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What Do We Talk About When We Talk About  
Reforming the Marital Surname System in Japan?  
*An Analysis of Japanese YouTube Video Comments*

By

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates public discourse on the reform of Japan's marital surname system, with a particular focus on debates over the Selective Separate Surnames System. Drawing on computational and qualitative analysis of over 100000 comments posted under Japanese-language YouTube videos, this research seeks to identify the main focuses of current public discussions, including the central themes and recurring concerns. The study aims to clarify what is truly at stake in these debates and how key concerns and assumptions are articulated by individuals.

The findings reveal that opposition to the Selective Separate Surnames System is disproportionately represented among the most popular videos. These oppositional narratives, often right-leaning and nationalist in tone, are primarily posted by genuine and highly active users rather than automated bots. Topic clustering identifies three main themes: the preservation or abolition of the family registration system; the rise of xenophobic narratives linking surname reform to anxieties about foreigners and social stability; and the increasing politicization of the issue within electoral contexts. The analysis also demonstrates that public attention to the marital surname system is closely tied to judicial decisions and electoral cycles, underscoring the issue's connections with broader political developments. These findings suggest the likely persistence and continuing significance of the debate over the marital surname system in Japan.

# 1 Introduction

Under Japan's Civil Code and Family Register Law, married couples<sup>1</sup> are required to share the same surname. Although the law permits the adoption of either the husband's or the wife's surname, in practice, over 95% of women take their husband's surname upon marriage. As this system disproportionately affects women, it has long been a target for gender equality advocates. In 1996, the Legislative Council submitted an advisory report proposing the Selective Separate Surnames System<sup>2</sup> as a step toward promoting gender equality in Japan (Ishiyama, 2009). The proposal was not passed and no bill was introduced to the Diet, but later reform advocates carried forward the idea of a Selective Separate Surnames System and it gradually came to symbolize the reform of Japan's marital surname system.

Unlike the current system, which requires couples to adopt a single shared surname, the Selective Separate Surnames System would allow spouses to either share the same surname or each retain their original family names after marriage. More specifically, two implementation proposals have been put forward: one in which different surnames are the default, with the option to adopt the same surname; and another, proposed later as a more moderate approach, where a shared surname remains the default, but couples may choose to keep different surnames (Ishiyama, 2009; Takizawa, 2016). Regardless of the specific method of implementation, the core principle of the Selective Separate Surnames System is to grant couples the freedom to choose their surname arrangement upon marriage. However, neither of these proposals has been adopted into law.

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding international marriages

<sup>2</sup> i.e. 選択的夫婦別姓制度 in Japanese

Nearly 30 years later, the issue of reforming the marital surname system has regained both the public's and the Japanese government's attention more strongly than ever before. For instance, in *The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality* announced in 2020, the government expressed its intention to advance the discussion on the marital surname system. Moreover, the issue became one of the key points of contention in the 2024 prime ministerial election.

This resurgence raises several key questions: What are the main focuses and dominant themes in this ongoing debate? And what might public discourse reveal about the potential trajectory of the future of Japan's marital surname system?

To address these questions, this study analyzes user comments posted under Japanese-language YouTube videos related to marital surname reform. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative techniques with contextual qualitative interpretation is employed. By integrating these approaches, the research aims to uncover not only the dominant themes and concerns within public discussion, but also the underlying values and motivations that drive them.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 The Two Sides: Supporters and Opponents of the Selective Separate Surnames System**

The debate over Japan's marital surname system, particularly the proposed introduction of the Selective Separate Surnames System, has generated sustained academic, legal, and public discussions. The two primary positions in this debate are: those who advocate for allowing married couples to retain separate surnames legally, and those who oppose such reform, favoring the current system of a shared surname. Supporters tend to emphasize individual rights, gender equality, and legal flexibility, whereas opponents often invoke broader societal concerns, such as traditional family values and social cohesion. Importantly, neither group is internally homogeneous, complicating a simple binary classification.

Among those who support the Selective Separate Surnames System, Kita (2025) found that proponents tend to be highly educated, and are more likely to be professionals, younger in age, and female.

This finding is consistent with previous scholarship advocating for reform of the current marital surname system in favor of the Selective Separate Surnames System (e.g., Suzuki, 2015; Takizawa, 2016; Omura, 2019; Sakai, 2021; Terahara & Miura, 2024). For example, Omura (2019), adopting a welfare perspective, argues that legislative change is essential, as allowing couples the option of separate surnames could enhance individual well-being and promote greater fairness within the legal system.

Another key demographic among proponents is working women, who are particularly affected by the current system. Many face practical difficulties after legally adopting their husbands' surnames upon marriage while continuing to use their maiden names in the

workplace. Suzuki (2015), based on interviews with 20 such women, concluded that implementing the Selective Separate Surnames System is essential to resolving these challenges. She further argued that broader institutional reforms are required to address the structural gender inequality embedded in Japan's legal and social systems.

In addition, Sakai (2021) offered a more nuanced classification of proponents, identifying two primary subgroups: those who advocate solely for the option of different surnames upon marriage, and those who fundamentally oppose the family registration system, namely the *Koseki system*. Individuals in the former group emphasize personal choice and individual rights within marriage. Those in the latter group focus on the abolition of the family registration system, which registers Japanese citizens not as independent individuals but as part of a family unit, recording their key personal information such as births, familial relationships, marriages, and deaths. Meanwhile, individuals who fall at the intersection of both groups tend to hold a broader vision for structural reform of the marriage system. Specifically, they view the allowance of different surnames as a step toward the eventual abolition of the institution of marriage itself.

In contrast to supporters, opponents of the Selective Separate Surnames System are much more demographically diverse, including those who oppose all forms of reform, those who support milder reforms, and those who advocate for more radical reforms.

The first group is often seen as holding more traditional values and being more conservative (Ishida, 2018; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020; Kita, 2025). Ishida (2018) argued that traditional Japanese family ideals have long functioned to systematically suppress women's social status, with the single-surname rule serving as a key mechanism for reinforcing this

subordination. Taniguchi and Kaufman (2020), using data from the Japanese General Social Survey, found that individuals with more traditional gender beliefs and a preference for extended family households were significantly more likely to support the requirement for married couples to share the same surname.

The second group within the opposition consists of those who support an alternative reform proposal: the expansion of legal recognition of pre-marriage surnames as official aliases, rather than allowing couples to adopt separate surnames. This position reflects a compromise, acknowledging the need for reform while maintaining Japan's family registration system. This perspective comes from a chain reaction that introducing the Selective Separate Surnames System will cause. If married couples were allowed to retain different surnames, it would no longer be guaranteed that all members of a family unit share a single surname, thereby undermining the foundational structure of the family registration system. Sakai (2021) noted that while the family registration system is closely intertwined with the issue of surnames, abolishing the system alone will not resolve all related challenges, particularly those concerning surname selection and inheritance. As such, he suggested that discussions of family registration and surname practices should be approached as related but distinct areas of discussion.

