

*Diversified Career Path of Legislators in New Democracies:  
South Korea's Case*

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**Abstract**

This study asks how the legislators' occupational backgrounds have been changed in post-democratization South Korea. While previous studies on legislators' career paths have been argued from the perspective of gender, ethnicity, and institutionalization of candidate selection in intra-party level, pre-legislative occupations have not been sufficiently reviewed. To fill the blank, this paper reviews how the occupational backgrounds of the members of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea elected in Busan City, the second largest city of South Korea, have been changed during post-democratized three decades. According to the author's literature review, local elites such as former mayors and municipal council members have emerged as a new type of legislators in post-democratization era while state and social elites such as bureaucrats and social activists have been remained as major resources for legislative candidates. This suggest that legislators' pre-legislative career paths have been diversified in post-democratization South Korea.

Keywords: Legislator, Candidate Selection, Political Party, South Korea

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## 1. Introduction

This study asks how legislators' career paths in post-democratization era have been diversified focusing on the case of South Korea. Particularly, this paper asks how the South Korean legislators' pre-legislative backgrounds have been diversified reviewing the actual careers of the winners of general elections.

Democratization can work as a turning point of legislators' career paths in terms of candidate selection. Under authoritarian rule, candidate selection for legislative elections by rulers or major political bosses plays decisive role in determining the members of legislature because elections themselves are unfair and less competitive. Particularly in the cases of less-institutionalized authoritarian rule such as South Korea and the Philippines (Han, 1999), candidate selection processes are mostly seized by supreme leaders of the nations, the Presidents, and patronage plays central role in filtering the candidates. Following democratization, however, the patronage-based candidate selection decreases its political importance because nominees of ruling parties are not promised to win competitive elections. In the post-democratization phase, then, how are the candidate selection processes changed? If the patronage decreases its role in candidate selection, do any new career paths of legislators emerge? This paper seeks the answers to those questions.

As the methodology of the review above, this study employs literature review of electoral statistic data collected by the National Election Committee<sup>1</sup> and newspaper articles. In reviewing the literatures, this study classifies the members of the National Assembly of South Korea into three types according to their pre-legislative background: State elites, social elites, and local elites. The first type 'state elites' is defined as former military officials, civil bureaucrats, and businesspersons who are privately scouted by the Presidents or major political bosses such as incumbent leaders of political parties. They have no or only limited political and financial resources to be selected as major political parties' candidates and to win legislative elections. To cover the insufficiency of resources, they depend on their bosses' assistance. The second one 'social elites' is defined as those who run in legislative or presidential elections based on their own popularity among the mass and/or on their rich financial resources. Businesspersons of major private enterprises, famous social activists and journalists are included to this type. Differently from the first type, those elites have some electoral resources to run as candidates for legislative elections. The last one 'local elites' is defined as those who aim win legislative election based on their experiences as mayors, governors, and/or members of local councils. While they have their own resources and experiences to act elected officials in municipal and provincial levels, they seek more resources to win national-level elections. As indicated on Table 1, therefore, the third type can be distinguished from the first one on whether they have their electoral resources partly or not.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Election Committee of South Korea archives the data of the country's national and local elections on its official website (<https://www.nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1129>).

Type	Examples
State Elites	Bureaucrats, and retired military officials
Social Elites	Businesspersons of major conglomerates
Local Elites	Mayors, Governors, and members of local councils

Table 1. Typology of Candidates for Legislative Elections  
(Source: Originally created by the author)

In the following chapters, the chronological changes of candidate selection in Busan City, the second largest city of the nation, are reviewed as the case. In previous studies such as Lee (2021), Busan City has been chosen an ideal case to see chronological changes of politics because case studies on the municipality do not need take intra-regionalism, urbanization, and some other socio-economic factors into consideration as major intervening variables. Due to restrictions of the data, however, the following chapters review candidates' background of National Assembly elections in 1985, 1996, and 2020. In addition, this study sees only the winners in local constituencies of those elections.

## 2. Previous Studies

Previous studies on career paths of legislative in new democracies can be categorized to two types: The studies focus on candidate selection methods, and those on candidates' ethno-gender backgrounds.

