



Center for Asian Democracy

# South Korea General Election 2024 Pre-Election Report

CAD Research Brief

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Cover Image: Source: [Korea Herald](#), Yonhap

# Country Profile

## Overview

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) is a representative democratic republic in East Asia with a population of 51 million people. South Korea was first established as a democratic republic in 1948. The government is separated into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial, ensuring separation of powers. The executive and legislative branches consist of a President, Prime Minister, and unicameral 300-member National Assembly, with the judicial branch split into two high courts. Since 1948, South Korea has undergone several republic changes, with the Fifth Republic still in place today.

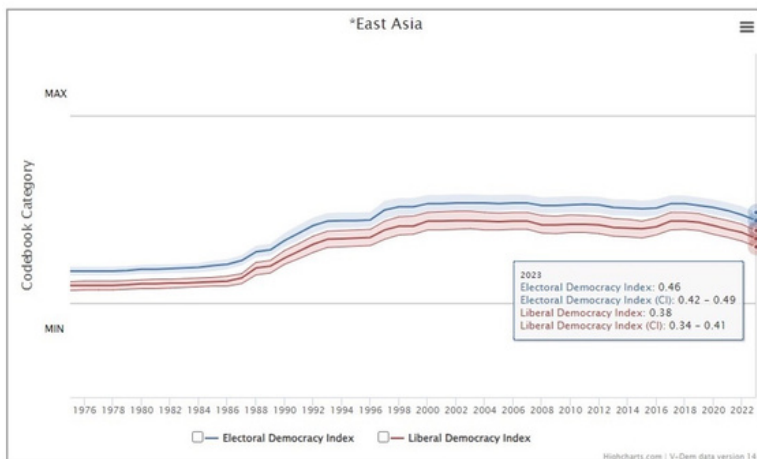
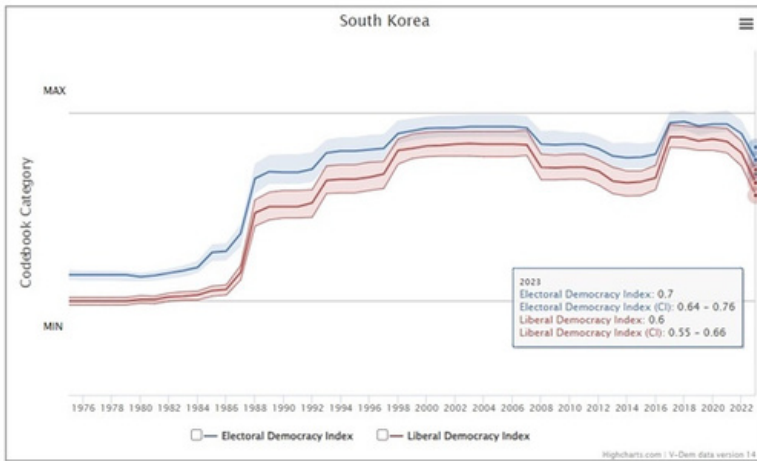
## Measures of Democracy

According to V-Dem's measures of electoral and liberal democracy, South Korea performs well above East Asia's overall average. South Korea scored .73 in liberal democracy and .81 in electoral democracy, similar to Japan and Taiwan's scores of .73 on the liberal democracy index. In recent years, South Korea's electoral and liberal democracy scores have shown some decrease, reflecting trends discussed later in this report.



## Media Freedom

South Korea was ranked 43rd out of 180 countries in 2023, scoring 70.83 in press freedom. Press freedom rankings for the country fluctuated over the years under different presidents. Following 2019, there has been a steady decline in rankings attributed to Presidents Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol's war on the media and "fake news."



