



# MANAGING THE 20TH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS UNDER THE OMICRON VARIANT IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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Lessons for future elections can be drawn from both the success and failures of the Republic of Korea's 20th presidential election in 2022, which was, in part, significantly informed by the 2020 National Assembly election. In sum, deliberate efforts were deployed to ensure previously marginalized or excluded voters from the 2020 polls were purposively enfranchised in the 2022 presidential election, using interventions including early and overseas voting. Despite some minor early irregularities related to the placement of ballots marked by Covid-19 patients, the election was widely received as free and fair, with high rates of electoral integrity. A note of caution relates to confrontational election campaign which widened the various fault lines—based on gender, age and generation, levels of income and economic equality, regional and political ideology.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) a global pandemic, the potential ramifications on global elections were unknown. The Republic of Korea (RoK) was among the first countries to deliver nation-wide polls in this unprecedented context. As Covid-19 rates surged globally in 2020, the RoK delivered the 21st National Assembly—its electoral first test in the pandemic era. With the lessons learned from that poll, the presidential election was held in 2022. The largely successful elections provided a framework for other nations holding elections amid an evolving global public health crisis.

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### Purpose

Building on previous analysis of the 2020 National Assembly election in the Republic of Korea, this Technical Paper will:

- Examine public health and safety measures and extended voting channels in the 2020 presidential election, which was held amid the highest rates of infection in the country.
- Provide an overview of the legal provisions which governed the 2020 presidential election.
- Compare the management of both the 2020 National Assembly and 2022 presidential elections, identifying and analysing points of continuity or departure in public health and legal measures when delivering the election.
- Assess the main outcomes of the 2022 presidential election in terms of transparency, integrity, inclusion and voter participation, and perceived and actual levels of public safety.
- Determine key insights and lessons from the 2022 presidential election that could support future elections in RoK or elsewhere.

### Main findings

Conscious efforts were made to ensure the enfranchisement of Covid-19 patients who were self-isolating or quarantined, as well as overseas voters, due to their lower rates of participation in the 2020 vote. For people in isolation, voting a day ahead of the official polling date was made available. Overseas voters also had improved access, thanks to the National Election Committee (NEC) conducting expanded out-of-country voting in countries with a significant population of RoK nationals.

Overall, the 2022 presidential election was free and fair, with high levels of integrity and transparency. This is a credit to the NEC, especially given the unusually adversarial campaigning environment. The defeated candidate, Lee Jae-myung, conceded quickly, which is an indicator of a mature democracy.

However, some procedural hiccups were evident in the early stages, with ballots cast by Covid-19 patients barred from being deposited in the same ballot box as those of other electors. This raised widespread public concern about possible fraud. Crucially, the NEC took swift accountability, identifying their own failure to adequately prepare for the early voting that was made available to those with Covid-19 or in quarantine.

This election was another significant step in the country's transition to democracy. This progress comes despite deep ideological divisions in the nation's politics and internal factionalism. While it may be too early to determine how critical the election, and its aftermath, will be in the long term, it is hoped and anticipated that the lessons learned by the NEC in this unique election period will feed into ever-improving election cycles both domestically and internationally.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Korea (RoK) was one of the first countries to hold a nationwide election after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO 2020). Four nations held elections after the WHO announcement, but before the RoK vote: the Dominican Republic (15 March municipal elections), Vanuatu (19 March general elections), Guinea (22 March parliamentary elections and constitutional referendum), and Mali (29 March parliamentary elections).

At the same time there were serious questions related to how, in the unprecedented context of a pandemic, an election could be held safely for all those taking part in it; how the required standards of participation, transparency and integrity could be met; and how a legitimate and broadly trusted outcome could be produced.

As Covid-19 infection rates continued to rise in the RoK and around the world, the conduct of the 21st National Assembly election became a crucial test case of how to hold an election during a pandemic. The NEC's seamless management of the election and the high voter turnout (66 per cent—the highest since 1992) confirmed that the stringent public health and safety measures adopted had worked well. The election's success provided valuable insights and lessons that were applied elsewhere over the next two years (Spinelli 2020).

This follow-up Technical Paper builds on the previous analysis of the RoK's 2020 National Assembly election (Spinelli 2020). It:

- Examines the public health and safety measures and extended voting channels adopted in the RoK's March 2022 presidential election, which was held during the highest surge of Covid-19 infection rates recorded in the country since the onset of the pandemic.
- Overviews the legal provisions governing the 2022 presidential election as well as the political and public health contexts leading to election day.
- Compares the management of the 2020 and 2022 elections, identifying and analysing the public health and safety measures and the legal, procedural or operational changes adopted to create a safe polling environment for voters and election officials.
- Assesses transparency, electoral integrity, inclusion and voter participation in the 2022 election, as well as the perceived and actual levels of public safety.
- Identifies insights and key lessons learned in the 2022 election that could inform policy and practice related to future elections in the RoK and elsewhere.

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## 2. BACKGROUND

On 9 March 2022, at the highest peak in the diffusion of the Omicron variant, the RoK held what turned out to be one of the country's most divisive and bitterly contested presidential elections in its democratic history. Initially contested by 14 candidates (two withdrew before election day), the 20th presidential election featured an extremely fractious campaign and a very close race between the two leading contenders: the incumbent, liberal-leaning Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) candidate Lee Jae-myung and the conservative People Power Party (PPP) candidate Yoon Suk-yeol.

