Fostering Trust in Government During a Pandemic: The Case of South Korea

Nathan Park

Abstract: With mass-scale testing and extensive contact-tracing, South Korea's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been among the strongest in the world. This success has often been credited to the Korean public's cultural willingness to trust their government and put up with measures that supposedly infringed on their liberties and privacy. While the trust has indeed been important, the reductive attempts to locate the source of the people's trust in Korea's Confucian heritage, homogeneous society, or deferential culture are misplaced. Contrary to the orientalist caricature, South Korea's political culture is marked by low trust in government and deep polarization along ideological lines, making it an obstacle to be overcome rather than a foundation for success. This paper will analyze the measures taken by the Moon Jae-in administration to manage the fractious politics surrounding the outbreak and foster the public trust in the government's response, and also explore the limits of such measures.

Introduction

South Korea's successful response to the coronavirus pandemic won plaudits from around the world. At one point, with a massive outbreak in the southeastern city of Daegu in late February, South Korea had the highest number of COVID-19 cases outside of China. Yet, it decisively flattened the curve while many other countries floundered, thanks in no small part to the orderly cooperation of its citizens. Korea saw no heated debate about the wisdom of mask-wearing, nor did it see any protest against the government-mandated quarantine of affected individuals (although there were protests for other reasons, to be sure). Toilet paper rolls in stores never ran out.

International observers ascribed such cooperation to the stereotypical image of compliant and homogenous Asians, deferential to authority and focused on social harmony. This orientalist caricature is contrary to fact: the South Korean public, in truth, is marked by low trust in government and in one another. As it has only been a few years since former president Park Geun-hye's impeachment, South Korean politics have been rife with unvarnished attempts to politicize the pandemic response.

Yet it is also true that the Korean society did follow the government's lead in the fight against coronavirus—not because some cultural factor made Koreans predisposed to trust their government, but because the government earned their trust. Acutely aware of the previous administration's repeated failures in the face of major disasters, the Moon Jae-in administration focused on communicating the message that his government would protect the people and followed through on the message in its actions. This posture, standing in sharp contrast to the previous administration's, led the Korean public to rally around the government's recommendations and also reward the Moon administration with an unprecedented landslide electoral victory.

This article first outlines the arguments regarding cultural factors in South Korea's successful response to the pandemic and

discusses why such arguments are fallacious by expanding on the reasons described above. This article then examines three critical junctures in Korea's journey through the pandemic: (1) the airlift of Korean nationals out of Wuhan and elsewhere; (2) the Daegu outbreak, and; (3) the socioeconomic secondary effects such as face mask distribution, online education and holding a national election. At each juncture, the South Korean government took measures designed not only to combat the disease, but also to give the public the sense that the government was doing everything it could to protect them and address their needs arising from the pandemic response. This article concludes with a look toward further challenges that the South Korean government will face in inspiring public trust, especially in relation to marginalized social groups such as LGBTQ.

The Cultural Argument Fallacy

South Korea's handling of the coronavirus pandemic has been among the world's best. While many other countries deserve commendations for their pandemic responses, South Korea's success is relatively unique in that it managed to quell a huge spike in the number of cases without resorting to a wholesale lockdown or travel ban. Unlike other success cases like those of Taiwan or New Zealand, which initially had a low number of cases that were then kept low, South Korea faced a massive outbreak event in the city of Daegu, where the secretive Shincheonji cult members spread the virus while lying to the contact tracers about the circumstances of transmission. On February 17, South Korea had a total of 30 COVID-19 cases and zero deaths; just a month later, the number of cases skyrocketed to over 8,000, with as many as 909 new cases in a single day at its peak (KCDC 2020). Yet, South Korea resisted the temptation to implement a harsh lockdown that would have severely infringed on the people's liberty and

