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## Cultural Foundations of Contentious Democracy in South Korea

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## Cultural Foundations of Contentious Democracy in South Korea

*What Type of Democracy Do Korean Citizens Prefer?*

### ABSTRACT

This study takes a cultural approach to examine the unstable and contentious nature of Korean democracy. Analyzing an original nationwide survey conducted in 2015, we find that the democratic and participatory culture of the Korean people underlies Korean democracy. This finding suggests substantial tension between the participatory orientation of the public and Korean representative democracy.

**KEYWORDS:** Korea, contentious democracy, political culture, modernization, popular protests

THE CANDLELIGHT PROTESTS OF 2016–17 in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) surprised scholars of Korean politics and comparative democratization. The initial demonstrations began with a couple of thousand protesters in Seoul's Gwanghwamun Square in late October 2016. However, like a prairie fire, these demonstrations suddenly led to nationwide anti-government rallies of more than two million protesters within a month and continued weekly for four more months. The massive protests forced the legislators of the National Assembly to impeach President Park Geun-hye. The Constitutional Court unanimously ruled that President Park had violated the constitution and laws throughout her time in office and thus her impeachment was just. Recorded as the largest demonstrations in modern Korean history, five months of candlelight protests ended with Park's dramatic downfall, from president to prisoner.

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Although popular protests have been an increasing phenomenon since the 2000s, the latest candlelight protests and subsequent political changes were so dramatic they raised a number of puzzling questions about Korean democracy. Surprised by the 2008 anti-US-beef protest, in which a million people took part, scholars and policymakers tried to probe its meanings and causes, but the years of 2016 and 2017 further deepened their curiosity and concerns.

On the one hand, the candlelight protests were widely praised because they stopped the deconsolidation of Korean democracy driven by the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments. For instance, Hong-koo Lee, the former prime minister of Korea, praised “South Korea as a beacon of Asian democracy,”<sup>1</sup> and Ha-Joon Chang, a renowned economist, commented that “South Koreans worked a democratic miracle.”<sup>2</sup> Yascha Mounk stated that the candlelight protests “can serve as inspiration to defenders of liberal democracy around the world.”<sup>3</sup> To those recalling the pessimistic lament about Korean democracy over the last decade among leading scholars, these comments indicated a sea change in Korean politics.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the candlelight protests again confirmed the gap between representative institutions and resistant civil society. They revealed without reserve that the formal representative system of Korean democracy was dysfunctional. Political parties were unable to check President Park’s wrongdoings—or to resolve public discontent, while operating in confusion between Park and the protesters. Pointing to these features—active social movements and ineffectual representative institutions—Sunhyuk Kim called Korean politics “contentious democracy,” and Yoonkyung Lee termed it “democracy without parties.”<sup>5</sup>

1. Hong-koo Lee, “South Korea as a Beacon of Asian Democracy,” East Asia Institute, September 21, 2017.

2. Ha-Joon Chang, “South Koreans Worked a Democratic Miracle. Can They Do It Again?” *New York Times*, September 14, 2017.

3. Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018): 185.

4. Jang-Jip Choi, *Democracy after Democratization: The Korean Experience* (Stanford, CA: Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2012); Hyug Baeg Im, “Better Democracy, Better Economic Growth? South Korea,” *International Political Science Review* 32:5 (2011): 579–98.

5. Sun Hyuk Kim, “‘Contentious Democracy’ in South Korea,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 8:2 (2012): 51–61; Yoonkyung Lee, “Democracy without Parties? Political Parties and Social Movements for Democratic Representation in Korea,” *Korea Observer* 40:1 (2009): 27–52.

Why has this civic activism persisted and increased in Korea despite the country's economic miracle and the institutional advancement of representative democracy over the past three decades? To the extent that few scholars expected such large-scale protests in 2008 and 2016–17, this has remained an ongoing and timely question about the nature of Korean democracy. Leading scholars from diverse approaches have struggled to answer theoretically why the contentious style of Korean democracy has been an enduring feature.<sup>6</sup>

This study is an empirical effort to answer why Korean citizens set aside representative organizations and take part in social movements. Prior studies have focused on the structural and temporal causes of democratic instability in Korea. However, there has been a lack of empirical studies of why so many citizens are willing to be main actors of contentious democracy.

To this end, we take a cultural approach to shed new light on why Korean democracy is contentious from the perspective of ordinary people. In particular, the study attempts to unravel the types of democracy Korean citizens have in mind. If democracy is the dominant concept with which ordinary people interpret and evaluate their politics, how they conceptualize democracy influences the nature of the democratic politics in which they live.<sup>7</sup> Because people in different countries have different orientations toward democracy, their democratic or non-democratic attitudes can explain the dynamics of new democracies.<sup>8</sup>

How do Korean citizens conceive democracy? What type of democracy do Koreans prefer? Do they advocate participatory forms of governing or accept representative ones?<sup>9</sup> To answer these questions, we conducted an original

6. Choi, *Democracy after Democratization*; Kim, "Contentious Democracy"; Yoonkyung Lee, "Diverging Patterns of Democratic Representation in Korea and Taiwan," *Asian Survey* 54:3 (2014): 419–44; Ho Chul Sonn, *Chotbul hyokmyonggwua 2017 cheje* [Candlelight revolution and the 2017 regime] (Seoul: Sogang University Press, 2017).

7. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *Civic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963); Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8. Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Christian Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

9. As an overarching concept, modern democracy includes several political ideas such as representative government, mass participation, regular elections, rule of law, popular sovereignty, and civil liberties. These ideas are not always harmonious, and they often conflict with one another. Depending on which idea someone emphasizes, different forms of democracy can be identified. Comparative scholars have found that two practical forms of democracy are in tension in terms of the political process of decision-making: representative democracy and participatory democracy. The former stresses the role of elected representatives, whereas the latter emphasizes the necessity of citizens' participation in political processes beyond regular elections.

nationwide survey in the summer of 2015: empirical analysis of the data shows that most Koreans demand participatory democracy. They think that national referenda are needed and that political participation should be more expansive. Only a small minority agree that national affairs should be determined by elected officials, and about a third of Korean citizens are not supportive of democracy at all. These results suggest that Korean democracy is by and large composed of participatory democrats, and the cultural foundation of representative democracy is shallow. Accordingly, the latest candlelight protests can be explained as challenges by participatory democrats to the authoritarian-style governance of the Park Geun-hye government. These findings also raise a question about the relationship between modernization and stable democracy in the non-Western world, and have important implications for the political stability of new democracies.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW ON CONTENTIOUS DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH KOREA

As Ivan Krastev aptly pointed out,<sup>10</sup> the transition from “politics to protest” has become an increasing phenomenon in both new democracies and transitioning countries.<sup>11</sup> Korea is not an exception. However, academic discourse about the contentious nature of Korean democracy did not emerge in earnest until the massive candlelight vigils of 2008. Before then, Korea had been regarded as an exemplary case of successful third-wave democracies. The 2008 protests broke the illusion of the successful consolidation of Korean democracy.

Before 2008, many scholars had evaluated Korean democracy positively, with only a small minority holding critical views. The positive assessment stemmed from its institutional development. For example, Kim Young Sam, the first civilian president (1993–97), successfully purged a clique of politically ambitious and authoritarian army officers and established civilian control over the military. He also expanded the electoral participation of the public, allowing them to elect members of both the central and local governments. After the first peaceful power transfer, in 1998, to Kim Dae Jung, the opposition leader and renowned democratic activist, Byung-Kook Kim stated that “by any standard South Korea was a case of

10. Ivan Krastev, “From Politics to Protest,” *Journal of Democracy* 25:4 (2014): 5.

11. Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs, *The Complexities of Global Protests* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).

success.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, because Korea met Huntington’s two-turnover test of democratic consolidation by electing Lee Myung-bak of the conservative party in 2007, Chaibong Hahm declared that “South Korea’s democracy is consolidated in the maximalist sense.”<sup>13</sup> In assessing East Asian democracies, Larry Diamond declared that “Korea can be now considered consolidated and essentially irreversible.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite these institutional advancements, the 2008 protests revealed the unstable nature of Korean democracy, and the 2016–17 protests reaffirmed this pattern: very strong civic activism in juxtaposition with weak representative institutions. Why have so many citizens been engaged in social movements on a massive scale, while the political parties remained hesitant and unable to resolve national issues?

Many scholars have explored the question, focusing on structural and temporal factors. One dominant line of thought finds the answer primarily in the lingering authoritarian legacy. Yoonkyung Lee, for instance, contends that Korean authoritarianism was personalistic rather than party-based, and this left both political parties and civil society excluded from the core of politics.<sup>15</sup> This tradition has left the formal political system feeble, which in turn has motivated civil society to play a vital role at every critical moment in the nation’s progress toward democratization.<sup>16</sup> The conflictual relationship between state and society has not changed much, even since the democratic transition. This approach views the main issue as party failure. Parties failed to expand their social bases and channel diverse social interests effectively into government action.<sup>17</sup> In

12. Byung-Kook Kim, “Party Politics in South Korea’s Democracy: The Crisis of Success,” in Larry Diamond and Byung-Kook Kim (eds.), *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea* (Boulder: Lynn Rienner, 2000): 53.

13. Chaibong Hahm, “South Korea’s Miraculous Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 19:3 (2008): 129.

14. Larry Diamond, “East Asia amid the Receding Tide of the Third Wave of Democracy,” paper presented at the conference, Democracy in East Asia and Taiwan in Global Perspective, Taipei, August 24–25, 2011, <<http://www.asianbarometer.org/publications/9047d4415457a0784a8673ab30b47f17.pdf>>. International institutes confirmed this positive evaluation. For example, Freedom House rated South Korea partially free in 1987 but free in 2008; political rights and civil liberties improved from 4 to 15, on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is the most democratic kind of regime and 7 is the most authoritarian. In 2010, the Economist Intelligence Unit described Korea as a member of the league of full democracies and placed it at the highest level in Asia, above Japan.

15. Lee, “Diverging Patterns.”

16. Kim, “Party Politics.”

17. Lee, “Democracy without Parties?”; Jennifer S. Oh, “Strong State and Strong Civil Society in Contemporary South Korea,” *Asian Survey* 52:3 (2012): 528–49.

short, the persistence of conflictual civic activism in Korea is due to the authoritarian legacy, which allows presidents to wield enormous power and marginalizes the legislature and parties.

Like most historical and structural studies, this approach has trouble explaining the development of social movements since the 2000s. Though the state–society relationship remains as conflictual as before, the recent social movements have been more individualistic and spontaneous than those in the late decades of the 20th century, which were mostly organization-driven. The 2002 anti-US candlelight vigil and the 2004 anti-impeachment protest demonstrated a new spontaneity in social movements in Korea. And both the 2008 and the 2016–17 protests were initiated and led by individuals rather than social movement organizations. Civic organizations, labor unions, and social movement organizations joined the masses later, to help coordinate these voluntary and spontaneous demonstrations.