When the polls closed, the NEC announced that:

- Voter turnout was 77.1 per cent: 34 million out of 44.2 million (*The Korea Times* 2022).
- The margin of victory was the narrowest in the country's history at 0.73 percentage points (the previous record was 1.53, from 1997): Yoon won with 16.4 million votes (48.56 per cent of the total valid votes cast); Lee obtained 16.1 million votes (47.83 per cent of valid votes) (*Hankyoreh* 2022).
- Sim Sang-jung, of the Social Democratic Justice Party, came a distant third with 2.40 per cent of the vote.

### Legal and political context of the 2022 presidential election

The RoK has maintained a presidential system since it began its transition to democracy in 1987. Presidential elections are governed by the Constitution and the amended Presidential Election Act of 1987, which stipulate that the president is to be elected by direct popular vote and secret ballot through a single-round plurality voting system. The president is elected for a single, non-renewable, five-year term. The presidential term has been set at five years since 1988. It was previously set at four years from 1948 to 1972, six years from 1972 to 1981, and seven years from 1981 to 1988. Since 1981, the president has been barred from seeking re-election. Historically, the RoK's political system has been dominated by two opposing camps—one liberal, the other conservative—divided along several fault lines (Table 1).

The 2022 election followed the early presidential election prompted, in 2017, by the impeachment, ousting and imprisonment of former President Park Geun-hye on corruption charges. The 2022 election was widely expected to restore a sense of political normalcy to the country and signify a return to the traditional electoral dynamics exemplified by messaging and campaigns driven by regionalism and by the choice of presidential candidates within the established political elite.

The most notable point of departure in 2022 from previous presidential elections was in the selection of candidates. Traditionally, presidential elections have been contested by mainstream politicians who are elite insiders of the national political establishment. In the past four presidential elections, all candidates standing for the main parties who were selected by their supporters through primary elections possessed prior legislative experience

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at either the national or other levels of government, or had held national leadership positions in their party. In 2022, both main candidates were political outsiders with no prior national-level legislative experience; Mr Yoon rose to fame through prosecuting former President Park Geun-hye for corruption (Economist 2022b). This choice of outsiders reflected voters' widespread mistrust of politics and dissatisfaction with the political establishment.

**Table 1. The RoK's main political fault lines**

<b>Fault line</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Gender</b>	<p>The fiercely contested campaign in 2022 fuelled underlying issues of gender equality and women's rights. Both leading parties sought to attract support from a fringe online community—male voters concerned about losing ground to women—using anti-feminist language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yoon pledged to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality, alleging that its officials treated men like 'potential sex criminals'. He attributed the country's low birth rate to feminism, which he said prevents healthy relationships between men and women. He also denied the existence of systemic 'structural discrimination based on gender' in the RoK (Gunia 2022), which has been assessed as having 'one of the worst women's rights records in the developed world' (Bicker 2022).</li> <li>• Lee distanced himself from Yoon's plan to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality, but expressed his 'distaste' for feminism, stating that 'discrimination' against men had to be stopped (Lee 2022).</li> </ul> <p>Opinion polls indicated that only 34 per cent of women in their 20s voted for Yoon, vs. 59 per cent of men in their 20s. The defeated candidate, Lee, was the least popular choice among women over 60 (M. Shin 2022).</p>
<b>Age and generation</b>	<p>RoK voters over 60 have traditionally supported the conservatives, and younger voters the liberals. In 2022, voters in their 20s were split by gender: 58.0 per cent of females voted for Lee, while 58.7 per cent of males voted for Yoon.</p>
<b>Income level/ economic equality</b>	<p>The largest and most evident group of swing voters was individuals in their 30s, who changed their support from the liberal to the conservative candidate (H.-A. Kim 2021). With ever-increasing generational income disparities, this age group is the most affected by rising real estate costs, particularly first-home buyers.</p>
<b>Regionally based political affiliation</b>	<p>Voting in the RoK has historically been shaped by pockets of regional support from both parties' traditional strongholds (H.-J. Kim 2022). This trend marked a point of continuity for the 2022 election, as the DPK candidate garnered greater support in the south-western province, while the PPP candidate enjoyed an advantage in the south-eastern one (Realmeter Korea 2022). More popular with older voters, the PPP enjoys stronger support in the south-eastern region of Gyeongsang, where past conservative and authoritarian leaders originated from; its supporters typically favour a stronger military alliance with the United States and a tougher stance with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), and credit past authoritarian rulers with rapidly developing the economy after the Korean War. The DPK's base consists largely of younger voters in the south-west. Its supporters advocate an equal footing in relations with the United States and a rapprochement with North Korea; they are critical of the poor human rights records of past authoritarian rulers (H.-J. Kim 2022).</p>
<b>Ideology</b>	<p>Electoral politics in the RoK have traditionally been contested between the liberal DPK and the conservative PPP, as was the case for the 2022 election, which produced the narrowest margin in the country's history. This result highlights the deep ideological divisions among the electorate.</p>

### The national public health environment in the lead-up to the 2022 election

Table 2 summarizes the main differences between the pre-election contexts of the 2020 and 2022 elections.

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## 3. KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The 2022 presidential election coincided with peak infection and death rates, which posed both old and new challenges to the NEC. The following subsections describe the main points of continuity, or departure, between the 2020 and 2022 elections to highlight key considerations that are likely to continue to inspire, inform, and guide the delivery of future elections in the RoK and elsewhere.