The first type of previous studies has seen candidate selection processes. Hellman (2012) and Fell (2006) analyzed how the parties in East Asian democracies of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have introduced democratic order in their political parties' candidate selections prior to legislative and Presidential elections. Those studies reviewed and analyzed how institutional features of major political parties' candidate selection from the perspective of democratization. They argue that the major parties of the Asian democracies of Taiwan and South Korea have introduced primary election in selecting their presidential and legislative candidates.

The second type of previous studies has sought how gender balance, ethnicity, regional and religious features of electoral candidates have changed. Lee (2019), Hinojosa (2012), and Krook (2007) analyzed how women are under-represented in legislatures focusing on the function of candidate selection. These studies pointed out how candidate selection inside parties can work as so-called 'glass ceiling' for female politicians.

Though the previous studies above have clarified institutional features of candidate selection and candidates' ethnic backgrounds, they have paid only limited attention on the candidates' occupational backgrounds. Some literatures on Western democracies such as Nihill et al (2009) point out that the experiences in local government such as mayors and local council members can play the role as steps to rise to higher positions. Differently from the West, however, newly democratized countries following the Third Wave of democratization as Huntington argued have had poor experiences of local elections. In the case of South Korea, elections in municipal and provincial levels were introduced in the early 1990s after the three decades of central government's authoritarian control on local officials. If Nihill et al's argument can be applied universally, does the recent introduction of electoral local governance in some Asian democracies such as South Korea encourage new political career paths? The answer will be sought in the following sections.

### 3. Backgrounds of the Legislators in the Authoritarian Era

In this section, candidate selection and the selected candidates' background in the 1985 National Assembly election, the last legislative election under the authoritarian rule, are reviewed. Particularly, this chapter sees those who were elected as the member of the National Assembly in Busan City due to the restrictions of candidates' information.

The backgrounds of the 12 candidates who won in Busan City are indicated on Table 2. The details of their pre-legislative occupation and partisanship, and the number are indicated on Appendix 1. In the 1985 election, six multi-member constituencies were assigned to Busan City and two seats were assigned to each constituency. Among the winners, seven were former state elites such as military officers, bureaucrats, and secretaries for legislators. The left five winners were social elites such as journalists, lawyers, and pastors. Local elites did not win any seats because elections for local councils were 'frozen' under the authoritarian rule. Shortly, more than half winners in the case were former state elites.

Amount	State Elites	Social Elites	Local Elites
12	7	5	0

Table 2. The Backgrounds of the Winner in Busan City (1985)

Source: National Election Committee (<https://nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1129>) (accessed on June 15, 2022), *The Chosun Ilbo*, and *The Joongang Ilbo*

Out of the seven state elite winners, one (Yoo, Heung-soo) belonged to the ruling Democratic Justice Party. The two (Kang, gyeong-sik. and Lee, Geon-il) belonged to the Democratic Korea Party and the Korea Nationalist Party, which have been known as satellite parties. The left four (Seo, Seok-jae. Kim, Jeong-soo. Park, Gwan-yong. and Moon, Jeong-soo) belonged to the New Korean Democratic Party, an opposition. Out of the five social elites, on the other hand, the three (Kwak, Jeong-chul. Jang, Seong-man. and Kim, Jeong-gil) belonged to the ruling party while the left two did to the opposition.

The data above indicates that both the ruling and opposition parties nominated state and social elites as the candidates for legislators. Even under the authoritarian rule, social elites such as journalists and pastors were the sources for the members of the National Assembly for major parties, including the ruling one.

More detailed analysis, however, shows us further findings. Out of the seven 'state elites' winners, the two former civil or military officers in executive branch belonged to the ruling or the satellite parties, not the opposition ones. Out of the left five, meanwhile, only one (Lee, Geon-il) belonged to the satellite parties and the other four did to the opposition. This suggests that, under the authoritarian rule, the ruling party had advantages to recruit former governmental officers as the sources for legislative candidates.

From the perspective of the opposition parties, only two of the six winners were social elites and the left four were the secretaries for legislators. Though the collaboration of anti-regime social movements and opposition parties are often observed in authoritarian regimes such as the Suharto administration in Indonesia, this does not mean that the movement activists simply emerge as the actors in institutionalized political system. Rather, this fact suggests that the opposition parties under the authoritarian rule had systematic career steps to

nominate their legislative candidates following the experiences as the staffs for senior legislators.

