

---

# PRESIDENTIAL SCANDALS IN SOUTH KOREA SINCE 1993: AN ANALYSIS OF RESOLVE IN DECISION-MAKING

---

Kangkyu Lee

Georgetown University

*The impeachment and arrest of President Park Geun-hye has galvanized a renewed interest in discourse covering political scandals in South Korea. A terse, historical appraisal of the Republic of Korea will illustrate that South Korean leadership has been perennially mired in political scandal since its transition to democracy. From the Kim Young-sam to Park Geun-hye administrations, allegations of direct or indirect involvement in corruption have plagued the legacies of South Korea's presidents. What prompts political scandals to be so recurring? While traditional scholarship discusses corruption à la institutional arrangements, this paper seeks to analyze the role leadership and behavioral characteristics play in non-rational decision-making of South Korea's presidents. I offer resolve as an explanatory variable to quantify the significance of certain dispositional and situational variables that affect a leader's decision to engage or refrain from iniquitous activity. Utilizing an interactionist framework, I isolate honor orientation and trait self-control for my dispositional variables and security and chaebol presence as my situational attributes. By comparing case studies of political scandals throughout ROK presidencies since 1993, this paper ascertains that trait self-control, largely affected by the formative years of a president, has the most substantial impact on resolve. I also contend that the tallied resolve of each president demonstrates a behavioral tendency of overconfidence and that South Korean decision-making cannot be evaluated under traditional cost-benefit and domestic audience cost frameworks.*

In 1993, the first civilian, democratically-elected South Korean President Kim Young-sam pledged that he would eradicate the “Korean disease” of corruption.<sup>1</sup> Citing the unchecked military rule of decades past, Kim Young-sam embarked on a quest of reform that sought to mitigate the unfettered

---

1 With the understanding that while Roh Tae-woo's election was technically democratic, Roh was personally a remnant of Chun Doo-hwan's military regime; nor was his election entirely free of influence from said establishment.

dominance of the *chaebol*.<sup>2</sup> While he failed to meet his grand ambitions, he was fêted as a symbol of democratic progress after his death, having instituted stringent anti-graft legislation during his tenure. Twenty-three years later, the reverberations of the most recent scandal involving Park Geun-hye has attracted a return of discourse covering the pestilence of corruption.

As numerous pundits have already pointed out, presidencies in the Republic of Korea are no stranger to scandals: every South Korean president since the country's democratic transition has been directly or indirectly involved in a scandal.<sup>3</sup> It is also evident that these leaders consequently leave office with public baggage and shame; at this point, one can argue the image of ROK leadership has become nigh-inextricable from the rhetoric of corruption, begging for a central question: why do South Korean presidents consciously choose to engage in potentially scandalous affairs, despite knowing their image as a leader would be irreparably besmirched and despite being well-aware of the expected vitriolic response of their domestic audience, both the public and media?

Traditional scholarship, either through comparative study or methods, has carved a niche in political science connecting corruption to institutional patterns or policy making. This paper seeks to study presidential scandals in South Korea after 1993 from the lens of leadership, utilizing tools such as behavioral analysis and case studies to identify patterns in the presence of both situational and dispositional factors that may persuade South Korean leaders to engage in ignominious activities, despite the massive costs of being caught.

## Literature Review

### *Political Scandals*

Extant political science literature defines a *scandal* as an activity that violates norms governing elected office holders – Apostolidis and Williams provide observations of sexually involved scandals and supplement that political scandals include “activity that seeks to increase political power at the expense of process and procedure.”<sup>4</sup> Their interpretation is important, however, founded off heavily positivist observations that may be difficult to quantify or measure

2 Jinwung Kim, “Both Koreas in a New Phase,” in *A History of Korea: from ‘Land of the Morning Calm’ to States in Conflict* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012), 519-521.

3 “Why South Korea’s Corruption Scandal is Nothing New,” *BBC News*, November 24, 2016.

4 Paul Apostolidis and Juliet A. Williams, “Introduction: Sex Scandals and Discourses of Power,” in *Public Affairs: Politics in the Age of Sex Scandals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

from 1993 to present day South Korea. Korean presidential scandals often have nationwide consequences, involve *chaebol* (business conglomerates), and receive a visceral reaction from the public. These responses make sense considering the politically turbulent development of South Korean democratic institutions during what David Fowler called, *cycles of liberalization*.<sup>5</sup>

It's a cultural touch. In Korean culture, when something goes wrong, if you're the boss you have to express your regrets," said a close aide to Lee Myung-bak, after President Lee apologized for his brother's acceptance of illegal funds on July 24, 2012.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, such cultural idiosyncrasies are rather consistently portrayed across Asian countries and even in the United States. In Susan Pharr's trenchant and comprehensive appraisal of Japanese media, she underscores the way public-private interactions and image management transformed to closely emulate the American television politics.<sup>7</sup> According to Pharr, Liberal Democratic Party politicians in Japan copied this formula to attenuate public ire in the face of their own scandals.<sup>8</sup> While these models did not last past the 1990s, improvisation and the importance of taking responsibility has evolved from Western guilt culture into a necessity in Asian countries.

From a behavioral analysis perspective, Rosa Chun's take is also of interest: she asserts Asian political dimensions have empirically been affected by the *chaebol* in Korea and *zaibatsu* (business conglomerate) in Japan. As such, the practice of Asian corporate atonement is starkly different than a political one. In Korea or Japan, an apology is a sign of personal remorse – equivalent to redeeming an individual's honor. To the public eye, a leader recovers honor "...through a deep, bowing apology..."<sup>9</sup> This shame culture is what may have influenced President Roh Moo-hyun to commit suicide. The rapid propagation of social media and other technologically distributed news renders this perception management all the more important.<sup>10</sup>

The interaction between the *chaebol* and media is also of fundamental importance in ascribing the interrelation between scandals and South Korean political leadership. In his seminal research on South Korean and Filipino institutional corruption, David Kang underscores the prevalence of "money

---

5 David Fowler, "The United States and South Korean Democratization," *Political Science Quarterly* 114:2 (1999), 265-270.

6 Simon Mundy, "South Korea's President Lee Myung-bak Apologizes for Corruption Scandal," *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2012.

7 Susan J. Pharr and Ellis S. Krauss, *Media and Politics in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996).

8 Ibid.

9 Rosa Chun, "Samsung, Shame, and Corporate Atonement," *Harvard Business Review*, May 17, 2017.

10 J. Hyejung, "The Nature of Nationalism in the "Korean Wave: A Framing Analysis of News Coverage about Korean Pop Culture," *National Communication Association*.

politics” in South Korea that have both empowered and crushed politics in the country since the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> The clear and intrinsic role the *chaebol* play in South Korean politics has shaped the zeitgeist and political attitudes of the citizenry and modern netizens. The concept of ‘pay to play’ is thus well-noted. This study is less about the political stranglehold of the *chaebol* in political scandals, but more about the leader-based attributes that lend themselves as determining factors for a decision to engage in immoral behavior.

