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 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 into Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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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.

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.

What did the Japanese public think about this border closure? In this paper, we answer this question in two ways. First, we look at the question of what the Japanese public thought overall. In this section, we also consider whether and how factors such as partisanship, gender, age, education, income, and ideology are associated with attitudes towards these border closures. Second, we look at the particular groups that the Japanese public was most and least concerned with when thinking about these restrictions.

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, Grossman and Zonszein 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, Grossman and Zonszein, 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 (as were publics all over

the world). 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., Forthcoming, 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 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, Rosenbluth and Tanaka, 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?

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,

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

[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).

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., a survey vendor in Japan. We employed quota sampling by age, gender, and prefectures to match the most recent national census distribution.

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."

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.[3] 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

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[3]To compute the predicted responses, we fit a hierarchical LASSO regression model (Bien, Taylor and Tibshirani, 2013). The tuning parameter is selected by 5-fold cross validation. The estimated coefficients are shown in Table 2.
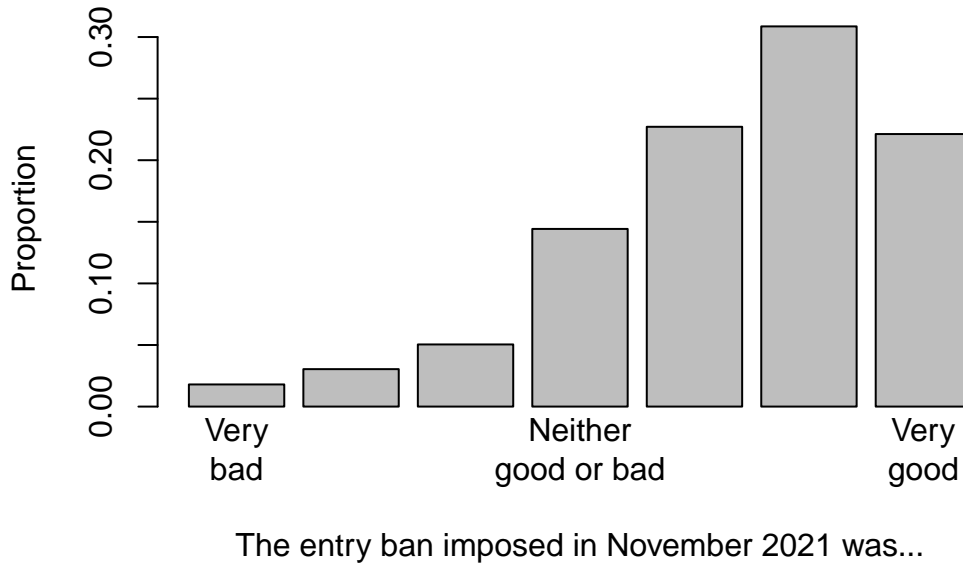
Figure 1: Distribution of Support for the Entry Ban Imposed in November 2021, Measured in February 2022.

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 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 ID. For the questions measuring xenophobia, we asked about people's attitudes on the potential impact foreigners or people from abroad would have on Japan. For example, one question was "When more people from abroad come to Japan, is Japan's economic situation improved? Or is it made worse?" All xenophobia question items were measured on a 5-point ordinal scale ranging from (depending on the wording of the question) "It is made worse" to "It is made better" with some more nuanced options in-between. In total, the xenophobia battery asked four questions.[4] The predicted responses were divided between "low xenophobia" meaning respondents who

