



# The Asan Monthly Opinion Survey January 2012

Jiyeon Kim  
Karl Friedhoff



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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies conducted its monthly opinion survey from January 25-26. The following are the key findings:

- Once again, President Lee Myung-Bak's approval ratings are below 30%, at 27.6%. The 5.8% bump in approval ratings that President Lee received following the death of Kim Jong-Il was largely reversed in January.
- Much of the drop in President Lee's approval rating was driven by drastic declines among respondents in their forties, fifties, and sixties, where he lost 10.2%, 16.1%, and 21.2%, respectively.
- Support for Ahn Chul-Soo continued to erode from the previous month. His support now stands at 24.0%. Meanwhile, Park Geun-Hye reclaimed her spot as the front-runner to become the next president of South Korea, garnering the support of 30.3% of respondents. Moon Jae-In saw support for his candidacy almost double, reaching 12.0%, marking the first time his support has reached double digits.
- The Grand National Party (GNP) now trails the Democratic United Party as the party seen as most capable of handling job creation, North-South relations, and the redistribution of wealth. This marks the first time that the GNP has trailed on all three issues at the same time.

The sample size of the survey was 1,000 respondents over the age of 19. The margin of error is  $\pm 3.1\%$  at the 95% confidence level. The survey was conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in partnership with Research & Research. It employed the Random Digit Dialing method for mobile phones.

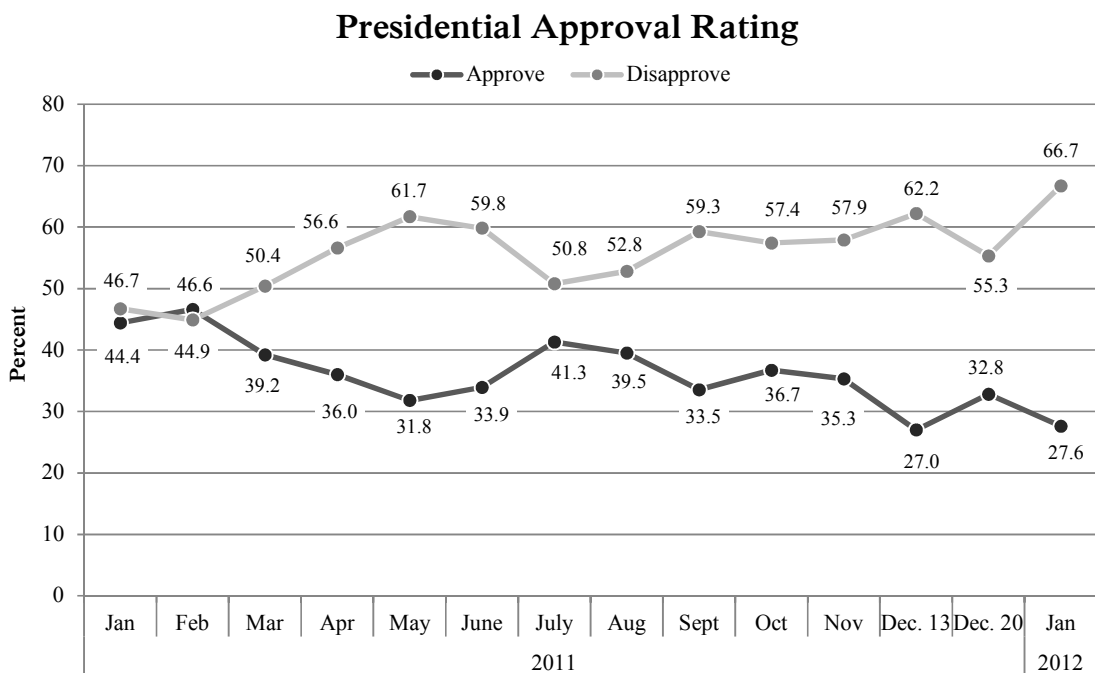


## Presidential Approval

The end of 2011 offered a brief respite for President Lee Myung-Bak, whose approval ratings declined throughout the year. While he began the year in the mid-forties, by December 13 it had reached its lowest point, hitting 27.0%. This marked the first time it had ventured below 30%. However, on December 19, North Korea announced the death of Kim Jong-Il and in a poll conducted by the Asan Institute on December 20 his approval rating increased 5.8%.

However, that 5.8% bump was largely reversed in January. As shown in Figure 1, a 5.2% decline for the month left his approval rating at 27.6%—the second time in six weeks his approval rating fell below 30%.