## Methodology

The emergence of political psychology in political science literature offers an opportunity to scrutinize decision-making in scandals through a fresh lens. Research emphasizing leadership and the gravity of situational factors on decision-making is lacking in the context of East Asian political systems. Especially in the context of comparative work, South Korean leadership warrants further study. While the challenge of political psychology still very much lies in its applicability, the prevalence of scandals in South Korea since 1998 offers ample case studies to determine patterns that may offer answers concerning leader engagement in political scandals.

For this study, I define political scandals to be intentional acts of corruption that directly or indirectly involve the president and receives nationwide media attention. I will be analyzing both the internal (behavioral/dispositional) and external (situational/environmental) factors that may have affected the decision-making of each South Korean president since 1993. To this end, I will be utilizing Joshua Kertzer’s model of resolve and study each president’s “state of firmness or steadfastness in purpose,” and the “extent to which (s) he maintains...intention despite contrary inclinations or temptations to back down.”<sup>12</sup> I quantify resolve as the dependent variable primarily to establish a threshold: what level of resolve is necessary for a president to refrain from engaging in a political scandal? And considering how damaging the discovery of a political scandal can be, what factors reduce the resolve of leaders from resisting improvident decisions?

While Kertzer offers multiple dispositional and situational variables, not all of them are applicable to this study (for example, time preferences and costs of fighting). Thus, I default to choosing only two variables from his dispositional and situational experiments.<sup>13</sup> Regarding dispositional factors, I will conduct a longitudinal assessment of each leader and the implications of their

---

11 David C. Kang, *Crony Capitalism: Corruption and Development in South Korea and the Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 1-3.

12 Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

13 *Ibid.*, 143-165..

behavioral traits via biographical analysis. For these behavioral inquiries, I will illustrate each leader's *honor orientation* and *trait self-control*. Borrowing from anthropologist Organski, Kertzer defines honor orientation as an "ideological system that places a strong emphasis on honor or face, maintaining reputation for toughness, and standing up to perceived slights."<sup>14</sup> Second, I observe trait self-control – an attribute Kertzer likens to the psychological phenomena of willpower, in which leaders demonstrating high levels of trait self-control also display commensurate levels of resolve.<sup>15</sup> Both these attributes will be scored on a scale of 0.1 to 0.5. Higher scores represent greater commitment to honor orientation and willpower, meaning it should be less likely for a leader to engage in ignominious behavior.

As it pertains to the situational variables, I submit two strings of inquiry. First, I will analyze the president's foreign policy and survey the resultant security environment, including relations with neighboring countries and the US. The second variable I measure is the relative presence of chaebols in scandals affecting the leader in question. Both these attributes will also be scored on a scale of 0.1 to 0.5. Higher scores for the security variable means the leader has skillfully maintained relations and has managed security threats well, rendering it less likely for the leader to engage in scandalous behavior – doing so would only undermine their international image and jeopardize the domestic foundation (s)he set up. This variable will better ascertain the effect of implementing sound foreign policy on a president's decision to engage in a political scandal. Lower scores for the chaebol presence variable means there is greater interaction with conglomerates, making it less likely the leader will refrain from scandalous behavior simply due to the overwhelming influence of chaebol.

The four scores (two dispositional, two situational) will be totaled to represent the leader's resolve on a scale of 0.4 to 2.0. The higher the number, the more resolve a leader has in refraining from scandalous activity. It is through this two-pronged framework that I hope to identify the presence of systemic variables that have pushed South Korean presidents to engage in discreditable behavior. Kertzer's research indicates that dispositional traits have stronger impacts on resolve than situational ones. Namely, in a laboratory-experiment, Kertzer labels trait self-control as the largest influence on an individual's decision making.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, resolve is affected by incentives – that is economic

---

14 In the aforementioned analysis by Rosa Chun and David Kang, honor orientation has importance in public and media attitudes. Presidents in South Korea incessantly interact with an audience of high honor cultures and ergo, face caustic reputation costs with every misstep. Honor orientation is also why any involvement with the *chaebol* elicit particularly acerbic backlash.

15 Kertzer, 44-45.

16 *Ibid.*, 107.

or political benefits to be gained from engaging in scandalous behavior. In the leader’s mind, the perceived benefit of engaging in a scandal would have to expressly outweigh the consequences of being caught.<sup>17</sup> However, this variable is difficult to accurately quantify as details concerning such prospects would be delineated in a surreptitious setting. So, while incentives are also represented as a variable in the ideal equation in Figure 1 below, it will not be calculated in the results.

**Figure 1: Equation of Resolve – Factors Affecting a South Korean President’s Decision to Engage in a Political Scandal**

$$\begin{aligned}
 &[\text{Dispositional Factors (Honor Orientation + Trait Self-Control)} \\
 &+ \text{Situational Factors (Security Environment + Presence of } \textit{Chaebol}\text{)}] \\
 &- \text{Incentives (Economic, Political Prospects)}
 \end{aligned}$$


---

**Resolve**                      ↗ Engage in Potentially Scandalous Behavior  
    ↘ Avoid Potentially Scandalous Behavior

Dispositional and Situational Variables Scaled (0.1 - 0.5)  
 Resolve Scaled: (0.4 - 2.0)

### Case Studies: South Korean Leaders and Political Scandals

All five Presidents since 1993 have been directly or indirectly associated with a political scandal, and excluding Kim Young-sam, have received accusations of involvement in corruption. In lieu of conducting an extensive evaluation of every scandal and the decision-making process behind each, I will be categorizing the ROK presidents since 1993 into two groups based on the ramifications the political scandal(s) in question ultimately had on their transition out of presidency.

One group labeled “traditional exits” include Presidents Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Lee Myung-bak. The second group contains Presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Park Geun-hye, who have experienced “non-traditional exits” from Presidency. President Park was involved in a scandal that the South Korean public viewed as egregious enough to elicit grave consequential action. The label “non-traditional exit” is a slight *faux facteur* in President Roh’s case, as his suicide was a personal decision that occurred after ceding office to Lee

17 James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88:3(1994): 577-92.

Myung-bak in a traditional fashion, but is still categorized as such because his suicide was the final ramification. Comparing the two groups will better underscore which variables are most important in a leader-centered analysis that seeks to quantify resolve.

**Figure 2: The Impact of South Korean Presidential Scandals since 1993**

South Korean Presidents	Knowledge of/ Participation in National Scandals	Exit-type	Ramifications	Public Perception Leaving Office <sup>†</sup>
Kim Young-sam	No	Traditional	Null	Negative
Kim Dae-jung	Yes	Traditional	Null	Negative
Roh Moo-hyun	Possible	Non-traditional	<b>Suicide</b>	Negative <sup>††</sup>
Lee Myung-bak	Possible	Traditional	Null	Negative
Park Geun-hye	Yes	Non-traditional	<b>Arrested</b>	Negative

<sup>†</sup> 'Negative' containing a value of < 50% approval rating in the Gallop Poll just before leaving office.

<sup>††</sup> Roh Moo-hyun's approval rating before his suicide; though it is noteworthy that post-mortem, Roh elicited fonder public perception. A similar observation can be made regarding Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam.

