

23 January 2026

Five uncertainties as lower house dissolved

Key takeaways

- The House of Representatives was dissolved on Friday, 23 January, starting the countdown to the start of the campaign on 27 January and the general election on 8 February.
- Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are projecting confidence – the latter raised its victory line to an absolute majority of its own – but there are five major sources of uncertainty that make an overwhelming victory for Takaichi a relatively unlikely outcome.
- These factors include turnout; the impact of the LDP's loss of Kōmeitō's support; competition between the LDP and conservative parties for the youth vote; a chaotic landscape in Osaka; and the effects of a short campaign.

Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae dissolved the House of Representatives on Friday, 23 January immediately after the Diet reopened. With sixteen days until the general election on Saturday, 8 February, the stage is set for Japan's shortest-ever campaign season; the formal campaign period, which begins on Tuesday, 27 January, will be a mere twelve days.

Despite the short campaign, the outlook for the general election remains highly uncertainty. Although the LDP has raised its ambitions – after initially saying that the party is aiming for a simple majority for the ruling coalition, i.e., the status quo, it is now saying it is aiming for a simple majority of its own, a gain of thirty-four seats – the two weeks since the first reports of Takaichi's readiness to call a snap election have, if anything, deepened the uncertainty surrounding the outlook for an election.

There are five major sources of uncertainty.

First, it is unclear whether turnout will match or exceed last year's upper house elections or whether it will be closer to general elections since 2014, in which turnout has hovered between 52% and 56%. Takaichi's popularity and the youth turnout machines of the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) and Sanseitō suggest it could be higher, but there are countervailing forces, including the weather (though this could be offset by early voting) and general irritation at an election that had no obvious rationale and is inconveniencing people's lives across the country as community events scheduled to be held at voting facilities will have to be relocated or canceled at short notice. Holding an election during university entrance exam season could also depress youth turnout, though Takaichi has called for young voters to use early voting. The short campaign could also depress overseas absentee voting.

Second, with the Centrist Reform Alliance (CRA) formally launched and virtually every incumbent lawmaker from both the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and Kōmeitō participating, the new party may well be able to draw upon the combined electoral strength of both parties, which was roughly 12.5mn in the 2025 upper house elections, nearly as many votes as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) received. The CRA may not be able to rely on all of these Kōmeitō votes, since some unknown number of the party's PR votes were LDP voters instructed to vote for the party under the terms of the coalition agreement. If the CRA's candidates in single-member constituencies turn out the bulk of Kōmeitō voters, many LDP incumbents would have to make up for the loss of anywhere between 10,000 and 25,000 votes. However, the alliance could prove off-putting to both CDP voters, who resent the alliance's shifts on security policy and nuclear power, and Kōmeitō voters, who do not want to support candidates from a party to which they were recently bitterly opposed. In short, the new party's constituencies could all hang together, as voters from both parties vote strategically to deal a blow to Takaichi or it could easily fizzle. It may not be clear until the votes are counted.

Third, while the LDP battles with the CRA for older voters – both of the parties in the alliance have struggled to appeal to younger voters and the alliance is unlikely to enjoy any more success on this score – Takaichi and the LDP will also be battling with the DPFP and Sanseitō for younger voters. The gap between Takaichi's support and the LDP's support can be attributed in part to her attracting the support of DPFP and Sanseitō voters. How these Takaichi supporters will vote is a mystery. While some may vote a straight LDP ticket, others could split their tickets, voting for one party in SMDs and another in PR. Sanseitō is deliberately attempting to exploit the gap between Takaichi's and the LDP's popularity; party leader Kamiya Sōhei has said that the party is aiming to field 150 candidates and will deliberately run against LDP candidates it deems as "globalists" opposed to Takaichi's leadership. In other words, some LDP candidates could find themselves contending with the loss of Kōmeitō support while facing right-wing challengers from Sanseitō.

Fourth, the campaign in the greater Osaka region will be more chaotic than in recent elections, which could have implications for Ishin no Kai's post-election strength and therefore the prospects for the LDP-Ishin partnership. While Ishin no Kai swept Osaka

prefecture's nineteen constituencies in 2024, the prefecture could now see three-way contests in all of them, pitting Ishin no Kai candidates against LDP candidates and CRA candidates, the latter of whom will benefit from Kōmeitō's strength in the region (while the former will suffer from its loss). That said, Ishin no Kai's gambit – having Governor Yoshimura Hirofumi and Osaka Mayor Yokoyama Hideyuki resign to trigger by-elections on 8 February intended as a referendum on the party's auxiliary capital plan – could generate higher turnout for Ishin, even though Yoshimura and Yokoyama are running unopposed by major party rivals.

Fifth, the short campaign may be a factor in its own right, since it could amplify the impact of big events during the campaign, whether financial market movements, foreign policy shocks, gaffes, scandals, or other black swan events (like the reports of Russian interference on Sanseitō's behalf last summer that appear to have depressed its vote in the final days). Each side will be limited in their ability to counter the impact of these developments before election day.

To be sure, it is conceivable that Takaichi's popularity is the single most important factor and is overcomes the uncertainty around these other factors. However, there is not yet sufficient evidence to suggest that this factor alone will determine the outcome. At this point, **the most likely outcome (40%) is the LDP gaining between ten and thirty seats**, which would modestly bolster the government's majority but would not be an overwhelming mandate and would fall short of the LDP's victory line. The next most likely outcomes are a **closely contested election in which the LDP either picks up or loses a small number of seats (20%)** essentially preserving the status quo, or an **overwhelming victory for the LDP in which it gains upwards of sixty seats (20%)**. The impacts of these outcomes are, of course, diametrically opposed. The former could result in calls for Takaichi to resign to take responsibility for the defeat; the latter would enable her to overawe the opposition in the upper house and press ahead. Meanwhile, there are two tail risks. One scenario (15%) is that the **CRA does just well enough to equal or surpass the LDP** – the CRA needs to gain only fourteen LDP-held seats from its pre-election strength of 172 to do it – which would result in either a minority LDP-Ishin government or some kind of unruly multi-party coalition, in which Takaichi's survival is highly unlikely. Finally, the least likely outcome is **the CRA performing well enough form a government (5%)**. The opposition alliance will not field enough candidates to win an outright majority, suggesting that any scenario in which the CRA takes power means a coalition with at least one other party, presumably the DPFP since, while the end of Ishin's partnership with the LDP is conceivable, a new partnership with the CRA is not.

At this point, the most important signs to watch for indicators of voter enthusiasm. If it appears that floating voters in particular are prepared to turn out to deliver a mandate to Takaichi – and if it appears that the CRA, depresses rather than mobilizes turnout among older, moderate voters and Kōmeitō voters (if they find it a cynical, desperate maneuver rather than a natural alliance, for example) – it could point to a stronger outcome for the LDP. This forthcoming weekend should be an important weekend for opinion polling, since pollsters will not be able to publish detailed results of polling after

the campaign begins on 27 January. New polls should provide some data, albeit far from ironclad, about the electorate's mood ahead of the start of the campaign.

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