### INDEX 2023

**47** / 180

Score : 70.83

### INDEX 2022

**43** / 180

Score : 72.11

POLITICAL INDICATOR

**54**  
63.51

POLITICAL INDICATOR

**42**  
71.15

ECONOMIC INDICATOR

**48**  
55.81

ECONOMIC INDICATOR

**43**  
55.31

LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR

**60**  
70.03

LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR

**61**  
72.81

SOCIAL INDICATOR

**52**  
77.53

SOCIAL INDICATOR

**51**  
79.80

SECURITY INDICATOR

**34**  
87.26

SECURITY INDICATOR

**42**  
81.50

# Election Profile: South Korea's National Assembly

The South Korean National Assembly operates under a mixed electoral system through single-member constituencies and proportional representation. 253 out of 300 National Assembly members are elected through single-member constituencies, and the remaining 47 are selected through a closed-list balanced representation system. For seat allocation, parties must win at least five constituency seats or more than 3% of the total proportional representation ballots. The remaining 30/47 seats are distributed on an additional member system expected to favor more minor parties.

## Candidates and Parties

South Korea's legislative election is scheduled for April 10, 2024. The election will determine the National Assembly members for the next four years. Two leading parties are competing for a majority: the current legislative plurality-holding Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and the People Power Party (PPP), the legislative minority but the current executive party. Other political leaders have initiated last-minute attempts at establishing a foothold in the election race with smaller parties separating from the Democratic and People Power parties.

### Democratic Party of Korea: Lee Jae-myung

The Democratic Party is currently the ruling party of the National Assembly and is under the leadership of Lee Jae-myung. As DPK's leader, Lee is vying to hold on to its majority rule in the Assembly with his party's support, but leading up to the election season, it has proven a tough battle inside and outside of the party. The party has had initial wins and indications of campaign success; however, it is uncertain if they can hold on to their current share of power. The party's prospects are especially tied to larger Seoul districts and other significant population centers.

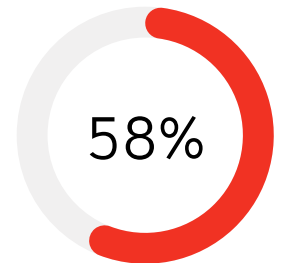
### People Power Party: Yoon Suk-yeol

The People Power Party is the party in control of the country's executive branch under the leadership of President Yoon Suk-yeol. The PPP does not have a majority within the Assembly, causing tension with DPK and PPP lawmakers. The PPP is forced to rely on cooperation from the opposition lawmakers to pass budgets, legislation, and key appointments from the President's desk. The PPP continued to maintain its main conservative views on issues surrounding the media, women's rights, corruption, and political violence.

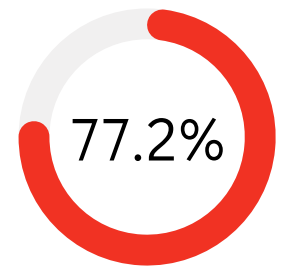
### Satellite Parties

In recent elections, South Korean political parties have continued to split into so-called satellite parties. These smaller parties are separated from a larger party and are used by larger parties to secure proportional seats before dissolving and merging back into their original party. DP Leader Lee Jae-myung announced his plans to use such parties for the upcoming parliamentary election. Smaller parties, including the New Future Party and New Reform Party, continue to rise ahead of the election, leaving many to wonder if this loophole used by politicians will become a theme in future elections. However, in a recent survey by RealMeater, 83% of voters support either the DP or PPP, making it difficult for small, independent parties and satellite parties to secure substantial seats.

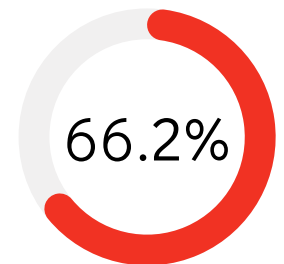
## Recent Voter Turnout



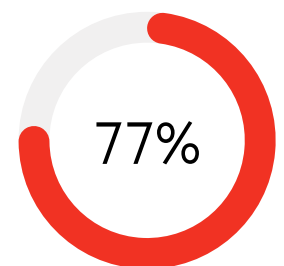
2016 Parliament Election



2017 Presidential Election



2020 Parliament Election



2022 Presidential Election

Source: IFES ElectionGuide

## Polarization and “Lesser Evil Politics”

In recent years, South Korea’s political atmosphere has been subjected to a deep-rooted rivalry between Lee Jae-myung and Yoon Suk-yeol, two prominent political leaders in charge of the executive and legislative branches. The rivalry has deepened since Yoon’s 2022 Presidential Election victory. This pattern has encouraged voter frustration with the ruling parties, leading to what some call “lesser evil politics.”

