



Economic and Social Research Council



MANAGING ELECTIONS DURING COVID-19: THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA'S FIRST CRUCIAL TEST

Case Study, 24 May 2022

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INTRODUCTION

This case study looks at the administration of the 21st National Assembly elections held in the Republic of Korea on 15 April 2020, one of the first nationwide elections held after the onset of the pandemic. During the early months of Covid-19, countries and states were faced with an unprecedented dilemma as to whether to hold or postpone scheduled elections, resulting in controversies in either case. The Republic of Korea was one of the first to face this decision and thus at the forefront of elaborating new practice. The elections for the 300 members of its unicameral legislature represented a critical test for being able to fulfil the social contract between a government and its citizens while at the same time protecting the health and lives of candidates, voters and the wider population from a highly contagious virus.

Data collected and regularly updated during the pandemic (International IDEA 2020–2022) confirms that during the early months of 2020 at least 50 countries, states and territories—faced with the prospect of potentially spreading the virus by holding elections—opted to defer them. However, the elections in Korea were a symbol that safe elections could be held during the pandemic and would later prove an example for other countries to study as the pandemic continued and the need to devise a plan for Covid-safe elections became unavoidable.

Public health conditions in April 2020

The Republic of Korea recorded its first Covid-19 case on 20 January 2020, triggering a nationwide response of contact tracing based on Korea's previous experience with SARS and MERS virus outbreaks (V. Cha 2020). After weeks of cases remaining low, on 18 February 'patient 31' caused a spike in cases

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(related to a minor religious sect) that lasted from 20 February to 25 March. Beginning in the Daegu region and spreading around the country, this outbreak was linked to 4,259 cases (Yonhap News 2020) and by 23 February the Korean health authorities had raised the infectious disease crisis alert level to 'Severe' (NEC 2020d). However, by 9 April 2020, the day before early voting for the National Assembly elections began, the spread of Covid-19 had largely been brought under control at around 10,423 total cases confirmed and with recorded daily cases not above 100 since 31 March 2020.

This relative success—at a time when the pandemic was reaching crisis levels in Europe and the Americas—was as a result of a stringent, whole-of-government approach. The combination of testing and monitoring, contact tracing, self-isolation, social distancing, and strict quarantine for those arriving from overseas, was praised by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). The Korean response drew widespread praise during 2020 despite some concerns about the intense and highly transparent nature of contract tracing: in the first months of the pandemic personal information of Covid patients was made available online and sometimes sensitive information was demanded of such patients by the authorities (Martin and Yoon 2020).

LEGAL PROVISIONS AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

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Elections in Korea are governed by three main pieces of legislation: the Public Official Election Act (Korea 2020, hereafter 'the Election Act'), the Political Parties Act and the Political Fund Act. According to the former, the three main election types—presidential, National Assembly and nationwide simultaneous local elections—are held separately and the election dates are fixed. In the case of National Assembly elections, they are held on the first Wednesday from the 50th day before the expiration of the terms of office. This meant that the date for the 21st National Assembly elections (15 April 2020) could not be changed by the electoral management body (EMB). Article 196 of the Election Act empowers the President alone to postpone an election in the event of 'a natural disaster, terrestrial upheaval or for other unavoidable reasons'.

Initial uncertainty in political and public debates as to the feasibility of the original electoral schedule was—in time—curbed by the successful containment of the virus. In addition, there were political factors affecting the decision to go ahead. The country had only moved to a democracy in 1988 after years of authoritarianism, and therefore any move to cancel or postpone elections might have been viewed by voters as a backward step. Incumbent President Moon Jae-in himself was a former democracy campaigner and human rights lawyer, so his public image could have been compromised by a postponement. As was observed at the time, elections had never been postponed in Korean history, including during the Korean War, which is a further measure of the potential risk to government legitimacy if elections did not go ahead (Klingner 2020).

The sole EMB in Korea is the National Election Commission (NEC), a body established by the Constitution to manage all elections for public office. The NEC asserted its independence after the 1987 presidential elections and increased its capacity after the unification of election law in 1994. The NEC is at the top of a four-tier organizational structure with 17 metropolitan city/provincial commissions (Si/Do), 250 small city and district-level commissions (Gu/Si/Gun), and 3,481 local-level commissions (Eup/Myeong/Dong). The NEC is an example of a robust and well-funded EMB, with a total of 3,085 staff (Ministry of Personnel Management 2020) and an operational budget of KRW 702 billion (USD 588 million) in 2020 (Ministry of Economy and Finance n.d.).

