

FORUM:	General Assembly
ISSUE:	Measures to Address the Impact of Political Polarization and Democratic Instability in South Korea
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Introduction

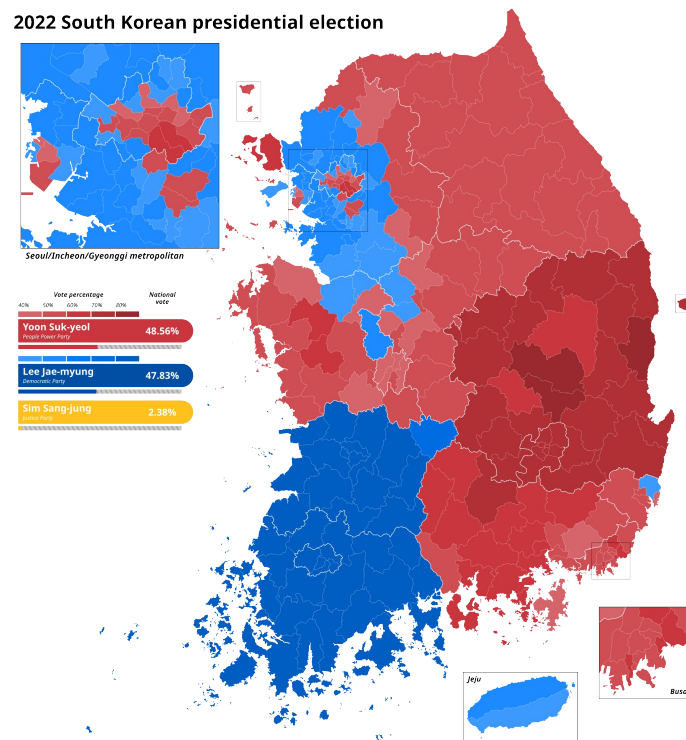


Figure 1: Results of the 2022 South Korean presidential election

From being a nation devastated by war into one of the largest economies in the world, South Korea is a nation that has undergone impressive economic and political changes. After the military dictatorship of thirty years has ended by mass protests organized by students in 1987, the country has paved its way towards democratization. Nonetheless, although South Korea has a multi-party system, its current political landscape is highly polarized. The liberal Democratic Party (DP) and the conservative People Power Party (PPP) are the two most significant political parties in the nation. With clashes occurring between opposing political identities and ideologies in the last few years, political polarization has intensified in Korea. This was vividly exemplified in the 2022 presidential election, in which conservative Yoon Suk Yeol has won the closest race in the country's history by a 0.8% point over his liberal rival Lee Jae-myung (Dyvik). Due



to the increase of political polarization, the two major parties began to increasingly rely on stoking hostility against each other to gain public support, with electoral campaigns shifting focus from promoting policies to fueling rivalry. These political tensions resulted in the president Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law and deployment of military in December 2024. Yoon's flawed decision has led South Korean democracy into a state of crisis, reviving memories of coups that were common during the military dictatorship before 1988. In this vein, it is essential for the General Assembly to create feasible yet effective solutions that can address the impact of political polarization and democratic instability in South Korea for the nation to achieve more resilient and sustainable democracy (Sohn and Kang).