The next section sees how the backgrounds above changed following the democratization in 1987.

#### 4. Background of the Legislators during Transitional Period

In the 1996 National Assembly election, the ruling New Korea Party led by President Kim Young-sam won all 21 seats assigned to Busan City. As a hero of democratization movement and resistance to the authoritarian rule, Kim Young-sam has been the most influential political leader in his hometown: Busan City. While acting as a leader of the opposition, however, he has also been a political boss followed by large number of secretaries, subordinates, and businessperson based on nepotism<sup>2</sup>. As the incumbent President, Kim Young-sam mobilized every socio-political resources to dominate all seats in his hometown as his rivals of Kim Dae-jung in southwest Gwangju City and Kim Jong-pil in mid Chungcheong Provinces did in their hometowns. The 1990s' South Korean politics, therefore, has often called as 'Three *Kims* Politics' or the era of regionalism.

Amount	State Elites	Social Elites	Local Elites
21	13	8	0

Table 3. The Backgrounds of the Winner in Busan City (1996)

Source: National Election Committee (<https://nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1129>) (accessed on June 15, 2022), *The Chosun Ilbo*, and *The Joongang Ilbo*

Table 3 indicates the background of the 21 Busan winners in the 1996 election. Though the local council elections started in 1991, no local elite won the seat. Instead, more than half winners, 13 out of 21, were state elites and the remained eight winners were social ones. The details of the winners' background are listed on the Appendix 2.

The details of the 13 state elite winners reflect the regional dominance by the three *Kims*. 6 winners, or nearly half of the 13 state elites, were former secretaries for legislators and most of them were the ones for a former member of the National Assembly, Kim Young-sam. In addition, four former bureaucrats in the 13 state elite winners were cabinet ministers or vice-ministers in the Kim Young-sam government as seen in Appendix 2. Even among the 8 social elites, some entrepreneurs such as Kim Moo-seong had been supporters for Kim Young-sam and were nominated by him as the ruling party's legislative candidates. Due to those features, the Kim Young-sam government was called 'semi authoritarian regime,' which means imperfect from the perspective of democratization<sup>3</sup>.

In the 7 social elite winners, non-political professional workers such as medical doctor (Jeong, Eui-hwa) was selected as the candidates and won the seats as well as a pharmacist (Kim, Jeong-soo). Jeong, Wui-hwa had worked in hospitals in Busan City for more than a decade until he was nominated as the candidate in 1996. As seen in this case, the political boss Kim Young-sam not only nominated his followers as legislative candidates but also scouted grass-rooted elites. In the Western democracies, the role to send professionals to political

<sup>2</sup> (Im, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> (Cha, 1993)

arena is often played by middle groups and/or lobbying groups. In the 1990s South Korea, however, those roles are done by a political boss.

The fact above indicates, despite the democratization including constitutional revision in 1987, that the legislators' backgrounds did not change at the time of the mid-1990s at least in Busan City. Similar to the result of the 1985 election under the authoritarian rule, state elites were the most major resources for legislative candidates and local elites did not emerge in the national election. Rather, the political boss, Kim Young-sam, acted as a decisively crucial player in candidate selection as well as the former authoritarian regime. The following section sees how it changed after the retiring of the boss politicians in the early 2000s.

## 5. Background of the Legislators under Democratic Regime

In the 2020 general election, amount 18 winners won their seats in constituencies in Busan. The backgrounds of the 18 winners are indicated on Table 4. Compared to the two previous cases, state elites decreased their share while local elites emerged. Even among state elites, in addition, not only former cabinet ministers but also prosecutor (Kim, Do-eup) selected as a candidate and won the seat.

As indicated on Appendix 3, the conservative Liberal Korea Party, the successor of Kim Young-sam's New Korea Party won 15 out of 18 total seats in the municipality. While the 'hometown' party decreased lost its dominance in the City, the progressive Democratic Party of Korea, which has its safe seats in southwest Gwangju City, won 3 seats. This can be interpreted as the weakening of the regionalism and the conservative dominance in southeast regions<sup>4</sup>.

