



## Japan's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Phillip Y. Lipscy*

I think the “Japan model” is about doing [COVID-19 response] in a democratic and liberal way.

—Nishimura Yasutoshi<sup>1</sup>

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), became a world-wide pandemic in 2019. The pandemic caused millions of tragic deaths worldwide, major economic and social disruptions, and calls for renewed cooperation to remedy shortcomings of global health governance.<sup>2</sup> Japan was affected relatively early on, attracting global media attention in February 2020 as the government of Abe Shinzō struggled to manage an outbreak on the Diamond Princess cruise ship. COVID-19 response

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P. Y. Lipscy (✉)

Department of Political Science, Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

e-mail: [phillip.lipscy@utoronto.ca](mailto:phillip.lipscy@utoronto.ca)

dominated the remainder of Abe's tenure and that of his successor, Suga Yoshihide, who ruled from September 2020 to October 2021.

What features of Japan's COVID-19 response stand out, and how are they best explained? As illustrated by the opening quote, Japanese officials have promoted the "Japan model" as exemplary of how to manage the pandemic without sacrificing fundamental democratic values and civil liberties. Do these claims hold up to scrutiny? What impact did the pandemic and the government's response have on Japanese politics? How did the pandemic affect the outcome of the 2021 Lower House election, which saw the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Kōmeitō coalition under the leadership of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio return to power, and did the Kishida government pursue a different approach?

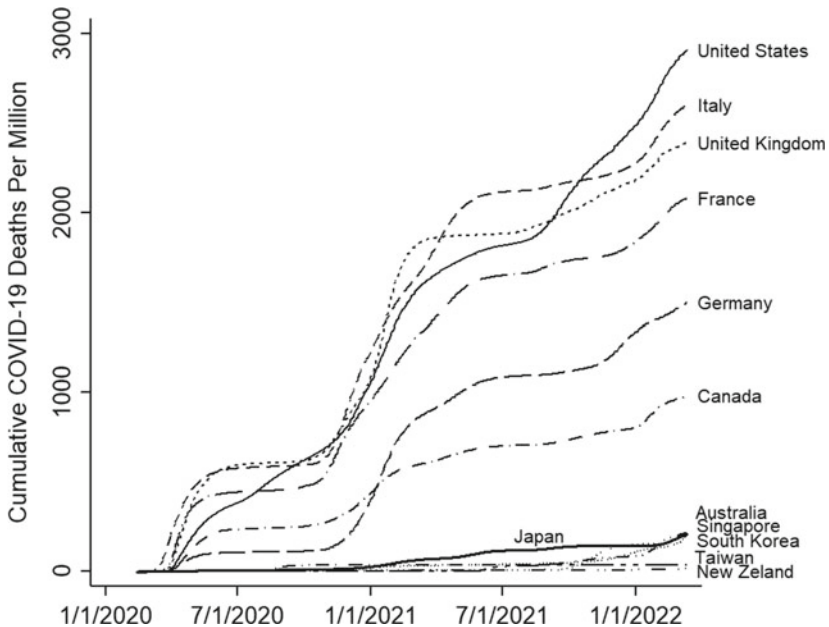
This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I place Japan's COVID-19 response in cross-national context through comparison with other countries. Relative to other G7 countries, Japan stands out for relatively low cases and deaths per capita, but these numbers must be interpreted with caution due to residual uncertainties about factors such as the immunology of COVID-19. Next, I provide the political context for key characteristics of Japan's pandemic response, which generally avoided heavy-handed restrictions on civil liberties and emphasized technocratic measures designed by scientific experts. My central argument is that the Abe model of governance critically shaped both the strengths and weaknesses of the Japan model of COVID-19 response. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of Kishida's approach to COVID-19, which in its early months was suggestive of a somewhat different emphasis compared to Abe and Suga.

## THE JAPANESE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In this section, I present some basic data to place Japan's COVID-19 response in global, comparative perspective.<sup>3</sup> Figure 16.1 depicts cumulative confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people for the G7 countries and several of Japan's regional peers. It is important to understand the limitations of COVID-19 statistics.<sup>4</sup> Autocratic countries like China have both the will and ability to manipulate these figures. Developing countries may lack the institutional capacity to accurately track cases and deaths. Figure 16.1 thus focuses on economically developed democracies (plus Singapore), which have both the capacity and levels of transparency that

make it likely that the statistics reflect meaningful differences in outcomes albeit with some margin of uncertainty.