In this sense, this historical approach has trouble accounting for how the organized civic activism of the past evolved its spontaneous quality in the 2000s. Due to this limitation, some researchers have attempted actor-centric explanations. For example, Cho and Park argued that the post-materialistic young generation drove the 2008 candlelight vigils and that Korean democracy had experienced a “silent revolution,”<sup>18</sup> to borrow Ronald Inglehart’s term.<sup>19</sup> Kap Yoon Lee identifies characteristics of the participants: many of them were from the Jeolla region, ideologically progressive, and young.<sup>20</sup> Lee concludes that the 2008 candlelight protest was caused by citizens’ dissatisfaction with the Lee Myung-bak government, reflecting the existing electoral cleavages in Korea.

Political economists, on the other hand, take the recent large-scale social protests to be resistance to a series of neoliberal reforms that have been introduced in Korea since the late 1990s.<sup>21</sup> According to them, these reforms

18. Kisuk Cho and Hye Yun Park, “Gwangjangui jungchiwa munhwajok chungdol” [Politics of agora and the clash of culture: an empirical analysis of the 2008 candlelight vigil], *Hanguk jongchi bakhwebo* [Korean Political Science Review] 42:4 (2008): 243–68.

19. Ronald Inglehart, *Silent Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

20. Kap Yun Lee, “Chotbul jiphwe chamyojai ingu/sahwehakjok tuksung mit jongchijok sunghyanggwa taedo” [Social and demographic characteristics and political orientation of participants in the candlelight protest of 2008], *Hanguk jongdang hwebo* [Korean Party Studies Review] 9:1 (2010): 95–120.

21. Seung-Ook Lee, Sook-Jin Kim, and Joel Wainwright, “Mad Cow Militancy: Neoliberal Hegemony and Social Resistance in South Korea,” *Political Geography* 29:7 (2010): 359–69; Sonn, *Candlelight Revolution*.

have exacerbated inequality and economic insecurity, and thus social discontent. This chain of effects is the driving force behind the recent protests, contributing to the instability of Korean democracy.

These actor-centric studies have identified characteristics of the main participants in recent protests, but they also have limitations. For instance, Cho and Park's post-materialist thesis is an overstatement, given that the proportion of Korean post-materialists has been consistently low compared with other affluent democracies since the first World Values Survey in 1981.<sup>22</sup> Concerning Lee's argument regarding preexisting electoral cleavages,<sup>23</sup> the 2016–17 protesters do not seem to fit, as they are not distinguished from non-participants by region, generation, or even ideology.<sup>24</sup> Also, the political economy arguments lack validity in explaining the contentious nature of Korea democracy because the main participants of the 2016–17 protests were not socioeconomically marginalized groups or individuals but well-educated, middle-class citizens.

In sum, since the 2008 anti-US-beef protest there has been considerable scholarly debate over the unstable nature of Korean democracy. Scholars have reached a consensus that its instability is characterized by feeble representative politics and strong civic activism. The 2016–17 candlelight protest reaffirmed this view. Although previous studies, structural and actor-centric, provide insights into the phenomenon, this article contends that they do not pay adequate attention to the general public as an independent variable for explaining civic activism and Korea's contentious democracy. Therefore, this article aims to investigate how ordinary Koreans envision democracy and to uncover the cultural foundation of Korea's contentious democracy.

#### **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY AS A REGIME AND AS A GOVERNING FORM**

Cultural studies on Korean democracy are not rare. As a representative scholar, Doh Shin has consistently shown that Korean democracy is not culturally

22. Cho and Park, "Politics of Agora."

23. Lee, "Social and Demographic Characteristics."

24. Jiho Lee, "'Park Geun-hye chotbul,' nuga ue chamyohatna: Chamyohangdong mohyunggwa chamyotaedo mohyungui bigyo" [Who and why participated in the 2017 candlelight protest?], *Hanguk Jongchi Yonggu* [Journal of Korean Studies] 26:2 (2017): 75–103.



embedded in the mass political culture, thereby slowing its consolidation.<sup>25</sup> According to him, the Korean people are very idealistic about democracy, but they are ill-prepared in practical terms to appreciate the complexity of modern representative democracy. And Samuel Huntington speculates that it is difficult for Korea to develop liberal democracy because of the country's strong legacies of Confucianism.<sup>26</sup>

However, these points are only partially useful, because stating that the consolidation of Korean democracy is sluggish is different from positing that Korean democracy is contentious in nature. Incomplete democracy can be contentious or it can be silent, depending on various factors. To better understand the nature of post-transitional politics in new democracies, it is necessary to explore how ordinary people view democracy and envision it as a governing form in practice.

How do we discern public attitudes toward democracy? Analytically, past studies of political culture in new democracies have assessed whether ordinary people prefer democracy over authoritarianism and how supportive they are of democratic values.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, cultural studies of advanced democracies have investigated whether citizens support representative forms of national decision-making or participatory forms.<sup>28</sup>

Given that the political environment differs drastically between new and established democracies, this division of labor in cultural studies is understandable and in some sense desirable.<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that most citizens in new democracies lack democratic experience, and often the competition between pro-democratic and authoritarian groups defines the

25. Doh Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Doh Shin, "The Deconsolidation of Liberal Democracy in Korea: Exploring its Cultural Roots," *Korea Observer* 49:1 (2018): 107–36.

26. Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

27. Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes, and E. Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Rose et al., *Democracy and Its Alternatives*; Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture*.

28. Nicholas Allen and Sarah Birch, "Process Preferences and British Public Opinion," *Political Studies* 63:2 (2015): 390–411; Russell Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

29. Rose et al., *Democracy and Its Alternatives*.

major electoral cleavage. In contrast, such authoritarian legacies and political struggle at the regime level are in the past of advanced democracies.

