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Analysis

Have Japanese Voters Begun to Care about Migration?

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Abstract

In recent elections across major destination countries in the developed world, migration has become a major issue of political salience. Japan has traditionally been an outlier to the trend, but migration did become a major topic driving public opinion in the 2025 Upper House election. This article explores the overall political salience of migration in Japan, focusing primarily on how the ruling coalition managed public discourse as it pushed through major reforms over the past decade, why it lost control of the narrative in the recent election, and what this means for the politics of migration in Japan going forward.

Keywords: Japanese Politics; Migration Policy; Political Discourse; Foreigners in Japan; Politics of Migration

In a recent book, noted migration scholar Hein de Haas calls migration the "most divisive issue in politics" (Haas 2023). However one feels about the issue, the political salience of migration—especially in the world's major destination countries—is undisputed, and major recent elections have underscored this. For instance, in the lead up to the November 2024 U.S. presidential election, YouGov found that the share of Americans ranking immigration as the single most important issue facing the country reached a record-high 14.6%, up from just 2.1% in 2012 (AS/COA 2024). In the lead-up to Germany's election in February 2025, one ARD-commissioned poll asked German voters what their single most important issue in the upcoming election was, and migration took the top spot, with a plurality of 37% (Riesewieck 2025). Countless other polls from recent elections across the developed world that show a similar trend could be listed.

For a long time, Japan seemed like an exception to this overall trend. Across consecutive elections in recent years, arguably the only thing noteworthy relating to migration to analyze was its absence from both the political and public consciousness. The general election held in October 2024, following current Prime Minister Ishiba's election as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president a month earlier, was one example of this. Similar to the polls cited above, major outlets such as the public broadcaster NHK or the major daily Yomiuri Shimbun also asked Japanese voters what their most important issue was going into the election (NHK 2024; Yomiuri Shimbun 2024). In a stark contrast, however, these pollsters did not even list any topic related to migration as one of the choices it presented to those it polled. Similarly, the issue was not even mentioned once at the party leader's debate held at the National Press Club, despite the event being extended to a record time of 80 minutes.[1]

However, the recent Upper House election of July 2025 has seemingly changed this narrative, bringing migration to the forefront of political debate in Japan. Issues related to foreigners, including related to real estate acquisition, traffic accidents, and more general concerns about crime and public order, were omnipresent throughout the campaign. The center-right Democratic Party for the People (DPP) and far-right populist Sanseitō both campaigned on and ultimately benefited from a more hawkish stance toward foreigners, gaining 13 and 14 seats, respectively. The rise of Sanseitō especially, who only held a single seat in the Upper House prior to the election, was widely reported on due to its parallels with similar populist outfits across North America and Europe. Throughout the campaign, pollsters also began including questions related to migration, with NHK finding 79% overall support for "stronger administrative measures against foreigners" (NHK 2025).

This article takes a look at migration as an issue of political salience in Japan. Quite simply, this article aims to answer two related questions: Why did Japanese voters not care about migration prior to the 2025 Upper House election, and what factors led to the recent increase in the issue's political salience?

To begin, let us look at the overall trendlines and recent policy changes that can begin to answer both of these

[1] On the basis of a review of the transcript of the debate posted by the National Press Club on YouTube. The author searched the transcript for relevant terms such as *gaikokujin rōdōsha* (foreign worker), *imin* (immigrant), or *hitode busoku* (shortage of manpower), finding no mention. Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thejRIsTQyU.

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questions. First, the traditional view of Japan is that it is a "negative" case of migration (Bartram 2000), a homogenous country that simply does not accept immigrants at the same level as comparable countries in North America and Europe. This also helps to explain why migration has not been as politically relevant in Japan. While the overall share of the foreign-born population is still lower than in peer countries, such a view is nevertheless outdated. As of June 2024, close to 3.6 million foreigners live in Japan (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice 2024). This is a record number, up almost 600,000 since the end of 2022, and follows a fairly consistent increase in the number of foreign residents over the course of the last four decades. Indeed, within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Japan has consistently been one of the top 10 countries in terms of net migration for many years now (OECD 2022).

The increase in the foreign population, and especially foreign workers, is especially important considering the structural demographic issues Japan faces. Famously the oldest country in the world, Japan faces *shōshi kōreika,*[2] a term that refers to the dual problem of a decreasing birth rate and an aging population. This structurally decreases the working-age population in the country, and foreign workers are increasingly being called on to fill labor shortages. In fact, recent analysis by JICA suggests that to meet the government's GDP growth objectives, Japan would need about 6.9 million foreign workers by 2040, which would represent an increase of 236% when compared with 2023 (JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development 2024).

