Clarifying the threat of populism: Place and party organizational strength[*]

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the role of existing mainstream parties in shaping populist electoral success. I attempt to bridge the gap between micro-level theories of politician strategy and voter demands and macro-level theories of crisis and globalization through an understanding of local party organization and party-voter linkage. I test my hypotheses by examining within-country variation in Japan. I employ a statistical analysis utilizing measures for party organizational strength and party-voter linkages in a municipal-level panel dataset that spans more than 1,000 municipalities and six lower house elections from 2000 to 2014, two of which occurred during the leadership of an anti-elite populist maverick in Japan's dominant party. This paper contributes to literature on place-related determinants of populist support and questions existing views of the populist threat as uniquely tied to a particular ideology or the challenges of globalization. More broadly, the paper aims to bring clarity to questions of a phenomenon that may involve both genuine pursuits of stronger representation and potential threats to democratic stability.

Keywords: Populism, political parties, party strength, party-voter linkage, Japan

1 Introduction

The rise of populism has been viewed as closely related to instances of democratic backsliding (Berman 2021). Populists often advance particularly authoritarian modes of rule, which demand a rolling back of democratic norms and institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This concern motivates studies examining electoral support for populist parties, which broadly clusters into two groups. One strand of scholarship focuses on individual, social, and geotropic—a combination

of geography and community—factors explaining support for policies raised by populist politicians (e.g. Ivarsflaten 2008, Oesch 2008, Adler and Ansell 2020, Broz, Frieden and Weymouth 2021). Another strand is characterized by efforts to identify an independent effect of populist-type voter attitude and politician rhetoric on voting support, though these studies have found a lack of evidence for the claim (Marcos-Marne, Gil De Zúñiga and Borah 2022, Neuner and Wratil 2022, Castanho Silva, Neuner and Wratil 2022, Dai and Kustov 2023). These literature present the supply- and demand-side factors fueling populism, but there remains a gap with regards to the moderating effects of meso-level organizational and institutional structures, be it enabling and curtailing the potency of populist support.

Instead of probing the policy positions or voter attitudes that leads to support for populist leaders, I ask how do voting patterns differ across locations with varying mainstream party organizational strength during periods of populist emergence. Even if voter-level attitude and grievances from economic crises or transitions present a window of opportunity for opportunistic politicians—populist outsiders and issue entrepreneurs—what is the role of existing parties in mediating this effect? In this paper, I attempt to bridge this gap between micro-level explanations of politician strategy and voter demands on one hand and macro-level explanations of crisis and globalization on the other by clarifying the role of party-voter linkages and party organizational strength.

I refer to populism conceptually as a discursive frame (Hawkins 2023), with three attributes—anti-elitism, people-centrism, and popular sovereignty. This is based on the minimalist definition by Mudde (2004, 543): populism is "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." Populism by this definition is a discursive frame because the three attributes describe how substantive issues are discussed and how policies are proposed in campaign messages. These attributes are unlike "thick" ideologies that are comprehensive enough to shape policy, such as socialism and liberalism (Mudde 2004; Mudde 2017, 30).

While there are three attributes to this definition, they are not equally distinctive. People-

centrism is arguably common in the speeches of leaders across polities, while anti-elitism and popular sovereignty are more important in distinguishing populism. In particular, there is relative consensus within the populism literature that anti-elitism is a fundamental feature of populism (Wuttke, Schimpf and Schoen 2020, 358). Anti-elitism refers to populism's Manichaean, dualistic delineation of a people against the elites in the polity (Hawkins 2023).[1] This contrasts demoticism, which emphasizes a similar "closeness to ordinary people" (March 2017, 284), in other words, people-centrism without a Manichean antagonism. This dualistic division relates directly to the attribute of popular sovereignty as populism claims decision-making power to lie with the people and not the elites. Populism can also be distinguished from other forms of Manichaean discursive frames, such as xenophobic nationalism (Brubaker 2020).[2]

Table 1: Examples of discursive frames

	Manichaean	Universalistic
People	Populism	Demoticism
Nations	Xenophobic nationalism	Inclusive nationalism

Note: This is an edited version of the table presented by Hawkins (2023). The row on nationalism was revised based on concepts developed by Brubaker (2020).

This multi-dimensional definition is adopted for the purpose of engaging with central discussions on populism. This definition remains the "most broadly used" (Mudde 2017, 28) in the discipline and is adopted in prominent datasets such as the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (Hobolt et al. 2016).

The aim of this paper is not to reject studies that have examined different sources of grievances and drivers of the populist vote. Scholars have investigated extensively the role of voter demand as a cause of populist electoral success. The studies looking at voter preferences as a factor driving the rise of populism have shifted over the past decade from policy positions to attitudes. Earlier

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[1]Some scholars (e.g. Barr (2009)) use anti-elitism and anti-establishment interchangeably. There is no meaningful distinction between the two terms in this paper as well.

[2]In a study by Bonikowski, Luo and Stuhler (2022), the neural language models built by the authors identify higher levels of nationalism in US President Donald Trump's speeches in 2020 than 2016, and vice versa for populism. Table 1 summarizes the distinctions.

efforts examining support for populist parties identified causes such as policy support for immigration (Ivarsflaten 2008), trust in political institutions (Doyle 2011, Fieschi and Heywood 2004), and globalization and class identity (Oesch 2008). Increasingly, this strand of literature has moved from emphasizing individual factors to social factors, specifically geotropic factors that bridge individual-level causes and geographically-delineated group identity to explain the electoral potency of these issues (Ansell et al. 2022, Broz, Frieden and Weymouth 2021, Adler and Ansell 2020). For instance, Adler and Ansell (2020) identify geotropic voting patterns of support for Brexit in the United Kingdom and Marine Le Pen in France, which their analysis shows are linked to decades of unequal growth that has disproportionately benefited cosmopolitan cities through price inflation of non-productive assets.

More recently, scholars have located more proximate causes of populist voting in individual voter attitudes, sometimes termed "thin" populist ideology (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove 2014). Populist attitudes refer to a multidimensional construct based on Mudde's (2004) definition of populism, measuring the concurrent presence of latent beliefs toward anti-elitism, people-centrism, and popular sovereignty among individual voters. Some cross-national studies have argued that populist attitudes are relevant in explaining support for populist parties (Jungkunz, Fahey and Hino 2021, Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and Andreadis 2020, Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018). Others have also shown that populist attitudes differ from related constructs of trust in political institutions and political efficacy previously thought to explain support for populist parties (Geurkink et al. 2020). However, the evidence remains inconclusive. While studies have found correlational evidence between populist attitudes and electoral support for populist candidates, there is a lack of evidence for its independent effect on voting behavior as a substitute for policy agreement (Dai and Kustov 2023, Neuner and Wratil 2022, Castanho Silva, Neuner and Wratil 2022). Furthermore, populist attitudes are not exogenous to domestic factors and may be quite unstable. For example, Rico and Anduiza (2019) show that perceptions of the national economy can affect populist attitudes.

These narratives leave us with two questions. First, how is the populist vote different from

traditional politics if voting is mainly driven by policy agreement? On one hand, it is possible that populist leaders are simply aberrant actors whose idiosyncratic behavior voters are willing to overlook for the sake of policies they support. But if so, changing voting patterns would resemble what is observed during shifts in issue dimensions and party system changes. In these cases, voters are simply switching their votes and studies into populism do not seem to advance any unique and meaningful concept. The findings in this paper suggests that there is more to be understood about the changing voting patterns. Second, how do parties fare in their performance against these aberrant actors? If parties do function as a vehicle for representation, then notwithstanding support for policies, locations with stronger party presence should have an effect in shaping its voting patterns during periods of a populist appearance.

2   Theory and hypotheses

An underlying consideration motivating this study concerns representation. One of the reasons populism is conceptually meaningful and distinctive is its anti-elite or anti-establishment appeal—its identification of opposition that lies "between loyal and disloyal opposition, as semi-loyal opposition" (Barr 2009, 32). In theory, populism departs from traditional politics in the sense that its politics deviate from status quo opposition that is presumably loyal. While loyal opponents recognize a legitimate government, disloyal opponents reject its legitimacy in whole, leading to a breakdown in democratic regimes Linz (1978). Legitimacy, that is, the belief that the democratic set of political procedures and institutions are better than other alternatives, and consequently, the acceptance of "its binding character and its right to issue commands" (Linz 1978, 17). The semi-loyal anti-elite appeal, then, stands midway in posing a challenge not to democracy in entirety but to particular procedures and institutions. Thus, by definition, populism presents a challenge to democratic norms, procedures, and institutions.

At a minimum, this challenge is purely discursive. By invoking a delineation of the people—a shared and fundamental building block from which decision-making authority is derived within a democracy—against an elite establishment, populism taps directly into a common source of

legitimacy to question existing beliefs about norms and institutions and, in some cases, propose an alternative solution. In this way, the manner in which populism impacts public discourse presents a "transformative potential" (Urbinati 2019, 114) regardless of whether the populist actor assumes power in a democracy.

Beyond the discursive effect, this paper is concerned with a concrete and comparable outcome of the populist challenge, and that is how populism disrupts voting patterns. As aforementioned, studies on voter demand as a driver of the populist vote have shown that voting patterns are shaped by sources of grievances and resentment, including geographic and geotropic factors, or place-specific conditions, such as housing prices, migration, demographic decline (Arzheimer and Bernemann 2023, Ansell et al. 2022, Adler and Ansell 2020). Based on these views, votes are changing because issue dimensions in the electoral arena have been reconfigured and hijacked by parties and politicians challenging the mainstream (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Presumably, voters are switching their votes to support parties that best represent their sentiments with respect to these new issues.

Issues matter, but does the strength of political parties matter as well? Mainstream political parties enter the picture because they are hitherto the main conduit for communication of demands between voters and the government (LaPalombara and Weiner 1966, 3) prior to the emergence of new actors in the electoral arena. Political parties share the general characteristics of permanent organization at the local level (LaPalombara and Weiner 1966, 6) and the dual pursuits of policy and electoral success (Stokes 1999, 251).

There are three locations of relationships that matter to political parties, the direct relationship between central party and voters, the intra-party relationship between the central party and local party organization, as well as the geographically local relationship between the party organization and voters. Depending on the type of party-voter linkage—that is, the basis of interaction—between the party and voters, these three relationships can be expected to play a different role. I consider party-voter linkages to be broadly categorized into programmatic and clientelist linkages, the latter of which I use to refer to all non-programmatic transactions between parties and voters

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that do not involve or follow a public and formal criteria (Stokes et al. 2013, 7).

