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Civic Literacy and ¹the Rise ⁴of Anti-Immigration Rhetoric in Japan

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Introduction: In July 2025, Japan reached a turning point when the Liberal Democratic Party lost its Upper House majority for the first time in 70 years. In its place, the right-wing populist Sanseito won 14 seats, becoming the third largest opposition force [1][6]. Its slogan, “Japanese First,” reflects global nationalist trends, with policies calling for stricter immigration controls, tougher citizenship exams, and reduced welfare access for foreigners. Despite only 3.36% of foreign households receiving welfare in Japan, Sanseito’s campaign speeches spread narratives that vilify immigrants [1]. Compared to the US (14.3% foreign-born) and UK (16%) [2][3], Japan’s foreign population is small, raising the question of why anti-immigration rhetoric resonates. This study examines whether limited civic literacy, knowledge of institutions, rights, and political information, explains public susceptibility to xenophobic discourse.

Research Aim

This research aims to build a quantifiable relationship between the rise of anti-foreigner rhetoric in Japan and the breadth of civic literacy in Japanese education curricula. These three research questions will investigate the relationship between civic literacy at school on reducing xenophobic attitudes.

Research Questions

1. Do students classified as low, moderate, or high civic literacy show differing attitudes toward foreigners in Japan?
2. Which component of civic literacy, addressed through quantity, instructional style, scope of content, and student assessments, showed the strongest association with low levels of xenophobia?

Final: How consistently is civic literacy integrated and emphasized across different Japanese schools, and how does this variation relate to students’ views toward foreigners?

Literature Review

Global Trend of Anti-Immigration: The US, UK, Australia, Poland, Italy, and many others have seen an increasing trend of anti-migrant voices, and in return, have fostered xenophobia, racism, and both misinformation and disinformation around anti-immigration narratives. This global trend in recent years can be greatly attributed to the rise of right-wing populism in politics.

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In 2013, 360 xenophobic street demonstrations against ethnic minorities were held in Japan. With the rise of Sanseito, a right-wing populist party, they claim that the increase of foreign workers in Japan over the past few years has caused funds to prioritize welfare benefits over the wages of Japanese citizens. The 2025 election cycle showed the resurgence of xenophobic campaign rallies as 274 NGOs publicly condemned the trend during the Upper House election[1][5].

Role of Literacy in Mitigating Xenophobia, Racism, and Cultural Exclusion:“New racism” in immigration debates is characterized by subtle forms such as microaggressions and cultural exclusion rather than overt discrimination. Some researchers (e.g., Christina Hajisoteriou) link its spread to post-truth dynamics, in which public opinion and policy are influenced more by emotion or personal conviction than by verifiable evidence. In this literature, “education, especially intercultural literacy” is examined as an approach to develop students’ capacity to recognize narrative framing, propaganda techniques, and deceptive media practices[8]. Media-effects studies report associations between negative portrayals of immigrants and outcomes such as more hostile attitudes, physiological arousal (including testosterone changes), and intergroup anxiety. These findings motivate evaluations of media-literacy interventions as potential moderators of such effects. Together, intercultural literacy and media literacy are studied as mechanisms that may reduce the influence of polarizing anti-immigration narratives[4][8].

Japan’s Limitations in Civics Education: “Civics education” would be Japan’s equivalent of intercultural and media literacy in the broad scope of democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions for participation. Research shows that higher levels of education in Japan are correlated with lower prejudice and more tolerant attitudes, suggesting that schooling can help reduce xenophobia[6]. Japanese schools work to strengthen “citizenship education” (主権者教育) since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 2016. Meiji University states that Japan lags behind developed nations in civic education due to apprehension about handling real politics in class and fears about classroom neutrality. Germany integrates the Beutelbach Consensus (1976) design that (1) forbids indoctrination, (2) requires teaching controversies as controversies, and (3) builds participation skills. Japanese civics class is narrower and more cautious, limiting evidence-based discussion and civic action in class[7]. Although MEXT mandated civics in high schools, its implementation remains uneven. In a 2022 nationwide survey of 1,306 high schools, only 67.7% reported delivering civics education for first-year students . In principle, civics is meant to help students independently evaluate information, form their own judgments, and participate actively in society. In practice, lessons were often narrowed to skills aimed at raising short-term voter turnout. The limits of this approach were visible when turnout among 18-year-olds reached 51% in the 2016 House of Councillors election, but fell to 33% just one year later after students graduated from high school. This study will aim to identify a structured correlation between civic literacy and attitudes towards foreigners in Japan[4][7] .

Research Gap:There is extensive research on the correlation between civic literacy and the reduction of aggressive attitudes towards ethnic minorities and intergroup mentality, but

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Japanese research papers have not directly compared the effectiveness of civics education and its limitations with anti-foreigner rhetoric. Articles speak on the effect of media, propaganda, and emotionally charged political campaigns on individuals with limited civic understanding, and the need to increase political awareness. Nevertheless, most overlook the deeper issue of how Japanese civics education, in both design and practice, shapes civic literacy outcomes. This gap becomes more apparent when considering the inconsistency of civic engagement within Japanese schools. To identify the fundamental weaknesses in the Japanese education curricula, a comprehensive classification system is required to structurally examine the association between civic literacy and hostile attitudes towards foreigners in Japan.

