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Essentialist Democracy and Political Polarization: Korea's Experience from a Comparative Perspective

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Despite its appearance of stability, South Korea (hereafter Korea) faces a democratic crisis rooted in severe political conflicts. Korea's democratic backsliding is different from that of Western European democracies. Rather than mainstream party convergence toward the center, Korea's crisis results from extreme confrontation between mainstream parties and deep polarization in political and civil society. Why has Korea experienced polarization resulting in democratic backsliding? To address this question, this study focuses on key actors' ideas of democracy, rather than socioeconomic, technological, or institutional explanations. It argues that Korea's democracy is threatened by its supporters' essentialist conception of democracy. As animosity between progressives and conservatives intensifies, each becomes increasingly entrenched and demonizes the other, revealing Korea's democracy to be insufficient to resolve polarization and achieve national integration.

Keywords polarization, essentialist democracy, Korea, democratic backsliding, parliamentarism

Introduction

A close and comparative look at the crisis of South Korea's (hereafter Korea) democracy reveals that its backsliding is different from that of other countries, particularly the backsliding of advanced Western democracies. Unlike the crises in advanced democracies in Western Europe, Korea's democratic crisis is not caused by the cartelization of mainstream parties (e.g., the Christian Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party). In Europe's advanced democracies, mainstream parties converged toward the center, with their differences disappearing, and moved away from citizen participation, resulting in citizens' apathy toward politics and low participation in voting and party membership.

In contrast, Korea's crisis comes mainly from citizens' excessive participation,

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which has resulted in so-called "fandom" politics. In addition, extreme confrontation occurs between two mainstream parties, the Democratic Party of Korea and the People Power Party. Western democracies' crises come mainly from non-democratic anti-system forces which easily mobilize citizens' discontent concerning mismanagement of the mainstream parties. Korea's turn toward partisan politics has created extreme polarization *from within*. In short, Korea has been undermined *from within* by those who support democracy. Our question is: Why?

Prevalent studies have attributed Korea's crisis of democracy primarily to universal stories of global democratic crises. These narratives emphasize one of three factors: (1) socioeconomic crises caused by globalization, (2) changes in patterns of participation resulting from the development of new media technologies, or (3) institutional dynamics, namely the concentration of power in the executive branch (the so-called "imperial presidency") and the winner-take-all nature of the single-member district system. While these socioeconomic, technological, and institutional narratives have merit within the context of global historical trends, universal approaches fail to grasp the unique dynamics of Korea's democratic crisis. For example, socioeconomic crises do not always lead to democratic crises. The 1997 Asian financial crisis was the biggest crisis in Korean modern history. Yet, despite the 1997 socioeconomic crisis, the Kim Dae-jung administration achieved national integration and successfully overcame the crisis. Unlike Western democracies, which are often challenged by non-democratic or anti-system forces, Korea's democracy is paradoxically threatened by actors who support democracy.

To illustrate Korea's democratic backslide, this study focuses on key actors' ideas about democracy rather than their socioeconomic approaches, technological developments, or institutionalism. I make the case that Korean democracy is threatened by an essentialist conception of democracy.

Political polarization and animosity, in the name of democracy, have increased through citizens' participation, as seen in the progressives' *candlelight vigils* and the conservatives' *Taegukgi* and *Yoon Again* rallies. Each camp, whether conservative or progressive, argues in terms of democracy: "My democracy is right, and your democracy is wrong and should be overthrown." Both sides lack mutual understanding and willingness to compromise due to misguided conceptions of democracy. In the essentialist conception of democracy, the progressive camp frames the opposition as anti-democratic, while the conservative camp emphasizes the restoration of a pure nation distinct from leftist subversive forces. Both sides define those in the opposition as enemies; not as partners for dialogue, but rather as targets for elimination.

This essentialist understanding of democracy—very different from British and Swedish conceptions of parliamentary democracy—insists that the people's will is singular and apparent and should be expressed without intermediaries

such as political parties and parliaments. This Korean essentialist conception of democracy, which is held by key democratic actors in Korea, fails to develop parliamentarism and results in extreme polarization. This view of democracy first emerged during Korea's democratization process before eventually settling into fandom politics. It has since, however, further deteriorated into a *politics of retaliation*.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I review the literature and present a theoretical alternative to existing analyses. Then I examine the characteristics of Korea's democratic backsliding from a comparative perspective. Finally, I analyze key actors' understandings of democracy in Korea in the democratization process as well as in the process of practicing democracy.

Literature Review and a Theoretical Alternative

Why do some democracies develop in a stable manner, while others do not? Why have democracies, including Korea, suffered from backsliding? Research in political science yields very different theoretical perspectives. Here, I briefly review socioeconomic approaches, institutionalism, and technological development theory. Then, I present a theoretical alternative centered on an ideational approach.

Socioeconomic Approaches: Globalization, Economic Crisis, and Immigration

Those who emphasize the socioeconomic aspects of democratic crisis tend to point out the growth of social inequality and immigration due to liberal globalization. They argue that neoliberal globalization has led to social inequalities, causing discontent among the losers, resulting in populism (Caramani 2017; Jeong and Lee 2022). In actuality, globalization has exacerbated social inequality all over the world. For example, in the United States the proportion of total income accounted for by the nation's top 10 percent of earners increased from 34.2% in 1980 to 45.5% in 2019; in Western Europe, the proportion increased from 29.9% in 1980 to 34.8% in 2019; in Japan, it increased from 36.5% in 1980 to 44.9% in 2019; and in South Korea, it increased from 32.8% in 1980 to 46.5% in 2019 (World Inequality Database, n.d.). A situation in which deepening income and asset inequality causes anxiety and dissatisfaction among citizens requires the election of strong leaders who are competent in economic issues. Leaders who drive economic growth tend to be lenient toward corrupt practices and other wrongdoings (Klasnja, Lupu, and Tucker 2021; Albertus and Grossman 2021; Ahlquist et al. 2018).

