Public trust in and support for government is crucial to governing parties’ success in passing unpopular economic policies. Liberal voters are more likely to support private sector social welfare solutions, an ideologically incongruent policy position, when they also trust government. Further, when voters are asked to support policies that entail economic sacrifices, politicians are more likely to gain and retain support when public trust is high. Otherwise, empirical evidence shows that electoral fortunes rise and fall with the economy, and raising taxes in difficult economic times is even more likely to stretch the limits of public confidence and cost politicians votes.

When Prime Minister Naoto Kan promised Japanese voters a hike in the consumption tax upon assuming office in June 2010, political observers predicted that the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) would face the same outcome in the July 2010 House of Councillors election that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) faced in 1989 when angry voters delivered the party a historic loss after it instituted an unpopular increase in the consumption tax. The DPJ did experience a significant loss of seats that cost it majority control of the Upper House in July 2010. Political observers subsequently worried that the party’s loss threw Kan’s leadership and the government into jeopardy in advance of the September 2010 election for DPJ party president (and prime minister). By September 2010, however, voters’ support for the Kan administration rebounded after he prevailed over Ichiro Ozawa in the race for DPJ party president. Though the Kan administration and the DPJ paid in the short-term, Kan was able to retain leadership of the party and reclaim public support despite the continued unpopularity of his administration’s economic policies.

Kan’s high public support following a rocky start is odd given that Japanese voters are renowned for their cynicism. Only one in ten Japanese in a 2004-05 cross-national survey agreed that they could trust people in government to do the right thing most of the time, making the Japanese less trusting than other democratic publics. Further, the current administration is asking distrustful voters to make hard choices that they have not had to make in the recent past. The high growth period that preceded the bursting of the asset bubble enabled politicians and voters to avoid making the difficult trade-off between taxes and social welfare. This is no longer tenable; the public must pay higher taxes to continue funding a social welfare system struggling to meet the needs of a rapidly aging population. An untrusting public is being asked to make sacrifices now for payoffs later by a party that is new to leadership and, thus, still learning to govern. That is a tremendous leap of faith.

Despite predictions that public ire over a proposed increase in the consumption tax would lower support for the Kan administration and potentially cost Kan his post as party president and prime minister, public opinion polls suggest that voters are keeping their attitudes about Prime Minister Kan, his cabinet, and his administration’s economic policies separate. Public opinion
about the consumption tax remained relatively stable while public opinion about the Kan administration fluctuated from Kan's ascendency to the premiership in June through the July Upper House elections and Kan's re-election as DPJ party president in September in response to other policy-related events. Public opinion polls provide insight into these disparities and lead me to forecast a somewhat brighter future for the DPJ if it is able to capitalize on the levels of trust that extend to Kan, if not to the party.

Public opinion polls suggest that the consumption tax did not influence vote choice as much as presumed. Polls conducted before the Upper House election show a public divided; there was no consensus. In the second week of June, 49% of voters polled supported an increase in the consumption tax and 44% opposed.4 A week later 46% were in favor and 45% opposed.5 Public opinion remained stable at the end of June when 46% supported an increase and 44% opposed.6 Two weeks prior to the July 2010 election, only 19% of voters claimed that the hike in the consumption tax was the biggest issue and 71% claimed that there were other larger issues.7 Nearly a month after the Upper House elections, an Asahi Shimbun poll showed that voters were split over whether or not Kan’s statement about increasing the consumption tax contributed to the DPJ’s loss; 47% of voters attributed the DPJ’s loss of Upper House seats to Kan’s statement; 48% did not agree that it had affected the outcome.8 Rather, the overwhelming majority of voters (69%) attributed the DPJ’s loss to failure to keep its campaign promises and 61% cited general criticism of policy content.9 In September 2010 public opinion on the consumption tax remained split with nearly one-half (48%) of voters in favor of raising the consumption tax and 44% opposed.10 Kan won the DPJ party presidency with a landslide of support amid this climate, and public support ratings climbed.

While public opinion on the consumption tax remained split and stable throughout a busy summer of electoral campaigning, public support for the Kan administration experienced larger shifts. Support for the Kan cabinet decreased in advance of the House of Councillors election, from 59% in early June to 39% a week before the election.11 Shortly after, the campaigning for DPJ party presidential elections began and support for the Kan administration increased to 49% by the first week in September.12 Public approval of the Kan administration rebounded to 64% following his victory over Ozawa and a cabinet reshuffle, approximating the 66% public approval that Kan received after stepping into the premiership in June following Hatoyama’s resignation.13

The Mainichi Daily News reported, “the Kan Cabinet is the first one to successfully regain public support since the Cabinet of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.” Public approval was high even though 70% of voters polled reported that they did not support the administration’s economic policies. Why? The Mainichi poll found that 65% of respondents supported the Kan administration because they hoped that “it may change Japan’s political culture.” And, voters approved of Kan’s decision to exclude members of the Ozawa political group from the new cabinet lineup.
Kan’s cleaner image and populist roots prevailed. Three-quarters of voters (65%) indicated that Kan was “more suited to be prime minister” while only 17% found Ozawa to be better suited. 14 75% of voters were unable to support Ozawa’s candidacy for DPJ president due to his June 2010 resignation as DPJ secretary-general amid allegations of a political funding scandal. 15 Kan ultimately is more trustworthy in the eyes of voters, and this trust contributes to higher levels of public support. The level of public trust he engenders places this administration in a better position to carry out unpopular economic policies.

Japan observers have been absorbed by valid overlapping concerns that include: instability in prime ministerial leadership and its consequences; whether the DPJ can learn to govern fast enough to successfully position itself as a viable alternative to the LDP in the long-term; and eradicating LDP-style money-power politics. Amid these concerns, few Japan observers have stopped to think about the significance of public attitudes that defy conventional wisdom. Potential policy successes of the DPJ administration are as contingent upon the ability of the party to learn the business of governing as it is upon the party’s ability to gain and keep public trust. While these processes are not mutually exclusive, the amount of early public trust that the Kan administration enjoys may have bought the DPJ a little extra time to set things right with the Japanese public.

7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
13 ‘Kan Cabinet public approval rating rises to 64 percent following reshuffle.” Available at The Mainichi Daily News online http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/news/20100920p2a00m0na008000c.html.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.