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Ishiba at the cliff's edge

Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru remains at risk more than a week after reports emerged of legally questionable gifts to LDP lawmakers.
- His approval ratings have fallen sharply, and his response to parliamentary questioning, far from shoring up his reformist credentials, have damaged his reputation and undermined trust in the LDP (again).
- With opposition parties threatening a potential no-confidence motion later in the session, the LDP may have to weigh pushing Ishiba out now versus having him removed by the opposition later.

Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru's position remains vulnerable more than a week since he [admitted](#) that he had distributed gift certificates to first-term Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmakers ahead of a 3 March gathering. The likelihood that he will lead the LDP into the upper house elections has fallen substantially, and it is possible that he could be forced out as early as the beginning of April, after the passage of the budget.

The problem is that the gift-giving scandal has fundamentally damaged the reputation Ishiba has burnished for decades as a conscientious political reformer. He has repeatedly apologized in public statements and parliamentary questioning, while also insisting that he violated no law as his gifts were intended to express his appreciation to young lawmakers for hard-fought campaigns and therefore do not violate laws against donations for "political activities." He has acted evasively, denying calls that he face questioning in the lower house's political ethics commission (before possibly changing his tune later in the week); facing suspicions that he used a secret cabinet secretariat fund to buy the gifts, he has insisted that he paid for the gifts out of pocket but has been unable to furnish evidence; and, perhaps most damagingly, he implied that this kind of

gift-giving has been standard practice by LDP prime ministers for years, which reporting on gifts given during the Kishida and Abe administrations seemed to confirm.

In short, the gift-giving scandal and Ishiba's handling of the allegations not only threatens his argument that the case for his premiership is that he is the best politician to restore public trust and bring disaffected voters back to the LDP. It also risks re-igniting "money and politics" as an issue that could dominate political discourse in the months leading up to the upper house elections, increasing the probability that the LDP and Kōmeitō will fall short of a majority in the upper house. As Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) leader Noda Yoshihiko said after reports suggested that this manner of gift-giving has been customary within the LDP, "It's a problem with the culture of the LDP. It's become a deep-rooted structural problem." With the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) already having narrowed the LDP's lead in polls for the upper house elections and the ruling coalition defending a sixteen-seat majority, the party does not have much margin for error.

The LDP, however, has been unsure of how to respond. Party officials seem extremely reluctant for Ishiba to appear before the political ethics committee, a demand that the opposition parties have been increasingly unified in making. While some right-wing lawmakers have called for Ishiba to quit, other, more moderate lawmakers have thus far not joined them. Koizumi Shinjirō, the leadership contender who backed Ishiba in the second round, said on Thursday that the LDP should focus on taking genuine steps to regain public trust instead of "forcing out leaders when their approval ratings fall." But it is unclear whether others will join Koizumi in standing behind the prime minister. If his approval ratings continue to fall, LDP leaders may conclude that Ishiba has truly lost the public's confidence and that the party has no choice but to replace him as soon as possible. In this case, it could take only a few more sour polls and a handful of prominent politicians to call for Ishiba's resignation before his position becomes untenable.

How popular is the Ishiba government?

A ten-day moving average of the Ishiba government's support, weighted by sample size and adjusted for the age of the poll.

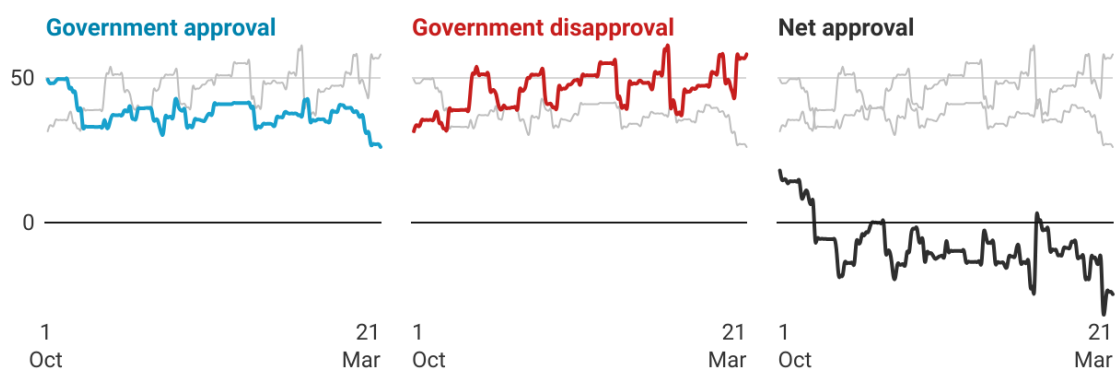


Chart: observingjapan.substack.com • Created with Datawrapper

The LDP is also trying to assess the opposition's thinking about a no-confidence motion. Even if Ishiba were to survive beyond the passage of the FY2025 budget – the timing of which is still in question due to the scandal – the possibility that the opposition parties could unite later in the session to pass a resolution and force Ishiba out (or, perhaps worse for ruling party lawmakers, give Ishiba the option of a calling a snap election instead of resigning) could make LDP lawmakers more open to replacing the prime minister now instead of leaving him in place under the threat of a no-confidence motion. While some opposition lawmakers – most notably DPFP leader Tamaki Yūichirō – have suggested that it would be appropriate to submit a no-confidence motion soon, others, particularly in the CDP, have been cagier, forcing the LDP to try to game out the timing of a motion and the likelihood that all the opposition parties would unite to pass it.

For now, the key indicators to watch for are (1) public opinion polls and (2) the public statements of prominent LDP politicians, like Koizumi's mentioned above. To some extent, these indicators will interact. LDP lawmakers will of course be responding to public opinion, but the public may in turn respond to cues from LDP elites. Judging by the first week of the gift-giving scandal, neither necessarily seems inclined to stick by the prime minister. The question is whether it is already too late for Ishiba to make a convincing case to voters and his own party that he is still the best option to restore trust in the LDP and politics more broadly.

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