

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## South Korea's 2022 Presidential Election: A *Vox Populi* that is Evenly Divided

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On March 9, 2022, South Korea held a presidential election, in which the opposition People Power Party's Yoon Suk-yeol prevailed over the governing Democratic Party's Lee Jae-myung by a slender margin of a 0.73 percent point—the smallest in the history of the country. The only comparable neck-and-neck two-party electoral competition would be the 1997 presidential race that Kim Dae-jung won by a margin of 1.52 percent point. Out of 34,067,853 valid votes cast in the recent election, Yoon secured 16,394,815 and Lee gained 16,147,738—the largest number of votes obtained by the champion and runner-up, respectively, in South Korean history. As a full-scale two-party electoral mobilization, the only comparable in scale would be the 2012 presidential race in which 30,594,621 valid votes were divided between Park Geun-hye with 15,773,128 and Moon Jae-in with 14,692,632. In terms of both the intensity of competition and the immensity of mobilization, consequently, it seems indisputable that the 2022 presidential electoral outcomes<sup>1</sup> are historically unparalleled, reflecting a strong political division between conservatives and progressives. The problem is that it appears that the observed political division between the two camps amounts to 'negative' partisan polarization rather than to a 'positive' one.

According to a public opinion survey<sup>2</sup> that was conducted by Gallup Korea immediately after the election, the essential ingredients for this unprecedented political division are made less of programmatic differentiation that renders democracy healthy; but instead made more of partisan sorting that renders democracy dysfunctional. On partisan sorting, it is reported that 39 percent of those who voted for Yoon regarded turnover of executive power as the most important approval cause and 17 percent selected disaffection toward the other candidate as the second-most important approval cause while 27 percent of those who voted for Lee regarded disaffection toward the other candidates as the most important approval cause. For voters, affective partisan identity with or against candidates is one of the most critical factors that determines voting choices. As for programmatic differentiation, on the other hand, the survey reveals that only 6 percent of those who voted for Yoon and 13 percent

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<sup>1</sup> The National Election Commission, *Election Statistics System* (in Korean), Gwacheon-si, Republic of Korea: 2022. <http://info.nec.go.kr/>

<sup>2</sup> Gallup Korea Research Institute. *The Post 20<sup>th</sup> Presidential Election Survey* (in Korean). March 10, 2022. Distributed by Gallup Korea. <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1278>

for Lee regarded policy profiles and electoral manifestoes as an important approval cause. For voters, policy-based competition between candidates is one of the least influential factors that affect their voting decision. Essentially, the presidential election outcomes manifest a ‘pernicious<sup>3</sup>’ polarization—the division of society into mutually distrustful ‘Us versus Them’ camps in which political identity becomes a social identity—in the making in South Korea.

The emergent pernicious polarization that transpired through the election poses multi-level challenges to South Korea’s democratic politics in which the incoming president will play a pivotal role in the following: a divided cabinet in which he is required to collaborate with a coalition partner, a divided government in which he is required to cooperate with the opposition party, and a divided public in which he is required to accommodate those who did not vote for him. An evenly divided *Vox Populi* that is identified in the election calls upon him to be adept at the fine art of centripetal democratic governance. The following shows how much he would be hard-pressed to navigate.

### Challenges of the Divided Cabinet

The new president is supposed to form a coalition cabinet with Ahn Cheol-soo’s People Party. Although the People Party has only three seats in the National Assembly, its presidential candidate Ahn sustained 12 percent of popular support<sup>4</sup> primarily from the centrist voters who are not tied to major parties. When Ahn resigned from the race on March 3 to cut an electoral deal with Yoon, Yoon and Lee were virtually tied. Yoon’s pre-electoral coalition with Ahn paid off handsomely. An exit poll<sup>5</sup> that was conducted by major broadcasting stations KBS, MBC, and SBS on the election day compared the voting behavior between the voters in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections. 25 percent of those who voted for Moon in 2017 cast ballots for Yoon and 72 percent for Lee. 95 percent of those who voted for the conservative candidate Hong Joon-pyo in 2017 cast ballots for Yoon and 4 percent for Lee. 80 percent of those who voted for Ahn in 2017 cast ballots for Yoon and 18 percent for Lee. Yoon kept most votes from the conservative camps while Lee secured votes from the progressive camps albeit with a substantial loss. Collecting ballots from the former Ahn supporters was decisive for Yoon as he received four times more votes than Lee. In other words, the pre-electoral coalition with Ahn turned out vital for Yoon’s victory under the conditions of looming pernicious polarization.

