

Political Affiliation and the Politics of Immigration in Japan: A Quantitative Analysis of National Diet Records

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Abstract:

As of December 2024, close to 3.8 million foreigners live and work in Japan, a number that is expected to grow further as the country grapples with demographic challenges and a resulting labor shortage. In recent years, Japan has instituted new migration policies to proactively recruit foreign workers. Despite this, Japan maintains that it does not have a formal immigration policy and denies being a “country of immigration.” Within this context, the aim of this study is to analyze how politicians have discussed immigration, foreign labor, and related terms in the National Diet, and whether usage of these terms differs by political party affiliation. We have constructed a database featuring records of every single speech in both houses of the National Diet based on its API. This article focuses on the period 1985–2024, which overlaps with the influx of so-called “newcomer” migration to Japan. We have designed a program to count the frequency of four topic-related terms: immigrant (*imin*), immigration policy (*imin seisaku*), foreign/migrant worker (*gaikokujin rōdōsha*), and foreign human resources (*gaikoku jinzai*). Next, we mapped the overall frequency of each term for the period 1985–2024 to show modern trendlines. Finally, we outlined the mention of each term by political affiliation (classified as government or opposition) for the period 2015–2024. Overall, we found that immigration-related language in Japan has increased substantially over the past four decades. However, opposition parties are far more likely to utilize such language, with government parties preferring the neologism *gaikoku jinzai*.

Keywords: *Japanese politics, immigration policy, political discourse, party politics*

1. Introduction

As of December 2024, the foreign population of Japan has risen to nearly 3.8 million, following an increase of over 300,000 foreign residents in that year alone (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice 2025). This is a record number and follows a consistent increase in the foreign population in Japan over the past four decades. Admitting more foreigners, and foreign workers specifically, has become an issue of increased political salience in recent years, as Japan continues to

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grapple with the effects of *shōshi kōreika*,¹ a term that refers to the dual problem of a decreasing birth rate and an aging population. Demography plays a significant role in persistent labor shortages across various sectors of Japan's economy (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2019), and foreign workers are expected to become a solution to this issue. In fact, recent analysis by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) suggests that to meet the government's GDP growth objectives, Japan would need about 6.9 million foreign workers by 2040, which would represent an increase of 236% when compared to 2023 (JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development 2024).

It is no surprise then that Japan has also enacted numerous changes to its migration policies in recent years. However, in overall terms, Japan has experienced quite a varied trajectory regarding immigration following its defeat in World War II. In the immediate post-war years and until the 1980s, colonial-era transplants accounted for the majority of immigrants, which have come to be known as “oldcomers” in the literature on Japanese immigration. In contrast, the decades since have seen first a gradual and then a more rapid rise in the number of foreign residents—so-called “newcomers”—driven primarily by the admission of foreign workers. This has led to some academics arguing that Japan is converging with other Western countries on immigration policy (Hollifield and Sharpe 2017). This is the primary reason we have chosen to focus on the period since 1985 for this study.

Throughout Japan's post-war history, there has been one constant when it comes to discussions on this issue: Japanese politicians have generally avoided any mention of the word “immigrant” or “immigration policy” and framed the acceptance of ever more foreigners using different language. Since its founding in 1955, Japanese politics has been dominated by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has held power continuously aside from a brief period in the early 1990s and from 2009–2012. The LDP's dominance has undoubtedly shaped the national debate on immigration as well, especially as it relates to the discursive denial of immigration. For example, despite enacting numerous migration reforms during his second administration (2012–2020), the late LDP Prime Minister Shinzo Abe maintained that his government “is not considering the adoption of a so-called immigration policy” (National Diet Library 2018).

Given all this, what terms have Japan's politicians used to describe the admission of foreigners into their country, and the related migration policies? Has the volume of discourse changed over time? And is there any discrepancy between political parties in the political discourse on this issue? This study aims to answer these questions by systematically analyzing political discourse in the National Diet (Japan's primary legislative body) over the period from 1985 up to the present, and we present two separate analyses in this paper.

First, we employ a frequency analysis that counts every single occurrence of a set of terms that relate closely to immigration and related policy. These terms are “immigrant” (*imin*, can also mean emigrant, immigration, or emigration depending on context), “immigration policy” (*imin seisaku*), “foreign/migrant worker” (*gaikokujin rōdōsha*), and the neologism “foreign human resources” (*gaikoku jinzai*). We classify the former two terms as “immigration-related” language, with the latter two being “substitute” or “alternative” language. Second, we analyze whether there is a difference in the volume of usage of each term by political affiliation. For this analysis, we look at the period from 2015 to 2024, as this timeframe has the highest overall frequency and corresponds to a relatively stable period of concurrent coalition rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito. We map usage of each

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

term by classifying overall volume between the government (LDP/Komeito) and opposition (all other parties) in an effort to determine whether—and how pronounced—the difference in political discourse on immigration is.

