

Asan Breaking Poll

*The Death of Kim Jong-Il
and Its Effects on South Korean Public Opinion*

Jiyeon Kim
Karl Friedhoff



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I. Introduction

The announcement on December 19, 2011 that North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il had died caught the world by surprise. In the days that followed, numerous observers attempted to understand what Kim's death would mean for North Korean politics, inter-Korean relations, the upcoming elections in South Korea, and the stability of East Asia.

While the opacity of North Korean society makes it virtually impossible to be certain about the political dynamics in Pyongyang, South Korean public opinion remains a crucial indicator of how the government in Seoul may behave toward the North. Public opinion is particularly important since 2012 is an election year. To gauge South Korean public reaction to the changing of the guard in North Korea and its potential implications, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies conducted its second Breaking Poll on December 20, 2011, one day after the announcement of Kim's death.¹

To provide more detail and a broader context, this report draws on three other surveys: the Asan Institute's monthly public opinion surveys—which were conducted on November 16 and December 13, 2011—and a survey conducted on November 20, 2011 in collaboration with TV Chosun, a new television network established by the *Chosun Ilbo*. The surveys covered respondents' approval ratings of President Lee Myung-Bak, their favored candidate and party in the next presidential election, and what they believed to be the most important issue facing the nation both before and after the death of Kim Jong-Il. Combined, these four surveys offer a window on South Koreans' beliefs about the future of North Korea and how it will affect South Korea's domestic politics.

Each survey employed the Random Digit Dialing method for mobile phones and elicited responses from 1,000 South Koreans over the age of 19. The poll result has a 95% confidence level and a $\pm 3.1\%$ margin of error. *Research & Research* carried out the surveys.

II. Main Findings

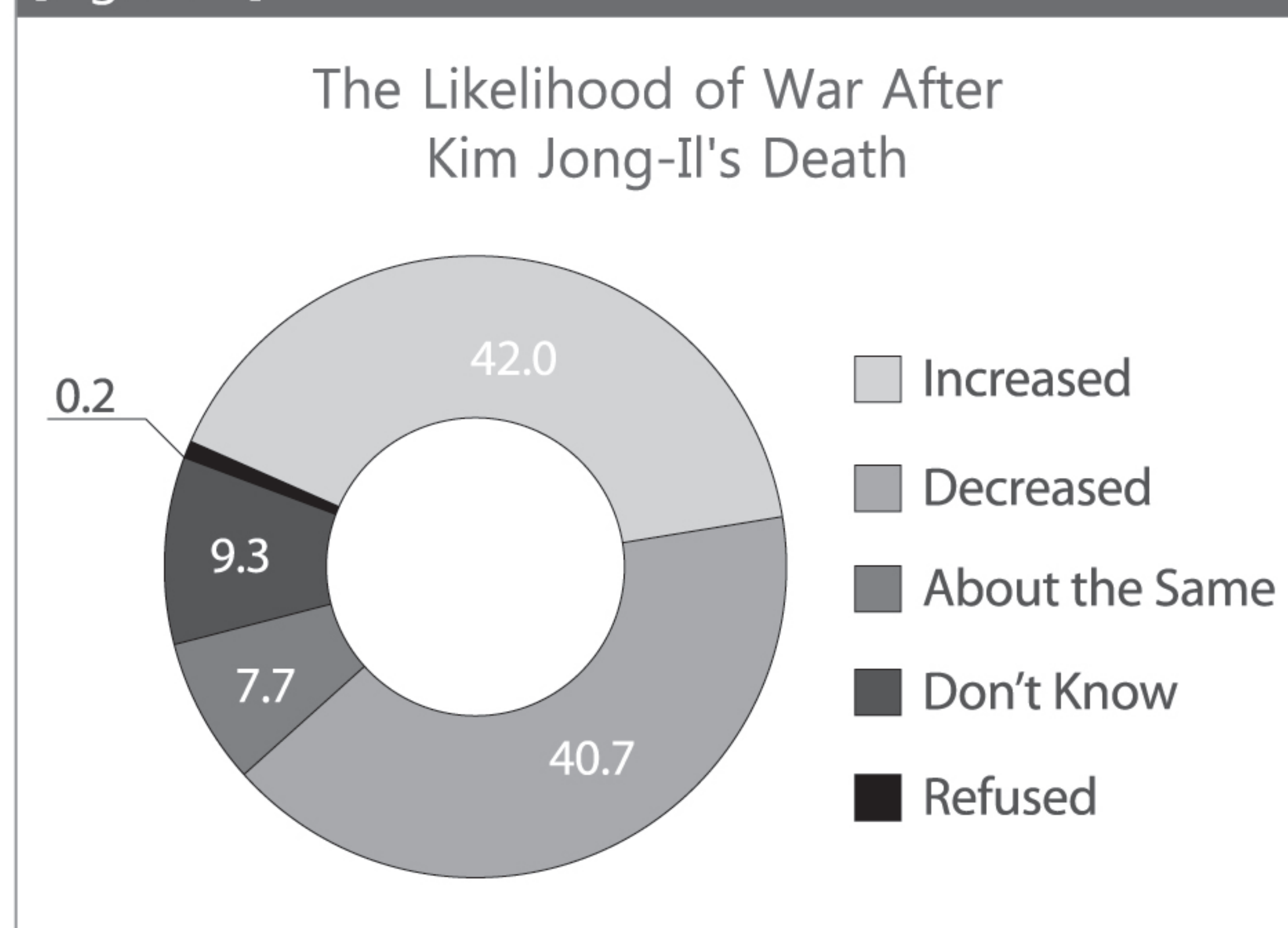
1. Perceived Instability and Cooperation

War and Security

When Kim Jong-Il suffered a stroke in 2008, observers and policymakers predicted a host of possible outcomes—nearly all involving increased political instability—in the event of his death. Observers remained skeptical when Kim Jong-Il designated his youngest son, Kim Jong-Eun, as heir apparent. Given the latter's youth, unknown position on inter-Korean relations, and overall lack of experience, his appointment promised to increase uncertainty on the peninsula.

The Asan poll first asked respondents about their perceived sense of threat following Kim Jong-Il's death. On the possibility of war with North Korea, respondents were split as to whether war was now more or less likely. While 42.0% stated that the possibility of war was now greater than before Kim Jong-Il's death, 40.7% responded that the risk of war had decreased, as shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1]



On what Kim's death means for the survival of the North Korean regime, the South Korean public is less divided. While experts differ on the ability of the regime to successfully transfer power to Kim Jong-Eun, 49.9% of survey respondents stated that they did not envision a quick collapse of the regime, whereas 38.4% believed that Kim's death would bring about its end.

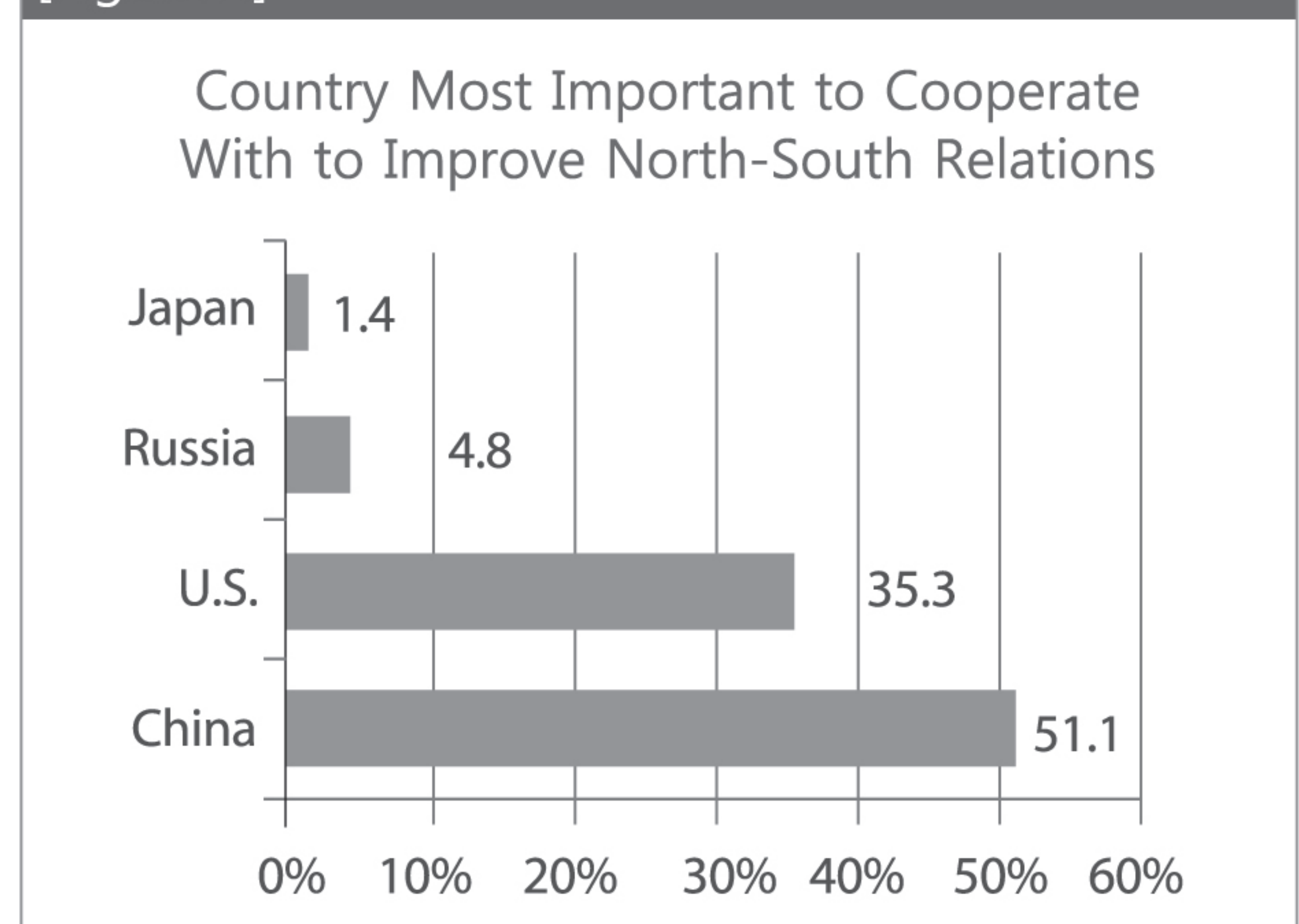
There was a stronger consensus among respondents regarding the implications of a North Korean collapse for South Korea's security situation. While 56.5% stated that a collapse would worsen South Korea's security, only 34.6% believed that a collapse would improve it. Younger generations appeared to be the most pessimistic, with 62.9% of respondents in their twenties and 62.3% of respondents in their thirties indicating their belief that a collapse of the North Korean regime would negatively affect South Korean security. It would be worthwhile to further investigate this question in order to see if there are other cleavages based on time horizons (i.e., do people's predictions of how a collapse would affect South Korean security change depending on whether they are considering the short-, medium-, or long-term effects?).

