

**NIRA OPINION PAPER
No.62 | May 2022**

What Do Freedom and Equality Mean to the Japanese? - Considering the Issues Based on the Results of a Deliberative Survey (3)-

Shigeki Uno Executive Vice President, NIRA / Professor, Institute of Social Science,
The University of Tokyo

In order to formulate effective policies that will receive public support, it is essential to consider the public's fundamental sense of values in relation to freedom and equality. The Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) conducted a project involving "consideration" and "deliberation" regarding economic and social issues. The results showed that the overwhelming majority of respondents chose freedom over equality. However, we must be cautious with regard to immediately concluding that the Japanese value freedom more than equality.

First, the majority of respondents were positive concerning the restriction of individual freedom for the purpose of implementing countermeasures against COVID-19. It is distinctly possible that rather than a "libertarian" freedom that radically asserts individual liberty, the Japanese envision freedom as something that is not opposed to order and social consensus, while also allowing restrictions on that freedom. Second, among both respondents who chose equality and those who chose freedom, many favored the cutting back of government services over the provision of generous services. In particular, respondents who are the beneficiaries of government services would rather see a reduction in services. If the reason for this is dissatisfaction with, or distrust of, the fairness of government services, it would represent a serious problem. Here, it is possible to read Japanese voters' awareness of the relevant issues.

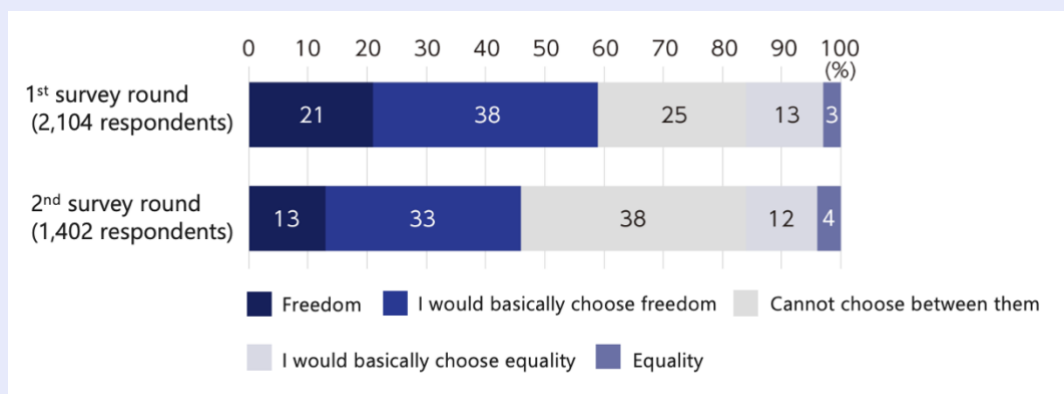
NIRA is conducting a project to stimulate discussion on a variety of important issues through a combination of a two-part survey (referred to as “consideration” below) and an online interview-style discussion (referred to as “deliberation” below) *. This paper brings together what we have learned regarding the fundamental sense of values surrounding “freedom” and “equality” that underlie the public's opinions on a variety of issues.

* The project selected four themes related to society and the economy, and conducted a monitored Internet survey and online roundtable discussions. The Internet survey was conducted in two parts. The first round of the survey garnered basic data (personal attributes, etc.) and asked respondents their opinions on government policy. In the second round, to examine the ways in which people's views changed, we asked the respondents to read discussions of the issues authored by experts holding differing opinions (Sonoe Shigeta and Yasushi Watanabe), and then to answer the same questions as they had in the first round of the survey. We termed this a process of “consideration.” Following this, we conducted an online interview using Zoom, with 10 of the respondents from the first survey present. In this interview, the respondents read the opinions of the same experts as they had previously done in the survey focusing on “consideration,” and we observed changes in their opinions as a result of listening to others’ opinions. We termed this a process of “deliberation.” For details of the survey method and results, see Taniguchi, M. (2022), “What constitutes a Policy Vision that the Public can Accept?: Considering the Issues based on the Results of a Deliberative Survey (1),” NIRA Opinion Paper No. 60, and Kawamoto, M. (2022), “Size of Government and the Burden on Citizens: A Deliberative Survey,” NIRA Working Paper No. 3.

