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Neoliberalism and Negative Attitudes toward Immigrants¹

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Abstract

Existing studies emphasize that the neoliberal ideology creates anti-immigrant attitudes. They attribute this to the influence of radical right-wing parties, which combine a pro-market ideology with authoritarian social conservatism. However, this claim has not been fully tested. To understand the mechanisms behind this association, our study analyzes data drawn from a representative survey and an online survey experiment conducted in Japan. Our results demonstrate that an association between neoliberalism and anti-immigrant attitudes exists even where radical right-wing parties are absent. Furthermore, the results of our experiment, where immigrants' skill levels and country of origin are varied in the vignette, show that respondents espousing neoliberal ideology are sensitive to the skill level of immigrants in that they strongly oppose low-skilled immigrants, while welcoming high-skilled immigrants. These results suggest that the association between neoliberalism and anti-immigrant attitudes is not simply a result of the influence of radical right-wing parties but rather stems from concerns over their future welfare burden.

Keywords: Immigration, Neoliberalism, Public Opinion, Survey Experiment
JEL classification: J15, D72, D91

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The idea of neoliberalism, which highly values free-market competition, thrived in the world economy, and now it has evolved into a socio-political ideology and expanded its influences into individual psychology and intergroup relations (Bettache & Chiu, 2019). Specifically, neoliberal ideology has been discussed in association with negative attitudes toward immigrants in the U.S. and European countries as the trend of international migration and welfare chauvinism expands (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019; Schmidt & Spies, 2013; Zhirkov, 2014). However, despite a considerable number of studies, we still do not fully understand why neoliberal ideology, which has nothing to do with exclusionism or xenophobia, could be linked with exclusive attitudes toward immigrants.

One of the most widely accepted explanations for the associations between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes is that radical right-wing parties deliver political messages combining pro-market ideology and authoritarian social conservatism in order to garner support from their constituencies (Kitschelt, 1995). Citizens thus internalize the logic of radical right-wing parties and develop anti-immigrant attitudes associating with neoliberal ideology (e.g., Zhirkov, 2014). This mechanism may not be applicable to the current political situation because radical right-wing parties have shifted their economic policy positions from neoliberalism toward the center, protectionism, or welfare chauvinism (de Lange, 2007; Minkenberg, 2002; Rovny, 2013). However, neoliberal ideology is still found to be connected to anti-immigrant attitudes at the individual level (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019; Schmidt & Spies, 2013; Zhirkov, 2014), making the radical right-wing party explanation questionable.

In this study, we argue that the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes is not simply driven by the messages of radical right-wing parties but rather by people's perceptions of immigrants' skills. That is, people adhering to neoliberal ideology, who value immigrants for their skill level and as a labor force, exhibit negative attitudes toward those with low-level skills. To test our hypothesis, we analyze data drawn from two surveys—a nationally representative survey and an online survey with experimental components—conducted in Japan, where radical right-wing parties are absent. The case of Japan is indeed suitable to test this hypothesis because we are able to detect whether there is any association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes even when no radical right-wing party exists. The experimental design also allows us to elaborate on the mechanisms behind this association.

Neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes

The economic aspect of neoliberal ideology is defined as “deregulation of markets and free movement of capital with an emphasis on fluidity and globalization” (Adams, et al., 2019: 191). It is originally an ideology of market economy, but recent studies in political science and social psychology emphasize its influence on shaping people's political behavior and attitudes (Bettache & Chiu, 2019). These studies describe individuals adhering to neoliberal ideology as “entrepreneurial selves” (ibid.) who take full responsibility of their own decisions, economic success (and failure), and ultimately their own lives (Sugarman, 2015).