Another prominent cause of populism in a socioeconomic approach is immigration. The advancement of globalization has brought a large wave of immigration to Western countries, resulting in populism based on anti-immigration

sentiment (Shin and Kim 2022, 6-7). Rodrik (2021) argues that globalization has led to the emergence of populism by increasing the international movement of resources through liberalized trade, direct investment, and immigration, thereby undermining people's stable identities.

However, economic explanations for the collapse or backsliding of democracy tend to oversimplify the political interpretations and struggles of key actors. Economic crises do not define themselves, nor do they determine their own solutions; they depend on who interprets them, and how. As with the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration in the U.S. and with Sweden in the interwar period, economic crises do not necessarily lead to democracy's collapse, but can instead lead to the creation and consolidation of new types of democracy.

Technology and Changes in Political Participation

The development of technology for the information society has changed the way citizens participate in politics. The internet and smartphones have enabled social movements to quickly mobilize the general public, and popular social media platforms have created channels for direct communication between ordinary citizens and politicians. As a result, many citizens have come to understand democracy as a system that bypasses the representative mediation of traditional political parties, civic forums, and the press to communicate their sentiments directly to top leaders (Fuchs 2017).

In Korea, many social scientists observe that changes in the social media environment have created conditions that can amplify anti-intellectualism, conspiracy theories, and emotional polarization in Korean society (Jang 2019, 11-14). Lee (2022) argues that in Korea, social media users are more polarized in their views, participate more in political protests, and further exacerbate social divisions for political gain.

Technological advances and changes in the mass media environment indeed have greatly contributed to changing the forms of political participation. Technology itself, however, does not determine the direction of political development. As we will see below, even under similar conditions of technological advancement and globalization, the nature and manner of the crisis of democracy vary across democracies.

Institutionalism: Presidentialism and Election Rules

Many political scientists point out institutional conditions as a cause of democratic backsliding, arguing that as the power of the executive branch increases, democracy regresses. Many political scientists in Korea point to "strong presidency" and winner-takes-all election rules as causes of Korea's democratic backsliding (Kwon 2023; Won Taek Kang 2021). Due to polarization and the concentration of power centered on the president, the independence of institutions such as audits and the judiciary system has been threatened. Under a winner-take-all political

and electoral system, third and fourth parties struggle to emerge, and democracy regresses under the two-party system (Won Taek Kang 2021).

However, institutionalists have difficulty accounting for how the U.S. has operated a stable democracy under the presidential system, before the Trump administration. Advanced democracies in Europe show a general trend toward presidentialization, which strengthens the powers of the head of the executive branch. Yet not all democratic countries in Europe are experiencing a crisis of democracy. Furthermore, the nature of a democratic crisis is different in the U.S. and Korea, which have similar presidential and two-party systems. In Korea, polarization is intensifying not at the level of institutional politics but at the level of social movements (Ahn 2022, 46), shown by the extreme polarization driven by pro-democrats who strongly support democracy (Park 2022, 114; Shin 2020; Ko 2020). Understanding the ideas about democracy held by major political forces, with which they interpret the meanings of democratic institutions and socioeconomic crises, is essential to understanding the direction of democratic political development toward stabilization or collapse.

Theoretical Alternative: Ideas on Democracy

To better account for the crisis of Korea's democracy, I focus on key actors' ideas about democracy. To understand the nature of Korea's democratic backsliding, its unique characteristics must be understood. Far from underestimating socioeconomic and institutional conditions, our ideational approach emphasizes that economic crises and institutions find meaning only through actors' interpretation in the context of practicing democracy. To better understand the democratic crises of Korea, I focus on major political forces' ideas about democracy, particularly Koreans' conception of essentialist democracy.

The essentialist conception of democracy, like populism, pursues democracy yet risks distorting it due to the indeterminacy of the people's will and its inherent contradictions. As Rosanvallon (2021) notes, the concept of democracy holds various internal contradictions, which give rise to different ideas about democracy and different practical problems. Democracy, as commonly understood, is *popular sovereignty* or *rule by the people's will*. However, political forces have different views on who the people are and what the will of the people is. Like many variants of populism, essentialist democracy causes limit cases of democracy due to its own indeterminacy of democracy (ibid., 8-9).

The essentialist conception of democracy, however, is fundamentally not a type of populist regime, but a belief held by major political actors regarding the principles of democracy. It is neither an abstract academic theory nor an ideology, nor merely a rhetorical style. Rather, essentialist democracy in this paper refers to a specific belief about democracy, held by major political actors in the context of political practices, through which essentialist democrats pursue their own notion of *authentic democracy*. It reflects their underlying beliefs about democratic

principles and legitimacy, as well as the distinctive ways of doing politics that are grounded in those beliefs.

Essentialist democracy can be understood as a variant of populism, insofar as it represents a limit case that emerges from the pursuit of democracy itself. However, it differs from populism that defines virtually all opposition movements—often noted in discussions following Brexit (Mounk 2018). Nor does it correspond to the conception advanced by some leftist intellectuals who frame populism as a strategy to rejuvenate democracy (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2016). While much of the populism literature emphasizes anti-establishment attributes, the essentialist conception of democracy developed here focuses on a specific way of essentially defining the people's rule (Urbinati 2019, 116; Rosanvallon 2021, 24-26, 89-96, 101-3). Unlike populism's anti-establishment rhetoric and strategic positioning, essentialist democracy entails *a priori* presupposing one's own legitimacy as a democratic actor by claiming to be the more authentic representative of the people.