Overall, through this analysis we are able to show three primary conclusions. First, the overall volume of debate (as measured by the frequencies of all four terms we selected) on migration has increased dramatically over the past four decades, reflecting the increased salience of the migration portfolio in Japanese politics. Second, immigration-related language has correspondingly increased in usage within the National Diet, although substitute language continues to appear far more frequently. Third, government parties are more likely to utilize substitute language—and especially the neologism *gaikoku jinzai*—while opposition parties are far more likely to use immigration-related language.

2. Literature Review

When discussing immigration to Japan and related policies, academics generally focus on either oldcomers or newcomers. While there is significant literature discussing the *zainichi korean* specifically (e.g., Lie 2008; Ryang and Lie 2009), most holistic examinations of the politics of immigration in Japan have been conducted since the start of newcomer migration. In general, many domestic Japanese scholars focusing on migration have come from the field of sociology (see for example Kajita 1994, 2002; Komai 1994, 2016; Miyajima 1993) and have thus focused on micro-level analyses that outline the lived experiences of migrants in Japan. A recent book by Gracia Liu-Farrer focuses on a similar theme, describing how immigrants see their place amidst an “ethno-nationalist society” (Liu-Farrer 2020). On the other hand, a number of international scholars have aimed to place Japan’s immigration policies within existing frameworks in migration studies prevalent in Europe and North America (Chung 2014; Cohen 2020; Cornelius 1994; Hollifield and Sharpe 2017; Tsuda and Cornelius 2004). None of these approaches examines political discourse in the way this study aims to do.

Of course, there have also been scholarly works that focus more heavily on specific Japanese immigration policies, how and why they were implemented, and what their outcomes were (Akashi 2010; 2014; Endoh 2019; Kondo 2002). These studies do include a component on how these policies were framed, justified, or otherwise presented, both within the National Diet and outside of it. More recently, scholars have also begun to study the seemingly contradictory nature between Japan’s proactive recruitment of foreign workers and discursive denial of immigration policy, a theme we touched upon in the introduction. They have focused on the politics of immigration (Strausz 2019), as well as the policymaking process (Akashi 2010). Song (2020) discussed the recent migration policies under the Abe administration, outlining his political balancing act between business interests that need foreign labor and Abe’s nationalist base that opposes immigration. On the other hand, Wakisaka (2023) argued that the bureaucracy’s approach to drafting migration policy is oftentimes self-constrained, avoiding fundamental reform. Again, these academics do pay credence to political discourse, but this is not the primary scope of their analyses.

A recent paper by Glenda Roberts (2018) focuses on the semantics of immigration in Japan. Roberts outlines how Japan has created diverse pathways for foreigners to come and stay in Japan, including some that allow for permanent settlement, all the while carefully avoiding the “i-word” (referring to *imin*). Through a careful analysis of each major Japanese migration policy, she outlines how each pathway is described in substitute wording in lieu of immigration-related language. Roberts uses an anthropological approach, describing how “creative nomenclature and some stipulations about

qualifications” can be “transformed into categories that sound more palatable to the general populace without violating the ‘no blanket immigration’ stance” (Roberts 2018, 99). While her study is quite close to our own thematically, Roberts employed a very different methodology: a qualitative review of key policy documents.

Looking beyond Japan, quantitative political discourse analyses focusing on parliamentary debates on migration have become more prevalent in recent years due to the mass digitization of legislative records and the overall increase in the political salience of the issue in major democratic destination countries. For instance, there have been major recent long-term studies focusing on the USA (Card et al. 2022), the UK (Ghafouri et al. 2025), or as part of a comparative study featuring the Spanish, British, and European parliaments (Calzada Pérez 2023). All of these studies begin with a frequency analysis of relevant terms, while also adding additional quantitative aspects such as mapping discourse by political parties or analyzing long-term sentiment trends. While our study is admittedly comparatively limited in scope, we are also employing a frequency analysis, which we then further map onto political party affiliation. Our paper is thus positioned as the first foray into a long-term quantitative analysis of the Japanese case, providing some firm initial clues on how the topic of migration has been discussed in the National Diet.

One of the constant themes in studies focusing on the European or North American legislative debate on migration has been “framing,” i.e., what themes politicians choose to associate the issue with when speaking in a parliamentary context. One study comparing the USA and Canada found that there are clear measurable differences in how migration is framed based on ideological blocs, with liberal-leaning parties emphasizing humanitarian or welfare aspects, while their conservative-leaning counterparts highlight security and legal issues (Hajdinjak et al. 2020). By mapping the frequency of words related to migration, which have certain political connotations in the Japanese context, to party affiliation, our paper also attempts to provide some answers on how different political blocs frame the issue.

Moving back to the Japanese case, the closest study to our own is by Yuka Omoya (2020) who quantitatively analyzed how migration was discussed during the extraordinary session of the National Diet in late 2018, which specifically addressed the passage of the 2019 amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (ICRRA). Her word selection was similar to ours (including *imin*, *gaikokujin rōdōsha*, and *gaikoku jinzai*), and she focused on differences in political discourse between government and opposition parties as well. Omoya’s analysis found that ruling parties were more reluctant to use immigration-related language and that there were clear differences in the aspect of the law that the government and opposition focused on during debates. Our analysis broadly confirms her results but is conducted over a far longer time span and thus offers more conclusive evidence.

