

DEMOCRATIC JAPAN

The Rise of Local Women Politicians

By Sherry L. Martin

It's a muggy August evening in 2010, and I am enjoying dinner and conversation in a Ginza sushi bar with local politician Kyoko Nakamura (a pseudonym), a woman from one of Tokyo's twenty-three ward assemblies. Ms. Nakamura is nearing the end of her first term. After initially losing her challenge for a seat on the Tokyo Metropolitan Government council a business partner encouraged Nakamura to run for the ward assembly as an independent "pinch hitter" when a Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) candidate dropped out of the race. In a field of over sixty candidates, Nakamura handily won a seat, coming in as the sixth top vote-getter. Finishing in the top ten was a big deal for a woman without broad name recognition, money, or party support running for a seat on a conservative, male-dominated council.

Prior to our sushi meeting, a mutual friend described Nakamura as a "new-style" politician whose success with local voters was due as much to her gender and relative youth—she's a forty-year-old woman—as to her unique blend of professionalism and ability to connect with working class voters, when traditional political elites are increasingly seen as being out of touch with everyday Japanese. Nakamura was a successful corporate executive who could lay credible claim to working class roots. During her youth, she worked in her family's *izakaya* (a Japanese-style tapas pub) on one of the main shopping streets in the ward. Her deep familiarity with the concerns of small business owners and working class customers enabled her to establish an easy rapport with voters and frame their concerns in ways that underscored her demonstrated commitment to serving her community and representing their interests. Nakamura describes herself as an "ordinary person" who, like her constituents, is married, works, and is raising a family.

Nakamura recounted her victory and shared her future political ambitions during our dinner. She won her seat as an independent candidate, becoming the first woman to win a seat in her ward without support from any of the existing political parties in the Japanese system. She prides herself on being an outsider politician without ties to traditional parties and interest groups because freedom from obligations to established political and economic elites means that she can pursue policies that she believes to be in the best interests of her constituents. In recent months, however, Nakamura reluctantly joined a party that is a newcomer to the political scene—*Minna no Tō* (Everyone's Party)—because she found that being an independent limited her range of action on the ward assembly. When the assembly met to decide the 2010 budget, the dominant conservatives invoked an informal rule to limit participation to party members only. Nakamura was asked to leave the chamber during the most important decision-making session of the entire year, one that her career depended upon. Her inability to give voice to her constituents' interests and secure and claim credit for favorable policies could make her seat less secure in future elections. Nakamura used this example as evidence of the extent of "undemocratic" practices and "bullying" in local politics that she and others like her seek to change. Even though this experience forced her to seek safety in numbers with *Minna no Tō*—a party that split from the conservative and long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in August 2009—the new party has pledged to increase democratic transparency and accountability by curtailing the role of unelected bureaucrats in the decision-making process.

Women like Nakamura hold the potential to change the face of Japanese politics, which has traditionally been an "old boy's club," by changing the

Japanese way of doing politics from the ground up. As more women like Nakamura enter local politics, the dearth of women in national office continues to receive the lion's share of media and academic attention as a measure of women's participation in government and progress toward gender equality in Japan and cross-nationally. In privileging national politics, we find Japanese democracy lacking due to the underrepresentation of women while overlooking some of the most exciting and potentially revolutionary developments in grassroots democracy that have women as central actors. To fully appreciate the contrast between women's rapid advancement into local politics and the national political scene that is renowned for its stagnancy—and to appreciate the promise that the incorporation of women as local political actors holds for the national political trajectory over the long term—I will briefly discuss factors that have contributed to the slow progress of women in national office and those that have motivated voters to reinvest their political energies into local politics.

Running for National Office

It is an old and oft-repeated adage that successful candidates for local office need *kaban* (money), *kanban* (name recognition), and *jiban* (a support base) in significant amounts. Just as often, political researchers have concluded that women are underrepresented among elected officials in Japan because they face higher barriers to acquiring these valuable resources. Men who have traditionally won national office in Japan are former bureaucrats, inherited their seats from male relatives, or built a support base as local politicians. Even though women have succeeded male relatives in politics, women's education and employment trajectories have not provided easy access to other recruitment pools.