caused significant damage to the economy. Through the redoubled efforts to trace and isolate the patients, South Korea was able to successfully flatten the curve.
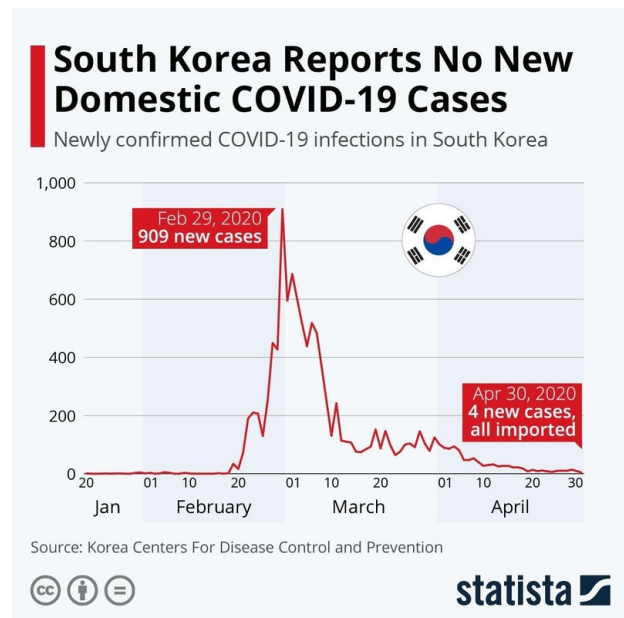
Source: Statista

Voluntary cooperation of the South Korean public was crucial in this effort. Even without a stringent lockdown, Koreans by and large followed the government's recommendations on mask wearing and social distancing. Except for a handful of exceptions involving cult members and other socially marginalized groups, those who came in contact with a carrier dutifully self-isolated. News reports praised exemplary cases of hygiene, such as a tour guide in Incheon who worked with Chinese tourists (MBC News Desk 2020). The tour guide self-isolated, wore a mask and gloves even inside her own home, and walked to clinics rather than taking public transit to get tested when symptoms appeared. Although the tour guide tested positive, all 23 people with whom she came into contact—including her mother who lived in the same house as

she—were unaffected.

To be sure, it may be fair to say the Korean public had a lower bar to clear. Unlike many other governments around the world, the Korean government was not asking the public to essentially put themselves under house arrest for months. Because Korea already had the mask-wearing culture in place, there was little controversy on the recommendation to wear masks in case of a pandemic. In fact, the commotion about the masks in Korea was more about how to buy them in the sudden spike of demand, not about whether or not to wear one. When compared to the toilet paper hoarding and the boisterous protests across the United States and Europe by those refusing to acknowledge the danger of the pandemic, it seems fair to say that the South Korean public heeded their government's suggestions better than most.

Observing South Korea's successful response, several Western thinkers and media outlets offered reductive cultural explanations, usually centered on the orientalist trope that Koreans are less individualistic, more community-oriented, and more willing to sacrifice for the greater good. Guy Sorman, for example, cited Korea's "deep-rooted sense of solidarity," or "the belief that each individual belongs to a community beyond just oneself, and a national mission to unite as a member of such a community," to explain Korea's strong response to COVID-19, adding he felt ambivalent about how such solidarity weakens individuality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). A similar idea appeared in a New York Times article analyzing South Korea's success: "Social trust is higher in South Korea than in many other countries, particularly Western democracies beset by polarization and populist backlash" (Fisher et al. 2020). Closely related to this analysis is the claim that Koreans are docile and more willing to follow the government's lead. Sung-yoon Lee claimed in an interview with the Wall Street Journal: "Most [Korean]

people willingly submit themselves to authority and few complain . . . The Confucian emphasis on respect for authority, social stability, and the good of the nation above individualism is an ameliorating factor in a time of national crisis" (Martin et al. 2020). Bruce Klingner suggested Americans would not accept South Korea's extensive contact tracing, which included monitoring CCTV footage, credit card records and cell phone GPS data (Lucas 2020, Kim, Max 2020).

These observations, however, do not stand up to closer scrutiny. First, contrary to popular imagination, South Korea is a society marked by its citizens' low trust in government and in one another. In an OECD study from 2016, only 24 percent Koreans responded they had confidence in the national government, trailing significantly behind the OECD average of 42 percent and such "independent-minded" Western countries like Canada (62 percent), Germany (55 percent), the United Kingdom (41 percent), the United States (30 percent), and France (28 percent) (OECD 2017). Similarly, in an OECD study from 2014, South Korea's score for "average trust in others" was merely 0.32, trailing such "individualistic" Western societies like Norway (0.68), Sweden (0.65), the Netherlands (0.53), Canada (0.44), the United States (0.41) and the United Kingdom (0.37) (OECD 2018).

