

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOUTH KOREA

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Korea's presidential election of December 19, 2002, has baffled many observers. Sociologically, it must be understood in the context of major transformations in the wider society. This paper examines the claims made by some observers that attribute the election results to the revolt of the younger generation, and to the ideological split that surfaced in Korean society. By examining data on voting behavior, it is ascertained that age may have influenced the election results, however, regional divisions still made the most difference. The information revolution also had a significant influence on the process. Implications of these findings are discussed against the backdrop of broader societal changes, with some thoughts on the prospect of the new regime.

INTRODUCTION

A presidential election is an important event in any country. In South Korea, it is not merely an important event; is critical to the fate of the entire nation. This may be accounted for by an unusually high degree of concentration of power in the hands of president, and a strong tendency of reliance on politics among the Korean people in general. The December 19, 2002 election was to become an historic event. To the surprise of the majority of Korean voters, it became an epoch making event, causing enormous confusion and frustration.

My aim in this paper, however, is not to examine the "whys" of the election results. Rather, my interest lies in tapping into the nature of societal changes that have loomed beneath the surface of this historic event. My emphasis is on the fact that people have not simply been unaware of these changes that have been ongoing, and that have already made much difference in daily living. These changes have made their presence and effect apparent through the external event of the election.

First, I investigate some of the most prominent signs of changes that have caused so much surprise among the general populace to see if they may not be mere myths. Second, data will be analyzed with respect to the election results to separate myths from reality. Third, the broad societal changes that have affected the election process and voting behavior will be briefly enumerated. Finally the implications of these myths, reality, and societal

changes are examined to gain a better understanding of what occurred in the past, and what is expected in the future for Korean society.

MYTHS: SEA OF CHANGE?

The So-Called 12.19 Syndrome

One month after the December 19, 2002 presidential election in South Korea, a former journalist related an interesting mood among Koreans. He wrote that those who considered themselves to be “conservative” suffered from insomnia, a loss of appetite, of interest in television, and of enthusiasm in daily life, feeling they have nothing to live for, and thus comforting their dejected hearts with hard liquor.¹

I have also observed a complex of such symptoms among individuals around me, and label it “the December 19th (or in short, 12.19) Syndrome.” Many people aged fifty and over have actually gone through a period of attack by strange symptoms they would never have been afflicted with under ordinary circumstances. These include headache, common insomnia, a loss of appetite for, interest in or enthusiasm for food, sex, entertainment such as TV, social and other daily activities, the wrung out feeling of having nothing to live for any more, being generally run down, disheartened and frustrated, unable to believe what has happened to the society, and being nervous about what is in store for them and for the nation in the coming days. This has been characterized as “societal panic,” not just psychological panic.

Press reports and survey findings have that the 5060 generation, as the people in their fifties and sixties are referred to in the press, believe they have suddenly aged within a month since the last presidential election. Some experts have diagnosed a sort of psychological panic, caused by frustration and remorse over the election results among this older generation, which goes beyond a simple conflict of generations.² One sociologist commented that the only voters who are neither worried nor nervous about Korean society today happen to be the 2030 generation (those in their twenties and thirties), who played a major role in the elections.³

The press painted a grim picture of what was happening and what could be expected to make this older generation nervous. Some notable samples

¹ Geum Chang-Tae. “Is It Really a Defeat of the Conservative?” *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. January 22, 2003.

² *Hangyeore Shinmun*. January 26, 2003.

³ Song Bok. As quoted in *Hangyeore Shinmun*. January 26, 2003.

are given below.

“The future has defeated the past in the battle between the past and the future.” This was the main thrust of a commentary by a sociologist in an Internet press report. In this article, expressions such as the following appear: “Something I couldn’t really believe was happening;” “Roh’s victory is a heroic deed salvaging us from the pit of despair;” “Roh’s election is not an end but a beginning: while the retrogressive forces in politics have been cleared up in this election, the new forces have not made their full appearance yet ... only a new stage for new political forces armed with a new platform and ideology to lead the way has been provided.”⁴

The same day, another newspaper had a commentary entitled, “Now is the time for politics of retaliation! (exclamation mark included)” in which explicitly hostile expressions were used liberally. Examples included “wipe out all those guys,” “punish those who betrayed and deceived people with utter lies,” or “I hope to see the tragic demise of those rats queuing up for power here and there.”⁵ Another newspaper stated that the 2030 generation has surfaced to the fore of Korean society in all fields of politics, economy, and culture, pushing aside the 4050 generation (people in their forties and fifties), and that the energy of this generation craving for change is becoming the new source of change in Korean society in the 21st century.⁶

Other reports claimed that the 2030 generation is the principal actor leading the rapid change of Korean society from now on, and a warning was issued on the day after the election that “revolutionary change” is in store, with the election of a man in his fifties, including a sweeping reshuffling of the ruling elite forces.⁷

Generation Revolution or Generational Schism?

Immediately after the election results were disclosed the morning after, the first wave of media commentaries rushed to hit the generation cord, asserting that the 2030 generation had triumphed in an election revolution. The concepts of this media frenzy included “generation revolution” (*Chosun Ilbo*. December 20, 2002; *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. December 21, 2002), “contest of generations” rather than that of platform or ideology (*Chosun Ilbo*. December 21, 2002), the “strong blast of generational shift or replacement” (*Joong-Ang Ilbo*. December 21, 2002), or “victory” of one generation bringing “defeat” to

⁴ Kim Dong-Chun. “The Future Defeated the Past.” *PRESSian*. December 20, 2002.