As the figure shows, Japan's low reported death count stands out compared to other G7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States): Japan is the best performer according to this measure by a considerable margin. Although not depicted, the pattern is largely similar for reported cases. However, Japan's outcome measures are unexceptional compared to its regional peers, which have recorded comparable or lower cases and deaths. Japan had the highest level of reported deaths per capita among the depicted regional peers for much of 2021. The Omicron wave that started at the



**Fig. 16.1** Cumulative COVID-19 Deaths, January 2020–March 2022 (*Note* Compared to other G7 countries, Japan is characterized by an exceptionally low level of cumulative COVID-19 deaths per capita. However, Japan does not stand out compared to its regional peers. *Source* COVID-19 Data Repository, Center for Systems Science and Engineering [CSSE], Johns Hopkins University. Data as of March 13, 2022)

end of that year increased cumulative deaths in Australia, Singapore, and South Korea to a comparable level. This is useful context to consider when evaluating any merits of the Japanese approach to the pandemic.

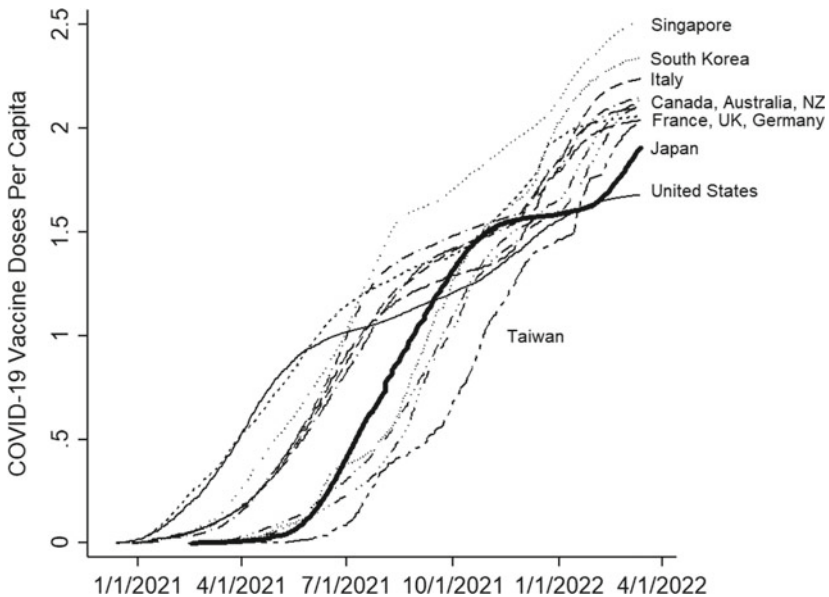
Some scholars have argued that there are common themes that contributed to the favorable regional performance of East Asian countries, such as lessons learned from prior pandemics like SARS and MERS, effective institutional frameworks for pandemic response, social cohesion, and robust democratic institutions that allowed for proportional surveillance measures with transparency and accountability.<sup>5</sup> The validity of these claims will continue to be evaluated with greater nuance as new data and studies emerge—for example, strong social ties appear to be associated with low initial COVID-19 spread but higher case fatality rates once the disease is present within the community.<sup>6</sup>

Many variables that plausibly account for the strong performance of East Asian countries during the pandemic apply in equal measure to Japan. Although this chapter will focus primarily on Japan's response, it must be noted that the verdict remains out on whether it is best to speak of a unique "Japan model" or a broader "East Asian model" of COVID-19 response. Furthermore, it is possible that the virulence of the pandemic in the region was less severe due to yet unknown non-political and non-societal factors. For example, recent research suggests that there may be immunological differences between Japanese (and plausibly East Asian) populations and those in the West, which made it more difficult for SARS-CoV-2 to spread.<sup>7</sup> We cannot dismiss the possibility that better outcomes in Japan and among its neighbors—along with the option to manage the pandemic with relatively lax restrictions—will ultimately be attributed to confronting a less serious pandemic for reasons outside the realm of government policymaking.

