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Overcoming Gendered Images:  
Japanese Women Politicians' Self-Presentation on Twitter

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Women's political representation in Japan has been limited as compared to their high achievement and success in various fields. Stereotypes and media portrayals of women politicians have been regarded as crucial factors to affect gendered reaction to women politicians and low representation of women in politics. In recent times, social media is becoming essential tools for politicians to build their self-image by appealing more directly and to engage in the political process more interactively. It is argued that social media would advantage to political outsiders in particular, including women politicians. This research investigated campaign strategy of women candidates on Twitter during the election period with emphases on the 'representation' of issues and personal traits, and 'interaction' with voters. A total of 699 tweets of four women candidates in the 2013 election, Japan's first 'Internet election', were analyzed for the study. The results revealed that women candidates focused on the issues that have been viewed as male and female issues equally, indicating that women candidates might overcome disadvantages of gendered print and broadcast media framing by using social networking. Representation of personal traits and interaction with voters on Twitter varied according to the candidates: Renho's tweets were the most interactive and often mentioned everyday lives and personal information, while the other women candidates centered on political views.

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## Introduction

Japan has been a male-dominated democratic society with low representation of women in politics despite women's high level of academic achievement and socioeconomic status. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union, Japan's proportion of women in parliament has been consistently low, ranking 130th out of 189 countries as of 1st December 2014 (8.1%, 39 among 480 seats). In recent times, the situations surrounding women politicians are gradually changing and the women's image of 'agent of change' (Norris, 1997) in Japanese politics is certainly working to their advantage.

In the 1989 House of Chancellors election, women candidates attracted a lot of attention on the background of voters' increased political mistrust after a series of political scandals by the Liberal Democratic Party. Women candidates of the Social Democratic Party appealed to voters under the leadership of Takako Doi, the first female party leader in Japan's politics, focusing mainly on social issues from women's perspective (Iwai, 1993; Eto, 2010).

The proportion of assemblywomen also increased to 7% in the 2000 general election after a long period of women's low representation in the Lower House. The 2005 and 2009 Japanese general election particularly highlighted women candidates: Forty-three and fifty-four assemblywomen were elected in the 2005 and 2009 election, accounting for 9.0% and 11.3% respectively. However, the increasing trend ended shortly as the ratio of assemblywomen has decreased to 7.9% in the 2012 general election. In fact, although women candidates were spotlighted in the 2005 and 2009 election, media differentiated male and female candidates in terms of their political experiences and abilities. Women candidates' success in the race was mostly portrayed as a result of influential male-dominated parties and politicians, referring to the Democratic Party's women candidates as 'Ozawa girls' in the 2009 election, for instance. Al-

though it was not limited to women candidates, 'Koizumi Children' also highlighted the influence of male-dominated party in the 2005 election.

Widespread gender attitudes in our lives are regarded as crucial factors to affect voters' gendered reactions to women politicians. Gendered portrayal of women in politics by media also has worked to disadvantage of women politicians (Everitt and Gidengil, 2003). However, recent media environment offers new ways for women politicians to communicate with voters. Parties and candidates are increasingly embracing social media to convey their point of view and strengthen their visibility (Miragliotta, 2012). The Internet and social networking provide politicians with more channels and opportunities to reach various voters and interact with supporters more efficiently. As Bligh, Schlehofer, Casad, and Gaffney (2012) have noted, the Internet-based media enable women politicians "to present a more nuanced view that potentially mitigates voters' reliance on gender-role attitudes" (p. 564). Additionally, it is becoming common that journalists and mass media get political remarks and views from the tweets, which might in turn affect media framing of women politicians.

Although a large amount of research documented gendered depictions and portrayals of women politicians by traditional media (Kahn, 1996; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993), there are few studies on online presentation of women politicians so far (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, and Robertson, 2004; Gelber, 2011). The current research seeks to understand women politicians' self-presentation patterns on Twitter as to how they utilize Twitter to express political opinions and views, construct their self-images and interact with voters, with specific emphases on issue competencies and image presentation. The primary focus of the following literature review is placed on the differences in women politicians' self-portrayals of traditional mass media and online media including websites and social media.

