

LK

Professor Bray

Game Theory

November 30, 2017

Unique Factors of the South Korean Presidential Elections

In May of 2017, Republic of Korea, commonly known as South Korea, elected the new president Moon Jaein through its 19th presidential election. In this young democratic country less than a century old, the constitution states that a presidency is 5 years long with no re-election. That would bring people to assume President Moon to be the 19th president of South Korea. In fact, he is only the 12th. Historically, South Korean democracy had a dark era of dictatorship under the name of presidency and thus a hazy democracy until the late 1980s. Elections were rigged and the Constitution was unjustly reformed so that a president can re-run the presidential election. However, the rigorous resistance against the anti-democratic government and the sacrifice from various social class of the South Korean society that continued on for decades slowly gave way to true democracy in South Korea. By the 13th presidential election—for the sixth president—the direct election system took stance.¹

In a democratic system in which a candidate must gain the support of the people to get more votes and ultimately win the position, he or she would often establish election pledges or promises that aims a certain audience. In most presidential elections around the globe, economy, international relations, and domestic issues are common grounds on which presidential candidates build their pledges. Since the start of the direct presidential election system in South Korea, two uniquely Korean characteristics arose during the campaigning season and left clear

¹ Jung and Kim, “Development of Democratization Movement in South Korea.”

marks in the election results. These two major factors can define the rise and fall of certain candidates during the time period. In this paper, the two uniquely Korean factors of presidential election—party regionalism and generation gap—that were mutually noticed in the South Korean presidential elections between 1987 and 2012 will be analyzed. In addition, through taking a look at the most recent presidential election in 2017, the paper will further examine the legacy of the two distinctive factors.

Party Regionalism

Although the Korean politics vaguely portrays a rigid two-party system with a major conservative party and a major liberal party, the floating party system is a more accurate way to describe the unstable political system. For example, between 1988 and 2007, multiple liberal parties arose and, moreover, the main liberal party changed its name seven times in less than twenty years. Moreover, the ruling party of the 2007 presidential election changed its name *during* the campaigning period, in the hopes to bring a new, more optimistic path to the future of the party. ²

The political regionalism of Korea is due mostly to the rivalry and competitive relationship between *Honam* and *Youngnam* region. Honam is the southwest region and is comprised of the South Jeolla Province, North Jeolla Province, and Gwangju. Youngnam is the southeast region, comprised of South Gyeongsang Province, North Gyeongsang Province, Busan, Ulsan, and Daegu. For the last four decades, it has been an apparent trend for Honam to be relatively liberal and Youngnam to be relatively conservative. The reason behind such regional difference goes back to the time of the controversial dictator, Park Chunghee. Presidential elections started to take a regionalist color starting from the 1971 presidential election between

² Kang, “Regional Party System, Causal Attribution, and Economic Voting in New Democracies.”

Kim Daejung from the Honam region and Park Chunghee from the Youngnam region. Since President Park had unfairly treated the two areas economically during the time of economic boom, the Youngnam region naturally favored Park and his party, while the Honam region reacted the opposite.³

Party regionalism that started in the era of dictatorship dominated the major trend in presidential elections for more than three decades. As shown below in Figure 1, in every democratic presidential election that occurred in Korean after the end of military dictatorship, there is a clear division on which candidate won majority in each region.⁴ Excluding the 1987 presidential election in which three candidates—a conservative and two liberals—ran against each other, the candidates from the major conservative party gained full support from the Youngnam region, while the candidate from the major liberal party had the unlimited support from the Honam region. Therefore, the result would depend on how the people in the other regions—Kangwon Province, Chungcheong Province, Kyunggi Province, Seoul, and etc.—sway.