Clientelist party-voter linkage can be expected to operate through the local party organization, or brokers, due to its transactional nature involving a targeted appeal and some level of monitoring. To the extent that this transaction relates to the national electoral arena, local party organizations would assume some level of relationship with the central party for coordination at a minimum, if not for resources as well. These three relationships are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Local party organization and party-voter linkage

As it relates to populism, I am interested in two dimensions of party characteristics, party organizational strength and party-voter linkage. Party organizational strength can be conceived as the functional capacity of parties to compete in electoral politics. From the perspective of party politicians, in terms of central party organization, this may involve investment in skills to estimate candidate popularity, and distill salient issues that are crucial for electoral success (Ziblatt 2017). More locally, this may involve the organizational ability to mobilize voters for elections. Party organizational strength is associated with both stable democratization as well as party system institutionalization post-democratization due to political actors' belief in their ability to succeed in elections (Ziblatt 2017, Riedl 2014). From the perspective of voters, local party organizational strength concerns voters' encounters with the party on the ground (Katz and Mair 2018, Chapter 3).

I posit that where the local party organization is weak, voters are more strongly mobilized by

populism. As populism is often coupled with a policy discourse, it functions through a programmatic linkage. This means that we can expect two possible pathways for populism's appeal. The first is through the direct relationship between the central party and voters. When the functional capacity of a party with respect to a particular location is lacking, the channel for communication is truncated and the pathway for voter demands to travel to parties is diminished. This potentially leads to either a real or perceived deficiency in the representation of local voter perspectives, interests, and opinions reflected in the deliberative processes that generate party platforms.[3]

While parties can still achieve accountability where they fulfil their professed campaign pledges, voters on the ground may increasingly feel estranged from policy discussions that do not reflect their concerns. In other words, the capacity of parties to mobilize votes on the ground is theorized here to be intertwined with the effectiveness of its representation of voters in the geographic area. The weakness of representation fuels votes for populists because voting shifts away from simply a competition of policies in the electoral arena to a perceived lack of access by voters, given status quo norms, procedures, and institutions. Thus, where party organization is weak, voters respond more strongly to toward the discursive frame of anti-elitism and popular sovereignty.

At the same time, populism can also function through opposition local organizations. When local networks exists but are isolated from or do not support the existing establishment, they may be mobilized in support of radical goals (Berman 1997). Ravanilla, Sexton and Haim (2022) find in their study of the Philippines that mayors who lacked access to traditional patronage networks were more likely to rally behind implementing the policies put forth by populist president Rodrigo Duterte. Both of these pathways suggest that support for populism has an inverse relationship with the party organizational strength of existing mainstream parties.

Hypothesis 1 *Geographic areas with weak local party organizations observe an increase in vote share for populist leaders relative to areas with strong local party organization.*

The other dimension of party characteristic that shapes populism is party-voter linkage. Discus-

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[3]According to Young (2002, 128), "the specific function of legitimate representation consists in exercising independent judgement but in knowledge and anticipation of what constituents want."

sions of linkages in electoral systems typically focus on charismatic, clientelist and programmatic linkages (Kitschelt 2000). Studies have looked at how changing clientelist linkages affect the emergence of populist leaders in electoral systems where these linkages are dominant, but there is a lack of attention on how the type of linkage shapes the populist vote. Rather, studies have tended to slip into siloed developments of theories on electoral systems with predominantly programmatic and clientelist linkages respectively. This is most apparent in the regional bifurcation of studies of populism in Latin America and Western Europe—with a scatter of cases strewn between the two groups. Moreover, this division has extended to disagreements over the definition of populism.[4] Yet, the presence of populism can be identified across both clientelist and programmatic linkages. Following the definition of populism adopted in this paper, Figure 2 plots the observation of populism across electoral contexts with varying combinations of clientelist and programmatic linkages.

I posit that clientelist linkages can have a curtailing effect on shifts to support the populist vote even in electoral systems that observe a mix of both types of party-voter linkages. Existing studies have argued that clientelist linkages lower levels of populism in electoral systems that are non-programmatic. In a study focusing on populism in India, Kenny (2017) shows how weakening control by the central party over local brokers in the patronage system led to an electoral environment more conducive to the rise of personalist leaders, such as Narendra Modi in India, who receive support from weakly organized voters. Conversely, scholars have also shown that the establishment of clientelist linkages is associated with a reduction of populism. For example, Levitsky (2007) explains how populism in Argentina declined as the Peronist Justicialist Party institutionalized and established its links to voters using clientelist strategies, thereby evolving from the rallying of unorganized voters behind populist leaders to the organization of voters through

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[4]Earliest works on populism focused on Latin American cases where populism took the form of a charismatic leader who attracts weakly organized voters. Weyland's (2001, 14) widely cited political-strategic approach defines populism as, "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers." Similar definitions are often used by scholars of Latin American populism (see Levitsky 2007, Roberts 2015). Notably, this conceptual definition itself was developed to juxtapose the cohesive political strength of the working class in Europe (Roberts 2015, 144).

Figure 2: Populism by executives in power observed across electoral linkages
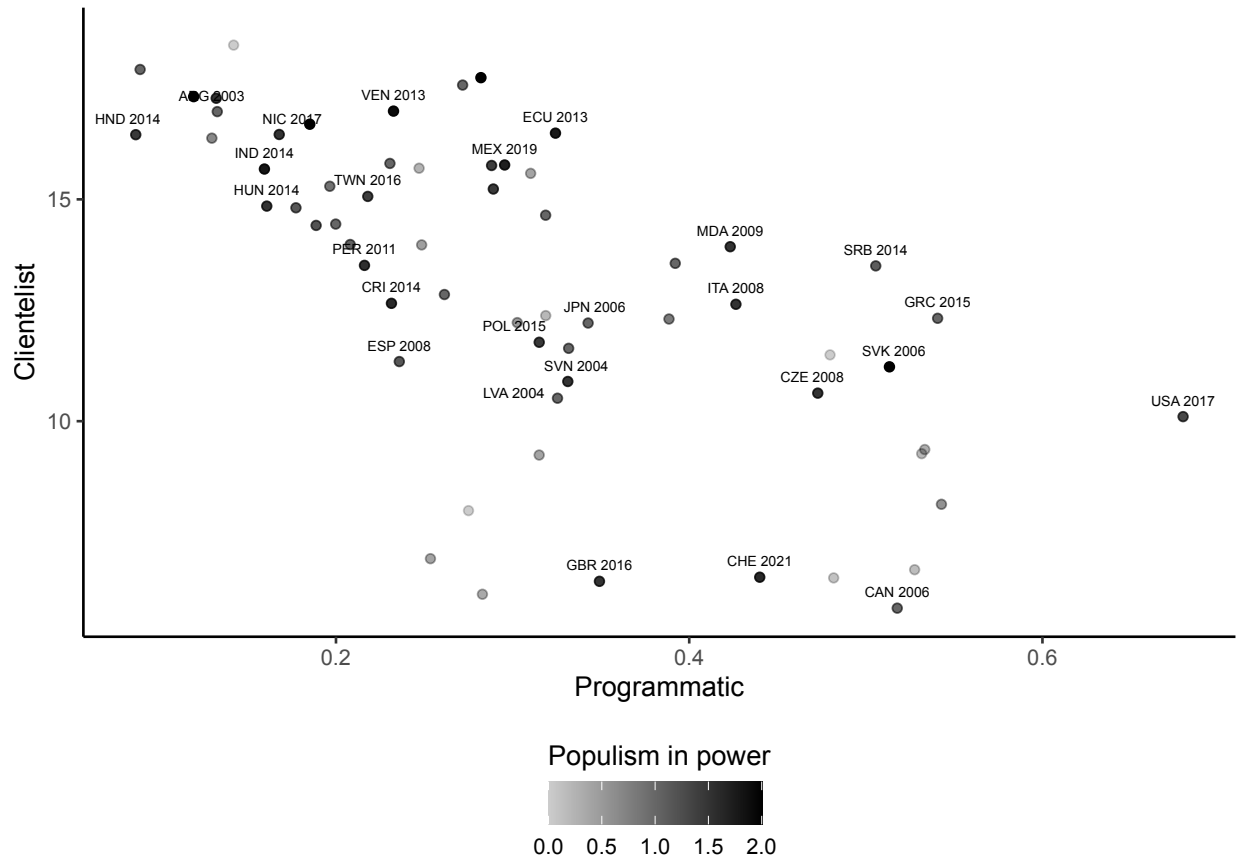
Note: This is a revised version of the graph by Kenny (2017), with the addition of Hawkins' coding of populism. Data is taken from the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP) (Kitschelt 2013) measured in 2009 and the Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al. 2022). To match this data, only populist executives observed a decade prior and after 2009 are indicated, i.e. 1999 to 2019.

clientelist ties. In other words, in these contexts, both the emergence and decline of support for populism can be explained by shifts away from and to clientelist linkages.

I argue that clientelist party structures crowd out programmatic structures, that is, the avenues for appeal are mutually exclusive. This is because party-voter expectations and interactions differ in the two cases. In contexts where party-voter interaction is primarily clientelist, the development of programmatic policies is dispensable and subject to the discretion of party politicians. For example, Kohli (2012, 65-66) explains that India has become a "two-track polity", where parties pursue elections and leave governance wholly to technocrats. Politicians no longer deliberate

economic policies in the parliament and rely wholly on local patronage for electoral gains. In this way, parties have chosen to abandon the party apparatus for economic policy making. Voters in India have little to no expectations of programmatic representation, and parties do not have the incentives to maintain structures that serve such functions. By extension, I argue that in electoral settings with a mix of programmatic and clientelist party-voter linkages, parties and voters interact via clientelist expectations in areas where clientelist linkages dominate and should observe less electoral success and volatility resulting from the populist appeal.

Hypothesis 2 *Geographic areas where party-voter interaction is more clientelist are associated with weaker gains in vote share by populist leaders.*

3 Data and method: the Japan case

I test my theories by examining within-case variation in Japan. Before delving into the case of populism in Japan, I begin by situating Japan's comparability to other electoral contexts. Following an electoral reform in 1994, Japan's electoral system runs on a semiproportional formula involving both plurality and proportional allocation of seats. However, Japan's semiproportional formula stands out among democracies. Unlike cases like Germany, New Zealand, and Italy where the mixed formula involves a proportional component that compensates disproportionality arising from the plurality allocation, the two components in Japan's case are determined independently (Lijphart 2012, 135-7). In this way, Japan's electoral system situates between plurality and proportional representation systems, with a leaning toward majoritarianism in terms of barriers to the enlargement of small parties. In relation to populism, this means that Japan's electoral system would presumably favor the emergence of populist candidates in mainstream parties, similar to that observed in the UK and the US, as opposed to populist parties, such as in Germany or the Netherlands.