One outcome measure that is less subject to such uncertainties is vaccinations, which can be measured directly with less concern about potential confounders. Figure 16.2 presents data on COVID-19 vaccine doses administered per capita. Japan was relatively late in getting its vaccination campaign off the ground, hindered by supply problems and bureaucratic hurdles: for example, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare allegedly caused several months of delay by insisting on conducting randomized control trials not only on Japanese citizens, but also on Japanese soil.<sup>8</sup> This delay contributed to widespread concern over the Tokyo Olympics, which took place when only a small fraction of the Japanese public was immunized.<sup>9</sup> However, the pace of vaccinations picked up in the summer

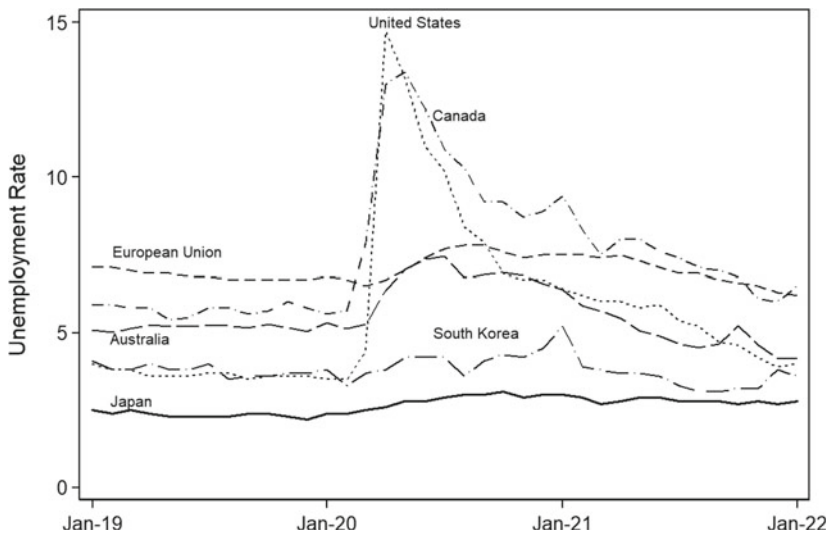
of 2021. By that fall, Japan's share of "fully vaccinated" people—defined as two doses at the time—climbed to the top of G7 countries and a level comparable to regional peers. This suggests Japan's vaccination challenges were more about procurement and distribution rather than vaccine-hesitancy among the population. Furthermore, Japan was late in rolling out booster shots, which meant the country remained a relative laggard in terms of total doses administered amidst the Omicron wave in late 2022, which highlighted the necessity of a third dose for adequate protection.

In terms of economic response, Japan appears to have been relatively successful in cushioning the short-term shock created by the pandemic.



**Fig. 16.2** COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Administered per Capita (*Note* Japan's vaccination campaign was slow in getting off the ground compared to other G7 countries, though it was ahead of some regional peers like Taiwan, which faced serious procurement challenges. The rollout of booster shots in Japan was also slow, leaving the country only ahead of the United States by early 2022 in doses administered per capita. *Source* Our World in Data [<https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer>], accessed March 14, 2022)

The Japanese government responded to the pandemic with relatively large fiscal stimulus measures, and this was complemented by emergency monetary measures by the Bank of Japan, which had already adopted exceptionally loose policy under Abenomics.<sup>10</sup> The government explicitly prioritized the protection of employment and businesses in its economic response, and this objective was largely achieved.<sup>11</sup> Although Japanese GDP declined during the height of the pandemic, the recession was relatively mild compared to other major economies, and as Fig. 16.3 shows, the unemployment rate was maintained at an exceptionally low level. Corporate bankruptcies also held steady at pre-pandemic levels. The Japanese government thus saw its fiscal position deteriorate significantly during the pandemic, but domestic economic disruption was relatively modest in cross-national comparison.



**Fig. 16.3** Unemployment Rate (%), Before and During the Pandemic (*Note* Japan entered the pandemic with a relatively low unemployment rate, and the onset of the pandemic in January 2020 did not result in a noticeable increase. *Source* OECD [2022], Unemployment rate [indicator]. <https://doi.org/10.1787/52570002-cn> [accessed March 14, 2022])

## THE ABE MODEL AND THE JAPAN MODEL OF COVID-19 RESPONSE

As I have argued elsewhere, the second Abe Shinzō government (2012–2020) ruled Japan using a deliberate strategy that sought to take advantage of Japan's new electoral and administrative institutions.<sup>12</sup> His successor, Suga Yoshihide (2020–2021), was Chief Cabinet Secretary during the entire Abe government and one of the architects of this strategy. These two prime ministers oversaw Japan's COVID response from the beginning of the pandemic through October 2021, when Kishida Fumio replaced Suga as prime minister and led the LDP to a Lower House election victory. The Japan model of COVID response was thus critically shaped by the Abe model of governance.

