Attitudes on the Entry Ban in Japan during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Japan had one of the most restrictive entry bans between 2020 and 2023 to curb the spread of COVID-19. While there was critical coverage of this entry ban by foreign media, how did Japanese citizens perceive these restrictions? We fielded a survey in February 2022 with 6,033 respondents, in which we asked the respondents whether they supported the ban and what types of foreigners they would support getting entry to the country. Our results show that the overall level of support for the ban was very high. Those with a stronger sense of ethnic identity expressed a higher level of support, although those with more of a civic sense of national identity also supportive of the ban. Furthermore, while the respondents were more likely to tolerate the entry of foreign spouses of Japanese citizens and resident foreigners compared to the other immigrant types, even the supporters for the admission of the spouse category were only barely a majority. In sum, our data show that Japanese citizens were uniformly negative against any entries by non-Japanese citizens into Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, border closure, immigration, Japan, xenophobia, hierarchical LASSO, principal component analysis

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Country	Total entry ban	Partial entry ban	Total or partial entry ban
Japan	512	323	835
New Zealand	709	92	801
Taiwan	200	576	776
United States	0	670	670
Australia	591	66	657
Canada	509	52	561
Italy	0	518	518
Germany	59	444	503
France	0	449	449
South Korea	0	413	413
United Kingdom	0	356	356

Table 1: Number of Days. The data is introduced by Hale et al. (2021), and the updated version is provided at `https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/covid-19-government-response-tracker`.

1 Immigration during COVID-19

In response to the COVID pandemic, Japan adopted extremely strict regulations on the entrance of foreigners into Japan, even foreign legal residents. According to Vogt and Qin (2022, 248), because of these policies foreign residents sometimes "found themselves stranded overseas as Japan banned them from returning home." Between April of 2020 and March of 2023, Japan closed its borders to non-Japanese citizen entrants from all countries in the world for 512 days, and from some countries for 323 days. As Table 1 suggests, Japan's border closure to non-citizens was substantially longer than many other industrial democracies.

Despite what is often assumed about Japanese public opinion given the relatively small proportion of foreign residents in Japan, data in the pre-COVID era show that the Japanese public is not particularly anti-immigration. In a 2018 Pew Survey, 25.57% of Japanese respondents said that Japan should admit more immigrants, which was the third most of the 27 countries studied, behind only the United States and Spain. 59.18% of Japanese respondents said that Japan should keep the same number of immigrants, which was the largest percentage studied, followed by South Korea and Canada (Pew Research Center, 2018, analysis by authors).

To what extent might a pandemic change this? As Seltzer notes in his essay about the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States after COVID-19, "[i]n times of elevated stress, even subtle, dimly recognized prejudices can be blown out of all proportion, compelling us to react in unprecedented ways" (Seltzer, 2020). More broadly Xun and Gilman cite Thucydides' discussion of the Plague of Athens in 430 BCE to argue that, "from this first account of a pandemic in the West, the fear of the Other has become a permanent feature of all epidemics. Counter-epidemic hysteria always attributes new diseases and their mutations to the actions and behaviors, malevolent or merely indifferent, of the Other" (Xun and Gilman, 2021, 11).

Interestingly, in their paper on anti-Asian hate crimes in Italy after the pandemic, Dipoppa et al. find that, while the pandemic did lead to a significant increase in hate crimes against Asians all around Italy, "Simply having more individuals with dispositions to prejudice in economically affected municipalities does not correspond with a differential increase in hate crimes" (Dipoppa et al., 2023, 400). In other words, at least in Italy, it was not simply the case that the pandemic gave xenophobic people new ways to express their xenophobia; the pandemic seems to have activated new rationals for xenophobia and thus created new xenophobes (at least within the context of a pandemic).

The Japanese public was certainly nervous about the pandemic. Between August 2020 and September 2021, "the percentage feeling very or somewhat concerned with [COVID] infection ranged from 76.0% to 87.1%" (Maeda, 2023, 178). Despite this broad sense of worry, in the context of the United States and the United Kingdom, a recent study found less support for total border closures among older respondents, and, in the case of the UK, more liberal respondents (Kobayashi et al., 2024, 8-9).[1] In the following section, we assess how this worry may or may not translate to support or opposition to border closures in Japan.

