

Evolution of Media Discourse on Universal Basic Income in South Korea (2022-2025): A Mixed-Method Approach using Topic Modeling & Sentiment Analysis

Minkyung Kim

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1 Introduction

In recent years, South Korea has implemented a series of Universal Basic Income (UBI) pilot programmes and related policies, attracting attention in global debates on UBI [Prochazka 2025; Basic Income Earth Network 2025]. Unlike many other countries, South Korea has pursued a variety of quasi-UBI pilot programmes and UBI-like experiments that function as real-world policy trials rather than mere conceptual proposals [Basic Income Earth Network 2025]. Representative examples include the Youth Basic Income (2019), the Artist Basic Income (2021), and the Farmers’ Basic Income (2022). These programmes operate as categorically targeted cash transfers that are unconditional within defined eligibility groups. Together, they have provided South Korea with a valuable empirical context for examining the practical implementation and societal implications of UBI-like cash transfer schemes, while contributing empirical evidence to both domestic policy debates and international discussions on basic income [Widerquist 2018; Prochazka 2025]. Despite this growing body of empirical evidence, the transition from local experimentation to a national policy framework remains highly contested, as public and media narratives continue to diverge over the long-term legitimacy and implications of UBI [You and Choi 2022; Kang 2025]. Accordingly, this study examines how media discourse on UBI in South Korea has evolved between 2022 and 2025, a period marked by the shift from political proposal to active policy implementation.

1.1 Problem Statement

As these pilot programmes have transitioned from theory to practice in South Korea, they have generated substantial media attention, raising critical questions about how such policies are publicly interpreted and contested. Media discourse has frequently reflected concerns commonly associated with global UBI debates, including the perceived utopian nature of the policy, the legitimacy of “income without labor,” concerns over long-term fiscal sustainability, and skepticism regarding the responsible use of transfers by recipients [Widerquist 2018; Standing 2017; Basic Income Earth Network 2025].

However, in South Korea these debates are further intensified by entrenched political polarization. Because the primary advocate and key architect of these pilot programmes is Lee Jae-myung, leader of the Democratic Party and current president of South Korea, media discourse has become highly politicized, with UBI frequently framed through partisan lenses rather than evaluated in terms of policy design or implementation. Consequently, UBI-related policies are often characterized by labels such as “populist” or “electorally motivated,” alongside persistent concerns regarding fiscal risk. This leads to media attention that peaks during election cycles while failing to provide sustained focus on actual policy outcomes or implementation mechanics [Park 2025; The Korea Times 2025].

At the same time, the period between 2022 and 2025 represents a critical turning point in South Korea’s policy environment. During this period, UBI shifted from a largely contested political proposal to an expanding set of actively implemented programmes across multiple policy domains and local governments. This transition was further solidified by the 2025 election of Lee Jae-myung and the subsequent introduction of livelihood recovery coupons which is a quasi-UBI measure that achieved exceptionally high public uptake and satisfaction [Ministry of the Interior and Safety 2025]. Such developments highlight a growing dissonance between expanding policy institutionalization and persistently

politicized media framing. This raises a critical empirical question: has media discourse evolved to reflect the reality of policy institutionalization, or does it continue to prioritize political contestation even as UBI-related initiatives move toward large-scale implementation?

1.2 Research Question (RQ)

How has media discourse on Universal Basic Income (UBI) and related cash transfer programmes in South Korea evolved between 2022 and 2025, and how are these changes reflected in shifts in dominant topics, policy frames, and sentiment across political cycles?

2 Methodology

2.1 Policy Context and Scope

The pilot programmes in South Korea are quasi-UBI in nature but share key characteristics of Universal Basic Income, including unconditional or broadly targeted cash transfers, limited means-testing, and population-based eligibility [Basic Income Earth Network 2025]. As such, these programmes have played an important role in shaping public debate and media discourse on income support.

