Hwaiting!

South Korea's Struggle with Democracy

A Thesis in Political Science

by

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Abstract

South Korea had a tumultuous journey toward democracy and struggles with support for democracy today. Its support for democracy is drastically lower than that of other comparable democratic societies, even though there is strong support for the government. This research is guided by the question, *why does South Korea have low and declining support for democracy?* Upon analysis of World Values Survey Wave 7 results and dominant theories in the literature (emancipative values theory, East Asian values theory, and democratic consolidation theory), I argue that the democratic consolidation theory emerges as the clear theory that helps explain and understand the South Korean case because of its emphasis on institutional development. I further argue that political parties and their institutionalization are vital to democratic transitions because they educate the public and model what democracy is. Thus, Koreans have been unable to create partisan and ideological identities without proper democratic education. I conclude that South Koreans have never known what a true liberal democracy should look like and therefore do not know what to make of it. This lack of a true liberal democracy comes from the fact that Korea never fully consolidated, and its frequent instances of corruption seem like features of a functioning democracy rather than indicators of an incomplete democracy. Therefore, Koreans do not have a clear view of what democracy is and do not support what they know as "democracy". Additionally, South Korea experienced an anticlimactic transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the form of a presidential election in 1987. This failed to create a vibrant culture of democracy or encourage democratic values.

Keywords: *South Korea, democratization, democratic values, democratic consolidation*

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1. Introduction

South Korea had a tumultuous journey toward democracy and struggles with support for democracy today. Its support for democracy is drastically lower than that of other comparable democratic societies, even though there is strong support for the government. South Korea officially transitioned to democracy in 1987 after holding its first presidential election that was open to the public. Prior to 1987, the Korean peninsula was under Japanese imperial rule from 1910 to 1945, a brutal colonial regime that sought to erase Korean culture, the Korean language, the country's history, and even its food. After Japanese imperial rule ended, South Korea was occupied by the United States and North Korea was occupied by the Soviet Union where regimes were installed by the respective occupiers. Korea was officially divided in 1948 when both North Korea and South Korea debuted their new, separate governments, both vying for power and control over the entire peninsula. This quarrel resulted in the Korean War which, in the end, was a Cold War proxy war between the US and the USSR, and the Koreas were caught in the middle of this fight between capitalism and communism, and for global hegemony.

In 1953 when the Korean War came to its unofficial end with the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, things in South Korea began changing. After the war, South Korea's economy expanded at a rate so rapid that many people have lived through both nationwide famine crises and the popular culture phenomenon that is South Korea today. South Korea is truly a feat of industrialization and modernization, achieving what many countries achieved in 50 years in just one generation. Because of this, all signs point to a prosperous democracy in South Korea with a populous that is not only on board with democratic ideals but also enthusiastic about them. It is quite a puzzle that this is not the case in South Korea as it is in other fellow democracies.

Depictions and understandings of modern-day South Korea in all of its popular culture and economic glory do not lend an image of anti-democracy and illiberalism; it is easy to assume quite the opposite. Though, it is true that people in South Korea are hesitant to fully support democracy. South Korea's low support for democracy is evident in survey results conducted by the World Values Survey. The World Values Survey (WVS) is an international research project founded in 1981 by political scientist Ronald Inglehart that surveys national societies on questions of political, economic, religious, cultural, and social values (*WVS Database*, 2020). The survey is conducted every five or so years and is divided into waves. The most recent iteration is Wave 7, ranging from 2017 to 2022, and it has been uploaded to the online database. The WVS covers 120 countries and surveys are conducted in dozens of languages. Using survey data made available on the WVS online database, comparisons can be made between South Korea and other countries to reveal sentiments about democracy and related issues. World Values Survey data as well as qualitative analysis from the literature will help answer the question of why South Korea has low and declining support for democracy.

The World Values Survey asks questions about whether people prefer democracy over other systems of government, whether people believe democracy is important, how people think their government is functioning, and other questions alike. South Korea presents with low support for democracy in comparison to other comparable democratic systems and is more likely to sympathize with authoritarian sentiments. Oftentimes, South Korea is the outlier, having more extreme answers than its counterparts. The following section as well as the forthcoming theoretical sections will dive deeper into WVS results as well as their implications.

The research in this paper is guided by the question, "Why does South Korea have low and declining support for democracy?". In this paper, I will, first, present data from the WVS to

paint a picture of South Korea's low and declining support for democracy. Then, I will analyze the dominant theories of democratization and where values come from as they may pertain to the South Korean case, which are the theories of emancipative values, East Asian values, and democratic consolidation. Each of these theories has different perspectives and conclusions when determining where values come from. I argue that the democratic consolidation theory emerges as the clear theory that helps explain and understand the South Korean case because of its emphasis on institutional development. I further argue that political party institutionalization is vital to a democratic transition because they educate the public and model what democracy is. I conclude that South Koreans have never known what a true liberal democracy should look like and therefore do not know what to make of it. This lack of a true liberal democracy comes from the fact that Korea never fully consolidated and its frequent instances of corruption seem like features of a functioning democracy rather than indicators of an incomplete democracy. Therefore, Koreans do not have a clear view of what democracy is and do not support what they know as "democracy".

2. Korean Support for Democracy

Wave 7 of the WVS is the dataset that will be used throughout this paper (Haerpfer et al. 2022) unless otherwise specified such as in a time series that involves multiple waves or data from different sources. South Korea (hereafter Korea) will be compared with Taiwan, Hong Kong[1], Japan, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The first three were selected because they also reside in East Asia alongside Korea, and they serve as a control group in testing culture-based theories. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan have histories of sharing similar

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[1] While Hong Kong is not a country but rather a special administrative region of China, it, along with the independent countries in the analysis, will be referred to as the collective "countries".

Confucian values, so comparing these three East Asian countries will put cultural arguments to the test. Germany, the US, and the UK were chosen to compare Korea to Western democracies. More specifically, the US previously occupied Korea and administered a military government upon the conclusion of World War II and championed the subsequent democratization of the country. Also, the UK and Germany are situated in Europe, which is a different political landscape than the US but are comparable democracies. With that, these comparable systems and societies will help define where Korea stands on questions of democracy.

Figure 1 below shows the results of the seven countries on whether they believe having a democratic political system is either "fairly bad" or "very bad".

Figure 1 Having a democratic political system is either "very bad" or "fairly bad"
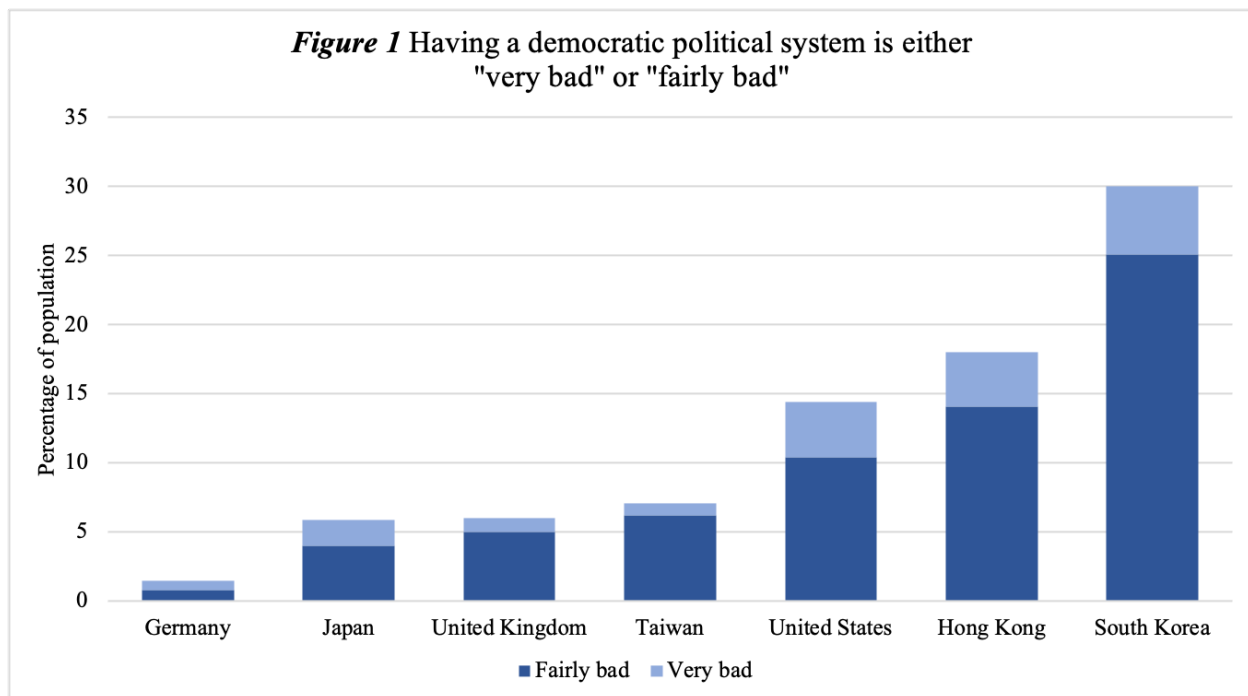
According to the data, 30% of Koreans believe having a democratic political system is either "fairly bad" or "very bad". Albeit, a majority of Koreans still believe that having a democratic political system is either "fairly good" or "very good", these results suggest that Koreans have a comparatively low opinion of democracy. Korea's disapproval of democracy is almost twice as more as the second-most disapproving case of Hong Kong. Korea is the very obvious outlier

here, so this suggests there is something unique about the Korean population's opinion of democracy.

   The next figure demonstrates a similar sentiment as *Figure 1*. *Figure 2* asks participants on a scale of one through ten how important they believe is for their government to be democratic, with "not at all important" being one and "absolutely important" being ten.

