The 2022 Presidential Election in South Korea: The Politics of Resentment and Revenge Confirms Older Trends and Cleavages and Reveals New Ones

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Introduction

Yoon Suk Yeol, the candidate of the People Power Party (PPP), won South Korea’s 20th presidential election on March 9, 2022 after a highly personalized and acrimonious electoral campaign whose outcome remained unpredictable until the very end. Yoon won by a mere 0.73 percent margin with 48.56 percent of the total votes. The losing candidate, Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party (DP), received 47.83 percent of the total. Turnout was 77.1 percent. This was the smallest vote difference between the two leading candidates in the history of South Korea’s presidential elections. The candidate of the progressive Justice Party (JP), Sim Sang-jung, received only 2 percent of the total votes.

The election was defined by deepening inequalities in Korean society which have fueled political polarization, popular resentment against the elites, and growing anger, especially among the youth, over the lack of job opportunities and fairness in the job market. Such polarization has taken the form of a gender conflict, with intra-generational tensions especially visible within Korea’s young adults, especially voters in their 20s and 30s mired in mutual recriminations and accusations over perceived and alleged unfair advantages in the job market. The electoral campaign was labeled by many academics as Korea’s “worst,”

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1 * Research for this article was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2019-INC-2230005).
2 The total voter turnout was 77.2% in the 19th Presidential election in 2017 and 75.8% in the 18th presidential election in 2012. "Presidential elections voter turnout in the past", Yonhap News, March 9, 2022, https://www.ytn.co.kr/issue/2022election_5.php?tab=5.
with most candidates focusing on negative campaigns against their competitors, rather than engaging on substantive policy issues. The PPP's strategy targeting male voters in their 20s and 30s paid off as they gained 58.7 percent of votes among male voters in their 20s and 52.8 percent in their 30s, while Lee gained 58 percent from female votes in their 20s and 49.7 percent in their 30s. Interestingly, Yoon did not actually perform better than Lee among voters in their 20s, having received 45.5 percent compared to Lee’s 47.8 percent. However, there were differences in the 30s age group, with Yoon receiving 48.1 percent of voters, compared to Lee’s 46.3 percent. Yoon also performed better among voters above 60.

The election confirmed long-term trends prevalent in South Korea, such as the personalization of politics and intra-party factionalism, as well as the centrality of pre-electoral coalitions. Most notably, the decision of third candidate Ahn Cheol-soo, leader of the People Party (PP), to withdraw his candidacy and announce support for Yoon and a coalition between their two parties likely tilted the balance in Yoon’s favor. In addition, gender, generation, and class—new cleavages which have emerged in the past couple of decades—are replacing older political cleavages centered around region and ideology.

This article is structured as follows. First, it revisits the presidential electoral campaign which, at a time of global geopolitical upheaval, barely touched on foreign policy issues. Next, it advances four considerations emerging from the campaign and the election: the reasons behind the DP’s failure; the reconfiguration of cleavages in Korean politics and society, rendered especially acute by the current state of polarization and inequalities in the country; factionalism and intra-party politics; and the enduring presence of coalition-building as a regular strategy for minority governments.

An Acrimonious Electoral Campaign

The two leading contenders, Yoon Suk Yeol and Lee Jae-myung, were outsiders in their respective political parties and political novices lacking experience in parliamentary politics, neither having held a seat in parliament nor cabinet positions. In fact, their candidacies arose in the context of personalized political parties in South Korea and popular demands for “new faces” in politics. Four main candidates initially contested the election: Lee Jae-myung, former governor of Gyeonggi province and former mayor of Seongnam, candidate from the DP (172 seats out of 300 in the current parliament); Yoon Suk Yeol, former prosecutor general who fought against the Moon administration over the Cho Kook scandal and prosecution reform policies, candidate from the PPP

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(112 seats out of 300 total seats); Sim Sang-jung, leader of JP (6 seats out of 300), and Ahn Cheol-soo, former medical doctor, software entrepreneur, and the leader of PP (18 seats out of 300). Ahn formed a coalition with Yoon six days before the election.

In the primaries, voters supported presidential candidates with no party experience in a clear rejection of established policymakers who were perceived as self-serving office-seekers, highlighting a strong demand among Korean voters for “new faces” in politics. Lee Jun-seok, the current leader of the PPP, is himself in his 30s and has never been elected as a member of parliament. The 2022 presidential election reflected a lack of trust in the current political class: the election was the political outsiders’ game.

