

# Game Changer: The By-Election for Seoul Mayor

*An analysis of the October 26 by-election exit poll*

*The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*

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Many observers claimed that the by-election that took place on October 26 would not only determine the new mayor of Seoul, but would also forecast the results of next year's presidential election. In order to further analyze the by-election results, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies conducted an exit poll to investigate why and how voters cast their ballots. Previous exit polls only predicted who would win the presidential election. Our survey differs from past exit polls because we examine in detail voters' rationale for supporting a particular candidate. Using alternative questions and methodology, we believe that our survey results will help shed more light on voters' behavior and decision making processes.

## **Background on the Seoul Mayoral By-Election**

In the October 26 by-election, Park Won-soon, an independent candidate and lawyer-turned-activist, defeated Na Kyung-won, a candidate from the ruling Grand National Party (GNP). Park won the election with 53.3 percent of the vote against Na's 46.3 percent.

Korean politics have been on a rollercoaster ride since last August when former Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon staked his position as mayor on the results of a referendum. It began with a battle between Oh and the Seoul City Council. The City Council, which is dominated by opposition party members, decided earlier this year to provide free lunches to all 850,000 elementary and middle school students in Seoul. Mr. Oh subsequently called for a referendum on the free lunch program and proposed to limit free lunches only to children from lower-income families. The cost of the city council plan was projected to be \$378 million per year whereas Mayor Oh's plan was estimated to cost \$280 million per year. Crucially, Mr. Oh vowed to step down as mayor if the referendum failed.

The referendum on the free lunch program was held on August 24, but we will never know the vote count. Only 25.7 percent of Seoul's eligible voters participated, less than the 33.3 percent required for quorum, thereby invalidating the referendum. Shortly afterwards, Oh Se-hoon resigned as mayor amid criticisms that he had tried to use the referendum as a vehicle for his presidential aspirations.

Following the referendum, the conservative GNP tried to spin the results in a positive light. They asserted that the 25.7 percent of Seoul voters who cast

their ballots were most likely both conservative and supportive of Mr. Oh's plan (because it was assumed that most opponents refused to vote). The GNP also pointed to data showing that the voter turnout for the referendum (2,159,095 voters) was similar to the number of votes (2,086,127 votes or 25.4 percent of the voting population) that Mr. Oh received when he was reelected in 2010.

At this point Dr. Ahn Cheol-soo appeared on the political scene. The founder and CEO of AhnLab, a computer antivirus company, expressed his interest in running for mayor on an independent ticket. He was courted by both ruling and opposition parties after Mr. Oh resigned. What made this move interesting is the fact that Ahn, who also serves as the dean of the Graduate School of Convergence Science and Technology at Seoul National University, is enormously popular among the younger generation. Many surveys have found that college students frequently select him as their favorite role-model. Various opinion polls have also confirmed his popularity among the broader electorate. Most polls showed that over 50 percent of Seoul voters wanted him to be elected the new mayor, followed by the GNP's Na Kyung-won, who garnered about 25 percent, and the lawyer-turned-civic activist Park Won-soon with less than 10 percent. Ahn would beat any candidate by a landslide if he ran for a political position.

Ahn's appearance on the public stage electrified Korean politics because of his threat to crack the political fortress of GNP kingmaker Park Geun-hye. In various media polls, Ahn gained almost as much support as Park Geun-hye, a previously unheard-of feat. However, the story did not end here. On September 6, Ahn announced that he would not run for mayor and would instead support Mr. Park Won-soon. Consequently, Park, who was suffering from very low popularity, suddenly became the most formidable candidate with polls showing about 50 percent support.

The Democratic Party (DP) also played a part in this political drama, though it was ultimately a bit part. Its main candidate for the by-election was Park Young-sun, a two-term lawmaker, but the DP's ambitions were stopped short by Park Won-soon in the October 3 primary election for a unified opposition candidate. The result realized the DP's fears of being unable to put forth a candidate in the most important election before the 2012 general elections and the presidential election. This has been a worrying trend for the DP as its candidates have consistently failed to win primaries for the unified opposition.

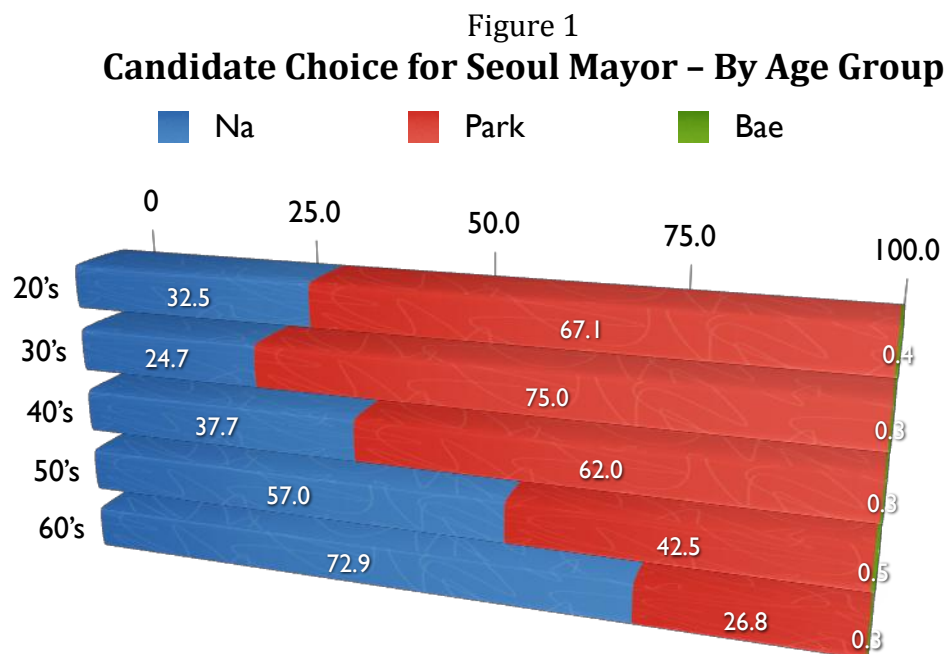
Meanwhile, the GNP chose Na Kyung-won as its mayoral candidate after a short but ultimately meaningless period of fuss over who would secure the nomination. Since the by-election was the result of the GNP's opposition to a universal welfare program (the free lunch program), many believed that welfare issues would be at the center stage of the election. In the end, however, the election boiled down to a character debate between Na and Park. Both camps used negative campaign tactics in the name of so-called "candidate scrutiny", but it was ultimately Park Won-soon who prevailed.

