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The 2025 Presidential Election in South Korea and Its Implications for Korean Democracy

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Snap Election Following Impeachment of President Yoon

On December 3, 2024, then President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, a move widely condemned as unconstitutional and reminiscent of an authoritarian past. This unprecedented act plunged the country into a constitutional crisis and led the National Assembly to pass his impeachment motion on December 14. The Constitutional Court upheld this decision and removed Yoon from office on April 4, 2025. As a result, an early presidential election was held on June 3, 2025, marking the second occurrence of such case since Korea's democratic transition in 1987.

This election served not only as a regular democratic process but also as a referendum on the abuse of power by a sitting president. It tested the resilience of Korea's democratic institutions and the political maturity of its citizens. Despite the severity of Yoon's actions, the electorate remained deeply divided, illustrating that ideological and partisan loyalties continue to run strong. The events leading to this early election raised fundamental questions about the scope and limits of executive authority in Korea's constitutional framework. Moreover, it reinvigorated public discourse about the role of checks and balances, civilian control of the military, and democratic accountability in the face of authoritarian threats.

Exceptionally High Voter Turnout and What It Reveals

The 2025 election recorded a turnout of 79.4%, the highest since the 1997 election that marked Korea's first democratic power transition. This figure is 2.3 percentage points higher than the previous election held in 2022 (Lee 2025). The remarkable levels of participation reflect not only the gravity of the political moment but also the intensity of partisan mobilization. For many citizens, this was not a routine election—it was a critical moment to defend or redefine democratic norms. For others, this snap election may be perceived as a pivotal moment of partisan confrontation—a zero-sum struggle to safeguard in-group interests amid an intensely polarized political environment in South Korea.

Notably, the highest turnout rates were recorded in Gwangju (83.9%) and South Jeolla (83.6%), strongholds of the Democratic Party. Conversely, Daegu and North Gyeongsang—traditional conservative bastions—registered the lowest early voting rates but compensated with high turnout on election day, with Daegu exceeding 80%. This phenomenon suggests a strategic

calculation among conservative voters to avoid early voting, possibly influenced by coordinated messaging from right-wing media and political actors (Kim 2025).

This disparity can be partly attributed to the growing distrust among far-right conservatives concerning the early voting process, fueled by conspiracy theories about electoral fraud. These dynamics highlight the interplay between political polarization and institutional legitimacy. However, the high voter turnout does not necessarily imply the presence of a political consensus; instead, it underscores the intensely contested and high-stakes nature of electoral competition in a polarized society. Voter mobilization on both sides was driven not only by policy preferences but also by existential fears about the possibility of the opposing camp seizing power (Lee 2013; Muñoz and Meguid 2021).

The Nature of the Campaign: Polarization, Negativity, and Strategic Blunders

The election was precipitated by an emergency political crisis, rather than the customary expiration of a presidential term, resulting in a shortage of time for political parties and candidates to engage in serious policy development, research, or public consultation. As a result, the campaign season was marked by a stark absence of detailed policy proposals or forward-looking visions for governance. Instead, it descended into a battlefield of accusations, personal attacks, and ideological posturing.

Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung positioned the election as a referendum on democracy itself, casting the People Power Party (PPP) as complicit in the failed authoritarian turn under former President Yoon. His narrative emphasized the moral urgency and the civic duty, portraying support for his candidacy as a vote to preserve constitutional order and civil liberties. This moral framing proved galvanizing for his base, yet it offered little to clarify how he would address Korea's pressing policy dilemmas if elected.

In contrast, the PPP tried to deflect attention away from its association with Yoon's unconstitutional actions, by focusing its campaign on Lee's legal entanglements—ranging from allegations of corruption to past administrative decisions. Rather than presenting original policy proposals or a forward-looking vision to address the pressing political, social, and economic challenges, the party's electoral strategy appeared to be primarily focused on discrediting the opposition candidate—emphasizing his alleged unfitness for office and reinforcing a negative personal image.