Overall, our study thus fills several clear gaps in the literature. First, the political discourse on immigration in Japan has rarely been the focus of past scholarship. Second, our methodological approach, a quantitative approach to political discourse analysis that employs a frequency analysis of National Diet records, is unique in the Japanese context, with a similar methodology only being attempted once in the previous literature. Third, our analysis covers an extensive timeframe that broadly corresponds to the entire period of newcomer migration to Japan, thus providing results based on long-term analysis.

3. Data and Methodology

As we saw above, quantitative analysis of legislative speech has become a cornerstone of political science, as it offers systematic insights into agenda salience and partisan framing through text-as-data approaches. As Grimmer and Stewart (2013) outline, one of the most important aspects in study design is to ensure that chosen metrics (i.e., word frequencies) actually capture the intended concept (i.e., salience, framing).

To that end, the primary methodology employed in this paper is a frequency analysis. Basically, a frequency analysis counts every single instance a specific word appears in a given database. Such an analysis is useful for gauging numerous trends that can be theoretically linked to two separate frameworks. First, borrowing from concepts related to agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972), we assume that the frequency of immigration-related terms in parliamentary debates is an indicator of issue salience. Quite simply, legislative debates constitute a formal record of what policymakers consider important (Proksch and Slapin 2014). Therefore, measuring the frequency of how related words have increased or decreased over time can demonstrate how the political salience of a given topic has changed.

Second, we are attempting to obtain clues on how the issue of migration has been framed based on whether the frequency of certain words (for instance, with a positive or negative connotation towards the given topic) has increased or decreased. Framing constitutes selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman 1993, 52). In our case, a policymaker using the term “foreign human resources” can indicate a desire to frame the acceptance of foreigners in economic terms, whereas using the term “immigrant” emphasizes their potential for a long-term stay. Therefore, measuring the frequencies of these words can also provide clues on how policymakers frame migration. Furthermore, we also mapped frequencies by political orientation (government or opposition) to assess whether there is a difference in the usage of language among policymakers based on their political affiliation. As word selection is crucial to the relevance of a frequency analysis, we have dedicated an entire section to explaining why we chose the four words included in this study (see below).

Our dataset is based on the National Diet Library’s API,² and we have constructed a database that features individually searchable records of every single speech in both houses of the National Diet from its first convening on May 20, 1947, to May 31, 2024. In addition, we have designed a program that counts occurrences of target words within the database. To validate our approach, we also manually tested keyword searches using the National Diet Library’s official search engine.³ The specific timeframe of our analysis is January 1, 1985, to May 31, 2024, and our corpus includes 44,226 total records (corresponding to a committee meeting, plenary session, etc.), in which each instance of speech is coded individually.

(1) Word Selection

While this study employs a quantitative approach, the word selection process is still subjective and was ultimately carried out based on our domain knowledge of the subject. However, we did employ concepts from the field of political discourse analysis to guide our selection. Specifically, we utilized concepts from Teun A. van Dijk (van Dijk 1997; 2018). The simplest definition of political discourse is simply “doing politics,” as most political actions are discursive in nature (van Dijk 1997, 18). In this study,

² <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/api.html>

³ <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/>

we have the benefit of a clear institutional setting, the Japanese National Diet. Therefore, we have a comparatively easily definable political domain, which is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Political Domain of this Study

Domain	Politics
System	Constitutional monarchy w. parliamentary system of government
Institution	National Diet (primarily legislative body)
Values/Ideologies	Democracy, group and party ideologies
Organizations	Political parties, parliamentary committees, lobbyists, interest groups, etc.
Political Actors	Members of parliament, cabinet ministers, invited speakers
Political Relations	Legislative power
Political Process	Legislation
Political Action	Political decision-making
Political Cognitions	Attitudes about migration and related policy

Created by the authors based on Teun A. van Dijk's framework (van Dijk 1997).

Debates within the National Diet are a more formal form of political discourse when compared to a more informal environment, such as a political rally. There is also a clear goal of legislating, i.e., making legally binding political decisions. A majority of the speakers are the policymakers themselves, with some exceptions for invited speakers. Overall, the clearly defined political domain is conducive to our overall goal for this study, i.e., to determine how Japanese politicians have changed their political discourse on immigration since the mid-1980s. Finally, the Japanese National Diet is a comparable institutional setting to similar parliamentary systems in major immigrant-receiving countries, making this study relevant from a comparative perspective as well. Japan is an “intermediate” case when compared with other legislatures throughout the world, featuring leader dominance in plenary debate but a more egalitarian distribution of speaking time in committee (Smith 2021, 538).