*Figure 2* Belief that democracy is "absolutely important"
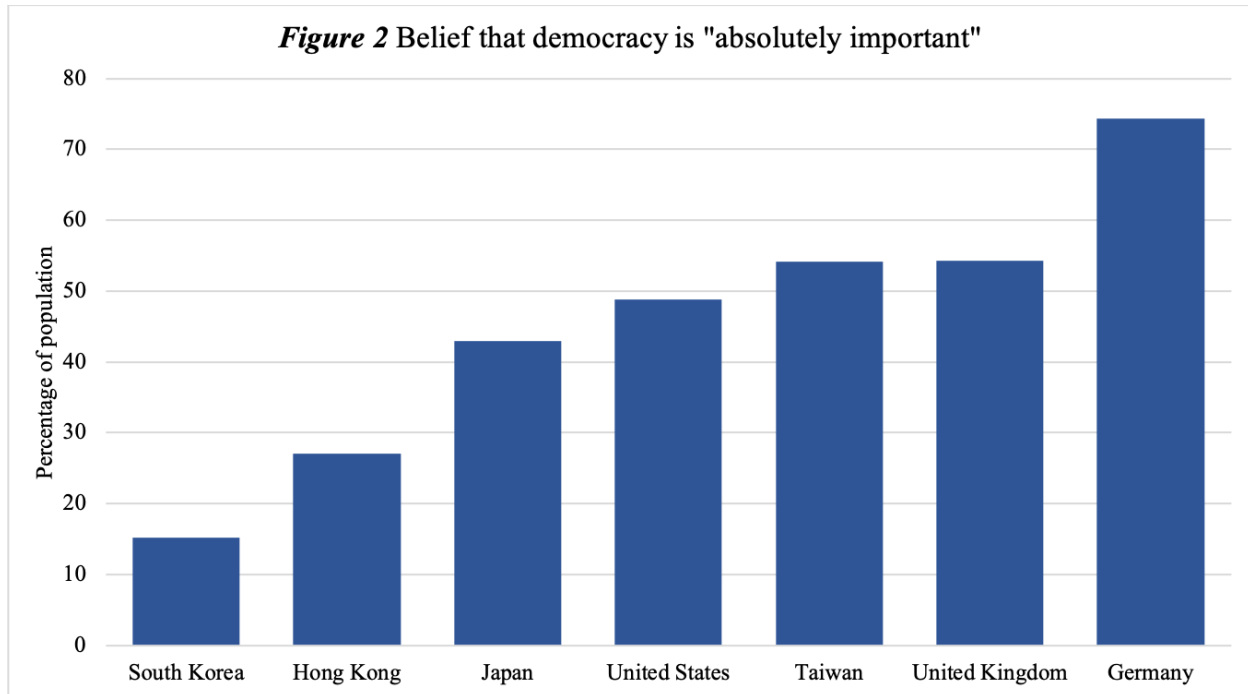
Upon isolating responses saying "absolutely important", as shown in *Figure 2*, it is evident that Korea is once again the outlier. Out of all seven countries, Korea had the lowest percentage of their population believing democracy is absolutely important. While it is true that most Koreans—around 92%—rate the importance of living under a democracy at six or higher, it is curious that so few Koreans do not want to go as far as to say it is "absolutely important". At least 40% of every other population in the analysis, with the exception of Hong Kong, believe it is absolutely important. Again, the data suggest there is something peculiar about Korean society, politics, people, or something else that causes this lack of enthusiasm for democracy.

The next question is unique because it does not directly ask participants about democracy but rather asks around the question. Questions that do not directly ask about democracy are especially revealing because the participant may not necessarily realize they are being asked about democracy. The question in *Figure 3* asks participants their opinions about a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections. The results shown in *Figure 3* show whether participants believe the aforementioned way of governance is "fairly good" or "very good".

Figure 3 Belief that having a strong leader who doesn't bother with Parliament or elections is "very good" or "fairly good"
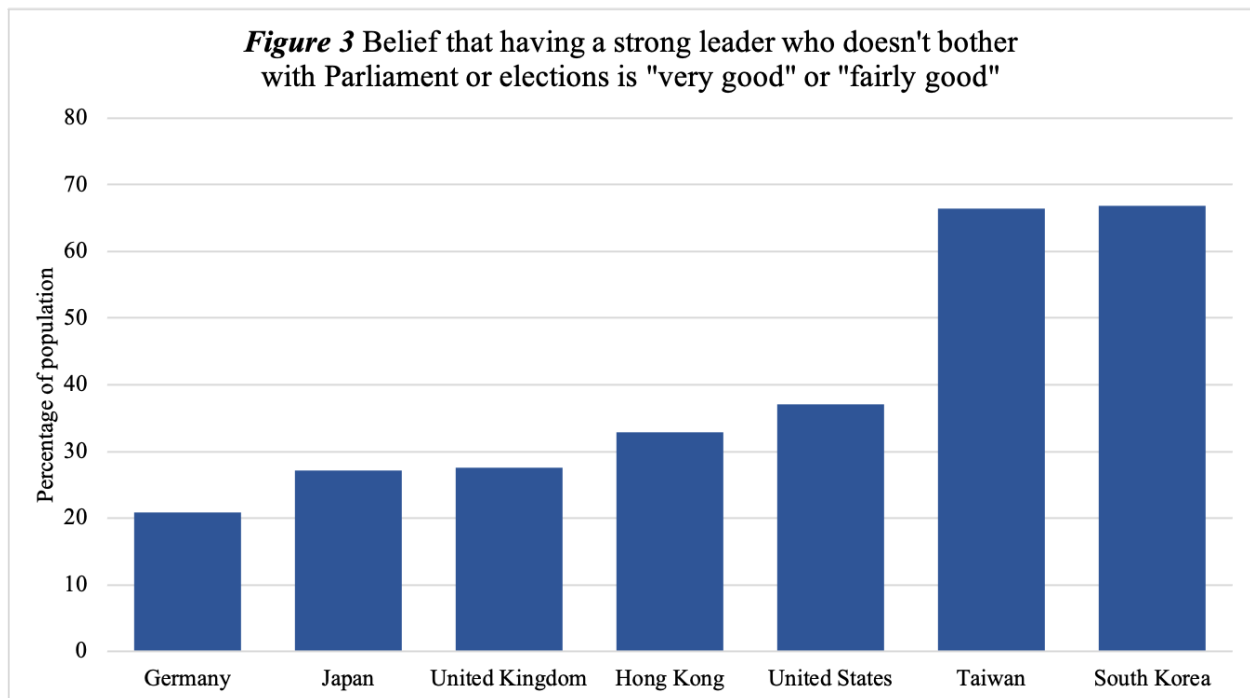
Nearly 70% of Koreans believe that having a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections, and only Taiwan presents similar results. The other five countries have less than 40% of their populations believing it is either "very good" or "fairly good". While these results can be suggestive for both Taiwan and Korea, it is important to note the pattern of results from Korea thus far. In all three figures so far, Korea consistently ranks as the least democratic and no such pattern exists for the other six countries.

Despite Korea's continued display of a lack of enthusiasm for democracy, its people are nonetheless satisfied with the current political system's performance. *Figure 4* shows results from when participants were asked on a scale of one through ten how satisfied they are with the performance of their country's political system.

Figure 4 Satisfaction with political system performance: six or higher
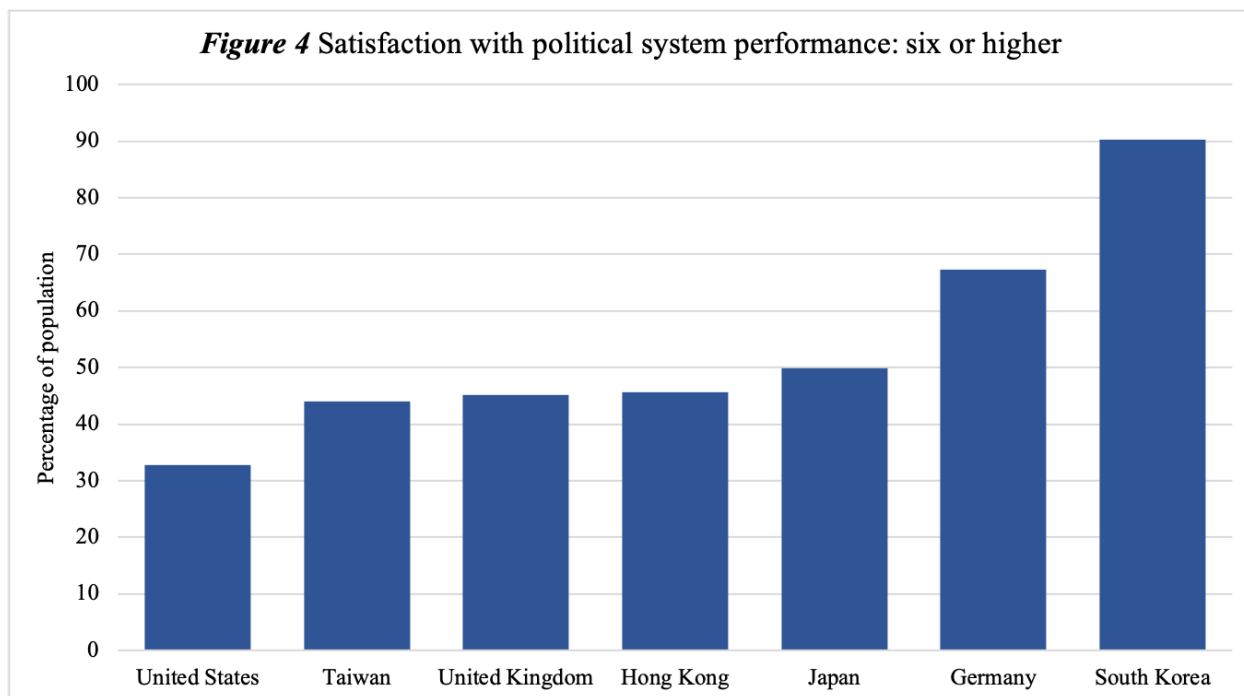
Ninety percent of Koreans answered a six or higher. The next highest is Germany with more than 20% less of their population than Korea's answering the same. Similarly, nearly 90% of Koreans believe that their country is being governed democratically at a six or higher with Germany trailing behind at just over 80%. These questions along with the previously mentioned ones generate confusion due to seemingly inconsistent responses and call into question how Koreans really feel about their government, the political system they live in, and democracy in general.

Essential to understanding these results is understanding South Korea's political system and how South Koreans view it. Asking questions such as *what kind of political system do South Koreans believe they are living in?* or *are the governing practices in South Korea contradictory to people's understanding of democracy?* will help understand this further. South Korea is

widely understood as a democracy akin to that of the US and the other five countries in the analysis. A deeper look into the Korean political system and its nuances will help understand the inconsistencies in the survey results that indicate a lack of support for democracy yet high support for the government. Yet, these results beg the question, why does South Korea have low support for democracy?

