

Japan's women lawmakers remain seated

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The House of Councillors (Upper House) election was held on 10 July 2022 to elect 125 of the 284 upper house seats. All Japanese national newspapers headlined, “A record-breaking number of women won seats” in the election. But the praise may not stand up to close scrutiny.

In the Upper House election, a record-breaking 181 female candidates ran for office, accounting for 33% of the 545 candidates. This new record came very close to the government’s target of 35% female candidates by 2025, part of the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality which aimed to increase the proportion of female candidates. Female candidates subsequently won 35 seats (28%) of the 125 contested seats. As a result, the total number of female lawmakers, including the uncontested seats in this election, increased to a new high of 64.

It is important to note here that candidate selection depended not only on whether the party was expected to win or lose in the election, but also on party ideologies on the role of women in politics. In particular, the Japan Communist Party (JCP), being more female-friendly than conservative parties, nominated the highest proportion of female candidates at 55%. The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) followed suit, with 51% and 42% respectively. In contrast, the conservative ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) fielded only 23.2% of LDP candidates.

Despite the high nomination rates by opposition parties, LDP women candidates were much more likely to get elected than opposition parties’ candidates. The electability (female candidates elected / all female candidates) of the LDP female candidates was 68% (13/19), as compared with 6% (2/32) of the JCP female candidates, 35% (9/26) of the CDPJ female candidates, and 20% (1/5) of the SDP female candidates. In other words, opposition parties found it very difficult to increase the parliamentary representation of women in the LDP-dominated party system, which could reduce pressure on the LDP to respond to new demand for more women candidates.

Japan’s Upper House election system is much more advantageous to women than the House of Representatives (Lower House) election system. In the recent Upper House election, voters cast two ballots – one for 74 seats of multi-member/single-member prefectural electoral districts and another for 50 seats of open-list proportional representation. Multi-member district and proportional representation systems are associated with greater representation by women. When one organization selects multiple candidates in multi-member districts, it has an opportunity to balance its ticket by achieving gender representation, while party-list systems require a centralized procedure of candidate selection that gives party leaders, rather than local party members, greater flexibility to nominate candidates from diverse backgrounds.

Although the women’s record in the recent Upper House election is a positive step, the real challenge faced by Japan’s political parties is to increase the representation of women elected in Lower House elections, which clearly favoured male incumbents. In the 2021 Lower House election, women accounted for 18% of all candidates and 10% of all elected candidates. Although Japan's Constitution delegates more power to the Lower House by giving its

decisions precedence over those of the Upper House, the biggest losers in the Lower House election system are women who are willing to run but not nominated or elected. The Lower House election system is based on a mixed electoral system of single member districts and party-list proportional representation tiers. The problem lies in the unusual system of dual candidacy that allows candidates to simultaneously run in an electoral district and under the proportional representation.

In the single member district systems, party leaders have difficulty in including female candidates, because they tend to choose the “safe” representative as only one party-endorsed candidate or to favour incumbents who are mostly men. The primary driver of electoral success is based on single member districts and party-list proportion representation tiers are preserved as a secondary chance to win a seat even if they lose the single member district race. In the 2021 Lower House election, 91% of LDP candidates for single member districts were dual candidates and 88% of LDP incumbents were successfully elected, but women accounted for only 8% of LDP incumbents.

In terms of supply side barriers, women lack the *sanban* (three key factors for being selected: campaign organization, name recognition, and fundraising apparatus). Newcomer women are thus less likely to be selected as candidates or as challengers of other party members in Lower House elections. One problem-solving strategy, as seen in more than 60 countries, is to adopt voluntary quotas that individual parties may adopt for women. In fact, after the Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field was unanimously passed in May 2018, the CDPJ, the JCP, and the SDP set a target of 50% women candidates. But the LDP has not set voluntary targets and undertaken a blame avoidance, sidestepping strategy stating that its headquarters has asked local organization to proactively field women.

Finally, it is important to note that international pressures and norms may affect the level of Japanese women’s participation in the political and economic fields. The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), reported by the World Economic Forum in 2021, ranks Japan 120th out of 156 countries, undermining Japan’s reputation as a major advanced economy. Japan is certainly prone to such international pressure as well as domestic pressure from women voters to increase the numbers of female candidates and politicians.

**Japan Times*, “Women win record 35 of 125 seats in Japan's Upper House election.” 11 July 2022.

**Asahi Shimbun*, “Women secured record 35 seats in July 10 Upper House election.” 12 July 2022.

**Mainichi Shimbun*, “Record 35 women elected to Japan upper house.” 11 July 2022.

*Cabinet Office, “The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality” March 2021.
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