

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

South Korea's Ballot Shortage and the Debate over Electoral Commission Reform

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Introduction

During South Korea's ninth nationwide local elections on June 3, 2026, 91 out of 14,288 polling stations ran out of ballots, temporarily halting voting at 26 locations.¹ The commission's account of the failure was revised upward more than once: its early tallies of both the affected stations and the missing ballots proved partial, and a parliamentary review of polling-station CCTV footage later put the number of citizens who left without voting at up to 91—a figure that remains provisional.² An unprecedented failure of this kind produced an equally unprecedented reaction. Citizens framed it as an infringement of the right to vote, and in the days after the election tens of thousands gathered outside the Jamsil counting center in Olympic Park, with participants in their twenties and thirties conspicuously represented.³ The mobilization was politically heterogeneous: coverage recorded calls for a revote and chants of “electoral fraud,” while some younger participants also tried to separate their voting-rights grievance from established partisan symbolism.⁴ Within a week, university student councils across the country had issued joint declarations demanding an accounting for the infringement of voting rights.⁵

¹ *Seoul Shinmun*. 2026. "Additional Ballots Sent to 140 Polling Stations; Voting Halted at 26 (In Korean)." June 9. <https://www.seoul.co.kr/news/politics/local-election2026/2026/06/09/20260609500003>.

² The commission's initial tally, covering the fifty stations identified by June 5, put the shortage at 4,726 ballots—3,912 of them in Seoul, of which 1,965 were in Songpa; those figures reached the public on June 8 through the office of lawmaker Kim Min-jeon. As the count of affected stations rose to 91, the total was revised to 7,194 ballots, 4,206 of them in Seoul. On the successive revisions, see *MBC News*. 2026. "NEC Reverses Itself Again as Shortage Count Rises from 50 to 91 (In Korean)." June 9. https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2026/nw1200/article/6828794_36967.html. On the CCTV review, see *News 1*. 2026. "Parliamentary CCTV Review Raises the Number of Voters Turned Away from 44 to as Many as 91 (In Korean)." July 22.

³ Reports put the crowd around the Jamsil counting center as high as 30,000, although the estimate included some nearby event traffic. Mobile-population data for the Olympic Park area placed the combined share of people in their twenties and thirties at 52.6 percent; those data describe traffic in the area, not a verified census of protesters.

ChosunBiz. 2026. "Thirty Thousand Gather Outside Jamsil Counting Center (In Korean)." June 6. https://biz.chosun.com/topics/topics_social/2026/06/06/M7WRRIFN5GHZLPUXPYN2G2EBQ/.

⁴ *Yonhap News*. 2026. "Jamsil Counting-Center Protest Enters Third Day (In Korean)." June 7. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20260607023900004>.

⁵ Sixteen student councils were announced on June 9 as taking part; by June 11 the count had reached nineteen as further universities joined. The declarations were timed to the thirty-ninth anniversary of the June 10 Democratic Uprising. *ChosunBiz*. 2026. "Student Councils at Sixteen Universities Issue Joint Declaration (In Korean)." June 10. https://biz.chosun.com/topics/topics_social/2026/06/10/EWM2QPLUPZBWNFQI24XIUEHYPQ/; *Kookje Shinmun*. 2026. "Voting Rights Trampled: Universities Issue Joint Declarations (In Korean)." June 11. <https://www.kookje.co.kr/news2011/asp/newsbody.asp?code=0300&key=20260611.22003002978>.

Two months after the election the controversy has not subsided, and three processes are now running in parallel. The National Assembly's special investigation committee has been sitting since June 18, taking agency reports, inspecting the district, metropolitan, and central commissions, and holding hearings through the summer; its mandate has already been extended once. An internal fact-finding committee recommended criminal referral for twelve senior officials and disciplinary action against six staff. A joint prosecution and police investigation headquarters, meanwhile, has searched commission offices repeatedly, widening its inquiry from the ballot shortage itself to alleged embezzlement involving the former chair's overseas travel and to indications that voting statistics had been manipulated.⁶

The episode has not unfolded in a political vacuum. It arrived in a party system already marked by deep polarization and by a durable repertoire of election-fraud claims, cultivated since the 2020 general election and given new prominence during the impeachment crisis of 2024–25. For actors invested in that repertoire, the ballot shortage supplied what earlier allegations had conspicuously lacked: an undisputed, visible failure of election administration. An administrative breakdown has thus been recast, in parts of the public sphere, as evidence that elections themselves cannot be trusted—a reading that extends well beyond what any investigation has found, but one that a commission with a weakened reputation is poorly placed to rebut. The stakes of the controversy therefore exceed the mechanics of ballot printing: at issue is whether a technical failure hardens into institutional distrust of the electoral system as such.