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the issues at stake in the elections. At the beginning of the year, just prior to the outbreak, it appeared that the vote would be dominated by more 'conventional' issues, such as the country's economic growth and the recent electoral reform¹ and its relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, among others. However, the perceived poor handling of the pandemic in its initial period surged in importance, rapidly becoming an electoral issue.

Held in such exceptional circumstances, the 2020 elections became an opportunity for political and electoral gains for both political fronts. For President Moon Jae-in, his government and the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), it became vital to demonstrate their capacity to respond to the ongoing crisis and the effectiveness of the measures adopted. The largest opposition party, United Future Party (UFP)—an uneasy alliance of three conservative factions, still reeling from impeachment and dismissal of President Park Geun-hye in 2017—placed its efforts on convincing the electorate of the opposite: that the government's presumed failure to contain Covid-19 would shatter the national economy. The UFP had been beginning to make gains into the DPK's lead in opinion polls throughout February and March, but as the Korean Government's response began to be viewed favourably when compared with other nations resorting to lockdowns, it recovered. By early February the ruling party took a commanding 20-point lead in Gallup's opinion polls (Gallup Korea 2020).

Special voting arrangements

Although the NEC is responsible for the administration of elections, it can only recommend changes to election law, and otherwise works within the constraints of the three main acts that govern elections. This presented a particularly difficult task for the NEC in the run up to the 21st National Assembly elections. Given the chequered record of elections during the 1970s and 1980s, and in particular postal voting, the Election Act only allows mail voting in very specific circumstances, for which only those in hospital with Covid or being required to self-isolate would have been eligible (Korea 2020).

¹ Adopted in December 2019, just a few months ahead of the April 2020 elections, the two main changes to the electoral law of the Republic of Korea were: (a) the amended electoral system for the National Assembly now requires voters to cast two ballots simultaneously: one for a candidate, on a first-past-the-post (FPTP) basis, in single-member districts (accounting for 253 of the 300 seats); the other for a political party, to fill the remaining 47 seats through a proportional party list system; and (b) the lowering of voting age from 19 to 18 years.

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This was further complicated by the fact that registration for postal voting closed 17 days before the election, so anybody who caught Covid or was required to isolate after this period could not use mail voting.

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Therefore, without the option of utilizing postal voting, the NEC's only option was to make early voting and voting on polling day as safe as possible within the existing legal framework. Certainly, the NEC was fortunate that early voting was available. This voting method was introduced for the first time in 2013 during by-elections and implemented nationwide in local elections a year later. It allows all voters to cast their ballots at any polling station around the country for two days (starting five days before the election). The voter puts their ballot in an envelope printed with the address of the correct local election commission and places this in the ballot box, allowing the NEC to then mail the ballots to the correct jurisdiction for counting. This compromise system—which is essentially controlled postal voting—gave the NEC two extra days of voting to reduce congestion on election day and the opportunity to set up additional, special polling stations in facilities being used for Covid patients. More details on special voting arrangements (SVAs) in 2021 are given below.

RISK MITIGATION MEASURES

From the outset of the Covid-19 crisis, and as soon as the decision to go ahead with the elections was formalized, the NEC took immediate action to assert its commitment and capacity and to reassure the public of the safest possible voting environment: 'With the belief that disinfecting as much as possible is the best election management, the National Election Commission will prepare and carry out measures to ensure voters can cast their ballots without concerns about their safety', said the NEC Chair (NEC 2020d). The NEC was able to work closely with the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KCDC), who had developed public health measures for pandemic scenarios following Korea's previous experiences with SARS and MERS.

To that end, the NEC promptly followed its pledge by announcing several extraordinary measures it was putting in place to minimize the risk to voters of contracting and spreading the virus when casting their ballots.