Yoon and Ahn pledged to form a coalition cabinet and combine two parties of their own. Yoon appointed Ahn as chairperson of the presidential transition committee to show the credibility of the coalition. However, the inherent instability in the coming coalition cabinet formation will continue to distress the new president. While Ahn’s electoral influence was indispensable for winning the presidency, his party’s legislative influence is almost nil for passing bills in the National Assembly. The asymmetric bargaining power between the electoral and legislative arena of the People Party

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<sup>3</sup> Murat Somer, Jennifer L. McCoy & Russell E. Luke (2021) Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies, *Democratization*, 28:5, 929-948, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316

<sup>4</sup> Gallup Korea Research Institute. *Daily Opinion No. 485(1<sup>st</sup> week, March 2022)- Presidential Support Map before Ahn Cheol-soo's Resignation, Image of the Candidates in 7 perspectives* (in Korean). March 2, 2022. Distributed by Gallup Korea <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1275>

<sup>5</sup> Jang, Seulki. "[Data M] 2017 Presidential vote, Where is it going this Time? (in Korean)" *MBC News*. March 9, 2022. [https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2022/nwdesk/article/6348716\\_35744.html](https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2022/nwdesk/article/6348716_35744.html)

poses as a ‘commitment’ problem for Yoon to maintain the pre-electoral contract to make a post-electoral cabinet coalition. Moreover, Yoon’s People Power Party, which holds 106 seats in the legislature, might be disgruntled with disproportional over-representation of the smaller Ahn’s party members in the coming cabinet portfolio allocation process. South Korea’s presidential democracy makes the commitment problem more complicated as the chief executive can unilaterally appoint and dismiss cabinet members, which reduces the credibility of Yoon’s pre-electoral contract from the perspective of Ahn and his party members. To manage the challenges of a divided cabinet, it is critical for Yoon to keep in mind that his triumph was possible not least because of centrist voters who had supported Ahn. While the abandonment of Ahn in the cabinet may have little effect in the legislative area, it will have a great effect on the public’s support for the new president, which will intensify rather than diminish the tendency of pernicious polarization.

### Challenges of the Divided Government

Yoon also faces the opposition from Democratic Party as they currently hold the majority equating to 172 seats in the National Assembly for at least the next two years. Under this divided government situation, the new president simply cannot accomplish any of his policy initiatives without acquiring the consent of the Democratic Party. Even worse, Yoon’s power to appoint the prime minister, which is key to maintaining the coalition contract, is subject to the approval of the National Assembly that is controlled by the Democratic Party. In other words, without attaining the cooperation of the Democratic Party, Yoon cannot form his executive cabinet let alone enact his legislative initiatives. In order to avoid the worst-case scenario that is expected to be brought on by the divided government, Yoon needs to solve this ‘coordination’ problem by trying to reach an outcome in which both governing and opposition parties are satisfied.

This is a daunting task for the incoming president, especially during the era of increasing pernicious polarization in which parties view one another as competing camps and engage in a legislative battle where the political stakes attached to victory or defeat are extremely high. According to the exit poll<sup>6</sup>, however, there are some vital policy realms in which the two can generate mutually beneficial outcomes. 29 percent of those who voted for Yoon and 31 percent for Lee both agreed that ‘economic growth and creation of jobs’ should be the most important policy agenda that the new president deals with. Also, 23 percent of Yoon supporters and 21 percent of Lee supporters both confirmed that ‘stable management of housing prices and real estate market’ should be the second-most important policy agenda. To put it differently, a solid majority of those who supported Yoon as well as of those who supported Lee considered ‘valence’ issues—programmatic values that are broadly shared in the electorate—the highest priority of legislative deliberation and implementation. Consequently, for Yoon, tackling these valence issues first will become a gateway to a political solution to the coordination problem emanated from a divided government.