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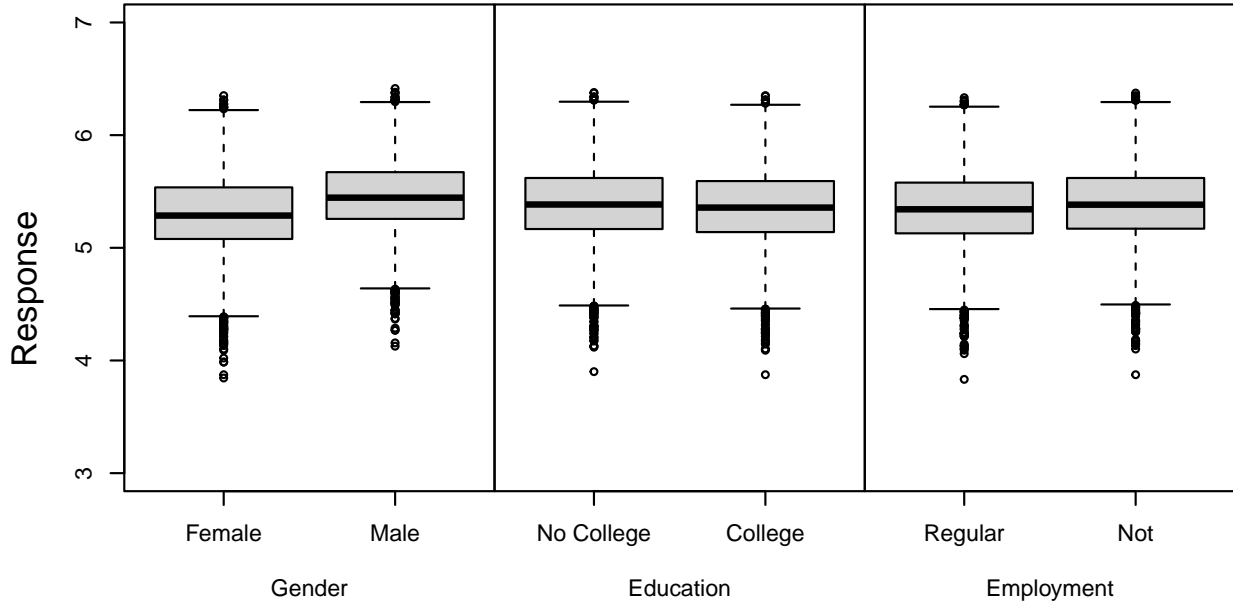[4]All questions included in the xenophobia battery can be found in the appendix.

Figure 2: Predicted Response by Demographic Variables.

did not feel as though foreigners would make Japan worse, and "high xenophobia" being for respondents who indicated that they thought more foreigners would worsen things. 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 person. The answer options, depending on the question, were either 4-point or 5-point scales indicating agreement or evaluation of importance or not.[5] For example, one item for the

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[5]All questions that were part of the ethnic or civic national identity can be found in the appendix.
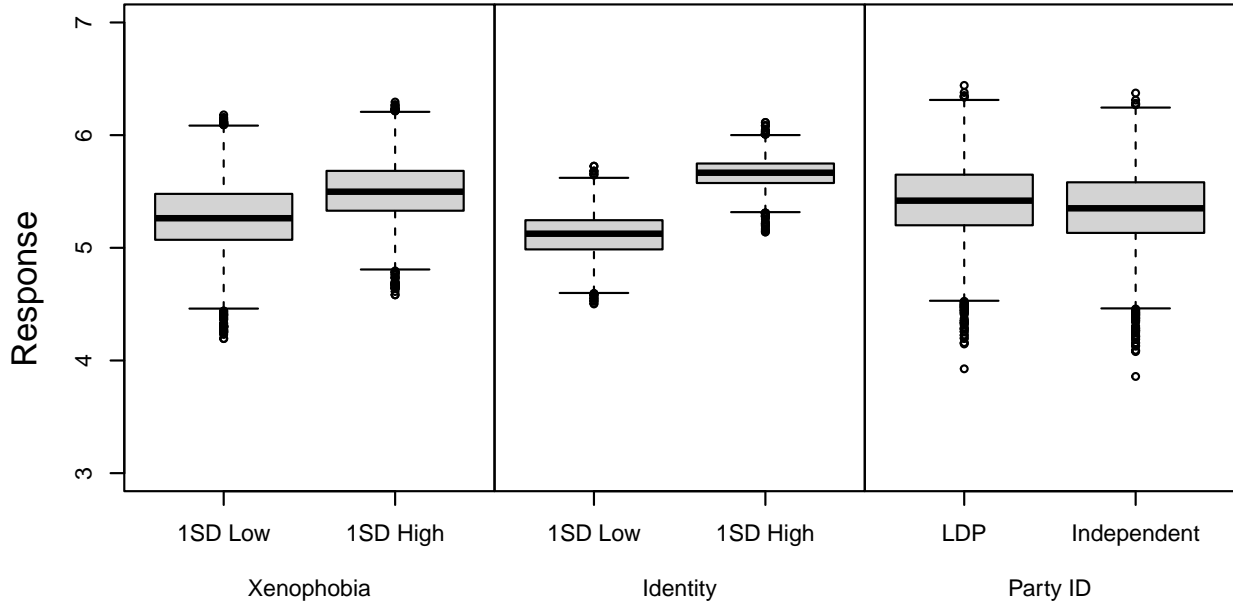
Figure 3: Predicted Response by Attitude Variables.