### Offering multiple voting channels made voting safer and convenient—and increased turnout

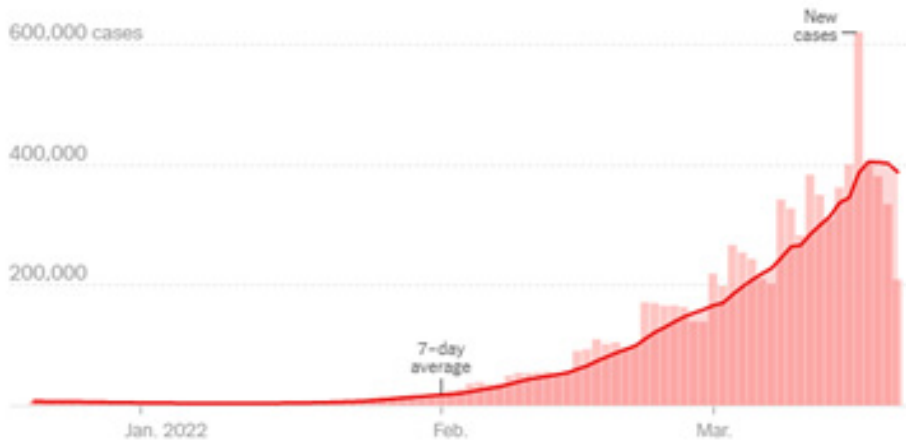
In April 2020, in the lead-up to the National Assembly election, infection rates in the RoK were lower than those in other countries that were forced to postpone or cancel elections to prevent them from becoming superspreader events. The NEC focused its efforts on reducing the risk of infection at polling stations and devising innovative ways to allow all eligible voters to vote—particularly those who were more vulnerable to potential health-related risks.

In 2022, the NEC built on this experience as the infection rate soared. To maximize voter turnout, it sought to ensure that eligible voters could choose from the same five voting channels that were available in 2020 (with minor adaptations) (Table 3).

The main points of departure introduced in 2022 included:

- Covid-19 patients who were self-isolating or in quarantine were allowed to cast their ballot during the two-day early voting period (this was not allowed in 2020).
- Several procedural irregularities marred the early voting process. Among the most significant incidents were reports that Covid-19 patients were not allowed to deposit their marked ballots in the same boxes as the other voters; inadequate arrangements for Covid-19 patients that resulted in long waiting times at the polling stations; and an overlap in the queues for Covid-19 patients and non-infected voters. The NEC was forced to publicly apologize for the shortcomings of the early voting period (*Korea Herald* 2022b).
- Out-of-country voting (OCV) was conducted at the pre-pandemic level. In 2020, concerns about voter safety in countries with high infection rates, or that individuals would be unable to vote due to lockdowns and other restrictions on movement imposed by host governments, had forced the NEC to cancel the OCV operation in 55 countries, which disenfranchised 87,000 voters, or 51 per cent of those registered abroad.

**Table 2. Main differences between the 2020 and 2022 elections**

Difference	Description
Increased know-how	In 2022 the NEC had significant experience, know-how and lessons acquired during the early stages of the pandemic through the management of the 2020 election and the experiences of other countries.
Higher infection rates	<p>Daily infection rates in the RoK were far higher in 2022 than in 2020. There was a record 600,000+ new daily cases (and a daily record of 429 deaths), as illustrated in Figure 1 (Reuters 2022b).</p> <p><b>Figure 1. New cases of Covid-19 in RoK, January–March 2022</b></p>  <p>Source: Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University. The daily average is calculated with data that was reported in the last seven days.</p> <p>On 4 March 2022, just 5 days before election day, more than 800,000 persons were reported to be under home isolation or in treatment—nearly 800 of them in intensive care.</p>
Relaxed restrictions	Tracking, tracing and quarantine were widely used to control new Covid-19 cases in the lead-up to the 2020 election. In 2022, under pressure from small businesses and many others affected economically by the pandemic (and despite a dramatic surge in infection rates), most restrictions were relaxed—including social distancing, bans on private gatherings of more than six people, curfews on restaurants, enforcement of vaccine passes, and quarantine requirements for vaccinated inbound travellers.
Increased vaccination rates	Vaccines had not yet been developed in 2020, but by the time of the 2022 election, Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency records show that 87 per cent of the country's population was fully vaccinated, and nearly 63 per cent had received booster shots. These high rates helped avert a major public health crisis akin to those that unfolded in other countries, limiting the number of deaths and serious health impacts.
Higher virus transmissibility	The Delta and Omicron variants, and their subvariants, have a much higher transmissibility rate than was observed in 2020, which may have deterred some voters from participating in 2022. Yet despite record-high death rates in 2022 compared to 2020, the overall fatality rate at the time of the 2022 election (0.14 per cent) is low compared to other countries.

**Table 2. Main differences between the 2020 and 2022 elections (cont.)**

Difference	Description
Citizen awareness	Overall, citizens' awareness of the health risks posed by the pandemic, and their attitudes towards it, had changed considerably since the 2020 election. Thus despite the increase in transmissibility, Omicron's relatively low fatality rate appears to have alleviated general concerns (H. Shin 2022). A survey conducted in March 2022 by Seoul National University's Graduate School of Public Health found that at the time of the 2022 election, the number of citizens who believed they were likely to contract the virus was at its highest level since the beginning of the pandemic in January 2020 (around 28 per cent). Conversely, the number of people concerned about a serious health impact after contracting the virus had declined to its lowest (48 per cent).