The Abe model had three key components. First, Abe and Suga sought to manage public opinion and retain a high level of public support for the prime minister. The Abenomics reforms played a key role in this strategy—reformist economic messaging was seen as the key to maintaining broad public support, and the Abe government strategically pivoted to Abenomics growth themes when the prime minister's popularity began to wane. Public opinion was also managed through an aggressive media strategy, which restricted and controlled access to government officials, reduced opportunities for the prime minister to be questioned directly, shaped social media discourse through targeted activities by LDP supporters, and pressured critical voices by invoking the Broadcast Law and Radio Law.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the Abe model sought to maintain party discipline, an issue that had bedeviled both prior LDP and DPJ governments.<sup>14</sup> Discipline was promoted through practical reforms, such as appointments of the prime minister's close confidants to the Diet Affairs Committee and frequent coordination meetings. However, perhaps the most crucial element in maintaining party discipline under Abe was the credible threat of calling a snap Lower House election. The threat was made credible through two successful elections in 2014 and 2017. The former was particularly critical in silencing internal dissent over Abe's proposal to postpone a consumption tax hike, which Abe and Suga feared might precipitate an internal political contest and a direct challenge to the prime minister. The credible threat of snap elections was supported by the prime minister's relatively robust public support and a weak and divided opposition, which made an election loss relatively unlikely.

Third, the Abe government built on prior institutional reforms that had shifted power from the bureaucracy to the prime minister.<sup>15</sup> Through the creation of institutions like the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs and Japan's first National Security Council, and further expansion of the Cabinet Office, the Abe government further centralized power and solidified political control over the bureaucracy. Combined with various practical reforms and symbolic personnel decisions, this made it difficult for bureaucrats to resist or stymie policy priorities promoted by the prime minister.

It is a matter of debate whether the Abe model contributed to the longevity of the Abe government or whether other factors, like the relative absence of major crises or opposition weakness, were more important.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the Abe Model is important context in understanding how Japan responded to COVID-19. The pandemic ultimately exposed important limitations of the Abe model and illustrated some distinctions between governing under normal circumstances and during a major crisis.<sup>17</sup>

The pandemic exposed the limitations of using Abenomics as a strategy to manage the prime minister's popularity. Before the pandemic, when faced with declining public approval, the Abe government had quickly pivoted to macroeconomic growth themes. Abe himself saw Abenomics as the key source of his popularity, which enabled the passage of controversial legislation in domains like security and secrecy.<sup>18</sup> However, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a trade-off between public health and macroeconomic performance that the government had not faced prior to 2020.

Both the Abe and Suga governments struggled to manage this transition. Implementing harsh lockdown measures or providing financial incentives to close businesses would have sacrificed the macroeconomic achievements of Abenomics, which the government routinely touted as core achievements.<sup>19</sup> As their public approval ratings declined amidst questions about their handling of the pandemic, both Abe and Suga stuck to their playbook by promoting macroeconomic measures like the "Go To" travel campaign, which subsidized domestic travel but likely contributed to a counterproductive increase in COVID-19 cases.<sup>20</sup> Although government officials publicly framed the Japan Model in normative terms, emphasizing universalistic values like civil liberties and democracy, the approach was also fundamentally aligned with the prioritization of macroeconomic growth under Abenomics.



The pandemic also diminished both prime ministers' authority vis-à-vis party backbenchers. As discussed above, the threat of calling a snap election was a key mechanism for maintaining party discipline under the Abe model. However, the credibility of this threat diminished as the virus spread and public approval of the government sagged. Suga perhaps had a brief window of opportunity to take advantage of high approval ratings after assuming power in the fall of 2020—circumstances that resembled those of Kishida's victory in 2021—but he chose not to call an election. The diminishing authority of the prime minister strengthened the role of alternative power brokers within the party like LDP Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro, and government decision-making increasingly became subject to internal contestation and perceived indecision. The “light touch” that characterized government intervention under the Japan model could be attributed in part to policy paralysis as the pandemic undermined one of the core pillars of the Abe model.