## **Self-Presentation and Campaigning of Women Candidates within Traditional Media**

Gender stereotyping and gender-role attitudes provide voters with an opposite scheme and image of gender, which might encourage them to consider women as having “expressive strengths” (p. 61), such as being emotional, understanding, and compassionate, whereas men are regarded as holding “instrumental strength” (p. 61), referring to being independent, aggressive, and knowledgeable (Kahn and Gordon, 1997). Likewise, Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) argue that men candidates are considered to be stronger leaders and to possess typical masculine traits that encourage voters to perceive them more competent at dealing with wide-ranging issues.

Previous studies on media depictions and portrayals of women politicians have continuously revealed that the media representation of women in the political arena is quite limited and news media stereotype female politicians by keeping emphasizing feminine traits and issues (Kahn, 1996; Everitt and Gidengil, 2003).

The candidates themselves also face an important decision concerning what issues and images to be stressed in their campaigns. As Kahn (1996) noted, given both differing media coverage of men and women in politics and voters’ deep-rooted stereotypical gender views, female candidates face much more difficulties than their male counterparts when presenting themselves in the campaigns. Iyengar, Valentino, Ansolabehere, and Simon (1997) argued that information corresponding to voters’ stereotypes is more likely to get voters’ attention and to be effective when processing information. Candidates are well aware of this situation and tend to choose rather stereotypical messages and expressions strategically in their campaigns within traditional media (Kahn and Gordon, 1997).

Previous studies analyzing candidates’ campaign messages suggest that candidates appear to focus on issues rather than images, regardless

of gender. Kahn (1996) showed that both male and female candidates emphasized issues over traits and stressed their competence more than other personal traits. Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, and Robertson (2004) also found that both male and female candidates tend to emphasize campaign issues rather than personal images. However, the issues that are highlighted in their campaign messages appear to be dependent on the candidate's gender. Kahn (1996) showed that female candidates were more likely than men to emphasize their stereotypical strengths by stressing such issues as education and health policy, whereas men tended to present their stereotypical strengths by discussing the economic and defense policy.

Similarly, Dabelko and Herrnson (1997) showed that although both male and female candidates emphasized economic issues, women were more likely than men to focus on social issues including women's issues in the US 1992 congressional election. Their study revealed that women candidates also choose strategies that rely on their stereotypical image. However, a recent study by Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, and Robertson (2004) indicated that both male and female issues were mentioned in women candidates' ads, including the economy, education, health care, women's issues, and youth violence. Men candidates discussed crime or prisons and welfare slightly more often than their female counterparts. Additionally, Kahn and Gordon (1997) argue the issues stressed in campaigns depend on domestic and international situations: Social issues are less likely to be highlighted during unstable economic and international situations and women's emphasis on social issues tends to be represented by the media in stable times. Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, and Robertson (2004) also noted that recent concerns with the military and defense might disadvantage women candidates.

In addition to self-portrayals of issue competency, candidates seek to present and manage self-images. Benz and DeClerq (1985) showed that in the 1980s, female candidates had a tendency to focus on their traditional image such as compassion and warmth, whereas male candi-

dates stressed their toughness. By contrast, a recent study by Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, and Robertson (2004) showed that women candidates were more likely to stress their toughness and strength, whereas men candidates mentioned their sensitivity and understanding as well as their political experiences. The results show that candidates do not appear to rely primarily on gender schemes to appeal to voters with the increase of women politicians and gradual changes in voters' attitudes toward women politicians.

However, the situation surrounding women candidates varies according to the country and political culture. In a study on self-presentation in newspaper campaign ads of the 2005 House of Representatives election and the 2007 House of Chancellors election in Japan, Lee (2011) found that male candidates emphasized the economy and political reform slightly more than female candidates, whereas female candidates centered on child-raising, education, and social security. The results indicated that women candidates in Japan continue to rely on gender framing, which means gender cue still serves as a major political resource for women for showing their strength in dealing with feminine issues.

### **Online Campaigning and Self-Presentation of Women Candidates**

The Internet and social networking are becoming increasingly important campaign media to promote self-image and interact with voters. The successful online campaigns of Barack Obama by using social networking in the 2008 US presidential election got worldwide attention particularly. Politicians are able to manage and control their image more directly and interactively on the Internet and social networking.