One of the things that was particularly notable about the border closure in Japan is

[1] In the US, the relationship between ideology and support for total border closer was not statistically significant.

that it applied to all non-Japanese, even permanent residents who tend to be wealthier and better positioned socially than other foreign residents. Scholarship on comparative public opinion in Japan, the United States, and other countries has regularly found that so-called "high skilled immigrants," immigrants with bachelors and post graduate degrees who are immigrating to work in white collar jobs, are the least controversial type of immigrants (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015; Kage et al., 2022; Valentino et al., 2019).[2]

Japan's policy stood out because it prohibited even a relatively uncontroversial group of foreign residents—those with bachelors and post graduate degrees who are coming to or even have lived for a while in Japan to work in white collar jobs—from entering Japan. What did the Japanese public think of this? Were they critical of this policy, or did the context of a pandemic make even those foreigners typically thought to be desirable immigrants seem threatening? And how do potentially mediating factors, such as xenophobia or civic identity influence or not influence how people respond to immigration restrictions during a pandemic?

We address these questions with a survey of 6,033 people conducted in February, 2022. This was shortly before the almost total ban of entry of foreign residents was to be lifted, so this is an ideal time to assess what the public thought of the ban almost two years after the beginning of the COVID pandemic. The respondents were recruited through Cross Marketing Inc., one of the largest survey vendor in Japan. We employed quota sampling by age, gender, and prefectures to match the most recent national census distribution. The survey questionnaire was written in Japanese and was distributed online. Although online surveys are not perfectly representative of the Japanese population, many recent surveys conducted in Japan such as Horiuchi and Oishi (2021) and Kuzushima et al. (2024) rely on online surveys. Also, one important deviation of online samples from the census is that enough number of elderly people are not included in the sample. However, we do not observe

[2]In the American context, there is a debate about whether the skills premium is truly "race neutral," as Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) suggest. Newman and Malhotra (2019) find that Americans, and particularly prejudiced Americans, apply the "skills premium" differently to those from developing countries and those from the developed world. In other words, they find that "the skill premium partly represents a preference against disliked prevalent immigrants" (Newman and Malhotra, 2019, 153).

any significant difference of the response to our main question between those in their 60s and 70s and those in their 80s (Table A.1).

2 Analysis and Discussion

To assess attitudes on immigration during the COVID-19 entry ban, we asked respondents two questions. The first question asked, "Do you think the entry ban to almost all foreigners in light of the discovery of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus at the end of November was good or not good?" Respondents could choose responses on a 7-point ordinal scale ranging from "very good" (indicating strong support for the near absolute entry ban), to "very bad," indicating strong opposition to the entry ban. Respondents also had the option of refusing to answer. Figure 1 shows the proportions of respondents within each answer, with the x-axis showing whether respondents selected that they thought that the entry ban was very bad all the way to respondents who indicated that they thought the entry ban was very good. Overall, there is a lot of support for the entry ban, with the most selected response at 30% being one point away from "very good."[3]

To understand further how support or opposition to the entry ban was affected along demographic lines and other attitudinal factors, we plotted predicted responses by demographic variables in figure 2 and by attitudinal variables in figure 3.[4] The box and whiskers plot shows the distribution of what responses would look like if, for example in figure 2, all respondents were female or male, obtained a college education or did not, and are regular employees or not. As the figure shows, there are not any observable differences between average predicted responses along demographic lines. Regardless of the gender, level of education, or employment, most predicted responses hover around 5 on the 7 point Likert scale

[3] We associate support for these restrictions with negative attitudes toward foreigners because these restrictions were only applied to foreigners. If, for example, a Japanese citizen and their non-Japanese spouse traveled abroad during the pandemic, only the non-Japanese spouse would have been prohibited from returning to Japan, despite the fact that they both would have the same risk of bringing COVID into Japan. Therefore, public attitudes toward these entry restrictions do not merely reflect compliance to non-pharmaceutical interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[4] To compute the predicted responses, we fit a hierarchical LASSO regression model (Bien et al., 2013). The tuning parameter is selected by 5-fold cross validation. The estimated coefficients are shown in Table A.1.