Essentialist democracy takes *the people* as its fundamental principle of legitimacy. The problem, however, is that the people it presupposes do not correspond to the actual social reality of citizens, but rather to its own essentialist interpretation of who the people are. In most cases, this takes the form of an *a priori* conception of the people—an imagined unity such as an idealized nation (for example, an uncontaminated peasant community in Russia or the Volksgemeinschaft in Germany), an abstract notion of national interest, or the proletariat's historical mission (Kwon 2022). This essentialist expression of democracy contrasts with pluralistic parliamentarism, in which the people's will is formed through collective and parliamentary deliberation. Essentialist conceptions of democracy tend toward authoritarian dictatorship, as in Carl Schmitt's ([1921] 1985) idea of the national will represented in a dictator and the Marxist concept of the proletariat dictatorship. By contrast, British parliamentary democracy recognizes that the will of the people is plural and elusive. The will of the people is formed through rational deliberation in the parliament and the public sphere.

Essentialist democracy differs from fascism or traditional military dictatorships grounded in violence and the rejection of democratic elections. Rather, it seeks legitimacy within democracy itself and aspires to realize democracy in its "authentic" form. Essentialist democrats recognize elections in the course of pursuing democracy; however, unlike advocates of representative democracy, they regard elections as a ritual that celebrates the authentic people. The notion of the majority embraced by essentialist democrats differs fundamentally from that of ordinary democratic actors. In representative democracy, majority rule is merely a procedural instrument for making decisions on specific issues during a given period. By contrast, essentialist democrats link their electoral majority not to actual citizens at a particular moment in time, but to an *imagined authentic*

people, whom they define a priori.

For example, in his inauguration speech on January 20, 2017, President Donald Trump stated, "What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20, 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer" (quoted in Urbinati 2019, 122). When essentialist democrats win a majority, they interpret their victory "as if it were the right winner, with a mission of bringing the 'forgotten' and 'true' country back" (Urbinati 2019, 120), as reflected in Trump's inaugural rhetoric. Because essentialist democrats presuppose that they uniquely represent the authentic people, they regard their electoral majority not as a simple numerical outcome but as the *true majority*. As a result, essentialist democrats view their legitimacy as grounded not merely in numbers but primarily in an *a priori* and imaginary unity of the authentic people defined by themselves.

Once in power, essentialist democrats tend to believe that the leader is authorized to act unilaterally, making decisions without meaningful institutional consultation or mediation, since the leader is presumed to embody and authentically represent the people. Essentialist democrats often portray the opposition as distant from the authentic people—an illegitimate, undemocratic foreign body or conspiratorial force—tolerated only in a strategic sense. Urbinati (2014; 2019, 119-20) characterizes this emphasis on the immediate identification and expression of the genuine people as *direct representation*, distinct from direct democracy, while Rosanvallon (2021) refers to it as *immediate democracy*. Because they assume that they fully represent the authentic people, essentialist democrats are rarely satisfied with a single electoral victory achieved through majority rule; instead, they seek more unbounded power, such as making constitutional amendments and imposing restrictions on free speech and political association, while framing opposition forces as scapegoats for national social and economic distress (Urbinati 2019, 121).

Conversely, when essentialist democrats lose elections and become a minority, they may frame the outcome as the theft of the nation by illegitimate forces and call for "taking back" the country. This reaction stems from their belief that they themselves represent the authentic people—and thus the sovereign—and therefore possess inherent democratic legitimacy (Espejo 2017, 94; Urbinati 2019, 122).

Ultimately, essentialist democracy tends to disregard the formal procedural dimension of democracy—how democratic institutions and rules actually operate and are used. By emphasizing the identification between the leader and the authentic people, essentialist democrats also neglect the mediated organizations—such as parties and parliament—that are essential for forming and articulating the people's will within representative democracy. Thus, the essentialist conception of

democracy tends to generate extreme polarization among major political forces and, in turn, disfigures constitutional and representative democracy, as seen in the case of Korea.

Characteristics of Korea's Democratic Backsliding

Korea's democracy in the 2020s appears stable through fair elections and regime changes based on a multiparty system. For example, in the 2022 presidential election, the defeated candidate, Lee Jae-Myung, accepted the outcome of the election, which he lost by a mere 0.7%. Yet, Korean society has become increasingly emotionally divided between progressives and conservatives. This polarization has resulted in the impeachment of progressive President Roh Moo-hyun, followed by his death, and the impeachment of conservative President Park Geun-hye. Antagonism has brought a politics of retaliation, prohibiting not only reasonable parliamentary debates but sound development of the public sphere in civil society. This section briefly examines the characteristics of the democratic crisis in today's Korea, before exploring how the crisis is amplified by essentialist ideas about democracy, which progressives and conservatives developed in the process of democratization and practicing democracy.

Recently, the world has been undergoing a crisis of democracy. According to Diamond (2021), the freedom index has noticeably declined since 2006, and the rate of democratic regime collapse is increasing. During the third wave of democratization (1976-2019), the rate of democratic regime collapse increased from 10.7% in the first decade to 18.9% in the last decade (Diamond 2021; Boese et al. 2021, 885). Even advanced democratic nations that were once considered models of democracy have experienced democratic regression. As seen with Brexit in the U.K., and the Trump administration in the U.S., and the rise of populism, including the National Front (renamed National Rally since 2018) in France, Alternative for Germany, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and Podemos in Spain, mature and advanced democracies have fallen into crisis (Shin and Kim 2022, 3).