Adapting the election campaign

Rallies, public speeches and debates, fundraising events, and even door-to-door canvassing were among the in-person campaign methods and activities prohibited, in effect, under the new public health regime. Although Koreans were not under a national lockdown or any legal restrictions, from 22 March the government asked people to 'delay or cancel nonessential gathering, dining-out, events, travel; Refrain from going out except for buying necessities, visiting a doctor, commuting' (MoH 2022) and this was then further extended until 19 April. In the same communication, guidance was given for public officials to avoid crowded environments, and the operation of public facilities such as libraries, museums and galleries was suspended.

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These restrictions obliged political parties and candidates to resort to alternative campaigning methods to reach out to their voters. There was a shift to online and digital technology, mainly video messages disseminated through social media platforms, SMS and mobile phone apps. Some candidates went as far as using innovative methods, employing augmented reality (AR) technology² to interact with their supporters remotely. Other candidates conducted volunteer Covid-related work, which involved cleaning neighbourhoods in their constituencies and disinfecting the streets. Others, more conventionally, sent their manifesto and campaign materials through direct mail to households nationwide. But, inevitably, election campaigning activities for the 2020 elections had a much lower profile than in any previous election.

Voting for Covid-19 patients

The first important measure was to confirm that postal voting (referred to in Korea as home voting) would be applicable to Covid-19 patients who were being treated in hospitals and other medical facilities. As mentioned, only special categories of voters would usually have been entitled to postal voting provisions under the Election Act (persons with disabilities that mean they cannot go to the polling station; the elderly with limited mobility; persons unable to leave hospitals and nursing homes; and those confined in prisons or other custodial settings). On 5 March 2020 the NEC decided that COVID-19 patients who were hospitalized, in a care centre or in isolation at home would be eligible under the statute (NEC 2020e). To vote by mail, a postal voting application had to be submitted to a local administrative office between 24 and 28 March, and the NEC worked with the Ministry of the Interior and Safety and the Ministry of Health and Welfare to ensure those voters received an application and then could cast their vote from where they were residing (NEC 2020e).

The next measure was to encourage the electorate to take full advantage of early voting provisions. For the 2020 elections, early voting took place on 10 and 11 April, at any of the 3,508 polling stations, including the 8 special early voting polling stations additionally installed at Covid-19 care centres across the country. The rationale for encouraging more early voting was to reduce the number of voters gathering at polling stations on election day.

The last two special measures were to guarantee the voting rights of people diagnosed with Covid-19 or their close contacts who were asked to isolate at home after the postal voting registration period ended (28 March) or who did not register during the designated period. Therefore, the NEC developed two solutions to allow those persons to vote.

One of these was setting up the abovementioned special early voting polling stations. At the time in Korea, all persons who were diagnosed with Covid-19

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² For example, one candidate allowed supporters to endorse his election pledges through a mobile application and their phone cameras. Other candidates launched AR mobile services that enabled voters to digitally 'meet' and interact with a 3D animated party representative; this character could appear on photos and videos taken by users, who could then share these with other supporters.

were required to isolate and receive treatment in the eight designated care centres. Article 149 of the Election Act empowers the local election commission to establish an early voting polling station in a location such as a hospital, prison or residential facility for persons with disabilities if at least 10 persons register for postal voting (Korea 2020), a threshold that was easily met at all eight facilities. Further, as early voting is not restricted to those who register for it, anyone in the facility who was eligible to vote and had not yet done so—staff and healthcare workers isolating in the facilities, as well as their patients—was able to use these special early voting stations. They were run for a single day on either 10 or 11 April, for between four and eight hours, depending on the number of voters. Special measures included Level D PPE (personal protective equipment), the highest medical level, for all polling staff; separate voting times for staff and patients; and disinfection of all items, including the envelopes with ballots inside (NEC 2020d).

The final measure put in place was to allow voters who were isolating at home (as a close contact of a Covid case) to vote only from 18:00 on election day, the time when polling stations closed to all other citizens. In this the NEC was able to take advantage of existing provisions. According to Article 155 of the Election Act, any voter standing in line waiting to vote at the close of polls (18:00 for election day) is given a numbered ticket and allowed to vote even after that time. The NEC therefore agreed with the Ministry of the Interior and Safety that they would release those in isolation at home from 17:20 to 19:00 to allow them to vote. The local authorities provided a list of such voters to the relevant election commission the day before election day and also informed the voter to arrive at their registered polling station by 17:55 and wait in line to vote. These voters waited in a separate location and were given a ticket, and once all other voters had cast their ballot and left the polling station, preparations were made. Polling booths were moved outside in a well-ventilated space, and a designated member of staff wore Level D PPE to supervise the voting. The voters then followed the instructions of the local authorities and immediately returned to isolation (NEC 2020e). This was a deft and creative way of ensuring voters in this category could be separated and kept safe at the polling station—3,640 made use of it—and within the law.