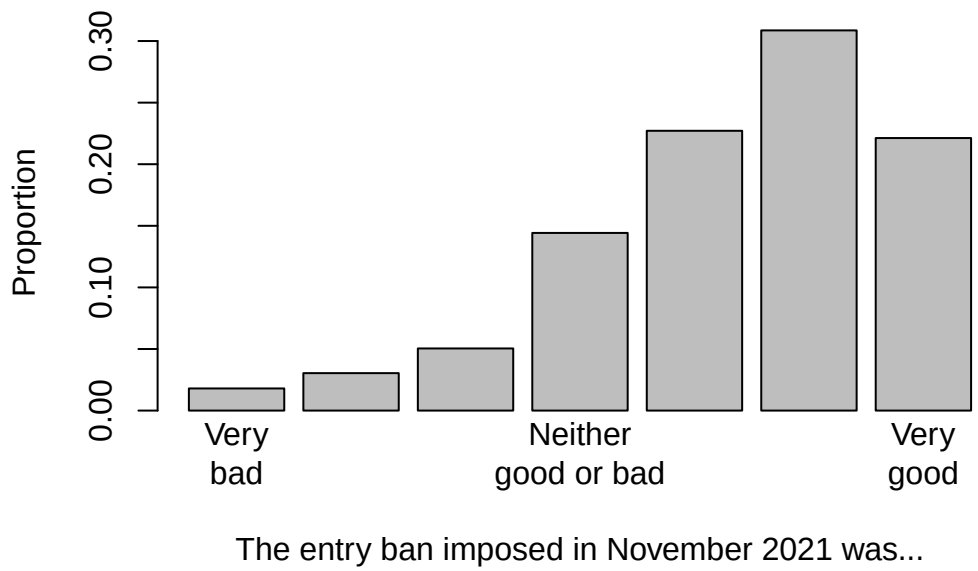

Figure 1: Distribution of Support for the Entry Ban Imposed in November 2021, Measured in February 2022.

shown in figure 1, meaning overall, respondents gravitate towards supporting the entry ban.

Figure 3 shows the differences in predicted responses for different attitudinal variables, including a battery of questions we labeled "xenophobia," another set of questions for "ethnic or civic sense of national identity," and finally one for party identification.

To measure xenophobia, we asked the following four questions:

1. "Do you think Japanese culture will improve if more foreigners come from abroad? Or do you think it will regress?"

2. "Do you think Japan's economic situation will improve if more foreigners come from abroad? Or do you think it will deteriorate?"

3. "Do you think Japan's safety will improve if more foreigners come from abroad? Or do you think it will deteriorate?"

4. "Do you think Japan's social security system, including medical care, long-term care, and pensions, will improve if the number of foreigners coming from abroad increases? Or do you think it will deteriorate?"