After an election, democratic norms typically involve the loser’s acceptance of defeat and winner’s accommodation of the minority’s future political role. However, in the South Korean case, losers have refused to concede, and winners trample on the losers (if given a chance). Lee Jae-myung’s power in the National Assembly, and Yoon’s through the executive branch, set the stage for entrenched rivalry between leaders and in the general population.

In a study by the Korea Institute of Public Administration, interviews with 1,000 Koreans aged 18 and above found that 92.6% of interviewees regarded the issue between conservatives and progressives as serious. Ideological conflicts between conservatives and progressives outweigh conflicts between regions, classes, generations, and genders. 61.8% of PPP supporters voiced negative opinions of the DPK, with 30.2% having neutral views, compared to 74.1% of DPK supporters who voiced negative views of PPP, with only 16.3% expressing neutrality. The study concludes that the rise of this polarization can have broader social effects on Korean society

The rising polarization has especially centered on foreign relations between South Korea and its neighbors, China, Japan, and the United States. The DP and PPP have different focuses regarding foreign policy and the main countries they wish to side with. A [recent poll](#) of South Koreans found that two-thirds (58.7%) placed the U.S.-China tensions as one of the top five pressing issues. Many believe the political party divide continues to threaten and undermine South Korea’s foreign policy credibility and sustainability.

The South Korean public is [broadly critical](#) of leaders of each party, and dissatisfied with their vision of the country's future in terms of urgent issues of widening deficits, aging population, low fertility rates, immigration issues, and the economy’s low growth. Korean sentiment towards democracy significantly emphasizes qualified leaders who cooperate on national and international issues. The performance of both parties is not up to the public’s expectations and has generated a bitter, tension-filled campaign leading into the April election. Violence from the public is on the rise, with notable incidents of the unexpected [stabbing](#) of Lee Jae-myung and the physical assault of a PPP [lawmaker](#). As South Korean politicians and the public inch closer to the election on April 10, the election outcome could swing in favor of either party, with many voters ultimately deciding who they view as the lesser evil.



South Korea’s opposition Democratic Party leader, Lee Jae-myung speaks after being discharged at Seoul National University Hospital in Seoul, South Korea, January 10, 2024.  
Source: [Reuters](#)



President Yoon Suk Yeol presides over a Pan-governmental Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters meeting in Sejong City, which addressed recent protests.  
Source: [Korea Herald](#), Yonhap

# Democracy: Challenges and Potential Backsliding

## Corruption

Corruption has remained a topic in elections over the years since the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye following an abuse of power in 2016. DP leader Lee Jae-myung and PPP leader President Yoon Suk-yeol have used such allegations to fuel the tension between their respective parties. DP Lee Jae-myung was on trial last year on allegations of abuse of power and illegal money wiring, but managed to avoid conviction due to lack of evidence. President Yoon was not left unscathed after his Gender Equality and Family Minister nominee, Kim Haeng, faced allegations of illicit stock transactions in October, causing another blow to the PPP's attempts to consolidate their ruling power. Corruption in South Korean elections hampers the legitimacy and liberal democracy of the elections, leaving lasting impacts on the public's trust in politicians.

## Media Freedom

South Korea's media freedom ranking has dropped under President Yoon since 2022. After President Yoon declared war on fake news and targeted media outlets and reporters, the Yoon administration stressed the importance of hindering the spread of fake news that threatens democracy and democratic goals. The Yoon administration's crackdown on fake news has led to multiple altercations, lawsuits, and retaliation efforts against media outlets. One notable event in September 2022 involved the release of video footage of President Yoon using foul language toward U.S. President Joe Biden, which was revealed by an MBC broadcaster. Many South Korean critics accuse President Yoon of eroding press freedom via defamation suits and threats of penalties and criminal investigations.

