

Income and Voting Behavior in Korean Politics: Why Do the Poor Support Conservative Political Parties?*

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The purpose of this study is to examine the determinants of the poor's political support for conservative parties in Korea. Using data from the post-election survey of the last presidential election in 2012, three competing theoretical frameworks were analyzed to identify the determinants of this support. The results of the empirical analyses demonstrate that the role of political cleavages such as regional cleavages and the North Korea cleavage, as well as critical evaluations of the progressive government model, play key roles in determining the support of the poor for the conservative Saenuri Party. Although this study concerned the Korean case, two of its findings have significant implications for comparative studies. First, political cleavages (second dimensions) are context-dependent, and second, the performance of the progressive government is important for the potential future mobilization of the poor.

Keywords: *Political Cleavage, North Korean Cleavage, Regional Cleavage, Progressive Governments, Inequality*

1. INTRODUCTION

Many have praised South Korea's (Korea's) success in achieving the difficult combination of "growth with equity" (Stiglitz, 1997: 11). However, with the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 (often called in Korea the International Monetary Fund (IMF) economic crisis), this so-called "blessing" came to an end (Wang, 2011). Indeed, important indicators of economic inequality and concentration of wealth, such as the Gini index and the decile distribution ratio, have worsened since the IMF economic crisis.¹ Accordingly, economic polarization has become a central issue of concern for Korean citizens. For instance, in a 2009 International Social Program Survey (ISSP) of Korea, more than 90% of respondents said that income differences were too large in Korea and almost 74.5% said that the tax rate for those on high incomes is too low. Also, nearly three-quarters of the citizens surveyed believed it is the government's responsibility to reduce the difference between the wealthy and the poor.

The increasing welfare concerns of citizens have made welfare politics highly prominent in recent Korean electoral politics. Welfare policies—such as free school meals for all students as a form of universal welfare—were among the most important issues of the 2011 Seoul mayoral by-election, which ended in a victory for the Democratic Party. Similarly, economic democratization was one of the most significant campaign issues of the 2012

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¹ According to a recent survey (The World Top Income Database 2015; Chang, 2015), the top 10 percent wealth share has drastically increased from 29.2% in 1995 to 44.8% in 2012. In addition, the Gini index (household disposable income) has increased from 2.7 before the IMF crisis to 3.1 in 2011 (www.index.go.kr).

National Assembly election and the 2012 presidential election (Jang, 2013: 12).

Yet, even though the platforms of conservative political parties are at odds with their economic interests, the poor² in Korea have consistently supported the conservative over the liberal Korean political parties. This phenomenon has become even more marked of late, particularly as seen in the 2012 legislative and presidential elections. According to the data this study employs (IKPS), Park Geun-hye (PGH), the candidate of the conservative Saenuri Party (SNR), garnered around two-thirds (63.79%) of the poor's support—nearly twice that gained by Moon Je-in (MJI) (33.33%), the Democratic United Party (DUP) candidate.³

The connection between the poor and support for the conservative (incumbent) party was typical during the authoritarian periods in Korean history (approximately from the 1950s to the 1980s). Voting behavior tended to lean in favor of incumbents in rural areas and in favor of the opposition in urban areas (*YeochonYado*). In fact, the efforts of authoritarian incumbents to mobilize support in rural areas, where the poor were concentrated, created a strong political base that remained intact until democratization in 1987.

More than a quarter of a century since democratization and the emergence of the left parties in the Korean parliament, almost two-thirds of the poor in Korea still support the conservative parties despite the economic policies of those parties being at odds with the poor's economic interests. This support, therefore, poses an interesting puzzle. In a successful democratized society where welfare politics have gained center stage, why do the poor support more conservative parties whose platforms are largely against their economic interests?

Scholars have addressed this puzzling phenomenon in the context of advanced democracies by investigating the conservative shift of the labor class (Houtman et al., 2012), the role of religion (Huber and Stanig, 2007, 2011; De La O and Rodden, 2006) and group identity/rural consciousness (Walsh, 2012: 106).

Little research, however, has sought to analyze this phenomenon in the context of young democracies. Specifically for Korea, only a few existing studies can be identified (Kang, 2013; Han, 2013; Lee et al., 2016). Furthermore, by being dependent upon the “class betrayal voting” framework, the few studies that do exist (Kang, 2013; Han, 2013: 89) fail to test relevant theoretical frameworks. This concept may be inappropriate here because the poor as a single category of class have never been politically mobilized in Korea.

This study aims to advance scholarship by focusing on the case of Korea, which is instructive for at least two reasons: first, because inequality worsened very quickly during the process of democratic consolidation in Korea, increasing the prominence of welfare issues in electoral politics. The Korean case enables us to test if this prominence could

² The “poor” in this study, following OECD standards, are defined as anyone whose household income is below 50% of the median household income. For specifics on the measurement of poverty, please refer to the measurement section of this paper.

³ Recent media coverage (Kyunghangsinmun, 2008/04/09) has presented the “class voting” phenomenon, in particular among the rich in the 19th legislative election of 2012. For instance, incumbent candidates swept the race with 88.5% in the upper-class, residential Tower Palace residential complex area of Kangnam-gu, while the relatively poor residential area (*Seomindongne*) showed more support for the opposition party's candidate. This interesting coverage, however, suffers from an “ecological fallacy” and even allowing for the fact that it is not an academic analysis, it does not control for many important variables such as the proportion of voters from Cholla region and Kyeongsang region, etc.

affect the poor's voting behavior based on their economic interests. Second, because the voting behavior of the poor has persistently been more conservative, even after successful democratic consolidation, and has even become more conservative in some cases, the case of Korea elucidates the rigidity of political cleavages such as regional cleavages and the North Korean cleavage that played similar roles to the second dimension in US politics. The experience of Korean electoral politics since democratization provides an excellent test case for competing theoretical models.⁴

So what may account for the seemingly irrational support of the poor for conservative parties in Korea? A key assumption in this study is that this persistent support is, in fact, not irrational, but can be better explained by taking the following factors into account: the role of political cleavages, specifically regional cleavages and the North Korea cleavage, and the poor voters' negative evaluation of progressive governments.