Finally, a third group within the opposition comprises individuals with more radical reform proposals. They are the only group among the opponents who support the idea of allowing married couples to have different surnames, yet they reject the Selective Separate Surnames System itself. Instead, they advocate for alternatives such as the adoption of compound surnames or the creation of entirely new family names (Sakai, 2021).

Given that both supporters and opponents of the Selective Separate Surnames System approach the issue from a variety of perspectives and pursue differing objectives, the core concerns and main focuses in the current debate remain ambiguous. To address this, more analysis is needed. Therefore, this study examines online comments to uncover the underlying values, concerns, and assumptions that shape public discourse on this topic, hopefully, to help move the discussion forward and perhaps foresee where this long-standing debate will go from now on.

## **2.2 Online Comments as Reflections of Sociopolitical Attitudes**

In recent years, debates over marital surname reform in Japan have increasingly unfolded on social media platforms, with online comment sections becoming important arenas for public expression. Understanding how these platforms reflect opinions is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of the discussion on Japan's marital surname reform.

Oster et al. (2015) believe that internet comments may serve as an indicator of the level of forthcoming social response, as user comments on online platforms often capture subtle collective sentiments before these sentiments manifest in broader social behavior. However, by conducting an online survey on the websites of eight Swiss newspapers, Friemel and Dötsch (2015) found that right-leaning individuals tend to be more active in posting online comments than the general audience of comment readers, indicating that such comments should not be interpreted straightforwardly as proxies for public opinion. Relatedly, for U.S. commenters, Artime (2016) challenged the stereotype of online commenters as merely angry and socially isolated, showing that the demographic profile of commenters may not be fixed. By analyzing

Pew survey data from 2008, 2010, and 2012, he found that although earlier patterns did support the view that unmarried, unemployed men were most likely to post, by 2012 the demographic profile had shifted to younger, white, and more highly educated individuals. In other words, analyzing comment sections alone makes it difficult to determine which side holds the majority view. In the context of our research, this means that we cannot draw any definitive conclusions about whether more people support or oppose the Selective Separate Surnames System.

Meanwhile, Hoffman et al. (2013) showed that most individuals engaged in online political activities, such as commenting, primarily to communicate their own political ideas rather than to directly influence governmental decisions. Bail (2021) further advanced this perspective by arguing that social media acts less like an echo chamber and more like a prism, refracting and amplifying political identities through processes of social comparison and identity performance. This framing helps explain why perceived independence and authenticity in online discussions are so critical. Indeed, Vendemia, Bond, and DeAndrea (2019) demonstrated that individuals are more likely to trust and endorse political messages when they do not perceive that comments are being manipulated by political organizations or posted by affiliated commenters. Similarly, Steinfeld, Samuel-Azran, and Lev-On (2016) found that pre-existing opinions were the most significant and persistent predictors of how readers evaluated online political articles, suggesting that online platforms often serve to reinforce users' political identities. Taken together, these findings suggest that online comments can offer valuable insight into people's underlying attitudes and reasoning on the issue of the marital surname system, as such expressions are often shaped by their pre-existing beliefs and identity-related motivations.

Turning to Japan, scholars have increasingly examined how social media shapes the

nation's political dynamics. By analyzing online interactions surrounding the pro- vs. anti-Kishida cabinet conflict, Nishi (2024) found that exposure to rude comments decreased individuals' willingness to read opposing views, suggesting that incivility may reinforce political echo chambers. Takikawa and Nagayoshi (2017) similarly demonstrated how Twitter (now known as X) fosters political polarization in Japan by creating insular clusters that deepen ideological divides. Schäfer, Evert and Heinrich (2017) thought that political bots' posting and retweeting supported the previous prime minister Shinzo Abe's election in 2014. Miyazaki et al. (2022), also focusing on Twitter, identified a "honeymoon effect" whereby public sentiment temporarily improves following a change in the prime ministership, highlighting the fluid and reactive nature of online political attitudes.

Particularly notable is the role of YouTube in Japan's politics. According to a survey on social media in Japan that targeted 1100 people aged 20 to 69 conducted by Cross Marketing, the most frequently used social media platforms among those surveyed were Line and YouTube, at 60.1% and 57.2%, respectively, followed by X<sup>3</sup>. Guerrera-Sapone (2021) analyzed the rise of the Party to Protect the People from NHK, showing how its leader leveraged YouTube's live broadcasts and algorithmic amplification to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. This strategy enabled the cultivation of a decentralized supporter network that translated into tangible electoral success, with the party securing over 3% of the national proportional vote in the 2019 House of Councillors election, gaining parliamentary representation and official party status under Japanese law. This study highlighted how platforms like YouTube have become powerful tools for political mobilization in Japan, reshaping traditional pathways of political

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h02384/>

communication and engagement. By analyzing YouTube comments on real news videos from an international online news organization, another study found that the most engaging news content is also often the most polarizing (Mall & Nagpal & Salminen, et al, 2024). Building on this, this study focuses on the most viewed videos related to Japan's marital surname system to examine how individuals reason, argue, and express their views and emotions on reforming the marital surname system.

## **2.3 Limitations of Previous Quantitative Studies**

### **2.3.1 Surveys**

Recent quantitative research on public opinion regarding Japan's marital surname system has produced mixed findings, largely due to variations in survey design and public familiarity with the concept of a Selective Separate Surnames System.

Numerous surveys have been conducted regarding the issue of the marital surname system, yet the results remain inconclusive on whether the public generally favors reform of the current system or not. The inconsistency across survey findings suggests that public opinion on this issue is sensitive to factors such as question framing or terminology.

Nukatsuka (2022), for instance, criticized the 2022 Public Opinion Survey on the Family Legal System, arguing that the answer choices of Question 12 were manipulated under political pressure. Rather than directly asking whether respondents support the introduction of a Selective Separate Surnames System, the survey included a third option, maintaining the current system while legally allowing the use of former surnames as aliases<sup>4</sup>. As a result, the

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<sup>4</sup> Translation of 現在の制度である夫婦同姓制度を維持した上で、旧姓の通称使用についての法制度を設けた方がよい

percentage of respondents supporting a Selective Separate Surnames System dropped to 28.9%, the lowest till that time, while 42.2% of people chose the alias option. This criticism seems justified when compared to the 2025 Survey on Married Couples' Surnames<sup>5</sup>, where the framing of questions was framed more specifically. In that survey, 46.8% of respondents selected "It doesn't matter whether a couple has the same or different surnames; it's better to have the choice"<sup>6</sup>, whereas 26.6% chose "It's better for couples to have the same surname"<sup>7</sup>. These results indicate substantially higher support for the Selective Separate Surnames System than was observed in the 2022 survey.