### Traditional Exits:

\*Scored Format: (Honor orientation; Trait self-control), (Security; *Chaebol* presence)<sup>18</sup>

*Kim Young-sam: (0.5; 0.5), (0.3; 0.4)*

It bears repeating that President Kim Young-sam is the only South Korean leader who did not involve himself in a political scandal with the intent of deriving economic or political benefit. What unfortunately marred the final few years of his leadership was an inefficacious response to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the subsequent bankruptcy of Hanbo Steel Company, and a scandal involving his son's acceptance of illegal funds.<sup>19</sup> His son's complicity

<sup>18</sup> Scores are self-determined via content analysis of case studies, utilizing Kertzer's four traits.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Pollack, "Korean Chief's Son Held on Graft Charges," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1997.

in the slush fund scandal was particularly ruinous to Kim's reputation because it undermined the legitimacy of his anti-corruption reforms.

Kim Young-sam's storied history of protesting military rule and nefarious government since the era of Park Chung-hee contributes to his high levels of both honor orientation and trait self-control.<sup>20</sup> This is a self-evident observation based on first, the absence of any direct involvement in corruption and second, his immediate acceptance of responsibility and apologies for the "severe shock and disappointment" caused by his son.<sup>21</sup>

However, for Kim Young-sam, situational variables have played a larger role in besmirching his presidential legacy, likely subtracting greatly from his resolve. Foremost, in his memoirs, Kim Young-sam expressed regret in playing safe on North Korea and importuning President Bill Clinton from bombing nuclear sites in 1994.<sup>22</sup> He bemoans destiny and asserted that his legacy would have been much different should he have met Kim Il-sung.<sup>23</sup> Kim Young-sam, at the time confident that the North would collapse (famine, Kim Il-sung's death) damaged US relations and contrasted American policy. The resultant lack of cooperation during the Agreed Framework did him no favors.

Most importantly, his handling of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis irrevocably damaged his reputation as the collapse of chaebol such as KIA forced Kim to accept a \$58 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund. The public lambasted the government and its interactions with the chaebol and believed that "97.8 percent of political news, 76.5 percent of social news, and 75.5 percent of economic news" were propagated by the hands of the government-chaebol coalition.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, negative public opinion of Kim very much stemmed from the perception that his administration was gridlocked and inept on both the security and economic fronts. Thus, despite his high honor orientation, trait self-control, and low chaebol presence scores, Kim left office with record-low approval ratings of 6 percent. This is an immutable irony as he is the only leader who definitively has not perpetrated a political imbroglio.<sup>25</sup> As a case study, Kim Young-sam represents a fascinating interaction between scandals involving family and unfortunate leadership in times of international crisis. If anything, these observations lend credence to the magnitude and

20 Jon S. T. Quah, *Curbing Corruption in Asian Countries: An Impossible Dream?* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2011), 310-321.

21 Pollack, "Korean Chief's Son Held on Graft Charges."

22 Sang-Hun Choe, "Kim Young-sam, South Korean President Who Opposed Military, Dies at 87," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2015.

23 Ibid.

24 Quah, *Curbing Corruption*, 324.

25 Yoon Young-ho, "Chong Tae-soo wa komun ton," (Chong Tae-soo and Black Money), *Shindonga*. March 1, 1997, 201.



importance of situational variables on the effect on a South Korean president's resolve and public image.

*Kim Dae-jung (0.3; 0.1), (0.5; 0.1)*

A veteran combatant against military rule alongside Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung was notorious for his vigorous devotion to spreading liberal norms and is known as the 'Nelson Mandela of Asia.'<sup>26</sup> Kim endured much hardship, being jailed, forcibly kidnapped, and exiled numerous times at the hands of Rhee Syng-man, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan.<sup>27</sup> Many Koreans sympathized with his tribulations, and Kim entered Presidency as the first left-leaning candidate. He practiced great accountability and prioritized reform that held chaebol to transparency and dramatically cut subsidies to conglomerates, earning him high points in honor orientation.<sup>28</sup>

President Kim is of course famous for winning the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize, awarded for his sage devotion to human rights and for his reconciliatory Sunshine Policy towards North Korea.<sup>29</sup> With regard to foreign policy, few South Korean leaders can claim to have done better. His decision to formally initiate détente with North Korea led to a historic meeting between himself and Kim Jong-il in 2000.<sup>30</sup> Under President Kim Dae-jung, bilateral relations with Japan were also at their best: his state visit to Japan in October 1998 served as an emblematic gateway to friendlier ties.<sup>31</sup> Under Kim Dae-jung, South Korea maintained amicable relations with all Six-Party nations for the first time.<sup>32</sup> As such, President Kim scores highly on the security variable: his administration was not impeded by any existential threat and instead was surrounded by cooperative neighbors.

Three years later, however it was discovered that President Kim's greatest achievement, the 2000 summit, involved a transaction of \$500 million to North Korea through Hyundai Asan.<sup>33</sup> Kim's Chief-of-staff and two leaders of

26 "'Mandela meets 'Asia's Mandela,'" *BBC News*, March 12, 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1216234.stm>.

27 Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 34.

28 Jiho Jang, "State Activism Toward the Big Business in Korea, 1998-2000: Path dependence and Institutional Embeddedness," *Midwest Political Science Association* (April 2001): 2-6.

29 "Kim Dae-jung: Dedicated to Reconciliation," *CNN*, June 14, 2001.

30 "Kim Dae-jung: Dedicated to Reconciliation". *CNN*. 14 June 2001. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060922050400/http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/12/bio.kim.dae-jung/>

31 Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 394.

32 Interview with Michael Green concerning Kim Dae-jung's leadership and legacy, January 2016.

33 "S Koreans charged over summit cash," *BBC News*, June 25, 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3018874.stm>.

Hyundai Asan were convicted for falsifying transfers and records. The summit scandal offers insight on the interaction between dispositional and situational variables in that Kim Dae-jung scored high on security, but involved himself in a massive scandal involving chaebol to secure such foreign policy ambitions in the first place – grounds for a low trait self-control and chaebol presence score.

Would Kim have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize if the transactions were discovered earlier? The scandal became the largest blemish on Kim Dae-jung's presidency and demonstrates he possessed low levels of resolve. President Kim did apologize to the nation for the advance payment to the North, but he prevaricated and ultimately implied he wasn't responsible, decreasing his honor orientation score.<sup>34</sup> What's more, all three of Kim Dae-jung's sons were implicated in bribery scandals, forcing Kim to leave the Millennium Democratic Party.<sup>35</sup> While difficult to prove Kim Dae-jung was privy to his sons' malfeasance, it is reasonable to doubt that Kim was completely ignorant, especially in the backdrop of the summit scandal. While President Kim believed strongly in the principles of democracy (and thus demonstrates high levels of honor orientation), he evaded responsibility. Unlike Roh Moo-hyun and unlike Kim Young-sam, he intentionally involved himself in the summit scandal.