The situation was further complicated by a last-minute and poorly managed unification attempt between PPP candidate Kim Moon-soo and former Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, which created confusion within conservative ranks. The attempt was perceived as a top-down imposition rather than a consensus-based move, and it alienated both party elites and grassroots supporters. Kim's sustained alignment with pro-Yoon factions within the PPP hindered his credibility among moderate and undecided voters, pushing many of them toward alternative conservative voices such as Reform Party candidate Lee Jun-seok.

Perhaps most damaging was the failure of all major candidates to meaningfully address the country's long-term structural challenges. Korea faces deepening economic inequality, particularly among younger generations who struggle with stagnant wages, insecure employment, and a housing market out of reach for most. Additionally, the country is confronting a demographic time bomb due to ultra-low fertility rates, as well as persistent regional inequalities that fuel feelings of alienation in

non-metropolitan areas. Tensions on the Korean Peninsula remain unresolved, and yet inter-Korean policy received scant attention during the campaign.

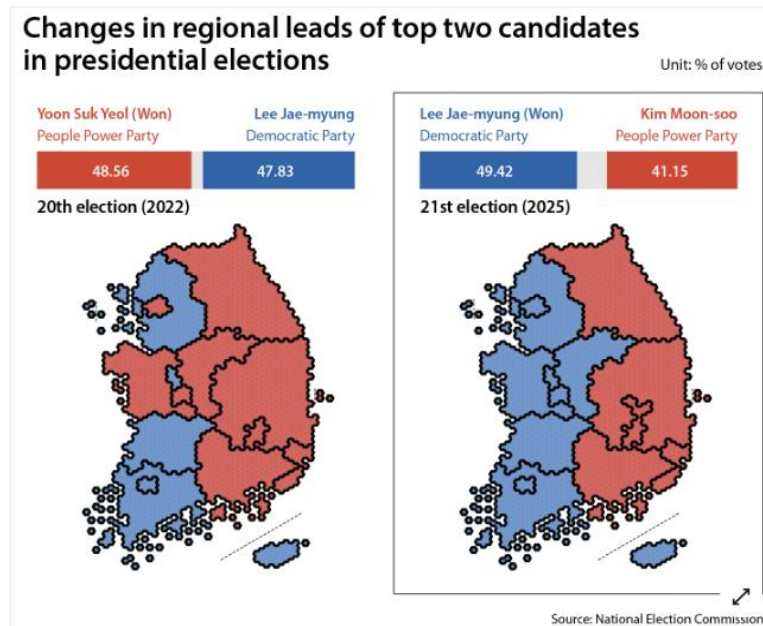
Despite these urgent issues, the campaign was overwhelmed by moralistic language, symbolic battles, and appeals to fear. Voters were rarely given the opportunity to evaluate competing solutions to concrete problems. This lack of substantive debate further eroded public trust in Korea's party system (Lee 2025). A notable trend among younger voters is a growing perception that party politics has become performative, tribalistic, and divorced from the everyday realities of jobs, education, housing, and mental health. The 2025 campaign, rather than reinvigorating democratic deliberation, reinforced a sense of cynicism and alienation among a generation that was already skeptical of institutional politics.

Electoral Outcomes: Deep Ideological Polarization and Fragmented Conservatism

Lee Jae-myung secured 17.28 million votes (49.42%), setting a new record for the highest number of votes ever received by a Korean presidential candidate (Lee 2025). Yet, despite this remarkable achievement, he fell short of an outright majority, a symbolic reminder of the deeply fractured nature of Korean politics. His vote total exceeded that of any previous candidate, surpassing even the highly contentious 2022 race. However, the result also underscored a structural limitation: the near impossibility of achieving broad-based consensus in an era of entrenched polarization.

