

The Iron Lady Effect? Sanae Takaichi and Personalistic Voting in the 2026 Japanese House of Representatives Election*

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Abstract

In the 2026 Japanese House of Representatives election, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), led by Japan's first female Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, won a landslide victory. To what extent did her personal traits contribute to this victory? Using leadership trait preferences measured through a post-election conjoint survey, we find (1) female voters showed stronger support for Takaichi than men, and this was driven by their shared gender identity instead of preferences for stereotypical female leadership traits; and (2) Takaichi's masculine leadership style was instrumental in generating personalistic support among LDP non-supporters and encouraging voting for the LDP. These personalistic trait effects were independent of party-level factors and policy preferences, suggesting an alternate way in which gender shapes electoral outcomes. Our findings advance research on how gendered personalistic leadership shapes vote choice in a parliamentary democracy that has broken the "glass ceiling" but remains slow in closing broader gender gaps.

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Introduction

In 2025, Sanae Takaichi broke the “glass ceiling” by becoming the head of a minority-coalition government and Japan’s first female Prime Minister (PM). In the midst of low approval ratings for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) throughout 2025, Takaichi achieved another feat in 2026 when she led the LDP to victory in the House of Representatives (HoR) election. With this reaffirmation of her leadership, Takaichi now became the head of a majority-coalition government.¹ On one hand, these turn of events in a country that ranked 138 out of 146 countries in terms of female political empowerment ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#)) challenge conventional theories about gender descriptive representation ([Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993](#); [Swers, 2007](#)). On the other hand, the emergence of Takaichi comports with a rising trend of personalized politics in parliamentary democracies ([Krauss and Nyblade, 2005](#); [Jou and Endo, 2015](#); [Garzia, Ferreira da Silva and De Angelis, 2022](#)). Takaichi also follows a pattern of female leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Marine Le Pen, and Giorgia Meloni in leading conservative parties, disavowing feminism and gender-equality policies, and cultivating a personalistic leadership ([Geddie, 2025](#)). Often described as Japan’s “Iron Lady” ([Geddie, 2025](#); [Ko, 2025](#); [Maslow, 2025](#); [Reidy, 2025](#)), Takaichi has never made closing Japan’s vast gender gaps in socioeconomic and political empowerment a priority in her campaigns or her government policies.

We take Takaichi as a focal point to understand how the individual attributes of female heads of government influence vote choice. Specifically, we examine the process and extent to which Takaichi’s gendered personalistic traits influenced vote choice for the LDP in the 2026 HoR election. Using leadership trait preferences captured through an original post-election conjoint survey, our central findings are twofold. First, Takaichi’s identity as a woman did not necessarily attract those who descriptively prefer female leaders, but it did help her (and eventually the LDP) gain electoral support from female voters. Second, the preference for Takaichi’s masculine leadership style had a significant impact on LDP voting, particularly among individuals who do not regularly support the LDP. These findings provide key insights into how Takaichi’s cult of personality offset low approval ratings for her party and led the LDP to victory in the 2026 HoR election. They demonstrate that her path to victory is not random, while also raising questions as to whether more women (in a country like Japan) can (and should) follow her path.

The remaining sections of this article are constructed as follows. The next section describes events in Japanese politics leading up to the 2026 HoR election, including the emergence of Japan’s first female PM. The third section presents theoretical expectations regarding how the gendered personalistic attributes of PM Takaichi may have contributed to LDP voting in the 2026 election. To test these expectations, we fielded an original online survey after the 2026 HoR election that includes experiment-based measurements of leadership preferences. We present both individual and aggregate-level results, and conclude with key insights from our findings, as well as suggestions for future studies.

¹Note that the LDP and its coalition partner remain in the minority in the House of Councillors.

The Case of Japan's First Female Prime Minister

The path for Takaichi to become the first female PM in Japan was not an easy one, as Japanese media rarely report women as viable candidates in the PM race (Naito, 2024). The 2025 race marked her third attempt at the position. Her first candidacy was in the 2021 leadership contest following PM Yoshihide Suga's resignation amid criticism for his inadequate handling of the COVID-19 crisis. She failed to advance to the runoff, and Fumio Kishida won the race. She ran for a second time in the 2024 leadership race after PM Kishida resigned due to declining approval ratings. In this race, she astonished pundits by leading in both the Diet member and party member votes among nine candidates in the initial round of voting, but she was defeated by Shigeru Ishiba in the final round. In the 2025 race, the media regarded Takaichi as one of the major contenders, while her victory was uncertain until the last moment. In fact, several Japanese media outlets published last-minute reports that Shinjiro Koizumi, a son of former PM Junichiro Koizumi, was leading the race slightly ahead of her (Chiba, 2025; Nakamura, 2025).

The long-delayed election of the first female PM, however, received mixed responses from proponents of gender equality in Japanese politics, as Takaichi is well-known for holding conservative views on several gender-related issues, particularly regarding the allowance of separate surnames for married couples (Kaizuma, 2025; Ueno, 2026). Despite her identity as a woman, gender equality has not been a focal issue under Takaichi's leadership. Furthermore, Takaichi is also known for her masculine personality. In her inaugural address as party leader, the prime minister explicitly articulated her stance, declaring, "I will work, work, work, work, and keep on working," thereby aligning herself with traditionally male-stereotyped social values (Ogi, 2025). Following her words, foreign media and scholars frequently juxtapose Takaichi with Margaret Thatcher, citing an overlapping image of the "Iron Lady" (Geddie, 2025; Ko, 2025; Maslow, 2025; Reidy, 2025).

In spite of mixed receptions from scholars and activists in gender politics, public opinion has been overwhelmingly favorable toward the Takaichi Cabinet, with an approval rating of 71 percent in her first month, as reported by a Yomiuri Shimbun public opinion poll. This initial rating was significantly higher than those of previous cabinets, and although there were several instances of negative media coverage, such as imprudent and aggressive statements regarding a potential Taiwan contingency that exacerbated tensions with China in November, she continued to maintain similar ratings in the subsequent months of 2025 (nippon.com, 2025). From a personalistic perspective, journalistic accounts of political experts discuss that the novelty of a female PM, her masculine leadership style, and the cultivation of support from younger voters contributed to Takaichi's resilient popularity (Uchiyama, 2026; Ikeda, 2026; Yokoyama and Terukina, 2026), while deeper scientific assessments of how she gained and maintained popularity are yet to be made.

From a policy standpoint, Takaichi positions herself as an ideological successor to Shinzo Abe (former Japanese PM from 2006 to 2007 and from 2012 to 2020, assassinated in 2022). Following Abe, she is one of the most conservative members of the LDP who is a strong proponent of strengthening Japan's defense capabilities to cope with China's military expansion and is a consistent supporter of low interest rates and broad government spending, or the return to "Abenomics" (Hernández and Ueno, 2025). Coupled with stringent policies against foreigners and support for traditional family values, Takaichi's policy stance is considered

significantly more conservative than those of other central figures in the post-Abe LDP, such as her predecessor Shigeru Ishiba and her PM race contender Shinjiro Koizumi.

In January 2026, PM Takaichi announced the sudden dissolution of the HoR. The LDP experienced defeat in the 2024 HoR and 2025 HoC elections under PM Ishiba and was forced to form a minority government. Takaichi's intention was to regain the LDP's majority in the HoR and stabilize parliamentary governance, backed by the high approval ratings of her cabinet. Still, critics expressed at least three concerns regarding the achievement of her goals. First, during the final few months of 2025, Takaichi maintained her personal popularity among voters, but the approval rating for the LDP as a party remained low (Chai, 2026). Second, it was only a little more than a year since the previous HoR election held in October 2024. If the majority of voters see a snap election as her self-interested and opportunistic act, it may damage her reputation and harm her party's performance in the election (Higashijima et al., 2025; The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2026). Third, the LDP's long-time coalition partner, Komeito, decided to terminate its campaign collaboration with the LDP due to significant conflicts in policy positions with Takaichi (Murakami and Nohara, 2026). As a result, the LDP could no longer count on Komeito machines to consolidate their voter base.

