

Analysis of the 4.27 Special Election Results and the 2012 Presidential Election

KIM Jiyeon
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

The special election held on April 27, 2011 to fill 38 vacant positions in district assemblies, the National Assembly and governors, could not have been more intriguing for scholars whose research focuses on elections and party politics. This election, held during President Lee's fourth year in office, drew much attention as it could potentially predict future leadership of the state and even the result of next year's presidential election. In particular, the results gathered more attention as many prominent political and public figures ran in the special election.

The constituency that received the most attention by far was Bundang Eul, where the leader of the Democratic Party (DP) SOHN Hak-gyu and the former Grand National Party (GNP) leader KANG Jae-sup ran as opponents. Other areas that gathered national interest were Gimhae Eul, where the People's Participation Party's (PPP) Gyeongsangnam-do leader LEE Bong-su and former governor and prime minister candidate KIM Tae-ho ran against each other, and the gubernatorial election where former CEOs of Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), OHM Ki-young and CHOI Moon-soon ran as candidates. When SOHN Hak-gyu prevailed in Bundang Eul, previously considered as a constituency where the victory for the GNP was undisputed, it became the leading sensation of the special election. In the Gangwon gubernatorial election, GNP's OHM Ki-Young unexpectedly lost to CHOI Moon-soon. In Gimhae Eul, LEE Bong-su, the only opposition party candidate to run, lost his 20% lead to KIM Tae-ho.

The April special election's unexpected results caused quite a stir. PPP's leader RHYU Si-min lost in Gimhae Eul; former President ROH Moo-hyun's hometown and where the Uri Party and the Democratic Party (DP) gained victory in the previous general election. The former governor of Gyeongsangnam-do KIM Tae-ho's victory was especially meaningful in that he established his way back into the world of politics. For OHM, who ran for Gangwon's governorship, earlier criticisms of lacking a firm political identity seemed fitting and it was evident from his appearance in a TV

discussion that he is yet deficient to be a professional politician. Moreover, it is doubtful whether he can recover from negative publicity he received from participating in an illegal election campaign by utilizing call centers.

However, the person who gained the most advantage among all the candidates was definitely SOHN Hak-gyu, who rose to instant political success. He was victorious in Bundang - a city referred to as 'Gangnam of Gyeonggi' where the GNP has a strong foothold - despite being a member of the DP. Bundang Eul is a constituency where the current Presidential Chief of Staff and a member of the GNP, LIM Tae-hee won with 71% of the vote in the 2008 Parliamentary elections. In 2004, this was the constituency in which LIM won with more than 13,000 votes despite the impeachment scandal and the Uri Party having national support. Simply said, since the formation of constituencies, the GNP has never lost in Bundang.

In light of SOHN's unexpected victory, those in political circles offered many analyses. The media and many analysts believed that the white collar group, mostly in their 30s and 40s and showing a strong antipathy toward the current LEE administration, actively participated in voting and may have determined the results of the election. It was their own way of critiquing the GNP, the ruling party, and the LEE administration for failing to effectively deal with problems such as high gas prices, unstable prices of goods, lack of housing and other economic problems.

In fact, Bundang has a larger proportion of people in their 30s and 40s compared to other areas. According to the 2010 findings from Korean Statistical Information Service, the Bundang area's population of people in their 30s and 40s was 177,868, totaling 37% of the population. This is a bit higher than the national average of 34.1% and Seoul's average of 35.1%. In the Asan Institute of Policy Studies' monthly survey of presidential job approval ratings conducted in April, President LEE's average approval rating was 36.6%. Among different age groups, those in their 20s, 30s and 40s showed the lowest approval rating. Among voters in their 30s, President LEE's approval rating was the lowest with 25.9%; voters in their 40s had an approval rating of 30.1%. The number is very low compared to the approval rating of voters in their 60s, which was 60.4%. President LEE's approval rating fluctuated considerably for different job categories, levels of education and levels of income. He received the least support from the group that had high levels of education (29.4%), white collar workers (26.7%) and the middle-class with an income of 4,000,000-5,000,000 won a month (24.9%).

On a related note, Bundang Eul's high turnout rate is also important. In this election, many predictions were made as a result of Bundang Eul's high turnout rate. The DP interpreted this to mean more active participation by young voters, who tend to have pro-opposition party tendencies. The GNP stated that, as seen in the Eunpyeong re-elections, high turnout rates do not necessarily indicate better results for the opposition party, and they have expected the conservatives to rally. Bundang Eul's final turnout rate was 49.1%, which was record-breaking for re-elections. Turnout rate per hour for Bundang Eul showed a similar pattern to Suwon Jangan's parliamentary re-elections in 2009. Turnout rate up until 9 a.m., the start of the workday, was over 20%, but more importantly the after-work hour (7-8 p.m.) turnout rate also reached almost 20%. This is a rare phenomenon in other constituencies' re-elections. This shows that young 'necktie units' that tend to be pro-opposition party were actively involved.