Background

Regionalism

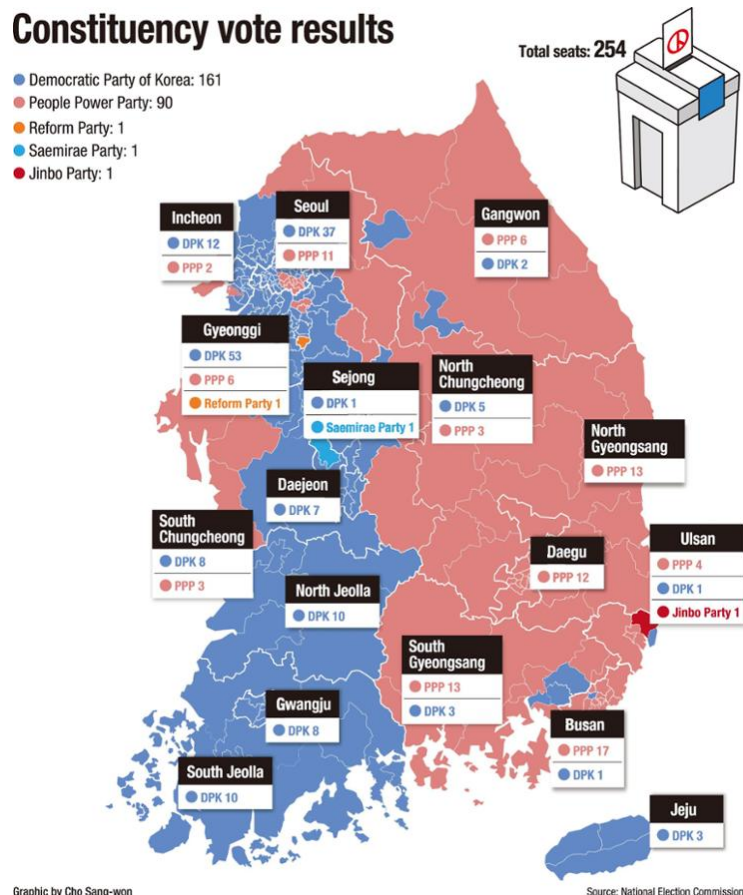


Figure 2: Map showing the result of 2024's general election

One of contributors to South Korea's political polarization is regionalism. Regionalism refers to a political ideology that favors a region of a country to be more significant than the whole. Most of past South Korea's presidents comes from Gyeongsang, a hometown of the military dictator, Park Chung-hee who has ruled the country for 18 years from 1961. He has launched South Korea's economic miracle, leading not only the capital city Seoul but also his hometown Gyeongsang to be rapidly developed, with major



industrial hubs being established in Gyeongsang. Nevertheless, this development was unevenly distributed, as other areas such as Jeolla province were left underdeveloped and largely agricultural. This unfair economic development created a rivalry between Jeolla, a liberal stronghold and Gyeongsang, a conservation-leaning area. Forces of regionalism was further reinforced during the May 1980 Gwangju Uprising, when the military leader Chun Doo-hwan, who comes from Gyeongsang ordered violent crackdown against pro-democracy protesters in Gwangju in May 1980, killing hundreds of civilians. With the regime and state media framing this democratic movement as communist-led engendered anti-Jeolla sentiment into an anti-communist loyalty test (Szczepanski). Consequently, in Jeolla, strong anti-conservative and pro-democracy identity defined by victimization and resistance was formed. On the other hand, in Gyeongsang, official narratives encouraged hostility towards Jeolla, causing a conservative stronghold.

After the impeachment of two conservative presidents, Park Geun-hye and Yoon Suk Yeol, the people in Gyeongsang, specifically Gyeongbuk region remains loyal to the conservatives to reinforce and defend their political base (Lim and Tang). Hence, the continuation of South Korea's regionalism plays as a factor that exacerbates political polarization as the rivalry between two regions aggravates.