In spite of these doubts, the LDP won a landslide victory at the 2026 HoR election on February 8. It gained 316 out of 465 seats, which is a 160% increase from 198 seats in the 2024 election. Combined with the 36 seats gained by its new coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party, the new Takaichi cabinet secured 354 seats, or 76.1% of the seats in the HoR. The key question is whether and how the personalistic attributes of Takaichi may have contributed to the LDP's victory, independent of party- and policy-level factors such as preexisting support for the LDP outside of elections, distance from the LDP's ideological positions, preference for a PM with LDP affiliation, retrospective economic evaluations, and policy positions on major agenda items during the election. In the remainder of this article, we present one of the first systematic accounts of this question by paying particular attention to the gendered aspects of Takaichi's personalistic attributes. The following section starts by developing a set of theoretical expectations.

Hypotheses: The Iron Lady Effect

Based on our observations about Sanae Takaichi's path to becoming Japan's first female PM and the head of a majority-coalition government in 2026, we present four hypotheses. First, most notably, is the glass barrier that holds back female politicians. Previous studies in Japan show that this barrier is not actually rooted in voter bias. The majority of Japanese voters evaluate female politicians as favorably as (or sometimes more favorably than) their male counterparts (Kage, Rosenbluth and Tanaka, 2019; Horiuchi, Smith and Yamamoto, 2020; Kato, Lu and Endo, 2025, but also see Endo and Ono 2023). Furthermore, both male and female voters support the introduction of gender quotas to enhance the descriptive representation of women in politics (Miura, McElwain and Kaneko, 2023). For Japanese people who wish to increase the descriptive representation of women in political leadership, the very fact of Takaichi being a woman can boost their positive impressions of her. Therefore, we posit that Japanese people who prefer a female over male PM should have more positive personal attachments to Takaichi:

H1: The stronger the preference for a female PM over a male PM, the more positive Takaichi's personal image becomes.

Second, Takaichi is widely known for her masculine leadership style. Extant studies in psychology suggest that stereotypes of political leaders are decidedly masculine, and women with a feminine gender stereotype have a baseline disadvantage in being evaluated positively as leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011; Lombard, Azpeitia and Cheryan, 2021). How, then, do voters evaluate women who defy feminine stereotypes, like Takaichi? Existing evidence suggests that deviating from feminine stereotypes can improve support for female leaders, but its effectiveness is highly conditional and may even backfire (Schneider, 2014; Bauer, 2017; Ono and Yamada, 2020; Bernhard, 2022). Therefore, we posit that the effectiveness of Takaichi's masculine leadership style is also conditional; it helped her gain personalistic support more from Japanese people who prefer a masculine over feminine leadership style for PM:

H2: The stronger the preference for PM with masculine than feminine personality traits, the more positive Takaichi's personal image becomes.

H1 and H2 suggest that the unique combination of female *identity* and masculine *personality* may have allowed Takaichi to gather personalistic support from an unexpectedly broad class of voters who care about gender-related attributes of political leaders. A natural question that follows is whether attachments to Takaichi contributed to the increase in LDP voting among her personalistic supporters. Here, empirical evidence suggests that Japanese politics in the last couple of decades has undergone “presidentialization,” or strengthening connections between the popularity of party leaders and their party's electoral performances (Krauss and Nyblade, 2005; Jou and Endo, 2015). Corroborating such evidence with journalistic accounts surrounding the 2026 HoR election, we hypothesize that personal attachment to Takaichi, independent of party- and policy-level factors, did contribute to the LDP's victory in the election:

H3: The more positive Takaichi's personal image, the more likely they are to vote for the LDP.

If H1, H2, and H3 hold, what we should expect is that Takaichi's gendered traits (i.e., her female identity and masculine personality) impacted voting behavior in the election through personal attachment to her. Based on this expectation, our fourth and last hypothesis is as follows:

H4: Takaichi's personal image mediates the impacts of gender and personality trait preferences for PM on LDP voting.

Post-Election Survey of the 2026 HoR Election

Following the 2026 HoR election on February 8, 2026, we fielded a post-election online survey in Japan, collecting responses between February 27 and March 5. 2,665 participants aged 20 or older were recruited from the monitor pool of the online survey company, *Rakuten*