⁵ *Hangyeore Shinmun*. December 20, 2002.

⁶ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. December 21, 2002.

⁷ *Chosun Ilbo*. December 20, 2002.

another generation (*Chosun Ilbo*, December 22, 2002).

A post-election survey of 1,192 individuals, conducted on December 22, produced findings that 48.8% of the 2030 age group said they voted for Roh (reads Noh) Moo-hyun for the sake of a "replacement of generations" or "generational transfer." Platform and ideology came second.⁸ Remarks were made that pointed to the surfacing of the generation variable, as the 2030 generation had moved into the mainstream and assumed a leading role in Korean politics through this election, although regional politics still played a part.⁹ Going one step further, it was claimed that the power of generation has demonstrated the possibility of overcoming regionalism in Korean politics.¹⁰ This is a strong statement; to be noted in this connection are claims that the central axis of Korean elections has moved from regionalism to "generation," the emotional generation having represented the revolt and challenge to the existing values and traditional elements.¹¹ It is suggested that this was possible because in this election, the attitude of the younger generation shifted from apathy and indifference to participation, which in some sense is new in Korean politics.¹²

It is also asserted that the issue of generation must now be regarded as the "key issue" in analyzing the tide of the entire society, and not just that of popular culture or politics, since generation has now surfaced as one of the "driving forces" of our society. Especially, the younger generation will now "lead the tide of change" in society, and the power of the 2030 generation will change society as those "young ones" now have moved into the center stage of our political culture, changing the mainstream of 21st century Korea.¹³

Other voices express concern over these series of comments regarding generation. While acknowledging that the election results might be considered as a sort of "generation revolution," it is warned that this should not be exaggerated, leading to an actual "conflict of generations," "confrontation among generations," or "exclusion by generation."¹⁴

Some have critically remarked that the press may actually be instigating or aggravating conflict of generations by the frequent and callous mention of generation conflicts observed during the election campaigns, in which

⁸ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, December 23, 2002.

⁹ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, December 21, 2002.

¹⁰ *Chosun Ilbo*, December 20, 2002.

¹¹ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, December 20, 2002.

¹² *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, December 21, 2002.

¹³ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, December 21, 2002.

¹⁴ *Chosun Ilbo*, December 22, 2002.

strong support for Roh came from the 2030 generation. It is contended that these press reports and comments implicitly presume that this conflict of generations could lead to a “generational war” which could devastate national integration.¹⁵ Similarly, another commentary points out that there is no such thing as “east-west conflict” (meaning regionalism) or “generational schism;” these ideas only appear in the editorials of newspapers such as *the Chosun Ilbo*.¹⁶ This commentary was offered by *the Hangyeore Shinmun*, a self-proclaimed progressive paper that strongly supported Roh.

Ideological Split?

Reporting the election results, the conservative *Chosun Ilbo*, warning of the coming “revolutionary change” in national politics, characterized the main axis of Roh’s campaign team as those from the democracy movement of the past generation. It predicted that the new administration would be filled with people of progressive inclinations rather than seasoned technocrats, in order to ensure compatibility with Roh’s policy staff which is strongly tilted to a progressive orientation.¹⁷ In a commentary two days later, it advised that Roh should strive to heal the problem of division and schism created in the process of elections between conservative and progressive forces, 2030 and 50+ generations, and east and west.¹⁸

On the day after the voting, a known progressive sociologist, claiming that the future has won over the past, characterized the election results as “a breakthrough to shatter the half century of the conservative monopoly of Korean politics”.¹⁹

Nonetheless, some questioned these assertions and asked, “Is it really a defeat of the conservative?” This question is the actual title of a column written by a former journalist who currently teaches at a university. The article begins with the following observation: “One of the most commonly accepted views is that this election was a kind of contest between the conservative and progressive, and that Roh’s victory represents the triumph of the progressive forces, whereas Lee’s defeat means a loss of the conservative forces. After a lengthy review of the fluctuations of popularity rates for the major candidates in the opinion polls conducted over the past few months, the author concludes that this may not be the case, because people’s ideo-

¹⁵ *Hangyeore Shinmun*. January 26, 2003.

¹⁶ *Hangyeore Shinmun*. December 20, 2002.

¹⁷ *Chosun Ilbo*. December 20, 2002.

¹⁸ *Chosun Ilbo*. December 22, 2002.

¹⁹ Kim Dong-Chun. loc. cit. *PRESSian*. December 20, 2002.

logical inclinations do not form or change in a short span of time. He, however, duly warns that the conservatives should take heed of the changing mood of the society that was manifested in the elections.²⁰

FACTS

It is about time we double-checked whether or not those changes mentioned in the press really occurred. In order to do that, we begin with some findings about the presidential election.

Election Results: General

To begin with, the voter turnout rate was meager 70.8%, (of 34,991,529 total voters), the lowest ever, and 10% lower than 80.7% in the 1997 presidential election. Roh Moo-hyun, the 16th President of the Republic of Korea, won the office by gaining 48.9% (12,014,277 votes) of the valid ballots cast (24,561,916 votes) against Lee Hoi Chang who collected 46.6% (11,443,297 votes), but lost by a margin of 2.3% (570,980 votes). The remaining 4.5% votes went to the other candidates. Interestingly, this figure represents the largest ballots ever collected by an elected president.²¹

If we recalculate the results against total voters, instead of the actual ballots cast, the relative proportions of the two contenders are as follows: Roh: 34.3%, Lee: 32.7% (difference: 1.6%), and the rest (including other candidates plus those abstained): 33.0%. This means that Roh was supported by only about one-third of the total voters or eligible constituent of the entire population of Korea. Thus, it could be asked how much of a voter revolution occurred?