Kim Moon-soo, representing the People Power Party (PPP), received 41.15% of the vote, maintaining the PPP's core base despite recent scandals and internal disunity. Meanwhile, Lee Jun-seok of the Reform Party captured 8.34%, a striking outcome for a third-party candidate, particularly within a system that has historically marginalized minor contenders. Lee Jun-seok's performance reflects growing disaffection with the two-party system, particularly among young and moderate conservative voters who feel politically disoriented.

The results highlight the fragmented and ideologically fluid state of Korea's conservative electorate. Despite securing a substantial share of the vote, the PPP failed to unify the broader right-leaning base, allowing space for insurgent conservative alternatives to gain traction. At the same time, Lee Jae-myung—despite adopting a centrist conservative message and presenting himself as a moderate choice in the wake of a constitutional crisis—was unable to secure support from more than half the electorate. This dual outcome underscores both the limitations of ideological repositioning and the enduring nature of Korea's political polarization, where loyalty to ideological or regional affiliations often outweighs institutional accountability or democratic norms.

Figure 1. Regional Voting Patterns in South Korea: The Geographic East–West Divide

*Source: <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-06-04/national/politics/President-makes-up-ground-in-conservative-strongholds-but-regional-partisanship-holds-firm-results-show/2322971>

Lee's performance in Busan—where he won 40.14% of the vote—was especially noteworthy. This marks the highest-ever support for a Democratic candidate in the city, which has historically leaned heavily conservative (Oh 2025). This result suggests a gradual erosion of rigid regional voting patterns, particularly among younger and urban voters who may be more responsive to policy content and national leadership issues than to traditional party loyalty. However, this trend of regional softening is far from uniform. Lee received more than 80% of the vote in Gwangju and South Jeolla Province, consistent with the Democratic Party's historical dominance in the Honam region. In stark contrast, he garnered a mere 25.52% in North Gyeongsang, the conservative stronghold of the PPP and former President Yoon. Kim Moon-soo garnered less than 10% in most of Honam, reaffirming the still potent influence of regional identity and political memory. Despite highlighting his origins in North Gyeongsang Province as a strategy to appeal to local voters, Lee Jae-myung failed to translate that regional affiliation into significant electoral gains in what remains a core base for the conservative bloc.

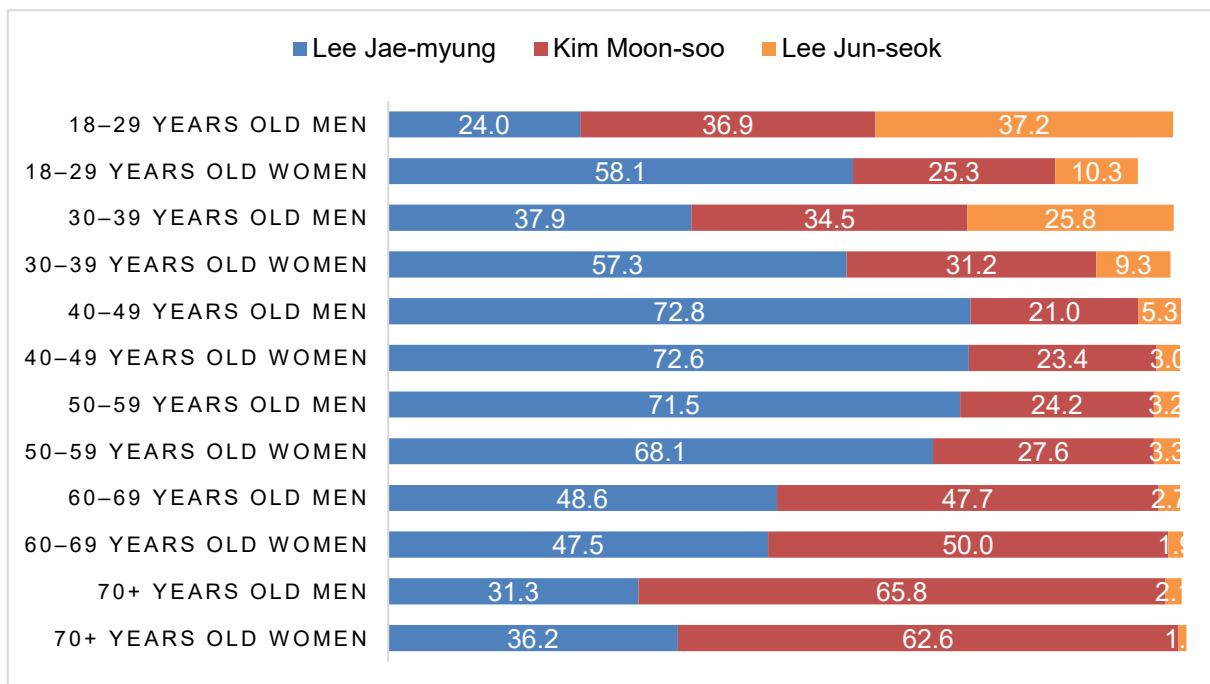
Thus, while the political landscape of Korea is undergoing gradual transformation, especially in urbanized regions and among younger voters, regionalism remains a powerful determinant of electoral behavior. It not only shapes vote distributions but also conditions political discourse, candidate selection, and party strategy. Addressing the roots of this cleavage will require sustained efforts in regional development, historical reconciliation, and political inclusion—none of which can be resolved in a single election cycle.

