



SURPRISING RESULTS OF THE 2026 LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SOUTH KOREA

by

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Introduction

Local elections in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) have a relatively short and interrupted history. First introduced in 1952, they were held only [three times](#) (1952, 1956, and 1960) before being abolished after Park Chung-hee's military coup in 1961. Park, who ruled Korea as an authoritarian modernizer until 1979, sought to establish a centralized and disciplined system of governance. To this end, he dismantled local councils and replaced elected mayors and governors with centrally appointed officials. This system continued until democratization in 1987.

Local elections were partially reintroduced in [1991](#) as part of democratic reforms, but voters were initially allowed to elect only local council members, while mayors and governors remained presidential appointees. The 1995 local elections therefore, marked the full restoration of local autonomy and are widely regarded as the founding moment of contemporary local politics in Korea. Since then, local elections have developed distinct institutional and political characteristics.

The 2026 local elections, held on June 3, took place three decades after this restoration. They provide an important opportunity to assess the dynamics of local politics, its interaction with national politics, and evolving electoral patterns. The results carry significant implications for the future trajectory of Korean politics.

Characteristics of Local Elections in Korea

Three features have consistently shaped local elections in Korea. First, these elections function largely as referendums on the incumbent president rather than on local officeholders. Voters tend to prioritize national political performance over local governance, creating a cyclical pattern in which the ruling party generally performs well in elections held early in a presidential

term (years one and two), while the opposition gains ground in later elections (years four and five). Mid-term contests are typically more competitive, making presidential approval ratings a strong predictor of local electoral outcomes.

Second, [regionalism](#) remains a defining feature of local elections. The southeastern Gyeongsang region has traditionally supported conservative parties, while the southwestern Jeolla region has consistently favored progressive parties since democratization. The Chungcheong region has long served as a political swing area. In recent years, however, the Democratic Party has made notable gains in parts of the southeastern region, including Busan and South Gyeongsang Province.

Third, local elections are less salient than presidential or legislative elections. Voter turnout typically exceeds [70 percent](#) in presidential elections and 60 percent in legislative elections, whereas turnout in local elections has generally remained far below 60 percent, except in [1995 and 2018](#).

Against this backdrop, the 2026 elections displayed both continuity and change. They were held one year after the snap presidential election that brought Lee Jae-myung to power, and roughly a year and a half after the political crisis triggered by former President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law. Under these conditions, a landslide victory for the ruling Democratic Party was [widely anticipated](#) for three reasons: [a fragmented conservative opposition](#), the [honeymoon period](#) of a newly elected president, and Lee's relatively high approval rating of around [60 percent](#).

However, the results diverged from these expectations. Rather than delivering a clear mandate, they revealed mixed and, in some respects, surprising outcomes that complicate conventional interpretations of electoral dynamics in Korea. Consequently, the elections cannot be regarded as an unequivocal success for any major political figure, including President Lee Jae-myung, Democratic Party leader Jung Chung-rae, or People Power Party leader Jang Dong-hyeok.



Election Results

The [2026 local elections](#) were the ninth since the restoration of local autonomy in 1995. Voters elected eight governors, six metropolitan mayors, 933 council members at the upper provincial level, 227 municipal mayors (*si-gun-gu*), 3,034 council members at the lower municipal level, and 16 superintendents at the upper provincial level. These representatives serve four-year terms and may hold office for up to three consecutive terms. The continuity of local elections over the past three decades demonstrates that Korean democracy has been institutionally anchored at the local level, providing citizens with regular opportunities to participate in local governance. At the same time, the quality and depth of local democracy remain a work in progress.

Electoral systems differ across administrative levels. For example, a single-member plurality system is used for governors and mayors at both the provincial and municipal levels, as well as council members at the provincial level. Council members at the municipal level are elected through a multi-member constituency system (with districts electing two to five members) using a simple plurality rule. In addition, [14 percent](#) of council members at the provincial level and [10 percent](#) at the municipal level are elected through proportional representation (PR) based on party votes. The PR list is closed, meaning that parties prepare candidate lists before the election. Korean parties may nominate candidates in all districts and at both administrative levels, except in superintendent elections.

Voter turnout reached [61 percent](#) in this election, the highest since the first local elections in 1995. This indicates that the 2026 local elections attracted substantial public interest rather than being treated as low-salience contests. Moreover, their importance was further heightened by the simultaneous holding of 15 legislative by-elections, which increased voter attention and the overall salience of the elections.

The [main results of the 2026 local elections](#) revealed both the continuous dominance of the two major parties and several unexpected electoral patterns. At the provincial level, the ruling Democratic Party won 12 provinces and metropolitan cities, including Gyeonggi,

Chungcheong, Jeolla, Kangwon, Busan, Incheon, Ulsan, and Jeju, while the opposition People Power Party retained four: Seoul, Daegu, North Gyeongsang, and South Gyeongsang. This suggests the persistence of regionalism, with the ruling Democratic Party dominating southwestern Jeolla and the opposition People Power Party retaining its stronghold in the southeastern Gyeongsang region. At the municipal level, the Democratic Party [won 119 races](#), the People Power Party secured 95, and the remaining 13 were captured by minor parties and independent candidates. The two major parties also dominated local councils, winning 588 and 325 council seats, respectively, at the provincial level and 1,574 and 1,277 seats, respectively, at the municipal level. Together, the two major parties control 94 percent of municipalities, 98 percent of provincial-level council seats, and 94 percent of municipal-level council seats, underscoring the consolidation of a highly cartelized two-party system that leaves little room for smaller parties in local politics.

