

Women: missing (but) in action in Japanese politics

Edition 9, 2022

Professor Donna Weeks

DOI:

Discussion about women in politics in Japan will often start with a look at where the country stands on the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) leader board. In its November 2021 report, the IPU ranked Japan at 165. This takes into account the October election result in which one prominent long-serving parliamentarian, Tsujimoto Kiyomi, actually lost her seat, unexpectedly, reducing the number of women in the lower house to 45 out of 465 members. By contrast, the same report puts Australia at 56. But these figures tell only a part of the story. As an academic living in and studying both countries, my research interest seeks to focus on reasons for this difference in ranking when a broader look at the roles of women in both societies suggests there is a lesser gap than those numbers indicate.

The 2021 lower house election actually provided a few surprises about women in politics as well as avenues to ask 'what next?', especially with the upper house election due in July 2022. Some international attention was given to the governing Liberal Democratic Party's presidential election in September 2021 with two women among the four candidates vying to replace Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide. Politics being what it is, a set of factional plays decided the result in Kishida Fumio's favour but, almost 76 years since women were first elected to parliament in Japan, what might Takaichi Sanae and Noda Seiko's pursuit of the prime ministership herald for women in politics in Japan?

Why do people become interested in politics? What leads one person to want to

pursue high political office while her next-door neighbour might prefer engagement at the local school's parents and teachers committee? Both emerge from a socio-political milieu in a Japan that does not *discourage* political actions but can nonetheless quickly slam down those who might want to disrupt a seemingly rigid gender discourse. The world, and not just Japan, has trouble coming to terms with the idea that women can and should be holding office in national parliaments. Those who reach the highest offices are inevitably held to higher and tougher standards than their male counterparts and this in itself adds pressure to those women seeking office. These limitations of course are not confined to the political world. Like its IPU counterpart, the World Economic Gender Gap Report, including health, economic and educational indices, similarly ranks Japan down the list, most recently at 120 out of 153 countries.

Each time these international reports are released, the results are taken up in the media and questions asked about what needs to be done. My office bookshelves heave under the weight of texts addressing gender issues in politics and other areas. Newspapers devote much space to gender. When we hear reports of universities making entrance more difficult for female students we rise in anger at the inequity. Industry, companies, and educational institutions talk the talk about gender inclusion, gender parity, gender equity, yet all around us, the gaps continue to be the lived experience. The question is not 'if' change can be made, but how, how long it will take and indeed what form those changes will take.

Universal suffrage was finally granted for the first election post-World War Two, held in 1946. Women had been actively seeking the right to vote in the first half of the 20th century, finally granted as part of the democratic reforms introduced by the Occupation Command. Thirty-nine women were elected in that first post-war election, a figure that was not achieved again until the early years of the 21st century. The highest number for women's representation was achieved at the 2009 election: 54 out of 480 seats in the lower house, compared with today's 45 (out of 465 seats). Representation is higher in the upper house where, at the last election in

2019, 22.9 per cent of seats were held by women (56/245).

In Tokyo, I teach Japanese politics to second- and third-year university students. All have their different reasons for studying in the department. Some plan to go on to be public servants, many focus on a career in private enterprise, a handful are considering an active political career, but most want to understand the political system better and want to understand how and why to vote. Voting in Japan is not compulsory and Japan's low participation rate (in the mid 50 per cent range) versus Australia's compulsory voting and consequent high participation (in the low 90 per cent range) is often a topic of discussion. Few students think their one vote will make any difference.

Our discussion turns to the voting system. Is the voting system the first hurdle to electoral success for candidates? Japan's parliament is made up of two houses, the House of Representatives (or lower house) and the House of Councillors (or upper house). The lower house election in 2021 saw 1051 candidates stand for 465 seats. As part of ongoing reforms to parliament, lower house voting consists of two distinct systems. Electors vote for a single representative in one of 289 single-member electorates; the remaining 176 seats are filled proportionately via a party list. Electors thus have two ballot papers to fill out, one with the name of their preferred candidate, the other with their preferred party, from which candidates are chosen according to the party. My research suggests a small tweak to this latter list could increase the number of women in the lower house, if the political parties chose to do so. I will return to this point later.

As our discussion in class deepens, some students are of the view that even if they did vote, their impression of politics is old men making policy according to the wishes of older people who do vote, the so-called 'silver democracy'. A fair impression when just 10 per cent of parliamentarians are women. I introduce them to a former representative and candidate for Japan Communist Party (JCP), Ikeuchi Saori. She is a young, progressive woman whose political career has ridden the ebbs and flows of the voting system and with a just small tweak to the system noted

earlier, she could be returned to parliament. I have been following her career for a number of years now. In following Ikeuchi, one senses the potential for change sits just below the surface of Japan's political machine.

