

2011 Seoul Mayoral By-Election

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With 48.6% of voters going to the polls, the Seoul Mayoral by-election on October 26th was seen as a referendum on the rule of the Grand National Party (GNP) and the traditional power elite, as well as a preview of the 2012 presidential election. Independent opposition candidate Park Won-Soon, a former lawyer and prominent NGO leader, defeated Na Kyoung-Won—the candidate of the ruling GNP—by a margin of 7.2%.

An analysis of exit polls from the by-election yielded several interesting findings. In this issue brief, we focus on the emergence of an unambiguous cleavage along various socio-demographic traits and a clear shift among unaffiliated voters toward Park Won-Soon, which contributed decisively to his victory. We also discuss the role of the by-election as a preview of the upcoming presidential election in 2012, given that the chief candidates in the former were backed by the current expected contenders for the latter.

The Run-up to the By-Election

The origins of the by-election lay with a seemingly innocuous proposal for a free lunch program for Seoul elementary school students. The proposal, advanced by the progressive opposition, was rejected by then-mayor Oh Se-Hoon, who argued that those who could afford to pay for their children's lunches should indeed pay as a way to ease school districts' already strained budgets. Progressives, for their part, framed the matter as one of equality and balked at the prospect of fostering social class divisions from such a young age.

Mr. Oh, who harbored presidential ambitions, staked his political career on killing the program and called a referendum on it. The opposition coalition actively encouraged voters not to go to the polls in the hopes that voter turnout would fall below 33.3%. If this threshold were not met, the ballot boxes would not even be opened. To counter, Mr. Oh promised that if voter turnout fell short of the mark he would resign immediately from his position. When the referendum was held on August 24, voter turnout reached only 25.7% and Mr. Oh duly resigned. A by-election was quickly called.

Initially, confusion gripped both the GNP and the opposition as they attempted to identify viable candidates. The GNP quickly settled on Ms. Na Kyoung-won, who gained the endorsement of the powerful conservative kingmaker Park Geun-Hye, who herself harbors presidential ambitions. But it was the search for an opposition candidate that made the by-election such a remarkable event. Dr. Ahn Chul-Soo, a very successful IT entrepreneur and now a professor at Seoul National University, received numerous offers from political elites on both sides to join their respective parties. Ahn indicated that he was intrigued by the idea. Upon announcing his possible candidacy, public support for him immediately reached 50%,

dwarfing support for other candidates.¹

On September 6, however, Ahn withdrew from the race but strongly endorsed independent candidate Park Won-Soon, whose popularity with opposition voters had been flagging. Ahn's abrupt withdrawal and endorsement of Park not only catapulted Park to the front of the opposition's stable of mayoral candidates but also generated intense speculation that Ahn himself was considering a run for the presidency in 2012. Thus, the forces were marshaled for a proxy battle between the two early leading contenders for the Blue House, with Ahn Chul-Soo backing Park Won-Soon and Park Geun-Hye backing Na Kyoung-Won. In a late October opinion poll, Ahn received support from 48% of those polled, exceeding the 45.9% who supported Park Geun-Hye.²

Who Voted for Whom?

At a glance, the election results show a noticeable shift of the electorate toward the progressives. During the 2010 Seoul mayoral election, Oh Se-Hoon was elected by winning eight of Seoul's 25 municipalities. This year, however, Na won only four of those eight municipalities—Yongsan, Seocho, Kangnam and Songpa—all of which are relatively affluent.

Not only did the GNP lose four of the municipalities that Oh had previously won, but the gap between vote shares within municipalities also widened. In every municipality, the share of votes received by the progressive candidate increased over the 2010 mayoral election. On average, Park Won-Soon received 8% more votes than the previous progressive mayoral candidate, Han Myung-Sook, received in 2010. The progressives saw their largest gain in votes over 2010 in Keumcheon, where Park received 25% more votes than Na, an increase of 11% from Han's performance just 16 months earlier.

