

Women in Politics in Northeast Asia: South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan

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Introduction

As of May 2020, the average proportion of women in Asia's national parliaments in lower and upper houses is 20.3%, which is slightly lower than the world average of 25%.¹ Even though the number of female members of parliament (MPs) has grown since 1999, the share of women in the national parliaments in the three Northeast Asian democracies varies: 10% in Japan (lower house), 19% in South Korea, and 42% in Taiwan.² The current share would have ranked Taiwan as the 15th highest in the world, if the Inter-Parliamentary Union were to count Taiwan as a country. In contrast, the growth has been slow and the share still relatively low in South Korea (ranked the 117th) and Japan (the 166th).³

Once elected, women MPs have made efforts to represent women's interests. For example, female MPs in Taiwan and South Korea proposed more bills on feminist issues, childcare, education, and social welfare is-

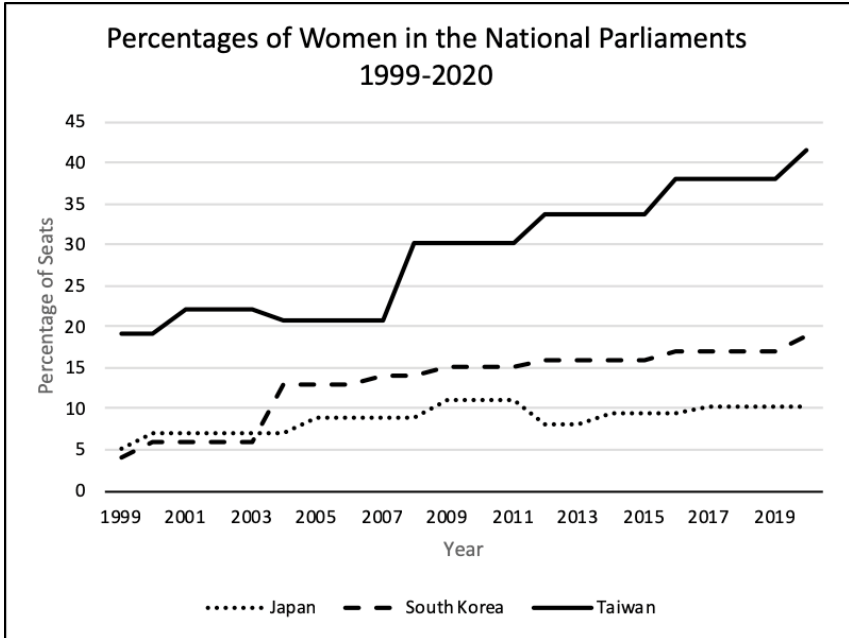
¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in Parliament: Global and Regional Averages," IPU Parline, 2020, <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages>.

² Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Percentage of Women in National Parliaments - Ranking as of 1st May 2020," IPU Parline, 2020, <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=5&year=2020>; Korean National Election Commission, "Election Statistics," Korean National Election Commission, 2020, <http://info.nec.go.kr/main/showDocument.xhtml?electionId=0000000000&topMenuId=BI>; Taiwan Central Election Commission, "2020 Legislator Election," Taiwan Central Election Commission, 2020, <https://www.cec.gov.tw/english/cms/le/32472>.

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Percentage of Women in National Parliaments - Ranking as of 1st May 2020."

sues than their male counterparts.⁴ Japanese women MPs organised an all-partisan parliamentary group which prepared the historic Gender Parity Law on 16 April 2018.⁵

Graph 1: Percentage of women in the national parliaments, 1999–2020.



Data sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union, and Taiwan Central Election Commission.

It should also be noted that both South Korea and Taiwan have elected a female president respectively. Park Geun-hye was elected in 2012, being

⁴ Cal Clark and Janet Clark, "Women in Taiwan: The Opportunities and Limits of Socioeconomic and Political Change for Women's Empowerment," in *Women and Politics Around the World: A Comparative History and Survey*, ed. Marian Lief Palley and Joyce Gelb (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 605–21; Young-Im Lee, "South Korea: Women's Political Representation," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights*, ed. Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Netina Tan (London, UK, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 627–40.

