

# Youth Dynamics: Shaping South Korea's Political Landscape



This global electoral year, South Korea will head to the polls in April to elect their 22nd National Assembly. Key points each election season, which occurs every 4 years, invariably include "youth politics" and "young voters." Korean youth voters, particularly those in the 2030 age demographic, constitute approximately 31.1% of the electorate, with more than half being "swing voters" who do not clearly align with or support a specific political party.[1] Given the entrenched two-party system in Korea, capturing these swing voter-type young constituents is a primary concern for both political factions. However, youth political representatives, capable of most directly conveying and reflecting their perspectives and voices, ranks among the lowest globally.

According to a 2023 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) survey, only about 3.7% of Members of Parliament (MPs) are 40 years old or younger, placing Korea 142nd out of 150 countries.[2] The opportunity for youth to present their perspectives on transitional challenges and the space for them to address issues they face are seriously limited. This lack of political representation for youth naturally reduces young people's political efficacy and willingness to participate, leading to a loss of dynamism. Despite

the economic scale of South Korea, such as GDP, having been ranked at the level of developed nations, this serves as an indication that politics remains mired in an outdated system.

The low political representation of youth in Korean society, along with the political apathy among young people, has been constantly raised as an issue, and there is a broad consensus on its significance. Fortunately, efforts to address this problem through institutional reforms and social movements have been continuously made, achieving some success and progress. In 2019, a significant amendment to the election law was passed, which played a crucial role in enhancing the political participation of young people by lowering the legal voting age from 19 to 18.[3] Before then, South Korea was the only OECD country with a legal voting age of over 19. The movement to lower the voting age initially began in 2002, taking almost 18 years to achieve its goal. The campaign started with the first mock voting involving teenagers in Seoul during the 2002 presidential election, followed by thousands of teenagers submitting a legislative petition in 2004 to lower the voting age to 18. Although the voting age was lowered from 20 to 19 in 2005, it was still considered high.

*In South Korea's upcoming elections, youth politics and the engagement of young voters, comprising approximately 31.1% of the electorate, are crucial. Recent reforms have lowered the voting and electoral eligibility ages, signaling progress but highlighting the ongoing need for comprehensive support systems to fully engage and empower young people in politics.*



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After years of political participation campaigns targeting youth suffrage, South Korea's National Assembly passed an election reform bill to lower the voting age to 18 in 2019. Additionally, the minimum age for running in elections was also lowered from 25 to 18 years old in 2021.

Since 1948, the electoral eligibility age has been set at 25 and has not been changed until the 21st National Assembly. It made significant progress by amending the Public Official Election Act to lower the electoral eligibility age for National Assembly members, local council members, and heads of local governments to 18. While still higher than the global average, the passage of this amendment to lower both the legal voting age and electoral eligibility represents a significant advancement in activating youth political participation in Korean society.

Despite the low political representation and participation rates among the youth sector, young people – mainly university students leading movements – have been crucial



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in generating momentum in modern Korean political history, such as amplifying the handwritten poster protest asking “How are you all doing? :안녕들하십니까”.

In 2013, a handwritten poster by an undergraduate student addressing societal issues sparked a widespread protest movement, quickly spreading across campuses and generations. This movement highlights problems like suicide and criticizes the political situation, which has seen students nationwide voicing their discontent through similar posters, a traditional form of student dissent. The movement also gained momentum in the digital realm, with significant social media engagement, indicating a powerful blend of conventional activism and online amplification.[4]

Another significant case is strongly linked to the impeachment of the president in 2017. At that time, Ewha Womans University students protested against the administration’s new degree program, leading to its withdrawal. However, their activism didn’t stop there; they continued with a sit-in demanding the school president’s resignation. This movement unintentionally revealed biased support towards an equestrian athlete, who was the daughter of Choi Soon-sil, former president Park’s adviser.[5] This discovery became a crucial link in the political scandal that ultimately led to the downfall of South Korea’s president, showcasing the students’ significant role in unveiling corruption at the highest levels of power.

South Korea’s political landscape is primarily split between two major parties, the People Power Party (PPP) and the Democratic Party.

The large parties and other minor political parties commonly share that the low political representation of youth and its disadvantageous ecosystem is significant.

Therefore, major parties give extra points or benefits to politically disadvantaged groups such as youth, women, and people with disabilities during the nomination process for general election. Despite these advantages in primaries, the absence of political training and a systematic talent development system, along with significant barriers like cost and networking, makes it challenging for many youths to even consider running. Consequently, new initiatives have emerged outside of traditional party systems to enhance young politicians’ skills and to provide additional support in their needs, such as Studio Vanzeon (since 2022).[6]

In the context of South Korea’s efforts to enhance youth involvement in the political sphere, it is imperative to recognize the necessity for more comprehensive support systems. The introduction of legislative adjustments and the emergence of youth-led movements mark significant strides toward this goal. However, to fully realize the potential of youth in politics, there must be a concerted focus on developing an environment that nurtures young political talent. This entails not only educational and mentorship opportunities but also the removal of systemic obstacles that hinder their active participation. Achieving a genuinely inclusive and dynamic political landscape demands a formal commitment to empowering youth, ensuring their voices contribute meaningfully to the national discourse, consequently leading to further representation in the government.



[4] <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-25450218>

[5] <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/south-korea-downfall-of-president-park-geun-hye-1.402381>

[6] <https://vanzeon.com/>