During the authoritarian periods in Korea before democratization, as in other new democracies, the main cleavages were along democratic–authoritarian lines (Moreno, 1999). Even after the transition to democracy, class cleavages were never politically mobilized and voters' alignments were frozen along regional lines. Further, perceptions of policy ineptitude by the progressive governments of Kim Dae-jung (DJ) and Roh Moo-hyun (MH) were prominent among the poor, thereby limiting their appreciation of the effectiveness of progressive alternatives. Under these circumstances, the poor's increased support for conservative parties is better understood as logical behavior.

To test this argument, this study employed data from the recent presidential election in 2012 produced by the Institute of Korean Political Studies (<http://www.ikps.or.kr>) (IKPS). At this point, this is the only survey data that contains several questionnaires that enable us to test competing theoretical models regarding the poor's political support for conservative parties.

This paper proceeds as follow. The next section contains the development of three different theoretical models that address the research question based on the existing literature. Section III includes a discussion of the data, variables, and measurements employed in the study and a discussion of the results of the empirical analysis follows. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of the main study findings.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Scholars of American politics have found that income has a substantial effect on voting behavior (Brooks and Brady, 1999; McCarty et al., 2006), while in the European context, scholars have traditionally focused more on the role of class as a determinant of voting behavior (Robert and Goldthorpe, 1992). According to a recent comparative study (Huber and Stanig, 2007), in many countries, relatively large numbers of the poor support right-wing parties whose platforms offer policies contrary to their economic interests. This vexing

⁴ The relevance of the Korean case does not lie in the poor's conservatism itself. The poor's persistent conservatism might give the impression that the Korea case per se is too straightforward a case with which to examine the hypothesis. However, as Huber and Stanig's (2007) comparative study well demonstrated, the low-income voter's conservative voting choice is not unique to the case of Korea. Also, the main purpose of this study is not to demonstrate the poor's conservative voting trends. Instead, this study aims at analyzing the determinants of the poor's conservative electoral choice.

phenomenon has drawn much scholarly attention (Citrin and Green, 1990; Oesch, 2008: 29), most recently in regard to the conservative shift of the labor class in Europe and of the poor (particularly the white poor) in the US (Frank, 2004). This study examines three different models that may be relevant for analyzing this phenomenon in the context of Korea: the Political Cleavage Model, the Low Information Voter Model, and the Negative Evaluation of the Progressive Governments Model.

2.1. The Political Cleavage Model

While there is no unified theory to account for the support of poor voters for right wing/conservative parties, the most prominent explanation may be the salience of second dimensions (Frank, 2004; Huber and Stanig, 2007). If such cleavages are significant for the poor, these voters may be distracted from voting based on their economic interests. It should be noted that the manifestation of such second dimensions/cleavages would be context-dependent. In US politics, the second dimension of moral conservatism has been identified as especially important for the white poor. Frank⁵ famously articulated this argument in contending that the Republican Party's success was mainly due to their successful use of a political strategy that distracted the white working class from the country's economic issues by drawing their attention to moral issues such as gay marriage and abortion. In a similar vein, a series of studies (De La O and Rodden, 2006; Scheve and Stasavage, 2006) has focused on the role of religion as the secondary dimension. In a recent comparative analysis by De La O and Rodden (2006), differences in voting behavior between secular and religious voters were largely attributed to their preferences for moral rather than economic issues. So at least for religious voters, economic issues exercised little effect on their electoral choices. Huber and Stanig's recent study (2011) provided a more nuanced analysis. They found that the mechanism enabling both rich and poor religious individuals to ally with each other was an organized religious network rather than some specific core trait of religious individuals. Thus, the distributive preferences of religious individuals are not invariant but instead vary according to institutional context.

The second dimension framework is relevant to the Korean case, in which regional cleavages and the North Korea cleavage play a similar role as political cleavages to the second dimension in the US.

Regional Cleavage

During authoritarian rule from the 1960s until democratization in 1987, the main cleavage in Korean politics was democracy vs. anti-democracy. With a founding election in 1988 (13th National Assembly election), voters realigned rapidly according to four regions: Cholla (the southwestern region), Choongchung (the center region), South Kyeongsang (south of the southeastern region), and North Kyeongsang (north of the southeastern region). In each region, one of four parties was dominant: one of the three newly formed opposition parties

⁵ Contrary to Frank's (2004) argument, Bartels (2008) presents a different story. Economic issues are still important among the white poor, but the white poor do not understand the distributive issue (Chapter 6) correctly. He presents three main reasons for the success of the Republican Party: voter's shortsightedness; voter sensitivity at all income levels to high-income growth rates; and the fact that voters' responsiveness to campaign spending rewards Republicans' advantage in fundraising (Chapter 4).

the Peace Democratic Party (PDP), Unification Democratic Party (UDP), and the New Democratic Republic Party (NDRP), or the incumbent Democratic Justice Party (DJP).⁶ The three opposition parties were created by the so-called “three Kims.” A long-time fighter for democracy during the authoritarian periods, DJ created the the PDP while his ally during the same period, Kim Young-sam (YS) was a leader of the UDP. Another opposition leader, Kim Jong-Phil (JP) a number two during the Park Chung-hee regime, created the NDRP. This cleavage remained throughout the so-called “three Kims” era from 1987 to 2002 and continues today.

