to vote for the incumbent candidate. The results are presented in Table 4. Columns (1) and (4) do not show clear evidence that the information treatment affects the likelihood of voting for the incumbent candidate. The same results appear even if the sample is split based on social norms in Columns (1), (3), (6), and (8) in Panel A of Table 5. However, as we will discuss later, this masks important heterogeneity.

Voting for an alternative candidate Did the treatment affect voters' decision to vote for a candidate other than the incumbent? Columns (2) and (5) in Table 4 suggest that the treatment increased the likelihood of voting for an alternative candidate. In terms of magnitude, the estimated coefficient in Column (5) indicates that the likelihood of voting for an alternative candidate increased by 7 percentage points. According to Table 5, this effect is primarily driven by individuals with stringent views on intolerance norms (Columns (1) and (6) in Panel B). Figure A.4 in the Online Appendix visualizes these findings.

Turnout Finally, we examine the effect on voter turnout. First, Columns (3) and (6) in Table 4 suggest that the treatment increased turnout, with Column (6) indicating that the magnitude of the effect is 6 percentage points. Second, Panel C of Table 5 shows that this effect is concentrated among individuals with stringent views (Columns (1) and (6)). These results are also seen in Figure A.5 in the Online Appendix.

Combining the results of voting for an alternative candidate and voter turnout, one possible interpretation is that those with stringent views experienced a shock upon learning that social norms are more tolerant of corruption than they had initially believed, prompting them to turn out and vote for an alternative candidate.

5.2.3 Robustness checks

We conducted various robustness checks in the Online Appendix. Table A.6 reports p-values using randomized inference, considering multiple hypothesis testing (Young, 2019), and applying the Wild bootstrap (e.g., Cameron et al., 2008). Table A.7 shows Lee bounds (Lee, 2009), accounting for attrition. Finally, Table A.8 presents estimates using Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood (Correia et al., 2020). Overall, the qualitative results are similar across these exercises.

5.2.4 Other outcomes

Although our primary outcomes are respondents' posterior beliefs and voting behavior, we also examined the effect on other outcomes as specified in the PAP.

Policy support and donations First, we analyzed the treatment effect on respondents' support for policies promoting more transparent political funding and their donations to NGOs working to enhance transparency, as shown in Table 6. For these outcomes, we found only a weak positive effect among swing voters with stringent views (Column (1)).

Political attitudes Second, we examined three intermediate outcome variables. The first outcome measures respondents' beliefs about the proportion of other voters in their constituency who perceive the incumbent candidate as competent (Kendall et al., 2015). The second outcome captures respondents' posterior beliefs about the proportion of other voters

who view the incumbent as trustworthy (Chong et al., 2015). The third outcome evaluates respondents' belief in their vote's influence on the election outcome, reflecting their perception of pivotality.

The results in Columns (6) and (8) of Table 6 indicate that the treatment increases respondents' perceptions that more voters in their constituency view the incumbent candidate as competent and trustworthy. These findings suggest that respondents believe others perceive the incumbent as more competent and trustworthy, which may justify their decision to support the candidate. Furthermore, Column (10) indicates that the treatment reinforces respondents' belief in the influence of their vote, potentially boosting support for the incumbent. In contrast, we find no significant effects among swing voters for these outcome variables.

5.3 Mechanism

To further explore these main findings, we conducted additional analyses on the interplay between the perception of social norms and party identity. In particular, we seek to understand how the perceptions of social norms vary by party identity. The analysis using party identity was pre-registered in the PAP.

In Section 5.1, we found that some voters make lenient judgments about the malfeasance of the LDP incumbent, while others are more stringent. Further analysis reveals that the distribution of these beliefs systematically varies according to respondents' party identity. Panel (b) of Figure 2 illustrates that ruling-party supporters are more likely to believe others are more tolerant of the malfeasance of LDP incumbents compared to opposition-party supporters (mean for ruling-party supporters: 62; mean for opposition-party supporters: 70; the difference in means: p-value < 0.001).[5] Moreover, Panel (a) of Figure A.2 in the Online Appendix shows that this specific distribution for ruling-party supporters is primarily driven by LDP supporters. In contrast, Panel (b) of the same figure also indicates that the most stringent views are held by individuals who do not support any particular party.

