

Thick Glass Ceiling

: Japanese Women Candidates Less Likely for Local Council Elections

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Abstract

In Japan, the shortage of local politicians has become a nationwide issue. To address this problem, appointing individuals from demographics that have not traditionally pursued political careers could be considered. However, it is rare for current politicians to designate women as their successors. To investigate whether there is gender discrimination in the selection of successors, we conducted a survey targeting local politicians in Japan. We surveyed local Japanese councilors to examine the factors that led them to nominate successors. The results revealed that Japanese local councilors tended to have a positive attitude toward nominating women as successors. However, they also believed that this would not be acceptable to their supporters. This study suggests that Japanese local councilors do not inherently discriminate against women, but refrain from nominating them for other reasons.

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Our findings revealed that Japanese local politicians have a positive attitude towards appointing women as their successors. At the same time, these politicians perceive that their supporters are reluctant to accept women in these roles. This study suggests that Japanese local politicians do not personally discriminate against women but refrain from appointing them due to perceived resistance from their supporters.

Keywords

Local Council Election, Female Candidate, Gender, Quota System, Japanese politics

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I . Introduction

1. The Growing Shortage of Local Councilors

Local councils in Japan, particularly village councils, are facing a serious shortage of members. According to the data presented in “Choson Gikai Giin no Narite Busoku Kento Iinkai (an expert panel to study the shortage of town and village council members),” the number of town and village council member elections held at the time of local elections, wherein winners were decided without an election, tends to increase each time (Table 1). The number of elections with the number of candidates being less than the quorum also increased from four municipalities in 2015 to 20 in 2023.

The lack of qualified local council members has long been an election issue, but has been overshadowed by major issues

linked to central–local relations, such as decentralization and Heisei municipality mergers. One opportunity to draw attention to candidates for local council elections was to consider the dissolution of local councils by Okawa Village in Kochi Prefecture (Kawamura 2020, 2022). Since the 2015 nationwide local elections, this has become a national issue and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has launched several expert panels on local councils.¹⁾ As shown in Table 1, the shortage of qualified candidates has been becoming increasingly serious.

Table 1: Town and Village Council Member Elections Held in Unified Local Elections

Uncontested election year for local elections			
Election year for local elections	2015	2019	2023
Number of town and village councils	89	93	123
Number of elected	930	988	1,250
Percentage of uncontested winners to the quota	21,8%	23,3%	30,3%

Number of uncontested votes in relation to the quota			
Election year of local elections	2015	2019	2023
Number of town/village councils	4	8	20

Number of women			
Election year of local elections	2015	2019	2023
Number of candidates	491	557	671
Percentage of candidates	10,2%	12,1%	14,7%
Number of persons elected	443	521	632
Percentage of candidates elected	10,4%	12,3%	15,4%

Source: Choson Gikai Giin no Narite Busoku Kento Inikai (2024)

1) Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/kenkyu/c-gikai/index.html
https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/kenkyu/choson_gikai/index.htm
https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/kenkyu/chihogikai_giin/index.html
 (last accessed May 21, 2024)

Kawamura (2020), who examined the background of the shortage of local councilors in Japan, noted that there are multiple reasons why people no longer run in local councilor elections.

First, they are poorly compensated. In particular, rural councilors are pre-war honorary councilors, and their compensation is low. This makes it difficult for them to make a living on their compensation.

The second concern is the risk of unsuccessful candidacy. Japanese civil servants lose their jobs if they report candidacy. Many Japanese companies do not want their employees to run for office. Therefore, the probability life becoming difficult is high in Japan if one fails to win elections.

Third, the culture of donations has not taken root in Japan, and, as mentioned above, there is a tendency to avoid Central Party confrontation. In other words, running for office in Japan requires individuals to prepare electoral resources, thereby involving high costs.

Since the 1990s, electoral reciprocity between MPs and local MPs has been reducing because of changes in elections for House of Representatives from the SNTV/MMD to the SMD. National elections were changed to party-centered elections, and support from Diet members for local Councilors began to shrink (e.g., Uekami 2013; Hamamoto 2018). Political reforms have strengthened the reliance on individual electoral resources for local council elections.²⁾

2) Since the DPJ lost power in 2012, finding candidates for the DPJ and

Bryce says, “Local councils are schools of democracy.” Local councilors are the most familiar political figures and can be positioned as the bearers of citizenship education. Elections for their selection result in increasing political interest. Communication with them promotes an understanding of local issues, thereby arousing political interest. Working with them is also effective in improving an understanding of the institutions that support democracy, such as electoral and parliamentary systems.