On the other hand, similar bias in question framing can also be observed among proponents of reform. In a 2020 joint survey<sup>8</sup>, respondents were asked to choose among the following options: "I prefer to have the same surname as my partner's. Other couples should also have the same surname (14.4%)"<sup>9</sup>, "I prefer to have the same surname as my partner's. I don't mind if other couples have the same or different surnames (35.9%)"<sup>10</sup>, "I prefer to have the option of whether to have the same surname as my partner or not. I don't mind if other couples have the same or different surnames (34.7%)"<sup>11</sup>.

Beyond question design, limited public understanding of the Selective Separate Surnames System is also likely to have contributed to inconsistent survey results. In the 2025 survey, only 9.4% of respondents said they knew this term well<sup>12</sup>, while 42.2% of them knew this term<sup>13</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jtuc-rengo.or.jp/info/chousa/data/20250306-1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Translation of 夫婦は同氏でも別氏でも構わない。選択できる方がよい

<sup>7</sup> Translation of 夫婦は同氏がよい

<sup>8</sup> <https://chinjyo-action.com/47prefectures-survey/>

<sup>9</sup> Translation of 自分は夫婦同姓がよい。他の夫婦も同姓であるべきだ

<sup>10</sup> Translation of 自分は夫婦同姓がよい。他の夫婦は同姓でも別姓でも構わない

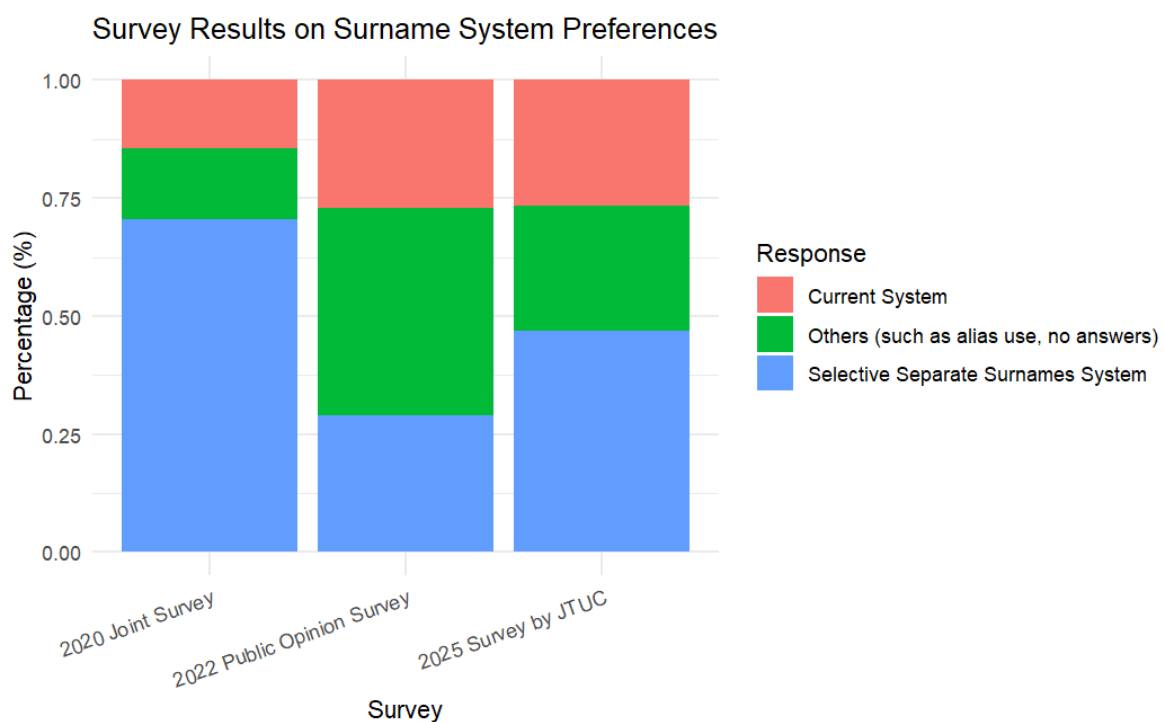
<sup>11</sup> Translation of 自分は夫婦別姓が選べるとよい。他の夫婦は同姓でも別姓でも構わない

<sup>12</sup> Translation of よく知っている

<sup>13</sup> Translation of 少し知っている

27.9% had limited knowledge<sup>14</sup>, and 20.5% were completely unfamiliar with the term. This suggests that how information and options are presented in surveys is influential in assessing public opinion on this issue.

Therefore, despite the breadth of survey data, public opinion gathered through structured questions may have reflected “constructed attitudes” (See graph 1) rather than people’s genuine beliefs (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001).



Graph 1: Comparing survey results when questions are framed differently

This highlights the need to investigate how people express and articulate their views in more natural and unstructured settings, such as online platforms.

### 2.3.2 Newspaper Articles

Besides surveys, the media also plays an important role in public discourse on Japan’s

<sup>14</sup> Translation of あまり知らなかった

marital surname system reform. Ishiyama (2009) analyzed Japanese newspaper articles published between 1987 and 2006 and found that public discourse on the surname system gradually shifted from a focus on gender equality to political positions. Tanaka (2022), through an analysis of news articles from 1989 to 2021 and national opinion surveys conducted between 1994 and 2017, argues that the lack of consensus on the surname system is not solely the result of partisan divisions, but is also shaped by the fragmented nature of the debate and the widespread perception of the issue as a minority concern.

Although mass media in democratic politics primarily serve a reflective role rather than acting as an independent driver of public opinion or policy change (Wlezien & Soroka, 2024), they still fail to directly capture individuals' bottom-up perspectives in the way that social media platforms can.

## 3 Data and Methodology

### 3.1 Data

This study focuses on YouTube comments as the primary source of data. YouTube is one of the most widely used video-sharing platforms in Japan, with a large number of users actively posting comments daily. Leveraging YouTube comments allows for the collection of a substantial volume of data while also capturing a wide range of public opinions to enhance the representativeness and diversity of the sample as much as possible.

Using “YouTube Data API v3”, this study collected 105079 comments from 52 videos. The dataset includes metadata such as video IDs, posting times, uploader IDs and their follower counts, video like counts and view counts, as well as commenters’ IDs and their comments. I also note the tendency of attitude (whether it is opposed or in support of reform to a Selective Separate Surnames System) reflected in the video titles and contents.

