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The Fiscal Politics of Immigration: Expert Information and Concerns over Fiscal Drain

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ABSTRACT



Recent studies find that fiscal concerns strongly condition public attitudes toward immigration. To what extent do expert cues affect these worries? Original survey experiments in Japan reveal that citizens are more easily swayed by experts warning against negative fiscal effects of immigration than they are by suggestions of possible positive economic or cultural impacts. This strong responsiveness to negative information is shared across the population, including the more educated who may be pro-immigrant, richer respondents who are less likely to depend on the government for their livelihoods, and younger respondents who may worry less about possible cuts in benefits. A follow-up survey four years after the initial survey confirms the reliability of our findings and also suggests some macro-level variables that condition how expert cues work.

KEYWORDS

Immigration; expert information; social spending; survey experiments; Japan

Introduction

Nonpartisan policy experts shape public debates over policy issues through various media. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman writes editorials for the *New York Times* and has 4.6 million followers on Twitter alone. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, medical doctors have become fixtures on television news shows around the world, offering their views not only about how individuals can protect themselves from the virus, but also about the utility of lockdowns and other public policy measures. Shigeru Omi, an infectious disease specialist and top Japanese medical advisor for COVID-19, recently

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Frances M. Rosenbluth sadly passed away in November 2021, shortly after submitting the second revision of this paper to Political Communication. The paper went through one more round of revisions after that. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the European Political Science Association and the 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC. We thank Jacques Hymans, Roland Kappe, Yuko Kasuya, Hiroto Katsumata, Taeku Lee, Sijeong Lim, Kenneth McElwain, Hirofumi Miwa, Hugh Patrick, Katharina Pfaff, Alex Quiroz Flores, Tara Slough, Michael Thies, Miki Toyofuku, Michio Umeda, audiences at the Annual Meetings of the 2017 European Political Science Association and the 2019 American Political Science Association, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Naosuke Mukoyama and Keita Ando provided excellent research assistance. We also thank the Mitsubishi Foundation, the Murata Science Foundation, and the Nomura Foundation for generous support of this project. The human subject protocol of the research was evaluated and approved by the Institutional Review Board, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo (Research Project 444, approved January 21, 2016; Project 699-2, approved August 4, 2020), and the research was conducted following the approval. Replication materials for this paper are posted on Harvard Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/6QMPMZ>. The authors are listed in alphabetical order.

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started an Instagram account that quickly accumulated over 700,000 followers. Experts are also often present in public debates over immigration, one of the most contentious political issue in the developed world. Given the high profile that experts take in immigration debates, it is important to assess the impact of nonpartisan expert cues on public opinion.

This study draws on original survey experiments in Japan to probe whether, and to what extent, expert information about the possible fiscal impact of immigration shifts citizens' attitudes toward immigration. The idea that immigrants will drain the state coffers has become a strong driver of anti-immigrant sentiment (Dustmann & Preston, 2006; Facchini & Mayda, 2009; Gerber et al., 2017), although economists disagree about whether this fiscal concern is realistic or not (The Initiative on Global Markets, 2013, 2018). Examining the impact of expert cues on the issue is thus especially relevant to real-world politics as well as scholarship.¹ We also ask whether those who are more prone to anti-immigrant sentiment to begin with and those who stand to lose more from an increased fiscal burden are more likely to be swayed by negative expert cues on the fiscal impact of immigration.

Japan presents an important case for our questions because it combines the fastest rates of aging with the largest fiscal deficits in the developed world. Japan's rapidly aging population may make its citizens eager to accept more immigrant workers and taxpayers. But Japan's large fiscal deficits may also generate anxiety about the possibility of added tax burdens or benefit cuts. The Japanese case thus offers a real-world policy dilemma that also provides a useful lens through which to examine the effects of expert cues on public attitudes.

Our study proceeded in three steps. First, in 2016, we conducted conjoint experiments to assess Japanese voters' baseline expectations on the impacts of immigration. Second, as our main study, we employed vignette experiments to examine whether, for whom, and to what extent, expert information about the possible fiscal impact of immigration shifts public attitudes toward immigration. We compared the magnitude of these effects to expert information on the possible overall economic and cultural impact of immigration, which the literature considers salient to the public. Third, in 2020, four years after the first survey, we conducted a follow-up survey to examine the reliability of our earlier experimental results. Experimental studies of immigration attitudes largely adopt cross-sectional designs, while cross-temporal work is often observational. Conducted during the COVID-19 economic downturn, the timing of the third test offered an unusual opportunity to assess not only the reliability of our earlier findings but also the broader contextual factors that condition the effects of expert cues.

Previous studies show that the impact of expert cues over public opinion is greater for more technical issues such as the environment than symbolic issues such as immigration (e.g., Johnston & Ballard, 2016). We find that even within the sphere of immigration, experts have more sway over public opinion on more technical issues such as the fiscal impact of immigration than on its cultural or even general economic impact. We also find that due to negativity bias, people are swayed more by negative expert information than by positive. Existing studies also find that fiscal concerns strongly shape anti-immigrant sentiment, but our findings suggest that experts can fuel this sentiment by disseminating negative information on the fiscal impact of immigration, despite the lack of academic consensus on the issue. Our study points to the need for an awareness of the possible repercussions of expert information, both among those who offer them and the media that carry them.