Despite the fact that the number of women winning elections for national office, often in critical elections, reached historic highs in the last decade, Japan lags behind in this measure of gender equality when compared to other democracies. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's comparative database on women's national-level office-holding ranks Japan, with women holding 11.3 percent of the House of Representatives' seats and 18.2 percent of the House of Councilors' seats, at number ninety-five, behind Guatemala and Romania.¹ Japan fares poorly given its length of time as a democracy and level of economic growth; it is dead last among the OECD nations in women's representation in national politics.

Researchers projected that Japanese women would enter politics in higher numbers as they gained access to higher education and higher status employment, opportunities that would sustain the networking needed for amassing *kaban*, *kanban*, and *jiban*. An early breakthrough occurred in 1989

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when the Japan Socialist Party's (renamed the Social Democratic Party in 1996) Takako Doi, the first woman to lead a major political party, recruited women candidates to protest then Prime Minister Ono's sex scandal and the LDP's adoption of a consumption tax that was particularly unpopular among women voters. The "Madonna Boom" swept in a wave of new female politicians who promised to "bring a different perspective to national politics." However, two decades later, women politicians are still struggling to gain a foothold in national politics. Popular former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi punished primarily male opponents of his postal privatization bills by kicking them out of the LDP in 2005, calling a snap election and running "female assassins" in their districts. The DPJ's historic victory in the 2009 House of Representatives election—this was the first time since 1955 that the LDP was voted out of power—brought in waves of new female lawmakers; forty of fifty-four elected women were members of the DPJ. Ozawa Ichiro, then party chairman, recruited young women who were political newcomers to run against old, male LDP incumbents.

On all of these occasions, female candidates embodied political change that was ultimately unrealized. As newcomers to politics, many of these women promised to bring fresh perspectives to the decision-making table, with some explicitly extending their roles as housewives into the public sphere. Whether they claimed to speak in a distinctive "women's voice" or not, women promised that their distance from the elite political world meant that their political practice was untainted by corruption that has been endemic to Japanese politics. In practice, there are not enough women in the national Diet (the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors) to sway legislative norms. Like Nakamura, they face bullying and more implicit strategies that work to silence their voices.

It is important to avoid the oversimplification that women have difficulty entering national politics solely because of gender issues. The slow inroads that women have made into national politics illuminates problems in how Japanese democracy works that, while more pronounced for women, extend to men as well. As political scientist Robin M. LeBlanc details in her 2010 book, *The Art of the Gut: Manhood, Power, and Ethics in Japanese Politics*, the barriers to entering the political world are almost as high for most men as they are for all women. The consequence is that elected decision-making bodies are unrepresentative of most Japanese—politicians are older, more male, better educated, and wealthier than the general public. LeBlanc notes that running for politics is a costly and risky endeavor that most Japanese (like Nakamura), who need to work to support themselves and their families, cannot afford.

Ten years before meeting Nakamura, I interviewed women voters—professionals, housewives, and students—active in a variety of community groups (e.g., working mothers' groups, nonprofit associations, international exchange, etc.) and asked whether electing more women to national political office was a priority. They complained that while the women who were elected to national politics might have descriptively differed from their male counterparts, they were just as out of touch with the average Japanese voter. Successful female politicians were "talent" candidates—actresses, athletes, and other high-profile personalities with name recognition; from political families; or those who campaigned heavily on their identities as housewives. Consequently, women voters—and judging from national surveys such as the *Japanese Election and Democracy Survey 2000*, men too—complained of a distance between themselves and political elites that was evident in policies that were ineffective in solving the socioeconomic problems that everyday voters encountered. For example, voters complained that political elites did not display an appropriate urgency for reforming the pension system because

their backgrounds were privileged and their futures secure, making them unable to empathize with the material concerns of most Japanese workers.