One of the most striking differences in the mayoral election was the intergenerational gap. According to an exit poll conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in collaboration with Hankook Research and Yonhap Television News, voters in their twenties, thirties and forties voted heavily in favor of Park with 67.1%, 75.0%, and 62.0% of vote shares, respectively. Only 32.5% of those in their twenties, 24.7% of those in their thirties, and 37.7% of those in their forties voted for Na. In contrast, 72.9% of voters in their sixties supported Na, while only 26.8% supported Park.

The gap in vote shares was also visible by educational level. The voters who attended university or higher were more likely than those who only finished high school to vote for Park (56.7% vs. 43.0%). With that in mind, it should not be surprising that 60.9% of white-collar workers, many of whom supported Lee Myung-Bak in the 2007 presidential election,

¹ Joongang Daily and Gallup Korea, Sept. 5, 2011.

² Chosun Daily, October 31, 2011. For a more in-depth discussion of the nomination process, see the Asan Institute issue brief by Jung-Yeop Woo and Lisa Collins at [http://\[...\]](http://[...])

also turned to Park.

When assessing vote share by income, middle-class voters supported Park, while Na garnered more votes from the two extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum: those with a monthly income below one million Korean won and those with a monthly income exceeding seven million Korean won.

Who Are the Independent Voters?

Another notable feature of the by-election was the decisive role of independent voters, who constitute a sizable portion of the Korean electorate. Monthly opinion surveys conducted by the Asan Institute since January 2011 revealed that 30% to 40% of respondents claimed no party affiliation. In general, supporters of the GNP consist of 30% of all respondents and the supporters of the Democratic Party fluctuate around 20%. Considering the number of unaffiliated voters, their role will be significant in deciding the 2012 elections.

In the exit poll conducted following the mayoral by-election, we noted several characteristics of independent voters. According to the poll, 51.5% of independent voters were in their twenties or thirties. By contrast, there was a large drop-off as the age of respondents increased beyond that range. Those in their fifties and sixties only comprised 17.6% of independent voters.

With regard to education, those who had achieved a university degree or higher made up an overwhelming percentage of independent voters (78.4%), while 21.6% had only finished high school. Unsurprisingly, independent white-collar workers were the largest segment of independent voters, comprising 37.4% of the group.

Of course, simply identifying oneself as an independent does not necessarily mean that the respondent does not have conservative or progressive leanings. When questioned on ideology, 29.9% of independents stated they were progressive, 14.4% stated they were conservative, and 55.7% responded that they were middle-of-the-road. Respondents were also asked about their opinion on the free lunch program to further measure their ideological position. Approximately 56% of independents approved of the free lunch program for all students, while 44% of them approved of a selective free lunch program. This suggests that the independents are more likely to agree with the ideas of progressives than the ideas of conservatives.

Accordingly, independents disproportionately shifted toward Park in the most recent mayoral election. When respondents eligible to vote in the previous local election were asked who they had voted for between Oh Se-Hoon and Han Myung-Sook, 29.7% of independents answered that they voted for Oh, while 36.8% had voted for Han, the opposition candidate. This time, 69.7% of independents said that they voted for Park and only 29.8% voted for Na,

demonstrating a huge increase in that gap. The gap increases even further when it comes to a hypothetical presidential election. Of independent respondents, 40.7% stated that they would vote for the opposition party's candidate, only 5.6% stated they would vote for the GNP's candidate, and 53.7% remain undecided. Does this mean that independents have significantly shifted and are willing to shift further toward the left?

The above results raise a question: exactly how independent are the independents? Since they are not bound by party affiliation, it is expected that vote inconsistency should be higher in independents. Nonetheless, they maintain rather consistent voting behavior. When asked about their voting choices in the 2007 presidential election, the 2010 Seoul mayoral election, and the 2011 Seoul mayoral by-election, 71.6% of independents responded that they had voted consistently. That is, they had either voted for the GNP candidate in all three elections or the non-GNP candidate in all three elections. Only 28% of independent voters indicated a real possibility of switching votes. More specifically, 25% of all independent voters had consistently supported the GNP and 47% had consistently supported opposition parties.