3. Emancipative Values Theory

A prominent democratization theory that is often employed to help explain a country's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy is the emancipative values theory. This theory is a version of the modernization theory, for which the primary claim is that a society is conducive to democratization as it industrializes and eventually modernizes (Welzel 2006; Welzel and Inglehart 2005). The emancipative values theory provides a new perspective to the modernization theory as it claims that as a society industrializes and shifts to a post-industrial society, it will also shift from traditional values and culture to secular-rational values (Inglehart and Welzel 2009). Once this cultural shift occurs, conditions are present that make the society conducive to democratization. These emancipative values include gender equity and equality, freedom of personal choice, autonomy, individualism, political voice, and more (Alexander and Welzel 2010). Emancipative values represent societal liberalization shifting not only from traditional to secular values but also from survival values. This includes moving from prioritizing economic security and rights over self-expression to embracing self-expression values, which includes prioritizing happiness and wellbeing and also accepting LGBTQ+ rights (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). It is important to note that modernization does not automatically lead to democracy but rather creates a set of conditions that are a good environment for democracy to come about, exist, and have the potential to thrive. The emancipative values theory argues that

democratic values come from emancipative values, even if indirectly. An increase in emancipative values in a given society creates the necessary conditions for democratic values to also increase.

Critics of this theory point to a flawed research design that puts too much weight on democracy versus non-democracy rather than quality and degree of democracy (Hadenius and Teorell 2005). Authoritarian regimes can seem to have democratic practices on paper, namely in allowing political participation. But a one-party state with limited competition that still has elections is far from a democracy. Also, a country like Korea is a democracy with some formal democratic institutions, free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and other characteristics. But I argue that Korea is not a fully consolidated democracy which results in its public's low support for democracy, especially compared to some of its other democratic counterparts (Putnam 1993 cf. Hadenius Teorell 2005). Korea and other incomplete democracies alike can have the basic criteria for democracy, but qualitative criteria show how a democracy functions and can also reveal things such as support for democracy (Hadenius and Teorell 2005). Democracy should be viewed on a spectrum rather than a binary. Countries can have democratic characteristics and be a democracy, but at the same time, there are countries with stronger democratic institutions and elections that are more free and fair which indicate a higher degree of democracy.

Another error in research design is the common assumption that there is causation when only mere correlation is represented (Hadenius and Teorell 2005). The correlation that occurs in the emancipative values theory is that cultural shifts and shifts toward democracy occur simultaneously. The truth is that there can be other causes or factors influencing the simultaneous shifts, and critics of the emancipative values theory argue that this simultaneous shift is not convincing enough. Also, in the case of Korea, we are not even seeing this

simultaneous shift that proponents of this theory suggest will occur; according to World Values

Survey data, Korea experienced the cultural shift without the shift towards democracy. *Figure 5*

shows Korea's declining opinion of democracy and its increasing emancipative values over time.

In the figure, I consider emancipative values index scores from 0.3 to 1 a representation of high

emancipative values[2]. As society has progressed, Koreans have gained individualistic values

over traditional values. According to the emancipative values theory, these values should be

shifting together, and specifically in the Korean case in which emancipative values are

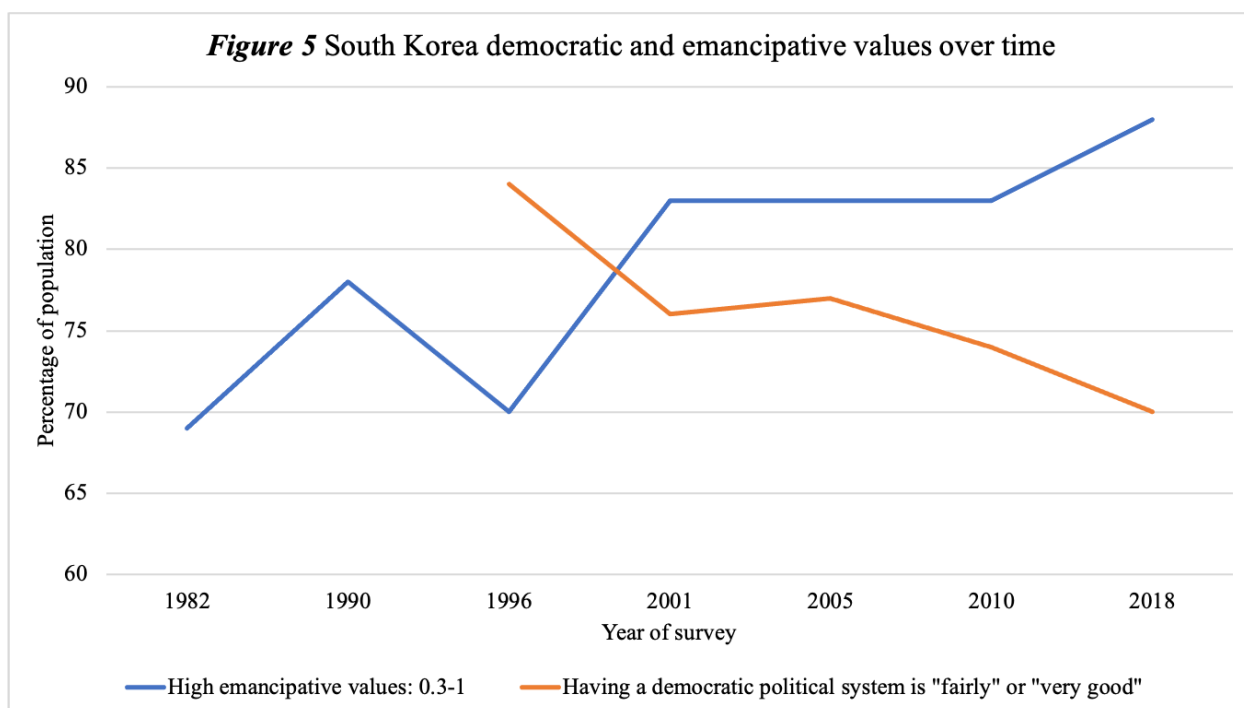increasing, democratic values should also be increasing.

Figure 5 South Korea democratic and emancipative values over time

Figure 6 below breaks down the increase in emancipative values over time by birth year.

Stratifying the population by age supports the claim that different age groups and generations,

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[2] In Inglehart and Welzel's emancipative values index, values are coded on a scale of 0 to 1, 0 being least emancipative and 1 being most emancipative depending on the participant's response. The scores for each section and subsection of the questionnaire that represent collective emancipative values are averaged to yield an emancipative values index score for each participant. Scores from 0.3 to 1 represent high emancipative values because they are above 0, being least emancipative.

based on their experiences with or without democracy, have different levels of emancipation. The data are almost completely consistent in terms of those born in earlier decades having higher emancipative values than the previous decade, and so on. The only exceptions are the brief crossovers in 2005 between 1960-1969 and 1970-1979 as well as between the surveys in 2010 and 2018 with the 1970-1979 and 1980-1989 age groups. In all, emancipative values are mostly increasing consistently, or remaining the same, across all age groups, once again indicating a nationwide increase in emancipative values.

Figure 6 South Korea emancipative values over time by birth year: 0.3-1
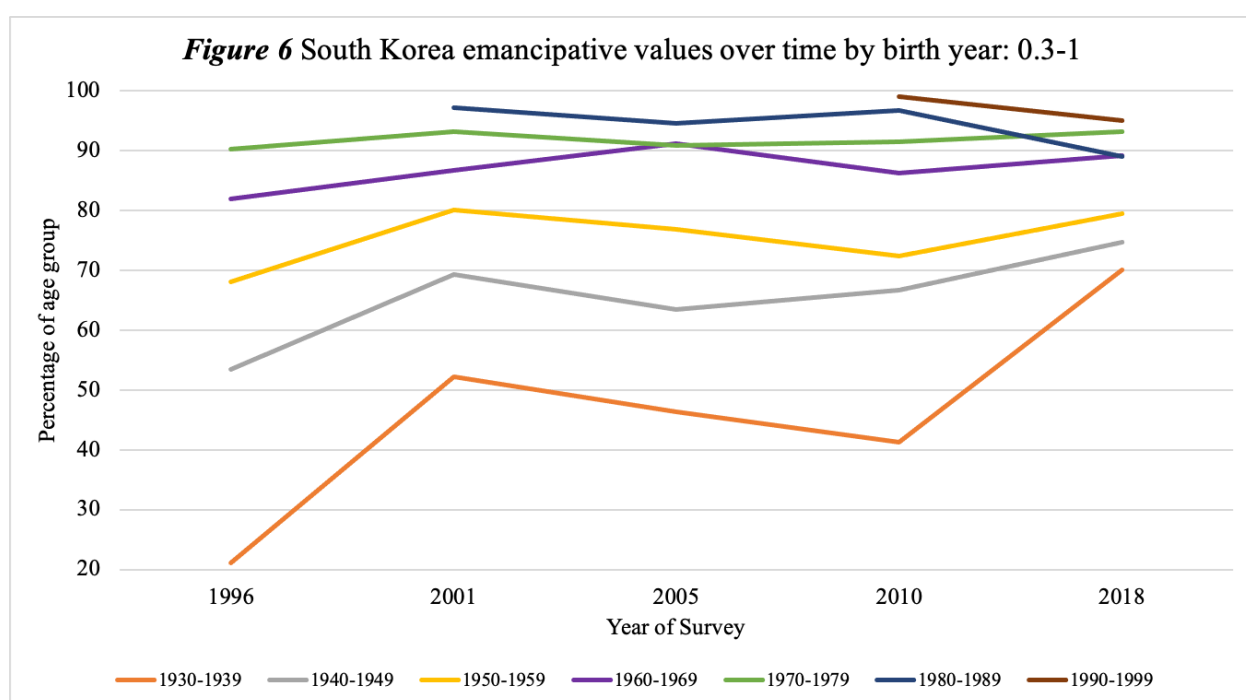
Another point of interest is analyzing where Korea's emancipative values stand relative to the comparison group. Recent WVS data show that Korea does trend lower than most of the group, falling behind Germany, the UK, the US, Japan, and Hong Kong but ever so slightly above Taiwan. But upon analysis of all 88 countries surveyed, Korea falls around the middle. This does not negate the fact that Korea has been experiencing an increase in emancipative values over time, but it suggests that Korea is not as high as it can be. The issue is that all of the other countries in the comparison group are not experiencing the same continuous downward

trend in support of a democratic system and are therefore more in line with the emancipative values theory.