Cooperation

Due to North Korea's insularity and East Asia's complex and delicate geopolitics, it is often assumed that any movement on inter-Korean relations will require the

involvement of other countries. Thus, respondents were asked which country they believe is most important for South Korea to cooperate with in order to improve North-South relations. Despite the prominence of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the continuing cooperation between the two nations regarding North Korea, respondents deemed China (51.1%) to be South Korea's most important partner for improving North-South relations. Only 35.3% of respondents named the United States as such.

[Figure 2]



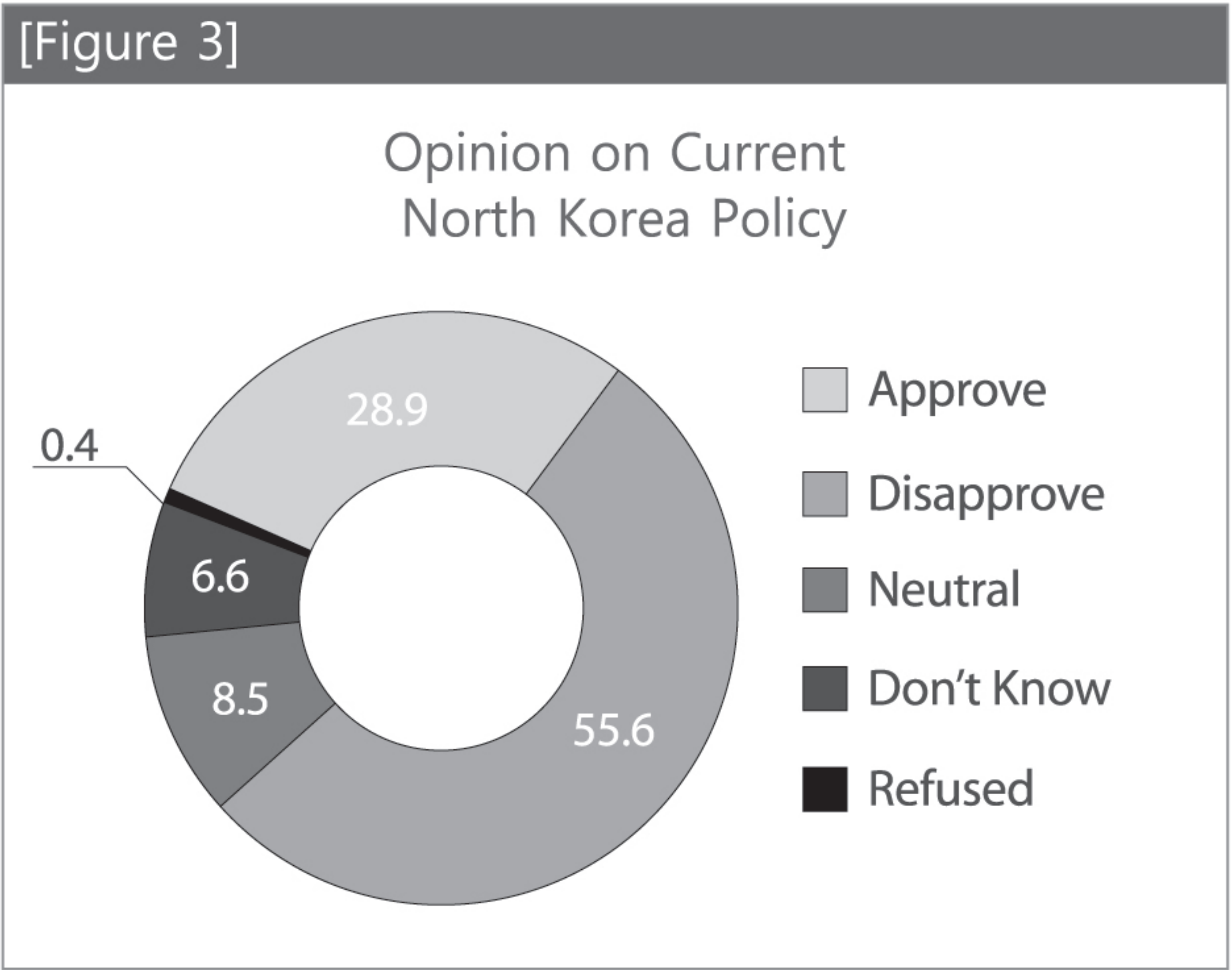
Trust between China and South Korea has declined over the past several years due to a series of incidents and disagreements. The Chinese government's reaction to the March 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan* and the November 2010 artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island tarnished China's reputation in the eyes of many South Koreans. More recently, the killing of a member of the Korean Coast Guard by a Chinese fisherman in the waters west of South Korea in December 2011 further eroded favorable opinion.

There is variation on this issue across the political spectrum. Respondents who identified themselves as supporters of the Grand National Party (GNP) were split over which country was the most important partner to cooperate with in improving inter-Korean relations, with 44.1% citing the United States and 43.9% citing China. Those who supported the Democratic Party (DP) were less divided, with 36.0% citing the United States and 51.0% citing China.

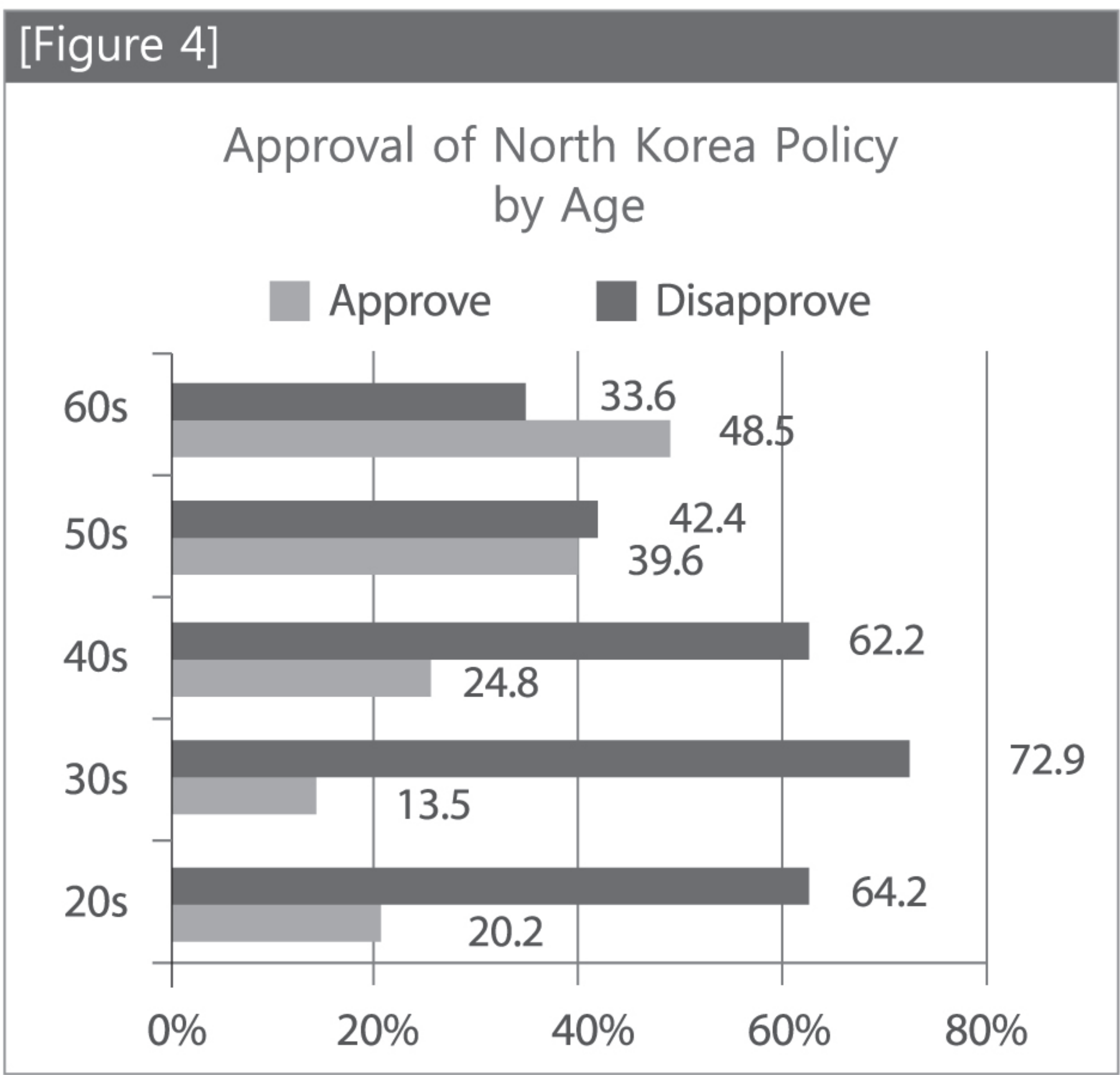
2. North Korea Policy, Presidential Approval, & Party Support