- Assessing voter attitudes and intention to participate in the 2022 election through a pre-election survey helped ascertain that 90 per cent of the voters surveyed expressed interest in the presidential election, and 80 per cent planned to vote.

#### **Previously acquired know-how helped ensure strong compliance with public health and safety measures**

All public health and safety measures introduced in 2020 National Assembly election were maintained in 2022. The only exception was that the measures mainly targeted the voting process rather than the election campaign in 2022. As it had done in 2020, the NEC promoted public health and safety measures introduced for the 2022 presidential election through the adoption and dissemination of a Code of Conduct (see Table 4) (NEC 2022g).

There were high levels of compliance with safety requirements in 2022, since voters and election officials were familiar with the measures detailed in the Code of Conduct, which resembled those applied to many other aspects of their lives (social, administrative, etc.). The only exception was that some polling stations did not consistently maintain separate lines for Covid-19 patients.

#### **Better planning needed for early voting**

Early voting, first introduced in the RoK in the 2013 by-elections, was extended across the nation in the 2014 local polls: voters could cast their ballot at any polling station in the country on the Friday or Saturday before election day with no prior registration or authorization. Korean voters have steadily increased their use of early voting since its introduction at the national level in 2014 (20.1 per cent of votes cast) to the highest percentage recorded in the 2022 presidential election (36.9 per cent) (Table 5).

In February 2022, as the Omicron variant continued to spread across the RoK, Parliament passed a legislative amendment to expand access to voting for Covid-19 patients, allowing them to cast their ballots in person, during the early voting period or on election day. On 22 February, the NEC announced the adoption of several measures to allow infected individuals to vote while keeping other voters and election officials safe, including: setting up additional



**Table 3. Voting channels in the 2022 presidential election**

Voting channel	Description
On election day	Polling stations were open from 6:00 to 18:00; the 18:00–19:30 slot was reserved for voters in isolation or quarantine, or any voter whose temperature was higher than normal when measured by the polling officials.
During the early voting period	All voters who would be out of their registered district on election day could vote in advance on 4–5 March.
Postal voting/home voting	Any voter unable to attend a polling station due to limited physical mobility (elderly, persons with a disability, hospitalized voters) could cast their ballots from their place of residence or hospitalization by ordinary post.
Out-of-country voting	Over a 5-day period (23–28 February), overseas voters could cast their ballots at one of the 219 polling stations set up at diplomatic missions in 115 countries with the cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 177 diplomatic missions.
Remote electronic voting	Those aboard ships (such as deep-sea fishing vessels and outbound passenger ships) could cast their ballots at onboard polling stations using 'Shield Fax', a Shipboard Secret Electronic Voting System (Huh, Koh and Seo 2016).

**Table 4. The NEC 2022 Code of Conduct****# Code of Conduct for Voters to Participate in the 20th Presidential Election**

1	Prepare your ID card in advance before going to the polling station
2	Avoid being accompanied by young children if possible
3	Wash your hands for 30 seconds thoroughly with soap and running water before going to the polling station
4	Wear a mask and go to the polling station
5	Complete your temperature check at the entrance of the polling station and wear the disposable vinyl gloves after sanitizing your hands
6	Inside and outside of a polling station, maintain enough distance from other voters
7	Avoid unnecessary conversations inside and outside of the polling station
8	Lower your mask temporarily at the identification section in the polling station
9	If you have any symptoms such as a fever, vote at a temporary polling booth and visit a public health center or call 1339 or area code + 120 after voting
10	Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and running water for 30 seconds when you return home

Source: National Election Commission (NEC), Republic of Korea, Code of Conduct to Participate in the 20th Presidential Election (Measures for Covid-19), 19 January 2022a, <<https://www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/ex/bbs/View.do?cbldx=1269&bcldx=157744>>, accessed 16 May 2022.

temporary polling stations, allowing Covid-19 patients to queue and vote separately from non-infected voters, and reserving time slots for infected

**Table 5. Early voting trends since its introduction**

	2014 local election	2016 National Assembly election	2017 presidential election	2020 National Assembly election	2022 presidential election
Number of early ballots cast	8,640,897	5,131,721	11,072,310	11,742,677	16,323,602
Early voter turnout (%)	20.1	12.2	26.1	26.7	36.9

Source: National Election Commission (NEC), Republic of Korea, '16.32 Million Voters to Participate in Early Voting, the Highest Turnout of 36.93% in History', 7 March 2022g, <<https://img.nec.go.kr/site/eng/ex/bbs/View.do?cbIdx=1270&bclDx=167526>>, accessed 12 May 2022.

voters (1 hour at the end of the second day of early voting, and 1.5 hours after the official close of the polls on election day) (Park 2022).

To vote, Covid-19 patients could walk or drive to their polling station, or use the taxis or ambulances provided by the local municipal offices and cast their ballot under enhanced safety measures. Infected voters with limited mobility who lived in remote areas were allowed to vote prior to the reserved time slot if authorized by the district public health authority.

As used in the 2020 election, CCTV cameras equipped with video encryption and anti-fabrication technology enabled 24-hour/day remote monitoring of the voting process and the overnight storage of sealed ballot boxes between days 1 and 2 of early voting. The NEC implemented a live broadcast of the voting and counting process during the early voting period and on election day on Korea Election Television, which was also available on the website of all major traditional and online media outlets, including the NEC YouTube channel and social media.