Upon analysis of Korea's support for democracy over time, it is clear that support for a democratic political system has decreased, even though emancipative values have increased. According to the emancipative values theory, democratic values arise in modernized and industrialized societies that experiences cultural shifts from traditional values to modern and secular values. As apparent in the WVS results, Korea experienced a shift in emancipative values but it did not experience a simultaneous shift in democratic values. While the emancipative values theory is successful in explaining Korea's modernization and industrialization trajectory, it is curious that it did not have a corresponding shift in democratic values. In fact, the opposite occurred; while South Korea's democratization movement in the 1980s was a clear showcase of the need and want for democracy in the nation, democratic values and favorability towards democracy have been consistently dropping over time. This could be a reflection of a public that was desperate for a freer system and to replace their current authoritarian one. But, because Korea never became a fully consolidated democracy with lingering authoritarian sentiments, people turned away from democracy.

3.2 Analysis

It has become evident that the emancipative values theory does not best explain the South Korean case. The puzzle remains, if Korea's emancipative values continue to increase or at least level out, what can explain its simultaneous decline in democratic values? The emancipative values theory came about from analyzing Western countries that successfully democratized. Opponents of the emancipative values theory (Bell 2009; Pye and Pye 1985) have stated that East Asians, or Asians in general, do not have the same emancipative values and democratic

values growth as Westerners and therefore cannot be measured on the same plane. Though, this has been refuted since there are no substantial differences between emancipative and democratic values in the East versus the West; it has been proven that modernization processes are similar across Eastern and Western cultures (Welzel 2011). Though, it is also important to critically analyze another competing theory, the East Asian Values theory, which attempts to address low support for democracy in Asia in comparison to Western nations. The succeeding section analyzes South Korea through the lens of the East Asian values theory.

4. East Asian Values Theory

The East Asian values theory is a major point of contention and controversy within Asian democratization scholarship. In general, the East Asian values theory claims that (Western-style) democracy is incompatible with East Asian societies that may be more used to Confucian styles of order and governance that emphasize hierarchy. While the theory has been co-opted to argue that East Asian people are incapable of understanding democracy and therefore democracy cannot occur in East Asia, it is important to consider this prominent theory when analyzing the democratization of South Korea. The idea that democracy is a universal value and ideal is a Western idea to begin with. Huntington argues that the West's assertion that democracy and democratic values are universal norms not only ostracizes non-Western societies but also pushes Western ideology onto societies that simply are not Western (Huntington 1993, 1996). Using the East Asian values theory is important in understanding Eastern societies by using an Eastern lens.

The East Asian values theory argues that values come from culture, thus, different cultures may have different values systems. With that, I deduce that this theory argues that democratic (or non-democratic) values also come from culture, for which some proponents of the

theory will argue that East Asian and/or Confucian cultures are incompatible with democratic values. Furthermore, within this scholarship, some argue that East Asian values are incompatible with liberal democracy and that Western-style democracy is not applicable in Asia, and others argue that Asian values and Confucianism are not contrary to democratic values but are rather the opposite. I define these two schools of thought as the proponents and opponents, respectively. Both schools of thought will be analyzed in this section as it pertains to the South Korean case.

4.1 East Asian Values Theory Proponents

Proponents of the East Asian values argument point to Confucian values or a broader collective system of values that are common throughout East Asia as to why democracy might not be panning out in the region as it has in the West. Cultural arguments like this remain prominent in an attempt to explain all sorts of things around the world, but it is especially prominent in Asia and other non-Western regions. Proponents of this theory argue that this system of values and culture are incompatible with democracy (Heo and Hahm 2014; Hermanns 2009; Huntington 1991; Park and Shin 2006). Specifically, Heo and Hahm (2014) argue that remnants of Korea's Confucian past have hindered its democratic consolidation and have contributed to continued authoritarian sentiments after the point of democratization. Korea has been unable to create an institutionalized or stable political party system and proponents of this theory point to Confucianism as a reason. While democracy emphasizes individualism, majority rule, and the rule of law, Confucianism is believed to have contradictory emphases on deference to authority, hierarchy, and family values. Another part of Asian values that might be seen as contrary to Western values is the preference for socioeconomic rights versus political rights.

Thus, the conclusion here is that Confucian culture is what one should point to when attempting to explain Korea's immature democracy and low levels of civic engagement.

Other proponents of this theory argue that Confucianism and East Asian values do not necessarily hinder democratization. Instead, these scholars wish to reimagine democracy from a non-Western lens because analyzing the East from a Western lens is not only ineffective but can also yield inaccurate results and analyses. Also essential to this belief is that democracy comes in different forms, that it is naïve to suggest that Western-style democracy is the only possible and acceptable form of democracy, and that it is incorrect to apply Western-style democracy in the East. One of the foremost leaders of the East Asian values theory is Lee Kuan Yew (Kim 1994; Thompson 2015; Zakaria and Yew 1994).

Lee Kuan Yew, or LKY, was the first prime minister of Singapore and was frustrated at the US and the West's attempts to spread their ideas of democracy onto Asia. He disagreed with the notion that Western-style democracy is the only way to go and believed that the US's system was deeply flawed. LKY believed that the US had an unstable civil society due to crime, drugs, and other social disorders—and wished better for Singapore. He emphasized the role of the family in a person's life rather than focusing on individualism like in the US. He argued that the missing piece in US society and governance is the emphasis on family since the US attempts to govern as if it is the leader of a family, and also in its support for single parents (Zakaria and Yew 1994). This is what he pushed onto Singapore: strengthening family dynamics so that people can be successful and also so that Singapore can be successful.

Singapore has achieved great economic success with a nominal GDP of USD$396.99 billion in 2021 without a liberal democratic system (World Bank 2021). LKY explains this phenomenon by arguing that liberal democracy and Western tradition are foreign concepts to

Asian people and thus it is wrong to search for those things in Asia. LKY has been largely refuted on the basis that his opposition to liberal democracy is merely to justify his authoritarian beliefs and style of governance as well as to maintain a homogenous society (Kim 1994; Ortmann and Thompson 2014; Thompson 2015). On top of that, Singapore's economic success can excuse its authoritarianism because, as a part of the Asian value that prefers socioeconomic freedom over political freedoms, it can be that Singaporeans would not be too hard-pressed about the authoritarian government in the name of wealth at all costs and societal order (K. P. Tan 2012). For example, Singapore had the world's highest execution rate between 1994 and 1995 (Zimring, Fagan, and Johnson 2010), during a period of significant economic growth (World Bank 2021). Additionally, according to Freedom House's 2023 Freedom in the World report, Singapore is ranked 47/100 for political liberties and civil rights (Freedom House 2023); at the same time, its Global Social Mobility ranking, which measures economic mobility between generations and is a measure of socioeconomic status, ranked at a 74.6/100 in 2020, which is 20th best in the world and only one of two Asian countries in the top 20 (World Economic Forum 2020).

In all, the Asian values discourse emerged as a counter to Westernization and democratization efforts in Asia. Like LKY, people were frustrated at the attempts to Westernize East Asia and preferred to retain Asian culture and values. Though, opponents of the East Asian values argument believe that it is possible to retain Asian culture and "Asian-ness" in general while still achieving democracy. South Korea is a prime example of an (East) Asian nation that not only did not resist Westernization and democratization but fully embraced it. For example, Kim Dae Jung of South Korea was a leading democracy activist and advocate. He and other opponents of the East Asian values argument will be analyzed in the next subsection.

Another component of the arguments in favor of the Asian values thesis is not an opposition to democracy in Asia in general but rather an opposition to the insistence of Western-style democracy in Asia. This school of thought is not always necessarily against the notion that a collective values system within Asian societies exists but rather the root of the argument is a critique of liberal democracy and cultural imperialism of the West. As expressed in LKY's views, if there is an objection to democracy in Asia it is an objection to the imposition of a style of democracy that does not apply to Asian people who may be accustomed to a particular values system, i.e., Confucianism which emphasizes the role of family, hierarchical structures, and respect for authority figures. Secondarily, Fukuyama (1995) argues that there are only a few valid points, if any, that would suggest Confucian values are incompatible with Western-style democracy, which is evidenced by the liberal democracies currently in East Asia, namely Japan, Taiwan, and Korea which have Confucian histories. S. Tan (2012) argues that the flaw is not necessarily in Confucian philosophy itself but rather in analyzing it against liberal and Western philosophies. The implication within the Western cultural imperialist ideology is that liberal/Western-style democracy is absolutely the only possible or legitimate type of democracy and that other "versions" of democracy are merely excuses for illiberal systems. A major flaw in this argument is that there is a failure to recognize and admit to the problems within Western democracies such as poverty, mass incarceration, violence, and other civil and political rights violations, and most especially in the United States which is still considered a liberal democracy.

Confucian democracy, referred to as a contradictory phrase by opponents (Huntington 1991), is another possible type of democracy that is not necessarily illiberal, but simply not Western-style democracy. Characterizing Confucian values as incompatible with Western-style democracy is not only an unfair and inaccurate representation of Confucianism but is also

inherently unfair to apply "Western-style" to non-Western countries. Confucian democracy can look something like a system that prioritizes socioeconomic rights over political rights and communitarianism over liberalism (Rosemont 2004; S. Tan 2012). In addition, we have seen efforts by the US and the West to spread liberal democracy in places around the world—for which not all have histories of Confucian practices—that did not necessarily ask for it. In an analysis by Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2004), it was concluded that out of 35 democracy promotion campaigns by the US, only one was considered successful, which translates to a mere 3% success rate. Why question these states that endured these failed democratization and liberalization campaigns, assuming there is something wrong with *them*, instead of questioning liberal democracy itself?

This side of the Asian values thesis proponents goes hand in hand with opponents of the thesis who disagree with the notion that Confucianism is anti-democratic and illiberal. This will be explored in the next subsection.

4.2 East Asian Values Theory Opponents

Opponents of the East Asian values theory, on the other hand, aim to dispel any connections between Confucian and East Asian values and faltering democracy in East Asia. This side of the theory argues that there are only a few valid points that would suggest Confucian or East Asian values are incompatible with Western-style democracy (Fukuyama 1995). They also argue that there is nothing culturally *wrong* with Asians that they cannot successfully form a democracy, which is evidenced by the liberal democracies currently in East Asia, namely Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. Kim Dae Jung, a prominent democracy leader in South Korea and president between 1998 and 2003, argued that Asian values are not contrary to democratic values but

rather that any pushback about democracy has to do with "authoritarian rulers and their apologists" (Kim 1994, 194).