However, Bundang's unexpected poll results are not necessarily solely due to the younger voters' active participation. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies' monthly survey results between January and April show that 40 and 50 year-olds were most likely to shift their position in support for the president. In particular, voters in their 50s were most likely to shift their position; support rating in January was 55.6% but in April, the number drastically dropped to 38.5%. It is astonishing that the 50s age group, traditionally known to have a high support rate for the GNP and President LEE only had a support rate of 38.5%. The fact that the shift in general public's attitude is not just limited to the younger generations, but spreading to older generations as well is a worrisome fact for the GNP and President LEE.

Examining the election results in each of the administrative districts in Bundang, it appears that there is an overall alienation of public sentiment and a judgmental tendency toward the government. During the last year's June 2nd gubernatorial election of Gyeonggi province, RHYU Si-min, a representative candidate for the opposition party, did not prevail in any of the Bundang districts and lost to the GNP candidate KIM Moon-Su. RHYU was only behind by 0.3% of the votes in Jung-ja 2 dong and next closest result was in Gumi 1-dong, where he was behind by 7%. During this special election, SOHN Hak-gyu outpaced his opposing candidate KANG Jae-Sup in all of the districts except Jungja 1-dong, where most residents are in the upper class, and lost by 11% of the vote.

In fact, Jungja 1-dong is where Governor KIM Moon-su triumphed over RHYU Si-min

with at least 30% more of the votes. This evinces that even where there is a strong advantage for the GNP, the difference between the ruling and opposition parties have narrowed considerably. SOHN won with the most lead in Jungja 2-dong and Gumi 1-dong over KANG; 17% and 10% respectively. It seems as though even the constituency with the strongest pro-ruling party tendencies, Jungja 1-dong and other pro-ruling party constituencies such as Jungja 2-dong and Gumi 1-dong joined the rest of Bundang in their verdict against the GNP.

Legitimacy is not the only crucial factor in the special election process, as human character also plays an important role. Such is the case with SOHN Hak-gyu: his clear-cut modern human character attracted many votes from the younger population of Bundang. Bundang is a region mainly composed of highly educated, white-collar workers. Thus, it is not surprising that SOHN's character, representing the image of professionals in Political Science and the intelligentsia was more appealing to the voting public than is the character of the preceding representative KANG Jae-sup, who served five years in the same region of Daegu and was absent in the political arena for nearly three years. The two candidates' campaign strategies also differed greatly. Whereas SOHN effectively communicated with the Bundang residents by promoting enhancement of the middle class welfare, KANG only offered the same old "eradicate the leftist influence" strategy, merely reinforcing his old-school image. However, such left-right arguments were a wrong campaign strategy to utilize in such a time when Korea is facing economic slowdown and problems with job creation.

When Representative SOHN won the election, he was finally able to thwart his 'peddler' image that has tailed him since his service in the GNP. Moreover, the fact that SOHN was able to win over the Bundang region, also known as the backyard of the GNP, as a DP candidate, can only bode good will in his future candidacy in the upcoming presidential election.

On the other hand, the effect of the election loss at Gimhae Eul, the birthplace of the former President ROH Moo-hyun, where the PPP candidate LEE Bong-soo lost to the GNP candidate Kim Tae-ho, is estimated to be quite influential in representative RHYU Si-min's election campaign. The plan that the PPP's very first inroad into the National Assembly is to be held at Gimhae is considered meaningful because Gimhae is the 'sacred homeland' of former President RHO. Moreover, this progress is understood as an essential step in the unification process of the opposition parties in next year's presidential election, as a candidate in the National Assembly can

interact with the pro-ROH figures in the GNP and prepare a foundation for a favorable position in the negotiation process with the said party.

However, during the process of unification among opposition candidates, the PPP had conflicts with the ROH loyalists of the DP—former Prime Minister LEE Hae-chan, former Prime Minister HAN Myeong-sook, and Supreme Council Member LEE In-young—and some NGOs. The PPP's defeat in the special election, even after making KIM Kyung-su give up his candidacy and replacing him with LEE Bong-su, manifested the party's incompetence. Given that PPP Chairman RHYU Si-min, a sole candidate of the opposition party, had also lost against current Governor KIM Moon-soo in last year's local election, one can see that the PPP does not hold too much power among the opposition parties yet. Through the party's defeat in Gimhae Eul, The PPP members should reflect deeply on the party's popularity and extensionality.