A growing number of studies indeed argue that neoliberal ideology causes people to hold an exclusive attitude toward outgroups, especially immigrants. For instance, by using public opinion surveys in Europe conducted between 2002 and 2010, Zhirkov (2014) shows that opposition against redistribution, one of the key elements of neoliberal ideology, is positively associated with support for a radical right-wing party. Schmidt and Spies (2013) show that in European countries, anti-immigrant sentiment and opposition to redistribution are highly correlated among voters. In addition, Dutt and Kohfeldt (2019) show that Americans who espouse neoliberal ideology exhibit more negative attitudes toward asylum-seekers while being more supportive of ethnocentrism compared to those without such a strong ideological belief.

The dominant explanation for the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes focuses on the role of radical right-wing parties and their political message. Kitschelt (1995) argues that the combination of market liberalism and authoritarian social conservatism is a “winning formula” for radical right-wing parties to win elections (de Lange, 2007). Betz (1994) also claims that the success of the radical right in Europe is due to its shift in political emphasis toward neoliberal populism. For example, the Front National in France was successful in elections when using xenophobic statements mixed with strong opposition to high taxation and welfare states, as working class voters do not benefit from big government but are rather disproportionately taxed (Betz, 1994). Such radical right-wing parties’ messages promoted citizens to internalize the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant sentiment. This theoretical explanation was widely accepted in the literature (e.g., Mudde, 1999) and used as the underlying assumption in the models of empirical analyses (e.g., Zhirkov, 2014).

This mechanism, however, is not necessarily applicable to current political situations where radical right-wing parties have shifted their economic policy positions. Betz and Kitschelt modified their hypotheses (Betz, 2003; McGann & Kitschelt, 2005), arguing that the radical right-wing parties’ involvement in neoliberal economy was a rather temporal phenomenon in the 1980s. Indeed, de Lange (2007) empirically shows that radical right-wing parties have shifted their positions to the economic center since the 1990s (see Minkenberg, 2002). Instead, these parties take welfare chauvinism (Oesch, 2008) or blur economic positions (Rovny, 2013). Thus, at least in the current period, radical right-wing parties do not use political rhetoric mixing neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant sentiment. Despite these findings, empirical studies still show a consistent pattern that neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes are closely connected at the individual level (e.g., Zhirkov, 2014).

To understand the remaining puzzle about the mechanism behind the association between neoliberalism and anti-immigrant attitudes, we introduce a different explanation than the role of radical right-wing parties. That is, we hypothesize that people who espouse neoliberal ideology are more hostile against immigrants than others because they are highly sensitive to immigrants’ skill level and see them as a labor force. Natives tend to perceive immigrants as low-skilled labor (e.g., Scheve & Slaughter, 2001). Since high-skilled immigrants are more likely to contribute to the market of the host society than low-skilled immigrants are, people who embrace neoliberalism are concerned with immigrants’ skills as it will affect their potential welfare burden. Thus, we expect that neoliberal ideology to be highly correlated with negative attitudes toward immigrants even when radical right-wing parties are absent.

To test our hypothesis, this study uses survey data drawn from Japan, where radical right-wing parties do not exist or are hardly evident in the national parliament. The case of Japan enables us to exclude the possibility that citizens receive political messages from radical right-wing parties that connect neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes. Some might argue that the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is a right-wing party, which promoted neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s. However, the LDP did not necessarily associate immigrants with welfare policies (Asano, 2011). Even during the neoliberal reform period when the LDP’s Prime Minister Koizumi was popular among the public from 2001 through 2006, debate on immigration had been absent in the political arena. Hence, Japanese citizens hardly had an opportunity to be exposed to the political message connecting neoliberal ideology with anti-immigrant sentiment. If we find the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes even in the Japanese context, therefore, we are able to speculate that the combination of market liberalism and authoritarian social conservatism stems not from the winning formula of radical right-wing parties but from other mechanisms.

Population based survey (Study 1)

Data and Measurements

In Study 1, we test whether the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes is found among people in Japan, where no radical right-wing party is evident. To do so, we analyze data drawn from a nationally representative survey conducted in October 2017. Using stratified multistage random sampling, this survey sampled vote-eligible Japanese constituencies aged from 18 to 80 in 60 municipalities. Paper-format questionnaires were sent to the selected respondents' residential address by postal mail. The total number of respondents, who sent back their responses, in the sample is 3,882 (the survey's response rate is 44.5%). Average age of those respondents is 55.0 years old, and the share of male respondents is 46.8%. More details about the descriptive sample statistics are shown in Appendix.

