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**The Road to the Blue House: Korean Newspaper Coverage of the
2007 South Korean Presidential Election**

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Abstract

This study investigates the newspaper coverage of two of South Korea's most prominent newspapers *Han-Kyoreh Shinbum* and *Dongailbo* during its 2007 presidential election campaign. Applying Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's typology of campaign news coverage, the study examined the Korean coverage based on newspaper type, candidate in focus, voice, tone, and topic. A content analysis of coverage from the week prior to the South Korean election reveals that the most common topic of campaign coverage was horse race (37%), followed closely by character (23%) and policy (20%). The most frequently addressed horse race topic was opinion poll (43%), followed by campaign strategy (29%). The most discussed candidate was Grand National Party candidate Lee Myung-bak (53%), the predominant tone was neutral (53%), and the primary source of campaign discussion was reporter (52%). The study concludes that there are many unique features of the South Korean campaign that distinguish it from scholarship typically directed toward the United States and that these features are directly influenced by the Korean electoral process as well as the cultural customs guiding public perceptions of the campaign.

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The government of South Korea must eventually address a difficult paradox. The challenge it faces is to balance constitutional protections of freedom of expression with the desire to preserve fairness in its democratic elections. Article 21 of the constitution of the Republic of Korea specifies: "All citizens shall enjoy freedom of speech and the press, and freedom of assembly and association." However, this overarching statement about freedom of expression is incommensurate with the government's Election Act, which heavily restricts media, candidates, and voters from making evaluative judgments about the campaign. The National Election Commission (NEC), the government's watchdog organization charged with enforcement of the nation's election laws justifies these restrictions:

Freedom of election campaign is a precondition of exercise of the right to vote and a form of freedom of expression for expressing one's thoughts freely in the process of an election.

Nevertheless, at the same time for fair election, the election must be prevented from becoming corrupt from money, abuse of government power and slander, and it is necessary to minimize socioeconomic losses and side effects that might be incurred by allowing limitless election campaigning. It is also necessary to put certain restrictions on freedom of election campaigning to prevent the principle of equal opportunities for election campaign from being marred because of differences of economic power among candidates and to keep public opinion from being distorted in the election results.

In contrast to South Korea's approach to regulating the campaign, other democratic systems of government view the ability to control public opinion as a necessary precursor to winning an election. Benoit's (1999) Functional Theory of Campaign Discourse asserts that voting is a comparative act and that for candidates to win an election, they must work hard to make themselves look favorable and their

opponents look unfavorable. In American political campaigns, it is not unusual to see the media and the candidates embrace the challenge of propping up or tearing down other candidates with few reservations. The fundamental differences in the way Korean newspapers cover its presidential campaign are at the heart of what makes a study of this kind of discourse important. Much of the literature on newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns, as would be expected, focuses almost exclusively on U.S. elections. However, even with some of Korea's government-imposed restrictions on the press, many of the primary functions of newspaper coverage during American presidential campaigns may also be present in the South Korean election coverage. In order to justify the study of Korean newspaper reporting during its 2007 presidential election, we have determined that there are several key reasons for examining coverage of campaigns in general and several reasons for studying Korean newspaper coverage in particular. These reasons include the overall substance of newspapers, the potential for newspapers to increase voter turnout, the uniqueness of government censored newspapers, and the distinctive political elements in the 2007 election itself.

First, newspapers will always be important for the substantive content they provide to voters prior to an election-day decision. Hollihan (2001) explained that "for national political news coverage, the most thorough, comprehensive, and substantive information regarding political campaigns, political issues, and public policies is available to readers of comprehensive large city daily papers" (p. 79). Therefore, voters at least have an opportunity to learn something about a candidate's character or policy positions. Whether voters take advantage of this opportunity is an issue that has generated varied opinion. Although some researchers believe that there may be a disconnect between the available and the actual use of newspaper, Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) have concluded: "Although the literature on voter learning from newspaper coverage of political campaigns is mixed, the evidence suggests at a minimum that newspaper can be a significant source of issue knowledge for voters" (p.

356). The authors imply that even if the use of newspapers is sometimes lower than expected, it still provides enough information to the voters to be an important medium during the campaign cycle.

