

South Korean Democratization: A Comparative Empirical Appraisal

Jung Kim

May 2016

Knowledge-Net for a Better World

The East Asia Institute (EAI) is a nonprofit and independent research organization in Korea, founded in May 2002. The EAI strives to transform East Asia into a society of nations based on liberal democracy, market economy, open society, and peace.

The EAI takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

 EAI is a registered trademark.

Copyright © 2016 by EAI

This electronic publication of EAI intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Copies may not be duplicated for commercial purposes. Unauthorized posting of EAI documents to a non-EAI website is prohibited. EAI documents are protected under copyright law.

“South Korean Democratization: A Comparative Empirical Appraisal”
ISBN 979-11-86226-91-9 95340

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Euljiro 158
Jung-gu, Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683
Fax 82 2 2277 1684



South Korean Democratization: A Comparative Empirical Appraisal

Jung Kim
University of North Korean Studies
May 2016

Introduction

The literature on South Korean democratization is copious, providing us analytic historical narratives on zigzagged democratization processes or ordered systematic evaluation of uneven democratic achievements of this polity. Among others, Adesnik and Kim (2013), Chu and Im (2013), and Im (2010) represent a subset of the most recent notable contributions to the edited collections that have a wide audience in the field. In this paper that attempts to appraise the evolution of South Korea's democracy, I depart from these noble scholarly traditions not because I think that their works are irrelevant, but because I believe that such departure can complement their work.

The first departure is from the tradition of single- or small-number comparative studies to that of large-number comparative one. While scholars of South Korean democratization have produced a substantial number of studies on the issue, most of existing works are single- or small-number comparative case studies. Recognizing the costs of diminishing in-depth analysis, I put the case of South Korean democratization in wider comparative perspective to enlarge the empirical width. Second, I employ empirical data that travels across space and time relatively freely to broaden the comparative scope of analysis, acknowledging the costs of diminishing context-sensitivity of local data derived solely from South Korean sources. Whenever it is relevant, I endeavor to place our case in the cross-national context with comparable empirical data to estimate the accurate location of South Korea's democracy with precise measures.

With these methodological switches, this paper traces the evolution of South Korea's democracy by focusing on two interconnected questions: (1) what most aptly characterizes South Korean democratization; and (2) why has South Korea's democracy evolved as it has.

In the next section, I attempt to assess South Korean democratization with an emphasis on descriptive inference. To bring order to the discussion, I propose a conceptual scheme that generates three distinctive characterizations: democratic completion, democratic erosion, and democratic stagnation. I conduct a comparative empirical study to examine the validity of each por-



trayal with empirical data from other fellow third-wave democracies. I close this section, showing that South Korean democratization is characterized by neither democratic completion nor democratic erosion. Interpretations of empirical evidence supports that the most suitable description of South Korean democratization is democratic stagnation. The penultimate section deals with what best accounts for democratic stagnation in South Korea. Decomposing democracy into the elements of contestation and accountability, I begin to uncover the uneven development between the two components of democracy. I also examine the validity of the constitutional design hypothesis and of the party system hypothesis in explaining the accountability deficit in South Korean democratization. I conclude this paper with the finding that South Korea's democratic stagnation is attributable to the political party system that remains under-institutionalized.

Descriptive Assessments of South Korean Democratization

Contending Characterizations

For students of democratization, the evolution of South Korea's democracy seems to defy an easy characterization. Some confidently qualify it as a fully consolidated "miraculous" democracy (Diamond 2013; Chu and Im 2013; Hahm 2008). Typically, Hahm (2008) argues that "South Korea's democratic development was made possible through pact-making between unlikely political partners," so that "there are still areas in which democratization and liberalization need to make more progress, but the foundations of a liberal-democratic order have been consolidated (141)."

Others are somewhat ambivalent about its status, claiming that it is "at a crossroads" between democratic development and decay (Heo 2013; Yun and Min 2012; Kim 2012; Im 2010). For instance, Kim (2012) insists that whether underdeveloped political parties prove to be "a temporary problem in an evolving innovative experiment with creating a new type of democracy," or "a fatal flaw that will undermine and potentially unravel South Korean democracy, remains to be seen (61)."

Still others anxiously declare a "crisis" in South Korean democracy as a serious decline in democratic performance has been detected (Haggard and You 2015; Kang and Kang 2014; You 2014; Choi 2012). Among others, You (2014) contends that "whereas South Korea has been widely considered a "consolidated democracy," it has experienced deterioration in freedom of expression and overall civil liberties during the past few years, rendering its liberal democracy in serious jeopardy (35)." All in all, it appears that the scholarly discussion on South Korean democratization is thrown into disarray.

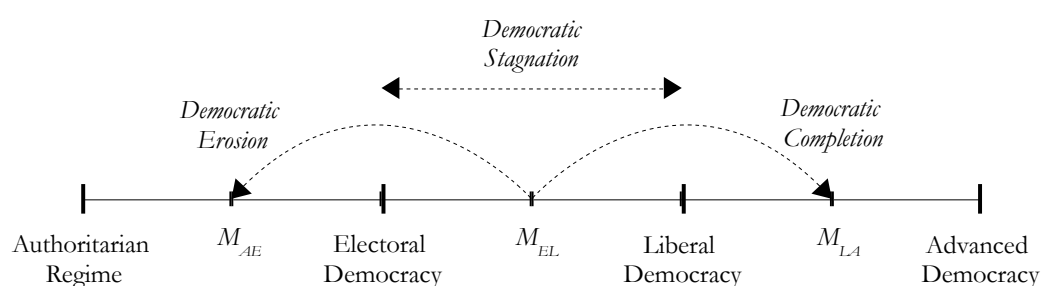
To bring order to the chaos in understanding how South Korea's democracy has evolved, building on Schedler (2010), I propose a conceptual map of the democratization process with four distinct regime types. Figure 1 illustrates a graphical representation of a one-dimensional continuum of democratization process in which an authoritarian regime, which has no attributes of democracy at all, is at the one end of the continuum, and advanced democracy, which has all the attributes of democracy, is at the other. Departing from an authoritarian regime toward advanced



democracy, a country may cross the first threshold of electoral democracy. Crossing the first threshold requires that the state have an essential attribute of democracy: contestation, or the extent to which government offices are filled by free and fair multiparty elections. Reaching the second threshold in the democratization process requires that the state acquire another attribute of democracy: accountability, or the extent to which government power is decentralized and constrained.¹

The strategy of cumulative conceptualization departs from the “consolidology” tradition that has suffered from conceptual confusion. Through this conceptualization, democratization can be characterized as the creation of a “combination of two sets of institutions—democratic ones that ensure that governments are accountable to popular choice, and liberal ones that provide for a rule of law (Fukuyama 2010: 33).” Accordingly, democratic outcomes can be evaluated by both (1) the extent to which political institutions “ensure the ultimate sovereignty of the people;” and (2) the extent to which political institutions limit “the day-to-day rule of the majority so that it does not infringe upon the rights of individuals or minorities (Plattner 2010: 84).” To yield a clear-cut conceptual separation, borrowing from Mazzuca (2007), let an “access-to-power” regime denote a set of institutions that governs contestation of the electoral process that constitutes the government and a “exercise-of-power” regime denote a set of institutions that governs accountability of the policy process that constrains the government.² This conceptual exercise reveals that so-called “two-turnover test,” which has been repeatedly employed to show evidence of democratic consolidation by scholars, is unlikely to meet our empirical purpose here since it is primarily designed to examine only the quality of the access-to-power regime without considering that of the exercise-of-power regime.³

Figure 1. Democratic Completion, Erosion, or Stagnation



Source: Schedler (2010: 62) with author’s modifications.