The dependent variables for our empirical analyses are respondents' attitudes toward immigrants coming from China, South Korea, the Philippines, Brazil, Germany, and the United States. We chose the first four groups of immigrants (Chinese, South Korean, Filipino, and Japanese-Brazilian) as they compose the largest number of immigrant groups in Japan; Americans and Germans are selected as they are the most favored immigrant groups in Japan (Igarashi, 2015). These variables are based on responses to the following question: "Do you agree or disagree with the following groups coming to live in your neighborhood?" The response for each immigrant group is recorded in the four-point scale ranged from 1 (agree) to 4 (disagree).

Our main explanatory variable is the measure of a respondent's support for neoliberal ideology, which is based on a question about one's attitude toward income inequality. The question shows two extremes: (A) "a society that provides generous welfare to people" and (B) "a society in which individuals are responsible for taking care of themselves." Respondents are asked to choose either one of the extreme ends as the one closer to their own preferred position in the four-point scale from 1 (close to A) and 4 (close to B). We acknowledge that this may not be perfect as a comprehensive scale for measuring neoliberalism (e.g., Bay-Cheng, et al., 2015). Yet, we believe that this question captures the key concept of neoliberalism—personal responsibility (Bay-Cheng, et al., 2015; Sugarman, 2015), which is applicable to the Japanese context as well. For example, as poverty became a salient social issue in Japan, many citizens began to criticize those who are homeless and live on public aid, blaming their economic failure on their personal responsibility (Nishizawa, 2015; Yuasa, 2008).

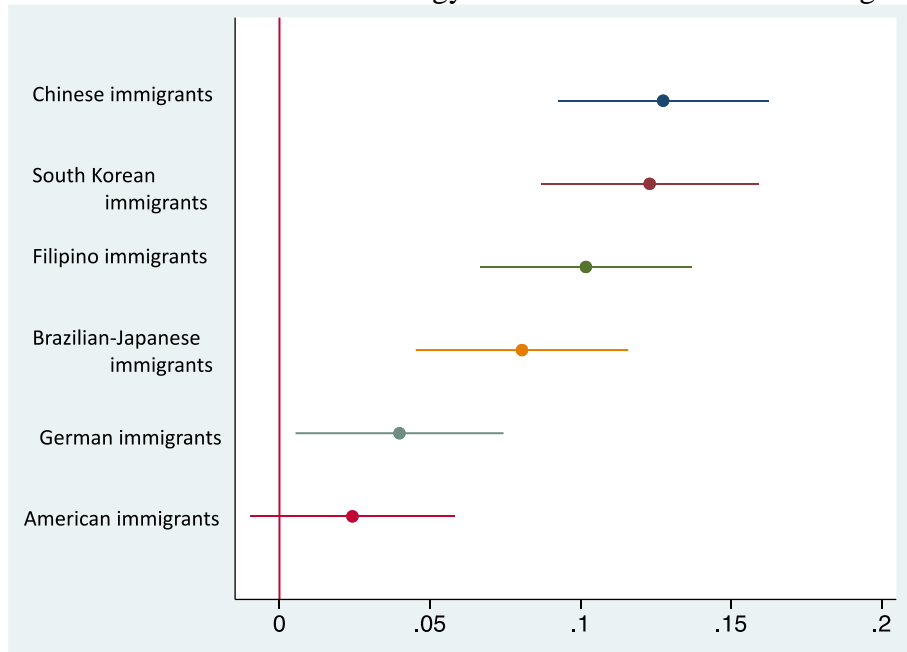
We control for each respondent's sex, age, education, satisfaction with one's life, perceived economic and security threats, and party preference. The model also includes fixed effects for individual municipalities where respondents reside in order to control for their life environmental effects (e.g., the proportion of immigrants living in their neighborhoods).