The fact that such regional cleavages became dominant before class issues or other cleavages were mobilized by political parties points to the importance of the regional cleavage in Korean electoral politics. In young democracies, it is very difficult to mobilize new cleavages when previous cleavage structures are already in place (Zielinski, 2002: 54). The Korean case demonstrates clearly the rigidity of political cleavages initially structured at the founding election. Scholars of Korean electoral politics (Moon, 2005: 11) have documented that the most significant determinant of electoral choice in Korea, until the recent elections of 2012, has been regional cleavages,⁷ and that their effect lingered even after the exit of the three Kims from the Korean political arena. For instance, even in the 19th legislative election in 2012, the Saenuri Party, the successor to the Grand National Party (GNP), did not gain any seats in the opposition party’s stronghold, the Cholla region, while the Democratic United Party, the successor to the Uri Party, acquired only three of the 67 seats in the incumbent stronghold, the Kyeongsang region.

In the Korean case, regional cleavage could be an important factor in hindering the poor from casting their votes based on economic behavior. The KIPS data this paper employs reveals that the poor’s support for PGH in their North Kyeongsang political stronghold (77.51 percent) is much higher than the national average (48.83 percent). On the contrary, the same indicator in the Cholla region, a political stronghold of the opposition party, was much lower (16.44 percent) than the national average. That is, the poor’s support level for the PGH differed by a factor of five between the Cholla region and the North Kyeongsang region. Looking at the poor’s conservative electoral choices in other regions, the significance of regional cleavage becomes even clearer. The rate of the poor’s support for PGH in Seoul (the capital) and the Incheon/Kyunggi region (the metropolitan area near Seoul), and Choongchung (the central region) were 57.14% and 45.83%, respectively. That is, the rate of the poor’s support for PGH in those regions are much higher than that in Cholla region but lower than that in North Kyeongsang region.

The North Korea Cleavage and Ideological Proximity

In addition to regional cleavages, North Korea cleavages—largely related to voters’ attitudes toward the inter-Korea relationship—have held sway in Korean elections. With

⁶ For example, in the founding National Assembly election of April 1988, four parties swept their regional strongholds. The DJP earned 86.2% of seats in the North Kyeongsang region; the PDP swept 97.9% of seats in the Cholla region; the UDP garnered 62.2% of seats in the South Kyeongsang region; and the NDRP obtained 55.6% of seats in the Chungcheong region.

⁷ The Democratic Labor Party (DLP), the first leftist party that gained force after democratization, rose to become the third-largest party in the Parliament with 10 seats in the 2004 legislative election. However, the main support for the DLP was not the labor class but white-collar workers (see Kang, 2003). In particular, the poor’s support for the DLP was very weak (see Ahn and Ka, 2006: 5).

the installation of separate North and South Korean governments and the resolution of the Korean War in 1953, a staunchly anticommunist state was consolidated in South Korea. From then until democratization in 1987, an anticommunist (anti-North Korean) ideology served as the governing ideology in South Korea. In particular, the Park Chung Hee government publicly declared anticommunism to be *kuksi* [the national essence], and competition with North Korea during his period became the driving force for rapid industrialization as the foremost goal of his administration.

However, with the disappearance of the Cold War at an international level, anticommunism as a governing ideology faced dissolution. Ironically, democratization served as a catalyst for ideological conflict at the domestic level. In addition, the constant push for an engagement policy with North Korea (termed the “Sunshine Policy” by the DJ government), which had resulted in an historic South–North Korean summit, further inflamed the ideological conflict between conservative and progressive groups about inter-Korea policy. Specifically, aid to North Korea, irrespective of humanitarian or governmental considerations, became a major source of controversy.⁸

Since the progressive governments of DJ/MH, the most important factors determining ideological conflict have continued to be political rather than socioeconomic issues. As a series of studies (Kang, 2003) has shown, political factors, in particular inter-Korea relationships and anti-communism (often measured with attitude toward the National Security law) continue to be subjects of ideological conflict in Korea, while economic issues such as welfare and the Free Trade Agreement are less important to voters.

Indeed, according to KIPS data, the poor have a more negative view of North Korea than the average Korean citizen. For instance, three-quarters of the poor oppose the expansion of aid to North Korea (71.96%) and more than two-thirds of the same group (68.61%) do not agree with abolishing the National Security law, 7.46% and 7.64% higher than the national averages, respectively.

Closely related to the North Korean cleavage, another plausible explanation for the poor’s voting behavior is the ideological proximity framework. The central tenet of this perspective is straightforward. Following research by Downs (1957), voters can be expected to choose a political party whose ideological stance is closest to their own. Existing literature (Kang, 2003; Oh and Gil, 2013) on recent Korean electoral politics has pointed to the increasing relevance of the ideological proximity model as an explanation for electoral choice.⁹ If we apply this model to the poor’s political support in Korea, it indicates that this group supports conservative parties simply because they feel a closer ideological proximity with conservative politicians.