South Korea also had no shortage of fractious politicians seeking to leverage the coronavirus epidemic for political gain. It was only three years before the outbreak that former president Park Geun-hye was impeached and removed, leaving a bitter, polarized political scene in its wake. When the pandemic began in late January, the all-important National Assembly elections were just a few months away on April 15. Recalling that Park's inept handling of the Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) epidemic of 2015 led to the erosion of her support, South Korea's conservatives mounted a full-scale attack on

Moon Jae-in administration's response to COVID-19. The main line of conservative attack was the demand to implement a travel ban against China. On February 24 as South Korea was going through the peak of its outbreak, Hwang Gyo-an, then-chairman of the conservative United Future Party, said: "We once again strongly urge a ban on travel from China. That is virtually the only available response" (Jeong et al. 2020). On the same day, JoongAng Ilbo—the right-leaning, second largest newspaper of South Korea—made the extraordinary move of putting its editorial at the top of the front page, titled: "Enact Total Ban of All Foreigners' Entry from China" (*JoongAng Ilbo* Feb. 24, 2020, p.1). These moves were a cynical attack that simultaneously red-baited and race-baited, painting Moon Jae-in as "too soft on China" while whipping up xenophobia against ethnic Chinese immigrants in South Korea.

The politics around coronavirus in South Korea became so toxic to the point that, in the middle of the pandemic, the South Korean government had to dissolve the presidential board of medical advisors. The Korean Medical Association, an interest group representing doctors in South Korea, had long been critical of the Moon administration, and opposed the expanded coverage of South Korea's national health insurance as harming doctors' interests. Just as COVID-19 was reaching its peak in South Korea in late February, Choi Dae-jip, the president of the KMA (and a founder of a fascist group that claimed to be the heir of the groups that massacred civilians during the Korean War) demanded the Moon administration sack the Minister of Health and Welfare and the presidential advisory panel (Kang 2020). To accommodate the KMA and protect its members from political attacks, the panel decided to voluntarily disband.

Finally, a recent survey conducted jointly by KBS, Korea Research, and SisaIN magazine, focusing specifically on the correlation between political orientation and individual participation in the social effort to combat the outbreak, strongly suggests that deference to authority has little to do with Koreans' willingness to follow their government's lead (Cheon 2020). In the survey, the researchers devised a questionnaire with 288 questions, designed to gauge the political orientation of the respondents along the lines of authoritarian tendencies, deference, collectivism, democratic citizenship, and horizontal individualism. Then the respondents were presented with ten everyday actions involving personal hygiene and social distancing measures recommended by the government, such as wearing a mask, washing hands and avoiding public transit, and were asked how often they adopt those measures in their personal lives on the scale of 1 to 4. The study found no significant correlation between the rates of compliance with such measures and political orientation. To the extent there was any correlation, there was a weak positive correlation between sanitation measures and democratic citizenship, and sanitation measures and horizontal individualism. In other words, the individualistic and democratic Koreans were more likely to be more diligent in following the government's guidance, albeit by a small margin.

Moon Jae-in Administration's Efforts to Win Popular Trust

In putting together all that has been mentioned, we are presented with a mystery. By and large, the South Korean public faithfully followed the government's recommendations to respond to the pandemic. The KBS/Korea Research/SisaIN survey suggests that an individual's political orientation makes no significant difference in the rate of compliance with the government-recommended personal hygiene measures. Indeed, South Korea is a society marked with deep mistrust of the

government and fellow citizens. Throughout the coronavirus outbreak, there were constant attempts to politicize the disease response from the conservative opposition—so much so that the attempts nearly derailed the scientific response when the presidential advisory board disbanded under pressure. At least through the peak of the outbreak for South Korea, there was no discernible "rally around the flag" effect for Moon Jae-in: in the Gallup Korea weekly survey, Moon's approval rating in all of February and the first week of March fluctuated at around 44 percent, remaining constant from the pre-outbreak approval rating (Gallup Korea 2020). How did the government in a society that does not trust it manage to extract such a robust response from the public?

