A Link to the Authoritarian Past?  
Older Voters as a Force in the 2012 South Korean Presidential Election

Hyejin Kim

Abstract

South Korea’s democratization appeared to mean the demise of a harsh political style that was dominant during the country’s rapid industrialization. The 2012 presidential election placed in power a leader who deliberately invoked the style and policies of that predemocratic period. The election saw a sharp divide between voters aged fifty and over, who overwhelmingly supported the winning candidate Park Geun-hye, and those under fifty. This result is surprising: Koreans in their fifties and sixties had demonstrated against the heavy-handed measures of Park’s father, Park Chung Hee, whom the candidate repeatedly invoked in her campaigning. How could people who had struggled against dictatorship and later won turn to a symbol of that nondemocratic period for leadership? The essay argues that a reinterpretation of the authoritarian period and nostalgia for policies of that time among an increasingly large population aged fifty and older played a role in the creation of a key support base for Park. Against the background of an aging population, the reinterpretation of Park Chung Hee helped to generate an electoral victory for his daughter. The policies and politics that drove South Korea’s economic rise not only are important to understanding the past but also their memory continues to challenge the country’s new democratic values.

Keywords: Elections, South Korea, aging population, Park Geun-hye, cohort.

At six p.m. on December 19, 2012, the day of the eighteenth presidential election in South Korea, many district polling stations still were unable to close their gates. Although election day was a public holiday, many companies remained open for business. Working Koreans rushed to the polls after leaving the office to grab a piece of paper proving that they had arrived at the station.

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before six p.m., and then stood in line on the cold winter’s evening. Some working voters had avoided this situation by heading to the polls very early in the morning. Excitement about the election was such that even the demands of unscrupulous bosses could not prevent voters from striving to vote in time.

Analysts and campaign strategists believed that high voter turnout would give victory to Moon Jae-in, the progressive candidate. The progressive party, the Democratic Party, proposed an extension of voting hours so that working voters could make it to the polls, but the ruling Saenuri Party blocked the bill’s passage. Part of the reason for confidence that voter turnout would help the opposition came from the ruling party’s candidate. Moon was running against Park Geun-hye, the daughter of long-time dictator Park Chung Hee, a controversial figure. The election seemed to pit the democratic present against the authoritarian past, and it was thought that turnout would ensure victory for the former.

Enthusiasm for the election increased the voting rate to 75.8 percent, much higher than the 62.8 percent reached in the last presidential election in 2007. As many people assumed that a high voting rate would be an advantage for the progressive party, the percentage seemed to guarantee a change of government. Even before the public announcement of the voting result that night, some people who supported the progressive party gathered together and started early celebrations.

However, the outcome of the election was exactly the opposite. Park swept into power, winning by more than one million votes. The logic regarding voter turnout had been completely wrong. The election placed a politician associated with nondemocratic values into the highest office of a proud young democracy. The turnout puzzle was quickly solved. Older and younger voters were sharply divided. Voters under fifty years of age overwhelmingly supported Moon, while those fifty or older were even more strongly supportive of Park. Ten years before, this divide would not have been conclusive. Younger voters propelled a progressive president into office in 2002. However, a rapidly aging population now gave the edge to the older crowd. In this “battle between generations” (sedae gan gyeokcha), as the election has been called, the older generation had the numerical advantage.

Why did older Koreans form such a strong base for Park? While one might expect people anywhere to become conservative as they age, support among older Koreans for Park is actually very surprising. Memory of the Korean War was a major force guiding support for the conservative candidate. Members of the generation in their fifties were born after the war; most who were in their sixties have little recollection of it. People in their fifties are part of the generation which experienced the dictatorship of Park Chung Hee between 1961 and 1979. This generation also played an important role in the democratization of South Korea. Many young demonstrators were tortured or killed during Park Chung Hee’s leadership. After the assassination of Park, a new military government emerged and protests continued. One of the major
activists and politicians, Kim Dae-jung, later became the fifteenth president of South Korea and a symbol of the victory of democracy. Yet in the election of 2012, people who were in their fifties voted for Park Geun-hye instead of Moon Jae-in, who was a close associate of former president Roh Moo Hyun, who had been imprisoned due to his political activism while in college and spent his life as a human rights lawyer. Support for Park seems to contradict the values for which the generation of people in their fifties fought. How could people who struggled against dictatorship and later won turn to a symbol of a nondemocratic period for leadership?

This essay argues that a reinterpretation of the authoritarian period by an increasingly large population over age fifty played a role in the creation of a key base of support for Park. One set of factors driving this reinterpretation relates to the economic situation of older Koreans. The simultaneous onset of neoliberal reforms and the beginning of the welfare state made many people in age groups fifty and older disillusioned with both neoliberalism and progressive policies. In light of the situation, elements of Korean society—including both intellectuals and ordinary people—have reevaluated Park Chung Hee. During the election campaign, Park Geun-hye played on this nostalgia to gain support. Her opponent, meanwhile, was trapped into talking about social change in an idealistic way. In the context of Korea’s aging population, the reinterpretation of Park Chung Hee helped to generate an electoral victory for his daughter.

This essay does not contend that the cultural shift documented here should be viewed as a definitive explanation of the election result. The election was very close; attention to any single factor is certain to miss a relatively minor one that contributed just as much to the outcome. Traditional influences in South Korean politics also played a role. Parties are divided along regional lines, and again in this election the southeastern region from which Park hails supported the conservative candidate, while the southwestern region overwhelmingly favored the progressive candidate. Gender also mattered. This was the first presidential election in which a woman was a leading candidate, and women tended to support Park. It would be a mistake to view an aging population as the only factor behind Park’s success.