⁸ During the second progressive government (MH government), another important issue (the National Security Law) related to the North Korean cleavage swept the political scene. This law, enacted in 1948 in the name of enhancing protectionist measures against security threats from North Korea, has been abused by authoritarian governments to repress anti-authoritarian forces. Stimulated by a landslide victory in the 2004 National Assembly election, the incumbent party of the MH government (the Uri Party) actively tried to abolish the law. However, it failed due to internal conflict within the Uri Party and a ferocious reaction from the larger conservative bloc, including conservative opposition parties and conservative media outlets.

⁹ According to Oh and Gil’s (2013) analysis of the latest presidential election in 2012, all other factors being equal, if one unit increases in ideological proximity from the candidate, the probability of voters choosing this candidate increases by 5%.

Even within Korea, there is a scholarly consensus that the poor are typically more conservative than middle- and higher-income groups.¹⁰ This was reaffirmed by a recent survey (Hani, 2012/05/14) in which 28% of those who thought of themselves as members of the low-income group self-identified as conservative, while only 19.1% and 21.6% respectively, of those who considered themselves middle- or high-income, self-identified as conservative.

Based on the discussion above, it is possible to draw the following expectations. First, based on regional cleavage, that poor voters from the North Kyeongsang region, the political stronghold of the SNR, would be more likely to support the PGH, SNR's candidate. In addition, poor voters with a negative attitude toward the North Korean cleavage (the National Security law and aid to North Korea) would be more likely to support the PGH. Second, following the North Korean cleavage, the poor who have a more negative view of North Korea are more likely to support PGH and, following the ideological proximity framework, the poor who felt an ideological proximity with PGH would be more likely to support PGH.

2.2. The Negative Evaluation of Progressive Governments Model

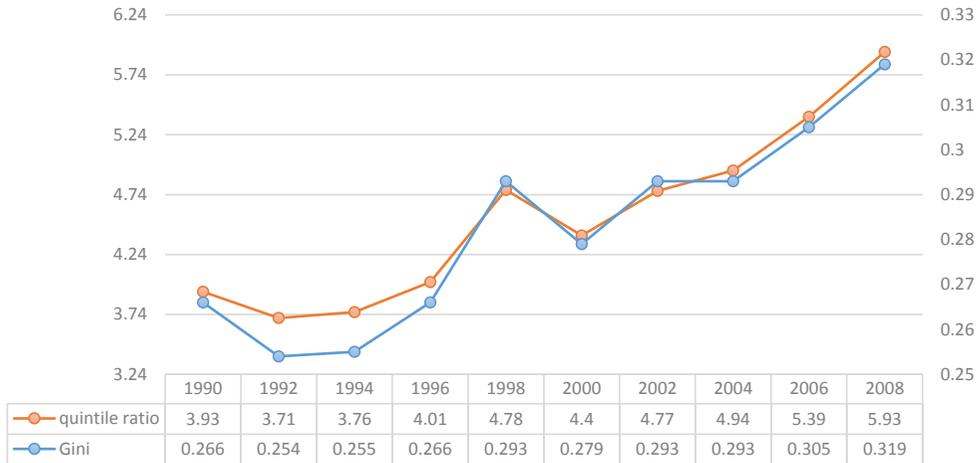
The second framework this paper adopts to better explain the poor's support for conservative parties concerns the negative evaluation of progressive governments due to the (perceived) policy ineptitude of progressive governments¹¹ at handling inequality issues. The Korean democratization process might best be characterized in terms of its paradoxical outcomes. Although the Korean case represents one of the most successful democratic consolidations, at least in terms of electoral democracy,¹² Korea's successful process of democratic consolidation has engendered rapidly rising inequality and economic and social polarization. In particular, during the period of the progressive governments, all major indicators measuring inequality and poverty rose. Figure 1, for instance, demonstrates income inequality (Gini index) and the quintile share ratio from 1990 to 2008 (the last year of the MH government).

Before the IMF crisis, Korean society had maintained a modest level of inequality and economic polarization. But during the IMF crisis and onwards, the degree of inequality began to increase drastically and continued to grow during the two progressive governments

¹⁰ According to Kang's (2003, 2013) studies, the lower class is more likely to place social and cultural values above economic issues. Accordingly, they demonstrate a conservative attitude in the related areas such as inter-Korea relations, relationship with foreign powers like the Korea-US alliance, and law and order.

¹¹ Here, "progressive governments" refers to DJ government (people's government) and the MH government (participatory government). Even if the YS government was the first civilian government since the Jang Myun administration in 1960, it was only able to take power through forging a coalition with the authoritarian bloc. Ideologically, the YS government is considered a conservative government. This study, therefore, identifies two genuine civilian administrations as progressive governments compared to other conservative governments.

¹² A recent study (Hahm, 2008) praises it as "Miraculous Korean Democracy." After the two-turnover test, at this point, there is a consensus that electoral democracy in Korea is successfully consolidated. The Korean democracy did not experience "perverse institutionalization" (Hahm, 2008: 19). Many scholars also categorized Korea as one of the three liberal democracies in East Asia, along with Japan and Taiwan. As an exemplary study, see Diamond (2008).

Figure 1. Income Inequality and Income Quintile Ratio from 1990 to 2008

Source: Koh (2011) and Household Survey data (Statistics of Korea).

(1998–2008). This startling record indicates that progressive governments were “ill-equipped to protect citizens from the fallout of the IMF crisis” (Kim et al., 2011). Indeed, even though social welfare spending increased significantly during the same period, poverty reduction effects were shown to be the weakest among OECD countries in 2009.¹³

Since the primary interest of this study is to examine the poor’s political support, it might be more relevant to examine what citizens think about wherein responsibility for exacerbated inequality lies. It is possible to draw implications from one survey, even though there is no specific evidence that citizens attributed the increased inequality to the failure of government policy changes rather than structural changes. A survey by the Korea Society Opinion Institute (2006) found that during the MH administration, a little more than three-fourths (77.8%) of those surveyed said that rising inequality was due to government policy failures, while less than one-fourth (18.8%) thought it resulted more from environmental factors, such as changes in economic structures.

