

Support for the Radical Right in Japan: Converging to the European Politics?

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Abstract

Although no radical right party actually won a seat in Japanese national and local assemblies until 2012, radical right parties and movements have had a noteworthy place in postwar Japan. Moreover, new radical right movements have been growing in the last decade. While Japan's old radical right is authoritarian, anti-communist, and nationalist, the new radical right is uniquely characterized by its xenophobia. Keeping the rise of the new radical right in mind, Japan seems to be opening a Pandora's box of radical right politics—much the same as European countries. In this paper, we will examine the characteristics of Japan's radical right, comparing the different support bases of the old and new radical right politicians. Analyzing survey data from research we conducted in 2007, we found that nationalism was their most strongly correlated characteristic, while xenophobia had no significant role in steering the politics of the old radical right. That xenophobia is such a prominent feature of Japan's new radical right suggests that this political preference is aligning with its West European counterparts.

Keywords: extreme right, nativism, nationalism

1 Introduction

The rise of European radical right parties has provoked extensive research into who supports them and why (Art, 2011; Mudde, 2007). However, the radical right in Japan has not attracted commensurate interest by researchers (e.g., Norris, 2005: 77). It is true that no radical right party won seats in the Japanese Diet until the mid-2000s, but there have been Diet member groups, such as Seirankai (Babb, 2012), and small radical right parties like *Ishin Seito Shinpu*¹. In addition, radical right parties—some branched off from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and others newly established—have won seats in Diet elections since

the late 2000s. Japan also saw a rise in action by anti-immigrant organizations, such as *Zaitokukai*'s demonstrations in major Japanese cities since 2008 (Higuchi, 2016; Yamaguchi, 2013).

So far, the Japanese media and researchers have called such parties and politicians 'conservatives' (*hoshu*) or 'right wingers' (*uyoku*), avoiding such terms as 'radical right,' 'far right,' 'extreme right,' or 'ultra-right' (*kyokuu*). As such, journalists, scholars, politicians and the general public has regarded the rise of the radical right as a European phenomenon unrelated to Japan, which has resulted in a paucity of research on Japan's radical right. Our analysis, then, presents a rare effort to examine the support base of one Japanese radical right politician.

Our research question was twofold: (a) Who supports the radical right in Japan, and (b) why do they support it? These questions aimed to test whether research findings on European radical right hold true for the Japanese case. The first question explored how Japanese radical right supporters are similar to their European counterparts—described as “young male, with no college education, working in a blue-collar job in the private sector, and living in an urban environment” (Immerfall, 1998: 250). The second question explicated the variables most closely related to support for the radical right in Japan.

To answer these questions, we analyzed the case of Shintaro Ishihara, a prominent radical right politician who became governor of Tokyo²). We focused on Ishihara not only because he is known as a hawkish politician but also because his xenophobic remarks have become a prominent feature of his politics. This feature is noteworthy because Japanese politicians have not generally been interested in migration issues. Japan’s right wingers have been characterized by anti-communism, nationalism, and traditionalism but not xenophobia (Hori, 1993). While Ishihara is one of the founders of Seirankai, a right-wing LDP Diet group established in the 1970s, his anti-immigration attitude and populist tendency have much in common with the ideological platform of Western European radical right politicians³).

2 Hypothesis and Set of Variables

Previous studies have clarified the demographic characteristics of radical right supporters: They are less educated, younger, and do not belong to a church. They tend to be unemployed, self-employed, blue-collar workers, or retired (Betz, 1994; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2001; Norris, 2005; Scheepers et al., 1997); men are more likely to be its supporters than women (Gidengil et al., 2005: 1171; Givens, 2005). However, factors such as anxiety and discontent provoked by social change

cannot adequately explain the rise of the extreme right (Eatwell, 2003; Rydgren, 2007). The causal mechanisms of support for the radical right are much more complicated. Moreover, the explanatory power of demographic variables is rather low: Van der Brug and Fennema (2003: 69) found that sociological variables played a less important role in explaining support for ultra-right political parties than they do for other political parties.