Freedom or Equality?

Which do the Japanese value more, freedom or equality? In the results of NIRA’s survey, the number of respondents who chose freedom overwhelmingly exceeded the number of those who chose equality (Figure 1). When the number of respondents selecting “I would basically choose freedom” is included, the “Freedom” group accounts for almost 60% of the respondents, while the “Equality” group accounts for only about 15%. Nevertheless, we should be cautious with regard to immediately concluding that the Japanese value freedom more than equality.

Figure 1: If offered a choice between them, would you choose freedom or equality?



(Source) Shigeki Uno, Sonoe Shigeta, and Yasushi Watanabe (2022), "The Japanese View of 'Freedom' and 'Equality,' as shown by a Survey of 2,000 People: Acceptance of Rules to ensure Safety / Dislike of Pressure to Conform," *Chuokoron*, April issue, pp. 134-145, *Chuokoron Shinsha*.

First, needless to say, the respondents differ in their understanding of “freedom” and “equality.” Normally, it would be desirable to provide common definitions of these concepts and have respondents choose based on those definitions. However, both freedom and equality are multivalent concepts, and it is difficult to offer a unified definition. Here, we only presented the words “freedom” and “equality,” and allowed the respondents to decide what meaning they read into these words.

Second, it should be noted that for many respondents, it was difficult to choose between freedom and equality when asked to do so. 25% of respondents in the first survey, rising to 38% in the second survey, chose “Cannot choose between them” as their response. Perhaps “Both freedom and equality” would represent many people’s actual feeling with regard to this subject, and some of the respondents must have felt uncomfortable with the very idea of choosing between the two. This suggests that the question “Freedom or equality?” itself is not a self-evident one.

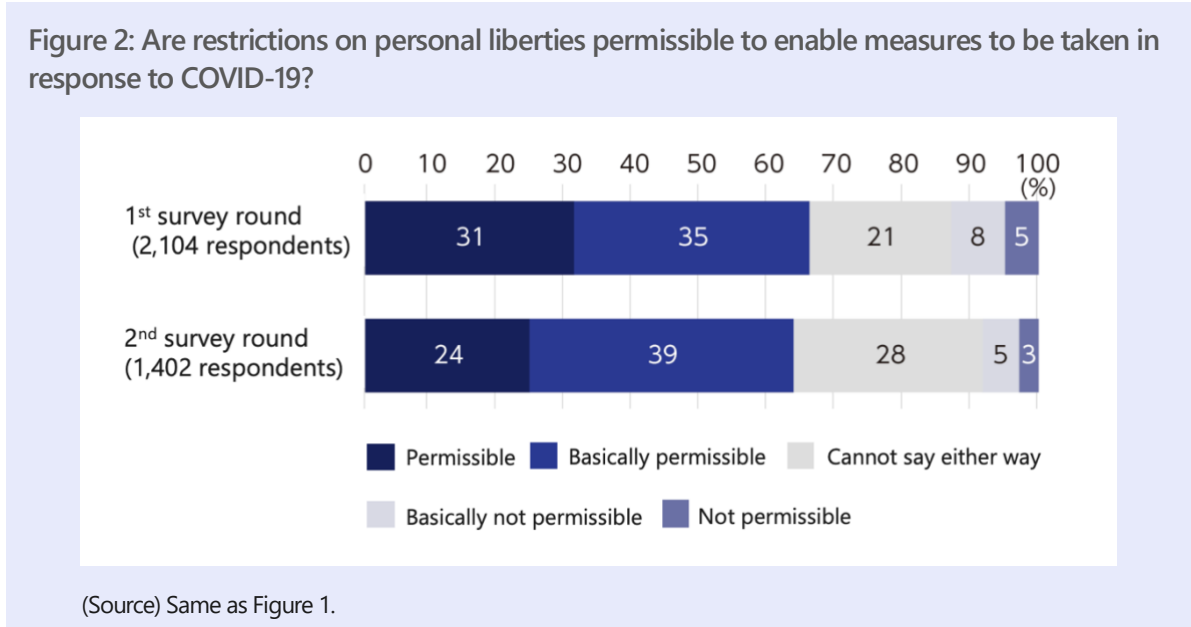
Third, even if we hypothetically assume that “Japanese people value freedom more than equality,” the interpretation of this statement itself involves further ambiguity. This is because the survey results may indicate that Japanese people have a skeptical (but not negative) image of equality to a greater extent than they have a positive image of freedom. This possibility will be discussed below.