Nonetheless, the support of older voters for Park is significant and deserving of explanation. As shall be seen, the effect of age on support for Park was noticeable and statistically significant, even when controlling for a variety of other factors. The importance of this effect goes beyond the voting behavior of individuals. Since older voters comprised a larger proportion of the electorate than ever before, the effect of their preferences was amplified. As South Korea’s population rapidly ages, the political ideas of this group will grow in electoral influence. In addition, many of Park’s campaign appeals made sense only in light of the ideas of this group. Park made repeated references to themes from the 1970s; these appeals targeted older voters with memories of that period. Furthermore, examination of this support base can serve as a window onto the broader theme of the possible resurgence of political styles.
of decades past. With the return of a Park to the presidency and an apparent downturn in protection of civil liberties, there is now widespread concern that authoritarian-era politics is creeping into South Korea’s democracy.\(^1\)

This study speaks to discussions about declining popular support for democracy in South Korea. Drawing on attitude surveys, scholars have shown that enthusiasm for democracy peaked in the mid-1990s and then declined in the wake of corruption scandals and the 1997 Asian financial crisis. While Koreans profess commitment to democracy in the abstract, they are more hesitant if democracy comes at the cost of economic prosperity. These findings may be the result of the perception that democracy is not working as well as had been hoped.\(^2\) This essay’s examination of older voters builds on this research concerning public opinion. Studies of advanced industrial economies, as well as of post-communist states, also have documented varying levels of skepticism about democracy.\(^3\) While much of the existing research concerns mass attitudes, this essay examines the link between attitudes toward and the consequences of the exercise of power. Previous studies have hinted in this direction. Chong-Min Park and Doh Chull Shin suggest that underlying Confucian attitudes may drive nostalgia for previous authoritarian governments to the point that “Korean democracy may degenerate into a delegative or an illiberal populist democracy, if not outright authoritarianism.”\(^4\) A significant question for examination from their research is how attitudes could prompt such a transformation. While, here, there is no claim that South Korea has become authoritarian, understanding the movement that helped to bring Park Geun-hye into office is important for gaining insight into how attitudes can affect political outcomes.

**Aging Population and Politics**

A main trend in the 2012 election was that young voters supported the progressive candidate and older voters preferred the conservative candidate. The outcome of the election clearly follows the aging-conservatism hypothesis,

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which holds that people become more conservative as they age.\textsuperscript{5}

Aggregate data clearly show that older voters supported Park. What do individual data reveal? Surveys conducted during 2012 can help us answer this question. The essay draws on a nationwide survey from the East Asia Institute (EAI) in Seoul. EAI conducted five rounds of telephone surveys over the course of 2012, a year that included National Assembly elections in the spring and the presidential election in December. The survey aimed to build a sample that was representative of the voting population by age, education, and income level. The panel survey included two thousand participants. The response rate varied over the iterations of the survey. In the final round, the response rate was 67.8 percent.\textsuperscript{6}

The main interest is in the support of older voters for Park. EAI data are used to illustrate that older voters were indeed more likely to support Park than younger voters. One way to examine this relationship is to look at one binary dependent variable, support for Park, versus support for another candidate, and one binary independent variable, whether voters were under fifty or fifty or older. The dependent variable was obtained from a question in the fifth round of the EAI survey, just after the election. Respondents were asked whom they supported. Since the main interest is in Park, the other candidates were lumped together with Moon. The independent variable was easily constructed from the ages of the respondents. Dividing the population into two groups at age fifty is in keeping with the interests of this investigation. The goal is not to look simply at the effect of each year of age, but also to see how voters fifty and over and under fifty differed. The odds ratio is one useful measure for examining the relationship. It can be obtained both through cross-tabulation and through binary logistic regression. The odds ratio refers to the ratio of the odds that voters under fifty supported Park and the odds that voters fifty and over supported Park. In this case, the odds ratio was 4.05 (see model 1 in table 1). This figure means that a voter aged fifty years or more had odds of supporting Park four times greater than the odds of a voter under fifty. If, for


\textsuperscript{6} The survey respondents had a sex ratio of 98.0. The mean age was forty-five, with a standard deviation of 14.6. These figures can be compared to the general population and the voter registry. The general population in 2010 (including those below the voting age) had an average age of 38.1 and a sex ratio of 98.7. Ages of registered voters in the 2012 presidential election are unavailable but the sex ratio was 97.5. We also can compare the education of the respondents with those of the general population. Eleven percent of respondents had a middle-school education or less, while the figure for the voting-age population is 20 percent. The survey captured a group in which 40 percent had at least a university degree; only 30 percent of the voting-age population has a university degree. The EAI survey sample has much more education than the general population. Information calculated from Korea Statistical Information Service, kosis.kr, and the National Election Commission, info.nec.go.kr. (accessed November 23, 2014).
example, a voter under age fifty had one-to-one odds of supporting Park (i.e., a 50 percent probability), then a voter aged fifty or more had four-to-one odds of supporting Park (80 percent probability). This result is striking.