To ensure that the comments primarily come from Japanese users, the study targeted the most viewed Japanese-language videos related to the surname system for married couples in Japan. The keyword “夫婦別姓 (Fūfu bessei)”<sup>1516</sup> was used to filter content relevant to the topic. The search results were then sorted by view count, and all the videos with more than 100k views were selected without setting a particular time frame. Also, in order to ensure the quality and relevance of the comments, only standard YouTube videos were included in the dataset, that is, YouTube Shorts were excluded. After selecting the relevant videos, comments were scraped from each video. The comments were collected on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025, while the

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<sup>15</sup> Directly translated as “different surnames for married couples”

<sup>16</sup> Instead of using the legal term 夫婦別氏 (Fūfu besshi / Fūfu betsushi), this study used 夫婦別姓 (Fūfu bessei), which is the more commonly used term in everyday discourse. While 夫婦別氏 tends to appear more frequently in legal documents and court cases, 夫婦別姓 is more familiar to the general public and widely used in online discussions.

metadata was gathered over a period from late June to early July.

### **3.2 Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach that integrates large-scale computational text analysis with contextual qualitative interpretation to investigate public discourse on the reform of Japan's marital surname system.

The computational components consist of descriptive statistical analysis, unsupervised topic clustering (using TF-IDF vectorization and K-Means algorithms), and N-gram analysis (with a particular focus on trigrams). The results of these computational methods are then further examined and interpreted through qualitative, context-based analysis.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

#### 4.1.1 Videos: Mostly Posted in 2025 with Moderate Views and Oppositional Framing

As of July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025, there were 54 videos that had each received over 100k views. However, with one video disabling comment access and another being deleted sometime between the end of June and the beginning July, a total of 52 videos were ultimately included in the dataset.

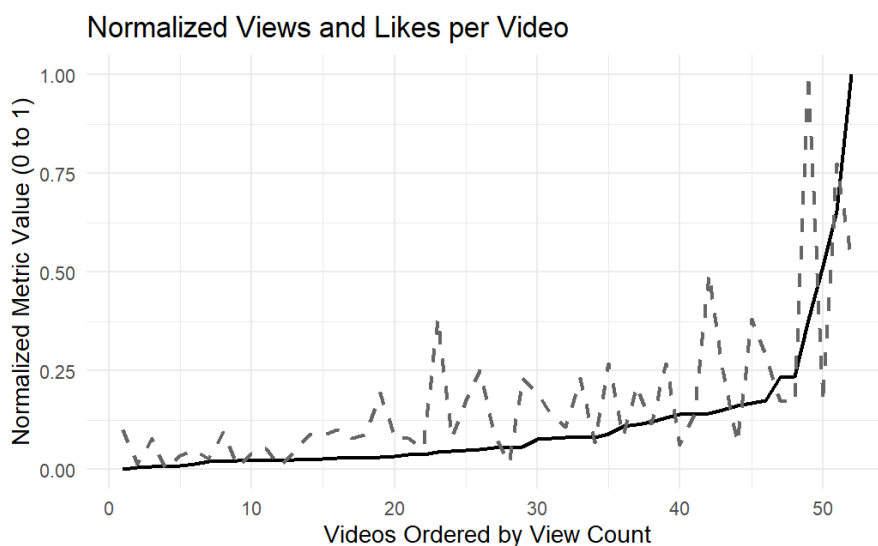
Among the 52 videos analyzed, 20 fall within the 100k-200k view range, representing the largest count among all view ranges (Table 1). Additionally, the average and median values are relatively close within each range, suggesting that there are no substantial outliers in the dataset and that the distributions are generally balanced.

Views Range	Video Count	Avg Views	Avg Likes
100k-200k	20	159400	4045
201k-300k	9	240778	8711
301k-400k	6	337000	9616
401k-500k	4	446000	9750
501k-600k	6	536667	13050
601k-700k	1	610000	16000
701k-800k	2	783000	9800
1m+	4	1950000	33675

Table 1: Video count, Average views and likes for each view range

Graph 2 shows the relationship between views and like counts for each video. The x-axis represents individual videos ordered by increasing view count, while the y-axis depicts the normalized scale for both views (solid line) and likes (dashed line). The distribution of views is right-skewed: the majority of videos receive relatively low view counts, whereas a small subset attains exceptionally high views. Indeed, in this dataset, the three most-viewed videos garnered 3 million, 2 million, and 1.6 million views, respectively.

By contrast, the likes demonstrate greater variability across the dataset. This indicates that some videos with comparatively lower view counts still achieve a substantial number of likes, suggesting factors such as content quality or audience engagement may drive liking behavior. However, higher-viewed videos still tend to accumulate more likes in general compared to the lower-viewed ones, reflecting a relationship between views and likes. Overall, these observations suggest that while views and likes are broadly correlated, likes do not scale uniformly with views across videos.



Graph 2: Views and likes for each video

It is also worth noting that the majority of videos in this dataset were posted in 2025, with only 1 video from 2020 and 4 from 2021, and 8 from 2024. This distribution reflects the recent surge in public attention to the topic, aligning with heightened discourse during the 2025 election period. Additionally, most of these videos express opposition to the Selective Separate Surnames System, suggesting that the critical perspective currently dominates online discussions on this issue (further analysis on video stance is in Findings 1).

#### **4.1.2 Comments: Active and Mostly Genuine Engagement**

The dataset identifies a total of 58084 unique users, who contribute an average of 1.8 comments per user. Among them, 16593 users, accounting for approximately 28.6% of the total, posted more than one comment. This distribution suggests that while the majority of users engaged only once, a substantial subset demonstrated repeated participation in the discussion.

After examining user activities, a small subset of extremely active users was spotted. Among them, the most active user contributed 705 comments under one single video (including replies to other commenters), while the second and third place highly active users posted 262 and 227 comments under one video respectively. Conversely, some users tend to comment on multiple videos. The most active user commented across 35 different videos, but with far fewer comments per video.

To further assess whether these hyperactive users might be automated bots, further analysis is conducted focusing on users with the following 3 behavioral patterns: (1) users who posted many comments under a single video, (2) users with the highest overall comment counts across videos, and (3) users who commented on the largest number of different videos.

For each potential bot account, I examined the repetition rate of their comment texts and the posting time of their comments (whether the comments are posted within a few seconds).

The results indicate that most of these users exhibited low repetition rates, meaning they did not simply post identical or nearly identical comments. Among the top 20 users who posted the highest number of comments, 15 had repetition rates below 5%, and 8 of those 15 had a repetition rate of 0%. Only two users demonstrated notably higher repetition rates, one with approximately 69% and another with about 47%. In terms of posting frequency, there is little evidence of rapid, high-volume commenting. The maximum number of comments posted by any user in a single minute was 7, and the majority of users posted no more than 2 comments per minute. Notably, for 11 out of the 20 most active users, their most frequently posted texts were replies to other users rather than standalone comments.

