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THE PENINSULA

A Guide to South Korea's 2024 National Assembly Election

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This week, South Koreans will head to the polls to elect their legislative representatives. The National Assembly election is often seen as a barometer for the public's sentiment towards the sitting president and the ruling party. In 2020, the Democratic Party of Korea won an unusual landslide during a global pandemic, strengthening President Moon Jae-in's political power at home and abroad. Four years later, the People Power Party is campaigning to gain control of the legislative body under President Yoon Suk Yeol. This year's election is more contentious and divisive than ever, with internal dissatisfaction among the major parties leading to the formation of new political parties and coalitions. With eminent domestic issues like the high cost of living, food inflation, and an aging society that affect people's livelihoods, a record number of South Koreans are expected to head to the polls to cast their ballots.

Demographics of the Candidates: Who's Running?

For this year's election, a total of 940 candidates are running for the 300 seats in the National Assembly. Out of the 300 seats, 254 will directly represent a district and 46 will be proportional representatives. Due to some re-districting, the 22nd National Assembly will have one more district-level seat compared to the 2020 election.

The overwhelming majority, 86 percent, of the candidates running for this year's district-level seats are men and only about 14 percent of the candidates are female. Candidates for proportional representation seats are much more balanced, with 135 female candidates (55 percent) and 112 male candidates (45 percent) due to the gender quota, which requires political parties to nominate at least 50 percent of their candidates to be female and must be assigned an odd number to increase the chance of them being selected from a party's candidate list. There are ongoing debates about whether this quota is discrimination against men, but this quota has helped more women get elected. In the 21st National Assembly, only 57 out of the total 300 members were female, which was 19.1 percent. Although this was the highest number of female National Assembly members in Korean history, South Korea still ranks far behind other countries globally, especially among the OECD member states.

This year's candidates are also older than four years ago, with an average age of 56.8, compared to 54.8 in 2020. This is higher than the average age of the 20th National Assembly (55.5) and could potentially be the oldest National Assembly in Korean history. The majority of the candidates are in their 50s and 60s, with the oldest being 85 and the youngest being 28. Although we often hear discussions about the 2030 generation in South Korea, they are not well represented in the political space. Only 37 of the candidates in their 20s and 30s are running for district-level seats and only 31 for proportional representation seats. Although the age limit for running for a political office was lowered from 25 to 18 in 2021, South Korea still has the lowest number of elected officials under 40. The age of the legislators will impact the legislation that they support and in the 22nd National Assembly, women and younger generations will be overwhelmingly underrepresented in politics.

Political Parties

There are 40 parties on the ballot for this legislative election, 21 of which are fielding candidates in at least one of Korea's 254 district constituencies, while 38 parties have registered candidates for proportional representation. The proportional representation expands diversification within the National Assembly by giving smaller parties a better chance to participate. The unspoken rule is that the two dominant parties would not seek a share of the 46 proportional representation seats and would only contest representation in district constituencies. The reality, however, is that the two dominant parties have not always abided by this rule, and in this election (as was the case in the previous legislative election in 2020), the ruling and main opposition parties have created "satellite" parties for the sole purpose of securing additional representation from the 46 allocated seats. The number of participating parties has resulted in a longer ballot sheet, which is said to be 51.7cm (20.4 in) in length.

The ruling party in Korea is the conservative **People Power Party (PPP)** headed by Han Dong-hoon, a former prosecutor and the first Justice Minister in the Yoon Suk Yeol administration. He became a star among conservatives during his tenure as minister for his quips in verbal jousts with opposition lawmakers. Han was chosen as interim leader while the PPP was attempting to recover from the defeat at the Gangseo District Office by-election and its aftermath, which saw the departure of former leader Lee Junseok from the party. While Han's taking control initially saw the ruling party's approval rating rebound, the PPP, like the other parties, has struggled to adequately counter the rise of Cho Kuk's party in the election race. With the possibility of the Yoon administration becoming a lame duck with three more years to go and fears that the opposition might attempt to revise the

constitution should they secure the necessary 200 seats, the key for the PPP is winning at least 100 seats to prevent such an outcome. The ruling party has created the People Future Party to represent itself in proportional representation.

The main opposition party and currently the largest party in the National Assembly is the progressive-leaning **Democratic Party**, led by former presidential candidate and former governor of Gyeonggi Province Lee Jae-myung. The Democratic Party has not been without its troubles, having been mired in a power struggle pitting Lee Jae-myung and supportive lawmakers against those disaffected with his leadership over his alleged “privatization” of the party. Lee, who was the party’s candidate in the 2022 presidential election, was elected party leader that August. He is currently under investigation for multiple counts of corruption involving his tenure as mayor of Seongnam and is seeking to defend his district seat in Incheon in this election. The key for the Democratic Party in this election is maintaining its position as the largest party in the National Assembly to continue to serve as the leading counterweight to the Yoon administration. For this purpose, the Democratic Party has created the Democratic Union as its representative in proportional representation.