This briefing sets out what the ballot shortage revealed about Korean election administration and about the commission that runs it. It then examines the remedies now under discussion.

Why Did It Happen?

(1) The immediate cause

Korean elections run in two stages. Early voting, first used nationwide in the 2014 local elections, runs for two days at stations where any voter may cast a ballot regardless of registered address; election-day voting takes place at the voter's assigned precinct (National Election Commission 2014). Because the two stages use physically different ballots, printed separately, the commission must forecast the split between them months in advance. That forecast has grown harder as early voting has expanded, and its share varies widely by region and by contest.

In this environment the commission revised its comprehensive management guidelines, lowering the print floor for election-day ballots from 60 percent of registered voters to 50 percent. The base for the percentage is the entire electorate, not the electorate net of early voters, so the change was not on its face reckless. But it removed the margin that had absorbed forecasting error, and it left the actual ratio to the discretion of each district commission. The divergence that followed was wide: several Seoul districts raised their ratios above the floor, while Songpa alone among them held to 50 percent—and its worst-hit station was allocated 1,400 ballots where its roll called for more than 2,500.⁷ Wherever election-day turnout ran high and the ratio had been set low, a shortage became

⁶ The inquiry was widened on July 23. *Yonhap News*. 2026. "Prosecutors Search NEC Headquarters and Regional Offices (In Korean)." July 23. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR202607230453000004>.

⁷ At the parliamentary committee's field inspection of the Songpa commission, members noted that districts such as

arithmetically possible. The commission's own preparations make the imbalance plain: it printed more than twice as many early ballots as were ultimately used, while holding election-day printing to the newly lowered floor.⁸

The lowered floor explains why ballots could run short; a second failure explains why the shortage could not be contained. No protocol existed for the event. The Songpa district commission received its first warning of a shortage before noon;⁹ the central commission learned of the situation only in the late afternoon, and then through a citizen's complaint call rather than through its own reporting chain.¹⁰ The fact-finding committee described the result as "a paralysis of the reporting system and a comprehensive failure of the election management system."¹¹ What was missing was not ballots but procedure: no rule required a station to report a projected shortfall at a defined threshold, no standing instruction governed how reserve ballots held elsewhere in a district were to be identified and moved, and no obligation existed to escalate to the metropolitan or central commission once voting was suspended.

(2) Governance structure

The decision-making record exposed the first of two structural limitations: a mismatch between authority and responsibility. Asked at the parliamentary investigation about the change in the minimum printing ratio, Chair Roh Tae-ak acknowledged that it had been processed under the Secretary-General's delegated authority; while "there may have been a brief report," he said, he had no recollection of being informed. The consequential point is not his memory but the procedure. A decision of this significance never went to a vote of the nine-member commission, and Democratic Party lawmaker Lee Hae-sik identified exactly this as the origin of the failure: resolution by delegation rather than by the commission.¹²

The structure makes such delegation close to inevitable. Under Article 114 of the Constitution the commission consists of nine members, three appointed by the President, three elected by the National Assembly and three nominated by the Chief Justice. It is a collegial body: formal decision-making authority rests with the commission as a whole, not with any individual. Yet only one of the nine serves in a standing capacity. The remaining eight, the chair among them, are non-standing, and by convention the chairship is held concurrently by a sitting Supreme Court Justice, with metropolitan

Jungnang, Seodaemun, and Gangseo had raised their print ratios while Songpa alone kept to the 50-percent floor, and that Jamsil 4-dong's seventh station had been allocated 1,400 ballots against an estimated need of more than 2,500. *Financial News*. 2026. "Parliamentary Committee Rebukes the Songpa Commission during Its Field Inspection (In Korean)." July 2. <https://www.fnnews.com/news/202607021420525340>.

⁸ Roughly 23.9 million early ballots were printed for what turned out to be some 10.49 million early voters. *Financial News*. 2026. "NEC Had Prepared Early-Voting Ballots for More than Twice the Number Used (In Korean)." June 24. <https://www.fnnews.com/news/202606240906063889>.

⁹ The first warning reached the Songpa district commission at 11:34 a.m. *Financial News*. 2026. "NEC Revises When It First Learned of the Shortage: 11:34, Not 11:40 (In Korean)." June 23. <https://www.fnnews.com/news/202606231217275296>.

¹⁰ The central commission became aware of the situation after 4 p.m. *MBC News*. 2026. "NEC Reverses Itself Again as Shortage Count Rises from 50 to 91 (In Korean)." June 9. See note 2 above.