Next, we needed to pay special credence to the Japanese language itself. For this, we took special care to consider two specific factors in our word selection: (1) local semantics, i.e., the nuance of certain word choices and what they mean in the context of the Japanese language; (2) lexicon, specifically the usage of substitute words and neologisms to describe immigrants (van Dijk 1997). Table 2 outlines the four terms we ended up choosing for this analysis, as well as the reasons why we made these selections.

Table 2: Details on Word Selection

Japanese	Romanization	Meaning	Reasoning for Inclusion	Other Considerations
移民	<i>imin</i>	immigrant, emigrant, to immigrate, to emigrate	Directly related to primary subject matter	Local semantics
移民政策	<i>imin seisaku</i>	immigration policy, emigration policy	Directly related to primary subject matter, relevant due to institutional setting	Local semantics
外国人労働者	<i>gaikokujin rōdōsha</i>	foreign / migrant worker	To gauge the volume of substitute word usage, i.e., whether debate on migration avoids immigration-related language	Alternative Lexicon

外国人材	<i>gaikoku jinzai</i>	foreign human resource	To gauge volume of neologism usage, i.e., whether neologisms were introduced to avoid immigration-related language	Neologism
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Created by the authors.

This study's primary subject matter relates to how the issue of immigration has been discussed in the National Diet, and therefore the inclusion of both *imin* and *imin seisaku* makes abundant sense, with the latter being relevant given the institutional context. However, when analyzing the results relating to these words, it is important to recognize that their meaning can change depending on linguistic context. Specifically, they can relate to both immigration and emigration. Considering that Japan also employed emigration programs in the immediate post-war period, these local semantics are potentially important to consider when interpreting the results. However, since this analysis focused on the period from 1985 to 2024, this consideration is less relevant for the timeframe covered.

Finally, one of the recent trends many scholars have identified when it comes to Japanese migration policies—and what prompted us to design this study—is the apparent political will to increase levels of migration, especially as it pertains to foreign workers, while maintaining the discursive denial of immigration. Therefore, we wanted to include substitute wording to get a clearer picture of the level of intensity of migration-related discussion in general, and how the volume of usage of these substitute words compares to immigration-related wording. *Gaikokujin rōdōsha* is the most common way to refer to foreign or migrant workers in Japanese. The term gained special prominence starting in the 1980s, when the influx of primarily unregistered foreign workers was referred to by policymakers as the *gaikokujin rōdōsha mondai* (foreign worker problem) (Hachiya 1992). On the other hand, *gaikoku jinzai* is a neologism that has entered the political parlance in the late 2000s to describe the government's more proactive stance in admitting foreign workers in skills-based or economic terms, arguably to sidestep a discussion regarding immigration (Roberts 2018).

Overall, we have thus selected two terms (*imin* and *imin seisaku*) that can be classified as immigration-related language, with the other two (*gaikokujin rōdōsha* and *gaikoku jinzai*) corresponding to substitute language. Finally, we also took special credence to compare our final word selection with Omoya's quantitative study on the National Diet deliberations surrounding the 2019 ICRRA amendment, as she identified three terms that are “related” to immigrant (*imin*) that appear at high frequencies (Omoya 2020, 179). Two of the terms (*gaikokujin rōdōsha* and *gaikoku jinzai*) are included in our own study. We decided to forego including the final term, technical intern (*ginō jishūsei*), due to the fact that it refers to a specific labor migration policy, the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), and we wanted to measure the political discourse on migration in a more general sense.

4. Results

Table 3: Numerical Overview of Frequency Analysis, 1985–2024

	1985-1989	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2015-2019	2020-2024
移民 (<i>imin</i>)	212	209	219	433	461	264	800	255
移民政策 (<i>imin seisaku</i>)	6	6	8	48	45	75	344	69
外国人労働者 (<i>gaikokujin rōdōsha</i>)	693	1194	184	396	843	309	1898	489
外国人材 (<i>gaikoku jinzai</i>)	0	0	0	0	17	172	2008	430

Created by the authors, based on the National Diet's API.