In light of the democratization process depicted in Figure 1, I attempt to reorder the debates on the evolution of South Korea’s democracy. First, most students of democratization agree that South Korea can be located somewhere along the continuum between electoral democracy and liberal democracy. It is too difficult to precisely estimate South Korea’s location on the democratization continuum. However, it may be possible to reasonably determine an interval within which



South Korea's democratic development falls. Most scholars could agree that South Korea's democratization is within an interval that does not extend as far as authoritarianism and advanced democracy, but that exceeds electoral democracy and falls short of liberal democracy. In particular, South Korea's democratization is likely within an interval centered on M_{EL} —the mid-point between electoral democracy and liberal democracy—and extends to M_{AE} —the mid-point between authoritarian regime and electoral democracy—and M_{LA} —the mid-point between liberal democracy and advanced democracy.

Second, scholars diverge on the direction of change in the evolution of South Korea's democracy. Some argue that South Korea's democracy is moving from M_{EL} to M_{LA} , cutting across the threshold of liberal democracy. For them, South Korea has progressed towards democratic completion with accumulating democratic attributes on top of contestation and accountability. For others who express concern over a crisis situation, South Korea is regressing from M_{EL} to M_{AE} , passing across the threshold of electoral democracy. That is to say, they hold that it has retreated in the direction of democratic erosion, losing democratic attributes such as accountability or even contestability. Last, for those who are uncertain about the direction in which South Korea is moving, it is swaying back and forth around M_{EL} , fluctuating between electoral democracy and liberal democracy. In other words, it has oscillated between democratic completion and democratic erosion.⁴

In a nutshell, scholars have proposed three contending characterizations of South Korean democratization: (1) democratic completion—a forward-looking movement from electoral democracy to liberal democracy and beyond; (2) democratic erosion—a retrograde movement from liberal democracy toward electoral democracy and beyond; or (3) democratic stagnation—an undetermined tendency to vacillate between electoral democracy and liberal democracy.

Empirical Adjudication

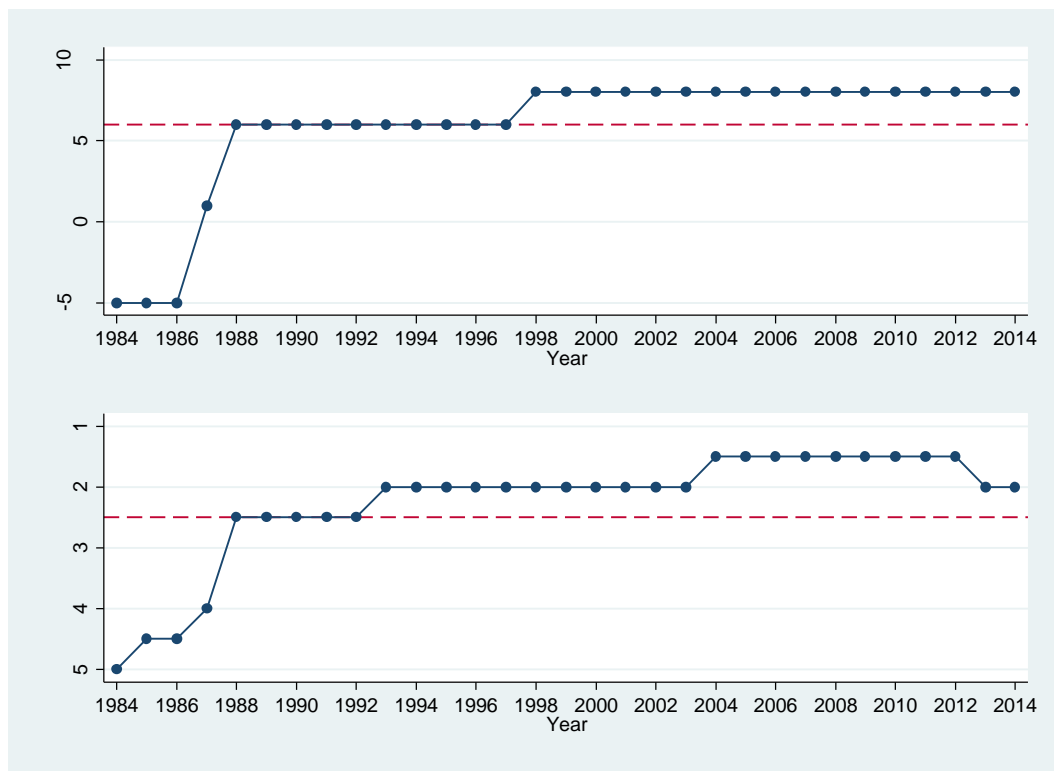
Which characterization is the most apt portrayal of the evolution of South Korea's democracy is ultimately an empirical question. To adjudicate on the debate, I employ two measures that are commonly used in the political science literature—Polity and Freedom House scores. Since the two indicators share the procedures to combine contestation and accountability measures in producing aggregate democracy scores, they nicely jibe with our conceptual map. Moreover, they measure distinctive facets of democracy: the Polity score underscores democracy's institutional quality while the Freedom House score stresses democracy's political attainments. As they differ in emphasis, it is empirically possible to appraise the evolution of South Korean democracy at each of both observed levels (Pop-Eleches 2007).

Specifically, the Polity score has two-dimensional institutional properties: (1) “the presence of institutions and procedures through which citizens can express effective preferences about alternative policies and leaders,” which corresponds to the institutional quality of access-to-power regime; and (2) “the existence of institutionalized constraints on the exercise of power by the executive” (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2014: 14), which corresponds to the institutional quality of exercise-of-power regime.⁵ Likewise, the Freedom House score consists of two-dimensional political



outcomes: (1) the extent to which a country can “enjoy a wide range of political rights,” which indicates the political attainments of access-to-power regime; and (2) the extent to which a country can “enjoy a wide range of civil liberties,” which indicates the political attainments of exercise-of-power regime (Freedom House 2015).⁶ Disaggregating the two composite indices into their separate components enables us to develop a more fine-tuned characterization of the democratization process.

Figure 2. Level of Democracy in South Korea, 1984-2014



Note: Dashed line indicates the threshold score into democracy for each measure.

Sources: Polity score available at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html>; Freedom House score available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world> (accessed on August 24, 2015).