Figure 1



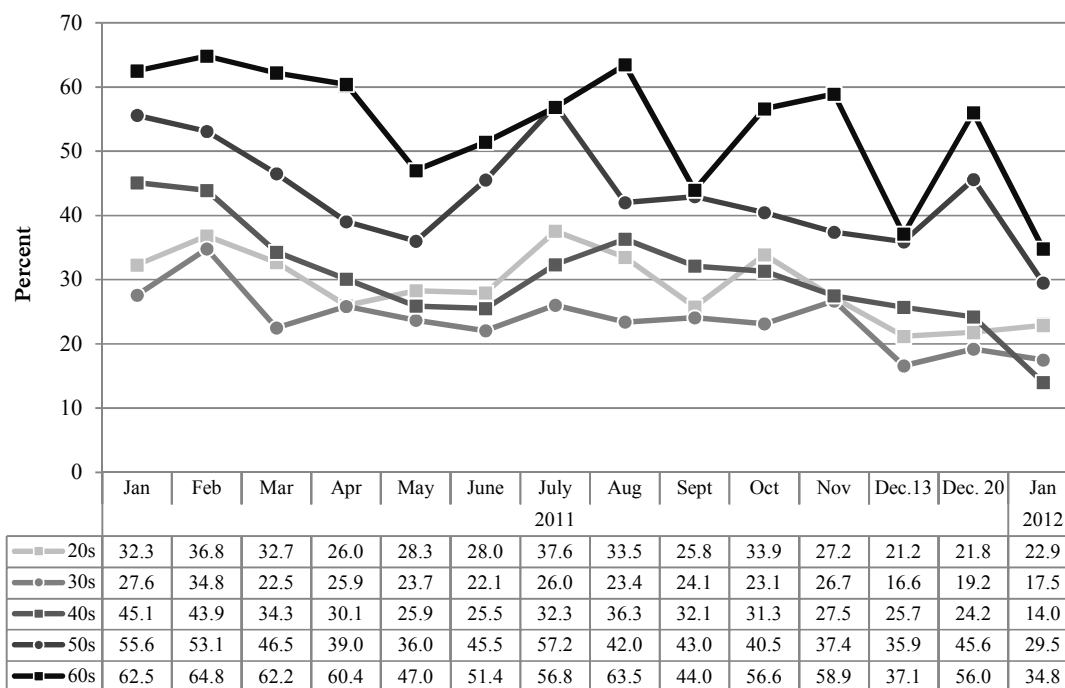


Among age groups, the roller coaster ride continued for respondents in their sixties. After a dramatic increase in approval in this cohort following the death of Kim Jong-Il, January saw an almost equally dramatic decline, illustrated in Figure 2. The approval rating of 34.8% in January is the lowest of the past 13 months for this cohort. Further significant declines came among respondents in their fifties. The 29.5% approval rating for this age group is also a 13-month low, and the first time it has dropped below 30%. The loss of support among these two cohorts is particularly worrisome as these are traditionally the core supporters of the GNP and President Lee.

While approval among respondents in their twenties and thirties largely held steady, a third significant decline took place among those in their forties. Approval among this cohort declined 10.2%, falling to 14.0% overall, marking the first time that any age cohort has fallen below 15.0%. In the 2007 presidential election, white-collar metropolitan voters in their 40s were vital in delivering the Blue House to President Lee. Combined with losses among those in their fifties and sixties, support has seriously eroded among all of the electorates that played an important role in his election.