In studying Koreans' attitudes toward democracy, however, we contend that both analytical approaches are necessary, for two reasons. On the practical level, the general attitude toward democracy at the regime level remains relevant because Korea is an incomplete democracy and political parties still compete primarily along the former pro-democracy (progressive) versus former authoritarian (conservative) dimension.<sup>30</sup> But it is also imperative to ask Korean people whether they prefer representative or participatory forms of democracy, because advanced and practiced representative institutions have emerged over the last three decades and the country is one of the world's most modernized societies. According to the cognitive mobilization thesis of Russell Dalton,<sup>31</sup> Koreans should be sophisticated enough to demand participatory democracy because of their high educational attainment, political interest, and wealth.

On the theoretical level, the distinction between public attitudes toward democracy and particular forms of democracy is important. Modern democracy has developed as a practical combination of representative government and popular sovereignty over the last several centuries. As Dahl and many other scholars point out, representative politics was established before mass participation in elections was allowed as a method of exercising popular sovereignty.<sup>32</sup>

Because liberal democratic forces developed contested politics of representatives and allowed mass participation in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modern democracy is by nature elite-oriented and hierarchical. In a division of political labor, modern democracy grants representatives authority over national affairs, and ordinary citizens hold political rights to elect them. Therefore, modern democracy can be understood as governance by representatives on behalf of electors. Owing to this feature of modern democracy, Almond and Verba pointed out that in the civic culture of a stable democracy, mass political participation is not only active but should be mixed with passivity and deference to authority, allowing elected representatives to deal with national affairs at their discretion.<sup>33</sup>

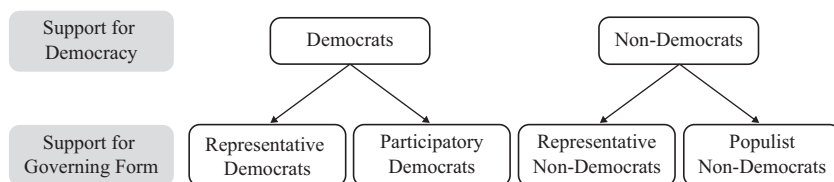
30. Choi, *Democracy after Democratization*; Shin, "Deconsolidation."

31. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*.

32. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); Huntington, *Third Wave*; David Stasavage, "Representation and Consent," *Annual Review of Political Science* 19:1 (2016): 145–62.

33. Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*: 5–8.

FIGURE 1. Typology of Support for Democracy and Governing Form in South Korea



SOURCE: By authors

As steady economic development and increased education have produced cognitively mobilized citizens over the last half century, scholars of Western democracies have naturally been interested in whether people are supportive of the representative form or a new, participatory form.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, we are interested in what specific form of democracy Korean citizens prefer. Since the 1987 democratic transition, Korea has successfully introduced representative institutions of the West. Given modernization as well as the advancement of democratic institutions, it would be valid to ask whether ordinary Koreans endorse politics via representatives or advocate participatory methods.

Building on this analytical distinction, we examine Koreans' preference for democracy over authoritarianism as a regime and their attitudes toward representative versus participatory democracy as a form of governing.<sup>35</sup> Figure 1 illustrates a typology of citizens combining these two dimensions. At the regime level, depending on whether individuals support democracy over authoritarianism, there are two types: democrats and non-democrats. *Democrats* are in full support of democracy over authoritarianism as a regime and acknowledge the legitimacy of democracy at the regime level. *Non-democrats* do not fully endorse democracy and view authoritarian alternatives as favorable.

Regarding forms of democracy at the practical level, there are also two types: those who support representative democracy and those who give more

34. Sonia Alonso, John Keane, and Wolfgang Merkel, *Future of Representative Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*; Todd Donovan and Karp Jeffrey, "Popular Support for Direct Democracy," *Party Politics* 12:5 (2006): 671–88; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy*.

35. Youngho Cho and Yong Cheol Kim, "Hanguk minjujuui bulanjongui munhwajok giban" [Cultural foundation of Korean democracy's instability], *Hanguk jongchi hakwebo* [Korean Political Science Review] 51:5 (2017): 5–28.

credit to participatory democracy. The former agree on the mechanism of delegation—citizens delegating decision-making authority to elected officials. The latter consider that citizens’ direct participation in decision-making is preferable and should be expanded. Combining these two dimensions, we can identify four distinct types of citizens: representative democrats, participatory democrats, representative non-democrats, and populist non-democrats.

*Representative democrats* support democracy over authoritarianism and think elected representatives should have authority over national affairs. To the extent that they are committed to democracy but acknowledge a division of political labor between politicians and citizens, they are close to the “allegiant citizens” of Almond and Verba’s civic culture model.<sup>36</sup> *Participatory democrats* prefer democracy to authoritarianism but also demand participatory reforms. According to recent cultural studies of democracy, critical and assertive citizens are the ones who move democratic quality forward across democratic polities.<sup>37</sup> The participatory democrats of this study are similar to these citizens. *Representative non-democrats* hesitate to support democracy but endorse the authority of representatives over national affairs. They think democracy is not suitable for Korea and accept the elite-driven decision-making process by generally deferring to elected representatives in political matters.

*Populist non-democrats* are interesting because they want to use mass participation to restore authoritarianism rather than democracy. This type is not rare in Korean history. For example, President Rhee Syngman, the founding father and civilian dictator of Korea, mobilized the masses in elections to buttress his rule in the 1950s. Throughout the 1960s, Park Chung-hee was active in mobilizing the masses for his authoritarian and centralized regime. Even after he declared martial law in 1972, calling it “Korean-style democracy,” he used state resources to mobilize grass-roots meetings at the village level while suppressing representative institutions such as elections, the National Assembly, and mass media.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that some Koreans hold such “authoritarian nostalgia.”<sup>39</sup>

36. Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*.

