Generation Effects? An Empirical Analysis of the Korean National Assembly and Presidential Elections

Jinman Cho and Kihong Eom

Generation has played a role in Korean elections, especially since the democratization movement of 1987. In this article, we unify the concept of generation effects to produce two dimensions (the aging effect and the cohort effect), and examine whether these have been embodied in Korean elections. Analysis of survey data for two presidential elections and three National Assembly elections reveals that the importance of generation effects is somewhat exaggerated. For the 2002 and 2007 presidential elections we find that generation had a significant effect on the former but not on the latter. Neither aging effect nor cohort effect had a significant influence on voter choice in any of the National Assembly elections. Even in the 2002 presidential election, in which generation effects are statistically meaningful, their substantive importance is minor compared to that of ideology. We conclude that, with regard to Korean politics, debating the political implications of generation effects is premature.

KEYWORDS: Korean politics, generation, aging effect, cohort effect, multinomial logit model.

One of the major contemporary issues in Korean politics is generation. Arguments regarding anti-US sentiment and North Korea are divided along generational lines (Lee and Jung 2003). The younger generation has a negative attitude toward the United States but a positive attitude toward North Korea, whereas the attitudes of the older generation are generally the opposite. Political parties use these generational differences to consolidate their political support (Yun 2006), which may explain why Korean politics, as well as society, is known for being conflict-ridden rather than consensual. As such, Ronald Inglehart predicted that generation gaps could impede the development of politics in Korea, as the gaps among the different generations seem serious (Chosun Ilbo 1995).
The generation gap had not been a serious issue in Korea in the past, because Confucian culture, which emphasizes respect for elders, was so dominant in society. However, starting in the 1960s, the rapid industrialization process under the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee changed the culture as well as its embedded hierarchical structure. The rapid industrialization process and the dictatorship generated an age-bracket layer leading to despotism, rapid urbanization, and the disintegration of the extended family. Later, the democratization movement of the 1980s promoted Korean heterogeneity. Dissatisfied with the dictatorship, the people fought for a better democracy throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and eventually achieved liberal reforms in 1987. More recently, the Internet revolution has changed people’s thinking and modes of assembly. Individual freedom has become more highly valued. If people who share a historical experience in their youth tend to behave similarly, as scholars of generation studies argue, then these three historical experiences paved the way for generational differences and, possibly, generational conflicts in Korea (Kim 2007).

Along this line of thinking, scholars of Korean politics argue that generational differences became an important factor in determining the outcomes of Korean elections, especially after the democratization movement in 1987. The analysts point out that, in addition to ideology and regionalism, generation became a third variable to explain voting decisions (Chung 1992; Kang 2003). Accordingly, scholars have examined the existence of generation effects, as well as their causes and consequences. In general, their theories are based on the premises of Karl Mannheim’s (1952) work,1 while taking into account Ronald Inglehart’s (1977) argument on generational differences.

Despite the popularity of these theories, however, scholars in Korea have yet to reach a consensus on the concept of generation effects per se and have questioned their existence. For example, when defining generation effects, some scholars refer to “aging effect” (Kim 2007), while others refer to “period effect” (Ma 2003) or “cohort effect” (Chung and Hwang 1999; Chung 1992). As such, the assertion that generation effects are a factor in determining Korean election results becomes debatable.

The debate grows more complicated because the extant studies fail to sort out the net impact of generation on the Korean elec-