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### **Reasons for Women's Successes in Japanese Local Politics**

Despite Japan's prominence, the political representation of women is severely lacking in comparison to most of the world. Just this past year, 2021, Japan ranked 147 amongst 153 for women's political empowerment as low numbers repeatedly show at both the national and local levels (Takeuchi). However, there lies a bit of hope for women at the local polls according to long-term trends. While the percentage of women in Japan's national House of Representatives has leveled around 10% for the last two decades, representation at the local level has been steadily increasing (Shin p. 78). From 1998 to 2018, the subnational legislative representation of women grew by 13% in Tokyo's special wards, 7% in government-decreed city assemblies, 7% in other city assemblies, 5% in prefectural assemblies, and 5% in towns and villages (Shin p. 86). In terms of women in local executive positions, all 7 female governors, 34 out of the total 38 city or special ward mayors, and 19 out of the total 34 town or village mayors were all elected since 2000 (McCurry and Tsuji p. 37). In 2019 local elections alone, a record-breaking 6 women were elected city mayors in one election round, an increase from 4 in 2015, and a high of 1,239 women were elected to city assemblies (McCurry). With the addition of these winners, there are now around 4,078 women serving on Japanese subnational assemblies (Steel and Martin p. 216). While most academic writing focuses on finding the reason for the lack of women's representation in Japanese politics, far less focus is on these successes that are increasing in the local sphere. The most common barriers discussed are the difficulty of women being able to

establish a career while being expected to take care of children and family, frequent sexual harassment in the political workspace, difficulty in gaining the reputation and funding equivalent to the men that have been in government for years, etc (Nakano p. 75-76). So, how are some women succeeding in local politics despite these barriers?

With this paper, I intend to compile possible explanations for why women's local representation started to significantly increase since the start of the 21st century. The examined reasons within this paper include greater emphasis on the socialization of care and the utilization of gendered stereotypes, the acquisition of political or lawmaking experience, growth of women's support groups, and institutional reasons such as the backing of political parties and municipal mergers. To properly display each of these explanations, I will start by discussing how their gender has boosted women's political careers by discussing the socialization of care, housewife activism, and the perception of women as "clean"/less corrupt than male politicians in Japan. Beyond gender, I will then discuss how previous political experience in local assemblies, bureaucratic careers, or national legislatures has contributed significantly to the political careers of female governors and mayors. Then, the considerable growth and contribution of women's support groups. Additionally, I will cover women as the opposition's strategy, the rise of a women's party, and municipal mergers. I will finish with concluding thoughts on which proved to be more important, the continued efficacy of the discussed strategies, and suggest avenues for further research.

The first explanation for why female political participation has increased at the local level in more recent times is a shift in policy to focus more on welfare issues and "socialization of care" (Tsuji p. 43). Starting in the 1990s, elderly and child care became priorities for Japan, and they decentralized authority to make municipal governments more responsible for elderly

nursing services, public daycare funding, and generational support action plans (Tsuji p. 43). This new locally-based focus on welfare boosted women's political careers because women are seen by voters as having natural expertise in areas of welfare due to established gender roles and stereotypes (Tsuji). This pathway for Japanese women is commonly called "housewife activism": where female politicians utilize their identity as housewives to claim control of policy issues related to elderly care, child care, education, food safety, etc. (Nakano p. 79). Political participation associated with motherhood occurred in the form of grassroots women's movements and community groups far before it was utilized by women seeking elected positions (Gelb and Kubo p. 121). But, many politicians have found success utilizing this strategy at the leadership level—such as Hayashi Fumiko who became Mayor of Yokohama City in the Kanagawa Prefecture in 2009 by appealing to issues like childcare waiting lists, support for working mothers, and community medical care (Tsuji p. 51-52). Okuyama Emiko, Mayor of Sendai City, also made appeals to childcare and education in her mayoral campaign (Tsuji p. 53). While this has proven successful so far, Emma Dalton argues that this method will not be helpful for female politicians in the future as they seek to break down gender stereotypes or wish to appeal to different policy areas like security or fiscal policy (Nakano p. 80). In other words, according to Dalton's view, if the "housewife platform" continues to be seen as the basis for electing women to political leadership roles, it severely limits the policy subject areas in which women can perform.