Election Results: Regional Division

Comparing Table 1, which contains the official figures of ballots by region, with figures from 1997, one summary comment about the election results may be: "East Lee" vs. "West Roh" (in Korean it sounds "Dong Hoi Chang" vs. "Seo Moo-hyun"). This is almost a complete replica of the 1997 ballots. Once again, regional division was the crucial factor, especially with overwhelming support for Roh in the Honam (southwestern provinces) region being 93.2%.²²

²⁰ Geum Chang-Tae. loc. cit. *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. January 22, 2003.

²¹ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. December 20, 2002. p. 1.

²² This survey was taken by Gallup Korea on December 18, 2002, in which 2,055 people,

TABLE 1. REGIONAL DIVISION (%)

Region	Ballots cast	Voter turnout	2002		1997	
			Roh	Lee	DJ	Lee
All nation	(100.0)	70.8	48.9	46.6	40.3	38.7
Seoul	22.1	71.4	51.3	45.0	44.9	40.9
Capital megalopolis (Incheon + Gyeonggi)	24.5	69.2	50.5	44.3	39.1	35.7
Honam region (Gwangju + Jeonbuk + Jeonnam)	12.0	76.2	93.2	4.9	94.4	3.3
North Yeongnam region (Daegu + Gyeongbuk)	11.2	71.4	20.2	75.5	13.1	66.9
South Yeongnam region (Busan + Ulsan + Gyeongnam)	16.6	71.5	29.4	65.3	13.7	53.8
Daejeon + Chuncheong	9.4	67.1	52.5	41.3	43.9	27.4
Gangwon	3.1	68.4	41.5	52.5	23.8	43.2
Jeju	1.1	68.6	56.1	39.9	40.6	36.6

Source: Gallup Korea (2003: 35).

This figure could be read as almost absolute support, which is rare in any ordinary democratic election. In addition, voter turnout rates were also the highest in this region, with 78.1% in Gwangju City, 76.4% in Joennam Province, and 74.6% in Jeonbuk Province, which comprise the Honam region. These figures all surpass the national average of 70.8% participation (National Election Commission, 2003: 19). Voters in the Honam region not only went to ballot stations in earnest, but they also cast almost all of their votes for the candidate of the party of the outgoing president Kim Dae-Jung (DJ for short).

DJ originally came from this region, and it has been a staunch bulwark for him all his political career. It also remained strongly loyal to DJ's party in this election, and not necessarily to Roh, whose local origin is not Honam, but Yeongnam (southeastern provinces). Yeongnam also happens to be Roh's opponent Lee's traditional stronghold. Regional divisions in Korean politics have been most starkly manifested between these two regions, the South East (Yeongnam) and the South West (Honam).

The Yeongnam region consists of two large sections. The northern section contains Daegu City, the third largest city in the country, and Gyeongbuk Province, the third largest province. The southern section contains Busan,

chosen by stratified, quota sampling, responded. The relative support for Roh and Lee was 48.2% and 46.4%, respectively. This result came pretty close to the actual ballots of 48.9% for Roh and 46.6% for Lee. See Gallup Korea (2003).

the second largest city, Ulsan, the seventh largest city, and Gyeongnam Province, the second largest province. Yeongnam region still supported Lee's party, 75.5% in the north and 65.3% in the south. However, these figures are no match for the 93.2% that Roh received in the Honam region. This support may not necessarily have been for Lee as the candidate and even for the party, but merely against DJ's party. Anti-DJ sentiment is unusually strong in the Yeongnam region.

The regional division between the Southeast (Yeongnam) and the Southwest (Honam) should be examined in context. The size of total voters (9,636,278) in the Yeongnam region is about 2.5 times that (3,915,466) of the Honam region, and the number of voters who went to the polls was also 2.3 times larger. Thus, although more than nine out of ten voters supported Roh in the Honam region, the absolute number of votes was still short of that cast in the rival Yeongnam region. Therefore, Roh's victory required relatively larger additional support from other regions. The decisive winning spot outside the Honam region was in the area where the size of voters was the largest in the country. This is the region which contains Seoul, the capital city, plus the so-called capital megalopolis, with 46.6 percent of the total votes cast, 22.1% in Seoul, and 24.5% in Incheon City and Gyeonggi Province surrounding Seoul.

In addition, Daejeon City and surrounding North and South Chungcheong Provinces with 10% of voters also voted for Roh. Slightly over one-half of the votes went for Roh in this region, a much stronger showing, even compared to that of DJ's in 1997. In Seoul, where 21.9% of voters live, Roh gained over DJ by 6.4%. In contrast, his opponent Lee's gain over 1997 votes was only 4.1%. In the Incheon and Gyeonggi area, the increment over time was +11.4 for Roh, vs. +8.6 for Lee. Lee also gained nearly 10% in the Yeongnam region, compared to his 1997 ballots. Even in this region that favored Lee, Roh fared well, as compared with DJ, especially in large cities like Busan and Ulsan, plus Gyeongnam Province, apparently due to his local origin in this part. Roh is from one of the counties in this province. These findings strongly suggest that regional divisions largely determined the voting behavior of the Korean electorate. To determine if regionalism in Korean politics was really effective in making a difference in the election, additional survey findings are examined.