37. Russell Dalton and Christian Welzel, *The Civic Culture Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

38. Jungmin Seo and Sungmoon Kim, “Civil Society under Authoritarian Rule,” *Korea Journal* 55:1 (2015): 59–85.

39. Yu-tzung Chang, Yun-han Chu, and Chong-Min Park, “Authoritarian Nostalgia in Asia,” *Journal of Democracy* 18:3 (2007): 66.

This framework of four citizen types can make an important contribution to the literature of Korean politics and new democracies. To date, public opinion studies on democratization have heavily focused on public support for democracy over authoritarianism at the regime level.<sup>40</sup> They are effective in revealing a shallow democratic reservoir in non-Western countries as a barrier to democratic consolidation. However, this practice is limited in shedding light on what kind of democratic politics emerges in new democracies and how democracy is practiced in them.

Overall, since existing analytical frameworks offer limited information about why Korea has faced confrontational challenges from massed citizens, we attempt to consider popular support for specific forms of democratic governance—representative versus participatory at the practical level—in understanding the contentious nature of Korean democracy. With this framework, we provide an empirical analysis to reveal the cultural foundation of contentious democracy in Korea.

#### EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: WHAT TYPE OF DEMOCRACY DO KOREANS SUPPORT?

Is democracy the only game in town in the minds of Korean citizens? Do Koreans support the idea of delegating authority and decision-making power to elected officials? Simply put, what type of democracy do they support? To answer these questions, we conducted a nationwide survey in August 2015 and asked 1,300 respondents for their views on democracy and politics through computer-assisted telephone interviewing.

To assess Koreans' support for democracy at the regime level, we first implemented two widely used measures: preferability of democracy and its suitability in Korea.<sup>41</sup> Based on Linz's idea that democracy is hard to break down when citizens are attitudinally more attached to it than to authoritarianism, we designed questions for each measure as follows.<sup>42</sup> To assess the

40. Bratton et al., *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform*; Rose et al., *Democracy and Its Alternatives*.

41. Bratton et al., *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform*; Chong-Min Park and Yunhan Chu, "Trends in Attitudes toward Democracy in Korea and Taiwan," in *New Challenges for Maturing Democracies in Korea and Taiwan*, edited by Larry Diamond and Gi-Wook Shin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014):259–82; Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture*.

42. Juan Linz, *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). We also surveyed public attitudes toward military dictatorship and strongman

relative preferability of democracy to authoritarianism, we asked: “With which of the following statements do you agree most? (1) Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government; (2) Under certain situations, a dictatorship is preferable; (3) For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic government or non-democratic government.” We also asked respondents to rate whether democracy is suitable or unsuitable for Korea.

By combining these two questions, we identify three types of individuals with varying degrees of democratic support: democrats, hybrids, and authoritarians. *Democrats* express a firm preference for democracy over its alternatives and believe it is suitable for Korea. *Hybrids* are reluctant to agree with either preferability of democracy over authoritarianism or its suitability for Korea. *Authoritarians* reject both. Thus, the first type is fully supportive of democracy, and the other two types are partially and completely unsupportive, respectively.

To measure citizens’ attitudes toward representative or participatory forms of democratic practice, we employed two questions. The first was, “Which of the following three do you think is a better way of deciding important policies of state? (1) Elected representatives decide with professional bureaucrats; (2) Elected representatives decide with parties through public hearings; (3) People participate and decide, for instance, through a referendum.” The second was, “With which of the following statements do you agree most? (1) Opportunities for electoral and political participation should be reduced from the current level; (2) Opportunities for electoral and political participation should be maintained at the current level; (3) Opportunities for electoral and political participation should be increased from the current level.”

Regarding the operationalization of public attitudes toward participatory versus representative forms of democratic governing, it should be noted that consensus has not been reached in the literature.<sup>43</sup> In the European context, because Switzerland is an exemplary case of direct democracy, some researchers use it as a reference point, asking whether the country under study needs

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authoritarianism. The results are similar to that for suitability of democracy. Whether we use authoritarian rejection or suitability, the results reported in this study do not change.

43. Kathryn VanderMolen, “Stealth Democracy Revisited,” *Political Research Quarterly* 70:3 (2017): 687–98.

TABLE 1. South Koreans' Support for Democracy and Governing Form

<i>Support for Democracy</i>				
Preferability	Suitability	Democrats	Hybrids	Authoritarians
69.9%	85.9%	65.3%	26.0%	8.7%
<i>Support for Participatory and Representative Forms of Governing</i>				
Participation in government decisions, such as by referendum	More opportunities for elections and participation	Participatory	Partially participatory	Representative
52.2%	59.1%	35.2%	41.4%	23.4%

SOURCE: By authors

reform to move toward Swiss direct democracy.<sup>44</sup> Others conceptualize participatory citizens as those who disagree with the questions of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse in *Stealth Democracy*.<sup>45</sup>

However, it should be considered in this case that Korean democracy takes a strict representative form, and direct and participatory methods are not widely used. To adapt to this context, we asked respondents how much they prefer participatory democracy in comparison to the current practice of representative democracy. Combining the two questions, we identify three types of citizens: participatory, partially participatory, and representative. *Participatory* citizens think a referendum is necessary (response 3) and political participation should be increased (3). *Representative* citizens endorse the current practice (2) or agree that political participation should be reduced and elected leaders should decide national affairs (1). *Partially participatory* citizens demand more participation (3) in one of the two questions.

Do Koreans support democracy over authoritarianism? If so, do they prefer the current representative form, introduced and practiced over the last three decades, or do they demand participatory reforms? About 70% say that democracy is always preferred to any other kind of government (Table 1).