Figure 2

### Presidential Approval by Age Group





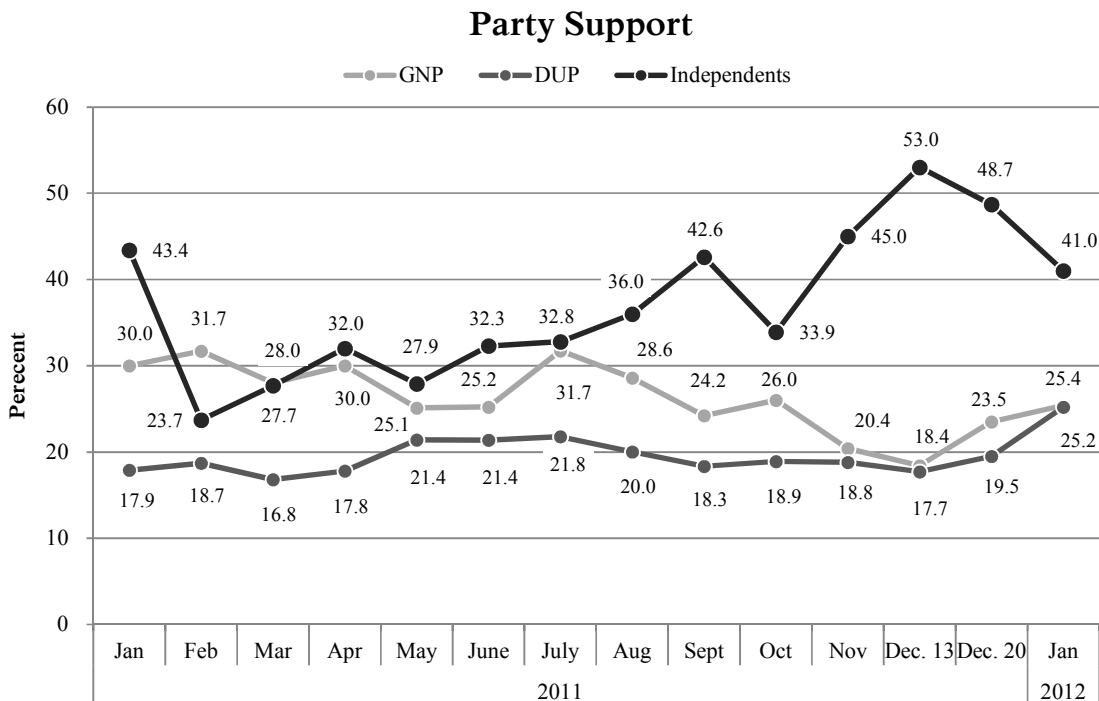


## Party Support

The efforts undertaken by the Grand National Party (GNP) to initiate internal reform and to distance itself from President Lee seem to have been successful thus far. The significant decline in his approval ratings was not accompanied by a decline in support for his party. In fact, the GNP gained 2.1%, reaching 25.4%, as shown in Figure 3. This modest gain is somewhat surprising given the scandals that have engulfed the party over the past month, including the allegation that money-filled envelopes were offered as bribes to party members ahead of a party leadership vote in 2008.

However, the news is not all positive for the GNP. Despite the slight gain, the GNP's margin over its main political rival, the Democratic United Party (DUP), is now razor-thin. Not only did the DUP gain slightly following the death of Kim Jong-Il, but the January 2012 gain of 5.7% to 25.2% was the single largest one-month gain for the party in 13 months. However, this may not translate into an increase in seats in the coming general election due Korea's use of single-member district system.