The overall results of self-portrayals of politicians on websites show somewhat different patterns from the ones in traditional media. In an analysis of candidates' websites in 2000 and 2002, Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, and Robertson (2004) found that both female and male candidates



highlighted similar traits associated with their experiences, performances, qualifications, and leadership. Similarly, results from analysis of campaign websites by Dolan (2005) showed that women in the 2000 and 2002 US elections did not give priority to female issues and found no significant difference between male and female candidates. Instead, the electoral situation of women candidates affected the way they put the emphasis on issues. Women candidates who ran against men in 2000 were more likely than women who competed with women to concentrate on male issues. It is also interesting that women were less likely to describe their families and were more likely to focus on personal qualifications on the websites, such as education and work experience in an analysis of Niven and Zilber (2001). With regard to the issue presentation, both men and women gave priority to male issues as well.

Although recent research has attempted to investigate politicians' active engagement in social media, including Twitter (Granta, Moona and Grant, 2010; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011), there have been few studies on politicians' use of social media in terms of gender (Gelber, 2011; Cancila and Spina, 2013).

'Representation' and 'interaction' are the main function of political discourse (Chilton, 2004), and social networking tools enable politicians to communicate more directly and interactively with voters than websites. However, interactive communication between politicians and voters seems still very limited in social media (Cancila and Spina, 2013). Cancila and Spina (2013) indicated that politicians employ twitter as a tool of traditional impression management, including self-promotion, particularly referring to qualification, position held, and personal achievement. Male Members of Parliament (hereafter, MP) were more likely than female counterparts to promote their achievement and abilities in the study (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). As for interaction with voters, Cancila and Spina (2013) showed interesting gender differences based on a content analysis on the use of Twitter by Italian politicians: Men tended to be more self-focused and less interactive, while women were likely to re-

spond to voters more interactively by engaging interpersonal relationships rather than simply broadcasting formal information. Consistent with the result, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) showed a similar gender difference pattern in interacting with voters: Female MPs were more likely to be asking for help or seeking their views. With regard to personal information, men referred to children more often than women in the study of Cancila and Spina (2013), which can be interpreted that responsible and reliable traits related to 'father' have more significant meaning for a politician in Italian culture.

To summarize, male and female politicians' campaigning varies according to the political culture, pervasive issues during the election period, and candidates' profile and so on. The 2013 Japanese House of Councilors Election was the first election that candidates and parties use the Internet and social networking during the election period. Candidates put intense efforts into online campaigning and media coverage on voters-generated data on Twitter got a lot of attention. Contrary to expectations, Japan's first 'Internet election' was not a success at all in terms of voter engagement in the election process and turnout. However, there is no doubt that social media might serve as important tools for politicians to build their self-image by appealing more directly and for voters to engage in the political process more interactively. This research could a valuable insight into the role of social media in overcoming the gendered image to women politicians and empowering women's equal participation in Japan's changing political landscape and media environment.

## **Research Questions and Methodology**

This study analyzes tweets of women candidates during the 2013 election period to investigate how they construct self-image as candidates, focusing primarily on the way they 'represent' themselves as candidates and 'interact' with voters. Given that there has been no research on social media presentation of politicians from a gender perspective in Japan

to our knowledge, qualitative research in addition to content analysis seems appropriate to understand current situations surrounding social media and women politicians and guide further research as well.

Based on the literature review and discussions above, the following research questions were posed to explore women politicians' self-presentation on Twitter:

- RQ1: What political views and issues do women candidates present on Twitter?
- RQ2: To what extent and how do women candidates present personal traits on Twitter?
- RQ3: To what extent and how do women candidates interact with voters on Twitter?

Firstly, we examine women candidates' tweets in terms of representation of issues (RQ1) and personal traits (RQ2). Issues were categorized as economic issues, employment issues, consumption tax, foreign issues, disaster reconstruction, nuclear issues, constitutional issues, social securities, children's issues, TPP (Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement), and others based on the previous examination of the contents of tweets and media coverage during the election period. Considering that candidates' personal traits presented on Twitter tend to be very subtle, we conducted both quantitative and qualitative analysis of mentioning of personal life and information. Tweets on the personal life and information consist of family, personal interests, and mention of non-political everyday lives on Twitter. Women candidates' use of Twitter in terms of interactive communication is also examined (RQ3).