Japan watchers have closely monitored national politics for signs of change that have been more evident in local politics where the barriers to entry—and thus to change—are much lower. Nakamura is one of the rapidly increasing number of women breaking into Japanese politics at the ground level. Traditional metrics of women's political participation that focus on the national Diet have failed to grasp the more complex changes in women's office-holding in local politics. Although women hold 11 percent of the total number of local assembly seats across Japan and seemingly perform comparably worse in local politics, this translates into more than 4,000 elected women in local politics and ninety-eight total across both houses in national politics.² Further, the rate of increase in women's candidacies and victories has been more rapid over the course of the last ten years than the previous fifty. At the end of the 1980s, women held only 2.5 percent of seats on elected decision-making bodies at the level of the prefecture, city, town, ward, and village. This figure rose to a total of 6 percent over the 1990s and continued to increase to reach 11 percent today. Moreover, many local assemblies have reached a "critical mass" with approximately 30 percent of seats held by women, and some have reached parity.

Building a Pipeline

Every local unified election brings a record number of women into local offices across Japan. Getting more women in local politics means that women are gaining experience to potentially advance to national politics in the long run while changing how democracy works closer to home in the short term. The movement of more women into local politics has progressed alongside a movement toward direct democracy, an uptick in citizens invoking procedures designed to give everyday voters more opportunities to weigh in on the decisions that affect their lives and greater control over government. Renewed citizen energy in local politics has taken the form of information disclosure movements, wherein activists demand that elected officials publicly account for how tax monies are being spent; referenda movements that allow voters to express support or oppose public works projects planned for their districts; and recall movements that enable voters to unseat unpopular mayors and governors. These movements have mobilized women as candidates and voters and have long-term potential to change political dynamics from the bottom up as the current generation of local politicians internalize new visions of how democracy works and develop ambitions for higher office.

The entry of more women into local politics is facilitated by institutional reforms adopted in Japan in recent decades. Administrative decentralization, the transfer of responsibility for social welfare, and other policies from the central government to local government have been a game changer in Japanese politics. Local governments are assuming greater independence in setting their policy agendas. As decision-making moves closer to the grassroots, there are more incentives for citizens to become involved in local politics and more access points for them to do so. Political researchers have noticed, for example, that many women are running for local office because it no longer makes sense for male-dominated assemblies to make social welfare decisions for the elderly and their caregivers since women constitute the majorities of both populations. Voters also have more incentives to vote for women and other "outsider" candidates who have little connection to the central government but big ideas about how local politics can benefit from greater citizen involvement. As more locales assume a heavier tax burden to fund social welfare politics, this reduced dependency on the central government for funding has reduced voters' incentives to support "insider" candidates (e.g., former bureaucrats, political legacies, and local politicians) with close con-



Fusae Ichikawa (1893–1981).
Source: <http://tiny.cc/7zul6>.

nections to national political elites that help them bring pork-barrel projects to local communities.

Women's groups and gender equality advocates have created their own institutions to increase the number of women officeholders. The Alliance of Feminist Representatives, founded in 1992 by a group of feminist local assembly members, spearheaded a campaign to eliminate all assemblies that have no women elected to them by raising mass consciousness about the scope of the problem. The Fusae Ichikawa Association, named in honor of the Japanese feminist and postwar Dietwoman, also supports women's entry to local politics with training courses for incumbent women and prospective candidates.

In 1999, Women in New World, International Network (WINWIN) was founded as the Japanese equivalent to EMILY's List (a US organization that promotes electing women to public office) to raise financial resources to support women candidates for political office in Japan.

Gender-equality activists have also applied sustained pressure on the government and major political parties to institute affirmative policies, often citing the United Nations' call for member states to strive to increase the share of seats held by women on all decision-making bodies to a critical mass of at least 30 percent. Anti-establishment parties like the Seikatsu Club Network, the political arm of a consumer movement with a heavily female membership, have long been at the forefront in running women candidates for local office. Whereas established national parties like the Socialists and the Communists have always supported women candidates for office, mainstream parties such as the LDP and DPJ are increasing their efforts to recruit and train women candidates in an effort to expand their loyal base of supporters.