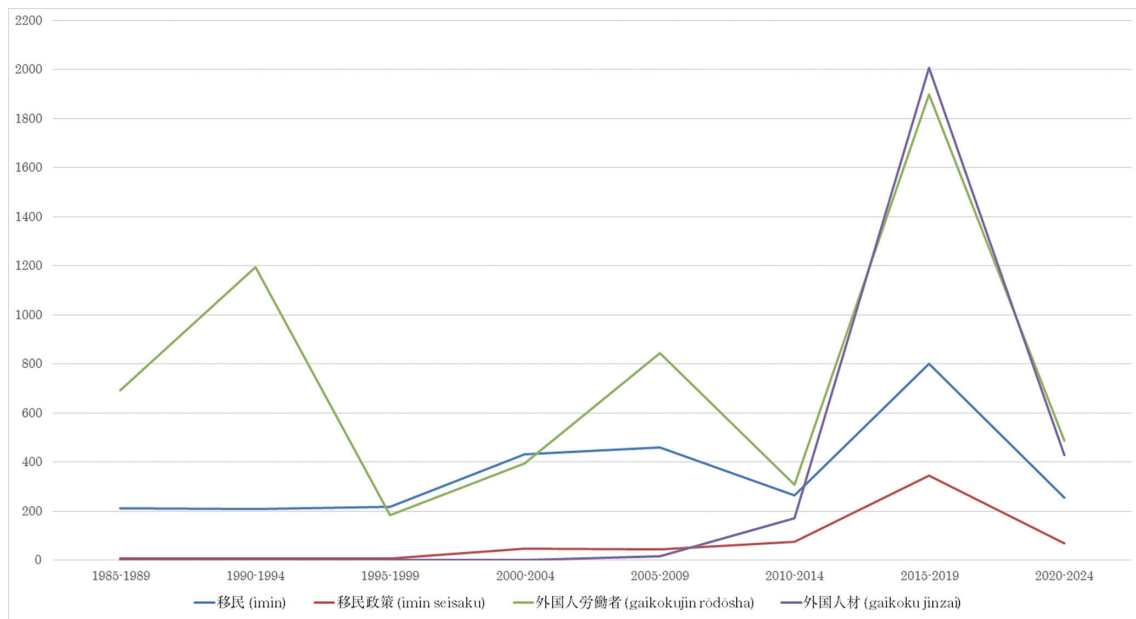


Figure 1: Graphical Overview of Frequency Analysis, 1985–2024

Created by the authors, based on the National Diet's API.

Let us now move on to the results of our analysis, which are summarized in Table 3 and Figure 1. As outlined above, our program counted every single instance of the four target words being mentioned in any record of both houses of the National Diet from January 1, 1985, to May 31, 2024. To visualize long-term trends while smoothing short-term fluctuations, we decided to present the results in separate five-year periods, with one exception: the period 2020–2024 is shorter due to the parameters of our program, which cuts off on May 31, 2024. One five-year period begins on January 1 of the first year (e.g., January 1, 1985) and ends on December 31 of the last year (e.g., December 31, 1989).

Out of the four terms selected, *gaikokujin rōdōsha* appeared most frequently overall, and in every single period but two (2000–2004 and 2015–2019), underlining that the primary way Japanese policymakers frame migrants is in economic terms, as potential workers. The term thus saw consistent usage, including an early peak during the 1990–1994 period, with 1194 mentions, before tapering off again until dramatically increasing during the 2015–2019 period, which saw the highest overall frequencies for all four target terms. The first appearance of *gaikoku jinzai* was during the 2005–2009 period, underscoring its status as a neologism. Its usage then increased rapidly by the 2015–2019 period, with a total of 2008 mentions. Usage of the term *imin* was consistent but fairly low until a similar spike in the 2015–2019 period, when it was mentioned a record 800 times. The overall trendlines for *imin seisaku* mirrored those of *imin*, though at noticeably lower volumes. Here too, the 2015–2019 period represented an overall peak at 344 total mentions.

Table 4: Frequencies of Target Words by Political Affiliation, 2015–2024

	Term	2015–2019	2020–2024
Government	移民 (<i>imin</i>)	212	39
Government	移民政策 (<i>imin seisaku</i>)	139	14
Government	外国人労働者 (<i>gaikokujin rōdōsha</i>)	308	114
Government	外国人材 (<i>gaikoku jinzai</i>)	1162	225
Opposition	移民 (<i>imin</i>)	461	149

Opposition	移民政策 (<i>imin seisaku</i>)	165	40
Opposition	外国人労働者 (<i>gaikokujin rōdōsha</i>)	1267	273
Opposition	外国人材 (<i>gaikoku jinzai</i>)	346	74

Created by the authors, based on the National Diet's API.

Next, we present the results of our analysis of frequencies by political affiliation (Table 4). For this, we chose the periods 2015–2019 and 2020–2024. The primary reason why we chose these periods is because they correspond to the two most recent data sets, as well as consecutive five-year periods in which the LDP was in a stable coalition government with its junior coalition party Komeito. Furthermore, it includes the 2015–2019 period, which had the overall highest frequencies recorded. We divided the frequencies by government (LDP and Komeito) and opposition (all other parties) affiliation. The latter includes the primary center-left opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and its precursor (the Democratic Party of Japan, or DPJ), as well as other major opposition parties such as the Japan Innovation Party (Ishin), Japan Communist Party (JCP), and Democratic Party For the People (DPP), in addition to numerous other smaller parties.

Table 5: Average Number of Members of Parliament by Political Affiliation, 2015–2024

	2015–2019	2020–2024
Lower House Seat Average (gov)	320.58	301.68
Lower House Seat Average (opp)	144.42	163.32
Upper House Seat Average (gov)	142.1	143.08
Upper House Seat Average (opp)	99.9	98.92
Total (government)	462.68	444.75
Total (opposition)	244.32	262.25

Created by the authors, taking into account lower house election results in 2014 (baseline), 2017, and 2021 and upper house election results in 2013 (baseline), 2016, 2019, and 2022.

