

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

South Korea's 2020 Legislative Elections: A Supermajority with a Narrow Mandate

Jung Kim (University of North Korean Studies)

On April 15, 2020, in midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea held legislative elections, in which President Moon Jae-in's governing Democratic Party won 180 seats out of 300. The electoral creation of a three-fifth supermajority has been unprecedented in the democratic history of the National Assembly since 1987. It is also significant under the legislative rules in that it can fast-track bills to cut short legislative committee deliberations to be presented for a final vote on the floor. On the surface, the electoral landslide appears to enable President Moon and his Democrats to pursue their long-standing legislative goals without any opposition hindrance. A deeper understanding of why such an extraordinary electoral victory was possible, however, leads us to a different prediction: Democrats are unlikely to push their partisan agenda on the legislative table due to the legislative election's narrow mandate which was based on a single salient issue of how effectively the government has dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. President Moon's response to the crisis, through measures that fruitfully stroke balance between security and privacy without invoking lockdown anxieties, has been acclaimed both at home and abroad as decisive and sophisticated. Moon has been able to translate public health achievements into his political capital, which has been magnified from a majoritarian electoral system to a supermajority governing party. The supermajority Democrats hence have a narrow mandate in that they should not over-utilize their power beyond the purpose of exclusively dealing with the post-COVID-19 economic consequences.

Flattening the COVID-19 Curve

According to a [public opinion survey](#) that was conducted by the Seoul National University's Graduate School of Public Health a few days before the election, 73 percent of South Koreans believed that the government's response to COVID-19 was effective (a 31-point increase from the previous survey conducted in the last week of February). Moreover, 60 percent stated that the outbreak is serious (down 31 points) and 12 percent argued that they were likely to be infected (down 16 points). The survey shows that in the last fifty days, South Koreans perceived the government as more dependable, the epidemic as less serious, and the region as less dangerous.

Such encouraging results were achieved at a time when citizens were also positive about the public health agencies responsible for containing the epidemic. Indeed, 90 percent of South Koreans (up 14 points) stated

that they trust the “Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC),” 77 percent (up 19 points) the “Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW),” and 62 percent the “Blue House (the Office of President)” (up 19 points). In sum, the survey shows that South Korean confidence in national public health institutions reflected positively on the government, which looks more competent.

Several analysts at home and abroad agree that the surge of public support for the government was mainly due to the systematic actions that were taken to control the outbreak as quickly, comprehensively, collaboratively, and transparently as possible.

[For starters](#), public health agencies set up a testing protocol two weeks after the first case was confirmed, and were able to produce 100,000 test kits per day as of March 23. [Second](#), public health authorities had tested 6.56 per 1,000 people by March 23 (while the United States did 0.87 per 1,000), completing a total of more than 500,000 tests as of April 15. [Third](#), by detecting positive cases, national public health workers have been able to retrace the movements of patients, isolate the infected, and disseminate real-time information to the public in collaboration with provincial and local authorities. [Last](#) but not least, as the main authorities for public health at the national level, the MHW and KCDC successfully coordinated inter-agency work and guaranteed cooperation from the general public through television broadcasts, public transportation announcements, and smartphone alerts, which reminded citizens of social distancing requirements.

Translating the Public Health Achievements into President’s Political Capital

It is no surprise that President Moon’s approval ratings heightened, reflecting positively on the coordinated efforts of the government and the voluntary support of citizens. According to a [Gallup Korea poll](#) conducted a couple of days before the election, 59 percent of South Koreans evaluated the president’s performance positively (up 17 points from the previous survey conducted in the last week of February). Indeed, Moon has recovered from the lower scores he obtained after the inter-Korean summit at Pyongyang in 2018. 54 percent of those who answered positively indicated that president’s response to COVID-19 was the best work he has undertaken (up 24 points). Among those who had a negative assessment of his performance, 14 percent considered it the worst that the president ever pursued (down 27 points).

These results show that the coronavirus crisis has overtaken other traditional issues, such as the income-led economic growth policy or inter-Korean reconciliation diplomacy for the last fifty days. At the same time, they also imply that, if the legislative election had been held two months earlier, the Democrats may have potentially been defeated or secured a plurality at best.

This counterfactual speculation is not unreasonable when the approval ratings of President Moon are decomposed into ideological, regional, and generational categories. In ideological groupings, 30 percent of conservatives positively assessed his job of presidency (up 8 points), 55 percent of moderates (up 18 points), and 90 percent of progressives (up 21 points). In regional groupings, 56 percent of Seoul residents favorably judged his performance (up 14 points), 58 percent of Incheon and Gyeonggi residents (up 12 points), 57 percent of Daejeon, Sejong, and Chungcheong residents (up 18 points), 83 percent of Gwangju and Jeolla residents (up 15 points), 50 percent of Daegu and Gyeongbuk residents (up 24 points), 56 percent of Busan, Gyeongnam, and

Ulsan residents (up 23 points). In generational groupings, 54 percent of voters in their twenties and less (up 10 percent), 75 percent of voters in their thirties (up 21 points), 66 percent of voters in their forties (up 18 points), 65 percent of voters in their fifties (up 24 points), and 45 percent of voters in their sixties and more (up 14 points).