The effect of age might be diluted when other factors are included. Logistic regression analysis can test the effects of a set of variables. A series of logistic regressions was run with the dependent variable of support for Park or not. The binary independent variable of voters below fifty or fifty and above was used, and several other independent variables were added. One was gender. Another was income, since the effect of age might actually be an effect of rising income. A third was education, to check for the possibility that the older voters who supported Park were those with less education who might not have participated in the movements of the 1980s. Two others related to region of origin. In the South Korean context, region of origin is a crucial factor in candidate preference. Because of the regional alignment of the parties, with one having a base in the southeast and one in the southwest, it is important to control for the effects of hailing from either of these regions.

The effects of political attitudes also were examined. Since support for Park could come from being a supporter of the party to which she belongs, Saenuri Party identification was included. Another indicator was the party for which the respondent voted in the National Assembly elections held earlier in 2012. Also included was a variable that indicates whether the respondent voted for Lee Myung Bak, Pak’s predecessor, in the 2007 presidential election. The results can be seen in table 1.

Model 2 shows the effect of being over fifty, along with the other socioeconomic variables. We see that age is the only variable that has an effect that is statistically distinct from 1. It appears that the odds were greater that women would vote for Park, but the effect is significant only at the 0.1 level. We also can confirm that the support of older voters for Park was not an effect of income. Model 3 introduces the party identification variable. The massive effect of party identification on support for Park hardly should be surprising. In fact, perhaps party identification should not be considered a separate variable from support for Park. The Saenuri Party, which she led, was founded soon before the April 2012 legislative elections. The image of Saenuri is fully tied to the image of Park. The old party name of Hannara lasted for fifteen years, a very long time by Korean standards. The conversion of the party to Saenuri was a rebranding of the party around Park’s leadership. For these reasons, party identification is not truly independent of support for Park.

In model 4, we see the effects of region. As expected, region of origin helped to predict support for Park. The odds that a voter from Cholla would support Park were 0.36 that of a voter from outside the region, or, in more intuitive terms, the odds that a voter from Cholla would not support Park were nearly three times higher than for a voter from elsewhere. Model 5 includes other indicators of political identity. It should be noted that voters fifty and over in this model still had double the odds of voters under fifty of supporting Park.
This figure means that a voter who had a 50 percent likelihood of voting for Park had a 67 percent likelihood if that voter was fifty or older. The regressions indicate that aging and political identification led older voters to prefer Park Geun-hye.7

Of course, the support of older voters only mattered if they actually voted. In the election, turnout among voters between ages twenty and forty-nine reached a historic high. Over two-thirds of voters in their twenties participated, and 70 percent of those in their thirties. Nineteen-year-olds, voting in their

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7 Since the dependent variable is binary, linear regression is not the best tool. Nonetheless, a series of linear regression models was run to test the same variables. Across the models, the impact of age remained significant. Income had no significant effect. Those results converge with the results of logistic regression.
first election, also had a high rate of turnout in an election that generated widespread excitement. Older voters, however, had even higher rates of turnout. Four-fifths of voters in their fifties and 82 percent of people over sixty visited polling stations. This turnout demonstrates one component of how the voting power of older Koreans became influential.

The rapid transformation of age demographics in South Korea makes the turnout rates all the more important. As table 2 indicates, there are two million fewer people in their twenties than in their fifties, and one million fewer in their thirties than in their fifties. Even if the voting rate is high across all age groups, older voters can have a much larger impact on an election.

Table 2. Voting Rates Based on Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age distribution</th>
<th>Voting rate</th>
<th>Number of population</th>
<th>Progressive candidate</th>
<th>Conservative candidate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>0.60m</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>68.5%</td>
<td>4.78m</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>5.90m</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
<td>6.94m</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>80.9%</td>
<td>6.98m</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
<td>6.63m</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The potential power of older voters has expanded in each presidential election. Figure 1 shows changes in every presidential election. In the sixteenth presidential election in 2002, people in their sixties made up only 16.4 percent of the population. However, the number jumped to 20.8 percent in the eighteenth presidential election in 2012. On the other hand, the percentage of voters in their twenties decreased from 23.2 percent in 2002 to 18.1 percent in 2012. If one combines voters in their fifties and sixties, the percentage shot up from 29 percent to 40 percent between the sixteenth and eighteenth presidential elections.

One surprising factor in the eighteenth election was the voting tendencies of people in their fifties, who did not exactly belong to either the elderly group or the young group. Why did they join voters over sixty in supporting Park? While their behavior fits the expectations of the aging-conservatism hypothesis, most research focused on other societies has debunked this hypothesis. Alwin and Krosnick point out that the political characteristics of age groups constantly shift as cohorts are influenced not only by aging but also by factors specific to given time periods. This insight would seem to make

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sense in thinking about the cohort of voters in their fifties in South Korea. Those who were born between 1952 and 1962, the postwar generation, were in their teens and early twenties during the dictatorship of Park Chung Hee. Members of this generation powered the mass demonstrations of the 1980s that helped lead to democratization. This generation was one with values in opposition to authoritarianism. Because of shared values and experiences, one would think that this cohort of former activists would not support a candidate associated with the Park regime—even as the cohort ages. Moreover, ten years before, in the 2002 election, many of them chose the progressive candidate, Roo Moo Hyun. Indeed, they mobilized many citizen activities in support of Roh Moo Hyun. Even in the 2012 election, the conservative party predicted that it would be difficult to persuade people who were in their early- and mid-fifties to support Park. Park Geun-hye’s advisers, therefore, excluded this group from among those they targeted in campaigning. However, 62.5 percent of people in their fifties voted for Park. A surprising number of people in this age group who had supported Roh in 2002 voted for Park ten years later. Among voters in this cohort who voted for Roh in 2002, 47.1 percent voted for Park in 2012. Among voters in their fifties in 2002 who had voted for Roh Moo Hyun, 56 percent supported Park in 2012.9