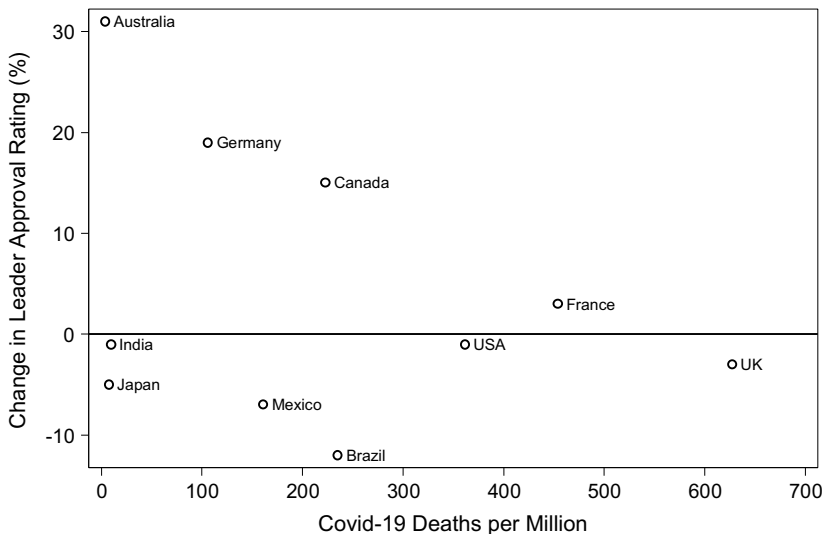
The pandemic also revealed a key shortcoming of the centralization of power that Abe and Suga had leveraged and deepened—it did not extend to the local level, which emerged as critical for pandemic response in areas like testing and the management of business closures.<sup>21</sup> Japanese local governments retain considerable autonomy in spite of increasing prime minister authority at the central level.<sup>22</sup> During the pandemic, this gave governors like Koike Yuriko (Tokyo) and Yoshimura Hirofumi (Osaka) an effective platform to challenge central government policy. The central government also struggled to coordinate and manage local responses, which magnified perceptions of incompetence.

Finally, Abe and Suga lost control of the media narrative, which they had carefully managed and cultivated through a variety of tactics prior to the pandemic. The Japan model placed scientific experts like Omi Shigeru and Oshitani Hitoshi front and center. These experts designed key elements that defined Japan's response, such as avoidance of the 3Cs (closed spaces, close-contact settings, and large crowds), emphasis on clusters, and retroactive contact tracing. The early emphasis on masks and risks of aerosol transmission appeared prescient in retrospect. Despite its virtues, this technocratic response—combined with the Abe model's emphasis on limiting media access to the prime minister—may have conveyed the impression that the nation's political leadership was aloof and absent during a major crisis.

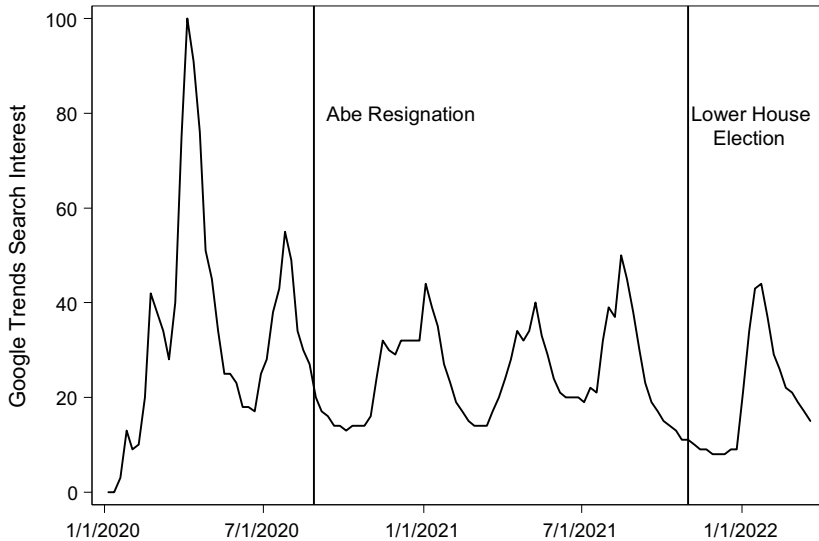
The pandemic dominated the media and public discourse after March 2020, and coverage was often critical of the government's response.