## Gender in Politics

Women in South Korea face the most dramatic wage gap of any OECD nation and suffer one of the highest rates of femicide in the world. South Korean women endure cycles of trauma and hopelessness through sexual violence, ineffective law enforcement, and lack of enforced gender equality. As the National Assembly finalizes its party nominations in mid-March, there is a trend of low nominations for women. South Korea's representation rates are lower than the average of other OECD countries, further jeopardizing gender equality and democracy in the country. In response to years of misogyny, gender imbalance, and anti-feminist sentiments, the 4B Movement has swept the country since 2019. It has continued to impact politics and the future of South Korea.



The South Korean broadcast station MBC employees protested a visit by ruling party lawmakers to their office in Seoul in September 2022.

Source: [The New York Times](#), Yonhap



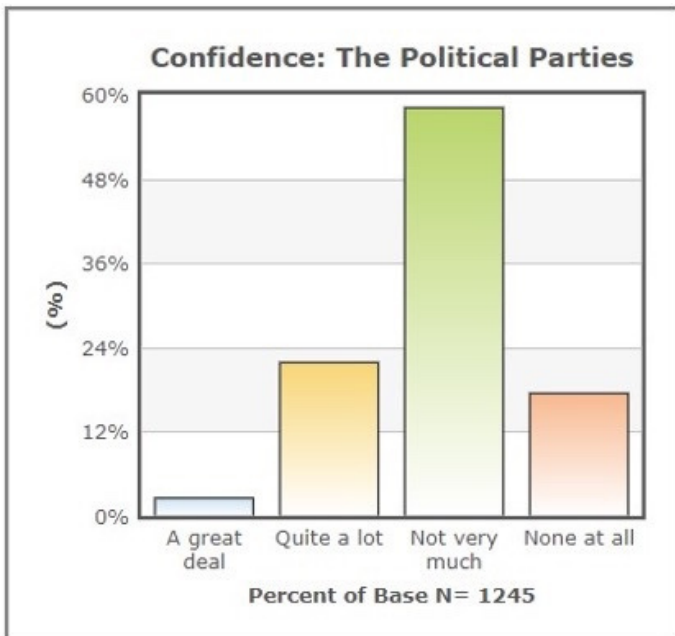
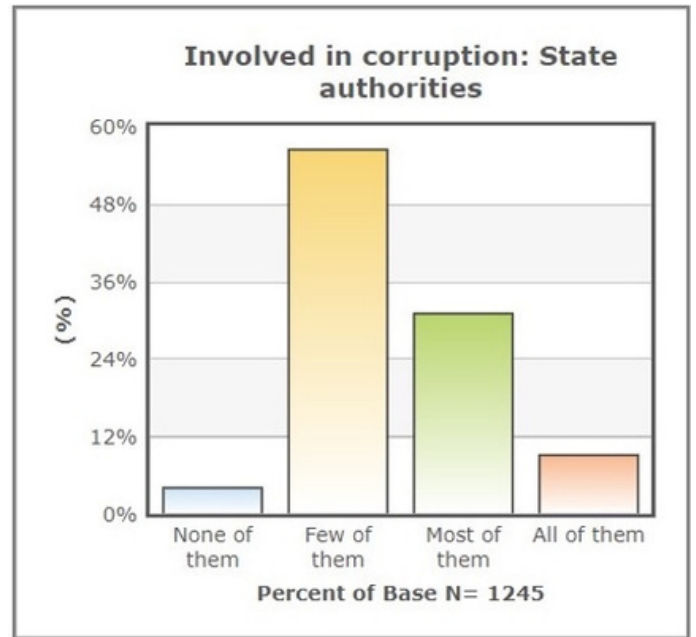
Korean National Council of Women hold a policy seminar discussing expanding women's political participation at the National Assembly on Nov. 20, 2023