⁵ *Gender Studies Journal*, "The Gender Parity Law in Japan: The Potential to Change Women's Under-Representation: Interview with Mari Miura," *ジェンダー研究 (Gender Studies)* 21, no. 1 (2018): 87–99.

the first female president of South Korea.⁶ However, she was impeached in 2016, and later sentenced to 25 years in prison due to bribery.⁷ Tsai Ing-wen was elected in 2016, becoming the first female president of Taiwan,⁸ and was re-elected in a landslide victory in January 2020.⁹ Before Tsai, Lü Hsiu-lien (Annette Lu) was elected as the first female vice-president of Taiwan in 2000, serving for eight years with Chen Shui-bian.¹⁰ Japan has not elected a female prime minister yet, but leaders like Tokyo's first female governor Koike Yuriko, the former Defense Minister Inada Tomomi, and the former Democratic Party leader Murata Renho are knocking against the glass ceiling.¹¹

Why and how does Taiwan have a higher level of women's representation at the national level, compared to Japan and South Korea? How can women's presence in the national parliaments improve in a sustainable, empowering way? This chapter explains how the specific mechanisms of a mixed electoral system in Japan and gender quotas in Taiwan and South Korea result in varying levels of women's electoral success. The chapter concludes by proposing ways to improve women's presence in politics, emphasizing the important roles that political parties can play to promote women's political representation before and after elections.

⁶ Young-Im Lee, "From First Daughter to First Lady to First Woman President: Park Geun-Hye's Path to the South Korean Presidency," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 3 (2017): 377–91.

⁷ Sang-hun Choe, "Park Geun-Hye, Ex-South Korean Leader, Gets 25 Years in Prison," *New York Times*, August 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/world/asia/park-geun-hye-sentenced-south-korea.html>.

⁸ Austin Ramzy, "Tsai Ing-Wen Sworn In as Taiwan's President, as China Watches Closely," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/world/asia/tsai-ing-wen-sworn-in-as-taiwans-president-as-china-watches-closely.html?_r=0.

⁹ Emily Feng, "Rebuking China, Taiwan Votes To Reelect President Tsai Ing-Wen," *National Public Radio*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/11/795573457/rebuking-china-taiwan-votes-to-reelect-president-tsai-ing-wen>.

¹⁰ Wen-hui Anna Tang and Emma J. Teng, "Looking Again at Taiwan's Lü Hsiu-Lien: A Female Vice President or a Feminist Vice President?," *Women's Studies International Forum* 56 (2016): 92–102.

¹¹ Elise Hu, "Women Are Making Their Voices Heard In Male-Dominated Japanese Politics," *National Public Radio*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/01/13/509611952/women-are-making-their-voices-heard-in-male-dominated-japanese-politics>.

Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Representation

Electoral System

South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan use mixed electoral systems, where some of the MPs are elected by the first-past-the-post system in single-member districts (SMD) and the remaining seats are allocated proportional to each party's vote share (proportional representation, PR). For the PR seats, political parties select and rank their candidates before the election. A PR system tends to see more women elected than an SMD system, as political parties have an incentive to create a more inclusive slate of candidates.¹² A mixed electoral system can achieve a high level of minority representation through the PR system while providing a mechanism for geographic representation and accountability through the SMD system.¹³

In all three countries, the share of female MPs is higher in the PR tier than in the SMD tier. In South Korea, women make up 11.4% of the 253 SMD seats, and 60% of the 47 PR seats.¹⁴ About one third of the SMD seats in Taiwan are filled by women, whereas 55.8% of the 34 PR members are women.¹⁵ In Japan, only 8% of the 289 SMD members and 13% of the 176 PR members are women.¹⁶

¹² Wilma Rule, "Women's Underrepresentation and Electoral Systems," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27, no. 4 (1994): 689–92; Rob Salmond, "Proportional Representation and Female Parliamentarians," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2006): 175–204; Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer and William Mishler, "An Integrated Model of Women's Representation," *Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (July 29, 2005): 407–28.

¹³ Tracy-Ann Johnson-Myers, *The Mixed Member Proportional System: Providing Greater Representation for Women? A Case Study of the New Zealand Experience* (Springer International Publishing, 2017).

¹⁴ Korean National Election Commission, "Election Statistics."

¹⁵ Legislative Yuan of Taiwan, "第10屆立法委員名單," Legislative Yuan of Taiwan, 2020, <https://www.ly.gov.tw/Pages/List.aspx?nodeid=109>.

¹⁶ The House of Representatives of Japan, "Composition of the House," The House of Representatives of Japan, 2020, http://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_english.nsf/html/status/member/mem_a.htm; The International Foundation for Electoral Systems, "Japan Election for Shugiin, Oct 22, 2017," IFES Election Guide, 2020, <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3114/>.