The analysis here focuses on the period beginning from the year 2000, for two main reasons. First, it includes a period with the demand and supply for populism. In terms of voter demand, the presence of crises and grievances is often cited as an important condition for populist support

(Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and Andreadis 2020, Laclau 2005) as well as more broadly for anti-system voting (Grant 2021). In the 1990s, Japan faced a banking crisis after the burst of its asset bubble and subsequently a systemic financial crisis in the region during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. In close proximity to the economic crises, there was also a brewing political crisis. Japan's dominant party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), had been in power for most of the postwar period since its founding in 1955, except during a period of from 1993 to 1994 and 2009 to 2012. Leading up to the 2000s, there was a series of scandals involving government ministries that called into question collusive relationships between bureaucrats and LDP politicians.

With respect to the supply of populism, the LDP saw the rise of a maverick, Koizumi Junichiro, within its party during the early 2000s. Koizumi served as prime minister for five and a half years from 2001 to 2006, which makes him to date the fourth longest serving prime minister in postwar Japan. Koizumi Junichiro was viewed as a political outsider because of his strong reformist mindset, which manifested in his flouting of party taboos and disregard for interest group politics (Maclachlan 2011). In addition, he was a proponent of executive aggrandizement, having voiced his support for reforms such as the direct election of the prime minister (*shushō kōsensei*).[5] Moreover, even though some reforms for the expansion of prime ministerial power was initiated in the 1990s, it was only during the Koizumi administration that these expanded powers were heavily exercised (Takenaka 2019, 855-856).

Koizumi's anti-elite sentiment surfaced most prominently in his push for privatization of the state postal system which went against an iron triangle of elites, involving bureaucrats, LDP politicians, and the postmasters alliance interest group. In addition, Koizumi also resisted party factions, which constituted an important party institution for the LDP as a big-tent party. Specifically, during the 2005 elections, Koizumi led a group of young LDP political candidates, also known as the "83-kai" or "Koizumi children", who were not affiliated with the traditional factions to electoral success–some of whom were campaigning against LDP veterans.

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[5]The idea of direct election of the prime minister was stated by Koizumi in his inauguration speech on May 7, 2001, and an advisory panel was set up to discuss the proposal for the direct election of the prime minister in August, 2002 (Tadano 2003).

Koizumi led the party in two national elections in 2003 and 2005, but it was only in the latter that the element of popular sovereignty was brought to the fore. While Koizumi was able to rise up the ranks to LDP leadership with his postal privatization platform, his proposal did not gain sufficient support from his party members in the Diet. His proposed reform bill was rejected in the Diet and in response, Koizumi made an unprecedented move by dissolving the Lower House and calling for a de facto referendum on the issue through a national election in 2005. Thus, with his sustained anti-elitist stance and call for a popular vote on postal privatization, populism as a discursive frame with its three attributes was salient in the 2005 elections.

To be sure, it is important to emphasize the minimalist definition of populism here. It would be inaccurate to construe of Koizumi's electoral appeal as similar to right-wing populism involving nativism or a particularly conservative ideology. On one hand, Koizumi supported a neoliberal ideology, which would place him in opposition to conservative ideology. Yet, this did not place Koizumi more closely in alignment with opposition parties on the left. In particular, out of the 233 votes cast for the postal privatization bill in the House of Councillors, all 103 opposition members voted against the bill. LDP and its coalition partner, Komeito, had 138 votes in total but 22 were cast by LDP politicians to the contrary (House of Councillors N.d.).

Specifically, the 2005 elections is a suitable test for the theories as the proposal for postal privatization arguably circumvents one of the problems with the endogeneity between policy issues and support for populism. Unlike policies such as taxes or immigration, postal privatization does not stem from a geographically circumscribed voter grievance. This does not mean there are no geographically unequal implications, but only that the policy proposal does not directly respond to a purported cause of voter grievance. At the same time, it was an overtly anti-elite proposal. Postal privatization was during the late 1990s and early 2000s a heavily political issue due to its size as a financial institution, as well as inefficiencies in its operation and ties to the interests of bureaucrats and politicians that was revealed through a series of scandals (Amyx, Takenaka and Toyoda 2005). The case also allows some room for the policy position to be disentangled from the populist discourse because Koizumi had held on to this pet project and his anti-elite appeal across

two elections, but the element of popular sovereignty was only taken up in 2005.

Second, I limit the analysis to after the 1994 electoral reform because the reform marks the emergence and relevance of programmatic party-voter linkages in Japan. The reform saw a change in the electoral formula from the single non-transferable vote and multi-member district (SNTV/ MMD) system to a mix of plurality voting in single-member district and list proportional representation. In the old system, party politicians within each electoral district coordinated to carve out their respective support bases. This meant that LDP politicians and voters interacted predominantly on the basis of locally determined and targeted benefits. There was little incentive to coordinate and agree upon national party-level programs. Programmatic linkages emerged after the electoral reform alongside the electoral incentives to appeal to pluralities (Catalinac 2016). At the same time, clientelist linkages have not disappeared, for a number of possible reasons ranging from ongoing utility to path-dependencies of historical institutions (Krauss and Pekkanen 2011).

For the analysis, I make use of a municipality-level panel data set covering six Lower House elections from 2000 to 2014, where the 2005 elections involves the populist vote. The first election post-reform in 1996 is omitted due to a brief fragmentation of the party system amidst a scramble to reorganize afte the reform.[6]

To measure changing electoral support as an outcome, I consider the change in votes for the LDP as a proportion of the municipal eligible voting population in municipal i in election year t— this measure is sometimes referred to as "absolute vote share" (*zettai tōhyōritsu*).[7] Absolute vote share is preferred here over relative vote share to enable a more comparable measure over time in light of the general decline in voter turnout.

$$\Delta \text{LDP Absolute Vote Share}_{it} = \text{LDP Absolute Vote Share}_{it} - \text{LDP Absolute Vote Share}_{it-1}$$

Due to the lack of a direct measure of LDP's party organizational strength in national elections, I consider the use of a proxy variable. As a measure of LDP's organizational strength in

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[6]I aim to include the 2017 and 2021 elections in future drafts.

[7]I make use of replication data from Catalinac, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2020).

each municipality, I consider LDP's vote mobilization strength at the municipal level for prefectural assembly elections.[8] This approach is premised on two assumptions. First, beyond national politicians' personal support bases, voters encounter the party through the party's municipal politicians and resources. To the extent that it relates to the party and not the candidate, the party's local organizational strength for its prefectural politicians should presumably correlate with its organizational strength for national elections.

Second, this proxy variable is suitable because of the independence between national and local elections in Japan. Local elections in Japan are not nationalized (Reed 1986). They do not tend to reflect voter sentiments related to the national electoral arena, unlike elections in contexts such as the US. Moreover, there exists a disjuncture between partisanship at the local and national level. While there is an overlap between parties in prefectural assembly elections and the general elections, prefectural assembly elections continue to run on SNTV system that deters partisan cooperation among party candidates (Hijino 2021*a*, 147). As such, we can expect support for local LDP politicians to be unrelated to policy or partisan positions at the national level, thus being a measure of the party's local organizational strength. I create a measure by taking the minimum aggregate LDP absolute vote share at prefectural assembly elections across four local election cycles.[9]

A drawback of this measure is the presence of unreported party affiliations of local politicians. A mix of candidacy and electoral rules for local politicians enable and promote the adoption of partisan independence (*mutōha*) among local politicians, even though some of these politicians have national party affiliations (Hijino 2021*b*, 426-8). While this weakens the proxy measure, it should create a conservative bias as it leads to an underestimation of LDP's local organizational strength.[10]

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[8]I make use of the Japanese Local Election Dataset by Horiuchi and Natori (2019).

[9]In light of frequent walkovers at local elections, I consider at least two elections–i.e. maximum of two walkovers–within 12 years from the most recent local election cycle occurring within four years of the HoR election. Municipalities with only one data point in the past four local elections are omitted.

[10]A correlation plot of the outcome variable against the proxy measure can be found in Appendix 2A.

$$\text{Party Organization Strength}_{it} = \min\{\text{Local LDP Absolute Vote Share}_{ij}\}$$
$$\text{where } j \in \{l, l-1, l-2, l-3\} \text{ and } l \text{ is the local election cycle preceding } t$$

To measure variation in programmatic vis-à-vis clientelist party voter linkage, I utilize a clientelism measure of candidate campaign pledges from Catalinac (2016) where Catalinac measures the proportion of particularistic vis-a-vis programmatic topics in an electoral candidate's manifesto. For the LDP candidate in each district k in election t, this is done by dividing the topics retrieved by LDA topic modeling into programmatic and particularistic topics and summing the estimated probabilities of particularistic topics, where particularism refers to narrow subsets of the general population. This measure is coded at the level of electoral districts instead of individual municipalities. Data for this measure is only available for the elections from 2000 to 2009.

$$\text{Clientelist Appeal}_{kt} = \sum \text{Probabilities of Particularistic Topics for Candidate}_{kt}$$

In addition to the explanatory variables, I include municipality controls for population density and size, prefectural electoral district magnitude, House of Councillors (Upper House) PR votes as a control for party support, and prefectural fixed effects. The descriptive statistics of the variables can be found in Table 2 below.

Using these variables, I estimate a linear mixed effects model with election year fixed effects and municipality random effects. The choice for random effects at the municipality level is due to the covariates being relatively constant within municipality units. To investigate the differentiated effect of party organizational strength and clientelist linkages across the elections, I include an interaction of each of the variables with the election year fixed effects. In addition, due to the debatable grounds for the assumptions between the choice of fixed effects and random effects, I include also a random effects with within and between effects (REWB) model (Bell and Jones 2015) to parse out the respective cross-sectional and within-municipality effects of the explanatory variables. The between effect is calculated using the mean of the explanatory variable at the municipal level, $\bar{x}_i$, and the within effect is calculated by de-meaning the variable, $x_{it} - \bar{x}_i$.

As the number of municipalities observes a steep decline from 2003 to 2005 due to a series of municipality mergers that took place over the course of the 2000s, I include an analysis with only municipalities not involved in the merger, i.e. excluding all pre- and post-merger municipalities. According to Shimizu (2012) and Horiuchi, Saito and Yamada (2015), municipal mergers led to a weakening of both support for LDP in the local and national elections. These mergers present a confounding variable as they contribute to a spurious relationship between local and national elections that could have resulted from not only party organizational factors but also voter-level factors. Thus, I consider a separate model that excludes these municipalities.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Δ LDP absolute vote share	-0.008	0.105	-0.773	0.747
Party organizational strength	0.186	0.166	0.000	0.843
Party org. str. (between)	0.212	0.154	0.000	0.839
Party org. str. (within)	-0.026	0.093	-0.699	0.603
Clientelist appeal	0.366	0.244	0.001	0.989
Client. appeal (between)	0.401	0.192	0.002	0.920
Client. appeal (within)	-0.035	0.153	-0.546	0.457
Δ Upper house PR votes	0.015	0.056	-0.483	0.334
Population density (logged)	5.591	1.934	0.284	9.879
Population size (logged)	9.957	1.455	5.056	13.310
Prefectural electoral dist. magnitude	2.450	1.697	1.000	17.231

Note: Summary statistics are based on model for party organizational strength ($N = 8702$) that excludes clientelist appeal. Values for clientelist appeal is based on observations in the reduced time frame ($N = 5463$). The number of municipalities in each election year varies ($n_{2003} = 2900$, $n_{2005} = 1423$, $n_{2009} = 1368$, $n_{2012} = 1502$, $n_{2014} = 1509$).