A record 36.9 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballots early in 2022, up from 26.1 per cent in the 2017 presidential election and 26.7 per cent in the 2020 National Assembly election (NEC 2022e).

At the start of the early voting period on 4 March, the national health authorities reported that more than 1 million people were in self-isolation, receiving treatment at home, or in quarantine (Park 2022). Unlike the 2020 National Assembly election, the early voting process experienced procedural irregularities (Jun-tae 2022; Reuters 2022a).

- In some polling stations, election officials did not separate Covid-19 patients from non-infected voters, which raised concerns about contracting the virus while voting.

- Electoral regulations prescribed the use of a single type of ballot box at each polling station. Separate boxes were not provided to collect the ballots of Covid-19 patients, and election officials were not provided with guidance on what alternative boxes could be used for this purpose.
- Some election officials instructed Covid-19 patients to deposit their ballots in plastic bags or other unofficial containers rather than in official ballot boxes. While these ballots were presumably later combined with those of non-infected voters, this did not adequately protect the secrecy and integrity of the vote.
- Several Covid-19 patients were mistakenly issued ballot papers that were already marked.
- Arrangements to help Covid-19 patients vote early were insufficient to accommodate the larger than expected demand. Procedural confusion also caused delays and long waiting times for voters, often in cold weather, and required polling stations to operate longer than scheduled—up to four additional hours in some cases.

Many argued that these departures from established voting procedures violated the Election Act, which stipulates that a voter ‘folds the ballot paper on the spot’ and ‘then deposits it into the ballot box in the presence of the election observers’. The media reported numerous complaints by Covid-19 patients across the country, such as ‘How can we call this a direct voting system if I can’t even see my own ballot going into the ballot box?’ or ‘How can I trust these officials to carry out transparent voting procedures if they don’t even have solid guidelines prepared for voters and collect ballots in leftover cardboard boxes?’ (Jun-tae 2022). The shortfalls exposed the NEC to significant public criticism and outcry from the main political parties; citing concerns about possible electoral fraud, they asked the NEC to assume full responsibility and satisfactorily explain the problems that had occurred. Calling on NEC Chairperson Noh Jeong-hee to resign, the opposition candidate, Yoon, sharply criticized the NEC’s performance, remarking that ‘an elementary classroom election couldn’t have been sloppier’ (Bicu 2022).

As criticism continued to grow and several civic groups filed formal complaints, the NEC had to officially apologize for being unable to guarantee a ‘stable and orderly early voting’ process due to the various irregularities (Young 2022a): ‘All the problems resulted from our failure to make thorough preparations and we are fully responsible for falling short of people’s trust and expectations’ (Reuters 2022a). It also sought to reassure the public and candidates that the irregularities were unintentional and not deliberate acts of electoral fraud: ‘This election recorded the highest-ever early voting turnout, and we fell short of properly managing the early voting process due to lack of voting management personnel and a lack of availability of polling stations’ (Jun-tae 2022).

The NEC chairperson openly acknowledged these problems during the ‘Online International Election Observation Programme for the 20th Presidential Election’, which was held virtually on 9 March; she noted that ‘ensuring that those infected could vote was the biggest issue in the presidential election’ (NEC 2022f).

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**Ensuring a broader enfranchisement of overseas voters**

During the 2020 National Assembly election, due to Covid-19-related concerns and restrictions, and in the absence of legal provisions allowing voters residing abroad to return their ballots to the NEC by international mail (when abroad, Korean voters can vote in person at their diplomatic missions), the OCV process suffered from significant problems. Lockdowns and several other restrictions on movement in host countries at the start of the pandemic forced the NEC to close OCV facilities in 55 countries; some diplomatic missions also had to shorten their voting periods. As scores of eligible voters residing in these countries were disenfranchised, the 2020 National Assembly election recorded the lowest voter turnout rate (23.8 per cent) since it introduced OCV in the RoK.

Based on this experience, when preparing for the five-day (23–28 February) OCV period for the 2022 election, the NEC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reviewed the experience from 2020. Despite the dramatic spike in infection rates caused by the Omicron variant across the world, 219 polling stations were established in 115 countries and 178 diplomatic missions. OCV turnout in 2022 was 71.6 per cent (NEC 2022b), representing one of the election's most important successes.

**An unusual election campaign: choosing the best candidate or avoiding the worst?**

In another significant departure from 2020, the pandemic did not prevent political parties and presidential candidates from conducting in-person public events such as campaign rallies in 2022. Officially opening the election campaign period on 15 February 2022, the NEC announced that it was going to be on a 'full scale', using the 'means allowed by the Election Act for voters and candidates to engage in election campaigning with spoken words, by phone, or through internet, social media or text messages' (NEC 2022c). However, while most restrictions on movement and public gatherings were relaxed, what unfolded between 15 February and 8 March was one of the most unusual and fractious election campaigns ever conducted in the RoK.

Although infection rates steadily surged as election day approached, neither of the leading presidential candidates' platforms proposed to adopt measures to contain the spread of the Omicron variant if they were elected. On the contrary, on 18 February—just three days into the campaigning period—several of the few remaining public health and safety measures were further relaxed.

- The curfew on businesses—such as bars and restaurants—was reduced by one hour and the restriction on public gatherings of more than six persons was lifted (Seoul.co.kr 2022).
- While requirements for vaccination passes or a negative PCR test were still in place to access public facilities and were extended to those aged 12–18

(*Korea Herald* 2022a), the QR code check-in/check-out system for contact tracing purposes was temporarily suspended, to be possibly reinstated in the event the quarantine situation changed—for example the emergence of a new Covid-19 variant or subvariant.