In a direct response to LKY, Kim argues against the notion that Asians value families over the individual and that the individual should be seen in the context of their family, as opposed to the rugged individualism and self-interest that are so central to Western-style democracy and capitalism (Kim 1994). He instead argues that while those might be Asian values, or once have been, industrialization causes an inevitable break away from family-centric dynamics and shift towards individualistic dynamics. In saying this, Kim argues in favor of the emancipative values theory. As per the emancipative values theory, once a country industrializes it is bound to have a shift in values, and some of these values shifts include shifting from traditional values to secular values. Traditional values emphasize family, religion, and authority while secular values emphasize the opposite. According to the Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map of 2023, which plots all of the surveyed countries' traditional versus secular values and survival versus self-expression values, South Korea scores about 1.5, on a scale of -2.50 to 2.00 for traditional to secular (WVS Database 2020).

4.3 Analysis

As the competing schools of thought continue to argue and disagree, the data remain clear. While it cannot be concluded that the East Asian countries in the comparison group do not sometimes align, the placements of the East Asian countries are completely independent of one another; there is no clear trend that would suggest the East Asian countries in the group have similar values and without a doubt respond similarly to survey questions. According to the East Asian values theory, if Confucian values were truly incompatible with democracy, then Taiwan,

Hong Kong, and Japan would sit alongside Korea in its downward trajectory in support of democracy.

An important WVS question to analyze and keep in mind in relation to the East Asian values theory is whether respondents believe having a strong leader who does not bother with parliament or elections is a good way of governance. The theory holds strongly onto the Confucian preference of paternalism and deference to authority, which would suggest that most or all East Asians would either support or oppose a strong leader. To revisit the results in *Figure 3*, no pattern would suggest all of the East Asian countries support having a strong leader. Rather, all of the countries are arbitrarily organized in terms of regional or cultural similarities, with the exception of Taiwan sometimes standing close to Korea.

Also revisiting the WVS question in *Figure 1*, Korea stands apart from all of the countries in the comparison group on top of its being isolated from the other East Asian countries. With that, it is evident that the East Asian values theory falls flat. Cultural arguments can be made for many circumstances—such as how the United States' culture of nationalism may have implications on its democracy—but there is an inherent issue of falling into stereotypes, especially ones that are potentially racist. Many societies may hold similar values to "Confucian values", but they are not considered as such simply because they are not (East) Asian.

In all, the East Asian values theory fails to explain the South Korean case. To reiterate what was explored in the section, even with Korea's Confucian past, the type of democracy that Korea has attempted and implemented is liberal democracy modeled after the West, not Confucian democracy. Increasing emancipative values in South Korea suggest that the public is liberalizing, but democratic values are still decreasing. But, the East Asian/Confucian values

thesis cannot explain why there was once support for democratic values in Korea and also does not explain its decline since Confucianism was not just recently introduced—if anything, these ideas are declining as the society modernizes.

What the East Asian values theory can, though, explain is the deference to authority in Korea. Due to Korea's authoritarian past, it is possible that this is simply what the Korean people are used to and that a strong leader can be a source of comfort in times of turmoil and disorder. The Confucian and East Asian preference for communitarianism can also in part explain the South Korean case in analyzing the prevalence of mass mobilization and social movements. Post-WWII Korea has a strong history of public protests against the government, such as the April Revolution against Rhee Syngman, the democracy protests in the 1980s, and the Candlelight Demonstrations against Park Geun-hye.

Nonetheless, the East Asian values thesis does not fully explain the South Korean case, even if it can explain certain trends. The missing pieces in the East Asian values thesis are that it does not explain previous favorable opinions about democracy in South Korea, the existence of Western-style democracy in South Korea, and growing individualistic sentiments. These pieces can be filled by the democratic consolidation theory, which will be analyzed in the next section.

5. Democratic Consolidation Theory

South Korea is a well-recognized democracy, but I argue that it has not achieved full democratic consolidation which has then led to low support for democracy. Complete democratic consolidation entails the following things: transition, implementation, and consolidation (Croissant 2002; Heo and Hahm 2014). Transition merely refers to the point at which a political system switches from one system to another. After a country's first democratic election in which the people democratically elect a national leader, the country has transitioned. Implementation

occurs following the recognition of civil rights, the establishment of democratic institutions, the existence of the rule of law, and free and fair elections. This includes the institutionalization of political parties, interest groups, liberal legislative bodies, and a participatory electoral system. Consolidation, on the other hand, refers to the effectiveness of political institutions and procedures and the existence of relevant actors that regulate the democratic order. Democratic consolidation also refers to the strength of the democracy and its risk—or lack thereof—of facing democratic backsliding, suggesting that there is a threshold that a democracy has to reach to be certain that its democracy will not crumble the next day (Schedler 2001).

To better understand the possible types of transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, I introduce Share's (1987) typology for democratic transitions. The four terms and their definitions are categorized as gradual versus rapid and consensual versus non-consensual transitions. *Incremental democratization*, which is gradual and consensual, describes a transition in which the authoritarian elites work with opposition democrats to negotiate a peaceful transition of systems and power. *Transition through protracted revolutionary struggle* is a gradual and non-consensual transition to democracy that occurs as a direct result of a pro-democracy revolution that overthrows the authoritarian government. *Transition through transaction* is rapid and consensual and happens through a series of compromises and bargains between authoritarian and democratic elites who agree to transition to democracy together. *Transition through rupture* describes a forceful transition to democracy due to some outside entity that removes the current authoritarian regime from power. This requires delegitimization of the current regime and rapid legitimization of the incoming regime. This transition is both rapid and non-consensual.

With these definitions in mind, it is evident that what exactly democratic consolidation is can be vague because, one, who is to say what the parameters of "transition" and "risk of backsliding" and "implementation of institutions" are, and, two, who is to say when they are or are not met. Schedler (2001) provides a framework to measure consolidation to combine structure-based, attitude-based, and behavior-based explanations, and it goes as follows: structure determines elite attitudes, which determines elite behaviors, which then determines the stability of the democracy. I will use this framework as I explain South Korea's democratic consolidation journey. With all of its components, I extract from the democratic consolidation theory that democratic values come from democratic institutions, which educate the public about democratic governance and participation. I argue that since democratic consolidation was not completely seen through in Korea, Koreans were never able to develop genuine democratic values and therefore are unable to support democracy at high and enthusiastic levels. I also argue that even if there does not seem to be an immediate risk of democratic backsliding present, Korea has still not reached its fullest potential in democratic consolidation. In this section, I will analyze political party development, elite attitudes and behaviors, and the resulting democratic attitudes.

5.1 Political Parties

Failure to institutionalize political parties is important to any story of incomplete democratic consolidation, specifically on the structural and attitudinal levels, and scholars point to this aspect of Korean politics to help understand its faltering democracy (Croissant 2002; Heo and Hahm 2014; Hermanns 2009). I argue that political party institutionalization is one of the most—if not the most—vital parts of democratic consolidation due to the multiple roles that parties play in functioning political and democratic societies. Party institutionalization can be

defined as the process where political parties become established, organized entities and have a platform of values and beliefs that turn into partisan ideologies (Hermanns 2009). A stable and institutionalized party system allows for a formal mechanism of competition and exchange of ideas. Political parties also encourage collective action among like-minded individuals, encourage participation in general, and create a space for recruitment into the political sphere. Korea, which does not have an institutionalized party system, disallows people to develop political and party identities, creating a confused and politically uneducated public.

I also argue that political parties help create democratic values. Some ways that this occurs include representing political order and cohesion, encouraging the public to claim political identities and then encouraging them to participate in the political process, and even modeling what a healthy debate between different ideologies looks like. These are only a few examples among many more, but it is evident that political parties are an important part of democracies. On top of creating democratic values, parties play the role of political educators to the public. With all of these things lacking in Korea's unstable political parties, democratic education and values among the public are also lacking.

One of the most important things that political parties do for the public is simplifying and relaying political information (Wong 2014). This role is what I refer to as "ambassadors of political information". Not only do political parties model the democratic process to the public, but they also simplify potentially complex political information into layman's terms. Political parties help demystify politics and allow everyday people to become confident in their political identities and ultimately drive them to participate. With that, I argue that since the Korean public never received the proper political education due to a lack of an institutionalized political party system and therefore never had a chance to develop partisan, ideological, and political identities,

it has led to low support for democracy. During Korea's democratic transition in the late 1980s and early 1990s, budding leader Roh Tae-woo did not necessarily mobilize a political party around him and also did not encourage any party opposition (Wong 2014). Instead, he encouraged an oppositional public who did not have any partisan identity. This created a public that never hesitated to take their political frustrations to the streets, but not a public that wished to express their frustrations at the ballot box.

Political parties were minor and insignificant entities during the authoritarian era and this reality bled into the democratic transition. This was never corrected which is why we still see a lack of institutional party development and political party identity. After numerous splits and mergers among the major political parties, voting in Korea is confusing, to say the least. For example, the Democratic Party, Korea's center-left establishment party, experienced at least twenty different name changes and re-brandings between 1945 and 2023 (as of May). A confusing electoral and political system dissuades people from participating. If ideological stances and party platforms are unclear, it is difficult for an individual to align their personal beliefs with a political party. They may resort to voting for a candidate on a case-by-case basis which further discourages party identification and political participation. It is true, though, that Korea's political parties currently seem to be ironing themselves out with fewer mergers and splits in the past ten years. But now, it has been almost 40 years since the democratic transition and an even longer period without a stable party system. Thus, it is hard to say whether or not Korea's political parties are going to begin stabilizing now since there is no precedent to do so.

In this same vein, I argue that the importance of political party organization when a country is undergoing a democratic transition has to do with elite formation. By elite formation, I mean the organization of political elites to create institutions in order to carry out government

functions. These elites have the important job of not only organizing themselves but also organizing the public that is willing to legitimize and believe in the new government. These elites also have the opportunity to organize into different political parties and demarcate certain political positions into ideological and partisan boxes. South Korean elites did not create concrete parties that had concrete ideologies, which contributed to its failure to institutionalize political parties.