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." Interestingly, for this item, support for the entry ban varied in a more pronounced way depending on whether respondents had what we call civic identity (coded in a way that means that their idea of what constitutes a Japanese person is not very restrictive to a specific type of Japanese person) or ethnic identity (meaning that they were more restrictive such as believing a Japanese person must have Japanese ancestors, live according to Japanese customs, etc.). 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. Party ID, where we compared LDP supporters with independents did not result in strong differences.

To get a better understanding of whether there were attitudinal differences in support for
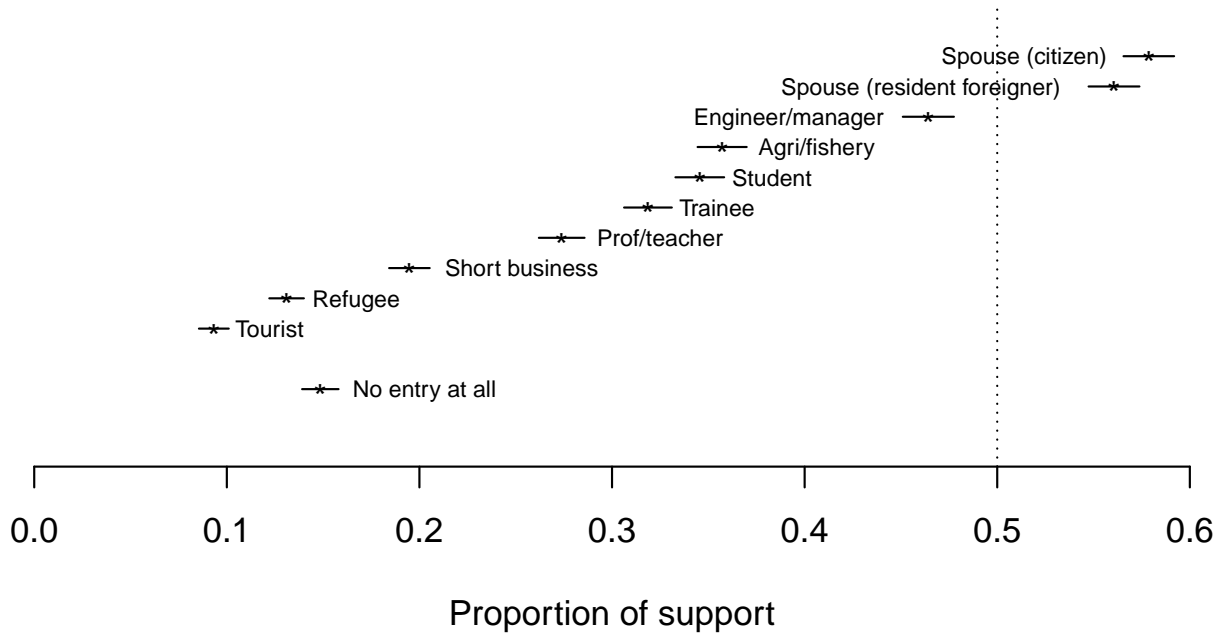
Figure 4: Support for Entry of Foreign Citizens by Entry Type.