4   Results and discussion

The results present support for the theories. Full regression tables can be found in Appendix 1. Figure 3 and Figure 4 plot the marginal effects and predicted values of party organizational strength, and Figure 5 and 6 similarly for clientelist appeal. Due to the difference in time periods analyzed, I ran separate models for the two explanatory variables with the same control variables

(Model 2 and Model 5 in Appendix 1). A combined model with the reduced time frame yields substantively similar results (Model 7 in Appendix 1; figures in Appendix 3C).

As shown in Figure 3, in 2005, municipalities with higher party organizational strength were associated with a decrease in LDP absolute vote share, statistically significant at 95% confidence interval. This is not observed in other elections where party organizational strength is associated with either no change in LDP absolute vote share in 2003 and 2012, or a slight increase in 2009 when the LDP lost the election to the opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), as well as in 2014.

Figure 3: Marginal effects of party organizational strength on change in LDP absolute vote share by election year
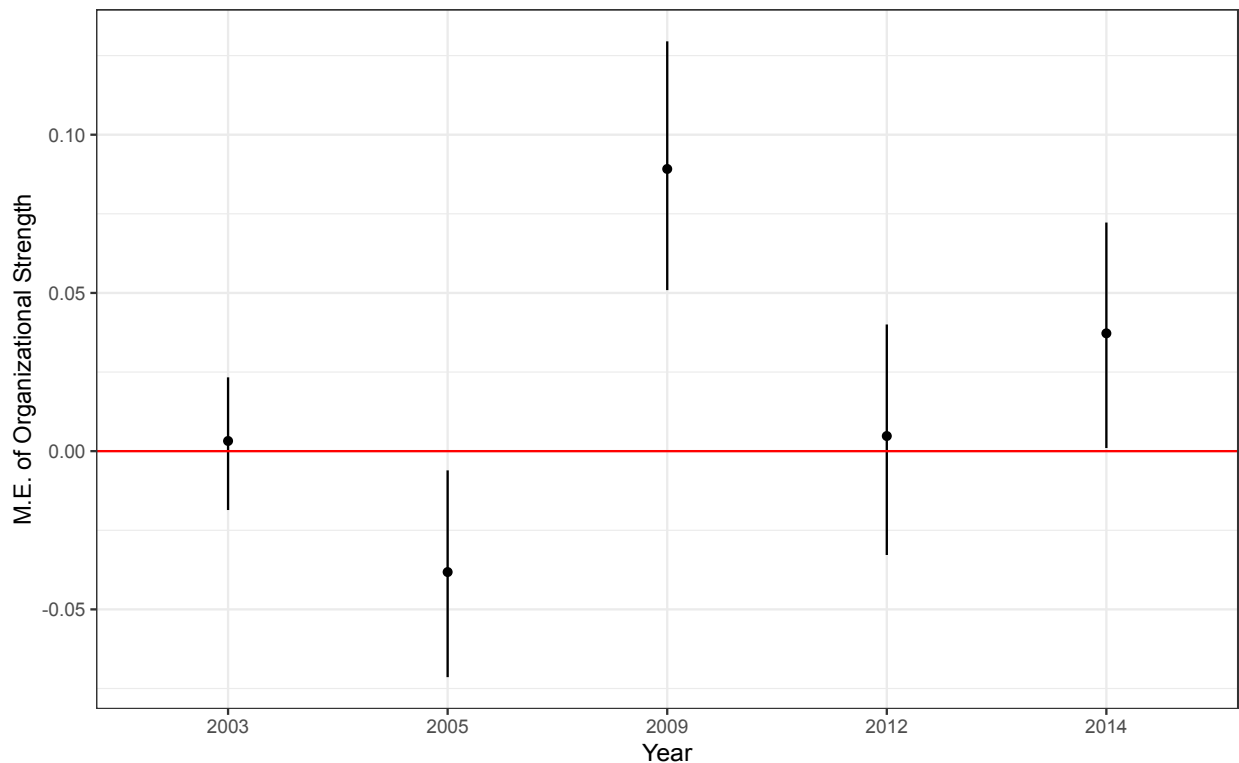
Note: Points plot the mean coefficient for party organizational strength from a simulation of multivariate normal draw of coefficients based on the model. Error bars indicate 95% confidence interval.

Moreover, based on Figure 4, which plots the predicted values of changes in LDP, the disparity appears to be driven by disparities at low levels of party organizational strength, consistent with the proposed theory. The same effect is not observed in other elections where LDP has won, in

2003, 2012, or during Abe's second HoR election in 2014. In these other elections, low levels of LDP organizational strength are associated with decreases in LDP absolute vote share, possibly due to attrition in voter turnout. The unique effect observed in the 2005 elections provides support for H1 that party organizational weakness is associated with gains in populist vote share.

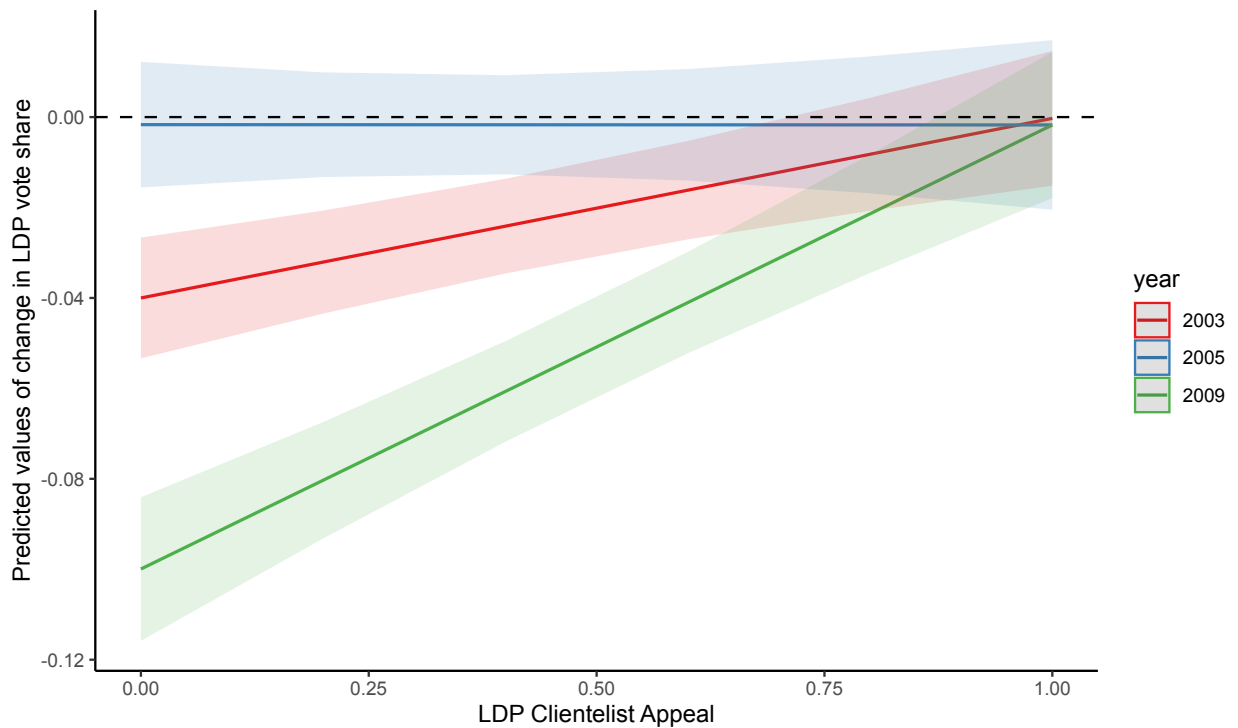**Figure 4: Predicted values of change in LDP absolute vote share**
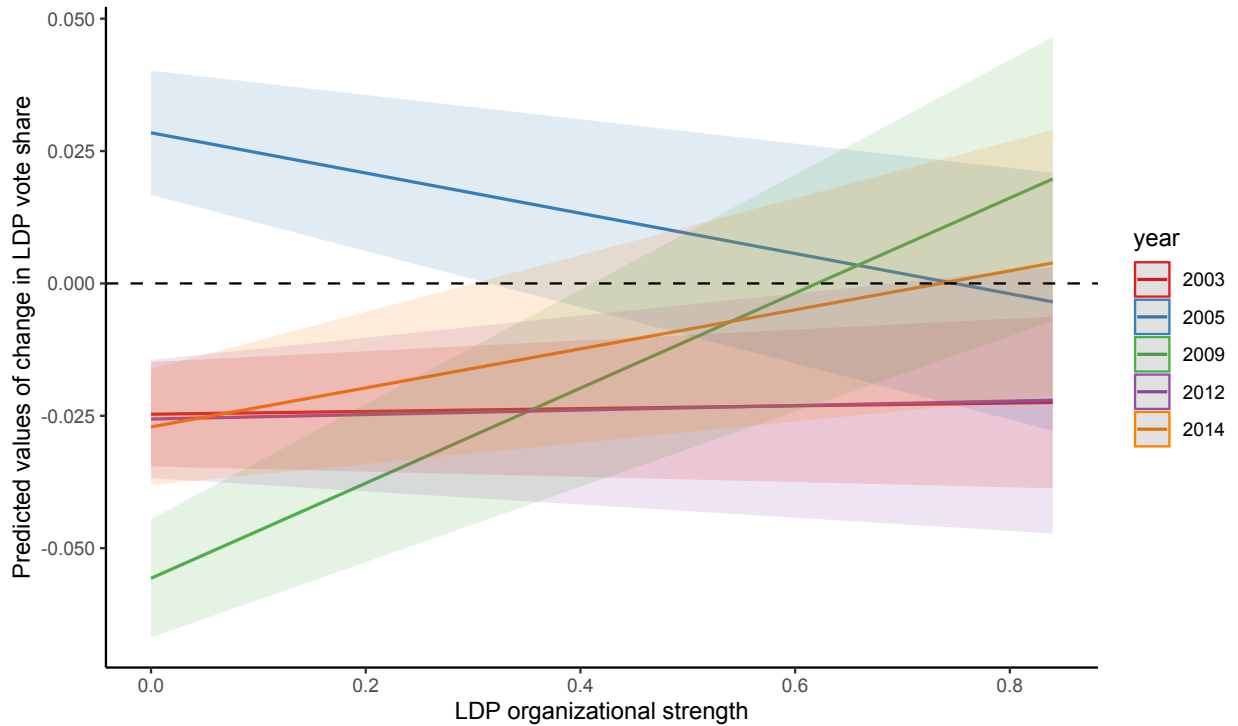
Note: Line plots predicted values of changes in LDP vote share as LDP organizational strength increases from minimum to maximum.