Figure 3



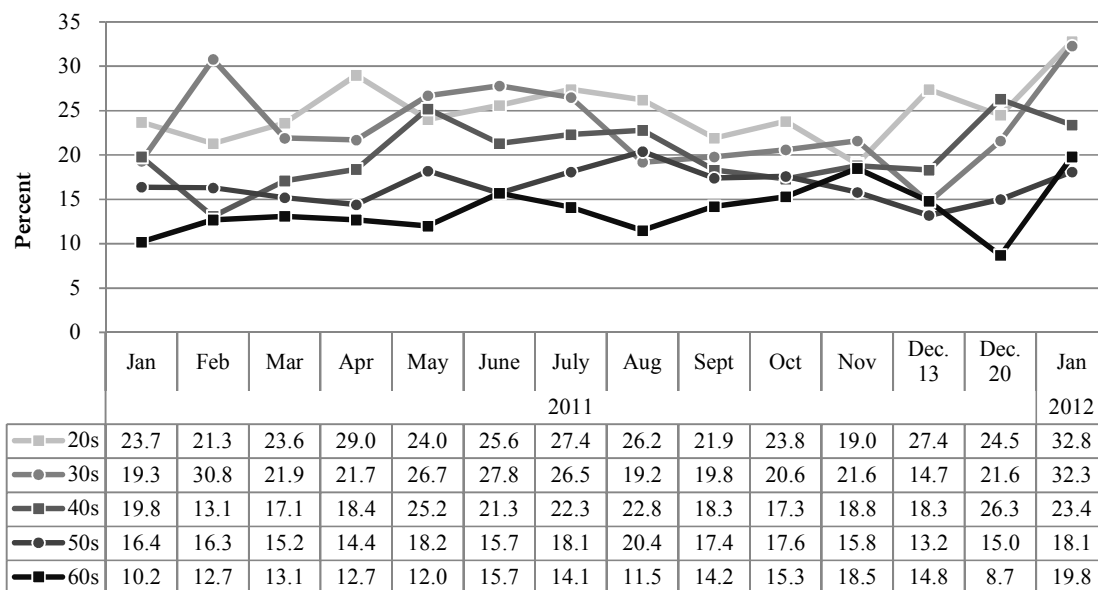


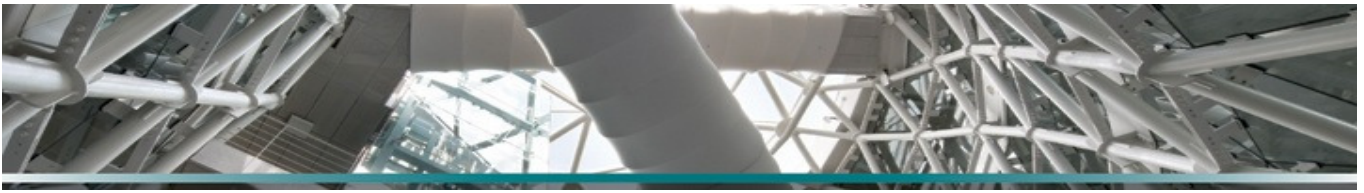
The survey conducted on December 13 likely captured the GNP just as it hit rock bottom. The party was in chaos, support among 4 of the 5 age cohorts was at yearly lows, and new party leadership had not yet stepped in to take charge of a party spiraling out of control. There seemed to be no direction to go but up. While the death of Kim Jong-Il may have kick-started the process, much of the increase since December 13 likely came from Park Geun-Hye firmly establishing her control over the party.

The 5.7% gain for the DUP was driven by large gains among respondents in their twenties, thirties, and sixties, as shown in Figure 4. There was also a moderate gain among respondents in their fifties. The only age cohort within which there was a decline was respondents in their forties.

**Figure 4**

### DUP Support by Age

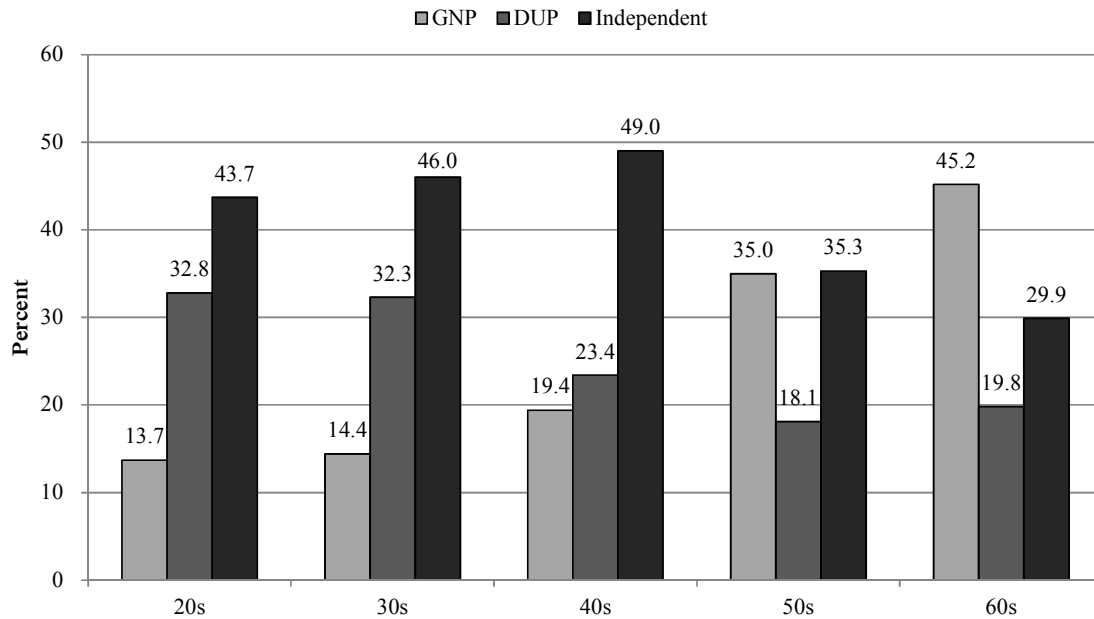




Of course, the big question that remains is what will become of the 41.0% of respondents who remain self-identified independents, as shown previously in Figure 3. Worryingly for the GNP, there are far more independent respondents among the twenties, thirties, and forties age cohorts than in the fifties and sixties (Figure 5). These younger voters will likely swing toward progressive candidates as the election approaches, further increasing support for the DUP or other opposition parties.