As these outcomes indicate, if the legislative elections had been held fifty days earlier, Democrats would have secured only a majority of progressive people in ideological groupings, a majority of Gwangju and Jeolla residents in regional groupings, and a majority of voters in their thirties in generational groupings. This is why the characterization of the 2020 legislative election as an “[electoral realignment](#)”—a set of sharp changes in party ideology, issues, party leaders, regional and demographic bases of power of political parties—is misleading.

The issue of how the government deals with the COVID-19 pandemic has made a national saliency that overshadows all other local concerns in legislative elections. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the government’s response to the COVID-19 crisis is apparently tinged more with colors of “valence” issue—an issue where there is a broad amount of consensus among voters, than with those of a “position” issue—a divisive issue for which there are different preferences among voters. In a national two-party electoral competition dominated by a single salient valence issue, there emerges potentially a strong impetus for swing voters to tilt to one side, depending upon the performance of the incumbent government. Especially under majoritarian electoral settings, a slim shift of public mood from a negative evaluation of the government to a positive one can produce a landslide victory for the governing party when the political leader establishes a robust “issue ownership”—exclusive control over the issue. As the poll results suggest, President Moon has firmly constructed an issue ownership over the issue of the government’s response to COVID-19, creating a presidential “coattail effect”—the tendency for a popular political party leader to attract votes for other candidates of the same party within an election—for Democrats in the legislative elections.

Magnifying the Winner’s Bonus under Majoritarian Electoral Rules

In addition to national electoral contestations dominated by a single salient valence issue, majoritarian electoral systems magnify the presidential “halo effect”—the tendency for positive impressions of a person, company, brand or product in one area to positively influence one’s opinion or feelings in other areas in the legislative elections. According to calculations based on [electoral district data](#), which is provided by the National Election Commission of South Korea, in the 2020 legislative election, the winner’s bonus—the difference between a party’s seat share and vote share—of Democrats in single-member districts (SMDs) is 0.145 (seat share of 0.644 and vote share of 0.499) and loser’s penalty of conservatives (Future United Party) is -0.082 (seat share of 0.332 and vote share of 0.415), both of which are the largest margins among nine general elections since 1988. In the 2008 legislative elections when the conservative party won by a landslide with no single salient valence issue, the winner’s bonus of conservatives was 0.100 (seat share of 0.535 and vote share of 0.435) and loser’s penalty of Democrats was -0.020 (seat share of 0.269 and vote share of 0.289). Note that the difference in vote shares of the two parties is larger in 2008 (0.146) than in 2020 (0.084), which implies that majoritarian electoral rules strongly inflate winner’s bonus when they encounter a single salient valence issue in the elections.

The magnification of winner’s bonus under majoritarian electoral systems usually originates from the

leaning of swing voters to one side. A roughly estimated size of swing voters of a party is surmised from the difference between the size of votes in SMDs (the sum of the royal voters and the swing voters) and the size of votes in proportional representation (PR) (only the royal voters). In the 2020 legislative election, the Democratic Party obtained 14,345,425 votes in SMDs and 9,307,112 in PR so that the size of swing voters amounted to 5,038,313. Conservatives received 11,915,277 votes in SMDs and 9,441,520 in PR so that the size of swing voters was 2,473,757.

In order to add up the swing voters of both parties to gauge their total size, it is not implausible to make a conjecture that 67 percent of the total swing voters were tilting toward the Democrats and 23 percent toward the conservatives. Approximately, it seems that swing votes constituted 35 percent of the total votes that Democrats had while the Democrats themselves constituted 21 percent of the total votes that conservatives had in the 2020 legislative elections. As a result, Democrats, compared to conservatives, were supported by more swing voters whose mandate has to be narrower than that of loyal voters. This is why President Moon and his Democrats should underutilize their legislative power to push the bipartisan agenda in dealing with the post-COVID-19 economic consequences on the legislative table arising from two years of his tenure.

In conclusion, the 2020 South Korea's legislative election is exceptional in the sense of power and purpose. The general election produced an unprecedented supermajority governing party that is able to clear any sort of legislative barriers for President Moon's policy agenda. At the same time, it conferred a narrow mandate on the supermajority to prioritize the responses to the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These are unique political outcomes of the national two-party competition with the single salient valence issue under majoritarian electoral systems.

- *This brief is an updated and extended version of "Covid19: After Flattening the Curve, South Korea Faces a Verdict," Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI) Commentary (April 8, 2020)*
<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/covid19-after-flattening-curve-south-korea-faces-verdict-25698>

- **Jung Kim** is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of North Korean Studies, South Korea. He teaches courses on International Relations in East Asia and Political Economy of the Two Koreas, among others. Prior to this, from 2009-2015, he was a Lecturer at the Underwood International College and Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University. During this time, Mr. Kim was also a Chief Researcher at The East Asia Institute. He pursued his Bachelors and Masters in Political Science at Korea University and went on to pursue his Ph.D. at Yale University. His research interests include Comparative Politics and International Relations in East Asia.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

“South Korea’s 2020 Legislative Elections: A Supermajority with a Narrow Mandate”
979-11-90315-73-9 95340 Date of Issue: 7 May 2020

Typeset by Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:

Jinkyung Baek, Research Associate/Project Manager
Asia Democracy Research Group
North Korea and National Security Research Group
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209) j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr