



Center for Asian Democracy

Republic of Korea

2022 Pre-Election Report

CAD Research Brief 22.01.01

By Tristin Black, Undergraduate Research Fellow
March 2022 // University of Louisville

*Cover image source: Newscom 23 November 2021



Country Profile

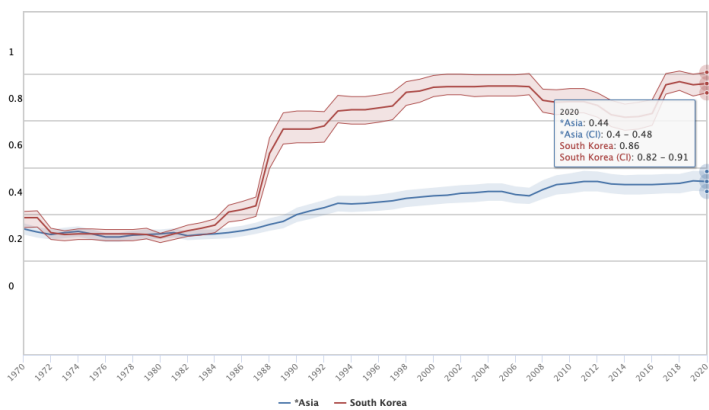
Overview

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) is a representative democracy in East Asia with a population of over 51 million people. The country is a constitutional republic, with a President, Prime Minister, National Assembly, and independent judiciary. Its constitution can be reviewed [here](#).

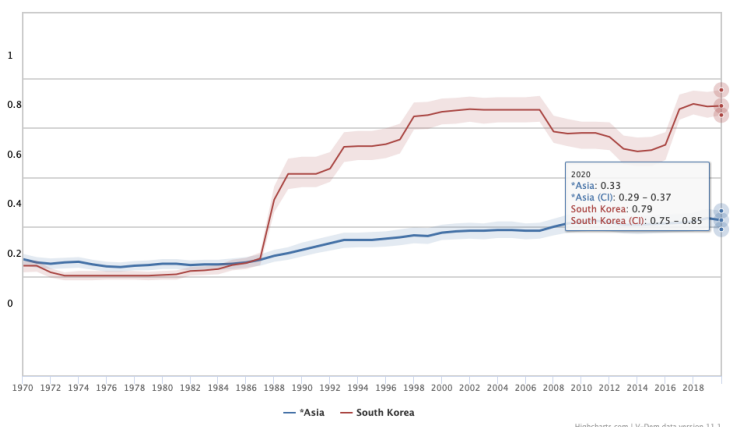
Measures of Democracy

Compared to its peers in Asia, South Korea performs exceedingly well on leading indices of democracy. [V-Dem measures of electoral and liberal democracy](#) visualize this point. South Korea's electoral democracy index of .86 and liberal democracy score of .79 are double that of the average for the Asian region. The charts on the left and below indicate that the progress that South Korea has experienced on both fronts dating to democratization in the late-1980s.

Electoral Democracy Index



Liberal Democracy Index



Media Freedom

Press freedom in South Korea has increased recently after falling in the 2010s, during the administration of former President Park Jae Geun-hye.

Year	Ranking	Change	Year	Ranking	Change
2021	42 / 180	=	2016	70 / 180	↓
2020	42 / 180	↓	2015	60 / 180	↓
2019	41 / 180	↑	2014	57 / 180	↓
2018	43 / 180	↑	2013	50 / 180	=
2017	63 / 180	↑			

(Reporters without Borders, 2021)

Election Profile: President of the Republic of Korea

Leading Candidates and Parties



Lee Jae-Myung, DPK Candidate

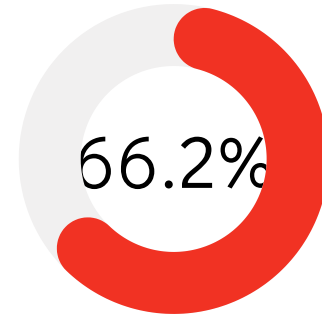
Yoon Suk-yeol, PPP Candidate

South Korea's presidential election is scheduled for March 9, 2022. The contest will determine the successor of outgoing President Moon Jae-in, who is limited to a single five-year term in office. There are two leading parties vying for the presidency: the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), of which Moon is a member, and the People Power Party (PPP), the primary opposition.