Given the impact of this election on the 2012 general elections and the presidential election, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies decided to conduct an

exit poll in conjunction with television news network YTN and polling company Hankook Research. The survey questions sought to investigate why voters picked a certain candidate and what they expect for next year's elections. The data reveals some very interesting results.

### Survey Analysis

Based on an analysis of demographic characteristics, the data shows strong differences in candidate preferences among various age groups. The choices of those in the 20-40 age range contrasted significantly with those in their 50's and 60's. Our survey shows that 67.1 percent of those in their 20's, 75.0 percent of those in their 30's, and 62.0 percent of those in their 40's voted for Park, whereas 57.0 percent of those in their 50's and 72.9 percent of those in their 60's voted for Na.

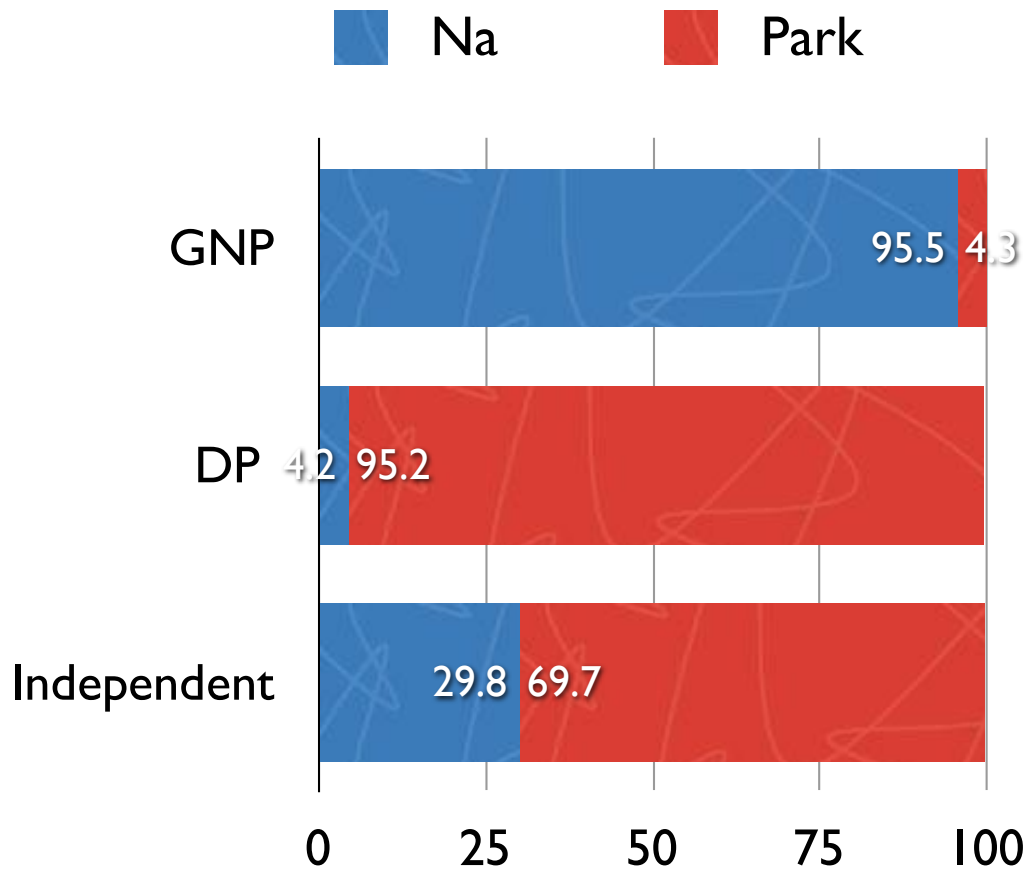


Voters' levels of education also had an impact on their choices. Those with a high school diploma or less education were inclined to vote for Na (60.3 percent), whereas 60.4 percent of those who received a college-level education or higher voted for Park. Analyzing the data according to occupation, white-collar workers and students constituted the main supporters of Park with 65.4 percent of white-collar workers and 68.6 percent of students voting for him.

While the fact that Park Won-soon ran as an independent candidate did not influence the choice of DP supporters, many independent voters who said that they do not support any particular political party voted for Park. 95.5 percent of GNP supporters voted for Na and 95.2 percent of DP supporters voted for Park. However, 69.7 percent of independent voters voted for Park. Considering that

about 40 percent of those who cast ballots indicated they are independent voters, these results are very significant.

Figure 2  
**Candidate Choice for Seoul Mayor – By Political Party**



Many observers have declared that the mayoral election foreshadowed a potential presidential election showdown between Park Geun-hye and Ahn Cheol-soo. A significant number of media outlets have shown keen interest in determining how much popular support each candidate would receive. Journalists and pollsters have tried to gauge the magnitude of their public support through the by-election results. Notably, the by-election represented the first time since the beginning of the Lee Myung-bak administration that Park Geun-hye publically backed a candidate. Prior to that, she was nicknamed “Queen of the Election” because of her record of virtually guaranteeing victory for candidates or regions enjoying her support. The fact that Na lost the election despite Park Geun-hye’s backing has raised serious questions about the latter’s influence and ability to win the presidency.