In South Korea's transition to democracy, it did not need political parties due to the revolving door of elites. Roh Tae-woo, Korea's first democratically elected president, was a part of the authoritarian elite establishment that resisted democracy for decades. It is hard to even say that he was democratically elected. While he was elected with a plurality of total votes, he was also the favored pick by the preceding Chun Doo-hwan regime; Roh had been mentored by Chun and even aided in Chun's coup d'état to take over the previous Park regime. Roh ran his campaign under the Democratic Justice Party, the right-wing authoritarian establishment party of Chun. Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, both pro-democracy elites and future presidents, ran separately under different parties and split the opposition's vote. The two Kims' as well as the rest of the opposition elites' failure to organize around one party—and one candidate—allowed Roh to continue the authoritarian elites' agenda while squashing any possibility of the elite opposition from gaining traction at that time (Strnad 2010). The two Kims collectively won 55.54% of the vote—a healthy majority. Roh and the other authoritarian candidate Kim Jong-pil won 44.71% of the vote. If the opposition elites rallied around just one of the Kims, the opposition most likely would have won with extra votes to spare. Due to the elites' inability to organize political parties and the opposition votes split between the two candidates, Roh won with a plurality of the vote with only 36.64% of the total vote. Not only did this allow the

authoritarian establishment to continue its reign through the beginning of the democratic transition, but this also exacerbated the problem of non-institutionalized political parties on both ends of the spectrum. This certainly stunted Korea's democratic consolidation.

Wong (2014) argues that political parties are important to the democratic transition and reform processes and this is evident in Taiwan's transition to democracy. Because Taiwan had the foundation for political party development due to the presence and dominance of the Taiwanese nationalist ruling party Kuomintang (KMT) as well as viable opposition parties, there was a basis for its transition to democracy. In addition to this, parties exercised their roles as ambassadors of political information to mobilize the public around these ideologies instead of just the elites. A failure by the Korean elites to destroy its authoritarian party foundation and rebuild a democratic one has resulted in the continued weak party system. Weak party institutionalization has resulted in a citizenry with low and declining opinions of democracy. Elites and their political parties in South Korea missed an important opportunity to educate their public, support serious opposition parties, and foster a complete transition to democracy.

Korea's failure to institutionalize political parties can be attributed to its lack of democratic revolution. Many other countries that transitioned to democracy experienced a dramatic revolution in which the ruling party was overtaken by the opposition party, including the American Revolution and the Arab Spring Uprising in Tunisia. In Korea, it was only the election of 1987 that signified its transition to democracy. The Gwangju Uprising in 1980 as a response to Chun Doo-hwan's coup did not reach the level of a revolution that could have resulted in democratization because the movement was heavily suppressed by the government. As a result, political parties have merged, split, and dissolved countless times. This has resulted in an average life span of 35 months for Korean political parties (Hermanns 2009). Currently, the

two main parties are the liberal Democratic Party of Korea and the conservative People Power Party. Both of these parties are mergers of former parties, and those former parties were the results of splits and dissolutions of others. This is because of the lack of party institutionalization. Weak political parties also mean that there is no financial structure to fund campaigns. Thus, campaigns are largely funded by candidates themselves, creating a steep barrier to entry. This also opens the floodgates to massive election corruption.

Without stable political parties, candidates do the heavy lifting when it comes to campaigning, not the party establishment. Voters look to the most charismatic and promising candidate when choosing whom to vote for rather than backing a set of values or a party platform. When WVS participants were asked which party they would vote for if there was a national election tomorrow, 29.4% of Koreans responded with a "don't know" answer or no answer. This is as opposed to only 3.8% of Americans, 2.1% of British, and 4.5% of Taiwanese answering the same. About 19% of Japanese and 20.8% of Germans answered the same. This is clear evidence that Koreans have the weakest party identification out of the comparison group whereas the US, UK, and Taiwan have very established political parties and all have *de facto* two-party systems. Japan has a one-and-a-half party system and Germany has a multi-party system, which can explain hesitancy or uncertainty about which party to vote for. Korea currently has a two-party system of sorts with the Democratic Party of Korea and the People Power Party dominating politics. Though, the two parties also lack distinct ideologies with both having similar views on the economy, LGBTQ+ rights, and Korea's relationship with the United States. This makes it difficult for people to attach to partisan identities.

Political parties are traditionally formed along the lines of mainly moral and personal values and beliefs that then align with certain political beliefs. Parties are also formed along the

lines of racial and ethnic, religious, and class divisions in multicultural societies, namely in the West. Political parties can be an organizational tool for marginalized or disenfranchised people to obtain political power and mobilize people who are in a similar predicament as them. But, it is hard to characterize South Korea as a multicultural society; it is almost completely ethnically homogenous which also means it is mostly racially homogenous, most of the population is areligious, and there is a lack of class consciousness (Jee 1997). That mostly only leaves organizing based on political beliefs. Immediately before the 1987 election, the political camps in Korea were organized into mainly right-wing authoritarianism and democratic opposition with few left-wing or progressive parties. Even so, the elites who were a part of these parties failed to organize and coalesce despite small ideological differences and distanced themselves from one another, creating dysfunction within the party system

5.2 Clientelism, Personalism, and Regionalism

Clientelism and regionalism are also important considerations in the discussion about low support for democracy, particularly at the behavioral level of democratic consolidation. Regionalism is any favoritism or preference shown towards someone or something that comes from the same region as themselves. Clientelism can be considered a form of personalism where political elites advance their power and influence by creating transactional relationships and exchanging political favors. Personalism goes hand in hand with clientelism for which it describes political platforms such as political parties as avenues for merely the benefit of the politician. The four elements of a clientelist relationship as per Hicken (2011) are dyadic relationship, contingency, hierarchy, and iteration. All three -isms describe the political situation in South Korea. According to Wong (2014), regionalism is the leading predictor of Koreans' voting behaviors due to historical personalist and regionalist favoritism in political parties. There

is a historical regional conflict between the southeastern region of Youngnam and the southwestern region of Honam with the former supporting conservative candidates and the latter supporting liberal candidates (Jacinto 2022). In the most recent presidential election in 2022, these regional cleavages persisted, and this same pattern of the southwest voting conservative and the southeast voting liberal has existed in every democratic presidential election.

It is also important to note that these regional cleavages are based on the ideological identification of the candidate. Since 1987, there have been many name changes for the dominant political parties. With that in mind, it is clear that these voters do not have party identification themselves but rather follow individual candidates and whichever party they are affiliated with at that time. Voter volatility and lack of party identification are further proof of the importance of party institutionalization in developing democratic attitudes. Political parties help people become ideological and develop political and partisan identities. Existing political parties are merely spheres for politicians' personal gain rather than a venue to organize politically like-minded people and demarcate ideologies. Not only does this exacerbate the issue of disorganized and non-institutionalized political parties, it causes higher rates of voter volatility, meaning voters do not consistently vote for the same party.

5.3 Corruption

Deeply related to clientelism, personalism, and regionalism, corruption has also affected democratic consolidation in Korean society and government, which speaks to the stability aspect of consolidation. Political corruption is said to have a negative impact on democratic values and political system performance (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Choi and Woo 2012; Sandholtz and Koetzle 2000). Also, the weaker the democratic institutions are in a given country, the more vulnerable it is to corruption, and it has been established that Korea's democratic institutions

could be stronger. This can in part be exemplified when analyzing Korea's Corruption

Perceptions Index (CPI) over time, conducted by Transparency International (Transparency

International 2022). The CPI measures how corrupt a country's population believes its

government is. Thus, it is merely based on perception as corruption is impossible to objectively

measure. The CPI is measured on a scale of zero to 100, where zero is the most corrupt and 100
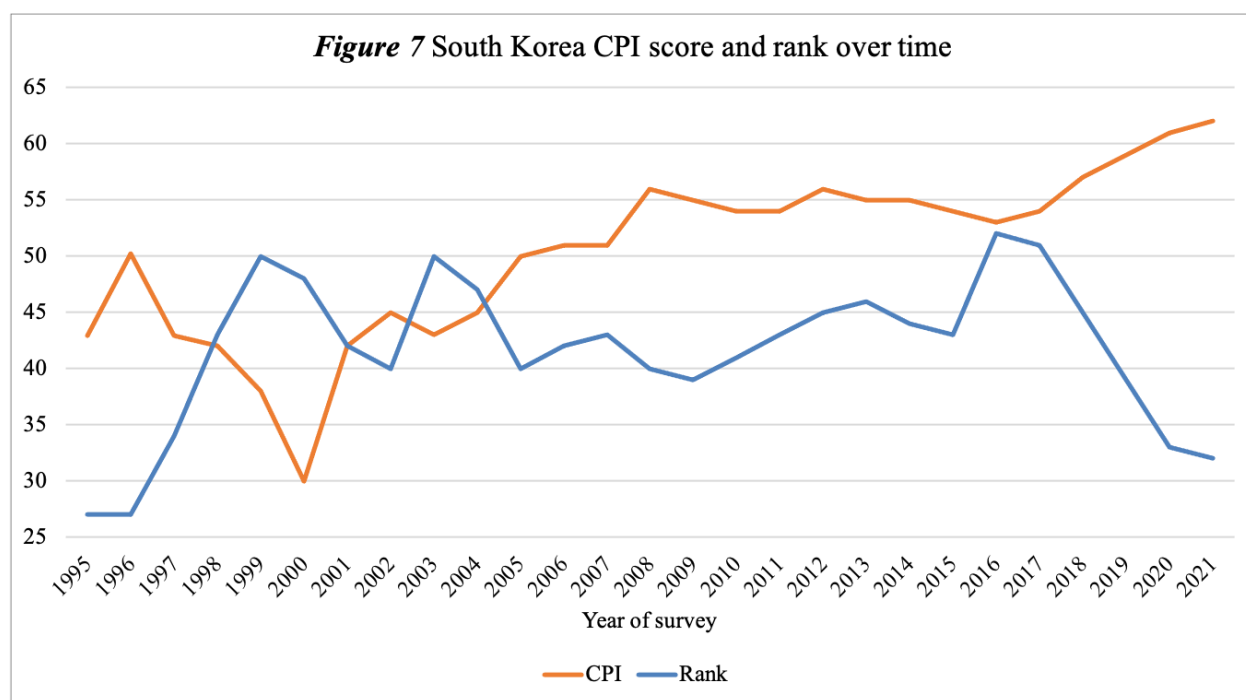
is not corrupt.

Figure 7 South Korea CPI score and rank over time

Figure 7 above represents South Korea's CPI and its rank relative to all other surveyed

nations since the survey has been active, to the most recent round of surveys in 2021. The lower

the orange "CPI" line is, the more corrupt the population perceives the country; the higher the

blue "rank" line is, the more corrupt the country is relative to other surveyed countries (i.e.,

ranking #1 is to be least corrupt in the world). In other words, when CPI has a larger number, the

less corrupt the country is, and the smaller the rank number, the less corrupt the country is

relative to others. When the survey debuted in 1995, Korea's rank was around 26th and had a CPI

of less than 50, but its standing soon decreased as the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and its

aftermath were underway. Since then, its rank teetered steadily between the 40s and the 50s. It was not until after 2017 that Korea's rank returned nearly to its original 1995 standing after President Park Geun-hye's corruption scandal ended. Though, Korea's recent rising rank could be more of a reflection of other countries' ranks decreasing. As represented in the corresponding CPI, there is not as dramatic of a decrease in corruption perception as there is in its rising rank.