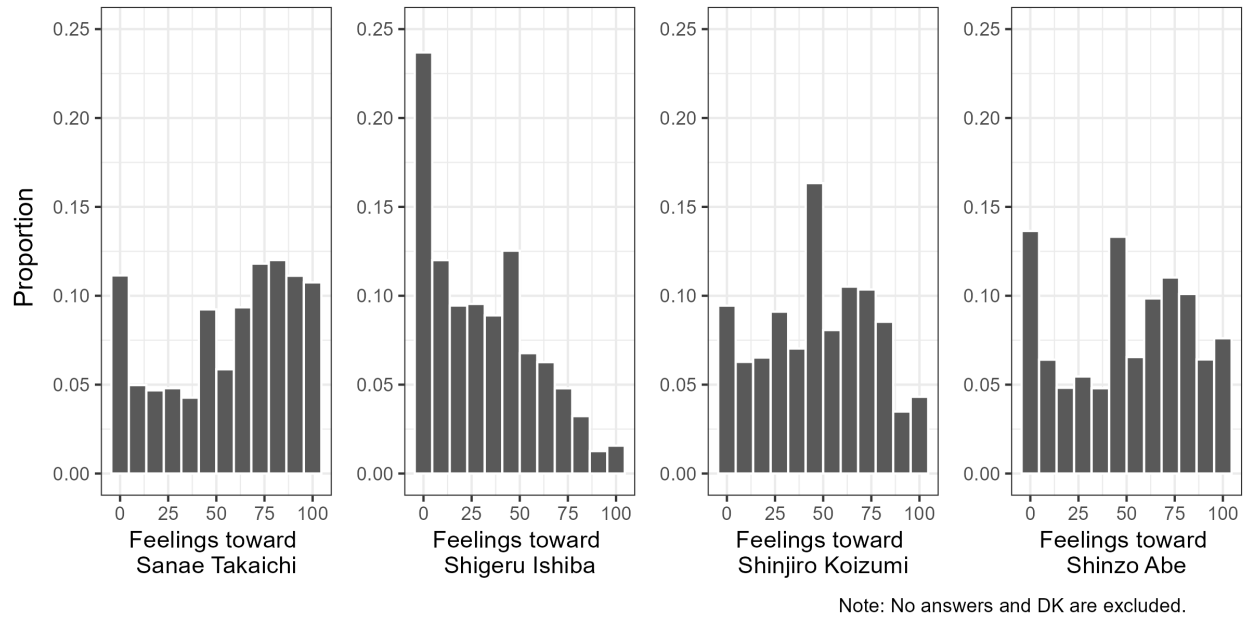


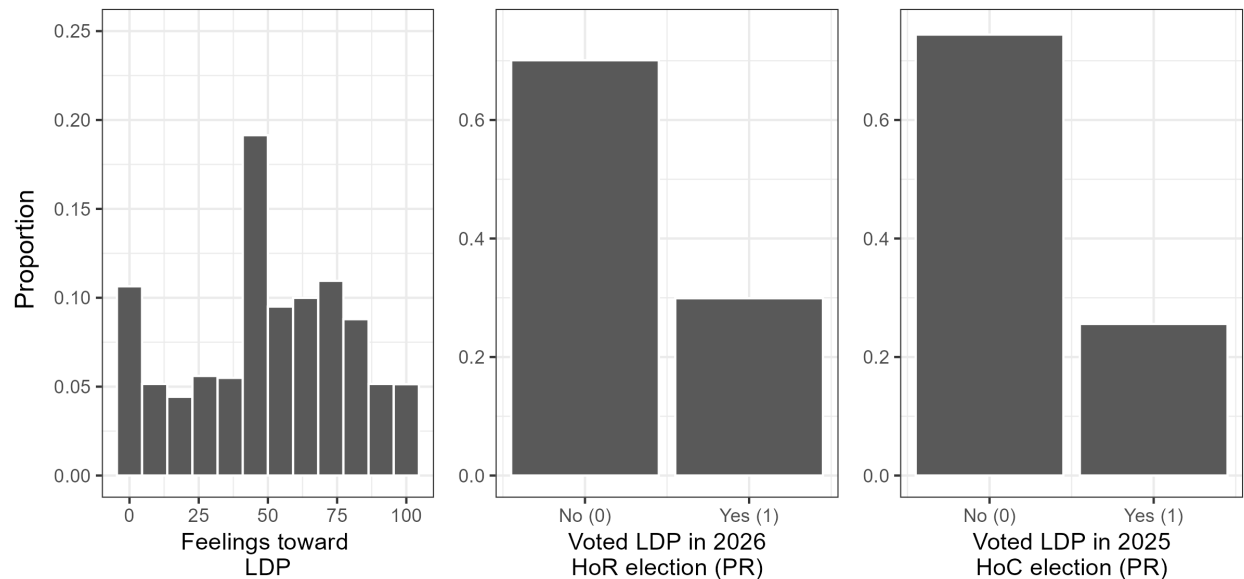
Figure 1: Distributions of LDP leader feeling thermometer (FT)

Insight, using quota sampling that maintains balance in the distributions of gender, age cohorts, and prefectures of residence according to the Japanese census.² We used *Qualtrics* to ask questions and record responses. The specific number of observations differs across analyses as we excluded non-responses unless otherwise noted (see Online Appendix tables for the number in each analysis).

To start with, we measured respondents' personal attachment to LDP leaders using a feeling thermometer (FT). The exact wording of the FT question is as follows: "Please indicate your feelings toward the following politician by expressing them as a temperature on a numerical scale" (see the original Japanese wording in Online Appendix A; the same follows for other questions). The responses were recorded on a scale from 0 to 100. We asked about Sanae Takaichi, as well as her predecessors and competitors within the LDP, who are all male: Shigeru Ishiba (previous PM), Shinjiro Koizumi (her contender in the 2025 LDP presidential election), and Shinzo Abe (former PM from 2006-2007, 2012-2020; Takaichi is often seen as his ideological successor). **Figure 1** shows the distributions of those LDP leader FTs. They demonstrate that Takaichi maintained a particularly positive personal image among respondents (mean = 56.90, s.d. = 32.28), followed by her ideological predecessor Abe (mean = 50.60, s.d. = 31.60). Ishiba's personal image was strikingly negative (mean = 31.20, s.d. = 26.79) compared to Takaichi and Abe. Voter attachment to Koizumi was relatively neutral, peaking at 50 (mean = 47.60, s.d. = 27.88).

Another outcome variable of interest is LDP voting in the 2026 HoR election in the Pro-

²As the survey company continued to open survey recruitment until almost all quotas were filled, some cells were oversampled (also, one cell was slightly undersampled). We adjusted these imbalances by reweighting samples using entropy balancing (Hainmueller, 2012) based on the original quota. Additionally, those aged 18 and 19 are eligible voters in Japan but were not included in our samples. We compensated for this imbalance by overweighting the responses of those aged 20-29 to match the distribution of those aged 18-29 in the census.



Note: No answers and DK are excluded. Abstentions and blank votes are coded as "No (0)".

Figure 2: Distributions of LDP FT, LDP vote in 2026 HoR election, and LDP vote in 2025 HoC election

portional Representation (PR) district. Here, we asked the question: “Which political party did you vote for in the proportional representation district in the House of Representatives election this February?” The responses are coded as 1 if they answered that they voted for the LDP and 0 if they voted for parties other than the LDP or abstained (including blank votes). Those who answered don’t know or skipped the question were excluded from the analysis. We additionally measured two related variables. First, we measured attachment to the LDP as a party by LDP FT, using a question that parallels LDP leader FTs. Second, we recorded respondent’s recall of their LDP vote in the 2025 HoC election (PR district), coded in the same way as for the 2026 LDP vote. In the 2025 HoC election, the LDP under PM Ishiba failed to obtain a majority of seats. We are interested in how voting patterns shifted from this election to the 2026 HoR election. **Figure 2** presents distributions of these outcome variables. The left-hand panel shows that LDP FT peaked at 50 (mean = 50.78, s.d. = 28.16). Its distribution weighs slightly more towards the positive direction, but the tendency is not as strong as it is for Takaichi FT. The center and right-hand panels show LDP voting behavior in 2026 and 2025. They confirm that in our samples, the proportion of those who voted LDP in 2026 (29.92%) is higher than that in 2025 (25.56%).³ We observe a significant amount of vote switching between 2025 and 2026: 9.57% of respondents didn’t vote LDP in 2025 but switched to LDP in 2026; 4.75% of respondents voted LDP in 2025

³The numbers here are lower than the actual PR vote share of the LDP in 2026 (36.7%) and higher than the actual PR vote share of the LDP in 2025 (21.6%). For 2026, the number is lower because we coded abstention as 0 in the variable. If abstention is excluded, the LDP vote share in our sample rises to 37.6%, comparable to reality. For 2025, the exclusion of abstainers leads to a further increase in the LDP vote share in our sample to 31.7%. Here, we suspect that the 2026 voting behavior spills over to the recall of their 2025 voting behavior. As Takaichi played a central role in 2026 voting behavior (but supposedly not in 2025), it implies that the analysis based on 2025 recall likely overestimates the impact of Takaichi on voting.

Table 1: The list of conjoint attributes and levels

Attribute	Levels
Gender	Male ; Female
Personality	Masculine (Persuasive: Hold consistent views and persuade others; Visionary: Hold clear visions and swiftly cope with things) Feminine (Mediator: Ease disagreements and mediate conflicts; Listener: Listen to a wide range of views with humility)
Age	Younger (50; 53); Older (69; 72)
Terms served (seniority)	Junior (elected 2 or 3 times); Senior (elected 10 or 11 times)
Party affiliation	LDP; Non-LDP (Centrist Reform Alliance; Democratic Party for the People; Japan Innovation Party)
Economic (fiscal) policy priority	Expansion: Even with large spending increase, prioritize policy achievement; Austerity: Limit spending to what is necessary and prioritize fiscal discipline
Japan-China Relations priority	Hawkish: Combatting military threats; Dovish: Maintaining economic partnership

but didn't vote LDP in 2026.

Our key independent variables are preferences for PM leadership traits. We measured such preferences by estimating Individual Marginal Component Effects (IMCEs) for each respondent based on the conjoint experiment (Zhirkov, 2022). IMCEs are essentially the Average Marginal Component Effects (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014) estimated at the individual level, which excel at independently extracting preferences that are potentially endogenous to one another. In the conjoint experiment, we asked the following question to capture preferences for the personalistic attributes of potential PMs.