On a policymaking level, there does seem to be acute awareness of the role that foreign workers will have to play in alleviating the worst effects of demographic change. In 2019, the late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe implemented a set of reforms that set up the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system, which aims to recruit lower- to medium-skilled foreign workers in 12 sectors (since expanded to 16) of the economy specifically identified as having the most severe labor shortages. At the time, migration did briefly feature in the national consciousness, at least when measured by the record levels of media coverage the issue received (Chiavacci 2025).

Since then, the government has arguably doubled down on these policies (Rehm 2024a). In 2024, policymakers more than doubled recruitment targets for the SSW program to 820,000 by 2029, while access to permanent residency through the program was expanded a year earlier. In other areas, Japan has increased targets for international student recruitment—many of whom work part-time during their studies—and unveiled a plan to reform the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), the primary way the country has recruited lower skilled workers. Again, this is in contrast with the more restrictive policies being implemented in many developed countries, which some academics have described as "illiberal convergence" (Thiollet 2022).

[2] In this article, Japanese words are Romanized using the modified Hepburn style, except for significant person and place names. All translations were done by the author.

Japan has thus experienced an increase in the overall foreign population driven by the structural necessity of admitting even more foreign workers, with the government enacting numerous recent reforms that aim to facilitate just that. Given the trends observed in other major Western destination countries, perhaps it was just a matter of time before a nativist backlash against the country's expansionist migration policies occurred. Before putting that hypothesis to the test by taking a more detailed look at what happened in the recent election, this article will outline what could be argued to be the primary reason why migration *was not* a politically salient issue in the past: elite-managed political discourse.

After gaining power in 2012, the governing LDP–Komeito coalition has framed the conversation on migration in a very distinct manner, avoiding prolonged national conversations on the issue, and when forced to comment, downplaying any politically sensitive aspects to their reforms. This approach was most evident during the policymaking process that eventually led to the 2019 implementation of the SSW system through an amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (ICRRA). During this time, the government used its large majorities in both houses of the National Diet to push the amendment through with extreme haste. Announced in early 2018, the bill was first presented to the House of Representatives on November 2 of that year and passed a little more than a month later on December 12, ultimately going into effect on April 1, 2019. This expedited timetable effectively reduced the space for debate—both within the legislature and beyond it.

Furthermore, the government, and especially the LDP, was extremely careful in how it framed the law. Since 2012, the Abe administration almost exclusively used economic terms to describe any migration reforms, placing such changes within Abe's broader framework for economic revitalization ("Abenomics"). They even adopted the neologism *gaikoku jinzai* (foreign human resources) as the primary way to describe the admittance of foreign workers, most likely in an attempt to further obfuscate any fundamental discussion about the potential long-term settlement of the migrants the government was admitting (Roberts 2018). Abe himself consistently stayed on message, oftentimes repeating that "Japan is not adopting a so-called immigration policy" in debates on the topic (National Diet Library 2018). This is a long-held trope among Japanese policymakers in successive governments, who have maintained the discursive denial of immigration policy throughout the post-war period.

The government has been able to control the conversation on migration in this manner for two primary reasons. First, political power has overall become more concentrated in the executive branch following former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's administrative reforms in 2001 and Abe's own decision to increase political control over civil appointments in 2014 (Rehm 2024b). This has effectively decreased the influence of more traditionally hawkish bureaucratic actors on immigration, such as the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) (Wakisaka 2023). This concentration of power, in combination with the political capital

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gained from winning five straight elections, allowed the Abe administration to assert strong agenda-making powers, ultimately allowing for the 2019 amendment to be passed with the haste that it was.

Second, Abe's own political standing allowed him to effectively quell any potential opposition before it could even form. Abe led the powerful conservative-nationalist *Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūka* faction within the LDP (disbanded in January 2024), arguably the exact political force that would be opposed to expanding the admittance of foreigners. Through the framing of migration in economic terms and downplaying concerns about long-term settlement, he thus achieved a political balancing act between placating the interests of business organizations that needed more workers and his own nationalist base (Song 2020). Post-coronavirus disease (COVID), these trends broadly continued. The reforms described above, largely enacted by the Kishida administration, were undertaken through a combination of cabinet-level initiatives and bureaucratic finetuning, further underscoring the increased power of the political executive and limiting debate in the legislature.

