



Complex and Confusing: Public Opinion Reaction to the NIS Scandals

Kim Jiyoan and Karl Friedhoff

Research Fellow and Program Officer
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Scandal, Truth, & Politics

Discerning truth from politics is never an easy task, and it was impossible in June and July, 2013 in South Korea. Two major scandals—one involving the Northern Limit Line (NLL) and the other involving the National Intelligence Service (NIS) meddling in the 2012 presidential election—came to the fore with the NIS serving as a common thread between them. The investigations revealed multiple violations of the law, but the timeline and cast of characters was opaque. Unsurprisingly, the country's major political parties used these scandals to attack one another, hoping to deflect any negative public opinion in the direction of their political rivals. However, the complexity of these scandals and the cynicism of the South Korean public prevented any significant movement in terms of public opinion.

The parties reached an awkward status quo in early August, unable to gain or lose ground in terms of public support. But this did not stop them from partaking in an ugly race to the bottom. This race, interestingly enough, did not hurt the job approv-

al rating of President Park Geun-Hye, and it may have helped Ahn Cheol-Soo, the 2017 presidential hopeful. While neither made grand political gestures or speeches, they stayed above the fray allowing the two parties to demonstrate why the National Assembly is the least trusted institution in the country.

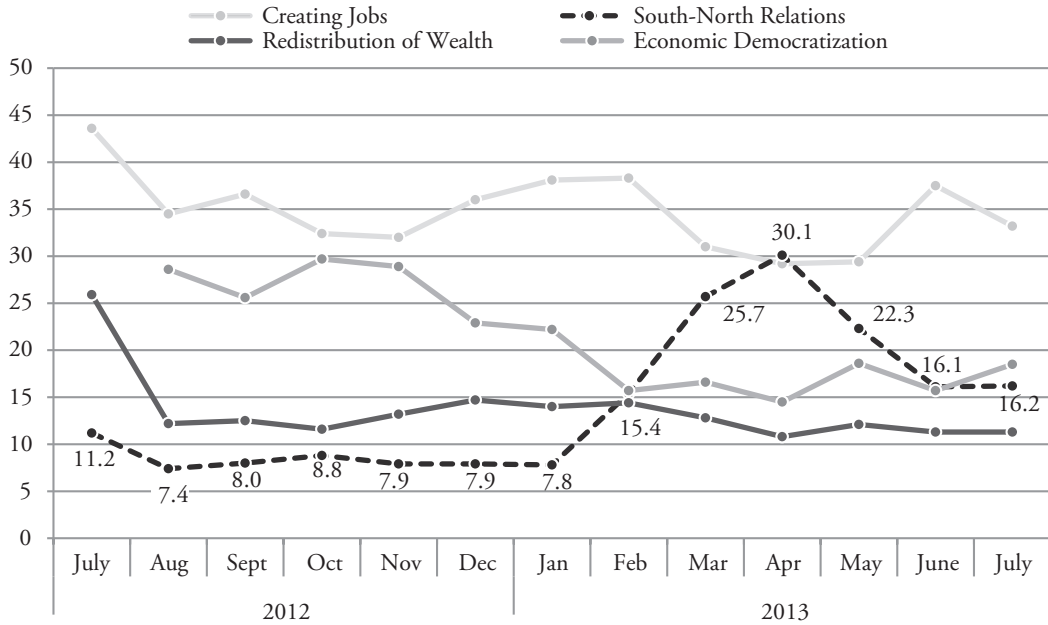
A Scandal of Choice

The first scandal began in October 2012—just two months before the presidential election—when members of the Saenuri Party claimed that former president Roh Moo-Hyun had disavowed the NLL at his 2007 summit with Kim Jong-Il. To back this claim, party members cited a then-secret transcript of the meeting in which President Roh is said to have made the statements. Of course, the timing of these claims created speculation that this was an attempt to smear Moon Jae-In, the Democratic [United] Party’s (DP) presidential candidate and President Roh’s former chief of staff. But the fact that Saenuri had ostensibly seen this transcript raised serious procedural questions. Chief among them: Why did members of the Saenuri Party have access to what was supposed to be classified material? All signs pointed to a leak from the NIS.

Revealing the transcript now looks like a miscalculation on the part of the Saenuri Party. First, it failed to dent the presidential hopes of Mr. Moon, as issues related to North Korea played no part whatsoever in the presidential election. As shown in Figure 1, South-North relations were one of the least important issues to the South Korean public in October and had been for months. More importantly, the disclosure of the secret transcript broadened suspicion that the NIS was interfering in the presidential election and spurred the uncovering of the second scandal.