However, recent scholarship shows that this correlation is not as significant as previously thought.¹⁷ Japan and South Korea show that electoral rule changes alone do not lead to sustained growths in female political representation. When Japan changed its electoral system from the SMD system to the mixed system in 1996, the share of female MPs immediately increased from 4.6% to 7.3%, but the growth has since stagnated. Similarly, the share of women in the National Assembly exceeded 10% for the first time right after the adoption of the mixed system and gender quotas in 2004, but since then it has reached a plateau. The mixed system has led to only slightly more women MPs, partly because the share of PR seats in the parliament is smaller than the SMDs': 18% of the seats in South Korea and 37.8% in Japan are PR seats. Thus, the number of seats more conducive to electing women is not large in the first place. However, Taiwan's PR seats are 30% of the Legislative Yuan, but its share of women MPs is four times higher than that of Japan. Hence, the share of PR seats is not a sufficient reason to explain women's under-representation.

A more compelling reason for women's under-representation under the mixed system is political parties' candidate nomination and district assignment practices. Both in South Korea and Japan, political parties are more likely to assign women candidates to run as challengers against another party's incumbents, and less likely to assign them to run in their own parties' strongholds. Women lack three critical resources, "*jiban* (a local support base), *kanban* (name recognition) and *kaban* (financial resources)," and thus face greater challenges in district elections than men in Japan.¹⁸ Women incumbents' success rate is also much lower than that of male incumbents.¹⁹

To make the matter even more challenging for women, Japanese parties use a distinctive dual candidacy system, which undermines the potential of the PR system in achieving a more representative legislature.

¹⁷ Andrew Roberts, Jason Seawright, and Jennifer Cyr, "Do Electoral Laws Affect Women's Representation?," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 12 (2013): 1555–81.

¹⁸ Sherry L. Martin, "Japanese Women: In Pursuit of Gender Equality," in *Women and Politics Around the World: A Comparative History and Survey*, ed. Marian Lief Palley and Joyce Gelb (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 397–419.

¹⁹ Miyuki Kubo and Aie Rie Lee, "Electing Women to the Japanese Lower House: The Impact of the Electoral System," *Asian Women* 33, no. 2 (2017): 69–99.

The majority of candidates run for both SMD and PR seats: if they narrowly lose in the district election, they have a second chance in the PR election. Many parties place these dual candidates at the same ranking on their PR lists before the election (for example, twenty candidates are ranked as the third place on the PR list). After the election, the candidates who were placed at the same rank on the list before the election are ranked again based on “the best-loser ratio,” the ratio of the number of votes a candidate won compared to the district’s winner. Thus, those who lost by the narrowest margins are more likely to be elected as the PR members. Due to the dual candidacy system, with equal ranking placements on the PR list, the SMD election results are tied to the PR result²⁰ and cannot promote the outcome of diversifying the candidate slate as effectively as other PR systems.

Gender Quotas in Taiwan and South Korea

Japan has not enacted gender quotas to promote women’s representation in the national government. Four opposition parties submitted a bill proposing a gender quota for the election in 2016, but did not get enough support from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party for it to pass.²¹ The aforementioned Gender Parity Law stipulates that political parties should aim for gender parity in candidate nomination, but it is not a gender quota.²² The lack of a gender quota for elections partly explains the dearth of women MPs in Japan, compounded by the aforementioned dual candidacy and candidate nomination pattern. What then explains the differing share of women MPs in Taiwan and South Korea in spite of gender quotas in the two countries?

Taiwan has had reserved seats for women at the local level since the 1950s; 5% to 10% of local council seats are stipulated to be reserved for women, depending on the district size. Taiwanese feminists such as Peng

²⁰ Kubo and Lee.

²¹ Rieko Kage, Frances M. Rosenbluth, and Seiki Tanaka, “What Explains Low Female Political Representation? Evidence from Survey Experiments in Japan,” *Politics and Gender* 15, no. 2 (2019): 285–309.

²² *Gender Studies Journal*, “The Gender Parity Law in Japan: The Potential to Change Women’s Under-Representation: Interview with Mari Miura.”