Results of Empirical Analysis

We test the association between neoliberal ideology and attitudes toward Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Japanese-Brazilian, German, and American immigrants coming to Japan as well as the endorsement of their voting rights. Figure 1 shows the results. As it is evident from the results, people who adhere to neoliberal ideology hold negative views toward Chinese, Korean, Filipino, and Japanese-Brazilian immigrants. Note that we have controlled for major types of threats as well as various respondent level attributes, including party support. Thus, while previous studies have focused on the cases in Western Europe, we found a similar pattern of results in Japan.

Interestingly, however, we also found that the associations between neoliberal ideology and attitudes toward German and American immigrants are very small and marginal. This contradicting result may stem from the general public’s image associated between immigrants and the level of their skills. For example, immigrants who come from East Asian countries are often associated with the “welfare fraud” image among natives in Japan (Higuchi, 2014), partly because they are perceived as low-skilled people. On the other hand, American immigrants, who tend to have a general image of being highly skilled, are preferred among Japanese (Igarashi, 2015). Thus, to better understand the association between neoliberal ideology and attitudes toward immigrants, we need to decompose immigrants’ skill levels and country of origin. Next, we present the results of our survey experiment that attempts to test our hypothesis in a more direct manner.

Figure 1. The effect of neoliberal ideology on attitudes toward each immigrant group



Survey experiment (Study 2)

Data and Methods

To understand the mechanisms behind the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes, we conducted a survey experiment in Japan. We collected data through an online survey with an experimental component. The target age is from 18 to 79. Respondents were recruited from the subject pool of Rakuten Insight, Inc.—one of the largest survey companies in Japan—so that our sample matches the Japanese census population in terms of age, sex, and residential area (i.e., prefecture). The sample size is 3,153, and we obtained the data from a total of 2,369 respondents after excluding those who failed to pass inattentive check questions.² The average age of our respondents is 48.8 years old, and the share of male respondents is 49.2%. The detailed sample statistics information is presented in Appendix.

Variables

² We also analyzed data including those who are inattentive to our questions, but the results remain the same substantively. The results are provided in Appendix.

In the experiment, we asked the following question to individual respondents: “Do you support or oppose increasing the number of [high school graduate/post-graduate] [Chinese/American] immigrants in your residential area?” The respondents answer this question on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (support) to 5 (oppose). We manipulated the nationality (Chinese or American) as well as skill levels (high school diploma or post-graduate) of immigrants in the question statement. Thus, there are four conditions in total. Respondents are randomly asked one of the four types of questions. We selected Americans and Chinese here because they are the most and least favored by Japanese, respectively (Igarashi, 2015). The skill levels of immigrants are manipulated by the level of their educational attainment, following previous studies (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001).³

We also asked respondents about their position on socioeconomic policies to measure their affinity with neoliberalism. To be more specific, we asked the extent to which respondents agree with the following statement about personal responsibility—the key concept of neoliberalism: “Individuals should be responsible for taking care of themselves.” Their responses are recorded in the four-point scale from 1 (disagree) to 4 (agree).

By using these variables, we examine not only the effects of the nationality and skill levels of immigrants on respondents’ attitude toward the immigrants, but also how those effects vary depending on the strength of respondents’ belief in neoliberal ideology. Our argument suggests that respondents espousing neoliberal ideology prefer high-skilled immigrants to low-skilled ones. Thus, we expect that the effects of skill level on anti-immigrant attitudes become larger as respondents have stronger belief in neoliberal ideology. In the regression models, we also control for respondents’ age, gender, education, and party preference, and include the fixed effects for their residential location as well.