North Korea Policy

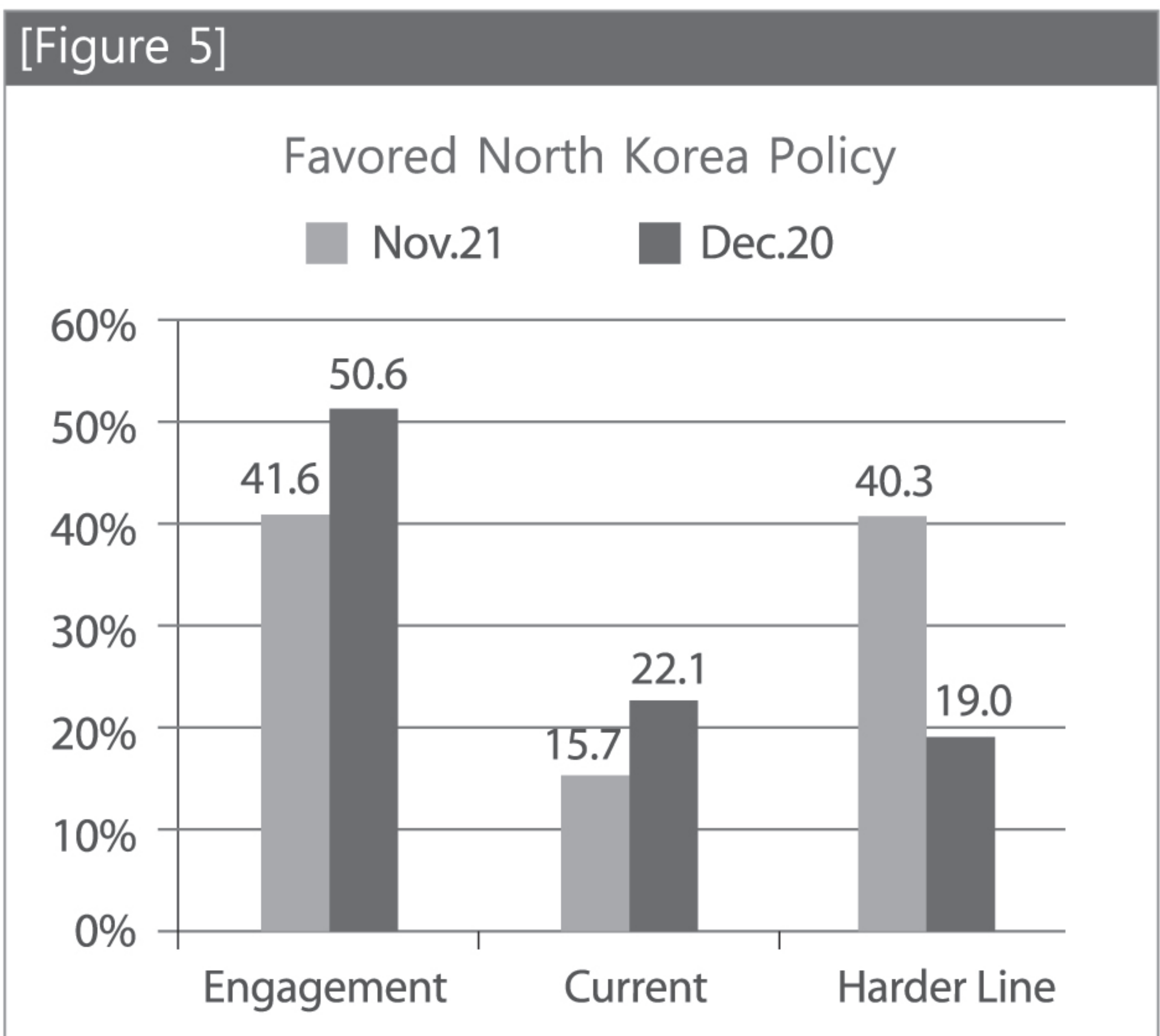
Since taking office, the Lee Myung-Bak administration has rolled back the engagement-oriented North Korea policy of previous administrations. President Lee has taken a hard-line stance from the beginning of his time in office and has not wavered. However, support for that policy has flagged. Only 28.9% of respondents approved of current policy while 55.6% did not approve (Figure 3).



Breaking these numbers down by age group highlights the cleavages between generations. As shown in Figure 4, there is a clear distaste for the current policy among respondents in their twenties, thirties, and forties. In each of these age cohorts, more than 60% of respondents disapproved of the Lee administration's policy. Only respondents in their sixties had a higher approval rate than disapproval rate. The highest disapproval rate was among respondents in their thirties. Cohort effect theory helps to explain this. This group came of age during an unprecedented thaw in North-South relations and experienced the historic inter-Korea Summit. Thus, they formed a relatively accommodative attitude toward North Korea, which continues to influence their current opinion.



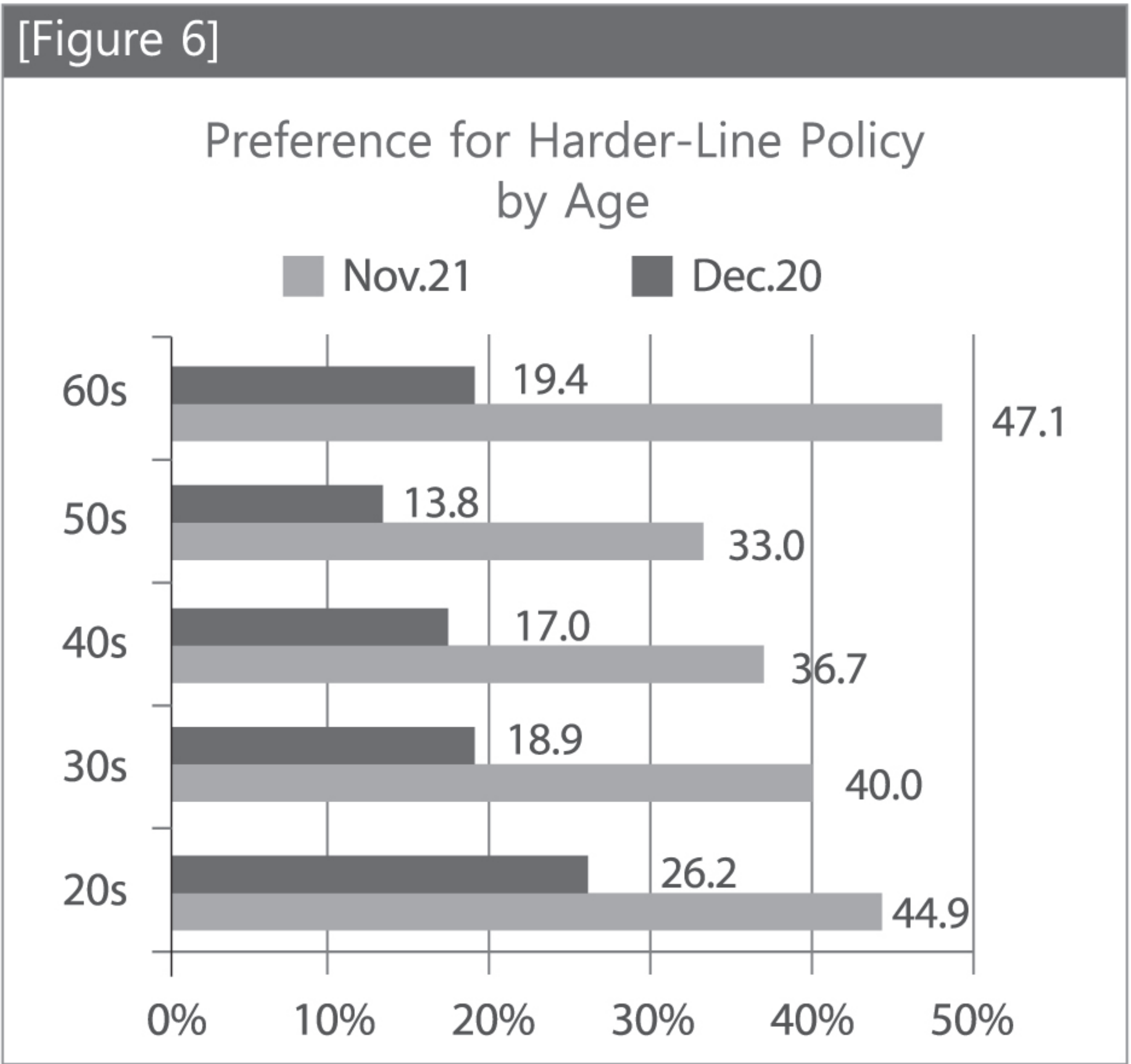
This cleavage highlights the ongoing debate within South Korean society about the best way to interact with North Korea—hard-line vs. engagement. From November 21-23 the Asan Institute, in collaboration with TV Chosun, conducted a public opinion survey which asked respondents what kind of North Korea policy they preferred—engagement-oriented, the current policy, or a more hard-line policy. The December 20 survey presented the same question. The changes are illustrated in Figure 5.