Suppose the following three individuals are current members of the National Diet. To what extent do you think each person is suitable to serve as Prime Minister? Using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “not at all suitable” and 10 means “highly suitable,” please indicate your answer with a number between 0 and 10.

Following Zhirkov (2022), to secure sufficient data to estimate IMCE, we asked respondents to rate ten different sets of three profiles, obtaining ratings for 30 profiles per respondent.⁴ All attribute levels are also dichotomized to simplify the IMCE estimation process.

Table 1 presents the set of attributes included in our conjoint experiment. In the current study, our central focus is on two attributes: gender identity and gendered personality. First, gender identity is captured by a simple contrast between male and female profiles. Second, masculine and feminine personalities are measured through the description of four gendered personalities following Ono and Yamada (2020). *Persuasive* and *visionary* personalities represent a “task-oriented style that focuses on the achievement of their own goals” (481), which is often expected of male leaders; *Mediator* and *listener* personalities imply a “relationship-oriented style that emphasizes the importance of participatory decision-making processes” (481), which is often associated with female leaders. Conjoint design is particularly effective in extracting preferences here since preferences for gender identity and gendered personalities

⁴Some respondents provided ratings for only a subset of profiles. To ensure measurement reliability, we estimated IMCEs only for those who rated 20 or more profiles.

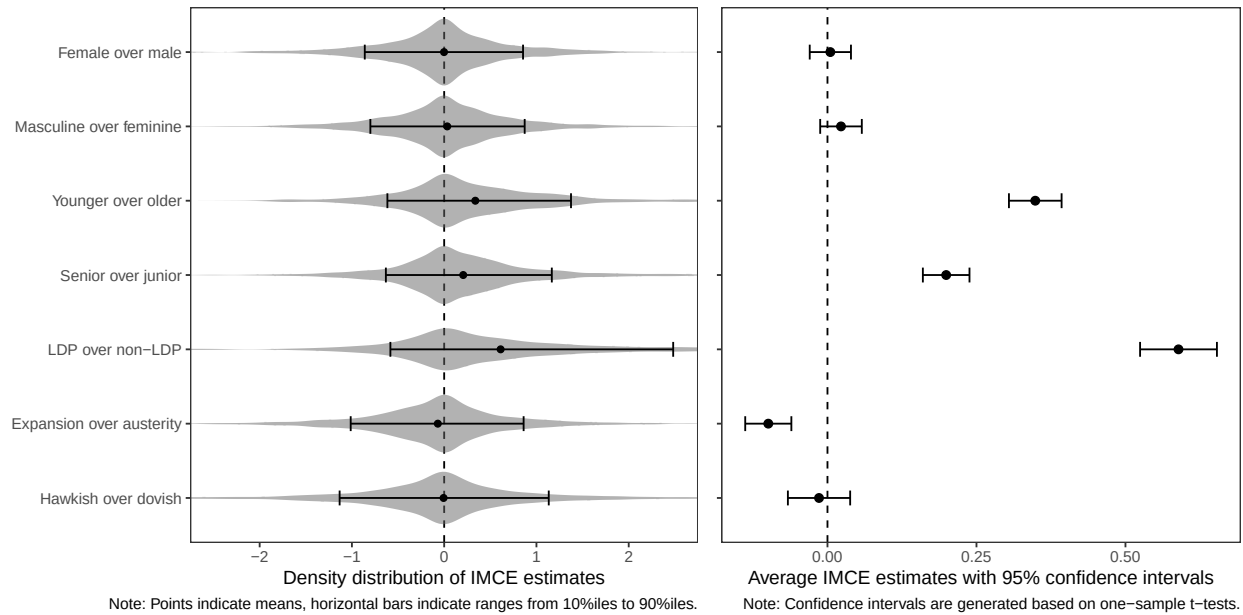


Figure 3: Distributions of preferences for PM leadership traits (IMCE estimates)

are clearly endogenous to each other. IMCEs allow us to measure these two preferences as being independent of each other (and independent of all other conjoint attributes presented in Table 1).

Figure 3 shows the distributions of IMCE estimates and their averages. It shows that, on average, Japanese respondents have almost no preference regarding the gender identity of the PM, a result consistent with previous evidence that women are no less preferred than men for political leadership in Japan (Kage, Rosenbluth and Tanaka, 2019; Kato, Lu and Endo, 2025). Also, masculine personalities are slightly more preferred than feminine personalities, while the magnitude of this advantage is negligible and statistically insignificant ($p \approx 0.203$). Moving from the 10th to 90th percentiles, IMCEs for gender identity and gendered personality move by around 2 units on an 11-point scale, generating sufficient variance in preferences. Independent of these two preferences, on average respondents have clear preferences for a younger but more experienced person for PM. The clearest tendency in IMCE distributions is that respondents prefer the PM's affiliation with the LDP. This pattern comports with previous studies suggesting the LDP has an independent valence advantage over other parties in Japan (Kuriwaki, Horiuchi and Smith, 2025; Hamzawi, Kato and Endo, 2025). Lastly, regarding the preferred policy positions taken by the PM, fiscal expansion is slightly unpopular, and a hawkish China policy is neither popular nor unpopular.

In addition to the above IMCE estimates as independent variables, our analysis includes the set of covariates displayed in Table 2 to isolate the impact of preferences for gendered personalistic PM attributes. *Support LDP* represents a dummy variable taking the value of 1 if a respondent is a regular supporter of LDP and 0 if not. *Ideological distance from the LDP* is the absolute distance between respondent's self-identified position and their perceived LDP position on an 11-point liberal-conservative ideology scale.⁵ *Economic evaluation* is an

⁵Missing values are recoded as 5 for each ideological position variable.

Table 2: Summary descriptive statistics of additional covariates

Label	Mean	SD	Values
Support LDP (dummy)	0.272	0.445	0;1
Ideological distance from LDP (0-10)	2.005	2.385	0;1;2;3;4;5;6;7;8;9;10
Economic evaluation (0-4)	1.285	0.981	0;1;2;3;4
Female (dummy)	0.518	0.500	0;1
Age cohort: Young (20-30s)	0.253	0.435	0;1
Age cohort: Middle (40-50s)	0.327	0.469	0;1
Age cohort: Elderly (60s or above)	0.420	0.494	0;1
College education (dummy)	0.571	0.495	0;1
Income: Low (Less than 6 million yen)	0.331	0.471	0;1
Income: Middle (6-8 million yen)	0.293	0.455	0;1
Income: High (8 million yen or more)	0.183	0.387	0;1
Income: Missing	0.193	0.395	0;1

evaluation of the current state of the Japanese economy, coded on a five-point scale from bad (0) to good (4). We also include respondent-level demographic covariates of gender, age cohorts, college education, and income, all on a dummy-coded scale.

Analysis: Gendered Leadership Traits and Personalistic Voting

Using the variables described in the previous section, the first step of our analysis explores the impact of preferences for the PM’s personalistic attributes on LDP leader FTs. Given the pseudo continuous nature of the outcome variables, we run OLS regression to generate relevant estimates (see Online Appendix B for a detailed regression table). Then, to compare each predictor’s impact on leader FTs, we calculate first differences by moving predictor values from their 10th percentiles to 90th percentiles (or from 0 to 1 in the case of dummy-coded variables). **Figure 4** visualizes these first differences. It shows that party-level factors are dominant determinants of LDP leader FTs. Respondents who prefer LDP PM, regularly support the LDP, are ideologically closer to LDP, and have more positive evaluations of economic performance feel significantly more positively ($p < .05$) toward any LDP leaders (except that Ishiba is perceived more *negatively* by those who prefer LDP PM). Policy-level factors also play significant roles: consistent with their public policy positions, Takaichi and Abe are perceived more positively, while Ishiba is perceived more negatively by those who prefer leaders prioritizing fiscal expansion over austerity and hawkish over dovish actions regarding Japan-China relations.