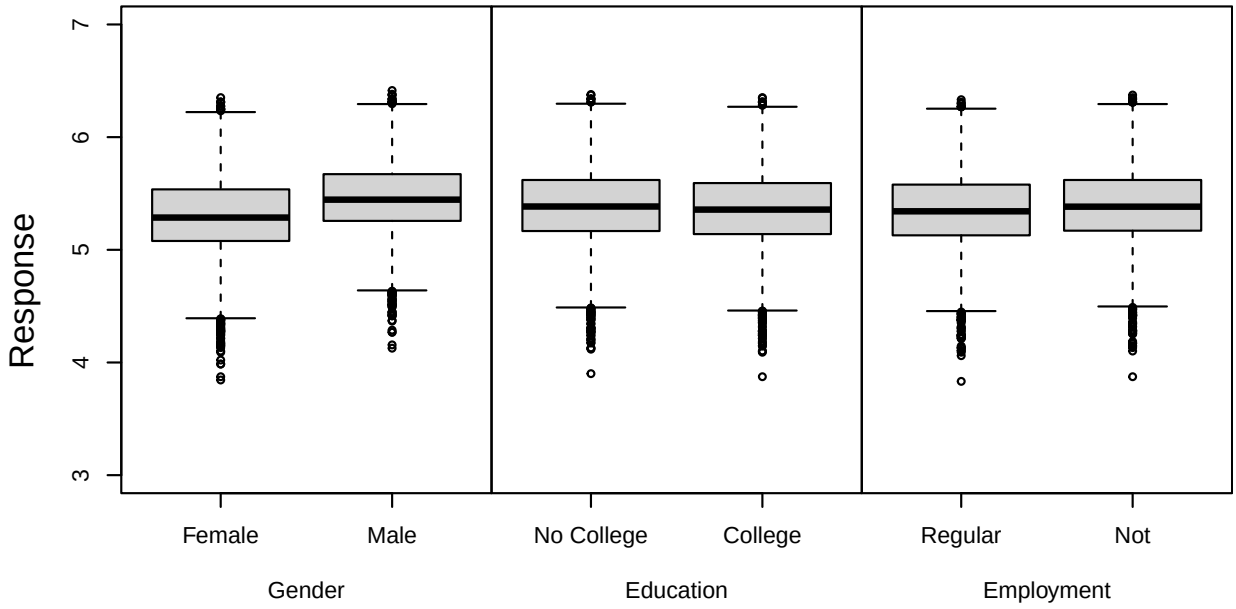

Figure 2: Predicted Response by Demographic Variables.

In each survey item, respondents are asked to choose a response from a five-point ordered scale. We used factor analysis to combine the answers to these survey items to construct a xenophobia score. We chose these questions because they isolate the economic and cultural reasons that individuals might support or oppose immigration. Those are the dimensions that Kage et al. (2022) and others examine when looking at approval of and opposition to immigration.

Interestingly, counter to much literature that has found relationships between xenophobic or racist attitudes and support for more restrictive immigration policies (e.g. see Burns and Gimpel (2000), Newman (2013), Valentino et al. (2019)), our predicted responses do not show a large difference for low and high xenophobic respondents. This may be indicative of how the framing of the entry ban – or immigration policy broadly – and the time during which it was implemented affects attitudes, leading to wider-spread support even from people who would usually be less inclined to support such a policy.

The second attitudinal variable we used consists of a battery of questions on ethnic or civic national identity where we asked respondents' perception of what constitutes a Japanese

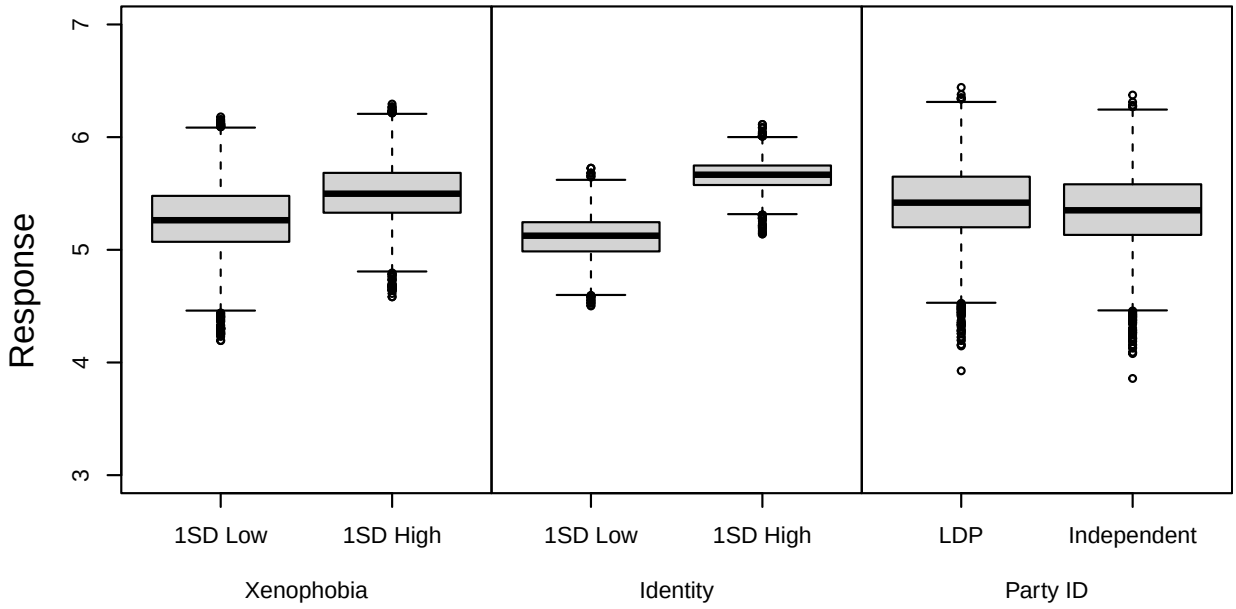

Figure 3: Predicted Response by Attitude Variables. "High" for the xenophobia score means that the respondent is more xenophobic, and "high" for the identity score means that the respondent has a more ethnic sense of national identity. "SD" stands for the standard deviation of the score obtained from the factor analysis of each set of the survey items mentioned in the main text.

person.[5] The answer options, depending on the question, were either 4-point or 5-point scales indicating agreement or evaluation of importance or not.[6] For example, one item for the question on what constitutes a Japanese person was "speaking Japanese well," to which respondents could choose between "important," "somewhat important," "I can't say either way," "somewhat unimportant," and "unimportant." As is the case for the xenophobia score, we used factor analysis to scale the responses to these questions into a one-dimensional score.