Major initiatives analyzed in this study include:

- Farmers’ Basic Income (농민기본소득)
- Artists’ Basic Income (예술인 기본소득)
- Youth Basic Income (청년기본소득)
- Disaster Relief Funds (재난지원금)
- Livelihood Recovery Support Funds (민생회복지원금)
- Livelihood Recovery Coupons / Vouchers (민생회복쿠폰 / 민생쿠폰)
- Safety Income (안심소득)

The analysis is limited to the 2022–2025 period, during which UBI-related cash transfer programmes were actively implemented and widely covered in Korean news media.

2.2 Data Collection

News articles were collected from BigKinds, the news big data system operated by the Korea Press Foundation [Korea Press Foundation 2025]. The dataset covers the period from January 1, 2022, to December 12, 2025. Articles were retrieved when at least one of the following policy-related keywords appeared in the article title:

‘기본소득 (Basic Income)’ OR ‘재난지원금 (Disaster Relief Funds)’ OR ‘민생회복지원금 (Livelihood Recovery Support Funds)’ OR ‘민생회복쿠폰/민생쿠폰 (Livelihood Recovery Coupons)’ OR ‘안심소득 (Safety Income)’.

These keywords were intentionally selected to capture both explicit UBI discourse and quasi-UBI pilot programmes that function as cash transfer experiments not conditional on labour participation in the South Korean policy context. Although these terms partially overlap conceptually and sometimes co-occur within the same articles, this strategy ensures broad coverage of UBI-related cash transfer discourse while acknowledging the fragmented and evolving nature of related policy debates in South Korea.

A title-level filtering strategy was employed to ensure that the collected articles were substantively focused on cash transfer policies, rather than merely referencing them incidentally within the body text. In the context of Korean news reporting, policy-related terms are frequently invoked as background information or comparative examples; limiting retrieval to articles in which such terms appear in the title therefore serves to reduce topical noise and enhances the likelihood that the policy in question constitutes the central subject of the article.

Although BigKinds provides metadata and partial textual content, the dataset includes only the first 200 characters of each article’s body. To enable full-text analysis, the complete articles were subsequently collected through web scraping from the original news outlets. During this process, a subset of articles was found to be inaccessible due to deletion, restricted access, or ongoing editorial revisions, and these items were consequently excluded from the analysis. After removing duplicate entries and excluding articles with missing or unavailable full texts, the final analytical corpus comprised 8,930 news articles.

2.3 Analysis Techniques

This study employs a mixed computational approach combining topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and statistical testing.

(1) Topic Modeling

Latent Dirichlet Allocation [Blei et al. 2003] was applied to identify dominant discourse topics within the corpus. Nouns were extracted using MeCab-based morphological analysis [Kudo 2005], and high-frequency functional words were removed. The optimal number of topics was selected based on coherence score comparisons across candidate models.

(2) Lexicon-Based Sentiment Analysis

Media sentiment toward UBI-related cash transfer policies was measured using the KNU Sentiment Lexicon [Park et al. 2018], supplemented with a custom policy-specific sentiment dictionary designed to capture:

- Policy implementation outcomes (e.g., execution, expansion, benefits)
- Perceived economic risks and fiscal concerns (e.g., burden, deficit, inflation)

To minimize framing bias, policy name components that carry inherently positive semantic connotations were excluded from the sentiment analysis. In particular, the term “Ansim” (안심), meaning “safety” or “peace of mind,” which forms part of the policy name Safety Income (안심소득), was excluded to prevent artificially inflating positive sentiment scores unrelated to substantive evaluative content.

(3) Temporal and Statistical Analysis

Sentiment scores were calculated at the article level and aggregated on a monthly basis to examine long-term trends in media discourse on UBI-related cash transfer policies.

Both Pearson and Spearman correlation tests were employed. Pearson correlation was used to assess linear trends over time. Spearman correlation was applied to detect monotonic (rank-based) trends, which are more robust to non-linear fluctuations and short-term volatility commonly observed in political media discourse.

