

THE IMPACT OF REGIONALISM ON THE PARTY SYSTEM OF THE
REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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Annotation: This article examines the enduring impact of regionalism on the party system of the Republic of Korea, analyzing its historical roots, institutional manifestations, and continuing influence on contemporary political dynamics. Tracing regional antagonisms back to the era of the Three Kingdoms, the study highlights the long-standing rivalry between the Honam (southwest) and Yeongnam (southeast) regions as a defining feature of South Korean politics. The analysis demonstrates how regional identity shapes electoral preferences, with voters consistently favoring candidates from their own areas regardless of ideological alignment. This tendency reinforces the fragmentation of the party system, impedes the emergence of nationwide political institutions, and influences state personnel policies, where appointments often reflect regional considerations. The study also explores key turning points in modern South Korean politics, including the 1997 election of Kim Dae-jung, the 2007 victory of Lee Myung-bak, and the highly contested presidential elections of 2022 and 2025. These cases reveal both the persistence and gradual transformation of regionalism under conditions of electoral volatility, socio-economic change, and growing distrust of political elites. The findings suggest that while regionalism continues to distort political representation and perpetuate social divisions, it remains a decisive factor in electoral outcomes and party competition in South Korea.

Keywords: South Korea, Republic of Korea, regionalism, party system, electoral behavior, Honam, Yeongnam, political polarization.

Introduction.

In the political system of the Republic of Korea, the factor of regionalism has traditionally been strong, manifesting itself as a key determinant shaping the main actors of the country's contemporary political life. Some researchers trace the roots of regionalism in South Korea back to the early first millennium, namely to the era of the "Three Kingdoms." They draw parallels between the ancient struggle for hegemony over the peninsula between the two Korean states of Baekje and Silla and the modern antagonism between Honam and Yeongnam.

The struggle for power in the country has mainly unfolded between representatives of two regions:

- The southwestern region - Honam (including North Jeolla Province, South Jeolla Province, and the city of Gwangju),
- The southeastern region - Yeongnam (including North Gyeongsang Province, South Gyeongsang Province, and the cities of Busan and Daegu).

Voters from these regions usually cast their ballots for candidates and parties originating from their own area. For example, Honam has served as the main political base for left-center parties, whereas the vast majority of Yeongnam's population supports right-wing conservative forces and their leaders.

The renowned Russian Korea specialist Konstantin Asmolov emphasizes that the concept of "regional" should not be understood only in geographical terms. South Korean society has a strongly developed corporatism, particularly visible in the form of "classmate associations". For example, in the military sphere, these associations are formed by graduates of the military academy in a given year, while in civilian life they emerge from prestigious universities' alumni networks. This practice often leads to the erosion of professionalism in governance, attracts criticism, and is considered to provide opportunities for abuse of power.

One example is the presidency of Kim Young-sam, whose administration ended on a negative note. His personnel policy errors were largely linked to favoring individuals from his native city of Busan. Similarly, Kim Dae-jung was criticized for prioritizing personal loyalty over professional competence when appointing individuals to high positions, which left him vulnerable to attacks when incompetent appointees committed mistakes.

This practice is so widespread that the government has traditionally tried to take into account the birthplace of newly appointed figures so as not to provoke regional tensions. For this reason, representatives of Jeolla or Gyeongsang have rarely been appointed as Prime Minister. Similarly, the election of Roh Moo-hyun, a native of Yeongnam, as leader of the Democratic Millennium Party symbolized not so much his personal attempt to gain leadership in a "foreign" region, but rather his party's effort to present itself as free from regionalism.

For fifty years, the path to high politics remained closed to natives of Honam. Even under favorable circumstances, a candidate from this region could hardly hope for more than 30–35 percent of the votes nationwide, relying only on his local base. Victory in presidential elections was possible only through alliances with strong candidates from other regions. Nevertheless, when the domestic political climate turned unfavorable for the ruling elite,

opposition representatives from marginalized regions could seize power. Thus, in 1997, for the first time, a native of Honam, Kim Dae-jung, was elected President of the Republic of Korea.

Kim Dae-jung's victory in the 1997 presidential election can be explained by two main factors:

- his electoral alliance with Kim Jong-pil, a charismatic leader from Chungcheong Province,
- internal divisions within the ruling Grand National Party.