*Lee Myung-bak (0.3; 0.2), (0.5; 0.1)*

Lee Myung-bak, former CEO of Hyundai Engineering, was the first businessman to become President and he brought with him a style of leadership befitting said background. The Lee administration was renowned for its promotion of business-friendly policy and tougher North Korea stance. President Lee easily receives a high score in the security variable. During a time when the Democratic Party of Japan was rapidly swapping Prime Ministers and being aloof with the US, Lee Myung-bak became the East Asia anchor and stalwart partner to President Obama.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, in the face of a series of dangerous provocations from North Korea including the 2009 nuclear test, 2010 Cheonan Incident, and the Yeonpyeong Island shelling, Lee showed sangfroid and rational judgment that earned him trust as a commander-in-chief.<sup>37</sup> President Lee had the least to gain from jeopardizing his legitimacy due to his solid

34 Rebecca MacKinnon, "S. Korean Leader Sorry for Summit Scandal," CNN, February 14, 2003. <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/east/02/13/kim.scandal/>.

35 "How Do Analysts View Kim Dae-Jung's Administration?" *Voice of America*, May 9, 2002, updated 2009. <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2002-05-09-11-how/296809.html>.

36 Jeffrey A. Bader, "Chapter 3," in *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

37 Jayshree Bajoria, and Youkyung Lee, "The U.S.-South Korea Alliance," Council on Foreign Relations, October 13, 2011. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-south-korea-alliance>

foreign policy. He racked up considerable international sympathy and wide coalitions of support, likely strengthening his resolve.

However, his business persona made him a natural target for his domestic opponents when he ran for election in 2008. Public opinion of Lee has been driven by the perception that he was an ally to the chaebol. This was a view especially invigorated by the departure of progressivism once Roh Moo-hyun left office. With these initial attitudes being the backdrop, Lee Myung-bak very early on faced allegations of corruption. Lee's ties to a subsidiary company called BBK were raised; the founder of BBK was being investigated for embezzlement and prosecutors sought to implicate Lee for co-founding a securities firm called EBK which invested close to \$2.5 million in BBK.<sup>38</sup> But as Lee's presidential victory grew evident, the investigation became sporadic and ultimately dissolved, despite the discovery of a video that depicts Lee discussing the co-founding of EBK.<sup>39</sup> In 2011, members of Lee's family were also found to have shares in DAS, a company related to BBK, transforming into a situation that even involved the US Supreme Court.<sup>40</sup>

Lee was also criticized for his poor handling of the "Four Rivers Project," which sought to consolidate South Korea's major rivers via a canal.<sup>41</sup> The project cost an exorbitant \$20 billion and was impaired by subpar implementation and construction. By the end of his presidency, critics accused Lee of intentionally neglecting the project and distancing himself from environmental issues.<sup>42</sup> The speculation was that the extravagant cost was simply a form of kickback for Lee's construction-based cronies. As treasurer for Somang Church, Lee's endowed position in Korean-Christian society, a sector that is no stranger to scandals, was also suspect.<sup>43</sup>

However, the political scandal that had the most salient impact on President Lee was an incident involving his elder brother who was arrested for accepting a bribe of \$500,000 from two bank chairmen.<sup>44</sup> The arrest prompted President

38 "A Look into the BBK Scandal," *The Korea Herald*, April 05, 2010. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20071117000029>.

39 "BBK Video Clip Revives UNDP-GNP Tensions," *The Donga Ilbo*, December 17, 2007. <http://english.donga.com/List/3/all/26/256403/1>.

40 "미 연방법원 '다스, BBK 상대 140억 민사소송 취하' 최종승인" (US Federal Court Withdraws BBK Litigation Case Worth 14 Billion Won), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, December 2, 2011. [http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201112021709461&code=970201](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201112021709461&code=970201)

41 Sang-hun Choe, "Controversial Canal Tests South Korea's New Leader," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2008. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/12/world/asia/12canal.html?\\_r=1&ref=asia&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/12/world/asia/12canal.html?_r=1&ref=asia&oref=slogin).

42 Min-sik Yoon, "Government to Address Faults in Four-river Project," *The Korea Herald*, December 27, 2014. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20141228000142>.

43 Youngmi Kim, *The Politics of Coalition in Korea: Between Institutions and Culture* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 181; "For God and Country," *The Economist*, October 15, 2011. <http://www.economist.com/node/21532340>.

44 Simon Mundy, "South Korea's President Lee Myung-bak apologizes for corruption scandal," *The*

Lee to make a public apology regarding scandal allegations for the first time. But while President Lee did apologize, he worded his statement in a way that he expressed regret for the situation, not necessarily implicating himself or admitting knowledge of the scandal.<sup>45</sup>

Both of President Lee's dispositional variables and the level of chaebol presence are tricky to determine with certainty. Due to his extensive network and background, it is difficult to conclude to what extent Lee Myung-bak was cognizant of the scandals he, his administration, or his family were implicated in. He was a veritable socialite, glib in mannerism, and an expert negotiator and many individuals close to Lee were indicted on corruption. "[These individuals] include three relatives, four senior presidential aides and several former senior officials in the cabinet and government-run companies," – far more than just the family members involved in scandals concerning Roh Moo-hyun or Kim Young-sam.<sup>46</sup> The circumstances behind the BBK and Four Rivers Project also naturally render Lee suspicious. Is it so unbelievable that Lee was able to pull strings and keep key individuals silent about these back-deals? Likewise, is it believable that Lee somehow had absolutely zero knowledge on any of the incidents involving himself and his aides?

Ultimately however, Lee was not convicted for intentional involvement in a scandal and he did not need to apologize for a political scandal he himself was accused of. Simply due to the sheer number of individuals incriminated in association with President Lee and the number of conglomerates involved, Lee receives a low score on chaebol presence. 'Innocent until proven guilty' being the default framework, the combination of clashing narratives (in that there are both very convenient conclusions to investigations and a lack of definitive evidence concerning Lee's involvement) renders it sensible to assign Lee Myung-bak neither an extremely high or low score in both honor orientation and trait self-control.

### **Non-traditional Exits:**

*Roh Moo-hyun: (0.5; 0.1), (0.2; 0.4)*

President Roh Moo-hyun's suicide marks itself as one of the most significant political tragedies in South Korean history.<sup>47</sup> Coming from humble and

---

Washington Post, July 24, 2012. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/south-korea-president-lee-myung-bak-apologizes-for-corruption-scandal/2012/07/24/gJQAKiSk6W\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/south-korea-president-lee-myung-bak-apologizes-for-corruption-scandal/2012/07/24/gJQAKiSk6W_story.html)

45 Sang-hun Choe, "South Korean President Apologizes for Corruption Scandals," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/world/asia/lee-myung-bak-of-south-korea-apologizes-for-corruption-scandals.html>

46 Ibid .

47 Justin McCurry, "Former South Korea president Roh Moo-hyun Leaps to Death in Ravine," *The Observ-*

penurious beginnings and working passionately as a civil rights activist and human rights lawyer, Roh Moo-hyun entered politics with grand ideals and a background in progressivism.<sup>48</sup> His presidential campaign resonated deeply with the Korean public and he emphasized values in his platform. However, these characteristics would land President Roh into trouble as he tended to pursue controversial policies in his attempts to assimilate a sundry of ideologies in his economic and political reforms.