While it is necessary to take these reservations into consideration, the fact that numerous respondents chose freedom rather than equality is in itself an important finding of this survey.

Incidentally, I would like to touch on the increase in the proportion of respondents selecting the response “Cannot choose between them” in the second round of the survey. The survey was predicated on having one of the expert contributors write on behalf of a libertarian conception of freedom, one which does not assert an essential affiliation to the state, while the other would argue that equality and freedom are inseparable, and that in a sense “equal freedom” is what is important. Although the issues raised by these experts did not necessarily lead to a clearer distinction between the freedom and equality camps, in a sense they did contribute to shedding light on the specific characteristics of the Japanese understanding of freedom and equality. Below, I would like to indicate some of the relevant key points.

Freedom and an Emphasis on Safety

First, it should be pointed out that although the respondents overwhelmingly chose freedom, the majority of respondents were positive regarding the restriction of personal freedom in order to respond to COVID-19 (Figure 2). Of course, the fact that the survey was conducted in August and September of 2021, during the fifth wave of the pandemic in Japan, may have had an impact on the results. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that only around 10% of respondents (including those who selected the response “Basically not permissible”) considered the restriction of personal freedoms to be impermissible.



As exemplified by then German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s March 2020 statement to the effect that restrictions on freedom of movement are justified only when absolutely necessary, which

attracted considerable attention, in western nations, the opinion was frequently expressed that restrictions on behavior and movement should be applied cautiously, even in light of the pandemic. Without conducting comparative research under common conditions, it is impossible to make precise assertions, but it certainly seems that in Japan, by contrast, there is a noticeably positive attitude toward restrictions on personal freedom.