¹¹ *Aju Business Daily*. 2026. "Fact-Finding Committee Recommends Referral of Twelve Officials, Citing 'Comprehensive Failure' (In Korean)." June 19. <https://www.ajunews.com/view/20260619145632090>.

¹² *Financial News*. 2026. "Ballot Investigation Opens with Consensus on Statutory Oversight (In Korean)." June 23. <https://www.fnnews.com/news/202606231508553584>.

and district commissions likewise chaired by serving judges.¹³ The body that holds the authority thus lacks the time and the institutional position to exercise it, while the secretariat accumulates the operational power the commissioners cannot use.

The second limitation is capacity, and it showed on election day. The commission has four tiers: central, metropolitan, district, and precinct. Its lowest tier, some 3,500 precinct committees, has no permanent secretariat at all. As of May 2026, it employed 3,007 officials nationwide, an establishment expected to administer 14,288 polling stations. The arithmetic closes only through temporary mobilization on a very large scale: a 2022 study commissioned by the NEC itself estimated that a single national election requires some 360,000 temporary personnel, and recommended expanding the commission's own staffing by 1.5 to 2 times.¹⁴

That mobilization runs on assignment, not employment. Presiding officers and polling clerks are commissioned from among public officials and school staff in the days before the election and released automatically once voting ends.¹⁵ The appointment is consensual in form, but the obligation falls on the agency head rather than on the individual. In practice local government employees carry the overwhelming share of this work, and the arrangement is failing on its own terms: in the same 2022 study, 75 percent of surveyed civil servants considered being assigned to election duty unjustified and 82 percent said they would not participate again.¹⁶ Temporary staff receive training, but a few days of instruction has limits, and those limits bite hardest in exactly the exceptional situations that training cannot rehearse.

Songpa illustrates the whole chain. On election day the district commission had thirteen permanent election staff for 146 precincts, supervising 2,961 temporary personnel—one permanent official for every 227 temporary workers.¹⁷ What followed was a failure of execution, not of supply. Warning signs appeared before noon, but nearly two hours passed before staff began numbering reserve ballots—no one knew how to operate the numbering device—and the first delivery left for a polling station only in mid-afternoon. When twenty-one stations requested ballots at once, the district commission could neither answer them nor report the emergency upward. The fact-finding committee concluded that there had been no protocol for shortages and no established practice of redistributing

¹³ Article 114(2) of the Constitution provides for nine commissioners—three appointed by the President, three elected by the National Assembly, and three designated by the Chief Justice—with the chair elected from among the members. The single standing commissioner and the practice of judicial chairship derive from statute and convention, not from the constitutional text.

¹⁴ The estimate comprised roughly 100,000 personnel for early voting, 200,000 for election day and 60,000 for counting (Korean Association of Party Studies 2022).

¹⁵ Presiding officers are commissioned by district commissions from among public officials or school staff under Article 146-2 of the Public Official Election Act; polling clerks are commissioned by precinct committees under Article 147(9). Both are commissioned between ten days and three days before the election (Public Official Election Act, Articles 146-2 and 147(9)).

¹⁶ The survey covered 3,849 civil servants in a convenience sample drawn from three public-sector unions (Korean Association of Party Studies 2022).

¹⁷ The district had roughly 567,000 registered voters; its permanent establishment amounted to 0.4 percent of the election-day workforce. The temporary personnel comprised 146 presiding officers, 2,025 polling clerks and 756 counting staff. *News1*. 2026. "Songpa Commission Had Thirteen Dedicated Staff to Manage 2,961 Workers (In Korean)." June 22. <https://www.news1.kr/politics/assembly/6205004>. The figures cite NEC data submitted to lawmaker Lee Hae-sik. A separate account from Songpa district put the total at fifteen staff, of whom three covered its 146 polling stations while twelve managed the count: *Dong-A Ilbo*. 2026. "Songpa Officials' Anger over Unanswered Ballot-Shortage Calls (In Korean)." June 11. <https://www.donga.com/news/Politics/article/all/20260611/134093498/1>. The two figures come from different institutional accounts and should not be treated as a single denominator.

reserves.¹⁸ Scarcity was never the constraint: Songpa ended the day with some 40,000 unused ballots district-wide while twenty of its stations ran short and voting was suspended at fifteen, and its election-day turnout of 42.4 percent sat well within what had been printed.¹⁹ What failed was distribution, and the capacity to respond.