Though not a scandal, one would be remiss to gloss over Roh Moo-hyun's impeachment, as this series of events provides insight into Roh's dispositional attributes and his association with the public. President Roh confronted a major socio-cultural cleavage at the time between the more traditional power blocs in domestic politics and the younger 386 generation that supported him.<sup>49</sup> The ideological chasm between President Roh and the establishment came to a watershed when Roh seemingly abrogated the rules of "political neutrality" by openly supporting the greenhorn Uri Party.<sup>50</sup> This fomented the first-ever impeachment of a South Korean leader, passing with an overwhelming 193-2 vote from the National Assembly.<sup>51</sup>

However, President Roh received an unexpected deluge of public support, with citizens conducting civic protest (including the first mass candlelight vigil in favor of a political party member) with peak numbers around 130,000 people across 50 cities.<sup>52</sup> The public fiercely punished the establishment in the National Assembly, voting heavily in favor of Uri Party candidates, overthrowing the Grand National party majority. Only a month later, on May 2004, the South Korean Constitutional Court rescinded the impeachment charges of executive mismanagement and reinstated President Roh.<sup>53</sup> The impeachment of Roh Moo-hyun is a case study that exhibits the resounding success of people politics (alongside the Park Geun-hye scandal) in South Korea: a testament to the very real consequences of inciting the Korean public's fury.

Roh Moo-hyun possesses high honor orientation in that he displayed true commitment to the principles he campaigned on: a quality no doubt shaped and refined from his years in activism and law. Akin to both Kim Young-sam

---

er, May 23, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/24/south-korea-former-president-suicide>.

48 "Roh Moo-hyun: A Life of Challenges," *The Chosun Ilbo*, May 25, 2009. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2009/05/25/2009052500537.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/05/25/2009052500537.html)

49 Emanuel Pastreich, "Strategic Thought toward Asia in the Roh Moo-hyun Era." *South Korean Strategic Thought Towards Asia* 3:8 (2008): 101-26.

50 Ibid., 9.

51 Da-sol Kim, "Revisiting Roh Moo-hyun impeachment," *The Korea Herald*, December 08, 2016. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20161208000727>.

52 Ibid.

53 Anthony Faiola, "Court Rejects S. Korean President's Impeachment," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25441-2004May13.html>.

and Kim Dae-jung, Roh has a history steeped in altruism and perseverance, defending student and labor activists who opposed the military regime and chaebol hegemony. President Roh's conscientiousness and history appealed greatly to the South Korean public both during his campaign and throughout the impeachment process. While public opinion would eventually disavow him because of his maladroit foreign policy and bribery allegations, these emotions would again revert after his suicide. Two films have been released memorializing Roh Moo-hyun's years of activism and leadership: "The Attorney", the second highest-grossing Korean film of all time and a documentary-film released June 2017 titled "Our President".<sup>54</sup> The domestic audience remember President Roh with affection and eulogize him as a political saint, perceiving his suicide as the ultimate sacrifice and proof that he remained committed to the principles he stood for until the very end.

### *Roh's Foreign Policy*

On the other hand, many senior foreign policy officials in the US remember Roh Moo-hyun in lesser graces. For better or worse, President Roh, following in the footsteps of Kim Dae-jung, sought to establish warmer relations with North Korea and ushered in foreign policy that was disconcerting to America.<sup>55</sup> President Roh believed strongly in the Sunshine Policy, to the point it caused distress to the US-ROK alliance and discord amongst counterparts in leadership. What's more, Kim Jong-il's general recalcitrance to cooperation and the inefficacious Six Party Talks left a hapless scar on Roh's record.

In their memoirs, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates commented on President Roh's stubborn insistence on amicability with North Korea and disclosed there had been a lack of cooperation from the South Korean administration on key foreign policies.<sup>56</sup> In the final year of the Roh administration, the reemergence of bellicose rhetoric from North Korea made clear that the Six-Party Talks were breaking down. Things only got worse for President Roh, as it became evident to the domestic audience that his grand ambitions of peace had failed. In addition, despite a good start in 2005, Roh was unable to maintain amiable relations with Japan.<sup>57</sup> By the end of his tenure, Roh's image as an anti-American did him no favors for his credibility as a commander-in-chief. His long-term goals of

54 "Box office: Documentary on Roh Moo-hyun off to flying start," *Korea Times*, May 27, 2017. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2017/05/689\\_230137.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2017/05/689_230137.html).

55 Young Wan Kihl, "The Past as Prologue: President Kim Dae Jung's Legacy and President Roh Moo-Hyun's Policy Issues and Future Challenges," Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2005.

56 Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 528-529; Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 416

57 Pastreich, "Strategic Thought," 12.

peace with North Korea became unsustainable, even as Roh grew ostensibly stubborn on the issue, alienating the progressive base he established after 2004. Recognizing his declining political capital, the resurgent Grand National Party pushed the narrative that Roh was pro-North Korea and intent on endangering the integrity of the American alliance.

Most interestingly, Roh's foreign policy mishaps illustrates the public's obsession with security issues and domestic well-being. However, in the case of Kim Young-sam, he was unlucky in being handed a regional financial crisis that involved chaebol beyond his knowledge and control. And in Kim Dae-jung's case, despite the summit scandal, he was able to reconcile and cooperate with his domestic opponents, enhance foreign relations, and adroitly generate successful foreign policy that matched his long-term goals with North Korea.

Roh Moo-hyun scores low in both the security and trait self-control variables for demonstrating inconsistent leadership, and an ineptitude for diplomacy and patience, as was prominently demonstrated by his foreign policy. The aftermath of his foreign policy would reverberate down to his domestic policy. By 2005, it became clear that political viability went hand-in-hand with maintaining healthy bilateral relations with the US. President Roh pursued a combination of exotic domestic and foreign policies without proper control over his own political base.<sup>58</sup> Unlike with Kim Dae-jung who scored very highly on security, Roh showed an inflexibility that produced a detrimental environment that cost him his political influence and popularity: an environment that likely pushed him into a corner as domestic and foreign allies abandoned him left and right. It is not so hard to believe these factors played a role in weakening President Roh's resolve and high honor orientation against malfeasance.

### *The Scandal*

Roh Moo-hyun and his family were pulled into a corruption scandal involving bribery accusations, in which the family accepted a total of \$6 million from a shoe manufacturer.<sup>59</sup> His wife took \$1 million and his son-in-law, \$5 million. Roh initially denied these allegations in his final year of presidency. However, as police investigations closed in, a year later in April 2009, Roh made a blog post titled "I Apologize," submitting that his wife accepted the funds to settle a household debt and his son-in-law made a business investment.<sup>60</sup> Roh maintained this story up to his suicide in May 2009.