Despite ideological and political differences, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-pil formed an alliance. While Kim Dae-jung enjoyed stable support in his home region of Honam, he could not secure sufficient votes beyond its borders. Kim Jong-pil's voter base in Chungcheong was relatively small, but a coalition was his only path forward, since the main axis of political competition lay between Jeolla and Gyeongsang. To strengthen his role in government formation, Kim Jong-pil proposed an electoral coalition with a party that supported a transition to a parliamentary system. Other candidates rejected this idea, but Kim Dae-jung, seeing it as his last chance, agreed.

Support from Chungcheong voters proved decisive for Kim Dae-jung's victory. Voting patterns in the 1997 election varied sharply by region. In Jeolla (Honam), Kim Dae-jung won overwhelming support, whereas his rival Lee Hoi-chang garnered only 1.7% in Gwangju, 4.5% in North Jeolla, and 3.2% in South Jeolla. Honam voters are famous for uniting behind their "favorite son" Kim Dae-jung, feeling discriminated against during the administrations of Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan, Roh Tae-woo, and Kim Young-sam, all of whom were from Yeongnam. Moreover, the people of Gwangju never forgot how their resistance was brutally suppressed in 1980 when General Chun seized power by military force.

The distinctive feature of that election was the voting in Chungcheong and Gyeongsang Provinces, which had traditionally supported the ruling bloc. In 1997, however, these areas split their support between Lee Hoi-chang and Lee In-je. Factional disputes within the Grand National Party, formed by the 1990 merger of three parties, exacerbated divisions along lines of former political identity. Lee In-je performed relatively well in his native Chungcheong, but Kim Jong-pil ultimately dominated there. This division of votes created the favorable conditions for Kim Dae-jung to succeed on his fourth presidential attempt.

Although Kim Dae-jung was internationally recognized as a champion of democracy, his administration faced heavy criticism for openly favoring regionalism in high-level appointments. Many key government and state corporation posts, including in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were filled by individuals from Honam. The proportion of politicians from

Honam in top positions rose sharply from 14% to 27%, while the share from Yeongnam fell from 45% to 25%.

In parliamentary elections, most candidates had ties to their constituencies by birth or other factors, and voting reflected the regional bases of parties or their leaders. Regionalism became a decisive factor in voter choice. In the 2000 parliamentary elections, each major party had a clear regional base:

1. The Grand National Party - in the southeastern Gyeongsang region,
2. The Democratic Party - in the southwestern Jeolla region,
3. The United Liberal Democrats - in the central Chungcheong region.

The fact that neither the Grand National Party nor the Democratic Party won any seats in each other's regions underscores the strength of regionalism in the Republic of Korea.

Regionalism plays a decisive role in both presidential and parliamentary elections. Kim Dae-jung's victory in 1997 was largely ensured by his alliance with Kim Jong-pil, which gave him access to Chungcheong's votes. In the 2000 parliamentary elections, too, regional loyalties in Honam and Yeongnam shaped the results.

Although Kim Dae-jung promised to reduce regionalism during his presidency, he failed to do so. The appointment of many high-ranking officials from his native Honam weakened his support in Yeongnam. In fact, while the opposition Grand National Party secured 62.5% of the vote, not a single Democratic Party member won a seat in Yeongnam. Attempts to reform the electoral law did not result in agreement. The number of National Assembly seats was reduced from 299 to 273, but the two-tier system of representation was preserved, leaving single-member districts dominant.

On December 19, 2007, South Korean citizens elected Lee Myung-bak as their next president. He received 48.7% of the vote, while the candidate of the United New Democratic Party, Chung Dong-young, obtained only 26.1%. Independent candidate Lee Hoi-chang came in third with 15.7%.

Lee Myung-bak won a convincing victory in nearly all regions of the country, except in Gwangju and the Jeolla provinces, where Chung Dong-young secured overwhelming majorities. For example, in North Jeolla, Chung gained 81.6% of the votes, while Lee received only 9%. Conversely, in North Gyeongsang Province, Lee garnered 72.6%, with Lee Hoi-chang at 13.7% and Chung at 6.8%. Given the weak party discipline and minor differences in political platforms, entrenched regionalism once again became a decisive factor in legislative elections

The Grand National Party secured 153 seats, but none came from Gwangju, Honam, or Chungcheong. The United Democratic Party won 19 seats in North and South Chungcheong, but managed to secure only one seat in conservative Yeongnam, where the Grand National Party claimed 29. For Park's coalition, victories were concentrated in Gyeongsang, while the Liberty Forward Party gained seats in Daejeon and South Chungcheong.

The negative impact of regionalism lies in distorting political choices and de-forming political consciousness. From an economic perspective, voting based on regional loyalty may appear rational, but from a social standpoint it fosters exclusivity and antagonism, thereby skewing political opinion. Furthermore, regionalism is closely intertwined with school and family ties, amplifying its influence on presidential and parliamentary elections.