The **Green Justice Party** is currently the third largest party in terms of representation in the National Assembly (excluding the two satellite parties), and is co-chaired by Kim Jun-woo, a lawyer, and educator Kim Chanhwi. The party is a coalition between the progressive Justice Party and the eco-oriented Green Party, formed solely to share the ballot in this election, as opposed to a party formed through an official merger. Although being the third largest party in terms of representation, the party’s only district representative is the veteran Sim Sang-Jung, with the other five lawmakers being proportional representatives. The party has struggled to imprint itself in the minds of the electorate, however, despite the rising popularity of other third parties. While the Green Party has never won a seat, at stake for the Justice Party in this election is its reputation as the traditional “third voice” within the National Assembly..

The **New Future Party** was founded by former Democratic Party members disapproving of Lee Jae-myung’s leadership, and it is co-chaired by former prime minister and current lawmaker Lee Nak-yon and lawmaker Kim Jong-min. Lee Nak-yon was once considered a frontrunner within the Democratic Party for the presidency, but he parted ways with his former party this past January over differences with Lee Jae-myung. He then joined forces with the conservative Lee Jun-seok in February to form a “big tent” party, only to part ways just 11 days later after failing to find common ground. Both Lee Nak-yon and Kim Jong-min are running for district seats, and life outside of the Democratic Party has not proven easy for the former prime minister. While Kim is leading the polls in his district, Lee Nak-yon has yet to find his form against the competition. While the party strove to establish itself as the rallying point for Democratic Party members disapproving of Lee Jae-myung’s leadership, the failure to draw prominent anti-Lee voices and the departure of allies have largely stalled the momentum of the New Future Party. The key in this election for this party is for Lee and Kim to win their district races, which will enable them to maintain their positions as the primary alternative voices for Democratic Party supporters opposed to Lee Jae-myung.

The **New Reform Party** is led by Lee Junseok, the former leader of the People Power Party. Lee, a well-known “young” face among Korean conservatives, during his tenure as party leader was seen as having played a key role in Yoon Suk Yeol’s successful bid in the 2022 presidential election by bringing in the “2030” vote, although he was removed as leader a

few months later on allegations of misconduct. Lee has acted as one of the most prominent voices of opposition to President Yoon, and he departed the PPP last December and combined forces with the former Democratic Party and other progressive lawmakers to form the New Reform Party. Until earlier in the year, he was widely seen as the leading contender to the two main political parties, but his much anticipated joining of forces with Lee Nak-yeon in February was seen as having alienated his primary support base, and the advent of Cho Kuk as a political force has largely eclipsed his party's hype. Despite having served as leader of one of the major political parties, Lee has never served in the National Assembly, and he is seeking his first term by vying for a district seat in Gyeonggi Province. Having relinquished the banner of leading third voice to the ascendant Cho Kuk, the key for the New Reform Party this election is for Lee Junseok to win a seat in the National Assembly, allowing him to maintain his prominent voice in Korean politics and continue to serve as a rallying flag for disillusioned conservatives as well as left-leaning voters disapproving of Lee Jae-myung and Cho.

The Rebuilding Korea Party, led by former Justice Minister Cho Kuk, is a relative latecomer to the election race. Still, his party has seen a meteoric rise in popularity since its entrance into the race in February. Cho, a former law professor, famously clashed with Yoon Suk Yeol over reforms regarding the Prosecution Service while they each served as the Justice Minister and the head of the Prosecution Service, respectively, which ultimately resulted in Cho's resignation. Cho entered the election race on the platform of putting an end to what he has deemed the "dictatorship" of the Prosecution Service, on whom Yoon is seen by some as having considerably relied, and his party's approval rating has soared to the point of coming within two percent of the highest polling party in one recent survey. His message seems to have resonated mostly with voters in the 40 and 50 age groups. However, he has struggled to gain ground among younger voters in their 20s and 30s, who tend to view Cho in a more negative light given the allegations surrounding his daughter's college admissions, a sensitive topic among younger voters given Korea's notoriously competitive admissions system. Cho is currently awaiting the verdict of the Supreme Court regarding his alleged crimes, and there is the risk that he may be incarcerated after being elected. On his part, Cho has stated that he will respect the final verdict. Regardless of that verdict, the key for his party, especially given the momentum behind it, is to try to secure the 20 seats required to form a negotiation group within the National Assembly, a status that brings with it added authority and benefits.

Key battlegrounds to watch:

The Nakdong River Belt refers to the eastern part of Gyeongsangnam-do and the western part of Busan, where Democratic candidates usually do well each election, which is rare in the Yeongnam region where conservative party support is strong.

– Gyeongnam Yangsan-eul (경남 양산읍) : Kim Doo-kwan (DP) vs Kim Tae-ho (PPP)

This district, which emerged as a national-level battleground for being the "former governor match" in the Nakdong belt, is considered one of the tightest race. PPP candidate Kim Tae-ho was the 32nd and 33rd Governor of Gyeongsangnam-do Province and Democratic Party candidate Kim Doo-kwan was the 34th former Governor of Gyeongsangnam-do Province.