By mid-November, rumors had already surfaced in Seoul that a bureau within the NIS was tasked with creating favorable public opinion for Moon Jae-In as it would be easier for Park Geun-Hye to defeat him than Ahn Cheol-Soo. While the above scenario was not uncovered by the subsequent investigation, it was seemingly an open secret that some type of NIS interference was taking place. Despite the initial investigation concluding that no meddling took place—a conclusion reached due to interference in the investigation directed by the then-Seoul chief of police—a subsequent investigation did uncover NIS activities.

Figure 1. Most Salient Issues to the Korean Public

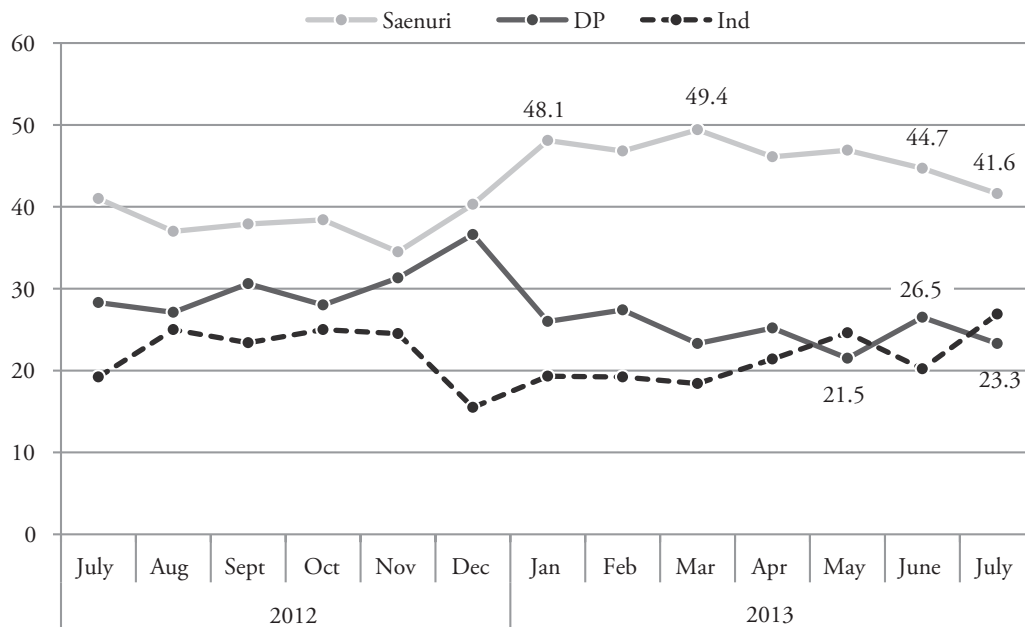


The exact involvement of Saenuri Party members is not yet clear—and it may never be—but neither party was punished in the court of public opinion. Since the December presidential election, support for the Saenuri Party was elevated and sustained (Figure 2). However, not too much should be made of its decline from a high of 49.4% in March to 41.6% in July. This looks more like a regression to the mean rather than the party being punished for its role in the scandal. Moreover, there was no continued decline. In early August support remained in the mid-40s.

For its part, the DP was at rock bottom since losing the presidential election, and speculation about its ultimate demise abounded. Yet, it has also managed to continue on unscathed. Since January, there was no significant change in the level of party support, and its supporters dug in, unwilling to abandon their party.

Not to be forgotten throughout this was Ahn Cheol-Soo. Now a member of the National Assembly, Dr. Ahn was quiet throughout this process. He allowed the two main parties to clearly demonstrate why his presence in politics is necessary in a way that Dr. Ahn himself never could. These episodes will only serve to strengthen his

Figure 2. Party Support



platform as he forms his own party and begins a serious run at the presidency in 2017.

Complexity and Confusion

Why the Saenuri Party raised the issue in the first place remains unknown, but the game did not appear to play out the way its members anticipated. Asan polling indicates that views of the scandal seem to break down along party lines, but a high degree of confusion remained for the Korean public.

Numerous studies have confirmed that the public has a limited level of sophistication with regard to political knowledge. When an issue is simple and thoroughly discussed in the public sphere, people are ready and able to express their opinions. However, in cases where the subject matter is complex and no clear narrative exists within the public realm, people rely on the opinions of political elites, parties, and the journalists that they trust.¹ This is particularly true on subjects related to national security, an issue which divides the South Korean public along ideological and partisan lines.