Ensuring a safe voting environment

The NEC enacted stringent measures to guarantee a safer voting environment for those intending to cast their ballot through in-person voting, which took place on 15 April (no additional polling days were added) at 14,330 polling stations nationwide—one per electoral precinct. To this end, the NEC adopted important safeguards throughout the steps of the in-person voting process, from queuing outside the polling stations, to limiting crowding in voting areas, to the safe handling of election materials (see Box 1). All these measures were reinforced by publishing a Code of Conduct for Voters, which provided detailed instructions and precautions that voters were required to follow. The NEC made significant efforts to disseminate the Code of Conduct as widely as possible so voters would be well prepared on election day.

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Image credit: The Republic of Korea National Election Commission, <<https://www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/main.do>>.

The NEC also had contingency plans in case of polling station workers testing positive or developing Covid symptoms. This was put to the test at around 12:30 on the second day of early voting, 11 April, when one polling staff worker who had been checking voter IDs began showing symptoms (high temperature and chills). They were immediately instructed to report to a testing centre. The polling station was closed, and a sign was posted outside directing voters to another station. A bus from the local election commission waited outside the station to relay voters to another polling station as required. Meanwhile, polling staff were kept inside the polling station at a safe distance and with food and water, while awaiting the test result. At 21:30 the test was confirmed as negative and the polling station's staff were released from isolation.

Maintaining safety during counting

Counting for public official elections in Korea is done using centralized counting centres, usually a gymnasium or large community centre, one for each constituency of the National Assembly. Counting centres in some ways posed an even greater Covid risk than polling stations, as thousands of staff, observers and media would usually have to gather in an indoor location. Therefore, the following measures were put in place during counting:

- on entering the premises, polling centre staff had temperature checks and had to walk over a disinfectant mat;
- staff wore masks and gloves at all times;
- tape was used on the floor to indicate appropriate distancing and ensure one-way flow during the counting process;
- additional ventilation systems were installed; and
- equipment and items were regularly disinfected after use, including door handles and ballot sorting machines.

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Box 1. Stringent safeguards for in-person voting**Voters**

- Voters were required to wear face masks when queuing to vote.
- Before accessing the polling station, all voters' temperatures were checked with non-contact thermometers; those showing a temperature higher than 37.5 degrees Celsius, or displaying respiratory problems, were redirected to special polling stations with even higher degrees of protection.
- Voters had to keep a safety distance of at least one metre from each other, with signs and marks strategically placed throughout the voting premises to assist with compliance.
- Keeping their IDs ready to be inspected, voters had to sanitize their hands and wear the disposable plastic gloves provided.
- Once allowed to enter the polling station, voters temporarily lowered or removed their mask to facilitate identification.
- Putting back their masks and keeping their gloves on, voters then received, handled and cast their ballots.
- On leaving the polling station, voters removed their gloves and left them into a disposal box, located at the exit.

Polling staff

- Polling stations were sanitized the day before election day and no one was allowed to enter until staff arrived to open the polling station.
- All staff were required to wear masks and plastic gloves and were provided with face shields for additional protection.
- Staff were asked to periodically disinfect the polling booths and ballot marking devices.
- Polling stations were required to keep windows open at all times to ensure ventilation.

Communicating with the public

The NEC used a range of communication channels to reach the electorate, including messages on its own broadcasting channel (NEC eTV), frequent information slots on national television, posters and banners around the country, and print copies of the Code of Conduct (posted to all voters ahead of the election with their polling card, as well as displayed inside polling stations). NEC eTV started as an Internet-only channel providing information for the 2014 elections; however, in 2017 it began broadcasting also as a 24-hour TV channel, as well as providing content to major news channels. With low viewing figures of below 0.1 per cent, NEC eTV has received criticism from the National Assembly for being poor value for money (Yonhap News 2019) but the channel did allow the NEC an avenue to provide public information on Covid-19 when needed in this election.