**Figure 5**

### Party Identification by Age

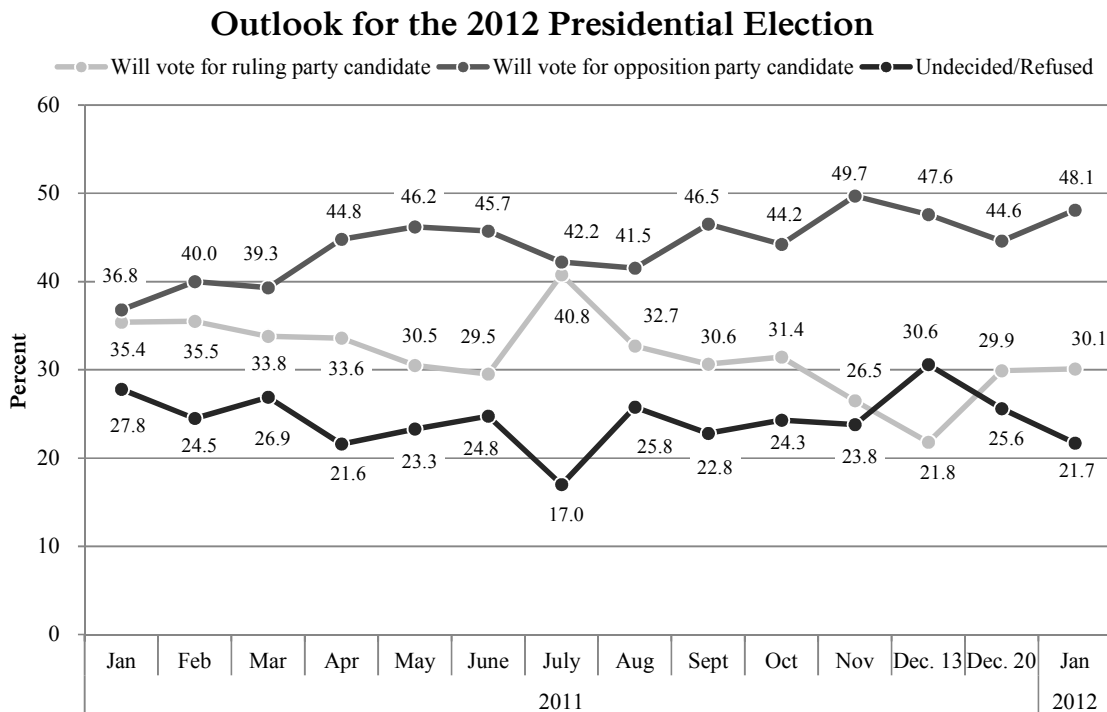




## 2012 Presidential Election

Even though there was an overall increase in party support for the GNP, this increase did not translate into a meaningful increase in vote intention for the 2012 presidential election. While there was a 3.9% decline in those who remain undecided, virtually none of that decrease translated into gains for the GNP, as shown in Figure 6. The real gain was made for opposition parties, which saw an increase of 3.5%. The gap between the two now stands at 18.0%. Clearly, the GNP faces an increasingly difficult challenge in the months remaining before the presidential election.

**Figure 6**





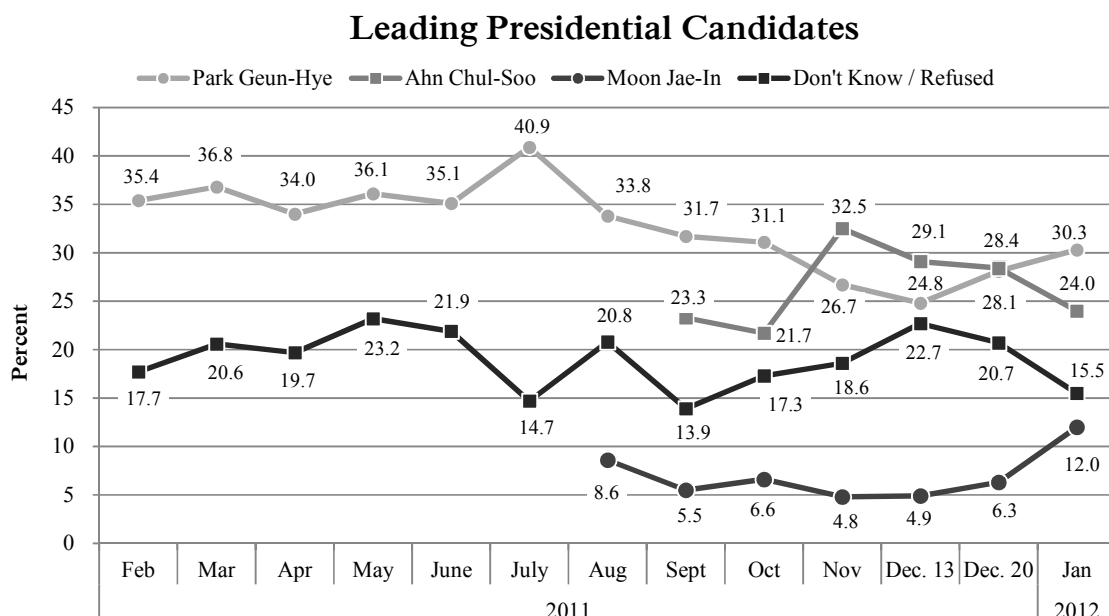


Despite the seeming lack of enthusiasm for a second consecutive GNP administration in the Blue House, the opposition party continues to struggle in finding a candidate ready to challenge Park Geun-Hye, the presumptive GNP candidate. While Ahn Chul-Soo performed strongly before December 2011, his support began to slide in the last month of the year. That slide continued in January 2012, as his support fell to 24.0%. For the first time in three months, he is no longer the front-runner among potential presidential candidates. Moreover, his candidacy is far from assured. On the other hand, Ms. Park has seen her support climb from a low of 24.8% on December 13 to 30.3% in January 2012.

