Elections in South Korea - Who Voted for Whom, and Why did Yoon Win?

So, the elections have finished and a winner has been declared! The election results have been discussed in detail in the Korean media, with breakdowns of the results by region and in terms of the age and sex of voters.

According to data published by the Korean Electoral Commission following the counting of votes, elector turnout was 77.1%, 0.1% less than in 2017. According to the television and radio broadcasters KBS, MBC, SBS and the Korean Television and Radio Broadcasters’ Association, Yoon Suk-yeol was elected with 48.4% of the votes. Lee Jae-myung received 47.8% of the votes. The gap between the two leading candidates was less than the statistical error margin.

In general, voting patterns were consistent with the traditional regional sympathies in Korea. Lee Jae-myung won the support of “his” Gyeonggi Province (where he served as governor) and the Honam region (Gwangju and the South Jeolla and North Jeolla Provinces), a traditional opposition stronghold. Equally predictably, Yoon Suk-yeol won the support of traditional Conservative regions - the Yeongnam region (North Gyeongsang and Daegu, Park Geun-hye’s home city).

As expected, Sejong City voted in favor of Lee Jae-myung, or rather against Yoon Suk-yeol. Since the government is currently trying to transform that city into an administrative centre by relocating ministries and other bodies there, the city’s vote can be seen as an expression of the sympathies of Korea’s civil servants.

In general female voters supported Lee Jae-myung, probably as a result of the Conservative Party’s promise to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and the Family, which many young people see as supporting reverse
Men's voting choices are also worth looking at. Yoon Suk-yeol was supported by men in their 20s and pensioners. People over 60 traditionally tend to support the Conservatives, and this was the only age group in which most women voted for Yoon Suk-yeol, but the voting choices of Koreans aged between 18 and 29 are interesting. In addition to protest voting and social justice, another factor is also relevant: this generation was born after South Korea became a developed nation. According to Park Sung-min, President and founder of MIN Consulting, “they have never experienced poverty or lived under a dictatorship... They are very critical of China and North Korea, and very positive in their attitudes to the USA and Japan.” Unemployment, especially among young men, has also led to anti-feminism and anti-migration sympathies, which helped to boost the vote for Yoon Suk-yeol.

There has been a lot of focus on the 586 generation, who were born in the 1960s, took part in the protests against the dictatorship of the 1980s. On the whole, this cohort voted for Lee Jae-myung. Those in their thirties or in their fifties tended to be evenly split between the two leading candidates. Within those age groups, the closer voters were to the age of forty, the more likely they were to vote for Lee Jae-myung.

Some conservatives have already started making a fuss about falsifications, but since Yoon won the vote anyway and they lacked support, the Democrats have accepted their defeat, fearful of a scandal should there be a recount. While the present author attributes this to a conspiracy theory, it may also be due to other mistakes made by Lee Jae-myung and his supporters, who were too indulgent to Yoon Sook-yeol.

Lee Jae-myung himself disassociated himself from his election team and party leadership during the campaign. He may have believed that his personal charisma was enough to win him the vote, but he had little support from Song Young-gil or Lee Nak-yon, leaders of two other Democratic Party factions. Moon Jae-in also failed to lend him his full support, seeing him merely as the lesser of two evils. Thus, while Yoon Seok-yeol held difficult but ultimately successful talks with Ahn Cheol-soo and Lee Jun-seok and was able to unify his party, Lee Jae-myung, despite not having to deal with any external scandals, was left on his own as a result of party infighting.

Some people believe that if Lee Jae-myung had managed to persuade Sim Sang-jung to withdraw from the race then he could have won, although probably by a similar narrow margin to that by which he lost. But the present author doubts whether she would have agreed to do that. Firstly, the Justice Party is a left-leaning group that does not get involved in party-political intrigues of this sort. Secondly, the Democrats stole a number of her election promises to use in their own campaign. And thirdly, the Justice Party had not forgotten about how their performance in the 2020 parliamentary elections was undermined by the creation of a number of "satellite" parties, thus - according to some experts - reducing their vote by two thirds.

One can therefore see Yoon Seok-yeol's victory not so much as a swing towards the right, but as a protest against recent political maneuvering and an expression of hope that an honest public prosecutor can restore a culture of justice and fair play. However, his image was also damaged in the mutual mud-slinging that characterized the campaign, and a number of commentators expressed dissatisfaction with both of the main candidates.

Following the election, Yoon Seok-yeol was congratulated over the phone by US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and the Russian President Vladimir Putin sent him a telegram complimenting him on his victory. Xi Jinping did not call him in person but during a regular press conference Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian congratulated him on his election victory and expressed the hope that relations between the two nations would continue to develop. Yoon Seok-yeol later had a meeting with ambassador Xing Haiming, who passed on the congratulations of the Chinese premier. Unusually, the North Korean media also reported on Yoon Seok-yeol's victory - in the past they have refrained from commenting when Conservative presidents have been elected.

This is the first time in the country's history that a president has been democratically elected without first serving as a lawmaker or minister. The new president has inherited a considerable number of problems, including, to name but a few, the challenge of dealing with the rampant COVID-19 epidemic, foreign policy challenges, particularly in relation to North Korea, and economic pressures (especially in relation to social support and housing shortages).

Yoon Seok-yeol will officially become president in two months - his inauguration is scheduled for May 10, 2022 - and under the Constitution, his term of office will be five years.

As you may have noticed, he seized his victory at the last moment, and while the election result is far from inconclusive, the narrow margin makes it clear that the divisions in Korean society have yet to be overcome. And it is one thing to win an election, it is quite another to govern well and fulfil one's campaign promises. The new president
has a difficult journey ahead of him, and will face significant resistance from his defeated opponents. As a result one can be sure that the next season of Korea’s “Game of Thrones” will be every bit as entertaining as the previous ones have been.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 