Table 4 shows that even in absolute numbers, the opposition mentioned three out of the four terms (*imin*, *imin seisaku*, *gaikokujin rōdōsha*) more frequently than the government, which only used the neologism *gaikoku jinzai* more frequently than the opposition. This was true for both periods analyzed. To adjust for the uneven representation of government versus opposition in parliament (Table 5) across both periods analyzed and to measure the statistical significance of this result, we further calculated the average mentions per average member of parliament.

Table 6: Average Number of Mentions of Target Words by Average Number of Parliament Members and Political Affiliation, 2015–2024

Term	2015–2019		2020–2024	
	Government	Opposition	Government	Opposition
移民 (<i>imin</i>)	0.458	1.887	0.088	0.568
移民政策 (<i>imin seisaku</i>)	0.300	0.675	0.031	0.153
外国人労働者 (<i>gaikokujin rōdōsha</i>)	0.666	5.186	0.256	1.041
外国人材 (<i>gaikoku jinzai</i>)	2.511	1.416	0.506	0.282

Created by the authors, based on the National Diet's API.

Table 6 shows the average number of mentions of each target term divided by the average number of parliament members, classified by political party affiliation. This analysis further underscores the discrepancy in frequency of usage by party membership, as it accounts for the electoral dominance of the ruling coalition. For instance, during the period 2015–2019, opposition parties mentioned the term *imin* 1.887 times per member of parliament, compared with 0.458 times for the government. Similar frequencies could be observed for the terms *imin seisaku* (0.675 versus 0.300) and *gaikokujin rōdōsha* (5.186 versus 0.666). Only the term *gaikoku jinzai* was mentioned more often by government members (2.511 mentions per average member of parliament) than by opposition parties (1.416). The period 2020–2024 showed broadly similar results, although at overall lower frequencies. Finally, to show that these results were not due to chance alone, we conducted a non-parametric Wilcoxon sign test (see Appendix A), as the necessary assumptions for parametric tests were not fulfilled. In the non-parametric Wilcoxon sign test, the difference proved to be statistically significant ($W=0$; $W_{critical}=2$; $p=0.03125$).

5. Discussion

How can we interpret these results? First, the overall frequencies track the overall political salience of migration as a political topic quite accurately, which has been quantitatively measured through different means, such as keyword frequency in media (Chiavacci 2025). We observed an early peak, especially in the usage of *gaikokujin rōdōsha*, during the first two periods analyzed (1985–1989 and 1990–1994), which corresponds to a period where many of the policies that form the basis of the modern Japanese immigration regime were passed (Akashi 2010; Komai 2016). These include the 1990 amendment to the ICRRA, which established the modern system for administering residence status and gave privileged residency rights to Japanese co-ethnics (*nikkeijin*), as well as the establishment of the Technical Intern Training Program in 1993. These policies, known collectively as the 1990 system, were passed in response to what was at the time framed as the *gaikokujin rōdōsha mondai* (foreign worker problem), and this discursive framing probably explains why the term *gaikokujin rōdōsha* in particular saw increased usage in the National Diet. On the other hand, immigration-related language was relatively scarcely used during this time.

While the foreign worker problem and the policies enacted in response to it marked the start of the modern period of newcomer migration to Japan, usage of the four target terms remained stable at relatively low levels until the 2015–2019 period. While numerous tweaks to Japan’s migration policies were made in the interim, this reflects the fact that the 1990 system remained broadly unchanged. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the foreign population of Japan declined due to decreased economic opportunities for migrant workers, decreasing the political salience of migration.

More recently, it was especially the second Abe administration, in power from 2012–2020, that was responsible both for enacting major migration reforms and increasing the number of foreign residents. His reforms included adjusting existing pathways, such as the TITP, as well as establishing new pathways, such as the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system—aimed at recruiting primarily lower and medium skilled workers in industries facing an acute labor shortage—through the 2019 amendment to the ICRRA (Rehm 2021; Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice 2024). The flurry of policy activity during the second Abe administration corresponds with a marked uptick in the frequencies that our four target words appear, which is especially apparent in the 2015–2019 period. The total mentions of the four terms *imin*, *imin seisaku*, *gaikokujin rōdōsha* and *gaikoku jinzai* reached

5050 for this period alone, compared to 1409 for the period 1990–1994. This suggests that Japanese policymakers have discussed migration more frequently as Japan has passed new migration policies and accepted more foreign residents. Another potential explanation is that since the 1980s, the influence of the bureaucracy in immigration policymaking has declined, and with it, political discussion increased (Rehm 2024).

Second, and perhaps more significantly, the variation in lexicon has also increased. As outlined above, the early newcomer period saw an almost exclusive use of *gaikokujin rōdōsha*. While *gaikokujin rōdōsha* still saw heavy usage, with the 2015–2019 period representing overall peak usage for the word, all four words have seen an uptick in mention frequency in recent years. The most marked increase was observed for *gaikoku jinzai*, with its status as a neologism all but confirmed through our analysis. Furthermore, during the 2015–2019 period, both *imin* and *imin seisaku*, terms that have traditionally been avoided by Japanese politicians as part of their rejection of Japan as a country of immigration, have appeared more frequently. Mentions of *imin* increased to 800 when compared to the 264 mentions during the 2010–2014 period, and *imin seisaku* increased to 344 from 45. This suggests a more widespread acceptance of at least discussing migration policy utilizing immigration-related language.