Attitudinal variables—such as nationalism, xenophobia, economic liberalism, authoritarianism, political discontent, and so forth—can more effectively elucidate support for the radical right. Among these variables, nationalism, economic liberalism, and authoritarianism are more ‘strong’ elements embodying positive ideologies, whereas xenophobia and political discontent are ‘weak’ elements that negatively react to the status quo (Ignazi, 2003: 27). The causal relationship between these variables and support for the radical right is summarized below.

Firstly, nationalism is the common denominator of all radical right parties. Such political factions hold that national interest should be prioritized in order to tackle various problems, emphasizing national integration and identities. Although there is a relatively small body of literature addressing the alliance between nationalism and support for the radical right, the extant research has identified positive relations between them (Billiet, 1995; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2000, 2002). Still, the explanatory power is rather limited: Sometimes national pride is negatively related to support for the radical right.

Secondly, xenophobia is the most powerful explanatory factor for support for radical right parties. Xenophobes claim that immigration presents both an economic threat that burdens the welfare and a cultural threat that destroys traditions (Kitschelt, 1995; Norris, 2005; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2001). Remarkably, radical right parties did not look upon migrants as enemies until the 1980s, but the “immigration problem” has been their most urgent topic since then. Their preoccupation with immigration—combined with rising anti-immigrant sentiments—has enabled issue ownership to gain

strength since the 1990s, which is why extreme right parties are also called “anti-immigration parties” (van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2000; van der Brug and Fennema, 2003).

Thirdly, recent supporters of the radical right are more supportive to economic liberalism than those of traditional fascist parties (Kitschelt, 1995; Betz, 1998: 5). They stress the importance of market competition, support the management rights of owners rather than worker participation, and disguise economic equalization. Such an ideology increases welfare chauvinism, targeting migrants as welfare recipients.

Fourthly, the transformation of cleavage structures has resulted in the polarization of left libertarians and right authoritarians (Kitschelt, 1995). The rise of sociocultural issues such as human rights, immigration, and multiculturalism have reinforced divisions between authoritarians and libertarians. While green parties embody ideologies of left libertarians, radical right parties resonate with right authoritarians, emphasizing law and order, immigration problems, and family values. Authoritarians support radical right politicians because of their demand for strong leadership (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2000; Lubbers et al., 2002)⁴, which is the case with Ishihara.

Fifthly, the political discontent that has been signaled through protest votes has been regarded as beneficial to the radical right (Lubbers et al., 2002: 371; Betz, 1998; Owen and Dennis, 1996)⁵. Political discontent often leads to anti-party sentiments (Poguntke, 1996), which in turn embolden support for the radical right, which behaves like an outsider to conventional party politics. This is why leaders of radical right parties prefer a populist style of politics for differentiating themselves from other politicians (Taggart, 2000).

We will examine how these variables can explain support for Ishihara. As mentioned above, Ishihara has much in common with European radical right politicians, and thus we can expect that supporters of Ishihara resemble radical right supporters in Western Europe. As such, three hypotheses are tested regarding the supporters of Ishihara.

Our first hypothesis is about who supports Ishihara: *Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of supporters of Ishihara are similar to those of West European radical right parties.* To be more specific, young blue-collar workers, and self-employed, less educated men are more likely to support Ishihara.

The second hypothesis deals with the difference between conventional right wingers and the radical right in the Japanese context. While right wingers have been rather indifferent to ‘immigration problems,’ Ishihara has often made racist pronouncements targeting foreigners. The hypothesis would thus be that *xenophobia is significantly related to support for Ishihara, although it is not related to support for right wingers.*

The third hypothesis focuses on a generational change of logics to support the radical right⁶. *While positive factors such as political ideologies can more effectively explain the older generation’s support for Ishihara, backing by younger people is due to negative factors such as political discontent.* On the one hand, older radical right supporters prefer Ishihara because he embodies their rightist ideologies, such as nationalism, xenophobia, and economic liberalism. On the other hand, younger supporters are not so ideologically oriented: they favor Ishihara due to their political discontent and preference for strong leaders (authoritarianism).