However, a lack of qualified candidates will result in the loss of a competitive environment for local council elections, which will create a lack of diversity and a decline in administrative oversight. This also negatively impacts citizenship education in communities, and could potentially result in the inactivation of local autonomy and a retreat from democracy in Japan (Choson Gikai Giin no Narite Busoku Kento Iinkai 2024).

Why are women not being appointed despite the severe shortage of successors? In case of no candidates for parliamentary positions, it is logical to consider entrusting these roles to individuals who have not traditionally held such positions. The proportion of women among Japanese politicians is extremely low, and this has become a significant social issue (e.g., Miura 2016). As shown in the table,

its successor parties has become more difficult (Maeda and Tsutsumi 2015). This may be another reason for the decline in the number of rural candidates.

Further, some have pointed to the extended retirement age of workers as one factor (Choson Gikai Giin no Narite Busoku Kento Iinkai 2024).

many female candidates are in their teens, indicating that women are not ready to run for office. If women are appointed successors, the shortage of candidates can be resolved.

The shortage of local council members in Japan is generally attributed to the lack of male candidates willing to run for office for various reasons. The aforementioned expert panel suggested that, instead of discovering male candidates, efforts should be made to encourage female candidacy.

The research question of this study is whether local council members in Japan appoint women as successors. This study uses a survey conducted by our research team on local council members to explore this issue.

2. Data

Our research team surveyed city, town, and village council members in Japan in 2022. In conducting this survey, we obtained cooperation from the National Association of Chairpersons of City Councils and the National Council Members of Town and Village Councils. In this study, we used only the results of the survey of city council members, covering all their members (815 city councils, 18,967 members). The questionnaire was distributed on February 9, 2022, and the deadline for receiving responses was April 30, 2022. Valid responses were received from 7,366 council members. The response rate was 38.8%.

3. Structure of this paper

This paper is organized as follows.

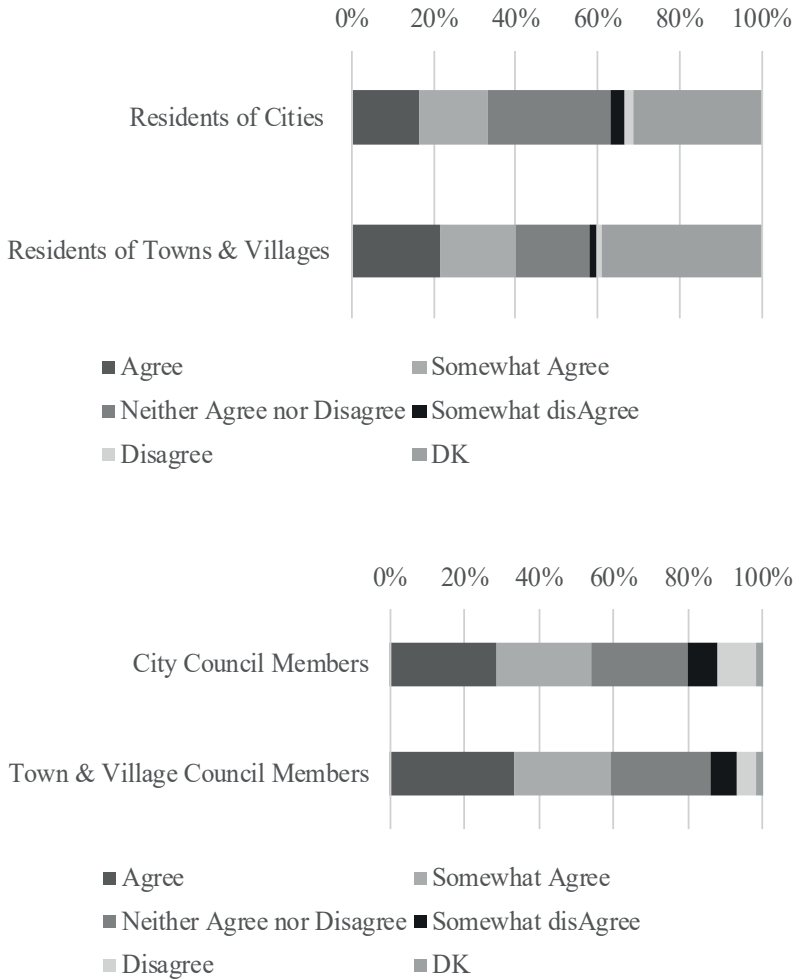
In Section 2, we discuss previous studies on women becoming politicians. However, most studies on recruitment and candidate selection for female politicians are from countries with party confrontation, even in local elections. This does not match the actual situation in Japan. For example, as Kawamura (2022) shows, both ordinary Japanese and local councilors tend to avoid getting party confrontations into local politics (Figure 1). Therefore, after reviewing previous studies, we explain the peculiarities of the local electoral environment in Japan, which cannot rely on the resources of political parties.

