

Universidades Lusíada

Sousa, Eduardo Manuel Oliveira e, 1985-
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<http://hdl.handle.net/11067/8191>
<https://doi.org/10.34628/30AZ-0R24>

Metadados

Data de Publicação	2024
Editor	Universidade Lusíada Editora
Palavras Chave	Eleições - Coreia do Sul
Tipo	article
Revisão de Pares	Não
Coleções	[ILID-CEJEIA] Polis, s. 2, n. 10 (Julho-Dezembro 2024)

Esta página foi gerada automaticamente em 2026-10-30T03:39:55Z com
informação proveniente do Repositório

South Korea Parliamentary Elections (April 10, 2024)

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DOI: https://doi.org/*****

1. Introduction

In early 2024 South Korea was deeply polarized, with the ruling conservative People Power Party (PPP) facing an entrenched liberal opposition. The main opposition, the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK, or just “DP”), held an absolute majority in the 300member National Assembly (about 180 seats) from the previous election. By contrast President Yoon Sukyeol’s People Power Party controlled far fewer seats and had struggled to advance its agenda under an opposition-led Assembly. This latest parliamentary election (which took place on 10 April 2024) was widely regarded as a *mid-term referendum* on Yoon’s presidency. Yoon himself had low approval ratings amid several scandals, heightening the stakes for the ruling party. This party’s objective was to reinforce its grasp on parliament so that the opposition (namely the Democratic Party) would stop from constantly checking every action taken by Yoon’s government.

The two main topics of the legislative elections were domestic issues: cost of living and government corruption. International affairs barely entered the debates between candidates, parties and alliances. Cost of living was a key issue triggered by the “Green Onions” turmoil⁵ that

started with a visit of President Yoon Suk-yeol to a market where he claimed that green onions sold at 875-won (0.55€) per unit were affordable, but analysts and TV commentators quickly pointed out that “*the price was a temporary discount price thanks to government subsidies*”⁶ with the real price per green onion being 3000-won (1.87€) to 4000-won (2.50€).

The “Green Onions” turmoil led to online and street protests and accelerated early votes, with people voting while wearing green onions as hats. The issue was so significant that “*South Korea’s National Election Commission (NEC) banned green onions from polling stations, citing concerns of “election interference”*”⁷. The “Green Onions” turmoil plunged the already low popularity of the President and threatened to drag the People Power Party with it. It led to several violent altercation between parties about the inability of the People Power Party to rule for younger generations and to meet the expectations of young professionals (it is important to remember that the Presidential system of South Korea favors the Presidency over parliamentary majorities).

Before the “Green Onions” turmoil, South Korea’s society was already simmering with tension due to the “Dior Bag Scandal” involving, this time, not the President of South Korea but the First Lady “*accused of accepting a \$2,200 Christian Dior bag as a gift*”⁸ from a Pastor that filmed the exchange. The People Power Party, that elected the President but had failed to gain control of Parliament on April 15, 2020, was deeply divided about the need of the First Lady to return the Dior bag to the Pastor or to keep it to herself. The “Australia Saga” concerning the nomination of the Minister of Defense as Ambassador do Australia, while the Minister was under investigation for accusations of political interference, only increased the electoral tension between the Democratic Party (that has majority in the Parliament) and the People Power Party (that has control of the Presidency).

Finally, the tension between the two main parties is easily summarized if we take notice that the President “*has vetoed legislation 12 times*

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5 See Times of India, 2024. Why the Green Onion has become a contentious poll issue in the South Korean elections. Available [Online] at: <https://timesofindia.indi>

atimes.com/world/south-asia/why-the-green-onion-has-become-a-contentious-poll-issue-in-the-south-korean-elections/articleshow/109105265.cms (Accessed on July 27, 2025).
6 See The Week, 2024. How Green Onions could swing South Korea’s election. Available [Online] at: <https://theweek.com/politics/how-green-onions-could-swing-south-koreas-election> (Accessed July 25, 2025)
7 See France24, 2024. Green onion outcry: humble vegetable roils S. Korean vote. Available [Online] at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240407-green-onion-outcry-humble-vegetable-roils-s-korean-vote> (Accessed on July 26, 2025).
8 See CNN, 2024. How a Dior bag shook South Korean politics. Available [Online] at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/09/asia/south-korea-dior-bag-scandal-intl-hnk-dst> (Accessed on July 29, 2025).

since coming into office, including a bill that would investigate allegations against his own wife. The parliament has also shown it is unwilling to pass the president’s bills and has filed 22 impeachment motions⁹ against administration officials”¹⁰.