Second, people who actually do read newspapers during an election are more likely to vote. “Newspaper users have a disproportionate impact at the polls. The 2000 [U.S.] election makes it plain that the outcome of close elections can be altered by a relatively small group of voters” (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005, p. 357). Additionally, there has been no shortage of close elections in the United States during the last fifty years. Zakahi and Hacker (1995) explained: “In 1960, John Kennedy beat Richard Nixon by 100,000 popular votes. This is a fraction of a percentage (0.2%) of the total vote. In 1968, Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey by 500,000 votes (0.7%). In 1976, Jimmy Carter won by less than 2% of the popular vote...In 1980, Ronald Reagan beat Carter by less than 10% of the popular vote, yet two week before the election, 25% of the voters were still undecided (p. 100).” Since that time, Bush narrowly defeated Gore in 2000 with sufficient electoral votes, but lost a close popular vote. South Korea had a very competitive conservative primary in 2007, as Lee Myung-bak edged out Park Geun-hye for the nomination (49.56% to 48.06% respectively). Additionally, the 2002 presidential election was very close as Roh Moo-hyun of the Millenium Democratic Party narrowly defeated Lee Hoi-chang of the Grand National Party by just over 2% of the overall vote.

Third, government censored newspapers may reflect a more restrictive view of the campaign, but they still function as an important information source. Numerous examples illustrate the lack of freedom reporters have to provide individual commentary on the campaign. Even small violations of the election laws can lead to criminal prosecution or a loss of professional livelihood. During the administration of former president Roh Moo-hyun, numerous complaints surfaced from South Korea’s newspapers claiming the government was trying to restrict journalistic freedom. One of these cases involved Lee Choon-keun, a producer of a South Korean investigative journalism television program, *PD*

Notebook, who spent two days in jail after the former Minister of Agriculture accused the show of slandering them. The show had simply asked whether imports of American beef were free of mad-cow disease ("Mad bullying," 2009). These kinds of complaints only inflamed the tenuous relationship between the president and the press. In fact, Mr. Roh once sued the popular newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* for simply reporting that he owned an expensive yacht ("A question, 2003). There was some hope by the International Press Institute, a body of journalists from 120 countries, that the newly elected 2007 candidate would remove many of the government's previous restrictions on the press. However, even new president Lee Myung-bak has maintained the previous levels of control. For example, a South Korean comic book artist was recently fired for weaving into the background of his cartoon two phrases "insulting" to Mr. Lee ("South Korean cartoonist, 2009).

Fourth, there are a few distinctive features of the 2007 South Korean presidential election that make this context particularly worthy of analysis. First, the candidate leading the polls, Lee Myung-bak, had been dogged throughout his candidacy by speculations that he participated in stock manipulation and embezzlement in his former business dealings. Lee had been cleared at one point of these accusations, but outgoing president Roh Moo-hyun ordered justice officials to reopen the investigation just days before the presidential election ("Roh to reopen, 2007). The new investigation dealt specifically with Lee's involvement in the investment firm BBK, with which Lee had previously denied having any connection. Although the timing of Roh's decision to reopen the investigation corresponded with the discovery of a videotape showing Lee speaking about his creation of the investment firm, many South Koreans felt that President's Roh's actions were politically motivated. Despite the new evidence, Lee continued to deny the accusations, claiming he had made "some incorrect statements" on the tape (Sang-Hun, 2007). Regardless of Lee's guilt or innocence, the scandal would likely influence the Korean newspaper coverage in the weeks prior to the election. However, there is reason to believe that South Koreans might not be heavily influenced by this coverage. Although the academic literature on culture

has frequently asserted that members of collectivist societies will usually place a heavy value on image or face, the voters during the Korean election tended to focus more on economic issues. San-hun (2007) wrote: "South Koreans' concern about their economy, squeezed between high-tech Japan and low-cost China, runs so deep that renewed charges this week of ethical lapses by Mr. Lee failed to shatter their belief that it was time to elect a man considered capable of reviving the economy." In this particular election year, the vitality of South Korea's economy clearly trumped questions of Lee's business ethics. Additionally, the outcome of the election was projected to have significant ramifications with regard to South Korea/North Korea bilateral relations. Roh Moo-hyun, as well as his predecessor, had maintained the Sunshine Policy (a doctrine emphasizing peaceful cooperation) with North Korea. In contrast, front-runner Lee Myung-bak had pledged to make efforts to push North Korea toward reform by withholding aid until North Korea made progress in terminating its nuclear arms program ("South Korea election," 2007). Obviously, the potential for a huge diplomatic shift was likely.

In light of the uniqueness of the South Korean presidential campaign, the purpose of this essay is to examine the rhetorical features of the Korean newspaper coverage just prior to the election. It is anticipated that there will be some similarities between Korean and American newspaper, but the cultural differences lend themselves to some dissimilarities as well. The structure of the essay includes an exemplary review of the literature, illustration of Benoit's, Stein, and Hansen's news coverage framework, and an analysis of the Korean newspapers.

[Further details of the analysis have been omitted because the paper is currently being revised for publication. If you have questions, you are welcome to direct them to the first author at stein@suu.edu]

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