In Japan, women's electoral resources are perceived to be relatively fewer than those of men. Japanese society has more male electoral resources, which makes it easier for men to be elected. Additionally, the seniority system remains in place in the rural areas of Japan. In a seniority-based society, more senior people tend to have greater human capital. This is why most members of Japan's town and village councils are older men. Some women, even if willing to run for office, may abandon their candidacy because of their limited resources.

In an electoral environment wherein society is male-centered and cannot rely on party resources, an effective means of facilitating women's candidacy is to let them succeed older male local councilors.

Considering that the recent shortage of local councilors is due to a lack of men who can be nominated as successors, the option of

Figure 1: Do you think central party rivalries should not be brought into local politics?



Source: Kawamura (2022), fig.1 & 2

nominating a woman as successor and handing over the patronage association to her is worth considering. In addition to the individual benefit of maintaining political influence, elderly councilors would gain the overall benefit of increasing the number of female councilors.

However, there are doubts regarding this. In other words, will local Japanese lawmakers nominate women as their successors? Some local Japanese lawmakers are expected to exhibit gender bias when nominating successors. Even if they themselves do not do so, their supporters could sway them. Existing research suggests that gender-based discrimination exists in the political recruitment process and that politicians have historically been less likely to recruit women than men (Fox and Lawless 2010; Fox and Oxley 2003; Sanbonmatsu 2006). One reason the discrimination against female candidates is gender stereotypes. When envisioning a congressman, political leaders tend to portray someone with masculine characteristics (Niven 1997). If local councilors consider women unfit for political office, one would expect them to be less likely to nominate women as successors.

We found that politicians do not hold discriminatory views against the appointment of women as successors. However, politicians recognize that they cannot persuade KOENKAI (supporters' association) to accept female successors. This study suggests that local council members in Japan do not discriminate against women,

but other factors contribute to their not appointing women as successors.

Therefore, in Section 3, we examine whether local councilors nominate women as successors. Section 4 summarizes the results of the study and presents its contributions.

II. Previous Studies and Japan's Socio-Political Environment

1. Previous Studies

According to Norris' book on the Electoral Integrity Project³⁾, a worldwide research project on electoral integrity, elements of democratic elections are required by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), drafted and concluded by the UN Human Rights Commission (Norris, Frank, and Martínez i Coma 2014). Table 2 shows the elements of democratic elections, as described in the ICCPR.

As the table illustrates, gender equality is an important element in the creation of democratic elections. Governments and political parties must strive to ensure substantive de facto equality between men and women. However, this is difficult to achieve if governments

3) The Electoral Integrity Project <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/> (last accessed April 22, 2024)

and political parties do not take the lead.

Table 2: Brief Summary of International Obligations for Democratic Elections

The free expression of the will of the people through genuine elections
Periodic elections
The state must take necessary steps to ensure rights
The rule of law
Universal suffrage
Equal suffrage
Secret ballot
Prevention of corruption
Right and opportunity to participate in public affairs
Right and opportunity to vote
Right and opportunity to be elected
Freedom of assembly
Freedom of association
Freedom of movement
Equality before the law and freedom from discrimination
<u>Equality between men and women</u>
Freedom of opinion and expression
Access to information
Right to security of the person
Right to an effective remedy
Right to a fair and public hearing

Source: Norris, Frank, and Martinez i Coma (2014), Table 2.1

Many previous studies note that women face greater barriers to becoming politicians than similarly situated men (Anzia and Berry 2011; Fox and Lawless 2004, 2010; Fulton et al, 2006; Norris and Lovenduski 1993).