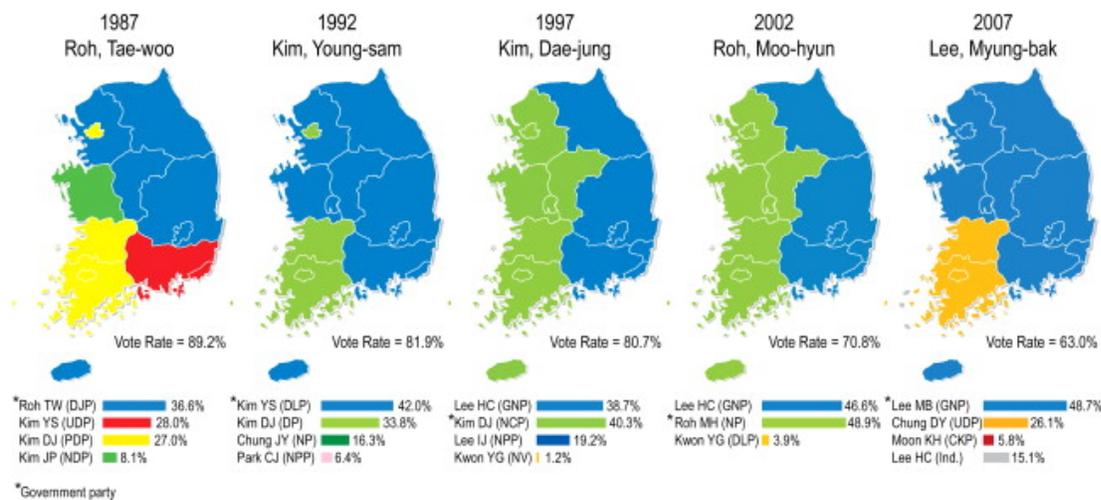


Figure 1.

³ Shin, “Correlates of the 2002 Presidential Election in South Korea.”

⁴ Song, Yang, and Kim, “The Saemangeum Reclamation Project and Politics of Regionalism in South Korea.”

Regionalism is a natural phenomenon that happens throughout the world. The most well known example can be the United States of America. Historically, the South is known to be generally conservative with the Republicans and the North is known to be liberal with the Democrats. Although this trend that started more than a century seems to fade away with time and advancement in technology that allows the boundaries of North and South less evident, the trend is still considered as a significant factor that effects candidate's campaigning strategy and the outcomes of the election.

What makes the party regionalism of South Korea unique to South Korea is that despite South Korea's strong regionalism rooted deeply in the society, party regionalism does not have to do with the origin of the candidate but rather has to do with which party the candidate is affiliated. A great example to look at is the 2002 presidential election. The two likely candidates were Lee Hoi chang for major conservative party, GNP, and Roh Moo hyun for the major liberal party, MDP. Naturally, Lee Hoi chang won the support of the Youngnam region and Roh Moo hyun had the support of the Honam region.⁵ What made such support system more interesting was the fact that in fact Roo Moo hyun is of Youngnam region (South Gyeongsang Province) and Lee Hoi chang is of non-Youngnam region (Hwanghae Province, which is currently under the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, commonly known as North Korea).⁶ As shown in Figure 1, the race between Roh and Lee clearly portrayed party regionalism, despite of the two candidate's origin.

Generation Gap

The attitude at which people view the world can vary drastically depending on who they are. Analysts like to categorize people into different groups to figure out a pattern in their

⁵ Shin, "Correlates of the 2002 Presidential Election in South Korea."

⁶ "Profile."

attitudes and political preference. Commonly used groupings are gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, etc. In the South Korean elections, experts generally believe the generation factor may have significant impact on presidential elections, but some experts believe that the generation factor may not be as significant as expected.

The cause of the difference in preferences among different generations can be explained in two different theories. First, the aging effect. Aging itself affects how a person responds to social problems. While people of younger age tend to tackle problems with a more defiant and challenging attitude, people of older age tend to conform to the status quo. In other words, the younger generation puts more emphasis on more democratic values, yearning for more freedom, eyeing on human rights issue, and urging advancement in quality of life. On the other hand, the older generations who have lived through various experiences tend to prefer safer and stable choices. Ultimately, younger generation leans more towards the liberal candidate, while the older generation leans more towards the conservative candidate.⁷

Another likely cause, which focuses exclusively on South Korea, is the historical effect. The time period of the Republic of Korea in which a person has lived through shapes his or her political stance. According to this theory, there exists three historical generations: industrial generation, democratic generation, and digital generation—in chronological order. The industrial generation lived under Park Chunghee's authoritarian dictatorship, and saw the straggling South Korean economy rise with unfathomable speed. They were born during the Japanese colonization era and spent their childhood in the worst of it. They had a short period of light around independence, but the economy destroyed by the Japanese colonization never healed. To them, democratizing South Korea was not their primary concern. Finding a stable job to sustain