However, this effect could be driven by the difference between municipalities or the changes within municipalities; the model does not explicitly differentiate between the two. As such, I ran another model using Bell and Jones's (2015) mixed effects model with within-between effects (Model 3 in Appendix 1). The analysis shows that the effect is mainly driven by between-municipality differences as opposed to over-time changes within municipalities (Appendix 3A). This means that weakness in party organizational strength explains relative gains in vote share cross-sectionally, i.e. Koizumi gained votes in municipalities with weaker party organizational strength, but not short-term changes of individual municipality party organizational strength be-

tween elections over the time period analyzed.

Figure 5: Marginal effects of clientelist appeal on change in LDP absolute vote share
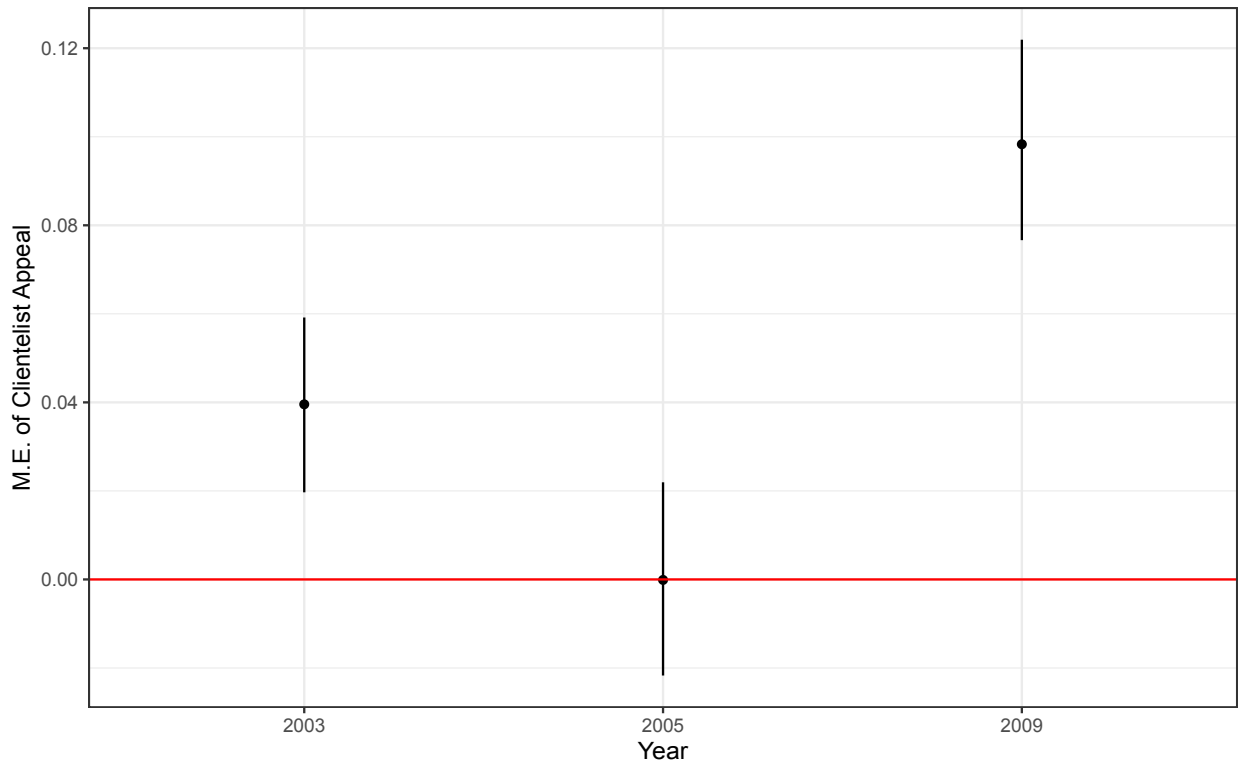
Note: Points plot the mean coefficients for clientelist linkages from a simulation of multivariate normal draw of coefficients based on the model. Error bars indicate 95% confidence interval, which are calculated using robust standard errors calculated using the White method with common variance within municipalities.

For H2, Figure 5 plots the marginal effects of clientelist appeal on change in LDP absolute vote share. A statistically significant positive relationship between clientelist appeal and gains in LDP support is observed in 2003 and 2009 but not in 2005. When this effect is decomposed using an REWB model (Model 6 in Appendix 1), the within and between effects show disparate effects. Based on the results, the within effect of clientelist appeal is positively associated with gains in vote share in both the 2003 elections and 2005 elections (Appendix 3B). This result is contrary to expectations and suggests that short-term enhancing of clientelist appeals were consequential and compatible with vote gains during Koizumi's overtly populist elections. On the other hand, the between effect of clientelist appeal is associated positively with gains in vote share in 2003

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and 2009, and negatively in 2005. This is consistent with the theory and shows that the theory applies only to more place-specific clientelist party-voter linkage as opposed to different strategies adopted by individual politicians over time within municipalities.

Figure 6: Predicted values of change in LDP absolute vote share

Note: Line plots predicted values of changes in LDP vote share as LDP clientelist appeal increases from minimum to maximum.

Another potential confounding factor is the effect of merger on municipalities. I repeated the analysis on the subset of municipalities that were not involved in any mergers throughout the time period studied (Appendix 3D). The results are substantively similar for party organizational strength. The relationship for clientelist appeal appears to be indistinguishable between 2003 and 2005. However, when decomposed, the disparate effects consistent with the analysis above are only observed for the 2005 elections (Appendix 3D).

5 Conclusion

Though the surge in right-wing populism over the recent decades have drawn significant attention to the topic, scholars have warned against an overuse of the term that stretches its meaning to encompass confounding phenomena. This risks euphemism and red herrings that divert attention away from perennial concerns, such as racism and extremist views (Brown and Mondon 2021). This study attempts to contribute to greater clarity by examining the challenge posed by populism through within-case variation in Japan. This case presents an analytically useful instance of populism that offers evidence for the influence of a place-specific factor such as party organization.

More importantly, it may be useful to parse out genuine pursuits of stronger representation and potential threats to democratic stability. The findings here suggests that the weakness of local party organizations from the party in power or the mainstream party system can contribute an effect on changing vote shares when the electorate is mobilized by populist discourse. This effect is curtailed where party organization is strong.

Specific to the case of Japan, the long-term effects of clientelism in stemming populism suggests that shifts away from clientelist party-voter linkages in recent decades may increase Japan's susceptibility to populist gains in vote share in the absence of strong ties established organizationally at the local level.

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7 Appendices

Appendix 1: Regression table

Prefectural fixed effects are omitted from the table.

	Dependent variable:						
	Change in LDP Absolute Vote Share						
	OLS	*RE*	*REWB*	*OLS*	*RE*	*REWB*	*REWB*
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Org. Str.	−0.017**	−0.003					0.020*
	(0.010)	(0.011)					(0.012)
Org. Str. × 2005	−0.053**	−0.041**					−0.067**
	(0.020)	(0.020)					(0.021)
Org. Str. × 2009	0.076**	0.087**					0.038**
	(0.022)	(0.021)					(0.023)
Org. Str. × 2012	−0.015	0.002					
	(0.020)	(0.020)					
Org. Str. × 2014	0.018	0.034*					
	(0.020)	(0.020)					
Org. Str. (Between)			−0.009**				
			(0.011)				
Org. Str. (Bet.) × 2005			−0.042*				
			(0.022)				
Org. Str. (Bet.) × 2009			0.124**				
			(0.023)				
Org. Str. (Bet.) × 2012			0.031				
			(0.023)				
Org. Str. (Bet.) × 2014			0.032				
			(0.023)				
Org. Str. (Within)			0.058**				
			(0.021)				
Org. Str. (With.) × 2005			−0.049				
			(0.045)				
Org. Str. (With.) × 2009			−0.055				
			(0.040)				
Org. Str. (With.) × 2012			−0.093**				
			(0.033)				
Org. Str. (With.) × 2014			−0.003				
			(0.033)				
Client. Appeal				0.010	0.040**		0.038**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
					(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Client. Appeal × 2005					−0.032**	−0.042**	−0.058**
					(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Client. Appeal × 2009					0.058**	0.059**	0.055**
					(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Client. Appeal (Between)							0.045**
							(0.012)
Client. Appeal (Bet.) × 2005							−0.093**
							(0.018)
Client. Appeal (Bet.) × 2009							0.141**
							(0.019)
Client. Appeal (Within)							0.033**
							(0.016)
Client. Appeal (With.) × 2005							0.055**
							(0.025)
Client. Appeal (With.) × 2009							−0.032
							(0.023)
Δ Upper House PR vote		0.014	0.016		0.087**	0.101**	
		(0.032)	(0.032)		(0.041)	(0.041)	
Pop. density		0.001	0.002		0.002	0.002	0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Pop.		0.002*	0.002		0.003*	0.003	0.003
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Prefectural elect. dist. mag.		−0.0002				0.001	0.001
		(0.001)				(0.001)	(0.001)
2005	0.056**	0.053**	0.052**	0.045**	0.049**	0.077**	0.061**
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.007)
2009	−0.027**	−0.031**	−0.042**	−0.048**	−0.054**	−0.082**	−0.065**
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.008)
2012	−0.003	−0.001**	−0.010**				
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)				
2014	0.002	−0.002	−0.003				
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)				
Year fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Prefectural fixed effects	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Municipal random effects	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Observations	9,057	9,057	9,057	5,463	5,463	5,463	5,463
Adjusted R^2	0.001	0.003	0.038	0.047	0.077	0.077	0.148

