

# [***South Korea's president faces a major test in a crucial parliamentary election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BRY-Y071-DYMD-632V-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

SEOUL, South Korea — South Koreans are voting Wednesday in a [*hotly contested parliamentary election*](https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-election-hot-issues-green-onions-860cbb313a4afb3776fd87052a051c9d) that's largely seen as a referendum on conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol and a possible sign of a deepening domestic divide.

Regardless of the results, Yoon will stay in power and his major foreign policy agenda will likely continue. But a failure by his governing People Power Party to restore a parliamentary majority could make him a lame duck for the remaining three years of his single five-year term, experts say.

Since taking office in 2022, Yoon, a former top prosecutor, has been grappling with low approval ratings and a liberal opposition-controlled parliament that has limited his major policy platforms.

Pre-election surveys indicate that the liberal opposition parties will likely maintain a dominant position in the single-chamber, 300-member National Assembly. But many observers say it's still too early to determine who will win the election because many electorates are being closely fought and many moderate voters will make last-minute choices.

"What would matter to the People Power Party is whether it can become the biggest party or the second biggest party,” said Choi Jin, director of the Seoul-based Institute of Presidential Leadership. “If his party loses the elections, Yoon will find it difficult to move forward even a single step on state affairs.”

Of the 300 seats, 254 are to be elected through direct votes in local districts and the other 46 allotted by the proportion of the votes cast for the parties. Election observers say candidates in about 50 to 55 local districts are in neck-and-neck races.

Polling stations opened at 6 a.m. and will close at 6 p.m. South Korea has 44 million eligible voters, and about 31% of them, or nearly 14 million people, have already cast ballots during two-day early voting last week. It was the highest turnout of its kind in the history of South Korean parliamentary elections, according to the National Election Commission.

South Korea’s toxic conservative-liberal division deepened during the [*2022 presidential election*](https://apnews.com/article/elections-asia-presidential-elections-seoul-south-korea-3e102da44c68b0c9a4c3ecd0ecb36d24), during which Yoon and his main liberal rival Lee Jae-myung spent months demonizing each other. [*Yoon eventually beat Lee*](https://apnews.com/article/business-elections-voting-campaigns-seoul-f29dd8982b18c1f7318d579b9afc83f1) by the narrowest margin in the country’s presidential race.

Lee, now the chairman of the opposition Democratic Party, is a harsh critic of Yoon's major policies and is eying another presidential bid. He faces an array of [*corruption investigations*](https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-opposition-leader-lee-arrest-corruption-a2788076d0e6049d9cceffed939a104c) that he argues were politically motivated by Yoon's government.

There was a brief soul-searching about South Korea’s divisive ***politics*** after [*Lee was stabbed*](https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-opposition-leader-attacked-47eb0b444b1f9620704d7087d1f8ffd7) in the neck in January by a man who, according to police, tried to kill Lee to prevent him from becoming president. But as the parliamentary election approached, the rival parties began churning out abusive rhetoric and crude insults against each other.

Ruling party leader Han Dong-hoon called Lee “a criminal” and labeled his past comments as “trash." Lee's party spokesperson described Han's mouth as a “trash bin.” Han accused Lee of using a sexist remark against a female ruling party candidate.

During one of his final campaign events on Tuesday, Han argued that giving too many seats to Lee's Democratic Party will throw South Korea into political turmoil. “Tomorrow's 12 hours will determine whether the Republic of Korea will plunge into shocking chaos and despair or overcome a crisis,” Han said, using South Korea's official name.

Speaking ahead of his corruption trial at a Seoul court, Lee urged voters to punish the Yoon government, which he said has used prosecutors to suppress opponents. “I earnestly ask you to hand out your judgement on a government that betrays and goes against the people,” Lee said.

Chung Jin-young, a former dean of the Graduate School of Pan-Pacific International Studies at Kyung Hee University, predicted that the opposition parties could win a combined 150-180 seats.

“That would cause a political deadlock for the Republic of Korea for the next three years, as both the ruling and opposition parties can't pursue things unilaterally and won't likely make terms with each other,” Chung said.

Earlier this year, Yoon saw rising approval ratings over his strong push to drastically increase the number of [*medical students*](https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-doctors-walkouts-patients-explained-326632dd061fc3b004b663cc761f9016) despite vehement protests by incumbent doctors. Yoon has said he aims to create more doctors to brace for the country's rapidly aging population, but thousands of young doctors have gone on strike, saying that schools can't handle an abrupt increase in students.

The doctors' walkouts eventually left Yoon facing growing calls to find a [*compromise,*](https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-doctors-strike-president-yoon-673d7cd4fe30cec0601519ff7c4b2466) with patients and others experiencing delays of surgeries and other inconveniences. Yoon's ruling party is also struggling with rising prices of agricultural products and other goods and criticism of Yoon's personnel management style.

"President Yoon has said a priority would be given to stabilizing prices and livelihoods, but they weren’t stabilized, so I think that will be a big negative for the Yoon government during the elections,” Kim Daye, a 32-year-old Seoul resident, said.

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Associated Press writer Jiwon Song contributed to this report.

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