I believe the intuitive answer is that the government earned their trust. By seeing the fall of the Park Geun-hye administration, the Moon Jae-in administration was acutely aware of the importance of gaining public trust, especially in matters where the government is expected to protect the public's health and safety. Seeing the potential of COVID-19 to undermine the support for the government, the Moon administration strongly focused on measures to earn the public trust, demonstrating its commitment to protect the public. In an interview with France 24, Korea's Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha provided a helpful view into the Moon administration's mindset in responding to the pandemic:

> You may know that in 2014, we had a terrible ferry boat accident where we lost 304 lives in the midst of a very inept response from the government at the time, and that has been a collective trauma to all Korean people. And then in the following year 2015, we had a MERS outbreak that lasted for about three months. It didn't affect that many people, but was very highly fatal. And I think the government's reaction then was also initially very intransparent and dismissive. It came

around, responded and contained. So this government has been very determined to be prepared when disaster strikes. We may not be able to prevent disasters from striking, but we can do a lot to prepare so that we can minimize the human suffering and contain the socioeconomic consequences (Perelman 2020).

Kang's reference to the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster in the same breath as the 2015 MERS epidemic is worth noting. On April 16, 2014, a ferry bound to the southern island of Jeju-do capsized, killing 304 passengers aboard—most of whom were students from a single high school on a field trip. The live telecast of the shocking image of the overturned ship, slowly sinking with hundreds of children in it while the outmatched rescue team could only watch helplessly, traumatized the Korean public like few other disasters have. Meanwhile, then-president Park Geun-hye was missing in action, appearing at the disaster response center seven hours after the news broke and asking questions that clearly indicated she did not understand the severity of the situation. At the time, the Park administration's incompetent response to the Sewol ferry disaster was seen as a violation of the most fundamental compact between the government and the people: that the government will protect the people (Choe 2014). This was a moment that signaled the beginning of the end for the Park administration, culminating in her impeachment and imprisonment in 2017.

Hankyoreh 21 cover headline: "Is This a Nation?"

I believe that the lessons learned from the Park administration's failure drove the response by the Moon administration. At each key juncture of the pandemic's progression, the Moon administration endeavored to instill in the public the sense that the government was doing everything it could possibly do to protect them and was attuned to their needs during the pandemic. In particular, three key moments stand out: (1) the effort to bring Koreans home from the affected areas, including Wuhan, China; (2) the all-out push in the Daegu Shincheonji outbreak, and; (3) second-order relief programs such as mask distribution and online schooling, as well as holding the national election for South Korea's legislature. The public trust earned through these actions helped not only with the public's response to the pandemic, but also with the Moon administration's political fortune.

Critical Moment 1: Bringing Koreans Home

When the COVID-19 outbreak began in the Hubei Province of China, there were approximately 800 South Korean nationals in the province. When China began its lockdown of the Hubei Province, the Koreans in the area were stranded. On January 28, the South Korean government announced it would send four charter planes to evacuate Wuhan and Hubei Province. By February 1, 701 Korean nationals returned to Korea via two charter flights. Their arrival to Incheon Airport, and the motorcade that escorted them to the designated quarantine facility, was telecast live with an air of solemn ceremony. Around the same time, Moon Jae-in held a cabinet meeting on live television, emphasizing fast and transparent communication of information. This episode, in the early stages of the pandemic before large domestic clusters began to appear in Korea, set the tone for how the Moon Jae-in administration would respond to the pandemic.

Korean nationals from Wuhan arrive at Incheon International Airport via charter flight. Source.