Considering the fact that independents hail mostly from the younger generations, are highly educated, more likely than other voters to be white-collar workers, ideologically moderate or progressive, and with a sizable portion voting consistently for non-GNP candidates, it is inaccurate to portray them as a swing electorate. Rather, they are a potential voting bloc for the progressives. This implies that they remain independent because they have not yet found a progressive party or candidate to whom they are attracted. Once a suitable progressive candidate appears, it is likely that a sizable portion of current independents will migrate to that candidate's party.

The Ahn Chul Soo Syndrome

The most scintillating subject in the upcoming election is the so-called Ahn Chul-Soo effect. As soon as he burst onto the political scene, he received almost 50% of public support to become Seoul mayor. Even in a hypothetical presidential race against Park Geun-Hye, Ahn is not a clear underdog. To the contrary, some polls show him leading in a contest with her. The fact that a political newcomer could suddenly receive substantial support demonstrates how weak the political party system is in Korea and how disappointed the Korean electorate is with the current political elite.

The analysis of independents offers us a lens through which to investigate the Ahn Chul-Soo syndrome. The exit poll asked respondents if they would be willing to support a new party led by Ahn. A plurality of respondents in their twenties (43.2%), thirties (50.9%), and forties (46.3%), stated that they would. Support is particularly noticeable among white-collar workers and student groups. The socio-demographic cohort quite conforms to that of independents.

To be sure, GNP supporters do not approve of a new party headed by Ahn (9.8%). Nevertheless, independents are much more willing to support Ahn's party (46.2% support,

16.6% do not support, 37.2% undecided). Surprisingly, a majority of Democratic Party supporters (60.4%) answered that they would also be willing to support Ahn's party. Only 16.1% stated that they would not be willing to do so. This is a striking finding that clearly shows how unsatisfied Democratic Party supporters are with their party and how ready they are to switch to a candidate—even an independent—who seems more promising.

Indeed, according to the Asan Institute's monthly polls, it was not Park Geun-Hye but rather other opposition candidates whose standings were hurt by Ahn Chul-Soo's appearance. In the September and October surveys, Park's presidential support was near 31%, only 3% to 4% lower than in previous months. However, all of the presidential hopefuls from the opposition coalition, such as Son Hak-Kyu, Yoo Si-Min, and Moon Jae-In, saw their support halve in September and October. One of the top opposition candidates, Son Hak-Kyu, was polling at 7.2% in August, a month before Ahn entered the picture. In September, Son polled at 4.0%. So, while Park did indeed take a 3 to 4 point loss, so did all of the other candidates. These losses were all gains for Ahn, who entered the polls with 23.3%.

The results also strongly suggest that the conservatives have a very clear idea of who their candidate will be in the presidential election, whereas the progressives do not. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the non-GNP supporters are already frustrated with the pool of possible candidates. This overall dissatisfaction also serves to explain Park Geun-Hye's lead in the polls. While a significant proportion of the electorate—including a sizable number of independents—is ready to support a non-GNP candidate in the next presidential election, a candidate that can galvanize the public has not yet emerged. Ahn Chul-Soo may very well be that candidate.

In conclusion, Ahn Chul-Soo can be a threatening figure to both sides. His presence and popularity among GNP opponents and those who are most willing to support the opposition party's candidate in the next presidential election represent a major threat to other presidential hopefuls from the opposition. In fact, he is arguably more of a threat to them than he is to Park Geun-Hye. Nonetheless, it does not follow that the solid conservative bloc can be assured of Park's electoral success. The potential Mr. Ahn demonstrated thus far in his meteoric political career simply confirms that progressives and independents, which together represent more than 50% of the electorate, ardently desire—and are ready to support—any qualified new figure that can wrest power away from the GNP. In other words, it is quite understandable if the GNP and Madam Park fervently hope not to hear any more of Ahn Chul-Soo until after December 2012.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies



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