The implications of the political scandal involving Roh Moo-hyun are not so much about the sheer scale or magnitude of the iniquity or volume of cash

58 Ibid., 13.

59 McCurry, "Former South Korea president Roh Moo-hyun Leaps to Death in Ravine."

60 "Roh Moo-hyun," *The Economist*, May 30, 2009. <http://www.economist.com/node/13726814/>.



transferred, but more about Roh's principles. The shoemaker involved, while having ties to Nike, is arguably not a chaebol, rendering possible levels of chaebol involvement low. Indeed, after his suicide, netizen debates erupted and pundits speculated whether Roh Moo-hyun truly knew about the \$6 million prior to the accusations. On the other hand, after Roh's suicide, high-profile figures in politics and business also committed suicide during or after their own investigations of graft, such as Busan Mayor Ahn Sang-yong, Chung Mong-hun of Hyundai, and later former deputy head of the Prime Minister, Kim Yung-chul in 2012.<sup>61</sup>

Most importantly, this case study reemphasizes that Roh Moo-hyun possessed a high level of honor orientation, possibly to the point he felt compelled to commit suicide as a form of apology and taking responsibility. There is no definitive proof or closure on whether Roh was cognizant of the funds in the scandal – the closest investigators have as evidence of guilt is self-admission on Roh's blog and vague insinuations contained in his suicide note. However, under current assumptions, Roh's principles and trait self-control did not necessarily stop him or his family from accepting these bribes. Nevertheless, very few people are privy to the full story, making a final judgment far from impartial.<sup>62</sup> Extolled today, Roh Moo-hyun undoubtedly displayed high honor orientation, declaring in a self-effacing blog post that he himself believed he could no longer represent the ideals he had once envisioned in his youth.<sup>63</sup>

*Park Geun-hye: (0.1; 0.1), (0.5; 0.1)*

Park Geun-Hye was removed from office in March 2017, after being impeached by the National Assembly in December 2016.<sup>64</sup> The scandal involving Choi Soon-sil and former President Park has been covered ad nauseum by political scientists and media alike. But as far as original analysis goes, the Choi scandal is a revealing case study for understanding Park Geun-hye's dispositional proclivities and her reasons for associating with Choi.

Lucian Pye argues that since the end of World War II, South Korean leaders were forced into a position that required bold and adamant action.<sup>65</sup> This is

61 "Former PM Secretary Kim Dead in Apparent Suicide," *Korea Times*, October 10, 2008. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/10/117\\_32488.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/10/117_32488.html).

62 "노 전 대통령, 돈문제 대신 인정하려 했다 (Late President Roh Wanted to Acknowledge the Money Issue)," Hankyoreh, June 1, 2009. [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society\\_general/358136.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/358136.html)

63 Sang-hun Choe, "Despair Overwhelmed Former South Korean Leader Embroiled in Scandal," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/world/asia/24roh.html>.

64 Se-Woong Koo, "South Korea's President Must Go," *The New York Times*, November 09, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/opinion/south-koreas-president-park-must-go.html?mcubz=3&r=1>.

65 Lucian W. Pye, and Mary W. Pye, "East Asia: Varieties of Confucian Authority," in *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 58.



because through history, they were geographically and politically bullied as the ‘shrimp amongst whales.’ This has produced a high-risk, high-reward style of leadership in South Korea.<sup>66</sup> Sociologist Karl Mannheim posits in his theory of generations, that leaders affected by traumatic or otherwise substantial historical experiences will subsequently shape their political landscape and leadership styles in a way responsive to those experiences.<sup>67</sup>

Enter Park Chung-hee: his influence on South Korea’s economic and political development is incontrovertible – as his daughter, Park Geun-hye adopted a superstar status that paved her road to presidency, doubling as a reputation she felt the need to uphold. In other words, the high-risk and bold leadership style of Park Chung-hee has translated to her own beliefs. Within Mannheim’s generation theory, interaction theory postulates that a younger generation of leaders acts in response to the preceding generations of leaders.<sup>68</sup> Mannheim’s experiential theory further posits that each generation of leaders is stamped by a unique experience that permanently alters their new world view.<sup>69</sup>

Park Geun-hye’s individual perceptions and actions were affected by belief systems based on the experiences of her past.<sup>70</sup> Her belief systems became the very lens through which her calculations concerning the physical and social environment was conducted. In this sense, Park’s attitude and policies were a byproduct of the environs created and left by Park Chung-hee, rendering her own decisions in domestic and foreign policy only explicable via dispositional characteristics. In the same way, Mannheim and Pye’s theories also explain the high levels of honor orientation in Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Moo-hyun – their attitudes towards democracy were refined by decades of resistance against the military regime.

How Park Geun-hye carried herself in bolstering the US alliance, her pursuit of the comfort women agreement in 2015 with Japan despite domestic uproar, toughness with North Korea, and her power play with China provides ample evidence to suggest Park truly made decisions based on her own calculations. This strategy Victor Cha called “Diplomacy 2.0”: a flexible pursuit of alignment with any nation that suits the national interest at that very moment. Park aggressively ventured to better relations with nations in a strategy that appears

---

66 Ibid., 59-62.

67 Brent J. Steele, and Jonathan M. Acuff, *Theory and Application of the “Generation” in International Relations and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

68 Akira Ogawa, “Normalizing the Relationship Between Japan and the ROK: Etsusaburo Shiina and Park Chung Hee,” in *The Miracle in 1965* (Higashiyama: Okazaki Institute, 2011).

69 Ibid.

70 Takashi Inoguchi, *Japanese and Korean Politics: Alone and Apart from Each Other* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 75.

counterintuitive.<sup>71</sup> Park was very successful in this regard, earning her high marks in the security variable. Indeed, aside from North Korea, Choi Soon-sil had almost no influence on Park's foreign policy. But how does Park fare with the remaining three variables?

Park Geun-hye scores low in honor orientation, trait self-control, and chaebol presence (Samsung merger) and Mannheim and Pye's theories offer a simple explanation to Choi's "complete control over Park's body and soul."<sup>72</sup> Covering the Choi scandal, Robert Kelly inquired, "how does one ascend to the presidency of a major country while simultaneously being a marionette to some weird Rasputin character?"<sup>73</sup> Considering the Choi family took in Park Geun-hye after the trauma of having both her parents assassinated, it is little wonder that Choi Soon-sil had such deep-seated influence on Park's agenda and chaebol related behavior. In a way, Park had no trait self-control to begin with. What's clear is that the Choi scandal was completely unforeseeable and Park's foreign policy was in a league of its own. The Choi connection can literally only be explained by the deeply personal motivations of Park Geun-hye and the behavioral byproducts of her formative years. In that regard, the utterly unorthodox manner of Park's downfall rings in dulcet tones of tragedy.

### **Analysis: Presidential Resolve in South Korea**

A comparative look at the dispositional and situational attributes of South Korean leadership since 1993 demonstrates that four of the five Presidents possessed the tendency to directly or indirectly engage in a political scandal. The final tally of resolve found in Figure 3 depicts Kim Young-sam with the highest level of resolve to refrain from participating in iniquity and Park Geun-hye with the lowest level of resolve. A resolve of 1.6 is likely the threshold for resisting scandalous behavior; this conclusion is both empirically corroborated through case studies and supported by the fact that none of the remaining four Presidents come close to said threshold. Possessing a high score in at least three traits appears necessary to maintain sufficient resolve to refrain from political scandal.

