

Resilient Democracy or Fragile Democracy? The Declaration of Martial Law and Presidential Impeachment in South Korea

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the implications of South Korea's 2024 martial law declaration and subsequent presidential impeachment for the study of democratic backsliding and resilience. It engages directly with key debates: whether established democracies remain vulnerable to backsliding despite achieving consolidation, and how underlying structural factors contribute to democratic fragility. While South Korea has often been seen as a model of democratic consolidation since its 1987 transition, this unprecedented crisis revealed significant vulnerabilities. Focusing on three key areas—the presidentialized politics, a polarized two-party system, and a winner-takes-all electoral system—we argue that South Korea's experience cannot be fully understood through the lens of democratic resilience alone. These findings challenge prevailing theories of democratic consolidation and show that even well-established democracies remain vulnerable to backsliding. We propose institutional reforms, with some cultural aspects, to address democratic vulnerabilities, offering lessons for emerging and established democracies facing threats to democratic stability.

KEYWORDS: democratic backsliding, resilient democracy, fragile democracy, martial law, presidential impeachment

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PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS

In recent years, scholars have devoted significant attention to democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2024; Little and Meng 2024; Müller 2021; Waldner and Lust 2018; Wunsch and Blanchard 2023). This focus reflects an escalating concern regarding the deterioration of democratic norms and institutions, a phenomenon observed in the 2024 martial law declaration in South Korea, a country which has been considered an established and stable democratic society. Scholars emphasize that modern threats to democracy are less likely to result from overt military coups and more often arise through subtle, incremental processes such as executive aggrandizement, constitutional hardball, the systematic weakening of institutional checks and balances, and the gradual erosion of democratic norms (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Numerous studies underscore the *resilience* of democracy in periods of crisis (Bateman 2025; Croissant and Lott 2024; Levitsky and Way 2024; Riedl et al. 2024; Williamson, Akor, and Edgell 2025). On the other hand, this scholarly attention also points to the inherent *fragility* of democratic institutions (Issacharoff 2015).

Within this broader theoretical framework, the case of democracy in South Korea is particularly significant. Since its transition from military rule in 1987, South Korea has often been viewed as a benchmark for democratic consolidation, with remarkable progress in a short period. However, the president's declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024, drew considerable attention and prompted substantial inquiries. This article explores the political turmoil surrounding Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration and his ensuing impeachment, to assess whether South Korea's democratic institutions demonstrated resilience in addressing executive overreach or if these events exposed inherent structural vulnerabilities that jeopardize democratic stability. This study contributes to the broader literature on democratic backsliding, resilience, and fragility by providing insights into how institutional design and party politics interact during democratic crises.

South Korea's rapid economic growth and political development have positioned it as one of Asia's leading democracies. However, this recent crisis has prompted a re-evaluation of its democratic institutions, raising key questions: Was this a case of democratic backsliding, or did the swift institutional response demonstrate democratic resilience? What does the crisis reveal about underlying structural vulnerabilities in the presidential system

and political parties? It also calls for a reassessment of the long-standing debate on democratic consolidation (Heo 2013; Przeworski 2024; Shin 1996; Suh, Park, and Kim 2012): are we seeing that democracy can deteriorate even after attaining consolidation, or that South Korea's democracy was never thoroughly consolidated?

In this article, we first engage with key theoretical debates before examining the crisis with reference to South Korea's presidential system, polarized two-party structure, and electoral dynamics. We then consider some potential institutional reforms and strategic remedies.

CONCEPTUALIZING DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Scholarly research on democracy has evolved from early views of democratization as a cumulative process with distinct stages like liberalization, transition, and consolidation—a perspective that suggested consolidated democracies were largely insulated from breakdown (Diamond 2021; Przeworski 2005)—to a recent surge in studies highlighting democracy's fragility and the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, a process of falling away from democratic standards (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018). This scholarship underscores that democratic trajectories can be discontinuous, even in seemingly established cases.