3 Data and Method

We conducted a survey in eight wards and cities in Tokyo in 2007 to gain insight about Ishihara’s support base. We selected a sample of 4,000 potential respondents from the voter registration list using a multi-stage random method, and distributed questionnaires by mail, asking the sample to return them by mail also; 1,477, or 36.93%, of them did so. Respondents were males and females aged 20 to 69 years. We also consulted survey data from research conducted in Tokyo in 2005 using the same method; in this case, 2,887, or 33.96%, of 8,500,

Table 1 Scores of feeling thermometers by generation

| | | 20–29 | 30–39 | 40–49 | 50–59 | 60–69 | total |
|------|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2005 | Ishihara | 59.8 | 58.4 | 57.0 | 56.9 | 63.2 | 59.6 |
| | LDP | 47.7 | 46.9 | 50.2 | 50.8 | 57.1 | 52.2 |
| | DP | 48.0 | 47.2 | 47.4 | 47.9 | 49.3 | 48.2 |
| 2007 | Ishihara | 46.6 | 47.6 | 48.6 | 49.3 | 57.9 | 51.0 |
| | LDP | 44.9 | 46.0 | 42.6 | 43.9 | 50.5 | 46.0 |
| | DP | 44.3 | 44.4 | 43.4 | 43.7 | 44.7 | 44.1 |
| | Abe | 40.0 | 42.6 | 41.2 | 42.2 | 48.1 | 43.7 |

Table 2 Variables used for analysis

| Variables | | |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Independent variables | Gender (female = 1) | |
| | Age | Age at the time of the survey |
| | Education (length of education) | Primary = 9, Secondary = 12, Junior college and vocational schools = 14, University = 16 |
| | Occupation | Professional, managerial, self-employed, and manual workers |
| | Economic liberalism (the score of the first factor) | I prefer the equalization of income rather than widening the income gap. I prefer more welfare provision for poor people. Competition is desirable for vitality and diligence in society. |
| | Nationalism (the score of the first factor) | It is natural to teach national flag and national anthem in schools. All Japanese should respect the Emperor. I am proud to be Japanese. Post-war education should be revised to teach more patriotism and duties. |
| | Xenophobia (the score of the first factor) | I am in favor of introducing foreign workers. I am in favor of the increase of foreign population. Policing foreigners should be prioritized over promoting the human rights of foreigners. The government should enfranchise permanent resident foreigners. |
| | Authoritarianism (the score of the first factor) | We should always respect authoritative persons. Abiding by convention will bring about the best results. Ignoring traditions and conventions will eventually cause problems. Dependence on leaders and specialists is the best way to understand how to deal with this complex society. |
| | Political discontent (the score of the first factor) | It is no use to express opinions because governmental officials are not interested in ordinary citizens. There are a lot of dishonest politicians. Ordinary citizens like me are powerless to determine governmental policies. National politics hardly reflect the opinions and hopes of the people |
| Left-right orientation | I think of myself as progressive when asked whether I am conservative or progressive. | |
| Dependent variables | Support for Ishihara and Abe | Scores of feeling thermometer (11 scale, from 0 to 100 degree) |

samples returned the questionnaire. Respondents were males and females aged 20 to 79 years, but we focused our analysis on those between 20 and 69⁷⁾.