Turning to our central variables of interest regarding personalistic attributes, preferences for a female PM over a male PM have virtually *no* impact on feelings toward Takaichi (or any other LDP leaders). This result directly contradicts our prediction from H1. Next, preferences for a masculine over a feminine leadership style do have a statistically significant impact on improving feelings toward Takaichi ($p < .01$). This result is consistent with H2 and makes Takaichi stand out, as feelings toward Ishiba, Koizumi, and Abe do not exhibit the same pattern. Another gendered attribute that distinguishes Takaichi from other LDP

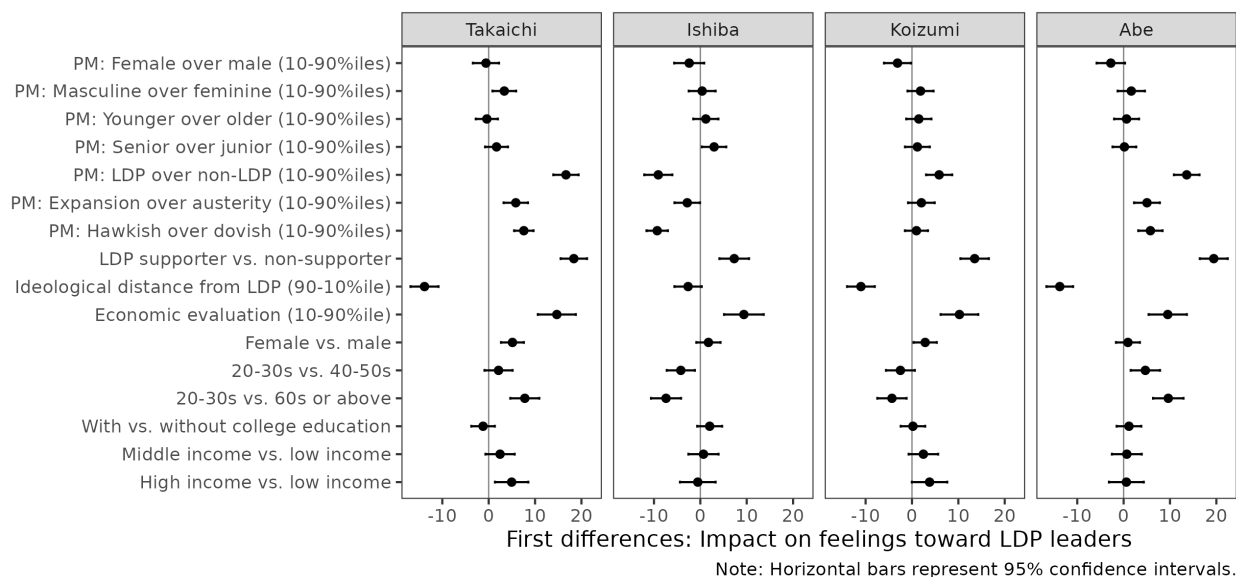


Figure 4: Personalistic support from those who prefer masculine leadership and female voters (but not those who prefer female leadership) distinguish Takaichi from other LDP leaders

leaders is the gender of respondents: Female respondents have significantly more positive feelings toward Takaichi than male respondents ($p < .001$). For male LDP leaders, only Koizumi shows a similar tendency ($p < .05$) but its magnitude is significantly smaller than that for Takaichi. This pattern implies that, while the *preference* for female leaders does not increase personalistic attachment to Takaichi, *shared identity* with female voters does. For other personal attributes, preferences for younger and more senior leaders, and whether respondents are college educated or not do not have significant connections with the FTs of any LDP leaders. Takaichi and Abe are liked more by younger respondents, while Koizumi and Ishiba show an opposite tendency. Takaichi and Koizumi (to a slightly lesser extent) are perceived more positively by those with higher incomes.

The second step of our analysis considers the impact of LDP leader FTs on LDP voting during the 2026 HoR and 2025 HoC elections, as well as LDP FT. Given the nature of the outcome variables, we run Logit to generate estimates for LDP voting outcomes and OLS to generate those for LDP FT outcomes (see Online Appendix C for detailed regression tables). The models include the same set of predictors as the models in the previous step, plus leader FT. We estimated a separate model for each leader FT. **Figure 5** presents predicted values and probabilities of outcomes when FTs are moved from 0 to 100. For reference, Δ values indicate the magnitude of first differences, and p values indicate the statistical significance of leader FT's regression coefficients. Note that each model controlled for all possible party- and policy-level factors. Therefore, the impacts of leader FTs should be interpreted as being associated with personalistic factors.

Figure 5 demonstrates that Takaichi FT has a particularly strong impact on increasing LDP FT and the probability of LDP votes in the 2026 HoR election. These results provide clear support for H3. The increase of Takaichi FT from 0 to 100 is associated with an increase

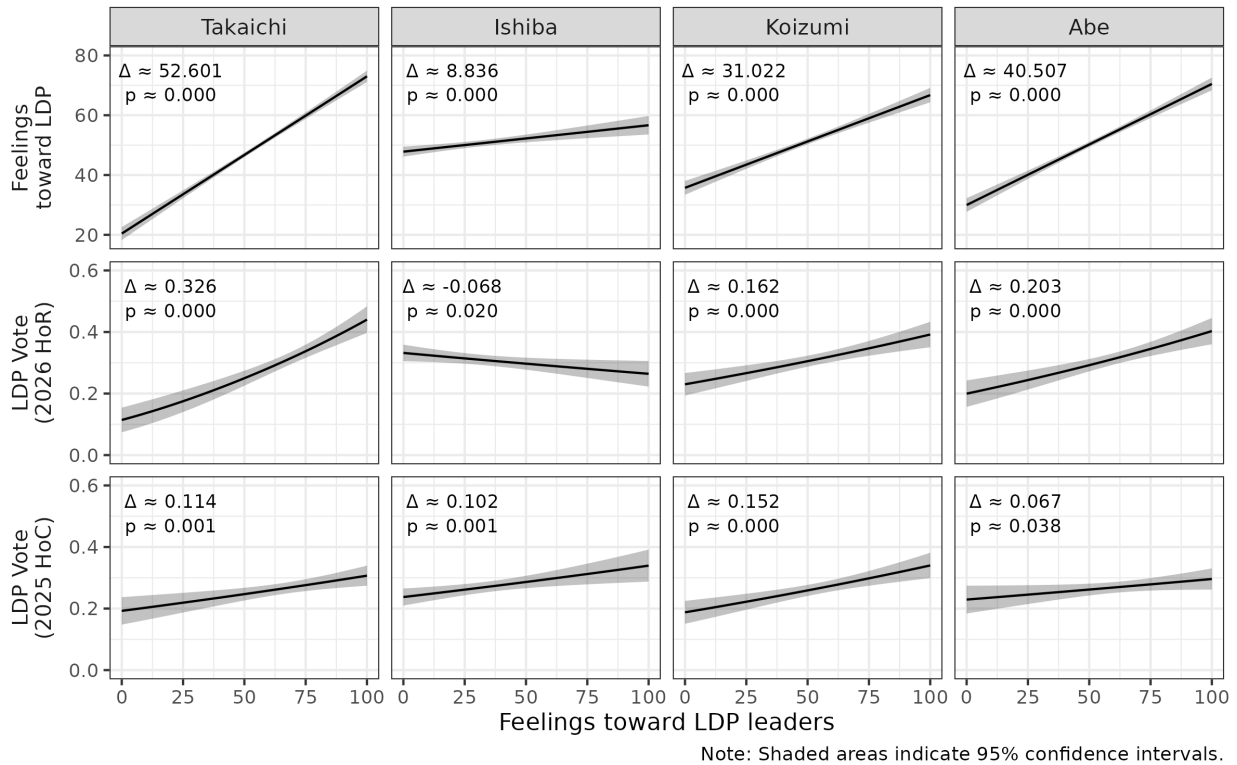


Figure 5: Feelings toward Takaichi have particularly strong connection with LDP FT and LDP votes in 2026 HoR election compared to feelings toward other LDP leaders, but its impact on LDP votes on 2025 HoC election is relatively weak.