Socio-Demographic Cleavages: Generational, Gender, and Class Divides in Korean Politics

Recent Korean elections have exposed growing divides in voter behavior that extend beyond the familiar lines of ideology and region. In particular, the rise of generational and gender-based cleavages has been a noteworthy development in Korean elections since the 2000s (Park 2020). In the 2025 South Korean presidential election, this pattern was once again clearly evident. Traditional regional cleavages accompanied by pronounced generational divides and, notably, gender-based cleavages emerged most prominently among younger voters in their 20s and 30s.

Generational divides were especially pronounced. Voters in their 40s and 50s—often referred to as the “86 generation” (those who born in the 1960s, entered university in the 1980s and led the pro-democracy movement) and Generation X—overwhelmingly supported Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung. Exit polls showed over 70% of these cohorts backing Lee, reinforcing their consistent alignment with center-left politics in recent electoral cycles. This generational loyalty reflects not only ideological identification but also formative political experiences shaped by Korea’s authoritarian past and democratization struggles.

Figure 2. Vote Share by Age and Gender (Exit Poll)



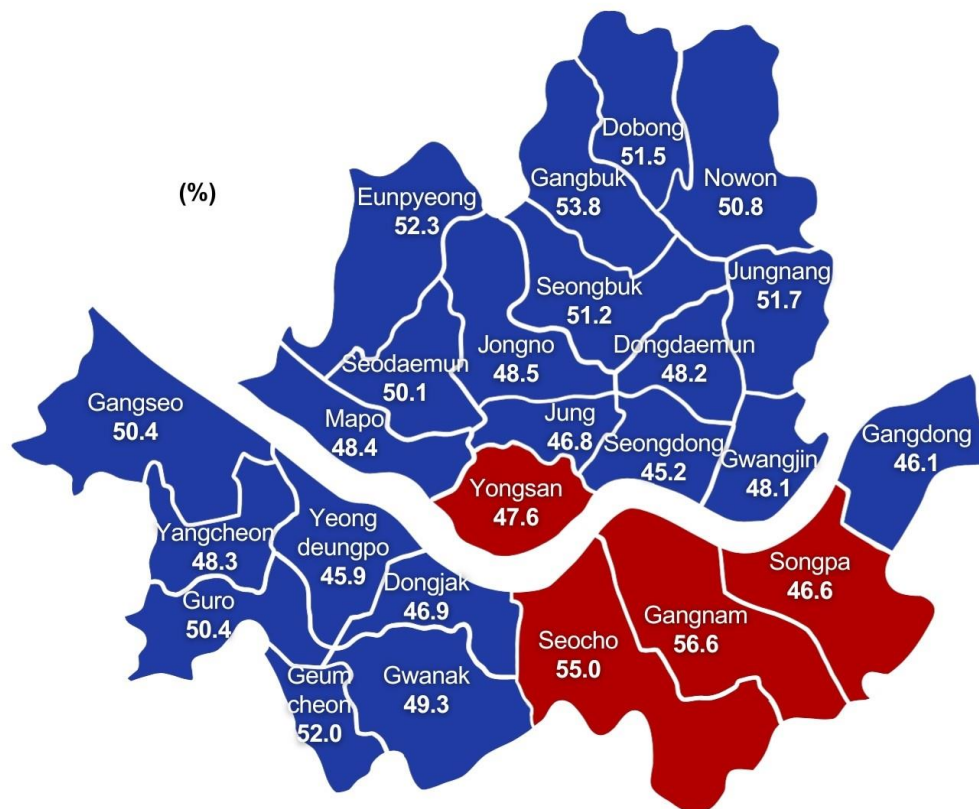
*Source: Exit Poll by South Korea’s Three Major Broadcasters (KBS, MBC, SBS)

