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What Explains Bias toward Immigrants?

Evidence from a Conjoint Survey Experiment in Japan

July 9, 2015
18:00 – 20:00

Akamon General Research Build.
(赤門総合研究棟) Room. 549

**Institute of Social Sciences
(Contemporary Japan Group) &
Todai-Yale Initiative**

An emerging academic consensus contends that economic self-interest alone cannot explain individual attitudes towards immigration in rich democracies. Our study adds support to this psychologically-inflected view, finding that in Japan, as elsewhere, skilled workers prefer skilled immigrants to low-skilled immigrants. A preference for skilled immigrants, which is not unique to Japan but is common across rich countries, poses a double challenge to the standard tenets of neoclassical economics since low-skilled workers, provided they are not net welfare recipients, should both contribute to the economy as a whole and be less threatening to the jobs and wages of native high skilled workers. Although more research is needed to trace and verify the mechanisms, our findings are consistent with a socially constructed “sociotropic xenophobia” for electoral gain and business success.