Ahn reached out to Yoon in early February, a month before the election, seeking to form a coalition, but his efforts were rebutted by Yoon. Later, on March 3, just six days before the election, Ahn and Yoon announced the formation of an “opposition coalition,” in which Ahn would support Yoon’s candidacy. In the case of electoral victory, the two parties would collaborate, and possibly merge, to form a coalition government. This was a move which was in a way unexpected—given the initially aborted coalition initiative—but also somehow expected, given that coalitions have been a regular feature of South Korean politics, as discussed later.\(^8\)

Polls consistently showed a high fluctuation in the voters’ preferences, leaving the outcome uncertain until the very end. Voters in their 20s and 30s represented the critical voting bloc this time and were split along gender lines, with young male voters supporting the opposition PPP and female voters the DP.

Personalized campaigning focused on the electorate candidates’ characteristics is nothing new in South Korea. Neither is the widespread use of social media and big data in one of the world’s most wired societies where online mobilization dates back to as early as Roh Moo-hyun’s presidential campaign in 2002.\(^9\) However, the 2022 presidential election campaign was centered, on both sides, on a negative strategy against the opposing candidate. Targets were both the presidential candidates themselves and their respective spouses, all mired in repeated scandals around housing, personal wealth, power abuse, privilege, and moral issues. Although polls showed the public’s lack of respect towards the candidates, the negative strategy served to consolidate core voters of the two main parties.

The campaign was mostly devoid of any substantive political content, occasionally descending into the farcical or the grotesque. Lee’s ostensive support for hair loss medical aid might have helped him gain some support,\(^10\) if any, among male voters whom


it was allegedly targeting. Yoon received a boost when he announced on his Facebook page that he would abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family,\(^\text{11}\) one of Korea's main achievements by equal rights campaigners and feminist activists in recent decades. He also pledged that he would ensure a monthly wage of two million Korean Won for soldiers on their military duty. The announcements caused a backlash from feminist groups, who in response strategically reoriented their votes from the JP leader Sim Sang-jung to the DP candidate, Lee Jae-myung. This ironically resulted in large donations for the JP as female supporters who strategically withdrew their votes to vote for the DP chose to express their political sympathy to JP through donations.\(^\text{12}\) Yoon also emphasized that he would support small shop-owners, another key social group that had seen itself on the losing end of Moon's economic support during the pandemic, and who turned out in large numbers in support of Yoon. Additionally, Yoon promised to focus on nuclear energy and energy efficiency to tackle climate change.

Amidst renewed testing of ballistic missiles by North Korea, tense U.S.-China relations, and the most serious global crisis in the post-Cold War period with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting global security and economic fallout, it was stunning that foreign policy did not feature prominently during the 2022 presidential election.\(^\text{13}\) South Korea's options are constrained by its alliance with the United States and its economic ties with China, which limits its margins of maneuver in taking a hardline against Beijing. Yoon announced that his government would seek to improve relations with Japan, a sore point in the Moon administration, maintain a closer alignment with the United States on its Indo-Pacific strategy, and take a stronger stance towards North Korea.\(^\text{14}\)

**Analysis**

If voters’ preferences have appeared in constant flux during the campaign, this was not because of the uncertainty of the political product offered. Rather, surveys and polls presented a lack of trust in the political class, who were perceived as political entrepreneurs and self-interested office-seekers. This was a negative campaign, fueled by anger, resentment, and the quest for political revenge. For the political campaigners, consolidating votes on the basis of hatred of the other seemed to be a more immediate and efficient strategy to gain votes. Opposition PPP leader Lee Jun-seok's strategy seemed successful in consolidating young male voters in their 20s. However, following the coalition building between Yoon and Ahn, female voters in their 20s and 30s mobilized


their strategic votes to support Lee Jae-myung. In that sense, Jin-wook Shin points out that Lee Jun-seok’s strategy was not successful. Shin also notes that while Korea, as an advanced country, ranks first in economic growth and growth in exports in the post-pandemic era, it also ranks first in rates of suicides, poverty, and industrial death. As class solidifies as a point of political divide, it is now conventional wisdom in Korea that politics represents the interests of the wealthy.

Why Did The Ruling Democratic Party Lose?