Amount	State Elites	Social Elites	Local Elites
18	7	7*	5*

Table 4. The Backgrounds of the Winner in Busan City (2020)

Source: National Election Committee (<https://nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1129>) (accessed on June 15, 2022), *The Chosun Ilbo*, and *The Joongang Ilbo*

\*Note: Chun, Bong-min from Suyeong District Constituency was counted as both social and local elites because he has the experience as entrepreneur as well as local council member

In the 7 social elite winners, it is remarkable that journalist (Ahn, Byeong-gil) was selected as a candidate and won a seat. Ahn, Byeong-gil worked as a journalist in local newspaper Busan Ilbo for more than 10 years and built rich number of connections with incumbent legislators<sup>5</sup>. In addition, an owner of private school (Jang, Je-won) newly emerged as a legislator.

The most remarkable change in this election, however, is the emergence of local elites such as former mayors and former local council members. 5 out of 18 winners have the experiences as mayor, city council members, or county council members. Most of them won local elections when they were less than 50-year-old. Based on the young local experiences, they aimed to win more higher position: The member of the National Assembly.

<sup>4</sup> (Lee, 2021)

<sup>5</sup> The Busan Ilbo (May 17, 2021)

In the case of Hwan Bo Seung Hee, for example, she won the Yeongdo District by-election in 2004 for the first time, when she was 28-year-old<sup>6</sup>. After serving as a member of the District Council for 8 years, then, she ran Busan City Council by-election in 2012 and won. As the member of the City Council, she served 6 years. Based on the experiences of 14 years as the local council member, she ran in legislative election 2020 and won a seat of the National Assembly. In the early stage of the 2020 legislative election, she ran primary election held by her belonging conservative party in her constituency. She as a not financially rich but deeply grass-rooted politician showed local advantage in the intra-party competition and won the primary election<sup>7</sup>.

As seen in Hwan Bo Seung Hee's case, the experiences as elected positions in local authorities play, at least in some cases, the role as steps to rise higher positions in national politics. This can be pointed out as the most major changes since the past elections reviewed in the previous chapters.

The introduction of primary election can be pointed out as a major contributor to the increase of 'local elite' legislators. Following the democratization in 1987 and the retirement of major political bosses such as Kim Young-sam around 2000, the headquarters of major political parties have decreased their influence on candidate nomination. Instead, the two major parties have introduced primary election both in presidential and legislative elections. Differently from closed nomination by bosses, primary opens a gate for local politicians who have limited political resources in party headquarters to request the nomination. Hwang Bo Seung Hee, who won the Liberal Korea Party's primary election in 2020, can be seen as a symbol of the new type of legislators.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This study has asked chronological changes of South Korean legislators' career path, particularly pre-legislative occupations, following the democratization in 1987 focusing on the case of Busan City. The review on the three legislative elections in 1985, 1996 and 2020.

The review on the three elections above indicates that the legislators' occupational backgrounds have been diversified: While state and social elites have been remained as major resources for legislators, also local elites have emerged as a new typology of the major resources. In addition to the introduction of electoral local governance in the early 1990s, the retirement of regionally dominant bosses such as Kim Young-sam and the introduction of primary elections can be pointed out as the reasons for it. As a result, the diversification of the South Korean legislators' career paths in terms of pre-legislative occupation has occurred.

This study is, however, just a review on only limited number of samples to pick up only one major city of a nation. Nationwide data analysis, review on every legislative election following the democratization, and review on the lost candidates in legislative elections are the subjects in future.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Aju Business Daily* (Feb. 18, 2022)

<sup>7</sup> *The Chousn Ilbo* (April 4, 2020)

**Appendix 1. The Backgrounds of the Winners in Busan of the 1985 Legislative Election**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Backgrounds</b>	<b>Party</b>
Kwak, Jeong-chul	Businessperson, Journalist	Democratic Justice Party
Yoo, Heung-soo	Bureaucrat	Democratic Justice Party
Jang, Seong-man	Pastor	Democratic Justice Party
Kim, Jeong-gil	Social Activists	Democratic Korea Party
Lee, Geon-il	Secretary for Legislators	Democratic Korea Party
Kang, Gyeong-sik	Military Officer	Korean National Party
Park, Chan-joong	Lawyer	New Korean Democratic Party
Seo, Seok-jae	Secretary for Legislators	New Korean Democratic Party
Kim, Jeong-soo	Secretary for Legislators	New Korean Democratic Party
Park, Gwan-yong	Secretary for Legislators	New Korean Democratic Party
Lee, Gi-taek	Social Activist	New Korean Democratic Party
Moon, Jeong-soo	Secretary for Legislators	New Korean Democratic Party

Note 1: Names are Romanized based on the 2000 Revised Romanization of Korean System

Note 2: Backgrounds indicate each Legislator's longest job before winning the election.