With Dr. Ahn's noncommittal attitude toward a run for the presidency, the hunt may well be on for a suitable replacement among the opposition parties. The only candidate to emerge thus far is Moon Jae-In, former chief of staff to Roh Moo-Hyun. While he had not polled particularly well since August 2011, his support nearly doubled from December 20, 2011 to January 25, 2012, reaching 12.0%.

While Dr. Ahn may not officially run for president, his influence on the election cannot be dismissed. His endorsement will remain a crucial factor for the success of any opposition party candidate hoping to defeat Ms. Park. Thus, even if he does not run, Dr. Ahn will hold considerable sway over the 2012 presidential election.

**Figure 7**

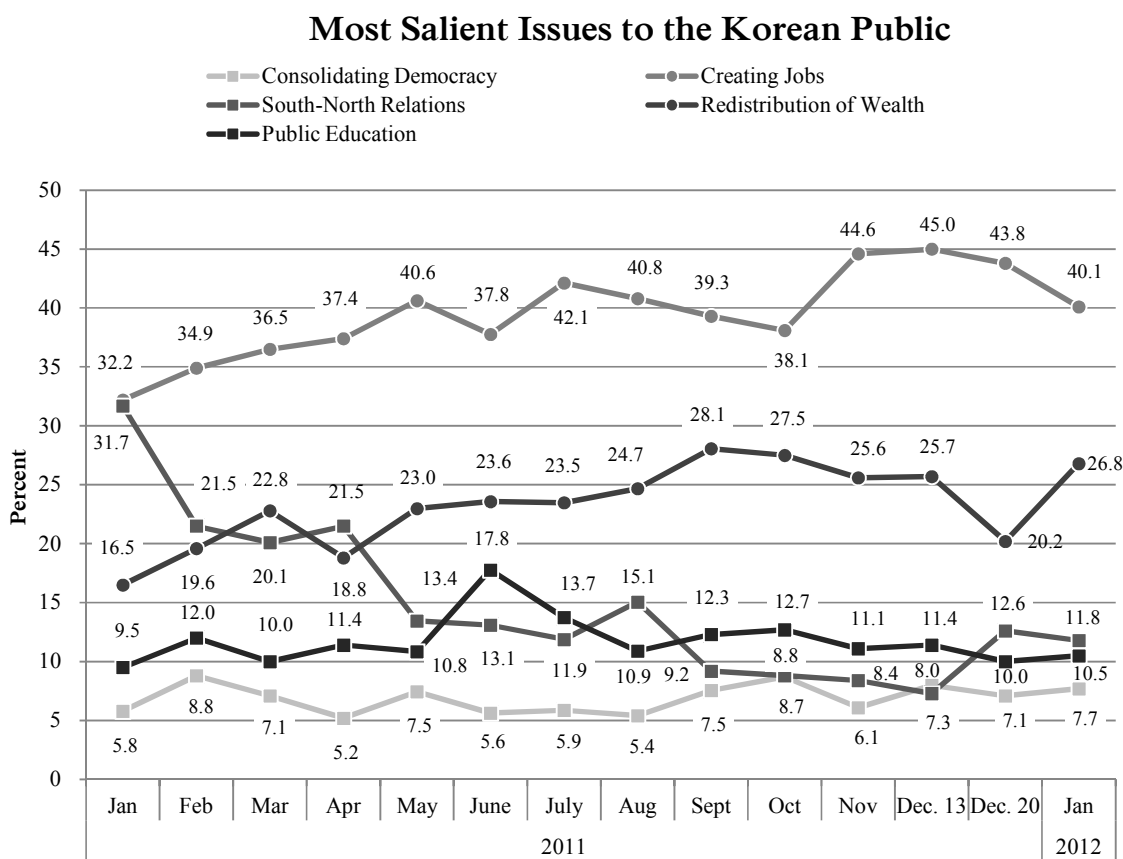




## Issues Important to the Nation

Among issues important to the nation, the economy remained the top priority for respondents by a wide margin, as shown in Figure 8. However, it continued to decline in importance from the high of 45.0% reached on December 13. The redistribution of wealth surged in importance in January, reaching 26.8%. These two issues figure to be common themes on the campaign trail as candidates attempt to address the public's concerns. The GNP has been particularly aggressive in repositioning itself to take on these issues and with good reason.