Figure 16.4 compares COVID-19 deaths per capita and change in leader approval rating between January and June 2020 for several countries. The figure is suggestive of some relationship between early pandemic intensity and leader public approval—Scott Morrison of Australia enjoyed a large bump in approval as the pandemic was contained, while Boris Johnson of the UK saw his approval slide along with mounting deaths. However, it is striking that Abe’s public approval declined during the pandemic despite cases and deaths in Japan remaining at a relatively low level. This was not due to a ceiling effect—the Morning Consult poll depicted in the figure put Abe’s approval rating in January 2020 at 34%, a level almost identical to Scott Morrison, who enjoyed a large subsequent boost.

Figure 16.5 depicts search interest in the term コロナ (Corona) in Japan according to Google Trends since the beginning of the pandemic. The figure clearly captures the six COVID-19 waves Japan experienced, but it is also notable that interest was most intense in early 2020: this was



**Fig. 16.4** COVID-19 Deaths and Change in Leader Approval, January–June 2020 (*Note* Limiting recorded COVID-19 deaths has not automatically translated into higher approval ratings for leaders. *Source* Morning Consult and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control)



**Fig. 16.5** Search Interest in コロナ (Corona) in Japan, Google Trends (*Note* The figure depicts search interest according to Google Trends for the term “コロナ” in Japan. The term is the conventional way COVID-19 has been described by the Japanese media and government [e.g., 新型コロナ・コロナウイルス]. The vertical lines indicate the dates of Abe’s resignation announcement and 2021 Lower House Election)

a period in which Japan’s case and death numbers remained low in international comparison and relative to subsequent waves. Abe’s sharp and terminal decline in public approval thus coincided with a period of intense public scrutiny about the government’s COVID-19 response. Concern about the pandemic declined from this peak but resurfaced during each wave under the Suga government.

## THE 2021 ELECTION AND THE KISHIDA GOVERNMENT

The Japan model imposed relatively few restrictions on civil liberties and economic activity while seeking to control the COVID-19 pandemic through measures guided by scientific expertise. Its emphasis on maintaining economic activity by limiting government intervention was largely

consistent with the macroeconomic priorities of the Abe model of governance. Japan's approach achieved a measure of success based on pandemic outcome measures, though these must be interpreted with caution, and Japan did not outperform regional peers like South Korea and Taiwan. However, the pandemic also exposed key weaknesses of the Abe model, contributing to real and perceived shortcomings of government leadership along with challenges from the local level.

Kishida Fumio became prime minister on October 4, 2021, and he secured a convincing victory only weeks later on October 31. There is thus little to examine specifically about Kishida's COVID-19 response and the impact it might have had on Japan's 49th Lower House election. It is notable, however, the election coincided with a trough in cases and deaths after the fifth wave and a decline in public interest to the lowest levels since the beginning of the pandemic, as illustrated in Fig. 16.5.<sup>23</sup> Kishida ultimately had little control over election timing, which was the first under the current constitution to occur after the expiration of the House of Representative's full four-year term. Thus, it stands to reason that the LDP benefited from remarkably good fortune when it mattered the most. Election exit polls generally suggested that the pandemic had receded in importance compared to economic and employment issues, where Japan's response had been relatively successful as discussed above.<sup>24</sup>

An interesting question is whether the ascendance of Kishida signaled a shift in Japan's approach to the pandemic. One of the first consequential acts of the Kishida government was the closure of Japanese borders to new foreign entrants in response to the Omicron variant, along with all classes of non-Japanese citizens from several African countries. Although the Abe and Suga governments had also imposed border restrictions, they had done so with considerable reluctance due to concerns about diplomatic relations, economic consequences, and the potential impact on the Olympics. Attracting high-skilled foreign talent and encouraging inbound tourism were important priorities under Abenomics, and border closures contradicted the principles of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Japan's signature foreign policy vision.

In contrast, Kishida's border closure was quick and decisive. The decision was supported by an extraordinarily large majority of the public and appeared to boost Kishida's public approval rating.<sup>25</sup> His government even briefly shut down reentry for Japanese citizens by requesting airlines to cease reservations, though this was quickly reversed and blamed

on overzealous bureaucrats amidst widespread questions about constitutionality.<sup>26</sup> In its early months, Kishida's government thus appeared to represent a subtle shift away from the Japan model, placing greater emphasis on pandemic control relative to protection of civil liberties and economic activity, at least as it pertained to overseas travel and particularly by foreigners.