Dalton (2011) argued conservative party culture of the Liberal Democratic Party has also hindered women's political achievement, pointing out the Liberal Democratic Party's enduring lower women's representation as compared to other parties. On the other hand, the Democratic Party is keen to embrace women candidates to run for election, and the

Table 1. The number of followers and followings, and profile by women politicians

Politicians	Follower/ Following	Profile	
		Political	Non-political
Renho@renho_sha	354,002/12,311	administrative reform	personal life
Katayama@ katayama_s	165,766/25,860	political experiences and posts	—
Fukushima@ mizuhofukushima	128,310/4,160	issues such as human rights, peace, gender equality, employment, and nuclear power free	—
Sato@SatoYukari	66,013/925	political experiences and posts	academic background

As of September 7, 2014

Social Democratic Party is the only party that has had a woman party leader so far. In this study, Satsuki Katayama and Yukari Sato from the Liberal Democratic Party and Renho from the Democratic Party and Mizuho Fukushima from the Social Democratic Party were selected to compare women candidates from ruling and opposing party considering party culture and its impact on Twitter use. They are top four women politicians in terms of the number of followers: Renho ranked 6<sup>th</sup>, Katayama 12<sup>th</sup>, Fukushima 17<sup>th</sup>, and Sato 28<sup>th</sup> among male and female politicians using Twitter (Meyou, As of September 7, 2014). Their tweets during the 2013 election period were collected utilizing Topsy (topsy.com). Jackson and Lilleker (2011) indicated that Twitter is useful tool in particular for senior politicians who have a high media profile and serves to reinforce the profile. The number of followers and followings, and profile by politicians are presented in Table 1.

Although these are not the figure during the election period, the tendency is considered to be quite similar. We examine tweets of these four women politicians during the 2013 House of Councilors election from July 4 to 20, 2013. A total of 699 tweets was analyzed for the analysis (Fukushima: 258, Renho: 183, Sato: 141, Katayama 117). The coder received

training prior to the actual coding tasks based on definitions. To check intercoder reliability, another coder coded ten percent of each politician's tweets. Intercoder reliability for all coding categories exceeded .90.

## **Findings**

### **Online representation: Tweeting issues and personal traits**

In terms of political and social issues that women candidates tweeted (RQ1), nuclear issues (28.8%) were the most mentioned and they also referred to constitutional issues (24.7%) as described in Table 2. Women candidates also presented employment (15.3%) and social securities (14.1%) issues frequently in their tweets. As party leader of the Social Democratic Party, Fukushima spotlighted nuclear issues, constitutional issues, consumption tax, employment, and economic issues in her tweets. Rengho mentioned social security issues most while Katayama tweeted children's issues most, focusing primarily on the issue of revision on the Act on Punishment of Activities Relating to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, and the Protection of Children, which became an issue during the period.

There are certain issues that either men or women are traditionally considered to be better at addressing (Kahn, 1996). Male issues include those issues that men are viewed more capable, such as foreign policy, defense, and economics, whereas female issues refer to those issues that women are seen as being more competent, including environment, minority rights, and social programs (Kahn, 1996). Studies on media portrayals of women politicians have shown that the media depict men and women politicians differently by focusing on the masculine qualifications of leadership in politics. In addition, personal traits of women politicians, such as compassion and honesty, encourage voters to view women as competent on welfare and social security issues, and men candidates' images as strong, knowledgeable leaders encourage voters to consider men better equipped to address the economy, military, and foreign policy

(Kahn 1996). We analyzed the issue mentioning on Twitter to consider this matter.

The candidates mostly concentrated on the issues such as nuclear and constitutional issues, and social security issues. As indicated in Table 2, the percentage of tweets for traditional masculine issues such as employment issues (15.3%) and economic issues (11.2%) are almost the same as feminine issues including social securities (14.1%), children’s issues (13.5 %). The study revealed that women candidates and politicians might overcome traditional media framing and pervasive voters’ perception by using social networking such as Twitter. However, one of the links to Katayama’s official blog mentioned “there are beautiful assemblywomen in Kyoto based association of Liberal Democratic Party like Osaka based association”, which highlights women politicians’ physical appearance.