These results may raise concerns that the above heterogeneous effects are merely a reflection of party identity. To address this, we restrict the sample using party identity and

[5] The mean value for those who do not support any particular party tends to be similar to that of opposition-party supporters (mean: 69; the difference in means: p-value $= 0.63$).

repeat the same analyses as before.

First, Figure A.3 in the Online Appendix shows that restricting the sample to LDP supporters yields similar marginal effects of the treatment variable as in the full sample. This finding is further supported by the regression analysis. As shown in Columns (4), (5), (9), and (10) of Table 3, significant positive effects are observed among these party supporters. Notably, the effect size approximately doubles for these subsamples. These results suggest that ruling-party supporters, particularly LDP supporters, are the primary drivers of the main effects on posterior beliefs. Crucially, heterogeneous effects based on prior beliefs about intolerance norms also exist within this group.

Second, regarding the likelihood of voting for the incumbent candidate, the full sample does not provide evidence that the information treatment influences voting outcomes. However, when restricting the sample to ruling-party supporters (Columns (4) and (9) of Panel A in Table 5) and LDP supporters (Columns (5) and (10) of Panel A), the treatment significantly increases the likelihood of voting for the incumbent. According to Column (10), the effect size reaches 12 percentage points. Combined with the results on posterior beliefs, this backfire effect may be interpreted as a form of protective behavior among those with lenient prior beliefs, who tend to be supporters of ruling parties (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Jost, 2004).

Finally, concerning the likelihood of voting for an alternative candidate and turnout, we find that positive treatment effects emerge among swing voters for both outcomes (Columns (2) and (7)). According to Column (7) in Panels B and C, the effect size is 10 percentage points for the likelihood of voting for an alternative candidate and 8 percentage points for turnout.

In summary, while perceptions of social norms generate heterogeneous effects within the same party identity, these effects vary significantly across subgroups based on party identity. These results underscore the critical interplay between prior beliefs about intolerance norms and party identity, with important policy implications.

6 Discussion

In this section, we explore alternative mechanisms that could explain the main findings.

First, prior beliefs about the prevalence of corruption might account for the observed results. To test this possibility, we split the sample based on respondents' baseline perceptions of the percentage of politicians involved in the slush fund. Columns (5) and (6) of Panel A in Table 7 show that the treatment effect emerges in both sub-samples, with similar effect sizes. Combined with the results in Columns (7) and (8), this suggests that perceptions of corruption prevalence are unlikely to be the primary explanation for the findings.

Second, the effects might vary between individuals who consider the slush fund an important issue in the October election and those who do not. While the effect tends to be more pronounced among those who do not view the slush fund as a key issue, the estimates are statistically indistinguishable between the two groups.

Finally, we examine whether living in Fraud Districts versus Clean Districts explains the results. Although the effect appears to be stronger in Fraud Districts, the coefficients are similar, and the difference is not statistically significant.

Overall, these alternative explanations do not appear to account for the main findings.

7 Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that voters tend to misperceive other voters' intolerance toward politicians' malfeasance, and that informing them of social norms influences their posterior beliefs and voting behavior. These findings highlight the importance of perceptions of other voters' beliefs in promoting political accountability.

However, the study also underscores the complexities involved, as perceptions of social norms and party identity appear to interact. For instance, we observed a backfire effect among individuals with certain prior beliefs. Future research should further investigate mechanisms to effectively promote political accountability without inadvertently reinforcing undesirable outcomes.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Information Treatment

This survey project brings together a diverse group of participants, whose responses can be said to represent the views and attitudes of the average voter in Japan. In the previous survey, participants were asked how many of the other respondents considered that "omissions in political fund reports and kickbacks from political funds" are "completely unacceptable" or "somewhat unacceptable."

As a result, it was found that people believe that out of 100 participants, 67 considered "omissions in political fund reports and kickbacks from political funds" to be either "completely unacceptable" or "somewhat unacceptable."