Wan-Ru led an effort to expand the gender quota, which eventually resulted in the 2005 constitutional amendment mandating at least half of each party's PR candidates be women. If the PR candidate list does not meet the 50% gender quota, the Central Election Commission does not accept the party's candidate list. If a party lists all the women at the bottom of the list, the Commission will skip the men ranked higher and give the seats to women, to make sure half of the eligible seats for each party go to women.²³ At the local level, at least one seat out of every four seats is to be held by a woman.²⁴

The gender quota at the local level has increased the number of female candidates and female council members.²⁵ The local-level gender quota fills a pipeline of women candidates for national-level offices, and local members go on to win national-level non-quota seats, thereby offering upward mobility for female politicians.²⁶ On the other hand, the national-level gender quota has not been a vehicle for upward mobility, as national-level PR experience does not improve one's chances of winning SMD seats at the national level. Moreover, more than half of female PR members who served between 2008 and 2012 left politics after their term was over, compared to 30% of their male counterparts.²⁷

In South Korea, women's organisations made a cross-ideological coalition in the 1990s to demand gender quotas for elections.²⁸ Immediately before the 2004 parliamentary election, the new Election Law stipulated a mandatory 50% gender quota for the national PR candidate list. The Law requires political parties to alternate women and men on the PR candidate list, with the first candidate on the list being a woman. For the SMD seats

²³ Chang-Ling Huang, "Reserved for Whom? The Electoral Impact of Gender Quotas in Taiwan," *Pacific Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2016): 325–43.

²⁴ Chang-ling Huang, "Gender Quotas and Women's Increasing Political Competitiveness," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 1 (2019): 25–40.

²⁵ Nathan F. Batto, Wen-Jong Juang, and Chiung-Chu Lin, "從四分之一到三分之一？婦女保障席次的選舉效應評估(From One Fourth to One Third: The Electoral Effects of Reserved Female Seats)," *東吳政治學報* 32, no. 1 (2014): 99–141.

²⁶ Nathan F. Batto, "Gender Quotas and Upward Mobility in Elections in Taiwan," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 39, no. 4 (2018): 1–16.

²⁷ Huang, "Gender Quotas and Women's Increasing Political Competitiveness."

²⁸ Ki-young Shin, "An Alternative Form of Women's Political Representation: Netto, a Proactive Women's Party in Japan," *Politics and Gender* 16, no. 1 (2020): 78–98.

at the national level, on the other hand, the law only *recommends* that parties *make an effort* to assign women as at least 30% of its SMD candidates.²⁹ At the local level, there is a mandatory 50% gender quota for the PR list, with strong sanctions for non-compliance as in Taiwan.

However, the growth in the number of women MPs has been slow, because parties do not follow the “recommended” 30% candidate quota for SMD seats. The monetary incentive for SMD quota compliance is inconsequential. More importantly, party factional leaders use the candidate nomination system as a way to reward their followers’ loyalty rather than achieve other causes such as gender parity.³⁰ Unlike in Taiwan, local council members did not win any SMD elections between 2000 and 2016 in South Korea. Worse still, national-level PR experience does not boost one’s bid for national-level SMD elections, similar to the situation in Taiwan. Political parties give priority to SMD members over PR members in leadership positions assignment, financial support, and candidate nomination. Therefore, many PR members have a hard time getting nominated and re-elected for SMD seats,³¹ even though the situation seems to have improved in the most recent elections. In the April 2020 elections, 57 women were elected, the highest ever in South Korean history. Eight of 24 female PR members elected in 2016 were nominated to run for the district-level seats in 2020, and four eventually won their seats (7% of the 57 women winners).³²

What Should be Done? The Role of Political Parties

Existing literature focuses on “three main suspects” to understand women’s persistent political under-representation: voters’ reluctance to vote for women; women’s low level of interest in pursuing political office;

²⁹ Young-Im Lee, “The Leaky Pipeline and Sacrificial Lambs: Gender, Candidate Nomination, and District Assignment in South Korea’s National Legislative Elections,” *Electoral Studies* 59 (2019): 27–38.

³⁰ Hyunji Lee and Ki-young Shin, “Gender Quotas and Candidate Selection Processes in South Korean Political Parties,” *Pacific Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2016): 345–68.

³¹ Lee, “The Leaky Pipeline and Sacrificial Lambs: Gender, Candidate Nomination, and District Assignment in South Korea’s National Legislative Elections.”

³² Young-Im Lee, “Five Things to Know about Women and South Korea’s 2020 Elections,” *Washington Post*, May 11, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/11/five-things-know-about-women-south-koreas-2020-election.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/11/five-things-know-about-women-south-koreas-2020-election/)

and political elites' unwillingness to nominate and support women candidates.³³ Studies have shown that voters are willing to and do vote for women candidates,³⁴ even though they prefer women candidates who were selected by primaries rather than top-down party nomination.³⁵ One study points to the gender gap in willingness to run for office, as the number of women candidates has never been bigger than that of men candidates in all three countries. Japanese women are reluctant to run for office due to socially expected gender roles in families.³⁶ Moreover, women's interest in running for office is undermined by the situation where constituency building for election requires round-the-clock availability and is built around a masculine culture, with practices such as backroom dealing and heavy drinking.³⁷