Regional Division: Another Look

The regional divisions only show the tendency to vote for a specific candidate or party according to where one currently lives. If regionalism really

operates in Korean voting behavior, then voting by region of origin, where people were born and/or raised, should also indicate some difference. Data strongly support this assumption, and show a clear regional division once again between the Honam and Yeongnam regions as shown in Table 2. Regardless of where one resides at the time of voting, a large majority (84.5%) of voters originally from the southwest (Honam) voted for Roh. The proportions drop for Lee, but support in the southeast (Yeongnam) was still larger for Lee than for Roh. Within the Yeongnam region, relatively stronger support for Lee came from voters in the northern section (Daegu + Gyeongbuk) than the southern section (Busan + Ulsan + Gyeongnam), where Roh is originally from.

Even in the capital megalopolis of Seoul and Incheon + Gyeonggi areas, which had almost one-half of voters, and which gave Roh a decisive victory, the proportion of ballots cast for Roh by the people originating from the Honam region was 86.1% and 84.4% respectively. In this megalopolis, the tendency was repeated, though to a lesser extent, for Lee in the case of voters originally from the Yeongnam region. However, Roh gained more votes than the national average from those who originated from this region, which also happens to be his own local origin.

These are persuasive indications that the regional split in Korean elections is really a Yeongnam vs. Honam division, or a Southeast vs. Southwest split. This split was created in the past election and political processes, and over-

TABLE 2. REGION OF ORIGIN (%)

Region of Origin	All nation		Residents in Seoul		Residents in capital megalopolis	
	Roh	Lee	Roh	Lee	Roh	Lee
Seoul	41.7	56.2	43.0	55.0	45.7	52.2
Capital megalopolis (Incheon + Gyeonggi)	43.6	53.5	34.3	60.6	34.8	60.8
Honam region (Gwangju + Jeonbuk + Jeonnam)	84.5	12.0	86.1	8.6	84.4	11.7
North Yeongnam region (Daegu + Gyeongbuk)	22.2	69.8	37.9	59.9	30.5	57.2
South Yeongnam region (Busan + Ulsan + Gyeongnam)	38.8	56.9	37.3	52.5	42.3	53.3
Daejeon + Chungcheong	45.3	47.9	43.1	48.3	50.0	44.4
Gangwon	36.1	55.9	36.4	57.1	43.5	49.8
Jeju	45.7	49.6	56.0	44.0	0.0	100.0
North Korea and other	37.3	56.1	33.1	58.2	38.2	59.5

Source: Gallup Korea (2003: 29-30).

TABLE 3. AGE DIFFERENTIALS BY REGION (%)

Region	Age and candidate							
	20s		30s		40s		50s+	
	Roh	Lee	Roh	Lee	Roh	Lee	Roh	Lee
All nation	62.0	31.4	60.2	30.7	43.4	50.8	33.4	65.5
Seoul	70.6	21.1	60.7	29.8	40.9	53.7	38.8	59.0
Capital megalopolis (Incheon + Gyeonggi)	61.0	31.6	65.1	29.3	40.6	53.0	27.4	70.9
Honam region (Gwangju + Jeonbuk + Jeonnam)	97.5	0.0	86.7	8.4	93.7	4.7	92.7	6.9
North Yeongnam region (Daegu + Gyeongbuk)	30.7	61.1	37.0	52.1	15.5	82.2	8.7	90.1
South Yeongnam region (Busan + Ulsan + Gyeongnam)	49.2	44.2	47.5	46.4	30.9	63.1	11.6	86.6
Daejeon + Chungcheong	66.8	25.6	58.4	31.1	53.3	41.1	35.5	61.7
Gangwon	79.5	13.7	48.6	32.2	32.1	65.0	26.1	70.8
Jeju	66.7	16.4	78.4	14.3	56.7	43.3	25.0	75.0

Source: Gallup Korea (2003: 23).

whelmingly slanted votes came from the Southwest than any other regions, including the Southeast.²³

Survey Results: Age Differentials

Much has been said about age and generation making a big difference in this last election. We investigate if this assertion holds from available empirical data, as presented in Table 3.

These figures show a distinct age differential in the support for the two major candidates. The younger generations in their 20s and 30s (or 2030s as coined by the media) clearly voted for Roh, while those in their 40s and over gave above average support to Lee. This pattern is repeated in the capital megalopolis area, including Seoul, where Roh gained a decisive difference overall. In other regions, however, this age differential pattern does not hold, suggesting that the regional split still exerts a stronger influence.

Again in the Honam region, it was not age that made the difference. A significantly larger than average number of votes was cast to Lee among voters in their 30s, clearly deviating from the national trend. Also, in the Yeongnam regions, even younger generation voters, i.e. the 2030s, rendered support to Lee at a level way above the national average. In other regions,

²³ For an interesting discussion of regionalism in Korean politics, see Cho Kisuk (1998).