To further examine the extent of repetitive commenting, I measured the maximum pairwise cosine similarity between each user's comments to identify identical or highly similar comment pairs. A maximum similarity score of 1 indicates that at least one pair of the user's comments was completely identical. While many users did display such scores, or values very close to 1 (e.g., 0.99), the actual number of highly similar comment pairs (defined as pairs with cosine similarity  $\geq 0.9$ ) was generally low. Only four users posted more than five such pairs: one user posted 20 highly similar comment pairs, two others posted 11 each, and another posted 6. For most users, however, even those with a maximum similarity of 1, the number of highly similar pairs was very low, often only one or two. This suggests that exact or near-duplicate comments were isolated cases rather than indicative of large-scale repetition.

Overall, there appears to be no clear evidence of widespread automated bot behavior among these commenters.

#### **4.2 Finding 1: A Surge in Opposition: A Public Opinion Shift or Disproportionate Online Engagement**

The videos collected can be broadly classified into 3 main categories. The first are the discussion videos, which are primarily posted by news channels' official accounts and typically feature debates between guests representing viewpoints from both the supportive and opposing sides. There are a few exceptions, however, where only one host interviews one guest, or the participants share the same stance, resulting in less balanced discussions. The second category is the talks, in which public figures (usually political figures) or YouTubers express their personal opinions. These are mostly original videos uploaded by the speaker in the video themselves, though in some cases, particularly when involving public figures, it can be footage taken from public events featuring people expressing their opinions. The third category is the clips, more specifically, re-edited or compiled clips. These clips often incorporate narration or textual explanation by the uploader, through which the uploaders promote their own perspectives using selected clips.

In most cases, these videos demonstrate a clear stance on whether they support or oppose the Selective Separate Surnames System. However, some videos do not present a clearly defined position. For example, certain discussion videos feature guests from both sides of the debate, but the discussions are often imbalanced, meaning there may be more participants representing one viewpoint and fewer advocating for the opposite side. In one instance, the

host and all but one guest shared the same stance, leaving a single guest to represent the opposing perspective. In this particular case, I categorized this video as “neutral leaning toward support”.

Ambiguity can also be seen in video titles. For instance, one video explicitly states, “...winning the argument with the supporters of the Selective Separate Surnames System...”<sup>17</sup> and is therefore categorized as “opposition”. In contrast, a video titled “...The Conservative (Party’s) Shimada wins the argument with the Constitutional Democratic (Party) and the (Democratic Party) for the People” is categorized as “neutral leaning toward opposition”<sup>18</sup>. While the stance in the second title is not explicitly stated, background knowledge reveals that the Conservative Party opposes the reform, while the Constitutional Democratic Party and the Democratic Party for the People support it. Thus, the categorization reflects the implied stance based on political alignment.

To account for ambiguity, I categorized video titles and content into 5 stance categories, ranging from support to opposition toward the Selective Separate Surnames System: support, neutral leaning toward support, neutral, neutral leaning toward opposition, and opposition. If the title or content clearly expresses a stance, it is labeled as either support or opposition. If no clear stance is expressed, or if both supportive and opposing views are fairly balanced, it is categorized as neutral. When the stance is implied but not explicitly stated, the video is classified as either neutral leaning toward support or neutral leaning toward opposition.

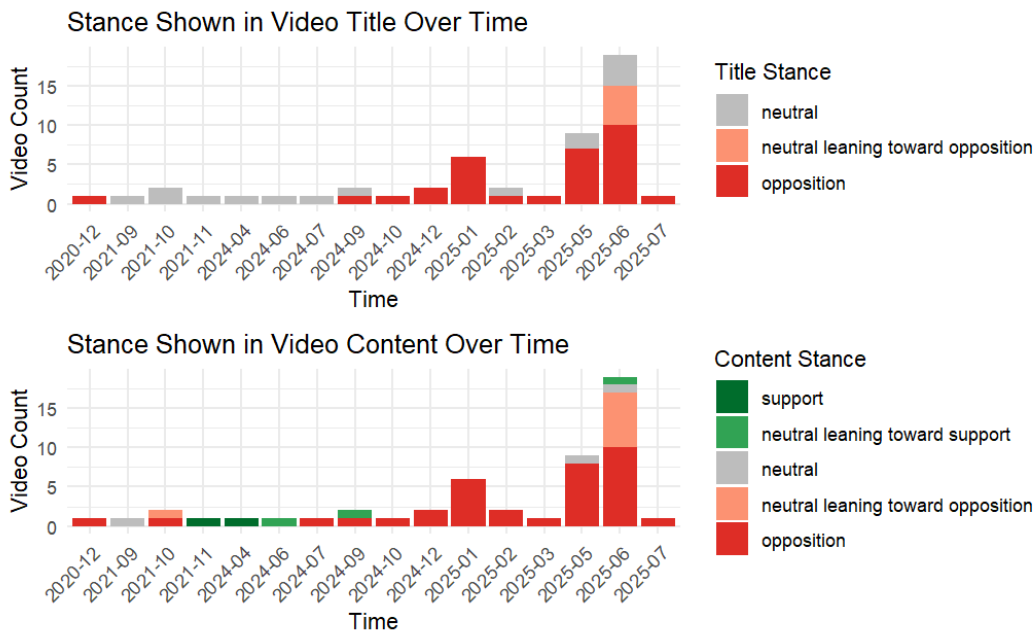
Based on this categorization framework, I analyzed the stance expressed in video titles and

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<sup>17</sup> …選択的夫婦別姓の賛成論者を完璧な論理で公開論破してしまう…

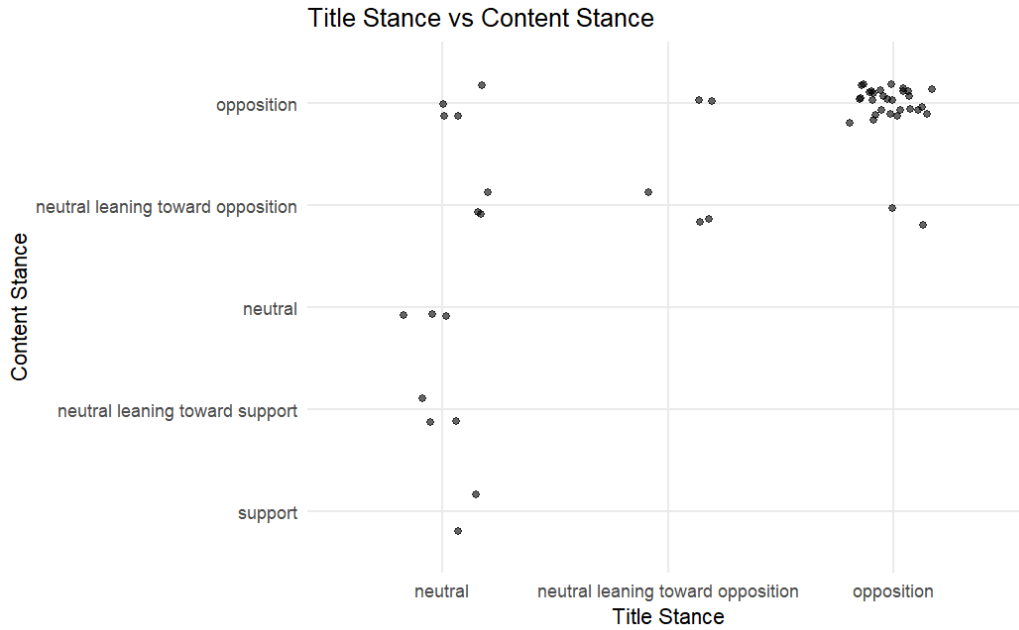
<sup>18</sup> …保守・島田氏が立民、国民を「論破」

content over time (Graph 3). Regarding video titles, there are no instances categorized as support or neutral leaning toward support. Even when the video content leans toward supporting the Selective Separate Surnames System, the corresponding titles tend to be neutral, indicating a tendency to downplay supportive positions in the framing of titles.