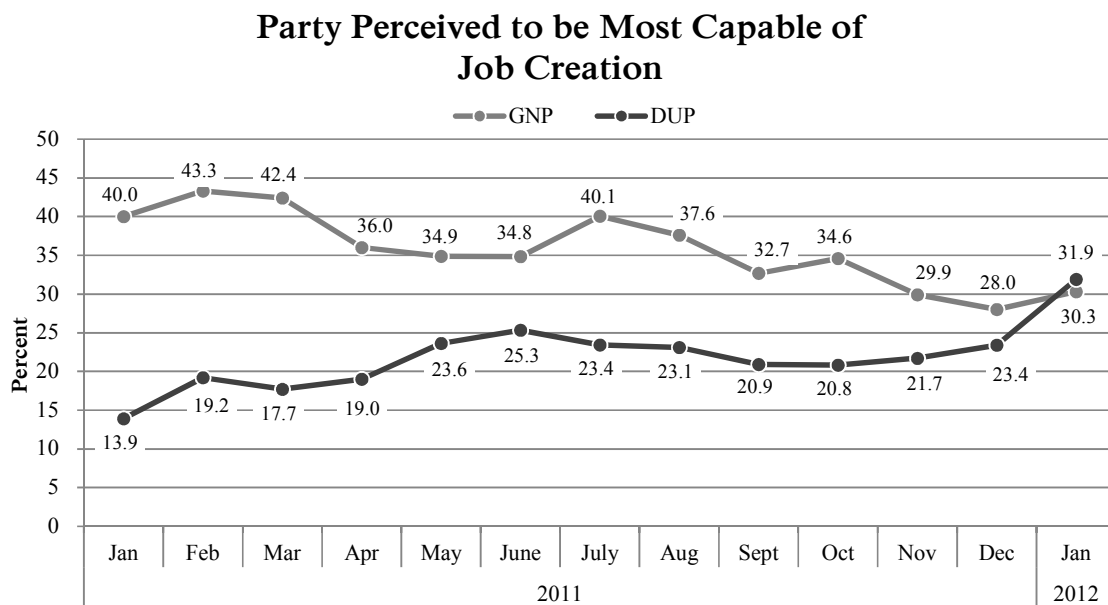
**Figure 8**





January 2012 marks the first time since the survey began asking the question that the DUP is now seen as more capable of creating jobs than the GNP (Figure 9). Throughout 2011 this issue was a core strength of the GNP, and its decline indicates just how serious the political crisis is for the party. While it did gain 2.3% from the December survey, it was not enough to maintain its position. The DUP gained 8.5% on this issue, marking the single biggest monthly gain for the party. With this issue set to play a central role in the coming general election, the DUP has positioned itself as a serious challenger.