The most striking result is the dramatic decrease in support for a harder line toward North Korea. While only 15.7% of respondents supported President Lee's policy in November, opinion was evenly divided over whether to take a more engagement-oriented approach or a

harder-line approach. However, following the death of Kim Jong-Il, a major shift took place. While support for an engagement policy increased by 9.0%, the most drastic change was in the decline of support for a harder line, which fell by 21.3%.

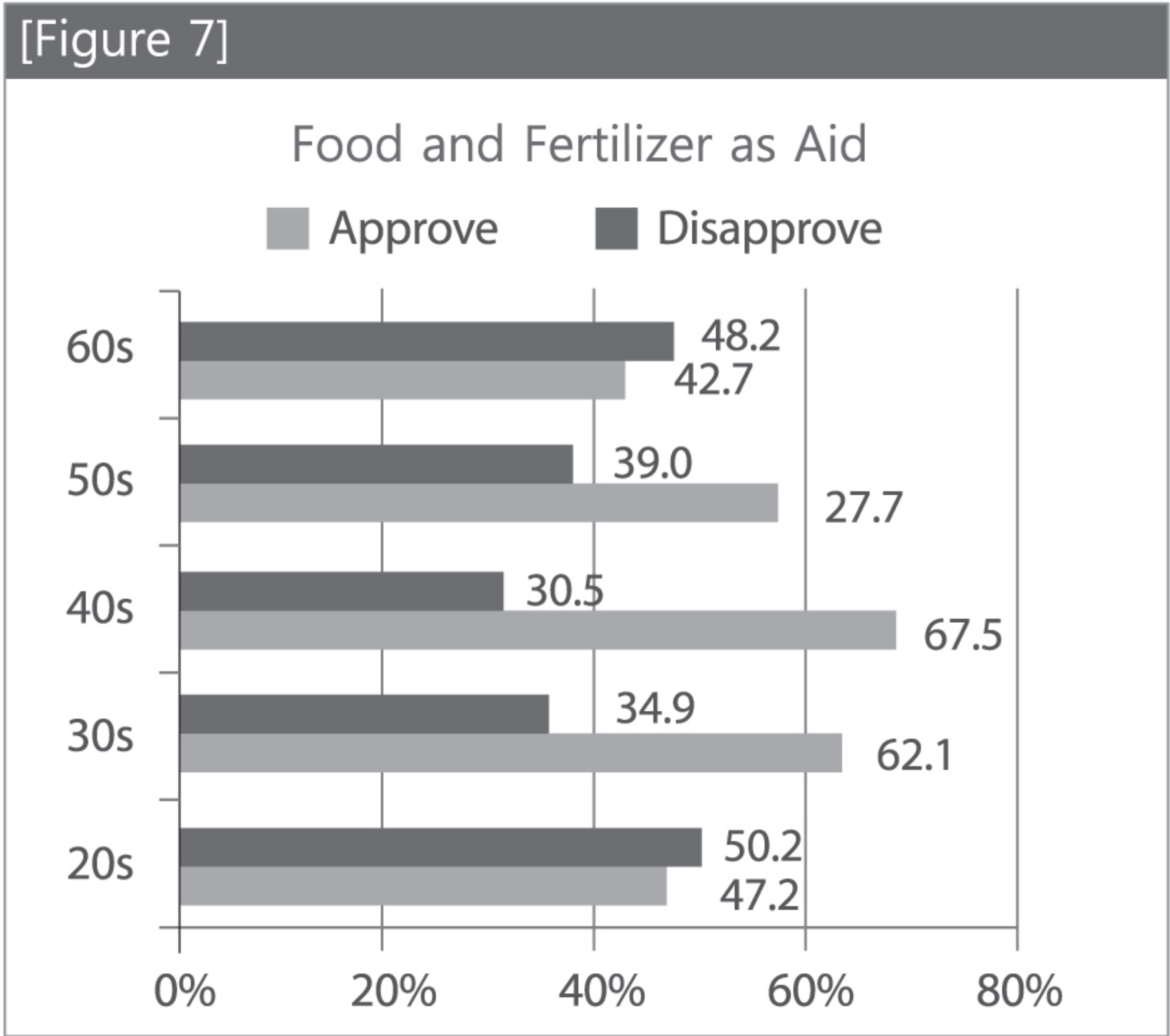
Responses by age groups, demonstrated in Figure 6, show a huge decrease in support for a more aggressive policy. Interestingly, respondents in their twenties and respondents in their sixties share strikingly similar views. Following Kim Jong-Il’s death, those in their twenties were the most likely to approve of a harder line toward North Korea.



Given the overall disapproval of President Lee’s current North Korea policy, a large part of which has been based on withholding economic and food aid in response to North Korea’s provocations, it is not surprising that a majority (55.9%) of respondents favor the resumption of aid in the form of food and fertilizer while 40.2% oppose it. But once again, this number invites further disaggregation by age cohort.

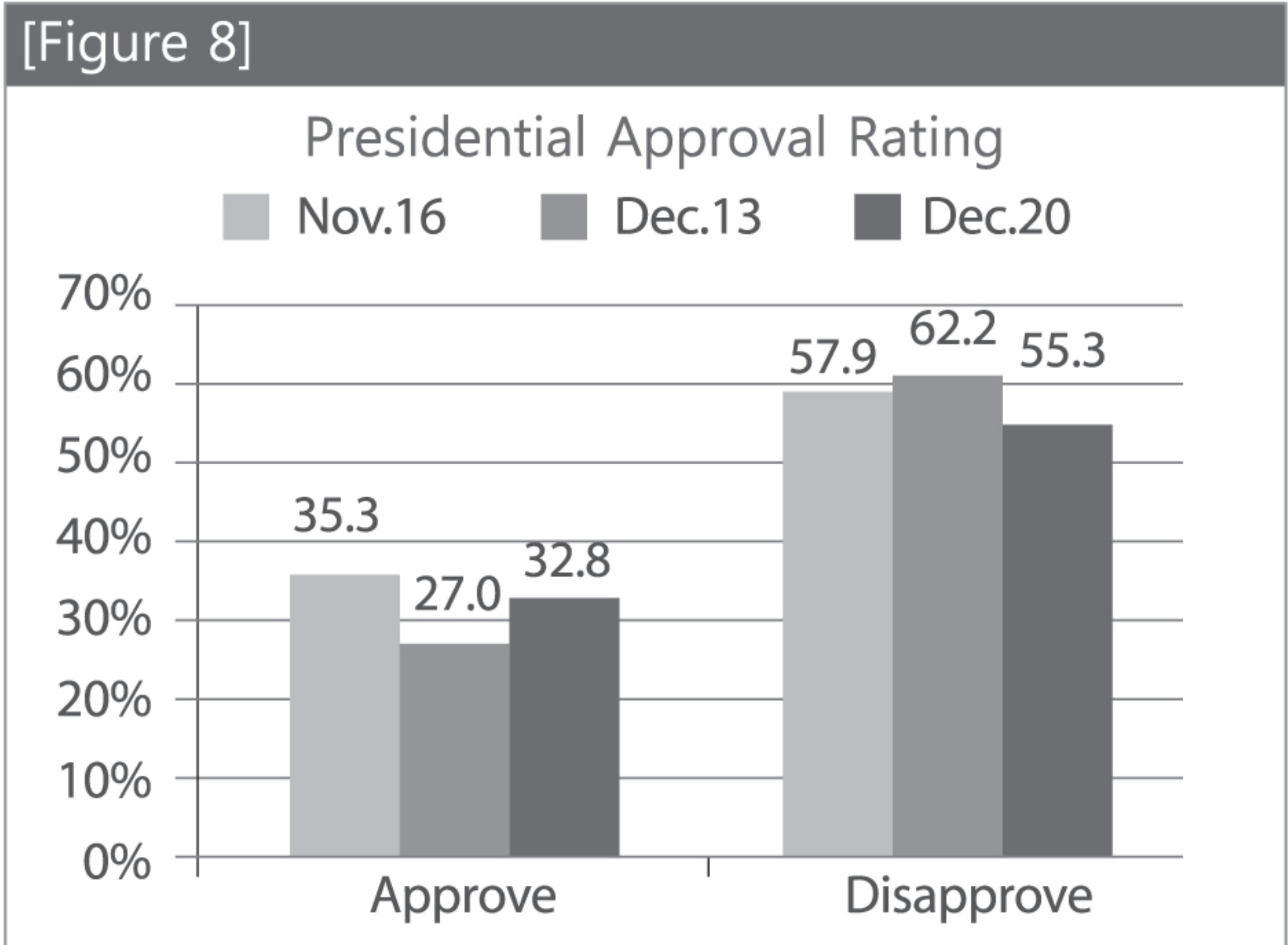
Respondents in their twenties again closely aligned with the opinion of respondents in their sixties, as shown in Figure 7. This is consistent with the data presented in Figure 6. These two age cohorts were most likely to disapprove of sending aid in the form of food and fertilizer to North Korea. Conversely, respondents in their forties were

by far the most amenable to the resumption of aid.