This negative evaluation of the MH government is more evident among the poor than the average. According to KIPS, their negative evaluation of the MH government (5.253, on an 11-point scale) is higher than that of the whole sample (5.034).¹⁴

As is well known, democracy in Korea was accomplished without a fierce historical struggle, creating a kind of “premature democracy” (Choi, 2012). Thus, a full embrace of democratic ideals by Korean citizens is still in progress, even though Korean democracy is consolidated at the electoral regime level. This, combined with the history of exceptional economic success during Park Chung Hee’s authoritarian regime, has created in Korean society a strong growth-first ethos or developmentalism (Kang, 2012: 28). Under these conditions, many citizens (the poor in particular) have begun to doubt the capabilities of

¹³ According to one study, the poverty reduction effects of Korean welfare policy were measured at 13.9% in 2009, at best one-tenth of the OECD average (Koh, 2011).

¹⁴ For more details, see the empirical strategy section below.

democracy¹⁵ and democratic governments to resolve the most salient economic issues in Korea. Those without a strong belief in the capability of democratic governments to resolve society's problems might therefore support conservative rather than progressive parties, the incumbent parties during the so-called democratic governments.

2.3. The Low-Information Voters Model

According to previous studies based on the US (Bartels; Lakeoff, 2012), the low-information voters (LIV) model is a theoretical framework that might explain the poor's political behavior. The central tenet of this framework is that electoral choice requires necessary information resources and in this regard, the poor are more likely to be information poor. In US politics, the term "low-information voters" has been used to characterize undecided voters who may vote for the Republican Party even when the party's platform is against their own interests (George, 2012). Such voting behavior is not always related to partisanship, however. Recently, Bartels (2005) presented a compelling argument that because such voters might be misinformed, they support policies (such as massive tax cuts for the rich by the Bush administration) that are at odds with their economic interests.¹⁶

The LIV framework may have implications for Korean politics. Moon's (2011) recent study found that the more political knowledge Korean voters have, the more easily they discern policy differences between parties. He argued that the unequal participation that seemed to be caused by income and education in fact resulted from information differences. Indeed, a recent interview documented that the poor in Korea are more likely than middle- or high-income groups to be information poor due to a lack of adequate resources. Similarly, according a recent media interview of the poor (Hani, 2012), it was shown that they were not able to distinguish progressive ideology from conservatism clearly. In addition, 90 percent of interviewees who live in rental housing for the low-income bracket answered that they acquired necessary political information only through TV and radio.

Briefly, the LIV model argues that the poor support conservative parties because they do not have enough information to guide them to choose parties in their own best interests.¹⁷

¹⁵ According to the Asian Barometer survey I (2001), a little less than three-quarters (71.55%) of respondents believed in democratic efficacy, agreeing with the statement "democracy is capable of solving the problems of our society." Surprisingly, citizens' belief in the efficacy of democracy actually deteriorated with the experience of democratic governments. According to the KDB 2010, only a little more than half (57.27%) of respondents had a positive evaluation of the efficacy of democracy.

¹⁶ According to him, such voter behavior is "on the basis of simple-minded and sometimes misguided considerations of self-interest" (Bartels, 2005: 21). He therefore emphasizes the role of political information, saying, "better-informed respondents were much more likely to express negative views about the 2001 tax cut" (2005: 24). See his article (Bartels, 2005: 3).

¹⁷ This study, however, does not conform to the main argument of the LIV model. First, even though some of the poor might be information-poor voters, according to the data this study uses, there is no significant relationship between income and level of political information. This study argues that the poor's behavior is not irrational. Rather, it could be better understood as rational behavior in line with the political cleavage frameworks and the negative evaluation of the progressive government.

2.4. Welfare Saliency and Conservative Poor in the 2012 Presidential Election in Korea

As mentioned earlier, welfare issues recently has become one of the most significant issues in Korean electoral politics. The 2012 presidential election this study aims at analyzing would be an exemplary case. Having lost the 2011 Seoul mayoral by-election, the incumbent GNP decided to shift its conservative platforms to more liberal policies as they attempted to reshape their old image of a party for the rich. In order to woo more voters, the GNP decided to revise its platform to include “economic democratization”¹⁸ as a key element and changed its name to the SNR. Thanks to this reform, the SNR retained a majority of seats in the 2012 legislative election. After the 2012 legislative election in April until the presidential election in December same year, the two main parties, the SNR and the DUP, competed fiercely to win ownership of the welfare issue in the presidential election.

In this presidential election, voters demonstrated a strong interest in welfare issues. First of all, according to KIPS data, a majority (51.42%) of respondents said that they believed it is necessary to focus more on welfare than economic development, a somewhat surprising result given that citizens in Korea have demonstrated a strong preference for economic development, even after democratization (Kang, 2015). Second, most respondents (86.67%) believed income disparity between high-income earners and low-income earners had widened compared to five years previously. Similarly, more than three-quarters of the respondents (79.33%) believed that conflict between same groups had escalated during the same period. Finally, most respondents agreed that high-income earners should pay more tax than they are currently paying. In sum, a persistent increase in inequality since the IMF economic crisis has contributed to the saliency of welfare issues in Korean politics, particularly in the 2012 presidential election.