of 52.6 in LDP FT and a 32.6% point increase in the probability of LDP votes in the 2026 election. The magnitude of its impact is significantly larger than that for Ishiba, Koizumi, and Abe FTs, demonstrating that attachment to Takaichi is the strongest personalistic predictor of LDP votes during the 2026 HoR election. In 2025, we find that Takaichi FT had a much smaller impact on how respondents voted in the 2025 HoC election, whereas Ishiba and Koizumi FTs had larger or comparable impacts on 2025 LDP votes compared to 2026 LDP votes. This is expected, as Takaichi was not the PM at the time of the 2025 election. However, it is worth noting that Takaichi FT's impact on the 2025 LDP vote, albeit smaller than that of 2026, is slightly larger than Ishiba FT's impact on the 2025 LDP vote, even though Ishiba was the PM at that time. Abe FT follows a similar pattern to Takaichi FT in 2025 and 2026, but its tendency is somewhat weaker than that of Takaichi FT.

As the third step of the analysis, we estimate the average causal mediation effect (ACME: Imai et al., 2011) of preferences for gendered personalistic traits, as well as the respondents' gender, on LDP FT and LDP votes. Both of these variables are mediated through LDP leader FTs. Based on models estimated in the first and second steps, ACMEs are generated using mediation package in R (Tingley et al., 2014). Figure 6 presents the results. They show that feelings toward Takaichi, but not Ishiba, Koizumi, or Abe, significantly mediate ($p < .05$) the impact of gendered personality preferences and the respondent's gender on LDP FT as well as LDP votes, which partially supports H4. The explicit preferences for

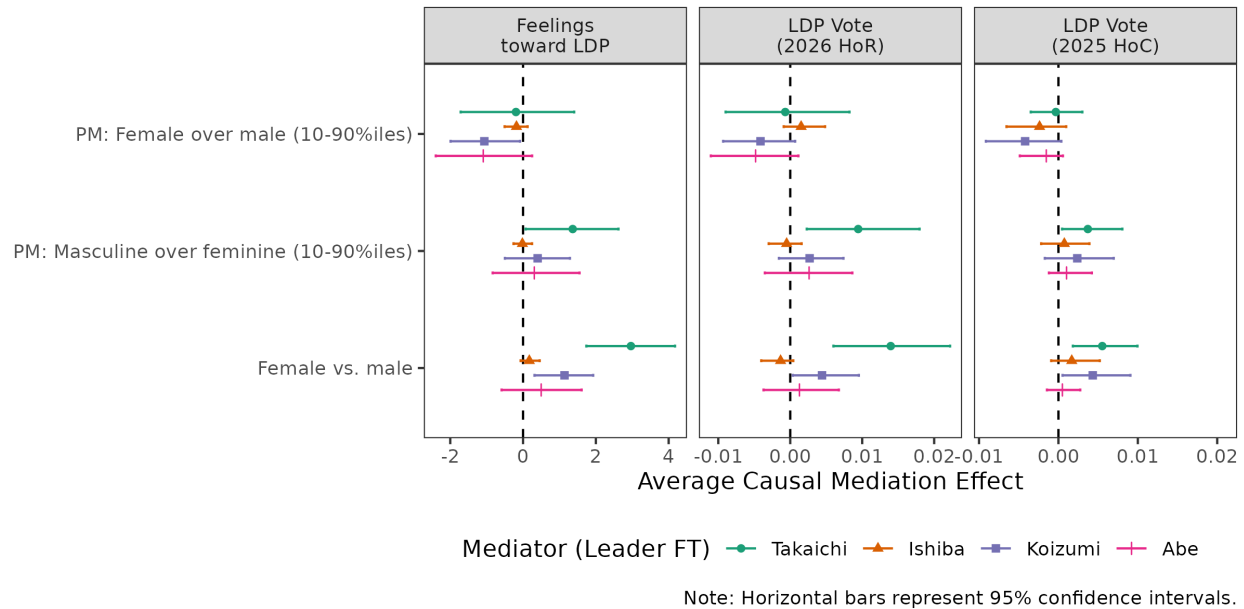


Figure 6: Takaichi FT (but not other LDP leader FTs) significantly mediates the impacts of preferences for masculine over feminine leadership style and respondents' gender

female over male leadership, on the other hand, have no statistically significant mediated effects on LDP FT and LDP votes, which is inconsistent with H4. As demonstrated in the previous steps, the magnitude of ACME on LDP votes in 2026 is clearly larger than that in 2025.

Subgroup Analysis: Cultivating Personalistic Support from Whom?

In this section, we disaggregate the main analytical results to deepen our understanding of how Sanae Takaichi gained her popularity during the 2026 HoR election. First, Figure 7 presents the results from a causal mediation analysis disaggregated by respondent's gender (see Online Appendix D for detailed results regarding mediator and outcome models). It shows similar patterns across female and male respondents. The preference for a masculine leader has similar magnitudes of impact on LDP voting through (and only through) Takaichi FT among female and male respondents, albeit slightly smaller for females. For LDP FT, its ACME is 1.556 ($p \approx 0.118$) among females and 2.255 ($p \approx 0.028$) among males. For 2026 LDP voting, its ACME is 0.014 ($p \approx 0.056$) among females and also 0.011 ($p \approx 0.042$) among males. Additionally, among both females and males, the preference for female leadership continues to have no mediated impact on LDP voting through Takaichi FT. Koizumi FT negatively mediates the impact of the preference for female leadership on LDP FT and voting, especially among male respondents, but Takaichi FT does not show such a tendency. Overall, the results show no indication that Takaichi as an "Iron Lady" gained support based on explicit leadership trait preferences differently among female and male voters.