In another media survey, respondents were asked whether they thought that Park Geun-hye’s (or Ahn Cheol-soo’s) support of a certain candidate would have an influence on the mayoral by-election. On that question, about 70 percent of respondents said that they believed it would. However, in order to show how

much actual influence Park and Ahn had on the results of the mayoral election we altered the survey question. In our poll, we asked whether Park's (or Ahn's) support for the mayoral candidate affected the respondents' voting decision. With the question worded in this way, the respondent did not have to make a guess about others' voting behavior; they only needed to explain their own decision-making process. Among those who voted for Na, 19.8 percent said that they voted for Na because Park Geun-hye endorsed Na during the campaign. On the other hand, among those who voted for Park Won-soon, 28.2 percent said they voted for him because Ahn backed him at the last minute during the campaign. Simple calculation shows that the effect of Ahn Cheol-soo's support was more influential than that of Park Geun-hye in the mayoral race. The fact that Ahn's chosen candidate defeated Park Geun-hye's chosen candidate suggests that Ahn would enjoy a more favorable political position were the presidential election to be held today.

Figure 3  
**Did Support for Park Geun-hye Affect your Vote for Seoul Mayor?**

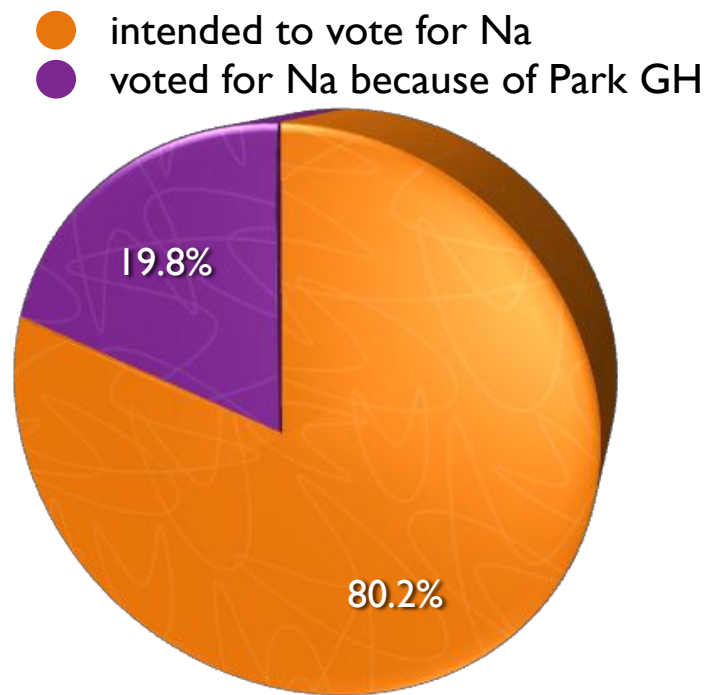
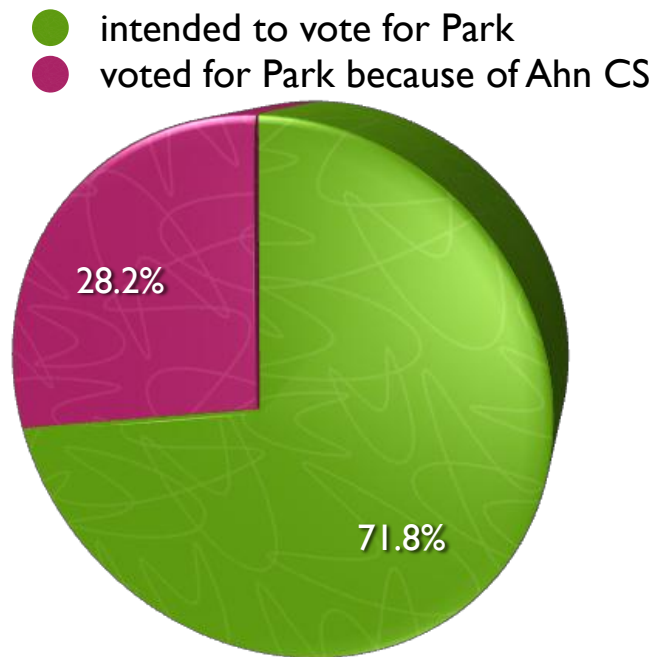
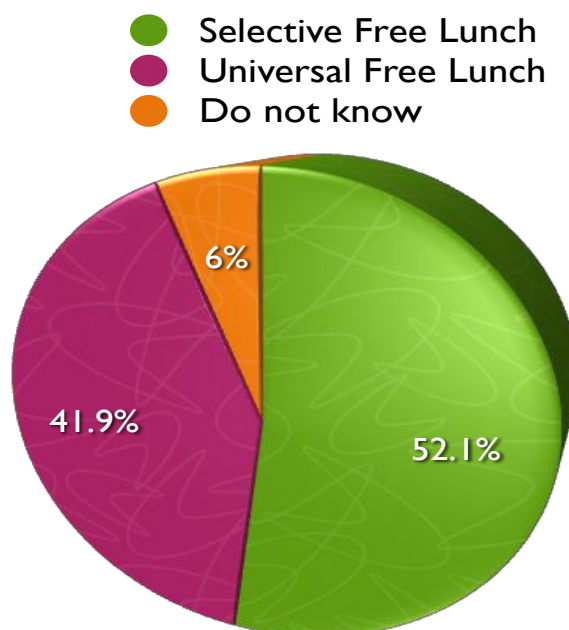


Figure 4  
**Did Support for Ahn Cheol-soo Affect your Vote for Seoul Mayor?**



When it comes to the free lunch program, our poll shows that the residents of Seoul would prefer to put a limit on the program. Between a selective free lunch program and a universal free lunch program, 52.1 percent of actual voters said that they preferred a selective program, whereas 41.9 percent said they preferred a universal program.