Korea's democracy is not an exception to the global trend of the crisis of democracy. Korea has been praised as one of the eight most successful democracies among the ninety-one countries that democratized during the so-called Third Wave (1974-2012) (Mainwaring and Bizzarro 2019, 99-113). However, in Korea's democracy, once a candidate wins a democratic election, the opponent tends to be investigated by the Public Prosecutors' Office, whether under a progressive or a conservative government (Hur 2022, 51-52). For example, during the progressive Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), an investigation with the goal of purging "historically deep-rooted wrongdoings" was used to harass the opposition party. The conservative Yoon Suk-yeol

administration (2022-2025) also suppressed the opposition party through relentless prosecutors' investigations into both the West Sea civil servant incident and the opposition party leader (Kwon 2023, 35).

According to the annual democracy report by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2024), South Korea fell to forty-seventh place out of 179 countries surveyed in the 2023 liberal democracy rankings. On an index where 0 represents a dictatorship and 1 represents a liberal democracy, South Korea received a score of 0.60 in 2023. This score and ranking represent a significant decline from 0.78 and eighteenth place in 2019, and 0.73 and twenty-eighth place in 2022. In its "Democracy Index 2022," the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) (2023, 49) similarly reported that Korea's political culture of deliberation and compromise has been in steady decline. According to the report, South Korea ranked twenty-fourth, a decline of eight places from 2021. Confrontational politics, which focuses on attacks on rival politicians, is an important contributor to Korea's decline in the democracy index. Korea's formal democracy is insufficient to resolve polarization and achieve national integration, because animosity between progressives and conservatives spirals through entrenched solidarity within each camp and the demonization of the other (Jang and Ha 2022, 53; Yoo 2024, 3; Kang 2024, 366-7).

Extreme Polarization from Within

However, it is particularly noteworthy that the features of Korea's democratic backsliding are different from those of advanced democracies in Western Europe. Korea's democratic backsliding results from extreme polarization among mainstream parties, rather than their convergence toward the center, as seen in Western Europe, in which mainstream parties (e.g., the Christian Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party) become closer to the median voter to catch all voters and show little difference between them. Due to the convergence of mainstream parties in Western Europe, the main challenges to democracy in Western Europe come from non-democratic, anti-system politics outside the system, as seen in the newly emerging extreme-right-wing parties, including the National Front in France, Alternative for Germany, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and Podemos in Spain. By contrast, in Korea, excessive confrontation and conflict occur between mainstream parties within the democratic system, rather than outside the system.

In Korea, extreme polarization among mainstream parties also divides civil society. According to a Spring 2024 Pew Research Center survey, Korea ranks first in political polarization among the nineteen surveyed countries, including the U.S., Canada, Germany, the U.K., and Japan (Pew Research Center 2024). In Korea, 90% of Koreans say that strong conflicts exist between people who support different political parties, while 40% in Japan, 60% in Germany, 61% in the U.K. and Italy, and 88% in the U.S. say the same (ibid.). While conflict is ubiquitous

in democracies, Korea's current political culture of public deliberation and compromise has been in a steady decline (EIU 2023, 49).

Citizens' Fanatical Participation: Fandom

Korea's democratic backsliding results mainly from citizens' extreme participation in democratic politics, rather than citizens' apathy, as seen in Western European democracies, due to the cartelization of mainstream parties. Such public apathy results in low political participation, as seen in low voter turnout, reduction in party membership, and decline in party support (Mair 2013; Katz and Mair 2018).

From a comparative perspective, the dominant trend in advanced democracies is a decline in party membership and an increase in the number of political parties (Hofmeister 2021, 180). But the case of Korea is the exact opposite. The number of political parties has decreased, while party membership has skyrocketed. According to the Central Election Management Committee's "2021 Overview of Political Party Activities and Financial Reports," the total number of party members in Korea is approximately 10.43 million: 725,380 for the Democratic Party and 569,059 for the People Power Party, which in 2021 represented 20.2% of the population and 23.6% of eligible voters (Park 2023, 139; Yoon 2022, 100-101). Compared to other countries, the number of party members is unimaginably high. In the U.K., the number of party members is about 2% of the population. Sweden has a relatively stable rate, with about 3% of the population being party members (Park 2023, 139-41).

Excessive membership in Korean political parties indicates a celebrity-style political culture, which deters reasonable deliberation within parties and parliament. In such politics, Korea's democracy deteriorates into extreme polarization through avid participants' sway over party politics. While Korea's moderate and median voters tend to distance themselves from politics due to extreme political confrontation, extreme pop culture supporters actively participate. For example, even after losing the presidential election, more than one hundred thousand supporters joined the Democratic Party to protect a specific person. These fanatical supporters not only dominate their party's candidate selection process but also generate extreme polarization in inter-party politics (Yoon 2022, 111).

For example, polling experts commonly point out that low response rates in opinion polls lead to biased sample extraction. Due to low response rates of 1% to 8%, survey agencies have come to rely heavily on the active responses of a specific, highly engaged group. Supporters of a particular candidate may share the survey's phone number and encourage others to respond, while low-engagement moderate individuals tend to block the survey's phone number as spam (Kim 2022; Yoon 2022, 112). This ultimately distorts public opinion about extremist groups, misrepresenting the public opinion of the broader population.

Democratic Backsliding by Pro-democrats

In advanced democracies, democracy is threatened by anti-system forces or supporters of authoritarianism. But in Korea, democracy is, paradoxically, undermined by "democrats" who support democracy.

Most Koreans, whether conservative or progressive, support democracy as the best political system. Data from the World Values Survey from 1996, 2005, 2010, and 2018 show Korea with very high rates of support for democracy (83.7% in 1996, 75.1% in 2002, 77.1% in 2005, 74.4% in 2010, and 70.1% in 2018)—more than 70% expressing support for democracy as "good" or "very good" (Inglehart et al. 2024). Despite this consistently high support for democracy, Korea now faces a democratic crisis mainly due to essentialist views of democracy held by conservatives and progressives. Each side justifies its view of democracy and paints the opponent as anti-democratic (Choi 2013, 88-89). Neither camp accepts the other camp as a partner to be reasoned with, but rather as a target to overthrow.