What explains these dramatic changes in political views? The survey data

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that are introduced in this essay do not dispute the hypothesis that individuals become more conservative as they age. Indeed, even in the 2002 presidential election, older voters had greater odds than younger ones of supporting the conservative candidate. This tendency has been documented in many societies. One possible mechanism is that individuals lose their idealism as they age, regardless of past experiences. In that case, arguments about nostalgia for authoritarian may seem irrelevant.

The argument presented here does not challenge the aging-conservatism thesis. However, the claim that South Korean individuals become conservative as they age requires further investigation. That claim is based on the premise that an election is a choice between candidates, one of whom is more conservative and the other, more progressive. If a candidate espouses policies such as reducing corporate tax rates, cutting back on entitlements, and increasing national security expenditures, maybe in any context that candidate could be labeled “conservative.” Of course, the meaning of conservative depends on context. In South Korea, a core feature of conservatives is their hawkish stance on North Korea. By such measures, in the South Korean 2012 election, Park could have been called more conservative and her main rival, Moon, more progressive.

At the same time, the label “conservative” does not adequately capture what Park symbolized. As discussed below, she also made populist appeals and used slogans such as “democratization of the economy.” Moreover, Park did not simply represent conservative values. She directly associated herself with her father’s rule and refused to condemn some of his repressive actions. Consider the contrast with previous Korean conservative leaders. Kim Young Sam, president in the mid-1990s, belonged to a party that preceded Park’s and had been an opponent of the progressive Kim Dae Jung. Yet, for most of Kim’s career, he was a critic of authoritarian regimes, including Park Chung Hee’s. As president, he introduced numerous reforms that limited state power and pushed military figures out of politics. The implication of voting for Kim Young Sam in 1992 and the implication of voting for Park Geun-hye in 2012 were poles apart. To apply the same conservative label to Kim and to Park Geun-hye is to gloss over massive differences in the meaning of conservative.

The aging-conservative hypothesis is not wrong, but it is a blunt tool. We need to make a more precise argument in order to understand how a large section of the Korean population could revise its values in such a significant way. Below, several factors are outlined that combined to cause Koreans from the feisty generation to alter their views. Again, these factors should be understood as supplementing the aging-conservatism hypothesis, which is not specific enough to account for the shifting understandings of conservatism. The factors discussed below help to highlight how recent experiences have shaped interpretations of the authoritarian past.
Links to the Past

The 2012 election featured a battle over the past. Candidates were linked to former presidents, both through the media and through the candidates’ campaigning. Park Geun-hye obviously was linked to her father. She was born in 1952. She spent her teenage years and her twenties in the Blue House during her father’s presidency. When an assassination attempt on her father killed her mother in 1974, she entered the limelight as the first lady at the age of twenty-one. She accompanied her father on his public duties until his own assassination in 1979. For most of the next two decades, she remained out of politics. However, she retained other positions in organizations, such as chairperson of the Yookyung Foundation and the Chungsoo Foundation. In 1998, the conservative Hannara Party brought her into politics and she won a by-election in her home city of Taegu. She won subsequent elections in her district by massive majorities. She claimed the reason why she entered politics was because of the 1997 East Asian financial crisis. She felt that she should do something for the country; otherwise, she would not be proud of herself.10

Moon Jae-in, born in 1953 to a middle-class family, belonged squarely to the demonstration generation. In the 2012 election, Moon was associated with former president Roh Moo Hyun (in office 2003-2008). Both worked as human rights lawyers. Moon had been a longtime associate of Roh’s and served as his chief of staff. After Roh committed suicide in 2009 in the wake of an intrusive investigation by the prosecution, Moon headed a foundation to commemorate him. Park’s camp emphasized Moon’s association with Roh, who had left office with low approval ratings. “The Roh Moo Hyun government was a failed government and therefore the candidate of the Democratic Party Moon Jae-in as the main power of the then-government should take responsibility,” Park’s party insisted.11

Park made deliberate and repeated references to her father’s rule. First, she emphasized returning to the past, including by highlighting it prosperity. For instance, Park used the slogan, “Try to Live Well, Again.” This phrase was adapted from “Try to Live Well,” the most famous campaign slogan during her father’s saemaeul undong (new village movement). Park Chung Hee himself wrote the lyrics for the song that accompanied the “Try to Live Well” campaign. Park Geun-hye’s slight tweak of this campaign slogan reminded people of her father’s time. Everyone who lived through his rule would remember Park’s slogan. When in elementary school, I woke up early to sweep around the house. As I worked, “Try to Live Well” and other saemaeul songs were broadcast

repeatedly on the street. Park Geun-hye also used the slogan, “To Restore 70 Percent to the Middle Class.” Again, this phrase aimed to invoke nostalgia for the past. The implicit message was that she could bring back an era of high economic growth, creating opportunities for many.