As expected, the election featured these two dominant parties – the Democratic Party of Korea led by Lee Jaemyung, and the People Power Party led by Han Donghoon. In addition, a number of breakaway and third parties played important roles. Chief among these was the newly formed Rebuilding Korea Party (RKP), a left-liberal party launched by ex-Justice Minister Cho Kuk in early 2024 (therefore it also being called “Cho Kuk’s party”). Other notable formations included the New Future Party (centrist, founded by former Prime Minister Lee Nakyon) and the Reform (New Reform) Party. The progressive Justice Party ran in coalition with the Green Party (as the “Green-Justice Party”) to promote a left/socialdemocratic platform. Opinion polls suggested the new RKP could win on the order of 10–15 seats, potentially making it a “kingmaker” in a divided Assembly. In short, the pre-election landscape was one of a *highly fragmented multi-party system*, with the major PPP/DP rivalry supplemented by several emerging parties on both the left and right.

Table 1: Major political parties in South Korea and ideological alignments

Democratic Party of Korea (DPK)	Liberal, centrist-to-centre-left
People Power Party (PPP)	Conservative, centre-right
Rebuilding Korea Party (RKP)	Progressive/liberal, centre-left
Reform (New Reform) Party	Conservative, centre-right
Progressive Party	Progressive, left-wing nationalism
Basic Income Party	Single-issue progressive party
Social Democratic Party	Social democracy, centre-left
Green-Justice Party (Coalition)	Progressive left/social democracy

2. Constitutional and Legal Framework

From a Constitutional and legal-normative perspective, elections in South Korea are principally governed by both the foundational legal instrument – the Constitution – and the *Public Official Election Act* (POEA, henceforth Election Act). Under article 41(1) of the Constitution, it is established that members of the National Assembly shall be elected through universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage. The Con-

stitution lays down several essential provisions concerning this sovereign body, including the minimum composition of parliament (200 members, article 41 no. 2), the duration of each legislative term (four years, article 42), parliamentary immunities (articles 44 and 45), and incompatibilities of office (articles 43 and 46 no. 3). However, the Constitution delegates the regulation of many remaining electoral matters to the Electoral Act. This includes, notably, the subsequent specification – under Articles 41 no. 2 and 41 no. 3 of the Constitution – of the number of electoral constituencies, the method for converting votes into seats (which follows a mixed proportional system), the total number of mandates to be allocated, as well as other electoral procedures.

A) National Assembly

South Korea’s National Assembly uses a mixed-member majoritarian and proportional system which is comprised of 254 single-member constituencies plus 46 proportional representation seats elected from a single nation-wide multi-member constituency. In practice this meant there were 254 geographic constituencies up for direct election, with these constituencies being spread across the country’s cities and provinces. As Table 2 shows, the distribution reflects population: the capital Seoul alone has 48 seats, neighbouring Gyeonggi Province has 60, and populous metropolitan areas like Busan, Incheon, Daegu, etc. all have between 6 and 18 each. Seoul’s 48 districts (e.g. Jongno, Gangnam, etc.) cover the dense city centre, while rural provinces have fewer districts. Regarding the other 46 seats, also known as Proportional Representation seats, these are distributed through a now-mixed proportional system as shown in the paragraph below.

Table 2. Regions and corresponding single-member constituencies

Region (City/Province)	No. of single-member constituencies
Seoul	48
Busan	18
Daegu	12
Incheon	14
Gwangju	8
Daejeon	7
Ulsan	6
Sejong City	2
Gyeonggi Province	60
Gangwon Province	8
North Chungcheong Province	8
South Chungcheong Province	11
North Jeolla Province	10
South Jeolla Province	10
North Gyeongsang Province	13
South Gyeongsang Province	16
Jeju Island	3

9 All the 22 attempts happened before the Martial Law Night (December 3, 2024) that led to the impeachment of President on December 14, 2024, with the process being confirmed on April 4, 2025, after a unanimous vote at the Constitutional Court.