The 2007 survey data were used for analysis for two reasons: more questions related to xenophobia and Shinzo Abe, then Prime Minister, are included in the 2007 survey. Abe is from a distinguished family—his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi was a former Prime Minister, and his father Shintaro Abe, was a former Minister of Foreign Affairs. However, they did not belong to mainstream factions within LDP: they were seen as hawkish and insisting on nationalism⁸⁾. Soon after Shinzo Abe was first elected in 1993, he became deeply committed to right-wing Diet member groups, which put him in the spotlight as a hardliner to the abduction of Japanese by North Korea⁹⁾. After he became Prime Minister in 2006, Abe devoted himself to ‘transcend[ing] the postwar regime,’ and actually revised the Basic Law on Education, reinforcing its nationalistic principles.

Yet, despite his emphasis on nationalism and traditionalism, Abe has been indifferent to ‘immigration problems’ (Abe, 2006). In addition, unlike his predecessors Junichiro Koizumi and Ishihara

(Otake, 2003), Abe does not have the talent to be a populist, which is why we can regard him as a typical traditional right winger that is comparable to Ishihara as the radical right.

Ishihara and Abe also differ in popularity. In spite of all of his hate speech, Ishihara has been one of the most popular politicians for decades. As Table 1 shows, he was popular among younger generations in 2005. However, he lost his popularity after the 2007 gubernatorial election when small scandals such as his luxurious official trip to the United States and ordering public works to his son broke out. Table 1 shows scores of feeling thermometer (from 0 to 100 degrees) for Ishihara, Abe, LDP, and the Democratic Party in 2005 and 2007. Although Ishihara’s score dropped by 8.6 percentage points from 2005 to 2007, he was still the most popular in 2007.

To test the three hypotheses, variables shown on Table 2 were prepared for analysis. Demographic variables (gender, age, education, and occupation) were mainly used for testing hypothesis 1. We constructed scales measuring ideologies through factor analysis, drawing on the survey respondents’ issue positions to three or four related questions, which were used to test hypotheses 2 and 3. Although the

Table 3 Results of multiple regression analysis for the support to Ishihara and Abe

| | Ishihara | | Abe | |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | B | | | |
| Gender (female = 1) | -0.037 | -0.016 | 0.037 | 0.051 * |
| Age | 0.080 ** | 0.005 | 0.051 | -0.027 |
| Education | -0.107 *** | -0.069 ** | -0.097 *** | -0.063 * |
| Self-employed | -0.007 | -0.034 | -0.019 | -0.045 |
| Professional | -0.041 | -0.029 | -0.026 | -0.015 |
| Managerial | 0.036 | -0.003 | 0.070 *** | 0.033 |
| Manual workers | -0.006 | 0.020 | -0.001 | 0.013 |
| Economic liberalism | | 0.194 *** | | 0.104 *** |
| Nationalism | | 0.316 *** | | 0.310 *** |
| Authoritarianism | | 0.051 * | | 0.086 *** |
| Xenophobia | | 0.086 *** | | 0.028 |
| Political trust | | 0.115 *** | | 0.168 *** |
| Left-right orientation | | 0.087 *** | | 0.133 *** |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.023 | 0.265 | 0.016 | 0.240 |

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

data on voting for Ishihara in the 2007 Tokyo gubernatorial election is available, we have no comparable data for Abe, therefore our dependent variables are the score of feeling thermometer toward Ishihara and Abe.

4 Results

4.1 Testing hypotheses 1 and 2

Table 3 presents results from a multiple regression analysis to compare social background and attitudes of Ishihara and Abe supporters¹⁰⁾. The first models focus exclusively on the demographic base of the support for the two politicians. The second models include attitudinal variables. Although the first models are significant, each adjusted R^2 is only 0.023 (Ishihara) and 0.016 (Abe), which means that demographic variables have a weak capacity to explain support for Ishihara and Abe.

Two variables have a significant effect on preference for both of Ishihara and Abe: age and education (Ishihara) and occupation and education (Abe). The result is ambivalent: while the less-educated support Ishihara—as expected by the

first hypothesis—elder people also tend to support him—unlike the expectation of the first hypothesis that younger people would prefer Ishihara. Gender and occupation were not in line with previous studies on the radical right: they were not related to support for Ishihara, whereas Abe was significantly preferred by the managerial class.