⁷ Cho and Eom, "Generation Effects?"

their family was. Thus, sacrificing their freedom to Park's authority in return of a boost in their income through a growing economy seemed more than reasonable to them. Thus, this generation holds strong faith in Park's legacy, which currently lies in the conservative party. On the other hand, the democratic generation sees something very different in President Park's era. These people have also lived in Park's era, but they were born in the 1960s, after the establishment of Republic of Korea and Parks' economic successes occurred during their adolescent period. To them, freedom and democracy were more prominent issues than the economy. College students at the peak of dictatorship and the anti-peak of democracy, the democratic generations were fighting out on the road in hope for a progress in democracy. Ultimately, their efforts led to the assassination of Park, and gradually yet eventually to the surmise of authoritarian government in South Korea. To this generation who puts democracy, freedom, and human rights as the utmost values, the liberal party seems to suggest a more ideal path for South Korea than the conservative party rooted in Park's regime. Lastly, the digital generation of the late twentieth century looks at the South Korean politics from a different perspective and approach. They were born around and after the time period in which the South Korean economy and politics started to settle down and take stable routes. In addition, thanks to the amazing ability of the Internet, news spread at a rate incomparable to the past. Such stability and easy access to news and knowledge led this generation to have individualistic inclination, supporting parties and politician depending on different values each individual aspire. Thus, they act as the tiebreaker between the industrial generation and the democratic generation, supporting parties depending on the situation and issues of the time.⁸

⁸ Cho and Eom.

Reflection on 2017 Presidential Election

Political trends change spontaneously. So does the demographics of political preference does. In this section, we will be analyzing the most recent presidential election in South Korea that took place on May 9th of 2017 to examine the presence of the two unique characteristics studied above. In the 2017 South Korean presidential election, five significant candidates—earned more than five percent of the votes—ran and Moon Jaein, the candidate of the major liberal party won the election with 41.08 5 of the votes. There was a tight runner-up match between Hong Junpyo, the candidate of the major conservative party, and Ahn Cheolsoo, a candidate who stands on the fuzzy line between the liberals and the conservatives. Candidates Yoo Seungmin, a conservative, and Shim Sangjeong, a liberal, did not gain enough votes—6.76% and 6.17% respectively—to be a threat to Moon, but they left significant positive impression that can optimistically influence their political career in the future.^{9,10}

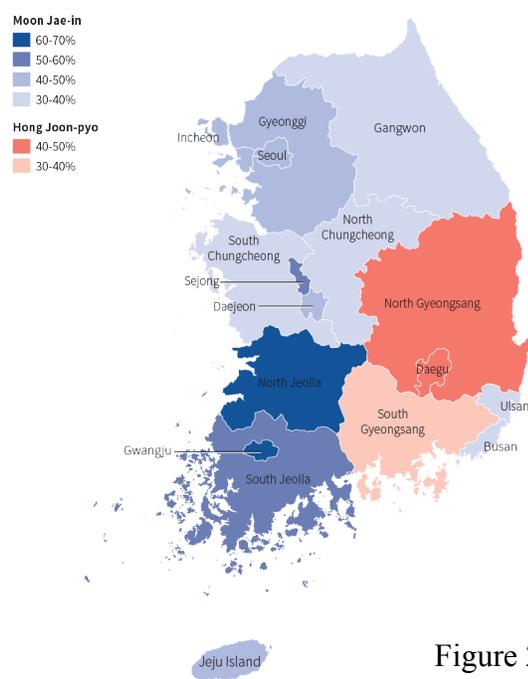


Figure 2.

Figure 2 supports the party regionalism that has been continuing for more than three decades in many aspects while also hinting at points of weakened regionalism.¹¹ In the map, the darker the blue a region is, the higher proportion of the people of the region voted for Moon Jaein, the major liberal party at the time. Vice versa, the darker the red, the higher

⁹ “19th Presidential Election Result.”

¹⁰ Kwon, Boykoff, and Griffiths, “South Korea Election: Moon Jae-in Is Declared Winner.”