Several studies suggest that political parties are relatively less enthusiastic about recruiting and helping women get elected. For example, history has shown that party leaders are more likely to recruit men than women (Fox and Lawless 2010; Niven 1997; Sanbonmatsu 2006; Schwindt–Bayer 2011). Some studies also indicate that while creating proportional representation lists, political parties often place women lower on the list (Luhiste 2015). The same is true of the number of women on the lists.

Some studies have focused on the willingness to run for office. One study states that gender affects the willingness to run for office, with women less willing to run for office than men (Lawless and Fox 2010). The factors that contribute to the gap in willingness to run for office include gender role consciousness (Clark, Hadley, and Darcy 1989), family obligations (Fulton et al. 2006), and others (Fox and Lawless 2004, 2010, 2011). The following is a list of some of the most common types of family obligations.

Recent studies have focused on the effects of the encouragement from the political elite. Preece, Stoddard, and Fisher (2016) show that women appear to be less responsive to recruitment than men, but that recruited women are more likely to declare their candidacy for election than non–recruited women. Karpowitz, Monson, and Preece (2017) point to the importance of intervention by party leaders, argue that they increase the number of women who win elections by stimulating both demand and supply. These studies show that

political parties can facilitate women participation in politics if they make suitable efforts.

In countries like Japan, where gender gaps exist, there are calls for the introduction of a quota system, especially among female researchers (e.g., Miura 2016); however, it is difficult to introduce such a system when the public is cautious about eliminating the gender gap. In Japan, there is no majority of ordinary voters and local lawmakers for whom the introduction of a quota system is prioritized. Measures accorded higher priority for increasing the number of female Diet members include improvement of the child-rearing environment and measures against sexual harassment in the Diet, rather than the introduction of a quota system (Table 3).

Table 3: Measures to Increase the Number of Female Local Councilors (Multiple Responses)

	voters (N=1200)	city and ward councilors (N=7704)	town and village councilors (N=735)
Conducting a women-only open call for candidates	21.3	12.7	9.0
Active support for campaigning by female candidates	32.9	23.9	21.9
Tilted distribution of political party subsidies based on the number of female Diet members	8.1	4.8	4.2
Enhancement of maternity leave and childcare benefits	50.8	46.6	46.3
Introduction of a system in which men and women run for office in pairs	4.8	2.2	2.9
Introduction of a quota system	26.5	22.6	28.2
Introduction of a proportional representation system for local council elections	5.8	4.9	4.8

	voters (N=1200)	city and ward councilors (N=7704)	town and village councilors (N=735)
Provide childcare and nursing rooms in local councils	35.7	42.1	34.1
Allow council members to use their maiden names	15.7	28.0	16.7
Implementation of measures against sexual harassment in local councils	46.3	43.3	43.9
NA	7.8	1.7	2.2

Resource: Kawamura (2022)

2. Japan's Socio-Political Environment

Unlike in the United States and other countries, in Japan, political parties rarely field candidates in local elections. The more local council elections are held in small municipalities, the less likely candidates with party labels are to run election campaigns. In local council elections in Japan, most candidates' election campaigns are financed by personal campaign resources. Most candidates have KOENKAI (e.g., Curtis 1999; Scheiner 2006), which is symbolic of the fact that most candidates start "patronage associations." In other words, it is difficult for those without personal campaign resources to run for office (e.g., NHK Special Report Team 2020).

One of the reasons behind individual-centered elections is the aversion to the afore-mentioned central party conflicts at the local level (Figure 1). Japan's central-local relations are centralized by global standards. Japan has adopted a uniform nationwide legal

system and most local governments depend on locally allocated tax subsidies, which are transfers of funds from the national government. However, as Muramatsu (1988) pointed out, local governments in Japan compete to obtain subsidies and other funds from the national government. Local councilors are incentivized to avoid central party conflict and obtain subsidies. The incentive is particularly strong in regions that lack high-speed transportation infrastructure, such as bullet trains and highways. This is because confrontations would hinder petitions from the national government (Kawamura 2010).