TABLE 4. RELATIVE SIZE OF VOTERS AND VOTER TURNOUT RATES BY AGE (%)

Age	Voters turnout	Voter Seoul	Voter turnout by region*							
			A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
All	(100.0)	70.8	71.4	69.2	76.2	71.4	71.5	67.1	68.4	68.6
20s	23.2	56.5	61.5	55.8	61.6	53.2	55.6	48.7	46.8	54.1
30s	25.1	67.4	66.9	66.9	75.3	66.7	67.8	63.2	63.0	64.9
40s	22.4	76.3	75.5	74.4	81.9	78.3	77.4	74.0	75.2	74.0
50s	12.9	83.7	83.5	81.6	86.7	85.8	84.3	81.8	83.8	81.6
60s	16.4	78.7	79.3	76.6	80.2	80.4	80.4	75.9	78.8	76.6

*A: Capital megalopolis (Incheon City + Gyeonggi Province)

B: Honam region (Gwangju City + Jeonbuk and Jeonnam Provinces)

C: North Yeongnam region (Daegu City + Gyeongbuk Province)

D: South Yeongnam region (Busan City + Ulsan City + Gyeongnam Province)

E: Daejeon City + Chungbuk and Chungnam Provinces

F: Gangwon Province

G: Jeju Province

Source: National Election Commission (2003: 8-9, 21-22).

the difference also does not clearly indicate a significant impact of age.

To reiterate, while there is significant evidence of age differences in the voting behavior of the Korean electorate, regional divisions still played a more significant role in the last presidential election. The power of the 2030s generation may have been exaggerated by the media. This will become more apparent if we examine the relative proportion of age groups in the total voters and their relative turnout rates, reported by the National Election Commission (2003: 8-9).

The first column of Table 4 shows that the relative size of the 2030s is close to one-half (48.3%) of the total voters, suggesting that their power could be something to be reckoned with. Their actual contribution to the ballot, however, has been quite short of their expected share. The second column of the table shows that their turnout rates at the ballot was only 56.5% among the 20s age group and 67.4% among the 30s, way below the national average of 70.8%.

A closer look at the voter turnout rates of age groups by region now indicates that the younger voters showed up at the ballot at a substantially higher rate than the national average only in those regions where Roh's victory was overwhelming or at least decisive, namely, the Honam region and the capital city of Seoul. Again, the combination of regional loyalty and predilections of age groups was the determining factor in the election, and not age alone. Regional split still seems to have exerted stronger influence

than the generational division.

Survey Results: Other Factors

To wrap up the empirical picture of the presidential election, we examine other variables that may be relevant to voting. Table 5 summarizes these data. The gender differential was not significant, although Roh drew more votes (50.4%) from male and Lee (49.9%) from female voters. Gender played a significant role when controlling for age, only in certain specific regions. In Seoul, the Incheon + Gyeonggi region, and the Daejeon + Chungcheong region, where Roh had a strong win over Lee outside the Honam region, the proportion of male voters in their 20s supporting Roh (73.8%, 68.3%, 79.2% in the three regions, respectively) largely surpassed the national average of 62.0%. Both in the Honam and Yeongnam regions, the age/sex combination did not make too much of a difference for either candidate, leading to the conclusion that regionalism still played the most significant role.

In terms of education, Roh attracted more votes from high school graduates (50.3%) and those who attended college (52.1%), while Lee's support came more from those with only middle school education or less (59.2%). It is generally known that people with less schooling tend to be more conservative in their political orientation. In terms of occupation, notable differences were that college students (59.0%) and blue-collar workers (50.7%) tilted towards Roh, while farmers (58.1%) voted for Lee. One might surmise that farmers are more conservative, whereas students and blue-collar workers tend to be less conservative.

Finally, party support was more apparent than expected, as 95.3% who supported DJ's New Millennium Democratic Party voted for Roh, while 91.2% of the Grand National Party supporters went for Lee. This suggests that voters did not necessarily cast their ballots for the candidate, or it might be that they voted against the other candidate, and not particularly for the candidate of their choice.

TABLE 5. OTHER FACTORS AFFECTING THE RESULTS (%)

Candidate	Male	Female	Education			Occupation		
	age 20s	age 50s+	Middle school	High school	College+	Farmer	Blue- collar	College student
Roh	64.8	29.5	39.4	50.3	52.1	40.3	50.7	59.0
Lee	28.4	70.1	59.2	42.7	41.7	58.1	39.0	32.3

Source: Gallup Korea (2003: 22-27).

REFLECTIONS: WHAT REALLY DID HAPPEN?

Leading up to the election, surprises awaited voters, particularly members of the society who had mostly been comfortable with the *status quo*, and had been less sensitive to societal changes that had been unfolding for some time.

Surprise 1: "Who Is Roh Moo-hyun?" — Election of the Politically Unknown

The first surprise was the election of a candidate who happened to be a political novice, little known as a potential hopeful until he was chosen as the presidential candidate of his party only a few months before the election. So, many people asked, "Who is Roh Moo-hyun?" Even after he became the party candidate, he had been pulled and pushed around by his own party members, fingered as a candidate who would be a sure loser, and had to tread a rocky road that led to the final victory. Until the last minute, he definitely was an underdog. So, what happened?

Surprise 2: The Young Generation Woke Up

Beginning with the more immediate phenomena in the backdrop, the general mood of the people was grave disappointment, disgust, dislike, and hence widespread indifference with regards to politics in general, politicians and their parties, especially the national assembly, and thus elections. "Just sick'n tired!" would be the right expression. A maverick, Roh could have aroused enough curiosity to attract some unusual attention, particularly of the younger generation. His major opponent, Lee Hoi Chang was an old-timer, a repeater with all the flaws of the past election still hovering over his head.

The voter turnout rate of this presidential election was 70.8%, the record low ever in any presidential contest. It was 9% lower than the lowest (79.8%) in that of April 1971, in which Park Chung Hee and Kim Dae Jung competed. However, it was only around 43% in the most recent local elections of June 13, 2002, a supposedly big event in which Lee's opposition party swept the election, strongly suggesting a sure victory for their presidential candidate, Lee, in the upcoming December 19 election. In the June 13 local elections, the voter turnout rate for the younger generation was much lower than average: 31.2% for the 20s and 39.3% for the 30s age groups.²⁴

²⁴ Joong-Ang Ilbo. December 23, 2003.