Beyond the governing coalition, opposition parties have been generally divided and comparatively weak. During the limited debates on the 2019 amendment, the opposition did urge the governing coalition to be more honest about the reform, attempting to move the conversation toward issues such as workers' rights, long-term settlement, and integration (Omoya 2020). However, on a more fundamental level, there was cross-party consensus on Japan's demographic challenges and the need to admit more foreign workers, which means that opposition pushback was limited to the details of the reform and the manner in which it was pushed through. Outside of a few backbenchers within the LDP, which Abe effectively managed, there was no powerful reactionary anti-immigration political movement—at least up until the 2025 Upper House election, held on July 20.

The Upper House election has exposed some cracks to this elite-managed political discourse, primarily due to the weakening of the LDP. After successive scandal-ridden years, mainly related to the party's ties to the Unification Church and a slush-fund scandal, the LDP-led governing coalition lost its majority in both houses of the National Diet after weak showings in successive elections. Furthermore, given the concentration of politicians involved in the scandals among the LDP's right-wing—including Abe's former faction—the party responded by electing two moderates, Kishida and Ishiba, in a row to lead it and thus the country. Overall, the relative weakness of the LDP and its shift toward the center gave political space for more right-wing parties to take advantage, which was on full display in the recent election. The election of the more conservative Sanae Takaichi as the LDP's leader and first female prime minister in October 2025 can thus be partly explained as a response to this growing right wing pressure.

As outlined in the introduction, the primary benefactors were the DPP and Sanseitō, who both managed to increase their seat tally substantially in the Upper House. While the DPP brands itself as "reformist centrist," it notably inched rightward during the campaign, including on issues related to foreigners. As part of their manifesto, they pledged to enact a new law restricting foreigners' ability to purchase real estate for investment purposes, while promising the "effective management" of foreigners' access to social security. In the lead-up to the election, DPP leader Tamaki Yuichiro stressed that "it is only natural that taxes should be used for one's own citizens first" (Tokyo Shimbun 2025). Sanseitō was far more explicit in their positioning on the issue. Running under the slogan "Japanese First," the party called for a stop of Japan's "de facto immigration policy," limiting foreign residents to a maximum of 5% in each municipality, in addition to a slew of other hardline measures (Sanseitō 2025).

It is clear that the 2025 Upper House election was an inflection point, showcasing the potential political salience of migration in Japan. At the same time, it could be argued that the recent election should nevertheless not be overstated: it would be shortsighted to declare that the issue has now reached a similar level of political relevance as in North America and Europe. To make this point, this article will now focus on some of the actual policy issues related to foreigners that drove political sentiment in the run-up to the recent election, and how they relate to other drivers of sentiment, including the aforementioned elite-managed political discourse, public opinion, and visibility.

In the NHK poll cited at the outset, 79% of respondents called for "stronger administrative measures against foreigners." This already provides a clue at the topics that drove public opinion. Unlike in other major destination countries, concerns over asylum or general levels of migration were not a major factor of political salience. Rather, very specific—and oftentimes widely reported—issues related to certain aspects of Japan's bureaucratic apparatus in relation to foreigners took the center stage.

For instance, Japan does not have a residency requirement for foreigners purchasing real estate in the country. Recently, this has led to reports of widespread foreign investment in major cities, sparking fears that this will increase housing costs. In Tokyo, foreign investment rose 18% year-on-year in 2024, followed by a further 45% increase in the first half of 2025 (Matsuno 2025). One particularly explosive story focused on a Chinese landlord that hiked rents in an attempt to evict local residents to increase available units for tourist accommodation (Takashima 2025). A loophole that allowed non-residents access to Japanese driver's licenses garnered similar media attention (Takahara 2025), as did constant reporting on perceived issues related to public order in relation to Japan's tiny Kurdish community, who represent just 0.1% of the overall foreign population (Rehm 2025). All of these issues are comparatively minor and can be easily addressed through public policy reforms. The National Police Agency has already unveiled new measures to curb the driver's license loophole, which went into effect in September.