The Argument

How might expert information on the fiscal impact of immigration affect public attitudes toward immigration? The media often provides frames that portray immigration as being either beneficial or harmful for the fiscal balance and/or the welfare state, and experts are often referenced in this valenced context as well (Avdagic & Savage, 2021). But in what is called "negativity bias," human beings are more likely to notice and to retain negative than positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Soroka & McAdams, 2015). This is true even outside the Anglo-American cases that most previous studies use to test negativity bias. Despite some individual variation that some people are activated by positive information, Soroka et al. (2019) find little evidence of cross-country variation in negativity bias. Although citizens are typically exposed to a mixture of both positive and negative expert information on the impact of immigration, due to negativity bias, they are likely to respond more to negative expert information than positive.²

If citizens are more affected by negative expert information on immigration, how might their responses vary across different types of negative expert information on the impact of immigration: fiscal impact, cultural impact, and impact on the overall economy? The social-psychological literature on motivated reasoning suggests that citizens are often resistant to new information that contradicts their priors and do not change attitudes in response to new information (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Lodge & Taber, 2013). This is often attributed to the negative affect that is evoked by counter-attitudinal information (e.g., Lodge & Taber, 2013). Yet in what is known as the prior attitude effect mechanism, people have also been found to change their opinions depending on the strength of their prior beliefs, and that those with the weakest priors shift the most readily upon exposure to external cues (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Chong & Druckman, 2012; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Because most citizens lack expertise on fiscal issues, they are likely to have weaker priors about the fiscal impact of immigration than about something as visceral as its cultural impact, and so they should be relatively more receptive to (negative) expert information on it. This mechanism is consistent with the more general empirical finding that expert information typically induces greater shifts in opinion on more technical issues than on symbolic issues (Johnston & Ballard, 2016). Studies also show that citizens hold weaker priors on budget issues than on overall economic issues (Barnes & Hicks, 2018), and that accordingly, their attitudes on fiscal issues change more in response to information than their attitudes on the overall economy (Althaus, 2004). Combined with negativity bias, we hypothesize:

H1: Expert cues on the negative fiscal impact of immigration should lead citizens across the board to become more opposed to more open immigration policies, relative to cues on negative overall economic impact or negative cultural impact.

While H1 concerns the general impact of negative expert fiscal cues, we also hypothesize that certain segments of the population will react more strongly than others. We particularly consider two sets of individuals: 1) those who are motivated to reinforce preexisting negative views of immigration; and 2) those who are highly sensitive to the fiscal impacts of government policies.

First, due to confirmation bias, those who are more opposed to immigration in general may be more affected by expert cues on the negative fiscal impact of immigration. These individuals may even more strongly oppose more open immigration policies when expert information provides them with a new argument that confirms and reinforces their prior anti-immigration biases.

A large body of literature finds that the less educated and the elderly typically exhibit greater anti-immigrant sentiment (Facchini & Mayda, 2009; Gerber et al., 2017; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015). This has been found to be true in Japan as well (Richey, 2010). The more negative attitudes toward immigration among the less educated are typically attributed to a less cosmopolitan outlook (e.g., Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007) and/or to labor market competition with low-skilled immigrants (e.g., Scheve & Slaughter, 2001). Meanwhile, the more negative views toward immigrants among older citizens is typically attributed to their greater cognitive inflexibility (Quillian, 1995). The present study does not make any assertions about the reasons why these types of people are more prone to anti-immigrant attitudes, but instead we simply note that education and age can be reasonably employed as useful proxy variables for people with those attitudes. We then use those proxy variables to test our theoretical contention that such people will be more likely to respond even more strongly than others to expert cues on the negative fiscal impact of immigration. Building on H1, we hypothesize:

H2: Expert cues on the negative fiscal impact of immigration should lead less educated or older citizens to become more opposed to more open immigration policies than more educated and younger citizens.

Second, those who are generally more concerned about fiscal deficits may react more strongly to expert information on the possible negative fiscal impact of immigration. In particular, those who depend on public spending and people who pay for it have vested interests in fiscal issues and may thus react more to experts' views based on their self-interests.

Studies typically find older citizens to be more concerned about growing government spending and/or public debts (Hayo & Neumeier, 2017; Roth et al., 2021). Given this broader picture, it is not surprising that Mewes and Mau (2013) and Reeskens and Van Oorschot (2012), among others, find that those who depend on public spending are chary about sharing welfare with immigrants. The elderly tend to depend heavily on the welfare state for pensions and health care, so clearly this hypothesis applies to them more than the young.

Studies disagree as to whether the poor or the rich are more concerned about fiscal deficits. Roth et al. (2021) find the rich to be more opposed to increased spending and/or fiscal deficits. But Hayo and Neumeier (2017) find no effect of income and Mewes and Mau (2013) finds the poor to exhibit "welfare chauvinism." Other studies also report mixed results as to whether poorer or richer individuals respond more to populist cues (Avdagic & Savage, 2021; Müller et al., 2017).

One way to interpret these mixed findings is that macro-level institutional features matter, in particular taxation systems that fundamentally affect the relationship between tax contributors and beneficiaries. In countries with regressive taxation systems, poorer citizens who are more likely to be beneficiaries should worry most in response to

information about immigrants posing a drain on fiscal coffers. These individuals are not only likely to pay additional marginal taxes if immigration has a negative fiscal impact but may also worry about intensified competition over limited social services.³ Richer citizens may also be concerned, but to a lesser extent than the poorer, because in regressive taxation systems, the former group is less likely to shoulder a disproportionate share of the increased taxes.⁴ Japan ranks among the lower-ranked countries in the OECD in terms of tax progressivity, operationalized as the proportion of income tax revenues as a percentage of GDP (see Figure A.1 in the Appendix).⁵ In sum, due to different groups' relative sensitivity to fiscal issues, again combining with H1, we expect:

H3: Expert cues on the negative fiscal impact of immigration should lead older or poorer citizens to become more opposed to more open immigration policies than younger and richer citizens.

