

# Voters and Parties in Local Elections: 1995-2006

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## Abstract

*The revival of local autonomy in the wake of democratization was conceived to signal a potentially successful decentralized democracy in Korea. However, in reality, almost half of all eligible voters have not voted in local elections, indicating a lack of interest in local politics, and this has often been cited as evidence of an ongoing crisis in grass-roots democracy. It is also constantly pointed out that political parties at the national level have been deeply involved in the local electoral process, and thus national politics have often overshadowed local elections. This routine has raised concerns regarding the health of local politics.*

*The purpose of this paper is to explain the characteristics of local Korean politics from 1995 to 2006 by focusing on voter participation and party involvements in local elections. This paper also analyzes the electoral cleavages in voter turnout as well as party support. In addition, the implications of these findings and current issues on autonomy in relation to local politics will be discussed.*

**Keywords:** voter turnout, political party, local election, regionalism, local autonomy

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### **Introduction: Local Autonomy along with Democratization**

The last twenty years has seen great progress toward democratic consolidation in South Korea (hereafter Korea). Electoral democracy has been realized since the democratization of Korea in 1987. With the following presidential election in 1992, a civilian government was inaugurated after a long succession of authoritarian military regimes. Electoral democracy was solidified with the election of a president from the opposition party in 1997, the first inter-party peaceful transfer of power in fifty years. Including these elections, four presidents have been elected in consecutive five-year intervals, and there have been elections for five National Assemblies in four-year intervals. The electoral arena has also widened to local government posts. In 1991, local councils were revived. They had been suspended since the military coup in 1961. In 1995, heads of local governments such as governors and mayors were also elected, having been previously appointed by the central government. Since then, there have been four local elections to date.

The reemergence of local autonomy, abolished during the military regime as it had been identified with democracy, signified a touchstone in the progress of democratization. People longed for local autonomy as it would potentially ensure decentralized democratic politics. It was highly expected that local autonomy would provide the training ground for a democratic citizenry with increasing civic participation in local politics, the realm through which local residents would engage and be empowered in the broader democratic process. Given the proximity of local governments and their relatively small sizes, local residents would have facile access to local affairs, develop crucial democratic skills, and become familiar with the public realm.

Contrary to expectations, actual voter participation in local elections has been noticeably low. Trends over time suggest that voter turnout in local elections is declining just as rapidly as it is at the national level. Considering that turnout in national elections is comparatively high nowhere is the turnout problem worse than at the local level. The fact that almost half of all eligible voters do not vote

in local elections has alarmed many observers of Korean politics.

The depressing voter turnout, indicating a lack of interest in local politics, is intermittently intertwined with the limited power of local governments. The cause of their meager power resides in local governments' inability to meet the interests of local residents, who turn to the national government for a more operative outcome. Another conceivable reason lies in the fact that local autonomy is a fairly new concept for most local residents, although it is not completely new since it was implemented from April 1952 to May 1961. Many local residents are ignorant or not fully aware of the extent to which local government affects their day-to-day lives. Making matters worse, local elections are steered away from local affairs and are overshadowed by national politics, as political parties are deeply involved in the local electoral process. The involvement of political parties, which have traditionally had strong ties with regions, has caused regionalism to penetrate into local elections and it has become the major factor in mobilizing party support. Regionalism in local politics, in contrast to that in national politics, can be detrimental to democratic development since the near monopoly of one party in the representation of local government can threaten the system of checks and balances.

The importance of local politics has increased to the extent to which it is almost impossible to discuss Korean politics without a basic understanding of local politics whose dynamics are well manifested in local elections. It is, therefore, necessary to examine overall trends and features of local elections, explicate the reasons behind the persistent party influence on them, and ponder the significance of local elections in Korean politics.

This study analyzes the process and outcome of the Korean local election and its impact on national politics. I will describe the distinctive institutional features of the election, mechanisms to induce parties' involvement, and the impact on voting behavior. The turnout trends and features over the period of between 1995 and 2006 will be examined, and the role of political parties in local elections analyzed. This paper mainly focuses on (a) changes and continuities in voter

participation in terms of urban-rural and regional cleavages and (b) political parties' influence on local elections in relation to candidate representation, campaign issues, and regional party support.

In analyzing local election results, this study uses aggregate data from the 1995, 1998, 2002 and 2006 elections issued by the National Election Commission. It should be noted that Korean local elections are simultaneously implemented, so the turnout in each local election is identical. However, in evaluating the role and influence of a party in local elections, it is necessary to highlight the most representative and exemplary type of election in Korea, which is the mayoral election. The mayoral election district is a basic unit of the local government system. In general, local elections of chief executives receive people's attention more than those of local councils. Mayoral elections have 230 districts, as opposed to 16 gubernatorial districts, and that makes it easier to explicate variations of election results.