Within this context, scholars also examine democratic resilience—the capacity of a democratic system to resist, withstand, and recover from internal or external shocks and challenges (Croissant and Lott 2024; Levitsky and Way 2024). While our study focuses on domestic institutions and politics, we acknowledge that the broader literature highlights international influences, such as diffusion processes, foreign policy considerations, trade integration, alliance security, and the role of international organizations, which can also stabilize or undermine democratic rule (Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Levitsky and Way 2024; Pevehouse and Glenn 2025). Building on this literature, this section delves into key debates surrounding democratic backsliding and resilience, focusing on dynamics relevant to domestic political systems.

One key perspective in the literature has viewed democratic development through distinct stages—liberalization, transition, and consolidation—suggesting that consolidated democracies are strong enough to resist backsliding (Diamond 2021; Przeworski 2005). However, recent events like the martial law crisis in South Korea challenge this assumption, raising questions about

whether democratic development can reverse even after reaching the consolidation stage and prompting a revisit of the long-standing debate between “minimalists” (who focus on thin procedural definitions like elections) and “maximalists” (who advocate for thicker definitions, including substantive rights and institutional quality) regarding democratic consolidation (Heo 2013; Heo and Hahm 2014; Przeworski 2005; 2024; Wunsch and Blanchard 2023).

Minimalists argue that the mere repetition of peaceful transfers of power signifies democratic consolidation. By this measure, South Korea—having demonstrated multiple peaceful transitions—would be a consolidated democracy. However, the 2024 martial law declaration complicates this narrative. Minimalists who claimed South Korea had achieved complete consolidation may now find it difficult to maintain this position.

Maximalists use a broader definition of democratic consolidation, encompassing the establishment of political legitimacy, diffusion of democratic values, decentralization of state power, incorporation of direct democratic elements, judicial reform, poverty reduction, economic stability, existence of institutionalized parties, and a certain level of civic culture. In particular, the maximalist approach emphasizes the institutionalization of political parties in representative democracy as an essential mechanism for sustaining democratic resilience (Weyland 2024). The South Korean case raises important questions about whether achieving minimalist criteria is sufficient for consolidation or whether deeper institutional and cultural embedding of democratic norms is required to withstand authoritarian temptations.

A second perspective focuses on the interplay between democratic consolidation and democratic resilience (Croissant and Lott 2024; Levitsky and Way 2024; Riedl et al. 2024; Williamson, Akor, and Edgell 2025). Given that democracies are inherently prone to periods of confusion, resilience is crucial for durability. Some theories suggest that a degree of backsliding can paradoxically catalyze further progress (Huntington 1993; Levitsky and Way 2024; Wunsch and Blanchard 2023). While temporary crises in consolidated democracies don’t necessarily mean collapse, the persistence of norm-violating practices can erode legitimacy, raising questions about whether democratic development is strengthened more by cycles of backsliding and recovery or by a stable status quo that hides tensions. The rapid institutional response to South Korea’s 2024 crisis could be seen as “reactive resilience.” However, it prompts further inquiry into whether this reflects deep-seated

“preventive resilience” or is merely a temporary response. The South Korean case offers a unique opportunity to explore this question of when resilience is restored and what form it takes.

A third perspective suggests that democracy does not follow a fixed or linear trajectory but is an inherently fluid and ongoing process (Mouffe 2005; Przeworski 2024; Shin 1996). On this view, periods of confusion and contestation are intrinsic to democracy, not signs of failure. However, even if disorder is not itself a sign of democratic breakdown, foundational values can still be subtly undermined. This is particularly true when democratically elected leaders erode democracy from within by exploiting existing legal mechanisms. This paradox—that backsliding can occur through ostensibly legal and constitutional processes—makes it hard to distinguish legitimate governance from creeping authoritarianism (Ding and Slater 2021). This gradual form of backsliding preserves a democratic structure while eroding its substance, highlighting the importance of informal norms alongside formal rules. The judicialization of politics and the politicization of the judiciary further blur these lines. This challenge is heightened in contemporary democracies characterized by intense partisanship and a dependence on electoral systems, where competition can evolve into a high-stakes rivalry, and elected officials may be inclined to misuse power within the legal framework.

Consequently, identifying, categorizing, and measuring democratic backsliding across different contexts and over time present significant scholarly challenges, leading to varied approaches and differing assessments in the literature (Little and Meng 2024). Building on the theoretical perspectives just discussed, in the following sections we examine how the institutional characteristics of South Korea’s presidential system, polarized two-party structure, and electoral dynamics contributed to this event and reveal underlying vulnerabilities.

DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCY

South Korea’s democratic trajectory since the 1987 Constitution of the Sixth Republic is often regarded as a successful transition from authoritarian rule in Asia (Heo 2013; Hur and Yeo 2024; Kwon 2023; Shin 1996). However, the recent political turmoil has raised essential questions about the stability and consolidation of its democratic institutions.

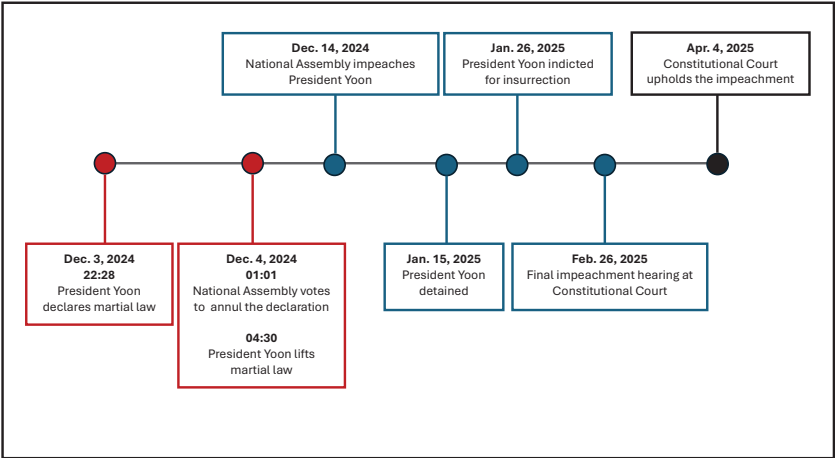
Historically, South Korea has faced various democratic crises, including presidential impeachments and mass protests, that tested its institutional

resilience. Previous declarations of martial law, such as the one in October 1972 that initiated the authoritarian Yushin system, serve as significant historical examples of dramatically expanded executive power and provide crucial points of comparison for assessing contemporary vulnerabilities. While past crises were resolved through legal mechanisms and public mobilization, the recent martial law declaration has revealed underlying vulnerabilities, prompting questions about whether its swift reversal indicates deep-seated resilience or merely a reactive response to the crisis.

According to President Yoon’s official statement, the declaration of martial law had two primary reasons. First, he claimed that the repeated motions for impeachment from the opposition-controlled National Assembly had paralyzed the executive branch, making governance impossible. Second, he claimed that electoral fraud was significantly threatening Korea’s democracy; this was the reason he gave for ordering the unprecedented deployment of military forces to the National Election Commission. We will consider whether these extraordinary events were a breach of the democratic threshold, indicating backsliding, or isolated incidents reflecting deeper structural issues related to power dynamics, government structure, party systems, and electoral mechanisms (Ganghof 2022; Jin 2025; Levitsky and Way 2024; Riedl et al. 2024).

The events surrounding the martial law declaration and subsequent political turmoil, summarized in the timeline in Figure 1, can be broadly

FIGURE 1. Timeline of the Martial Law Crisis and Subsequent Events



summarized as a severe confrontation between the executive and legislative branches. Various interpretations exist regarding the root causes of this extreme political standoff, ranging from a president willing to take drastic measures to the highly concentrated power in South Korea's presidential system. While institutional factors are crucial, the confrontational two-party system, with its relentless political obstructionism, also played a significant role.

It is also essential to acknowledge significant legal disputes concerning the declaration of martial law and the ensuing political events. The legal discussions of the declaration focus on various constitutional and procedural issues. The National Assembly and President Yoon present competing legal arguments. Figure 2 outlines the key legal issues and arguments.