This district is the biggest battleground in the “Nakdong River Belt”. It was the stronghold of the conservative camp, where People Power Party candidates were elected five consecutive times since the 15th Assembly Election. However, the situation was overturned when Democratic Party candidate Jeon Jae-soo, the second deputy chief of the Blue House of the Roh Moo Hyun government, was recently elected twice in a row (20th and 21st). The People Power Party is seeking to recapture the position by electing candidate Seo Byeongsu, a former mayor of Busan.

The “Han River Belt,” refers to several districts along the northern side of the Han River and a few south of the river that include Mapo, Yongsan, Seongdong, Gwangjin, and Dongjak. This area has been rising as a key battlefield area where a few conservatives have won in traditionally progressive Seoul (excluding Gangnam). With PPP in Gangnam and the DP in Gangbuk having the upper hand, there is a high possibility that the final victory or defeat will be decided within the Han River Belt.

– Yongsan (용산) : Kang Tae-woong (DP) vs Kwon Young-se (PPP)

With the relocation of the presidential office from Blue House to Yongsan, Yongsan is emerging as the “new political No. 1.” This district is also a return match for Democratic candidate Kang Tae-woong, chairman of the Yongsan regional committee, and People Power Party candidate Kwon Young-se, a current sitting member of the National Assembly. Yongsan, where the presidential office is located, is expected to become a barometer of public sentiment towards President Yoon in this election.

– Dongjak-eul (동작을) : Ryu Sam-young (DP) vs Na Kyung-won (PPP)

This is a key battlefield in Seoul, receiving most of the attention within the “Han River Belt”, with the ‘3 Gangnam districts,’ where the conservative camp is dominant to the east, and Gwanak, Geumcheon, and Guro-gu, which have strong opposition support, to the southwest. It is believed that the entire situation in Seoul can be influenced depending on who controls these districts. It is a representative ‘swing voter’ constituency, and the ruling and opposition parties traded wins and losses three times in the last six National Assembly elections.

Gyeonggi Province

In the 21st National Assembly election, the Democratic Party swept 51 out of the 59 seats, while the United Future Party, the predecessor of the People Power Party, took only seven seats in Gyeonggi Province. If the People Power Party is to regain control of the National Assembly, it needs win more seats from this region.

– Incheon Gyeyang-eul (인천 계양을) : Lee Jae-myung (DP) vs Won Hee-ryong (PPP)

This is another big-match district where Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung and former Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport Won Hee-yong are competing on the DP's turf. Since this district was newly established in 2004, Democratic Party candidates have won all of the by-elections except for the by-election in 2010.

The "Semiconductor Belt" is where the semiconductor industry is concentrated in southern Gyeonggi-do, including Suwon, Pyeongtaek, Hwaseong, Yongin, and Icheon. The ruling and opposition parties are focusing on the "Semiconductor Belt," a key battleground in Gyeonggi-do, which has the largest number of seats compared to other provinces.

– Hwaseong-eul (화성읍) : Gong Young-woon (DP) vs Han Jung-min (PPP) vs Lee Junseok (New Reform Party)

This district has the youngest voters in the country, with an average age of 34.7. Additionally, this is the center of the "Semiconductor Belt" where Samsung Electronics' Hwaseong factory is located. The Democratic Party won the last three National Assembly elections here and will try to defend it. The candidates running for this district are also interesting: Gong Young-woon (DP) is a former president of Hyundai Motor Company, Han Jung-min was a researcher at Samsung Electronics' DS division, and Lee Junseok, leader of the New Reform Party.

Other districts

– Busan Haeundae-gu Gab (부산 해운대구 갑) : Joo Jin-woo (PPP) vs Hong Soon-heon (DP)

This district is nicknamed "Gangnam of Busan" and is an area with a traditionally strong conservative tendency. Since the 13th Assembly election in 1988, no Democratic Party candidate has ever won the National Assembly seat in this district. However, a close race is expected, with the DP candidate leading in some polls, within the margin of error. Joo was the legal secretary for the Yoon Suk Yeol administration and a close aide to President Yoon, and Hong is a native of Busan and former Haeundae-gu mayor.

– Sejong Gab (세종갑): Ryu Je-hwa (PPP) vs Kim Jong-min (New Future Party)

This district is a heavily Democratic district, where the party won the 19th, 20th, and 21st Assembly elections. However, there is no Democratic candidate in this election due to the cancellation of the party's nomination of Lee Young-sun. Therefore, the PPP candidate Ryu Je-hwa and the New Future Party candidate Kim Jong-min, who defected from the Democratic Party, are running against each other. Out of all the candidates from the New Future Party, Kim has the highest chance of winning a district-level seat.

CONCLUSION

A record number of South Korean constituents have exercised their civic rights from abroad and by early voting ahead of the April 10 election day. This was the first time the early voting turnout exceeded 30 percent for the National Assembly election and a record

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high for overseas voting at 62.8 percent. As the dynamic political campaigning season comes to an end in Korea, voting turnout on election day will be crucial for all parties. The results will have a lasting impact on not only domestic politics and the make-up of the National Assembly, but also President Yoon's domestic political capital.

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