44. Russell Dalton, Wilhelm Burkin, and Andrew Drummond, "Public Opinion and Direct Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 12:4 (2001):141-54; Donovan and Karp, "Popular Support for Direct Democracy."

45. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy*; Allen and Birch, "Process Preferences."

Although not reported in the table, about 20% say that authoritarianism is sometimes preferable in certain situations, and the other 10% are ambiguous or indifferent between democracy and authoritarianism. Public endorsement of the suitability of democracy is much higher than that of preferability. An overwhelming majority (86%) said that democracy is suitable for Korea.

Our findings are consistent with other recent studies. Park and Chu, analyzing the Asian Barometer Survey from 1996 to 2011, find that Koreans' unconditional support for democracy has risen in recent years.<sup>46</sup> It reached 66% in 2011, whereas it was as low as 43% in 2006, and there have been fluctuations since the late 1990s. They also find that the proportion of those who view democracy as suitable for Korea was below 70% in the 1990s, but exceeded 80% in 2011. We see slightly higher levels of both preferability and suitability of democracy than those from the 2011 Asian Barometer Survey. This trend of democratic support among the Korean electorate suggests that new generations socialized after the democratic transition accept democracy as a legitimate regime and that authoritarianism has difficulty taking social root among educated people.<sup>47</sup>

However, as our data indicate, this ongoing democratic cultural evolution does not mean that Korea is a complete democracy. When the preferability and suitability measures are combined, more than one-third of the respondents (34.7%) are hybrids who did not either consider democracy preferable to authoritarianism or find it suitable for Korea. Only 65% are unconditional supporters of democracy. Strikingly, about one-tenth (8.7%) turn out to be authoritarians who reject democracy and judge it unsuitable for Korea.

What specific forms of practicing democracy does the Korean electorate support? As Coppedge and colleagues suggest, democracy can be organized practically in various ways with the basic conditions for democracy being met.<sup>48</sup> For instance, a polity can take on a more or a less participatory form, along the

46. Park and Chu, "Trends in Attitudes."

47. Russell Dalton and Doh Shin, "Growing up Democratic: Generational Change in East Asian Democracies," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 15:3 (2014): 345–72.

48. Michael Coppedge et al., "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach," *Perspectives on Politics* 9:2 (2011): 247–67. Political support follows various forms of democracy and authoritarianism. Some examples include participatory, social, liberal, and illiberal democrats and non-democrats. Tianjian Shi, *Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Tom Ulbricht, "Perceptions and Conceptions of Democracy: Applying Thick Concepts of Democracy to Reassess Desires for Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 51:11 (2018):1387–1440.



participatory–representative spectrum. As political discontent has increased across affluent Western democracies, scholars have started to question whether representative democracy is still legitimate or whether it is in crisis owing to the participatory aspirations of massed citizens.<sup>49</sup> This debate is ongoing, but little is known about whether new democracies follow such a trend.

Our survey shows that Korean democracy is not different from advanced democracies in that it is also faced with increasing participatory aspirations of massed citizens. For instance, 52% of the respondents agree that major national affairs should be determined directly by mass participation such as a referendum, and 59% believe that more participatory opportunities should be offered to the people. Although not reported in the table, only 26% think that elected representatives should be the ones who decide national affairs, along with professional bureaucrats. The rest (22%) prefer the status quo, whereby representatives make decisions in partnership with parties and through public hearings. Regarding political participation, about 12% say that participation should be restricted, and 29% say it should be maintained at the current level, while the rest believe it should be increased. In short, our data indicate that most Koreans disagree with the current form of representative democracy but aspire to participatory democracy, demanding more mass participation in politics.

With these two dimensions considered together, those strictly adhering to a representative form of governing are the smallest minority, at 23%. Citizens with fully participatory orientations make up 35% of the respondents, and those supportive of only one dimension of the two constitute 41%. Because the fully and the partially participatory citizens are both against the current practice of Korean representative democracy, they can be considered “revisionists.” Our finding that most Koreans endorse participatory reforms is similar to the trend in the advanced democracies.<sup>50</sup>

It seems that most Koreans are not satisfied with the current system of political decision-making and political participation. Reflecting the particularity of Korean politics, as Choi points out, political decision-making on national issues has been carried out by a strong president in an exclusive way, obviously marring the checks-and-balances system and the rule of

49. Alonso, Keane, and Merkel, *Future of Representative Democracy*; Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*.

50. Dalton et al., “Public Opinion and Direct Democracy”; Donovan and Karp, “Popular Support for Direct Democracy.”

law.<sup>51</sup> Electoral participation is strictly regulated by the National Election Law, and freedom of expression has been restricted by the government's abuse of various laws, such as the National Security Law<sup>52</sup> and the National Law on Assembly and Demonstration, under the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments.<sup>53</sup> Those laws neither exist nor are abused in advanced democracies. These results imply that Korean representative democracy has failed to satisfy the democratic standards of massed citizens.

What kind of democracy do Korean citizens support? Which types of democrats and non-democrats are more prevalent? To answer these questions, we dichotomize the two dimensions of support for representative democracy. In particular, concerning the first dimension—support for democracy at the regime level—we categorize the respondents into two groups, democrats and non-democrats. Non-democrats are operationalized by combining hybrids and authoritarians, which both reject the current state of Korean democracy as a legitimate regime. With regard to support for forms of democratic governing, we code fully participatory and partially participatory citizens (named “revisionists” above) as participatory, and the rest as representative.