Park also stressed her position as her father’s successor. In her autobiography, she shared her experiences as first lady. As she accompanied her father on official appearances, he would explain to her how much he cared about the country and gave her directions on how to be patriotic. “Father was a good teacher and I was a very sincere student. He gave me special private lessons, [the value of] which you cannot calculate with money. The conversations were mainly in the car when we moved around and he taught me about history, security, and the economy.”

Park also made reference to her mother, Yook Young-soo. Yook generally has a better image than Park Chung Hee. She is viewed as a traditional Korean mother and wife, distant from politics, and as a victim. For decades, Park has worn her mother’s hairstyle, reminding the public of Yook. Park’s campaign tried to create an image reminiscent of her mother. One politician who supported her claimed, “The reason why Park Geun-hye thinks of the country first, not herself, is due to her mother’s impact.” Yook Young-soo’s home province, Chungcheong, is also regarded as a “swing state” of great strategic importance in presidential elections. Park’s references to her mother may have been especially effective there.

Not only did Park associate herself with her parents, but also she distanced herself from the incumbent president—of her same party. The Democratic Party pointed out that the seventeenth president was elected from the conservative Hannara Party, and, therefore, that Park should take responsibility for the president’s mistakes. One way Park deflected such criticism was by changing the party’s name. Park changed the name from Hannara Party to Saenuri Party and tried to minimize the connection between herself and Lee Myung-bak. The election might have been portrayed as one pitting continuity against a newcomer, but Park strove to make voters see the choice as one between a leader associated with a period of the country’s prosperity and a candidate responsible for the “failings” of a previous government.

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14 Korea Gallup, Gallup Korea Political Index 54, no. 2 (February 18, 2013). Lee’s approval rating declined to 23 percent between July and September 2012. It was one of the lowest approval ratings after President Kim Young-sam, who finished his term in the beginning of the IMF crisis. Many looked forward to the date of the next presidential election.
Park’s effort to use her affiliation with her father succeeded with a portion of the electorate. The EAI survey asked respondents for their feelings about Park Chung Hee. They rated their view of him along a four-point scale from negative to very positive. Logistic regression analysis shows that the effect on propensity to support Park Geun-hye was great. The odds ratio is 4.29 and statistically significant. In other words, for each step up the scale of liking Park Chung Hee, the odds of supporting Park Geun-hye grew by a factor of more than four (i.e., from a 20 percent likelihood, 1:4 odds, to 50 percent, or from 60 percent, 3:2 odds, to 83 percent).

Why would Park’s strategy of connecting herself to her father work? People in their fifties and sixties could not possibly have forgotten about the political suppression that occurred during Park Chung Hee’s dictatorship. Park Geun-hye’s detractors repeatedly raised questions about episodes during the elder Park’s reign. Candidate Park was asked to explain where she stood on particular instances of repression, including cases of torture and state killing. These aspects of her father’s rule were not forgotten, but still most voters who lived as adults during that time supported Park.

Reinterpreting Park Chung Hee

Park’s references to her father helped her to gain support because of a reinterpretation of Park Chung Hee that has occurred in recent years. One episode sheds light on this reinterpretation.

I happened to accompany a Korean guide for a Korean tourist group in Singapore. The guide asked the visitors: “Do you know who Singapore founder Lee Kuan Yew respected most in his life? Previous Korean president Park Chung Hee... . He respected Park Chung Hee a lot and followed his policies. You can consider Singapore the country that Park Chung Hee wanted to create.”15 Singapore is a popular destination among Korean families looking for a safe place to live and raise their children. Singapore has presented two faces to Korea. On one hand, there is rule by a strongman, strict punishment for disobedience, limited media freedom, and a large wealth gap. On the other hand, there is continual economic growth, status as a leading economy, and a higher GDP per capita than Korea’s. Instead of taking human rights and freedom of speech seriously, Singapore’s government appears to have succeeded in focusing entirely on the economy, and the populace seems better off as a result. South Korea departed from the authoritarian path in the 1980s, when the country began to democratize. Singapore thus can be presented as following the path which South Korea abandoned. Koreans now talk about a “Singapore fantasy.”16

15 I conducted fieldwork in Singapore, January 2013.
Sociologist Song Ho Geun points out that “the rules and norms of lifetime employment and promotion by seniority were developed under Park Chung Hee’s authoritarian rule (1961-1979).”17 Today, stable jobs are more scarce and part-time work is increasingly common. Some Koreans, therefore, look back to the period of Park’s rule as one during which ordinary people prospered.

In 2012, nostalgia for the past was strongest among the elderly. Some were quick to identify Park with her parents. When Park visited the Korea Senior Association, the association emphasized to her that her mother had been very generous to its members.18 A representative of the association said, “To us, she is like our daughter.”19 In the countryside, Park’s campaign strategy resonated with many people. While Park conducted campaigns in rural areas, pictures and brooches of her father and mother appeared among attendees. In addition, members of her party sometimes encouraged onlookers to call out, “Park Geun-hye! Park Chung Hee! Yook Young-soo!”20 Many voters felt sympathy for Park Geun-hye because she had lost her parents in assassinations.21 Older voters could absolve her of her father’s violence, while associating candidate Park with the positive changes that had occurred in the country under her father’s rule.

The EAI survey examined earlier asked respondents to name their favorite president. Among respondents aged fifty and over, 52 percent responded that Park Chung Hee was the best president. By contrast, among those under age fifty, only 20 percent reported that Park was best. Roh Moo Hyun was the most popular president among this group.