Hypothesis 2 was tested with the second models. When all variables were included in the regression, they explained 27% (Ishihara) and 24% (Abe) of the individual-level variance in the support for the two politicians. In the second models, the effect of age disappeared when attitudinal variables were added, although education was still significantly related to support for them. All attitudinal variables, except for xenophobia, were in statistically significant relation to support for Ishihara and Abe. However, xenophobia was solely significant to the preference for Ishihara, indicating that hypothesis 2 was supported.

In terms of other features of attitudinal variables, nationalism was the most strongly related to support for the two. As far as standardized coefficients show, the effect of nationalism in this case seems much stronger than it is European cases because nationalism has been the primary indica-

Table 4 Results of multiple regression analysis for the support of Ishihara by generation

| | 20–49 years old | | 50–69 years old | |
|------------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|------------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | B | | | |
| Gender (female = 1) | -0.018 | -0.004 | -0.065 | -0.032 |
| Age | 0.003 | -0.026 | 0.108 *** | 0.007 |
| Education | -0.031 | -0.021 | -0.171 *** | -0.108 *** |
| Self-employed | -0.001 | -0.026 | -0.006 | -0.039 |
| Professional | -0.057 | -0.048 | -0.032 | -0.007 |
| Managerial | 0.042 | 0.003 | 0.052 | -0.008 |
| Manual workers | -0.052 | 0.002 | 0.058 | 0.032 |
| Economic liberalism | | 0.192 *** | | 0.183 *** |
| Nationalism | | 0.277 *** | | 0.360 *** |
| Authoritarianism | | 0.072 * | | 0.013 |
| Xenophobia | | 0.087 * | | 0.081 * |
| Political trust | | 0.102 *** | | 0.130 *** |
| Left-right orientation | | 0.033 | | 0.143 *** |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.007 | 0.199 | 0.057 | 0.364 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

tor of the left-right continuum in postwar Japan (Otake, 1996). With regard to explanatory power for Ishihara, next to nationalism comes economic liberalism. Economic liberalism is also significantly related to support for Abe, but compared to Ishihara, the size of the coefficient was reduced likely because right wingers, embodied by Abe, have favored paternalistic clientelism over market competition.

Unlike the expectation from findings of research on the European radical right, political trust was positively related to support for Ishihara. This finding is partly explained by his 2007 gubernatorial election scandal, which alienated the politically discontent and led, thereby ‘protest supporters’ to reject him.. In this sense, preference for Ishihara in 2007 can be regarded as ideological support rather than protest support (van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2000; van der Brug and Fennema, 2003)¹¹.

4.2 Testing Hypotheses 1 and 3

Table 4 compares different logics to support Ishihara by generation. Model 1 of the older generation (ages 50 to 69) explains more of the total variance than did Table 3. It also shows that age and education are significantly associated with support for Ishihara. However, the model fails to support hypothesis 1 for the younger generation (ages 20 to 49): none of the demographic variables is significantly related to support for Ishihara. While results for the aged are at least partly aligned with the hypothesis 1, that is not the case with the younger generation.

Like Table 2, second models of Table 3 include attitudinal variables to measure different reasons for supporting Ishihara. Here, again, the explanatory power of the model is greater for the older generation, but is still high for the younger generation. In the case of the older generation, the effect of education was robust in that it was still significantly related to support for Ishihara after adding attitudinal variables.

Values of standardized coefficients partially support hypothesis 3. Nationalism, economic liberalism, and xenophobia were significantly associ-

ated with support for Ishihara, while the effect of nationalism was greater for the older generation. Differences were seen in authoritarianism and left-right orientation: the former was significant solely for the younger generation whereas the latter related only to the older generation. This result is in line with hypothesis 3, although political trust had an almost equal effect on support for Ishihara.