TABLE 6. EXTENT OF INTERNET USE BY AGE

Age group	Internet users(%)
All nation	60.9
10s	89.1
20s	86.7
30s	63.1
40s	37.9
50s	20.6
60s+	4.9

Nevertheless, in the December 19 election, while still lower than the national average, the turnout rates for the 2030s did improve, especially in those regions where Roh made a big difference (Table 4). This shift from almost complete indifference to more participation by the younger voters is something new, and apparently was related to Roh's triumph. The proportion of this age group in the total voters was close to one-half (48.9%).

Surprise 3: The Internet Revolution

According to a loudly claimed and widely shared view in the immediate post election days, the Internet had brought about the electoral revolution. A survey report on the Internet use shows a clear pattern of use variation by age group (See Table 6). It was found that the proportion of those who believe that the Internet would enhance political participation was twice larger among Internet users than among non-users.²⁵

In another survey, more than 7 out of 10 people among the 2030 age group connected on-line daily, while only 3 out of 10 did so among those 40 and older. Also, various social activities are conducted on-line, more than twice among the 2030 group as compared with those 40 and older. Consequently, it is maintained that 'netizen power' was also the core of the 2030 generation.²⁶ Reflecting these general trends, a new saying has been coined among social scientists in the field of information society research, to the effect that "The younger, the richer; the older, the poorer."

Various remarks on the effect of the Internet were made during the post-election days. Sample statements are presented here.

"This election was a triumph of the 2030 generation and the Internet

²⁵ *Chosun Ilbo*. December 22, 2002.

²⁶ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. December 23, 2002.

media.”

“Despite the generally low voter turnout, the reason for the increased turnout rate by the 2030 generation was the advertisement strategy to incite voter participation by means of the Internet.”

“While it was possible for the ‘nomadic’ 2030 generation armed with informatization and Internet to achieve integration through the Internet, the older generation lacked the axis of integration.”

“The cyber campaign through the Internet has replaced the old patterns of cash envelopes and mass rally.” (These quotes are from *Chosun Ilbo*. December 20, 2002).

“The information society symbolized by the Internet is rapidly widening the gap between the new and old generations.”

“The level of interest in the presidential elections among college students has risen due to the Internet, compared with those past elections in which the politically charged student activists played a much greater role.”

“We can easily click to get all sorts of information on the platform and other stuff about each candidate, because even the hobby sites are full of such messages about the presidential elections.”

“In a situation where political education is quite limited, the Internet has come to fill the gap and to take the role, and anonymous cyber space, with its power to diffuse information horizontally, has become a public square for debate on the national agenda.”

“Although I have been feeling political inefficacy after graduation from college, the Internet has brought me to ‘political comrades’ out there, for now you can feel a sense of solidarity once you connect with the right site on-line” (These quotes are from *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. December 21, 2002).

Even foreign press like *The Guardian* of the UK is said to have mentioned “The First Internet President Roh.” In a talk, the speaker said that compared with the United State where those who already had some interest in politics made use of the new communication media called the Internet, Korea is different in that those who had been indifferent to politics so far have come to have interest and participate in politics by means of the Internet, and thus the Internet politics is going to continue in Korea while it was a sort of one-shot phenomenon in the U.S.²⁷

Surprise 4: Mobilizational Politics — New Style

Perhaps one of the most significant changes that occurred during the campaign period of this presidential election has to do with the form, mode, and mechanism of the mobilization of voters. In the past, campaigns largely

²⁷ National Strategy Institute. March 5, 2003.

relied on mass rallies and speech meetings organized and funded by political parties, costing significant amounts of money. Currently, the central mode has emerged to be issue-centered street gatherings legally organized by the parties, and personal appeals and encouragements on-line, by means of the Internet and mobile phones, costing little money.

The origin of this type of mobilization of crowds and masses can be traced to the Red Devils phenomenon that surfaced in Korea during the 2002 Korea-Japan FIFA World Cup soccer matches. This phenomenon was repeated during the campaign in the form of protest rallies staged to express grief over the death of two school girls in an accident involving U.S. military forces, and grievances against the U.S. Army authorities, which affected the election results. The Roh camp made full use of this new trend of rising anti-American sentiment. His camp members had been well trained in their earlier political involvement as student activists in the pro-democracy movements. One of the unique features of this type of mass mobilization is that it is swift and widespread. Internet and mobile phones can disseminate messages and instigate mass mobilization throughout the nation in a matter of seconds.

Surprise 5: Ideological Split Surfaced

In Korea, ideology has been almost a taboo and Koreans had inhibitions about publicly expressing their ideological inclinations. Essentially, permitted ideologies were confined largely to nationalism and anti-communism. Student movements initially meant for democratization became ideological struggles involving vulgar Marxism-Leninism and even Kim-Il-Sungism or *Juche* ideology, especially since the 1980s. Recently however, there have been gradual and implicit trends of loosening the grip of ideological dichotomy; people are becoming more tolerant of differences and their open expressions in word and deed. This is largely due to the changing nature of North-South Korean relationships in the past decade, and especially since the pursuit by the Kim Dae Jung administration of engaging the North under the "Sunshine Policy." Suddenly, South Koreans were exposed to open declarations of presidential bids by candidates with clear-cut socialist platforms, and not necessarily hidden socialist orientations. These candidates represented the Socialist Party and the Democratic Labor Party.