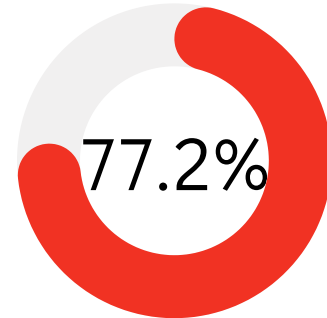
The Democratic Party nominee is Lee Jae-myung, a former civil rights attorney, Mayor of Seongnam City (2014-18), and Governor of Gyeonggi Province (2018-21). Lee resigned from his governorship in October 2021 after winning the DPK primary race with 50.3% of the vote. Lee is a member of the centre-left wing of the DPK and an advocate for progressive economic policies, including his signature campaign promise to implement a universal basic [income](#). Although Lee is progressive, the DPK is a big tent coalition that comprises both liberal and centrist factions, a product of gradual ideological changes that have occurred since its inception as a conservative party in [1955](#).

The People Power Party nominee is Yoon Suk-yeol, who served as Prosecutor General from June 2019 to March 2021, when he resigned following a series of corruption [allegations](#). Yoon's defiant exit made him popular among critics of the Moon Administration, and he joined the PPP in July 2021 shortly after announcing his candidacy for president. The PPP is the current iteration of the Korean conservative party tradition, established in 2020 as a merger of several splinter parties that formed following the impeachment of conservative President Park Geun-hye in [2016](#). PPP members are hawkish on North Korea, and Yoon has called on the United States to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea.

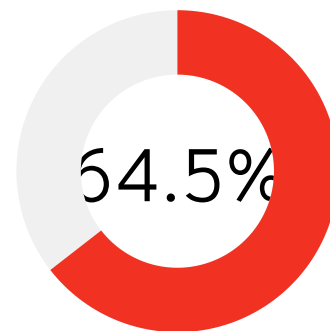
Previous Electoral Turnout



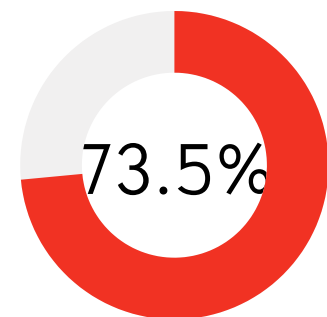
2020 National Assembly Elections



2017 Presidential Election



Average Parliamentary Turnout



Average Presidential Turnout

Public Attitudes Regarding Democracy

The 2018 [World Values Survey](#) waves captures the attitudes of Koreans about democratic institutions. This brief section highlights representative indicators from the most recent WVS polling on attitudes toward democracy, liberal rights, and institutional rights.

Democracy

How Democratically is this Country Being Governed Today?	
Rating	Percentage
Not at all democratic	0.2
2	0.2
3	0.6
4	1.9
5	8.0
6	21.9
7	37.4
8	23.9
9	5.2
Completely democratic	0.6
(N)	(1,245)
Mean	6.68
Std. Dev.	1.19

All tables via [World Values Survey Online Analysis](#).

How Important is Democracy to You?	
Rating	Percentage
3	0.6
4	0.8
5	6.2
6	10.2
7	16.9
8	28.5
9	21.6
Absolutely Important	15.2
(N)	(1,245)
Mean	7.9
Std. Dev.	1.49

Koreans generally report positive views of the current democratic governance of the country, with most values falling in the upper-half of the scale. With that said, very few believed the country was totally democratic in 2018. Koreans also report high personal importance of democracy, although the mean value (7.9) does lag a bit behind regional democracies like Japan (8.7) and Taiwan (9).

Liberal Rights

When asked about the necessity of protection of civil rights as a characteristic of democracy, most respondents agreed it had high importance. An overwhelming majority (81%) of Koreans report that there is fairly much respect for individual rights in the country, as opposed to a great deal or no respect.

How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays in this country?	
Rating	%/Total
A great deal of respect	5.0%
Fairly much respect	81.0%
Not much respect	13.7%
No respect at all	0.3%
(N)	1,245

Civil Rights Protect people's liberty against oppression	
Rating	% / Total
Not an essential characteristic of democracy	0.2
2	1.0
3	1.9
4	2.2
5	9.9
6	15.0
7	22.2
8	26.3
9	13.3
An essential characteristic of democracy	8.0
(N)	(1,245)
Mean	7.21
Std. Dev.	1.69

Confidence in Electoral Institutions

Trust in election officials to be impartial administrators of democracy is key for democratic legitimacy. According to the WVS data, most Koreans believe that election officials are fair often or very often. With that said, more than 1 in 4 respondents reported that election officials are not often fair.