However, despite this fact, the poor’s conservative voting behavior did not change in the 2012 presidential election. According to previous studies (Kang, 2013; Lee et al., 2016), the poor’s conservative behavior is more likely to result from the aging effect. Indeed, the largest group of the poor is those over 60 and the poverty rate of the elderly in Korea is the highest of the OECD countries (51.7% in 2015). However, there is a possibility that young poor voters under 60 are still more likely to demonstrate conservative voting behavior. Results in Table 1 show this. Interestingly, in the 2012 presidential election, according to the KIPS data, the proportion of voters over 60 supporting the PGH decreased more among the poor compared to the whole sample (-3.03%). However, it increased among those below 60 (+7.65). These results imply that we cannot attribute the poor’s conservative voting behavior only to the aging effects.¹⁹

¹⁸ One of the key members in the committee for this shift said the “new proposal aims at establishing a fair economy that shields small businesses and consumers from gigantic economic forces such as *chaebol*, family-owned conglomerates” (Yonhap News, 2012).

¹⁹ According to a recent survey (The National Statistics Office et al., 2015; Household financial welfare research, 2015), the poverty rate of all age groups below 60 while the poverty rate of those over 60 decreased slightly from 52.3% to 51.7%.

Table 1. Electoral Choices of the Poor—Comparison between those below and above 60

	Below Age 60		A-B	Above Age 60		C-D
	Whole Sample (A)	The Poor (B)		Whole Sample (C)	The Poor (D)	
Support PGH	50.24 (415)	57.89 (33)	+7.65	71.50 (148)	68.47 (76)	-3.03
Support MJI	48.18 (398)	40/35 (23)	-4.83	26.09 (54)	27.93 (31)	+1.84

Source: IKPS (2012).

Note: Each entry is a percentage and the number in parentheses is the number of observations; total number of observations is 826, including “Others” and “Don’t know.”

3. EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

The data used in the empirical analysis for this study was derived from KIPS, which included many specific questions about respondents’ democratic orientation and evaluation of previous governments, as well as the Lee Myung-bak (MB) administration, the incumbent at the time of the survey. The use of this data enabled us to test the competing hypotheses described above. Since the dependent variable was a categorical variable, the empirical analysis employed logit analysis. In addition, for an easy reading of the explanatory power of the main variables, the average marginal effects were calculated and reported.

To analyze the determinants of the poor’s conservative political support, this study used two different models. In the first model, empirical analysis including the poverty variable would identify the effect of economic status on the citizen’s conservative support. In the second model, it is possible to examine if theoretical expectations would hold in the analysis using only the poor subsample.

To measure the poor, this study adopts a relative approach, defining “the poor” as those whose income is below 50% of the median income.²⁰ According to household survey data in the fourth quarter of 2012,²¹ median household monthly income was 3.438 million KRW which gave around 1.70 million KRW as the breaking point for the poor. Because IKPS data does not correspond exactly to this criterion, this study defines as “the poor” those whose monthly household income is below 1.99 million won (15.75%). This is the closest point to 17.6%, the relative poverty rate of whole households in 2012.²²

3.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the citizen’s support for the PGH in the 2012 presidential election. Because the electoral race was a two-way contest between the conservative bloc and the progressive one, I created a dummy variable assigning 1 to those who chose PGH and 0 to those who support MJI.

²⁰ This is the standard approach the OECD recommends for relative poverty and has been adopted by the South Korean government (Statistics of Korea, Country’s Indicators, 2014).

²¹ http://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsList_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01#SubCont.

²² http://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsList_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01#SubCont.

3.2. Independent Variables

Political Cleavage Dimension

This paper used two main indicators to test the political cleavage dimension framework: regional cleavage and the North Korea cleavage. Measuring regional cleavage was relatively straightforward; a question from the KIPS asking for the respondent's hometown was used for this purpose. Because the regional stronghold of the incumbent party (particularly the PGH) has traditionally been the Kyeongsang region and the regional stronghold of the main opposition party is the Cholla region, both of these regions were used to measure regional cleavage. Also, given that PGH's home town is North Kyeongsang and MJJ's home town (even though he was elected as a DUP candidate) is South Kyeongsang, I included both the North and South Kyeongsang regions. Second, the North Korea cleavage was measured using two questions measuring the respondent's attitude to the National Security law and policy on North Korea. The original wording is as follows: *please state how much you agree or disagree with the following policy statements; the National Security Law should be abolished; aid to North Korea should be increased.*²³ I created an attitude variable for North Korea by multiplying the two variables above (1: most tolerant ~ 16: most strict).

To measure ideological proximity between PGH and voters, I used variables of self-reported ideology and his/her perception of PGH's ideology based on the following question: *where do you (PGH) locate your ideology.* This was measured on an 11-point scale (0: very progressive ~ 10: very conservative). I created a variable of ideological proximity by subtracting the latter from the first.

The Negative Evaluation of Progressive Governments

The KIPS included a question on citizens' evaluation of the Roh government: *to what extent do you think President Roh Moo-hyun was good at state management when he was in power.* This was measured on an 11-point scale (0: very bad ~ 10: very good). This was used to measure citizens' evaluations of progressive governments. I also recoded this from 0 (very good) to 10 (very bad) for easier interpretation of the results.

Low Information

To measure voters' level of information, three questions from the KIPS were used: *Do you know who is the prime minister of our country; do you know who is the chairman of the National Assembly; do you know the size of the national budget.* I assigned 1 to those who answered correctly and 0 to those who gave a wrong answer for each question. A variable representing political information was created by collapsing the three variables (0 for all three questions with wrong answers to 3 for all three questions with right answers). I recoded it as high information (0) to low information (3) for better understanding of the results.