In sharp contrast, Lee significantly underperformed among voters over 70, a demographic that traditionally supports conservative candidates. He garnered only 34% in this demographic, which remains one of the most reliable voting blocs for the PPP. Meanwhile, among voters in their 20s and 30s, the picture was more fragmented. Lee’s support hovered in the mid-40% range, while the Reform Party candidate Lee Jun-seok made notable inroads, especially among younger male. Exit polls revealed that Lee Jun-seok outpaced both major party candidates among male voters in their 20s, demonstrating a growing segment of the electorate that is both disillusioned with traditional parties and attracted to outsider, anti-establishment voices.

The gender divide within this younger cohort was particularly striking. Whereas young men gravitated toward Lee Jun-seok, young women tended to favor Lee Jae-myung, with support levels for the Democratic candidate in the high 50s. This emerging gender polarization appears to reflect broader societal tensions surrounding feminism, male identity, labor competition, and perceptions of victimhood. Recent studies suggest that this gender conflict among younger generations is less the result of deep-seated social divisions and more a product of political mobilization around selective, highly salient issues. While certain topics—such as the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family—have become politically charged, other gender-related debates remain more peripheral (Koo 2023). If this pattern of gendered divergence persists, it could mature into a full-fledged structural cleavage in Korean politics.

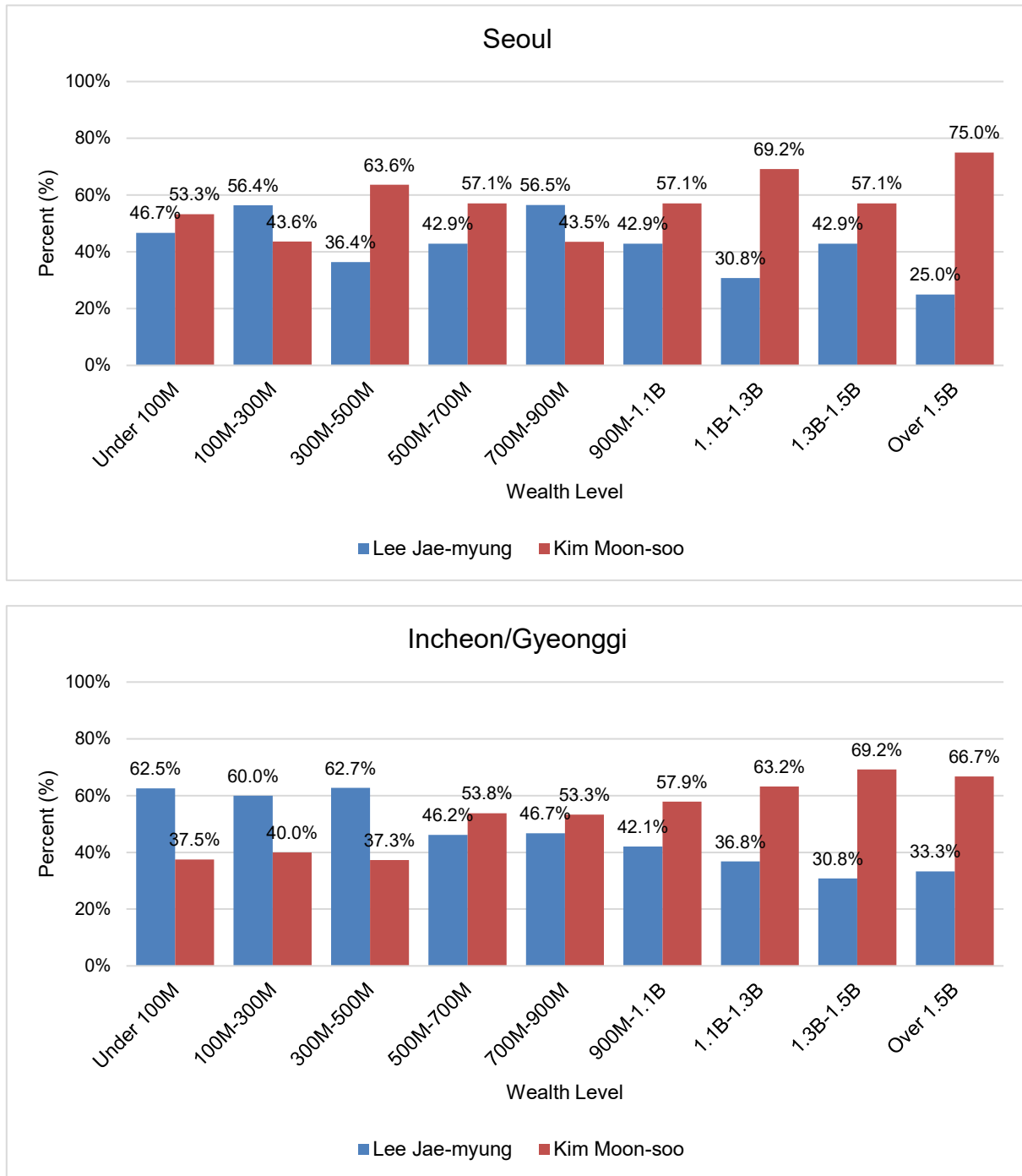
Simultaneously, the 2025 election revealed increasing signs of class-based voting, particularly in urban centers such as Seoul. While Korean electoral politics has historically downplayed class identity—often subsumed under regional or ideological banners—recent socio-economic trends have elevated material concerns. While the Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung secured a commanding lead over his rivals in most parts of Seoul, conservative candidate Kim Moon-soo maintained a strong presence in affluent neighborhoods such as Gangnam, Seocho, Songpa, and Yongsan, where the PPP’s base among the property-owning elites held firm. These districts have seen explosive real estate appreciation, and their residents tend to favor policies that preserve asset values and limit redistributive taxation.

**Figure 3. 2025 Presidential Election Results in Seoul by District:
Lee Jae-myung (Blue) vs. Kim Moon-soo (Red)**



In contrast, Mapo, Seongdong, and Gwangjin—districts known as the ‘Han River belt,’ where conservative support had increased in recent years amid soaring housing prices—shifted in favor of Lee Jae-myung. These neighborhoods are inhabited by younger, upwardly mobile professionals who have been increasingly affected by housing unaffordability, rising education costs, and job insecurity. Their political preferences appear to be shifting in response to perceived failures of market-centered policies to deliver equitable opportunities.