Note that both H2 and H3 expect older citizens to shift attitudes more in response to experts' negative fiscal information. If both older and less educated respondents shift attitudes in response to expert information, this would lend support to H2, whereas if both older and poorer respondents express greater opposition to more open immigration policies, this would lend support to H3. Theoretically, we may observe both.

Finally, we assess how changes in contextual factors condition the effects of expert information. Experimental studies on public attitudes toward immigration are largely cross-sectional, whereas cross-temporal studies are typically observational. Although cross-sectional, experimental studies of the impact of external cues have contributed much to our understanding of immigration attitudes, few have examined the reliability of treatment effects over time (exceptions include Brader et al., 2008). Our second survey, conducted in the fall of 2020, allows us to probe these issues. Between January and September 2020, when the survey was conducted, just over half a million jobs had been lost in Japan, pushing up the unemployment rate from 2.3% to 3.0% (Kosei Rodosho [Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare], 2020). Although these are low figures compared to the rest of the developed world in absolute terms, it still represents a sizable increase and the first increase in unemployment rates in Japan since the Lehman shock.

If, as H3 suggests, self-interest mediates between expert information and immigration attitudes, economic downturn should amplify the effect of fiscal information on immigration attitudes. Conceivably, then, negative information on the fiscal impact of immigration could have a greater negative impact on attitudes toward immigration in 2020 than in 2016.

Research Design

Following IRB approval from the University of Tokyo, we conducted an original survey in Japan between August and September 2016. The sample ($N = 2,750$) was randomly drawn by a Japanese survey firm, *Nikkei Research*, from their opt-in online panel. This is a non-probability sample, but it was stratified on key demographic variables of age, gender, and residential locations, offering a reasonably good approximation of the general population. Table A.2 in the Appendix provides the summary statistics for the respondents.

The survey consisted of two experiments. First, in order to establish a baseline as to what respondents expect in terms of the fiscal, economic, and cultural impact of having more

immigrants in Japan, we conducted a conjoint experiment that presented respondents with two hypothetical scenarios and asked which scenario they saw as being more likely if the Japanese government decided to admit more unskilled immigrants.⁶ Political scientists have increasingly found conjoint analysis to be useful for analyzing multidimensional choices and reducing social desirability bias (e.g., Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015; Leeper et al., 2020). We focus on unskilled immigrants because existing studies, including those of Japan, show the immigration of highly skilled immigrants to be politically uncontroversial (e.g., Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2010; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015; Kage et al., 2021). For ethical reasons, respondents were clearly informed that these were purely hypothetical scenarios.

We included five attributes associated with the treatment groups: the impacts on the national economy; local economy; fiscal balance; corporate culture; and national culture.⁷ The impact on local economy was included because Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010) find local economic conditions to strongly influence American attitudes toward immigration, and because as in the US, economic conditions vary considerably across different parts of Japan. The specific wordings for the economic impacts draw on the literature on public attitudes toward immigrants. One strand of the literature suggests that natives prefer skilled immigrants who are viewed to have a *positive economic impact on the economy as a whole* (e.g., Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015). Another strand suggests that natives are less likely to accommodate immigrants when they perceive *labor market competition* (e.g., Dancygier & Donnelly, 2013; Scheve & Slaughter, 2001). In the results below, we refer to the labor market competition attributes as “Negative national impact” and “Negative local impact” because citizens are known to associate labor market competition with economic downturns (Dancygier & Donnelly, 2013). Corporate culture was also included because long-term labor contracts still comprise a large part of Japan’s labor market (Song, 2014). If an increase in foreign workers changes a firm’s corporate culture, disgruntled native workers have limited options to change employers. In the subsequent results section, we refer to the negative impact on corporate culture as “Diluting corporate culture.”⁸

We showed respondents five pairs of hypothetical futures, with a randomized combination of the five attributes. Table 1 shows the attributes that were randomized and Table A.3 presents a sample image of what respondents were shown.

Table 1. Attributes and values in conjoint analysis.

Attributes	Values
Expected impact on national economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic growth ● No change ● Increased labor competition
Expected impact on local economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic growth ● No change ● Increased labor competition
Expected impact on fiscal balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fiscal surplus on government budget ● No change ● Fiscal deficits
Expected impact on national culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Positive change ● No change ● Negative change
Expected impact on corporate culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No change ● Negative change

Note: As noted in the main text, we use simplified attribute and value labels in the subsequent conjoint figures.

Table 2. Experimental design.

Experimental groups	Positive	Negative
C: Control		
T1: Economic – positive impact on overall economy	✓	
T2: Economic – negative impact on overall economy		✓
T3: Fiscal – growth in fiscal deficit		✓
T4: Culture – enrich Japanese culture	✓	
T5: Culture – undermine Japanese culture		✓

Second, as our main study, we conducted a vignette experiment to examine how different expert information on the possible impact of immigration policy shifts attitudes toward immigration.⁹ We compare six experimental groups: 1) control; 2) negative fiscal impact; 3) negative economic impact; 4) negative cultural impact; 5) positive economic impact; and 6) positive cultural impact. Following Gerber et al. (2017) and Scheve and Slaughter (2001), we differentiate between overall economic impact and fiscal impact.