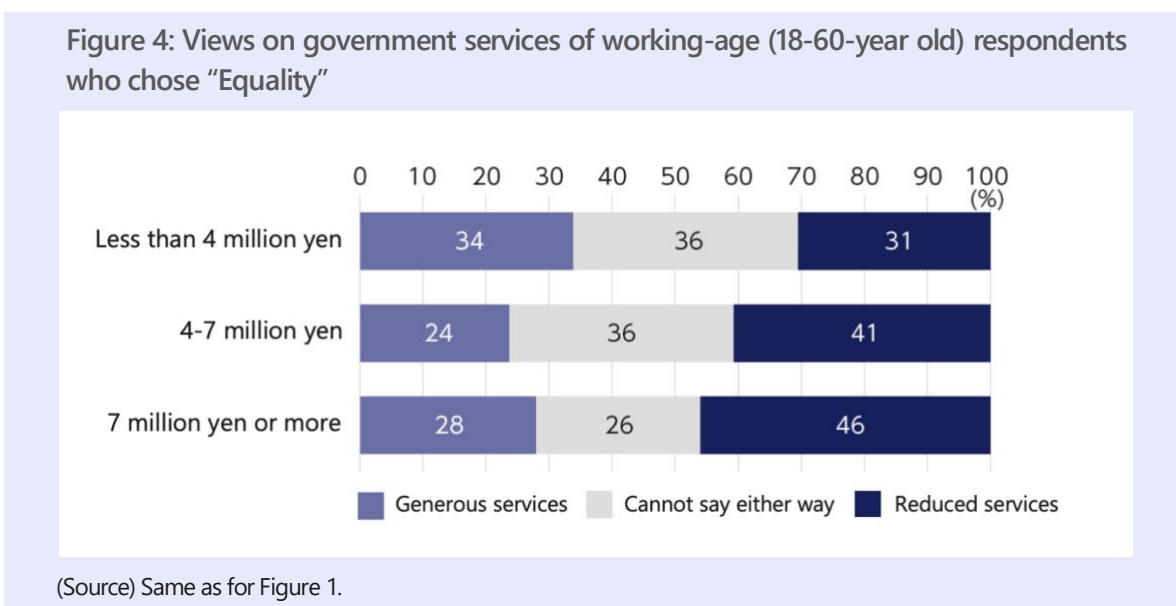
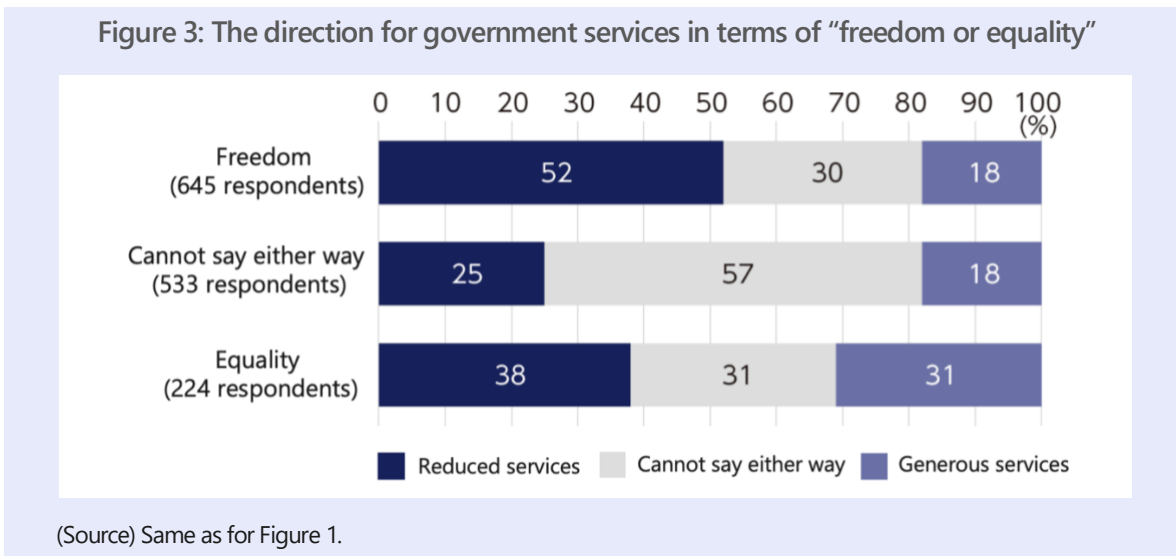
Of course, the tradeoff between safety and freedom is an issue that has always been with us. It would not be naturally contradictory for those who respect freedom to value safety even more. Nevertheless, this was a time when freedom of behavior and movement was restricted for a long period by a succession of declarations of states of emergency and the social pressure to conform, as exercised by the so-called “self-restraint police” (individuals who took it upon themselves to attempt to police or criticize other citizens or businesses that failed to comply with the government’s call to refrain from going out or conducting business beyond certain hours). It is astonishing that so many respondents were so tolerant of restrictions on individual freedom while they themselves were, as a result, inconvenienced.