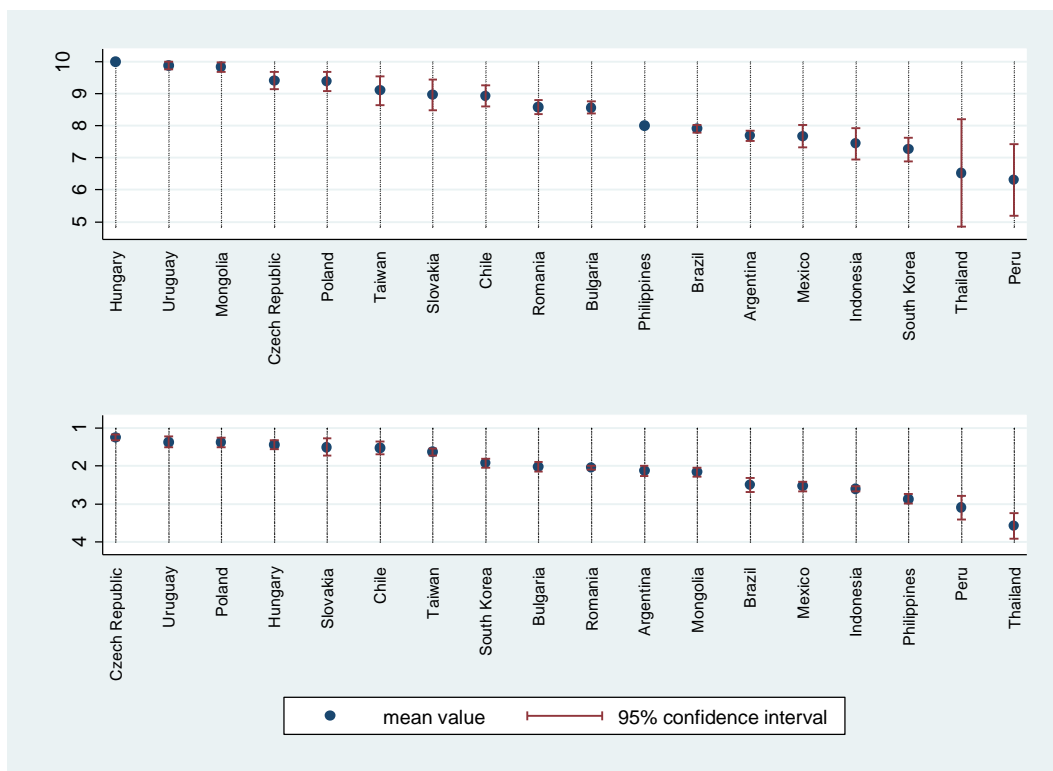
Let us start with the descriptive assessment of South Korean democratization at the aggregate level. Figure 2 shows the longitudinal change in the level of South Korea’s democracy over the past three decades. To align our conceptual scheme with empirical measures, I set the Polity score of 6 and the Freedom House score of 2.5, respectively, as the threshold into electoral democracy and the Polity score of 10 and the Freedom House score of 1, respectively, as the establishment of liberal democracy. Concomitantly, I match the Polity score of 8 and the Freedom House score of 1.75, respectively, to the status of M_{EL} —the halfway between electoral democracy and liberal democracy. First, the temporal trend of the Polity score shows that the institutional quality of South Korea’s democracy, after staying at the level of borderline electoral democracy during the first



decade of democratization since 1988, rose to the level of M_{EL} and remained unchanged up until 2014. In other words, the institutional quality of South Korea’s democracy, once it reached M_{EL} , has not changed and could be moving either in the direction of democratic completion or in the direction of democratic erosion.

Second, the temporal trend of the Freedom House score indicates that the political attainments of South Korea’s democracy, departing from the level of borderline electoral democracy after the first four years of democratization since 1988, was first upgraded to the level closer to M_{EL} in 1993, then improved past M_{EL} to the level closer to liberal democracy in 2004, and finally downgraded across M_{EL} to the level closer to electoral democracy in 2013 without any change up until 2014. Put simply, the political attainments of South Korea’s democracy, once it left the state of fledgling electoral democracy, have been oscillating around M_{EL} without a definite course of direction. Ultimately, empirical evidence seems to demonstrate that democratic stagnation is a better characterization of South Korean democratization over time than either democratic completion or democratic erosion.

Figure 3. Level of Democracy in Third-wave Democracies



Note: The level of each democracy is estimated by calculating the mean value of the Polity score and of the Freedom House score with 95% confidence interval from the year of democratic transition until 2014.

Source: See Figure 2.



Some may argue that the democratic stagnation that characterizes the evolution of South Korea's democracy is not a particularly unique phenomenon among third-wave democracies whose democratic experiences are relatively short. To examine the validity of this claim, I sample seventeen fellow third-wave democracies in East Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.⁷ The upper panel of Figure 3 illustrates information about the mean value of the Polity scores for the sample countries from their respective democratic transition until 2014 with a 95% confidence interval. States may be categorized reasonably as follows: (1) the group of countries that have progressed in the direction of democratic completion—Bulgaria, Chile, Czech Republic, Hungary, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Taiwan, and Uruguay; (2) the group of countries that have stagnated at the equidistance between electoral democracy and liberal democracy—Argentina, Brazil, the Philippines, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Korea; and (3) the group of countries that have degenerated in the direction of democratic erosion—Peru and Thailand.⁸

Likewise, the lower panel of Figure 3 shows information about the mean value of the Freedom House score of sample countries from their respective democratic transition until 2014 with 95% confidence interval. Again, states are categorized as follows: (1) the cluster of nations that have moved toward democratic completion—Chile, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Taiwan, and Uruguay; (2) the cluster of nations that have oscillated between electoral democracy and liberal democracy—Argentina, Bulgaria, Mongolia, Romania, and South Korea; and (3) the cluster of nations that have moved toward democratic erosion—Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines, and Thailand.⁹

Table 1. Variants of Democratization Outcomes in Third-wave Democracies

		Political Attainments		
		Democratic Completion	Democratic Stagnation	Democratic Erosion
Institutional Quality	Democratic Completion	Chile, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Taiwan, Uruguay	Bulgaria, Mongolia, Romania	--
	Democratic Stagnation	--	Argentina, South Korea	Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines
	Democratic Erosion	--	--	Peru, Thailand

Note: Author's classification based on Figures 2 and 3.



Combining both findings into a three-by-three matrix for taxonomical purposes generates Table 1, which classifies variants of democratization outcomes in our sample third-wave democracies along two dimensions—institutional quality and political attainments. It seems clear that democratic stagnation is far from universal among younger third-wave democracies. On the contrary, a majority of countries have reached liberal democracy on both dimensions—Chile, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Taiwan, and Uruguay—or at least on the dimension of institutional quality—Bulgaria, Mongolia, and Romania. It appears that characterizing South Korean democratization as democratic completion has little empirical foundation. At the same time, the characterization of the evolution of South Korea’s democracy as democratic erosion is also empirically unfounded. Unlike those countries that have regressed into authoritarian regimes on both dimensions—Peru and Thailand—or at least on the dimension of political attainments—Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, and the Philippines—South Korea’s democracy has never crossed the threshold into the zone of non-democracy. In short, along with the Argentine case, South Korean democratization is most aptly characterized as democratic stagnation.