(3) Oversight of the commission

The third strand is of a different kind. It cannot be counted among the direct causes of the ballot shortage, yet it did more to shape how the public received the shortage than anything else: the long-running controversy over the commission's own recruitment and conduct.

In May 2023 the Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI) opened an inquiry into allegations that the children of four serving and former senior NEC officials had received preferential treatment in mid-career recruitment. The commission refused the audit outright, resolving unanimously that, as an independent constitutional body, it fell outside the “administrative agencies” subject to BAI inspection and that its exemption was “a constitutional custom”—grounds the BAI contested point by point.²⁰

The refusal produced a lasting institutional consequence. The BAI proceeded with its inspection between June 2023 and February 2025; the commission brought a competence dispute; and in February 2025 the Constitutional Court held unanimously that the NEC does not fall within the “administrative agencies” of Article 97.²¹ Because the holding turns on the institution rather than on the subject matter, it closed external audit of election administration along with external audit of hiring.

¹⁸ Songpa detected the risk at 11:50 a.m. but began numbering its reserve ballots only at 1:40 p.m., and the first delivery left for a polling station at 2:20 p.m. *Chosun Ilbo*. 2026. “Warning Signs from Morning, but Songpa Commission Did Not Know How to Number Ballots (In Korean).” June 13.

¹⁹ *MBC News*. 2026. “Shortage Because of High Turnout? About Forty Thousand Ballots Remained in Songpa (In Korean).” June 5. https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2026/nwtoday/article/6827880_37012.html. The district's tally was later revised upward—twenty of its stations ran short, with voting suspended at fifteen—in the commission's June 8 release: National Election Commission. 2026. “Station-by-Station Annex to the Press Release of June 8 (In Korean).” June 8. <https://img.nec.go.kr/cmm/dozen/view.do?cbIdx=1090&bcIdx=326957&fileNo=1>. See also note 1 above.

²⁰ The commission resolved on June 2, 2023 that it could not accept a BAI job-performance inspection, on two grounds: Article 97 of the Constitution places the BAI under the President for the audit of “administrative agencies,” a category from which the commission, as an independent constitutional body, excluded itself; and Article 17(2) of the State Public Officials Act assigns audits of NEC personnel affairs to the commission's own Secretary-General. The BAI answered on each point: Article 17(2) merely bars personnel audits conducted by the executive branch; the BAI's own governing statute exempts only the National Assembly, the courts and the Constitutional Court; and the commission had in fact received BAI demands for staff discipline over improper personnel processing in both 2016 and 2019, which made the claimed custom difficult to sustain. *Yonhap News*. 2023. “BAI and NEC Clash over Whether Preferential Hiring Is Subject to Audit (In Korean).” June 2. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230602100200001>.

²¹ The Court reasoned from the text of Article 97 of the Constitution, which subjects “administrative agencies” to BAI inspection—a category it held does not reach an independent constitutional organ—and from the constitutional design that insulates election administration from the executive. It added that the ruling should not be misread as placing the commission beyond scrutiny for corruption, and that the commission should build an audit mechanism of its own. *Kyunghyang Shinmun*. 2025. “Constitutional Court Finds Audit of NEC an Unconstitutional Infringement (In Korean).” February 27. <https://www.khan.co.kr/article/202502271009001>.

Recruitment, moreover, was not the only issue. In 2024 the commission faced allegations that inflated overseas turnout figures had been used to justify expanded travel budgets for twenty-two staff,²² and the criminal investigation now under way has moved in the same direction.

The cumulative effect is what matters for 2026. The public had been told that the commission could not be audited because it was constitutionally independent; the same public was then asked to accept the commission's ballot failure as ordinary administrative error. What has grown out of that sequence is not a demand to abolish the commission's independence, but a recognition that independence in the conduct of elections and external supervision of the organization are separable, and that the second has been missing.

Directions for Reform

The reform debate divides along a line that is often blurred in public discussion: what the Constitution fixes, and what it leaves to statute. Article 114 fixes a limited set of things. It establishes the commission; sets its nine-member composition and six-year terms; insulates members from political involvement and from removal short of impeachment or serious criminal conviction; and grants the commission rule-making power. Abolishing the commission, or altering its composition and constitutional standing, therefore requires constitutional amendment.²³ Given how rarely that threshold has been met, reform at this level is unlikely to arrive in time to matter.