Party gatekeepers are a stronger factor in women's under-representation than the gender gap in political ambition. Political parties can and need to encourage more women to run for office, and to strengthen women candidates' electability. The positive impact of institutional arrangements like the mixed electoral system and the gender quotas on women's political representation depends on the political parties. The experience in Japan shows the critical role political parties play in nominating and electing women. Koizumi Junichiro of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2005, and Ozawa Ichiro of the Democratic Party of Japan in 2009 promoted many female candidates for strategic reasons. Due to these major parties' initiatives, the number of women candidates and MPs in the 2009 election was the highest ever in Japan. The record has not been broken since,

³³ David Niven, "Throwing Your Hat Out of the Ring: Negative Recruitment and the Gender Imbalance in State Legislative Candidacy," *Politics & Gender* 2, no. 4 (2006): 473–89.

³⁴ Kage, Rosenbluth, and Tanaka, "What Explains Low Female Political Representation? Evidence from Survey Experiments in Japan"; Lee, "The Leaky Pipeline and Sacrificial Lambs: Gender, Candidate Nomination, and District Assignment in South Korea's National Legislative Elections."

³⁵ Young-Im Lee and Timothy S. Rich, "The Impact of Gender and Nomination Paths on Strategic Voting: Experimental Evidence from South Korea," *Representation* 54, no. 4 (2018): 313–30.

³⁶ Kage, Rosenbluth, and Tanaka, "What Explains Low Female Political Representation? Evidence from Survey Experiments in Japan."

³⁷ Chang-Ling Huang, "Gender Quotas in Taiwan: The Impact of Global Diffusion," *Politics & Gender* 11, no. 1 (2015): 207–17; Kage, Rosenbluth, and Tanaka, "What Explains Low Female Political Representation? Evidence from Survey Experiments in Japan"; Lee, "The Leaky Pipeline and Sacrificial Lambs: Gender, Candidate Nomination, and District Assignment in South Korea's National Legislative Elections."

because these parties nominated more women not with long-term gender equality in mind but for short-term electoral gains. Even worse, these women were considered as subjects to the party boss, being labelled as “Koizumi’s female children” or “the Ozawa girls.”³⁸ In South Korea, PR members are considered to be beneficiaries of the gender quotas, and they are expected to vote along party lines on controversial issues to pay back the party for the favour. This means some female PR members vote against women’s interests under the pressure to conform.³⁹ Thus, policymakers need to consider measures not only to immediately increase the number of women MPs, but also to enable their autonomy and empowerment after the election.

From these three countries’ experiences, designing a mechanism in which women are expected to engage in constituency formation seems to be more beneficial than relegating women to be the simple beneficiaries of gender quotas.⁴⁰ In order to achieve this, political parties can maintain and expand a pool of female candidate aspirants, provide financial support for women, and offer leadership development programmes.⁴¹ This way, women can utilise the political capital to win elections and aim for even higher positions afterwards, reducing the likelihood of career interruption and termination of experienced women MPs. Moreover, women will be less likely to consider themselves as owing something to the party under this type of arrangement than when they are pejoratively considered as “quota women,” a label that restricts their legislative activities even after the election. Once elected, increasing women’s leadership in legislative committees, establishing policy advisory boards for women-related policies within the parliament, recruiting more female legislative staff, and creating coalitions and support networks among female MPs can help create gender-sensitive parliaments. In this environment, women MPs

³⁸ Kubo and Lee, “Electing Women to the Japanese Lower House: The Impact of the Electoral System.”

³⁹ Ki-young Shin, “Women’s Mobilizations for Political Representation in Patriarchal States: Models from Japan and South Korea,” in *Gender and Power: Towards Equality and Democratic Governance*, ed. Mino Vianello and Mary Hawkesworth (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 344–65.

⁴⁰ Batto, “Gender Quotas and Upward Mobility in Elections in Taiwan.”

⁴¹ Jiso Yoon and Ki-young Shin, “Mixed Effects of Legislative Quotas in South Korea,” *Politics and Gender* 11, no. 1 (2015): 186–95.

will be able to participate more effectively in parliamentary affairs and are empowered to be more responsive to women's interests, needs, and concerns if they desire.⁴²

⁴² Won-Hong Kim et al., "Research on the Measure to Strengthen the Effectiveness of Political Candidates' Gender Quota System : The Achievement and Its Limitation," 2016. Korean Women's Development Institute.