The evacuation of Wuhan left a strong impression in the minds of the Korean public. Living in the shadow of a war virtually for their nation's entire existence, South Koreans have regarded a country's ability to evacuate their citizens from dangerous areas as an important indicator of the country's status. Koreans, and especially Seoul residents, have always looked out for the surefire sign that the second Korean War was afoot—that the Americans were leaving the country (Deloitte 2017). The United States' near-mythical commitment of safely bringing every last American home loomed large in the minds of Koreans, who faulted their own government for failing to live up to that standard. One prominent example occurred in late 2016 under the Park Geun-hye administration, when the news broke that South Korea's consulate in Mexico did little to help a Korean national who claimed she was wrongfully imprisoned for eight months based on a false charge of sex trafficking (Ryu 2016). The consul, who did not speak Spanish, gave incorrect legal advice to the woman, who eventually served more than three years of prison time before the Mexican judiciary exonerated her.

In Korea's first major public display of the governmental action in the face of the pandemic, the Moon administration seemed determined to avoid the Park administration's missteps. Early in the outbreak when South Korea only had three cases of coronavirus, Moon publicly remarked to the presidential aides that the Blue House must be the "control tower" that provides timely and comprehensive directions in managing crisis situations both domestic and abroad (Choe 2020). This remark was clearly made to serve as a contrast to a statement by Kim Jang-su, the chair of the National Security Council under the Park administration who infamously claimed after the Sewol ferry disaster that "the Blue House is not the control tower for disasters" (*Kyunghyang Shinmun* Apr. 23, 2014). Commenting on the evacuation, Choi Deok-gi,

president of Hubei Province's Korean Society, said: "we felt the presence of our nation as we saw everyone who endeavored for the evacuation" (Cha 2020). Choi's remark reads like a response to the headline in the aftermath of the Sewol ferry disaster – "Is This a Nation?", with a tragic picture of the overturned ship (Jeong et al. 2014).

The evacuation of Korean nationals around the world continued apace, with chartered flights bringing Koreans out of Cuba, Kenya, Sudan, India, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Iran, India, and beyond. To retrieve the seven Korean nationals aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked at the port of Yokohama—the ship that became notorious for becoming a floating petri dish for the coronavirus—the Korean government sent the presidential plane. By late May, the Korean government brought home more than 30,000 Korean nationals from 103 countries around the world (Im 2020).

Critical Moment 2: The Daegu Outbreak

On February 10, Moon Jae-in seemed to issue a declaration of victory, commenting: "At least in our country so far, the novel coronavirus is not a serious disease and the fatality rate is not high" (Park, Jeong-yeop 2020). It was a misstep that would come back to haunt Moon, as the massive outbreak in Daegu would make South Korea the greatest epicenter of COVID-19 outside of China by the end of the same month. On February 17, there were only 30 coronavirus patients in South Korea. But the situation took a dramatic turn for the worse with the diagnosis of the 31st patient on February 18.

Patient 31 was a member of a quasi-Christian cult called Shincheonji. Founded in 1984, Shincheonji (whose official name is Shinchonji, Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony) means "new heaven and earth," a reference to Revelation. Its founder

Lee Man-hee claims to be the second coming of Jesus who is to establish the "new spiritual Israel" at the end of the world (Bell 2017). The cult is estimated to have approximately 240,000 followers and claims to have branches in 29 countries in addition to South Korea. Shincheonji's secretive ways seem almost designed to facilitate transmission of the virus. According to Shin Hyeon-uk, a pastor who formerly belonged to the cult, Shincheonji believes in "deceptive proselytizing," approaching potential converts without disclosing their denomination (Kim, Myeong-il 2020). Shincheonji has inculcated its members to cover their tracks, providing a pre-arranged set of answers to give when anyone asks if they belong to the cult. Often, even family members are in the dark about whether someone is a Shincheonji follower. What is more, Shincheonji teaches illness is a sin, encouraging its followers to suffer through diseases to attend services in which they sit closely together, breathing in droplets as the devoted repeatedly amen in unison.