Graph 3: Stance Trend in Video Title and Content Over Time

If further examining the relationship between the stance expressed in video titles and their corresponding content (Graph 4), it can be seen that videos with neutral titles exhibit a wider range of content stances, spanning all five categories, indicating that a neutral title does not necessarily reflect a neutral stance. In contrast, a prominent clustering appears in the upper-right quadrant, where the title and the content are categorized as opposition or neutral leaning toward opposition. This suggests a strong alignment in the oppositional video's title and content.



Graph 4: Alignment Between Video Title and Content Stance<sup>19</sup>

In terms of video content, a notable shift in narrative tone emerges in early 2025, with an increase in videos exhibiting an oppositional stance (see Graph 3). This trend peaks in recent months (May and June 2025), which may be associated with the ongoing House of Councilors election. While the earlier period (2021–2024) includes occasional supportive or supportive-leaning content, the majority of the videos collected, especially in 2025, demonstrate a negative stance toward the Selective Separate Surnames System.

Overall, the data indicate a clear increase in oppositional framing, both in video titles and content. This trend may be interpreted in two ways. One possibility is that the content and engagement on these videos mirror an actual shift in public opinion, with attitudes moving from support toward opposition as the issue has gained political salience. Alternatively, if the most-viewed videos are not representative of the broader public, this surge may instead reflect

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that the positioning of individual points in the scatter plot is arbitrary and does not carry any analytical meaning. The points have been slightly dispersed purely for visualization purposes.

the heightened activity and engagement of opponents on platforms like YouTube, where their voices are amplified due to platform dynamics or some communities' active involvement on this platform, rather than genuine changes in public sentiment.

One thing that has caught my attention, and also a limitation of this dataset, is that although the majority of YouTube videos on this topic express opposition to the Selective Separate Surnames System (which may influence who clicks on the videos), the comments are overwhelmingly from the oppositional perspective compared to the supportive stance. Among the 100 most-liked comments, only 2 can be identified clearly as supportive of the Selective Separate Surnames System, with the rest being either opposed or ambiguous in their stance. This imbalance remains obvious even when the 100 comments are randomly selected according to each video's proportion of total comments.

Some commenters mention that they are glad to see videos expressing an opposing stance because they rarely encounter like-minded views on television, where the coverages tend to favor supporters of the reform. While Japan does not exhibit strong political polarization, this situation reminds me of cases in the US where journalists and scholars failed to predict presidential election outcomes, partly because they tended to support the democratic side and republicans' viewpoints were underrepresented in the polls they conducted. Similarly, in the Japanese context, supporters of the Selective Separate Surnames System are more likely to be highly educated, including individuals working in academia, the media, and public policy, whose voices are more frequently heard in mainstream media, such as national television. In contrast, YouTube, as a more publicly accessible platform, tends to feature views from individuals with more diverse backgrounds. The observed divergence between discourse on

YouTube and that on mainstream television reflects Tanaka's (2022) observation that meaningful dialogue between supporters and opponents is largely absent. This growing separation not only suggests the formation of echo chambers, but also raises concerns about the further entrenchment of polarized views and the diminished possibility for constructive public discussions.

### **4.3 Finding 2: The Focuses: Family Registration System, Xenophobic Narratives and Electoral Politics**

Through unsupervised topic clustering of Japanese YouTube comments, 3 clusters reveal further insights into the discussion on the surname reform and commenters' interests (Clusters A, B, and C). The clusters were further analyzed using frequency distributions and visualized via word clouds.

#### **4.3.1 Cluster A: Family Registration System**

Cluster A reveals a strong linkage between Japan's family registration system (戸籍制度) and the surname system. The top 2 frequency counts in cluster A, namely, family registration (戸籍) appearing 9130 times and system (制度) 7072 times, represent the total number of occurrences of these words across all comments grouped into this cluster. These figures indicate how central these concepts are within this thematic grouping.

This linkage is also illustrated by the relatively high frequencies of words such as abolish/abolition (廃止, 1238 occurrences) and destroy/destruction (破壊, 959 occurrences) in this cluster. Overall, it reflects that commenters, as the video uploaders, actively tie these debates to the family registration system, framing it either as a threat to be resisted or as an



would draw on feminist arguments, maintaining that legal systems should protect the rights of minorities as well as those of the majority.

With opponents typically approaching the issue from a societal perspective and supporters from a personal one, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about the broader effects of implementing the Selective Separate Surnames System. For example, both sides debate the potential impact on Japan's declining birthrate. Opponents argue that allowing more flexibility in surnames could exacerbate the problem, for disputes over family names and children's surnames would increase, thereby lowering marriage and birth rates.

Supporters, on the other hand, predict the opposite effect, that a more flexible system would make legal marriage more accessible for people, such as those currently in a common-law marriage, thereby increasing marriage and birth rates. Additionally, both sides differ on what constitutes "sufficient" reform to address the problems of the current surname system.

Opponents claim that moderate reform is "enough" to resolve the main inconveniences, while supporters point out that such limited changes fail to address all the issues individuals face under the current system.

Given the countless possible practical outcomes and the absence of any clear or definitive result, it seems unlikely that the debate can be resolved by focusing on potential effects alone. The central disagreement does not concern these practical outcomes, but rather deeper questions about whether the family registration system should be maintained or reformed. Therefore, future discussions may be more productive if they address these structural issues directly, rather than debating possible effects. Interestingly, while opponents explicitly argue that individuals' needs need not be prioritized, especially if only a small

number are affected and if doing so would require changing the system, supporters rarely state outright that they wish to abolish the family registration system, even though their support for the Selective Separate Surnames System essentially implies that they would not oppose its abolition.

### 4.3.2 Cluster B: Xenophobic Narratives

Cluster B captures narratives that reflect xenophobic or nationalist sentiments. The most frequent terms include alias name (通名, 2122 occurrences) and abolish/abolition (廃止, 790 occurrences), alongside other words such as spy (スパイ, 217 occurrences), foreign (外国, 204 occurrences), residing in Japan (在日, 138 occurrences), naturalization (帰化, 134 occurrences) and original name/legal name (本名, 132 occurrences). We can understand that this cluster revolves around discussions of foreigners residing in Japan, notably framed with negative sentiments.