The 20th presidential election, held on March 9, 2022, offers another example of electoral polarization. This election, which resulted in a transfer of power, became an indicator of the growing ideological and electoral division within South Korean society. The conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol won with 48.56% of the vote, while his main rival, Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung, secured 47.83%. The margin was just 0.73%, the narrowest in South Korea's presidential history. This result revealed the extreme intensity of electoral competition and the absence of stable consensus among the electorate on the future political course of the Republic of Korea.

Interestingly, the election outcome was once again heavily influenced by regionalism, which traditionally plays a decisive role in Korean politics. Yoon Suk-yeol achieved a critical victory in Seoul, the country's largest metropolis and political center, winning by 310,000 votes. Considering that Seoul had traditionally leaned toward liberal candidates, as seen in Moon Jae-in's 2012 and 2017 campaigns, this was an unexpected result. Yoon's success in the capital can be explained by growing public dissatisfaction with the housing crisis, which had become a central campaign issue. This problem, particularly acute for the younger generation and the middle class, drove many to support the conservative candidate, who promised radical reforms.

At the same time, Lee Jae-myung showed strong results in Gyeonggi Province, the country's most populous region where he had previously served as governor, as well as in Incheon and Jeju Island. However, his defeat in Seoul severely limited his chances. Yoon's nationwide lead of 247,000 votes secured his presidency. Notably, Yoon became the first president in history to win a national election without carrying Jeju Province, traditionally regarded as a bellwether of public sentiment. Furthermore, even in the liberal stronghold of

Honam, where Lee Jae-myung won over 80% of the votes, Yoon managed to secure more than 10% - an unprecedented result for a conservative candidate.

The results of the 2022 elections demonstrated that high levels of regional and ideological polarization persist in the Republic of Korea. At the same time, voter behavior is becoming more volatile due to socio-economic factors, a crisis of trust in elites, and shifts in party communication strategies. All these factors are rendering the South Korean political system increasingly vulnerable to the challenges of the digital age, intensifying the need for inter-party dialogue and institutional adaptation to rapidly changing public demands.

After Yoon Suk-yeol assumed the presidency, his administration immediately faced a series of serious challenges, primarily linked to the lack of legislative control. The opposition Democratic Party, which retained a parliamentary majority, systematically blocked the president's main initiatives, making it difficult for Yoon to implement his agenda. The peak of political confrontation came on December 3, 2024, when Yoon declared martial law - an unprecedented move in modern South Korean history. In response, six opposition parties launched impeachment proceedings, accusing Yoon of attempting an insurrection. This incident reflected the deep mistrust between political forces and highlighted the limitations of presidential power under conditions of opposition dominance in parliament.

Ten days later, on December 14, 2024, the National Assembly voted to impeach President Yoon Suk-yeol on charges of violating the constitutional order and attempting to usurp power. Out of 300 deputies, 204 voted in favor, surpassing the threshold required to initiate removal proceedings. The final decision passed to the Constitutional Court, which by law had six months to deliberate. On April 4, 2025, the court issued its unanimous ruling, supporting impeachment and thus formally ending Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency.

Subsequent developments deepened the political crisis. On May 1, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo resigned to run in the presidential election. Soon afterward, Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok, who was supposed to serve as acting president, also resigned. As a result, Education Minister Lee Ju-ho was appointed interim head of state, symbolizing growing uncertainty and instability in the country's highest echelons of power. This chain of resignations and reshuffling after impeachment highlighted institutional fragility and the lack of a clear mechanism of succession.

As a result of Yoon Suk-yeol's impeachment, a snap presidential election was held on June 3, 2025, ahead of schedule (originally planned for 2027). The election took place amid high social tension and growing distrust of political institutions. This period once again underscored the increased influence of the National Assembly over the executive branch, the

decisive role of the Constitutional Court in managing political conflicts, and the weakness of the presidential system under conditions of divided government.

The 2025 election once again confirmed the persistent regional polarization between the liberal-leaning west and conservative-leaning east of the country. However, compared to the 2022 campaign, the balance of forces shifted significantly. Lee Jae-myung won a convincing victory with 49.42% of the votes, defeating People Power Party candidate Kim Moon-soo, who received 41.15%. The margin was 8.27%. Reform Party candidate Lee Jun-seok came third with 8.34%, while Democratic Labor Party candidate Kwon Young-guk secured less than 1%.