Patient 31, following the Shincheonji practice, became a super-spreader. Although Patient Number 31 ran a high fever, she attended two Shincheonji services which held more than a thousand worshippers each, in addition to attending a wedding and a conference for a pyramid scheme (Yu 2020). She visited a clinic after being involved in a minor traffic accident but ignored the repeated recommendations by the doctors to receive testing for COVID-19. In other cases, a self-identified Shincheonji follower who came to a hospital complaining of a high fever ran off during examination, when the doctors informed her that she might be quarantined (Kim, Y. 2020). A daughter who underwent surgery to donate her liver to her mother for transplant belatedly admitted she belonged to Shincheonji when her fever would not drop after the surgery (Park, Jun 2020). (Both cases led to a temporary shutdown of the hospitals involved, reducing the number of hospital beds that were critically needed.)

Ironically, one of the Daegu city officials in charge of infectious disease control was revealed to be a Shincheonji cultist only after a diagnosis confirmed he was infected with coronavirus (Lee, E. 2020).

Just two weeks after Patient 31 appeared on February 18, the number of cumulative cases exploded by 200 times to more than 6,000 by March 5, making South Korea the largest outbreak of COVID-19 outside of China at the time. (KCDC 2020). Moon faced a potentially severe political consequence, as conservatives made hay with his premature declaration, as well as the fact that Moon was hosting a Blue House luncheon for Academy Award winner Bong Joon-ho and the crew of *Parasite* when later that day, South Korea recorded its first coronavirus fatality. There was speculation that the liberal government would lock down the notoriously conservative Daegu and let the city fend for itself (Min 2020).

It was in the response to the Daegu outbreak that South Korea's vaunted testing capacity came to shine. As soon as the first patient of COVID-19 emerged in South Korea in early January, the South Korean government convened with Korea's pharmaceutical companies to develop a mass testing scheme that allowed nearly 15,000 tests per day by the end of February (Terhune et al. 2020). (In contrast, the United States—which had its first patient on the same day as South Korea—had conducted fewer than 500 coronavirus tests total.) With extensive contact tracing paired with blanket coverage of testing, the KCDC was able to keep pace with the spread of the virus. Also crucial was a tiered treatment system—the first of its kind in the world—that assigned the patients with severe symptoms to hospitals and those with light symptoms to community treatment centers, so as not to overwhelm the medical system (Lee, Jae-chun 2020).

The South Korean government also followed through with Moon's pledge to provide

transparent and timely information regarding the spread of the virus. Twice a day, the KCDC gave a live briefing on the daily status of the pandemic, including the number of new infections and notable developments, which was also posted immediately on the KCDC's website. Jeong Eun-gyeong, the head of KCDC who handled most of the briefings early on, attained a near folk-hero status as the viewers at home could see her hair turning visibly greyer with each passing day. Such transparency did much to dispel the suspicion that the Moon administration might try to downplay the extent of the pandemic by restricting testing or under-stating the number of cases.

These efforts were successful, as South Korea flattened the curve and pushed the number of new daily cases from the peak of 909 on February 29 to fewer than a hundred by mid-March—in other words, South Korea entered and exited its worst phase of coronavirus in about a month. Most importantly, South Korea never implemented any measure that was more drastic than its regular method of test, trace and treat. Even as Korea was going through the worst of the outbreak, the Moon administration stressed that Daegu would not face any Wuhan-style lockdown, or a shelter-in-space order that would soon become commonplace throughout the United States and Europe. The people of Daegu faced no restrictions on their activities, albeit with the recommendation to wear a mask and follow social distancing guidelines, and could travel outside the city if they wanted to.

Critical Moment 3: Masks, Online Schools and Election

The Daegu outbreak was a sobering moment for South Korea at a time it was sliding into complacency about the coronavirus. As the Korean public began to take COVID-19 much more seriously, they faced potential second-order and third-order socioeconomic problems.

The National Assembly elections, just a month and a half away, still loomed large not only because of their political significance, but also because of the logistics of arranging millions of voters to cast their ballot safely. But one by one, the government handled the issues ranging from supporting agricultural producers and small businesses facing a collapse in consumer demand, providing childcare for couples working from home, controlling the movement of international visitors, and protecting the mental health of the people who had been staying home for an extended period of time. In this section, I discuss three measures of particular significance: face mask distribution, online education, and holding the National Assembly election. Like the early stages of the Daegu response, not every part of the implementation of these measures was completely smooth. Yet the Korean government persisted, and the initial public querulousness shifted towards increasing trust in the government, delivering positive results for the Moon administration.