Much else, however, is statutory. The Constitution says nothing about whether commissioners serve in a standing capacity, and requires only that the chair be elected from among the members; the convention of judicial concurrent service is not constitutionally mandated. The organization and scope of duties of commissions at every level are likewise left to statute. Making commissioners standing, and giving them authority proportionate to the responsibility they already bear, can therefore be accomplished by amending the Election Commission Act alone. The proposals now before the National Assembly all sit at this level. A Democratic Party task force has proposed converting the chairship itself into a full-time standing post, expanding standing commissioners from one to three, assigning them separate portfolios, adding a confirmation hearing for an externally recruited Secretary-General, and establishing an independent audit committee composed of outside members.²⁴

The hardest question is the design of external control. The Constitutional Court closed the BAI route in February 2025, reasoning that inspection by an agency under presidential authority would endanger public confidence in the commission's impartiality. That leaves the National Assembly as the principal remaining candidate. Yet legislators are themselves subject to the commission's enforcement powers. The special investigation committee reached bipartisan agreement that external inspection should be placed on a statutory footing, while the parties continue to differ over whether constitutional amendment should follow.

²² *Hankyung*. 2026. "Repeated Election Failures Bring Calls to Dismantle the NEC (In Korean)." June 4. <https://www.hankyung.com/article/2026060481601>.

²³ Constitutional amendment requires a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly followed by a national referendum (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, Articles 128 and 130).

²⁴ *Yonhap News*. 2026. "Democratic Party Proposes Three NEC Reform Bills (In Korean)." July 9. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20260709137200001>.

Conclusion

The immediate causes of the 2026 ballot shortage were a failure of demand forecasting and the absence of a field response protocol. The deeper causes lie elsewhere. A commission that bears ultimate constitutional responsibility for election administration does not exercise authority commensurate with it; and the governance of election administration has not kept pace with changes in the voting environment, above all the growth of early voting, or with the mounting difficulty of securing the personnel that election days require. Citizens' exercise of their most basic political right was interrupted by administrative failure, and that fact ought to make this episode the occasion for repairing the governance structure behind it. The commission, for its part, must address the recurring lapses in its own personnel and conduct, which have done as much as the shortage itself to deepen public distrust.

Whatever direction reform takes, however, it must not be purchased at the cost of the independence and neutrality of election administration. Given how readily doubts about the impartiality of election management now circulate, transferring these functions to the executive branch risks generating distrust of a different and more dangerous kind. That is the remedy favored by 88.5 percent of the commission's own staff who responded to a July survey conducted by their union,²⁵ but it would place election administration under a ministry answerable to the government of the day. The task is to separate two things: independence in the conduct of elections, which must be preserved, and immunity from supervision as an organization, which cannot be.

Two implications follow. The first concerns sequencing. The constitutional constraint is real but narrower than the debate implies. Abolition and recomposition require amendment; the measures that would most directly prevent recurrence require only statutory revision. The risk is therefore not that reform is impossible but that it is displaced, with argument over amendment absorbing the available political energy while the statutory fixes go unlegislated once the special investigation committee's report is filed.

The second concerns a boundary that the reform debate has to hold. The governance and administrative critique of the commission must not be allowed to merge with claims that the election was stolen. The young participants who gathered at Jamsil in the first days understood this distinction and worked to maintain it. Their grievance was the procedural failure itself: ballots that were not there, a district office that did not answer. Several of them took pains to keep that grievance separate from established partisan symbolism. Those who have since taken up the incident as proof of a rigged election invert its logic, treating a breakdown in forecasting, distribution and reporting as an assault on the integrity of the count. The evidence assembled by the investigation does not support that reading, and the governing party said as much at the first hearing, warning that tying the episode to electoral fraud was "a regression that further sickens democracy and a clear misdiagnosis."²⁶ The warning is worth taking seriously in both directions. Where legitimate complaints about administrative failure are not met with visible institutional repair, they do not dissipate; they become

²⁵ *Chosun Ilbo*. 2026. "Eighty-Eight Percent of NEC Employees Say Voting Work Should Move to the Interior Ministry (In Korean)." July 27.

<https://www.chosun.com/politics/assembly/2026/07/27/ZYDECHC24VELFFQJDLTXNE6UWM/>.

²⁶ *Chosun Ilbo*. 2026. "Eighty-Eight Percent of NEC Employees Say Voting Work Should Move to the Interior Ministry (In Korean)." July 27.

<https://www.chosun.com/politics/assembly/2026/07/27/ZYDECHC24VELFFQJDLTXNE6UWM/>.

available to actors whose object is to delegitimize elections as such. Holding that boundary is itself part of the reform: repairing the administration while refusing the conflation.■

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<https://www.law.go.kr/LSW/lsInfoP.do?chrClsCd=010203&lsiSeq=239615&urlMode=engLsInfoR&viewCls=engLsInfoR>.

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