### **Institutional Features of the Local Electoral System in Korea**

#### *Simultaneous Implementation of Local Elections*

The local government in Korea is divided into two tiers, consisting of 16 provincial and 230 municipal governments: The former includes 7 metropolitan cities and 9 provinces, while the latter includes 69 metropolitan districts, 75 cities, and 86 counties. All the local governments take a strong mayor-council form so that local chief executives as well as local council members are directly elected by the people on a four-year basis. Citizens are given six vote choices in the amended local election voting system initiated in 2006. They have to choose four candidates for chief executives and local council members at each level. In addition, they have to choose two party rosters, which determine the proportional representatives from each level. These representatives comprise a tenth of the total seats. As of 2006, the population of Korea was forty-eight million, and there are 246 chief executives and 3,621 local council members.

*Table 1. Seats and Candidates in the 2006 Local Elections*

	Seats* (A)	Districts (B)	Candidates (C)	Competition Rate (C/A)	Candidates per District (C/B)
Total	3,414	1,929	10,935	3.2	3.2
Governors	16	16	66	4.1	4.1
Mayors	230	230	839	3.7	3.7
Provincial council members	655	655	2,062	3.2	3.2
Municipal council members	2,513	1,028	7,968	3.2	7.8

\* Figures exclude 453 party proportional representatives: 78 for provincial and 375 for municipal councils.

Local elections for chief executives and council members of provincial and municipal governments have been held simultaneously since the first full-fledged local election in 1995. The primary motivation for holding all the local elections on the same day is to save on administrative costs. By implementing all the local elections at the same time, local governments, which are responsible for total local election expenses, can reduce their financial burden.

The institution of election concurrency is also believed to spur turnout. There are strong ties between voter participation and the importance of office. The more important the office is, the more candidates run for election. Increased competition followed by more concentrated campaigning would induce higher interest from voters, thereby stimulating the turnout. As presented in Table 1, the average competition rate of gubernatorial elections (4.1) and mayoral contests (3.7) are higher than that of local council members (3.2).

Elections for chief executives such as governors and mayors are viewed as relatively high stimulus elections rather than those for local council members. The assumption behind the election concurrency is that the number of ballots cast for low stimulus elections could increase to a level nearly on par with those high stimulus elec-

tions. Turnout rates of local elections are indeed nearly identical with no variation in the different kinds of offices, as voters primarily motivated by chief-executive elections are more likely to vote for other contests as well.

However, some caveats on this expanded participation should be noted. Although concurrent local elections may surely lead to greater voter turnout in comparison with stand-alone elections, they do not necessarily reflect increased interest in local elections, especially in low stimulus contests. Voters' attention to local elections tends to be selective, probably depending on how they perceive the importance of each office. Empirical evidence suggests that voters are most interested in gubernatorial elections or mayoral contests, which also receive much media attention, while they are much less interested in those for local councils (Lee H. 1999).

Also, introducing a greater number of candidates into electoral contests may increase voter frustration and disinterest in local elections altogether, and thereby decrease turnout (Rosales 2000). Because long and complex ballots can increase voter confusion, it makes it difficult for voters to know and develop preferences when choosing among a large number of candidates. The last column in Table 1 shows how many candidates, on average, run in an election district for each local election: 4.1 candidates for governor, 3.7 for mayor, 3.2 for provincial council's district representative, and 7.8 for municipal council's.<sup>1</sup> Thus, on average, there are already about nineteen candidates in each constituency, without counting the number of candidates for proportional representatives of local councils.

It has also been noted that the short official campaign period for local elections contributes to voters' confusion. Parties and candidates are officially given just thirteen days to campaign, making local contests more confusing. The short period makes campaigning so intense that voters are bombarded with information about the election from the parties and the media. Without fully differentiating

1. The municipal council election in 2006 adopted a multi-member district in which two to four council members are elected with a simple majority vote.

each candidate, citizens with only limited knowledge of and interest in local elections may end up relying heavily on partisan labels in their decision-making. This might provide a good justification for political parties to play an active role in local elections drawing both strongly positive and negative reactions.

#### *Controversy over Partisan Ballots*

Partisan ballots, previously prohibited in the municipal council election, were introduced for the first time in the 2006 local elections. Although implemented in 2006, partisan ballots have been the focus of much debate going back to the reopening of local autonomy in 1991. Opponents have argued that the party system based on regionalism since the beginning of Korean democratization would undermine local government. A nonpartisan election system, they believe, is the only mechanism that would keep national parties from the local scene, preventing their divisive influence on municipal decision-making.

Yet, the partisan ballot was widely adopted in local elections except in the municipal council contest, despite the fact that reformists strongly proffered the nonpartisan election for the mayoral office. The reformists' goal is to remove party politics from the basic unit of local government at least, thereby making municipal governments more responsive to local citizens. They also view much of government as administrative by nature, and hence the role of the citizenry is to choose the most competent official to run the government effectively. In this view, voters are supposed to make their decisions on the basis of other information, ideally the candidates' qualifications and platforms.

Advocates of partisan election, on the other hand, have contended that political parties not only have a positive role but are also essential for a strong local democracy. From the advocates' standpoint, local politics is more about "who gets what" than about administering public services. In this respect, a critical measure of the strength of local democracy lies in the character of the linkage

between citizens and their elected leaders. In addition, they point out the fact that many citizens are only moderately interested in, and poorly informed about, “second-order” local elections. In order to overcome these shortcomings at the individual level, the use of information shortcuts are necessary to attain an electorate that is collectively rational and highly responsive to what the government does (Page and Shapiro 1992).