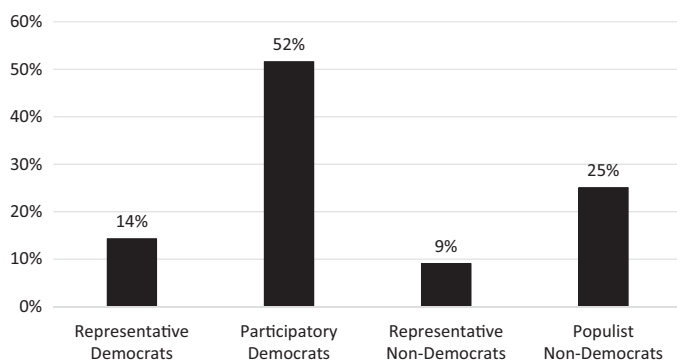
Figure 2 shows the distribution of the four types of Korean citizens according to their support for democracy as a regime (democrats vs. non-democrats) and their preference for governing forms (representative vs. participatory). Participatory democrats (52%) outnumber the other three types combined (48%). Only 14% are representative democrats, who unconditionally support democracy as a regime and acknowledge the leading role of elected officials in ruling national affairs. This clearly indicates that the current state of Korean representative democracy is incongruent with the Korean public attitudes toward democracy.

51. Choi, *Democracy after Democratization*.

52. The National Security Law was enacted on the basis of the public safety law of Japanese colonial rule when Korea was founded in 1948. This law was designed to remove communists as well as associations and activities related to North Korea in the name of protecting the liberal democratic order. Its scope was expanded in the authoritarian period. During this period, the law was widely abused to restrict the civil liberties of citizens and oppress opposition party leaders and democratic activists. Even after the 1987 democratic transition, this law was not changed. Although its application has been moderated, the United Progressive Party, which had five seats in the National Assembly, was disbanded by this law in 2014.

53. Stephan Haggard and Jong-Sung You, “Freedom of Expression in South Korea,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45:1 (2015): 167–79.

FIGURE 2. Prevalence of Four Types of Support for Democracy and Governing Form in South Korea



SOURCE: By authors

It is apparent that the participatory revisionists in Korean democracy come from two directions. First, it is participatory democrats who constitute the vast majority of the revisionist group. They are considered the driving force for further reforms of Korean democracy. Second, there are the populist non-democrats. This group neither endorses democracy as a legitimate regime nor accepts the concept of representative government. We conclude that Korean democracy is challenged by two cultural cleavages: democracy versus authoritarianism, and participatory versus representative forms of governing.

What do our findings imply for the contentious nature of Korean democracy? Our survey was conducted about a year before the 2016–17 candlelight protests erupted. Because we included questions about forms of governing, our study explored a new dimension of the mass political culture behind Korean democracy. The results reported here indicate that Korean democracy is pressured by strong participatory democrats on the one hand and populist non-democratic aspirations on the other. Both groups are participatory, but they have completely different goals.

In the 2016–17 protests, ordinary Koreans were united against the Park Geun-hye government, beyond the traditional cleavages of Korean politics defined by ideologies and regions. During the middle of the candlelight protests, however, tens of thousands of elderly, radical conservatives organized counter-candlelight and anti-impeachment rallies in support of Park Geun-hye. The “national flag” (*taegukgi*) protesters blamed political parties and the

National Assembly for their inability and unwillingness to rescue President Park from her predicament. They demanded that she be immediately released from prosecution—and that the army rise up, the National Assembly be dissolved, and martial law be imposed, to restore order in Korean society.<sup>54</sup>

The candlelight demonstrators and the national flag demonstrators were both participatory but had completely different attitudes toward democracy. This again confirms our finding that Korean democracy is pressured by strong participatory orientations on the one hand and populist non-democratic aspirations on the other. This is why Korean democracy has not been able to be institutionalized and remains unstable. It appears that the contentious style of Korean democracy is congruent with a mass political culture characterized by the interaction of these two conflicting forces: the participatory democrats and the populist non-democrats.

The final question remains: Who are the participatory democrats and the populist non-democrats? Direct observation of the candlelight protests and the national flag counter-demonstrations suggests that the two groups have opposite backgrounds. Is this simple inference valid? Table 2 shows the distribution of the participatory democrats and the populist non-democrats across six variables: generation, education, region, income, ideology, and party identification.<sup>55</sup>

The socioeconomic and political differences between participatory democrats and populist non-democrats are evident. Among the six variables, the differences in generation, ideology, and party identification stand out. Participatory democrats tend to be younger, progressive, and Democratic Party supporters. Only a small minority are older, conservative, or Saenuri (Liberty) Party supporters. Education is another factor that strongly distinguishes participatory democrats from populist non-democrats. Among those with a college degree and above, 61% are participatory democrats, while only 17% are populist non-democrats. We find the opposite pattern in the least educated category, where populist non-democrats outnumber participatory democrats 47% to 28%. Concerning income, the mode for participatory democrats is the middle-income category, while for populist non-democrats it is the low-income segment. Finally, participatory democrats are relatively

54. Chris Sommerfeldt, "Deadly Protests Break Out after the Removal of South Korea's Impeached President," *New York Daily News*, March 10, 2017.

55. Because we are interested in identifying their socioeconomic and political backgrounds, we use descriptive statistics rather than regression analysis.