3.3. Control Variables

Several important control variables were also included. As much of the economic voting literature has documented, citizens' support for the incumbent party has been associated

²³ The original coding was from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) but for easy reading of the dependent variable, I recoded it from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

with their evaluation of the country's economic conditions. I controlled for such citizen evaluations using responses to the question: *How do you evaluate the economic conditions of our country (your family) over the last five years? (1. Much better; 2. Better; 3. Neither better nor worse; 4. Worse; 5. Much worse)*. Related to this, I what(?) to control citizens' evaluation of MB, distinct from their evaluation of economic conditions. This was measured with the same scale as the variable for the Roh government (11-point scale).

As a large proportion of those in poverty in Korea are the elderly, I included age to control the generational effect. In particular, in order to examine age influence by cohort group, I created an age group variable of 'age20s', 'age30s', 'age40s', 'age50s', and 'age60sover'. I also included standard socioeconomic variables such as education and gender (male). Those who belonged to these categories were assigned 1 or 0, accordingly.

4. RESULTS

Before analyzing the empirical results, it was advisable to check for possible multicollinearity among the main variables. A correlation analysis confirmed that there are no multicollinearity issues.²⁴ Tables 2 present two models estimating the electoral determinants of voters' support for PGH/MJI (Model 1) and the poor's support for PGH/MJI (Model 2). Average and maximum marginal effects are also calculated and reported in the same tables.

Overall, results from the empirical analysis confirmed the theoretical expectation of this study: the relevance of the political cleavage model and the negative evaluation of progressive governments in Model 2.

First, with regard to the political cleavage, the regional cleavage, the Cholla variable (the political stronghold of the opposition DUP) and the North Kyeongsang variable (the political stronghold of the SNR) turned out to be statistically significant in the direction expected in Model 1. Both variables have direct and indirect effects on voters' support for PGH/MJI. Given the opposite signs of two variables, this result highlighted the regional cleavage exercise a strong countervailing effect than reinforcing effects on the poor' conservative choice.

Another variable of the political cleavages was the North Korea cleavage as measured by attitudes toward North Korea. As expected, they turned to be significant variables. Those who have a more negative view toward North Korea are more likely to support PGH/MJI. This result suggests that a quarter of a century after democratization, the North Korean issue wields a strong influence over citizens' electoral choices. Related to the North Korean cleavage, the ideological proximity framework was also statistically important but with a strong effect only on Model 1.

The so-called Low Information Voters (LIV) model failed to gain statistical support. This result seems to contradict previous findings on Korean elections (Moon, 2005; Hani, 2012). However, according to KIPS data, there is no significant relationship between political

²⁴ According to correlation analysis, the main independent variables for the three theoretical models are not significantly correlated. There is, for instance, a very weak correlation between attitudes toward North Korea and regional cleavage (Cholla and North Kyeongsang at -0.2035 and 0.0662 respectively). Also, a negative evaluation of the MH government is not correlated with regional cleavage (-0.2118 and 0.0983) or with attitudes toward North Korea (0.2263).

Table 2. Probit Analysis of Electoral Determinants of Voter's Support for PGH

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef (S.E)	Marginal Effect (Min=>Max)	Coef (S.E)	Marginal Effect (Min=>Max)
Cholla	-1.743 (0.281)***	-0.422	-2.733 (0.920)**	-0.207
North Kyeongsang	1.253 (0.314)***	0.304	2.156 (1.311)	0.163
South Kyeongsang	-0.179 (0.242)	-0.043	3.311 (1.844)	0.251
Abolish National Security Law	0.341 (0.129)**	0.066 (0.246)	1.177 (0.574)*	0.089 (0.411)
Expanding Aid to North Korea	0.350 (0.127)**	0.085 (0.253)	2.314 (0.707)**	0.175 (0.872)
Ideological Distance to PGH	0.236 (0.040)***	0.057 (0.767)	0.335 (0.181)	0.025 (0.558)
Evaluation of Roh government	-0.304 (0.053)***	-0.704 (-0.630)	-0.497 (0.222)*	-0.037 (-0.535)
Political Sophistication	-0.121 (0.114)	-0.027 (-0.089)	0.595 (0.496)	0.045 (0.097)
The Poor	0.021 (0.304)	0.005	-----	-----
Park Chung Hee best	1.109 (0.189)***	0.269	1.434 (0.801)	0.108
Evaluation of MB	0.302 (0.049)***	0.160 (0.593)	1.022 (0.290)***	0.077 (0.864)
Retro Evaluation of National Economy	0.193 (0.128)	0.046 (0.188)	0.590 (0.568)	0.044 (0.150)
Retro Evaluation of Family Economy	-0.019 (0.130)	-0.004 (-0.018)	-0.070 (0.602)	-0.000 (-0.016)
Age 30s	0.581 (0.300)	0.141	-2.775 (1.833)	-0.210
Age 40s	0.341 (0.303)	0.082	-3.439 (2.113)	-0.260
Age 50s	0.861 (0.334)**	0.208	-0.435 (2.115)	-0.033
Age 60s over	1.048 (0.407)**	0.254	0.474 (2.057)	-0.036
Education	-0.238 (0.174)	-0.057 (-0.113)	0.723 (0.792)	0.054 (0.090)
Man	-0.175 (0.195)	-0.042	-0.476 (0.929)	-0.0361
Constant	-1.721		-13.189 (5.414)	
Number of Obs	953		157	
Pseudo R-square	0.4159		0.7008	

Note: *p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001; model 1 includes the entire sample and the model includes the poor only.