Results

The results of our empirical analyses are shown in Table 1. Model 1 indicates the interaction outcomes between experimental components—nationality and skill level—and neoliberal ideology without control variables, and Model 2 includes control variables. These results demonstrate how the effects of immigrants’ nationality and skill levels on attitudes toward the immigrants vary depending on respondents’ adherence to neoliberal ideology. If the skill level of immigrants intervenes the association between neoliberal ideology and attitude toward immigrants as we have expected, respondents should not always exhibit negative attitudes toward immigrants even if they strongly espouse neoliberal ideology. The results of Table 1 show that the interaction between the skill level and neoliberal ideology is statistically significant, suggesting that the association between neoliberal ideology and attitudes toward an immigrant is moderated by the immigrant’s skill level. When respondents espouse a strong neoliberal ideology, they oppose low-skilled immigrants while supporting high-skilled ones.

We illustrate the marginal effect of neoliberal ideology on anti-immigrant attitudes in Figure 2a, which is based on the results of Model 2. These results are consistent with our hypothesis, suggesting that people adhering to neoliberal ideology are concerned with immigrants’ skills and opt for high-skilled immigrants. That said, we also found some unexpected results regarding the interaction between neoliberal ideology and immigrants’ nationality. Figure 2b shows that people espousing neoliberal ideology are more strongly

³ Some may consider that there is an interaction between the nationality and skill levels of immigrants. However, we found no statistically significant results.

opposed to a Chinese immigrant, regardless of his or her skill level.⁴ We speculate that this tendency among neoliberals reflects their social dominance orientation (SDO), referring to the beliefs that society is hierarchically structured and that some groups are of a higher status than others (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Those with a higher SDO tend to exhibit negative attitudes toward perceived lower status groups (e.g., Duckitt, 2006). People with a high level of neoliberal ideology are inclined to support SDO (Bay-Cheng, et al., 2015). Because American immigrants are located at the top and Chinese immigrants are located at the bottom of ethnic hierarchy in Japan (Igarashi, 2015), it is possible that neoliberal ideology that entailing the SDO leads the respondents to welcome higher status immigrants while distancing themselves from lower status immigrants.

Table 1. The effects on anti-immigrant attitude

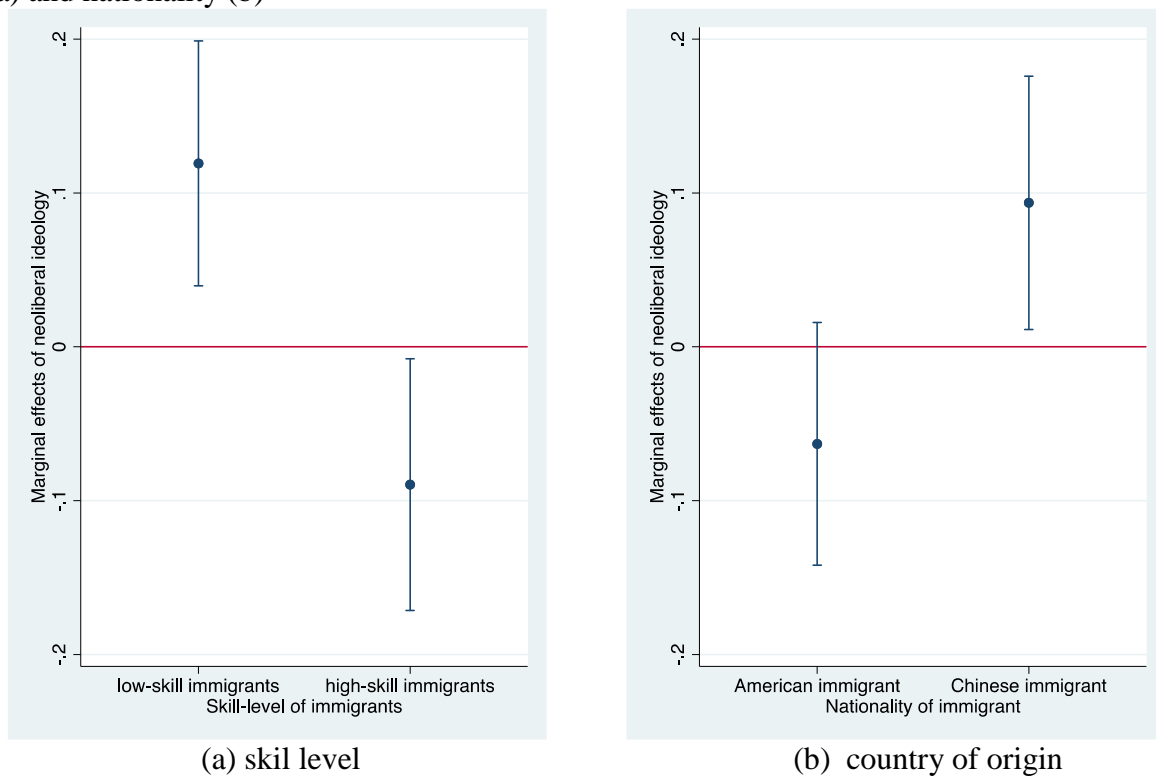
| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | B (S.E.) | B (S.E.) |
| Chinese priming (ref. American) | .196 (.172) | .176 (.172) |
| High skill priming (ref. low skill) | .227 (.172) | .230 (.172) |
| Neoliberal ideology | .052 (.048) | .041 (.048) |
| × Chinese priming | .152** (.058) | .157** (.058) |
| × High skill priming | -.209*** (.058) | -.209*** (.058) |
| Control variables | | |
| Age | - | .004** (.001) |
| Male | - | .070 (.043) |
| Education (ref. junior high) | | |
| High school | - | -.120 (.143) |
| College | - | -.092 (.144) |
| University | - | -.120 (.142) |
| Graduate school | - | -.272 (.166) |
| Party support (ref. no support) | | |
| Liberal Democratic Party | - | -.032 (.048) |
| Constitutional Democratic Party | - | -.241*** (.068) |
| Clean Government Party (Komei) | - | -.200 (.138) |
| Japan Innovation Party | - | -.005 (.091) |
| Japan Communist Party | - | -.124 (.102) |
| Other | - | .021 (.119) |

