



## INSIGHT: NORTHEAST ASIA

# Japan's spring elections underscore stark gender imbalances

### THE TAKEAWAY

Surveys of Japan's elected officials on gender equality ahead of the country's 20th quadrennial unified local elections in April highlight the halting, decades-long movement to address structured and institutionalized gender imbalances throughout Japan.

### IN BRIEF

The quadrennial unified local elections were implemented in 1947 to drum up support for the then-new electoral and political system in Japan. The percentage of participating locals has since decreased due to factors ranging from disasters to resignations to jurisdiction mergers. As of 2011, only about [27 per cent](#) of Japan's 1,788 local governments take part in the elections. However, it remains the most concentrated election season in Japan, with the most candidates and largest number of lawmaker positions up for grabs.

Several media outlets used the occasion to conduct surveys on the representation of women in local assemblies and the percentage of women candidates.

While the number of local assemblies with women has increased slowly over the last two decades, the most recent numbers give reason for pause. An [Asahi Shimbun](#) national survey released on February 18, found that as of November 1, 2022, out of 1,788 municipal (1,731) and prefectural (47) councils, there were 257 councils (14.3%) with no women representation and 437 councils (24.4%) with only one woman. Nationally, women comprise 15.4 per cent of all incumbent parliamentarians and only 4.2 per cent of incumbent parliamentary chairs.

The [Hokkaido Shimbun](#) found that 55 per cent of local lawmakers surveyed viewed the 2020 national government goal of increasing the percentage of women candidates to 35 per cent by 2025 as "unattainable," while only four per cent said the goal was attainable. However, 28 per cent said that the government's goal was too low and should be set at 50 per cent, while 79 per cent said that there should be more women legislators. Yet none of Hokkaido Prefecture's [163 assemblies](#) are implementing any measures to increase the participation of women on assemblies.

## IMPLICATIONS

The unified local elections are a bellwether for national politics. If the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) does not meet expectations and secure widespread public support in the elections, it could lead to calls for Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to step down, ahead of the Hiroshima G7 Summit in May.

The elections are also an indicator of society-wide systemic barriers inhibiting gender equality. [Gendered disparities](#) are notable in the overrepresentation of women in [irregular work](#), and the dramatic underrepresentation of women in [law professorial positions](#) (15%), company presidents (8%), boards (8%), and management (15%). And Japan's [wage gap](#), which sees the average woman make 22.1 per cent less than the average man, is almost double the OECD average. In the World Bank's latest "[Women, Business and the Law](#)" survey, completed annually since 1971, Japan dropped to 104th out of 190 economies, down from 74th in 2020. Japan's overall index score has not budged above 78.8 out of 100 since 2011 as it has enacted few reforms to improve in the categories of equality in workplace (50/100), pay (25/100), marriage (80/100), and entrepreneurship (75/100).

What would a low turnout of women candidates or elected women lawmakers mean for Kishida and national politics in the future? The pessimists would say 'not much,' pointing to the glacial speed of change despite the Japanese Constitution's stipulation on gender equality, and successive governments' attempts to advance societal gender equality. These efforts include a [Gender Equity Bureau within the Cabinet Office](#), and a variety of laws and initiatives, such as the [2018 Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field](#) and the 2020 [5th Basic Plan for Gender Equality](#), which aims to promote gender equality in all areas of society. However, deadlines for meeting goals seem continually extended.

The optimists would say that no one is expecting a sudden change and that no society is static. And considering Japan's demographic challenges, the

argument goes, it will only be a matter of time before the political glass ceiling crumbles under its own weight, or more women come together and break it down.

## WHAT'S NEXT

### 1. Running out of candidates and voters

Local assembly positions, with very low pay and excessive workloads, are [unappealing for many women](#), and present even more challenges for women with children. And thanks to Japan's super-aging society and an exodus from the countryside, many local elections have no candidates, while others are won with little to no resistance.

### 2. Will the Hiroshima G7 Summit be a coup for gender equality?

Hiroshima is Kishida's political base. He has travelled worldwide to meet with leaders to help ensure a successful summit. With so much time and energy invested, the G7 will provide an opportunity to explore and possibly advance related gender issues through dialogue and *gaiatsu* (i.e. foreign pressure). The [U.S. government and civil society organizations](#) are strongly encouraging Japan to increase LGBTQ+ rights ahead of the summit, while the G7 Ministerial Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment will take place in June.

### 3. #EmbraceEquity on International Women's Day

March 8 is [International Women's Day](#). This year's theme of #EmbraceEquity highlights how equity is not a luxury but a "must-have." As in previous years, there will be numerous rallies across Japan to commemorate the day and help translate talk to action — in politics and beyond.

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