At a first glance, the DP’s defeat may appear puzzling. South Korea received global praise for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The country’s testing, tracking, and tracing (3T) strategy and tight regulation of its borders meant that Korea suffered both a lower number of deaths compared to most other countries and that its infection cases remained at a comparatively low level, at least until early 2022, when the spread of the Omicron variant led to a spike in daily cases in excess of 600,000.

Yet, what domestic voters experienced was not the global acclaim for South Korea’s strategy, but rather a lack of support for small business, made worse by constant restrictions on citizens, customers, and visitors. A slow start in the vaccination program negatively impacted the country’s domestic reputation, despite the fact that it soon managed to catch up in the mass vaccination program and, later, its administration of boosters. Further, restrictions did nothing to cushion the impact of the Omicron variant in the run-up to the election, as daily cases surged considerably and hospitals were overwhelmed. Time is often of the essence in politics, and the DP and the Moon administration found themselves at the tail end of their widely-heralded success in the handling of the pandemic. Additionally, scandals affected both sides, but the Moon administration struggled to recover from the Cho Kuk scandal, which was in fact exposed by the investigation of then-Moon-appointed prosecutor Yoon Suk Yeol. If Moon had reacted to people’s anger and addressed their grievances more promptly, the reputation of the DP administration would have been less tarnished and Yoon’s political stance would have not risen to the presidential candidacy.

The housing scandals made an already challenging situation worse: critical was the failure of the real estate policy taxing homeowners who own more than one house at a time when many non-homeowners found it difficult to cope with the soaring housing prices that saw some people becoming suddenly very rich through real estate speculation. The electoral result in Seoul shows clearly that those homeowners, especially along the Han

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15 Shin, “Igniting Place for the Struggles.”
River, mostly supported Yoon Suk-yeol. Support for Yoon was strong in expensive housing areas, while support for Lee was stronger in cheaper housing areas. This again shows a clear economic polarization among the citizenry. However, on the national level, voters showed patterns of “class betrayal” voting behavior, as Yoon received higher voters from people with monthly income below 2 million Korean won. Further, the failure of real estate policy and high taxation policy toward ordinary people was not just Moon’s administration policy but rather a long-term DP policy hailing back to the Kim Dae-jung administration.

While roughly half of the voters supported Lee Jae-myung, his campaign was inevitably affected by the outbreak of a scandal over the housing development policies in Daejang-dong. Daejangdong is a district in the city of Seongnam, where Lee served as mayor, and the issue took place during his term in office. Additionally, the sexual harassment cases of two former DP mayors in Seoul and Busan and of the former governor in Chungnam contributed to the defeat in the 2021 bi-elections. As such, the new Yoon administration would be best served by learning lessons from why and how the Moon administration lost these elections despite earlier landslide victories in the latest parliamentary elections, which led to a DP super-majority in the National Assembly. Beyond this, the election result suggests three main considerations that may help account for the election’s results.

Political Cleavages, Old and New

Traditionally, South Korean voters—especially since democratization in 1987—voted along regional and ideological lines, with the central provinces acting as critical swing votes. In the 2022 presidential election, regionalism continued to play some role, with Yoon performing better in loyal conservative strongholds in the southeast Yeongnam region, and the progressives performing better in the southwest Honam region.

Additionally, recent trends in the previous general and presidential elections in 2000s show the emergence of new cleavages by wealth and class. The most recent elections since

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local elections in 2019 also reveal clear cleavages in gender and generation. While this may be at times referred to as an example of the “gender and generational conflict,” what has not been adequately addressed is how social, economic, and political polarization in South Korea has become more acute since the early 2010s.

The Moon administration was born out of former President Park Geun-hye’s impeachment in 2017, and nationwide candlelight vigils’ support yielded a super-majority of the seats in the National Assembly in 2020, with the DP gaining 180 seats out of 300. Until this election, Korea had experienced two rounds of two consecutive presidents from the same political camp: the progressive Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations were followed by the conservative Lee Myong-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations. This trend was broken in the 2022 election. Voters’ loyalty waned as they seemed to constantly switch allegiance. The two main competitors pitted the voters against each other, polarizing them by their social, economic, and political status. The result was that younger voters in their 20s and 30s replaced voters in their 40s and 50s as the new swing voters.

Factionalism and Intra-Party Politics

Since the leading presidential candidates were non-core members of their respective political parties, internal factional struggles emerged starkly during the presidential campaigns. Lee’s internal competitors from the DP only supported his electoral campaign in the later stages, not showing consolidated internal support from the party. Yoon Suk Yeol was also confronted with ongoing internal conflicts, especially with the party leader Lee Jun-seok, who does not have a significant internal party base as a newcomer himself who has never been elected as an Assemblyman in the general elections.