¹¹ “South Korea Presidential Election.”

percentage of the people voted for Hong Junpyo, the major conservative party. Without too much of a twist, the Honam region has the darkest blue and the Youngnam region has the darkest red, following the historical pattern of party regionalism.

However, there are a few evidences that may hint to the gradual trend moving away from the existing party regionalism. Looking back at Figure 2, Moon Jaein has gained more than majority of the votes (50-70%) in the entire Honam region, not to mention a few other non-Honam regions such as Sejong. However, on the other hand, Hong Junpyo's support in the Youngnam region did not seem to be as strong as what his predecessor had gotten in the past. Not only did he gained less than the majority of the votes in South Gyeongsang, but he also failed to be the leading candidate in Busan and Ulsan, giving the 1st place to Moon. What could have caused the change in the party regionalism that has been maintained since the 1987 presidential election?

In speculating the election, the cause of such phenomenon comes down to two major reasons. First, Moon Jaein is of Youngnam region. Born on an island of Geoje in South Gyeongsna, Moon grew up in Busan.¹² Thus, as a liberal candidate he could not gain the major support from the entire Youngnam region, but he did win the hearts of the people from Busan where he was raised and the neighboring Ulsan. Another, more significant, reason is the impeachment of President Park Geunhye, after Park's corruption and unjust relationship with a cult leader, Choi Sunsil, was revealed. Park's party—the major conservative party—lost the faith of those who had supported the president and the party.¹³ Such political chaos and people's desire for a clean democracy strongly influenced the presidential election that followed soon after the impeachment. Therefore, people also had low faith in Hong Junpyo, who ran as the

¹² Jane and Hancocks, "President Moon Jae-in on Being Born to North Korean Refugees."

¹³ Sang-Hun, "South Korea Removes President Park Geun-Hye."

candidate from the same conservative party of Park Geunhye, since the sense of betrayal at his party. Therefore, combining the two factors that was unique to the 2017 presidential election have weakened the strength of party regionalism.

Now, let’s take a look at the effect of generation gap in the 2017 presidential election. In Figure 3 below, age groups were divided into 19-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, and over 70 for the result of the exit poll, which has a confidence level of 95% with a range of error of $\pm 0.8\%$.¹⁴ Looking from the aging effect perspective, the result of the election is an exemplary result. As the age group increases, so does the population that supported Hong Junpyo from the conservative party. As people age and have a family to support, they tend to look for a life style that does not require much change from what they already have, since change and transformation may destabilize what they already have. The most striking contrast is show between the youngest two age groups and the oldest two age groups. While Hong gained less than 10 % of the votes from the people aged between 19 and 39, he gained over 40% of the votes from people over 60. Therefore, the 2017 South Korean presidential election supports the theory of how aging effects people’s political preference.

Looking at the result of the 19th South Korean presidential election from a historical effect perspective, there seems to be a weaker support in this theory compared to the aging effect perspective. The industrial

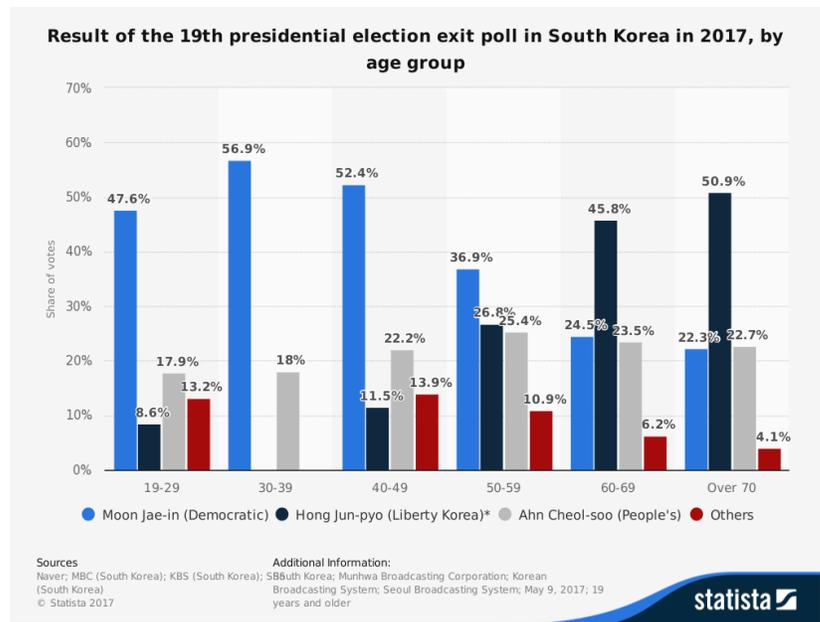


Figure 3

¹⁴ “South Korea.”