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05

Appendix 2A: Loess curve of party organizational strength and change in LDP absolute vote share
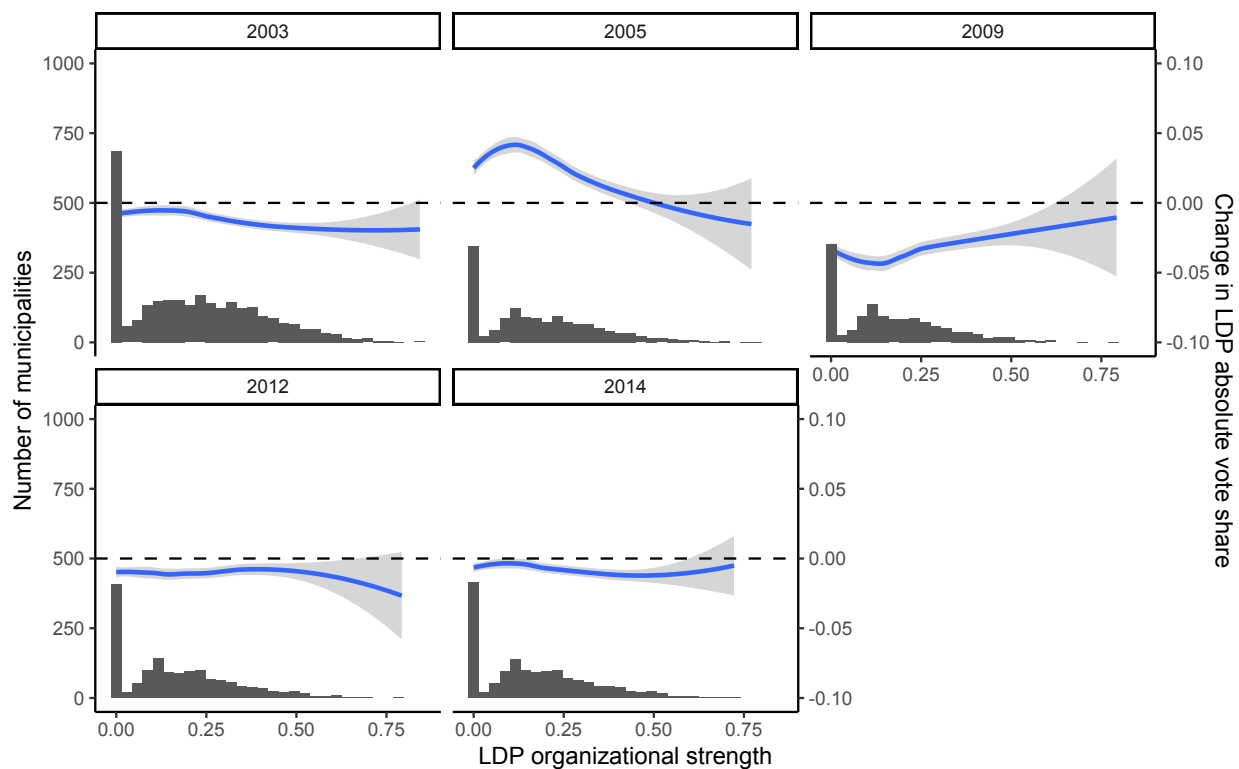
Note: Bars plot the frequency distribution of municipalities across the measure of party organizational strength. Solid line plots the loess curve of the relationship between organizational strength and change in LDP absolute vote share for municipalities in each year—individual data points are omitted here for clearer presentation.
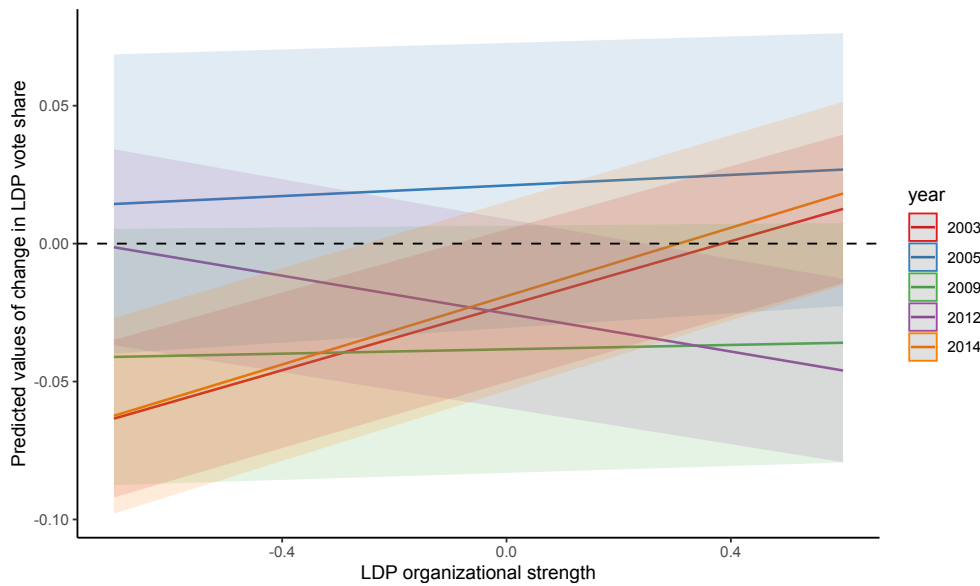
Appendix 3: Regression figures

Appendix 3A: Party organizational strength using the REWB model (Model 3)

Marginal effects of party organizational strength (within effects)
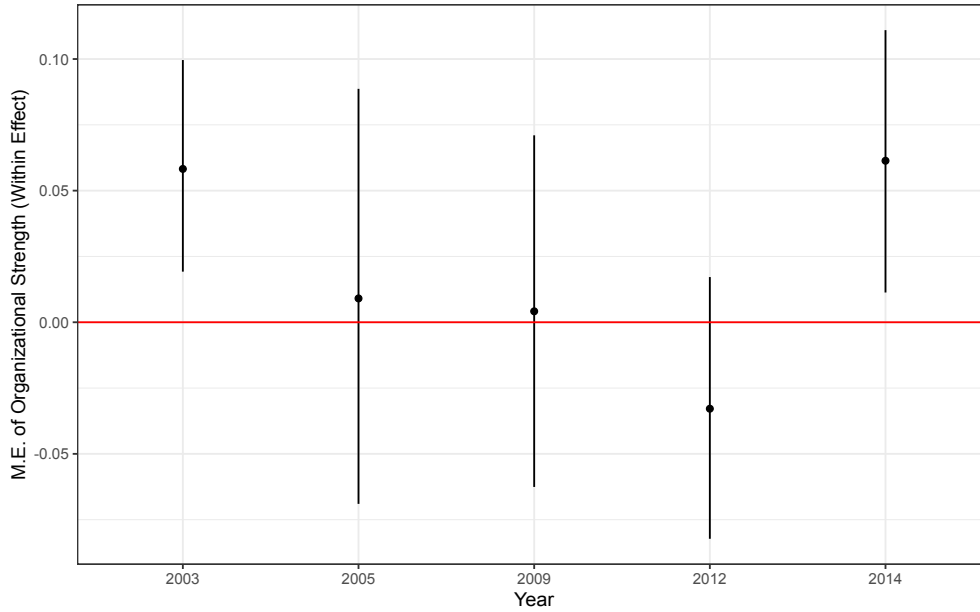
Predicted values of change in LDP absolute vote share (within effects)

Marginal effects of party organizational strength (between effects)
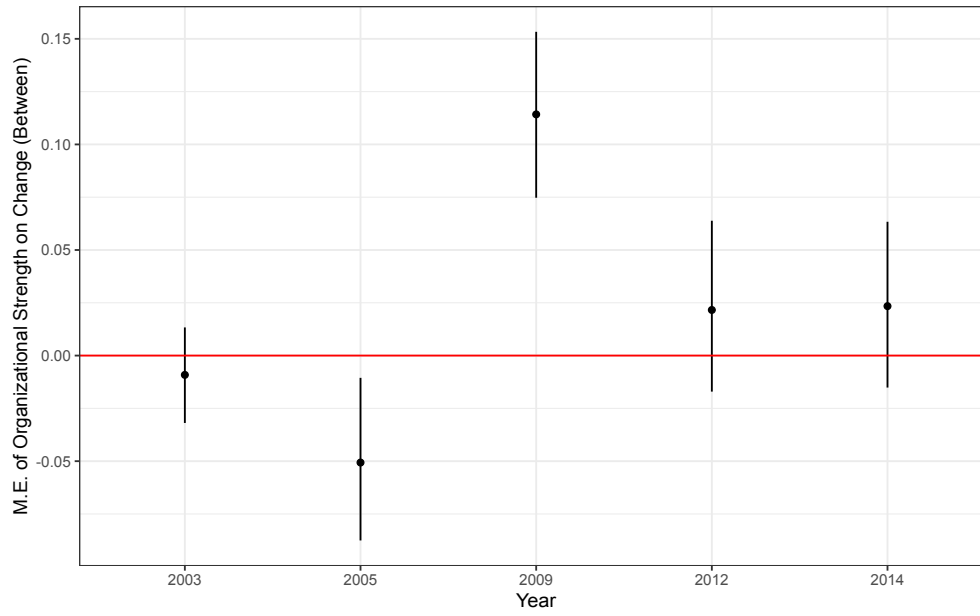
Predicted values of change in LDP absolute vote share (between effects)
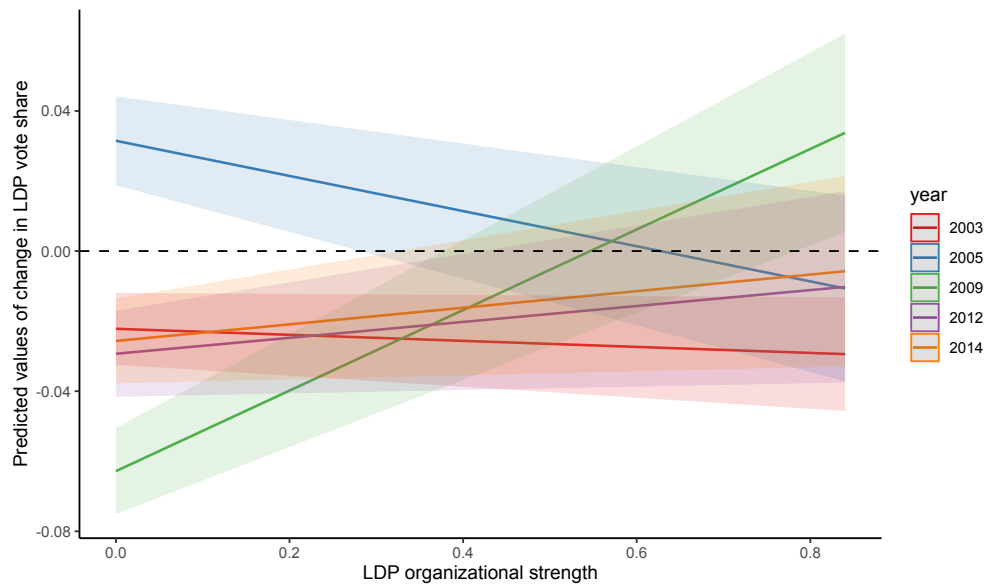
Appendix 3B: Clientelist appeal using the REWB model (Model 6)