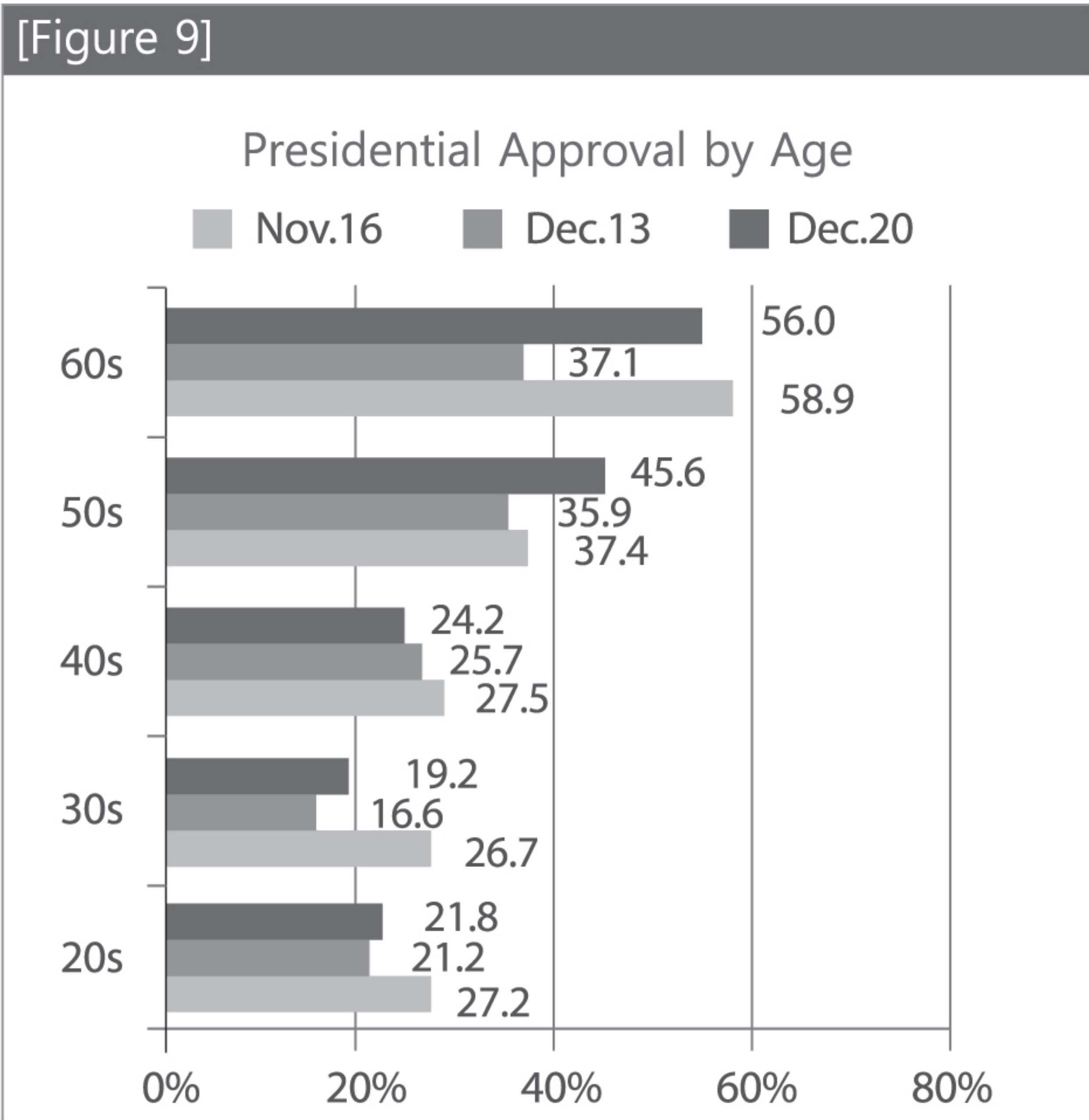


Presidential Approval Rating

The effect of Kim Jong-Il’s death on President Lee’s approval rating is somewhat harder to determine since December was a month of major turmoil for his party, the GNP. The top leadership resigned on December 9, and by December 13 Park Geun-Hye had not yet officially stepped in to take control of the party. Moreover, there were several ongoing political scandals involving people close to the president, including the brother of the first lady, whose top aide was indicted on taking bribes to peddle influence. Thus, the December 13 survey likely captured this inner turmoil, helping to explain why President Lee’s approval ratings dropped to their lowest point of the year—27.0% —a decline of 8.3%, as shown in Figure 8. However, by the time of the December 20 survey, his approval rating had increased 5.8% to reach 32.8%.

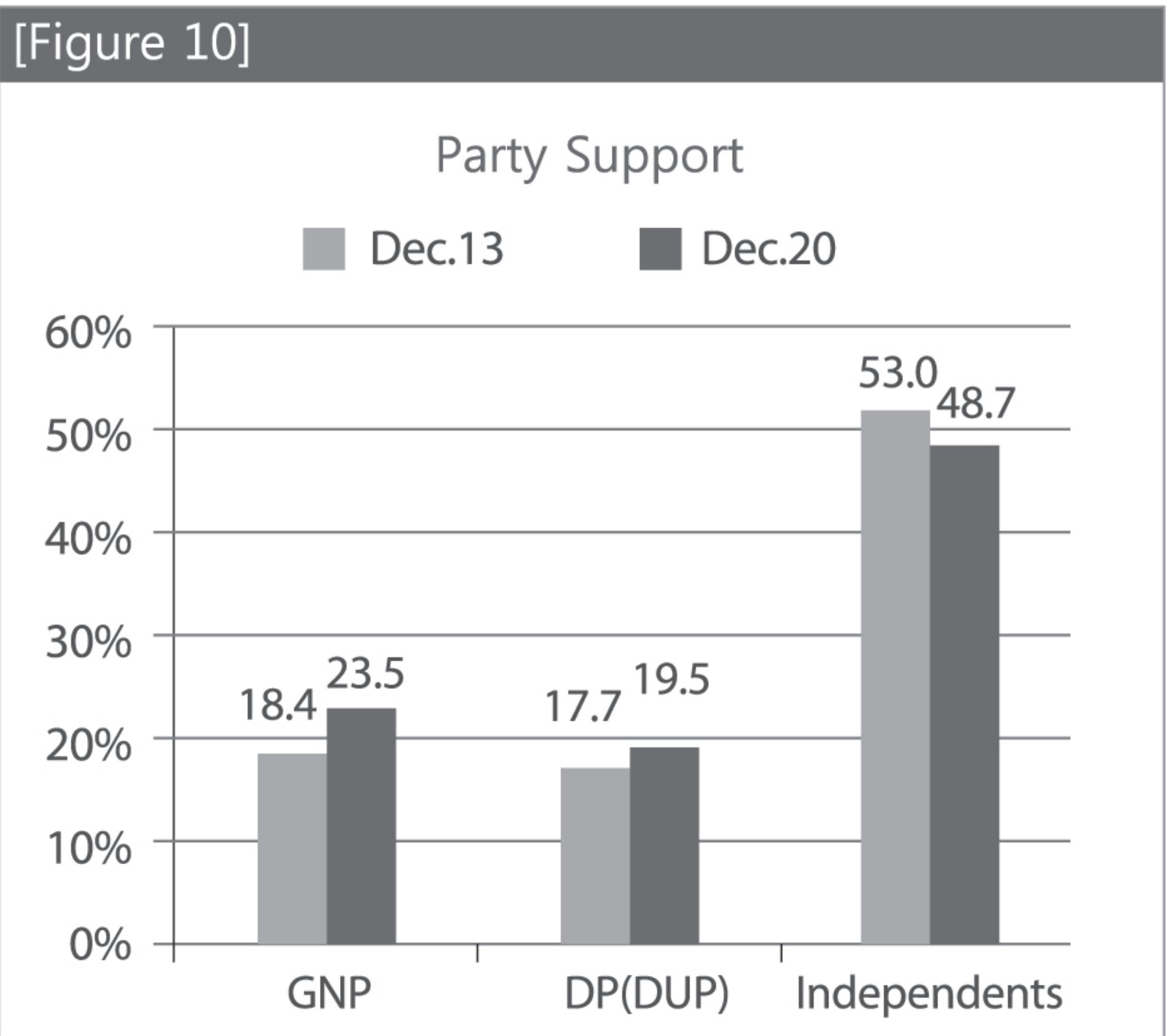


The decline in the president’s approval rating between November 16 and December 13 was largely fueled by a huge decrease in approval among respondents in their sixties, as shown in Figure 9. In that time, approval from the sixties cohort declined by 21.8%. However, in the December 20 survey, there was an 18.9% increase among this same age cohort. For the fifties cohort, the approval rating for President Lee’s increased by 9.7% after Kim Jong-Il’s death. Those in their fifties and sixties appear to be back in President Lee’s corner after the death of Kim Jong-Il.



Effect on Support for Political Parties

Conventional wisdom holds that uncertainty, instability, and provocations involving North Korea will lead to an increase in support for the conservative GNP. Thus, when the death of Kim Jong-Il was announced and the military was subsequently placed on high alert, it was expected that support for the GNP would increase. Indeed, the GNP did enjoy a boost in support between December 13 and December 20, as illustrated in Figure 10.² This boost was primarily driven by respondents in their fifties and sixties.