In addition to the housewife-caregiver image, another gendered image of women that have contributed to their campaign successes is that of a clean, less corrupt image. This stereotype has led to many women getting elected following the reveal of scandals or corruption surrounding their male incumbents (Tsuji p. 42). In other words, Japanese women are often

politically endorsed as clean-up candidates. For example, Fusae Ota became Japan's first prefectural governor primarily from having the image of a "pure" female politician who can clean up the misdoings of the previous incumbent. She was first elected to be governor of the Osaka prefecture after her predecessor, Knock Yokoyama, was caught up in a sexual assault scandal against a female campaign aide (TIME Staff). Ota, having experience as a career bureaucrat, was endorsed by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi for the position despite Ota not being from the Osaka prefecture. Although Ota was a former career bureaucrat, which will also be discussed later as a reason for some women's successes, her gender was the reason she was selected and proved to be more decisive for her success (TIME STAFF). Academic Susan Pavloska claims that this ideal, clean female political image also helped with Koike Yuriko's, Tokyo's current governor, campaign as citizens were angry over corruption and cronyism present in Tokyo politics prior to her election (Steel and Pavloska p. 154). Similar to the housewife platform, the use of this clean platform by women receives skepticism from scholars for its continued use in Japanese politics. For one, the political setting where there was previously a scandal will not always occur (Tsuji p. 43). Secondly, as women get more involved in the male-dominated world of politics, they will inevitably get involved with money politics and develop politically beneficial relationships to progress—things that metaphorically dirty a politician's image and would ruin any clean image held by women (Nakano p. 80). With this in mind, this strategy may become less prevalent in the future but would open up opportunities for women to attack more political campaigns with issues separate from gender stereotypes.

Besides utilizing their gender to their advantage, women have found success in progressing toward local political leadership after garnering experience in other political or law-making roles. The first of this experience-garnering category is characterized as grounds-up

due to candidate movement from volunteer-based community groups into elected local assemblies and then into higher leadership positions. Starting in the 1980s, there is an observable trend of women getting more involved in grassroots community/citizen movements and acquiring knowledge on the networking and funding required to pursue local leadership (Tsuji pg. 42). Amongst these grassroots organizations were many schools and training programs specifically attacking female representation in assemblies—some of which will be further discussed in the section about increased women’s movements (Takao p. 6). Following the growth of these local movements, women’s participation in assemblies started to grow with their newly-gained experience (Tsuji). Then, as women gained experience within these assemblies, many began pursuing mayoral positions. By the 2000s, the most prominent pathway for women to become governor or mayor was to first participate in the local assembly of their municipality, town, or prefecture—As of 2016, statistics show that 36 out of 58 mayors whose careers were documented were previously a part of local assemblies (Tsuji p. 44-45). Past the time of Tsuji’s journal entry, this grounds-up strategy continues to work for municipal mayoral elections. In the 2019 elections, two women who were previously members of assemblies gained mayoral positions by beating long-term incumbents. First, Akemi Fujita became the mayor of Kamo, a city in the Niigata Prefecture, after previously serving on the corresponding city assembly (“Record No.”). Second, Ritsuko Fuhii became mayor of Shunan city in Yamaguchi prefecture after serving on the prefectural assembly (“Record No.”). Unlike the other two gendered platform strategies previously discussed, this progression pathway is likely to remain a route for Japanese women in the coming years.

A far more rare pathway than working up from assemblies into local leadership is Japanese women gaining experience in national government before going local. Although less

frequent, this pathway is worth noting as an explanation for some local leaders' successes. For example, Tokyo's first female governor, Koike Yuriko, is one politician whose background greatly differs from the majority as she established herself at the national level before winning a governor position in 2016 (Steel and Martin p. 215). She was first elected to the House of Councillors in 1992 as a part of former Prime Minister Hosokawa's reformist party (Steel and Pavloska p. 157). Over the following years, Koike was a part of the House of Representatives under the LDP, then she held a number of cabinet positions as Minister of the Environment, Minister of State, and eventually, Minister of Defense (Steel and Pavloska p. 154). Her established national career undoubtedly helped with the name recognition that is required to win large cities like Tokyo (Steel and Pavloska).