Party labels in this respect can provide important cognitive information as they convey more or less accurate policy information about candidates, and their low cost and accessibility make it easier for voters to reach reasonable decisions (Aldrich 1995). Therefore, by taking party labels away from local elections, nonpartisan ballots may result in increased information cost to citizens, and thus would make voting more difficult and undermine democratic accountability and representation. The underlying assumption is that in nonpartisan elections voters as cognitive misers seek out low-cost cues because they have little incentive to search for pertinent information. An empirical analysis of a previous nonpartisan election shows that voters confused the order of candidates in a ballot with that of parties when party labels were not provided (Lee and Hwang 1999).

The information costs argument is also the foremost rationale encouraging electoral participation. Proponents of the partisan ballot draw much attention to the American municipal elections, showing that partisan ballots contribute to increased participation in comparison with nonpartisan elections (Schaffner and Wright 2001; Welch 1978; Karnig and Walter 1977). They argue that party labels in the ballot can provide an important mechanism to aid voter decision-making and to mobilize citizens into the electoral process. It follows, then, that by removing party identification from the ballots, nonpartisan elections require citizens to exert more effort, sometimes quite a bit of effort, to discern the difference between the candidates, and this increase in the cost of voting can be expected to yield fewer voters.

In addition to the lower information cost, two additional factors such as simplicity and competitiveness contribute to an increased

participation in partisan elections. Party involvement in local elections is said to bring about greater simplicity by combining the local and national level and thereby presenting simpler choices to voters. If local elections were interpreted as a contest between national parties, competitiveness would increase. Another institutional factor to be considered is that simultaneous nationwide local elections are scheduled to occur between general elections,<sup>2</sup> and thus, local elections are likely to be perceived as a midterm referendum of the ruling party at the national level.

## Trends and Features in Voter Turnouts

### *The Urban-Rural Difference in Voter Turnouts*

There were noticeable patterns of voter turnout in local elections. First, the voter turnout rate was low and continued to decline, though there was a slight increase in 2006. Another important phenomenon was the urban-rural split in voter turnout. Table 2-1 presents the voter participation rates in recent local elections in Korea.

Table 2-1. Turnout Rates by Municipal Type in Local Elections

	1995	1998	2002	2006
Total	68.4	52.7	48.9	51.4
Metropolitan districts	63.0	47.3	44.3	49.0
Cities	69.5	58.5	53.4	54.4
Counties	75.0	71.6	71.1	70.5
ANOVA ( <i>F</i> -test)	<i>F</i> = 130.4 <i>p</i> < .001	<i>F</i> = 239.2 <i>p</i> < .001	<i>F</i> = 266.9 <i>p</i> < .001	<i>F</i> = 239.3 <i>p</i> < .001

2. Though mayors and local council members were supposed to be elected for four-year terms in 1995, the following elections were held in June 1998 instead to allow for the National Assembly election cycle.

In spite of the simultaneous implementation of local elections, the overall turnout rate was low. Voter turnout in the May 31, 2006 local election was 51.4 percent. This figure contrasts sharply with that of national elections. It was about ten percentage points lower than the turnout rate (60.6%) in the 2004 National Assembly election and about twenty percentage points lower than voter participation (70.8%) in the 2002 presidential election. Also, it shows that even the generally low level of turnout in local elections declined sharply (by 15.7 percentage points) from 68.4 percent in the first nationwide local election of June 27, 1995 to 52.7 percent in the second 1998 local election. The turnout rate dropped further to 48.9 percent in the 2002 local election, yet it showed a slight upturn by 2.5 percentage points in the 2006 local election.

Despite low turnout in local elections, voting rates across communities varied greatly, especially by degree of urbanization. In Korea, urbanization can be categorized into three types: metropolitan districts, cities, and counties. The hierarchical classification is closely related to measures of population size, industrial base, and socioeconomic levels. For example, the average size of 69 metropolitan districts is 248,752 voters, 208,799 for 75 cities, and 44,517 for 86 counties. The more populous a municipal unit, the larger its non-agricultural population and the lower its voter turnout.

As shown in Table 2-1, a distinctive feature of turnouts in local elections is the urban-rural cleavage, with lower turnout in urban areas than in rural areas. The relation between urbanization and the rate of voter turnout is negative in all four local elections. For example, in the 2006 local election, the average rate of voter turnout in 69 metropolitan districts, the most urbanized areas, was 49.0 percent while it was 54.4 percent in 75 cities, and 70.5 percent in 86 rural counties.

The degree of fluctuation in voter turnout varies with municipal type as well. Changes in voter turnout in metropolitan districts are bigger than those in the other municipalities. In 2002, the average rate of voter turnout in metropolitan districts was the lowest (44.3 percent) in the recent history of local elections. It dropped by more

than 19 percentage points compared to the first nationwide local elections in 1995. By comparison, changes in the average rate of turnout in rural counties were quite stable after the second local election in 1998. It was 75.0 percent in 1995, 71.6 percent in 1998, 71.1 percent in 2002 and 70.5 percent in 2006. The average rate of voter turnout in cities lies between that of municipal districts and counties. The changing pattern of turnout in cities is similar to that of metropolitan districts. It declined sharply from 69.5 percent in 1995 to 58.5 percent in 1998, and dropped to 53.4 percent in 2002 again, but increased to 54.4 percent in 2006.