In a survey conducted after the election (January 4-13, 2003), it was ascertained that the self-reported ideological inclination of the Korean people had shifted, in a time-span of one year, from a strong middle-of-the-road position to more clearly expressed conservative or progressive positions. A

TABLE 7. SHIFT IN THE IDEOLOGICAL INCLINATIONS OF THE PEOPLE (%)

Ideological inclination	General populace 2002	Joong-Ang Ilbo*		Chosun Ilbo**	
		2003	Opinion makers 2003	2002	2003
Conservative	28.5	31.3	22.3	32.5	20.5
Middle-of-the road	49.5	34.8	35.6	59.2	67.1
Progressive	21.4	34.0	42.1	8.3	12.4

Sources: **Joong-Ang Ilbo*. February 10, 2003; ***Chosun Ilbo*. May 2, 2003.

distinct trend is a substantial increase in the progressive category, accompanied by a decline of the middle-of-the-road group, and a minor rise of conservatives.²⁸ The figures are presented in Table 7.

In terms of ideological inclination scores (range: most progressive 0; middle 5; and most conservative 10), the average has fallen from 5.2 in January 2002 to 4.97 in January 2003, slightly tilting towards the progressive end. This shift has been observed for all age groups except for those 50 and older, and the largest shift has been found among those in their 40s; from 5.4 to 4.88. Applying the same score, Roh scored 4.2 and Lee 6.4 in August 2002, but this changed to 3.83 for Roh and 6.27 for Lee in January 2003, indicating that Roh's score moved further towards the progressive pole. In August 2002, the distance in ideology scores for the two candidates was identical, 1.1 points for both Roh and Lee. In January 2003, the distance had widened for Lee to 1.30 from 1.1, but it remained about the same for Roh (1.14). Lee must have been perceived as having become more conservative over time.

Another newspaper offered a slightly different view of the ideological shift about three months after the inauguration of President Roh. According to this report, there has been an increase in the relative proportion of those who believe they are progressives, accompanied by a decrease in the proportion that is inclined to be conservative. In this poll, there has also been an increase in the percentage of the middle-of-the-roaders (see the two right-hand columns of Table 7). Nonetheless, the average score has shifted towards the center from the right, dropping from 4.1 to 1.8 on a scale of -50 (most progressive) and +50 (most conservative). The proportion of the middle-of-the-road group has risen from a simple majority of 59.2% to a strong majority of 67.1%. Although their relative proportion has increased, the progressive element accounted for only 12.4% in 2003, a rise from 8.3% in

²⁸ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*. February 10, 2003.

2002.²⁹

Therefore, it has been interpreted that this general shift in the people's ideological inclinations may be one factor explaining Roh's victory, and that this may be a sign that people are beginning to assume a wait-and-see attitude towards a "progressively inclined" president. Igniting this ideological awakening during the campaign, an anti-American mood was created and disseminated, especially among the younger voters who were readily agitated and mobilized by means of the Internet and mobile phones. This was caused by a traffic accident that involved American soldiers running over two Korean school girls in a regular military exercise. Rage over this incidence exploded into a series of mass candle light rallies against the United States, when the court martial of the U.S. Forces in Korea acquitted the two soldiers due to mechanical failures. This incidence definitely affected the election results in favor of Roh, who was depicted by Americans as a man who does not speak English, and has never been to the United States in his life.

Anti-American sentiment, combined with the North Korean nuclear hassle, has opened up another channel through which hitherto dormant ideological inclinations have been more openly and explicitly expressed, causing a schism in society along this ideological line, and alarming the older and more conservative elements in the society about the potential danger of subverting the nation to a leftist regime of North Korea.

Surprise? No Surprise — Regional Division

Despite changes that surprised major segments of Korean society, regional division in presidential elections did not change. While people may have been afraid of the operation of regional division, they certainly were surprised to find that an overwhelming majority in the Honam region still stuck with their "man," even if a surrogate or stooge of DJ. Again, in this region, even age and generation were not significant. As for the Yeongnam region, though substantially reduced, a majority of voters also went for the opposition candidate, Lee, not necessarily because they liked the person or his party, but largely because they did not want to go for DJ and/or his stooge. As shown in Table 3, even in the Yeongnam region where age did make a significant difference, the proportion of the 2030 age group voting for Roh still fell way short of his national average in that age category.

In those regions without a clear regional candidate or "their own boy" in

²⁹ *Chosun Ilbo*. May 2, 2003.

the contest, two things are apparent. First, the voter turnout rate was the lowest in the Chungcheong region and Incheon. The figures show that against the national average of 70.8%, the rates were 65.9% in South Chungcheong Province, 67.9% in North Chungcheong Province, 67.4% in Daejeon City, and 66.1% in Incheon City, a part of the capital megalopolis. Second, in these regions, a majority did vote for Roh. In conclusion, regional division was not overcome, as has been argued.

WRAP UP: SOCIETAL CHANGE IN RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Broad Societal Change in the Backdrop

However it has been perceived by the general populace, Korean society has undergone tremendous waves of change in the past half century, especially in the most recent decades. To begin with, one might cite industrialization, urbanization, rising standards of living, changing life-styles, changing values, and changing human relations, as outstanding aspects of transformations. In the process, remarkable demographic changes have occurred. These include an aging population (7% 65 years and older as of 2000), a sharp drop in crude fertility rate (1.3 as of 2000, the lowest among OECD nations), and a rapid rise in divorce (over 4 out of 10 marriages ending each year as of 2000).³⁰

Political democratization and societal liberalization began in earnest in 1987. They have advanced with the consequences of free election, free press, free organization, free demonstration, free ideological stance, free choice of a variety of alternatives in social customs and cultural items, plus eruption of violent industrial conflict and the initiation of burgeoning civil movement organizations.

