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Below are the key findings from the surveys conducted by Research and Research in January. Where applicable, dates the survey was conducted are in brackets.

- Among respondents who reported voting, a plurality (31.5%) stated that the “morality and integrity” of the candidate was the most important quality. 25.8% said the most important were ideology and policies of the candidate. [Dec 19-20]
- A clear plurality (35.7%) said the TV debates were the most important events in deciding their vote. Only 2.6% cited North Korea’s rocket launch as the most important. [Dec 19-20]
- 74.7% of respondents expect President-elect Park Geun-Hye to perform well as president. [Dec 21-23]. That number later increased to 82.5%. [Jan. 27-29]
- With regard to societal divisions, 42.4% cited the gap between the rich and the poor as the most important for President-elect Park to address. 26.3% cited regional divisions. Only 10.7% cited the generational divide. [Dec 21-23]
- Of all institutions included, respondents were least confident in the National Assembly, with only 8.6% citing confidence in it. The most trusted was the military, in which 44.2% expressed confidence. [Dec 28-30]
- The United States was the most favored nation, with a mean score of 5.7 on a 0 to 10 scale. North Korea (3.0) was lowest, with China (4.5) and Japan (3.3) second and third, respectively. [Jan 3-5]
- 68.7% saw U.S.-China relations as being mostly competitive while 40.9% saw ROK-China relations to be competitive. 49.8% saw relations between South Korea and China as cooperative. [Jan 3-5]
- A strong majority (71.9%) disapproved of President Lee’s handling of the economy over the past 5 years. 60.2% disapproved of his handling of South-North relations. [Jan 9-11]
- With regard to prostitution, 47.8% supported punishing women caught selling sex. 46.0% opposed punishment. [Jan 12-14]
- 48.7% stated that prostitution should be recognized as a profession, while 45.3% said that is should not. [Jan 12-14]
- 71.9% said that the 2004 law banning prostitution has been ineffective. [Jan 12-14]

The sample size of each survey was 1,000 respondents over the age of 19. The surveys were conducted by Research & Research, and the margin of error is ±3.1% at the 95% confidence level. All surveys employed the Random Digit Dialing method for mobile and landline telephones.

This report is a product of the Public Opinion Studies Center at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. To subscribe to this report please contact Karl Friedhoff at klf@asaninst.org.
Introduction

With the victory of Park Geun-Hye in the presidential election, all eyes have been on her as her administration takes shape. Even though that process has been kept largely under wraps—eliciting complaints from the media and progressives—the mood around the country is one of optimism. However, optimism is often accompanied by high expectations, and those expectations will put the Park administration under pressure to produce results early. This is clearly a tight rope, as rushing to get policies in place that fulfill campaign pledges may lead to miscalculations on feasibility, public sentiment, or both. The failure of Kim Yong-Joon to even make it to the confirmation hearing after being tapped to be prime minister may be the first evidence of such a miscalculation, and adds pressure to an already very tight timeline ahead of inauguration day.

On the domestic front, there are more than enough issues to keep the president-elect busy. Household debt, economic growth, youth unemployment, and rumored currency wars are just a few of the serious issues she faces. But it is not only domestic pressures that will welcome President-elect Park to office. With a third North Korea nuclear test looming, she will come into office with very little wiggle room on her North Korea policy. She had previously stated that she would pursue relations with North Korea based on mutual trust. A third nuclear test would seem to take her policy options off the table, and leave little room for a renewed attempt at engagement. However, North Korea may take care of this for her as its traditional cycle would suggest that after a nuclear test the country would be ready to negotiate.

Post-election Optimism

Despite the discord created during the presidential campaign, in the immediate aftermath of the election of Park Geun-Hye there was a noticeable turn toward optimism throughout the country. However, whether this was a rally-round-the-flag moment or a celebration of the end of an exhausting year of political campaigns is not clear. Immediately following the election 74.7% of respondents stated that they expected President-elect Park to perform well during her term as president. When the same question was asked one month later that number had grown to 82.5%. In both surveys 95% of Saenuri supporters expected President-elect Park to do well. While in the first survey a plurality (48.7%) of Democratic United Party (DUP) supporters expected her to perform well, one month later that number had risen to 69.1%.