At the core of the dispute is whether a national emergency existed that justified the imposition of martial law. The National Assembly contends

FIGURE 2. Key Legal Issues and Competing Arguments in the Constitutional Court

Key legal issues		
• Existence of a national emergency • Procedural legitimacy • Deployment of military and police forces • Seizure of the National Election Commission • Allegations of political persecution		
National Assembly's position (prosecution)	President Yoon's defense	
➢ The martial law declaration lacked a genuine national emergency and was therefore unconstitutional and illegal. ➢ The declaration represented an attempt to dismantle democracy and concentrate power within the executive branch. ➢ The actions taken under martial law, including troop deployment and political arrests, violated the constitutional order and democratic principles.	➢ The declaration was a legitimate exercise of presidential authority to address a national crisis. ➢ It was intended to alert the public to perceived threats from "anti-state elements" and North Korea. ➢ The president cannot be punished for exercising core constitutional powers, including those related to national security and emergency governance.	

that it did not, so the declaration was unconstitutional and illegal. Procedural legitimacy is another critical issue; the Assembly argues that Yoon violated constitutional requirements by failing to convene a Cabinet meeting and neglecting to notify lawmakers beforehand. And the deployment of military and police officers to the National Assembly, which allegedly obstructed legislative activities, has raised concerns about executive overreach and the infringement of legislative autonomy. Another controversial aspect is the military's warrantless occupation of the National Election Commission, which critics argue undermined electoral integrity and democratic governance.

In his defense, Yoon maintained that these measures were necessary to address threats from "anti-state elements" and North Korea, and that they were lawful exercises of presidential emergency powers. Allegations of political persecution soon emerged, with several media outlets and opposition figures claiming that Yoon had ordered the arrest of key political opponents, including lawmakers, as part of a broader effort to consolidate executive control. While the National Assembly viewed these actions as a direct assault on democratic institutions, the president's legal team denied issuing any arrest orders and stated that no individuals were unlawfully detained. They insisted that any police or security responses during the crisis were consistent with existing legal protocols. On April 4, 2025, the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment of President Yoon, removing him from office and setting a precedent for the interpretation of emergency powers and executive authority in South Korea. Beyond legal considerations, this case highlights the broader struggle over constitutional order, the separation of powers, and the limits of presidential discretion in times of crisis.

The judicialization of politics during this crisis also highlights the limitations of resolving political conflicts through legal means. As seen in the Constitutional Court proceedings, judicial interventions do not necessarily foster national unity; often they exacerbate political division, as rulings on contentious issues are perceived through partisan lenses. While the court's decision will shape future interpretations of presidential emergency powers, legal adjudication alone cannot address more profound institutional weaknesses, such as executive-legislative deadlock and partisan polarization. The following section delves further into the structural vulnerabilities that challenge South Korea's democratic stability.

INDICATORS OF DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCE

The concept of “resilient democracy” alone may be insufficient to fully explain South Korea’s democratic performance following crises like the martial law declaration. While the swift reversal of that declaration might suggest institutional resilience (Croissant and Lott 2024), it does not necessarily mean the underlying fragility has been addressed. As seen in cases like the 2021 attack on the US Capitol, democratic institutions can demonstrate resilience in a moment of crisis yet remain vulnerable to future challenges (Eady, Hjorth, and Dinesen 2023). South Korea’s swift recovery may highlight persistent structural vulnerabilities rather than just proactive strength.

South Korea’s democratic fragility is further exacerbated by the characteristics of its delegative democracy, where elected officials operate with minimal accountability once in office. While representative democracy inherently involves delegation, the complexity of modern governance—characterized by multiple layers of delegation within both the executive and legislative branches—often limits responsibility. The issue of delegative democracy is further complicated by elite behavior. In representative democracies, a small group of elites wield substantial power in decision-making processes. When these elites repeatedly make extreme political choices, the effects can eventually culminate in a moment when democratic achievements are suddenly overturned (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2024).

Democratic fragility in South Korea is also intensified by the rise of populism (Müller 2016, 2021) and the ebb of political tolerance (Gibson 1992; Stoeckel and Ceka 2023; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1993). In this political system, leaders often use anti-pluralist rhetoric, presenting themselves as the sole voice of the people and dismissing opposing views as illegitimate, which erodes respect for diverse perspectives and weakens checks and balances. This is coupled with diminishing political tolerance, where political opponents are increasingly seen as existential threats, fostering a zero-sum competition that limits compromise and allows democratic norms to be easily disregarded for partisan gain.