Upholding the transparency and accessibility of voting operations

While solely directed to protect public health, the stringent safeguards and precautions adopted by the NEC had an inevitable impact on the transparency and accessibility of voting and counting operations. In response, the NEC increased its livestreaming of polling station activities on its eTV and national channels at regular intervals, both during the two-day early voting period and on election day. Livestreaming cameras provided viewers nationally and globally with remote access to the various stages of the electoral process: the preparation and start of voting; voting in progress; the close of voting and the transferring and storing of the voted ballots; the preparation and the start of counting; the counting process as it was progressing; and the close of the vote counting. As a practice, livestreaming had started in 2014 at counting centres and some polling stations when early voting was introduced.

Domestic observation essentially remained unaffected, with party and individual observers allowed in the polling stations and counting centres in normal numbers. However, with strict border controls in place in the Republic of Korea, international observation was unable to take place. The NEC provided both livestreams and a summary video of voting for election officials from around the world. These videos were watched by around 120 international observers in real time. Following the election, the NEC met with election officials from the Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, the United States and other countries to take questions on how the elections were managed. The US embassy arranged a conference call following the election for election officials from each state to supplement the livestreaming provided with further information.

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Image credit: The Republic of Korea National Election Commission, <<https://www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/main.do>>.

TURNOUT AND OTHER INDICATIONS OF PERFORMANCE

Already at the closing of the polling stations, two initial successes for the 2020 National Assembly elections were evident. The seamless management of these elections by the NEC, and the level of voter participation despite the pandemic, offered an early indication that for the most part, the stringent safeguards that were put in place by the NEC had worked well. There had been significant concern that the risk of exposure to infection would keep voters away, reducing turnout and possibly putting the credibility of the elections at stake, as happened in France's mid-March mayoral elections and in Mali's parliamentary elections held in the same period.

Participatory elections

With slightly over a quarter of those eligible voting in advance, early voting provisions considerably helped decrease the concentration of voters at the polling stations on election day. As shown in Table 1, early voting ended on 11 April, with a recorded turnout of 26.7 per cent, and the NEC confirmed that approximately 12 million voters had used this voting method. This marked a sharp increase in early voting compared to previous National Assembly elections and the highest on record (also 6 per cent higher than for the 2017 presidential election, despite that having an 11 per cent higher turnout overall).

The extension of postal voting provisions to hospitalized patients being treated for Covid-19 was also an important measure. While it did not significantly increase turnout, with 364 voters taking part in this way, it was symbolically important in demonstrating commitment to the enfranchisement of vulnerable citizens who were most directly affected by the pandemic.

For in-person voting on 15 April, the voters of the Republic of Korea queued patiently and took part in large numbers, amid unprecedented circumstances and safety measures. Results released by the NEC indicate that 66 per cent of the country's nearly 44 million eligible voters participated in the elections. This was the highest turnout since 1992, and 4.7 million more ballots cast compared to the last National Assembly election in 2016 (see Table 1).

These participation figures are testament to Korean voters' resolve—as well as to the efforts exerted by the NEC in encouraging them—to fulfil their civic duty and right to vote, despite the risks. The NEC methodically announced and explained to the public the extraordinary measures it had devised to protect their safety, also clarifying the reasons for adopting them. This transparent and proactive approach to risk management not only reassured the electorate but also gave time to political parties and candidates to adapt and cope with the stringent limitations placed on their campaigning activities.

Preventing the spread of Covid-19

Thanks to the intense contact tracing undertaken by the KCDC it is beyond reasonable doubt that no transmissions occurred due to election. Yoon Tae-ho, director general for public health policy, confirmed two weeks after the election that 29 million voters having participated on 15 April, 'Not one case related to

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the election [had] been reported during the 14 days of incubation period' (S. Cha 2020). The KCDC were able to confirm that one voter came to a polling station after being infected with Covid-19, but they were asymptomatic at the time and had not yet tested positive. However, after all staff and persons who went to the polling stations were tested, it was confirmed there was no additional spread (Newsis 2020).