By never resorting to a lockdown or a shelter in place order, South Korea avoided the run on everyday commodities like toilet paper, but it did face a run on one major commodity of renewed importance in times of a pandemic: face masks. Korea's demand for masks declined in mid-February when it appeared that the coronavirus was under control, then surged again by early March as the country was going through the peak of the Daegu outbreak (Kim, W. 2020). The inability to import masks from China (which was facing its own shortage) as well as the hoarding by some of Korea's distributors compounded the shortage. The media lambasted the government and public opinion soured.

The Korean government responded by essentially nationalizing the production and distribution of masks. On March 5, they issued the Mask Supply Stabilization Plan, through which the government would oversee the entire

process of production and both wholesale and retail distribution of face masks (Ministry of Strategy and Finance 2020). Specifically, the government prohibited the export of masks, and mandated the mask-producers to supply 80 percent of their production to the government at a set price. The publicly procured masks were distributed solely to local pharmacies to control the distribution. At each retail pharmacy, the sale was limited to two per person. Each customer could purchase the masks once a week, on the specific day of the week designated by the year of birth. (For example, those born on a year ending in 1 or 6 could be allowed to purchase the mask on Mondays.) Each customer would have to present identification to prevent multiple purchases.

The rough-and-tumble implementation of this plan should dispel any mistaken notion that Koreans are unselfish and order-oriented communitarians. The producers revolted, with some of them claiming they would stop producing masks rather than sell them at a loss (Lee, Jin 2020). They only resumed production after further negotiation with the government. The pharmacies that sold the masks were overwhelmed with the additional task of checking IDs and ensuring customers lined up and were forced to sell the masks that earned them little profit. Some of the customers got into fisticuffs out of frustration at the prospect of leaving empty-handed after waiting in long lines. However, after several weeks of adjustment, the public came to trust the distribution system to have masks on hand when they were needed. The government also provided a smartphone app to show the real time inventory of masks at various pharmacies. Within a month, the mask supply stabilized, and there were no more long lines at pharmacies.

Schooling was another major issue. The pandemic began during the public schools' winter break, as the South Korean school year begins in March. As the outbreak continued

through early March, the government pushed back the schools' opening several times. The government opened new cable TV channels for each grade level and offered lessons over television, but the unidirectional lecture was not an adequate substitute. In the minds of the Korean public, infamous for their focus on education, anxiety began to build: would their children's education be disrupted this year? How would, for example, the rising seniors cope with the new schedule and prepare for the all-important college entrance exam later in the year?

To quell the concerns about a major disruption, the government pushed for online classes by building an interactive platform for every classroom in Korea so that the students can virtually meet with their teacher and classmates. To achieve this, the Ministry of Education converted a pilot program that was designed to host 2,000 simultaneous connections to a national online infrastructure that could host all 3 million public students in South Korea—an endeavor that was described as "converting a sailboat into an aircraft carrier" (Jo 2020). With around-the-clock support from Microsoft and LG CNS, the Ministry of Education completed this process in two weeks, allowing for the "online opening" of schools on April 9. Although some technical problems persisted, the online instruction served as a critical bridge for the full opening of schools, which occurred on a staggered basis from late May to early June.

Voter in Gwangju receives a temperature check prior to entering the polling site. Source.

Next came the National Assembly elections on April 15, in which South Korea elected the members for its unicameral legislature. It was a particularly important election, as throughout Moon Jae-in's term until that point, his administration could not enact its legislative agenda as their Democratic Party had the plurality but not majority in the legislature, with 123 seats out of 300. With two years remaining in Moon's single five-year term, the Assembly elections practically served as a midterm election that would either provide a renewed boost for Moon's political mandate or turn the president into an early lame duck. The logistics of having millions of voters cast their ballot amid the pandemic was a daunting problem. As late as one month before the elections, some politicians called for the elections to be postponed (Lee, M. 2020)