Marginal effects of clientelist appeal (within effects)
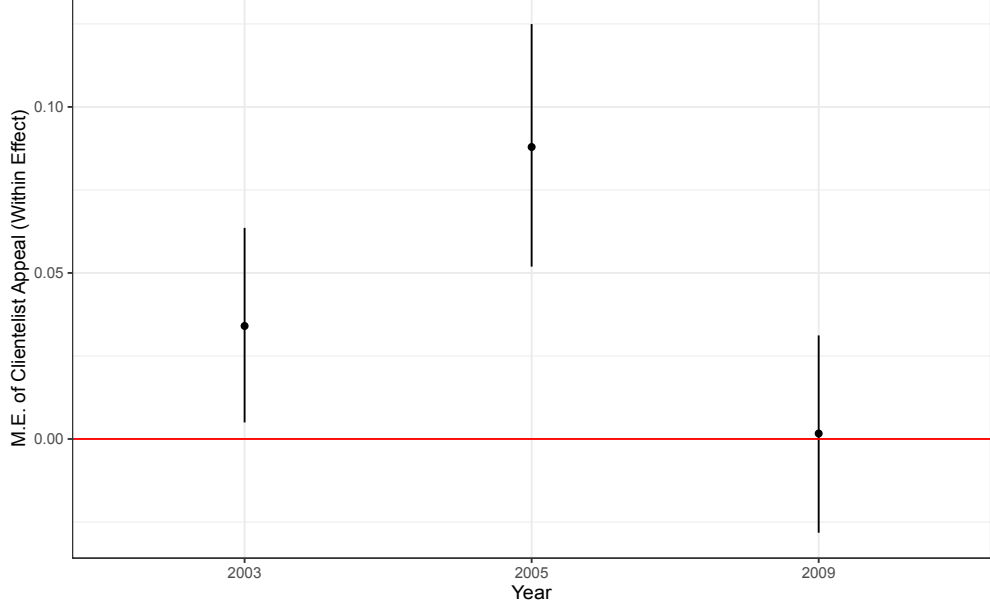
Predicted values of change in LDP absolute vote share (within effects)
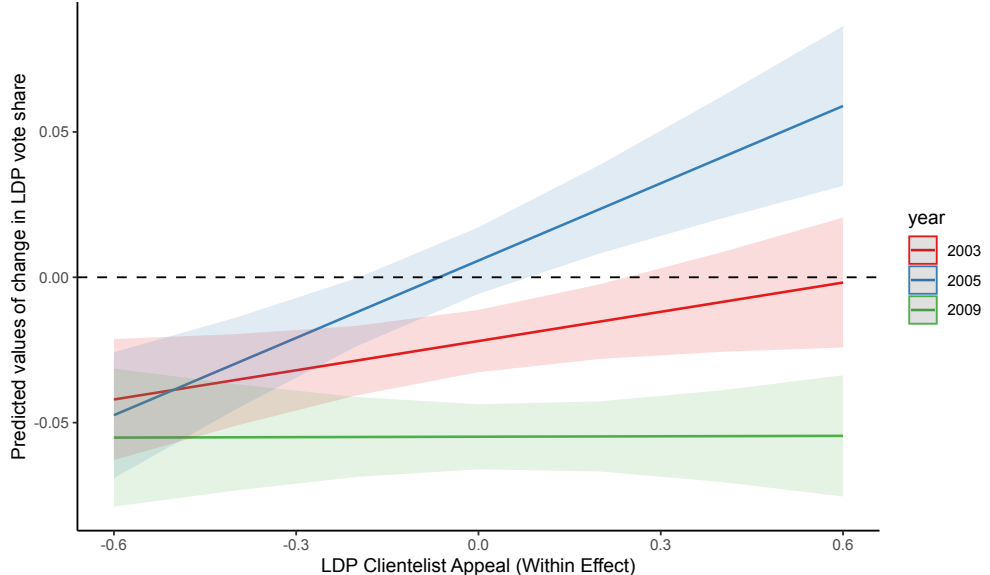
Marginal effects of clientelist appeal (between effects)
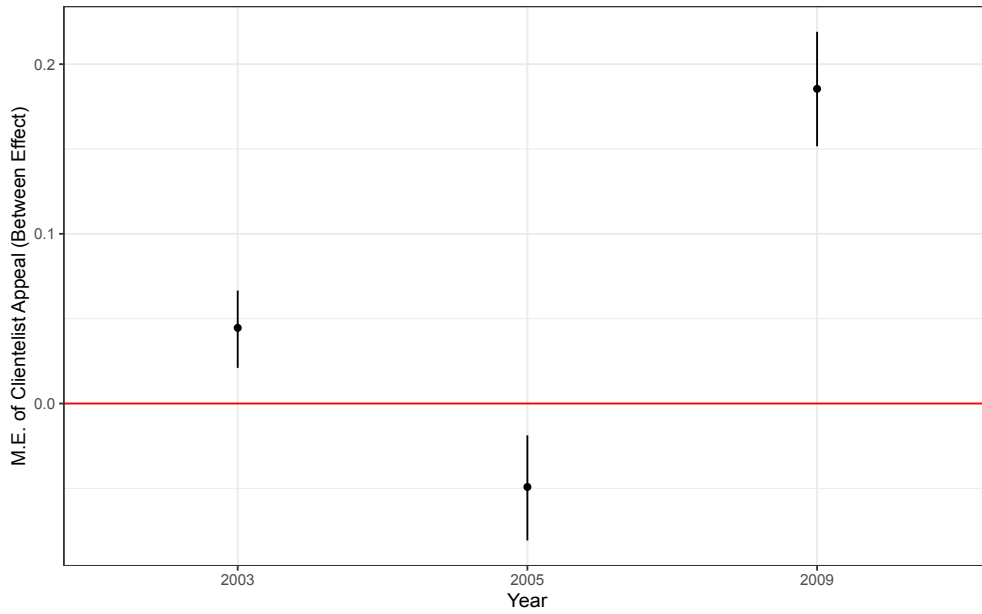
Predicted values of change in LDP absolute vote share (between effects)
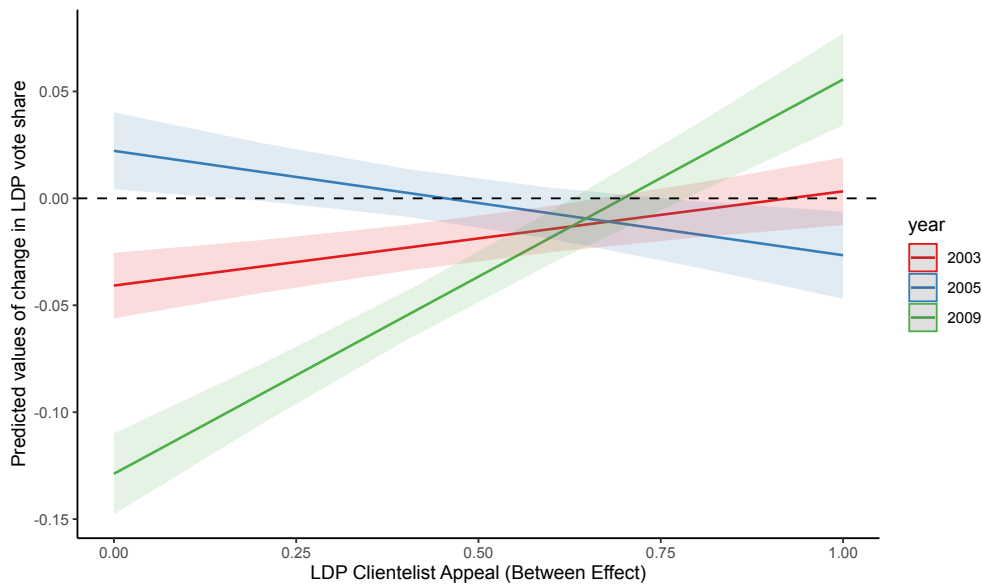
Appendix 3C: Combined model (Model 7)

Marginal effects of party organizational strength
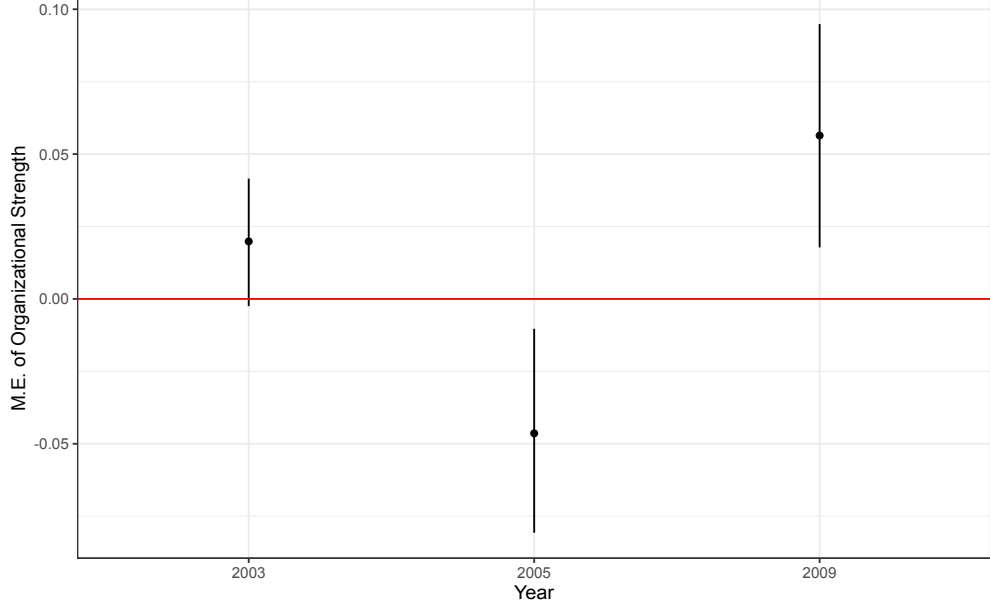
Marginal effects of clientelist appeal
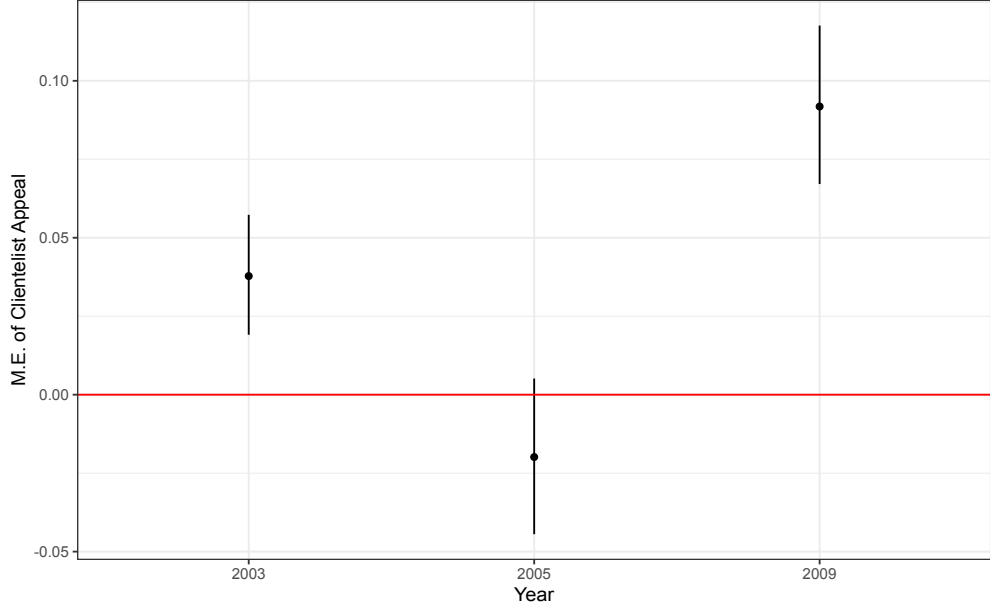
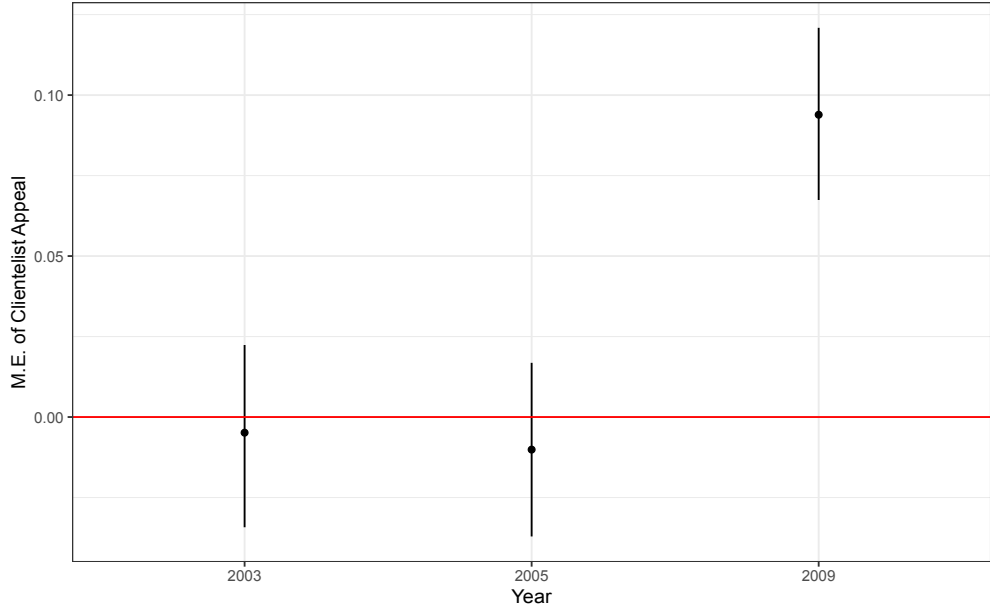## Appendix 3D: Analysis restricted to non-merger municipalities