Table 2 summarizes our experimental design. Our main treatment is T3, the fiscal treatment, while C serves as the control group that is not provided with any expert information. Table A.5 in the Appendix confirms that randomization has succeeded in generating balanced treatment groups across the demographic indicators of age, gender, education level, income level, party support, and ethnocentrism.

To test H1, we compare the effect of the negative fiscal treatment against the negative economic and negative cultural treatments. The exclusion of a positive fiscal treatment is not problematic, since, as will be shown below, the conjoint experiments found that most Japanese respondents did not expect increased immigration to improve the fiscal balance. The validity of this setup was further tested in our 2020 survey, as will be shown below. Note also that we do not include a control group in which non-experts provide the same information. This design allows us to examine the impact of expert cues on people's attitudes but makes it difficult to gauge whether the effect may differ between experts and non-experts. Our choice is driven by our focus on examining different impacts of different expert information on anti-immigration attitudes, rather than on the difference between expert and non-expert information. This issue will be discussed further in the conclusion.

The experiment proceeded as follows. We first exposed all respondents to the same hypothetical scenario so that they had a common understanding of the decision that they were being asked to make:

Please read the following hypothetical newspaper article before answering the questions. Today, the Japanese government decided to admit 1.5 million manual foreign workers over the next three years. The number accounts for about 2% of the entire Japanese working population.

Then, we randomly assigned respondents to either the control or one of five treatment groups. During this stage, we informed respondents:

According to an expert, the decision would be likely to result in negative [positive] impacts on the budget deficit [national economy; culture].

All respondents were asked, on a scale of one to five, whether or not they agreed with the policy (strongly disagree/disagree/neither agree nor disagree/agree/strongly agree).

Following H1, we expect those who are exposed to the negative fiscal cue to oppose the policy more relative to those who are exposed to the negative economic cue or the negative cultural cue. We also expect less educated, poorer, or older respondents to express greater opposition to the policy in response to the negative fiscal cue than more educated, richer, or younger respondents (H2 and H3).

The figure of 1.5 million new foreign workers is larger than the number of workers that the Japanese government has recently announced that they would admit, but it represents just a quarter of the projected job shortage in 2025 of roughly six million people (Rodoryoku Busokuwa Mohaya Kokkaeki Kadai [Labor Shortage as a National Issue], n. d.). This figure would also double the foreign population in Japan, making it more likely that respondents would come into contact with foreign workers at the workplace.

We also collected several covariates, including education, gender, employment status, party support, number of foreign friends, ethnocentrism, and right-wing authoritarianism. We also included an income variable and operationalize those who earn more than median income (roughly 4–6 million yen, or 40,000–60,000USD) as the rich and those who earn less as the poor. We use the covariates to increase the precision of our estimates of interaction terms, while conducting t-tests without covariates to examine the main treatment effects. Tables A.6, A.16 and A.17 in the Appendix provide the English-language translations of the survey item wordings and the original Japanese-language wordings are available upon request.

Findings

Conjoint Experiment

Figure 1 shows the results of the conjoint experiment. Respondents were more likely to expect increased immigration to expand Japan's fiscal deficits, with increased tax receipts being the next likely, and no fiscal impact the least likely. The fact that respondents did not view increased immigration as helping to pay taxes for the pension-drawing population is striking because the tight Japanese job market at the time of the survey makes it unlikely that low-skilled immigrants would end up on welfare. Respondents also worried that immigrants would hurt the national economy, although they were split as to whether their impact on the local economy would be positive or negative.

Figure A.5 in the Appendix shows differences between respondents who completed college and those who did not. Since the choice of baseline level for each attribute can yield different results, following Leeper et al. (2020), we report conditional marginal means. College-educated and other respondents largely shared similar expectations regarding the impact of immigration. In particular, the difference between these two groups in their beliefs on the fiscal repercussions of immigration failed to reach statistical significance.

Figure A.6 in the Appendix presents differences between respondents who are younger and older than median age. Younger and older respondents largely agreed on the expected impact of immigration. But younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to believe that immigration would lead to a budget surplus and less likely to expand the deficit. Also, although the standard errors are large, younger people were more likely to view immigrants as bringing cultural benefits. Both differences are statistically significant at the 5% level.

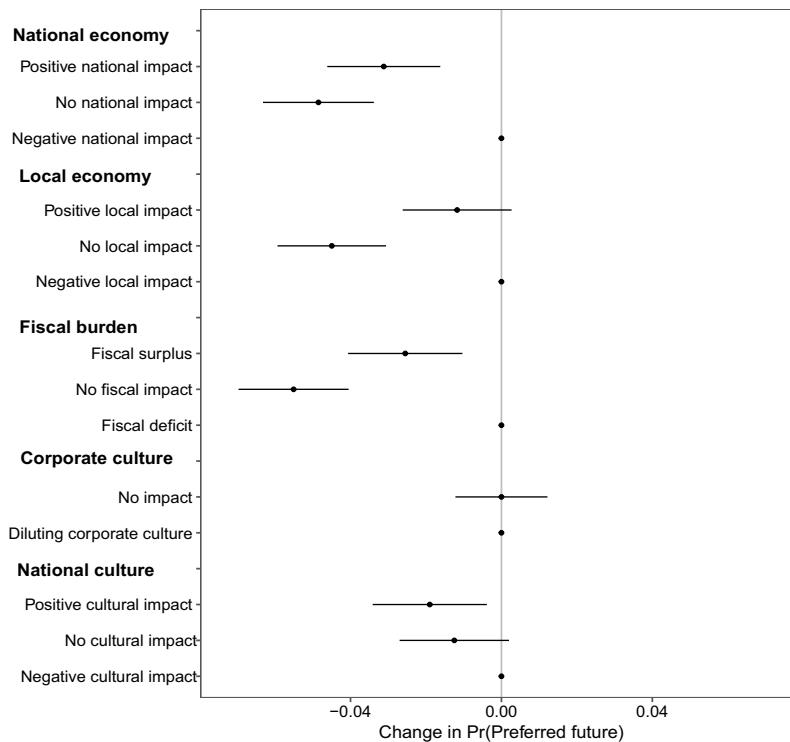


Figure 1. Main results of conjoint analysis (expected future). Note: Error bars denote 95% confidence interval. $N = 2,750$.