As a highly probable candidate for the upcoming presidential election, the PPP's chairman RHYU Si-min must have realized through the election results that becoming a popular politician is a better strategy than simply relying on a small number of supporters. The fact that the party even lost in an election that took place in former President ROH's hometown demonstrates that even the constituents who were highly loyal to ROH do not recognize RHYU Si-min as a well-qualified successor of ROH. If RHYU Si-min, even when associated with ROH, had failed in Gimhae, it is highly likely that he will fail in other provinces. The PPP needs to develop a popular image of RHYU Si-min and must make an effort to persuade his opposition, for victory in presidential election cannot be easily won through simple fan loyalty.

Lastly, the person who must be the most troubled is the former GNP Chairwoman PARK Geun-hye. The GNP's defeat in this special election will hurt the LEE loyalists and hasten the lame duck politics of the Blue House. However, how this situation will affect PARK is a question left to be answered.

This also can be considered in relation to the DP Chairman SOHN Hak-gyu's stronghold of Bundang, because his victory represents the voting trends of the electorates of the capital region. The GNP's defeat in the region forecast difficulties for the GNP in the April 2012 general election. With the resignation of their chairman AHN Sang-soo, the GNP clearly needs to reorganize its leadership and newly establish a powerful leader. Even if we disregard the party's inner rule regarding the separation of presidential candidate and party chairman, there are three other main

factors that make it hard for former GNP Chairwoman PARK to run for presidency. First of all, it is too much of a burden for PARK to officially come forth to the April 2012 general election. Although GNP's victory in this election is crucial for winning the December 2012 presidential election, PARK would not want to take the risky path, given that the election is taking place during the last year of the president's term.

Secondly, it is far too early for PARK to assume the leadership. PARK—whose previous multiple attempts to run for presidency and never succeeded—would not want to make the mistake of making the electorates feel fatigued or fed up with her image by entering the battle too early. As the first candidate, she should wait for the right time to appear to the public by refraining from exposure until the presidential race actually begins.

Finally, whether the GNP lawmakers in the greater Seoul area would wish for and approve of PARK Geun-hye take a leadership role is another question. According to the Asan Institute for Policy Studies' monthly survey, PARK relatively received the lowest approval rating in the capital region, excluding the Honam area. Given that DP Chairman SOHN Hak-kyu earned support from the so called the "Gangnam of Gyeonggi-do," the GNP lawmakers in the central region would desire a strong leadership that rivals that of SOHN. If so, PARK Geun-hye is not the most appropriate figure. Yet, it is also difficult to let another member of the party ameliorate the political situation and successfully increase his or her clout for the next presidential election because this might eliminate the chance of a rise of a highly influential rival that is essential to the party.

Through this special election, SOHN Hak-Kyu has emerged as the foremost presidential candidate in the opposition parties. The worst case scenario is starting to unfold for the GNP, which wanted a prolonged power struggle between former minister RHYU Si-min and chairman SOHN Hak-Kyu. In the monthly survey conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, respondents were asked about which party candidate they will support in the upcoming presidential elections. In January, the opposition party took the lead over the ruling GNP by a small percentage which was within the margin of error. However, when respondents were asked the same question in April, the difference between the ruling GNP and the opposition party was greatly increased to 10 percent. This means that a considerable percentage of people who chose not to reply in the January survey shifted their position to an anti-GNP stance in support of the opposition party's candidate. Whereas the distinct lead of PARK Geun-hye was assisted in part by the absence of a viable presidential

candidate on the opposition party's side, this special election has given rise to an opposition party candidate with a lot of potential. In conclusion, the appearance of SOHN Hak-Kyu, who received national spotlight as the foremost opposition party candidate, will put considerable pressure on the GNP.

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

KIM Jiyoan is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Kim received her B.A. in Political Science and Diplomacy from Yonsei University, M.P.P. in Public Policy from the University of California, Berkeley, and Ph.D. in Political Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Prior to joining the Asan Institute, she was a lecturer at Concordia University, Sookmyung Women's University, and Chungang University. She was also a postdoctoral research fellow at the Université de Montréal. Her research interests include elections and voting behavior, political economy, distributive politics in multiethnic societies, American political development, political methodology, and Korean politics. Recent publications include, "Political Judgment, Perceptions of Facts, and Partisan Effects" (*Electoral Studies*, 2010), and "Public Spending, Public Deficits, and Government Coalition" (*Electoral Studies*, 2010).