- The contact tracing system, which until then was mandatory and used to track and manage the contacts of confirmed cases, was terminated. It was replaced by a self-certification system (Yonyap News 2022): those who were infected, or at risk of having been infected, had to disclose their contact details and those of anyone they had been in recent contact with.
- The requirement for close contacts of infected persons to quarantine or take a PCR test ended.

The 2022 presidential election campaign featured unprecedented levels of negative rhetoric, personal attacks and scandals, defamation, allegations of illegalities and litigation between the two leading candidates.

- In the extremely tight race, both candidates engaged in ‘slinging mud at each other, while becoming mired in personal scandals themselves’ (Economist 2022a). They exchanged insults: Yoon described Lee’s party as ‘Hitler and Mussolini’, while an associate called Lee’s purported aides ‘parasites’. Lee’s allies called Yoon ‘a beast’, ‘dictator’ and ‘an empty can’ and ‘derided his wife’s alleged plastic surgery’ (Economist 2022a; H.-J. Kim 2022). They also adamantly sought to expose each other’s personal flaws, or those of their families, and accused each other of representing the political establishment (Young 2022b).  
As reported by South Korea Election Watch (Jacinto 2022) in a primer published on 22 February, Yoon’s credibility as a presidential candidate was heavily scrutinized following allegations that his wife—Kim Keon-hee—had made exaggerated or false professional claims on her resume; he was eventually forced to publicly apologize on her behalf (Ji-hye 2021). Yoon’s wife was also criticized for her comments on sexual violence and threats to prosecute and imprison journalists who had been critical of her husband. Lee’s family was also the subject of unwanted public scrutiny related to his son’s gambling habits (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 2021) and his wife’s misuse of public servants and corporate credit cards during his governorship (*Korea Herald* 2022c).
- Yoon threatened to investigate the alleged past wrongdoings of both the incumbent President Moon’s administration (Aljazeera 2022) and Lee, his political opponent, if he became president. While at least two other presidents elected before Moon were prosecuted for corruption, and although Moon has not been personally accused of wrongdoing, several senior officials from his administration have been at the centre of major corruption scandals (Aljazeera 2022).
- With their respective teams engaged in discrediting the other camp, the two leading candidates failed to dedicate adequate attention to promoting their political platforms on key domestic and international policy issues crucial to the RoK’s future, such as national security, a pandemic-induced economic slowdown, high youth unemployment with young generations unable to afford skyrocketing house prices, and the intensifying disillusionment of the Korean electorate with politics and the political

establishment. Internationally, they neglected to address the nuclear arms threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), the increasingly tense relationship between China and the United States, and the deterioration of the relationship with Japan, with which ongoing trade and political disputes are rooted in a long history of rivalry, war and colonial rule (BBC 2019).

- Both sides' campaigning efforts had 'little to distinguish their proposed policies on high housing costs or the economic fallout from the pandemic—the public's main concerns' (Economist 2022a).
- Rather than attempting to garner the support of a highly volatile electorate—particularly those increasingly disaffected with politics—or trying to attract votes from their competitors, both main candidates instead directed 'their political messaging almost entirely at their own supporters' (G.-W. Shin 2022), each blemishing the other in their own voters' eyes.
- Exacerbating the fault lines dividing the RoK's electorate, the raucous campaigns launched by the two leading candidates made their qualifications to become president, and lead the nation, a marginal concern.

Public opinion surveys confirmed that Yoon and Lee had 'more critics than supporters' (H.-J. Kim 2022); respondents considered them the most unappealing pair of presidential contenders since the RoK transitioned to democracy in 1987. Raising concerns that the fractious 2022 presidential race could affect the future of democracy in the RoK, the election was reportedly widely perceived to be 'the most uninspiring presidential election since democratization in 1987, one that is not about choosing the most appealing candidate, but instead about avoiding the worst' (G.-W. Shin 2022).

Despite the divisive and confrontational tones that tainted the campaign, on 10 March, as soon as the NEC released the election results, which confirmed Yoon's extremely narrow win—by 0.78 percentage points—the president-elect, in his acceptance speech, stated: 'Our competition is over for now, we have to join hands and unite into one for the people and the country' (CNBC 2022). Lee conceded defeat and congratulated his opponent.

While as a candidate he was unappealing to voters, Yoon's election represents a remarkable turnaround for the PPP (CNBC 2022), which was heavily penalized in the 2017 presidential election following the impeachment, dismissal and arrest of its candidate, Park Geun-hye, who in 2012 became the country's first female president.

### **Despite predictions for a decline, voter turnout remained high**

In the lead-up to election day, analysts and opinion polls had largely predicted that the 2022 presidential election would feature a sharp decline in voter turnout, mainly due to two factors: the unpopularity of both leading candidates among the electorate and the steadily rising daily infection rates. Concerned by these predictions, the NEC adopted several measures to encourage turnout.