Perhaps for the Japanese, freedom is not a “libertarian” freedom, in which all actions are basically free as long as they do not infringe on the bodies or private property of others, but rather a freedom that is compatible with order and social consensus. The feeling seems to be that “if someone does not obey the rules, I will also be inconvenienced.” The survey results lead us to conjecture that many people believe that it is only against the background of certain restrictions that they can enjoy freedom.

Small Government or Big Government?

The second point to be made is in relation to government services. It was previously expected that those who chose freedom would prefer “small government” and those who chose equality would prefer “big government,” but the results here were also somewhat surprising. While many of the respondents who chose freedom conformed to expectations and favored the cutting back of government services, many of those who chose equality were also in favor of the cutting back of services (Figure 3). Although a larger percentage of the group that chose “Equality” (31%) supported the provision of more generous government services than was the case in the groups that chose “Freedom” and “Cannot say either way,” 38% supported cutting back of government services, a higher percentage than those that favored more generous services. In particular, among the “Equality” group, support for the cutting back of government services was particularly noticeable among middle-class respondents (those with annual incomes of between 4 and 7 million yen) (Figure 4), indicating a paradox in which the beneficiaries of government

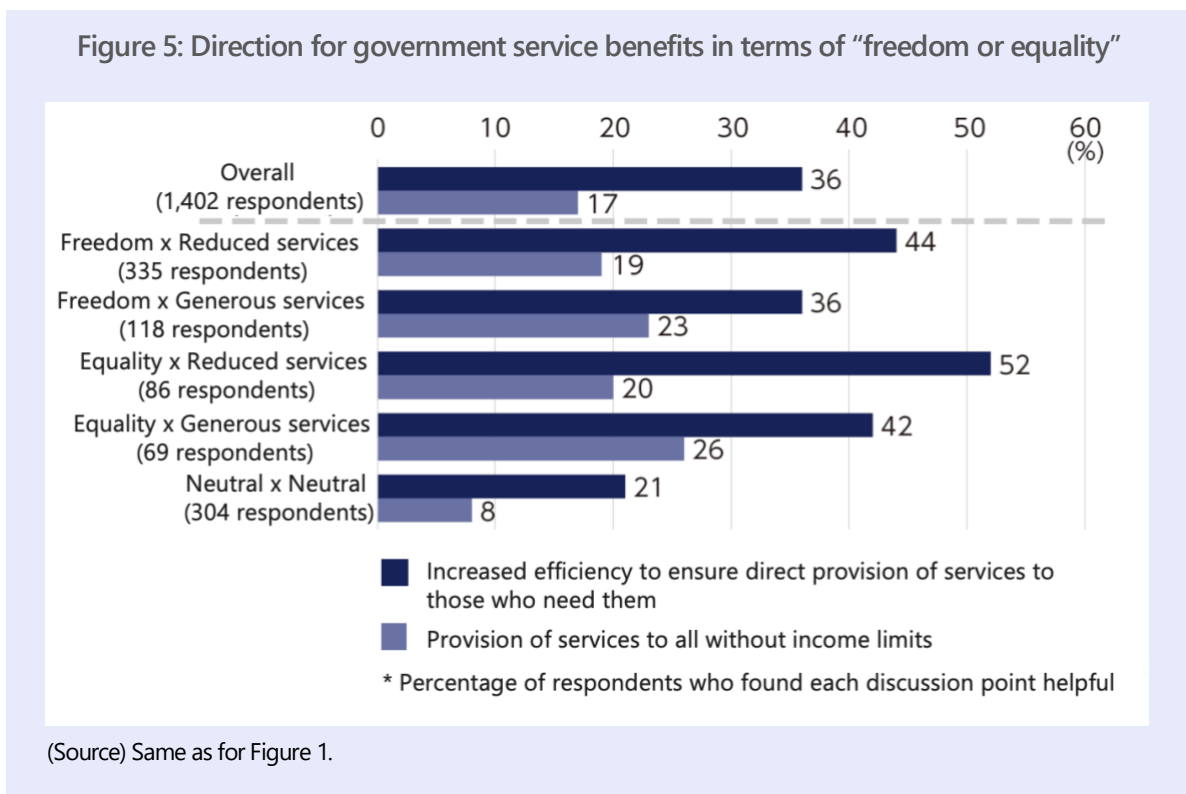
services would rather see a reduction in those services¹.