5 Conclusion

During the last decade, Japan has seen the rise of new radical right parties and groups, which is yet to be explained by researchers. This paper posed two questions—who supports the radical right in Japan and why?—testing three hypotheses related to the nature of the support for Ishihara—as ‘Japan’s Le Pen’. We hypothesized that social bases and logics that support Ishihara would be different from those supporting conventional right wingers.

Regarding Ishihara’s support base, hypothesis 1 was only partially supported. He was not significantly more supported by young, blue-collar workers and the self-employed or men. Only education was associated with a preference for Ishihara; therefore we can conclude that it is lesser educated elders who strongly support him. However, we could not find a clear counterpart in West European radical right supporters.

Hypothesis 2 was weakly supported: there was no significant relation between support for Abe and xenophobia, which was significantly associated with support for Ishihara. On the one hand, this finding indicates that immigration is not a matter of concern for conventional right wingers like Abe. On the other hand, there is room for the rise of the xenophobic radical right embodied by Ishihara. However, nationalism is the most important explanatory factor for Ishihara support. It is reasonable to expect that nationalism instead of xenophobia will play a key role when the radical right penetrates Japanese politics.

Hypothesis 3 was also partly supported. While the older generation support Ishihara due to their rightist ideologies, the younger generations prefer him because he meets their demand for a strong leader. However, nationalism and economic liberalism are strongly related to support for Ishihara for both generations. Moreover, political discontent does not account for generational difference.

These results led us to conclude that supporters and their logic for supporting Ishihara differ from those for conventional right wingers. Nonetheless, supporters and their logic do have something in common with European radical right, especially because xenophobia is significantly associated with support for Ishihara. However, it is premature to say that Japanese radical right politics is converging with its European counterparts. Our analysis identified at least two important differences worth explaining: (a) the lack of clear demographic basis to support Ishihara and (b) the importance of nationalism to explain support for Ishihara.

Research on Japan's radical right is still in the embryonic stage, but we have discovered a new hypothesis regarding the different types of radical right politicians, parties and groups in Europe and Japan. The recent rise of new populist and radical right parties—such as the Japan Restoration Party, the Sunrise Party of Japan, and the Party for Future Generations—enables us to test our hypothesis. It will be useful to expand the scope of research on the radical right worldwide.

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Notes

1. Regarding conventional right-wing groups, see Szymkowiak and Steinhoff (1995).
2. In fact, Ishihara was called “Japan’s Le Pen” (*New York Times*, April 29, 2002).
3. Regarding the populist nature of radical right politicians and its effect on voting behavior, see van der Brug and Mcghan (2007).
4. It is not always the case that authoritarianism is related to voting for the radical right. In the French case, authoritarianism had a significant effect on voting for Front National (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2002). On the other hand, supporters of Austrian Freedom Party were rather anti-authoritarian (McGann and Kitschelt, 2005).
5. There are complex relations between political discontent and support for the radical right. For details, see the following review (van der Brug and Fennema, 2007).
6. Different logics to support radical right politicians have been pointed out by European studies (Lubbers and Güveli, 2007; Ivarsson, 2005).
7. For details of the survey and descriptive statistics, see Higuchi et al. (2010), Matsutani et al. (2006, 2007).
8. Japan’s mainstream conservatives have been moderate in the sense that they emphasize economic growth and international cooperation instead of nationalism.
9. The most salient feature of recent right-wing politicians is their commitment to historical revisionism. For details, see Babb (2013).
10. The maximum bivariate correlation coefficient among independent variables was 0.337 between nationalism and authoritarianism.
11. The results of analysis using the 2005 data differed from those of the 2007 data: There was no significant relationship between political trust and support for Ishihara because those who were politically discontent also supported him in 2005 but were disappointed by his scandals (Matsutani, 2011: 139).

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