Source: National Election Committee (<https://nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1129>) (accessed on June 15, 2022), *The Chosun Ilbo*, and *The Joongang Ilbo*

**Appendix 2. The Backgrounds of the Winners in Busan of the 1996 Legislative Election**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Backgrounds</b>	<b>Party</b>
Jeong, Eui-hwa	Medical Doctor	New Korea Party
Chong, In-gil	Secretary for Legislators	New Korea Party
Kim, Hyeong-oh	Bureaucrat	New Korea Party
Jeong, Jae-moon	Secretary for Legislators	New Korea Party
Kim, Jeong-soo	Pharmacist	New Korea Party
Park, Gwan-yong	Secretary for Legislators	New Korea Party
Kang, Gyeong-sik	Military Officer	New Korea Party
Lee, Sang-hee	Academic Researcher	New Korea Party
Kim, Moo-seong	Entrepreneur	New Korea Party
Jeong, Hyeong-geun	Prosecutor	New Korea Party
Han, I-heon	Bureaucrat	New Korea Party
Kim, Un-hwan	Entrepreneur	New Korea Party
Kim, Gi-jae	Bureaucrat	New Korea Party
Seo, Seok-jae	Secretary for Legislators	New Korea Party
Park, Jong-woon	Entrepreneur	New Korea Party
Kim, Deok-ryong	Secretary for Legislators	New Korea Party
Kim, Do-eon	Prosecutor	New Korea Party
Choi, Hyeong-woo	Secretary for Legislators	New Korea Party
Yoo, Heung-soo	Bureaucrat	New Korea Party
Kwon, Cheol-hyeon	University Professor	New Korea Party
Shin, Sang-woo	Social Activist	New Korea Party

Note 1: Names are Romanized based on the 2000 Revised Romanization of Korean System

Note 2: Backgrounds indicate each Legislator's longest job before winning the election.

Source: National Election Committee (<https://nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1129>) (accessed on June 15, 2022), *The Chosun Ilbo*, and *The Joongang Ilbo*

**Appendix 3. The Backgrounds of the Winners in Busan of the 2020 Legislative Election**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Backgrounds</b>	<b>Party</b>
Hwang-bo, Seung-hee	Member of Busan City Council	Future Korea Party
Ahn, Byeong-gil	Journalist	Future Korea Party
Seo, Byeong-soo	Mayor of Busan City	Future Korea Party
Lee, heon-seung	Secretary for Legislators	Future Korea Party
Kim, Hee-gon	Secretary for Legislators	Future Korea Party
Park, Soo-yeong	Bureaucrat	Future Korea Party
Park, Jae-ho	Secretary for Legislators	Democratic Party of Korea
Chun, Jae-soo	Secretary for President	Democratic Party of Korea
Kim, Do-eup	Prosecutor	Future Korea Party
Ha, Tae-gyeong	Social Activist	Future Korea Party
Kim, Mi-ae	Lawyer	Future Korea Party
Choi, In-ho	Secretary for President	Democratic Party of Korea
Cho, Gyeong-tae	Social Activist	Future Korea Party
Park, Jong-heon	Member of Busan City Council	Future Korea Party
Lee, Joo-hwan	Entrepreneur	Future Korea Party
Chun, Bong-min	Entrepreneur & Member of Busan City Council	Future Korea Party
Jang, Je-won	Owner of Private School	Future Korea Party
Jeong, Dong-man	Member of Gijang County Council	Future Korea Party

Note 1: Names are Romanized based on the 2000 Revised Romanization of Korean System

Note 2: Backgrounds indicate each Legislator's longest job before winning the election.

Source: National Election Committee (<https://nec.go.kr/site/nec/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1129>) (accessed on June 15, 2022), *The Chosun Ilbo*, and *The Joongang Ilbo*

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