Comparative Case Study – South Korea Legislative Elections During COVID-19

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In late February 2020, South Korea became the country with the second-highest number of COVID-19 infections after China, with its count of new infections peaking on February 29 at over 900 daily. Brookings; Wall Street Journal.

On April 15, 2020, South Korea's 21st legislative elections were held across the country, electing all 300 members of the National Assembly. The election was held amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and South Korea was one of the first large countries to hold an in-person national election since the outbreak.

Although by Election Day South Korea had recorded over 10,000 cases and 200 deaths, the country enacted several precautionary measures to minimize the risk of community spread at the polls. As a result, over 40% of voters cast their ballot early – the highest early voting rate ever – and the country saw an overall turnout of 66.2% (over 29 million voters in total), the highest turnout of a parliamentary election since 1992. Yonhap; Associated Press. Since the election, there have been 0 confirmed COVID-19 cases related to exposure at the polls. NBC.

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I.   South Korea's Precautionary Measures

On Election Day

Hand sanitizer and disposable gloves were provided to voters before issuing ballot papers.

Face masks were mandatory in polling stations and queues, except during voter identification.
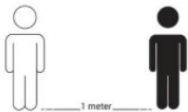
Social distancing: voters were asked to maintain a minimum distance of 1 meter between them at all times.

Temperature checks: voters displaying 37.5°C or more were directed to separate polling booths.

Polling stations were regularly sanitized and ventilated.

A special hour to vote was arranged for those in **self-isolation,** if they showed no symptoms, at the end of the day.

Polling and counting activities were live-streamed to ensure transparency.

Note: ANFREL does not advocate for holding elections at all costs during a pandemic. Each country should carefully consider its unique situation, before proceeding only if it is reasonable to do so.

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A. Encouraging Early Voting

The National Election Commission (NEC) administered the elections. Early Voting, which was first introduced in South Korean elections in 2013, took place nationally on April 10-11, 2020 at 3,500 polling places (representing 24.4% of the 14,330 total polling places open on election day). The NEC encouraged voters to vote early in order to "reduc[e] the number of voters expected to gather at the polling stations on election day." IDEA. As a result, over 12

million voters (26.7% of eligible voters and around 40% of overall turnout) cast their votes early. IDEA; Associated Press.

B. Ensuring a Safe Voting Environment

NEC adopted nationwide safeguards and precautions throughout its 14,330 polling places:

- Before accessing the polling station, poll workers checked each voter's temperature with a non-contact thermometer. If a voter's temperature was above 37.5 degrees Celsius (99.5 degrees Fahrenheit), or if they displayed other respiratory symptoms, they were redirected to special polling stations with heightened precautions.
- Face masks were required at the polls and in line outside the polls
- Voters had to stay 1 meter from each other in line, with signs and markings to assist them. On election day, wait times rarely exceeded 30 minutes. Wall Street Journal.
- Voters had to sanitize their hands and wear plastic gloves (which were provided to them) inside the polling station. When leaving the polling station, voters had to remove the gloves and discard them into a disposal box. BBC Seoul.

C. Special Polling Stations

Poll workers managing special polling stations for COVID-19 patients and medical workers had to wear protective equipment, such as full-body protective clothing, face protection, masks and plastic gloves.

D. Quarantined Voters

After official voting hours had ended, 60,000 quarantined voters were allowed to leave their place of confinement and vote at polling stations. They were allowed to head to polls between 5:20 and 7 pm. They were not allowed to use public transportation, and they were required to call officials when they returned home, or police officers were dispatched to find them. BBC Seoul.

- Korea has been able to identify COVID-19 cases due to a strong testing remine, which has included over 527,000 tests conducted to date, often for free. Al Jazeera.

- As of late April, South Korea has tested 1 in 130 people for COVID-19 (compared to 1 in 400 people in the U.S.). Healthline.

E. Strict Poll Worker Requirements

Compared to previous years, 20,000 additional poll workers were deployed. 550,000 staff helped prepare and disinfect 14,000 voting stations across the country. BBC Seoul. NEC required strict hygiene rules for poll workers.

- All poll workers wore masks and plastic gloves. There were similar requirements for election observers, journalists, and police officers.
- All polling stations were required to sanitize the environment before the voting started and regularly disinfected voting areas (including ballot stamps and election materials). The polling stations were also required to be regularly ventilated.

II. Communicating with Voters

A. Code of Conduct

NEC created a "Code of Conduct for Voters" which provided detailed instructions and outlined actions, safeguards and precautions that voters were required to follow through each step of the voting process.

B. NEC eTV Operation

NEC ran frequent voting information advertisements on national television, affixing posters and banners around the country, and displaying copies of the Code of Conduct inside polling stations during early voting and election day.

C. Live-Streaming Voting

To maintain transparency, NEC live-streamed polling station activities on its eTV and national channels, both during early voting and on election day. The livestreaming provided "remote access to the various stages of the electoral process, including the preparation and start of voting; the actual voting in progress; the close of voting and the transferring and storing of the

voted ballots; the preparation and the start of counting; the counting process as it was progressing; and the close of the vote counting." IDEA.

III. Election Roadblocks:

A. Voting By Mail

Voting by mail is extremely limited in South Korea, normally reserved only for special categories of voters such as individuals with limited mobility or unable to leave hospitals and/or nursing homes. In 2020, however, home voting provisions were extended to COVID-19 patients and citizens in self-isolation due to contact with infected individuals. Voters had to file a "home voting application" between March 24-28, but NEC "took steps to guarantee the enfranchisement of persons were infected with COVID-19 after the 'home voting' application period had formally ended." IDEA.

B. Voter ID

South Korea has voter ID requirements, and voters still had to hand their identification cards to poll workers (while wearing gloves). Voters were also required to lower or remove their face masks to facilitate identification.

C. Out of Country Voting (OCV) Operation

Due to safety concerns, "NEC [had] to cancel the planned OCV operations in as many as 55 countries, with some diplomatic missions also forced to shorten their voting periods." IDEA.

- There was no alternative mechanism (e.g. mail-in ballots) for out-of-country voters to vote, which affected over 87,000 potential voters, representing 51 percent of the total 172,000 voters registered abroad.
- OCV turnout of 23.8 percent (around 41,000 voters) during the 2020 elections marked the lowest since this voting method was introduced in Korea.

D. Drive-Through Voting

NEC also considered introducing drive-through voting, which would have allowed voters to line up and vote at special polling stations while remaining inside their vehicles. However, there was not enough time to implement this proposal.

IV. Results

A. Election

Moon's DPK party won 180 out of the 300 seats in the National Assembly, after the exit polls predicted a range of 155 to 173. Foreign Policy. This is the biggest win by any party since the current constitution was established in 1987. CNN.

B. COVID-19

South Korean health authorities have concluded that no COVID-19 transmissions occurred as a result of the parliamentary election. Reuters; NBC.

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