The prevailing optimism is best illustrated in attitudes on the outlook for the national economy, as shown in Figure 1. Koreans have remained optimistic on the national economy despite repeated cuts in growth forecasts, but that optimism hit new highs following Ms. Park’s victory. While 49.8% rated the outlook as positive on the day of the election, by December 23 that percentage stood at 57.5%, a 7.7pp increase. From December 19 (election day) through January 18, the average stood at 58.6%. As a means of comparison, that average was 50.3% in October and 47.2% in November.

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1 Survey conducted Dec. 21-23.
2 Survey conducted Jan. 27-29.
However, the numbers on the outlook for the personal financial prospects of South Koreans adds a small pinch of salt to the widely reported optimism. While 56.4% were optimistic about their future financial prospects on election day, that number barely budged in the days following the election. While optimism regarding the national economy rose 7.7pp, optimism on one’s personal financial outlook remained virtually unchanged over the same period. This suggests a potentially troublesome undertone for the incoming Park administration.

One of the core issues of the election was the disconnect between the growth of the national economy and growth in personal wages (i.e. economic distribution). It was precisely this disconnect that drove the calls for economic democratization and the redistribution of wealth. A recent report by the Bank of Korea brings this into sharp relief. The report specifically notes an increasing gap between the growth in corporate operating profits and the growth in wages. While that gap was 1pp in the 1990s, it now stands at 3pp. This can have a huge impact over twenty years due to the compounding effect. For example, a business experiencing a steady 3% annual growth for twenty years would see an 81% increase in its operating profits. Meanwhile, a worker experiencing 1% annual growth in wages would see a 22% increase in wages over the same period.

The fact that optimism did not rise for one’s personal financial outlook suggests that the public doubts the ability of Ms. Park to carry out reforms of the country’s economic distribution system. This could prove problematic as her presidency wears on and pressure builds for more thorough reforms. If the nation’s top corporations continue to post huge quarterly profits, even as average Koreans struggle with household debt and underemployment, the situation could become critical. However, one potential positive for the incoming administration is that the demand for economic democratization and the

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3 There were no results for Dec. 24.
redistribution of wealth has declined over the past two months. Job creation has moved to the fore once again (Figure 2), and with lower growth forecasts for the foreseeable future the emphasis placed on job creation will continue to grow, while the emphasis on economic democratization should fade.

**Figure 2**

**Most Salient Issues to the Korean Public**

Because the electorate was highly divided during the election, with 48% voting for Ms. Park’s opponent, Moon Jae-In, President-elect Park’s grace period will be significantly shortened. With high optimism on the future of the national economy and the increasing importance of job creation, and thus economic growth, it may not take a clear economic downturn for her grace period to evaporate. Instead, even perceived stagnation may bring frustration to the surface, embattling her presidency before the first year is out. Of course, this would not be something new—President Lee was in bunker mode before completing his first six months in office, albeit for very different reasons.

**DUP in Chaos**

The defeat of Moon Jae-In brought an end to the DUP’s dismal election cycle. Not only did it lose an election many tipped it to win in April, it was then soundly defeated in the presidential election. Mr. Moon stepped down as party leader, and the DUP is now going through the post-election routine. It has apologized to the nation, promised thorough introspection, and to not let the people down again. Of course, the party made the same promises in April and little changed. The DUP is now in crisis and there is very little light at the end of that tunnel. Moreover, it has taken a beating in the polls (Figure 3).
On the day of the election, a mere 0.7pp separated the two parties in the polls. However, following the election results a chasm quickly opened, with the Saenuri Party consistently holding a 15pp lead. But this is not the worst of the news for the DUP. The party now trails by more than 10pp in being seen as the party most capable of handling each of the most important issues for the nation. It has performed particularly poorly on job creation, the nation’s most important issue (Figure 4).

Moreover, on economic democratization, the second most important issue, that gap is 16.8pp, and on the issue of South-North relations—an issue it was seen as more capable of handling
in September—the DUP now trails the Saenuri Party by 25.6pp. Clearly, the collapse of support for the DUP has been swift and complete. But the final blow to a party on the ledge may be in the offing.

**The Secret Transcript**

One more thread running through the chaos of the DUP is that of former president, Roh Moo-Hyun. In early October 2012, a Saenuri lawmaker stated that there was a secret transcript of a conversation between Roh Moo-Hyun and Kim Jong-II about the Northern Limit Line (NLL) which took place at the 2007 inter-Korean summit. The lawmaker went on to say that this transcript recorded President Roh as stating that South Korea would not insist upon the NLL.