Here also, the image of the “cutting back of government services” is a problematic one. The interpretation depends on whether one sees it in neoliberal terms, such as reduction of the number of public servants and privatization of government services, or in terms of the simplification and streamlining of procedures such that they do not require the use of official or personal seals, etc. Nevertheless, it is clear that many respondents, both those who chose “Freedom” and those who chose “Equality,” view the “cutting back of government services “ in a positive light. This has enabled us to read the Japanese electorate's awareness of the issue.

Even more interesting is the choice, in the case of government services, between the provision of universal services (provision of services to all without income limits), and targeting provision

(making assistance more efficient to ensure that it directly reaches those who need it). While there was a relatively higher number of supporters of universal service provision among respondents who chose “Equality” and were in favor of the provision of generous government services, overall, support for targeting service provision outweighed support for universal services in both groups (Figure 5). Of course, many of these choices may be based on a naive awareness of the problem (respondents may find it strange to provide services even to people who do not need them), but the overall low level of support for universal service provision is another point worth noting.



Incidentally, the paradox that I have already referred to, i.e. the beneficiaries of government services choosing “small government,” is also a tendency in the U.S. It is often pointed out that the middle class in the U.S. complains that taxes are spent for the benefit of those in lower income brackets and that they themselves do not receive any benefit. Further study is needed to determine whether the same dissatisfaction is growing in Japan. If the beneficiaries of a policy do not support that policy due to dissatisfaction with, or distrust of, the government or other segments of society, this would represent a serious problem. It is also possible that such dissatisfaction and distrust is linked to the low level of support for equality mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

Conclusion

The results of the survey discussed above suggest the following conclusions: For many respondents, the choice between freedom and equality was not an easy one, but once having chosen, they overwhelmingly chose freedom. Here, it is very possible that rather than a libertarian freedom that radically asserts individual liberty, freedom is envisioned as something that is not opposed to order and social consensus, while also allowing for restrictions on that freedom.

With regard to government services, while most respondents who chose freedom favored the cutting back of services, even among respondents who chose equality, those who favored cutting back services outnumbered those who desired the provision of generous government services. The high level of support for the cutting back of services, especially among those in the middle-class group of respondents (those with annual incomes of between 4 and 7 million yen), implies that the beneficiaries of government services would rather see those services reduced. If the low level of support for equality over freedom was due to dissatisfaction with or distrust of the fairness of government services, this would represent a problem. Taking into consideration also the fact that more respondents supported targeted services than universal service provision, we can see that further study is needed.

In order to formulate effective policies, it will be essential to take into account the basic sense of values held by the public with respect to freedom and equality. It is to be hoped that this survey will help in this regard.

Note

¹ It should be noted, however, that the sample size was small.



Shigeki Uno

Professor Uno is an Executive Vice President of NIRA, and a Professor in The University of Tokyo's Institute of Social Science. He holds a Ph.D. in law from The University of Tokyo's Graduate Schools for Law and Politics. Professor Uno specializes in the history of western political thought and political philosophy. His research focuses on democratic politics in the U.S., France, and Japan, with a particular focus on the thinker Alexis de Tocqueville. He is involved in community activities on Oki Island, and in Kamaishi and Fukui Prefecture. Professor Uno

received the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities in 2007 for his book *Tokuviru – Byoudou to fubyoudo no rironka* (“Tocqueville: Theorist of Equality and Inequality”), (Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko; enlarged and revised edition published in 2019) and the Tanzan Ishibashi Award in 2021 for *Minshu-shugi to wa nani ka* (“What is Democracy?”), (Kodansha Gendai Shinsho, 2020).