Figure 5  
**What Kind of Lunch Should be Provided to Elementary and Middle School Children in Seoul?**



The survey also turned up some very interesting results regarding voters' views on campaign tactics. It was the GNP that initiated the negative campaign attacks with its salvo against Park Won-soon. At first it seemed that the GNP's campaign had achieved its intended purpose. However, it was Na who was hit hardest by the attacks from the Park camp. When we asked whether Na's method of accumulating wealth, issues with her spa skin treatments and her father's school were problematic, 44.9 percent of voters said that they found them to be problematic, whereas 44.3 percent said they were not. Regarding the issue of Park not completing mandatory military service and receiving funds from big businesses, 32.5 percent said that they found them to be problematic, whereas 54.2 percent said they were not. Based on our survey results, we can see that Na was hit harder by the effects of negative campaigning.

To examine the political significance of this election, we asked two additional questions. The first question asked voters whether they thought this election was about assessing the performance of the Lee Myung-bak government. The second question asked voters whether they regarded this election as a barometer of next year's general elections and the presidential election. Regarding the first question, about 60 percent of voters responded that the voting results did reflect their judgment about the current presidential administration. This was particularly true among younger generations: 64.5 percent of those in their 20's, 74.2 percent of those in their 30's, and 70.5 percent of those in their 40's said that their vote in this election reflected their assessment of the Lee government, while 50.0 percent of those in their 50's and 42.4 percent of those in their 60's also supported this statement. How voters perceived the political significance of the election also varied according to their ideological stance. 74.4 percent of those who identified themselves as progressive agreed with the statement, whereas only 36.8 percent of conservatives agreed. Interestingly, 60.1 percent of independent voters also agreed with the first statement. Similarly, while only 38.7 percent of GNP supporters said that their vote was based on their judgment of the Lee government, 78.1 percent of DP supporters and 64.5 percent of independent voters said that they cast their ballots based on this factor. Among those who voted for Na, only 37.7 percent claimed that the current administration's performance played a part in their decision, whereas 78.6 percent of those who voted for Park claimed that it did.



Figure 6  
**Was your Vote for Seoul Mayor Affected by your Evaluation of the Lee Myung-bak Administration? – By Age Group**

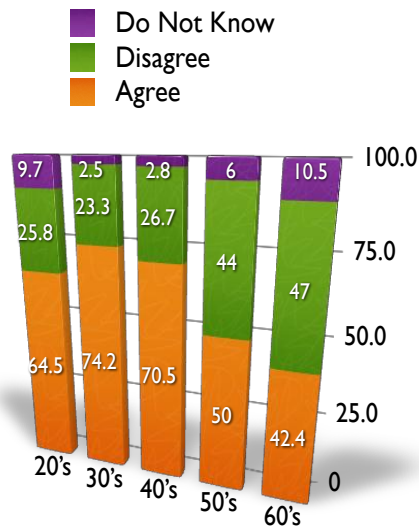


Figure 7  
**Was your Vote for Seoul Mayor Affected by your Evaluation of the Lee Myung-bak Administration? – By Ideological Affiliation**

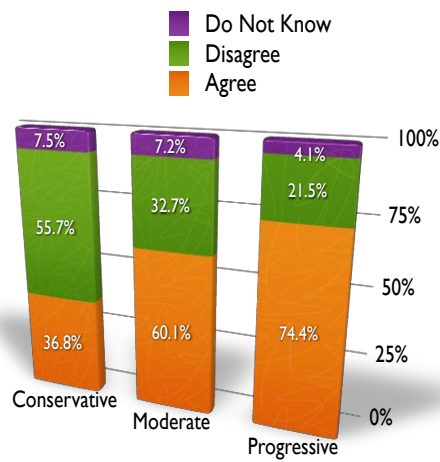


Figure 8  
**Was your Vote for Seoul Mayor Affected by your Evaluation of the Lee Myung-bak Administration? – By Political Party**

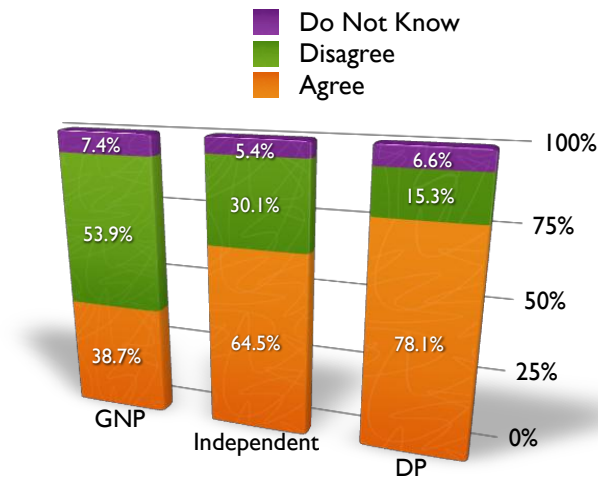
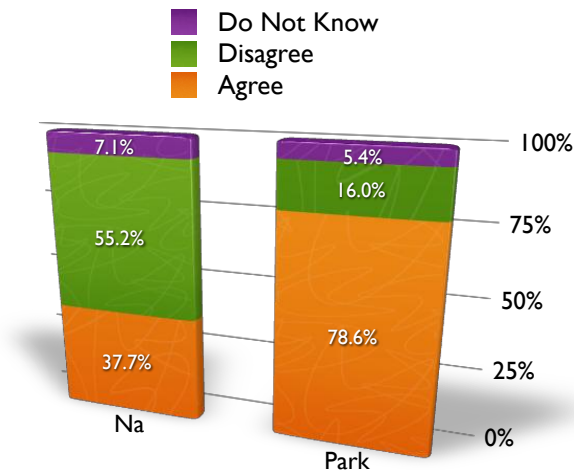