In this sense, it is unfortunate to note that Yoon as the president-elect pinpointed the electoral pledge of the ‘abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family’ as one of the highest priority

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<sup>6</sup> Ku, Kyungha. "[In-depth Exit Survey] ② Progressive Unity Higher than the 19<sup>th</sup> Presidential Election... Degree of cohesion higher among Conservatives (in Korean)." *KBS News*. March 9, 2022. <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=5412124>

policy agendas. As this is one of the most divisive ‘positional’ issues—programmatic values on which parties differentiate themselves in the electorate—in the presidential election, priming the issue will definitely produce political effects that exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the trend of pernicious polarization. It is noteworthy that the Democratic Party appointed a feminist activist as co-chairperson of the Emergency Response Committee to set a counter-attack on and exploit this divisive issue politically. For the president-elect, this serves as a good reminder<sup>7</sup> of his shaky electoral foundation among the voters under the age of 30 in which he secured 59 percent of votes from the male constituency but only 34 percent from the female constituency, which is an exact mirror image of Lee who gained only 36 percent from male constituency but 58 percent from the female constituency. The post-election ‘culture’ war on gender issues along party lines may become a gateway to political deadlock, causing the failure of policy coordination that makes the divided government unworkable.

### Challenges of the Divided Public

The difficulties to maintain a Yoon-Ahn coalition cabinet and to cooperate with the Democratic Party under a divided government will undoubtedly put the new president in an awkward and even frustrating position. This can usher him into the temptation of unilateral actions. In particular, as a political novice with no career in the National Assembly, Yoon may have a deep loathing of time-consuming political logrolling necessary to strike policy compromises in a coalition cabinet with collegial partners and divided government with opposition parties. If this is to become the case, Yoon will become more prone to take the strategy of ‘going public’—the president sells his programs directly to the public with the use of skillful opinion manipulation—to galvanize popular support for his policy agenda. In other words, for a president inflicted with political impasse, the going public strategy may be perceived as his last resort to break through the grave situation.

Unfortunately, for the new president, however, the strategy of going public will certainly be counterproductive in rallying popular support for his policy agenda. It will be persistently imperative for Yoon to recall that he won presidency in an election where 48.56 percent of the electorate voted for him and 47.83 percent voted for the opponent. How this balance is going to change will be tested during the local election that will be held three weeks after his inauguration on May 10. In a partisan landscape in which national electoral support is evenly divided between the conservative and progressive camps, it would be political suicide for a president to take the going public strategy and initiate unilateral action as a way of circumventing the cumbersome bargaining in a coalition cabinet and divided government. Unquestionably, such presidential maneuver will provoke the counter-mobilization from the supporters of the opposite camp, which endangers a spiral of conflict escalation that deepens, rather than lessens, the trend of pernicious polarization.

The discussion has now come full circle back to where it started. The intense two-party competition with extensive partisan mobilization that enabled Yoon to win the presidency now constrains his political options as the new president. The increase of pernicious polarization has made it inevitable for Yoon to accommodate Ahn in the divided cabinet, accommodate the Democratic Party in the divided government and accommodate the progressive voters in the divided public in order to

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<sup>7</sup> Kim, Youngeun. "[Graphic] 2022 Presidential Election Exit Survey Result based on Gender and Age (in Korean)." *Yonhap News Agency*. March 19, 2022. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/GYH20220309000900044>

get things done. It is not a coincidence that Yoon received a 53 percent presidential job prospect rating<sup>8</sup>—the lowest among presidents-elect—and Moon received a 43 percent presidential job approval rating<sup>9</sup>—the highest among presidents during their last two months of their term. It appears that effective partisanship, rather than policy performance, determines how voters support political leaders. The fact that Moon is likely to be the most popular outgoing president and Yoon is likely to be the least popular incoming president symbolizes that South Korea’s democracy has entered an era of pernicious polarization. This is why the quality of South Korea’s democracy is critically dependent upon how the new president will respond to these multi-level challenges of a divided cabinet, divided government, and divided public. ■

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<sup>8</sup> RealMeter. *[RealMeter March Second Week (10th-11<sup>th</sup>) Weekend Trend] Yoon Seok-yeol's Prospect for State Administration. 52.7% positive vs 41.2% negative.* (in Korean). March 13, 2022. Distributed by RealMeter <http://www.realmeter.net/jbshdifkg8owg897gt28/>

<sup>9</sup>Gallup Korea Research Institute. *Daily Opinion No.486(March 7, 2022)- Support for Candidates D-2 of the 20<sup>th</sup> Presidential Election, Views on Politics* (in Korean). March 8, 2022. Distributed by Gallup Korea <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1277>

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