Support for the entry ban varied in a more pronounced way depending on whether respondents had a civic sense of national identity (coded in a way that means that their idea of what constitutes a Japanese person is based on achieved attributes such as language ability and respect for institutions) or an ethnic sense of national identity (coded in a way that

[5]We base this scale on the one that that Lindstam et al. (2021) used in their study of ethic and civic nationalism in Germany. We kept items such as "to have Japanese ancestors," dropped items that were less important in the Japanese context including "to have a Christian worldview" and "to have democratic convictions," and added items specifically relevant to the Japanese context, including "loving the Emperor."

[6]All questions that were part of the ethnic or civic national identity can be found in the appendix.

means that their idea of what constitutes a Japanese person is as based on inherited attributes such as ancestry and location of birth). Respondents with civic national identity were hovering closer to 5 and high ethnic identity closer to 6, meaning that while respondents, regardless of whether they had a strong sense of ethnic identity or not, did support the entry ban, respondents with a strong sense of ethnic identity supported the entry ban more strongly.

We also analyzed differences by party identification (party ID), where we compared supporters of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which is Japan's ruling party with a conservative ideology, with independents. Given that the party has dominated politics during most of the post-war period, and has found continued political support—even despite some electoral failures along the way—and continues to espouse conservative and sometimes nationalist values, supporters of the LDP may be more inclined to enforce a more restrictive entry ban. To compare LDP supporters, we contrast them with independents. This is because of the instability of the Japanese party system, which leads to the creation and disbandment of parties in relatively short spans of times, and the subsequent instability of party identification and support (Kabashima and Ishio, 1998). Because of this, many Japanese voters consider themselves independents, making this a more stable group to compare LDP supporters to (Kabashima and Steel, 2012). However, comparing these two, we did not find strong differences by party ID.

To get a better understanding of whether there were attitudinal differences in support for different types of foreigners, we also asked a second question: "If the entry ban was relaxed even during COVID, which types of foreigners should be allowed entry? From the selection below, select all that apply." The options were: spouses of Japanese citizens, spouses of foreign residents already living in Japan, exchange students, refugees, university professors and/or other teaching staff at schools, short-term business, tourists, trainees, agriculture or fishery workers, and engineers and/or managers.

Figure 4 shows the proportion of support for different types of foreign citizens by using