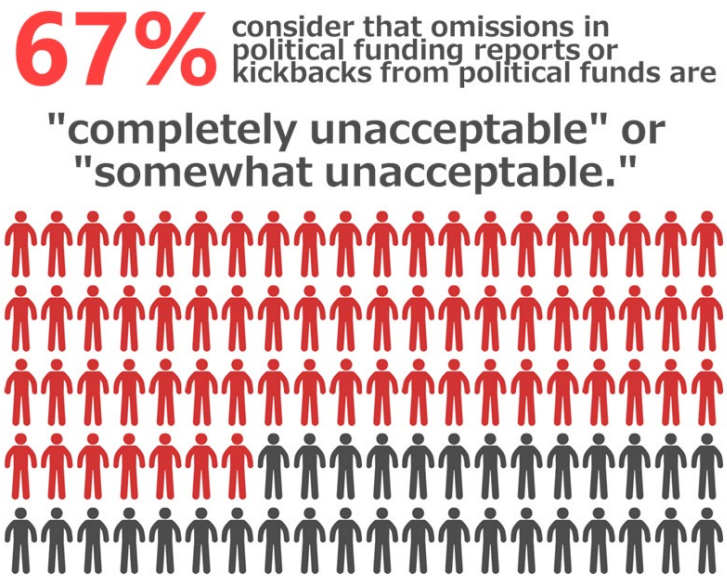
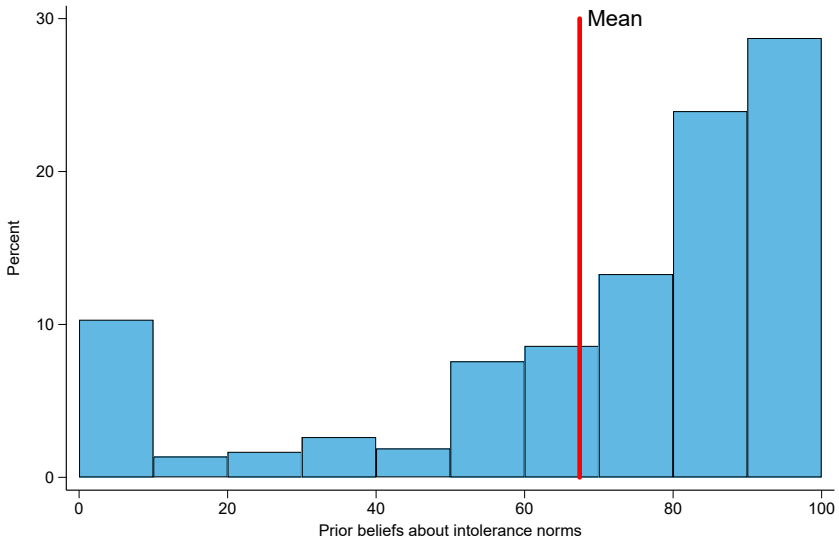
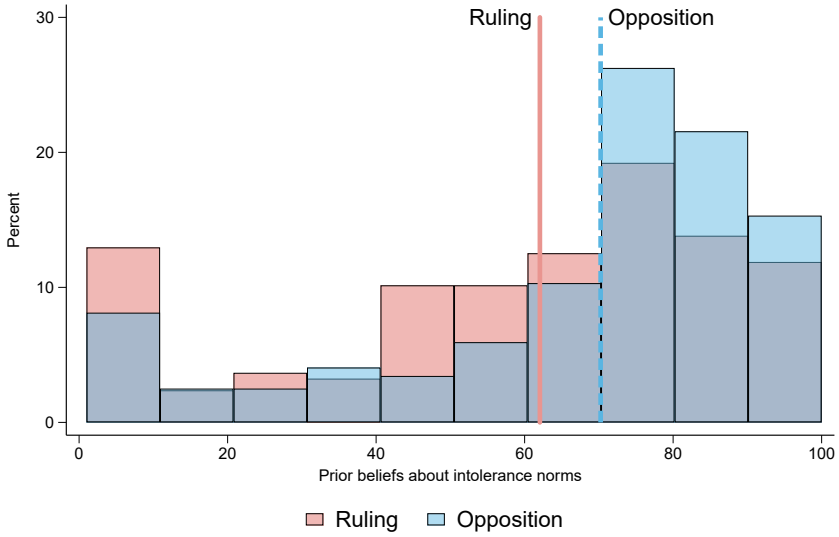


