



Older Voters' Policy Preferences in the Korean General Elections

Hyun-Chool LEE

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of age in the elderly population on electoral politics in a rapidly aging Korean society by using the results of a survey conducted after the 21st general elections. In particular, we empirically analyze the perception of senior voters on policy salience as well as on the expansion of government spending on senior welfare programs as part of a debate on silver democracy, which forecasts a senior-dominated representative democracy as the impact of senior citizens on elections increases concomitant with their growing numbers. Our results demonstrate that voter age is not an important factor affecting policy preference, and that support for the expansion of government spending on welfare policies for the elderly does not exhibit a statistically significant correlation with age. Yet, according to a cluster analysis of senior voters, four clusters we identified could be clearly divided along the income and ideology dimensions. Finally, this paper provides five possible explanations for why age seems to have no impact on voters' reaction to the expansion of government spending on welfare programs or senior welfare policies.

Keywords: population aging, older voters, silver democracy, political generation, policy salience, welfare policy, Korea

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Introduction

Korea became an aging society in 2000, when its share of elderly (aged sixty-five and above) reached 7.2 percent of the total population. Seventeen years later, in 2018, it became an aged society when that elderly population reached 14.3 percent of the total. Korea is now on track to become a super-aged society, with its percentage of population aged sixty-five and older attaining 21.4 percent by 2026.¹ Compared to France's 115-year transition period from an aging to an aged society, Korea's transition took only seventeen years, the fastest transition period of this kind in the world. The fact that Korea has been caught unprepared to face the problems brought about by its rapidly aging society has become a major social issue.

The impact of an increasingly lower birth rate and an aging population on political processes is undeniable. First, an increasingly aged population together with higher voter turnout rates raise the likelihood of a so-called *silver democracy*, in which the elderly population is overrepresented in politics, giving rise to the problem of intergenerational justice (Seo 2017; Hyun-Chool Lee 2018b). There is every reason to expect that the projection by Wattenberg (2007, 159) of "a government of older people, by older people, and for older people" in Western societies will soon be applicable to South Korean society as well. There are also concerns related to the financial aspects of excessive welfare pledges made by politicians seeking the political support of elderly voters (Cho 2017). Some media have suggested that in the near future more jobs will be available to the elderly relative to those for the younger generation (Kang 2020). Furthermore, the emergence of so-called *grey interest parties* that prioritize interests and votes of the silver generation (Hanley 2010; Lee and Moon 2019), and the catch-all behavior of existing political parties targeting the votes of the older population, have drawn the attention of students of party politics and population studies alike. Therefore, the research on how changes in population structure affect the election process will be key to understanding the transformation of democracy in

1. Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), accessed May 2, 2021, https://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?vwcd=MT_ZTITLE&menuId=M_01_01#content-group.

the era of an aging electorate.

Scholars of electoral politics have attempted to explain voter behavior by putting forward various competing theories, such as those about social cleavage structures (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), the theory of party identification, and the rational choice theory. It is no surprise that structural changes in the population driven by low birth rates and an aging population have a tremendous impact on the political and electoral processes. The median voter theorem states that in a representative system, political parties and candidates are tempted to adopt policies that respond to the preferences of the median voter in order to win a majority of the votes (Downs 1957). This implies that candidates will position themselves around the ideological center. In an aging society, the median voter age will be relatively high, while the economically active population (aged 15–64) and the youth population (aged 0–14) will be on the decline. There is a common assumption among scholars that, as the median voter age increases, the share of welfare, pension, and healthcare expenditures in public spending will increase, while spending on other areas such as education and infrastructure will shrink (Lynch 2006; Hyun-Chool Lee 2018b; Shimasawa et al. 2014).

Browning (1975) was among the first scholars to attribute significance to median voter age. His model contrasts the life cycles of three different generations and analyzes the costs and benefits characterizing the social security system from a politico-economic perspective. Assuming that only the younger generation has an optimal lifetime utility compared to the middle-aged and senior generation, the costs will never be fully internalized, putting the other generations in mutual conflict over a larger share of the income earned by the younger generation. Consequently, spending on social security grows as the median voter age increases. For instance, Browning (1975, 387) suggests that “the majority voting leads to overexpansion in the size of a social insurance system” and that maintaining the system of social security benefits entails a tremendous amount of government spending in aging democracies.

It is important to study the voter behavior of the elderly population in order to verify whether the so-called silver democracy is in fact emerging. A growing trend in the literature appears to be the examination of the

voting behavior of the elderly population as its share of the total population grows. In other words, scholars claiming that silver democracy has already emerged argue that there is a huge difference between the political preferences of the younger and older generations. This paper aims to study whether there is a difference in the political preferences between the older and younger population of Korea, and if so, to investigate factors affecting these differences. To be specific, we analyze the effect of the age variable in relation to other factors, such as regionalism, social class, and ideology, on voting behavior, and to better understand the implications of the silver democracy discourse for Korea. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the literature on Korean elections by assessing the effect of an age gap on voter preferences over the salience of welfare issues in a rapidly aging Korean society.

This paper examines the voting behavior of elderly voters, focusing on their policy priorities and their attitude toward expanding government spending in certain areas, using survey data collected shortly after the 21st National Assembly general elections held in 2020. Section 2 elaborates on the research questions of this paper along with outlining the theoretical debates on voting behavior. Section 3 summarizes the dataset and introduces the analysis framework behind this study. Section 4 analyzes the voting behavior of elderly voters within that framework. Section 5 summarizes the main results and findings of this study and discusses the implications of the emergence of silver democracy for Korea.

Theoretical Background

The existing literature highlights the regionalist, generational, and ideological orientation of voters as primary factors influencing the voting decisions of voters in South Korea. A considerable amount of work has shed light on the impact of regionalism on voting behavior. Kang (2003), for example, relates the emergence of region-based voting behavior to the sense of interregional isolation and the regional mobilization tendency of local politicians. He argues that this kind of voting behavior changed after

the 2002 presidential elections. Kim and Lee (2015), on the other hand, highlighted four important explanations in the literature behind region-based voting behavior: a development gap between regions, political mobilization theory, rational choice theory, and regional prejudices. In addition, some scholars argue that regionalism depends on the regional issues rather than on the inter-regional development gaps *per se* (Lee and Repkine 2020). As the role of regions in voting behavior diminished after the 2000s, the ideological divide became a more significant factor affecting voter behavior (Hyun-Chool Lee 2007). According to Kang (2003) ideological divide in South Korea, unlike in Western politics, takes the shape of inter-generational conflicts rather than class conflicts. The majority of studies in this area have emphasized the role of inter-generational factors after the 16th presidential election of 2002, especially the role of the 386 generation. The 386 generation refers to those Koreans who were born in the 1960s and are currently in positions of power. It turns out that members of this generation were the most active participants in the 16th presidential election.² Studies that examined the effect of the age factor on voting outcomes have shown that age had a significant impact on the voter decisions in both the 17th general election of 2004 and 17th presidential election of 2008 (Moon 2017). Other studies also shed light on the impact of age on voter political attitude, ideological orientation, party support, and policy preferences (Sung-youn Kim 2015; Choi and Cho 2005).

This paper strives to understand whether there are generation- or age-based differences in voter policy preferences. Policy-based or issue-based voting occurs when people vote on the basis of their policy preferences. Policy-based voting behavior occurs when voters have policy preferences and understand candidates' political stances. According to past studies, voters possess constant ideological and policy preferences. Since political parties and politicians are ultimately the political agents of voters, the latter select candidates who best reflect their ideology and policy preferences (Hinich and Munger 1997). Such behavior is especially pronounced in the US presidential elections, as noted by Highton (2010), as well as in US

2. On this, see for example, Kang (2003), Yun and Rhee (2014), and Noh, et al. (2013).

legislative elections (Ansolabehere et al. 2006). This behavior also plays a key role in elections that draw a high extent of voter interest (Snyder and Ting 2002). In Korea, policy preferences are also significant variables affecting voters' decisions in both presidential and general elections (Han-soo Lee 2017; Sung-youn Kim 2015).

Much has been written on the impact of policy preferences on voting behavior, but it is difficult to prove their significance in all elections. Depending on the circumstances and timing, voters may or may not be fully aware of the nuances in the political stances of different candidates. As liberal voters dominated the 16th and 19th Korean presidential elections, while conservative voters dominated the 17th presidential elections, scenarios might differ depending on the *period effect*, meaning the political circumstances or social mood at the time of investigation. What's more, political parties and candidates often do not clearly state their positions depending on the nature of the issues, a fact which may prevent voters from identifying the exact political stance of candidates (Han-soo Lee 2017).

In general, it is widely accepted that every generation has a different policy agenda that prioritizes different issues. For example, the younger generation (ages 18 to 39) is concerned with increasing the quality of public education and creating jobs for youth unemployment, while the middle-aged generation is more engaged with issues such as job security, job creation, taxes, child-rearing, education, and housing costs (Hyun-Chool Lee 2018b). On the other hand, the older generation is more interested in welfare issues, such as pension payments, job creation for senior citizens, and senior care and medical support. Empirical studies have revealed these kind of differences in policy preferences in Japan (Umeda 2019; Shimasawa et al. 2014). Also in Korea, the analysis of surveys conducted after the 19th presidential election reached similar conclusions (Hyun-Chool Lee 2018b). Thus, the majority of younger generation respondents highlighted unemployment and labor market problems as two major issues of concern, while only 18 percent of the elderly aged sixty and above attributed the same amount of importance to these issues. Conversely, the older generation emphasized issues primarily related to security, welfare, and inflation, while the younger generation assigned lower priority to these issues, as argued by

Hyun-Chool Lee (2018b).

Furthermore, elderly voters will leverage their growing numbers and high voter turnout to push the government to increase public spending on pensions and medical security at the expense of the budget allocated to education and the childcare needs of the younger generation. Alternatively, the government might choose to run budget deficits that future generations will have to take care of. Based on these assumptions, researchers have studied inter-generational inequality, conducting age-based analyses of government expenditure. The results are divided. Some studies in developed economies suggest that there is indeed generation-based inequality in government spending that assumes various forms (Lynch 2006). Nevertheless, the relationship between inter-generational inequality and the percentage of the elderly population remains unclear. Some scholars suggest that there is a direct association between the ratio of the elderly population and the size of the imbalance in generational accounting (Eschker 2003). On the other hand, other scholars argue there is no clear correlation between an aging society and elder-friendly government policies (see, for example, Tepe and Vanhuyse [2009]).

Applying a systematic approach, scholars have long treated the inter-generational distribution of public expenditure as cross-national. Tepe and Vanhuyse (2009) posit that the existing welfare systems of Western countries regulate the welfare policies of a new government for the elderly and the young generation. Lynch (2006) argues that political stance and the ideological orientation of a political party is a mediator representing the interests of the youth and the elderly in politics. However, only a few studies have explored the policy preferences of the elderly and young, with a consensus failing to materialize thus far. For example, case studies in the United States suggest that elderly citizens are not uniformly responsive to major age-related policies, being more likely to be affected by party support or one's economic background (Day 1990). However, more recent studies have shown that in rapidly aging societies there is a growing gap in policy preferences between voters of different age groups (Sørensen 2013; Umeda 2019). Therefore, age-based policy preferences are not a constant factor as the degree of demographic aging and political realities vary by country, thus

requiring in-depth case studies.

Thus far, age- and generation- related studies have attempted to make sense of the differences in political orientation or voting behavior based on the categories of age and political experience. Studies on policy-based voting have primarily addressed the issue of whether certain policies or issues impact voter decisions. However, differences in perception between the younger, middle-aged, and elderly population on the importance of specific issues or policies remains relatively unexplored.

The Analytical Framework and Survey Data Description

The dataset analyzed in this paper is based on the 2020 General Elections Voter Awareness Survey of the Korea Institute for Future Politics affiliated with Myongji University. This survey was conducted in the period April 20–30, 2020 in the aftermath of the 21st general election of that year. The survey was conducted on two thousand adult voters aged over eighteen and residing across the country. The survey sample was proportionally adjusted by gender, age, and region with a confidence level of 95 percent $\pm 2.2\%$. The survey respondents are evenly represented by males (49.7%) and females (50.3%). The respondents' regional distribution is as follows: Seoul (19.4%), Gyeonggi-do, Incheon (30.9%), followed by Busan, Ulsan, Gyeongsangnam-do (15.4%), Daejeon, Chungcheong-do, Sejong (10.4%), Gwangju, Jeollado (9.9%), and Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do (9.9%). Regarding age distribution, respondents aged 18–29 comprise 17.6 percent of the sample, followed by ages 30–39 (15.9%), ages 40–49 (19.1%), ages 50–59 (20%), and senior voters over age 60 (27.4%). In addition to the sociodemographic background of the respondents, seventy-three of the survey questions are related primarily to seven broad areas: participation in and voting behavior regarding the general elections; political awareness; political attitude; party identification; and the general assessment of the current government and economic situation. For instance, we designed questions such as what were the primary policy issues you considered when voting in this election, what current challenges require urgent addressing in our society, and how do you

think government spending on key policies should be structured.

The major dependent variables in this study are the salience of major policy issues such as welfare and education policies, and voters' perceptions of government spending on major policies. Priorities assigned by the voters to the policy issues are categorical variables whose values are assigned on the basis of the following question: "What do you think is the most urgent task in our society today?" The perception of government spending was measured on a five-point scale with the score of one corresponding to "very high spending" and the score of five corresponding to "very low spending." The key explanatory variable in this study is age. The respondents were divided into five age groups: ages 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and over 60. The key explanatory and control variables include party identification, ideology, income level, subjective class awareness, and socioeconomic background. The age variable is important since elderly voters may not only express their policy preferences according to their age or the circumstances of the time, but they may be influenced by their previous party identification, ideological orientation, or income levels (Lee and Moon 2019).

Party identification refers to a long-term, affective attachment to a preferred political party and is measured on the basis of answers to the following questions: "Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party? Which party do you feel closest to?" The party identification variable represents the Democratic Party (Minjudang), the Liberty Korea Party (Jayu hangukdang), and other parties and independent candidates. However, our regression analysis dealt with the two main parties by making use of two dummy variables. The household income variable was categorized into seven groups representing the following monthly income brackets: less than 2 million won (about US\$1,800), between 2 and 3 million won, between 3 and 4 million won, between 4 and 5 million won, between 5 and 6 million won, between 6 and 8 million won, and more than 8 million won. A subjective class identification variable was classified into upper, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle and lower classes. The ideological disposition variable represented liberal, moderate, and conservative attitudes.

In our analysis we first attempt to estimate the effect of age by controlling for differences in policies relevant to voter choice. One of

the objectives of our analysis was to see whether the assumption of prior research that the older generation is interested in welfare policies while the younger generation is more interested in education- or job-related policies was also applicable to Korean elections. If those differences exist, it makes sense to look into the voter characteristics and backgrounds that account for these differences. Another interesting question is whether differences in policy preferences are dependent on socioeconomic background among older generations as well. Next, we attempt to analyze the age effect by focusing on differences in perceptions of government spending on key policies. The survey examined voter perceptions of eight policies: national defense/security; education; senior citizen welfare; security; environment; culture/art; health/medical; and jobs. In this paper, the factors influencing perceptions of government expenditure are analyzed with a focus on demographic background and socioeconomic variables, looking at policies known to be closely related to age. Our analysis confirms the assumption that the proportion of government spending on the elderly (elderly to non-elderly spending ratio, or ENSR) will increase as the population ages, as was discussed by Lynch (2006) and Shimasawa et al. (2014). In the context of the latter study and given the scope of the data, we attempt to test the following hypotheses related to the effect of age:

Hypothesis 1: Elderly voters in Korea will show higher preferences for welfare policies compared to younger voters.

Hypothesis 2: Korea's elderly voters will support the increase in government spending on welfare policies for senior citizens more than younger voters.

Empirical Results: The Age-Based Gap in Policy Salience

Differences in Policy Salience in the Voting Process

First, we conducted a chi-square independence test for the groups of voters on the salience of policy issues that voters considered to be important when

voting as well as of the major explanatory variables relevant for general parliamentary elections. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1 below. First, there appears to be a statistically significant difference between genders on the perception of policy salience ($p < 0.001$). It appears that male voters attributed most importance to the issues of political reform (23.4%), regional development (21.0%), unemployment (18.6%), and welfare (17.0%). The female voters, on the other hand, considered regional development (24.4%), welfare (19.6%), political reform (16.4%), and unemployment (13.0%) to be the most important issues. Our results imply that women, rather than showing interest in the political reform discourse, are more interested in those policy areas that produce a more tangible impact on everyday lives, such as regional development and welfare.

Our results imply that there is also a statistically significant difference in perceived policy salience among different age groups. Unemployment (22.8%) turned out to be an issue of major concern among the respondents aged 18–29, followed by welfare (21.1%), regional development (21.1%), and political reform (13.2%). However, political reform (25.5%) was a top priority issue among those aged 60 and over, followed by regional development (20.3%), unemployment (16.8%), and welfare (13.0%). Among the younger generation, youth unemployment due to economic slowdown appears to be the most important issue. By contrast, the issue of youth unemployment ranked third among elderly voters. Interestingly, it seems that the senior voters gave more weight to political reform and regional development, while welfare policy was considered more salient among younger people (21.1%) compared to the elderly (13.0%). These results are in surprising contrast with the findings of previous studies such as Michio Umeda (2019) and Hyun-Chool Lee (2018b). Stronger support for welfare policies among younger people compared to older people can be explained on the basis of the future-oriented rational behavior of the younger generation. The family support mentality is well established in countries that are heavily influenced by Confucian values such as Korea, in which the younger generation is supposed to support their elders. In other words, future-oriented rational young workers might be supporting welfare policies with the expectation that an increase in government spending on

welfare programs might reduce their burden of family support. By contrast, the elderly generation, which already enjoys government support as well as that of their children, may be somewhat satisfied with the current situation, which explains why the senior support programs of the government are considered to be less important among the elderly cohort.

We also observe a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in policy preferences based on one's educational background. Respondents from all academic backgrounds revealed that they considered regional development policies and political reform to be important factors. However, those with a graduate degree or higher considered regional development issues relatively more important (30.0%), while among this same group, those who consider welfare policy important is eight percentage points lower compared to those with lower educational levels.

The differences in policy salience regarding ideological orientation are visible and statistically significant as well ($p < .001$). In casting their vote, liberal-minded voters seem to care mostly about regional development (25.9%), followed by political reform (23.8%), and welfare policies (21.6%). Conservatives, on the other hand, are mostly concerned with the employment policies (21.2%), followed by political reform (20.0%), and regional development (18.0%). The greater levels of concern for regional-development issues exhibited by the liberal respondents can be related to the fact that the current ruling party is liberal and welfare policies have long been associated with the traditional agenda of the liberal camp. However, as conservative voters are more concerned about job policies and political reforms, welfare policies appear to draw less of their attention. We infer that ideological influences have greatly affected voter perceptions of the salience of welfare policies. This is not surprising as there have been a series of conflicts between liberals and conservatives over welfare policies in the course of the debates over universal and optional welfare that have taken place since the 19th National Assembly of 2012.

Table 1. Chi-square Independence Test of Issue Salience by Groups of Voters in the General Elections

	Education				Unemployment	Welfare	Environment	Security	Housing	Political reforms	Regional development	Inflation	Population	Social healthcare	χ^2 (p-values)
Gender***	Male	2.4	18.6	17.0	2.1	5.5	3.4	23.4	21.0	4.0	1.4	1.1			
	Female	5.7	13.1	19.6	2.8	4.0	6.3	16.4	24.4	5.3	0.8	1.7			50.135(.000)
Age***	18-29	5.0	22.8	21.1	3.0	4.0	4.6	13.2	21.1	3.0	0.7	1.7			
	30s	6.1	9.1	22.7	2.7	1.9	4.9	14.0	28.4	5.7	2.3	2.3			
	40s	8.5	9.6	21.3	2.9	1.7	5.2	21.6	21.6	6.4	0.3	0.9			161.462(.000)
	50s	2.2	19.5	17.3	2.2	3.3	5.1	20.3	24.1	4.1	0.8	1.1			
	60 and over	1.0	16.8	13.0	1.9	9.9	4.4	25.5	20.3	4.3	1.5	1.4			
Education level*	High school	4.2	17.0	18.8	3.0	4.8	4.4	20.5	20.9	5.4	0.5	0.5			
	University (2-4 years)	3.7	15.3	18.7	2.0	4.7	5.5	18.9	23.5	4.0	1.7	2.0			36.573(.013)
Ideology***	Graduate and beyond	5.5	11.8	10.9	0.9	5.5	2.7	23.6	30.0	3.6	1.8	3.6			
	Liberal	4.2	11.2	21.6	2.4	1.0	4.6	23.8	25.9	3.0	0.6	1.6			
	Center	5.4	16.8	19.9	2.0	3.1	4.9	15.5	22.5	7.0	1.3	1.5			160.442(.000)
	Conservative	2.2	21.2	11.4	3.1	12.2	5.1	20.0	18.2	3.9	1.6	1.0			
	Less than 2 million (KRW)	3.8	19.9	25.9	1.5	7.9	3.0	16.9	13.5	5.6	0.4	1.5			
Household income*	2-3 million	2.6	15.7	17.5	3.5	4.1	4.7	19.2	25.7	5.0	1.5	0.6			
	3-4 million	6.1	15.2	19.1	2.7	3.3	5.8	17.6	24.3	3.3	1.5	0.9			
	4-5 million	4.3	13.7	15.4	2.3	4.3	4.0	20.7	25.8	6.4	0.7	2.3			86.136(.015)
	5-6 million	5.0	16.3	13.9	4.0	6.4	3.5	19.8	23.8	4.0	2.5	1.0			
	6-8 million	2.5	15.3	17.8	1.5	3.5	7.9	26.2	20.3	2.5	0.5	2.0			
	8 million and over	3.9	14.8	16.8	0.6	4.5	5.8	21.9	23.9	5.2	0.6	1.9			
Party support***	Democratic Party (DP)	4.6	9.9	25.0	1.3	0.7	3.8	27.8	22.1	2.7	0.7	1.3			
	United Future Party (UFP)	2.0	24.4	7.8	1.0	17.1	2.9	15.6	20.5	6.3	2.0	0.5			222.457(.000)
	Other	5.5	16.1	16.4	4.2	5.8	1.3	23.2	21.9	3.9	0.3	1.6			
	Non-partisan	3.7	17.9	16.9	3.0	4.0	7.6	13.9	24.0	5.9	1.5	1.6			
Class identification	Lower	3.5	19.3	14.0	3.5	3.5	5.3	22.8	19.3	5.3	1.8	1.8			
	Lower-middle	4.6	14.8	15.1	3.2	6.7	3.9	22.5	21.5	3.9	1.8	2.1			
	Middle	4.5	14.5	20.4	2.9	3.4	5.3	17.0	25.0	4.4	1.5	1.1			51.877(.099)
	Upper-middle	3.9	17.0	15.8	2.0	4.7	4.9	21.7	24.3	4.2	0.3	1.0			
	Upper	2.7	17.0	24.1	1.3	6.7	4.5	19.2	13.8	7.1	1.3	2.2			

*** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05

Note the difference in policy issue salience based on party support, which can be viewed as an extension of ideological orientation. The differences in policy issue salience based on party support are estimated to be statistically significant, with the p-value of less than 0.001. Supporters of the liberal Democratic Party of Korea (DP) considered political reform (27.8%) to be the most important factor influencing their voting decision, followed by welfare policy (25%), and regional development (22.1%). By contrast, supporters of the conservative United Future Party (UFP) gave more weight to unemployment issues (24.4%), followed by regional development (20.5%), and security policy (17.1%). Preferences of the DPK supporters were in line with the Moon Jae-in administration's emphasis on political reforms and welfare policies, in contrast to the preferences of UFP supporters who were more concerned about security and economic policies.

Differences in policy issue salience by household type are estimated to be statistically significant, with the p-value of less than five percent. While 25.9 percent of low-income households (monthly incomes of two million won or less) emphasized welfare policies as the most important factor in their voting decisions, only 13.9 percent of the respondents with an income level between five and six million won, and only 16.8 percent of respondents with an income level exceeding eight million won considered welfare policies to be an important factor affecting their voting decisions. Surprisingly, the high-income respondents highlighted regional development and political reforms as significant factors influencing their voting decisions, while this figure was lower in the case of low-income households.

However, the differences in policy issue salience based on subjective class identification were found to be statistically insignificant, as the p-value exceeded the five-percent threshold. Although formally speaking our results imply that voters subjectively perceiving themselves to belong to the lower-income class emphasized welfare and jobs, while those voters who subjectively assigned themselves to the high-income class emphasized political reform, regional development, and unemployment policies, the difference between the two groups is estimated to be statistically insignificant.

We now turn to an analysis of age-based differences in voter perceptions

of policy issue salience based on the findings of a similar survey conducted shortly after the 2017 presidential elections. According to the results of the last presidential election survey, the emphasis on issues seems to differ by age group, as shown in Figure 1 below. Thus, the younger generation emphasizes the issues of unemployment and jobs the most, while those aged sixty and above assign a score to these issues that is eighteen percentage points lower (Hyun-Chool Lee 2018b). In addition, the younger generation emphasizes education, while the older generation finds this issue less important. On the other hand, elderly voters seem to be emphasizing the importance of security, welfare, and price issues, while the younger generation considers these issues less important. Why this apparent difference in the perception of importance by age group in the 2017 presidential election? This change can be interpreted as a result of the age effect being buried within the period effect of a political situation, event, or social atmosphere at the time of observation, as discussed in Hwang (2009) and Noh et al. (2013). For instance, the overwhelming support for the Democratic Party in the general elections resulted in no noticeable age effect as a result of the progressive social atmosphere of the time.

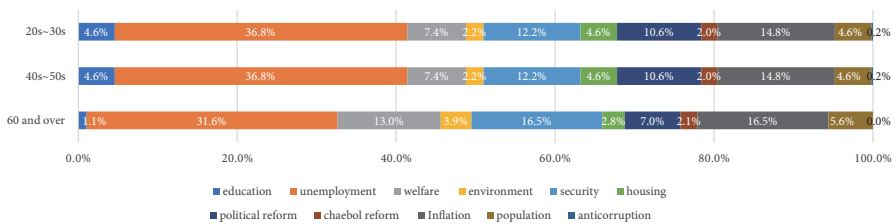


Figure 1. Differences in importance of issues by age group (2017)

Source: Hyun-Chool Lee (2018b).

Political Preferences of the Senior Population

We have reached a different conclusion compared to the empirical research on voter perceptions of the salience of certain political issues conducted in the prior studies (Hyun-Chool Lee 2018b; Shimasawa et al. 2014; Umeda

2019). According to our survey in 2020, South Korean voters demonstrated a different issue salience. Thus, 21 percent of young voters consider welfare policies to be important, while only 13 percent of the senior citizens do so. Furthermore, education policy, despite having long been regarded as an exclusive agenda of the youth, was not given high priority by the South Korean youth.

Our results imply that categorizing the elderly population based solely on age has its limitations. One must pay attention to other factors, such as material wealth, that has a high impact on socio-economic preferences in explaining voter behavior. We believe it is logical to assume that senior citizens belonging to different income groups are likely to have different preferences regarding welfare policies for senior citizens.

To check the validity of this inference, we used cluster analysis to divide our sample of older respondents into four subsamples based on average income level and ideological affiliation. We chose the number of clusters to be equal to four since among elderly respondents the number of middle-class respondents (309 people) is comparable to the combined number of the rich and poor older voters.

To be more specific, we employed the K-means methodology to identify four different groups among older voters with distinct socioeconomic preferences. As expected, the average income score of the low-income group is 2.54, while the wealthy group scores 8.59 on the income dimension. The average incomes of the lower- and upper-middle classes are 3.47 and 4.2, respectively, which is fairly close to the median income (4.0) of the entire survey sample population. Table 2 presents voters' characteristics in these four clusters.

The elderly voters in four clusters appear to be distinct in terms of their economic characteristics. First of all, Cluster 1 appears to represent middle-class voters as its average income level of 4.2 is very close to the South Korean median income level of 4.0. Ideologically, Cluster 1 is the most liberal among the four, with an average score of 4.01 on a liberal-conservative scale. Cluster 2 can be thought of as a lower-middle class with an average income level of 3.47. Ideologically, it is the most conservative, with an average score of 6.52. Cluster 3 represents an upper class with an

Table 2. Characteristics of Senior Voters by Four Clusters

Cluster 1				Cluster 2				Cluster 3				Cluster 4			
Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Gender	165	1.51	0.50	1	2	144	1.56	0.50	1	2	100	1.44	0.50	1	2
Education	165	1.48	0.65	1	3	144	1.39	0.60	1	3	100	1.86	0.68	1	3
Ideology	165	4.01	1.93	0	9	144	6.52	1.86	3	10	100	5.50	1.77	1	10
Income	165	4.20	1.26	1	7	144	3.47	1.26	1	7	100	8.59	1.85	6	12
Living standard	165	4.79	1.07	2	8	144	4.16	1.19	1	8	100	5.30	1.82	0	10
Class identification	165	3.21	0.77	1	5	144	3.54	0.77	1	5	100	2.80	1.03	1	5

Note: Living standards (compared to other families): 0 - lowest, 10 - highest. Subjective class identification: 1 - upper class 2 - upper-middle class 3 - middle class 4 - lower-middle class 5 - lower class.

average income of 8.59 and an average ideological score of 5.5. Cluster 4 represents low-income voters, with an average income of 2.54, and is characterized by a moderate liberal ideology with an average score of 4.94 on the ideological dimension. In terms of ideology, Cluster 1 is found to be the most liberal group, in contrast to the most conservative Cluster 2. Cluster 3 may be seen as centrist, while Cluster 4 can be characterized as moderate liberal. Combining the income and ideological dimensions, Cluster 1 can be viewed as middle class with a liberal ideology, while Cluster 2 falls into the lower-middle class, most conservative category. Cluster 3 is a wealthy class with a centrist ideology, while Cluster 4 represents low-income, moderately liberal voters.

The differences in policy salience for these clusters are shown in Table 3 below. To begin with, middle class, or Cluster 1, voters assign priority weights to government policies as follows: political reform (33.3%), regional development (22.4%), unemployment (13.5%), and welfare (12.2%). By contrast, the low-income class, or Cluster 4, places importance on regional development (19.5%), unemployment, welfare, and political reform (18.0%). The wealthy class, Cluster 3, considers political reform (24.5%), unemployment (18.4%), regional development (16.3%), and welfare (11.2%) as important factors in their voting decisions.

Table 3. Chi-square Independence Test of the Differences between Groups of Senior Voters’ Policy Preferences

	Education	Unemployment	Welfare	Environment	Security	Housing	Political reform	Regional development	Inflation	Population	Social healthcare	χ^2 (p-values)
Cluster 1	1.9	13.5	12.2	3.8	3.8	5.1	33.3	22.4	2.6	0.0	1.3	60.999(.001)
Cluster 2	1.5	18.5	10.4	0.7	17.0	0.0	24.4	21.5	3.0	3.0	0.0	
Cluster 3	0.0	18.4	11.2	0.0	9.2	9.2	24.5	16.3	5.1	3.1	3.1	
Cluster 4	0.0	18.0	18.0	2.3	10.2	4.7	18.0	19.5	7.0	0.8	1.6	

Perception Differences on Senior Welfare Policy

We analyzed the impact of age on specific policy issues using the results of a poll on whether to expand government spending. Overall, the majority of respondents held that government spending on employment should be increased “significantly compared to what it is now” (2.08), followed by health and medical expenditure (2.34), environment (2.47), and education (2.68) policies. The average score for the senior welfare policy is 2.69, which means that the government spending on senior welfare should be increased “significantly compared to what it is now,” which can also be inferred from the magnitude of the skewness coefficient equal to 0.392 since a positive value of the skewness coefficient implies that the mass of the distribution is concentrated to the left of the mean. Our results imply that the overwhelming majority of the voters perceive the demand for spending on unemployment and health care policies to be high with the degree of skewness of corresponding distributions being high as well.

Table 4. Opinion Poll on Whether to Expand Government Spending on Specific Policies

Policy categories	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	N
1. National defense/security	2.99	1.000	-.030	1902
2. Education	2.68	.864	.318	1934
3. Senior welfare	2.69	.913	.392	1940
4. Public order	2.69	.814	.133	1938
5. Environment	2.47	.920	.437	1942
6. Culture/arts	3.18	.883	.004	1929
7. Healthcare/medical	2.34	.861	.603	1942
8. Employment	2.08	1.018	.922	1950

Note: Survey was conducted on a five-point scale: 1 - “spend significantly more than currently”; 3 - “spend the same as currently”; and 5 - “spend very much less than currently.”

We then identified factors that have an impact on the senior welfare policy,

an issue directly related to elderly voters, as well as on the education and employment policies that can be viewed as the policy issues most relevant to the youth. Below we present the empirical results of estimating a regression specification in order to determine whether elderly Korean voters support the increase in government spending on welfare policies. The dependent variable is an assessment of the expansion of government spending on senior welfare policies, which is coded on a five-point scale with the score of 1 corresponding to “spending significantly more than currently” and the score of five being “spending very much less than currently.” The independent variables include gender, age, educational background, and the region of origin. The age groups are as follows: those 18–29 year-olds, those in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. The educational level score differentiates between high school graduates and below, university graduates, and those with a post-grad education. We included a dummy variable for the Yeongnam and Honam³ regions since these regions are key to the Korean regionalism that explains cleavages in voter choice as discussed in Lee and Repkine (2020).

The results of our empirical analysis are presented in Table 5 below. Female voters appear to be rather negative about expanding the welfare budget for senior citizens ($p < 0.05$). In terms of the regional distribution of the survey respondents, residents of the Seoul Capital Area (SCA) that includes Seoul, Gyeonggi-do province, and Incheon city, as well as the residents of the Honam area think it is worthwhile to increase public spending on welfare for senior citizens. The corresponding p -values indicate statistical significance at a one and five percent significance level, respectively. However, the impact of age and education does not appear to be statistically significant.

The major control variables including household income, class identification, ideological orientation, and a dummy variable for the Democratic Party are found to be statistically significant. Our results are rather controversial with respect to the household income variable in that

3. Yeongnam includes the southeastern provinces of North and South Gyeongsang-do and the self-governing cities of Busan, Daegu, and Ulsan. Honam refers to the southwestern city of Gwangju as well as North and South Jeolla-do.

they imply that support for the expansion of the welfare budget increases ($p<0.05$) as the level of household income increases. In other words, the higher the household income, the higher the probability of support for the expansion of the welfare budget. However, support for the expansion of public spending on welfare grows as class identification approaches the low-income class ($p<0.001$). In terms of ideological orientation, the survey indicates that the more conservative one gets, the less one supports the expansion of the welfare budget, whereas support grows as one gets more liberal ($p<0.01$). Regarding party support, the supporters of the Democratic Party of Korea responded that welfare budget spending should be expanded ($p<0.01$).

Table 5. Perception on the Expansion of the Government Spending on Welfare for Senior Citizens

	B	SE	t	Significance
(Constant)	3.226	.168	19.176	.000
Gender	.082	.041	1.989	.047
Age	-.003	.015	-.190	.849
Education level	-.024	.036	-.666	.505
Seoul capital area dummy	-.161	.060	-2.666	.008
Honam dummy	-.175	.084	-2.088	.037
Yeongnam dummy	.002	.067	.030	.976
Household income	-.029	.013	-2.281	.023
Class identification	-.156	.024	-6.577	.000
Ideological orientation	.087	.029	2.991	.003
DP dummy	-.132	.049	-2.731	.006
UFP dummy	-.043	.071	-.603	.547

* $R^2=.047$; $F=8.570$; $p=.000$

Note: Dependent variable: Opinion on government spending on a specific policy, - (3) welfare for seniors.

Contrary to the common belief, our results imply no statistically significant relationship between age and support for increased transfers to the senior

welfare funds. Thus, our findings conflict with the research conclusions arrived at in the Western context (see for example, Lynch [2006]). We have four interpretations in mind. First, Korea's elderly population may not perceive increases in transfers to senior welfare funds to be urgent since the elderly dependency ratio in Korea is not high compared to the West. As of 2020, the number of senior citizens aged 65 or older who need to be provided for by a hundred economically active persons aged 15–64 is 21.7 in Korea,⁴ in contrast to 48 in Japan, 36.6 in Italy, 33.7 in France and Germany, 29.3 in Britain, 27.4 in Canada, and 25.6 in the United States. It thus appears that the demand for increased welfare spending among the elderly is not yet recognized as significant.

Second, Korea has been consistently expanding its public budget for senior welfare since the Kim Dae-jung administration. The welfare policies for senior citizens in Korea target income security, healthcare security, support for social activities, and support for vulnerable seniors, but income security accounts for the largest portion of the senior welfare budget (Hyun-Chool Lee 2018b, 99–101). Kim Dae-jung government introduced the senior citizens' pension system in 1998, later succeeded by the basic old-age pension system that was introduced by the Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2008. In 2014, under the Park Geun-hye administration, this system was integrated into the basic pension system, which provided 200,000 won per month, an amount that was later raised to 250,000 won by the Moon Jae-in administration in 2018. In 2019, the monthly payment was increased to 300,000 won for low-income recipients. In this context, we assume that Korean senior citizens do not consider the expansion of welfare spending an urgent matter, especially since the previous governments, regardless of political party, have consistently expanded welfare benefits for seniors.

Third, ideological polarization increased in Korean society following the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye. It is our understanding that since that time ideological orientation and party support have become more

4. This data is taken from the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS). http://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?menuId=M_02_01_01&vwcd=MT_RTITLE&parmTabId=M_02_01_01#SelectStatsBoxD.

focused on policy directions. In other words, voters assess the policies of a political party on the basis of their ideological orientation and party affiliation. In the Korean case, compared to the cleavages based on region and ideology, the age factor was unable to create cleavages in issues related to welfare politics that would have been manipulated by competing interest groups.

Finally, we can interpret the positive perception of younger voters of senior welfare policies on the basis of rational choice behavior, as we observed in differences of policy salience earlier. It appears that younger voters are favoring the expansion of senior welfare policies based on the calculation that such expansion would reduce their share of the burden of supporting their senior relatives. In contrast to this, from the point of view of the seniors who are currently enjoying government support together with the support of their children, the government's senior welfare policies are not that important to them since they are sufficiently satisfied with the current situation. What's more, older voters in Korea may have an anti-welfare disposition because they are rather self-reliant as a generation that has contributed to the post-Korean War economic development and industrialization (Hyun-Chool Lee 2018c). In addition, while the tax burden associated with welfare policies was actually low, there exists a certain stigma associated with receiving welfare benefits.

However, significant differences are found between four groups of elderly voters identified by cluster analysis. Considering that the overall average score given by the voters regarding their preference for expanding transfers to seniors is 2.73, the value for Cluster 4, which is a lower-income class and has moderate ideological orientation, is 2.58, making Cluster 4 the most active in supporting the expansion of the budget for welfare programs targeting senior citizens. The middle-income class characterized by rather progressive tendencies (Cluster 1) commands an average of 2.67. However, Cluster 2, or the lower-middle income class characterized by conservative ideological orientation, is computed to have an average of 2.94, making it the most passive class regarding the propagation of increases in the budget for welfare for senior citizens. We thus infer that the older voters are more affected by ideology than by the income brackets when it comes to increases in the welfare budget.

Table 6. Perceptions of Senior Voters on the Expansion of Transfers to the Senior Welfare Fund

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	Confidence interval	
					Lowest	Highest
Cluster 1	162	2.67	.905	.071	2.53	2.81
Cluster 2	141	2.94	.908	.077	2.79	3.09
Cluster 3	99	2.72	.959	.096	2.53	2.91
Cluster 4	138	2.58	.827	.070	2.44	2.72
Whole	540	2.73	.905	.039	2.65	2.80

* F=4.220, p<.01

We observe similar tendencies when analyzing public perception on the expansion of the education budget. Women appear to have a positive perception on the expansion of the education budget. However, the effects of age and geographical location are not estimated to be statistically significant. Despite the fact that the effect of household income is not estimated to be statistically significant, the respondents identifying themselves with a high-income class appear to believe that an expansion in the budget for education is necessary. Regarding the ideological dimension, conservative respondents did not view favorably the expansion of the budget for education. Regarding party support, supporters of the Democratic Party of Korea are more positive about the expansion of the education budget (p<0.05).

Table 7. Perceptions on the Expansion of the Education Budget and Employment-related Budget

	Education budget ^a				Employment budget ^b			
	B	SE	t	p	B	SE	t	p
Gender	.088	.051	2.228	.026	-.032	-.016	-.696	.487
Age	.011	.019	.807	.420	.009	.012	.529	.597

Education level	-.026	-.018	-.760	.447	.017	.010	.432	.665
Seoul Capital Area dummy	-.003	-.002	-.050	.960	-.151	-.074	-2.219	.027
Honam dummy	.064	.022	.795	.427	-.132	-.039	-1.404	.161
Yeongnam dummy	.064	.032	.999	.318	-.113	-.049	-1.510	.131
Household income	-.021	-.044	-1.693	.091	-.030	-.055	-2.122	.034
Class identification	-.069	-.080	-3.054	.002	-.104	-.103	-3.946	.000
Ideological orientation	.096	.089	3.425	.001	.134	.105	4.108	.000
DPK dummy	-.120	-.063	-2.573	.010	-.175	-.078	-3.232	.001
UFP dummy	-.101	-.037	-1.474	.141	-.012	-.004	-.145	.885
Constant	2.700		16.727	.000	2.449		13.035	.000

^a $R^2=.024$; $F=4.284$; $p=.000$

^b $R^2=.035$; $F=6.482$; $p=.000$

The factors that were estimated to produce a statistically significant effect on voter approval of budget expansion for education, included the SCA dummy variable ($p<0.05$), household income ($p<0.05$), class identification ($p<0.001$), ideological orientation ($p<0.001$), and the DPK dummy variable ($p<0.01$). As expected, the respondents from the SCA highly favor budget increases in the area of employment policy as employment is a key policy issue in the SCA, given that 49.5 percent of the total population, and 38 percent of the nation's university students, are concentrated in an area that only accounts for 11 percent of the total territory of South Korea (Hyun-Chool Lee 2018a, 111). Our survey respondents tend to further support the expansion of the employment-related budget as their household income increases, whereas this support grows as respondents' class identification tends toward the lower-income brackets. Support for the expansion of the employment budget increases the more one leans towards a liberal ideology, whereas this support falls as one leans towards the more conservative end of the ideological spectrum. Also, the DPK supporters are found to be in favor of budget expansion for employment policies.

Our results imply that voter age does not impact one's view on the expansion of the budget for education and employment. Only female

respondents showed more support for the expansion of the education budget, while respondents from SCA favored the expansion of the employment budget. The party support and DPK dummy have an impact on the expansion of the budget in each policy area. These results are identical to what we have found regarding the senior welfare policy issues. Similar to what we saw in Figure 1, the correlation between household income, party support, and ideological orientation is not statistically significant. However, there is a statistically significant correlation between ideological orientation and political party support, which has an impact on voter perceptions of policy salience and their perceptions on budget expansion.

Conclusion

In this study we examined the impact of age among the elderly population on electoral politics in the context of a rapidly aging Korean society by employing the results of a survey conducted after Korea's 21st general elections. In particular, we intended to empirically analyze the perceptions of senior voters on policy salience as well as on the expansion of government spending on senior welfare programs as part of the debate over the *silver democracy* phenomenon, which forecasts a senior-dominated representative democracy in Korea as the influence of senior citizens grows in elections in tandem with their growing numbers.

Contrary to the long-held belief that voter perceptions on such things as welfare policy, education, and employment are primarily determined by voter age, with senior voters supporting welfare and younger voters primarily concerned with education and employment, our results demonstrate that voter age is not an important factor affecting voter decisions. Additionally, we have analyzed voter opinions on government spending on particular policies. Our results imply that voter preferences in those policy areas that have long been considered to be heavily influenced by voter age, such as senior welfare, education, and employment policies, do not exhibit a statistically significant correlation with age. Yet, according to a cluster analysis of senior voters, the four clusters we identified can be clearly

divided along the income and ideology dimensions as follows: middle class/liberal, lower-middle class/conservative, high-income class/moderate, low-income class/moderate liberal. When examining voter perceptions on policy salience as well as their opinions on the expansion of the budget for senior welfare programs, statistically significant differences did show up. We believe our results imply that the age effect may not be present in the preferences for welfare policies because of such factors as ideological orientation and social class awareness. Although age does not appear to produce an important effect on perceptions of welfare policies in Korea, it does become an important factor when older voters are divided into clusters according to their income and ideological orientation.

This paper provides five possible explanations for why age seems to produce no impact on voter reaction to the expansion of government spending on welfare programs or senior welfare policies. First, the perception of the urgency to implement such programs and policies among the elderly population in Korea may not be high given that the elderly dependency ratio in Korea is not high compared to current levels in the West. The second explanation is based on the assumption that Korean seniors consider the expansion of public spending on welfare as a less urgent matter because previous governments, regardless of political party, have regularly increased spending on welfare policies for seniors. The third interpretation is that ideological polarization has deepened in Korean society since the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, making ideological orientation and party support more powerful factors in evaluating policy directions. The fourth explanation explains positive perceptions of the youth on senior welfare policies from the perspective of rational choice behavior. It appears that younger voters favor senior welfare policies in the hopes such programs will reduce their personal share of the total burden of family care. Fifth, it is highly likely that the time effect will offset the age effect during a period of an increasingly dominant progressive social atmosphere. However, to verify this claim a time-series analysis is required, which is a goal for future research.

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