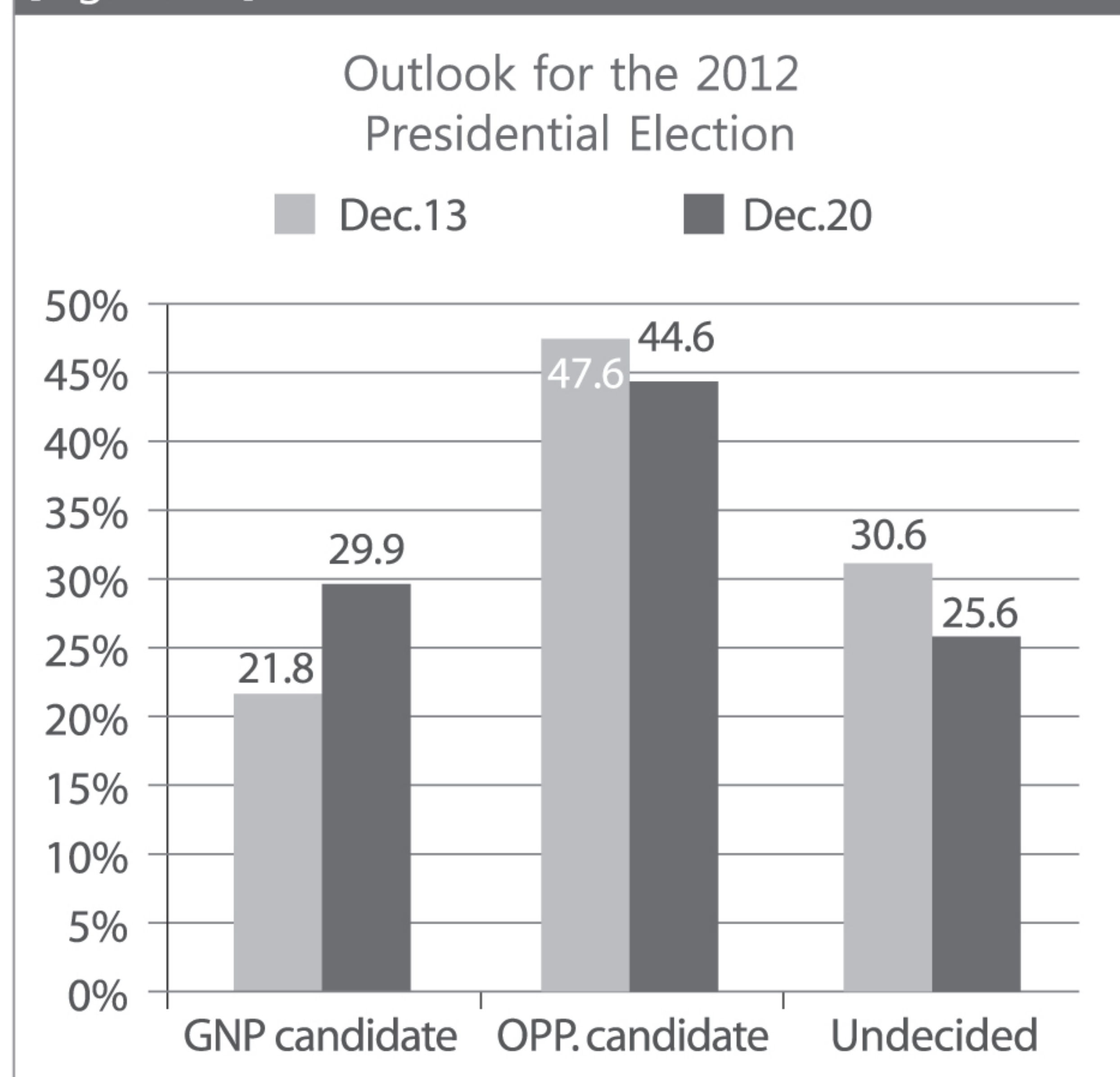


3. Kim Jong Il’s Death and the 2012 Elections

There has been ample speculation about the North’s ability and willingness to use provocations to influence elections in South Korea, especially since 2012 will see both legislative and presidential elections. While the death of Kim Jong-Il is certainly not a provocation, it does create uncertainty about the survivability of the regime and the stability of the Korean peninsula.

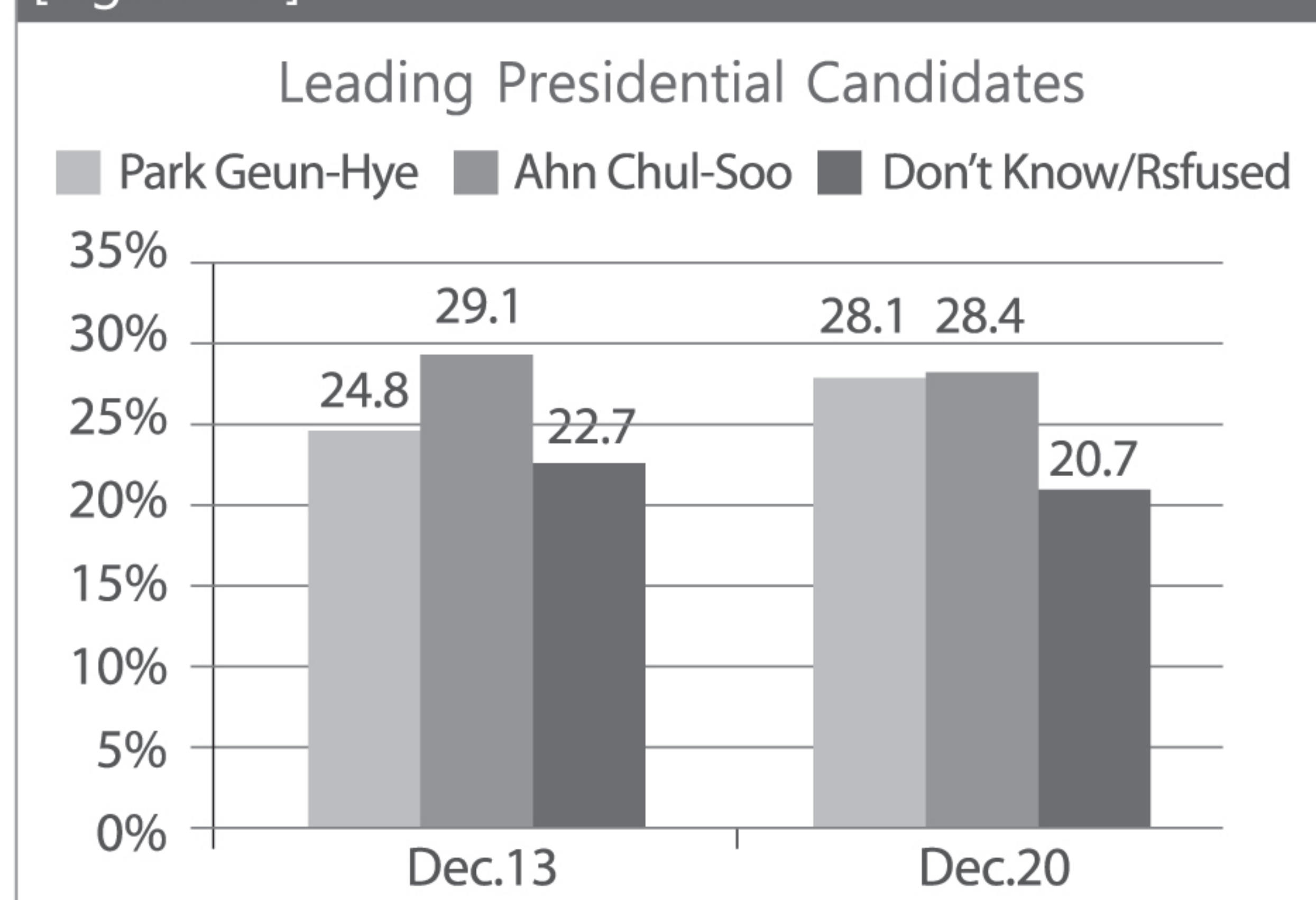
This concern seems to have contributed to an 8.1% gain in respondents voicing their intention to vote for the GNP candidate in the coming 2012 presidential election, rising to 29.9%. But, as previously stated, much of this may also be attributable to Ms. Park stepping up to lead the GNP at a time of crisis. While there was a 3.0% decline in respondents intending to vote for the opposition party candidate, falling to 44.6%, the 14.7% gap between the two remains significant, and the GNP faces an uphill battle.

[Figure 11]



The hypothetical race between the two potential presidential candidates, GNP candidate Park Geun-Hye and opposition candidate Ahn Chul-Soo, has continued to tighten following the death of Kim Jong-Il. While the gap stood at 5.8% on November 16, with Dr. Ahn in the lead, he now leads by the narrowest of margins (28.4% to Park's 28.1%), as shown in Figure 12.