It is quite interesting to note, however, that after the democratic transition of 1987, the chronic pattern of the urban-rural cleavage in turnout during the authoritarian governments<sup>3</sup> disappeared in national elections while it is still prevalent in local elections. This might be closely related to the decline of electoral participation in urban areas because of the differential impact of democratization on the urban and the rural. That is, the important voting pattern, during the authoritarian regime, showed a noticeable split between the pro-democratic in urban areas and the pro-status quo in rural areas. The majority of rural voters supported the authoritarian ruling party while urban voters showed strong anti-authoritarian sentiment by supporting the opposition parties. Democratization, considered highly important by most urban voters who tend to be younger and more educated, became the prime motivation in the city dwellers' political mobilization (Lee G. 1986). In contrast to their urban counterparts, rural voters, who were generally older and less educated, did not put too much weight on democratization. The voting rate in urban areas has noticeably declined since democratization was finalized in 1987, which explicitly indicated that democratization was no longer valid ground for urban dwellers.

3. Previous research suggests that the urban-rural difference in voter turnout was due to the proportion of mobilized voters who voted not because they felt they had a stake in the elections but because they were told to vote by the government (Kim and Koh 1972).

From a different but related perspective, municipal size itself may also affect voter turnout: the more populous a municipal unit, the lower the level of voter participation. This can be tested by a simple Pearson correlation analysis of the relationship between city size in terms of the number of eligible voters and voter turnout. The Pearson coefficient is  $-0.72$  in 2006,  $-0.74$  in 2002 and 1998, and  $-0.68$  in 1995, all of which are significant at the 0.001 level. The result confirms the previous argument that patterns of political mobilization vary as a function of city size (Oliver 2000; Fischer 1982). As the size of the city grows, people are less socially connected with their neighbors, less interested in local politics, and less active in local civic affairs. In contrast, living in a small city may provide an additional impetus for civic participation, encouraging greater citizen involvement in the governmental process. A smaller community may enhance firsthand knowledge about candidates, which gives voters a greater sense of having a stake in the outcome, and thus stir up enthusiasm leading to a higher turnout. It is also feasible for candidates and party activists to actually contact a significant share of the electorate in person.

According to empirical analyses of the turnout in local elections, municipal type is still a powerful predictor of voter turnout, despite being controlled by either its population size (Hwang 1998) or individual characteristics such as age, education, income and sex (Hwang 1998; Kim W. 1999). The fact that the urban-rural difference in voter turnout disappeared in national elections after the democratic transition in 1987 but is still a prominent phenomenon in local elections demands some explanation. Unlike the electorate in a large community, voters in a small community still show a considerably high, stable turnout in local elections. This implies that the former responds more sensitively to the importance of elections, while the latter does not. In spite of second-order local elections, a higher voter turnout in rural counties may reflect their strong normative beliefs in the importance of voter participation. In order to understand differences in variations and fluctuations of turnout rates across the municipal types, their different social structures should be taken into

account.

As noted before, municipal types in Korea are closely related to population size, industrial base, and socioeconomic levels. Early classics of urban sociology argue that the size, density, and heterogeneity of larger places dissolve the social and psychological bonds that exist between neighbors in small towns (Simmel 1969; Tonnies 1988; Wirth 1969). Because a person's social environment and psychological engagement in the community have an important impact on shaping civic life, the urban-rural disparity in voter turnouts is attributable partly to differences in social relations and psychological orientation between residents of urban and rural areas (Kim and Koh 1972; Kim C. 1980). Rural communities in Korea are very homogeneous and small in size. Residents in rural counties are more likely to know one another, where social networks are portrayed as closely knit, and thus there is more proximity and redundancy among acquaintances with higher pressure to conform with social values. People in larger cities, however, are less likely to know their neighbors and see acquaintances in public settings, which in turn may inhibit political mobilization.

#### *Regional Differences in Voter Turnout*

Another notable feature is regional variations in voter turnout. It should be first noted that regionalism in Korea has played a salient role in every election since the 1987 presidential election (Shin 2005; Cho 2000; Lee 1998; Yea 1994). Regionally divided party support, especially the east-west split (between the Yeongnam and Honam regions) in voting has influenced the outcome of all the elections to a great extent. Likewise, regionalism can be found in voter turnout. The presence of strong, continuing expectations about parties and regional cleavage alignments in Korea not only creates easily identifiable choices for citizens, but also makes it easier for parties to seek out supporters and mobilize them at election time.

Previous theories on voting participation have also emphasized the key role of citizens' ties to political parties (Verba et al. 1978;

Campbell et al. 1960). It is generally agreed that those who feel a strong sentiment for a political party are more likely to vote than those who do not. Partisan attachment not only contributes to psychological involvement in politics, motivating individuals to display party support, but it also reduces information cost and thereby reduces the cost of voting (Fiorina 1981). Furthermore, strong partisans are more likely to have stronger preference for their parties and thus gain a greater differential benefit from the election of their preferred party (Abramson and Aldrich 1982).