In addition, independent-sample t-tests were conducted to compare sentiment distributions between presidential election periods and non-election periods, in order to examine whether political cycles are associated with systematic shifts in media sentiment. Presidential election periods were defined as follows:

- **2022 election period** : January 1 – June 30, 2022
(Presidential election held on March 9, 2022, in which Lee Jae-myung—widely recognized as South Korea’s most prominent UBI advocate—was not elected.)
- **2025 election period** : December 1, 2024 – June 3, 2025
(Following the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol on April 4, 2025, and the subsequent presidential election on June 3, 2025, in which Lee Jae-myung was elected.)

These election periods were selected not only because they represent moments of heightened political competition, but also because UBI-related cash transfer policies became central campaign issues during these periods. In the Korean context, UBI has been strongly politicized, largely due to Lee Jae-myung’s

role as a leading advocate who actively promoted UBI-related policies as his core electoral pledges [Lee 2021].

Moreover, Lee Jae-myung played a key role in initiating and implementing multiple UBI-related pilot programmes, including youth basic income and other local-level cash transfer experiments. As a result, presidential elections involving his candidacy are especially salient moments in which UBI discourse intensifies and becomes more explicitly framed through partisan and ideological lenses.

Thus, focusing on these periods allows the analysis to capture how media framing and sentiment toward UBI-related cash transfer policies shift under conditions of political contestation, as opposed to the more pragmatic and implementation-focused discourse observed during non-election periods.

3 Results

3.1 Topic Modeling Results

To identify dominant frames in Korean media discourse on UBI-related cash transfer policies, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was applied to the corpus. Based on coherence score comparison, a six-topic model ($K = 6$) was selected, as it provided the most interpretable and stable topic structure.

Inspection of the highest-probability keywords associated with each topic revealed six distinct and recurrent policy frames. Topics were labeled based on dominant keyword patterns reflecting political contestation, administrative implementation, policy experimentation, crisis response, and regional policy design. Accordingly, the six topics were interpreted as:

- National Politics & Election Discourse (Parties, Candidates, UBI Debate)
- Youth Basic Income Application & Administration (Gyeonggi Province)
- Urban Welfare Policy & Research (Seoul, Social Security, Experiments)
- Local Economic Recovery & Consumption Stimulus (Coupons, Budget, Livelihood)
- Disaster Relief & Recovery Support (Damage, Wildfire, Emergency Aid)
- Rural/Regional Basic Income Pilots (Depopulation, Farming Communities)

3.2 Sentiment Analysis Results

Out of the 8,930 articles, 8,810 contained at least one sentiment-bearing token, while 120 articles were classified as neutral due to the absence of matched sentiment terms.

Table 1 reports the average normalized sentiment scores by dominant topic. Here, a higher mean sentiment score indicates that articles within a topic are, on average, framed using more positively valenced policy-related language, rather than implying normative support or endorsement of the policy itself.

Overall, sentiment was more positive in topics centered on **policy implementation**, administration, and experimentation, including urban welfare policies, youth basic income administration, and rural or regional basic income pilot programmes. In contrast, **national political and electoral discourse** exhibited comparatively lower sentiment, suggesting more contested and polarized framing. The near-neutral sentiment observed in the disaster relief discourse likely stems from its inherent lexical association with negative crisis contexts—such as **'damage,' 'loss,' and 'emergency'**—rather than reflecting a normative disapproval of the policy itself.

3.3 Temporal and Event-Based Analysis

Long-Term Trends in Media Sentiment

Correlation analysis was conducted to assess long-term trends in media sentiment toward UBI-related cash transfer policies. The Pearson correlation coefficient between time and monthly sentiment was $r = 0.236$ ($\rho = 0.107$), indicating a weak positive linear association that does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This suggests that sentiment does not increase in a strictly linear manner over time.

