

Chapter 7

State–Society Relations Under the COVID–19 Disaster in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced states worldwide to intervene in citizens' lives, especially in two critical aspects: behavioral constraints and economic compensations. Accordingly, the pandemic provides an opportunity to reconsider the role of the state. Given that public opinion is an essential determinant of state-society relations in a democracy, this chapter investigates the extent to which people in Japan think the state should intervene in people's lives. The authors propose four hypotheses (political party support, anxiety about infection risk, authoritative attitude, and economic ideology) and test them by analyzing data from a questionnaire survey. The analysis reveals that whereas support for the ruling party and authoritarian attitudes positively affect support for COVID-19 measures, economic ideologies such as liberalism and redistribution do not affect it positively or negatively. The results indicate both the similarities and differences in public opinion regarding the state's role between Japan and Western countries and provide implications for Japanese society in the post-pandemic era.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has forced societies across the world to address many problems, including not only medical and public health systems but also economic and social ones. One of the most critical elements that influence how to solve these issues is the role of the state. In this regard, there are two significant points of discussion.

The first point is how to regulate people's behavior to prevent increases in the number of COVID-19 infections. To reduce the spread of infectious diseases, certain preventive actions, such as wearing a mask and refraining from traveling and holding large events, are needed. These actions involve collective action

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-9760-6.ch007

problems because they are not effective for controlling the pandemic unless people cooperate with them (Jørgensen et al., 2021). Therefore, countries have applied coercive measures to varying degrees to force people to take preventive actions. Since the beginning of the pandemic, governments have prevented people from entering and leaving the country, traveling within the country, holding public events, and opening restaurants; they have even sealed off entire cities, a strategy called lockdown. New information technology was used to track people's mobility in some countries. Later, as vaccines were developed, state-sponsored vaccinations were promoted, and debates over making vaccination mandatory developed.

The second point is economic compensation. The restrictions on people's activities described above have caused severe damage to the economy. For example, many companies have been forced to refrain from business, and many workers have been forced to take time off work, resulting in economic losses. In response, the state has taken measures such as subsidies to ensure the survival of businesses and livelihoods and to alleviate growing socioeconomic inequality. In addition, to rebuild the shrinking economy, the state is required to implement large-scale economic policies.

In sum, most countries worldwide have taken two kinds of measures: restrictions on behavior and economic compensation by the state. These are related to the serious problem of whether and to what extent the state should control citizens. To what extent should the state guarantee the safety of people's lives? To what extent is the state allowed to intervene in citizens' lives?

When evaluating countries' COVID-19 measures in terms of restrictions on people's behavior, the political system and leadership have received attention. In authoritarian regimes, on the one hand, it is easier to restrict private rights and thus to efficiently implement countermeasures (Cassan & Steenvoort, 2021).¹ In democracies, on the other hand, the emphasis on individual freedom and rights makes it more difficult to respond flexibly. Although COVID-19 was considered a state of emergency and countries adopted policies with coercive powers that would not normally be implemented, many people in democracies still oppose these policies as violations of their rights. There is also worry about the state retaining strong authority even after the pandemic is over (Maduro & Kahn, 2021).

Economic compensation is another problematic issue. In today's globalized society, economic competition based on market principles is emphasized, and the state has been withdrawing from the social sphere. In other words, people are required not to depend on the state for social security but to be independent. This has led to the polarization of winners and losers in economic competition. However, as the economic damage caused by COVID-19 is at least partly due to measures taken by the state, monetary compensation has been demanded. This may provide an opportunity to reconsider the role of redistribution by the state.

A democratic system must be based on the people's will above all else. The role of the state is no exception. What kind of attitude do citizens have toward the role of the state, and how do they evaluate the state's policies? Specifically, what do people think about the extent to which the state should be allowed to restrict the rights of individuals in a state of emergency? To what extent do people think the state needs to guarantee the safety of citizens' lives, and how should we balance this state role with self-help and mutual aid? It is precisely in crises such as COVID-19 that we may be able to observe the essence of the relationship between the state and society.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, various problems of democracy had been pointed out (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). In particular, there has been growing dissatisfaction with representative democracy, including political distrust and poor policy responsiveness, as well as the rise of populism and calls for strong leadership (Foa & Mounk 2016; 2017; Zakaria, 2016). Taking this background into account may provide clues for exploring the state-society relationship after the COVID-19 convergence.

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