Figure A.7 in the the Appendix reports the results of the conjoint experiment by respondents' income level. Somewhat surprisingly, poorer and richer respondents did not have discernibly different views of immigrants' fiscal impact, except that the rich were more likely to believe that immigration would have a positive impact on the local economy.

Overall, the conjoint analyses show that Japanese people, on average, expect the arrival of additional unskilled immigrants to have a negative impact across the measured dimensions (except corporate culture). The results also reveal limited heterogeneity across different segments of the population in concerns over the impact of immigration.

Vignette Experiment: Overall Results

Figure 2 reports the main results of the vignette experiment.¹⁰ The control group neither opposed nor supported the policy of admitting 1.5 million manual foreign workers into Japan over the next three years. The mean response was about three on the scale of one to five. Consistent with the idea of negativity bias, attitude shifts were greater for negative information, whether economic, fiscal, or cultural, than for positive information. Among the five treatment groups, the group that was given the negative fiscal treatment reacted the most negatively, decreasing the level of policy support from about 3 in the control group to about 2.5, or a decrease of 16.7%, and the difference between this group and any of the other groups is statistically significant at the 5% level. Negative fiscal information (and negative

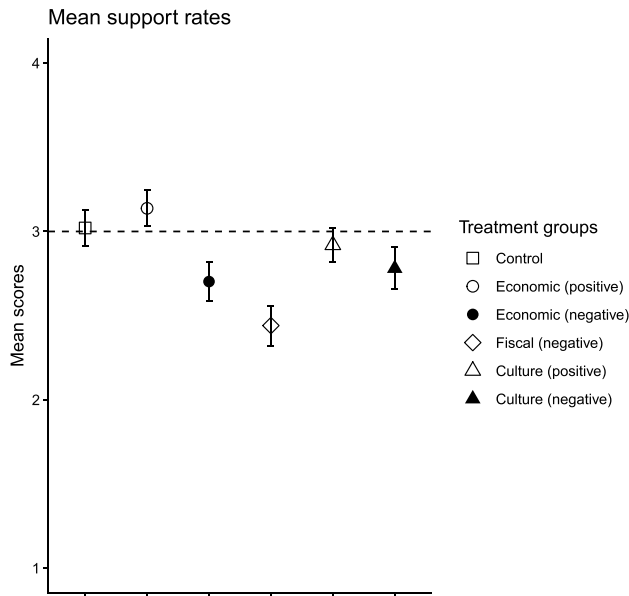


Figure 2. Main results of expert information experiments. Note: The Y-axis shows the mean response to the policy of admitting 1.5 million manual foreign workers over the next three years, on a scale of one to five (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree). Error bars display the 95% confidence intervals. $N = 2,750$.

economic information) elicited a stronger anti-immigration response than negative cultural information. These results lend support to H1. Among the positive treatments, respondents generally reacted more favorably to positive economic information than positive cultural information, although the difference was not statistically significant at the 5% level.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

We next test H2 and H3 by three covariates: education, age and income. All subsequent figures report predicted treatment effects based on regression results in which we interact the treatments with a binary variable of respondents' education level (or age or income) and include gender, income, employment status, party support, the number of foreign friends, ethnocentrism, and right-wing authoritarianism as covariates. Education, age, and income are observational moderators that may be correlated with other unobservable factors, so even with the inclusion of the covariates, our results should be interpreted with caution.

Contrary to H2, [Figure 3](#) reveals that there is no statistically significant difference in response to fiscal cues between college-educated respondents and those who did not complete college.¹¹ [Figure 4](#) shows that consistent with our expectation, for older respondents, the difference between the control group and those who received the negative fiscal treatment is significant at the 1% level. As reported in [Figure A.11](#) and [Table A.10](#) in the Appendix, older respondents respond more to the fiscal information than to other treatments, suggesting that concerns over fiscal crowding and fear of losing social services outweigh the hopes for increased tax receipts. But contrary to H2 and H3, the difference between older and younger respondents failed to reach statistical significance.¹²

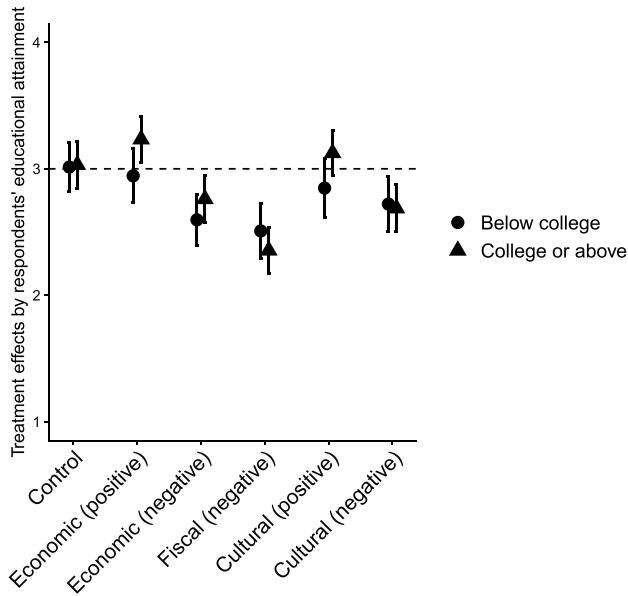


Figure 3. Results of expert information experiments: by respondents' education level. Note: The dependent variable is the level of support for the policy of admitting 1.5 million manual foreign workers over the next three years. Error bars display the 95% confidence intervals.