TABLE 2. Socioeconomic and Political Differences of Participatory Democrats and Populist Non-Democrats in South Korea

	<i>Participatory democrats</i>	<i>Populist non-democrats</i>
Generation		
19–39	65%	21%
40–59	50%	24%
60+	29%	35%
Education		
Less than high school	28%	47%
High school and junior college	45%	31%
College and above	61%	17%
Region		
Seoul/Gyeonggi/Others	54%	22%
Chungcheong	45%	32%
Jeolla	57%	25%
Gyeongsang	47%	28%
Monthly income		
Less than US\$ 2,715	42%	34%
US\$ 2,715–4,515	57%	22%
US\$ 4,525 +	54%	20%
Ideology		
Conservative	31%	32%
Center	52%	26%
Progressive	70%	17%
Party Identification		
Saenuri	30%	29%
Democratic	74%	12%
Independent and minorities	55%	26%

SOURCE: By authors

more prevalent in Jeolla and the capital area (Seoul and Gyeonggi region) than in Chungcheong, although the difference is small. However, populist non-democrats are smallest in number in the capital region. Consistent with the

expectation of modernization and cognitive mobilization theories,<sup>56</sup> these findings explain why the candlelight protests were particularly strong and highly concentrated in Seoul and why young, educated, and progressive citizens were the main participants.<sup>57</sup>

What do these results lead us to infer about Korean democracy? The positive side is that Korean democracy is nearly free from breakdowns. The public's support for democracy has steadily risen over time, and the rejection of its alternatives remains solid. Corroborating the findings of previous studies,<sup>58</sup> 85% of our respondents reject authoritarianism, and unconditional support for democracy is about 70%, high enough to prevent a slide back to authoritarianism. As demonstrated in the latest candlelight protests, these cultural forces have saved democracy at the regime level from its deconsolidation in Korea.

But there is also a negative side. Korean representative democracy is likely to continue to be unstable and contentious. Unlike in the Western democracies, where representative government and other democratic institutions have been institutionalized over centuries,<sup>59</sup> the system of representative democracy is not yet institutionalized and lacks solid social, historical roots in Korea. Korean democracy devolved into dictatorship shortly after its beginning, and authoritarian rule lasted for several decades. And Korean representative democracy is now being challenged by the participatory aspirations of both democratic and non-democratic groups.

Our findings suggest that steady social and economic modernization increases the participatory aspirations of massed citizens, but it is limited in strengthening the feeble representative institutions in Korea. Though participatory and democratic orientations are prevalent among young, educated, middle-class citizens living in urban capital areas, the weak foundations of representative agencies, such as political parties and interest groups, have been an enduring problem in Korea.<sup>60</sup> Together, participatory mass culture and feeble representative institutions have kept Korean democracy contentious and unstable.

56. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*; Dalton and Welzel, *Civic Culture Transformed*.

57. Lee, "Who and Why Participated."

58. See e.g. Park and Chu, "Trends in Attitudes."

59. Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Stasavage, "Representation and Consent."

60. Kim, "Contentious Democracy"; Oh, "Strong State and Strong Civil Society."

## CONCLUSION

This research began with a question of why Korean democracy has faced large-scale protests and remained unstable despite three decades of democratic advancements and steady economic development. Taking the cultural approach and using data from a nationwide survey conducted in 2015, we find that public support for democracy and participation is dominant among ordinary Koreans. This democratic and participatory culture is especially pronounced among the post-transition generations and the educated segments of its citizenry.

These findings have important implications for Korean politics and comparative democratization. Prior studies of Korean politics attribute the contentious nature of Korean democracy to ineffective representative institutions, especially the parties.<sup>61</sup> According to them, strong social movements have persisted because political parties have failed to expand social bases and channel various interests in representative politics. However, this study has demonstrated that under-institutionalized parties are just part of the story of unstable Korean democracy. The other side, which has received less attention, is the rise of participatory orientations among massed citizens due to steady social and economic modernization.

Furthermore, the existing literature on Korean politics is limited in explaining how civic activism has been reinforced despite the decline of civic associationalism since the 2000s. Although studies have identified specific actors in recent social movements, they are not able to address the resilient persistence of strong civic activism. Our analysis suggests that the tradition of civic activism has been reinforced by participatory mass culture rather than the organizational capacity of civic associations.

With regard to comparative democratization, this in-depth study of Korean democracy raises an issue about the relationship between modernization and democratic stability. According to modernization theory, social and economic development is conducive to stable democracy.<sup>62</sup> However, our findings suggest that this does not hold in Korea, which is a hyper-modern society. Even since the transition period, Korean democracy has remained unstable, with under-institutionalized parties and party system, despite the country's steady

61. Lee, "Diverging Patterns"; Kim, "'Contentious Democracy?'"

62. Diamond, "East Asia amid the Receding Tide"; Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: the Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

economic development and social modernization.<sup>63</sup> Thus, social and economic development contributes to the survival of Korean democracy, but it does not help institutionalize and stabilize it, while inspiring participatory attitudes among young, educated, and urban citizens.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, related to the previous point that successful modernization does not necessarily translate into stable democracy, our analysis raises the Huntingtonian concern that participation must be balanced with institutionalization, or political instability is inevitable.<sup>65</sup> We believe that this explains why many new democracies remain unstable, with an increasing number of protests in recent years.<sup>66</sup> Over the last three decades, average GDP per capita has increased threefold worldwide, and more than 100 countries have introduced elections and allowed multiparty competition. Yet, many of the new democracies do not perform well and suffer from weak institutionalization of representative politics, producing a “democratic deficit.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, because world GDP per capita started to decline in 2014 and inequality of income as well as assets has worsened, it is reasonable to conclude that the political instability of new democracies is likely to spread in the near future.

63. Aurel Croissant and Philip Völkel, “Party System Types and Party System Institutionalization,” *Party Politics* 18:2 (2012): 235–65; Olli Hellmann, “Party System Institutionalization without Parties: Evidence from Korea,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 14:1 (2014): 53–84.

64. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*; Dalton and Shin, “Growing up Democratic”; Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, “Modernization: Theories and Facts,” *World Politics* 49:2 (1997): 155–83.

65. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

66. Carothers and Youngs, *Complexities of Global Protests*.

67. Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.