Although most of the tweets were self-promotion, women candidates from the opposing parties promoted their own parties by attacking the Liberal Democratic Party while mentioning issues and public concerns (7.3% of all tweets, Fukushima: 15.1%; Renho: 6.6%).

In addition, the ways of tweeting differed according to the candidates:

Table 2. Issue representation by women candidates on Twitter

Issues	Tweets (%) (N=170)
Economic issues	19 (11.2)
Employment issues	26 (15.3)
Consumption tax	18 (10.6)
Foreign issues	7 (4.1)
TPP	20 (11.8)
Disaster reconstruction	13 (7.6)
Nuclear issues	49 (28.8)
Constitutional issues	42 (24.7)
Social securities	24 (14.1)
Children issues	23 (13.5)
Others	18 (10.6)

Fukushima tweeted slogans often such as “Tender Society rather than Strong Nation” and “Politics for 99% rather than 1%”. Katayama focused on the issue of children and promoted Satuki Channel. Sato has not referred to her political views and issues. Instead, her tweets were to broadcast her campaign activities.

Kahn and Gordon’s (1997) review of the voting behavior literature noted that competence and integrity are two principal traits in voters’ considerations. “Competence” is defined as including the traits “knowledgeable”, “leadership”, “experience”, and “intelligence”, whereas “integrity” refers to the “honesty”, “morality”, and “trustworthiness” of the candidate (p. 62). In addition, Brettschneider, Neller, and Anderson (2006) suggested that politicians’ images comprise four trait dimensions: “problem solving ability”, “leadership qualities”, “integrity”, and “non-political or personal characteristics” (p. 491).

It was analyzed to what extent women candidates’ tweets represented their personal traits. Many tweets of Katayama and Sato appeared to focus more on being experienced and knowledgeable on political and social issues. Fukushima also tended to highlight her experiences and leadership in the issues. On the other hand, her tweets were more centered on the trustworthiness and reliability by mentioning voters whom she met on the election trail as described later.

With regard to non-political self-presentation, 12.4% of the tweets had to do with their everyday lives. In particular, Renho’s patterns of self-

Table 3. Personal information and photos by women candidates on Twitter

	Fukushima (N=258)	Renho (N=183)	Katayama (N=141)	Sato (N=117)	Tweets (%) (N=699)
Tweets on everyday lives	9 (3.5)	76 (41.5)	2 (1.4)	0 (0.0)	87 (12.4)
Tweets with photos					
Politics	0 (0.0)	17 (9.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	18 (2.6)
Non-politics	0 (0.0)	39 (21.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	39 (5.6)

presentation on Twitter was quite different from other politicians by posting tweets on everyday lives (41.5%) as shown in Table 3. She also posted photos more than other candidates, including both politics (9.3%) and non-politics related (21.3%).

### Online interaction on Twitter

Generally, having a large number of followers is often regarded as popularity, but the interaction between politicians and voters can be also analyzed in the contents of twitter and the number of both being followed and to follow others as well. As presented in Table 4, among the four women candidates, Rengho (30.1%) and Katayama (17.9%) often engaged in online interaction with voters, including discussion of issues. In terms of followers/followings ratio, Sato's tweets were least interactive on Twitter and mostly stiff style of tweeting on her campaign activities each day.

In addition to online interaction on Twitter, it is worth noting that some women candidates shared their concerns by mentioning their interaction with voters during the campaign trails. In particular, Fukushima mentioned offline interaction the most (28%). She often tweeted her conversations with a wide range of voters whom she has met during her campaign trails, such as a mother with children in Oita, a tax accountant in Nagoya, an owner of Ryokan in Kyoto, a young man and a temporary worker in Osaka, and people from areas affected by the earthquake. She also often tweeted regional issues when she visited Okinawa.