Ikeuchi was finally elected in 2014, having tried and failed at three earlier elections between 2009 and 2013. In 2014, although she did not succeed in the single member electorate, she was elected on the strength of her place in the aforementioned party list. She campaigned for re-election in 2017 but failed at both the electorate and list level. She renewed her campaigning in the area almost immediately, for the 2021 election where, despite a strong campaign, she just failed again, and again on the proportional list. In 2021, in a three-way race for the electorate, Ikeuchi received just under 29 per cent of the vote. (Japan has effectively a first-past-the-post system, not a preferential system like Australia.) Ikeuchi was placed third on the JCP proportional list but the JCP qualified for just two seats there, both occupied by male candidates. As I show the students the figures, we ask 'what if women were given priority on those party lists?'. I am currently building a database that will hopefully demonstrate that, on present calculations, this shift in priority could quickly and substantially lift the number of women in the lower house. At the end of this discussion, the students have a different appreciation of just 'how' their one vote might contribute to the change they want to see.

In addition, we turn our attention to the conservative parties and I ask students then what of Takaichi Sanae and Noda Seiko both standing as candidates for the LDP presidency. Takaichi and Noda represent quite different approaches to conservative politics, the former being a more 'hard right' admirer of Margaret Thatcher, and an acolyte of former prime minister Abe Shinzo, while Noda takes a stronger equity and diversity approach to politics. Interestingly male students largely preferred Takaichi over Noda. Neither however, were seen as real challengers for the party's top spot. After the election, both women were 'awarded' key positions, Takaichi a senior party position and Noda a ministry. (It is worth noting however, that in several photo opportunities, it has been Noda standing or sitting beside Prime Minister Kishida, not Takaichi, giving more visibility to Noda.)

The 2021 lower house election, the contest for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and subsequent office of Prime Minister, and the forthcoming 2022 election for the House of Councillors, inevitably invokes further discussion about raising the numbers of women and members of minority groups in Parliament. Indeed, Tsujimoto Kiyomi is seeking to return to the Diet at the House of Councillors election, after losing her lower house seat last year. Some advocate quotas for women, either at the party level or within the parliamentary system. Social media plays a role in promoting the interests of a number of groups from across the political spectrum intent on increasing numbers of women in parliament. Arguably, there is a will for change, but we return to our question of numbers, and what exactly accounts for voter perceptions.

There are prominent women in Japanese politics, on both sides of the chamber and further afield in local government areas. Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko made a reasonably successful shift from the national scene to local politics, has steered the city through the Olympics and the COVID-19 pandemic (although with qualifications that cannot be fully covered here) and was once considered to be in line for becoming Japan's first female prime minister. Is Japan's first female prime minister already in parliament or is she yet to be elected? The less optimistic among us wonder if she is yet to be born? But in 2021, Rengo, the peak body of the Union movement elected its first female leader in Yoshino Tomoko.

To put a qualitative angle on that IPU gap between Japan and Australia, perhaps we need to ask women what discourages them from taking up office; look at the workplace environment provided by parliament, both as a physical space and the type of politicking that goes on within. While numbers of women in Japanese parliament hover around the 10 per cent mark, when I attend political gatherings and seminars, when I participate in local volunteer activities, there are often more women than men present, and the conversation is nearly always politically-attuned. Young women are active in forming or joining groups concerned with critical social and justice issues, enabled by social media. And although the focus of this article has been the place of women in parliament, it is important to note the growing push for

greater diversity in Japan's parliament too—LGBTQI+ and differently-abled representatives, amongst others, have increasingly made their presence felt in political participation.

There remains much to critique when it comes to diversity in Japanese politics. The IPU figures cited at the top of this article, if nothing else, always prompt more discussions across various forums. Pop culture references here in Japan, from television series to movies, to novels increasingly show strong women leads, no longer the attendant making the tea. Notwithstanding the leap it will take to get from fiction to reality, realising more women in higher positions is often framed in leadership terms, and maybe that is part of the language we can change too. As I see leadership dialogues becoming more prevalent between, for example, Australian and Japanese groups, perhaps we can shift the engagement to one of participatory dialogues inviting women of all ages and experiences to come together without the pressure of so-called leadership expectations. Grassroots initiatives are often overlooked for their potential to get things done.

No society is static. And as a long-term observer of women's participation in politics in both Japan and Australia, while some positive changes are apparent, the frustrations remain. But in recent times, I wonder whether or not 'party politics' itself, and what it has become, is the problem and that is the paradigm we need to change.

Dr Donna Weeks is Professor of Political Science at Musashino University in Tokyo.

This article was first published by Asia Society Australia.

Image: Japanese campaign posters. Credit: Creative Commons by Sinkdd from Flickr.