Overseas voting

One part of the electoral process that was adversely affected by unavoidably drastic public health measures was the out-of-country voting (OCV) operation. According to Korea's election law, overseas voting is conducted by setting up polling stations in diplomatic missions around the world. However, the NEC was forced to cancel this channel in 55 countries due to (a) concerns over the safety of voters and embassy staff of the Republic of Korea in countries with high rates of Covid infection; and (b) expatriate Koreans' inability to go out to work or to vote under the lockdowns and other strict restrictions of movement imposed by host governments. Other diplomatic missions conducted OCV but were forced to shorten the voting period (scheduled for 1–6 April 2020). With no provisions in the election law allowing for mail voting from overseas, there was a drastic reduction in the number of Koreans able to exercise their voting rights through OCV (NEC 2020c).

The NEC was forced to close 68 OCV facilities in 43 countries including some with large populations of Korean nationals such as Canada, China and the US, which together accounted for as many as 87,000 (approximately 51 per cent) of the total 172,000 voters registered abroad. As the operation concluded, the OCV turnout of 41,000 (23.8 per cent) was the lowest since this voting method was introduced in the Republic of Korea and significantly lower than the previous National Assembly election in 2016 (see Table 1).

Resourcing the mitigation measures

Within its overall operational budget, the NEC had KRW 226.7 billion (USD 189 million) earmarked to hold the 21st National Assembly elections. After deciding in consultation with the KCDC on the health and safety measures that would be needed, the NEC estimated that an additional 22 billion Korean won (USD 18.4 million) would be necessary, an increase of approximately 9 per cent. It secured KRW 17.6 billion (USD 14.5 million) of that from the National Assembly after making a request to the Ministry of Finance; the remainder was taken from the NEC's own budget reserved for other purposes. The budget increase was mainly spent on disinfecting polling stations and counting centres; purchasing masks for polling and counting staff; and thermometers, hand sanitizer, medical gloves, disinfecting tissues and face shields to prevent infections among voters (for a full breakdown see annexes in: NEC 2020e).

By making requests to other public bodies, the NEC secured a reserve group of staff made up of 'public officials, teachers, and members of the public

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Table 1. Turnout in the Republic of Korea by voting method (2016–2020)

	21st National Assembly elections (15 April 2020)	7th Nationwide simultaneous local elections (13 June 2018)	19th Presidential elections (8 May 2017)	20th National Assembly elections (13 April 2016)
Number of eligible voters	43,994,247	42,907,715	42,479,710	42,100,398
Total ballots cast	29,126,396 (66.2)	25,832,076 (60.2)	32,807,908 (77.2)	24,430,746 (58.0)
Early voting ballots cast	11,742,677 (26.69)	8,640,897 (20.14)	11,072,310 (26.06)	5,131,721 (12.19)
Postal voting ballots	100,529	82,225	101,089	97,354
Ballots cast at special early voting stations	446	N/A	N/A	N/A
Postal voting ballots cast by Covid patients	364	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ballots cast on election day by voters in isolation	3,640	N/A	N/A	N/A
Overseas voting turnout	40,858 (23.8% of registered overseas voters)	N/A	221,981 (75.3% of registered overseas voters)	63,797 (41.4% of registered overseas voters)

Source: Authors', data from the NEC homepage and the NEC's report Election Management in Response to Covid-19, <[https:// www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/main.do](https://www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/main.do)>.

considered fair and neutral' in case polling or counting staff either tested positive for Covid-19 or were asked to isolate. Training was operated at a reduced level, and textbooks and videos were distributed to supplement any in-person or direct training. In regions with high Covid-19 caseloads, such as the Daegu area, training was held through video conferencing or, when possible, at a small-scale by visiting the trainees directly, for example (NEC 2020e). It should be noted that most polling and counting staff in Korea are public officials and are compensated around KRW 50,000 (USD 42) per day. Many

of the staff work numerous elections and therefore were experienced in their roles. The additional training required was mainly focused on implementing the new health measures for polling stations and counting centres, as described.