Election officials are fair...	
	%/Total
Very often	12.6%
Fairly often	59.4%
Not often	25.7%
Not at all often	2.2%

Challenges to Democratic Institutions

Although South Korea is widely considered a consolidated [democracy](#), democratic institutions do face challenges. Scholars note that despite steady economic development and social modernization, South Korea's representative institutions (parties) have not equally progressed and have struggled to adequately channel public interests into policymaking. Thus, civic activism often circumvents the party structure and uses large-scale demonstrations to vocalize frustration, as seen in the [Candlelight Protests in 2016-17](#). Scholars have [linked](#) this challenge in Korea to the broader concept of a "[democratic deficit](#)" in which under-institutionalized parties can perpetuate political instability.



Candlelight Protests
Source: East Asia Forum, 2017

Other concerns about South Korean democracy center on outgoing President Moon Jae-in's administration. Upon entering office, President Moon declared a mission to "eradicate [deep-rooted evils](#) perpetuated by those in authority." Moon has used the mission of "eradicating evils" to overhaul South Korea's courts, appointing ten of the fourteen justices on the Supreme Court and eight of the nine on the Constitutional Court. In April 2020, Moon also supported the candidacies of three former judges who ran for seats in the National Assembly shortly after retiring. Scholar Gi-Wook Shin [argues](#) that, if such a process becomes normalized, judges' rulings could come to be seen as preemptive campaign appeals and undermine judicial impartiality.



Republic of Korea's Supreme Court 2020
Source: AP Yun Dong-jin/Yonhap

Some observers have also raised questions about President Moon's approach to freedom of speech. After [declaring](#) a "war on fake news" in 2018, the government encouraged state agencies to report misinformation accounts, including those on conservative YouTube channels, to law enforcement. That same year, the United States-Korea Institute, a Washington D.C. think tank, lost its funding from Seoul and was forced to close after rejecting a request to fire its director and assistant director on the grounds they were too [conservative](#). While South Korea remains a highly rated democracy, its institutions, like others globally, continue to confront challenges to their consolidation.



President Moon Jae-in Announces Measures Against Fake News, 2018
Source: AP Choe Dong-joon/Newsis

Elections in the Time of COVID

South Korea was one of the first countries in the world to conduct major national elections during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the elections for its National Assembly in April 2020 representing a critical test of public confidence and government competence. This unprecedented effort attracted global attention from electoral management bodies (EMBs), academics, and politicians alike.

As soon as the decision to proceed with the elections was finalized, the National Election Commission (NEC) began preparations to ensure a safe voting environment and implemented a series of ambitious measures with this goal in mind. First, the NEC conducted early voting at 3,500 polling locations nationwide on April 10th and 11th, with approximately [12 million voters](#) (26.7% of the total electorate) using this opportunity to cast their ballots. The NEC also extended the mail-in voting period to allow those quarantining because of the virus to cast a ballot, so long as it was filed before March 28th. To ensure voters' safety at the physical polls, the NEC circulated a [Code of Conduct for Voters](#) that outlined requirements such as mandatory masks, socially distanced lines, gloves, and temperature checks, with similar hygiene requirements for poll workers. The NEC communicated these guidelines to voters using a variety of communications, such as [advertisements](#) on national television and [social media](#) and displaying the Code of Conduct inside polling stations.

The efforts of the NEC to conduct a safe election in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic were widely [heralded](#) as a success. Approximately 29 million voters (66.2% of the electorate) participated in the 2020 elections, the highest turnout since 1992. The elections also demonstrated citizens' resolve in the face of the pandemic. Paradoxically, rather than deterring voters, the pandemic emphasized the importance of the right to vote, encouraging voting as a way to symbolically defeat the COVID-19 virus.

With the March 9th presidential election set to occur after a [record-breaking](#) Omicron surge, South Korea's National Assembly recently [approved](#) a proposal to allow voters who are infected with COVID-19 to cast their ballots in person after regular voting hours are complete. This reflects the extent to which COVID-19 guidelines have been relaxed in the two years since the unprecedented 2020 legislative elections.



Chair of NEC Delivers Election Update
02/18/22
Source: NEC ROK Facebook

Spotlight on the Campaign Trail

Democratic Party Candidate, Lee Jae-myung speaks at a campaign event

Source: jmleetogether.com



People's Power Party Candidate, Yoon Suk-yeol celebrates with supporters after winning the nomination of his party.