When this was initially reported, the DUP unequivocally stated that such a transcript did not exist. However, its existence was later confirmed and the DUP was forced to backpedal. The story went from, ‘The transcript does not exist and no such conversation ever took place,’ to maintaining that such a transcript was “restricted access”. Thus, to open the transcript would require a two-thirds vote in the National Assembly plus an order from a judge of the high court. However, prosecutors have since deemed that these transcripts are public record and are currently looking through them as part of legal disputes that arose among lawmakers as the existence of the transcripts was debated.

At some point the contents of this transcript will emerge, and if the claim that President Roh made such statements is proven true, it will likely be the catalyst for the dissolution of the DUP and it reforming under a new name. In fact, the party is likely waiting to take this step for just this reason. Reforming the party only to be greeted by a brand new scandal is certainly not an auspicious beginning.

**Foreign Relations**

While Northeast Asia continues to be stable that stability has been threatened on several fronts. Japan and China continue to squabble over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands; South Korea and Japan continue to disagree on the Dokdo islets, comfort women, and history textbooks; and North Korea has recently ramped up its rhetoric and may very well have conducted its third nuclear test by the time this report is issued. While all hope that cooler heads prevail, the chances for miscalculation have grown. Navigating these increasingly complex relationships will be a significant challenge over the next five years.

Due to increasing tensions, South Koreans were asked about the favorability and influence on global affairs of the four main players. For each question a 0 to 10 scale was used, with 0 representing ‘no favorability’ and ‘no influence’, respectively, and the mean scores were then calculated. As shown in Figure 5, the United States was the most favored, and Japan was viewed more favorably than North Korea.

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4 From the survey conducted Jan. 3-5.
When it came to influence on global affairs, the United States was seen as the most influential, followed by China, Japan, and North Korea. Interestingly, the mean scores for three of the four countries were higher than their favorability ratings. The only country which decreased was North Korea. It is somewhat surprising to see South Koreans put the role of North Korea into a seemingly global perspective. The reality is that North Korea has the potential to have a very large, very negative influence on global affairs, but in most corners of the world it is seen as isolated and unimportant.

Respondents were also asked about relations between these countries, excluding North Korea (Figure 6). It is no surprise that ROK-U.S. relations are seen as highly cooperative and ROK-Japan relations as highly competitive. But the relationship dynamics between Korea, the United States, and China put Korea in a potentially problematic position. On one hand, the United States is South Korea’s main security partner and on the other China is its main trade partner. Handling these relationships effectively will be a primary challenge for President-elect Park.

Confidence in Institutions

When respondents were asked in August 2012 about confidence in institutions, there were two clear results: the public had the most confidence in the military and the least confidence in the National Assembly. Neither of those result changed. In fact, the National Assembly was the only institute in which less than 10% of respondents expressed confidence, with 22.5% citing “0 confidence”. The full results can be seen in Table 1.

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5 From the survey conducted Dec. 28-30.
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<th>Institution</th>
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This report marks the first time that confidence in the judiciary was measured, and as shown it ranks second to last. While this can be partially explained by the fact that historically the courts were not seen as impartial due to their involvement with military regimes, there are also powerful explanatory variables that are more recent.

Throughout the campaign President-elect Park stressed that laws should apply equally to all South Koreans. On one hand this refers to the rich and powerful receiving light sentences by the courts or pardons by presidents. On the other, it refers to some of the heinous crimes that have caught headlines over the past year in Korea. In several of those cases it has come to light that the perpetrators have committed similar crimes previously, but for a variety of bad reasons were given light or even suspended sentences. The most common reason was that the perpetrator was either old or drunk (or both) at the time of committing the original crime. Later, that same perpetrator would commit a similar crime. When this came out the public was obviously outraged, and since then there has been a concerted move to ensure that punishments do indeed fit the crimes. That the judiciary has failed to protect the public—and in many cases children—from violent criminals will not soon be forgotten.
Review of President Lee’s Performance

The presidency of Lee Myung-Bak has not been easy. While no Korean president’s tenure has ever gone smoothly, President Lee’s was especially rocky considering that he was already embattled four months into his term. He then had to navigate the global economic crisis, two deadly North Korean provocations, and a leadership change in North Korea.