Post-election outcomes and disputes

After the election, there was a theory promoted by a fringe element of the leading conservative party, the UFP, that the election was rigged, pointing specifically at the early voting system. Led by defeated representative and former news anchor Min Kyung-wook, the group made a variety of claims including allegations of 'early voting ballots being destroyed' before counting, the 'NEC working with Huawei to help the Chinese government' ensure President Moon's party were able to win, and 'Chinese hackers working to infiltrate the NEC's counting systems' (Kim 2020). Those in Korea casting doubt on the result also jumped on a paper by Professor Walter Mebane that raised questions about the voting data (Mebane 2020), while conservative elements in the US such as commentator Grant Newsham repeated the allegations of fraud and Chinese involvement (Newsham 2020).

However, these theories were unsubstantiated and failed to gain any serious mainstream traction. The UFP ejected Min Kyung-wook after publishing its own report that refuted evidence of vote rigging, and Min's appeal to the Supreme Court was dismissed (Kim 2020; Korea JoonAng Daily 2020). The former head of Statistics Korea under the last conservative President Park Geun-Hye also launched his own report into the administration of the elections on behalf of the leading opposition party, dismissing the possibility of election fraud and the statistics put forward by Mebane (Yi 2020). This meant that the legitimacy of the elections remained intact. These groundless theories were, in some part, driven by increased early voting turnout and the relatively new system being misunderstood. The NEC addressed misunderstandings of its systems after the election by hosting an open day (28 May) during which observers and the media were briefed about the process and the data generated, and could inspect election equipment and question members of the election administration team (NEC 2020a). Further transparency measures and education will likely be needed in the future.

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The NEC addressed misunderstandings of its systems after the election by hosting an open day.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE?

As one of the first countries³ to have run a national election amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the Republic of Korea attracted global interest from the early stages of their preparation. From all continents, the eyes of EMB officials, electoral experts, academics, civil society and politicians alike, were all pointed at Korea. Pressing questions that existed at the time included:

³ Alongside (also in March 2020) Australia (local elections in Queensland); Dominican Republic (municipal elections); France (local elections); Germany (local elections in Bavaria); Guyana (general elections); Israel (general elections); Mali (general elections); Switzerland (local elections in Lucerne); and Vanuatu (general elections) (see International IDEA 2020).

- What measures were adopted to try to ensure a safe voting environment? And to what extent did such measures provide the electorate with enough reassurance and confidence to vote?
- How had the pandemic impacted the ability of political parties to campaign and reach their audiences?
- Had the Covid-19-related health risks kept voters away from the ballot box and, therefore, affected voter turnout? Was the disruption created by the pandemic of such a level that it undermined the credibility and legitimacy of the elections?
- Finally, had the decision to go ahead with the elections exposed voters and polling station officials to increased health risks?

At the time of writing Korea, like many other countries—with effective vaccines in existence and the milder Omicron variant in circulation—has changed to a long-term strategy focused on living with Covid-19 and rolling back restrictions (Hankyoreh News 2022). Future elections are likely to seek a more permanent solution outside of continuing emergency measures such as extended postal voting. Meanwhile this election is an example of how the more traditional polling station voting method can survive in the Covid era, while other lessons remain relevant to other future pandemic scenarios.

The NEC was able to share its experiences and offer crucial points of reflection in the months following the election.

As we have seen, the NEC succeeded in delivering a technically sound national election under extremely difficult circumstances. The NEC was able to share its experiences and offer crucial points of reflection in the months following the election. It worked together with The Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) and International IDEA to host two webinars in June 2020 in Spanish and English, participated in events by other EMBs such as the Election Commission of India, and arranged bilateral meetings at the request of election officials. In addition, with election officials remaining unable to visit Korea throughout 2020 due to travel restrictions, the NEC invited embassy officials to visit the NEC to respond to questions for various countries planning on holding elections in 2020 and 2021.⁴

However, as in all matters of electoral management it is not necessarily possible or straightforward to adopt and adapt these experiences in other countries. When considering the lessons learned, any country, state or territory should carefully evaluate its own specific context against the existence of those fundamental conditions that are essential to deliver credible, safe and fair elections amid the outbreak of a pandemic.