Second, Figure 8 presents the results from a causal mediation analysis disaggregated by the status of the respondent's support for the LDP (see Online Appendix E for detailed

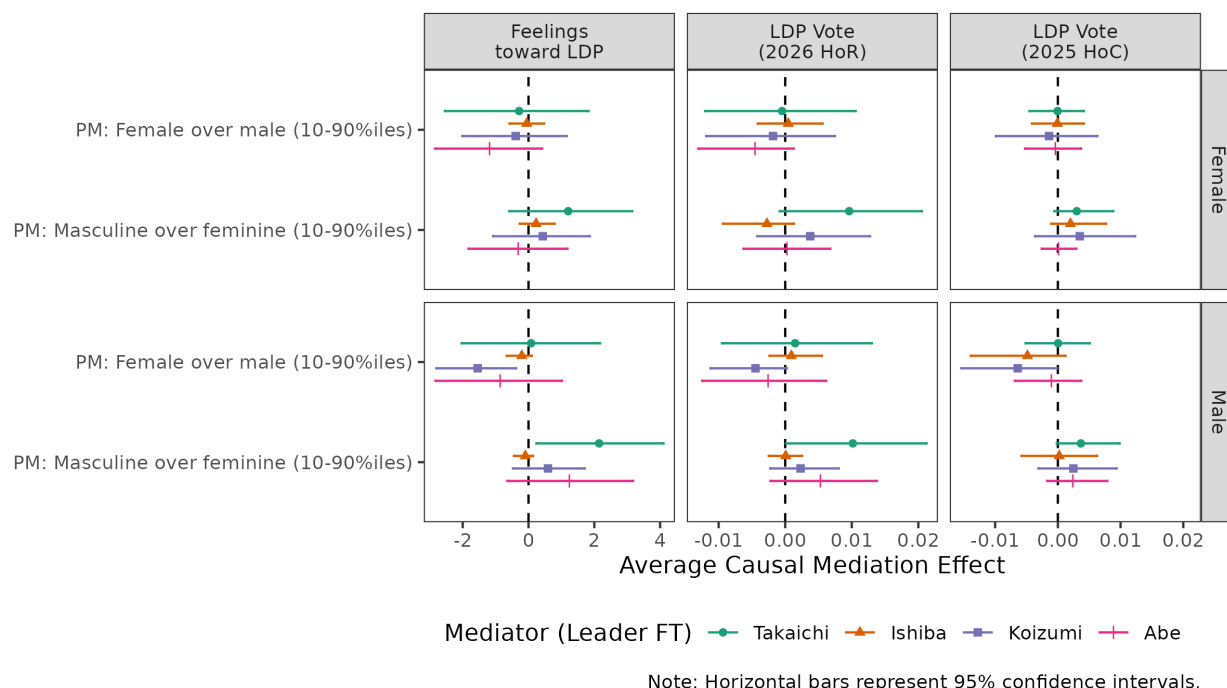


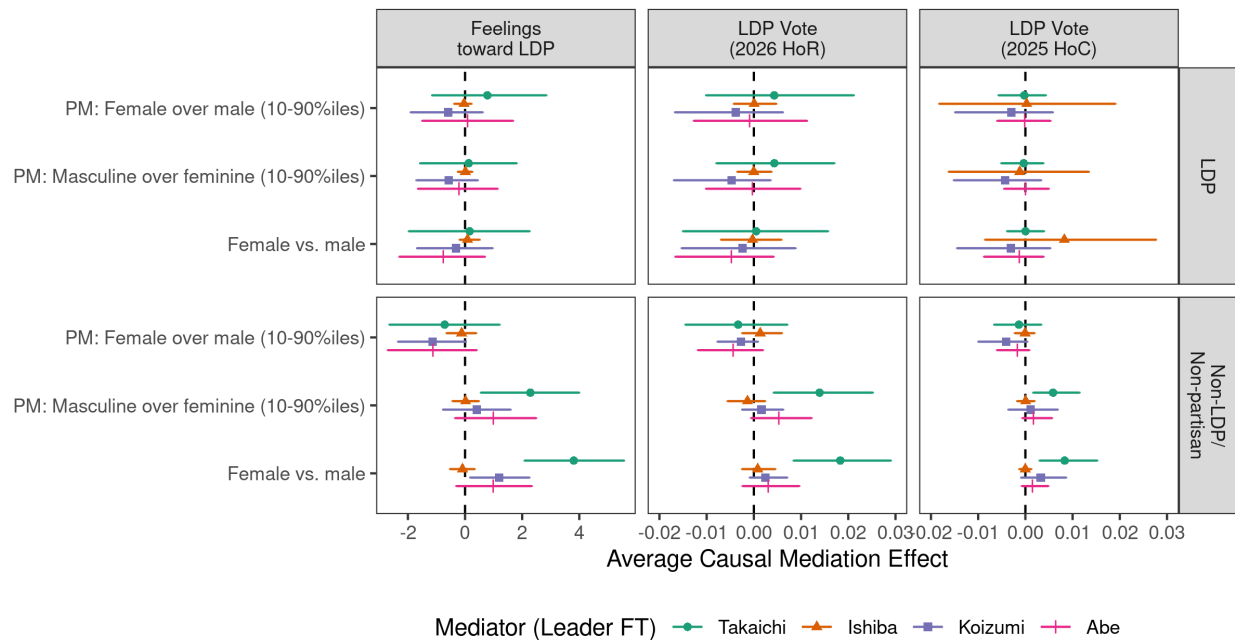
Figure 7: For both female and male respondents, Takaichi FT (but not other LDP leader FTs) mediates the impacts of preferences for masculine over feminine leadership style to a similar extent

results regarding mediator and outcome models). The first row of the figure represents the results for those who regularly support the LDP, and the second row shows the results for those who do not regularly support the LDP (including opposition supporters and non-partisans). The figure shows that the “Iron Lady” effect is present only among non-supporters of the LDP: Only among them does the preference for masculine leadership and the shared identity as female increase LDP FT and LDP voting through Takaichi FT (but the preference for female leadership continues to have no impact).⁶ Among regular LDP supporters, none of these effects are statistically significant. The results here indicate that the “Iron Lady” aspect of Sanae Takaichi uniquely attracted those who don’t regularly support the LDP, cultivating a new group of personalistic supporters who tend to prefer masculine leadership and hold a female gender identity.

Discussion: The Aggregate Impact of “Iron Lady” Leadership

So far, we have explored how the personalistic aspects of Sanae Takaichi, Japan’s first female Prime Minister, could have contributed to her party (LDP)’s landslide victory in the 2026 election. The analysis, based on conjoint survey measurements of leadership preference, voters’ demographic attributes, and exhaustive sets of party- and policy-level controls, indi-

⁶Additional analysis in Online Appendix F (Figure F.3) shows that among non-supporters of the LDP, the preference for masculine leadership has similar magnitudes of mediated effect among female and male respondents.



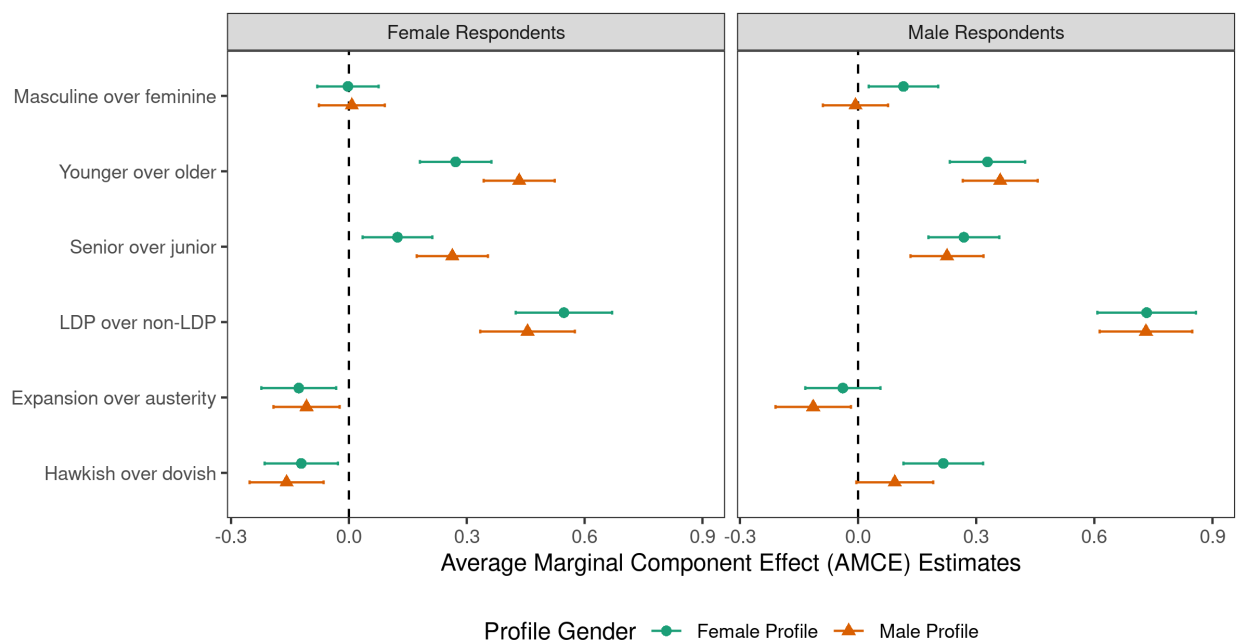
Note: Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 8: Only among LDP non-supporters, Takaichi FT (but not other LDP leader FTs) significantly mediates the impacts of preferences for masculine over feminine leadership style and respondents' gender