Especially in the past decade, significant shifts have occurred in the leading social forces constituting the power elite in control of national management. With the transition period of the Roh Tae Woo administration behind, the erstwhile political radicals and activists who fought in the pro-democracy movements have now moved into the power center. This process of replacement of the mainstream social forces began in the YS government, but the extent of such replacement was still limited. This process became much more vigorous, open, and extensive since DJ assumed power. This new power elite corps attempted various reforms, mainly in the economic system, with minor changes in other sectors.

³⁰ "Dropping Fertility Rate, Are There No Solutions?" cfe0@cfe.org. February 13, 2003. (in Korean)

Beginning with the Roh Tae Woo administration, the policy of detente with North Korea has left grave imprints on the minds of the general populace, regarding the ideological orientation of South Koreans towards the North. A consequence has been confusion over whether to consider the North friend or foe. The notion of the "chief enemy" has been challenged. Socialistic advocacy has explicitly crept into various social movements without much inhibition, and ideological split has become more pronounced.

In the economic sphere, the financial crisis calling for IMF bailout has left Korean society more divided and disheartened. The middle-class has been shrinking dramatically, the class division or the gap between the rich and poor has worsened, job security has become endangered, household debts have been mounting, and in general, a sense of insecurity permeates society.

Despite such unprecedented changes in society, politics remained basically unchanged, and various scandals erupted, even within this new corps of politicians who boasted a proud record of pro-democracy activism. This severely tarnished their monopoly over moral righteousness. The industrial relations field has not changed character, and is hurting the economy and society. Its violent and illegal labor disputes continue to haunt feeble business and social life.

Technological innovations affecting the Korean economy, social organization, and life-world are more rapid and recent changes. Revolutionary changes in information-communication technologies are causing major changes in the form of network society, digitalizing, cyber community and culture, on-line communication and transaction, by means of computer, telephone and mobile, multimedia, and the like. This has created what is known as the "digital divide," where it is claimed that "the younger, the richer; the older, the poorer," with social class division becoming more apparent, relative to contact with and use of available information.

In general, society has become looser in terms of morals, values, social norms and rule observances. Solid social ties have been weakened, social conflicts are still rampant, and social disintegration seems to be pending.

What Is in Store for the Future?

With the new administration in charge, the Roh Moo-hyun camp seems to be determined to lead the nation with "its own men." On the surface at least, they appear to be composed of erstwhile activists, radicals in some sense, and relatively young and eager to engage in swift changes in politics, society, and the economy. The advance of the so-called 386ers, the nickname attached to those who were born in the 1960s, who went to college in the

1980s when the student movement was at its peak in terms of ideological radicalization and violence, and who are now in their 30s, to the center stage of the state apparatus has become more pronounced and widespread. This is sufficient cause for alarm among the relatively conservative older generation with vested interests.

Depending on “what” reforms and “how” changes are pursued, resistance will be met from conservative groups and those with vested interests, notably the state bureaucracy, the corporate sector, and the social elite who are excluded from the current regime. This will affect the success or failure of the new regime. The regime could react with the notion of “class war,” and mobilize certain elements of civil society, as DJ did. The consequences of this reaction are unpredictable. A more moderate response from the regime could lead to compromised results, which could mean only “half success” in terms of intended reforms, though with reasonable stability in society attained.

Industrial conflict is another crucial factor affecting the path of the regime and Korean society. In the six month period of the regime change, there have already been violent and intensive strikes and sit-ins waged by radical labor unions, truckers’ associations, and farmers. These have affected the economy and cost corporations billions of dollars. The incessant labor disputes have given the nation the unwelcome name of a militant “labor state,” and have virtually chased away prospective foreign investors. This is a very complicated phenomenon for the apparently pro-labor regime to reasonably handle. Labor may have decided to take advantage of the pro-labor tendency of the new regime to raise its voice and reap any economic and political gains. The response of the administration initially was leniency, and the result was devastating as labor did not cooperate. Currently, the regime has to wield its power to put down the rampant illicit strikes. The result is that labor is turning against the regime. Either way, adamant or lenient, the regime has not been able to solicit cooperation from labor. As a consequence, management has become bitterly sore, the economy is bleeding badly, and the populace is worried.

Another important factor is how the new regime is going to manage international relations, especially with respect to the North Korean nuclear issue, and Korea-U.S. relations. DJ’s Sunshine Policy, despite some of its supposedly positive effects, has left the South in a hostage position in the hands of Kim Jong Il. He continues to play a very tricky and hazardous game of brinkmanship. The U.S., faced with the changing mood of South Koreans, which carries a tint of anti-American sentiment that has been unthinkable so far, is beginning to rethink its alliance with South Korea.

To top these, the economy seems to be precariously treading down-hill. Some have claimed its position is similar to that of the 1997 financial crisis. Finally, reform and reshuffling of politics are going to be crucial factors that determine the future of Korean society, and the prospect does not seem to be too bright. Many may be wondering that the burdens on the shoulder of the new president and his entourage may be too heavy for them to carry effectively.

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