To sum up, Korea's democratic backsliding is different from that of advanced democracies in the sense that the crisis of democracy in Korea comes mainly from citizens' excessive participation, as seen in the tremendous increase in party membership and street demonstrations rather than political apathy. More notably, the crisis of democracy in Korea occurs mainly among the strong democrats, who believe that democracy must be pursued to the end, rather than among anti-system and anti-democratic forces.

Causes for the Crisis of Democracy in Korea

To identify the causes of regression in Korean democracy, I will first examine the concept of democracy held by conservative and progressive forces before and after democratization. I will then examine why extreme polarization based on ideology continues to be reproduced in the process of practicing democracy after consolidation.

An Essentialist Conception of Democracy

Although Korea's democracy appears stable in terms of fair electoral competition, it is now regressing. Once a party wins a democratic election, it mobilizes the prosecution to investigate and suppress leaders of the opposing party (Yeo 2020; Hur 2022, 51-52). Furthermore, politics in Korea is more like a movement rather than an institutionalized parliamentary democracy, resulting in two presidential impeachments. Extreme polarization and antagonism in Korea come mainly from pro-democracy forces who justify their actions with claims to represent the authentic people.

To understand the prevalent views on Korean democracy, I first note that

essentialist democracy—*illiberal* and *non-parliamentary-democratic* practices—prevails in Korea even after democratization. While Koreans strongly support democracy, they also believe that democracy is compatible with a strong, unchecked leader. For example, according to the World Values Survey, approximately 67% of Koreans have a clear preference for a strong leader who is unchecked by parliament (Haerpfer et al. 2022). Korea's preference for authoritarian leadership is significantly higher than in other advanced democracies: the U.S. (37%), Japan (27%), Germany (24%), and France (23%). An analysis by Kim and Yoon (2020, 132) shows a strong preference for direct or participatory democracy in Korea, which directly expresses the will of the people, over representative democracy, and also a strong support for authoritarian rule, requiring strong, unchecked political leadership. This preference is found among both progressives and conservatives, as Jung's (2022) empirical study shows.

Currently, Koreans' idea of democracy is reminiscent of Weimar democracy. Carl Schmitt's ([1921] 1985) compatibility of democracy and dictatorship based on his essentialist view of democracy highlights democracy's immediate identification of a leader with the people's will, defined as *Volksgemeinschaft*, without parliamentary mediation or debate. Contemporary Koreans, whether progressives or conservatives, tend to define the people as an imaginary populace of a unified will, expressing immediate democracy or authoritarian populism, and identify leaders with the abstract will of the people. This model is characterized by two contradictory features: support for direct democracy, yet with a preference for an authoritarian leader unchecked by parliament. This is what Urbinati (2014; 2019) refers to as "direct representation," rather than direct democracy.

An essentialist conception of democracy based on authentic people and the nation in Korea differs from liberal parliamentarism, which can mediate, interpret, and form the people's will through reasonable deliberation in a pluralistic society. For example, the relationship between nationalism and liberalism differs between Koreans and Americans. In the U.S., the stronger the national pride, the higher the aversion to illiberalism (Solt 2011, 821-30). In Korea, the stronger the national pride, the higher the support for tolerance of illiberalism. Hur's (2022) analysis reveals the essentialist conception of Koreans' democracy. She surveys Koreans' perception of the following questions about illiberalism: (1) "When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch"; (2) "If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything"; and (3) "When the country is facing a difficult situation, it is OK for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation." In these questions, Koreans, whether conservatives or progressives, are more likely to support a tolerance of illiberalism as they have more national pride (ibid., 71-73). For partisan voters, "feeling[s] of national pride are associated with stronger support for a non-independent judiciary, a unilaterally powered executive, and [the] overrid[ing] of procedural justice—all foundational elements

of illiberal rule" (ibid., 73). In particular, in Korea, the positive relationship between national pride and illiberal tolerance has increased over time, based on the survey years of 2006, 2011, and 2015. This positive correlation between nationalism and illiberal tolerance is particularly evident in situations where partisan incumbents are replaced in 2006 and 2015.

Pro-democratic Forces' Conception of Democracy

The unique irony of Korea's democratic backsliding is that it is exacerbated by pro-democratic forces who justify their actions with democracy. The reasons lie mainly in their essentialist conception of democracy, whether they are progressives or conservatives.

First, in Korea, conservatives and progressives confront each other more intensely over foreign issues related to the U.S. and North Korea, than over taxation, labor, or redistribution, as seen in European countries. In Korea, foreign policy has become a primary axis distinguishing conservative and progressive camps. From political and diplomatic issues—such as North Korean policy, the North Korean nuclear question, the presence of U.S. forces in Korea, and the National Security Law—to socioeconomic controversies including removal of the MacArthur statue, the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, and the import of U.S. beef, virtually all matters connected to the U.S. and North Korea have been reframed as ideological battlegrounds between conservatives and progressives. This dynamic reflects the enduring legacy of Cold War ideological confrontation and national division that has shaped political contestation from the immediate post-liberation left-right struggles through the conservative-progressive confrontations since the 1980s. More than seventy years after the end of the Korean War and over three decades after the end of the Cold War, conservatives tend to regard North Korea as the foremost enemy, whereas progressives view North Korea as a legitimate coexisting regime on the Korean Peninsula. Conservatives maintain an ideologically driven, Cold War-oriented stance toward China and therefore interpret China's rise as a threat to regional security. In contrast, progressives approach China in more pragmatic terms, viewing it as South Korea's largest economic partner as well as an important regional neighbor.