Table 2-2. Turnout Rates by Region in Local Elections

	1995	1998	2002	2006
Difference	3.6	6.4	7.3	7.7
Yeongnam and Honam	71.9	63.6	59.0	62.7
Other Regions	68.3	57.2	51.7	55.0
<i>t</i> -test	<i>t</i> = 4.19 <i>p</i> < .001	<i>t</i> = 4.12 <i>p</i> < .001	<i>t</i> = 3.92 <i>p</i> < .001	<i>t</i> = 5.40 <i>p</i> < .001

Table 2-2 presents the average rate of voter turnout between the Yeongnam-Honam region and other regions. Without exception, the average rate of turnout in Yeongnam and Honam was higher than that of the other regions. Although all regions show a similar trend in the turnout, the regional difference in turnout rates has increased. The difference in turnout between the Yeongnam-Honam region and others was 3.6 percentage points in 1995, but it increased to 6.4 percentage points in 1998, 7.3 percentage points in 2002, and 7.7 percentage points in 2006. This regional cleavage may be due in part to the fact that political parties, deeply rooted in their regional strongholds, were heavily involved in local election campaigns, often framing the local election as a referendum on the ruling party. If local elections were viewed as a contest between the ruling party and the opposition parties, efforts to mobilize party support would increase,

particularly in each party's stronghold regions, Yeongnam and Honam.

Table 2-3. Turnout Rates by Region and Municipal Type in 2006

	Metropolitan Districts	Cities	Counties
Yeongnam and Honam	49.2	59.1	73.1
Other Regions	48.8	51.0	66.8
<i>t</i> -test	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>t</i> = 4.95 <i>p</i> < .001	<i>t</i> = 4.59 <i>p</i> < .001

Despite a general pattern of higher voter participation in these two regions, there is great variation in their discrepancies across municipal types. As shown in Table 2-3, there was no regional difference in turnout in metropolitan districts. Their average turnout rate in Yeongnam and Honam was almost the same (about 49 percent) as that of other regions. In contrast, the regional difference in turnout is quite noticeable in those less urbanized areas. The fact that regionalism had little impact on the turnout in metropolitan districts in Yeongnam and Honam may be due to lower levels of electoral competitions. Previous studies provide empirical evidence that the opposing factors between the partisan effect of regionalism and the impact of electoral competitiveness are counterbalanced in local elections among the most urbanized segments of the Korean electorate (Hwang 2006). Voter participation in metropolitan districts in both Yeongnam and Honam should have been higher than those of the other regions if the partisan effect of regionalism is considered, but they were counteracted by their lower levels of electoral competition. In contrast, the voting turnout of metropolitan districts in the other regions like Seoul should have been lower than those in Yeongnam and Honam because of the absence of their regional parties, but they were also counterbalanced by their higher level of electoral competition.

It is certainly true that electoral competition is also important to



spur participation. Voters' interests may be stirred if voters anticipate the electoral outcome to be close. If party competition is intense and close, the benefit from one party's winning and the likelihood of one's vote making a difference in the outcome both rise. This may also affect costs. The psychic costs of gathering information and of making a decision about whom to vote for may both be lower if who wins is an important matter. Yet, the persistently observed regionalism throughout all the local elections certainly becomes more predictable, less exciting, and ultimately makes elections less dynamic. The spread of strong regionalism in Korea has dwindled inter-party electoral competitions, accompanied by fewer contested seats (Hwang 1998). Where a given election outcome seems a foregone conclusion, turnout will decline in that election. In other words, if a party predominates in a certain region, interest will be weak among both voters and party activists, and voter turnout will decline.

### Party Involvement in the Local Electoral Arena

#### *Party Nomination of Candidates*

The 2006 institutional reform for abolishing nonpartisan ballots precipitated the party politicization in local elections. Now winning

Table 3-1. *Proportion of Partisan Candidates in Local Elections (%)*

	Partisan Candidates				Elected Partisan Candidates			
	1995	1998	2002	2006	1995	1998	2002	2006
Governors	67	80	76	95	87	100	100	94
Mayors	46	75	66	68	77	81	87	87
Provincial council members	65	70	72	72	83	94	96	98
Total	60	75	67	71	82	90	93	95

\* Figures are in percentages

parties at local elections are more likely to have party activists ready for upcoming presidential election campaigns in 2007 than those with little local presence. The expansion of partisan ballots increased inter-party competition as seen in the 2006 local election. The competition rate of the partisan election for municipal councils was indeed increased to 3.2 in 2006, compared to its rate of 2.4 in the previous nonpartisan election of 2002. Also, the overall candidate competition rates (3.2) in the 2006 local election increased by 0.7 points compared to the 2002 local election. This might result in the upturn of voter participation for the first time since the 1995 local election.

As presented in Table 3-1, one important indicator of the process of party politicization is the near monopoly achieved by political parties in the representation of local governments as well as nominations of candidates for local elections. Election results indicate that most candidates were endorsed by political parties, while independent candidates have been decreasing in number and electoral success rate since 1995. With the exception of the election for municipal councils,<sup>4</sup> the proportion of candidates with party affiliations comprised 71 percent in the 2006 local election, an increase of 11 percentage points compared to the 1995 local elections.