At the same time, the fact that substitutes for immigration-related language continue to be used consistently, and at higher volumes than *imin* and *imin seisaku*, does confirm the overall trend on Japanese political discourse concerning migration. For the period of 2015–2019, two trends have appeared simultaneously. First, Japanese policymakers continued to be more likely to use these substitute words in lieu of immigration-related language. Second, immigration-related language has seen a marked increase in usage.

The second part of our analysis gives more details on these trends, as we observed marked discrepancies in the political discourse on migration based on political affiliation. Indeed, for the 2015–2019 period, opposition parties were 4.12 times more likely to use the term *imin*, 2.25 times more likely to use *imin seisaku*, and 7.79 times more likely to use the term *gaikokujin rōdōsha*, when adjusted for mentions by an average member of parliament. The only word for which this trend was reversed was *gaikoku jinzai*, which government party politicians were 1.77 times more likely to use than their opposition counterparts.

Overall, this shows that opposition parties are far more willing to use immigration-related language, while the government prefers to maintain the discursive denial of immigration. This shows a clear difference in how the different political blocs prefer to frame the issue, as the government's preference for *gaikoku jinzai* reflects an economic framing strategy, while the opposition's use of *imin* signals a willingness to engage with settlement discourse. Furthermore, the strong discrepancy in the frequency in which *gaikokujin rōdōsha*—which we classified as a substitute term—was used also suggests that opposition parties were more willing to discuss migration *in general* as well. Despite the government enacting numerous major migration policy reforms during the 2015–2019 period, these results point to a preference for avoiding political debate on the issue entirely.

This is perhaps due to the paradoxical nature of the LDP's political interests on migration, as the party is aiming to placate both the pro-migration business lobby that needs workers to respond to labor shortages as well as its conservative national base, which is generally opposed to immigration (Song 2020). When forced on the matter, government politicians strongly preferred the neologism they themselves established, *gaikoku jinzai*, which arguably serves as a rhetorical way to frame the admission of foreigners in purely economic terms, sidestepping any debate on issues related to long-term settlement and integration. Furthermore, there is also a strong possibility that government politicians used

immigration-related terms in the context of denying them, further underscoring the difference in lexicon used in inter-party discussions. For instance, there are 41 instances of former PM Shinzo Abe using the term *imin seisaku* in the National Diet, and every single time he was denying that his government was adopting a formal immigration policy.

Finally, the period of 2020–2024 saw a marked decrease in the frequency with which all terms were mentioned. This is most likely due to the effects of the COVID-19 induced global pandemic, which shifted focus away from traditional migration policies towards border control measures due to public health reasons (Rehm 2023). However, regarding the frequencies of each target term by political affiliation, we observed very similar trendlines to those of the 2015–2019 period.

6. Limitations and Prospects for Further Research

There are several clear limitations to our study’s design, and questions that have arisen from its results, that could potentially be addressed with further research. First, a frequency analysis alone is not sufficient to draw definitive conclusions about how Japanese politicians discuss migration policy. Our program merely counted each instance of a target term appearing and cannot account for any further context on how these terms were used, beyond the party affiliation data used for the second part of our analysis. To gain this contextual information, further research is necessary. For example, a qualitative analysis of the specific statements made by politicians when they mentioned the target terms could be one way to further build on the results of this study. However, as it is difficult to qualitatively analyze each occurrence of each target term, this would most likely have to be done through random selection, which could diminish the value of such an analysis.

Another potential avenue could be to design another quantitative study. For instance, sentiment analysis based on word associations—words that frequently co-occur together with our target terms—is one way to gain more contextual information. By classifying whether the words that appear most frequently with a target term have a positive or negative connotation, we could determine the overall sentiment with which the politicians in question used these terms. We are actively exploring this option as we develop our research further.

While we were able to show clear discrepancies in the usage of the terms by political affiliation in the second analysis we conducted, this part of the study could also benefit from more depth. This could be accomplished by providing more detailed party breakdowns or by extending this analysis to cover a longer time period, including the two periods when the LDP was in opposition. As the current parameters of our program limit our results to five-year periods, such an analysis was not possible utilizing the current study design.

Finally, all our target terms saw a sharp decline in usage during the most recent 2020–2024 period. As mentioned, this is most likely due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration policymaking. Moving forward, it will be critical to continue monitoring how political discourse on migration evolves in the post-pandemic political environment.