However, overall Twitter was used as broadcast media rather than an interactive one. Only 11.2% of all tweets were interactive ones. Most

Table 4. Interaction with voters by women candidates on Twitter

	Fukushima (N=258)	Renho (N=183)	Katayama (N=141)	Sato (N=117)	Tweets(%) (N=699)
Interaction on Twitter	1 (0.4)	55 (30.1)	21 (17.9)	1 (0.7)	78 (11.2)



tweets consisted of what activities and campaigns they participated in each day such as constituency visits, wayside speeches, and events attended. Announcements of campaign trail and appearance in the media including online and mass media amounted to 19.5% and 4.9% respectively. Also, women candidates often linked a tweet to their websites or blogs (23.5%). Supporting remarks for another candidate (34.8%) and affiliated party (9.2%) were also often tweeted as compared to affiliated party (9.2%).

## **Discussion**

The Internet and social networking have opened new ways of conveying politicians' political views on issues and personal images, and interacting with voters as well. Researches have attempted to analyze Twitter as campaign tools and information source for politics, but there have been few studies from a gender perspective. In this study, we investigated 'representation' of issues and personal traits, and 'interaction' with voters (Chilton, 2004) on Twitter by women candidates in 2013 election, first 'Internet Election' in Japanese politics.

It is argued that self-promotion and appeal of constituency service on Twitter can promote a form of 'e-representation' and politicians can approach to voters by 'discussing' issues, not just 'broadcasting' information on Twitter (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). However, overall women candidates' tweets mostly concentrated on individual campaign activities and self-promotion. They tweeted their campaign trails, everyday campaign activities, and announcement on media appearance. Links to online media such as website or blog which are also intended for disseminating promotional information were often posted as well. Similarly, previous studies indicated that politicians' tweets usually consist of general news stories and links to their other online presences (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011).

In regard to issue representation, women politicians mentioned issues

from a woman's perspective on Twitter, such as women's employment and child-raising, but they emphasized male and female issues equally. The findings of this study might be resulted from the fact that we analyzed the tweets by women candidates with a high media profile who have no need for gender framing as political resources.

Although most tweets were centered on self-promotion rather than interactive ones, Renho's tweets were quite interactive and often tweeted everyday lives by posting photos. Her tweeting style was very different from other candidates by using emoticons and posting everyday photos. Renho also mentioned that she often tweets personal information in addition to political tweets in her Twitter profile. On the other hand, Fukushima mentioned offline interaction with voters often when tweeting her campaign trails. Those online and offline interaction could appeal to voters by conveying political views on issues and personal traits. It is needed to examine as to how women politicians' self-presentation on Twitter affects voters' reaction to women politicians in future study.

In addition, women candidates tried to support another candidates and affiliated party by tweeting, but supporting tweets for candidates outnumbered the ones for parties. Likewise, in a study of analyzing impression management of UK politicians, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) found that Twitter is regarded as a tool of promoting individual not the party. Jackson and Lilleker (2011) also argued that Twitter might change campaign approach from party centered traditional way to an individual politician centered one.

In future research, comparative analysis between male and female candidates' using social media is necessary. Additionally, high popularity of women candidates analyzed in this study might affect the way they present themselves on Twitter. Lee (2011) argued that women candidates with a low profile might need to appeal their female traits and competencies on women issues as political resources. In this regard, it would be necessary to compare between women candidates with a high and low media profile in order to fully understand women politicians' po-

litical communication through social media.

As Jackson and Lilleker (2011) noted, “as a direct communication channel, Twitter helps them bypass disadvantages in the access they have to traditional print and broadcast media” (p. 99). Social networking certainly advantage to political outsiders, such as women candidates and activists, who have had limited access to traditional media (Gelber, 2011). However, it also can be a ‘mixed blessing’ and more negative channels for women candidates, given its ‘unfiltered’ and ‘outspoken’ comments by social network users (Gelber, 2011). Accordingly, voters’ communication on Twitter about women in politics is another important topic on representation of women politicians.

Finally, Eto (2010) pointed out that active women’s movement and women’s own political motivation are necessary to increase women’s political representation in Japan. It is needed to give continuous attention to the research on social media as a political communication channel that could provide an opportunity to encourage women’s participation in politics.

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