Figure 9  
**Was your Vote for Seoul Mayor Affected by your Evaluation of the Lee Myung-bak Administration? – By Candidate Choice**



The data shows that the voting tendency was stronger for the second question, which asked whether the mayoral by-election was an indicator of next year's general and presidential elections. On average, 70.8 percent of voters said that it was. 75.8 percent of those in their 20's, 83.7 percent of those in their 30's, and 77.7 percent of those in their 40's also said that it was. By a smaller margin, a majority of older generations also agreed that it was (64.0 percent of those in their 50's and 55.7 percent of those in their 60's). From the ideological point of view, 81.0 percent of progressives and 70.1 percent of moderates said that the

mayoral election was an indicator of the upcoming elections, while only 56.6 percent of conservatives agreed with this statement. Similarly, 82.1 percent of DP supporters and 72.5 percent of independent voters affirmed this statement, whereas only 58.6 percent of GNP supporters agreed. Based on analysis of the data from these two questions, we can conclude that the public thought that this by-election was not just about choosing a new mayor, but was also a referendum on the Lee Myung-bak government and the current political parties.

Figure 10  
**Is your Vote in the Seoul Mayoral Election a Good Indicator of your Vote for the 2012 Presidential Election? - By Age Group**

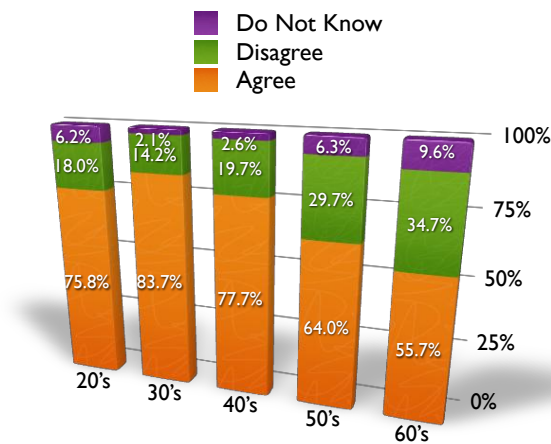


Figure 11  
**Is your Vote in the Seoul Mayoral Election a Good Indicator of your Vote for the 2012 Presidential Election? - By Ideological Affiliation**

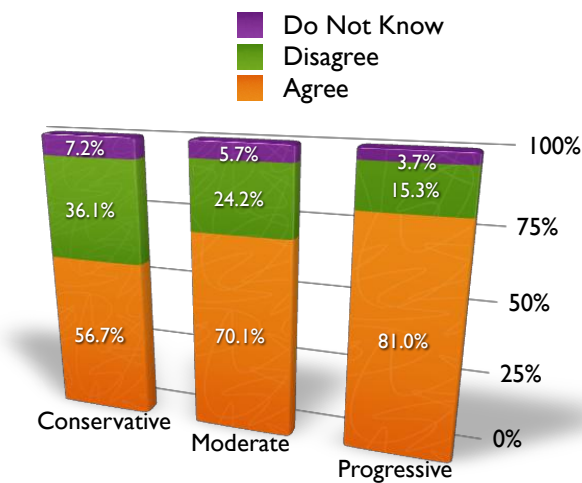


Figure 12  
**Is your Vote in the Seoul Mayoral Election a Good Indicator of your Vote for the 2012 Presidential Election? – By Age Group**

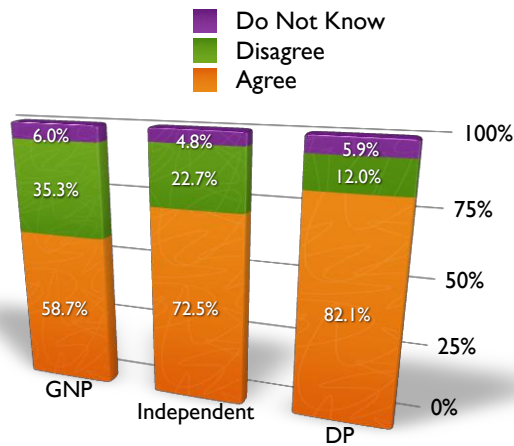
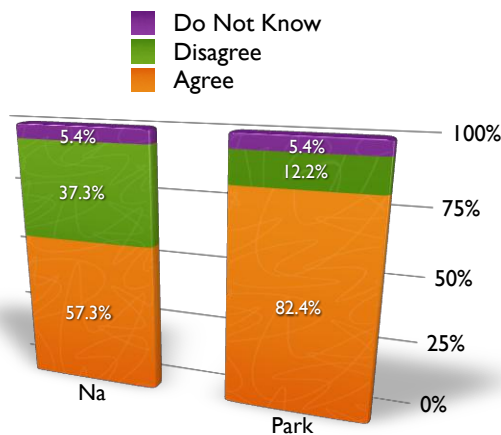


Figure 13  
**Is your Vote in the Seoul Mayoral Election a Good Indicator of your Vote for the 2012 Presidential Election? – By Candidate Choice**



We also asked Seoul voters what they thought the most important issues would be for next year’s elections. Overall, job creation was the most important issue for next year’s election (43.1 percent), leading by a wide margin. This was followed by income redistribution (23.3 percent), consolidation of democracy (13.1 percent), education (12.6 percent), and North-South security issues (7.9 percent). There was significant variation in this ordering among different age groups. Those in their 30’s and 40’s showed a stronger preference for income redistribution than other cohorts. Voters in their 30’s stated that the most important issue was income redistribution (32.8 percent), closely followed by job creation (31.8 percent). Those in their 40’s said that job creation was the most important issue (37.6 percent), closely followed by income redistribution