Exposure to Mass Media

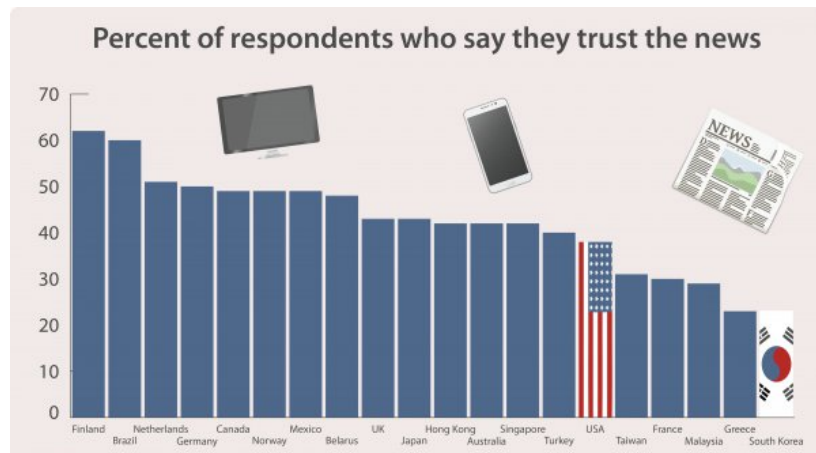
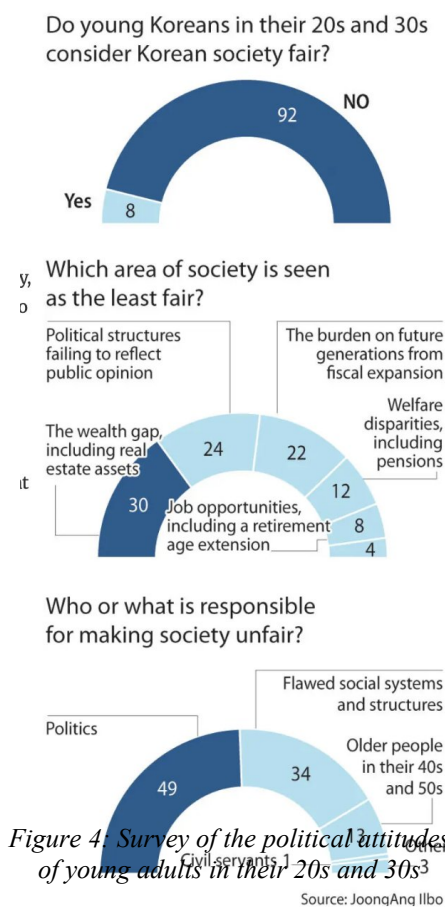


Figure 3: Graph showing the trust of news across different countries

With the political polarization, South Korean online public sphere is also splitting in two, reinforcing ideological echo chambers to the public by the use of mass media. Currently, creators and journalists of South Korea primarily release news online platforms such as YouTube. It is known that 50% of South Koreans regularly watch news on YouTube, which is higher than 30% of global average. With developing Artificial Intelligence (AI), algorithms recommend contents based on emotional engagement and controversy to the public, amplifying voices that intensify partisan sentiments. Consequently, there has been an increase of fake news, online smear campaigns and misinformation, transforming digital space

became to be dominated by radical ideologies, rather than critical dialogues. Fragmentation of media further promotes polarization by selectively exposing information that reinforces pre-existing arguments. For instance, traditional media outlets in South Korea which are aligned with specific political orientations urges divisive narratives, limiting the public's opportunity to access balanced perspectives. Consequently, the exposure to mass media engenders people to be placed inside their echo chambers, exacerbating polarization (Noh).

Frustration over unfairness



Nowadays, a trend of growing conservatism amongst people who are aged from their twenties to thirties are emerging in South Korea. Feeling unhappy with the current social systems, the younger generation believes that wealth gap between age groups continues to widen and current system lacks its ability to close it. According to the Ministry of Data and Statistics' household finance and welfare survey data, people aged 40 to 49 held an average of 627.14 million won (\$411,000) in total assets last year in South Korea. This data is double the amount of 314.98 million won held by people aged 39 and younger.

Gender dimension is another factor that intensifies feelings of unfairness in younger generations. Due to deeply institutionalized familism, family-based responsibilities are still deeply embedded in public policies, workplace norms and social expectations in South Korea. With limited public support, women are often burdened to juggle employment with unpaid domestic labor, resulting in slower promotion rates and selective hirings. On another hand, issue of selective hiring applies to men as well, as they have a mandatory military service to take. Many young men view this obligation as a career setback, especially in a competitive job market where women have more time to advance education or careers. Such issues have fueled the rise of hegemonic masculinity and anti-feminist movements, deepening polarization along gender lines: women increasingly align with progressive forces, while men lean toward conservatism. (Chan).

Due to growing frustration generated from unfairness, the young voters started to blame policymakers who makes them to feel excluded from the process (Kim, et al.). As a result, this time of economic dissatisfaction is increasingly shaping political preferences, leading younger voters towards parties or candidates that promise systemic change while the deepening distrust of the political



establishment. This generational divide contributes to political polarization as different age groups support opposing political preferences.