As mentioned previously, corruption is nearly impossible to measure. Though, some things such as bribery, embezzlement, and other abuses of power are tangible and undoubtable instances of corruption. Since democratization in 1987, there have been seven total presidents—excluding the currently sitting president as of 2023—and four of them have been involved in corruption scandals post-presidency that have led to jail time. Most recently, President Park Geun-hye was tried, impeached, tried again, and jailed for charges related to coercion, bribery, and leaking state secrets to a close confidant. She was ultimately pardoned after serving just a few years in prison by her elected successor Moon Jae-in. Just a year after Park was found guilty, her predecessor Lee Myung-bak was found guilty on graft and embezzlement charges. Roh Moo-hyun, who was Lee's predecessor, was also closely tied to a series of corruption scandals involving his family members. He admitted to accepting money from a businessman but denied bribery, though he remained under public scrutiny especially since he was the anti-corruption candidate and president. Roh Tae-woo, Korea's first elected president, was also taken down in a bribery scandal and faced a seventeen-year jail sentence. He was eventually pardoned by the very president who began the anti-corruption campaign that looked into Roh Tae-woo's corrupt activities, Kim Young-sam (Park Geun-hye: South Korea court upholds 20-year jail term for ex-leader 2021; Park Geun-hye: South Korea's ex-president granted government pardon 2021; Reuters Staff 2018; Sang-Hun 2009; Watanabe 1995).
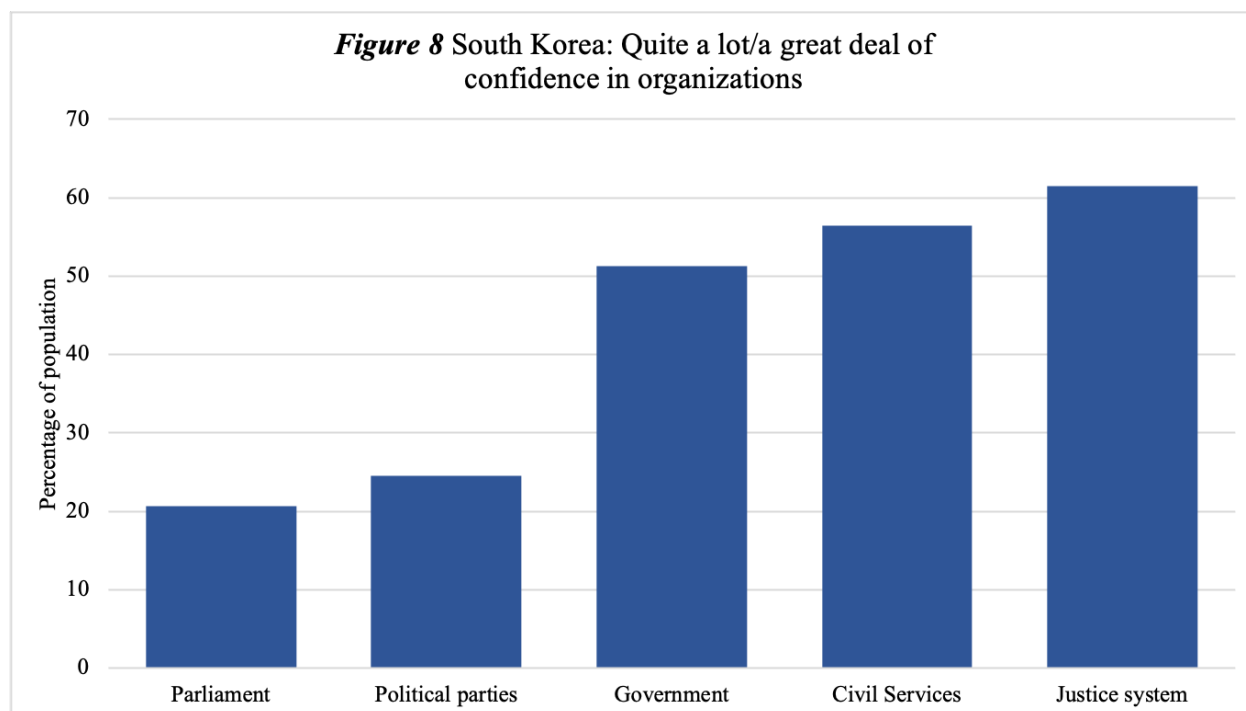
This is merely a glimpse into Korea's long history of corruption scandals, only addressing national presidential scandals. Nonetheless, corruption scandals, no matter how big or small, have an impact on support for the government and democratic values. In Korea specifically, corruption and failure to consolidate in general can at least in part explain why it has experienced uneven trends in support for government and support for democracy. Another way to look further into the uneven trends is by analyzing World Values Survey results for people's confidence in different organizations. I will compare Korea's confidence in five different organizations to the comparison group countries and analyze the results. The organizations to be analyzed are the government, the justice system and courts, political parties, parliament, and civil services.

5.4 Analysis

About 51% of Koreans have confidence—either choosing the answer choices "quite a lot" or "a great deal"—in the government itself, standing third highest in the comparison group, with Hong Kong first at 55% and the UK last at roughly 29%. For the justice system and courts, South Korea is the third least confident at about 62%; the range is Hong Kong at about 79% and Taiwan at about 57%, the highest and lowest respectively. For political parties, confidence is low across the board, though Korea has the second highest confidence at roughly 25% while the highest, Japan, stands at about 26% confidence and the lowest, the US, stands at 11%. The next organization is parliament, in which Korea has the second lowest confidence at about 21%, neighboring the US at about 15% and distant from Germany with the highest confidence at about 42%. While the other organizations may speak for themselves, the civil services are a large network of behind-the-scenes government bureaucrats. Civil servants are intended to be apolitical when conducting the duties of their job, moving from administration to administration

regardless of ideology and party. So, respect for and confidence in civil services is an essential indicator of someone's view of the function of the state. With that said, about 56% of Koreans indicated confidence in civil services, trailing behind Taiwan at the top with 65% confidence and above the US at the bottom with 41% confidence.

The following figure, *Figure 8*, shows where South Korea's confidence levels are for all of these five organizations. It is clear that Koreans are more expressive in their support for the behind-the-scenes structures of the government such as civil services and the judicial system as opposed to the front-facing structures like parliament and political parties. While civil services and the judicial system are not inherently political—or should not be by nature—parliament and political parties are inherently political. From these results, I theorize that Koreans' confidence in the government and their high satisfaction with the current political system comes not from these political institutions but rather from the apolitical institutions that make sure the government runs on the back end regardless of who is in power. As mentioned previously, Koreans support democracy at a lower rate than other countries. With this, I further theorize that the low confidence in parliament and political parties may help answer why Koreans have low support for democracy as many may be turned off by the political theatrics that pass as features of democracy.

Figure 8 South Korea: Quite a lot/a great deal of confidence in organizations

[Bar chart with y-axis labeled "Percentage of population" ranging from 0 to 70. Bars: Parliament ≈ 21, Political parties ≈ 24, Government ≈ 51, Civil Services ≈ 56, Justice system ≈ 61.]

Because Koreans are detached from political parties but still have faith in bureaucracy, I conclude that Koreans, if and when they participate in elections, vote for competence rather than specific policy positions and ideologies. Political ideologies are inextricably linked with political parties and their platforms; parties establish which positions align with what party and political leanings and ideologies arise. Since political parties in Korea lack this structure, voters are left with little help in their decision on who to vote for aside from just the individual candidates. If a candidate can promise voters that they will fix the mess caused by their predecessor(s), a voter may find that more appealing than another candidate whose campaign is based around a specific policy position. This is especially made possible by South Korea's five-year single-term limit for the presidency. The stakes may seem lower when voting for one party in this election and a different party in the next election because there will always be a new president in just five years.

Furthermore, there was never a structural foundation for Korea to develop strong political parties. Korea was never able to move on from its authoritarian past when creating political

parties and these parties merely serve as platforms for politicians to advance their power. Because this structure never existed, the political elites worked within whatever political party framework they had—which was an authoritarian one—and continued their opportunism. This then led to a chaotic political system that lacked ambassadors of political information, which of course led to a public that is largely unknowledgeable about democracy and the political process, thus leading to low support for democracy.

Democratic consolidation, or deepening, cannot occur without strong democratic institutions, and this mainly speaks to political parties. Features such as personalism, regionalism, corruption, and revolving elites worked during South Korea's authoritarian era. But these features remained after the democratic transition and are ultimately incompatible with democracy and democratic consolidation. Also, high levels of corruption in Korea have contributed to negative democratic values which also negatively affect support for democracy. If Korea had a proper transition with institutionalized political parties that allowed for full consolidation, political government institutions such as parliament and political parties would not only be less dysfunctional but also would draw more people in to support democracy. In order for Korea to become a consolidated democracy, it must leave corrupt and non-institutionalized political parties in the past and create strong democratic institutions to elevate and encourage democratic values.

6. Discussion

Upon analyzing public opinion, the scholarship on democratization and South Korea, and current events, it is not only clear that, one, it is, in fact, true that South Korea has comparatively low support for democracy, and, two, there is a theory that has emerged as the one that can explain this case best. As displayed in the preceding section, democratic consolidation theory in

its analysis and inclusion of multiple factors such as the point of democratic transition, institution building, and function of the political system are all important in understanding a country's democracy. For Korea, all three of these factors are insufficient or incomplete.

Korea is unique because it never had a revolution that resulted in a democratic transition. While it is true that there were mass pro-democracy and anti-authoritarian regime protests, there was no formal resolution in which an opposition group ousted the authoritarian status quo. Instead, Korea had the 1987 election where the authoritarian status quo put up then-candidate Roh Tae-woo who eventually became Korea's first 'democratically elected' president. Due to this anti-climactic transition to democracy, the subsequent institution-building—or lack thereof—and acceptance of the new political system happened gradually, which also allowed for lingering soft authoritarianism within the government. If Korea experienced the shock and drama of a revolution that indicated a clear political *and* cultural shift to democracy, it is possible that full consolidation could have occurred. Also, lingering sentiments of authoritarianism were folded into new democratic ones and these contradictory values were fused as "democratic" values, resulting in a society that sees authoritarian sentiments as a feature of democracy.