Cluster B: Xenophobic Narratives

It is important to clarify that the alias name here doesn't refer to the alias use of pre-marriage surname (旧姓の通称使用), which has been proposed as a compromise by opponents

of the Selective Separate Surnames System. Instead, in this context, an alias name refers to the practice that allows foreigners in Japan to adopt Japanese-style names for everyday social interactions, functioning much like the preferred name conventions seen in the United States.

Interestingly, many opponents of the Selective Separate Surnames System appear to support the idea of Japanese nationals adopting an alias name, while opposing the same practice when it comes to foreigners. They believe this practice would alleviate the inconveniences for the Japanese while assuming that allowing foreigners to use alias names could facilitate espionage and other criminal activities, as their legal names are not used in daily social interactions. This line of reasoning is also tied to their defense of the family registration system, which they believe contributes to societal stability by enabling authorities to track all citizens through registration within family units.

Moreover, many comments emphasize that banning foreigners from using alias names should be prioritized before any debate about reforming the surname system. This stance implicitly conveys their opposition to the Selective Separate Surnames System, suggesting that they see no need for change. Rather than focusing on issues such as the cost of living or inflation, these commenters instead choose to highlight the regulation of foreign residents. This may represent a political strategy, effectively diverting attention by shifting the debate toward the regulation of foreigners.

#### **4.3.3 Cluster C: Electoral Politics**

Cluster C mainly features terms associated with electoral politics. Election-related terms include election (選挙, 171 occurrences), political party (政党, 126 occurrences), and vote (投票, 117 occurrences), etc. Additionally, there are political terms that may refer either to politics



行く, 40 occurrences), make it clear that in this dataset, Sansei often refers specifically to Sanseito, the political party. The first trigram links Sanseito to the Conservative Party of Japan, and the second trigram directly reflects Sanseito's nationalist agenda "Japanese First". Other informative trigrams include Sanseito Christian Makuya/tabernacle (参政 キリスト 幕屋, 22 occurrences), which highlights the connection between Sanseito and the religious group Makuya (Christian Tabernacle), and Sansei Representative Yoshikawa (参政 吉川 議員, 21 occurrences), referring to Rina Yoshikawa, a notable Sanseito member. From these results, it is reasonable to infer that in many cases, Sansei in this cluster often refers to the Sanseito political party.

Sanseito's position on the Selective Separate Surnames System stands out sharply among Japanese political parties. Out of the 11 parties that have attracted significant public attention in recent years<sup>24</sup>, only Sanseito and the Conservative Party of Japan appear to have achieved clear intra-party consensus in opposing the Selective Separate Surnames System. In contrast, while parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan and the Japan Innovation Party also do not officially endorse the Selective Separate Surnames System, and tend to favor moderate reforms, namely the aliases use reform, some members within these parties publicly voiced support for the Selective Separate Surnames System in 2025.

It is worth emphasizing Sanseito's role in the context of the surname system debate for several reasons. Apart from the fact that, as shown in the clustering analysis, Sanseito is the most prominent party term in this topic clustering and has distinguished itself by taking an

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<sup>24</sup> Including the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, the Komeito, the Japan Innovation Party, the Democratic Party for the People, the Sanseito, the Japanese Communist Party, the Reiwa Shinsengumi, the Social Democratic Party, the Conservative Party of Japan, and the Party to Protect the People from NHK

especially firm and clear stance against the Selective Separate Surnames System<sup>25</sup>, Sanseito's success in the 2025 House of Councillors election echos two important trends: the rise of xenophobic narratives and the effectiveness of media-driven campaign strategies.

First, Sanseito has been identified by news media such as the BBC as a “far-right” party, known for its nationalist campaigns, including the “Japanese First” agenda and warnings about a “silent invasion of foreigners”.<sup>26</sup> This aligns with the xenophobic sentiments identified in Cluster B and is consistent with previous research findings that opponents of the Selective Separate Surnames System tend to be more conservative (Ishida, 2018; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020; Kita, 2025).

Second, as a relatively new party founded during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Sanseito's achievement of winning 14 seats and becoming the fourth-largest party in this election represents a remarkable increase and a significant accomplishment. From the very beginning, Sanseito has relied heavily on media-driven strategies, as it quickly gained attention through YouTube videos that promoted conspiracy theories about vaccinations during the pandemic. This suggests that YouTube and social media have played a crucial role in the party's rise, and that these efforts have paid off. Sanseito's success in the 2025 election is a notable example of the growing influence of social media in Japanese politics, following the earlier example set by the Party to Protect the People from NHK (Guerrera-Sapone, 2021). Additionally, the high level of attention Sanseito received in YouTube comments, combined with its substantial electoral gains, may serve as further evidence that online commentary can

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<sup>25</sup> Compared to the Conservative Party of Japan, Sanseito is more representative in opposition. This may be attributed to Sanseito's more active campaign strategy on YouTube, or to the fact that the Conservative Party of Japan is a newer party, founded in 2023, and has therefore received less overall attention

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly80nnjnv5o>

indicate the level of forthcoming social response (Oster et al., 2015).

#### **4.4 Finding 3: Judicial and Political Drivers of Public Attention**

As Ishiyama (2009) observed, public discourse surrounding the surname system in Japan is indeed closely intertwined with political developments.

Graph 5 illustrates Google search trends for the term *fūfu bessei* (夫婦別姓), meaning “different surnames for married couples” in Japanese, from August 2015 to June 2025. Data prior to August 2015 is excluded, as the search interest remained consistently low until a sudden and notable peak in December 2015.