Problems Raised

2024 South Korea Martial Law Crisis



Figure 5: Protests from the Martial Law Crisis

On December 3rd of 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea announced his implementation of martial law, claiming that anti-state forces had infiltrated the nation. Simultaneously, he imposed that political activity will be outlawed and ordered military to survey all media. His declaration of martial law occurred during a serious political deadlock that has been consistent since the April 2024 election, when the opposition DP won by overwhelming majority. With DP holding nearly two-thirds of the seats in the National Assembly, the rivalry between the two opposing parties intensified polarization. Tensions increased over budget plannings and controversies involving the first lady Kim Keon-hee, who was accused of bribery and stock price manipulation case. Simultaneously, many of his prosecutors in charge was impeached and special investigation law to be passed by the opposition, though Yoon vetoed it. Hence, he claimed that the martial law was essential to combat such a crisis involving the anti-state forces. Nonetheless, the declaration of martial law appears to be majorly driven by Yoon's personal ambition, as investigations confirmed that the event was planned for months, with troops intentionally placed to arrest DP legislators and suppress dissent. This exemplifies how political polarization in South Korea has intensified in to an extent where martial law is declared to threaten democratic stability, as the military forces to suppress the opposition party.

Although Yoon was soon impeached for his actions, his justification for the martial law, blaming the opposition party to collude in foreign forces and stolen the result of past elections, prompted what was considered a fringe conspiracy into realm of mainstream politics (Kwon and Butler). Hence, the declaration of martial law prompted many citizens to question whether the government was properly respecting and following the constitutional limits. Consequently, trust in institution including the presidency, National Assembly and the judiciary became increasingly polarized. Supporters and opponents begun to interpret

the same events in very different perspectives. With intensified division between conservatives and progressives into further degree, larger scale protests and counter protests on this event demonstrated how political identities have become more entrenched in South Korea.

2025 Seoul Western District Court Riot



Figure 6: Photos of the 2025 Seoul Western District Court Riot

Another event that exemplifies the significance of political polarization's impact in South Korea is the Seoul Western District Court riot. When Yoon was formally arrested to be investigated on his martial law declaration, dozens of pro-Yoon protesters stormed into the Seoul Western District Court, protesting on the judge's decision to issue an arrest warrant. The angry protesters violently climbed over the court walls, smashed the windows and doors, creating damage inside the court building. The mob also attacked vehicles carrying the investigators from the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which are the ones that requested the warrant, and insulted the judges who approved it. With 1,400 police officers being deployed, nine officers were injured due to the mobs while 87 individuals involved in the mobs were apprehended and investigated (Lee).

This unprecedented riot at the court in South Korea displays how polarization has denied the rule of law and the judicial system. Rather than accepting legal procedures, some of the Yoon's supporters viewed the court's decision as politically motivated and therefore illegitimate. This exemplifies how trust in neutral institution is declining, making compromise and acceptance of legal outcomes to be more challenging, making political disagreements to confrontations that can challenge the rule of law. Hence, this riot illustrates how political polarization can normalize political violence, weaken public's trust in democratic institution and threaten South Korea's democracy.

International Actions



There has not been a specific international approach made to resolve political polarization in South Korea, but the following are some relevant ones.