When viewing the top-line findings, it looks at first glance as though the partisan line was upheld. While 40.6% of all respondents stated agreement with the Saenuri position—that Roh’s NLL comments should be investigated—33.7% agreed with the DP position that this was a political maneuver plotted by the NIS and the Saenuri Party to distract from the NIS involvement in the December 2012 presidential election.² But it is important to note that more than one-fifth (21.2%) responded as “don’t know” (DK). Overall, this roughly aligns with party support, illustrated previously in Figure 2. However, on this issue it is important to look at the breakdowns among party supporters.

As illustrated in Table 1, among those who supported the Saenuri Party, 57.5% agreed with the party position, while 15.2% sided with the DP. But notably, nearly one-quarter of Saenuri Party supporters identified as DKs. On the DP side, 60.4% sided with their party, while 26.2% sided with the Saenuri position. The fact that there was such significant cross-over, as well as a high proportion of DKs illustrates the confusion surrounding the issue.

Table 1

	Saenuri	DP	DK
Total	40.6	33.7	21.2
Saenuri	57.5	15.2	24.1
DP	26.2	60.4	12.2
Independent	25.0	40.3	26.5

Both parties called for a full disclosure of the transcript, albeit for very different reasons. However, a search at the National Archives—where the original transcript was supposed to be stored as an electronic file—turned up nothing. Speculation about where that file is now and who put it there has sparked rumors that will not be recounted here. However, it is important to note that the move by the parties to disclose the transcript was not made at the behest of the public. In fact, the public was largely split in late June on what should be done with the document in ques-

tion. While 31.6% thought the entire transcript should be disclosed, 33.2% of respondents stated that it should remain classified.³ While 21.1% favored revealing only part of the document, 13.0% were DKs. Such a spread is not surprising given the confusion previously documented, but clearly no public consensus was reached.

When broken down by party affiliation (Table 2), it becomes clear that respondents did not toe the party line. Instead, they were split between keeping the document classified and disclosing it in its entirety. There was relatively little appetite for revealing only part of the transcript. Also notable is that among Saenuri supporters—a group famous for their unwavering support of the party—29.4% opposed disclosing the document and 13.9% identified as DKs.

Table 2

	Partly disclose	Disclose the whole document	Do not disclose	DK
Total	21.1	31.6	33.2	13.0
Saenuri	22.2	33.5	29.4	13.9
DP	21.1	33.0	41.2	4.4
Independent	19.3	26.8	30.9	20.2

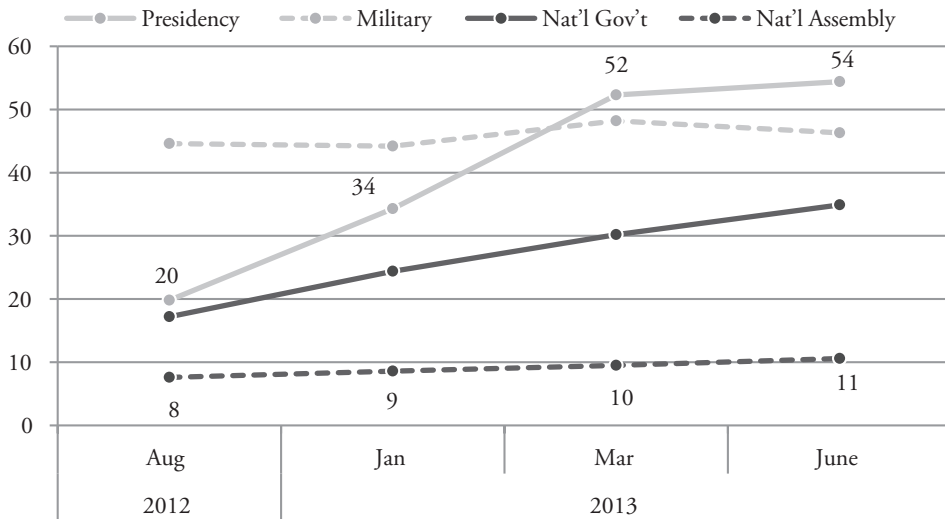
The take away is that after such a fierce political battle, the public remained as it was—confused. The NLL itself is too intricate an issue for the public to understand and the addition of the controversy over the confidentiality of the summit documents complicates it even more. Furthermore, the target of accusation is the late president Roh Moo-Hyun, and accusing him has proved a complicating factor in the whole affair. What can be said with some certainty is that the debate on the NLL did not work the way in which the Saenuri Party expected. Instead, both parties arrived at a tacit understanding to chalk the dispute up to much ado about nothing. It left them both deeply scarred but able to move forward.