71 Victor Cha, "A Path Less Chosun," *Foreign Affairs*, October 08, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-10-08/path-less-chosun>.

72 Ser Myo-ja, "Shamanistic Cult Linked to President," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 28, 2016.

73 Robert E. Kelly, "South Korea's Most Bizarre Corruption Scandal Yet," *The Diplomat*, November 04, 2016. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/south-koreas-most-bizarre-corruption-scandal-yet/>.

**Figure 3:** Quantitative Representation of South Korean Presidents' Resolve

South Korean Presidents	Dispositional Variables (Honor Orientation; Trait Self-control)	Situational Variables (Security; <i>Chaebol</i> Presence)	Resolve	Public Approval Leaving Office
Kim Young-sam	0.5; 0.5	0.2; 0.4	<b>1.6</b>	6%
Kim Dae-jung	0.3; 0.1	0.5; 0.1	<b>1.0</b>	24%
Roh Moo-hyun	0.5; 0.1	0.2; 0.4	<b>1.2</b>	27%
Lee Myung-bak	0.3; 0.2	0.5; 0.1	<b>1.1</b>	23%
Park Geun-hye	0.1; 0.1	0.5; 0.1	<b>0.8</b>	12%

Dispositional and Situational Variables Scaled (0.1 - 0.5), Resolve Scaled: (0.4 - 2.0)  
Public Approval Leaving Office: "Gallup Korea Daily Opinion Polls"<sup>74</sup>

The following conclusions about South Korean presidential resolve can be drawn from these results: first, South Korean leaders tended to score best on the security variable, averaging 0.38. The experiences of Kim Young-sam and Roh Moo-hyun demonstrate that poor foreign policy judgment greatly detracts from a leader's credibility. The resultant negative environment may pressure the leader to engage in malfeasance, either to save face or for gratification. Roh perceived the importance of bettering relations with North Korea as paramount at the expense of relations with the US and Japan, crumbling his domestic support. An environment with existential threats and tense foreign relations creates domestic pressure on a leader and is conducive to non-rational decisions.

At the same time, scoring highly on the security variable also seems to negatively impact a leader's resolve in resisting a scandal. Or at least, the experiences of Kim Dae-jung, Lee Myung-bak, and Park Geun-hye demonstrate that ROK leaders are proficient in keeping domestic and foreign policy separate. Maintaining regional security may actually strengthen a leader's desire to engage in iniquity due to positive domestic opinion and international feedback that South Korea is a stalwart partner (Kim Dae-jung

74 한국갤럽 역대 대통령 직무 수행 평가 1988~2017 (Korean Gallup Poll of Korean Presidential Approval Ratings 1988-2017). 한국갤럽 데일리 오피니언 (*Gallup Korea Daily Opinion*), Issue 261. June 1, 2017. <http://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportDownload.asp?seqNo=836>

and Lee Myung-bak). Comparing the cases of these three leaders also reveals that political affiliation means nothing: both Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy and Lee and Park's hardline stance created stability because they were a reflection of the foreign policy zeitgeist. However, both high and low scorers engaged in political scandal. Ergo, it appears that while South Korean leaders on average prioritized stability and the US alliance, this was neither an impediment nor a catalyst to scandalous behavior. From what is observable, the security variable detracts from a leader's resolve in either good or bad foreign policy.

Second, the presidents scored worst on trait self-control with an average of 0.2. Aside from Kim Young-sam, all leaders scored extremely low. Trait self-control is a de facto attribute in that if a leader is found to have engaged in scandalous activity, they evidently have low levels of self-discipline. Park Geun-hye and Kim Dae-Jung's cases lend credence to Mannheim and Pye's theories concerning generational and formative experiences having the largest impact on trait self-control. Ergo, matching Kerzer's experimental conclusions, trait self-control also has the largest influence on South Korean resolve. The undeviatingly low scores also neatly fit with the observation that the four presidents do not reach the resolve threshold of 1.6 set by Kim Young-sam.

Third, as it pertains to the dispositional attributes of South Korean leaders, these results demonstrate there is no observable relation between honor orientation (0.34 average) and trait self-control. While Kim Young-sam and Roh Moo-hyun's experiences are indicative of this, Kim Dae-jung's summit scandal is the strongest representation of this incongruity. Fighting dictatorship and conscientiously striving for progressive ideals does not preclude one from engaging in impropriety once in a position of power.

Fourth, high honor orientation only seems to positively affect resolve so long as the president remains credible. As the cases of Kim Young-sam, Roh Moo-hyun, and Lee Myung-bak most evince, even if the president is not definitively proven to be personally involved in a scandal, incidents involving family members or staff will still undermine the reputation of the president. The difficulty in appraising honor orientation as a component of resolve lies in whether the leader in question was actually cognizant of these back-deals. In that regard, analyzing the influence of honor orientation is especially interesting because the South Korean domestic audience also displays high honor orientation due to South Korea's tempestuous modern history.

Fifth, chaebol presence remains one of the easiest ways to determine presidential culpability in a scandal. While Kim Young-sam and Roh Moo-hyun did not personally involve themselves with chaebol, the remaining three leaders scored the lowest possible, indicating that the impact of the chaebol has nearly the same destructive power on a leader's resolve as trait self-control, its average score being 0.22 points, just .02 points above trait self-

control. As was made abundantly clear with the Choi scandal, Rosa Chun and David Kang's scholarship concerning chaebol dominance in Korean politics remains ever pertinent.

### *Broader Implications of Resolve on South Korean Leadership*

The conclusions concerning resolve also have applicability in general scholarship about Korean domestic politics. First, it demonstrates that South Korean Presidential decision-making cannot be explained through traditional literature on domestic audience cost and the two-level game. Fearon and Putnam conclude in their frameworks that the domestic audience or interest groups have a restrictive role on leadership. However, apart from Kim Young-sam, none of the ROK presidents have demonstrated a resolve strong enough to refrain from participating in a political scandal, despite knowing how negatively it would affect their legitimacy.<sup>75</sup>

Second, even under a theoretical framework that assumes South Korea's leadership interacts normally with its domestic audience, getting caught would incur costs too high to feasibly consider, rendering the perceived benefits of such behavior moot. The fact that every President after 1998 engaged in impropriety, despite knowing the tarnishing impact it would have demonstrates they either underestimated the costs or believed they wouldn't get caught in the first place. To this end I offer Robert Jervis' interpretation of overconfidence as a compelling explanation. Through experimental methods, Jervis argues that leaders tend to overestimate their cognitive capabilities and often have an inaccurate understanding of facts concerning their environment.<sup>76</sup>

Based on the observations made in the presidential case studies, it is possible each South Korean president (aside from Kim Young-Sam) felt overconfident in their disparate approaches to backroom deals: they trusted that their individual networks and understanding of politics would ensure they wouldn't be caught, causing them to overestimate their capabilities. This also makes most explanatory sense for our non-traditional exit group: in Roh Moo-hyun's case in particular, his high honor orientation mismatches greatly with his decision in allowing his family to accept bribes or not apologizing for his family's deals before they were publicly discovered. The suicide demonstrates that Roh understood the immorality of his actions, but if he was willing to sacrifice his life to repent, why wasn't his resolve strong enough to resist in the first place? Roh possibly overestimated himself and expected not to be caught

75 Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-level Games," *International Organization* 42:3 (1988): 427.