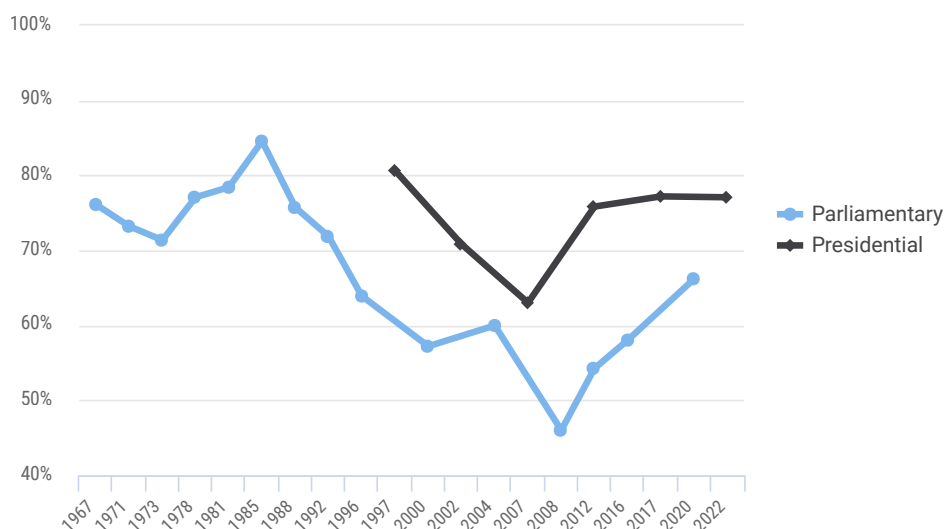
- On the day before the election, it administered a public opinion poll to gauge eligible voters' level of interest in participating in the election and whether they were likely to vote. The poll indicated that 9 out of 10 of those surveyed

were interested in the election, and 8 out of 10 said they would definitely vote.

- The NEC launched a voter education programme to encourage voter turnout and strengthen public perceptions that, despite the adversarial tones of the campaign, the election was focused on policy issues rather than on the leading candidates' backgrounds, or the scandals and wrongdoings of their family members (NEC 2022d).
- Promoting the slogan 'Let's pick the right one [candidate] and stamp [the ballot] well' (voters stamp rather than write on the ballot), the NEC voter education programme engaged the (voluntary) participation of popular national stars, entertainers and actors. The NEC also encouraged greater voter awareness of the value of the vote and the importance of making an informed choice, urging voters to familiarize themselves with the candidates' platforms and policies before election day.
- Introducing special measures for Covid-19 patients. In both the 2020 National Assembly and 2021 regional elections, infected voters were required to mail in their ballots or vote at special polling stations in hospitals. Eligible voters who were isolating or quarantining close to election day—and after the deadline to cast their ballot for early or postal voting had passed—were allowed to temporarily leave their confinement and vote at ordinary polling stations after they were closed to other voters.
- Ensuring that voters and election officials understood, and trusted, that public health and safety measures adopted at the polling stations guaranteed adequate levels of individual and collective safety while voting.

Thanks to these measures, voter turnout was 77.1 per cent in 2022, a decline that was not as significant as analysts and opinion polls predicted, and only marginally below that of the 2017 presidential election (77.2 per cent). Turnout was higher than in the 2020 National Assembly election which, despite being held during the first wave of the pandemic, had the highest turnout (66.2 per cent) of any parliamentary election held in the RoK since 1992 (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Voter turnout by election type**



Source: International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database, Korea, Republic of, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/163/40>>, accessed 11 May 2022.

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## 4. MAIN FINDINGS

Election-related successes provide valuable insights into what an electoral management body (EMB) needs to do to achieve the same (or better) results in the future, while failures identify what needs to be improved to deliver the next election more effectively and credibly. The crucial hands-on knowledge acquired in each election constitutes an ongoing learning cycle.

- Retroactively, the successes and failures—or lessons learned—from the management of the just-concluded election are captured, codified and consolidated into the established body of knowledge progressively acquired over the course of past election cycles.
- Proactively, the consolidated knowledge is applied to shape, inform and guide the delivery of the next election.

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**The NEC effectively employed the lessons learned during the previous election to conduct a safe election with a high voter turnout in 2022.**

Although the 2022 presidential race featured procedural irregularities, the NEC effectively employed the lessons learned during the previous election to conduct a safe election with a high voter turnout in 2022. Yet important improvements still need to be made.

The remainder of this section discusses four key findings related to the management of the 2022 election: (1) electoral inclusion, (2) procedural measures that improved public safety—and boosted voter participation, (3) electoral integrity and (4) democratic consolidation.

### Enhanced electoral inclusion

NEC efforts in the 2022 election to enfranchise the two most excluded groups in 2020 were successful. First, it extended early voting provisions to Covid-19 patients self-isolating or in quarantine immediately preceding election day, which represented large numbers of voters during the peak of recorded infections. Second, the NEC implemented OCV as normal to allow overseas voters to cast their ballots after they were disenfranchised on a mass scale in 2020. Adequate preparation and a general relaxing of rules and restrictions in most countries in which Korean overseas voters reside by 2022 made this possible.

### Procedural measures to enhance public safety

Building on the knowledge acquired in the management of the 2020 election during the emerging pandemic, the NEC was able to ensure significant levels of individual and collective safety at the polling stations in 2022 both during early voting (less consistently) and on election day (more consistently).

Two key preconditions can heavily influence the level of voter participation during a pandemic: (1) the EMB's ability to guarantee a safe environment at the polling stations and (2) citizens' level of trust that they can vote in absolute safety.