Figure 4. Wealth-Based Variation in 2025 Presidential Voting in the Seoul Metropolitan Area



The East Asia Institute (EAI), in collaboration with Hankook Research, conducted an online survey of 1,509 voters nationwide immediately after the 2025 presidential election. In the Seoul metropolitan area, where real estate prices are the highest in South Korea, the survey revealed a clear wealth-based voting pattern: support for conservative PPP candidate Kim Moon-soo rose steadily with voters' asset levels. In Seoul, conservative support surpassed that of Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung once assets exceeded KRW 900 million (equivalent to 6,600 USD), reaching 75% among those with assets above KRW 1.5 billion, the highest asset level in this survey. A similar trend appeared in Incheon and Gyeonggi, where Kim's support increased beyond KRW 700 million in assets, while Lee's support gradually declined. These findings suggest that the surge in real estate prices during the Moon Jae-in administration contributed to a more pronounced asset-driven voting tendency in the 2025 election.

When considered collectively, these socio-demographic divides—generational, gendered, and class-based—paint a complex portrait of Korean democracy in transition. The challenge for political leadership moving forward will be to craft inclusive narratives and policies that bridge these divides rather than exploit them. Failure to do so may accelerate voter fragmentation, erode democratic legitimacy, and intensify the crisis of political representation.

Democratic Backsliding and the Path Forward

This election was not merely about leadership change; it was about the survival of the democratic system. Former President Yoon's actions led independent international research organizations such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) to downgrade Korea's status from "full democracy" to "flawed democracy" (EIU 2025; V-Dem Institute 2025).

Lee Jae-myung now faces the dual challenge of restoring Korea's democratic reputation and governing a polarized nation. Unlike his predecessor, Lee benefits from a favorable legislative environment. His party currently holds 167 seats, with smaller leftist parties often voting in alignment with the DP. In contrast, the main opposition PPP controls only 107 seats. The supermajority position of the ruling party in the National Assembly provides a rare opportunity for the Lee government to implement substantial institutional reforms. Nevertheless, this dynamic gives rise to concerns regarding the maintenance of effective mechanisms for checks and balances on executive power backed by such a dominant ruling party.

Against this backdrop, the urgency of reversing democratic backsliding has become increasingly salient. To strengthen the foundations of institutional democracy, his administration must prioritize judicial independence and ensure effective parliamentary oversight. Equally important is fostering active engagement with civil society, which can help rebuild trust between the state and its citizens. A primary imperative would be to mitigate confrontational politics that pit one group against another. South Korean society is currently experiencing intense affective polarization between progressive and conservative camps, posing a threat to democracy. The impeachment of two former conservative presidents has further deepened the political divide. Recent research in comparative politics — including studies on U.S. politics — warns that unchecked political polarization may trigger democratic backsliding.

As political scientists Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, restoring norms of institutional forbearance and mutual tolerance is essential to the sustenance of a healthy democratic culture in Korea.

Complementing these efforts, medium-term reforms—such as improving electoral systems, enhancing transparency in party financing, and promoting media pluralism—will be crucial for reinforcing democratic resilience over time.

Lee has signaled his intent to form an inclusive administration and emphasized national unity. If he succeeds in governing with transparency and consensus, a credible path toward reclaiming Korea's democratic standing will be established. However, his administration must also resist the temptation of revenge politics and focus on building durable democratic norms. A successful presidency will require more than mere popular legitimacy—it will require restraint, vision, and institutional renewal.

Conclusion: A Cautious Hope for Democratic Renewal

The 2025 presidential election exposed the deep fissures within Korean society—ideological, regional, generational, and gender-based. Yet, it also demonstrated the resilience of democratic institutions and civic commitment to democracy, as voters countered authoritarian regression and reaffirmed democratic values.

Lee Jae-myung's mandate is both powerful and fragile. He enters office with historic vote totals but also a divided electorate. The future trajectory of Korean democracy, whether it moves toward renewal or further fragmentation, is contingent upon the manner in which the current administration exercises governance, implements institutional reforms, and engages the public. The road ahead is uncertain, but the direction is not predetermined. Korea now stands at a democratic crossroads—one that demands wisdom, restraint, and political courage. Democratic renewal will not be achieved overnight, but the 2025 election has opened a window of possibility—one that both the world and Korea's own citizens will be watching with hope and vigilance. ■

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