generation (60 and over) did strongly follow the previous trend of supporting the conservative party. The digital generation (19-39) also held their position by following the political trend of the time that election was going on—the political outrage that caused the impeachment of Park Geunhye. However, there seems to be a deviation in the democratization generation (40-59), who fought against the authoritarianism of Park Chunghee. Although Moon Jaein was the leading candidate in this generation, there were a significant proportion of people who voted for Hong Junpyo. Such deviation may be explained by the aging effect, since now that the democratization generation has become the middle-aged, those who fought against the dictatorship of Park in their twenties are now looking more for stabilization than challenge.

Would these unique factors of the South Korean presidential election maintain?

Generation gap and party regionalism has been a regular pattern for all the presidential election in South Korea that can be evaluated in terms of democracy, after the fall of military dictatorship. However, the South Korean democracy is still young and has room for a lot of change. To look into the nearest future, what would the next presidential election in 2022—unless another political chaos such as an impeachment occurs— look like? After examining the election trends from 1987 to 2017, especially scrutinizing the most recent presidential election, one could predict the generation gap to be maintained while the party regionalism to gradually fade, but yet having its significance. Of course, even though these two unique factors are undeniably crucial to strategize for campaigning and analyzing the election results, there are countless other variables that may step in as a game changer of the presidential election, just like the impeachment of Park Geunhye did in the 2017 election.

Works Cited

- “19th Presidential Election Result.” National Election Commission, n.d. <http://info.nec.go.kr/>.
- Cho, Jinman, and Kihong Eom. “Generation Effects? An Empirical Analysis of the Korean National Assembly and Presidential Elections.” *Asian Perspective; Seoul* 36, no. 3 (September 2012): 353–86.
- Jane, Sit, and Paula Hancocks. “President Moon Jae-in on Being Born to North Korean Refugees.” CNN. Accessed November 30, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/28/asia/moon-talk-asia/index.html>.
- Jung, Hae Gu, and Ho Ki Kim. “Development of Democratization Movement in South Korea.” *Asia Pacific Research Center at Stanford*. Accessed October 3, 2017. http://fsi.stanford.edu/publications/development_of_democratization_movement_in_south_korea.
- Kang, WooJin. “Regional Party System, Causal Attribution, and Economic Voting in New Democracies: The Case of the 2007 Korean Presidential Election.” *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 34, no. 2 (2013): 173–90.
- Kwon, K.J., Pamela Boykoff, and James Griffiths. “South Korea Election: Moon Jae-in Is Declared Winner.” *CNN*, May 10, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/09/asia/south-korea-election/index.html>.
- “Profile: Lee Hoi-Chang.” *BBC*, December 3, 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2535547.stm>.
- “Result of the 19th Presidential Election Exit Poll in South Korea in 2017, by Age Group.” Naver. Accessed November 30, 2017. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/706171/south-korea-2017-presidential-election-exit-polls-by-age-group/>.
- Sang-Hun, Choe. “South Korea Removes President Park Geun-Hye.” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2017, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/park-geun-hye-impeached-south-korea.html>.
- Shin, Eui Hang. “Correlates of the 2002 Presidential Election in South Korea: Regionalism, the Generation Gap, Anti-Americanism, and the North Korea Factor.” *East Asia : An International Quarterly; Dordrecht* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 18–38.
- Song, Tae-Soo, Min-Suk Yang, and Chong Su Kim. “The Saemangeum Reclamation Project and Politics of Regionalism in South Korea.” *Ocean & Coastal Management, The Korean Tidal Flat Systems: Ecosystem, land reclamation and struggle for protection*, 102, no. Part B (December 1, 2014): 594–603. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2014.08.017>.
- “South Korea Presidential Election.” Reuters. Accessed November 29, 2017. <http://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/rngs/SOUTHKOREA-ELECTION/010040X91Z1/index.html>.