# The Korean Presidential Election of 2007: Five Years on from the "Internet Election"

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Previous studies[1] illustrated that new information and communication technologies, represented by the Internet, contributed to bringing the young and reform-minded generation to vote for a liberal underdog Roh Moo-hyun[2] in the Korean presidential election of 2002. The next logical step in identifying the potentially long-standing impact of the Internet on Korean politics was to see if a similar scenario would unfold in the following election. From this perspective, Korea's seventeenth presidential election, held in December 2007, deserves scholarly interest. The present essay provides a brief reflection on the role the Internet played during this event. We analyzed the election utilizing a multi-faceted approach. This time, the candidate of the main opposition party, Lee Myung-bak, won the presidency by a significant margin (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Results of the 2007 Presidential Election South Korea**

| Candidate | Party | Votes | % |
|---|---|---:|---:|
| Lee Myung-bak | Grand National Party (GNP) | 11,492,389 | 48.7 |
| Chung Dong-young | United New Democratic Party (UNDP) | 6,174,681 | 26.1 |
| Lee Hoi-chang | Independent | 3,559,963 | 15.1 |
| Moon Kook-hyun | Creative Korea Party | 1,375,498 | 5.8 |
| Kwon Young-ghil | Democratic Labor Party | 712,121 | 3 |
| Rhee In-je | Centrist Reformists Democratic Party | 160,708 | 0.7 |
| Huh Kyung-young | Republican Party | 96,756 | 0.4 |
| Geum Min | Korea Socialist Party | 18,223 | 0.1 |
| Chung Kun-mo | True Owner Coalition | 15,380 | 0.1 |
| Chun Kwan | Chamsaram Society Full True Act | 7,161 | 0 |
| Total | | 23,732,854 | 100 |

Source: National Election Commission (NEC)

The overall findings of our research indicate three different developments:[3]

1. The waning benefit of online networking along with the widening access to the Web across the generational and political spectrums.
2. The re-emerging importance of top-down information campaigning.
3. The increasing importance of foreign web-domains due to the enhanced electoral regulations concerning 'user-created content' (UCC).

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## The Waning Power of Online Networking

Roh's victory in the 2002 election was largely attributed to online networking. Nosamo[4], an Internet-mediated community of his supporters carried out a wide range of both online and offline campaigns and urged young people to donate small amounts of money and to vote for Roh. They argued that supporting the reform-minded candidate was the 'civic responsibility' of the young generation.[5] *Nosamo*, other online communities of similar nature and political webzines favorable to the liberal and progressive camps failed in their attempts to mobilize voters in their 20s and 30s in 2007. This time voters of these age groups are less politicized and more entrepreneurial.[6]

The Internet is no longer the exclusive preserve of young liberals. A growing number of conservatives have utilized political websites since their defeat in the 2002 presidential and 2004 parliamentary elections. Widening access to political websites across the generational and political spectrums is one of the contributing factors to the conservatization of Korean cyberspace.

Our initial focus was on the networking capacity of candidates and their party websites, which we measured in terms of the number of web documents hyperlinked from external sites. Table 2 shows that the so-called anti-conservative candidates (Chung, Moon, and Kwon) are better networked than their conservative rivals (Lee and Lee). For example, Chung of the UNDP, who was popularly regarded Roh's successor, maintained a site much more networked than that of the candidate nominated by conservative GNP. However, this fact did not seem to affect the electoral outcome as Lee led in opinion polls before the election and became the eventual victor.

**Table 2. Number of Inlinks to Candidate Websites**

| Date | D Y Chung | K H Moon | G H Kwon | M B Lee | H C Lee |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 29 November | 22,700 | 13,600 | 58,000 | 8,350 | 317 |
| 02 December | 23,100 | 13,800 | 59,100 | 8,470 | 326 |
| 05 December | 22,900 | 14,200 | 58,700 | 8,300 | 332 |
| 08 December | 23,900 | 15,400 | 59,000 | 9,100 | 325 |
| 11 December | 24,400 | 16,300 | 59,300 | 9,960 | 348 |
| 14 December | 35,500 | 27,100 | 72,500 | 15,300 | 565 |
| 17 December | 39,200 | 28,500 | 72,400 | 15,500 | 613 |
| 18 December | 39,800 | 28,800 | 72,100 | 15,600 | 635 |

Source: authors' analyses

## The Return of Information Campaign

The *Internet and National Elections* project created a typology of political web practices. Campaign websites can be categorized into four groups by their principal aims and functions: informing, involving, connecting and mobilizing.[7] In 2007, there were ten candidates competing against each other. In previous elections, fewer hopefuls contested the presidency. Winning public attention thus was more challenging than ever for the candidates. It was difficult to differentiate their stances on issues from those of their opponents. Some parties only created their presidential campaign websites just before the 2007 election, with a long-term view to the parliamentary election scheduled for April 2008.

Under such conditions, the hopefuls opted for an information campaign. President-elect Lee's site also focused on the distribution of information. Web statistics illustrate his relative success in doing so (see Figure 1). Traffic to his site soared during the first week of Decem-

ber 2007, when he was cleared from allegations about his direct involvement in embezzlement (3 December).

**Figure 1. Number of Visitors to the 6 Major Candidates' Official Websites**
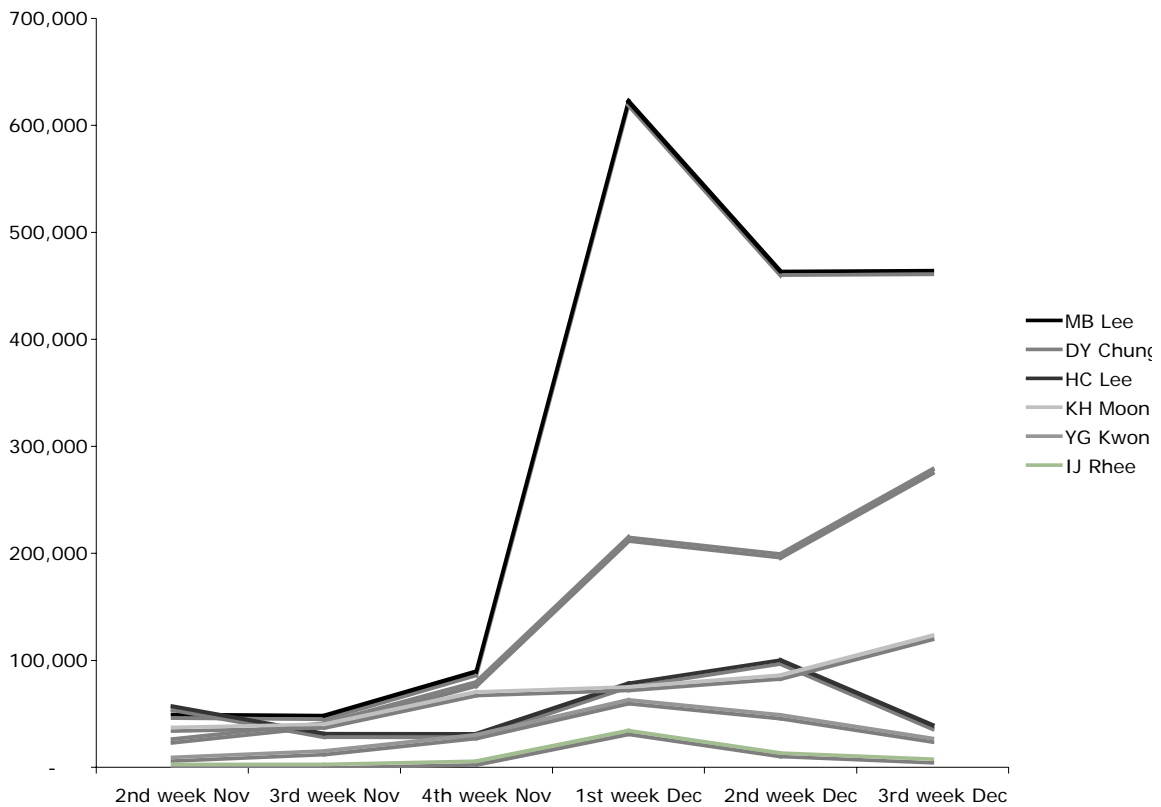


Source: Metrixcorp

**The Enhanced Electoral Regulations Concerning E-campaigns**

With the advent of what is dubbed Web 2.0, online users find new ways to appropriate existing technologies. Sites for social networking, such as *MySpace* and *Facebook*, or those for the diffusion of video clips, such as *YouTube*, represent this trend. In Korea, the concept of Web 2.0 is synonymous with user-created content (UCC), especially in the form of user-created video clips. The UCC hype, encouraged by commercial websites, faced new electoral regulations set by the National Election Commission (NEC). The new regulations were strict in banning publication of material implying support for or disapproval of a candidate 180 days prior to the election. This concerns both primary and secondary material (e.g. news articles or results from opinion polls), and covers not only the main content of websites but also chatrooms, bulletin boards and even comment boxes provided by online news sites.