Research Significance: While global research shows civic literacy (eg. media, intercultural) is linked to reduced prejudice and tolerance, few Japanese studies directly connect civics education with attitudes toward foreigners. Classifying civics education into quantity, instructional style, scope of content, and student assessments will provide a structured way to measure variation in civic literacy outcomes. With the rapid rise of anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobia in Japan, and as parties such as Sanseito normalize exclusionary discourse, the shortcomings of the education system have become increasingly visible. This study provides a basis for reevaluating the role of civics education and clarifying whether and how different dimensions of civic literacy correspond with lower acceptance of exclusion and xenophobia. At its core, it aims to advance Japanese schools and its curricula.

Methodology

This research will conduct short online questionnaires and 12 students will be invited for short interviews. To quantify the varying elements of civic literacy that may shape xenophobic attitudes, this study will construct a Civic Literacy Index. The Civic Literacy Index will be built from the four components: time (civics/inquiry hours), instructional style (discussion/debate/simulations vs lecture), content scope (local/global institutions, minorities and diversity, media literacy, SDGs, global issues), and self-assessments (student confidence level on government structure and ability to critically evaluate political information). The CLI score will be compared with xenophobia score derived from a Likert scale.

Independent Variable- With the Civic Literacy Index, a cross-sectional, school based survey of upper-secondary students in Japan will be conducted. This research will aim to target multiple high schools (different programs if possible). With the cooperation of 6 schools and sample size target of $n=300$, a class cluster convenience sampling with quotas by grade and gender will be employed to balance grade and gender.

1. Time (Quantity)

Students will self-report the number of classroom hours per term allocated towards civics/civics related activities. The options would be (0,1-2,3-5,6-9,10+ hours) and rescaled to 0-4.

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2. Content Scope (Breadth)

A checklist will ask if their civics class covers, Japanese elections and institutions, citizenship rights (including immigrants), minority and diversity issues, media literacy, global issues, etc. Will be rescaled to 0-4.

3. Instructional Style (Quality)

Students will rate how often their classes involve discussion, debate, simulations (e.g. Mock UN) or project-based activities compared with passive lecture style lessons. Each is scored based on a 1-5 Likert scale (Never to Always). Will be rescaled to 0-4.

4. Self Assessment

Students will rate agreement with statements such as:

"I understand how government policies are made."

"I can explain key civic rights and responsibilities."

"I know how to evaluate political information from multiple sources."

Responses will use a 1-5 Likert scale. Their average will be rescaled to 0-4.

The 4 components will be standardized on a 0-4 scale, and its average will determine the Civic Literacy Index score. (e.g. (time (2) + style (2) + scope (2.4) + confidence (3)) / 4 = 0.59 = 59/100 - CIL score)

Dependent Variable- This will be the student's attitudes towards foreigners, in other words, the degree of prejudiced, xenophobic, or exclusionary attitudes. It will be recorded on a Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree), for the statements below:

"Immigrants do not improve Japanese society."

"Foreign residents threaten Japanese culture and traditions."

"Public services are unfairly prioritizing Japanese citizens over immigrants."

"I would be uncomfortable working in a group with immigrants."

The average score of all Likert scales will be each student's xenophobia index. The reliability will be tested with Cronbach's α (target ≥ 0.7) to see if all items are consistent with each other.

Qualitative Layer

Conduct short structured interviews (10-15min) with 12 students selected from different CLIs. Interview prompts will be comprised of open-ended questions on how a student views the rise of immigration in Japan and whether their civics class influenced their answer. Their responses will be mapped against students' Civic Literacy Index scores to show how perspectives shift with different civics experiences. The qualitative layer also enable the cross-check consistency between Civic Literacy Index scores and xenophobia index (dependent variable) as opposed to CIL and the interview responses. It ensures that findings are both systematic and grounded in students' own words.

Data Analysis: Quantitative analysis will use the Civic Literacy Index (0-100) as the independent variable and the xenophobia index (mean of Likert items, 1-5) as the dependent variable. Descriptive statistics

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(means, medians, SDs, Cronbach's α) will be reported. Inferential statistics will include ANOVA to compare xenophobia scores across civic literacy tiers, correlation tests to assess associations, and subgroup comparisons to check consistency across schools/programs. Qualitative interview responses will be aligned with CLI tiers to contextualize quantitative findings.

Scientific Experiment and Representation

Quantitative Data

Independent variable: Civic Literacy Index (0–100)

Dependent variable: Xenophobia Index (mean of Likert items, 1–5)

Control variables: grade, gender, language background, time abroad, cross-group contact, and news/media exposure

Representation:

- Bar charts showing xenophobia scores across civic literacy tiers
- Scatter plots of CLI vs. xenophobia
- Tables summarizing average scores by school/program

Descriptive Statistics

- Means, medians, and standard deviations for CLI and xenophobia indices
- Reliability checks with Cronbach's α for the xenophobia scale

Inferential Statistics

- ANOVA
- Correlation/association tests
- Subgroup comparisons (Check whether associations are consistent across different schools/programs)

Qualitative Data

- Open-ended interview responses
- Organized into categories (e.g., foreigners as a threat, enrichment, or irrelevant to civics) will be mapped against students' CLI scores to see how civic literacy shapes student beliefs

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Limitations

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and convenience sampling.

Timeline

Weeks 1–2: Develop and pilot the survey (10 students), refine wording, and confirm school permissions.

Weeks 3–4: Administer survey in 6 schools; collect n=300 responses.

Week 5: Clean and code data, compute CLI and xenophobia indices, and reliability checks.

Weeks 6–7: Run descriptive stats, ANOVA, and correlation analyses.

Week 8: Conduct 12 interviews, transcribe, and categorize responses.

Week 9: Integrate quantitative and qualitative findings (compare narratives with CLI tiers).

Week 10: Finalize write-up: prepare tables, figures, and summary visuals.

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