Figure 2: Distribution of Prior Beliefs about Intolerance Norms



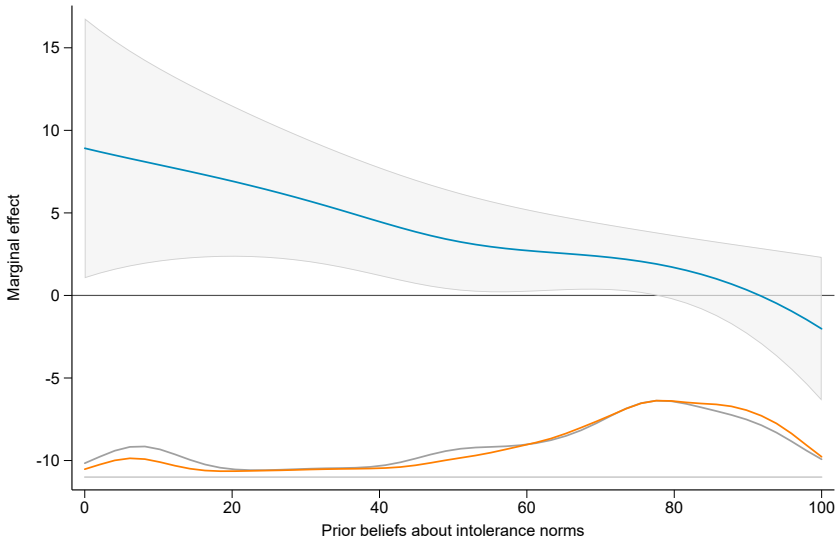
(a) Full sample



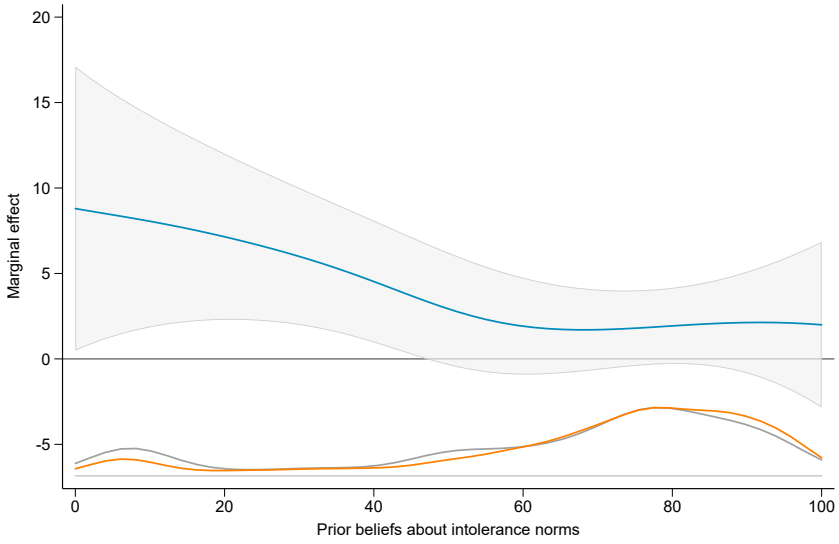
(b) By supporting party

Note: The figures show the distributions of prior beliefs about intolerance norms. Panel (a) uses the distribution of prior beliefs about intolerance norms using the full sample. Panel (b) shows the distribution of prior beliefs about intolerance norms by supporting party. The group omitted in the second panel consists of those not supporting any particular party and those unwilling to report a supporting party.

Figure 3: Marginal Effects of Information Treatment on Beliefs about Others' Voting Behavior



(a) Others will vote



(b) Others should vote

Note: The figures show the conditional marginal effects of the treatment variable with the 95% confidence intervals using the *interflex* package (Hainmueller et al., 2019). Panel (a) uses respondents' perceptions about the proportion of other voters who will vote for the incumbent as the dependent variable. Panel (b) uses respondents' perceptions about the proportion of other voters who should vote for the incumbent as the dependent variable. The distributions at the bottom of each panel show the distributions of prior beliefs about intolerance norms. The baseline control and prefecture fixed effects are included.

Table 1: Correlation between Beliefs and Voting Behavior

	Dependent variable: Vote incumbent					
	Before election			After election		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Others will vote	0.003	0.003		0.003	0.003	
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***		(0.000)***	(0.000)***	
Others should vote			0.003			0.003
			(0.000)***			(0.000)***
Female		−0.061	−0.060		−0.076	−0.073
		(0.018)***	(0.018)***		(0.021)***	(0.021)***
Age		0.013	0.018		0.004	0.010
		(0.008)	(0.008)**		(0.010)	(0.010)
Education years		−0.003	−0.001		−0.002	−0.000
		(0.005)	(0.005)		(0.005)	(0.005)
Log income		0.022	0.022		0.013	0.014
		(0.012)*	(0.012)*		(0.014)	(0.014)
Married		0.072	0.071		0.091	0.090
		(0.017)***	(0.017)***		(0.021)***	(0.021)***
Control mean	0.226	0.226	0.226	0.307	0.307	0.307
Control std.	(0.419)	(0.419)	(0.419)	(0.461)	(0.461)	(0.461)
R^2	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.02	0.04	0.04
N	2280	2280	2280	2047	2047	2047