The trend of running by party nomination is gaining momentum as candidates realize that party attachment can help them win elections. Local elections have become more of a political domain of parties as more and more voters are supporting candidates who are affiliated with parties. The evidence of the dominant role of political parties in electoral success is also reflected in a vast majority of elected local officials who are partisans. They comprised 82 percent in the 1995 local election and increased to 95 percent in the 2006 election. Yet, the fact that party candidates overwhelmingly won local elections does not mean that the local election was sluggish and stag-

4. Party nomination of those running for municipal councils was prohibited prior to 2006. The only data for municipal council members from the 2006 election are purposely excluded in the table in order to review the four elections under identical conditions. Partisan candidates comprised 59 percent and elected partisans 91 percent of the 2006 municipal council election.

Table 3-2. Incumbency Effects in Mayoral Elections

	1998	2002	2006
Incumbent Candidates	86	64	54
Re-election Rate	76	54	66
Newly-elected Mayors	34	66	64

\*Figures are in percentages.

nant, observing the increase of reelections of incumbents.

As shown in Table 3-2, the proportion of incumbent mayors reelected from the 2002 election was only 36 percent, and 147 out of the total 230 mayors (64 percent) were newly elected. Also the proportion of incumbent candidates was only 54 percent. On the party level, out of 140 elected in 2002, only 57 incumbent mayor candidates were renominated by the Grand National Party (GNP) in 2006; out of 44 elected Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) mayors in 2002, only 16 were renominated by either the Democratic Party (DP) or the Uri Party (UP). These results confirm the critical role of political parties in finding and supplying new candidates for local elections.

#### *The Nationalization of Issues*

It is a widely-held belief that political parties take an active role in the whole local election process. As a result, the local election is dominated by the national campaigns, which undermine local influences. Traditionally in Korea, a party's popularity is contingent upon the image of its party leader. Thus, all the leaders of a major party are expected to be a part of the local election campaign. Because party leaders are from the national level, they may well bring national issues into local elections. The evidence is that all the primary issues in local election campaigns have been obviously related to national politics such as presidential job performance, overall condition of the national economy, and political power balance between the ruling party and opposition parties. These national issues are the pointers to a heavily centralized party system in Korea. Because party

organizations at the local level do not have enough resources and those at the national level are also not able to deal with locally specific issues for all the different electoral arenas, taking on simple, easy issues is a useful and effective strategy for political parties to mobilize voters (Kang 1999).

More specifically, in local elections, the ruling party always raises the issue of political stability along with local prosperity. In doing so, it seeks a supporting means in exchange for local development by promising the central government's clientelist distribution of goods. On the other hand, opposition parties argue that the ruling party without any checks and balances would be detrimental to the democratic development of Korea. Also, they bring up the referendum issue in local elections so as to corner the ruling party. Throughout the entire campaign of the 2006 local election, the opposition parties' campaign slogan was "Punish the incompetent central government." Likewise, "Punish corrupt government" was the 2002 election slogan. The one exception was in 1998 when the party in power did well. But this was only because the local election was held during the "honeymoon period," taking place only six months after the 16th presidential election.

The reason referendum issues are brought up during local elections is that they are scheduled in between general elections. There is a general perception of equating the occasion of local election as a presidential performance test. Some local voters, influenced by this perception, vote for national rather than local issues, making governing parties in the mid-term especially vulnerable to defeat at local elections. Another cause for the referendum lies in the system of limiting presidents to single five-year terms. This system, in contrast to other systems, tends to be more susceptible to the lame-duck period. The current Korean presidential system is especially vulnerable to this and provokes periodic referendum issues. Every president and ruling party has inevitably been plagued by sharp drops in approval ratings toward the end of the term.

As presented in Table 4, a clear sign of voter punishment is reflected in the 2002 and the 2006 local elections. The ruling MDP

Table 4. Results of Local Elections by Party

	Ruling Party		Opposition Party (the GNP)	
	2002	2006	2002	2006
Governors	4 (25)	1 (6)	11 (69)	12 (75)
Mayors	44 (19)	19 (8)	140 (60)	155 (67)
Provincial council members	121 (20)	33 (5)	431 (71)	519 (79)
Municipal council members	n.a.	543 (22)	n.a.	1,401 (56)

\* Figures represent the number of elected party candidates and percentages are in parentheses.

obtained only 20 percent of the total posts in the 2002 election, while the opposition party, the GNP, showed remarkable success. In the 2006 local election, the ruling party (the Uri Party) experienced a devastating defeat due to the sluggish economy, high unemployment rate of young workers, and ineffectiveness of Roh Moo-hyun as a political leader. The Uri Party won just one post out of the 16 governors, 19 posts out of the 230 mayors, 33 seats out of the 655 district representatives for provincial councils, and 543 seats out of the 2,513 district representatives for municipal councils. In contrast, the GNP gained massive success in the 2006 local election: the number of elected GNP candidates was 12 governors, 155 mayors, 519 and 1,401 district representatives for provincial and municipal councils, respectively. These results indicate the difficulty the ruling party often faces in avoiding negative referendum issues raised by the opposition parties, and evading electoral punishment.