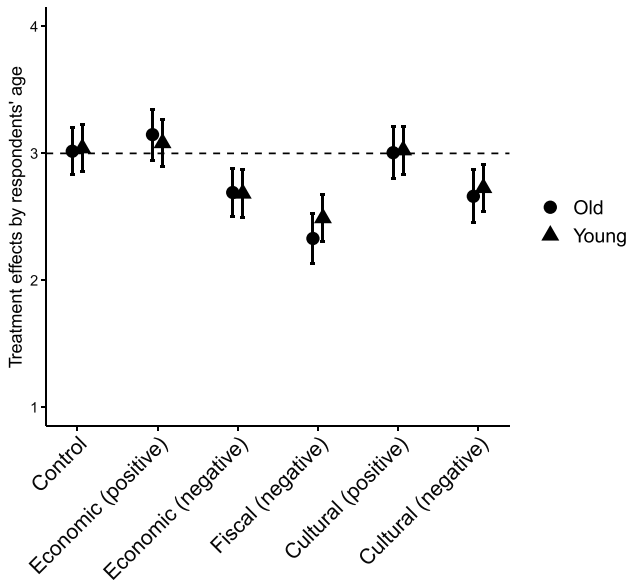


Figure 4. Results of expert information experiments: by respondents' age. Note: The dependent variable is the level of support for the policy of admitting 1.5 million manual foreign workers over the next three years. Error bars display the 95% confidence intervals.

Recall from the conjoint experiments that older respondents were generally more pessimistic about the fiscal impact of immigration than younger respondents. The expert information treatment may have reinforced their priors, due to confirmation bias (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Younger respondents, in contrast, had been more likely to expect immigration to improve the fiscal balance. Our finding of a large shift in attitudes among this group suggests that the younger respondents' priors may have been weak and easily swayed by expert cues.

Figure 5 splits the sample by respondents' income into the poor and rich (Table A.9 shows full regression results). The mean support rates to the proposed policy are roughly the same for the control groups among both the rich and the poor, at around three on the scale of one to five. Consistent with our expectations, for poor respondents, the difference between the fiscal treatment and control groups is statistically significant at the 5% level (see also Figure A.12 and Table A.11). But the rich also expressed lower levels of support for the proposed policy in response to the fiscal treatment, although to a lesser extent than the poor (Figure 5). Here again, contrary to H3, the difference between the rich and the poor fails to reach statistical significance.

Our findings show that both the rich and poor become more resistant to a more open immigration policy in response to the fiscal treatment. It is possible that this attitude shift is rooted in self-interest, with the rich expecting higher taxes and the poor anticipating reduced services and higher taxes. Alternatively, fiscal concerns may also be driven by racism (Newman & Malhotra, 2019). Japanese citizens have a particular aversion to Chinese and Korean immigrants (Kage et al., 2021). Our survey included feeling thermometers toward Chinese and Korean immigrants, which enables us to examine whether respondents'

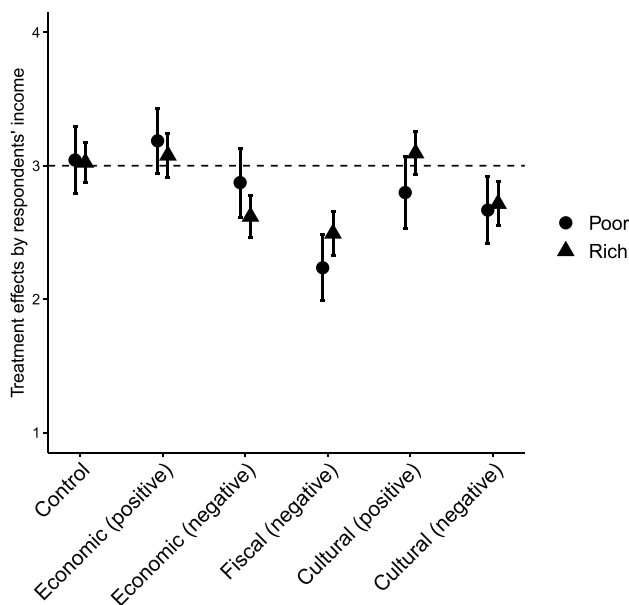


Figure 5. Results of expert information experiments: by respondents' income. Note: The dependent variable is the level of support for the policy of admitting 1.5 million manual foreign workers over the next three years. Error bars display the 95% confidence intervals.

fiscal concerns mask anti-Chinese or Korean sentiment. But as shown in Figures A.8 and A.9 in the Appendix, we find no statistically significant difference between pro-China and anti-China respondents or between pro-Korea and anti-Korea respondents in treatment effects.¹³

Follow-up Survey

In September 2020, we conducted a small follow-up survey that replicated the fiscal portion of the vignette survey, this time including a positive fiscal treatment. Because this follow-up survey did not include a cultural or overall economic cue, it is not intended as a full replication of the earlier experiment. Nevertheless, this survey serves three purposes. First, it allows us to assess the reliability of our earlier findings. Second, it provides a test of the positive fiscal treatment, which was not included in the earlier survey. Finally, because the 2020 survey was conducted during the COVID-19-induced economic downturn, it offers an opportunity to explore how changes in contextual economic factors condition the impact of expert information on public attitudes.