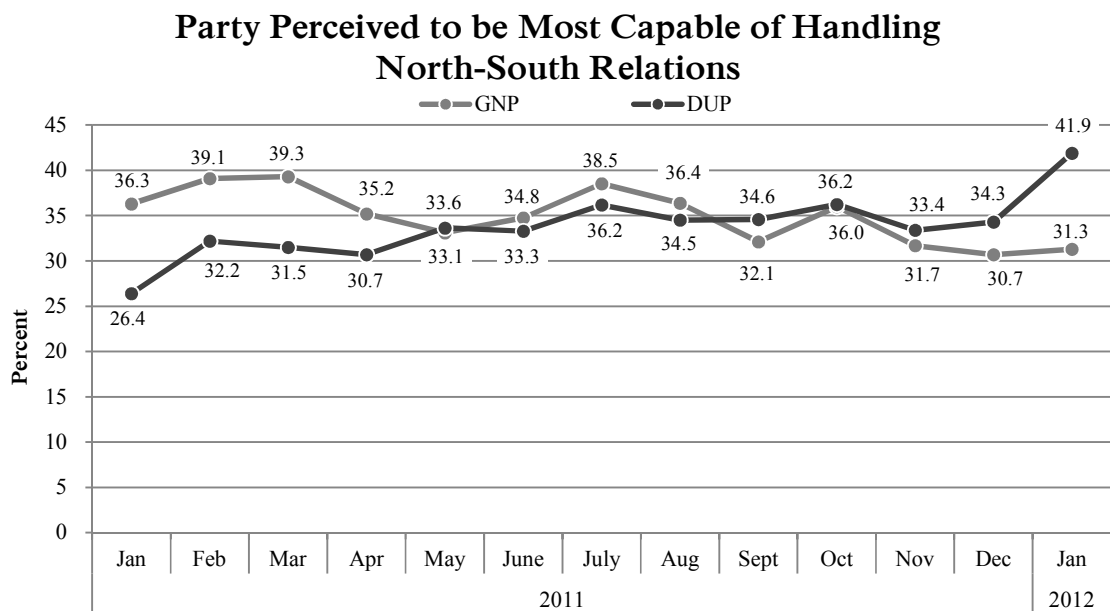
**Figure 9**





Further bad news for the GNP came on the issue of North-South relations. While the two parties had been in very close competition for being seen as most capable on this issue, the gap between the two parties more than doubled from December to January. That gap now stands at 10.6%, with 41.9% finding the DUP more capable (Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

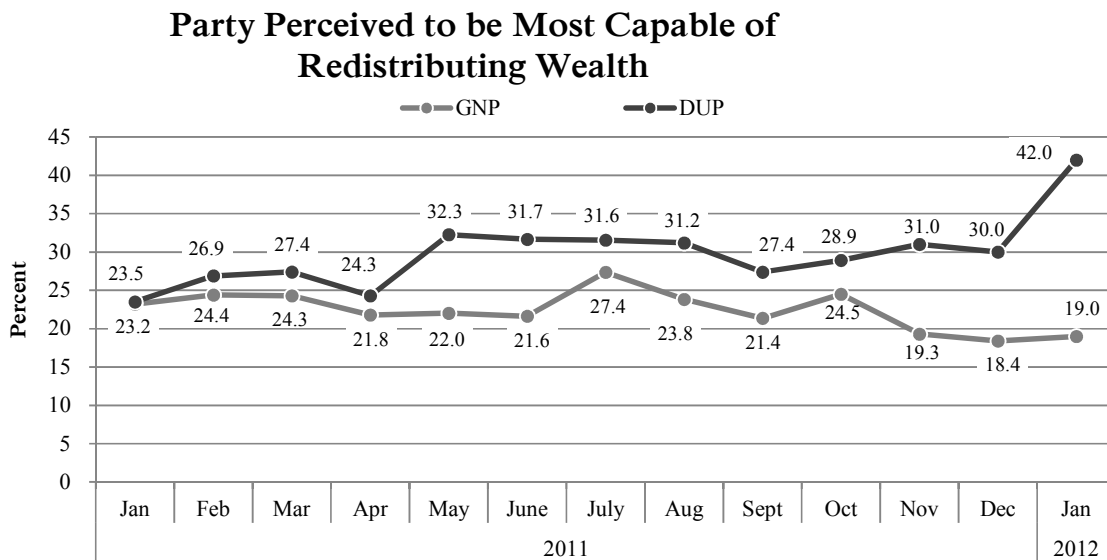


While this may not play a major role in the 2012 elections, it always has the potential to vault to the fore should North Korea resort to provocations in the weeks before the election. It should be noted that the surge in respondents viewing the DUP as more capable comes in the wake of the death of Kim Jong-Il. This turns conventional wisdom on its head. Generally, it is assumed that any perceived instability on the Korean Peninsula benefits the GNP. Yet, Kim's death has not had a significant effect. While there was a short-lived boost in support for President Lee and the GNP, it has almost completely eroded.



One of the biggest challenges facing the GNP is to change its reputation as being the party of the old and the rich. Part of that means proposing meaningful policy initiatives to successfully tackle the issue of wealth redistribution. Thus far, those attempts have fallen flat. Instead, the party now finds itself further behind than at any time in the past on this issue. While the GNP remained stuck in the 19% range for the third consecutive month (Figure 11) despite its overtures to the newly emergent youth vote, the DUP has taken its largest lead of the year on this issue. In January, 42.0% saw the DUP as the party most capable of handling this issue, creating a 23.0% gap.

**Figure 11**







## Conclusion

With elections looming, the GNP remains in a difficult position. It has thus far been unable to rebrand itself as a party that welcomes all ages and income brackets. It has even lost ground in areas that have traditionally been seen as its core strengths—the economy and relations with North Korea. This paints a worrisome picture as elections approach. Conversely, the DUP seems well-primed for the April general election. The worry for the DUP, as well as other opposition parties, is the December presidential election. While there is time for an electable opposition candidate to emerge, it is important that such a candidate emerge relatively soon. The later that emergence comes the more difficult it will be to overcome the momentum of Park Geun-Hye. Even though it seems Ahn Chul-Soo will not run for the presidency, his endorsement could well be a pivotal factor in the election. He will continue to be courted by opposition parties, putting himself in the position to make or break a candidacy.