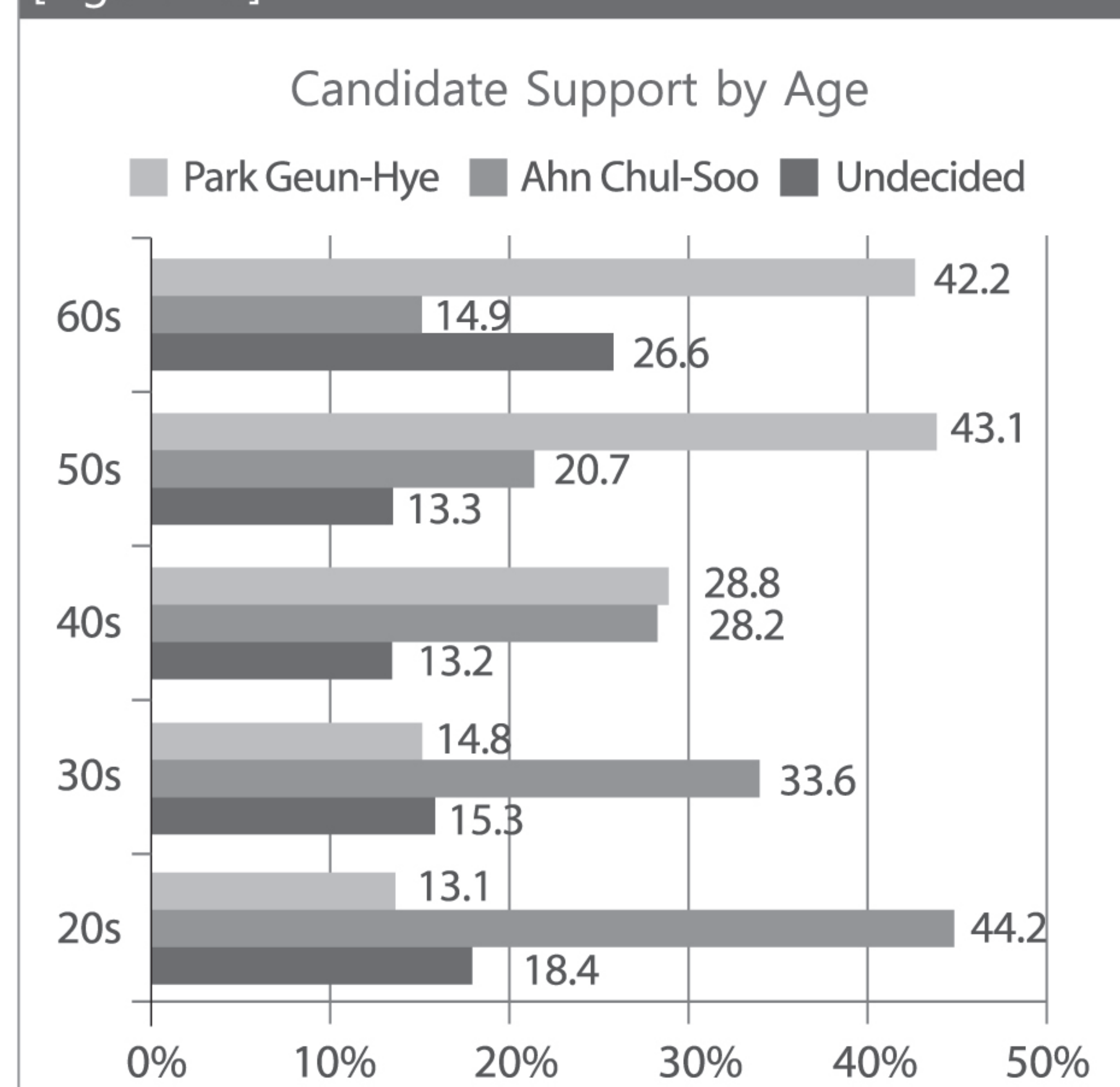
[Figure 12]



As has been the case in the past, the large divide in candidate support by age cohort remained an important feature of overall support for the candidates (Figure 13). Respondents in their twenties overwhelmingly supported Dr. Ahn, with 44.2% supporting him and only 13.1% supporting Ms. Park. However, that trend is nearly completely reversed for respondents in their sixties. Among this cohort, 42.2% supported Ms. Park with only 14.9% supporting Dr. Ahn. It is also of consequence that

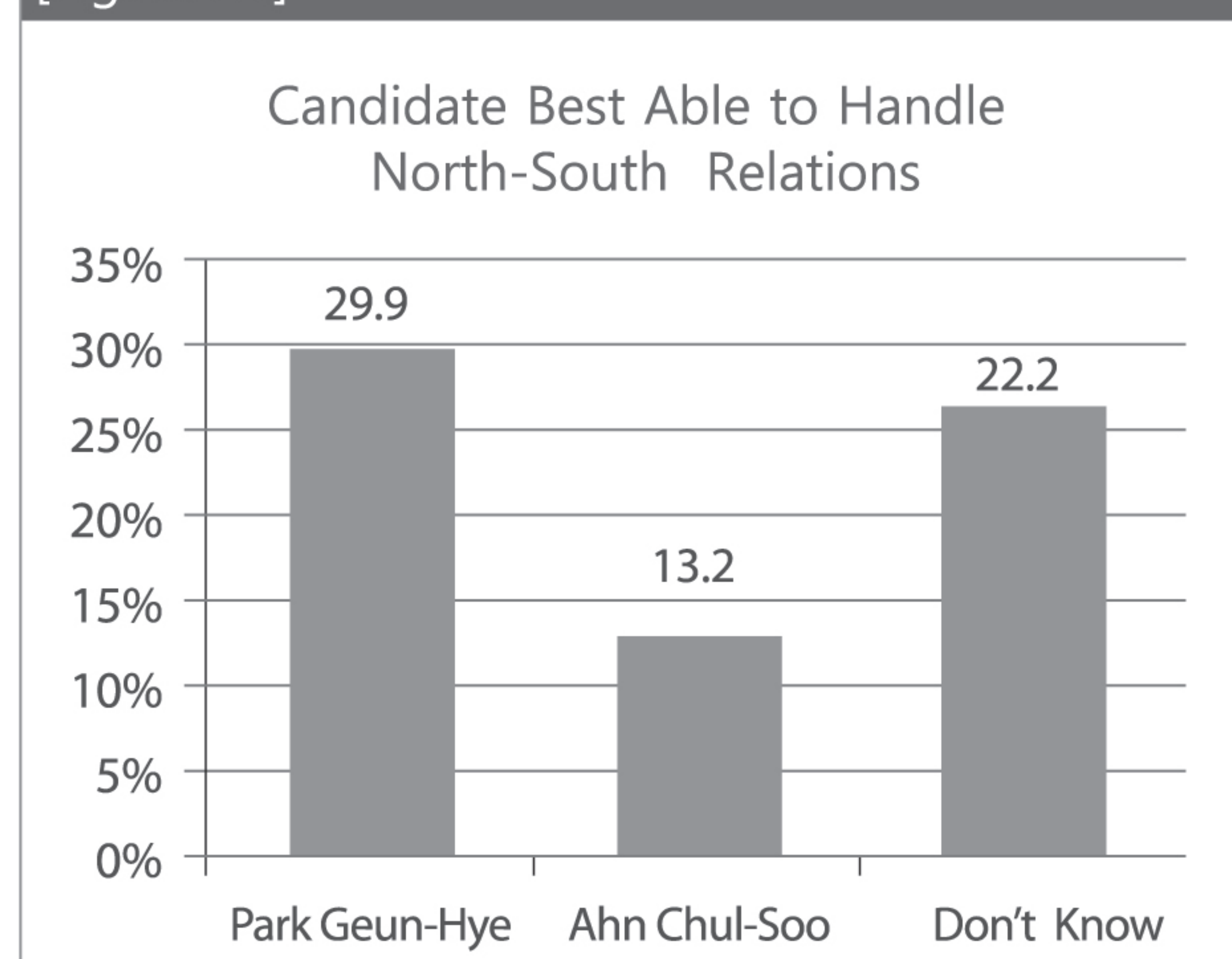
the sixties cohort has the highest percentage of respondents who are undecided. It is likely that a majority of these undecided voters will swing toward Ms. Park, further increasing the gap in support among this age group.

[Figure 13]