(30.7 percent). Voters in their 20's chose job creation as the most important issue (45.0 percent) by a large margin, followed by income redistribution (24.1 percent). Voters in their 50's and 60's indicated a very strong preference for job creation (52.7 percent and 46.7 percent, respectively) and a much weaker preference for income redistribution (17.2 percent and 13.0 percent, respectively). Conservatives chose job creation as the most important issue (47.6 percent) by a wide margin, followed by income redistribution (14.4 percent). Moderates also tended to list job creation as the top priority (45.4 percent), but the gap between job creation and income redistribution for moderates is narrower than for conservatives (income redistribution 21.4 percent). For progressives, the gap is very narrow. They preferred job creation (37.2 percent), but also preferred income redistribution (31.4 percent) to a much greater degree than conservatives and moderates. In a hypothetical presidential race between a GNP candidate and a unified opposition candidate, those who said that they would vote for a ruling party candidate favored job creation (53.1 percent) and showed little preference for income redistribution (only 9.4 percent). On the other hand, those who claimed that they would vote for an opposition candidate mostly preferred income redistribution (36.0 percent), closely followed by job creation (31.9 percent).

Figure 14  
**Most Salient Issues to Seoul Voting Population – By Age Group**

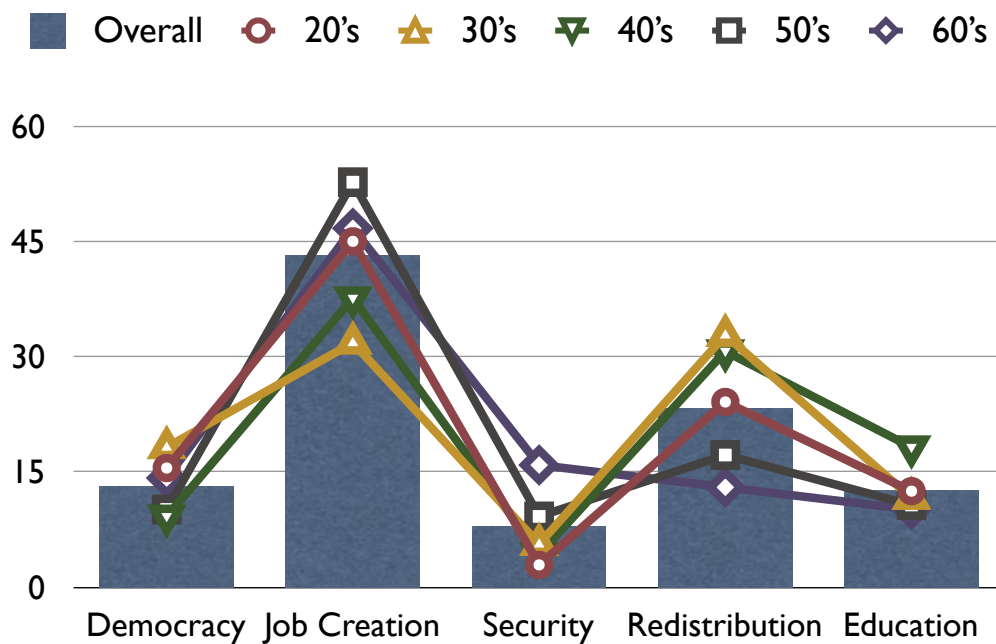
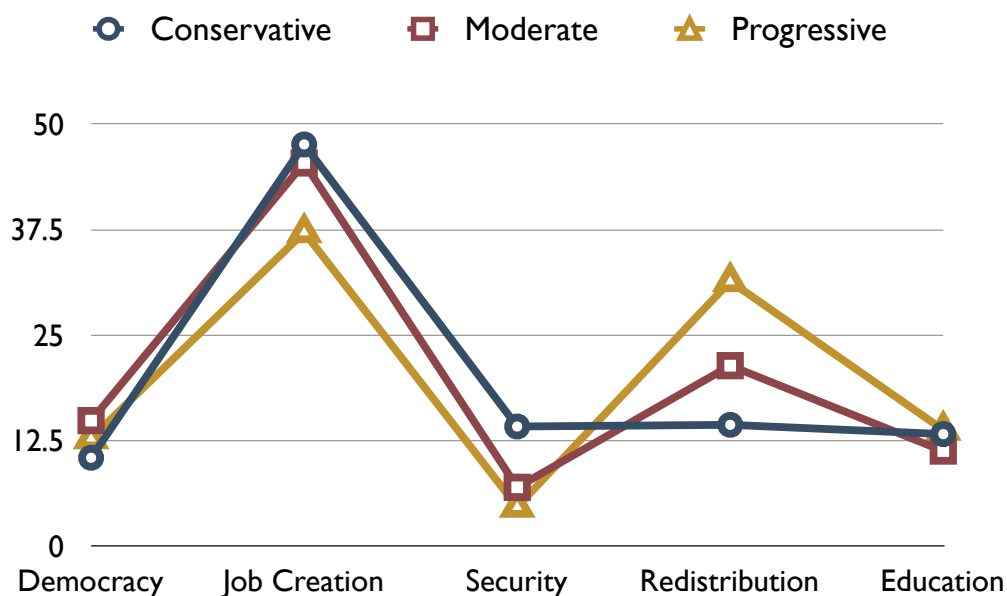


Figure 15  
**Most Salient Issues to Seoul Voting Population – By Political Affiliation**



We also asked voters several questions about the next presidential election. 33.0 percent said that they would vote for a ruling GNP candidate, whereas 39.7 percent claimed that they would vote for a unified opposition candidate. 27.3 percent were undecided. Again, we see very strong discrepancies among the different generations. Younger generations supported the unified opposition candidate, while older generations supported the GNP candidate. More specifically, among those in their 20's, 41.4 percent would have supported the opposition candidate and only 18.8 percent would have backed the GNP candidate (39.8 percent of those in their 20's said they were undecided). This tendency was stronger among those in their 30's. 56.2 percent of those in their 30's said they were going to vote for the opposition candidate, whereas only 14.2 percent showed an intention to vote for the GNP candidate. Those in their 40's were similar, but with a little more interest in the GNP candidate. 52.2 percent supported the opposition candidate, while 26.9 percent backed the GNP candidate. This trend of strong support for the opposition candidate was reversed among those in their 50's and 60's. 42.2 percent of those in their 50's stated that they would support the GNP candidate, while 33.0 percent said that they would support the opposition candidate. 56.7 percent of those in their 60's said they would vote for the GNP candidate, while only 18.3 percent claimed they would support the opposition candidate.

