



Exit Polls Show Loss for Japan Premier's Party

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TOKYO, July 29 – Japan's governing Liberal Democratic Party suffered a crushing defeat in today's election in the upper house of Parliament, but Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#) vowed that he would not step down.



Itsuo Inouye/Associated Press
Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at Liberal Democratic Party headquarters in Tokyo on Sunday.

The main opposition Democratic Party seized control of the upper house by a landslide, capturing seats not only in cities but also in rural districts that have long been strongholds of the Liberal Democratic Party. The rout was widespread, with household names in the governing party falling one after another before opposition newcomers.

In a devastating rebuke to Mr. Abe, angry voters punished him for his mishandling of bread-and-butter issues and a series of scandals in a government seemingly in disarray. Past prime ministers have resigned in the face of similar losses, but Mr. Abe, even before all votes were counted, tried to head off inevitable questions about his leadership.

"I have to repent for what I have to repent," Mr. Abe, who became prime minister last September, told a Japanese television network.

But, he said, "To pursue reforms, to build a new country, I have to fulfill my duties as prime minister from now on as well."

The loss, however, will allow the opposition to check Mr. Abe's legislative agenda. Using parliamentary majorities he had inherited from his popular predecessor, [Junichiro Koizumi](#), Mr. Abe rammed through laws to instill patriotism in schools, elevate the status of Japan's military and prepare for a referendum on revising the pacifist Constitution.

Of the 242 seats in the upper house, half, or 121, were being contested this election. The Liberal Democratic

Party and its junior coalition partner, the New Komeito, had to win a combined 64 seats to maintain a majority in the upper house.

With all but a few votes counted, Mr. Abe's party won 35 seats and its coalition partner took 8. The opposition Democratic Party captured 59 seats.

"Last time, I voted for the Liberal Democrats under Koizumi," Takeshige Iijima, 53, said after voting in Yokohama. "I can't support the present Liberal Democratic Party. Japan can't go on under Abe's leadership."

Given the voters' wrath, members of Mr. Abe's party may start looking for another leader with more popular support as they turn their attention to the next election. Although Mr. Abe, 52, was relatively young and inexperienced, party members chose him as leader last

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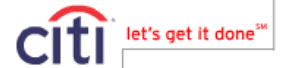
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September on the premise that he, like Mr. Koizumi, would lead them to electoral victories.

Under Japanese law, the lower house of parliament, which Mr. Abe's party controls firmly, chooses prime ministers. So a loss in the upper house would not immediately force his resignation.

But past prime ministers have taken responsibility for defeats in the upper house by resigning.

With polls predicting a tide against Mr. Abe's party, the Liberal Democrats had braced themselves for a defeat. Some members of his party – like Kohei Tamura, a lawmaker seeking a third term in a race that he had seemed assured to win just a few weeks ago – sought to survive by openly attacking Mr. Abe. Mr. Tamura, who represented Kochi prefecture in western Japan, lost Sunday.

Once over 60 percent, Mr. Abe's approval ratings plummeted as he appeared out of touch with voters' anxieties about everyday issues, especially a national pension record-keeping problem that could jeopardize the benefits paid out in what is a rapidly ageing society. Instead, Mr. Abe pursued a nationalist agenda, saying until recently that this election's main theme was revising Japan's pacifist Constitution and repeating his trademark, if vague, promise of turning Japan into "a beautiful country."

During the 17-day campaign, Mr. Abe switched gears and focused on economic issues. Mr. Abe took out full-page ads in Sunday's newspapers, pledging to turn voters' "anger and anxieties" into "peace of mind and hope." But the change in strategy was too late, particularly because the opposition leader, Ichiro Ozawa, had centered his campaign on the economy.

"Until now I've always voted for the Liberal Democratic Party, but this time I voted for Ozawa," said Kazuyoshi Tobita, a restaurant owner in Saitama, a prefecture next to Tokyo. "There were all sorts of problems. The pension problem was terrible. I mean, what are they thinking? We're all worried whether the money we paid into it is actually there."

"I'd like him to step down," Mr. Tobita, 71, said of Mr. Abe. "Doesn't everybody think that?"

Mr. Ozawa, a veteran politician famous for his tactical skills, focused on building support in rural areas whose backing the Liberal Democrats had secured for decades with public works projects and agricultural subsidies. Results showed that Mr. Ozawa's party won overwhelmingly in rural Japan.

Mr. Ozawa, a former powerbroker in the governing Liberal Democratic Party, famously left it in 1993 and formed an alliance of opposition parties that toppled the Liberal Democrats for 11 months – the only time the party has been out of power since its founding in 1955.

After voting with her husband, Shige Tahara, 60, said she had always supported the Liberal Democrats, but now believed that a two-party system would make politicians more accountable.

"We've come all this way with the Liberal Democratic Party, and things keep getting worse," Ms. Tahara said. "So, if another party took power, I'd like to see what kind of policies it would come up with."

Yasuko Kamiizumi contributed reporting from Yokohama; Makiko Inoue contributed reporting from Saitama.

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