These challenges are amplified in contemporary political environments, where every aspect of the political process is broadcast in real time. Social media and 24-hour news cycles have transformed how politics is conducted and perceived. Instant access to political developments raises public expectations for quick government responses, but democratic decision-making

processes—often slow and deliberative—cannot always meet these demands. Consequently, a significant temporal and substantive gap emerges between the public's *input* and the political establishment's *output* (Easton 1953). This gap creates frustration among the electorate, leading to more cynicism and less trust in democratic institutions.

The interplay between rising populism, declining political tolerance, and the inherent challenges of representative democracy fosters an environment conducive to democratic backsliding. In South Korea, these dynamics have intensified political polarization and heightened the risk of significant political crises. Understanding how these factors intersect is essential for identifying ways to bolster democratic resilience and restore public trust.

The nature of South Korea's presidential system also contributes to democratic fragility. While sometimes labeled an "imperial presidency," its structure, defined by the separation of executive and legislative elections, creates a persistent possibility of divided government and inherent conflict, particularly in a two-party system (Dostal 2023; Linz 1990; Samuels and Shugart 2010; Shugart and Carey 1992). The combination of this structure with populism and extreme polarization amplifies the flaws of presidentialism, intensifying political conflicts and making extraordinary events more probable when conventional processes fail to resolve disputes.

PRESIDENTIALIZED POLITICS: THE PERILS OF PRESIDENTIALISM IN SOUTH KOREA

As we have noted, a nuanced discussion of South Korea's government system is crucial for understanding its democratic fragility. Government systems are typically classified as parliamentary, presidential, or semi-presidential (Ganghof 2022; Shugart and Carey 1992). Shugart and Carey (1992) further refine these categories by assessing two dimensions: the extent of presidential authority over the cabinet and the degree of separation between the executive and legislative branches.¹ The system of the 1987 constitution does not neatly fit any of these categories but can be seen as a hybrid of presidential and president-parliamentary systems.

1. Based on these criteria, they propose five distinct government types: presidential, president-parliamentary, premier-presidential, parliamentary, and assembly-independent.

Aside from the brief adoption of a parliamentary system during the Second Republic (1960–1961), all other republics have maintained presidential governance. The Third (1963–1971), Fourth (1972–1979), and Fifth (1981–1987) Republics had elements of neo-presidentialism, which maximized presidential powers. This era saw instances where extraordinary measures, including martial law (e.g., the October 1972 declaration), were employed to consolidate executive control, highlighting the historical potential for presidential power to undermine democratic norms. During the Fourth and Fifth Republics, presidents were indirectly elected by electoral bodies comprised of regime loyalists, resulting in a lack of meaningful competition. The transition to direct presidential elections in 1987 marked a significant democratic shift; however, the debate continues over whether the current system remains structurally imperial or if the issue lies within individual presidential behavior influenced by political culture and societal norms (Dostal 2023; Shin 2020; Yun 2023).

The concentration of power in the presidency has sparked ongoing debates in both political and academic circles on reforms to decentralize and limit executive authority. While structural reforms, such as transitioning to a parliamentary or semi-presidential system, are often discussed, modifying the existing framework alone may not fully resolve the issue. It is essential to identify and address the institutional and political aspects of the current system that enable excessive presidential authority. Limiting the risks of an overly dominant executive requires targeted reforms that prevent presidents from perceiving their role as imperial (Henderson 1968), in addition to constitutional changes.

In the presidential system, the election of the executive branch is separate from that of the legislature, creating a persistent possibility of a divided government (Linz 1990; Samuels and Shugart 2010; Shugart and Carey 1992). This structural feature frequently leads to political gridlock, especially in a two-party system where the president's party differs from the legislative majority. In such cases, opposition parties have little incentive to cooperate with the executive branch, as doing so could bolster the president's achievements and weaken their electoral prospects in future contests. This political dynamic creates opportunities for executive overreach. In a profoundly polarized system, the president may attempt to bypass institutional checks by resorting to extraordinary measures, as evidenced by the martial law incident.