One very interesting point is seen when we analyze the results by party affiliation. As expected, 83.7 percent of GNP supporters said they would vote for the GNP candidate (2.0 percent for the opposition candidate), whereas 84.9 percent of DP supporters said they would support the opposition candidate (2.8

percent for the GNP candidate). However, the most interesting results are seen when analyzing the data collected from independent voters. 53.7 percent of independent voters said that they were still undecided. However, 40.7 percent of them said they would support the opposition candidate in the next presidential election, while only 5.6 percent said they would vote for the GNP candidate.

Figure 16  
**What Candidate Will You Support in the Next Presidential Election? - By Age Group**

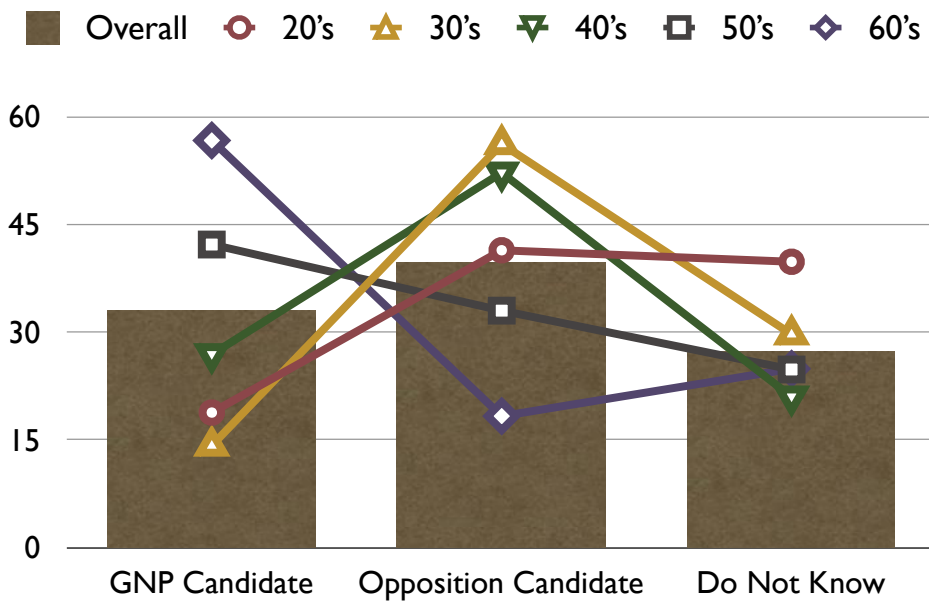
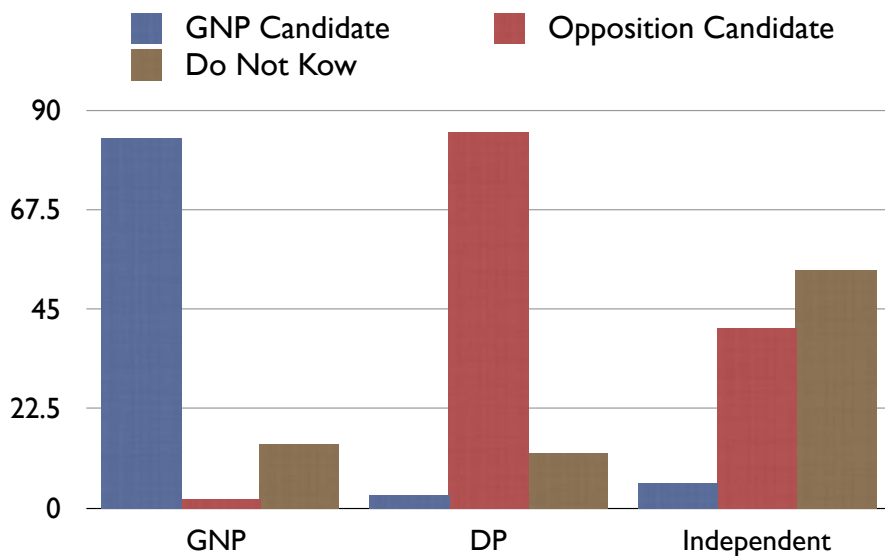
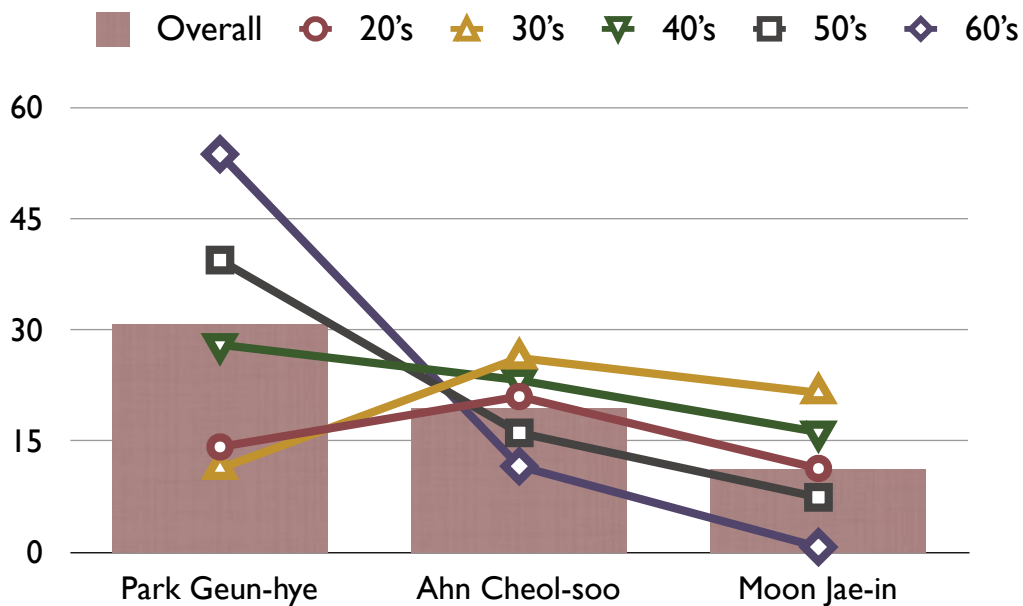