Causal Assessments of South Korean Democratization

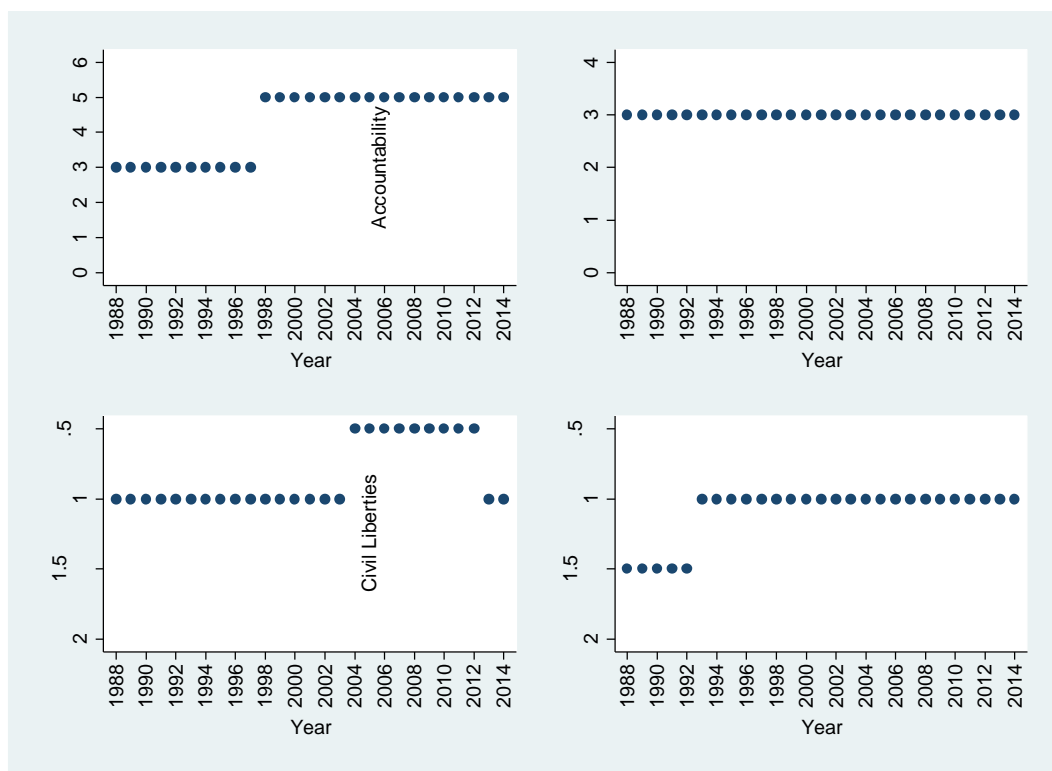
Constitutional Design

Characterizing the evolution of South Korea’s democracy as being in a state of democratic stagnation begs an obvious question: what can account for its undetermined oscillation between electoral democracy and liberal democracy over the past nearly thirty years? A convenient starting point for our analysis is the finding in the previous section that democracy’s stagnant institutional quality is tightly coupled with democracy’s stagnant political attainments in the country. To elaborate on institutional sources of political outcomes, borrowing the “partial regime” approach from Schmitter (2010), I break down our empirical measures into their constituent parts—contestation and accountability in the Polity score and political rights and civil liberties in the Freedom House score—from 1988 to 2014 in South Korea. Figure 4 illustrates the results.

First, except for the most recent two years, the temporal trend of political rights, which is shown in the lower-left panel with a highest value of 0.5, roughly corresponds to that of contestation, which is shown in the upper-left panel with a maximum value of 6. That is to say, as the institutional quality of the access-to-power regime improves by two points, political attainments of access-to-power regime reach the highest status. This temporal change implies that, on the dimension of access-to-power regime, South Korea’s democracy had actually moved in the direction of democratic completion until recently.¹⁰



Figure 4. Decomposition of Democracy Scores in South Korea, 1988-2014



Source: See Figure 2.

Second, the temporal trend of civil liberties, which is shown in the lower-right panel with a highest value of 0.5, except for the earlier years, roughly corresponds to that of accountability, which is shown in the upper-right panel with maximum value of 4. To put it differently, as the institutional quality of the exercise-of-power regime remains unmoved at the intermediate level, so does political attainment of exercise-of-power regime. This temporal non-change suggests that the strong tendency of stasis in South Korean democratization observed at the aggregate level has mostly stemmed from the exercise-of-power regime.

In short, the decomposition of our empirical measures provides a critical clue to solve the puzzle: democratic stagnation does not result from the institutional improvement of access-to-power regime that governs contestation of electoral process that constitutes the government; rather it is rooted in the institutional stasis of the exercise-of-power regime that governs the accountability of policy process that constrains the government.¹¹

This finding prompts the question of uneven democratic development between access-to-power regime and exercise-of-power regime: why have South Koreans underachieved in the ideal of limited government while they have overachieved in the ideal of popular government?

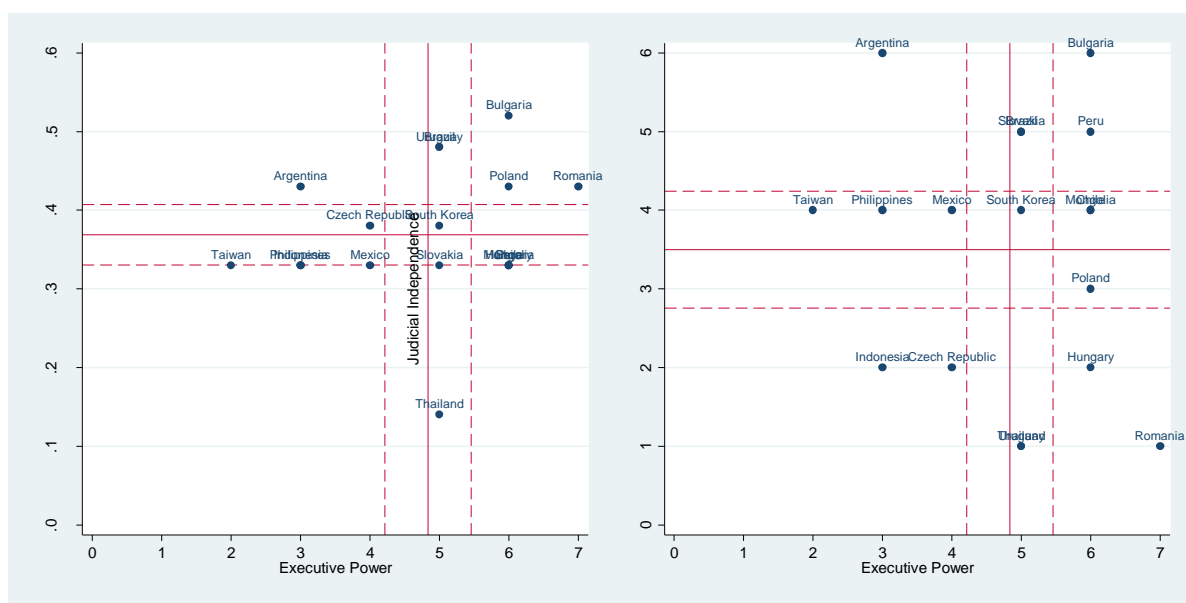
Some may contend that the accountability deficit of South Korea's democracy is essentially derived from a constitutional design that delegates extremely strong power to the executive vis-à-vis the legislature and the judiciary in the separation-of-powers system. For instance, in answering the question of why executives are capable of exercising strong discretion, Haggard and You