Quo Vadis, National Assembly?

The question that remains is what happens to both parties and, more broadly, the National Assembly. Although the phenomenon is not exclusive to Korea, the lack of confidence in the National Assembly is palpable. Since the Asan Institute began tracking confidence in institutions, the National Assembly has continually been seen as the least trusted institution (Figure 3).⁴

There have long been calls for the Blue House to wield less power over the governing process, and those calls came from all corners and from the National Assembly, in particular. However, the recent spate of scandals has done little to present the National Assembly as able to take on a greater role in governing the country. Instead, its members continue to pigeon-hole themselves as the sideshow to the Blue House. With President Park now leading the country, and her approval ratings virtually unaffected by the scandal, the Blue House remains the single-most trusted institution, and the only institution in which a majority of South Koreans express confidence.

Figure 3. Confidence in Institutions



Despite these scandals, it is impossible not to notice just how far South Korea has come. It was only a generation ago that the KCIA—the notorious forerunner to the NIS—struck fear into the hearts of progressive South Koreans due to its spying, coercion, and torture. By contrast, it now attempts to influence public opinion through posts on Internet message boards.

This is in no way meant to minimize the seriousness of an intelligence agency actively meddling in domestic politics—these are actions that strike at the very heart of democracy and are reminiscent of the world’s remaining political backwaters. But what remains curious is that the activities of the NIS did not yield the kind of public outcry one might expect considering how seriously the South Korean public generally guards its democratic principles.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect is the apathy of the Korean public. This kind of apathy raises concerns about the loss of political efficacy in Korea. The Asan Institute’s Annual Survey in 2012 indicates 55.1% of Koreans thought politicians were not interested in what ordinary citizens think, and 34% were skeptical of the people’s power to change politics.

Even though this was much more complex than the ordinary scandal in Korea, with significant confusion over what laws were broken and how severe the punishments should be, citizens have come to expect this from politicians. But the prospect for real reform is minimal. Neither party was punished by public opinion, and neither budged from its position.

In the end, the parties were unable to agree on even who should testify before the National Assembly in hearings related to the matter, not to mention a set of serious reforms. Considering that the parliamentary special committee charged with investigating the NIS scandal should conclude by August 23, it is obvious that the NIS and NLL disputes will be remembered as one absurd mishap.

Methodology of the Surveys

The sample size of each survey was 1,000 respondents over the age of 19. The surveys were conducted by Research & Research, and the margin of error is $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level. All surveys employed the Random Digit Dialing method for mobile and landline telephones.

This report is a product of the Public Opinion Studies Center at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. To subscribe to The Center's reports please contact Karl Friedhoff at klf@asaninst.org.

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1. The work of John Zaller explores this extensively.
 2. Survey conducted June 22-24.
 3. Survey conducted June 22-24.
 4. The increase in confidence for the presidency is a result of the “honeymoon”, as it clearly began to take hold even before President Park was in office.



Kim Jiyeon is a research fellow and the director of the Public Opinion Studies Center 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 postdoctoral research fellow at Université de Montréal. Her research interests include elections and voting behavior, American politics, political methodology. Recent publications include “Political judgment, perceptions of facts, and partisan effects” (*Electoral Studies*, 2010), and “Public spending, public deficits, and government coalition” (*Political Studies*, 2010).



Karl Friedhoff is a program officer in the Public Opinion Studies Center at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. He is also a Mansfield Foundation U.S.-Korea Nexus Scholar. Prior to joining the Asan Institute, he was a program assistant at the Institute for Global Economics in Seoul. His work has been cited by the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. His opinion pieces have appeared in the Korea Herald and the *JoongAng Daily*, and he is an occasional contributor to the *Wall Street Journal* blog, Korea Real Time. He has appeared on the BBC covering South Korean domestic politics and elections, he is a regular commentator on Korean domestic politics for Arirang TV, and has a regular segment titled “Public Eye” on TBS eFM. He earned his B.A. in political science at Wittenberg University and an M.A. in international commerce at Seoul National University.



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