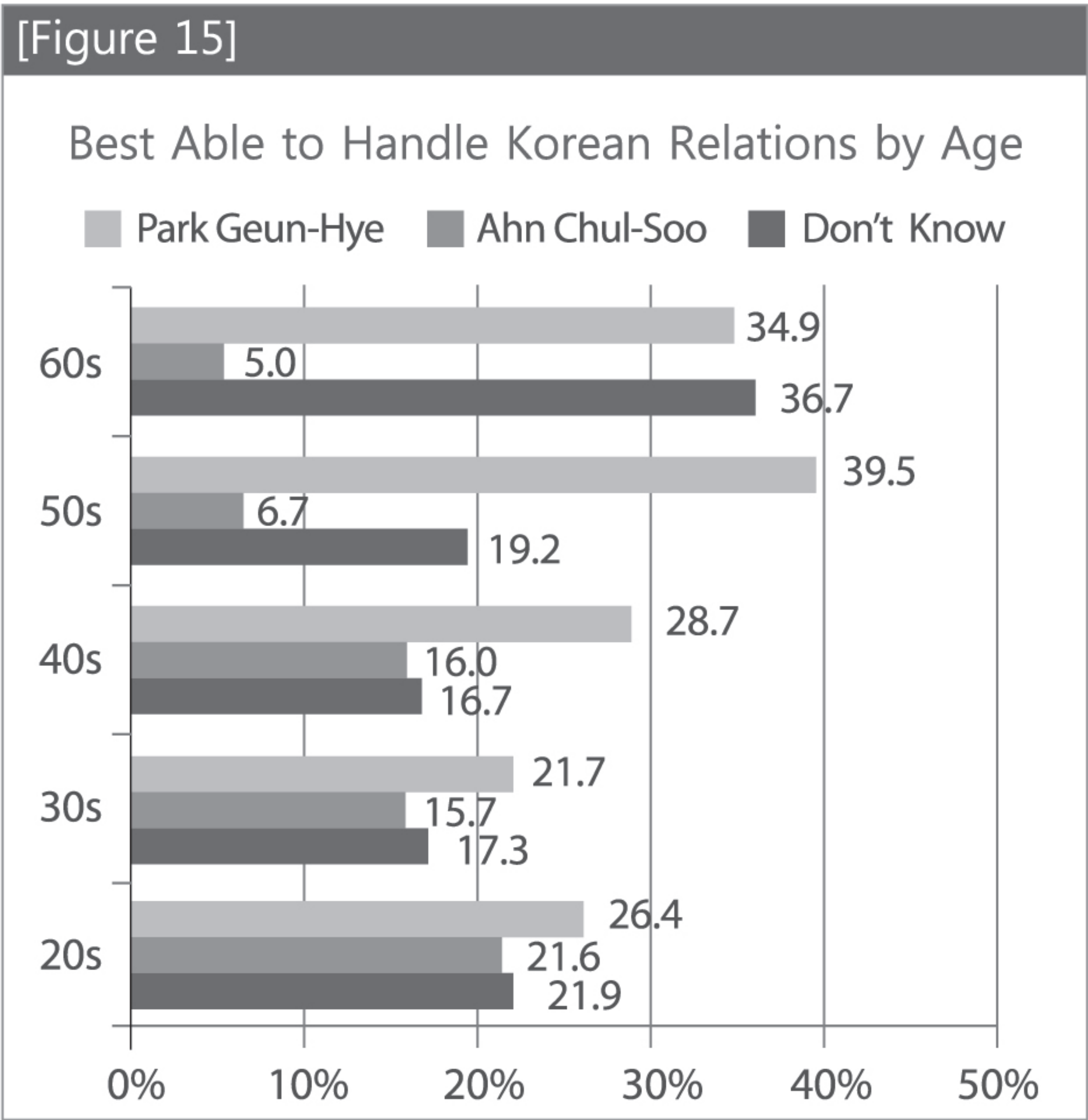


While Dr. Ahn has been a leading candidate on issues like the economy, the recent events have exposed one of his core weaknesses: a lack of experience on foreign policy issues. This was reflected when respondents were asked about which potential presidential candidate would best be able to handle relations between the two Koreas. On this issue, Ms. Park held a commanding lead. While 29.9% of all respondents thought her more capable, only 13.2% of respondents believed Dr. Ahn to be more capable (Figure 14).

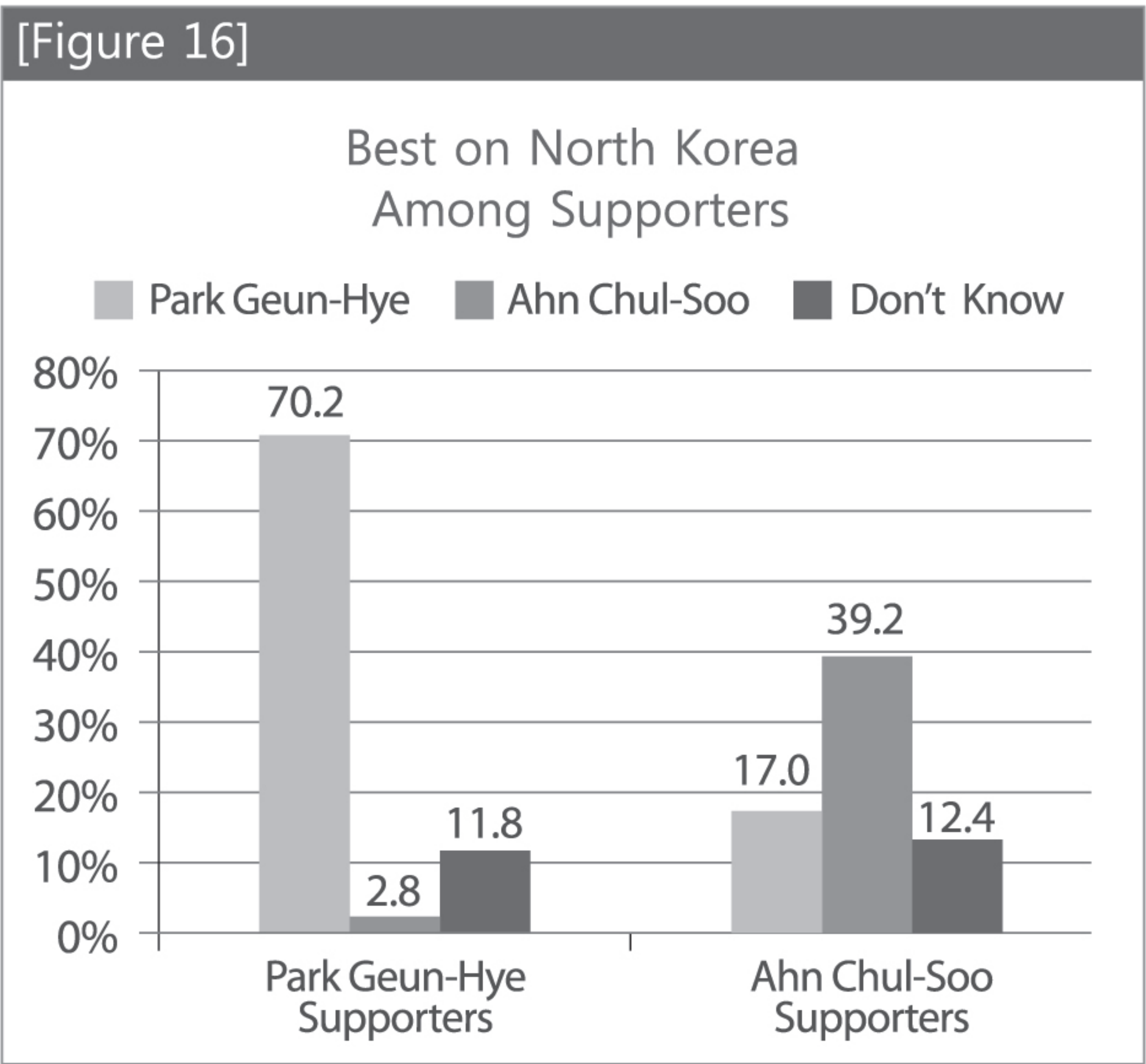
[Figure 14]



Unlike overall candidate support, there was no generational divide on which candidate was more capable of managing inter-Korean relations. Among all age cohorts, Ms. Park was clearly regarded as better qualified in this aspect. Even respondents in their twenties, the most ardent supporters of Dr. Ahn and the most likely among all cohorts to believe that he was the best candidate to manage inter-Korean relations, still thought Ms. Park to be better qualified in this area, as shown in Figure 15.



There is even concern among Dr. Ahn’s supporters about his ability to handle inter-Korean relations. Figure 16 compares the belief among supporters of the two top candidates and the belief that their candidate is the most capable of dealing with North Korea. For Ms. Park, there is a clear belief among her supporters that she is the best candidate to handle North Korea, with 70.2% stating as such. Only 2.8% of Park supporters thought Dr. Ahn was better equipped to handle the North. Conversely, 39.2% of Dr. Ahn’s supporters cited him as being most able to handle inter-Korean relations while 17.0% of his supporters thought Ms. Park was more capable. Dr. Ahn’s 39.2% was the second lowest for any candidate. Ms. Park’s 70.2% was the highest.



Conclusion

The death of Kim Jong-Il was not the game changer that many expected it to be, nor did it create the kind of instability that many had anticipated. It took place during a period when South Korea is inwardly focused on its tumultuous party politics. However, it did highlight several key issues. First, it brought to the fore Ahn Chul-Soo’s perceived weakness in handling foreign policy, even among his supporters. Park Geun-Hye was seen as much more capable of handling North Korea. Second, it highlighted the similarities in attitudes regarding North Korea that those in their twenties share with those in their sixties. Finally, it helped to draw voters in their sixties, many of whom had been abandoning the GNP due to the political infighting, back into the fold of the party.

On the domestic political front, Kim’s death was a positive development for President Lee, the GNP, and Ms. Park. This created a homecoming effect for the older generations—voters in their fifties and sixties—who are most concerned about national security. Interestingly, voters in their twenties, who display a very conservative attitude toward North Korea policy, did not turn their support to President Lee. It appears that their disapproval of President Lee and the GNP is much stronger and not primarily rooted in national security issues.

More importantly, while Kim's death was not a provocation, it suggested that the ability of North Korea to influence public opinion and therefore elections is more limited than is often thought. True, the passing of Kim Jong-Il benefited the GNP and Ms. Park, but the magnitude of that impact has been far less than might have been expected. Considering the fact that Ms. Park was perceived to be best able to deal with North-South Korean relations and yet remains in a neck-and-neck competition with Dr. Ahn, we can conclude that although inter-Korean relations do influence domestic politics, that influence is not as strong as observers often assume.

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1. The first Breaking Poll was conducted in November 2010 following the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.
 2. However, it is unclear if this increase in support was directly tied to the death of Kim Jong-Il. The reorganization of the GNP, along with Ms. Park Geun-Hye stepping up to take control of the party likely had some impact as well.



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