10 See ABC, 2024. How a Dior handbag, a tax scandal, and a furore over the price of spring onions triggered Yoon Suk Yeol’s downfall. Available [Online] at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-05/scandals-that-triggered-south-korea-yoon-downfall/104682352> (Accessed on July 30, 2025).

i) Composition:

According to article 21 no. 1 of the Election Act, the total number of members of the National Assembly is set at 300. This overall figure comprises two distinct categories of members: those elected through a national multi-member constituency (article 20 no. 1, also referred to as the proportional representation constituency), and those elected from several local constituencies (article 20 no. 3), which, under article 21 no. 2 of the Election Act, are defined as single-member constituencies.

The members of parliament elected through the multi-member constituency – also known as those who are elected for the proportional representation seats – are themselves also elected via a mixed system. To begin, under article 189 no. 2 et seq. of the Election Act, the proportional seats are distributed via a *modified d'Hondt* method, in which when there is a tie between the parties' decimal values (number of vote share/percentage x 46 PR seats), the seat is allotted via lottery. This method was applied for the total of 46 proportional representation seats until the latest amendment to the Election Act in 2020. Nowadays, however, it is only applied for 16 seats out of the 46 proportional representation seats in total. Under the new rules put forward by Act 16864 on January 14, 2020 which modifies article 189, the remaining 30 seats are distributed via a compensatory system which is applicable for parties that while above the 3% PR threshold or 5 seats single-member constituency threshold¹¹, have elected less PR seats than single-member constituency seats¹². Compensatory seats are then given via the following method: 1) the multiplication of the vote share at the PR constituency by the 300 seats of the Assembly; 2) subtraction of the number of single-member constituency seats from the “total entitlement” resulting from the previous operation; 3) the resulting “shortfall” is divided by 2; 4) find a scaling factor by calculating the addition of the results of the previous operation for all parties divided by the total number of compensatory seats; 5) divide again the result of each party (“shortfall” / 2) by the scaling factor. The result will be each party compensatory seat allocation.

For the members of parliament elected through the single-member constituencies, these are elected via a simple majority system, also known as *First-past-the-post* (FPTP) under article 188 no. 1 of the Election Law¹³.

ii) Legislative Term:

The legislative term is four years, as established under article 42 of the Constitution.

iii) Electoral Capacity:

Active suffrage: Granted at 19 years of age, contingent upon regis-

tration in the voter's residential constituency (Article 15 no. 1 of the Election Act);

Passive suffrage: Granted at 25 years of age (Article 16 no. 2 of the Election Act).

iv) Candidacy Requirements:

From the perspective of political parties, candidate nomination procedures vary depending on the type of constituency in question. That is, in the nation-wide proportional representation constituency, parties are required to submit lists composed of no less than 50% female candidates. In contrast, for the local constituencies – which are single-member in nature with respect to legislative elections – parties may nominate only one candidate per constituency.

The law also regulates political parties, since Assembly elections are fought by parties as well as individuals. The *Political Parties Act* requires parties to meet certain criteria to be able to run for elections: they must register, have a minimum membership, and refrain from activities forbidden to “anti-democratic” groups. Importantly for elections, the law ties public subsidies and ballot access to electoral performance with a curious threshold rule arising from such connection. Only parties that win at least five single-member constituency seats or 3% of the multi-member constituency party vote qualify for proportional representation seats, and likewise only such parties receive meaningful state funding. Small parties below these thresholds essentially cannot run for those 46 seats – a rule intended to prevent excessive fragmentation.

B) Result certification

Once vote-counting is complete the independent *National Election Commission*, under article 114 of the Election Act, formally certifies the outcome. The Commission's chairperson must immediately notify the National Assembly of the full list of elected members, as established by article 226 no. 1. Each declared winner is issued an official election certificate and must present it to the Assembly Secretariat to register as a member. This procedure finalises and publishes the official results – a process supervised by the Commission to ensure accuracy and transparency of the vote-counting.