+p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Number of observations is 2,357. Prefecture-fixed effects are included.

⁴ We also conducted three-way interactions between skill-level, nationality, and neoliberal ideology, but the three-way interaction term is insignificant, indicating that neoliberal people are likely to react to immigrants' skill-level independently from their nationality (see Appendix).

Figure 2. Marginal effects of neoliberal ideology on attitudes toward immigrants by skill level (a) and nationality (b)



Conclusion

In this study, we argued that natives adhering to neoliberal ideology are hostile against immigrants not because of pro-market and anti-immigration messages promoted by radical right-wing parties, but because neoliberal ideology is highly connected with concerns over immigrants’ skill levels. As shown in Study 1, even in the Japanese context, where no radical right-wing parties exist, neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes are strongly correlated. Moreover, neoliberal ideology is not associated with attitudes toward immigrants coming from the United States, who are indeed the most favorably perceived immigrant group in Japan (Igarashi, 2015). In Study 2, we manipulated the skill level as well as nationality of immigrants to uncover the mechanisms behind the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes among natives. Our results show that natives with neoliberal ideology prefer high-skilled immigrants to low-skilled ones. In addition, neoliberal ideology is associated with immigrants’ nationality—for example, people with neoliberal ideology exhibit negative attitudes toward Chinese immigrants.

This study reveals the mechanisms behind the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes. Previous studies largely focused on radical rights’ “winning formula” argument. Yet, the “winning formula” argument is not applicable to the Japanese case, and the mechanism behind these associations found in this study cannot be attributed to radical right-wing parties. We instead demonstrate that immigrants’ skill levels are highly relevant for understanding how natives with neoliberal ideology shape their attitudes toward immigrants. In other words, natives espousing neoliberal ideology attempt to exclude immigrants who are low-skilled and to accept high-skilled ones. These results expand the applicability of neoliberal xenophobia. Previous studies are limited to contexts where radical right-wing parties exist in explaining the associations between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes. Our studies, however, located these associations in more general situations and political contexts. Neoliberal ideology triggers anti-immigrant

attitudes among natives regardless of the political context if those natives perceive immigrants as low-skilled.