#### *Voter Mobilization of Region-based Parties*

Since the democratic transition of 1987, every election has been marked by decisive regional schisms and local elections are no exception. Regionalism is criticized as the major impediment to democratic development, since voters do not support parties and candidates for their policy stances and ideologies, but rather vote out of blind

loyalty. All the major parties get support along the regional origin of their party leader. However, given the short history of the party system<sup>5</sup> and the lack of clear ideological or issue differences between competing parties, it seems only natural that voters would be inclined to their native candidates. In a society that is otherwise remarkably homogeneous, regional identity may provide necessary safeguards against the strong centralized government. Yet, regionalism with the political party-centered electoral process allows national politics to hover over local politics.

Table 5-1. Regional Variations of Party Support in Mayoral Elections

Party	Region	1995	1998	2002	2006
GNP <sup>1)</sup>	Yeongnam	42.0 (15.2)	58.3 (21.5)	59.7 (20.4)	58.1 (15.4)
	Nationwide	34.6 (14.6)	45.7 (20.5)	52.0 (23.4)	51.4 (17.1)
DP <sup>2)</sup>	Honam	54.0 (14.2)	61.3 (22.5)	50.1 (23.6)	41.3 (16.1)
	Nationwide	36.1 (18.4)	42.7 (24.1)	39.9 (22.6)	23.5 (19.7)
Uri Party	Honam	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	36.1 (14.8)
	Nationwide				27.7 (12.1)

\* Figures represent the average of vote rates and the standard deviation is in parentheses.

- 1) The Grand National Party (1998, 2002, 2006), the Democratic Liberal Party (1995)  
 2) The Democratic Party (2006), the Millennium Democratic Party (2002), the National Congress for New Politics (1995, 1998)

The following analysis shows that regionalism is still rampant in local elections. Table 5-1 reports regional party support in mayoral elections, compared with the nationwide average vote share. Throughout the local elections of 1995-2006, there were some varia-

5. The history of political parties in Korea is marked by constant formation, realignment, and dissolution. During the last two decades they have undergone several transformations in factional alignments as well as changed names. In this context, the political party is viewed as the creature and instrument of its presidential candidate and vice versa.

tions in regional party support. Despite these variations, it illustrates a quite consistent pattern that Yeongnam voted mainly for the GNP, while Honam voted for the DP and for the Uri Party also in 2006.<sup>6</sup> The average vote of the GNP and the DP gained from each party's stronghold was 42 percent and 54 percent, respectively, in 1995; 58 percent and 61 percent in 1998; 60 percent and 50 percent in 2002; and 58 percent and 41 percent in 2006. If combined with the regional support for the Uri Party (36 percent) in Honam, it reached 77 percent in 2006. Regionalism in 2006 seemed stronger because the regional party support was concentrated with lower variance of party supports (see the parentheses in Table 5-1).

Table 5-2. *The Effect of Regionalism in Electoral Success of the 2006 Mayoral Election*

	GNP <sup>1)</sup>	UP <sup>2)</sup>	DP <sup>3)</sup>	PFP <sup>4)</sup>	Independent	Total Seats
Yeongnam	60 (83)	2 (3)	–	–	10 (14)	72 (100)
Honam	–	9 (22)	20 (49)	–	12 (29)	41 (100)
Nationwide	155 (67)	19 (8)	20 (9)	7 (3)	29 (13)	230 (100)

\* Figures represent the number of elected mayors and percentages are in parentheses. 1) GNP: Grand National Party; 2) UP: Uri Party; 3) DP: Democratic Party; 4) PFP: People First Party.

The impact of regionalism on electoral outcomes is more astonishing as indicated by the number of mayoral seats won by each party in Yeongnam and Honam region (see Table 5-2).<sup>7</sup> This is due to the electoral system. Under the “first past the post” electoral system, the percentage of seats won by a party is rarely proportional to its vote percentage. The GNP won 60 out of 72 mayoral seats in Yeongnam

6. After President Roh was elected with the MDP's nomination, he relinquished his party membership and the Uri Party was subsequently established by his supporters in the MDP.

7. A similar pattern can be observed in local council elections and there finds a perfect regional split in gubernatorial contests.

region, comprising 83 percent of the total, but failed to generate any support whatsoever in Honam region. Furthermore, the MDP won 20 posts, all from Honam, which had been its traditional stronghold. The Uri Party won just 9 out of the total 41 mayoral offices in Honam, its regional support base, and 2 posts in Yeongnam. The Uri Party's disappointing record in Honam might be due in part to the impact of referendum issues as well as to the party split into the MDP and the Uri Party, as discussed earlier.