Ultimately, the elections proceeded, making South Korea's National Assembly elections the first national election to be held in the pandemic era. Nearly all of Korea's voting is in-person, as absentee voting had been a popular method of election-rigging by South Korea's military dictatorships prior to democratization. Having disavowed remote voting options such as the mail-in ballot, Korea undertook an elaborate process to ensure the safety of the

voting public. After having put on a mask and lined up at the polling site in a socially distanced manner, each voter could enter the site only after a temperature check did not show a fever. After entering, the voters had to clean their hands with a hand sanitizer and put on disposable gloves, provided by the polling site, then proceed to vote after an ID check. Those with a fever or respiratory symptoms were escorted to a separate voting booth, which was cleaned after each use. Those under quarantine after having been diagnosed with the virus or having come in contact with a carrier received temporary relief from their quarantine, during which they could exercise their right to vote at a designated polling site. The result was a highly successful election in terms of participation: the turnout was 66.2 percent, the highest turnout for an Assembly election since 1992—with no case of coronavirus traceable to the polling sites.

The election was also a wild success for the Moon Jae-in administration, as his Democratic Party won 180 seats out of 300 in the National Assembly, an unprecedented scale of victory even under South Korea's military dictatorship when elections were blatantly rigged. While the coronavirus response was not the only factor in play, the result was an unmistakable vote of confidence for the Moon administration's handling of the pandemic. Moon's approval rating, surveyed each week by Gallup Korea, dipped slightly in the last week of February when the Daegu outbreak reached its peak, then began taking off in the second week of March as Daegu was exiting the peak (Gallup Korea 2020). By the first week of April, a week before the election, Moon enjoyed a +20 margin in approval (56% approve, 36% disapprove); by the first week of May, Moon's approval rating was a staggering +50, with 71% approval and 21% disapproval. Among those who expressed approval of Moon, 53% responded that the leading reason was the COVID-19 response. Even among those who disapproved of Moon, only 8% responded that

the administration's pandemic response was inadequate.

Conclusion: The Limits of Earning Public Trust as a Pandemic Response

For Koreans who were feeling increasingly safe in the belief that the coronavirus episode was behind them, the Itaewon club outbreak in early May was a rude awakening. Contact tracing revealed that on May 7, a virus carrier went club-hopping in the hip Itaewon district, coming into contact with thousands of people in a matter of several hours. By May 26, the KCDC traced 255 cases of COVID-19 originating from the Itaewon club cluster, with the infection traveling as far as seven steps removed from the original patient in Itaewon. In this instance, contact tracing was particularly difficult as many of the club goers were visiting Itaewon's vibrant gay bar scene, and were less than forthcoming about their whereabouts for fear of being outed in a society where homophobia remains strong.

This essay discussed the Moon Jae-in administration's success in cultivating public trust in response to the coronavirus pandemic, delivering excellent results both in terms of public health and political gains. However, in order to caution against excessive exuberance, it must be noted that the government's efforts to win public trust were largely focused on measures that would appeal to society as a whole, such as mask distribution. When confronted with specific demographics that were much less inclined to cooperate, the contact tracing had to take on more coercive forms, such as gathering information from nearby cell towers—an intrusion on privacy conjuring the dystopian scenario feared by some observers.

That two of the largest coronavirus clusters of South Korea were the Shincheonji cultists and the gay club goers is illustrative. These were

two marginalized groups of people who, for justifiable and less-than-justifiable reasons, held long-standing mistrust of the government that could not be overcome by a series of short-term measures, however well-intended and well-executed they may have been. These clusters show that even in a country with world-leading testing and tracing capabilities led by a government that earned broad-based trust, relatively small sub-groups can derail efforts to contain the virus. Thus, to the extent that South Korea's pandemic response succeeded because Koreans trusted the government, it may be that the government so far has been fortunate not to encounter too many groups whose trust could never be won.

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Nathan Park is an attorney based in Washington D.C. practicing international litigation. Mr. Park has written articles regarding East Asian politics and economy for CNN, *the Washington Post*, *the Wall Street Journal, Foreign Policy, the Atlantic, the New York Review of Books, East Asia Forum* (Australian National University), *Responsible Statecraft* (Quincy Institute), among others.