Table 1: Topic-wise Mean Sentiment and Document Count

Topic Label	Mean Sentiment	Count
Urban Welfare Policy & Research (Seoul, Social Security, Experiments)	0.9442	887
Youth Basic Income Application & Administration (Gyeonggi)	0.8718	913
Rural / Regional Basic Income Pilots (Depopulation, Farming Communities)	0.7926	2826
Local Economic Recovery & Consumption Stimulus (Coupons, Livelihood)	0.7014	1675
Mixed	0.5208	78
National Politics & Election Discourse (Parties, Candidates, UBI Debate)	0.4940	1334
Disaster Relief & Recovery Support (Damage, Wildfire, Emergency Aid)	-0.0120	1217

In contrast, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient was $r = 0.301$ ($p = 0.038$) and statistically significant. As Spearman correlation captures monotonic rather than strictly linear relationships, this result indicates that media sentiment has generally increased over time despite short-term fluctuations and non-linear variation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while media sentiment toward UBI-related cash transfer policies does not follow a smooth linear upward trajectory, it exhibits a statistically meaningful monotonic trend toward more positive framing over the study period.

Presidential Election Period Effects

To examine whether media sentiment differed across political contexts, an independent-sample t-test was conducted comparing sentiment scores during presidential election periods and non-election periods.

The results indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t = -6.70, p < 0.001$), providing strong evidence that media sentiment differs systematically across political periods. Mean normalized sentiment during presidential election periods ($M = 0.576$) was substantially lower than during non-election periods ($M = 0.673$).

This finding suggests that media discourse on UBI-related cash transfer policies becomes less positively framed during presidential election cycles, reflecting heightened political contestation and polarized framing. In contrast, non-election periods are characterized by relatively more stable and favorable sentiment toward such policies.

Temporal and Topical Visualization

Figure 1 illustrates the temporal evolution of media sentiment toward UBI-related cash transfer policies between 2022 and 2025. Monthly sentiment scores (grey dotted line) display substantial short-term volatility, whereas the three-month moving average (solid red line) reveals a gradual upward trend over time. This pattern is consistent with the correlation analysis results, in which the Spearman correlation indicated a significant monotonic increase in sentiment despite the absence of a strong linear trend.

Two presidential election cycles are highlighted in the figure. During these periods, sentiment becomes more volatile and exhibits temporary declines, indicating intensified political contestation and polarized framing of UBI-related cash transfer policies. In contrast, non-election periods are characterized by more stable and consistently positive sentiment levels. Importantly, the three-month moving average in Figure 1 captures a distinct recovery following each election cycle, suggesting that the decline in sentiment during electoral periods is temporary, with media discourse returning to more stable levels in subsequent non-election periods.

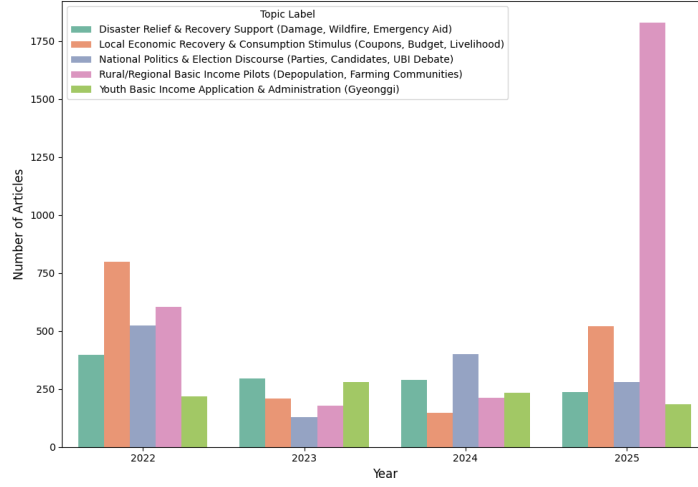


Figure 1: The Evolution of Policy Sentiment: Presidential Election Cycles and Non-Election Periods

Figure 2 presents the yearly distribution of major discourse topics identified through topic modeling. In 2022, coverage was dominated by local economic recovery and national political discourse, reflecting the legacy of pandemic-era cash transfer policies and electoral debates. In 2023 and 2024, attention shifted toward administratively grounded and regionally focused policy discussions, including youth basic income implementation and rural pilot programmes. By 2025, discourse surrounding rural and regional basic income pilots increased sharply, coinciding with renewed political attention following the presidential impeachment and subsequent election.