Sanseitō parlayed such stories into a broader narrative that foreigners were receiving "preferential treatment," alleging widespread abuse of Japan's healthcare and social security systems in addition to linking foreigners to public disorder and crime. The fact that they were electorally

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successful in doing so relates to what I would argue is the overall soft overall public opinion on migration, i.e., that many Japanese simply do not have strong, fully formed opinions on the issue. This makes sense, considering both the historically low levels of migration and the consistent downplaying of migration as an issue by the ruling coalition and political elite. There is scholarship to support this hypothesis: one study found that while overall support for increasing immigration (long-term settlement) is low, "treating" survey participants with information regarding the potential benefits dramatically increased support (Facchini, Margalit, and Nakata 2022). Following their argument, in this election Japanese voters were "treated" to almost consistently negative narratives about foreigners and responded in kind.

The second dynamic relates to the visibility of migrants. Migrant visibility refers to the degree that foreign residents are acknowledged in the host society, both in a literal (i.e., whether their physical presence is felt) and more abstract (i.e., whether they are culturally, socially, and legally integrated) sense (Battistella 2017). High degrees of migrant visibility (or invisibility) can have both positive and negative consequences on the overall political salience of migration depending on specific factors. For instance, high visibility due to cultural or religious differences can result in negative attitudes toward migrants, such as in the case of Muslim asylum seekers in Europe (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016).

In Japan, there is an argument to be made that migrants in Japan have been comparatively less visible, for numerous reasons. First, as mentioned above, there is a comparatively low percentage of foreign-born residents overall, standing at about 3% of the total population. Second, the overwhelming majority of foreigners living in Japan come from nearby Asian countries, with the two traditional origin countries being China and (South) Korea. However, the recent diversification of origin stories to include South and Southeast Asia, in addition to the country's record-breaking tourism boom, has increased visibility—especially in comparison with the preceding pandemic era, where Japan imposed strict border restrictions on both new foreign residents and tourists (Rehm 2023). There are quite simply many more foreigners present in Japan's major cities. Furthermore, there is also a potential dynamic at play in which bad behavior by a small subset of tourists drives negative sentiment towards all foreigners. Overall, how increased visibility of foreigners affects public opinion in Japan is a trend worth monitoring moving forward.

At least in the recent election, the above factors have led the ruling coalition to lose control over the political narrative on migration. Komeito had a relatively muted response, only outlining related policies relatively late in the campaign. The LDP responded with an attempt to "squeeze the right," outlining a set of policy proposals aimed at combating fraudulent residency, illegal work, and improper access to Japan's social programs, in addition to more oversight on foreigners buying property. These broadly mirrored the other right-wing parties' proposals and were presented under the hawkish slogan "Aiming for Zero Illegal Foreign Residents."

In a way, the LDP's focus on these "administrative measures" served to avoid a more fundamental conversation on the government's pro-active migration policies. However, similar to recent elections in Europe, simply reacting to right-wing pressure on the issue was not electorally successful. Rather, there is an argument to be made for a more proactive communication strategy. Foreigners in Japan access welfare at roughly the same rate as the native-born population (Mainichi Shimbun 2025), and account for a comparatively lower burden of public health insurance claims in relation to their population (Kotekawa 2025). Furthermore, crimes committed by foreigners have dropped from a peak of 43,622 recorded criminal offenses in 2005 to 15,541 in 2023 (Ministry of Justice 2024), impressive considering the foreign population roughly doubled during this time. The coalition could have highlighted such data to underscore that any issues related to the administrative state and foreigners are isolated and thus overstated, while highlighting the benefits foreign workers bring to alleviating labor shortages and supporting social systems.

Still, the elite consensus with regards to migration holds. Aside from Sanseitō, all other politically relevant parties and elite actors broadly support the government's recent migration policies and the role of foreigners within Japan's economy and society. The Upper House election is also traditionally seen as a protest election, and dissatisfaction with the LDP specifically was not due to their stance on migration but other issues. To ensure that anti-foreign sentiment does not become a permanent dynamic in Japan's politics, it is nevertheless important for the ruling coalition and other mainstream parties to learn the right lessons from this election.

If they do, the overall status quo on migration is set to continue. While it could be argued that the government should initiative a more honest national conversation, including all relevant stakeholders and especially the Japanese public, the political dynamics of the recent election make this even more unlikely to happen in the short- to medium term. Such a conversation could address the numerous open questions on protections for lower-skilled workers, the potential adoption of a national integration policy, and the many other issues related to potential long-term settlement of more foreigners. Most importantly, it could build both consensus and understanding for the overall direction Japan is taking on migration, and its relationship to the increasing numbers of foreigners the country is welcoming.

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