Even low-income voters, who usually would have supported a progressive candidate, were attracted to Park because of the nostalgia for her father’s time. According to an article that surveyed seventy people who lived in apartments for low-income households, 47.2 percent supported Park, while 7.1 percent supported Moon, and 21.4 percent, a third candidate named Ahn Cheol-soo.22 The reason why respondents supported Park was because Park Chung Hee

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18 Yook Young-soo supported the establishment of the office of Korea Senior Association in 1972.
22 Ahn Cheol-soo gave up his candidacy soon before the election and announced his support for Moon Jae-in.
was her father. A seventy-six-year-old man explained, “Park Chung Hee did a good job. He eliminated the period of hardship without stealing. She is his daughter. So don’t you think that she would do well like her father?” Another man who was forty-eight, also supported Park, noting that Park Chung Hee was his favorite president. “He’s cool.” Even though he was a teenager during Park’s time, he praised him: “I don’t remember Park Chung Hee, but I haven’t thought about anyone else as president except him.”

Some intellectuals also engaged in reinterpretation. Kim Chi-ha, a famous novelist and activist against the dictatorship of Park Chung Hee, was imprisoned and tortured during Park’s dictatorship. After release from prison, he suffered from chronic depression for several decades, but he continued to criticize the government. He became a legend among democracy activists. During the eighteenth presidential election, Kim made the startling announcement that he would support Park, and he harshly criticized the opposition candidates, Moon Jae-in and Ahn Cheol-soo. His sudden change of mind shocked many people.

After the 2012 election, in January 2013, a retrial of the mincheong hangnyeon incident saw Kim Chi-ha finally acquitted of political crimes after thirty-nine years. In an interview after the verdict was announced, he said, “I hope that I can be compensated a lot. So I can educate my sons because between parents and children, money is so important.” He also commented on the result of the eighteenth presidential election: “People in their 50s and 60s supported Park Geun-hye. In the Park Chung Hee period, they were leaders of the democracy movement and industrialization. The election shows that they changed their minds. That means the national destiny has changed.”

Socio-economic Factors and the Election Result

The appeal of the reinterpretation of the Park Chung Hee period makes sense in light of the problems that Koreans fifty and older have faced in recent years. While people in their fifties formed the demonstration generation, they also were beneficiaries of industrialization under Park Chung Hee’s rule. The reinterpretation of history focusing on the stable and growing economy of the

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24 Many people started to complain about Park Chung Hee’s long-term dictatorship and mobilized protests against it. His government targeted one dissident group of students and intellectuals, in particular, from whom this incident takes its name. In April 1974, 180 people from the group were arrested. Seven were executed, seven were given life sentences, twelve were sentenced for twenty years, and six for fifteen years. The seven people condemned to death were executed within twenty hours of the appeal to the Supreme Court.

1960s and 1970s led those in their fifties to change their political leanings. Rapid industrialization and economic development from the 1960s to the 1980s came alongside political repression. Dictatorship by military soldiers such as Park Chung Hee and then Chun Doo Hwan meant few freedoms. At the same time, wages grew and the real-estate market flourished. Working-age people benefited from this growth. People worked, earned salaries, and purchased homes or land. That investment became significant income for the household, a source of financing for children’s education, and a retirement fund.

However, the economic miracle began to come apart with the Asian financial crisis in 1997. As many as 1.8 million people lost jobs. Some workers were forced to retire early. One reason for South Korea’s exposure to the crisis was that, under President Kim Young-sam in the 1990s, the market opened quickly to international forces. Although Kim Young-sam seemed to care about developing a social welfare system, in 1995 he began to emphasize globalization as an effective strategy, which meant global economic competition. That eventually led to a loss of priority for social welfare. Welfare benefits were viewed as “unnecessary spending.” Kim Dae-jung came to office as president in early 1998, just after the crisis had begun. He had plans to initiate new welfare policies and began some of them. However, it was necessary to devote much of the energy of his administration to responding to the financial crisis. Following the IMF’s advice, banks were assessed and some were closed. A few large firms were allowed to file for bankruptcy, without the bailouts they might have expected in the past. Other companies had to cut employees. The next president, Roh Moo Hyun, worked to expand the welfare policies of his predecessor, but his term also promoted greater trade openness, especially through the signing of a record number of free-trade agreements. During the decade following the mid-1990s, the country experienced a simultaneous push toward neoliberalism and the establishment of the foundations of a welfare state.

Economic troubles caused instability in employment. Although full-time work had been the norm until the mid-1990s, since then there has been a rise in the number of part-time workers. Employees in their forties and fifties increasingly have been forced into early retirement. The term myeongye toejik (dignified retirement) was coined during the Asian financial crisis. Among

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26 Park Jaemin and Jun Jae-Sik, “Equilibrium Unemployment Using State-Space Model and Implications for Employment Policies,” KRIVET Issue 10, no. 3 (December 2007): 67-87 (in Korean). This figure is for the period up to February 1999. The number translates to an unemployment rate of 8.8 percent.