Because regionalism severely debilitates inter-party competition, creating a party monopoly in a specific region, its effect also appears among candidates. As one might expect, parties seek to endorse candidates at the local level when opportunity for electoral success is present. Candidates themselves also have a choice when a party offers a nomination. More specifically, in Honam region, the GNP had difficulty finding candidates and thus nominated only 8 candidates. The Uri Party and the MDP nominated 41 and 3 candidates respectively in the Yeongnam region. Regionalism is also evident in the number of independents. As far as independents are concerned, their success rate in Yeongnam and Honam is much higher than that of party candidates affiliated with the opposition's region. For example, in Honam there are twelve independent mayors whereas the GNP has none. Independents are better off running without a party affiliation in Yeongnam and Honam if they are not nominated by regional parties.

## Conclusion

Local self-governance after democratization constitutes an important component in Korean politics. Looking back over four local elections since 1995, we can find some important changes as well as continuities in voters' electoral behavior after democratization. Some of them surface as political cleavages between urban and rural areas and as regionalism. These characteristics of local elections become a source of deep anxiety over local autonomy, which was initially conceived

as a hope for reform.

Concerns over the low turnout assume this to be symptomatic of a lack of interest in local politics. The lack of interest, namely the low voter turnout, is seen as evidence showing that the legitimacy of local governments is undermined when elected officials are chosen by a small portion of their constituencies. However, there is no concrete evidence that the low turnout is directly linked to voters' dissatisfaction with the local political system or a threat to local authorities.

The phenomenon of the urban/rural split can be explained in light of the effect of democratization. Urban areas, traditionally noted for their anti-authoritarian sentiment, have yielded lower voter turnouts following the success of democratization. Thus, the low urban voter turnout can be interpreted as stemming from political stability. High turnout rates in Yeongnam and Honam regions derive from nationally heated inter-party competition in local elections wherein regionally affiliated parties play an active role. The parties' involvement causes regional differences in voter turnouts that can potentially deprive the local government of autonomy. There is evidence, however, that parties are marginally involved in the process of local politics even after the election (Park and Shin 2001).

Regionalism has had one of the most persistent, profound influences on election outcomes. It is so pervasive in Korean political culture that it still tends to outweigh voters' adherence to liberal democratic values and ideals. Admittedly, it is the major impediment to democratic development as it hinders political leaders from forming a broad national support base and thus hampers national integration. Unlike national contests, however, local election outcomes are confined to each local boundary. Regionalism, in this context, may have nothing to do with national discord along regional schisms. Particularly in a centralized nation like Korea, regional division of local power may be conducive to checking the power of the ruling party. The defeat of the ruling party candidates, as seen in the 2006 election, for instance, indicates that voters punished the party for its poor performance. This implies that the electoral mechanism of accountability is in effect at least at a national level.

There is also some apprehension about how parties politicize local elections by bringing up issues such as expansion of partisan ballots, monopoly of a regional party, and promulgation of national politics. This leaves room for local party activists to align with local notables who have money and power rather than be responsive to the needs of local residents. However, a party monopoly in local politics may mean an increase in that party's responsibility. This may have positive effects in the long run. Although a party's near monopoly in the representation of local councils as well as chief executives makes it hard to maintain the system of checks and balances, the high turnover of those elected can imply that local politics are not so stagnant.

Concern arises as a hierarchical relationship between central and local government is built. This is largely because of the short history of local self-governance along with the long tradition of a centralized government. One of the key features of the Korean political system is the heavy centralization of governmental finances. Because Korean public funds are primarily controlled by the central government, parties that control the national budget are most likely to benefit. Therefore, local politicians and voters may have an incentive to align with national parties that have access to the state budget. In view of the relatively short history of local autonomy, decentralization is usually regarded as a top-down process from the central government lending some additional authority for local autonomy. It is indeed the state's job to lay down the fundamental legal and financial parameters for local government activities. Admittedly, the effect of local politics upon national politics is meager under these conditions.

It is too premature to assess the role of local politics as being an intermediary that allows for a ladder-up process affecting national politics. Fortunately, political cleavages other than regionalism are not strong on national issues. One may expect that political parties could have a positive rather than detrimental influence on the central-local relationship. The theoretical assumption is that political parties, motivated not only by control of the local government but also by the intention to mobilize party support at national elections, are

deeply involved in local elections (Rallings et al. 2002). It is inevitable for parties, whose primary concern is winning the presidential election, to woo local voters for party support. This would benefit local governments as the parties formulate political programs that revolve around local issues and integrate local affairs into their local election programs.

Also, there is the prospect that local governments will serve as a pipeline into the national political arena. This is, to a large extent, because the nomination process for national seats is geared toward local public opinion. We can find some evidence that candidate nomination processes are becoming more democratic and transparent. First of all, the traditional style of selecting party nominees by powerful party leaders is disappearing. In the recent presidential election in 2002 and the National Assembly election in 2004, more open and transparent nomination procedures were adopted by the major parties. The open screening system for selecting nominees on the party level was decided upon by collecting opinions from local district-level party primaries, public debates, and public opinion polls.

At present, local Korean government, still in an infantile stage, has not yet attained the desired level of full autonomy. Nevertheless, local governments, over the past few years have gained slow but steady control in political and economic spheres. As devolution becomes an important national agenda, the prospects for local autonomy are expected to be bright. Expansion of autonomy would invigorate local politics, which could benefit local affairs, and consequently, local elections will be held for the sake of local interests.

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