Second, both conservatives and progressives justify their actions as efforts to defend "true democracy." According to the proclamation of martial law on December 3, 2024, the opposition Democratic Party was portrayed as engaging in anti-state activities and as a force undermining liberal democracy. The proclamation further presupposed the existence of a legislative dictatorship, implying that the National Assembly itself had become authoritarian. Former President Yoon Suk-yeol justified the declaration of martial law as a necessary measure to protect the Republic of Korea from North Korean communist forces, announcing the prohibition of political activities and limitations on the free press (Son 2024).

Likewise, pro-Yoon ("Yoon Again") demonstrators criticized the Democratic

Party as "pro-North Korea anti-state forces," staging rallies with placards reading "Nullify the Impeachment" and "Support Yoon" (Yang 2025, 392-3). Far-right protesters claimed to be defending liberal democracy even while engaging in contentious and violent actions, including storming the Seoul Western District Court on January 19, 2025, assaulting opposition supporters, and physically attacking pro-impeachment demonstrations on university campuses (Lim 2025; Song 2025; Yang 2025, 405-6). In the South Korean context, conservatives frequently portray themselves as the genuine defenders of liberal democracy while labeling progressive forces as anti-state and anti-democratic.

However, the conservative conception of democracy in Korea differs significantly from that of conservatives in Western Europe. Liberal democracy, in the Western sense, refers to a political system that guarantees civil rights, political freedom, separation of powers, and the rule of law. In the Korean context, however, conservatives understand it as anti-communism, anti-North Korea, a pro-American orientation, and, increasingly, an anti-China stance. Korea's conservative understanding of liberal democracy did not emerge from processes of collective will formation grounded in the concrete demands of everyday life. Rather, it is rooted in an abstract ideological framework shaped during the Cold War.

Throughout modern Korean history, conservative ruling elites based on statism have prioritized what they define as the "true national interest" as liberal democracy, and portray a wide range of social movements and progressive forces—particularly those demanding civil rights and social recognition—as acting against that national interest. Ironically, far-right conservatives who support Yoon Suk-yeol invoke the language of liberal democracy while simultaneously dismissing diverse social demands as threats to the social order. From a nationalist perspective, Korean conservatives tend to equate the "true national interest" as they define it with the authentic will of the people, viewing pro-Americanism, anti-communism, and national prosperity achieved through economic development as synonymous with liberal democracy. Within this framework, conservatives express strong confidence in their own interpretation of the national interest, while simultaneously accusing progressive forces of disregarding that national interest and engaging in a form of parliamentary overreach—what they describe as tyranny of the majority (Kim 2016; Doucette 2025; Moon 2024; Nan Kim 2018; Chun and Han 2025; Yang 2025).

On the other hand, progressives in South Korea also maintain an essentialist conception of democracy, while contesting the authentic people and nation with conservatives. They emphasize their moral superiority and antagonize their opponents based on ideological purity (Shin and Kim 2022, 20). Progressives in Korea tend to prioritize the immediate expression of the authentic people's will, while disregarding representative democracy and constitutional democracy (Choi 2020). The former fighters for democracy have become the ruling elite,

without recognizing or acknowledging the liberal values and the importance of representative democracy. Rather, they rely on an abstract conception of the people, or *Minjung*, formed by their own interpretation of history, rather than one constituted in a complex reality of diverse citizens (Shin and Kim 2022, 22; Ahn 2022).

In the 1970s, progressive forces emphasized democracy using various concepts, such as ethnicity, folk culture, and the nation in resistance to authoritarian rule. But their conception of the people referred to an imagined people with a unified will of resistance. In particular, the concept of *Minjung* has been essential for referring to the people in the 1980s democratic movement. *Minjung* is an *a priori* and imagined community with a unified will of resistance, which emerged through the experience of the Kwangju Massacre of May 1980, in images of workers, peasants, and the weak who were oppressed by elites and the fascist state power. Sometimes *Minjung* is also defined as historical subjects with a historical mission to carry out an anti-feudal civil revolution (Hong 2024, 3; 2021, 44; Lee 2010, 151).

The divergence of progressive forces, particularly student movements as a central force in Korea's democratization of the 1980s, depended on how *Minjung*, as an *a priori* community, could be understood (Lee 2008; Hong 2024). The political group People's Democracy (PD) emphasized class lines in defining *Minjung*, while the National Liberation (NL) group understood democracy in nationalist terms, defining the people as an entire nation, excluding only a small fraction of Korea's ruling elites. Despite their differences, the conception of democracy held by progressive forces in Korea relied on an abstract and imaginary entity—whether *Minjung* or an oppressed nation—with a unified will of resistance, meant to be expressed immediately by political leaders or mass movements, without mediating bodies of parliament (Lee 2007, 68). Even after democratization, progressive forces defined the will of the people as an *a priori* conception of historical missions.

After democratization in the 1980s, progressives criticized conservatives as reactionary actors obstructing historical progress across a wide range of issues, including inter-Korean relations, the presence of U.S. forces in Korea, diplomacy toward the U.S., the liquidation of the Fifth Republic legacy, labor policy, and education policy (Gweon 2013, 106). In this sense, even those who identified as progressive or pro-democracy tended to regard democracy as a singular historical truth, labeling their opponents as anti-democratic. Such a perspective can be described as an essentialist conception of democracy, in which one's own definition alone is seen as authentically representing "the people," rather than focusing on the democratic process of forming the will of the people through collective deliberation in parliament and the public sphere.

Continuation of the Perception of Democracy versus Anti-democracy

Even after democratization, both progressives and conservatives in Korea, based on their own conception of the authentic people, regard their opponents as anti-democratic evil, thereby extending and reproducing the political framework of "democracy versus anti-democracy" from the struggle for full democratization to the present day (Joon Man Kang 2021, 251). Both conservatives and progressives have reinforced the legitimacy of their own essentialist conceptions of democracy by pointing out the perceived faults of their opponents.