cates two paths through which Takaichi cultivated her personalistic supporters, particularly among people who don't regularly support the LDP. First, female voters are both more positive toward Takaichi and more likely to vote for LDP than male voters, while the preference for descriptive female leadership does not impact either Takaichi's or the LDP's popularity during the 2026 election. Second, those who prefer masculine personalities (i.e., persuasive and visionary) for a Prime Minister are more likely to feel positively about Takaichi and, ultimately, more likely to vote for the LDP than those who prefer feminine personalities (i.e., mediator or listener) for a leader.

One curious question that arises from our central results is whether, in aggregate, Sanae Takaichi has *benefited* from her masculine leadership style *because* she is a woman. On the surface, [Figure 3](#) provides no strong evidence that average Japanese respondents from our survey prefer a masculine over a feminine leadership style. Also, [Figure 4](#) demonstrates that supporters of masculine leadership do turn to Takaichi and not to Ishiba, Koizumi, and Abe; however, it is unclear if this pattern occurs because Takaichi is a woman. If there is no aggregate advantage to becoming masculine and gender is unrelated to attraction to masculine leadership, then our analytical result might explain who the personalistic Takaichi supporters are, but not why she, as an "Iron Lady", won a landslide victory.

To explore the above question somewhat indirectly, [Figure 9](#) revisits our conjoint experiment and breaks down the average leadership trait preferences (captured through the Average Marginal Component Effect, or AMCE) by the gender of respondents and the gender of profiles (see Online Appendix G for a table of precise estimates and pooled results with



Note: Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 9: Masculine leadership style and hawkish policy positions have aggregate advantage only among male respondents only when it is a female profile

all profiles). One striking tendency we see is that the AMCE for masculine over feminine leadership is positive and statistically significant ($p < .05$) only among male respondents and only for female profiles. In other words, masculine leaders have an aggregate advantage in attracting male voters (but not female voters) only if they are female. The preference for hawkish over dovish foreign policy shows a similar tendency: Hawkish leaders have a larger aggregate advantage in attracting male (but not female) voters when they are female than when they are male. While these additional results do not speak directly to realworld choices, when combined with our main analytical results, masculinity and hawkishness are the two distinctive attributes of Takaichi, and they seem to work in favor of her aggregate popularity among male voters *because* she is a woman.

Another important lesson we can learn from Figure 9 is that masculinity and hawkishness do not appeal to female voters in the aggregate, regardless of the gender of the leader profile. In addition, what we know from Figure 4 is that the preference for descriptive representation of female leaders does not lead to support for Takaichi. Still, on average female voters are more likely to support Takaichi than average male voters. These patterns imply that female voters, on average, are certainly empowered by having Takaichi as the first PM to share a gender identity with them. However, the reasons behind their enthusiasm are less about Takaichi's leadership style or policy stances, or even their explicit preference for descriptive female leadership.

In summary, additional analysis in this section imply that being an “Iron Lady” generates an aggregate advantage in increasing personalistic popularity among *both* male and female voters. On one hand, being masculine and hawkish is a particularly effective strategy for a

female leader to gain an aggregate advantage among male voters. On the other hand, this strategy does not work and can even backfire when gaining popularity among female voters. Nevertheless, in a country with severe gender gaps, just being a woman is sufficient for Sanae Takaichi to empower and mobilize female voters, offsetting the potentially negative impacts of her leadership style and policy stances.

Conclusion

Sanae Takaichi's landslide victory in her first national election in 2026 is a critical case for understanding the tentative success of female leadership in a country that still has severe gender gaps in both politics and society. It gives rise to the puzzle of how female political leaders can succeed without championing feminism and gender-equity policies.

Our results provide at least three key insights into research on politics and gender. First, even though partisan identity is the dominant determinant of vote choice, gendered personalistic traits can influence the decisions of Independents and non-regular party supporters. As a pathbreaker who defies stereotypes of a Japanese woman's place in government, Takaichi enjoyed significant support from voters who prefer masculine leadership, while she does not have an advantage among those who explicitly prefer descriptive representation of women in political leadership. Our additional analysis implies that the preference for masculine leadership is especially high among male voters only when they evaluate female (but not male) leaders. Combined, our findings demonstrate that acting as an "Iron Lady" can be a particularly effective strategy for a female leader to gain popularity among male voters who do not necessarily prefer more women in politics. Second, we find that female voters, independent of their leadership trait preferences, have higher support for Takaichi than male voters. This finding suggests that the mere presence of the first female leader who breaks the "glass ceiling" can have an effect on empowering and mobilizing female voters. Third, our mediation analysis reveals that gendered personalistic factors did influence voting behavior during the 2026 HoR election through Takaichi's popularity. This finding shows that gendered personalistic factors can contribute not only to a leader's own popularity but also to the broader electoral success of a party.

A couple of caveats remain. While we carefully constructed measurements of leadership preferences through a conjoint experiment, our central analysis is essentially observational. We believe the use of realworld leaders and voting behaviors helped increase the external validity of our analysis, especially in terms of understanding the unique context of Japan's first female Prime Minister. However, there is a limit to claiming that our results are causal. Additionally, our analysis included a comprehensive set of party-level covariates, such as regular LDP support status and perceived policy distance from the LDP, to alleviate concerns that Takaichi's personal popularity is endogenous to the LDP's popularity. These party-level covariates, however, may have partially absorbed the impact of personalistic factors since Takaichi's personal popularity could also cause an increase in regular support for the LDP as well as shrink the perceived policy distance from the LDP. Therefore, there is a good possibility that the actual impact of personalistic support for Takaichi during the 2026 election was even larger than what is estimated from our results.

Finally, with its first female head of government in history, Japanese politics is now at a critical phase of transition. Our findings bring some hope for more representation of women

in Japanese politics, but they also raise concerns. Most importantly, the effectiveness of a masculine personality (and the absence of gender-equity policies) in gaining popularity reflects the fact that politics is still regarded as a male-dominated field. This perception may be especially strong in Japan, but it is not unique. Female leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Marine Le Pen, and Giorgia Meloni also adopt masculine leadership styles; and the only two American women who have ever won their party's nomination for president chose to wear pantsuits prominently during their presidential campaigns. Turning back to Japan, our finding that mere shared gender identity drives women's support for Takaichi may mean that she had a temporal advantage as the first one to break the "glass ceiling" in the broader, and much slower, trend of descriptive representation of women in Japanese politics. There is still a long road ahead in Japan (as well as in many other countries) for gender stereotypes to become irrelevant for women to rise to the top, and future studies should continue to explore pathways toward achieving that ideal.

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