28 Before companies gave official notice to people, they indirectly recommended that some employees retire early so that those employees at least were able not to lose face.
companies that were registered in the annual insurance system, 170,000 people in their forties and fifties were pushed into dignified retirement in 1998 alone.\textsuperscript{29} Although some people who have been forced into early retirement receive severance pay, the sum is not sufficient to cover household costs, especially school fees. In addition, it is too early for the forced retirees to receive national pension payments. Rather than retire, they reenter the market with their severance pay and become independent entrepreneurs—such as opening small stores. Cambridge economist Hajoon Chang observed this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{30} In particular, Chang noted, they open fried chicken stalls. Korea’s consumption of chicken per person ranks tenth in the world, but the country is home to the largest number of chicken restaurants. This changeob yeolpung (fever for starting new businesses) has been a symptom of post-1997 economic problems for middle-aged Koreans. However, many small businesses fail and entrepreneurial activities do not guarantee success in feeding one’s family.

While job insecurity continues, children’s education also has become a big burden to parents. Educational fees continue to rise and more people are studying for a longer number of years. Each household spends more on education. Believing that education can solve job insecurity and increase social mobility, parents have been willing to dole out large sums on their children’s education. Between 1991 and 2010, the average monthly salary increased 4.1 times, while educational fees increased six times. The cost of education has increased faster than other household expenditures. As a proportion of household expenditures, education was 8.3 percent in 1990. By 2000, it had reached 11.2 percent, and increased to 12.6 percent in 2011. For the so-called “edu-poor” class comprised of households that invest even more in education, this figure approaches 28.5 percent. Most members of this group are middle-class families led by university-educated household heads in their forties.\textsuperscript{31}

One problem with the heavy investment in education is that it has not generated expected returns. Unemployment rates among new graduates remain high. While parents work in order to support their children’s educational fees, children continue to study and gain certificates into their late twenties and early thirties. Table 3 shows that the employment rate among Koreans in their twenties has declined, while the employment rate for those in their fifties has risen. The employment rate of people in their twenties dropped from 60.2 percent to 58.9 percent between 2000 and 2011, while that for people in their fifties rose from 53.9 percent to 59.3 percent for the same period. More

\textsuperscript{29} Park Jaemin and Jun Jae-Sik, “Equilibrium Unemployment.”


recent research (from May 2012) suggests that employment among people ages fifteen to twenty-nine declined 1.1 percent, while employment for those between fifty-five and seventy-nine increased 5.6 percent.\(^{32}\)

### Table 3. Comparison of the Employment Rate of People in Their Twenties and Fifties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Cohort</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While parents in their fifties and sixties have been successful in finding some form of work, their children have been less successful. A new term, *kangaroo-jok* (kangaroo class), has been in use since 2000. The term refers to people between twenty-five and forty-four who do not have work and who still live with their parents, even if they have married. The number of people in the kangaroo class has been growing rapidly; in 2010, one survey reported their number to be 1.16 million.\(^{33}\)

Both older and younger Koreans find themselves in insecure positions. Older Koreans, rather than focusing on “welfare” have again turned to “growth.” They find themselves caught between neoliberal reforms, which deprived them of stable long-term employment, and a welfare state which does not yet do enough to help older unemployed Koreans. Instead, they look for part-time work or take on small ventures. They have maintained an ethos of hard work inherited from their parents. As their parents had done, they work diligently and invest in their children’s education. This approach allowed their parents to achieve social mobility, but it is no longer working. As a result, many Koreans in this generation look back nostalgically to the period of growth in which they were raised.

**Policy Platform**

In Park, older voters found hope for a solution to their persistent woes through a return to the leadership style that oversaw burgeoning prosperity in the 1960s and 1970s. Park’s policy platform reached out to this hope. She offered simple, populist responses to the complicated problems faced especially by older

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Koreans. Social welfare and inequality were major themes in the election, and both candidates embraced the phrase “democratization of the economy.” Some specific policies were similar, such as free daycare. However, a closer look shows that most of the detailed welfare policies of the candidates were distinct. Moon Jae-in promised “free school lunch,” “free medical fee,” and “half a college tuition fee.” Those benefits would go mostly to younger families. Park promised “tax credits to encourage elderly labor” and “customized welfare based on age.” These promises appealed more to older voters whose children already were grown. Both Park and Moon proposed schemes to encourage the elderly to work. Given that many people at or nearing retirement had unemployed grown children, such policies might allow them to continue to serve as breadwinners for their families.

Park’s policies also parallel the pro-growth focus of her father. Moon specifically promised a reform of the conglomerates, or chaebol, that dominate the economy. From 2003 to 2012, the assets of the ten largest chaebol groups grew from 48 percent to 84 percent of GDP. Moon stated he would prohibit cross-shareholding, which meant that conglomerates would have to sell their shares of their branch companies and stop assigning managers to those companies. However, Park did not mention specific reforms of the chaebol. The ninth of her ten main public pledges was “the democratization of the economy through coexistence of conglomerates and small and medium enterprises.” Her policy with regard to chaebol was to preserve their power, but she also said she would introduce restrictions if they abused it.

Moon’s stance on conglomerates resonated with their critics who held that conglomerates were responsible for unemployment and rising income inequality. This view contends that conglomerates buy up or crowd out small firms, making the small- and medium-size enterprise sectors weak. The situation has been this way since the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. Another view, however, holds that conglomerates create jobs and growth. While many people claim that inequality stems from chaebol dominance and that their vertical integration is the main reason why the middle class suffers and small businesses fail, many others think the opposite. According to a popular advertisement in 2012, “gieobi saraya iljariga neureonanda” (when enterprises are doing well, there will be more jobs). The celebrity who starred in the advertisement publically supported Park and participated in her campaign. For Koreans in their fifties who hoped their children could land jobs

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with *chaebol*, this logic probably was attractive.