Candidates or parties may seek recounts or contest results before and after certification. If the vote margin is very narrow or irregularities appear, any candidate or party can request a recount at the counting centre (and the commission itself may order one) before final tabulation. After formal certification, aggrieved candidates or the parties that nominated can only challenge before the South Korea's Supreme Court under articles 222 no. 1 of the Election Act. Such election contests must be filed within 30 days of the official declaration pursuant to article 223. Grounds include procedural violations, loss of a candidate's eligibility, or other illegal practices. In conclusion, the Supreme Court is the sole arbiter of any dispute over National Assembly elections.

11 See the threshold clauses under iv) Candidacy Requirements.

12 This system is aimed at compensating what the Election Act comprehends as underrepresented parties. Namely, parties which might have a decent number of votes in the PR constituency but didn't win enough (or none at all) seats in the single-member constituencies. As such, parties which have higher percentages of single-member constituency seats than its “target” number of seats (% of PR vote share divided by 300) are deemed as overrepresented parties and will either be left out of the compensatory mechanism or will see its compensatory seats reduced.

13 Interestingly enough, article 188 no. 1 states that in case of a tie between candidates, the most senior shall be the one elected.

3. Result analysis

Table 3. Election Results (Major Political Parties and those w/ allocated seats)

Party/Coalition	Proportional Representation			Single-member constituencies			Sum of total seats
	Votes (no.)	Votes (%)	Seats in total	Votes (no.)	Votes (%)	Seats in total	
People Power Party/People Future Party	10,395,264	36.67	18	13,179,769	45.08	90	108
Democratic Alliance	7,567,459	26.70	14	15,075,279	51.57	162	176
Rebuilding Korea Party	6,874,278	24.25	12	---	---	0	12
New Reform Party	1,025,775	3.62	2	195,147	0.67	1	3
Liberal Unification Party	642,433	2.27	0	18,7	0.06	0	0
Green-Justice Party	609,313	2.15	0	107,029	0.37	0	0
New Future Party	483,827	1.71	0	200,502	0.69	1	1
Valid votes	28,344,519	95.58	46	29,234,129	98.63	254	300
Null votes	1,309,931	4.42	---	406,79	1.37	---	---
Total votes	29,654,450	100	---	29,640,919	100	---	---
Registered Voters / Turnout	44,280,011	66.97		44,245,552	66.99		
Abstention	14,625,561	33.03	---	14,604,633	33.01	---	---

Source: Daum. 제22대 국회의원선거 특집 페이지 (22nd National Assembly Election Special Page). Available [Online] at: <https://issue.daum.net/election/2024/status/proportional> and <https://issue.daum.net/election/2024/status/district> (Accessed August 08, 2025). and National Election Commission. Available [Online] at: <https://www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/main.do> (Accessed August 08, 2025).

It’s hard to overstate how South Korea’s 22nd National Assembly elections on 10 April 2024 produced a decisive victory for the liberal opposition. The main Democratic Party and its satellite coalition (the “*Democratic Coalition*”) won roughly 187 of 300 seats (DP 175 plus allied parties), while President Yoon Suk-yeol’s conservative People Power Party (PPP) and its ally (People Future Party) won 108 seats. The political turmoil that happened throughout the legislative elections of South Korea was capitalized by two new parties: *Rebuilding Korea Party*, founded on March 2024 by former Minister of Justice Cho Kuk, was able to conquer 12 mandates and the Reform Party created on January 2024 by Lee Jun-seok as a splinter group from the *People Power Party*, but later realigned with the *Democratic Party*, conquered 3 mandates. Other small parties won only a handful of seats (New Future Party 1, Progressive Party 1). The leftist Justice Party (in coalition with the Green Party) didn’t win any seats for the first time since Its founding, which signals the consolidation of liberal voters behind the Democratic Party.