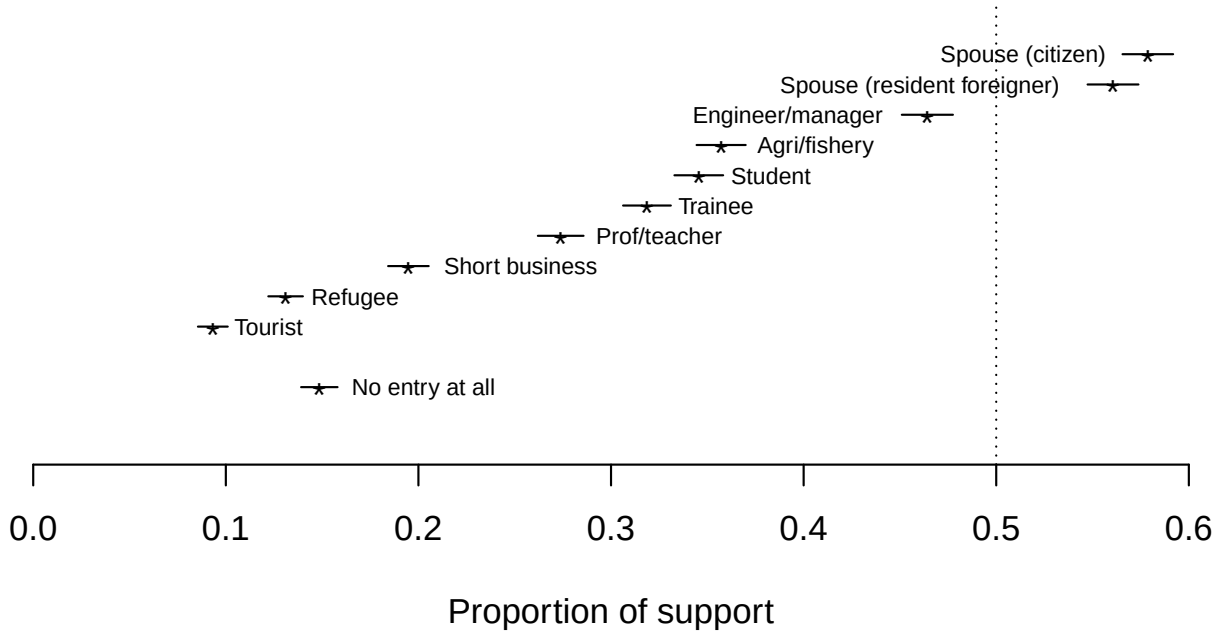

Figure 4: Support for Entry of Foreign Citizens by Entry Type.

95% confidence intervals. The support ranges from 0 (no support) to 1 (complete support). Numbers above 0.5 on the x-axis indicate majority support. As the figure shows, no entry type receives complete support. However, spouses of Japanese citizens and resident foreigners received majority support of gaining entry despite the entry ban. While skilled immigrants such as engineers or managers were relatively preferred, the majority of respondents still opposed them. The least support for entry was for tourists (0.09), closely followed by refugees (0.13).

In figure 5, we mapped how each of the types correlated with each other estimated via principal component analysis. When two points are closer, it shows that responses are correlated with each other, meaning that respondents were likely to select both types in their responses. For example, as the top left of the figure shows, spouses of citizens and resident foreigners are close together, meaning that respondents who said that spouses of citizens should be allowed entry into Japan were also highly likely to say that spouses of resident foreigners should be allowed entry. We also find that respondents who had selected short business were likely to select tourists and refugees as well. Note, as shown in figure 4 that