OECD Reinforcing Democracy Initiative

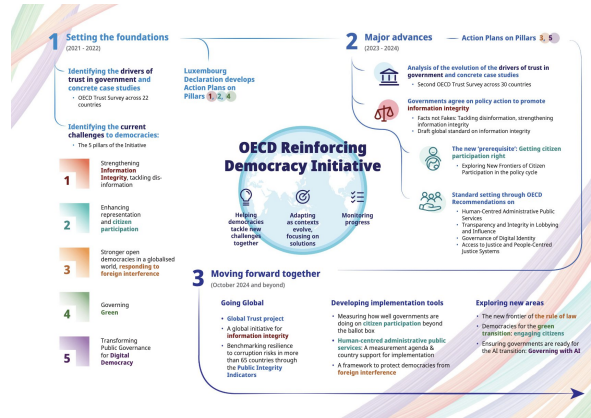


Figure 7: OECD Reinforcing Democracy Initiative

South Korea has signed OECD Reinforcing Democracy Initiative established by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) at the 2022 OECD Global Forum and Ministerial on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy. This initiative aims to provide evidence-based guidance and effective actions to help countries practice democratic values and institutions. It underscores five main pillars which includes: combatting misinformation and disinformation, enhancing public awareness on politics, embracing global responsibilities of government and building resilience to foreign influence, preparing for climate and environmental challenges and transforming public governance for digital democracy. Although this initiative does not solely target South Korea's political polarization, the nation can utilize this framework and recommendations to weaken polarization and strengthen their democratic stability (OECD).

Summit for Democracy

In March of 2024, South Korea has hosted the third Summit for Democracy to discuss ways to halt democratic degradation and erosion of rights and freedoms occurring worldwide. It specifically underscored the importance of youth participation in democratic procedures to not only reduce political polarization but also for future development of democracy. Additionally, it pointed out the roles of technical innovations, as the internet and AI are generating fake news, resulting in social division and conflict, political agitation and decrease in public trust. Although the topics discussed during the summit were relevant to the political polarization in South Korea, this summit faces controversies as it is a U.S. led initiative and can be seen as a tool for global confrontation of values for the competition between U.S. and China, not for South Korea (Smith). Furthermore, it is a forum for dialogue, not an enforcement mechanism.



Hence, to create a lasting impact, it is important for South Korea to actively utilize these opportunities and translate it to concrete domestic policies to create long-term democratic resilience (Lee).

Key Players

South Korean Government

The South Korean government has been both a victim and a contributor of political polarization. This conflict resulted in the declaration of martial law, which has intensified the situation. The subsequent political crisis, impeachment and investigations reduced public trust in the government. To combat political polarization, South Korean government is utilizing agencies such as National Election Commission (NEC) and Korea Communications Commission (KCC) to manage the spread of mis- and disinformation. Moreover, it is promoting democratic participations through civic educations, public consultations, youth participations and more. However, these measures are successful to a limited extent as rebuilding public trust requires cooperation from not only political parties but also civil society and citizens.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)

OECD is an international organization that aims to develop policies that fosters prosperity and opportunity with equality and well-being. Having joined the OECD in 1996, South Korea is a prominent member of the organization. One example of OECD's contribution to South Korea's political polarization is its Trust Survey, which investigates on people's perception of different public institutions in their country to measure how much they trust their government. It showcases evidence on people's expectations and experiences with government reliability, responsiveness, fairness, integrity and openness. The results for South Korea in 2025 specifically indicated that the political agency divides in South Korea is 54%, compared with the OECD average of 47%. Specifically, it indicated that the trust gaps are largest for political dimensions, such as partisanship and political agency, although the gap between socio-economic conditions are typically narrower. Trust gaps by education are the opposite to the average OECD pattern, trust in national government is 13% lower among people with post-secondary degree than those without upper secondary education. Pattern divided by age aligns with the OECD trends, as young people in South Korea less trust compared to those aged older than 50 years old (OECD). These findings demonstrate how political polarization in South Korea is closely associated with declining trust in democratic institutions. Nevertheless, although its results provide valuable evidence and policy recommendations, its lasting impact is limited as OECD cannot mandate member states to adapt its recommendations. Hence, the effectiveness depends on South Korean government's willingness to adopt the reforms.



Possible Solutions

Effective Regional Development Strategies

To reduce the rise of regionalism effective regional development should be operated to tackle its primary cause of uneven regional development. To start, it should focus on coordinated and multi-sectoral investment approach to target dimensions such as job creation, education, housing and childcare. By providing broadly focused investments to less developed regions, it will be seen as effective incentives for attracting people and boost regional appeal and develop economy. Building on, enhancing cultural, educational and social welfare infrastructure will be necessary to improve the resident's living conditions. Finally, non-metropolitan areas should incorporate sustainable and region development model, specifically led by local government to provide long-term effectiveness based on regional strengths and weaknesses (Kim and Han).