Overall, the figure demonstrates a gradual shift from crisis- and election-driven framing toward more sustained discussion of policy experimentation and regional implementation. Importantly, this shift does not imply the disappearance of political discourse surrounding UBI-related cash transfer policies. Rather, it reflects a rebalancing in which electoral debate increasingly coexists with discussions of policy design, administration, and localized experimentation, suggesting a broadening of the discursive space beyond electoral framing alone. Taken together with the temporal sentiment analysis, this pattern indicates that while political cycles continue to shape media attention, UBI-related cash transfer policies are increasingly discussed as ongoing and implementable policy instruments rather than solely as electoral promises.

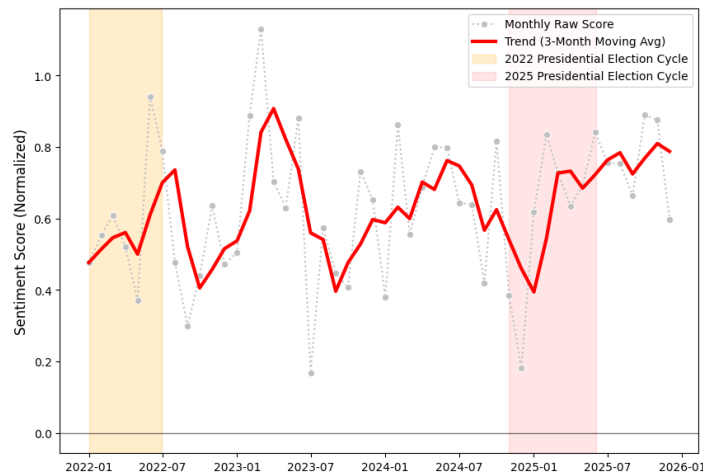


Figure 2: Yearly Shift in Major Topics: Policy Discourse Dynamics

4 Conclusion

This study shows that media discourse on UBI-related cash transfer policies in South Korea is shaped by a dual dynamic of political contestation and gradual policy normalization. Temporal analysis indicates that media sentiment becomes more volatile and less positively framed during presidential election periods, reflecting intensified political competition and polarized framing of redistribution. These findings highlight that UBI and quasi-UBI programmes remain closely embedded in electoral politics.

Topic modeling reveals a gradual shift in the substantive focus of media coverage. Beyond national political debate, increasing attention is devoted to administratively grounded and regionally implemented initiatives, such as youth basic income schemes and rural pilot programmes. This shift suggests that UBI-related cash transfer policies are not only discussed as campaign promises, but are increasingly treated as concrete policy instruments subject to implementation and evaluation.

In the South Korean context, this coexistence of political contestation and policy experimentation is closely linked to the role of Lee Jae-myung as both a prominent political advocate of UBI and a key actor in local-level policy implementation. As a result, Korean media discourse reflects both ideological debate and emerging policy normalization, illustrating how UBI-related cash transfer policies can evolve from contested political proposals into sustained areas of policy experimentation. Such experimental approaches align with broader debates on how basic income pilots should be evaluated beyond ideological claims [Widerquist 2018].

Future work could move beyond media discourse and examine behavioral responses to UBI-like cash transfers using administrative or transactional data (e.g., card spending records). Such an approach would allow future studies to assess whether dominant public narratives—such as concerns about wasteful spending—are consistent with observed consumption patterns. In addition, analyzing online discourse (e.g., social media posts and news comment sections) could provide further insight into citizen-level framing that may diverge from institutional media narratives.

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