Coalition-Building

Coalition politics is one of the most regular features of South Korean electoral politics. Building coalitions has not only allowed leaders to forge winning electoral coalitions, but also reconfigure political parties after the elections to secure majorities in parliament. Ahn Cheol-soo, the presidential candidate from the third largest political party, PP, built a coalition with Yoon Suk Yeol on March 3, six days before the presidential election, pledging his support for Yoon in return for the development of a coalition government with Yoon and his party. While some observers see a coalition between Yoon and Ahn as one of the main reasons for Yoon’s eventual victory, others argue that it did not quite play such a crucial role. Traditionally, building coalitions among political parties has been a key winning strategy in South Korea since democratization.

Kim, Youngmi, The Politics of Coalition in Korea, 2-7.
of the opinion poll in March, Yoon Suk Yeol received 45.1 percent, Lee Jae-myung 40.6 percent, Ahn Cheol-soo 7.1 percent, and Sim Sang-jung 1.9 percent. In a March 2 public poll by Media Research, Lee received 45 percent while Yoon received 44.9 percent. Given such a close margin, coalition building with Ahn certainly played a crucial role, though some supporters of Ahn withdrew their support for him.

However, despite his promise to form a coalition government, the Yoon administration did not appoint anyone from Ahn’s faction for key positions, ranging from the prime minister’s post to the eighteen ministers of the new administration. This contrasts with the coalition government of Kim Dae-jung and King Jong-pil in 1998, when there was a clear distribution of ministers between each factions per their coalition agreement. Accordingly, Ahn and his allies protested that their voices have not been heard or reflected in the appointments for the new administration. This election has shown how smaller parties struggle to gain enough seats to represent minority interests, and by building a coalition with the PPP, Ahn Cheol-soo also seems to have given up on his life-long political agenda of multi-party systems enhancing fair representation of the various people’s interests.

Conclusion and Outlook

South Korea’s 2022 presidential election was marred by negative messaging and personal attacks against candidates and their immediate families, marked by resentment and promises of political revenge. No matter how depressing, this was a rather accurate, if bleak, snapshot of the state of Korean politics and society, which have become extremely polarized. Policy preferences of either candidates or voters did not appear to strongly shape voting behavior. Foreign policy was also notably absent. By contrast, gender, generation, and class have emerged as strong predictors of voting behavior, replacing region and ideology.

30 Seokhyun Ko, “Presidential Elections D-7 Lee Jae-myung 45%, Yun Seok-yeol 44.9%, 0.1% Difference,” The JoongAng, March 2, 2022, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25052291#home.
The challenges awaiting President Yoon and his team are daunting. On the domestic front, a housing crisis, popular discontent with economic inequalities, the lack of opportunities for South Korean youth, and deepening inter-generational tensions are just some of the priorities to confront. Internationally, navigating the fallout of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the East Asian and global security architecture constitutes a tall order for any administration, further compounding the challenges of managing the intensifying U.S.-China great power competition amidst renewed missile testing from North Korea.

The forthcoming local elections will be an early test for the new Yoon-Ahn coalition. The new coalition government’s preparation committee faced considerable opposition in the parliament as it sought to select government officials for the new government. And Yoon’s decision to move the president’s residence out of the Blue House to Yongsan—the site of a former U.S. army base—already stirred huge controversy, not least because of the exorbitant cost associated with moving. Negotiation between the future government’s committee members and Moon’s committee has resulted in several prominent disagreements, including on the budget for relocating the presidential office and residence to Yongsan and on the appointment of the prime minister. Yoon’s newly appointed ministers have been labeled seoyuknam, meaning “male Seoul National University graduates in their 60s,”35 many of whom are likely to be Yoon’s old-time friends, colleagues, or classmates.

Political revenge may have successfully catapulted Yoon into his new presidential residence. Yet, society remains divided and grievances unaddressed. Korea’s politics of resentment and revenge is likely to go through a new phase, but will not go away any time soon. In the immediate, it is likely that the Yoon administration will maintain its focus on the economy, just as it had done during the campaign. Adjustments are expected in South Korea’s regional and global posture, with a different stance toward Japan, possibly over historical disputes, and a firmer alignment with the United States with respect to China and North Korea.

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