November 5, 2021

Source: REUTERS/Kim Hong-Ji/Pool

Election banners of presidential candidates of four main political parties hang near a road in Gwanak, western Seoul.

From top:

- People Power Party candidate Yoon Suk-yeol
- Democratic Party of Korea candidate Lee Jae-myung
- Justice Party candidate Sim Sang-jung;
- People Party candidate Ahn Cheol-soo.

Source: Yonhap



Further Reading

Ahn, Hae Kyung. “The Foreign Policy Outlook of South Korea’s Ruling Presidential Candidate.” *The Diplomat*, October 22, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/the-foreign-policy-outlook-of-south-koreas-ruling-party-presidential-candidate/>.

Kim, Nan. “Candlelight and the Yellow Ribbon: Catalyzing Re-Democratization in South Korea.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 15, no. 14 (July 15, 2017). https://www.academia.edu/36626137/Candlelight_and_the_Yellow_Ribbon_Catalyzing_Re_Democratization_in_South_Korea?from=cover_page

Lee, Seoho. “Why Did Young South Koreans Ditch the Democratic Party and President Moon?” *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/why-did-young-south-koreans-ditch-the-democratic-party-and-president-moon/>.

Lee, Sook-Jong. “The Contentious State of South Korean Democracy: Pitfalls and Hopes.” Council on Foreign Relations, January 25, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/contentious-state-south-korean-democracy-pitfalls-and-hopes>.

Lee, Yoonkyung, and Myungji Yang. “The Politics of the Pandemic in South Korea.” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 2 (2020): 57-77. The Politics of the Pandemic in South Korea.

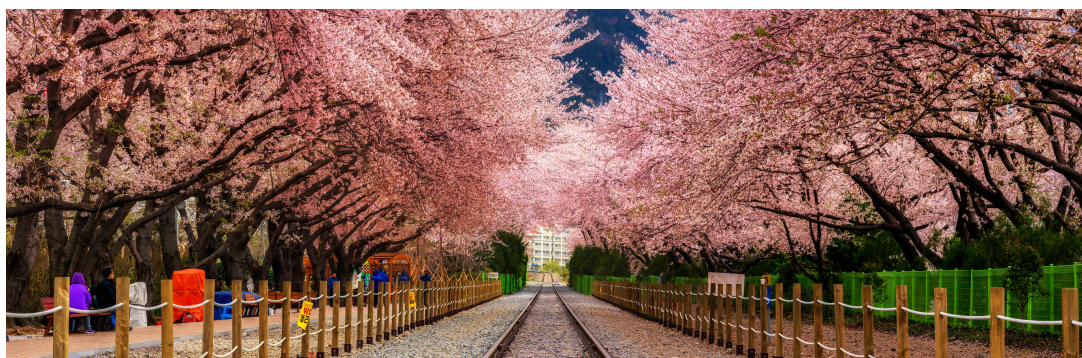
Park, James. “Have South Korean Conservatives Made a Full Comeback?” *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/have-south-korean-conservatives-made-a-full-comeback/>

Shin, Gi-Wook. “South Korea's Democratic Decay.” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 100-114. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0048>.

Shin, Gi-Wook. “What Does Korea's 2022 Presidential Election Mean for Its Democracy?” Council on Foreign Relations, January 26, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-does-koreas-2022-presidential-election-mean-its-democracy>.

Spinelli, Antonio. “Managing Elections Under the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Republic of Korea’s Crucial Test.” *International IDEA*, April 18, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2020.15>.

Youngho Cho, Mi-son Kim, Yong Cheol Kim. “Cultural Foundations of Contentious Democracy in South Korea.” *Asian Survey* 59, no. 2 (2019): 272-294. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2019.59.2.272>



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 Interim Director, 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

The substantive research of this report was conducted by CAD Undergraduate Research Fellow, Tristin Black, under the supervision of Dr. David Buckley. Tristin Black is a sophomore at the University of Louisville majoring in political science and pan-African studies. He is also a Brown Fellow at the University of Louisville, and his research interests include US foreign policy and democracy in Asia.

Acknowledgments

CAD thanks Graduate Fellow Jarett Lopez for excellent work formatting this report. The conclusions and recommendations of this Center for Asian Democracy publication are solely those of its author(s) and do not reflect the views of the center, its leadership, or other scholars.

COPYRIGHT

2022 University of Louisville Center for Asian Democracy