Also to be considered is the influence of the electoral system. Japan employs the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV/MMD) system for local council elections in multimember districts. While party labels are effective because they provide voters with information shortcuts (Aldrich 1995), they are less likely to work in local elections in Japan, where SNTV/MMD is used (Hijino 2013). This is because large parties, such as the LDP, often have multiple candidates running for office, making it difficult for voters to differentiate between candidates based on party labels.

Furthermore, SNTV/MMD can be selected without attracting a wide range of votes. Candidates with relatively large support organizations (patronage associations and interest groups) can compete effectively in elections even without party endorsement. It is sufficient to ensure that the members of their support organizations

vote for them.

It is also well-known that community labels function better than party labels in local council elections in rural Japan (e.g., Kawamura 2010). Japan's local council system has a long history, and the view that local council members are representatives of the community is a remnant of the prewar era of honorary council members.

Community labels and individual patronage associations are at the core of election campaigns, implying that those with more personal electoral resources are more likely to be elected. Although postwar Japan has made progress in correcting the economic disparity between men and women, a male-centered social structure remains. As a result, men have more electoral resources, including social relational capital, than women. In rural areas, male-centered local power structures often persist.

The more one travels toward the countryside, the more the predominance of seniority-based society. In the countryside, community leaders are older men, with women almost never being community caretakers. Because community labels are effective in attracting votes, and community activities on a daily basis increase recognition by name, leaders are more likely to be strong candidates to succeed incumbents. On the other hand, women who are willing to become politicians must make an effort to (1) first work to be selected as community leaders or (2) work to cede the electoral resources that incumbents have.

III . Nomination of successors to local councilors and women

As mentioned above, the treatment of local councilors in Japan, especially town and village councilors, is not high, and it is not easy to make a living from councilors' remuneration alone. Consequently, there is a shortage of qualified candidates, especially town and village councilors, who are not treated well. If men with experience as community leaders decline invitations to run for office, it would be desirable to nominate a motivated woman to succeed. Since supporters' organizations are recognizable as personal property, if council members who cannot find male successors nominate women as their successors, the number of female politicians will increase, and the shortage of candidates will be alleviated.

Are Japan's local councilors willing to appoint women as their successors?

They may exhibit gender bias when nominating successors. Existing studies have suggested that gender-based discrimination exists in the political recruitment process. Politicians demonstrate a preference for men over women (Fox and Lawless 2010; Fox and Oxley 2003; Sanbonmatsu 2006) .

One reason politicians discriminate against female candidates is gender stereotypes. When envisioning a congressman, political leaders tend to portray someone with masculine characteristics

(Niven 1998). If a local councilor considers women unfit to become politicians, he or she is likely hesitate to appoint one as his or her successor.

On the other hand, one might expect them to appoint a successor regardless of gender. For example, Dhima (2022) revealed that Canadian Councilors are more responsive to female political aspirants and provide them with helpful advice. It was also shown that this trend was particularly pronounced among female MPs and those affiliated with leftist parties.

If the nomination of a successor is also considered a response to aspiring politicians, a woman may be nominated.

1. Results

If local councilors have trouble finding successors, the latter is an effective way to increase the number of female councilors. This would also contribute to solving the shortage of female local councilors. However, local councilors may not be willing to nominate women as successors.

We therefore asked Councilors, “If you could nominate your own successor, would you nominate a qualified person to succeed you, regardless of gender? The results are summarized in Table 4. More than 80% of the respondents answered that they would be willing to nominate a successor, regardless of gender. From this result, it can be argued that few respondents resisted nominating a female successor.

Table 4: Do you nominate a successor regardless of gender?

	Local Councilor (N=7704) (%)
I think so.	67.3
Somewhat agree	17.9
Somewhat disagree	2.2
Unlikely to be able to nominate a successor	4.3
Unlikely to nominate a successor due to political party affiliation	4.3
Other	2.5
No answer	1.5

However, even if a patronage organization is privately owned, its members may not accept a senator’s nomination. In other words, the number of female candidates depends not only on whether the councilor will nominate a successor, but also on the acceptance of the members of the patronage association. Therefore, we asked the Councilors, “If you wanted to nominate a capable woman as your successor, do you think the executives of the patronage association who support you would accept it? Table 5 presents the responses, which suggest that many councilors are aware that the patronage association is likely to resist and that there would be persuasion costs involved in nominating a woman as a successor.