To evaluate the results of the 2026 local elections, it is useful to compare them with those held in 2022. Voter turnout in 2022 was [51 percent](#), 10 percentage points lower than in 2026. The People Power Party won a landslide victory because the elections were held less than three months after the presidential election that brought the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol to power. Likewise, the 2026 local elections took place during the honeymoon period of Lee Jae-myung's administration, when high public expectations for the new president benefited the Democratic Party. This helps explain its overall success at both the provincial and municipal levels.

At first glance, three main political figures—President Lee Jae-myung, Democratic Party chairman Jung Chung-rae, and People Power Party chairman Jang Dong-hyeok—could claim victory in the elections. However, a closer examination of the results reveals a more nuanced picture. Rather than representing unequivocal victories, the election outcomes reveal surprising patterns that complicate conventional interpretations of electoral success.

The ruling Democratic Party could argue that it won



the elections, and that the results strengthened both Lee Jae-myung and the party. However, several outcomes complicate this interpretation. Most notably, the [incumbent Seoul mayor](#) from the opposition People Power Party, Oh Se-hoon, retained the Seoul mayoralty, the country's most politically significant local office. As mayor of Seoul, Oh is the only local government leader who participates in the State Council, the executive branch's cabinet-level decision-making body, giving the position exceptional national political significance.

Moreover, the Democratic Party lost two critical legislative by-elections: one in Busan and the other in Pyeongtaek. In Busan, Ha Jung-woo, who served as an AI secretary in President Lee's office, was defeated by former People Power Party chairman [Han Dong-hoon](#). Ha Jung-woo had been expected to win because the People Power Party had expelled Han Dong-hoon and officially nominated Park Min-sik. Nevertheless, conservative voters largely consolidated behind Han rather than splitting between the two conservative candidates, allowing Han to win. In Pyeongtaek, two progressive candidates, Kim Yong-nam and [Cho Kuk](#), competed against the conservative candidate Yoo Ui-dong. This race attracted national attention because Cho Kuk leads the Rebuilding Korea Party, a progressive ally of the Democratic Party with 12 seats in the National Assembly. However, intense but seemingly unnecessary competition between the two progressive candidates fragmented the progressive vote and allowed the conservative candidate to prevail.

Taken together, these results suggest that the elections do not constitute a clear victory for either Lee Jae-myung or Democratic Party chairman Jung Chung-rae. Instead, the elections have elevated two prominent conservative leaders, Oh Se-hoon and Han Dong-hoon, who are likely to emerge as leading contenders in the 2030 presidential election. Moreover, their strengthened political standing could pose significant political risks to Lee Jae-myung once he leaves office. Lee currently faces [six ongoing legal cases](#) that have been suspended during his presidency. Depending on the outcome of the 2030 presidential election, the political and legal circumstances he faces after leaving office could differ substantially.

The election results are also less favorable for President Lee Jae-myung than the ruling party's overall success might suggest. In Seoul, the Democratic Party candidate, [Jeong Won-oh](#), who had been initially endorsed by Lee, was defeated by incumbent mayor [Oh Se-hoon](#). In addition, Lee's close associate, [Ha Jung-woo](#), failed to win the legislative by-election in Busan. These setbacks indicate that the election outcomes did not fully reflect Lee's relatively high approval rating of around 60 percent.

The opposition [People Power Party](#) also cannot regard the 2026 local elections as an unqualified success, although it secured four of the sixteen provincial and metropolitan governments, 43 percent (95) of municipal governments, 35 percent (328) of provincial-level council seats, and 42 percent (1,277) of municipal-level council seats. Since his election as party chairman in August 2025 with the support of pro-Yoon and far-right supporters factions, Jang Dong-hyeok has been relatively passive in his efforts to rebuild and unify the conservative bloc. Instead, he expelled former chairman Han Dong-hoon from the party and promoted pro-Yoon politicians in both the local elections and legislative by-elections. As a result, many People Power Party candidates deliberately distanced themselves from the party leadership during their campaigns. For example, Oh Se-hoon was re-elected in Seoul without campaigning alongside party leaders. Consequently, Jang Dong-hyeok is likely to face significant internal pressure and calls for his resignation.

Finally, the elections exposed continuing challenges to public confidence in Korea's electoral process. At more than 100 polling stations in Seoul and other areas, most in Songpa, Gangnam, and Gwangjin districts, voting did not proceed as scheduled due to [ballot shortages](#). As a result, voting was delayed until late in the evening, and some ballots were reportedly not counted. This administrative failure triggered a fierce political backlash. [Protests](#) erupted at polling stations and counting centers, including the handball stadium in Olympic Park in Songpa district, as well as in other major areas and cities. Some protestors attempted to block the transfer of ballots to local counting centers, while others gathered outside the National Election



Commission, demanding a re-election and denouncing the state of Korean democracy. According to [surveys](#), between 10 and 30 percent of voters believe that Korean elections are fraudulent. This perception remains a persistent and troubling issue for Korean democracy, despite the fact that elections are generally free from fraud, notwithstanding some administrative shortcomings.

Conclusion

The 2026 local elections and concurrent legislative by-elections were widely expected to consolidate support for President Lee Jae-myung and the ruling Democratic Party. While the ruling party achieved substantial gains, the results do not constitute a clear or decisive mandate. Nor do they indicate a straightforward recovery for the opposition People Power Party.

Instead, the elections reveal a more complex and fluid political landscape, characterized by persistent structural patterns, modest regional shifts, intra-party fragmentation, and growing challenges to electoral legitimacy. These dynamics will shape the trajectory of Korean politics in the coming years.

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