This sample was drawn by the *Rakuten Research Company* from their opt-in online panel and yielded 1,723 respondents. The sample was stratified by age, gender, and residential location so that it would mirror the distribution in the national census. Table A.12 in the Appendix provides the summary statistics for this sample.

After asking a series of demographic questions, the survey replicated the vignette experiment from the 2016 survey, only this time focusing on the fiscal treatments and adding a positive fiscal treatment. Thus, respondents were randomly assigned into one of three groups: 1) control; 2) negative fiscal treatment; or 3) positive fiscal treatment. As in the earlier survey, respondents were asked, on a scale of one to five, whether they agreed with the policy of admitting 1.5 million unskilled foreign workers. Table A.15 in the Appendix provides the English-language translation of the positive fiscal treatment. The rest of the survey was worded identically as the 2016 survey.

Our findings, shown in [Figure 6](#), are threefold. First, despite the much-worsened economic conditions in 2020 than in 2016, the control group was not more opposed to the proposed policy in 2020 than in 2016. The mean opposition score, at around 3 on a scale of one to five, is virtually identical to the results from the 2016 survey. This is striking, given that a struggling economy is often seen to heighten anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g., Aksoy, 2012). It is possible that the prospect of continued rapid aging is mitigating the fear of immigrants, but it is also conceivable that economic downturns exert limited impact over attitudes toward immigration in low-immigration countries (Finseraas et al., 2016). This point should be explored in future work.

Second, [Figure 6](#) also confirms our earlier results that respondents oppose a more open immigration policy more when exposed to negative expert information on the fiscal impact of immigration. Thus, we still find support for the general intuition that citizens become more resistant to increased immigration in response to negative expert information on the fiscal impact of immigration. Also as expected, the positive fiscal treatment does not shift respondents' attitudes toward immigration. The difference with the negative fiscal treatment is statistically significant at the 1% level.¹⁴

Third, Figures A.14, A.15 and A.16 in the Appendix show no statistically significant difference between the college-educated and less educated, the old and the young, or the

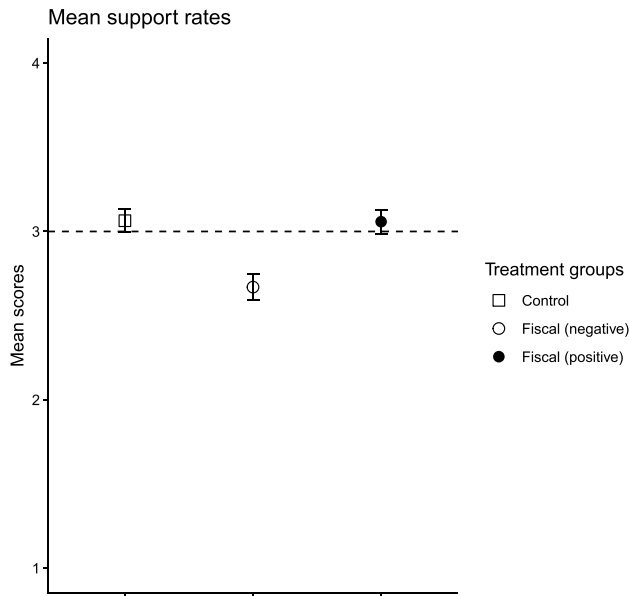


Figure 6. Main results of additional expert information experiments. Note: The Y-axis shows the mean response to the policy of admitting 1.5 million manual foreign workers over the next three years, on a scale of one to five (strongly agree, agree, neither agree not disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). Error bars display the 95% confidence intervals. $N = 1,723$.

rich and the poor. Thus, we continued to find limited heterogeneity across different socio-economic groups in response to expert information on the possible negative fiscal impact of immigration. The deteriorating economic conditions could have led the poor and the old to become more concerned about the fiscal effects of immigration relative to the rich and the young. In fact, the poor and the old were more likely to have lost jobs between January and September 2020 than other segments of the population (calculated from Kosei Rodosho [Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare], 2020). Yet we still failed to find any statistically significant difference between younger and older respondents and poorer and richer respondents in their responses to the negative fiscal information.

Conclusion

Recent studies have pointed to the importance of fiscal concerns in shaping anti-immigration attitudes. We push the literature forward by highlighting the malleability of fiscal concerns via negative expert information. We found that negative expert information on the possible fiscal repercussions of increased immigration readily swayed public attitudes toward immigration in Japan. Less educated, older, or poorer respondents were no more easily rattled by negative information about fiscal crowding than more educated, younger or richer respondents.

Our study also corroborates existing research that despite the recent decline in public trust toward experts, citizens in many developed democracies are receptive of expert judgment, although to varying degrees in different issue areas (Bertsou, 2022). Studies often find experts to exert a greater impact over more technical issues than symbolic issues

such as immigration (e.g., Johnston & Ballard, 2016). Our study finds that even within the sphere of immigration, experts have more sway over public opinion on more technical issues such as the fiscal impact of immigration than on its cultural impact. More disturbingly, it also suggests that on more technical issues, experts with negative information may be able to sway and to polarize public opinion even when there is no academic consensus over that information. Large grant providers often encourage the public dissemination of expert findings, but our study points to the need for an awareness of the possible biased reception of expert information.