Table 5: Will KOENKAI executives accept the decision?

	Local Councilor (N=7704) (%)
I think they’ll accept it easily.	46.2
I think they will accept it, although it will take some persuasion	33.4

	Local Councilor (N=7704) (%)
I don't think they will accept it easily	5.4
I think it is unlikely that they will accept my nomination.	1.7
Cannot answer because I am not likely to be able to nominate a successor due to my political party affiliation, etc.	5.7
Other	5.4

The results suggest that local councilors themselves may seek to solve the shortage of suitable candidates by nominating women as their successors, but may also choose to avoid paying the cost of persuading their patronage associations by not nominating women so much. This finding also indicates the existence of gender stereotypes.

Which local councilors nominate women as their successors and which act in a manner concerned with their own patronage? We provide an exploratory analysis of the relationship between local councilors' attributes and how they nominate their successors.

We estimated the effects of legislators' gender and personality on the outcome variables, using the following linear regression with ordinary least squares:

$y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 x_{1i} + \beta_2 x_{2i} + \epsilon_i,$	(1)
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where is the outcome of the attitude towards the nomination of the successor, and are variables indicating male legislator and legislator's age, respectively, is an intercept, and are coefficients, and is an error

term, and represent the effects of a legislator’s gender and age on outcomes. We adopted a within–subject design for own attitudes and those towards KOENKAI. For the efficacy of within–subject designs, see Clifford et al. (2021).

Based on existing research, we can expect female councilors to nominate women as successors more often than male councilors. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al. 1979) states that individuals tend to categorize themselves into groups based on personal characteristics such as gender and race. This social identity creates a sense of belonging and may evaluate in–group people more favorably than those who belong to out–groups (McPherson, Smith–Lovin, and Cook 2001) This theory suggests that male and female councilors are more likely to nominate men and women, respectively, as their successors.

Table 6: Results of Regression Analysis for the city survey

	Nomination	Agreement	Difference
Male	0.056**	-0.270***	0.308***
	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.027)
Age 30s	-0.003	0.049	0.001
	(0.192)	(0.190)	(0.223)
Age 40s	-0.058	-0.028	0.034
	(0.189)	(0.187)	(0.220)
Age 50s	-0.184	-0.175	0.068
	(0.188)	(0.187)	(0.219)
Age 60s	-0.248	-0.348*	0.181
	(0.188)	(0.187)	(0.219)

	Nomination	Agreement	Difference
Age 70s	-0.263	-0.455**	0.263
	(0,188)	(0,187)	(0,219)
Age 80+	-0.263	-0.513**	0.345
	(0,211)	(0,207)	(0,242)
Num,Obs.	6933	6564	6447
R2 Adj.	0,011	0,075	0,034

* p < 0,1, ** p < 0,05, *** p < 0,01

Tables 6 and 7 present the results of exploratory regression analyses. Male city legislators are more likely to nominate women as successors than female city legislators. On the other hand, we found no gender differences among town legislators. We found that male and older legislators believe that they will not be able to convince their patronage bodies to appoint women as successors. Furthermore, male legislators are more likely than female legislators to perceive themselves as willing to nominate a woman as their successor, but they do not believe they can persuade their patronage associations to do so.

Table 7: Results of Regression Analysis for the town survey

	Nomination	Agreement	Difference
Male	0.000	-0.210**	0.243**
	(0,109)	(0,099)	(0,113)
Age 30s	-0.357		
	(0,861)		
Age 40s	-0.530	-0.288	0.183
	(0,843)	(0,227)	(0,254)

	Nomination	Agreement	Difference
Age 50s	-0.272	-0.556***	0.639***
	(0.840)	(0.215)	(0.241)
Age 60s	-0.504	-0.624***	0.508**
	(0.837)	(0.204)	(0.228)
Age 70s	-0.591	-0.818***	0.578**
	(0.837)	(0.205)	(0.229)
Age 80+	-0.929	-0.859***	0.281
	(0.865)	(0.286)	(0.320)
Num.Obs.	695	658	653
R2 Adj.	0.009	0.055	0.026

* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

IV. Conclusion

After reviewing previous studies on women's political recruitment, we noted that it is not easy to analyze Japan using studied on Western countries. In addition to Japan's tendency to avoid bringing central party confrontation into local elections, this study points out that elections in Japan are primarily fought with the electoral resources of individual candidates. It was also noted that, because elections are centered on individuals, it is difficult for elderly men, who generally possess more human capital, to gain an advantage in rural areas. For a woman aspiring for candidature to a local councilor's post in rural Japan, significant efforts are required, such as becoming a community leader. Alternatively, she would need to secure support from a candidate without a successor, such as a

patronage association willing to cede its ground.

We surveyed local Japanese councilors to examine the factors that led them to nominate successors. The results revealed that Japanese local councilors tended to have a positive attitude toward nominating women as successors. However, they also believed that this would not be acceptable to their supporters. This study suggests that Japanese local councilors do not inherently discriminate against women, but refrain from nominating them for other reasons.

The political recruitment process comprises three stages: self-selection, political elite selection, and voter selection. Some studies suggest that the initial stage poses a significant barrier to women (Fox and Lawless 2004, 2010). Our findings indicate that the barriers women face in the early stages are due to their perceptions of politicians' KOENKAI, rather than the preferences of the politicians themselves.

This study focuses on closing the gender gap in local councils. The most effective way would be to introduce a quota system, as described by Miura (2016), and to implement Sunahara's (2017) proposal to reform local elections into a party-centered electoral system. Public support is necessary to revise institutions that support representative democracy; however, public opinion polls and other data indicate that there is no support for either of these proposals.

Our results, which show that discrimination against politicians does not hinder the nomination of women as successors, could

encourage women considering political careers. Future research should focus on accurately identifying where and why gender discrimination increases female political representation.

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일본 지방의회선거에서 여성 후보자 당선 의 구조적 장벽

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이 연구는 일본 지방의회에서 여성 의원이나 후보자가 소수인 배경과 구조적 한계를 분석한 논문이다. 실제로 일본 지방의회선거에서 경쟁률이 감소하고 있다. 선거가 치러지지 않고 후보자 모두가 당선되는 지방의회도 2015년 89개에서 2023년에는 123개로 증가하였다. 전체 지방의원 중에서 30.3%가 선거를 거치지 않고 무투표 당선되는 상황이다. 그러나 후보자 부족 현상이 심각해지고 있는 상황에서도 여성 의원 수는 늘어나지 않고 있다. 후보자 부족 현상은 보수가 지나치게 적고, 낙선 리스크가 크기 때문이다. 더구나 지방선거에서는 중앙정치에서 나타나는 정당 경쟁이 나타나지 않는 점도 큰 요인으로 작용한다. 정당이 후보자를 공천하지 않는 이유는 정당 불신과 관련되었지만, 후보자의 선거 자원 동원과 관계가 깊다. 즉, 선거에 필요한 재정적 자원, 정치적 동원을 정당이 아니라 후보자 개인이 부담해야 하기 때문이다. 이러한 문제점은 지방의회에서 여성 후보자가 적은 구조적 원인이다. 일본에서 지방의원은 지역(커뮤니티) 대표의 성격이 강하다. 지역사회가 남성 중심으로 운영되므로 대표 인식도 남성 중심이다.

현재와 같은 구조 속에서 여성 후보자가 증가하기 위해서는 현직 남성 의원이 여성 후보자를 자신의 후계자로 지명해야 한다. 그러나 후원회 조직이 여성 후보자를 후계자로 인정하지 않을 가능성이 크다. 여성 후보자를 후계자로 인정하도록 설득하는 과정에는 비용과 시간이 소요된다. 그러므로 남성 고령자 중심의 정치적 충원 구조 속에서는 비용과 리스크 회피를 위하여 남성 후보자가 지명되고 있다. 이러한 구조적인 문제는 여성 후보자의 의회 진출을 저해하는 현실적인 장벽으로 존재하고 있다.

주제어

지방의회, 젠더, 여성 후보자, 후원회, 여성공천, 일본 정치