There were a number of adverse factors, such as rising Covid-19 cases near the election. On election day alone, record numbers of over 340,000 new infection cases were reported, and more than a million (out of 44.2 million



eligible) voters were isolating at home. While not directly connected to the election, the day after the polls new infection cases soared to 380,000. However, despite the much higher transmissibility of the Omicron strain and the waning protection of the vaccines against it, levels of perceived and actual safety were high. The high voter turnout rates (37 and 77 per cent for early and election day voting, respectively) indicate strong confidence among the electorate that voting would be safe, as otherwise most would not have participated; high levels of actual safety were confirmed by the fact that the election did not become a superspreader event.

However, the failure of some polling stations to enforce the use of separate lines during the early voting period—to keep non-infected voters and Covid-19 patients apart—was a noteworthy departure from the established (and generally abided by) safety protocols.

### Electoral integrity

The 2022 presidential election was largely characterized by high levels of integrity, transparency, independence and accountability. As reports of procedural irregularities in the early voting process began to surface, the NEC took responsibility for these shortcomings by acknowledging their occurrence, explaining why they had occurred, vowing to resolve them, and committing to prevent their reoccurrence on election day.

However, procedural irregularities in the early voting process raised widespread public concerns about the possible occurrence of fraud. For instance, Covid-19 patients were not allowed to deposit their ballots in the same boxes as other voters, in violation of article 151 of the Public Official Election Act, which establishes that ‘two ballot boxes shall not be used at the same time at each voting district’. Furthermore, reports that infected individuals were issued pre-marked ballots raised widespread public concerns, and suspicion, about the possible occurrence of fraud (Reuters 2022a).

The NEC took full responsibility for these irregularities, attributing the causes to multiple (not necessarily fraudulent) factors, including its own failure to: sufficiently plan for early voting, estimate how many individuals would vote before election day, provide sufficient information about the temporary arrangements offered to Covid-19 patients, and secure adequate numbers of election officials and polling stations. While it managed to contain and dispel mounting allegations of deliberate fraud, the NEC could not avoid casting a dangerous shadow of impropriety over the entire electoral process, which ultimately affected its own reputation vis-à-vis key stakeholders.

### Democratic consolidation

Since direct presidential elections were restored in 1987, the RoK has made significant gains in consolidating its progressive transition to democracy. This shift reflects the transformation of its government from a nominally civilian one to one elected through a competitive multiparty system and characterized by the legitimate alternation of power. This move continued through the 1990s and entered into the mid-2000s, as the gains of the democratic transition

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**The high voter turnout rates indicate strong confidence among the electorate that voting would be safe.**

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**While it managed to contain and dispel allegations of fraud, the NEC could not avoid casting a dangerous shadow over the entire electoral process, which ultimately affected its own reputation.**

were progressively consolidated. The country's democracy regressed between 2007 and 2016, when it was ruled by two presidents who are both currently imprisoned. In 2017 a mass movement—the Candlelight Movement (S.-C. Kim 2017)—succeeded in ousting a president, who was subsequently sentenced for corruption.

National politics in the RoK have long been shaped and driven by a 'deep institutional instability within the parties themselves... while ideological divisions are generally present on the surface, the parties are subject to regular factionalism and infighting, name changes, and even realignments along the ideological spectrum, often in tandem with changes in leadership' (Jacinto 2022). The long shadow of past military rule and close connections between political and business elites have led to successive corruption scandals that have widened the distance between political parties and their constituents—and weakened parties' ability to respond to voters' grievances. This has led to a growing and deeply rooted general dissatisfaction with the political system, resentment of the political elite, a notable decline in party loyalty and the general detachment of an otherwise committed electorate.

International IDEA's Global State of Democracy 2021 indices rate the RoK's performance as a 'mid-performing democracy'. Its country profile highlights challenges to the state of democracy relating to Predictable Enforcement—large portions of the bureaucracy and public security apparatus, built during the Cold War, remain insulated from popular pressure—and Participatory Engagement, including from civil society. While Freedom House categorizes RoK as overall 'free', its Internet freedom is only rated as 'partly free' (Freedom House n.d.).

Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Democracy Index 2021 (EIU 2021) ranked the RoK 16th out of 167 countries, up 7 points from the previous year—the country's first advance since 2014, from its previous status as a 'flawed democracy' to that of a 'full democracy'.

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## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper broadly overviewed several patterns characterizing the management of the two national-level elections held in the RoK during the Covid-19 pandemic. It identified and highlighted points of continuity, and departure, between the elections to assess the extent to which, and how, the knowledge acquired during the first election was implemented in the second, which was held two years later.

The run-up to the 9 March 2022 presidential election involved intense, adversarial campaigning that was relentlessly defined by negative messages and personal invective that prevented discussion of policies important to the RoK's future, including national security, economic development and democratic progress. The confrontational and harsh tone of the election campaign further widened the various fault lines—based on gender, age and generation, levels of income and economic equality, regional and political ideology. However, the defeated candidate Lee Jae-myung quickly conceded defeat as soon as Yoon Suk-yeol's very narrow win was made public in the early hours of 10 March, which highlights the maturity of Korean democracy.

While it is too early to determine how the 2022 election will affect the RoK's long-term social, political and geopolitical, economic and democratic future, it is hoped that the important lessons learned by the NEC in the implementation of this highly unusual election will continue to enhance its ability to systematically improve the next electoral cycles.

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**The defeated candidate Lee Jae-myung quickly conceded defeat as soon as Yoon Suk-yeol's very narrow win was made public, which highlights the maturity of Korean democracy.**

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