To look back at Share's (1987) typology for transition, I analyze that Korea's democratic transition does not fit into the four typical models while having certain features of a few different types. I disagree with both the *incremental democratization* and *transition through transaction* types due to the absence of a viable opposition party in Korea. While there was an opposition presence in the public, elites failed to organize themselves and have a role in the transition process. Thus, there was no negotiation to be had between the authoritarian and democratic elites, rather the transition occurred within the existing elite structure. Korea does not fall into the non-consensual types as well. As mentioned previously, there were democratization

movements and mass mobilization but none of these movements amounted to a revolution that overthrew the government, as outlined in the *transition through protracted revolutionary struggle* type. And, there was no outside intrusion in Korea's transition to democracy which makes it difficult to categorize Korea into the *transition through rupture* type. These types are unique and specific yet Korea fails to be neatly described by any one type. It is a mix between incremental democratization and revolutionary transition but without both opposition presence and dramatic revolutionary struggle. This further asserts that Korea's democratization journey is hard to describe and categorize using the dominant theories of democratization but rather is best explained using the multi-level analysis using the democratic consolidation theory.

In addition, the initial transition to democracy can help explain the existing favorable opinion of democracy in Korea before the decline. The initial excitement and even desperation of a transition to democracy, as seen in the successful protests that advocated for and pushed the government towards democracy, would of course bring about democratic values in Korea, especially in comparison to a brutal military dictatorship as the alternative. Though, as the political system progressed, the authoritarian sentiments did not disappear. Once again, because Roh Tae-woo was handpicked by the ruling elites before democratization, and because he was still affiliated with the military, Koreans never saw a clear-cut transition of power between an authoritarian figure and a democratic figure. He was their new democratic president, even though he was just recently in the authoritarian camp. This is in addition to the fact that Roh Tae-woo, though technically democratically elected, was the only clear choice to win the presidency in 1987 due to the split ticket on the opposition side. So, instead, these systems were blended together during the transition and inevitably contributed to the lack of proper democracy

education in Korea and the difficulty to distinguish a democratic system from a non-democratic one.

Korea's failure to institutionalize political parties has resulted in elections free-for-alls. As mentioned previously, political parties have merged, dissolved, remerged, and divided while remaining under a similar ideological platform. This is because there is no formal party system in Korea; unlike in the US, UK, and Taiwan where there are two formal political parties with organizations and ideological positions, Korea has never had dominant political parties with formal structures and platforms. As a result, there is an emphasis on individual politicians and their personalities over party platforms and shared values systems. Korean elections have in part devolved into a fight over who is more charismatic rather than who can make Korea a better country. This lack of stability can not only confuse voters but also lead them to believe that this is the democratic norm. If voters decide they are unhappy with this, they may point to democracy to blame.

The two preceding factors lead into how a democracy functions, and without a strong foundation, it is hard for a democracy to thrive and achieve stability. The anticlimactic democratization process along with the failure to institutionalize political parties has created the perfect environment for political corruption. It is evident that instances of corruption in Korea are not anomalies but rather norms; this is clear by only analyzing past Korean presidents. And, as the literature makes clear, frequent instances of corruption lead to weak democratic values among citizens. To iterate once again, when democracies are unstable and are in part disingenuous, people can mistake the disingenuousness for regular features of democracy that they disagree with, thereby driving down the support for democracy.

Even though Koreans have a disdain for politics and democracy, they still have faith in government and bureaucracy—after all, governments do not have to be democracies. On this note, it is important to once again bring up the East Asian values thesis. The East Asian values theory puts a strong emphasis on hierarchy and order to explain why Western-style democracy is not compatible with East Asian people, culture, and values. While I argued that the East Asian values thesis is not the best explanation for the Korean case, I would be remiss if I did not draw a connection between the theory and Koreans' support for their government. Even though South Korean politics itself can be chaotic and unattractive and thus turns people away from democracy and the democratic process, the government still functions. By that, I mean that people in Korea get their pensions, their health care, and generally have the means to survive. As I argued in previous sections, that is perhaps enough for Koreans; if the government functions, who cares who the president is, which political party rules parliament, or who is up for the next election? I argue that this sentiment can be explained by the respect for hierarchy and order within Asian societies. In addition, as per *Figure 3*, the sentiment that a strong leader who disregards the parliament is favorable can also be explained by the East Asian values theory. A strong leader who can whip the parliament into shape and restore order in society is favorable to Koreans because the development of democracy in Korea created those conditions.

Favorable opinions of government and bureaucracy also explain why Korea can still be considered a democracy, even though it is not fully consolidated. To revisit Schedler's framework for measuring democratic consolidation, the final part of that framework refers to regime stability. South Korea is not at risk of backsliding even though the structure of the system created the attitudinal and behavioral conditions necessary for the political arena to become merely a playground for elites. Despite the ills of its democracy and political system, Korea still

functions and people are happy with how it functions at the governmental and bureaucratic levels. As long as Koreans have faith in the government, there should be no risk of democratic backsliding. Even with the faulty political party system, there is still some semblance of a democratic process in which people have the right to voice their opinions without fear of retaliation.

The mixed theoretical explanations in the South Korean case itself show how much of a puzzle the nation's politics is. The emancipative values theory explains other democracies because other democracies have the trajectory of simultaneously increasing emancipative values and democratic values following industrialization. While the emancipative values theory explains Korea's industrialization, shifting emancipative values, and historic support for democracy, it does not explain the decrease in support for democracy. And, the East Asian values theory does not explain the once favorable opinions of democracy in Korea or the liberalization of Korean society. This is why I highlight the democratic consolidation theory and the importance of political parties. Political parties are essential to a functioning democracy because of the role they play as ambassadors of political information and modeling a successful political system. Without the existence of stable political parties, Koreans never had a stable source to create their values systems. In the broader context of the democratization scholarship, I further argue that values come from various forms of socialization, be it political parties, upbringings, hegemonic discourses in the nation, formal schooling, or even friends and family.

In order for a democracy to be stable, functioning, and strong, there must be a foundation that fosters those things. As democratic consolidation is defined as transition, installation, and consolidation, which includes completeness and functionality, each step along the way must be stable and genuine. When all of these stages are only partially complete, a true democracy can

never thrive, as in the case of South Korea. This results in a population that not only has never seen the full potential of liberal democracy and therefore has a negative opinion of the only democracy they can identify—a faulty one.

7. Conclusions

In this project, I explored the issue of low support for democracy in South Korea despite strong support for the government and analyzed three dominant theories in Political Science scholarship that attempt to answer the question: emancipative values theory, East Asian values theory, and democratic consolidation theory. I argue in support of the democratic consolidation theory in its multifaceted approach which investigates not only the functionality of a democracy but also its origins. I then put forth the thesis that South Korea experiences low support for democracy because of its failure to fully consolidate, which includes its anticlimactic transition to democracy, failure to institutionalize political parties, political parties that only serve the careers of politicians, lack of a presence of ambassadors of political information, and frequent instances of corruption. For Korea to achieve higher support for democracy, it must correct its past errors. It can never retransition to democracy, but it can reinforce democratic institutions, institutionalize parties, provide political and democratic education to the public, and crack down on widespread corruption.

Even though there is low and declining support for democracy in South Korea, there is still strong support for bureaucratic institutions and the government. The moral of the story is that even though Korea's democracy is dysfunctional and has not completed its consolidation process, the government still functions. And, people recognize that the government functions— and functions well enough—and are happy about that, and that might be good enough for the Korean people. Furthermore, Koreans seem to not care who runs the government, especially with

the single five-year presidential term limit. As long as the government functions and they have freedoms, it does not matter to them who is running the government. Though, in democratic countries, support for democracy should be high, especially if support for the government is high. As per the emancipative values theory, people are meant to care more about government and political system function when things are going well. These events are at the center of the Korean democracy puzzle and are best explained by the democratic consolidation theory.

A limitation of this project is that it is a theoretical analysis that uses some quantitative evidence from the World Values Survey. I analyzed shifts in values and longstanding values of Koreans in comparison to other societies and applied and developed theories of democratization and values formation to help understand the case. Thus, this project is heavily dependent on the data that is readily available to the public and the journal articles that are accessible to me. Moreover, I was limited in what kinds of questions were asked in the WVS. There were some questions and answers that I wish were available to me, such as questions about the quality of democracy, how different societies understand what democracy is, and even precise reasons as to why people do not believe in democracy. More questions include ones that directly and indirectly measure a participant's expressed democratic values. Another limitation of the WVS is translation. The survey is initially written in English and then translated into different languages to survey different countries. In translation, even in exact translations, a lot of nuanced and underlying meanings can be lost from language to language which in turn has the potential to warp the original meaning and intention of a question. This is always a concern and limitation when questionnaires are in different languages. In a future study, creating an original data set based on personalized survey questions for this specific research that would also control for biases to supplement the WVS would be beneficial.

While this project analyzes the case of South Korea, this is ultimately a contribution to the broader conversations of democratization and where values come from. Democratization scholarship attempts to approach different angles such as analyzing revolutions, coups d'état, cultural shifts, or even peaceful transitions to power. As clear from the results of this project, South Korea does not fit into any of these explanations perfectly, but neither does any case. Thus, the overarching point of analysis that guided this project is the question of where values come from and why values shift in ways that may seem contradictory to the dominant theories. Values come from outside of our individual selves. The moment we are born, we are fed information. Those who argue that Western-style democracy is objectively the best form of governance are not born with this belief but rather experience and learn things that inform this belief. In Korea, the processes of political socialization did not occur as it does in other countries, such as from political parties that offer packaged ideologies and model the political process. Without any straightforward influences, it is hard to develop a system of political values. With that, I conclude that Koreans' socialization journeys have been greatly impacted by the lack of institutionalized political parties and the weak transition to democracy. Due to the absence of ambassadors of political information, Koreans never received concrete democratic education. Especially those who grew up during or right after 1987 never saw a model democracy at work and therefore their understandings of what democracy is became warped—a combination between soft authoritarianism and democracy.

There is hope, though, for Korea to fully institutionalize its democracy. It has yet to reach its full potential, as has any democracy. The political elites must make an honest move to organize political parties in a way that serves the whole country, not just themselves and big

businesses. In making this step, Koreans can become much more educated about the democratic political process and may even be excited to participate in it. *Dae Han Min Guuk—Hwaiting!*

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