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable for Columns (1) to (3) is the respondent's stated intention to vote for the incumbent candidate, as reported in the baseline (pre-election) survey. For Columns (4) to (6), the dependent variable is the respondent's actual vote for the incumbent candidate, based on the post-election survey. "Others will vote" captures respondents' perceptions of the proportion of other voters who will vote for the incumbent candidate, while "Others should vote" reflects respondents' perceptions of the proportion of other voters who should vote for the incumbent candidate. Baseline controls include education attainment. *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.01$, respectively.

Table 2: Effects of Information Treatment on Beliefs about Others' Voting Behavior

	Dependent variable:			
	Others will vote			Others should vote
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	3.103	3.047	2.933	3.150
	(0.954)***	(0.954)***	(0.957)***	(1.060)***
Baseline controls	no	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	no	no	yes	yes
Control mean	46.679	46.679	46.679	43.746
Control std.	(24.225)	(24.225)	(24.225)	(26.399)
R^2	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
N	2280	2280	2280	2280

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable for Columns (1) to (3) is the respondent's posterior belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who, she thinks, *will* vote for the incumbent candidate. In contrast, the dependent variable for Column (4) is the respondent's posterior belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who, she thinks, *should* vote for the incumbent candidate. Baseline controls include education attainment. *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.01$, respectively.

Table 3: Heterogeneous Effects of Information Treatment on Beliefs about Others' Voting Behavior

Dependent variable:	Others will vote					Others should vote				
Sample:	Prior > Norm		Prior ≤ Norm			Prior > Norm		Prior ≤ Norm		
		Swing		LDP+Komei	LDP		Swing		LDP+Komei	LDP
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Treatment	0.886	0.130	5.921	10.237	9.827	1.835	1.367	5.539	9.331	9.308
	(1.127)	(1.367)	(1.787)***	(3.277)***	(3.458)***	(1.270)	(1.548)	(1.921)***	(3.749)**	(3.961)**
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	49.323	48.925	42.170	47.236	47.692	44.669	44.111	42.172	48.250	47.658
Control std.	(23.340)	(22.693)	(25.050)	(24.494)	(23.235)	(25.692)	(24.771)	(27.517)	(28.189)	(26.768)
R^2	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.06	0.06	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.05	0.06
N	1508	965	772	206	177	1508	965	772	206	177

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable for Columns (1) to (5) is the respondent's belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who, she thinks, *will* vote for the incumbent candidate. The dependent variable for Columns (6) to (10) is the respondent's belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who, she thinks, *should* vote for the incumbent candidate. Baseline controls include education attainment. Columns (1), (2), (6), and (7) include individuals whose prior beliefs about intolerance norms are above the average value. The remainder uses individuals whose prior beliefs about intolerance norms are below or equal to the average value. Columns (2) and (7) restrict the sample to those who do not support a particular party, Columns (4) and (9) restrict the sample to ruling-party supporters, and Columns (5) and (10) limit the sample to LDP supporters. *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.01$, respectively.

Table 4: Effects of Information Treatment on Voting Behavior

	Dependent variable:					
	Before election			After election		
	Vote incumbent	Vote alternative	Turnout	Vote incumbent	Vote alternative	Turnout
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment	0.017	0.085	0.100	−0.009	0.074	0.063
	(0.018)	(0.021)***	(0.021)***	(0.021)	(0.022)***	(0.019)***
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	0.219	0.310	0.552	0.309	0.373	0.708
Control std.	(0.414)	(0.463)	(0.497)	(0.462)	(0.484)	(0.455)
R^2	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.04
N	2280	2280	2280	2047	2047	2047

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable for Columns (1) to (3) is the respondent's stated intention, as reported in the baseline (pre-election) survey, to vote for the incumbent candidate (Column (1)), an alternative candidate (Column (2)), or to turn out to vote (Column (3)). Similarly, the dependent variable for Columns (4) to (6) is the respondent's actual voting behavior, as reported in the post-election survey, indicating a vote for the incumbent candidate (Column (4)), an alternative candidate (Column (5)), or turnout (Column (6)). Baseline controls include education attainment. *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.01$, respectively.