Furthermore, our studies add nuance to the association between neoliberal ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes. Study 2 shows that American immigrants are more preferred as the level of neoliberal ideology rises, even after controlling for the immigrant's skill level. This outcome indicates that neoliberal ideology drives anti-immigrant sentiments not only based on immigrants' skills but also on immigrants' nationality or ethnic group. We speculated this tendency among neoliberals associating with their authoritarianism and SDO, but further study is needed to fully understand the mechanisms behind the linkage between neoliberalism and anti-immigrant attitudes. Future research might tease out the effects of SDO separately from those of neoliberal ideology to figure out the important role of immigrants' skill levels in shaping people's attitudes toward immigrants.

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Appendix

Table A1. Sample Descriptive Statistics for Study 1

| | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Male | 46.76% |
| Age | |
| 18-29 | 8.23% |
| 30-49 | 26.97% |
| 50-69 | 44.16% |
| 70-80 | 20.64% |
| Education | |
| Junior high school | 12.92% |
| High school | 48.56% |
| College | 13.21% |
| University | 25.31% |
| Party support | |
| Liberal Democratic Party | 38.18% |
| Party of Hope | 5.54% |
| Constitutional Democratic Party | 16.94% |
| Clean Government Party (Komei) | 4.14% |
| Japan Innovation Party | 3.00% |
| Japan Communist Party | 3.50% |
| Other | 0.50% |
| No support | 28.21% |

Table A2. Descriptive Statistics of Survey Responses for Study 1

| | Mean (S.D.) | Min. | Max. |
|-------------------------------|-------------|------|------|
| Attitudes | | | |
| Chinese immigrants | 3.12 (.88) | 1 | 4 |
| South Korean immigrants | 2.94 (.90) | 1 | 4 |
| Filipino immigrants | 2.62 (.86) | 1 | 4 |
| Brazilian-Japanese immigrants | 2.47 (.85) | 1 | 4 |
| German immigrants | 2.28 (.84) | 1 | 4 |
| American immigrants | 2.15 (.81) | 1 | 4 |
| Neoliberal ideology | 2.33 (.78) | 1 | 4 |
| Satisfaction with income | 2.71 (.78) | 1 | 4 |
| Economic threats | 2.93 (1.07) | 1 | 5 |
| Crime threats | 3.88 (.98) | 1 | 5 |

Table A3. Sample Descriptive Statistics for Study 2

| | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Male | 49.15% |
| Age | |
| 18-29 | 14.67% |
| 30-49 | 35.30% |
| 50-69 | 34.79% |
| 70-79 | 15.24% |
| Education | |
| Junior high school | 2.22% |
| High school | 27.27% |
| College | 23.35% |
| University | 42.25% |
| Graduate school | 4.91% |
| Party support | |
| Liberal Democratic Party | 36.05% |
| Constitutional Democratic Party | 12.50% |
| Clean Government Party (Komei) | 2.26% |
| Japan Innovation Party | 6.07% |
| Japan Communist Party | 4.33% |
| Other | 3.10% |
| No support | 35.69% |

Table A4. Descriptive Statistics of Survey Responses for Study 2

| | Mean | Min. | Max. |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|
| Attitude toward immigrants | 3.26 | 1 | 5 |
| Neoliberal ideology | 2.88 | 1 | 4 |

Table A5. Three-way interaction results

| | B (S.E.) |
|--|-----------------|
| Chinese priming (ref. American) | .258 (.240) |
| High skill priming (ref. low skill) | .312 (.237) |
| Chinese priming × high skill priming | -.171 (.344) |
| Neoliberal ideology | .059 (.055) |
| × Chinese priming | .118 (.081) |
| × High skill priming | -.248** (.080) |
| × Chinese priming × High skill priming | .080 (.116) |

+p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. N = 2,357.

Prefecture(residential area)-fixed effects and control variables are included.