Source: KIPS

sophistication and the poor with a very weak correlation (-0.0527). This is also confirmed by a chi-square test.

Finally, the last model addressed in this study was the negative evaluation of the progressive government, and it turned out to be a significant determinant of voters' support for PGH/MJI. As discussed earlier, had the progressive governments met citizens' expectations concerning policy prescriptions designed to reduce the rapidly rising inequality, citizens (especially the poor) might have had an opportunity to believe in the efficacy of progressive government. However, the opposite occurred. Though the purpose of this study was not to examine the determinants of citizens' attitudes toward democratic efficacy, a recent study (Kang, 2012) demonstrated that citizens' perceptions of inequality were significantly associated with skepticism about the efficacy of democracy. Since no study has examined the differential effect of the income quintile on Korean citizens' perceptions of democratic efficacy, such a subject would be a good focus for further research.

In Model 2 for the sample of the poor only, the main findings of Model 1 are also confirmed. Among the significant determinants are two main dimensions of the political cleavages: the regional cleavage and the North Korean cleavage. As found in Model 1, two main variables of the regional cleavage exercise a countervailing influence on voters' electoral support. Also, negative evaluation of the progressive government exercises a significant influence on the poor's support for PGH/MJI. That is, the poor from the (south) Kyeongsang region, and with a more negative view toward North Korea and a negative evaluation of the MH government are more likely to support PGH/MJI.

However, as this study expected and as has confirmed, the LIV model does not provide statistical support in explaining the poor's electoral choice. Contrary to a previous study (Kang, 2013), age does not have a significant effect on the poor's electoral support for PGH. As this study demonstrates (see also Table 1), conservative electoral choices by the poor are not confined to the elderly (over 60s).

In sum, the statistical analysis of the data pointed to the relevance of the political cleavage framework, the negative evaluation of the progressive government model, and the ideological proximity model as explanatory variables for voting behavior among the poor.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The main purpose of this study was to examine the determinants of support for conservative parties among the lower-income group in Korean society. I applied and analyzed three competing theoretical frameworks that might explain this phenomenon. The results of this empirical analysis, which utilized KIPS data, demonstrated that political cleavage dimensions such as regional cleavages and ideological cleavages relevant to North Korea, as well as the poor's critical evaluation of progressive governments, all play a key role in determining the support of the poor for Korea's conservative party (SNR)'s candidate, PGH.

Further, this study clearly demonstrated that the manifestation of the political cleavage dimension in elections is context-dependent. If moral issues and immigration issues are salient second dimensions in their respective US and European political arenas, regional cleavages and North Korea ideological cleavages are salient political cleavage dimensions distracting the poor in Korea from voting based on their economic interests. It should be noted, however, that the poor in many young democracies like Korea fail to mobilize as a class. If cleavage structures that already exist at the inception of a new democracy harden,

it is hard for a political party to mobilize a new cleavage without a major effort by the party. The differences in the voting behavior of the poor in advanced democracies and young democracies, then, stem from significant contextual differences, particularly about their different paths and sequences of modernization.²⁵

An equally important factor in understanding the voting behavior of the poor is the policy capabilities of new democratic governments in young democracies, many of which face difficult challenges in dealing with economic inequality (Fukuyama, 2011: 23). In the Korean democracy, especially, where a relatively equal distribution of wealth had been maintained until recently, the impact of rapidly rising inequality during the tenure of democratic governments was enormous. The first shift in equity occurred during the DJ government, when an unprecedented IMF economic crisis led to painful results such as massive layoffs. In the subsequent MH administration, economic disparity grew even worse. This (perceived) policy ineptitude of democratic governments may have led the poor to become skeptical about policy competence in dealing with inequality.

If the process of democratic learning did not change the political preference of the poor in Korea, are their conservative tendencies likely to change? Is there any possibility that class politics might become more prominent in the near future (Zielinski, 2002)? Such change is not impossible. In young democracies like Korea, the possible formation of new cleavages will depend on each party's various strengths in terms of ideological and organizational strategizing (Enyedi, 2005) and, more specifically, on the decisive roles of the political elite and entrepreneurs in creating new cleavages (Torcal and Mainwaring, 2003: 33).

Although this study was based on the Korean case, its findings have significant comparative implications.²⁶ First, the study suggests that the political cleavage dimensions that influence voting behavior are context-dependent. If this were so, the application of the class-voting framework to young democracies without consideration of the specific context would be questionable.²⁷ Second, the study findings indicate that the democratic government's performance is highly relevant to the poor's electoral choice. When progressive or left-leaning governments provide viable policy prescriptions that benefit the economic interests of the poor, it will enable the poor to believe in the efficacy of democracy, and vote accordingly.

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²⁵ Mainwaring and Zoco (2007) offer an interesting analysis of the causes of party system stabilization we might need to consider here. According to their analysis, what is more important is when democracy is born. The congenital difference has a long-term effect on party stabilization.

²⁶ This study has a limitation in that, due to data availability, it only analyzes the 2012 presidential election. In order to provide a more complete picture of the poor's conservative political choices, reliable survey data across time are necessary, but such data do not currently exist.

²⁷ For example, in electoral politics in Taiwan, identity issue would be the salient second dimension. For a recent analysis of the political influence of identity cleavage on the poor's voting behavior in Taiwan, see Chi (2012).

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