Also, the presidential system in South Korea is particularly vulnerable to populist tendencies. Presidential elections serve as the central focus of

political life, fostering personalized politics, wherein individual candidates, rather than institutional platforms, dominate the political landscape (Ganghof 2022; Samuels and Shugart 2010). Korean political scientists have analyzed how this candidate-centered dynamic shapes election campaigns and party behavior in South Korea (Cho, Kim, and Kim 2019; Suh, Park, and Kim 2012). This personalization of power encourages emotional and impulsive political mobilization, often at the expense of established democratic norms. In contrast to parliamentary systems, where political parties play a more central role, presidential systems frequently elevate leaders above their parties. This personalization makes the political system more susceptible to the whims of individual leaders, who may pursue populist strategies to maintain power.

Reforming South Korea's presidential system to address democratic vulnerabilities and mitigate the risks of populism and political gridlock will require comprehensive institutional adjustments. However, these reforms must go beyond simple constitutional modifications and consider broader political and cultural dynamics that shape governance (Cho, Kim, and Kim 2019; Shin 1996). One key proposal is a *presidential runoff system*. In the present single-round presidential election system, a candidate may secure the presidency with a plurality of votes, which may not accurately reflect the electorate's will. A runoff system would ensure that the elected president has a majority mandate, potentially encouraging moderate, consensus-driven politics. It could reduce the frequent realignment of political parties, which results in the repeated emergence of new parties (especially uninstitutionalized parties) aligned with presidential elections and then mergers into the two major parties, as parties dissolve or rebrand in response to each election cycle. These third parties cannot survive in presidential elections. In other words, they are victims of the competition between the two major parties during each five-year presidential term. By creating a more stable political environment, this reform would encourage parties to maintain their survivability and ideological consistency, rather than engaging in opportunistic shifts for political power dictated by short-term electoral strategies.

Another significant reform proposal is a *two-term presidency*. Allowing presidents to run for re-election could enhance political accountability by giving incumbents an incentive to deliver tangible results in their first term. It could also improve policy continuity, with fewer abrupt shifts in governance priorities. Moreover, a two-term system has the potential to stimulate

policy-driven competition among political parties. This is because parties would have greater incentives to develop long-term policy platforms rather than relying exclusively on short-term electoral strategies. This shift could foster a more constructive political environment, where negotiation and compromise replace extreme polarization, ultimately helping moderate South Korea's adversarial political culture. However, safeguards would have to be established to prevent power consolidation and ensure that re-election campaigns do not undermine democratic norms.

In summary, South Korean politics is often described as a “vortex” of presidential politics (Henderson 1968), reflecting a political culture where the president's influence shapes agendas, timelines, and party dynamics, and smaller parties struggle under the current plurality-winner, single-five-year-term system (Samuels and Shugart 2010). While reforming the presidential system is essential, addressing institutional vulnerabilities will require a more thorough evaluation of South Korea's polarized two-party system and electoral framework. The following section investigates how these dynamics contribute to democratic vulnerabilities and outlines potential reforms.

POLARIZED TWO-PARTY COMPETITION AND THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

In modern representative democracies, party systems and electoral frameworks are crucial in shaping political competition and democratic outcomes. The case of South Korea, and particularly the martial law crisis, illustrates how these institutional arrangements can increase political polarization and foster populist dynamics, contributing to political gridlock and democratic fragility.

The dynamics of South Korea's party system are closely linked to the challenges of contemporary party politics (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Müller 2016; Norris 2020; Weyland 2024). Ideally, political parties reflect social cleavages and represent diverse interests. However, South Korea's party system has struggled to align with the country's complex and overlapping societal divisions, including ideological, regional, and generational differences (Hur and Yeo 2024; Kwon 2023; Shin 2020; Suh, Park, and Kim 2012). This complicates party-system institutionalization and fosters competition based more on power struggles than on coherent ideological or policy agendas.

Since the democratization of South Korea in 1987, the nation's party competition has evolved into a two-party structure characterized by centrist competition—often framed as a contest between center-left and center-right parties. Historically, South Korea's party dynamics were defined by a confrontation between pro-industrialization forces aligned with authoritarian regimes and pro-democratization forces led by opposition leaders like Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung. However, in the twenty-first century, especially after President Roh Moo-hyun, the current center-left versus center-right competition emerged. Despite this seemingly narrow ideological distance, the competition between these two major parties has intensified into a zero-sum, winner-takes-all political culture (Cho, Kim, and Kim 2019; Kwon 2023). Thus, the labels “center-left” and “center-right” often mask an underlying reality of intense power struggle where winning elections by any means becomes the primary goal.