(2015) claim that “the constitution gives the president relatively strong powers vis-à-vis both other branches of government (177).” Likewise, Kasuya (2013), in a comparative analysis of the presidential systems in nine Asian countries, reveals that “the South Korean president is the strongest in terms of legislative powers (22).” Moreover, reviewing various aspects of constitutional and political reforms during democratization, Park (2010) concludes that “the critical limitations of South Korean democracy came from the constitutional system itself, not from the representative politics ... without the fundamental reform of the constitutional system and presidential power, any kind of political reforms including election, party and national assembly are not meaningful (385).”¹²

To scrutinize the empirical foundation of these arguments, I conduct a comparative analysis of the constitutional power of executives vis-à-vis legislatures and judiciaries in third-wave democracies using data collected by the Comparative Constitutions Project.¹³

Figure 5. Constitutional Power of Executive vis-à-vis Legislative and Judiciary in Third-wave Democracies



Note: Solid line indicates the mean value of each measure and dashed lines indicate 95% confidence interval of each measure.

Source: Comparative Constitutions Projects Rankings available at <http://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/ccp-rankings/> (accessed on August 24, 2015)

To interpret the results illustrated in Figure 5, it is crucial to recognize that the central trade-off in constitutional design is often characterized as being between the efficiency of executive and the checks-and-balances of legislative and judiciary. The efficiency gains in moving from weak to strong executive power yield increasing accountability costs, holding legislative or judicial power



constant. Likewise, the accountability gains in moving from weak to strong legislative or judicial power generate efficiency costs, holding the level of the executive power constant.

To minimize the tradeoff between efficiency and accountability, constitutional design should avoid two extremes: (1) extreme balance of powers: either too strong an executive with too strong a legislature or judiciary, which can produce policy stalemate, or too weak an executive with too weak a legislature or judiciary, which can produce policy ineffectiveness; and (2) extreme asymmetry of powers: either too strong an executive with too weak a legislature or judiciary, which can result in dominance of the executive, or too weak an executive with too strong a legislature or judiciary, which can immobilize the executive's policy agenda. Avoiding these two extremes enables us to identify a "sweet spot" in the design of constitutions (Carey and Hix 2011).

Figure 5 presents an illustration of this idea with empirical data. First, the left panel shows the constitutional power of the executive vis-à-vis the legislature among eighteen third-wave democracies. The x axis denotes executive power ranging from 2 (Taiwan) to 7 (Romania), with a mean of 4.8 and 95% confidence interval from 4.2 to 5.4. The y axis denotes legislative power ranging from .14 (Thailand) to .52 (Bulgaria), with a mean of .36 and 95% confidence interval from .33 to .40. The rectangle made by the intersections of dashed lines, which indicate 95% confidence intervals of executive and legislative powers, represents the sweet spot in constitutional design. This sweet spot is the location that minimizes the tradeoff between efficiency and accountability. Most countries that have moved toward democratic completion on both dimensions of institutional quality and political attainments—Chile, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Uruguay—are located very close to the sweet spot. The only exception is Taiwan. In this sense, the location of South Korea is surprising: it is the only country that falls in the sweet spot in the constitutional design of inter-branch relations between the executive and the legislature.

Second, the right panel displays the constitutional power of the executive vis-à-vis judiciary among eighteen third-wave democracies. Whereas the x axis denotes the same at the left panel, the y axis denotes judicial power, with results ranging from 1 (Romania, Thailand, and Uruguay) to 6 (Argentina and Bulgaria), with a mean of 3.5 and 95% confidence interval from 2.7 to 4.2. The rectangle made by the intersections of dashed lines, which indicate 95% confidence intervals of executive and judicial powers, represents the ideal constitutional design of separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary. While Chile, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia are located close to the sweet spot, Taiwan and Uruguay seem to be exceptions. Once again, the location of South Korea is surprising: it is the only country that falls in the sweet spot in the constitutional design of inter-branch relations between executive and judiciary. In a nutshell, among fellow third-world democracies, South Korea has the most desirable constitutional design of separation of powers in terms of minimizing the tradeoff between efficiency and accountability.



Party System

The finding means that if South Korea's separation-of-powers system had been working as the constitutional design stipulates, the problem of the accountability deficit might not have been as severe as to render its democratization stagnant. There emerges a puzzle: how has a liberal institution–constitutional design in the sweet spot–translated into an illiberal outcome–accountability deficit–in South Korea? This puzzle leads to the question of the causal agents that condition, shape, or even distort the relations between institutions and outcomes. In modern democracy, political institutions are connected to political outcomes by political parties, and South Korea is not an exception: political parties have been the double agents of electoral processes and policy processes in the democratic life cycle (Lupu 2015). What makes South Korea's parties exceptional is that they have been more agents of electoral contestation and less agents of accountability (Hellmann 2011: 34-66).

The identification of two simple patterns confirms the asymmetric roles of parties in the democratic process. First, every president since democratic transition has dissolved his or her party that was created for the electoral battle before his or her inauguration. President Roh Tae-woo broke Democratic Justice Party, which was the organizational foundation for winning the 1987 presidential election, crafting Democratic Liberal Party (DLP) in 1990. President Kim Young-sam sacked DLP, building New Korea Party in 1995. Subsequently, President Kim Dae-jung dismissed the National Congress for New Politics, which was the organizational base for winning the 1997 presidential election, making New Millennium Democratic Party (NMD) in 2000. In 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun terminated NMD, constructing Uri Party. Most recently, President Lee Myung-bak reorganized the Grand National Party, which was the organizational asset for winning the 2007 presidential election, assembling Saenuri Party in 2012.

In short, no president in the democratic period has ended his or her term with the same party to which he or she belonged at inauguration. Political parties are created as agents of electoral contestation, but because they are frequently demolished and reformulated, they do not survive long enough to constrain presidential policy activities. As a result, they are unable to hold the executive accountable. When parties as the agents of contestation are systematically incongruent with parties as agents of accountability, it is highly unlikely to perfect the institutional quality of exercise-of-power regime that shapes the accountability aspect of democracy.