Particularly noteworthy was the electoral shift in the capital. Whereas in 2022 Lee had lost Seoul and Chungcheong to Yoon Suk-yeol, in 2025 he reversed the dynamic, winning in 21 out of 25 districts of Seoul. In the capital, he gained 47.13% of the votes, compared to Kim's 41.55%. Even in traditionally conservative districts such as Gangnam, Seocho, and Songpa, which in previous elections had seen conservative leads of more than 30%, the gap was significantly reduced - to 24.35% in Gangnam, 21.07% in Seocho, and only 4.48% in Songpa.

Lee also consolidated his position in major metropolitan areas such as Incheon and Gyeonggi. In Gyeonggi Province, the most populous in the country, he secured 52.2% of the votes, while Kim received 37.95% — nearly double the margin of previous results. A similar dynamic was observed in Incheon, where Lee gained 51.67% against Kim's 38.44%. In these two regions alone, the number of ballots exceeded 11 million, accounting for more than 32% of overall turnout, reaffirming their decisive role in presidential elections.

In the central part of the country, Lee won in three key areas: Daejeon (48.5% vs. 40.58%), South Chungcheong (47.68% vs. 43.26%), and North Chungcheong (47.47% vs. 43.22%). In Daejeon, he prevailed in every district. Whereas in 2022 these areas had supported the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol, by 2025 they shifted in the opposite direction, signaling growing liberal sentiment in previously undecided regions. In Sejong City, historically a Democratic Party stronghold, Lee expanded his advantage significantly, increasing his margin from 7.77% to 22.41%. Kim Moon-soo could not offset his losses in Seoul and its surrounding areas through gains in central provinces, which became a decisive factor in his defeat.

In the southwestern Jeolla provinces and in the city of Gwangju, Lee achieved overwhelming superiority once again. In Gwangju, he outperformed Kim Moon-soo by 76.75%; in South Jeolla, by 77.33%; and in North Jeolla, by 71.75%. These results surpassed those of previous elections and reaffirmed Honam's position as the Democratic Party's political stronghold.

However, in traditionally conservative regions such as the city of Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province, Kim Moon-soo enjoyed a considerable advantage. Yet, unlike his predecessor, he was unable to achieve high results. In Daegu, he surpassed Lee by 44.4 percent, while in North Gyeongsang the margin was 41.35 percent. This stands in contrast to Yoon Suk-yeol's performance in 2022, when he secured more than a 50 percent advantage in these very areas. In Busan and South Gyeongsang Province, Lee was also defeated; however, compared to the 2022 elections, the gap narrowed significantly, amounting to 11.25 percent in Busan and 12.59 percent in South Gyeongsang. Even in Gangwon Province, where the previous difference had been 12.46 percent, the gap shrank to just 3.35 percent. This indicates an expansion of the electoral base of the liberal forces.

The extraordinary presidential elections held in 2025 once again confirmed the significant shifts in the country's voting patterns. This development highlighted the growing strength of liberal forces in key regions such as Seoul, Incheon, and Gyeonggi-do. Lee Jae-myung's decisive victory over the conservative candidate Kim Moon-soo reflected both the rising public dissatisfaction with the ruling authorities and the strengthening unity around the Democratic Party.

The political dynamics in the Republic of Korea are deeply intertwined with regional identity. The political rivalry between Honam (the southwest) and Yeongnam (the southeast) represents a historically entrenched and institutionally consolidated characteristic of South Korean party politics.

Conclusion. The analysis of electoral and political developments in the Republic of Korea allows us to identify several essential conclusions regarding the enduring role of regionalism. First, regionalism exerts a direct influence on citizens' electoral behavior, as voters frequently prioritize candidates from their own locality, even when ideological preferences do not align.

Second, the South Korean party system demonstrates pronounced regional characteristics, with each major party relying on a particular territorial base. This reliance not only contributes to the fragmentation of the party landscape but also impedes the consolidation of truly nationwide political institutions.

Moreover, regional identity continues to shape the state's personnel policy, as appointments to key governmental positions, including ministries and state corporations, are often determined by regional affiliation. The influence of regionalism on party politics becomes especially evident during periods of electoral volatility. Finally, recent presidential campaigns - specifically the elections of 2022 and 2025 - confirm that while regionalism is undergoing

gradual transformation, it remains a central factor in political competition. The victory of Yoon Suk-yeol in 2022, followed by the subsequent strengthening of the Democratic Party in 2025, clearly illustrates the persistence of regional dynamics despite repeated attempts to diminish their significance.

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