Reforming Electoral System

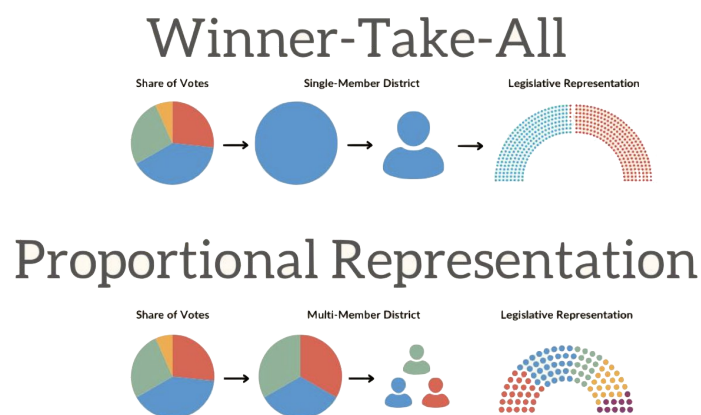


Figure 8: Different electoral system

Currently, South Korea uses single-member district system for their electoral system, which an electoral district elects a single representative. This system is criticized for being a winner-takes-all system, which not only strengthens the presence of the two major political parties' forces but also failing to represent those who did not vote for the winner. Hence, it is an on-going factor that contributes to political polarization in South Korea. A solution for this problem is employing a multi-member district system, a proportional representation system that elects two or more representatives from the same electoral district. By better representing diverse political opinions, smaller parties will have a greater chance of winning the seats in the National Assembly, reducing the powers that are currently only distributed to two parties. This also means that government will often need to form coalitions, encouraging negotiation and compromises

to tackle polarization (Nam). Nonetheless, it is crucial to consider its major drawbacks such as producing fragmented legislatures and slow down policy making and more.

Addressing unfairness over employments

By sharing job opportunities more equitably, the divide between demographic groups can be reduced, helping to alleviate perceptions of unfairness and prevent exacerbation of political polarization. First way is to prevent extending retirement age to reinforce new hires. Current trend of extension of retirement age can place a significant burden on job creation, especially for the young generation who are already experiencing severe employment difficulties. Hence, rather than pushing the retirement age, prioritizing good regular jobs for youth while creating targeted, age-appropriate jobs for older worker will be a suitable solution. Second is to shift toward a job-based pay system. South Korea's seniority-based pay generates financial burden on firm's labor costs, suppressing new hires. Instead, job-based pay system follows the principle of "equal pay for equal job", helping wage level to be determined by job content and value rather than employment type. This can reduce unfairness and expand both job opportunities and future for higher wages. A final measure is to increase labor mobility within the labor market. Currently, with most of the job opportunities being concentrated around major firms, many employees face limited mobility, as they all desire jobs in the major firms rather than small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Thus, by improving the working conditions of the SME workers and curbing unfair transactions between large firms and SMEs, more job opportunities can be created and halt uprise of unfairness amongst the young generation and decrease the wealth gap (Kim and Jung).

Glossary

Political polarization

Political polarization refers to a process where political opinions, beliefs and identities become more divided into opposing forces, reducing their willingness to compromise to each other and increasing hostility between groups.



Democratic instability

Democratic instability refers to a situation where a country's democratic system weakens or stabilizes due to political conflict, causing a decline of trust in institutions.

Regionalism

Regionalism is tendency for voting behavior, political attitudes and policy preferences to be shaped by regional preferences and identities rather than national interests.

Identity politics

Identity politics refers to a form of politics which people organize, and advocate based on shared aspects of their identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, and more.

Mass media

Mass media refers to communication channels that distribute information, news, and entertainment to a large audience, such as television, newspapers, radio, and social media.

Martial law

Martial law is the temporary replacement or restriction of civilian government authority by military authority, usually during a severe crisis or emergency.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs)

SMEs refer to business that is smaller than a large companies, but bigger than a medium or small sized business.



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