For example, the 386 student activists who were a driving force behind Korea's democratization in the 1980s went on to occupy key positions in the Roh Moo-hyun administration and, in particular, the Moon Jae-in administration.[1] However, even in the current situation of fair electoral competition, they still believe and act as if they are fighting against authoritarianism. They believe that for Korea to achieve complete democracy, authoritarians' vested interests, such as conservatism and Cho-Joong-Dong (which refers to Korea's three conservative daily newspapers: *Chosun Ilbo*, *Joongang Ilbo*, and *Dong-A Ilbo*), are still deeply rooted throughout society and must be removed (Choi 2020; Shin and Kim 2022, 17).

The Democratic Party and progressive forces often label conservative or opposing parties as descendants of the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan military regimes. Yoon Ho-jung, chairman of the Judiciary Committee in the National Assembly, defined the opposition as a force that has "sucked the honey of dictatorship" for a lifetime (*Yonhap News Agency* 2020). Hong Young-pyo, a member of the Democratic Party, claimed, "The forces that privatized the military and interfered in politics in the past, and those who conducted civilian surveillance operations and staged coups in the past, are now conducting operations in the National Assembly because they can no longer do so" (Lee 2020). The Democratic Party and progressives argue that the conservative forces trace their lineage back to the oligarchic political forces of the late Joseon Dynasty, pro-Japanese collaborators during the colonial era, military dictatorship elites during the Cold War, and now the conservative opposition party. Based on this essentialist conception, they define their opponents as absolute evil and present it as justification for the Democratic Party's long-term rule theory (*SisaIN* 2020; Cha 2021, 152).

Likewise, conservatives in Korea have grounded their politics in an essentialist conception of democracy, focusing on attacking the moral integrity and historical legitimacy of their opponents. For example, in the aftermath of the condolence controversy following Kim Il-sung's death in July 1994, progressive forces were framed as pro-North Korea and labeled anti-state actors (Gweon 2013, 111, 116). From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, conservatives further reinforced the legitimacy of their own version of liberal democracy, rooted in anticommunism and nationalist developmentalism, by opposing President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy toward North Korea and his attempts at chaebol

reform. During President Roh Moo-hyun's administration, they also resisted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's efforts to address historical injustices. At the same time, the political rise of the so-called "386 generation," many of whom had backgrounds in student activism, was portrayed through the lens of their youthful ideological commitments to socialist revolution and Marxism, thereby strengthening conservative narratives that emphasized anticommunism as a defining principle (Yang 2025, 400; Jeon 2014, 167).

As a result, pro-democratic forces in Korea are threatening democracy itself by imposing their own brand of democracy based on their abstract conception of the authentic people and history, while ignoring democratic procedures that shape the will of the people in a pluralistic society.

Politics of Retaliation

Recently, the essentialist conception of democracy under the framework of "democracy versus anti-democracy" has generated not just extreme polarization in Korean society, but also deteriorated further into a politics of retaliation in the process of political interaction. Whether progressives or conservatives, once they seize political power in democratic elections, they mobilize the public prosecutors to investigate and punish their opponents. Retaliation begets retaliation. The only difference is the justification for retaliation, as seen in their slogans such as "correcting history" or "cleaning up deep-rooted wrongdoings." Yoon Suk-yeol, the public prosecutors' office, the judiciary, which once were praised for their uprightness when used by their side like hunting dogs, are now considered anti-democratic forces and targets for elimination, as they deviate from their own positions.

The selection of the public prosecutors' office and conservative media as targets for purging is rooted in the trauma of Roh Moo-hyun, whose impeachment and death strengthened hostility and a desire for revenge against his opponents. Progressives believe that conservatives refused to recognize Roh Moo-hyun as president and even drove him to his death. Moon Jae-in defines Roh Moo-hyun's death as political assassination and points to the prosecutors' office and the media as the parties responsible (Moon Jae-in 2011, especially Parts III-IV). Candlelight protests during Park Geun-hye's impeachment demonstrated an expression of condensed anger based on emotional, simplistic judgments of good versus evil, or like versus dislike, far from pluralistic and rational citizenship (Seok-ho Kim 2018, 220).

Thus, progressives in Korea believe that there can be no meaningful dialogue or compromise with the conservative party. Progressives view the conservative party, the conservative press, and like-minded civil society actors, including Protestant churches and related organizations, as anti-democratic forces that oppose democratic reform. Progressive forces believed that as long as these conservatives continue to exert influence in political and civil society, or as

long as those labeled as "vestiges of the past" continue to exist, democracy is not possible. Progressives believe that democracy is possible only when these conservative forces are completely eliminated or when vestiges of the past are purged. Therefore, the struggle for democratization, which emphasizes the ongoing elimination of opponents, continues (Lee 2022, 103).[2]

The politics of retaliation by progressives begets the politics of retaliation by conservatives. After experiencing two presidential election defeats (1997 and 2002) and the retaliation politics of progressive forces (including, for example, the impeachment of the conservative President Park Geun-hye), conservatives mobilized their supporters to regain power—even hegemony—within civil society. Thus, they launched a new conservative movement called the New Right. The New Right formed a conservative alliance that went beyond the political party system to include the press, civil associations, and religious actors (Protestant evangelicals) (Lee 2022, 89-90, 97).[3]

The rise of the far-right within Korean conservatism was driven not only by opposition to the progressive governments discussed above but, more importantly, by the growth of the far-right Taegukgi movement that emerged in reaction to the candlelight protests calling for the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye (Yang 2020; 2025, 401). Core participants in the conservative anti-impeachment rallies—particularly veterans and retirees—mobilized under the banner of patriotism and liberal democracy, joining large-scale Taegukgi demonstrations. The Taegukgi movement has been described as "the largest, longest-standing right-wing movement in South Korean history" (Yang 2025, 401).