While very few have previously been a part of the national diet before going local like Koike Yuriko, some women have achieved elite bureaucratic experience like her and then entered local leadership. Before the 1990s, garnering bureaucratic experience used to be a more prominent pathway into the mayor and governor positions, but was eventually passed by the grounds-up assembly strategy discussed earlier (Tsuji pg. 44). Tsuji supports this claim by showing how only 3 of 58 mayors whose careers were documented were previously bureaucrats, 2 local and 1 national (Tsuji pg. 45). However, by observing female governors' biographies after the 1990s, it is notable that a few of them do have bureaucratic experience behind them, suggesting that it is a prevalent pathway for the prefectural governorship. While I argue that Fusae Ota was primarily chosen under the clean-up strategy for her governor position, she did also have an established bureaucratic career beforehand at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry that put her on the radar for endorsement ("State Minister of Economy.."). Like Fusae Ota, Hokkaido Governor Harumi Takahashi also held a bureaucratic position in the MITI

that gave her previous experience in lawmaking that gained her crucial Komeito backing in her 2003 election (Aiuchi). Takahashi originally tried to appeal to women voters through her campaign utilizing gender-related issues, but ultimately the exit poll showed that most women voted for men during the Hokkaido election—evidence that her gender had little effect on her win (Aiuchi). To reiterate, Koike Yuriko can also be put under the umbrella of Japanese female governors who formerly held bureaucratic ministerial positions—Which means that 3 out of the 7 total female governors in Japan had recent exposure to law-making in bureaucratic positions before pursuing gubernatorial elections.

Another explanation for why women's representation in local politics started increasing at the turn of the century was the increased organization of community support groups and training programs to help women gain seats in local politics. Amongst these support groups are organizations that help women get into local assemblies, citizen-led candidate campaigns, and training centers or academies that teach the necessary skills to run for elected office. One of the first of these groups was The Alliance of Feminist Representatives, developed in 1992, which ran the campaign 'Eliminate Zero-Women Representatives Assemblies' in 1997 to increase female representation in local assemblies (Takao p. 5-6). Another was the Promotion Center for Women's Political Participation: a political training program established in 1994 that found immediate success in the 1995 elections where 24 of its original participants won elected seats (Takao pg.6). The Promotion Center went on to train over 700 women over the next nine years and sparked similar educational training programs to open over the following years until 24 out of 47 prefectures had them by 2003 (Takao pg. 6).

One specific local leader who benefited from the organized effort of citizen support was Akiko Domoto, governor of the Chiba Prefecture from 2001 to 2009. During her time as a

broadcaster for TBS before 2001, she brought attention to women's rights and childcare issues and became recognizable by many citizens (Steele). It was the citizens, amongst them many women and youth, who drove her to run for elected office and who ran the campaign that eventually led to her successful acquisition of the Chiba governor position (Kyodo). During her time as governor, Domoto continued to appeal to this citizen support by holding citizen conferences; to make sure she was addressing the issues desired by the community (Steele). A more recent example of women's cooperative candidate support would be Yamada Yukio, who was elected to the Koshigaya city council in 2014 and then again in 2019 due to the support of mothers and activists trying to change the ratio of female politicians (Kambayashi).

The momentum for female political support groups does not seem to be slowing down as two women's educational programs were launched in 2022. The first one was an educational camp teaching women how to finance and conduct a campaign conducted this past summer in Kyoto by the Academy for Gender Parity (Kambayashi). The other is a newly-proposed project called "Kosodate Senkyo Hack!" to help mothers better run for local positions (Otake). This group intends to support mothers who find balancing a political career and child-rearing difficult by educating them on campaign tactics and how to avoid harassment during the campaign (Otake). If the group is successful in its mission, more mothers will potentially be running in upcoming local elections in April 2023. The examples mentioned in this section are just a few of many cooperative women's organizations that exist and are developing in Japan to support women's political careers in the local spheres. As cooperation amongst women remains diligent, there is a great likelihood that the upwards trend will continue and women in Japanese local politics will continue to grow.