76 Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 204-206.

in the first place; these observations also correlate with his obdurate pursuit of unpopular foreign policy.

Third, South Korean leaders practice non-rational decision-making because they refuse to learn from their predecessors. As an extension of overconfidence, Jervis asserts that leaders do not engage in the accumulation of information because they overestimate their capabilities.<sup>77</sup> Again, the presidential case studies demonstrate a general disregard for the consequences of scandalous behavior: President Park’s impeachment and jailing being the most striking display. In addition to her unique behavioral attributes, her decision to continue helping Choi can in part be explained by ignoring the consequences that affected her predecessors. George Williams argues that the environment surrounding a leader naturally fosters these types of non-rational thought processes – an idiosyncrasy that can only be understood by other leaders.<sup>78</sup>

Public Approval Leaving Office: “Gallop Korea Daily Opinion Polls”<sup>79</sup>

Figure 4 demonstrates that having a low score in any of the four attributes of resolve will negatively influence public approval of a leader; all five presidents have left office with lower than 30% approval ratings.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, aside from

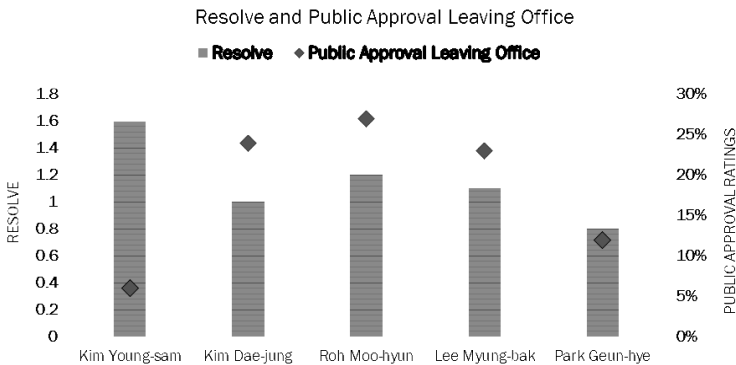


Figure 4: Graphical Representation of Resolve in Relation to Final Public Approval

77 Ibid., 207-212.

78 George Williams, “Why Leaders Lose Their Way,” *Harvard Business School: Working Knowledge*, June 6, 2011. <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/why-leaders-lose-their-way>.

79 한국갤럽 역대 대통령 직무 수행 평가 1988~2017 (Korean Gallop Poll of Korean Presidential Approval Ratings 1988-2017).

80 Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Young-sam’s cases depict an interesting relationship. Kim Young-sam had the highest resolve, which suggests involvement in political scandals for the traditional exits group is not the most important factor to the domestic audience, but rather the stability and livelihood provided. Roh’s ratings rebounded post-suicide, solely based on high honor orientation.

Kim Young-sam, the graph shows a correlation between low resolve to low approval ratings.

That is to say, discovery of a public scandal negatively impacts a president's reputation. This also explains the consistently low scores of trait self-control: it should be intuitive that resolve is adversely influenced by non-rational thought, but Figure 4 demonstrates that low approval ratings are the norm. It is difficult to label the prevalence of scandals as a coincidence, but it makes sense if each president refused to learn from the mistakes of their predecessor and engaged in a scandal anyways.

## Conclusion

To better understand the motivations that may drive South Korean presidents to consistently engage in political scandals, this paper embraced a leader-centric framework to analyze the behavioral and environmental attributes that may explain the decision-making of leaders and the resultant prevalence of iniquitous behavior. Utilizing Joshua Kertzer's interactionist framework and comparative case studies, I focused on two dispositional (honor orientation; trait self-control) and two situational variables (security; chaebol presence) to measure the resolve of five South Korean presidents since 1993 in resisting malfeasance and graft. The intent was to isolate the presence of behavioral factors or conditions that may have been conducive to non-rational decision making.

Foremost, while ROK leaders on average prioritized a stable security environment and warm relations with the US, the case studies demonstrated that resolve was adversely affected in both extremely positive and negative threat environs. Second, apart from Kim Young-sam, leaders scored consistently low on trait self-control. Third, there was no observable relation between the two dispositional attributes of honor orientation and trait self-control – instances of both high and low levels of honor orientation had little effect on a leader's resolve. Fourth, high levels of honor orientation only mattered so long as the president maintained trust of the domestic audience. If this trust was lost, either through poor foreign policy or bribery allegations against family members, honor orientation served as a gossamer defense and did not strengthen resolve. Last, chaebol presence continues to be a reliable predictor of culpability in scandal involvement. Traditional scholarship remains correct on the matter of conglomerate dominance in Korea, rendering low scores in this variable an almost definitive representation of feeble resolve.

These observations of resolve also lend support to broader conclusions concerning domestic politics and leadership in South Korea. First, these results demonstrate that presidential decision-making does not abide by the



traditional cost-benefit analysis or domestic audience framework. Second, they showcase that ROK presidents tend to be overconfident in their capabilities, consequently decreasing their resolve against immoral activity. Third, empirically, it appears that South Korean leaders disregard the consequences of scandalous behavior that have affected their predecessors, suggesting they do not actively accumulate and learn from such information.

The findings in this paper can benefit greatly from experimental methods. Surveys of random South Korean and international participants would gauge which situational or dispositional attributes participants believed were the most significant in defining resolve in the context of resisting political scandals. Furthermore, there is potential for further comparative research by analyzing domestic trends that explain the similarities between non-traditional exits in both South Korea and Japan. Finally, as was alluded to early in the paper, perhaps there are deeper, behind-the-scene variables that more strongly damage resolve, such as the one-term presidential limit.

Nevertheless, the paper's findings indicate that ultimately, South Korean presidents engage in political scandals because of low trait self-control; these findings are consistent with Kerzter's experimental results. As exhibited by the case studies of Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Park Geun-hye, the unique, behavioral quirks of a president developed in their formative years have the most salient impact on their resolve. Kim Dae-jung prioritized reconciliation with North Korea to the point the other three variables became moot. And Park Geun-hye's ambition and ties with Choi defined her leadership because of her traumatic, formative years. Nevertheless, in a vacuum, all four attributes can still decisively impact resolve. Lee Myung-bak demonstrates that neither trait self-control nor honor orientation is necessary as long as he could avoid assuming direct responsibility through his extensive chaebol network. In direct contrast, despite his poor foreign policy and trait self-control, Roh Moo-hyun's high honor orientation and repentance in a scandal absent of chaebol presence, has earned him lasting adulation from the public. Finally, Kim Young-sam demonstrates that being unable to maintain stability in times of international crisis will still effortlessly overrule high honor orientation, trait self-control, and low chaebol presence.