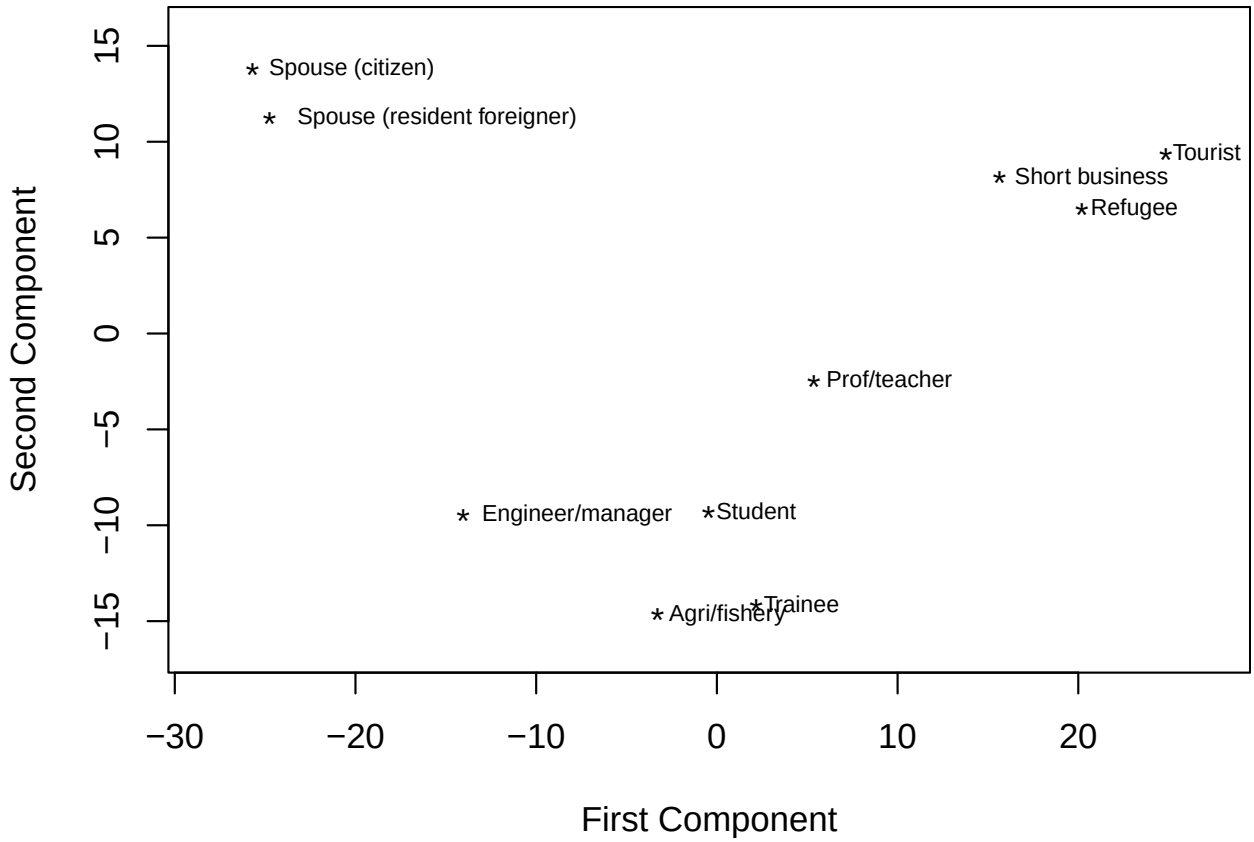

Figure 5: Principal Components of Support for Entry.

only a small share of respondents had selected those categories.

3 Discussion and Conclusion

As migration and immigration continue to rise globally and public health crises may inevitably arise again, understanding the link between the two may be an important area of further research and the lessons we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic are invaluable for this. Our poll was conducted in February of 2022, but by March, things seem to have changed quickly. On March 14, 2022, an NHK poll reported that "62% of the public was in support of relaxing the border closer at least to some degree," and March 15, 2022, two significant groups of "stakeholders in the academic, policy and the business community" released open letters critical of the closed door policy (Lipscy, 2023, 251). As of April 29, 2023, all border restrictions for international visitors to Japan were lifted and while many celebrated life

returning to pre-pandemic conditions, our findings have important implications beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, despite entry bans often being linked to xenophobic attitudes, our analysis shows that there was no connection with support for an entry ban and xenophobic attitudes. In other words, people—regardless of whether they were xenophobic or not—supported the entry ban. This shows some nuance in the relationship between restricting immigration and outright xenophobic attitudes and may hint towards more subtle xenophobic attitudes that are not captured in the survey measures we used. While xenophobic attitudes did not matter as much, our predicted responses showed that ethnic identity was somewhat associated with support for the entry ban. This may be an area that warrants further exploration.

Second, our findings suggest that even during a pandemic, some preferences for certain immigrant categories may stay the same. As Kage et al. (2022) find in their article on attitudes towards immigrants in Japan that used pre-COVID survey data, there is only relatively weak support for "high-skilled laborers" akin to what Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) find in the United States. Consistent with their findings, our data shows that manual laborers in agriculture or fisheries were preferred relatively to some other "high-skilled" groups during the pandemic – although again, it is important to note that the majority of people surveyed did in fact not support entry regardless. This shows that even in a time of crisis, some immigration attitudes may stay relatively consistent.

Third, it is interesting to note that views on allowing refugees entry so closely correlate with views on short term business travelers and tourists. We had theorized that perhaps views on refugee entrance would more closely correlate with allowing spouses entry for "humanitarian-type reasons," but the findings here show that is not the case. This may be an area worth exploring in depth in the future. Finally, support for pandemic restrictions are completely unlike other kinds of immigration restrictions. This underscores how much pandemics might upend our expectations regarding politics as usual.

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A Coefficient Estimates of the Hierarchical LASSO Regression

	Coefficient
Main Variables	
Xenophobia	0.116
Nationalism	0.272
College	-0.014
Executive	(not selected)
Regular Employment	-0.019
Party: Independent	-0.008
Party: LDP	0.011
Party: Others	(not selected)
Male	-0.079
Age 10	-0.003
Age 30	(not selected)
Age 40	(not selected)
Age 50	(not selected)
Age 60	(not selected)
Age 70	0.010
Age 80	(not selected)
Interactions Selected by hierNet	
Nationalism * Xenophobia	-0.024
Nationalism * Nationalism	0.009
Male * Nationalism	0.019
Party: LDP * Party: LDP	0.011
Age 10 * Age 10	-0.003
Age 70 * Age 70	0.010

Table A.1: Hierarchical LASSO Estimates of Coefficients in the Predictive Model for the Support for the 2021 Entry Ban in the 7-point Scale. The regularization parameter is chosen via 5-fold cross-validation, and the model is fitted with weak hierarchy. The baseline category of age groups is 20s.