While most women at the local and regional levels rely on female-support groups, such as those above, some female politicians find support in political parties. At the municipal and town level, women in assemblies who are fortunate to gain national party support tend to be backed by either the Japanese Communist Party or Komeito—The exact number of these assemblywomen is unclear (Steel and Martin p. 224-225). Beyond assembly nominations, however, there seems to be no clear trend of major national parties supporting mayors (Tsuji p. 39). There tends to be more party politics at the prefectural level and instances where opposition-backing, in particular, has been crucial for women gaining local leadership positions. For example, Governor Mieko Yoshimura won her race in Yamagata prefecture in 2009 due to support from the Democratic Party of Japan (“LDP-backed governor”). Yoshimura’s upset with her LDP-supported predecessor, Hiroshi Saito, came during a time when LDP approval was down and the DPJ would end up winning by a massive landslide in the 2009 national election. To this day, Yoshimura maintains her position as Governor of the Yamagata Prefecture with continued support from the DPJ with additional support from the Japanese Communist Party, Democratic Party for the People, and the Social Democratic Party (“Yoshimura Wins 4th Term”). This party-affiliation strategy may become more prevalent in the future if Japan’s opposition chooses to utilize women to boost their campaigns at local levels. However, following the trend, national party support will mainly apply to governors with enough exposure and experience to gain backing.

Besides national parties, Around the time that women’s representation in local politics started climbing, the late 1970s, the Netto party was formed by women and is a contributor to the increasing electoral successes over time (Shin p. 79). While other reasons that I examined so far may explain more why there was accelerated growth in the early 2000s, the Netto party has

supported female politicians for the last 40 years and saw its peak number of candidates in the mid-2000s (Shin p. 79 and 85). The most recent number in 2018 shows that 105 Netto candidates sat in elected seats across 74 local assemblies (Shin p. 79). The party originally stemmed from local co-ops and its support base/participants are primarily housewives and mothers concerned with children welfare issues, food safety, and their local environment (Shin p. 91). While the Netto party has not produced nearly as many candidates as some of the training programs discussed early, it has given a number of Japanese mothers an organization through which they can voice their opinions in Japanese politics (Shin p. 92).

The final potential reason for increased local representation is Japan's municipal mergers producing larger districts that were more favorable to women. Japan's "Great Heisei Merger" refers to the period of time in the early 2000s when many of Japan's municipalities were influenced to merge together by the promise of "fiscal rewards" and multiple revisions to merger law (Takao pg. 11). Between 1999 and 2010, Japan's number of municipalities went from 3,229 to 1,727 and the number of municipal and town assembly seats decreased by the ten of thousands as a result (The MIC and Takao). During this time frame, "the proportion of seats held by women increased in every prefecture" (Steel and Martin p. 224). The explanation for how the mergers caused this increase in seats held by women is the growth in district sizes due to the mergers—Women win more elected positions in larger districts due to increased electorate size and diversity (Steel and Martin p. 223). Additionally, these mergers broke up previously-embedded political support bases, which gave new candidates, including women, an opportunity to start fresh with new electorates (Steel and Martin).

While the number of women in Japanese local politics still remains relatively low, there exists significant positive growth trends in representation for a number of reasons. Amongst the

explanations discussed in this paper, I argue that utilizing gender as a political strategy, the grounds-up approach, and increased women's support groups were the most important contributors to women's growth in local political representation at the turn of the century. While some candidates may have strayed from the specifics of the "housewife platform" or "clean-up strategy," every single candidate I observed over the course of my research utilized women's related issues in their campaigns—from welfare expertise to women's representation. Also discussed early, the grounds-up approach was far more salient for female candidates in the last 20 years than the other experience-garnering pathways of 'national to local' or 'bureaucracy to local.' Additionally, the growth in representation directly corresponded with the start and progress of political training programs and citizen-led campaigns working towards greater political numbers. In regards to the party-related explanations discussed, national support of local candidates is too rare to count as a significant contributor and the local Netto party is having trouble winning a number of seats in recent elections (Shin p. 79). Finally, while municipal mergers may have contributed to increased the proportion of local female politicians with seats, there was actually a slight decrease in the absolute number of seats controlled by women (Steel and Martin p. 224). Of the three most important cited, I believe women's support groups in tandem with the grounds-up strategy will continue to be more crucial in the coming future as moving away from gender-based platforms will open up more opportunities for women. There is undoubtedly a renewed vigor for women's participation in government as more and more support groups and educational programs arise every year to help women break into male-dominated leadership roles. As more women gain experience within these organizations, the female candidate supply will increase for assembly, mayoral, and gubernatorial elections. While it was beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to observe if this local ground-up strategy

extends to the national level. In other words, I would like to see if there are instances of Japanese women finding success in the national diet after working up through local leadership. A discovery of that nature would provide even more hope for women's representation in Japanese politics.

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