Second, except for President Lee, every president elected since the democratic inception has been forced to leave his or her governing party while in office. President Roh Tae-woo left DLP in 1992 with 160 days remaining in his term. In 1997, President Kim Young-sam departed from GNP with 110 days remaining. President Kim Dae-jung withdrew from NMD in 2002 with 295 days remaining in his term. Finally, President Roh Moo-hyun left the United New Democratic Party that absorbed Uri Party in 2007 with 362 days remaining (Park 2010: 388). In sum, presidents had governed South Korea without the support of their political parties for more than two and a half years of their terms. When there are no institutional connections between presidents and governing parties, it is simply not possible to hold the executive accountable.



What has made “irresponsible party government” a norm in South Korea? As Schmitter (2010) points out, “many a new democracy has “shocked the experts” by consolidating as a regime without having first consolidated its party system (24)” and South Korea is not an exception. What makes South Korea’s party system distinctive is its extreme under-institutionalization. As Wong (2015) aptly summarizes, “the political party system in Korea is unstable, and lines of electoral competition are inconsistent, unpredictable, and not enduring (275).”

To gauge the degree of party system institutionalization, I employ one of the most commonly used indicators in the field of political science: electoral volatility. Electoral volatility calculates variation in aggregate party vote shares from one election to another. Low levels of electoral volatility reflect a stable pattern of competition among political parties and indicate that citizens are able to hold parties accountable. Contrastingly, high levels of electoral volatility demonstrate that parties are not held accountable to citizens. As a result, the birth of new parties, demise of existing parties, party switching, mergers, and party splits are rampant (Hicken and Kuhonta 2015).

Table 2. Electoral Volatility in Third-wave Democracies

	Years	Total Volatility	Within-System Volatility	Extra-System Volatility
Brazil	1986-2006	19.6	16.8	2.8
Chile	1989-2005	13.9	11	2.9
Uruguay	1984-2004	15.6	12.6	3
Hungary	1990-2002	30.1	26	4.1
Argentina	1983-2003	22.5	15.1	7.4
Mexico	1994-2006	20.6	13	7.6
Mongolia	1990-2004	32.2	24	8.2
Poland	1991-2005	45.5	30	15.5
Taiwan	1992-2001	20.3	3.8	16.4
Czech Republic	1990-2002	28.5	11.6	16.9
Philippines	1987-1998	44.8	27.1	17.8
Romania	1990-2004	46.5	23.8	22.7
Bulgaria	1990-2005	39.9	15.5	23.8
South Korea	1988-2004	36.6	9.9	26.7

Source: Mainwaring, Gervasoni, and España-Nájera (forthcoming).



Table 2, taken from Mainwaring, Gervasoni, and España-Nájera (forthcoming), displays the electoral volatility scores for South Korea alongside those of thirteen other third-wave democracies.¹⁴ The second column shows the period in which electoral data is collected. The third column contains the total volatility score, which is the sum of the within-system volatility and extra-system volatility. The former captures votes that are transferred from one existing party to another, and appears in the fourth column. The latter displays extra-system volatility, which occurs when shares of the votes are captured by new parties. According to Powell and Tucker (2013), while within-system volatility is “considered to be a healthy component of representative democracy, and essentially reallocates power between political actors that are already, by and large, a relevant part of the political process,” extra-system volatility is “much more closely associated with party system instability, and thus can pose very different challenges and problems for anyone trying to interact with political actors (124).” By disaggregating the total volatility into its separate components, it is possible to identify the source of aggregate volatility.

South Korea’s total volatility score indicates that party system institutionalization is atypically low. Additionally, within-system volatility is so low that little of the total electoral volatility in South Korea is explained by healthy inter-party competition. As such, extra-system electoral volatility, which is the highest of third-wave democracies examined, is the primary source of unhealthy and unstable inter-party electoral competition.¹⁵

By comparison, take the case of Hungary. In examining the high level of total electoral volatility, it might appear that the party system in Hungary is just as unstable as the system in South Korea. However, disaggregating the total electoral volatility into its constituent parts tells a different story. Hungary’s electoral volatility is mostly derived from healthy inter-party competition and very little can be attributed to extra-system electoral volatility. In other words, although South Korea and Hungary share the same level of electoral volatility, they differ in nature of volatility.

Ultimately, in South Korea the lack of government accountability is not due to the separation-of-powers system. This indicates that one should not always assume that formal institutions are the primary cause of political outcomes (Levitsky and Murillo 2009). Improvement of accountability requires that political parties hold the government in check. When a party system with strong institutions structures the policy process, politically dominant actors cannot unilaterally and arbitrarily abuse power. Many advanced democracies have succeeded in constraining overextensions of executive power merely with sufficient electoral pressure (Helmke and Rosenbluth 2009). It is crucial aspect of democratization that countries develop political parties that both serve an electoral role and hold the government accountable. This is the missing link in South Korean democratization that has prevented it from escaping democratic stagnation.



Conclusion

This paper has discussed various characterizations of South Korean democratization, proposing a conceptual scheme that captures the direction of democratic movement from democratic erosion to democratic competition. It also conducted a comparative empirical analysis of South Korea's democratization, which discovered that it is characterized neither by democratic completion nor by democratic erosion. This revealed that South Korean democratization is oscillating between electoral democracy and liberal democracy.

The characterization of South Korean democratization as democratic stagnation raised the question of what accounts for such a movement. Democratic stagnation is mainly due to under-development of institutions that regulate accountability as compared to institutions that regulate contestation. To explain why there was uneven development between democratic contestation and democratic accountability, two sets of comparative empirical studies were conducted. One is on the strength of executive vis-à-vis legislative or judiciary authority, rejecting the argument that South Korea's democratic accountability deficit derives from the separation-of-powers constitutional design. Another is on the relationship between the degree of party system institutionalization and the level of democracy, confirming the claim that South Korea's democratic stagnation is caused by an under-institutionalized party system that prevents parties from being able to hold elected officials accountable. ■



Endnotes

¹For the discussion that advocates the minimalist strategy of conceptualization of democracy, see Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010). In addition to contestation and accountability, you can include attributes of democracy such as participation, deliberation, and political equality if you take a maximal strategy of conceptualization in order to define advanced democracy (Coppedge 2012: 11-23). For the cumulative strategy of concept formation, see Gerring (2012: 131-140).

²Originally in Mazuza (2007: 45), “access-to-power” regime, “going upward from the society to the state, involves the efforts of groups in society to gain control over state positions—the access side of politics” while “exercise-of-power” regime, “going downward from the state to society, refers to the use of political power to align the behavior of social groups with the order created by the state—the exercise side.”

³On this point, Fukuyama’s following account is suggestive: “the idea that there’s a ratchet effect—if you have two elections with turnover, that gets you to democracy for good and you’re not going to slip back—just doesn’t make sense theoretically, and it’s belied by what actually happens in some countries (Diamond, Fukuyama, Horowitz, and Plattner 2014: 93).”