Table 5: Heterogeneous Effects of Information Treatment on Voting Behavior

Sample:	Before election					After election				
	Prior > Norm		Prior ≤ Norm			Prior > Norm		Prior ≤ Norm		
		Swing		LDP+Komei	LDP		Swing		LDP+Komei	LDP
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Panel A	Dep. var.: Vote incumbent					Vote incumbent				
Treatment	0.014	0.002	0.048	0.162	0.164	0.005	−0.017	−0.005	0.172	0.123
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.036)	(0.066)**	(0.069)**	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.040)	(0.065)***	(0.068)*
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	0.187	0.122	0.273	0.643	0.675	0.268	0.211	0.381	0.687	0.737
Control std.	(0.390)	(0.327)	(0.446)	(0.481)	(0.470)	(0.443)	(0.409)	(0.486)	(0.466)	(0.442)
R^2	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.08	0.09	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.09	0.09
N	1508	965	772	206	177	1361	861	686	197	171
Panel B	Dep. var.: Vote alternative					Vote alternative				
Treatment	0.078	0.106	0.079	−0.100	−0.071	0.078	0.095	0.040	−0.121	−0.089
	(0.025)***	(0.031)***	(0.035)**	(0.044)**	(0.043)*	(0.027)***	(0.034)***	(0.038)	(0.051)**	(0.048)*
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	0.344	0.305	0.251	0.157	0.111	0.407	0.388	0.313	0.187	0.140
Control std.	(0.475)	(0.461)	(0.434)	(0.365)	(0.316)	(0.492)	(0.488)	(0.464)	(0.391)	(0.349)
R^2	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.08	0.08	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.10	0.09
N	1508	965	772	206	177	1361	861	686	197	171
Panel C	Dep. var.: Turnout					Turnout				
Treatment	0.093	0.105	0.122	0.013	0.035	0.080	0.077	0.032	0.028	0.023
	(0.025)***	(0.032)***	(0.036)***	(0.053)	(0.056)	(0.023)***	(0.032)**	(0.035)	(0.046)	(0.052)
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	0.551	0.441	0.554	0.850	0.838	0.701	0.616	0.721	0.896	0.886
Control std.	(0.498)	(0.497)	(0.498)	(0.358)	(0.370)	(0.458)	(0.487)	(0.449)	(0.307)	(0.319)
R^2	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.07	0.03	0.05	0.05
N	1508	965	772	206	177	1361	861	686	197	171

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. In Panel A, the dependent variable for Columns (1) to (5) is the respondent's declaration to vote for the incumbent candidate, according to the baseline (pre-election) survey. The dependent variable for Columns (6) to (10) is the respondent's vote for the incumbent candidate, according to the post-election survey. In Panel B, the dependent variable for Columns (1) to (5) is the respondent's declaration to vote for a candidate other than the incumbent, according to the baseline (pre-election) survey. The dependent variable for Columns (6) to (10) is the respondent's vote for a candidate other than the incumbent, according to the post-election survey. In Panel C, the dependent variable for Columns (1) to (5) is the respondent's declaration to turn out, according to the baseline (pre-election) survey. The dependent variable for Columns (6) to (10) is the respondent's turnout decision, according to the post-election survey. Baseline controls include education attainment. Columns (1) and (5) include individuals whose prior beliefs about intolerance norms are above the average value. The remainder uses individuals whose prior beliefs about intolerance norms are below or equal to the average value. Columns (2) and (7) restrict the sample to those who do not support a particular party, Columns (4) and (8) restrict the sample to ruling-party supporters, and Columns (5) and (10) limit the sample to LDP supporters. *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.01$, respectively.