The collective identity of conservatives participating in the Taegukgi movement is strongly shaped by hostility toward communist North Korea. Many participants share memories of tragic experiences associated with the Korean War and express pride in South Korea's rapid and successful developmental growth during the 1960s and 1970s. From their perspective, progressive forces that disrupt state-led developmentalism are dangerous. Moreover, conservative participants reacted with anger to what they viewed as attacks on Park Geun-hye—the daughter of Park Chung-hee, a national leader whom they deeply respect (Yang 2025, 402).

Conservatives in Korea portray themselves as guardians of liberal democracy while simultaneously characterizing their progressive opponents as suppressors of democracy or as authoritarian forces (Mobrand 2021, 275; Yang 2025, 406). Through experiencing the impeachments of two conservative presidents, Park Geun-hye and Yoon Suk-yeol, conservatives believe that they are martyrs who attempted to dismantle a so-called "leftist cartel" (Yang 2025, 407). Moreover, Yoon's declaration of martial law is framed as an effort to resist a legislative dictatorship and to protect liberal democracy and the constitutional order. Ryu Geun-il (2025), a former editor-in-chief of *Chosun Ilbo* and current editorial

advisor to the far-right news outlet *New Daily*, described pro-Yoon rallies as acts of civil disobedience aimed at defending liberal democracy against a coup allegedly orchestrated by the far-left and its allies. Yoon Suk-yeol and his supporters justify the use of state violence as a necessary measure to save and rebuild a country in crisis, arguing that it was an unavoidable choice to defend a liberal democracy that they believe has been undermined by leftist forces (Shin 2025; Doucette 2025, 361).

The political polarization has been further intensified by a psychology of revenge, rooted in the belief that the leaders whom supporters revered were either killed or impeached by their political opponents. Furthermore, political antagonism based on the essentialist conception of the authentic people has easily deteriorated through political fandom, as seen in the fandom communities of *Nosamo* (supporters of President Roh Moo-hyun) and *Parksamo* (supporters of President Park Geun-hye) where political battles have ensued both online and offline between progressives and conservatives. In recent years, both conservatives and progressives in Korea have used social media platforms such as KakaoTalk and YouTube to manipulate public opinion, continuously spreading shocking news and disinformation—including false claims of election fraud—thereby further intensifying hostility toward their opponents (Yang 2025, 399, 403). Following the impeachment and death of President Roh Moo-hyun and the impeachments of President Park Geun-hye and President Yoon Suk-yeol, the progressive and conservative camps have come to view each other not as dialogue partners but as enemies, perpetuating a cycle of retaliatory politics.

Conclusion

In the 2020s, Korea's democracy can be considered fairly stabilized, with a formal multiparty system, fair elections, and peaceful regime changes. However, Korea faces a serious crisis of democracy, as many advanced democracies have similarly experienced in recent years. Currently, Korea's political and civil society are extremely polarized, making democratic decision-making difficult, with policy-making stuck in a stalemate.

Korea's crisis of democracy, however, is different from the prevalent patterns of democratic backsliding occurring in advanced democracies in Western Europe. Korea's democratic backsliding results from extreme polarization among mainstream parties, rather than convergence of mainstream political parties toward a median position. Unlike in Europe, where democratic challenges come from outside the system or from anti-system forces, Korea's main challenges come from *within*, from its polarization. Korea's democratic backsliding is also unique in that Korea's crisis of democracy comes mainly from citizens' excessive participation, rather than political apathy. This crisis of democracy is driven

mainly by pro-democratic forces who believe that democracy must be pursued to the end. At the root of this crisis lies the essentialist conception of democracy, held by both progressives and conservatives.

This study has shown that opting not to develop a system of parliamentarism based on the premise of a pluralistic society has weakened party politics by presupposing the people as an imaginary community with an *a priori* and unified will, and directly identifying the people with the supreme leader who best reflects that will in a realistic form. Hostile confrontation between progressives and conservatives becomes a politics of retaliation as each camp experiences impeachments and death of representative top leaders.

How Korea's current crisis of democracy will evolve is difficult to say. If the current pattern of political antagonism based on the politics of fandom and retaliation is allowed to escalate, then a stable democracy may be difficult to ensure, despite its formal and legal structures. In order for Korea to stabilize, mutually recognized party politics and parliamentarism are urgently needed under the assumption of a pluralistic society, not an *a priori* imaginary community and arbitrarily defined historical mission.

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Notes

1. The term "386 generation" was coined in the 1990s, when student activists for democratization were in their thirties. They attended college in the 1980s and were born in the 1960s. They are now called "586" to reflect their current age.
2. Meanwhile, the issue of media reform, which reached its peak in 2021 with the attempt to pass the revised Media Arbitration Act, also originated from the Roh Moo-hyun trauma. Now, the anger of strong supporters of the Moon Jae-in administration has been directed not only at conservative media but also at so-called progressive media such as the *Hankyoreh*, the *Kyunghyang*, and the *Ohmynews*. Progressives believe that the unfair criticism (or internal attacks) from these "pseudo-progressives" contributed to the failure of the Roh Moo-hyun administration and his death. These progressive media outlets were mockingly labeled as the "poor Cho-Joong-Dong" (Cha 2021, 156; Park and Lee 2019, 26-30).
3. The political role of the Korean church has become a prominent phenomenon. Several large churches and Christians migrated from North Korea to South Korea during the war. They have consequently strongly internalized anti-communism and view the Korean nation and people as a pure people free of communism. Therefore, they frame the Democratic Party and progressive forces as "pro-North leftists" (Lee 2022, 90, 97).

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