B Survey Questions

Below are the survey items for the xenophobia and ethnic/civic identity battery.

B.1 Xenophobia

1. When more people from abroad come to Japan, is Japanese culture enriched? Or is undermined?
    - It is undermined
    - Somewhat undermined
    - Neither enriched nor undermined
    - Somewhat enriched
    - Enriched
    - I prefer not to answer
2. When more people from abroad come to Japan, is Japan's economic situation improved? Or is it made worse?
    - It is made worse
    - It is made somewhat worse
    - It is neither made better nor worse
    - It is made somewhat better
    - It is made better
    - I prefer not to answer
3. When more people from abroad come to Japan, is public order in Japan improved? Or is it made worse?
    - It is made worse
    - It is made somewhat worse
    - It is neither made better nor worse
    - It is made somewhat better
    - It is made better
    - I prefer not to answer
4. When more people from abroad come to Japan, are Japan's social services, such as healthcare, caregiving, and pensions, improved? Or are they made worse?
    - They are made worse
    - They are made somewhat worse
    - They are neither made better nor worse
    - They are made somewhat better
    - They are made better
    - I prefer not to answer

B.2 Ethnic and Civic Identity

The question order for the ethnic and civic identity items were randomized.

Different people have different standards for what constitutes a "Japanese person." What kinds of elements are important to you in deciding whether someone is "a Japanese person?"

	Important	Somewhat important	I can't say either way	Somewhat unimportant	Un-important	I prefer not to answer
Being born in Japan						
Having Japanese citizenship						
Having Japanese ancestors						
Having Japanese parents						
Respecting Japanese culture						
Living according to Japanese customs						
Having Japanese values						
Speaking Japanese well						
Loving the Emperor						
Contributing to Japanese society						

In addition to the rows above, we asked two more questions:

1. Do you think that a person who has gotten Japanese citizenship as an adult is just as Japanese as someone who was born with Japanese citizenship?

    - I think there is a difference
    - I think there is somewhat of a difference

- I think they are generally the same
- I think they are the same
- I prefer not to answer

2. Do you think that someone who is born as a foreign citizen in Japan but raised in the same way as the Japanese people around them is actually the same as a Japanese person?

    - I think there is a difference
    - I think there is somewhat of a difference
    - I think they are generally the same
    - I think they are the same
    - I prefer not to answer

C Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	25th	75th	Max
Female	0.50	0.50	0.00	0.00	1.00	1.00
College-educated	0.47	0.50	0.00	0.00	1.00	1.00
Executive	0.02	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Regular Employment	0.32	0.47	0.00	0.00	1.00	1.00
Age Category	4.62	1.63	1.00	3.00	6.00	8.00
Support for Entry Ban	5.34	1.41	1.00	5.00	6.00	7.00
Xenophobia (Culture)	3.13	1.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Xenophobia (Economy)	3.19	1.04	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Xenophobia (Safety)	2.25	0.91	1.00	2.00	3.00	5.00
Xenophobia (Welfare)	2.62	0.96	1.00	2.00	3.00	5.00
Japanese (Born)	2.89	1.13	1.00	2.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Citizenship)	3.59	1.10	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Ancestors)	2.76	1.14	1.00	2.00	3.00	5.00
Japanese (Parents)	2.89	1.16	1.00	2.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Culture)	3.63	1.03	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Customs)	3.60	1.02	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Values)	3.37	1.07	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Language)	3.49	1.06	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Emperor)	2.70	1.16	1.00	2.00	3.00	5.00
Japanese (Contribution)	3.49	1.02	1.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Japanese (Naturalization)	2.69	0.86	1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00
Japanese (Birthright)	2.91	0.84	1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00

Table C.1: Descriptive Statistics of Survey Reponses. The mean, standard deviation, minimum, first and third quartiles, and maximum of each variable are shown as each row.