⁴Originally in Schedler (2010: 60-63), democratic erosion, which is a move from liberal democracy to electoral democracy, is a process distinctive from democratic breakdown, which is a move from electoral democracy to an authoritarian regime. Likewise, democratic completion, which is a move from electoral democracy to liberal democracy, is a process different from democratic deepening, which is a move from liberal democracy to advanced democracy. For an application of Schedler’s conceptual innovation to the comparative evaluation of Taiwanese and South Korean democratizations, see Chu and Im (2013).

⁵Even though Marchall, Gurr, and Jagers (2014: 14) accept “the guarantee of civil liberties to all citizens in their daily lives and in acts of political participation” as one of the three essential elements of democracy, they “do not include coded data on civil liberties” to compute the Polity score.

⁶According to Freedom House (2015), whereas political rights reflects the extent in which “Candidates who are elected actually rule, political parties are competitive, the opposition plays an important role and enjoy real power, and the interests of minority groups are well represented in politics and government,” civil liberties indicates the extent in which countries “have an established and generally fair legal system that ensures the rule of law (including an independent judiciary), allow free economic activity, and tend to strive for equality of opportunity for everyone, including women and minority groups.”

⁷The sample countries include Indonesia, Mongolia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand from East Asia, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay from Latin America, and Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia from Eastern Europe. The years of democratic inauguration of our sample vary ranging from 1980 of Peru to 1999 of Indonesia in the Polity dataset and from 1980 of Peru to 2005 of Indonesia in the Freedom House dataset, respectively. Correlation coefficients between the year of democratic transition and the mean value of each score are 0.155 in the Polity dataset and -0.115 in the Freedom House dataset.

⁸Under the Polity score scheme, the estimation formula is as follows: (1) a country moves in the direction of democratic completion if the lower bound of 95% confidence interval does not fall below 8; (2) a country moves in the direction of democratic erosion if the lower bound of 95% confidence interval falls below 6; and (3) a country shows the tendency of democratic stagnation if the lower bound of 95% confidence interval falls between 6 and 8.



⁹Under the Freedom House score scheme, the estimation formula is as follows: (1) a nation moves toward democratic completion if the upper bound of 95% confidence interval does not rise above 1.75; (2) a nation moves toward democratic completion if the upper bound of 95% confidence interval rise above 2.5; and (3) a nation reveals the propensity of democratic stagnation if the upper bound of 95% confidence interval falls between 1.75 and 2.5.

¹⁰In fact, among students of South Korean democratization, despite competing views on the characterization that we have reviewed, there are a solid consensus on the point that electoral contestation has become “the only game in town,” generating self-enforcing compliance with the outcome from all relevant political actors. For instance, according to Chu and Im (2013) who are proponents of democratic completion argument, “since 1987, elections have been held regularly, and the overwhelming majority of Korean elites and average citizens believe that the only way to take power is through free and fair electoral competition (118).” Likewise, Kang and Kang (2014), who are advocates of democratic erosion claim, acknowledge that “there is no doubt that the two peaceful power rotations—the formations of the Kim Dae-jung and Lee Myung-bak governments—have made elections the only game in town in South Korea’s democracy (274).”

¹¹This finding nicely echoes with that of Kang and Kang (2014) who, taking the partial regime approach to South Korean democratization, shows that “there were significant deteriorations in the quality of [other] partial regimes [rule of law, vertical accountability, and horizontal accountability] even though the stability of the electoral regime institutionalized (290).” Researches on cross-national public opinions on democratization also find out that South Korean, conceiving democracy more as electoral contestation, shows comparatively lower concerns about liberal elements of democracy. See Park and Chang (2013) and Mikami and Inoguchi (2010).

¹²For dissenting views, see Chibub and Limongi (2014) and Asaba (2013) on interbranch relations between executive and legislative, and Ginsburg (2010) on interbranch relations between executive and judiciary, respectively, in South Korea.

¹³Among many indicators available, I choose the Comparative Constitutions Project Rankings primarily because its scores are comparable across different forms of governments. The data is available at <http://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/ccp-rankings/> (accessed on August 24, 2015). According to the website, (1) executive power ranges from 0-7 and captures the presence or absence of seven important aspects of executive lawmaking: (a) the power to initiate legislation; (b) the power to issue decrees; (c) the power to initiate constitutional amendments; (d) the power to declare states of emergency; (e) veto power; (f) the power to challenge the constitutionality of legislation; and (g) the power to dissolve the legislature; (2) legislative power, capturing the formal degree of power assigned to the legislature by the constitution, is simply the mean of the 32 binary elements, with higher numbers indicating more legislative power and lower numbers indicating less legislative power; and (3) judicial independence is an additive index ranging from 0-6 that captures the constitutional presence or absence of six features thought to enhance judicial independence: (a) whether the constitution contains an explicit statement of judicial independence; (b) whether the constitution provides that judges have lifetime appointments; (c) whether appointments to the highest court involve either a judicial council or two (or more) actors; (d) whether removal is prohibited or limited so that it requires the proposal of a supermajority vote in the legislature, or if only the public or judicial council can propose removal and another political actor is required to approve such a proposal; (e) whether removal explicitly limited to crimes and other issues of misconduct, treason, or violations of the constitution; and (f) whether judicial salaries are protected from reduction.

¹⁴For technical specifics about the formula to calculate various volatility scores, see Powell and Tucker (2013). Due to data availability, among fellow seventeen third-wave democracies, Indonesia, Peru, Slovakia, and Thailand are excluded.



¹⁵The observed scores for total volatility range from 13.9 (Chile) to 46.5 (Romania) with a mean of 29.7 and 95% confidence interval from 23.9 to 35.5. South Korea's score of 36.6 is outside of the upper bound of confidence interval, which implies that the level of its party system institutionalization is atypically low when compared to fellow third-wave democracies. The observed scores for within-system volatility range from 3.8 (Taiwan) to 30 (Poland) with a mean of 17.1 and 95% confidence interval from 13.2 to 21.0. South Korea's score of 9.9 is outside the lower bound of the confidence interval, which indicates that healthy inter-party competition contributes to little of the total volatility in the country. Last, the observed scores for extra-system volatility range from 2.8 (Brazil) to 26.7 (South Korea) with a mean of 12.5 and 95% confidence interval from 8.3 and 16.8. South Korea's extra-system volatility is the highest among fellow third-wave democracies and far away from the upper bound of confidence interval.