By early 2022, the Kishida government's border closure measures were met with significant pushback from stakeholders in the academic, policy, and the business community, including several public letters calling for relaxation.<sup>27</sup> Activism by these groups, as well as the plight of students who were denied entry despite being admitted to Japanese universities, received considerable attention in both mainstream and social media. This might have played some role in shifting public perception toward the measures: by March 2022, 62% of the public was in support of relaxing the border closure at least to some degree.<sup>28</sup> The Kishida government initiated a gradual reopening in February 2022, with an early prioritization of student entries.

It is notable that Kishida criticized Abenomics as he rose to power, arguing that the reforms had mostly benefited the privileged and failed to contribute to broad-based growth. Although Kishida's policy rhetoric was characteristically understated, this prioritization of "ordinary" citizens at the expense of foreigners and societal elites arguably represented a subtle shift in the direction of populism. The two prime ministers who previously achieved longevity under Japan's new political institutions—Koizumi and Abe—had sought popular appeal by emphasizing reformist themes. At the time of writing, it remained to be seen whether Kishida's early popularity signified the durable success of an alternative, quasi-populist strategy or a temporary bump often associated with the early months of a new Japanese prime minister.

## NOTES

1. Nishimura was Minister in charge of economic revitalization and measures for the novel coronavirus pandemic during early phases of the pandemic. The quote is from The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19 2020.
2. Takuma 2020, Johnson 2020, Fazal 2020. Also see the Lukner Chapter, this volume (Lukner, 2022).
3. An excellent and extensive overview on this topic is available in Asia Pacific Initiative 2020.

4. e.g., Lipsky 2020a, 2020b.
5. An and Tang 2020, Tiberghien 2021, Greitens 2020.
6. Fraser and Aldrich 2021.
7. Shimizu et al. 2021.
8. Kanako Takahara, “Japan prioritized domestic trials of Pfizer before rollout, vaccine czar says,” *Japan Times*, 9/8/2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/09/08/national/taro-kono-vaccine-domestic-trials/>.
9. See Leheny chapter, this volume (Leheny, 2022).
10. IMF Fiscal Affairs Department 2021.
11. Asia Pacific Initiative 2020, 56.
12. Hoshi and Lipsky 2021.
13. Kingston 2016.
14. Reed, McElwain and Shimizu 2009, Kushida and Lipsky 2013.
15. Takenaka 2019.
16. Maeda and Reed 2021.
17. Lipsky 2020a, 2020b.
18. Interview of Abe in Oshita 2017, pp. 13–14.
19. For example, statistics on measures like GDP, unemployment, and corporate profits were updated regularly at government websites like <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/headline/seichosenryaku/sanbonnoya.html> and <https://www.japan.go.jp/abonomics/index.html>.
20. Anzai and Nishiura 2021.
21. Takenaka 2020.
22. Horiuchi 2009.
23. Also see the Thies and Yanai chapter in this volume for a detailed analysis (Thies and Yanai, 2022).
24. e.g., 景気・雇用、コロナ対策を重視 投票先の選択で—出口調査 <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2021103100830&g=pol>.
25. オミクロン株の水際対策「評価」89%、スピード感に肯定的受け止め... 読売世論調査 <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/election/yoron-chosa/20211206-OYT1T50000/>.
26. “国交省、独断で予約停止要請 「スピード重視」も即撤回の背景は,” *Mainichi*, 12/2/2021. <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20211202/k00/00m/010/407000c>.
27. Among others, see “U.S.-Japan Community Urges Government of Japan to Relax Border Closure” by researchers, academics, government officials, and others involved in US-Japan relations (researchers, academics, government officials and others, accessed March 15, 2022); “Joint Statement on Entry Restrictions in Japan” by the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan, European Business Council in Japan, and International Bankers Association of Japan (<https://accj.squarespace.com/s/220203-Joint-Statement-on-the-Entry-Restrictions.pdf>; accessed March 15, 2022).

28. NHK, “内閣支持53%、不支持25%(NHK世論調査),” March 14, 2022, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/> (accessed March 15, 2022).

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