Overall turnout was approx. 67.0%, the highest in 32 years, reflecting intense public engagement. However, turnout varied sharply by age: elderly voters turned out en masse (84.7% among those in their 70s) whereas only about 52.4% of voters in their 20s cast ballots¹⁴. Com-

pared to 2020, participation rose for those over 50 but fell for younger cohorts¹⁵. Regionally, traditional patterns prevailed: the Democratic Party swept Seoul (37 of 48 seats) and dominated the southwest (Jeolla and Honam provinces)¹⁶, while the PPP won overwhelmingly in its southeastern heartland (e.g. all 18 seats in Busan and 12 in Daegu)¹⁷. One of the few high-profile district contests was DP leader Lee Jae-myung retaining his Incheon seat against PPP challenger Won Hee-ryong. In short, the election confirmed longstanding regional cleavages but also underscored a surge of support for the opposition among urban and younger-leaning districts.

Going back to the results, the net effect was to maintain a liberal-dominated legislature and intensify gridlock. The Democratic Party-led opposition retained a clear majority, far outnumbering the PPP. In practice this leaves Yoon’s administration unable to command a legislative majority; this means that even budget bills and ordinary laws can be blocked or amended by the National Assembly.

14 Vide press release of the National Election Commission. Available [Online] at:

<https://www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/ex/bbs/View.do?cbIdx=1270&bcIdx=264063> (Accessed on August 08, 2025)

15 Ibid.

16 Vide National Election Commission. Available [Online] at: <https://www.nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/View.do?cbIdx=1129&bcIdx=233924> (Accessed on August 08, 2025).

17 Ibid.

Democratic leaders, however, framed their victory in moderate terms: Democratic Party chief Lee Jae-myung called for “overcoming the crisis in consumers’ economic livelihood” through cooperation¹⁸. In other words, while voters swung strongly to the opposition, they also expected action on the economy. With the opposition holding most seats, government formation was not a question of coalition-building (since the system of government is Presidential, the government is appointed by the President, who has a separate mandate) but of legislative strategy. In practice, Democratic Party leaders moved quickly to signal a dual approach: on one hand calling for bipartisan attention to urgent issues; on the other hand, preparing to scrutinise and check the Yoon government. The Center for Strategic & International Studies had predicted that the Democratic Party – now allied with the more progressive Rebuilding Korea Party – would “leverage perceived issues within the Yoon administration surrounding his family and controversial nominations to initiate special probes in the assembly”¹⁹. Indeed, opposition lawmakers vowed to pursue investigations of scandals (for example involving Yoon’s wife and top officials). The Democratic Party signalled it would use its majority to challenge unpopular policies of the administration, and it did exactly like analysts predicted, with the Assembly effectively blocking Yoon’s flagship tax-cut and corporate-incentive proposals²⁰.

This legislative stalemate resulted in the attempted *coup d’état* by President Yoon on the 3rd of December 2024, in which the former declared martial law, accusing the Assembly of being anti-state and surrounding it with hundreds of troops. However, the Assembly was able to override the presidential decree in a staggering unanimous vote of 190 to 0, with the president backing down from its martial law decree hours later. This effectively deepened the post-election crisis, which ended with Yoon being impeached December that year, and finally removed from office through a ruling of the Constitutional Court which upheld the impeachment passed by the National Assembly.

Although the legislative elections in South Korea were mainly focused on domestic affairs, there were three international issues that also entered the campaigns of the major parties and/or alliances: In first place, positioning vis-à-vis North Korea (diplomatic openness or political confrontation); In second, the relationship with neighboring Japan (keeping a rapprochement or insisting in historical grievances); And finally, third, opting to keep partnership with Washington or opening prospects for a more fortuitous dialogue with Beijing.

Unfortunately, like in many other countries, international issues were mostly sidelined and superseded by the domestic day-to-day dramas and scandals and so we cannot say that they significantly impacted the electoral outcome.

18 *Vide* Reuters. 2024. Opposition win in South Korea Election to deepen policy stalemate for Yoon. Available [Online] at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-opposition-wins-landslide-parliamentary-vote-resounding-blow-yoon-2024-04-10/> (Accessed on August 08, 2025).

19 *Vide* Cha, V. & Lim, A. 2024. South Korea’s 2024 General Election: Results and Implications. Center for Strategic & International Studies. Available [Online] at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-koreas-2024-general-election-results-and-implications> (Accessed on August 08, 2025).

20 *Vide* Reuters, cit. note 18.