Women Voters

Women voters are a force to be reckoned with. The success of women candidates is contingent upon their ability to convince other women to vote for them. Whether we are talking numbers or percentages, more women than men have voted in nearly every election across Japan for more than thirty years. This trend is even more pronounced in local politics where voter turnout has ranged between 75 and 85 percent in town and village assembly elections, compared to an average turnout of approximately 55 percent for national elections over the last decade. Whereas the gender gap in turnout has only been a single percentage point in recent national elections, in local elections women are 4 to 5 percent more likely to turn out than are men. This difference is enough to sway outcomes in the smaller electorates for local elections, fostering a competition among candidates for women's votes.

Winning women's votes is increasing in importance in national elections where the gender gap is more evident in rates of partisanship than turnout. Women are overrepresented among independent voters in Japan. When polled, women are less likely than men to respond that they support any existing political party. Nonpartisans—also called independent, swing, and floating voters—constitute between 30 and 50 percent of the electorate, depending on the timing of polls, and the majority of independents are women. Given that even independent women turn out in higher numbers than expected, parties must win these votes to secure and expand their base of voter support and, in turn, their influence in the legislative branch. Independent voters in Japan tend to be disaffected from, but not apathetic about, politics. They tend to vote for new party politicians, independent candidates, or “maverick” politicians, like former Prime Minister Koizumi, who articulate pop-

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ulist visions for political change that potentially address the mounting economic, social, and demographic challenges that have characterized Japan's “Lost Decade(s).”

Embodying Democracy

Women politicians and voters are changing the practice of democratic politics in Japan by prying open the doors of the male-dominated political establishment. The entry of women into elite politics is most rapid and evident at the local level. This rapid increase in the number of women elected to local assemblies holds the potential to change the practices of local decision-making bodies, as well as the relationship between local governments and the central government in Tokyo, with long-term consequences for women's representation in the national Diet and how Japanese democracy works.

When Nakamura's conservative male colleagues on the ward council excluded her from the budgetary process, they robbed her supporters of their political voice. Increasingly, local power struggles are erupting between voters and incumbent politicians who are questioning the right of elected assemblies that do not reflect the socio-demographic distribution of the population to legislate in the public's interest. The difficulty that newcomers such as Nakamura face, who embody political change in representing their constituents, serves to underscore further how political processes have developed exclusionary norms that can be broken down by electing more newcomers and old-timers willing to revise their ways. As local assemblies grow more representative and attuned to local voters, we can expect to see more localities challenging Tokyo's decisions—a process described by LeBlanc in her account of how local voters, in one rural locale, mobilized to launch a referendum campaign to resist plans to build a nuclear power plant in the district and campaigned to replace local assembly members with newcomers opposed to the power plant. Over time, these candidates—many of whom are women—will amass political expertise that may help them win and keep seats in the national Diet.

Years before Japan's March 11, 2011, “triple crisis,” Nakamura had already begun drawing connections between the presence of American aircraft carriers in Tokyo Bay and emergency safety for her constituents in the event of a natural or manmade disaster. In doing so, she showed rare foresight in her ability to bring national and international politics close to home and demonstrated her capacity for higher office. Nakamura may quite possibly be representative of many local women office holders who already have national office firmly within their sights. ■

NOTES

1. The Interparliamentary Union is an international organization of parliaments that works to support the goals of the United Nations. See <http://www.ipu.org> for the most up-to-date statistics.
2. National Women's Education Center Gender Statistics Database, accessed December 30, 2010, <http://www.nwec.jp/en/about/access.htm>.

SHERRY L. MARTIN is an Associate Professor jointly appointed in the Government Department and the Program in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Cornell University. Martin is interested in mass participation in politics, public opinion, electoral institutions, political socialization, and gender and politics in Japan and the United States. Martin's new book, *Popular Democracy in Japan: How Gender and Community are Changing Modern Electoral Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2011) examines institutional changes and new patterns of citizen engagement that emerged under an entrenched political elite widely criticized for being unresponsive to voters.