Source: [Korean National Council of Women](#)

# Public Opinion

## Corruption

According to the 2018 World Values Survey (WVS), most respondents (56.2%) believe that few state authorities are involved in corruption. Overall, 96.1% of people believe at least some corruption is present, indicating incomplete trust in state officials. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranks South Korea 31/100, with Taiwan (25/100) and Japan (18/100) rated above. Transparency International's 2020 Global Corruption Barometer found that 65% of South Korean respondents think most or all Parliament members are corrupt.

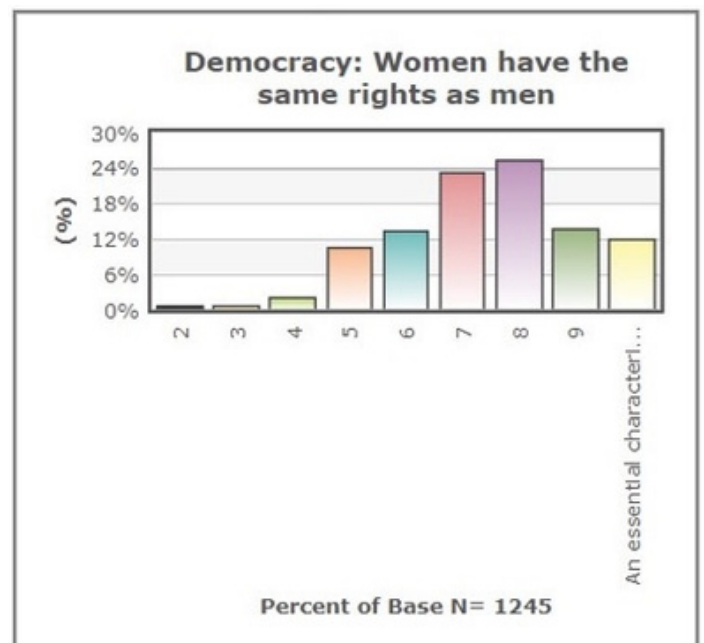


## Confidence in the Parties

An overwhelming number of respondents (58.1%) have little confidence in political parties. Only 2.6% of respondents indicated great confidence in parties, with 17.4% having no confidence. The country's average responses about not having very much confidence in parties are more pessimistic than those of Japan (50.8%) and Taiwan (49.6%).

## Women's Rights

South Korean respondents expressed their belief in the essential characteristic of women having the same rights as men in a democracy on a scale of one through ten, with one being the lowest. South Korean responses varied, with rank 8/10 being 25.1% of the responses and 6 and 7 following with 13.7% and 23.1%, respectively. Meanwhile, Japan and Taiwan's majority highly ranked women's rights as an essential characteristic of democracy, with 49.5% in Japan and 43.8% in Taiwan ranking them a 10/10 on the scale.



## Spotlight on the Campaign Trail



Lee Jae-myung (left) of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea and Yoon Suk-yeol (right) of the main opposition People Power Party.

Source: [Korea Herald](#), Joint Press Corps



Voters cast absentee ballots for the April 2020 parliamentary election at a polling station in Seoul.

Source: [Reuters](#)

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# About the Center for Asian Democracy

The mission of the Center for Asian Democracy, established at the University of Louisville in 2006, is to promote research and teaching about democracy and the prospects for democratization in Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia. Through publications, conferences, workshops, visiting scholars programs, colloquia, and research projects in Asian countries, the Center creates a forum for studying political dynamics in this vital region. The Center is currently led by Dr. David Buckley, Paul Weber Chair of Politics, Science and Religion, and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Louisville.

## About the Author

Lorena Gil Sanchez is an Undergraduate Research Assistant at the Center for Asian Democracy. She is a dual major in Political Science and Asian Studies at U of L, and has studied abroad in South Korea.

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