Figure 7

Presidential Approval Rating

![Presidential Approval Rating Graph]

Over the past year, President Lee’s approval rating has fluctuated around the 30% mark (Figure 7), but this has been solely driven by loyal supporters rather than by any kind of coalition. As his term ends, respondents were asked to rank President Lee’s performance on the issues most important to the nation. On economic growth President Lee was rated poorly—just 20.0% approved of his handling of the economy. On this, there was a serious divide among partisans, but that is not to say that one party held a positive view and one a negative—there were just different degrees of negative. While 31.2% of Saenuri supporters approved of President Lee’s handling of the economy, only 9.2% of DUP supporters agreed.

President Lee fared only slightly better on South-North relations. Overall, 28.7% approved of his handling of this issue, but once again there was a wide divide among partisans. While 46.8% of Saenuri supporters approved of his handling of this issue, only 14.3% of DUP supporters agreed.

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6 Survey conducted January 9-11.
As President Lee leaves office, he will finish with roughly 30% approval. This is certainly not a high mark, but it is not out of the norm for past presidents. Of the previous three presidents, Kim Dae-Jung finished his term with the highest approval—approximately 31%.

**Prostitution**

A new social debate came to the fore in January when a district court judge questioned the constitutionality of the 2004 law criminalizing prostitution. The premise is that criminal punishment of both the sellers and purchasers of sex may violate the rights of adult individuals to self-determination. At the time of writing this report, no final decision had been reached.

While the review continues, the Korean public has reached broad agreement on the effectiveness of the 2004 law—71.9% think that the law has been ineffective in dealing with the sex industry over the past nine years. Moreover, there was only a small gender gap on this with 73.4% of men and 70.4% of women agreeing. However, there was wide variance when viewed by age cohorts.

**Figure 8**

2004 Law as Ineffective

Among those in their 20s, 82.5% stated that the law had been ineffective versus 57.0% of those in their 60s or older. It should be noted that 23.6% of the oldest cohort stated that they did not know if the law had been effective, while less than 8% of every other cohort stated the same. Regardless, this variation touches upon part of the larger debate currently taking place about the consequences of the law. Namely, that it has driven the sex industry increasingly underground and online. The variation across cohorts may be a reflection of this in that older Koreans remember the days of red light districts and now that they are largely gone, the assumption is that the law has been somewhat effective. However, younger Koreans are likely aware of how the industry has changed.

While Koreans agree on the ineffectiveness of the law, this says little about support for the law itself. On that, Koreans stand divided. When asked if women caught selling sex should be punished 47.8% were in support while 46.0% opposed. This result is well within the 3.1% margin of error for the survey. However, unlike results regarding the effectiveness of the law,

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7 From the survey conducted January 12-24.
there was a significant gender gap. Women (54.8%) were much more likely to support punishing women caught working as prostitutes than were men (40.6%), shown in Figure 9.

![Gender Gap](image)

However, the divide does not end there. Another part of this debate is whether prostitution should be recognized as a profession for those who willingly enter the industry. Some of the women who have willingly entered prostitution have pushed for this, saying that such recognition would give them better access to health care and law enforcement protection. The Korean public is divided. While 48.7% supported recognizing it as a profession, 45.3% opposed such recognition. Once again, there was a wide divide based on gender with 59.7% of men supporting and only 38.0% of women agreeing.

Recognizing prostitution as a profession would certainly have important implications for the South Korean government, as it would allow them to regulate and tax the industry which, according to one 2007 report, was equal to 1.1% of GDP. Clearly, the upcoming decision could have important consequences for South Korea. But there is one thing on which a clear majority agrees: the law as it now exists and is enforced has done little to curb the industry.

**Conclusion**

Optimism is indeed high as President-elect Park prepares to assume office. However, whether that optimism is tempered by realistic expectations remains to be seen. With the challenges that she faces, there are certain to be less-than-optimum outcomes on a range of issues, but this is the nature of leadership in any democracy. The real question is how the South Korean public will react to those outcomes in light of the optimism with which she takes office. Ongoing tensions in the region will continue to pose challenges for her administration, with a North Korean nuclear test topping the bill. However, given recent history it should not be expected that this will strongly sway South Korean public opinion.

Given the tenor of the campaign, the real pressure will come on delivering on her campaign pledges on the domestic front. Those pledges were considerable, but thus far it seems she is intent on making good. If she does not, the 48% of the electorate which voted for Moon Jae-In will become more vocal, setting the stage for a tense five-year term.