Park also proposed solutions that seemed easier to understand than the more ambitious reforms of Moon. While Moon struggled to present the sweeping changes his party proposed in a simple manner, Park presented clear and tangible goals. For example, in order to protect the middle class, Moon used phrases such as “ceiling on total amount of shareholding” and “cross-shareholding.” In contrast, Park used easy terms such as “protection of temporary workers” and “protection of small business zones.”

Moon introduced his pledges based on complicated concepts, whereas Park suggested concrete plans and focused on problems concerning public welfare. Moon’s pledges and policy statements were professional but not packaged for ordinary voters. For example, to counter household debt, Moon introduced the campaign, “Fieta Three Laws.” If one wanted to understand what this slogan meant, a voter had to study the policy documents. Fieta Three Laws included, first, lowering the maximum limit on loan interests rates (from 39 percent to 25 percent annual interest), second, the introduction of a law on loans, and, third, the introduction of an official bond collection law. On the other hand, Park’s pledges were easy to understand, regardless whether they were realistic. Her pledges for household debt were to provide an “18 trillion won happiness fund,” and to save the “house poor” and the “rent poor.” Basically, her strategy was to offer money directly to indebted households.

According to economist and commentator Kim Sangjo:

> Although the campaign policies that the two candidates introduced were so similar that only professionals can find the difference, voters had the impression that Moon Jae-in could be a president for laborers and would intervene in the market system, but Park Geun-hye could be a president for SMEs and would be friendly to the market system.

He also noted:

> While Park Geun-hye made efforts on problems concerning public welfare, such as through an “18 trillion happiness

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Finally, some of Park’s policies directly targeted the elderly. Park’s campaign for welfare focused on distributing cash directly. For example, she promised to distribute 200,000 won (about US $180) monthly to everyone over age sixty-five. This proposal stood in contrast to the existing policy, which granted a maximum of 94,000 won to the elderly, depending on income and property owned. Seventy percent of the elderly received this benefit. Park promised that one hundred percent of the elderly would receive 200,000 won, regardless of income level.\(^4^0\)

**Conclusion**

This essay has examined one of the support bases of South Korea’s President Park Geun-hye. Older Korean voters supplied a crucial link between the political styles of the authoritarian past and contemporary democracy. The support of this group for Park was linked to their shifting perceptions of the period of her father’s rule. This rising nostalgia has socio-economic roots in the material challenges that Koreans fifty years of age and older have faced in recent years. The simultaneous introduction of neoliberal reforms and welfare institutions in the 1990s and during the first decade of the 2000s and the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s appear to have pushed this generation to reflect on an earlier period to guide their political values. President Park Geun-hye may be constrained by democratic institutions, but she drew strength from positive evaluations of her father’s less-constrained reign. When democratic institutions appear threatened—and concerns have risen about the interference of the National Intelligence Service in the 2012 presidential election and the dismissal of a sitting legislator for threatening the state, to name two examples—we can point to the shifting views of older Koreans as a force for resurrecting past practices.

This study has highlighted one way that nostalgia about authoritarianism can have political consequences. Observers such as Doh Chull Shin and his colleagues have warned for many years that democracy is not fully accepted

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This research has pointed to a way in which skepticism about democracy can feed a movement to elect a politician who is connected to authoritarian leadership styles.

What are the political implications of an aging population in South Korea? It can be said with certainty that the proportion of older voters will continue to grow. South Korea is among the fastest aging societies. In 2019, seniors will account for 14 percent of South Koreans, up from 7 percent in 2000. The same change that will have taken nineteen years in South Korea took 130 years in France, seventy years in the United States, fifty years in the United Kingdom, and twenty-five years in Japan. The next presidential election will be significantly affected by this change. Politicians are likely to take action in order to attract the support of this growing elderly population. Presumably, politicians increasingly will target older citizens. As the table 4 shows, in 2026, seniors will constitute one-fifth of the entire population. Also in that year, over half of the electorate will be at least fifty years of age.

Table 4. Seniors as a Percentage of South Korea’s Entire Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2026</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65 years old+</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Younger voters might well become more active in elections. Morgan and Kunkel demonstrate that, due to online activity, more young people under thirty felt that voting was a duty in the 2008 presidential election in the United States.

Figure 2. Voters Fifty and Older as Proportion of All Voters


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than previously. While 46 percent of people under thirty in 2007 felt that they should vote, two years later, 61 percent felt that they should vote, according to research conducted by the Pew Research Center. Among older groups, 71 percent consider voting a duty. These findings reveal that the gap in attitudes toward voting between the young and the elderly is shrinking.\(^{42}\) However, even if voter participation among young Koreans increases, the demographic gap remains formidable. In a by-election held in Korea in April 2013, the highest participation rate was among people in their fifties, followed by those in their sixties. Even though an independent candidate—who had been a presidential candidate—was wildly popular among younger voters, the candidate still relied on older voters for victory.

While the massive electoral presence of Koreans over fifty is a certainty, the question of their political preferences is not closed. Even if aging makes voters prefer conservative candidates, the meaning of “conservative” can shift. In order to understand what sorts of politicians draw support from older voters, it will be important to examine what particular generations of Koreans think about the past. Future research might take a longer-term view to distill the interactions between cohort experiences and aging in South Korea. Such research might also examine in greater detail the ways in which politicians interact with older voters.