Expert views are often contrasted with non-expert views (Merkley, 2020), and it is also important to understand whether expert views have more influence on people's attitudes than views of non-experts, including those of radical right-wing influencers. Moreover, experts increasingly convey information on their own via social media, but politicians and the news media also reference expert information to strengthen their own arguments. The combined effect of partisan and expert cues on public opinion also deserves further exploration in future studies. The durability of the effects of expert cues, and under which conditions, present further issues for future research.

Whatever the real economics of immigration, the public may fret that foreigners will burden public coffers. Given how easy it is to conjure up this vision in Japan, as revealed in our survey, immigration policy is likely to be a volatile issue in countries seeking to limit welfare spending. If even Japanese voters are susceptible to negative fiscal information cues, their counterparts in countries that face less rapid aging could be even more anxious about the fiscal implications of increased immigration. Whether expert fiscal information may have stronger effects in countries with more immigration and where the immigration issue is more politicized than in Japan also presents a fruitful avenue for future research. Citizens are easy prey to expert messages depicting dark prospects of impoverishment at the hands of greedy immigrants. As populations age, creating ever larger pools of pensioners, and as income inequality swells the ranks of vulnerable citizens, the politics of immigration may be poised to worsen.

Notes

1. In the US, economists are typically portrayed in the media as being overwhelmingly in support of immigration (Merkley, 2020), and if the bias is widely recognized by the public, it may affect how respondents view experts' opinions. In order to gain a sense of the Japanese public's expectations regarding economists' views on immigration, we searched all articles in the *Asahi Shimbun* daily newspaper in the last ten years (July 21, 2011 to July 21, 2021) that included the word "foreign worker" (the Japanese term for "immigration") and referenced comments by at least one university professor. Among the 94 articles that turned up, 46 articles referenced comments by a sociologist, followed by legal scholars (10 articles), economists (8), and political scientists (4). This leads us to expect that the Japanese public has no strong priors on economists' views on immigration. Moreover, economists' views on immigration were quite mixed and in only one article did the scholar express clear support for increased immigration. We thus expect that any effects that we observe are unlikely to be driven by respondents' priors on economists' views.
2. One mechanism via which negativity bias may operate is anxiety; Arceneaux (2012) finds that those with higher levels of anxiety are more likely to respond to nonpartisan cues that evoke loss aversion, even when exposed to a counterargument.

3. This discussion assumes that fiscal competition will lead to either benefits cuts and/or higher taxes. Alternatively, debts may simply continue to expand. Japan has had among the highest debt levels in the developed world in the last few decades, and, around the time of our survey, in 2016, the highest in the OECD (OECD, n.d-b.), and public opinion polls conducted in 2016 show many Japanese to view the fiscal balance as the most pressing issue facing the nation (Naikakufu [Cabinet Office of Japan], n.d.). Of course, this does not mean that a growth in deficits will be ruled out, but it is more likely that the public will view the situation as a trade-off. As is well known, the Euro zone also requires member states to keep their debt levels within 60% of GDP, making it likely that member countries will face a trade-off between benefit cuts and tax hikes.
4. Inequality could also influence public opinion on immigration, but the effects are probably countervailing. By the logic of Meltzer and Richard (1981), more inequality generates more redistribution, but more unequal societies are in fact associated with lower levels of redistribution for reasons that are still incompletely understood (Atkinson et al., 2011). Also, immigrants' dependency on social benefits (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2010) could matter.
5. Economists often employ the Kakwani index to measure tax progressivity, which captures the concentration coefficient for market income minus the concentration coefficient for transfers. Japan ranks in the bottom half of the OECD on this index (Joumard et al., 2013). Another measure is the top income tax rate, and Japan also falls in the bottom half among developed democracies on this metric (Scheve & Stasavage, 2016).
6. The English-language wording of the conjoint experiment is provided in the Appendix in Table A16. The exact Japanese-language version of the text is available upon request.
7. We also included another attribute to make our overall conjoint scenarios more realistic (Incerti, 2020): the impact of immigrants on security. We find that respondents are most concerned that increased immigration would increase crime. The full results are presented in Figure A12 in the Appendix.
8. A recent poll finds that corporate culture is *the* most important consideration for Japanese college seniors who are looking for jobs ("Shukatsusei Hansuwa Shafu Jushi [Corporate Culture Most Important for Half of All Job-Seekers]," 2018). Also, because new recruits look closely for companies with particular corporate cultures, once hired, workers are reluctant to see it change.
9. This paper limits the analysis to short-term foreign workers to avoid the ambiguity of terminology regarding immigration and subsequent measurement errors.
10. Following Aronow et al. (2019), we did not include a manipulation check in our experiment.
11. Table A.7 in the Appendix reports the full regression results.
12. Table A.8 in the Appendix reports the full regression results.
13. Figure A.21 in the Appendix further explores an interaction effect in which young respondents who are poor worry about possible fiscal crowding from immigrants. Due to the smaller sample size in each subgroup of respondents, this investigation is only tentative. Here again, the mean support rates among the control groups of all four subgroups are roughly the same. But the figure suggests that young respondents are more swayed by the fiscal information when they are also poor. Older respondents are responsive regardless of their income level.
14. Because inattentive respondents may have increased during COVID-19 (Aronow et al., 2020), we included an attention check to ensure the quality of the sample and found no substantive difference between attentive and inattentive respondents.

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