References

- Adesnik, A. David and Sunhyuk Kim. 2013. "South Korea: The Puzzle of Two Transitions." In *Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Asaba, Yuki. 2013. "Presidentialism in Korea: A Strong President and a Weak Government." In *Presidents, Assemblies and Policy-making in Asia*, ed. Yuko Kasuya. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Carey, John M. and Simon Hix. 2011. "The Electoral Sweet Spot: Low-Magnitude Proportional Electoral Systems." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(2): 383-397.
- Cheibub, José Antonio, Jenifer Gandhi, and James Raymond Vreeland. 2010. "Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited." *Public Choice* 143: 67-101.
- Cheibub, José Antonio and Fernando Limongi. 2014. "The Structure of Legislative-Executive Relations: Asia in Comparative Perspective." In *Comparative Constitutional Law in Asia*, ed. Rosalind Dixon and Tom Ginsburg. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Choi, Jang-Jip. 2012. *Democracy after Democratization: The Korean Experience*. Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center.
- Chu, Yun-han and Hyug Baeg Im. 2013. "The Two Turnovers in South Korea and Taiwan." In *Democracy in East Asia: A New Century*, ed. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Chu. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Coppedge, Michael. 2012. *Democratization and Research Methods*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Diamond, Larry, Francis Fukuyama, Donald L. Horowitz, and Marc F. Plattner. 2014. "Reconsidering the Transition Paradigm." *Journal of Democracy* 25 (1): 86-100.
- Diamond, Larry. 2013. "Introduction." In *Democracy in East Asia: A New Century*, ed. Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Yun-han Chu. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Freedom House. 2015. *Freedom in the World 2015 Methodology* available at <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2015/methodology#.UuEq87Qo711> (accessed on August 24, 2015).
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2010. "Transitions to the Rule of Law." *Journal of Democracy* 21 (1): 33-44.
- Gerring, John. 2012. *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework, Second Edition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ginsburg, Tom. 2010. "The Constitutional Court and Judicialization of Korean Politics." In *New Courts in Asia*, ed. Andrew Harding and Penelope Nicholson. New York: Routledge.
- Haggard, Stephan and Jong-sung You. 2015. "Freedom of Expression in South Korea." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45 (1): 167-179.
- Hahm, Chaibong. 2008. "South Korea's Miraculous Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 19 (3): 128-142.
- Hellmann, Olli. 2011. *Political Parties and Electoral Strategies: The Development of Party Organization in East Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Helmke, Gretchen and Frances Rosenbluth. 2009. "Regimes and the Rule of Law: Judicial Independence in Comparative Perspective." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12: 345-66.
- Heo, Uk. 2013. "What Delays Democratic Consolidation in South Korea?" *Korea Observer* 44 (4): 569-591.
- Hicken, Allen and Erik Martinez Kuhonta. 2015. "Introduction: Rethinking Party System Institutionalization in Asia." In *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadow of the Past*, ed. Hicken and Kuhonta. New York: Cambridge University Press.



- Im, Hyug-Baeg. 2010. "Development and Change in Korean Democracy since the Democratic Transition in 1987: The Three Kims' Politics and after." In *East Asia's New Democracies: Deepening, Reversal, Non-liberal Alternatives*, ed. Yin-wah Chu and Siu-lun Wong. New York: Routledge.
- Kang, Woojin and Kang Mun Gu. 2014. "Lee Myung-bak Government and the Quality of Democracy in Korea." *Economy and Society* 104: 265-298 (in Korean).
- Kasuya, Yuko. 2013. "A Framework for Analysing Presidential-Legislative Relations in Asia." In *Presidents, Assemblies and Policy-making in Asia*, ed. Kasuya. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kim, Sunhyuk. 2012. "Contentious Democracy" in South Korea: An Active Civil Society and Ineffectual Political Parties." *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 8 (2): 51-61.
- Levitsky, Steven and María Victoria Murillo. 2009. "Variation in Institutional Strength." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12: 115-33.
- Lupu, Noam. 2015. "Parties and Party Systems." In *Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*, ed. Jennifer Gandhi and Rubén Ruiz-Rufino. New York: Routledge.
- Mainwaring, Scott, Carlos Gervasoni, and Annabella España-Nájera. forthcoming. "Extra- and Within-System Electoral Volatility." *Party Politics*.
- Marshall, Monty G., Ted Robert Gurr, and Keith Jagers. 2014. *Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2013 Dataset Users' Manual*. Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace.
- Mazucca, Sebastián L. 2007. "Reconceptualizing Democratization: Access to Power versus Exercise of Power." In *Regimes and Democracy in Latin America: Theories and Methods*, Gerardo L. Munck. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mikami, Satoru and Takashi Inoguchi, "Diagnosing the Micro Foundation of Democracy in Asia." In *East Asia's New Democracies: Deepening, Reversal, Non-liberal Alternatives*, ed. Yin-wah Chu and Siu-lun Wong. New York: Routledge.
- Park, Chong-Min and Yu-tzung Chang. 2013. "Regime Performance and Democratic Legitimacy." In *Democracy in East Asia: A New Century*, ed. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Yunhan Chu. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Park, Myung Lim. 2010. "Constitutional Reform and Political Reform in South Korea: An Interconnected Approach with Empirical Data." *History Review* 90: 384-429 (in Korean).
- Plattner, Marc F. 2010. "Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 21 (1): 81-92.
- Pop-Eleches, Grigore. 2007. "Historical Legacies and Post-Communist Regime Change." *Journal of Politics* 69(4): 908-926.
- Powell, Eleanor Neff and Joshua A. Tucker. 2013. "Revisiting Electoral Volatility in Post-Communist Countries: New Data, New Results and New Approaches." *British Journal of Political Science* 44: 123-147.
- Schedler, Andreas. 2010. "What is Democratic Consolidation?" In *Debates on Democratization*, ed. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Philip J. Costopoulos. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schmitter, Philippe C. 2010. "Twenty-Five Years, Fifteen Findings." *Journal of Democracy* 21 (1): 19-28.
- Wong, Joseph. 2015. "South Korea's Weakly Institutionalized Party System." In *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadow of the Past*, ed. Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- You, Jong-sung. 2014. "Korean Democracy and Freedom of Expression: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy." *Journal of Korean Social Trends and Perspectives* 90: 9-42 (in Korean).
- Yun, Seongyi and Hee Min. 2012. "Democracy in South Korea: Consolidated but in Deficit." *Korea Observer* 43 (1): 145-174.

*Author's Biography***Jung Kim**

University of North Korean Studies

Jung Kim is an assistant professor of political science at University of North Korean Studies (UNKS) and director for planning at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) of Kyungnam University in Seoul. He is a lecturer at Graduate School of International Studies and Underwood International College at Yonsei University and an editorial committee member of *Review of North Korean Studies*. Prior to joining UNKS, he worked at East Asia Institute (2009-2013) and IFES (1996-2002) as a senior research fellow and held a visiting research position in Advanced Social and International Studies at University of Tokyo. He earned his undergraduate degree in political science from Korea University and graduated from Yale University with his doctoral degree in political science. He has published numerous articles in academic journals, including *Asian Perspective* and *Asian Survey*, and edited volumes, including *Adapt, Fragment, Transform: Corporate Restructuring and System Reform in South Korea* and *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Democratization*.

Knowledge-Net for a Better World

- This working paper is the result of East Asia Institute's research activity of the Center for International Relations Studies.
- Any citation or quotation is prohibited without prior permission of the author.
- This paper and other EAI reports can be found on our website, [\[EAI Working Papers\]](#).
The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the East Asia Institute.
- For inquiries:
HyeJung Suh, Research Fellow, Peace and Security Research Unit
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 140) hjsuh@eai.or.kr
- Typeset by HyeJung Suh