Containing Covid-19 infections

In the Republic of Korea, the incumbent government and the health authorities, albeit with a sluggish start, rapidly assessed the situation and based on previous public health experiences was able to limit the outbreak and flatten the curve of new infections. Without imposing any lockdown or major restrictions on citizens' freedom of movement, the pandemic remained at

⁴ For example, one candidate allowed supporters to endorse his election pledges through a mobile application and their phone cameras. Other candidates launched AR mobile services that enabled voters to digitally 'meet' and interact with a 3D animated party representative; this character could appear on photos and videos taken by users, who could then share these with other supporters.

contained levels throughout the pre-election and election periods. Thanks to this approach, the NEC had a safer, more stable environment in which to reassure voters, put Covid-safety adjustments in place and run the election. It is doubtful that any country could have held in-person voting on this scale, at this point of the pandemic, without the intensive contract tracking and tracing that Korea implemented. These systems managed to keep Covid-19 cases at a reasonable level.

A solid electoral framework

The response provided by the NEC, and the extraordinary precautions and safeguards adopted to minimize the risks to public health involved in the act of voting, were unprecedented in the Republic of Korea and worldwide. These measures, however, could not have been so smoothly implemented without numerous pre-existing legal and procedural provisions to facilitate voter inclusion and participation. Because postal and early voting procedures—both in-person and through remote voting—were already in place prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, these could be suitably and swiftly extended to meet new challenges. Perhaps most notably, early voting measures allowed any voter to cast their ballot in-person at any polling station in the country without prior registration. Furthermore, the EMB had proven administrative, procedural and operational capacities to implement these provisions.

The NEC also displayed its ability to use existing provisions of the electoral framework to advantage rather than revamping election law itself—as seen in the separate voting times introduced for voters who were isolating. This is also an example of the close cooperation with health officials that EMBs require in emergency situations.

Timely and appropriate resources

Unequivocally, the timely availability of adequate resources (financial, human, assets and supplies) played a major part in the sound electoral management by the NEC and the high turnout of the 21st National Assembly elections. The fact that not all countries, states and territories may possess, or be able to mobilize, similar levels of resources is a significant obstacle to achieving equivalent outcomes elsewhere. Nevertheless, this experience should be a lesson to countries around the world that in withstanding serious tests like public health emergencies, a well-resourced EMB that is independent yet able to cooperate closely with local administrative authorities is essential.

A conducive political environment is another important factor behind the success of these elections was a societal and whole-of-government consensus that the pandemic was worthy of a serious response. No major politician or political party questioned the additional measures brought in by the NEC in the face of the pandemic, which helped to build awareness and support for early voting and, ultimately, confidence in the process and results (NEC 2020b). According to a poll conducted on behalf of the NEC post-election, 64.7 per cent of respondents described the election as 'fair', 28.9 per cent responded that the election was 'average' and 6.4 per cent responded that the election was 'unfair' (NEC 2020f).

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CONCLUSION

Korea will have to factor in Covid-19 safety measures for the foreseeable future in-line with its new strategies of focusing on high-risk groups (rather than intensive tracking and tracing as practised in the early pandemic phase). Indeed, with presidential elections and local elections scheduled separately in 2022, the NEC has kept a vast majority of these measures in place, including the voters' Code of Conduct, Covid-19 measures in polling stations and counting stations, and the mail-in voting option for those testing positive.

For other countries now preparing to 'live with' Covid-19 in similar circumstances to Korea's—that is, relaxing restrictions despite high case rates, on the basis of high vaccination rates—many of the measures from this election can be used as a gold standard for maintaining the more traditional form of in-person voting in a safe manner. The early voting system, allowing voters to vote from any polling station around the country and acting as a form of in-person controlled mailing voting, could be a serious option for countries seeking a compromise between all-mail voting and the less flexible in-person voting. After more than two years of dealing with the pandemic, voters and staff in many countries are familiar with the kinds of health and safety measures used, and some will now wish to take further steps in mask wearing, sanitization and ventilation. In many ways, this first major national election of the pandemic remains one of the most helpful case studies available, as the worldwide public health risk posed by Covid continues to evolve.

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This case study is part of a collaborative project between the Electoral Integrity Project, Electoral Management Network and International IDEA, edited by Toby S. James (University of East Anglia), Alistair Clark (Newcastle University) and Erik Asplund (International IDEA).

Design and layout: International IDEA



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