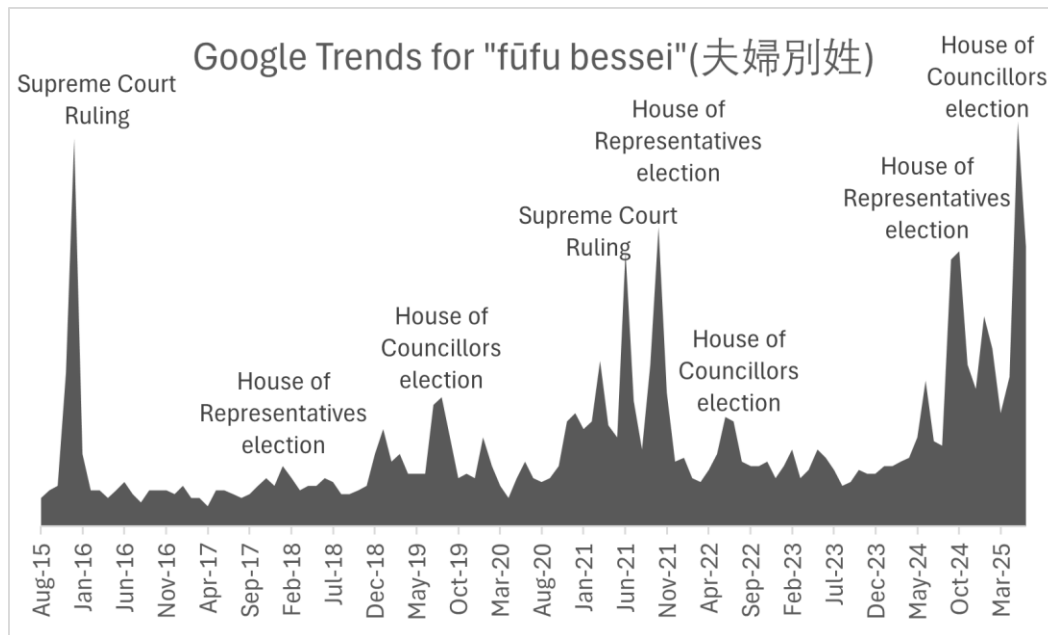
The first and most significant peak occurred in December 2015, triggered by the Supreme Court ruling on December 16<sup>th</sup> that upheld the constitutionality of the existing family surname system. This marked the beginning of the heated online public discourse on the issue in recent years.

Despite this initial surge in attention, interest quickly declined and remained low. For example, the October 2017 House of Representatives election did not generate a notable increase in search activity. It was not until the July 2019 House of Councillors election that the topic began to regain some visibility, reflected in a modest rise in search interest.

The second major peak in the data appears in mid to late 2021, corresponding with two events: the Supreme Court reaffirming its earlier decision in a second case on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021, and the House of Representatives election in October 2021. These events produced similar sharp increases in search volume, though they were not as high as the 2015 peak and were separated by a noticeable decline in interest between the two.

Following that, the July 2022 House of Councillors election generated a level of interest comparable to that of the previous House of Councillors election in 2019, suggesting a modest but recurring pattern of electoral relevance. Similarly, after a period of decline, public interest rose again during the October 2024 House of Representatives election, reaching a volume similar to the level observed during the previous House of Representatives election in 2021. This repetition indicates that while the issue of the surname system does not consistently dominate public discourse, it tends to regain attention in cycles aligned with political events.

The third notable peak corresponds with the ongoing election period for the House of Councillors in July 2025, indicating an unprecedented level of attention to the issue. The search interest has surpassed all previous records and, by June 2025, is approaching the level seen during the initial surge in 2015, when the topic first emerged in mainstream online discourse. In May 2025, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and the Democratic Party for the People submitted bills to introduce the Selective Separate Surnames System, while the Japan Innovation Party submitted a bill to expand legal recognition of pre-marriage surnames as official aliases. In early June, deliberation and questioning on these bills took place, however, none were passed. Notably, most of the videos in the dataset posted in June were recordings of the questioning sessions on these bills.



Graph 5: Comparing Google Trends for “fūfu bessei” (夫婦別姓) and Related Social Events:

Supreme Court Rulings and National Elections in Japan (data by June 2025)

The trajectory of online discourse surrounding *fūfu bessei* can be broadly divided into four distinct stages.

The first stage emerged in 2015, marked by a sharp peak in public attention following the Supreme Court ruling in December, signaling the beginning of broad online attention on the issue. However, this initial surge was short-lived. After the peak, online interest quickly declined and returned to pre-2015 levels, remaining relatively low from 2016 to 2018.

The second stage, beginning around 2019, was characterized by a tentative reemergence of the topic, coinciding with the House of Councillors election. Although search interest returned to baseline levels through 2020, the renewed visibility suggests a growing connection between the issue and political discourse.

The third stage began in 2021, triggered by another Supreme Court decision and the House

of Representatives election. These events collectively sparked a more sustained level of public interest that persisted into 2022 and 2023. Compared to earlier stages, this period shows an elevated engagement in general, a higher baseline level of attention to the issue.

The fourth and current stage reflects a new pattern in which *fūfu bessei* has become a prominent theme in political discourse, especially during national elections. Since 2024, the issue has been regularly brought up in campaign narratives, suggesting its deeper integration into electoral debates and its growing relevance in the broader public consciousness. Also, as the recently submitted bills were not passed, the issue of a Selective Separate Surnames System will likely be revisited in the near future.

One limitation of this analysis is that, while judicial and political events appear to be important drivers of public attention to the surname system, they may not be the only influencing factors. For instance, the National Review for Supreme Court Judges is held concurrently with House of Representatives elections, as was the case in 2017, 2021, and 2024. This overlap may help explain why the search interest index was higher during the 2021 and 2024 House of Representatives elections compared to the House of Councillors elections. Moreover, several smaller peaks in the graph cannot be directly explained by the listed events. It is important to acknowledge that the observed fluctuations in search interest were likely influenced not only by the events explicitly noted in the graph, but also by other concurrent factors that were not included.

## 5 Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of public discourse on the reform of Japan's marital surname system, utilizing a large dataset of YouTube comments. The findings show that opposition to the Selective Separate Surnames System is overwhelmingly prominent among the most popular videos, with right-leaning and nationalist perspectives dominating the conversation. Meanwhile, these comments are posted primarily by genuine and highly active users, rather than automated bots, suggesting that these views reflect authentic voices within the Japanese online public.

Through topic clustering and contextual interpretation, three core themes emerge at the heart of the debate: (1) the preservation or abolition of the family registration system; (2) the rise of xenophobic narratives that link surname reform to anxieties about foreigners and perceived threats to social stability; and (3) the increasing politicization of the issue, particularly as it intertwines with electoral politics.

Importantly, the analysis suggests that the discussions extend well beyond the marital surname system itself. Both support and opposition to the Selective Separate Surnames System can be seen as expressions of broader public dissatisfaction with the current state of society and demands for systemic reform. While supporters channel their desire for change into advocacy for progressive reforms to the marital surname system, opponents express their dissatisfaction by supporting more conservative parties and policies, seeking to reinforce traditional values and societal order. This conservative orientation, which is evident in the strong opposition to surname reform, indicates that significant changes to the marital surname system are unlikely in the near future, particularly before tangible improvements are made to

people's living quality.

Nevertheless, as the analysis demonstrates, spikes in public attention are closely linked to judicial decisions and national electoral cycles. Given the profound political entanglement of this issue, it is likely that debates surrounding the marital surname system will persist as a prominent topic in Japanese public and political discourse. Future research may benefit from further exploring how evolving social values, media ecosystems, and demographic shifts shape these ongoing debates. Ultimately, understanding the dynamics of public discourse on this topic may provide broader insights into the processes of social change and policy reform in Japan.

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