Lee of the GNP led in the opinion polls throughout the election period. His presidential bid was threatened when shortly before the election UNDP released a video clip. In the video, Lee stated his direct involvement in a highly publicized corruption scandal. His statement contradicted the prosecutor's conclusion that Lee had not been involved in the scandal. The electoral regulations prevented the distribution of the video clip over the Internet. This led the

supporters of liberal camp to abandon domestic social networking sites and to move to international domains. The clip was posted at *YouTube* on 5 December and attracted almost one million visitors within a week.[8]

**Table 3. User Reactions to the BBK Post on *YouTube***

| Date | Views | Comments | Add to Favorites |
|---|---|---|---|
| 11 December | 651,381 | 385 | 80 |
| 14 December | 838,428 | 497 | 99 |
| 17 December | 907,305 | 522 | 107 |
| 18 December | 927,962 | 532 | 108 |

Source: Park Han Woo and Lee Yeon-ok, "When *YouTube* Meets Local Politics," work in progress.

## Epilogue: 5 Years After the "Internet Election"

The observed developments of the 2007 election seem an inverse of the 2002 election, i.e. the Internet-based mobilization had a negligible impact. Korean cyberspace was generally silenced due to the legislation regulating e-campaigns. Moreover, the Internet is no longer a novelty. It is used across generational and political spectrums. The country witnessed, both online and offline, a U-turn of voters to conservative candidates, triggered by concerns such as the unstable job market. Younger voters were not as enthusiastic about campaign mobilization as their predecessors. Finally, unlike the previous election, the front-runner maintained a wide margin in opinion polls throughout the entire election period. This might have put off voluntary campaigns for other candidates. To summarize, the candidates had to reconfigure their e-campaign strategies in accordance with changes in the country's political climate. This highlights context-sensitivity in the political use of the Internet.

## Notes

[1] Park, Han Woo, Mike Thelwall, and Randolph Kluver. "Political Hyperlinking in South Korea: Technical Indicators of Ideology and Content." *Sociological Research Online* 10: 3 (2005). <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/10/3/park.html>, accessed 30 January 2007; Kim, Hyo, and Han Woo Park. "Web Sphere Analysis for Political Web Sites: The 2004 National Assembly Election in South Korea." In *The Election and National Elections: A Comparative Study of Web Campaigning*, edited by Randolph Kluver, Nicholas W. Jankowski, Kirsten A. Foot and Steven M. Schneider (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.226-239; Park, Han Woo, and Randolph Kluver. "Affiliation in Political Blogs in South Korea: Comparing Online and Offline Social Networks." In *Internationalizing Internet Studies*, edited by Gerard Goggin and Mark McLelland (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2008).
[2] In Korean, surnames precede forenames.
[3] Papers in preparation include: Lee, Y. and Park, H. W. "The Reconfiguration of E-Campaign Practices in Korea: A Case Study of the Presidential Primaries of 2007."; Park, H. W. and Lee, Y. "Understanding Elections by the Use of a Mixed Webometric Method: A Case Study of South Korea's 2007 Presidential Election."; Lee, Y. and Park, H. W. "When YouTube Meets Local Politics: The BBK Scandal During the 2007 Presidential Election of South Korea."
[4] A Korean acronym for "a gathering of people who love Roh Moo-hyun".
[5] Lee, Yeon-ok. "Movement Legacies and Online Mobilisation: The Korean Presidential Election of 2002." Paper presented for the conference *Changing Politics Through Digital Networks: The Role of ICTs in the Formation of New Social and Political Actors and Actions*, University of Florence, Italy, 5-6 October 2007.
[6] Klingner, Bruce. "South Korea's Mercurial Political Landscape." *Backgrounder 2068* (12 September 2007), <http://wwwheritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/upload/bg_2068.pdf>, accessed 11 October 2007.
[7] Kluver, Randolph, Nicholas W. Jankowski, Kirsten A. Foot, and Steven M. Schneider. eds. *The Internet and National Elections: A Comparative Study of Web Campaigning* (London: Routledge, 2007); See also Foot, Kirsten, and Steven M. Schneider. *Web Campaigning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
[8] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZFAywhGTgk>.