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 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).
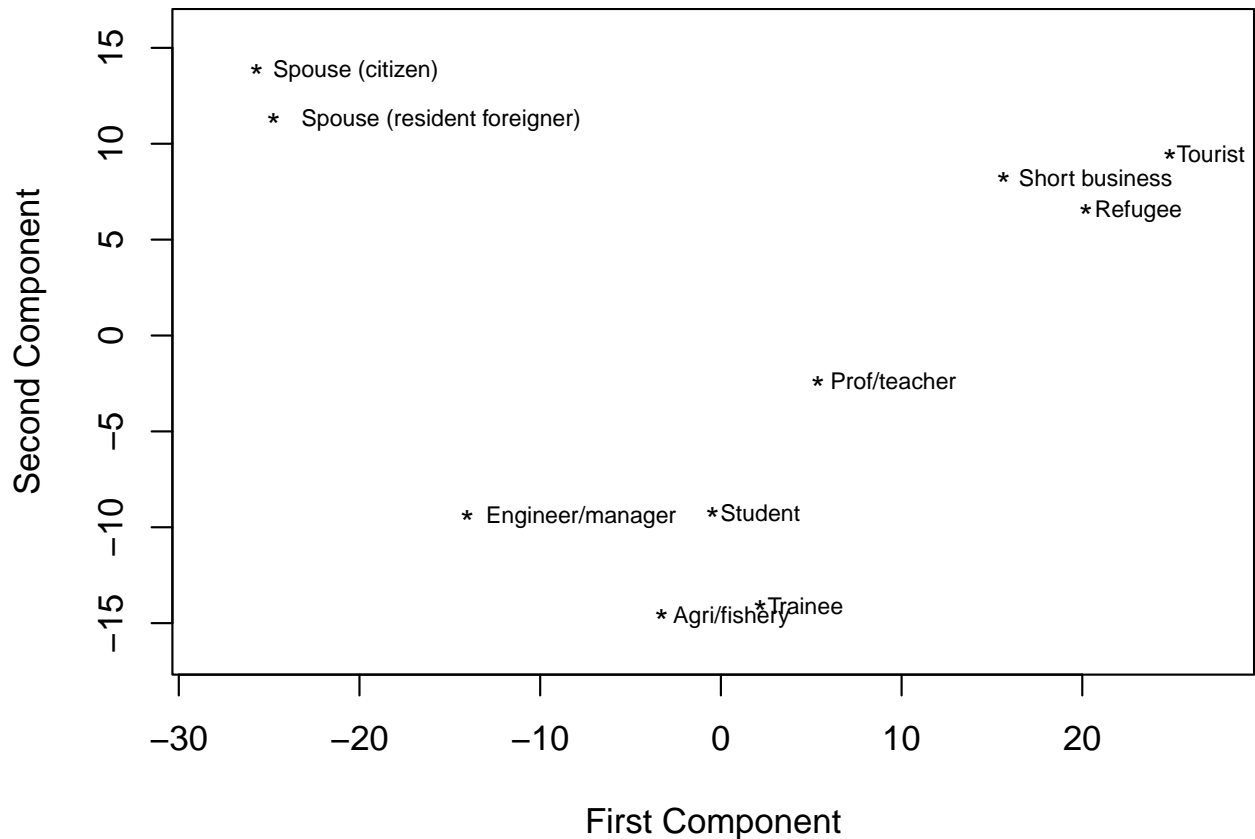
Figure 5: Principal Components of Support for Entry.

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 only a small share of respondents had selected those categories.

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3 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 during pandemics, the general preference of publics for "high skilled" over "low skilled" foreign laborers (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015) might weaken or even disappear. During the COVID-19 pandemic the Japanese public seems to have preferred agriculture and fisheries workers as well as trainees and technical interns to workers in occupations conventionally defined as "high skilled" such as professors and short-

term business travelers (although "high skilled" engineers and managers were the third most popular category, behind spouses of foreigners and spouses of permanent residents).

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 Appendix

A.1 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 2: 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.

A.2 Survey Questions

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

A.2.1 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

A.2.2 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