Table 6: Heterogeneous Effects of Information Treatment on Other Outcomes

Dependent variable:	Policy support		Donation		Competent		Trustworthy		Pivotal	
Sample:	Prior > Norm & Swing	Prior ≤ Norm & LDP	Prior > Norm & Swing	Prior ≤ Norm & LDP	Prior > Norm & Swing	Prior ≤ Norm & LDP	Prior > Norm & Swing	Prior ≤ Norm & LDP	Prior > Norm & Swing	Prior ≤ Norm & LDP
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Treatment	0.113	−0.077	6.791	333.010	1.543	10.456	1.818	9.576	0.028	0.236
	(0.065)*	(0.109)	(394.088)	(1126.759)	(1.345)	(3.849)***	(1.306)	(3.654)***	(0.050)	(0.118)**
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	2.837	2.803	1947.600	3241.598	31.425	32.479	29.991	33.821	2.222	2.624
Control std.	(1.005)	(0.710)	(6712.429)	(6506.688)	(21.480)	(25.273)	(21.343)	(25.158)	(0.809)	(0.763)
R^2	0.01	0.12	0.01	0.09	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.08	0.02	0.09
N	965	177	965	177	965	177	965	177	965	177

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable for Columns (1) and (2) is the respondent's support for a policy that makes political funding more transparent. The dependent variable for Columns (3) to (4) is the amount of donation (measured in JPY) to an NGO working to increase transparency in political funding. The dependent variable for Columns (5) and (6) are the respondent's belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who she thinks that the incumbent candidate is competent. The dependent variable for Columns (7) and (8) are the respondent's belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who she thinks that the incumbent candidate is trustworthy. The dependent variable for Columns (9) and (10) are the respondent's belief that her vote has an influence on the electoral result. Baseline controls include education attainment. In all regressions, the sample uses individuals whose prior beliefs about intolerance norms are below or equal to the average value. Odd columns restrict the sample to swing voters who hold stringent views, and even columns limit the sample to LDP supporters who hold lenient views. *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.01$, respectively.

Table 7: Heterogeneous Effects of Information Treatment on Beliefs about Others' Voting Behavior: Alternative Explanations

Panel A

Dependent variable:	Others will vote		Others should vote		Others will vote		Others should vote	
Sample:	Intolerance norms				Prevalence of corruption			
	Prior > Norm	Prior ≤ Norm	Prior > Norm	Prior ≤ Norm	Above Median	Below Median	Above Median	Below Median
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Treatment	0.886	5.921	1.835	5.539	2.656	3.123	4.700	1.688
	(1.127)	(1.787)***	(1.270)	(1.921)***	(1.450)*	(1.270)**	(1.580)***	(1.432)
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	49.323	42.170	44.669	42.172	46.925	46.444	43.766	43.727
Control std.	(23.340)	(25.050)	(25.692)	(27.517)	(25.102)	(23.376)	(26.878)	(25.954)
Stat. difference (p-value)	0.017		0.106		0.808		0.156	
R^2	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
N	1508	772	1508	772	1110	1170	1110	1170

Panel B

Dependent variable:	Others will vote		Others should vote		Others will vote		Others should vote	
Sample:	Importance of the slush fund				District types			
	Listed	Not listed	Listed	Not listed	Clean	Fraud	Clean	Fraud
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Treatment	1.917	3.209	1.813	3.714	2.013	3.719	2.263	3.941
	(1.645)	(1.188)***	(1.823)	(1.306)***	(1.352)	(1.355)***	(1.485)	(1.518)***
Baseline controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Prefecture F.E.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Control mean	48.090	46.044	43.333	43.932	47.861	45.520	45.095	42.425
Control std.	(23.872)	(24.368)	(26.116)	(26.537)	(24.483)	(23.931)	(26.450)	(26.300)
Stat. difference (p-value)	0.522		0.394		0.371		0.427	
R^2	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02
N	736	1544	736	1544	1186	1094	1186	1094

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable for Columns (1), (2), (5), and (6) is the respondent's posterior belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who, she thinks, *will* vote for the incumbent candidate. In contrast, the dependent variable for other columns is the respondent's posterior belief about the proportion of other voters in the same constituency who, she thinks, *should* vote for the incumbent candidate. Baseline controls include education attainment. In Panel A, Columns (1) and (3) include individuals whose prior beliefs about intolerance norms are above the average value, while Columns (2) and (4) include individuals whose prior beliefs about intolerance norms are below or equal to the average value. Columns (5) and (7) include individuals who believe that the percentage of politicians involved in the slush fund issue is above the median value, while Columns (6) and (8) include individuals who believe it is below or equal to the median value. In Panel B, Columns (1) and (3) include individuals in Clean Districts, while Columns (2) and (4) include individuals in Fraud Districts. Columns (5) and (7) include individuals who listed the slush fund as one of the important issues in the October election, while Columns (6) and (8) include individuals who did not list it. *, **, and *** indicate $p<0.10$, $p<0.05$, and $p<0.01$, respectively.