This latter point is especially relevant given that the political salience of migration has increased once again in the run-up to and aftermath of the July 2025 House of Councillors election. During that time, the ruling coalition was attacked from the right of the political spectrum, and especially from the populist Sanseitō, which increased its seat share from 1 to 15 in Japan’s upper house. Sanseitō leader Sohei Kamiya has attacked the government for instituting a *de facto* immigration policy and has thus not shied away from utilizing immigration-related language in parliamentary discussions (National Diet

Library 2024). This could indicate that political discourse is shifting once more, with the new ruling coalition between the LDP and the Japan Innovation Party (Ishin) facing attacks from both left- and right-wing parties over migration.

With that in mind, further research could be undertaken to isolate the period following the lifting of restrictions on new foreign residents to determine how political discourse has evolved post-pandemic. Such research could incorporate year-by-year plots or a moving average to more accurately capture short-term trends.

7. Conclusion

Through our frequency analysis, we were able to add to the growing scholarship on the politics of immigration in Japan and the political discourse surrounding it. Specifically, this research has yielded three primary conclusions about how politicians have discussed immigration in the National Diet during the period of newcomer migration from 1985 to 2024.

1. The overall frequencies of the four terms *imin*, *imin seisaku*, *gaikokujin rōdōsha*, and *gaikoku jinzai* correspond to the major periods of modern migration policymaking in Japan: the establishment of the 1990 system in and around 1990, and the second Abe administration (2012–2020). After an early peak in the 1990–1994 period, volume decreased and remained consistent at relatively lower levels before increasing and hitting an overall peak in the 2015–2019 period. The early peak saw the term *gaikokujin rōdōsha* being mentioned at a very high volume, while the 2015–2019 period saw all four words seeing a marked increase in usage.
2. Despite the historical hesitance of Japanese politicians to use terms that explicitly relate to immigration (*imin* and *imin seisaku*), these terms have seen a consistent increase during the period of newcomer migration and especially in the 2015–2019 period. However, opposition party politicians were far more likely to use immigration-related language, suggesting a maintenance of the discursive denial of immigration by government politicians.
3. At the same time, substitute words, i.e., terms that Japanese policymakers use to describe the acceptance of foreign residents in lieu of using immigration-related language, continue to appear far more frequently. This includes the more traditional *gaikokujin rōdōsha* as well as the neologism *gaikoku jinzai*, which has successfully established itself as a way to frame the admission of foreign workers in economic terms. Both terms saw their usage peak in the 2015–2019 period. Opposition parties were far more likely to use *gaikokujin rōdōsha* in that period, suggesting an overall hesitancy by the government to discuss migration. Indeed, the only word that the government was more likely to use than the opposition was *gaikoku jinzai*, underscoring the rhetorical framing that government politicians prefer.

While overall salience trends align with prior research (although our study confirms these trends through examination of legislative records for the first time), our partisan breakdown reveals systematic lexical divergence that has only been scarcely documented in prior studies.

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, it is very likely that Japan will continue to admit more foreigners moving forward due to its demographic challenges. With the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic having subsided—at least from the perspective of border control and migration policy—this means that the intensity of debate on the issue in the National Diet will probably continue to remain at high levels. Our research has confirmed the increased political salience of immigration for Japan’s policymakers, although the discrepancy between government and opposition parties in their choice

of terms was marked. Based on our results, the LDP seems committed to maintaining the discursive denial of immigration, although increased willingness by opposition parties to frame the admission of foreigners using immigration-related language could produce a change in the political discourse surrounding migration in the medium term. There is thus a possibility that immigration-related language will continue to become more normalized, and Japan will embrace becoming a formal “country of immigration,” complete with a political discourse that includes words such as “immigrant” and “immigration policy.” On the other hand, the recent sharp attacks from the populist right, who have also embraced immigration-related language, albeit with a negative connotation, could also mean that the government will continue to utilize substitute language. Moving forward, it will be important to further monitor these trends empirically to gain an accurate picture of Japan’s migration policy trajectory.

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

We conducted tests to assess statistical significance for the three terms (*imin*, *imin seisaku*, *gaikokujin rōdōsha*) that had more opposition mentions per average member of parliament than government mentions. When we calculated the average use per member in Parliament (lower house and upper house combined), the difference was 0.30 mentions per member of the government, compared with 1.58 mentions per member of the opposition for the entire period 2015–2024. As for statistical testing, a paired t-test was not possible because assumptions were violated. As a consequence, a nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used, which showed that the mentions per member of Parliaments were indeed significantly higher among the opposition compared to members of the governing parties ($W=0$; W critical =2; $p=0.03125$).

Parameter	Value
P-value	0.03125
Surprisal (S-value)	5
Effect Size (r)	0.8793
Z	2.1539
W, (W-, W+)	0, (0, 21)
Number of pairs (N)	6
Non-zero difference pairs (n)	6
Ties Correction	The data doesn't contain ties
S.E	4.7697
Average of differences ($\bar{x}_d$)	1.285
SD of differences (S_d)	1.6473
Normality p-value	0.0232
Skewness	2.073
Skewness Shape	 Asymmetrical , right/positive (pval=0.014)
Excess kurtosis	4.4497
Kurtosis Shape	 Leptokurtic , long heavy tails (pval=0.011)
Outliers	4.5202

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