Figure 17  
**What Candidate Will You Support in the Next Presidential Election? - By Political Party Affiliation**



We also asked the respondents whom they would vote for if the election were to take place tomorrow. One caveat: since these results are from the sample of voters from the Seoul mayoral election, it may differ from the data taken from nationwide surveys.

Figure 18  
**What Candidate Will You Support in the Next Presidential Election? –  
 By Candidate Choice**



In the data from our survey, Park Geun-hye is still the forerunner in the presidential race with 30.7 percent support of Seoul voters. She is followed by Ahn Cheol-soo with 19.4 percent support. Moon Jae-in, who was chief of staff for President Roh Moo-hyun and the current chairman of the Roh Moo-hyun Foundation, is ranked third with 11.2 percent support. Since Ahn and Moon are not full-time politicians, it is still not clear whether they will run for office next year. This makes the fact that public support for them is much higher than other politicians very interesting. Especially, for those in their 30's, Ahn is ranked first with 26.2 percent support, and Moon is second with 21.5 percent. Park Geun-hye is ranked third with only 11.3 percent. The story is similar for Seoul voters in their 20's: 21.0 percent ranked Ahn as their most preferred candidate, while 14.2 percent supported Park and 11.3 percent backed Moon. Considering that Park has been the most prominent forerunner for the past 3 years without any meaningful challenger from the opposition, this result should be taken very seriously.

One of the most important features of this by-election is the game-changing element of Ahn Cheol-soo entrance into the political scene. For the past 2-3 years, it had been generally understood that Park Geun-hye would have won the presidential election owing to the lack of credible challengers. However, since Park Won-soon won the mayoral race with help from Ahn, public interest has shifted to the question of whether Ahn will run for president and thus pose a



genuine challenge to Park Geun-hye's bid for the Blue House. This has thrown an element of uncertainty into the upcoming presidential race, as we cannot predict what will happen if Ahn runs or if he and Moon run on a united ticket.

The DP itself is also facing some very serious political challenges. When we asked who would be most suitable as the unified opposition candidate in the next presidential election, among those who voted for Park Won-soon, Ahn was ranked first with 34.9 percent, Moon was ranked second with 21.7 percent, and Sohn Hak-kyu, the DP leader, was ranked in mere third place with 11.5 percent of the popular vote. More than a half of Park Won-soon's supporters are backing a non-DP candidate. As it is expected that there will be very strong pressure to put forth a presidential candidate who can unify the opposition parties in the next election, the DP will be unlikely to put forth its own candidate if Ahn and Moon do not join it.

We also asked voters whether or not they would support a new party if Ahn were to create one. Overall, 37.1 percent of voters said that they would support it, whereas 34.0 percent stated that they would not and 28.9 percent were undecided. In particular, there was strong support from younger generations. 43.2 percent of those in their 20's, 50.9 percent of those in their 30's, and 46.3 percent of those in their 40's said that they would support a new party with Ahn at the helm. As expected, the most disapproval came from the GNP supporters. 65.5 percent of GNP supporters said that they would not support Ahn's party. However, 60.2 percent of DP supporters said they would. 46.8 percent of independent voters also indicated that they would support Ahn's party, though 36.8 percent were still unsure. We can see that if Ahn establishes a new party it will have a very powerful effect on Korean politics next year.

## **Conclusion**

What is the political significance of the Seoul mayoral by-election election? First, the by-election changes the nature of the game for the next presidential election. Park Geun-hye's victory had been almost assured given her dominance of the political scene over the past 2-3 years, but the introduction of Ahn Cheol-soo has so energized the opposition that a hypothetical presidential contest between him and Park Geun-hye would now be too close to call.

Second, the results from the Seoul mayoral by-election show that the leading political parties are now in serious trouble. Seoul voters showed a strong preference for an independent candidate instead of the traditional party candidates. The younger generation harbors significant antipathy toward the GNP, while the DP also faces internal challenges from its coalition partners. The fact that a majority of voters—including a sizable majority of independents—regarded the by-election as a referendum on the Lee Myung-bak administration also does not bode well for the GNP.

Third, the results suggest that Park Won-soon and other candidates from the NGO and civil society sector will face contrary pressures now that they have been elected to office. Park Won-soon was elected in large part because voters

perceived him to be a political outsider given Ahn's endorsement. Now that he will be mayor, Mr. Park will have to balance his activism with the realities of political compromise, potentially alienating his progressive base.

In conclusion, the Seoul mayoral by-election has completely overturned expectations about who South Korea's next president will be and has thrown in a heaping measure of unpredictability. The 2012 election season just got a whole lot more interesting.