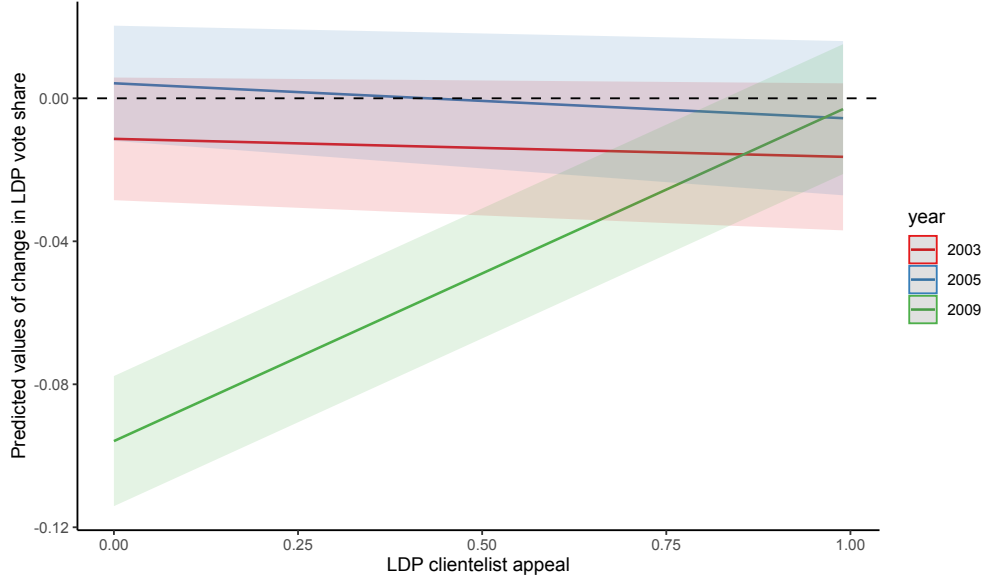## Marginal effects of party organizational strength for non-merger municipalities
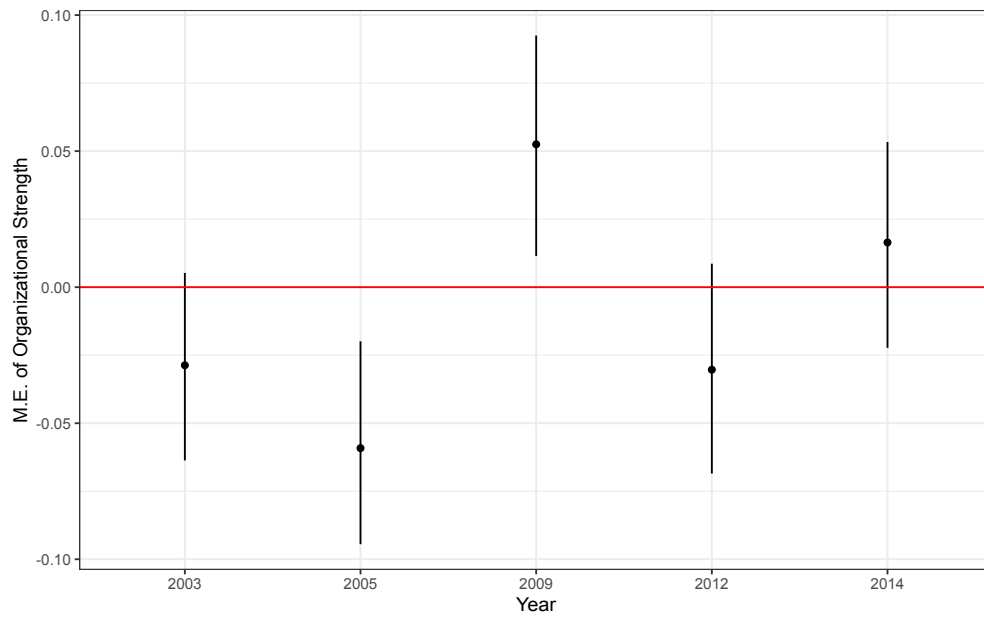
Predicted values of party organizational strength for non-merger municipalities
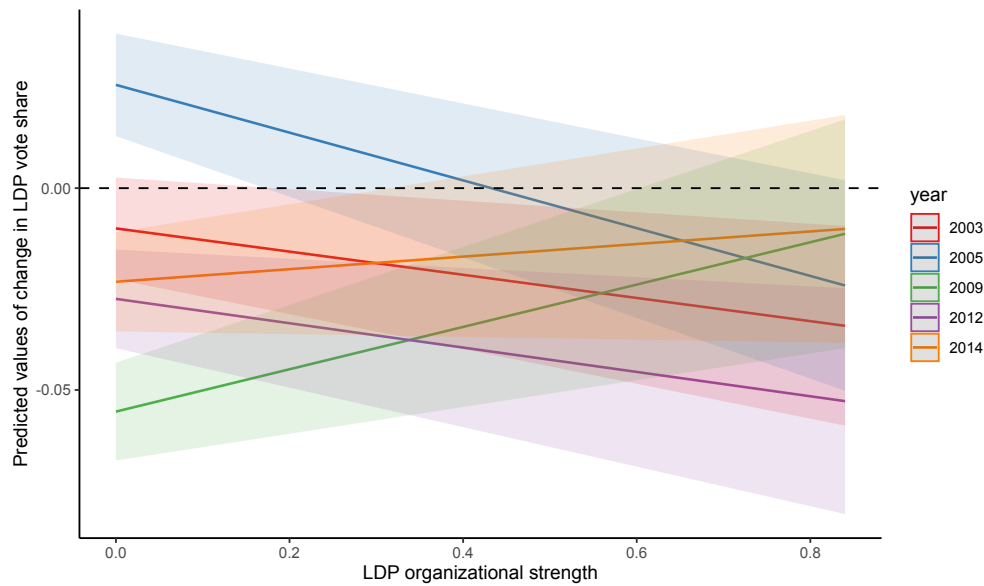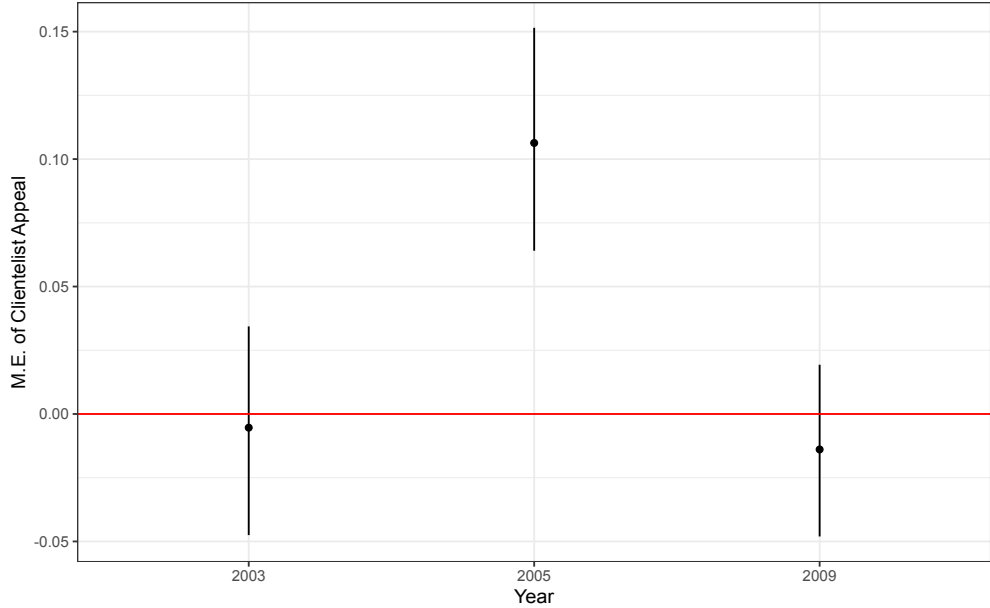
Marginal effects of clientelist appeal for non-merger municipalities

Predicted values of clientelist appeal for non-merger municipalities

Marginal effects of clientelist appeal (within effect)

Marginal effects of clientelist appeal (between effect)