This intense, often zero-sum competition contributes to a sense of political alienation among citizens. In a survey by the Pew Research Center (2024), most South Koreans (73%) said that elected officials don't care what people like them think. And a majority (54%) said that none of the political parties in the country represented their views well, highlighting a significant disconnect between the parties, elected representatives, and the electorate. The two major parties maintain a hostile interdependence, competing fiercely to block the entry of third parties and maintain their dominance while simultaneously exacerbating polarized social conflicts.

This polarization is closely linked to the electoral framework. South Korea currently uses a mixed-member proportional system, introduced in 2020, for legislative elections. Under this system, 254 of the 300 National Assembly members are elected through single-member districts, and the other 46 seats are allocated based on proportional representation.² However, in practice, the small number of proportional seats relative to single-member districts limits the impact of the system (Bochsler 2023), placing more emphasis on the single-member district seats, and thereby enhancing the mixed-member majoritarian characteristics. As a result, the first-past-the-post component continues to dominate, reinforcing the two-party structure and restricting opportunities for smaller parties to gain meaningful representation.

2. Thirty proportional seats are distributed through a compensatory mechanism, while the others are allocated based on the closed-list party vote.

This electoral arrangement deepens polarization by promoting winner-takes-all strategies, as parties focus on defeating their main opposition to secure power. Analyses of this electoral design highlight how it contributes to the adversarial political culture and limits the viability of third parties (Heo 2013; Heo and Hahm 2014; Jin 2019; Yun 2023). And the combination of this electoral structure with South Korea's presidential system further intensifies political competition. In this institutional setting, political parties tend to become highly presidentialized—that is, concentrating on aligning themselves with leading presidential candidates rather than developing cohesive, long-term policy agendas (Samuels and Shugart 2010). As a result, inter-party cooperation diminishes, political rivalry escalates, and democratic stability and resilience are weakened. Moreover, candidate-centered campaigns dominate elections, diminishing the role of institutionalized parties, as seen in frequent party mergers, splits, and rebranding whereby parties align themselves with prominent presidential candidates over ideological platforms. This personalization fosters populist politics and bypasses institutional checks, fostering democratic vulnerabilities.

A multifaceted approach, focusing on restructuring the party system and electoral framework, is essential to mitigate the political gridlock, populism, and personalization of politics exacerbated by the current system. Let us consider some reforms that could promote democratic stability and constructive political competition in South Korea.

One idea is to transition to a *four-party system*. Instead of two broad parties representing all societal cleavages, a structure in which each ideological side—left and right—has two competing parties could introduce greater nuance and reduce polarization. A four-way competition might consist of “left, center-left, center-right, and right” parties or could have more moderate and more progressive factions within both the left and right. Such diversification would foster more issue-based competition and compel parties to respond more accurately to the diverse interests of the electorate rather than engaging in zero-sum power struggles.

Reforming proportional representation (PR) is another idea. PR systems are generally praised for enhancing representativeness by allowing diverse political voices to enter the legislature and reducing the distortions caused by winner-takes-all elections. However, in South Korea's current system, these benefits are not fully realized due to the limited number of PR seats—only 46 out of 300 in the National Assembly. This makes it difficult to significantly

diversify societal representation or counterbalance the dominance of single-member-district elections.

Given these constraints, one reform option is to expand the number of PR seats to better balance district-based representation, enhancing its intended role. Alternatively, eliminating PR list seats could improve political predictability and accountability by focusing solely on constituency-based elections. Another possibility is to elect all legislators by PR, which could reduce regionalism and promote policy-driven competition. Future research could explore these options to mitigate political conflict and strengthen democratic governance.

Moreover, adopting *large electoral districts with three or four seats each* would enhance broader representation within constituencies. This system could mitigate the winner-takes-all dynamics of single-member districts, reduce the discrepancy between votes and seats, and ease the intense rivalry that often fosters polarized politics. The gap between seats and votes is the starting point of societal dissatisfaction, involving two polarized groups in South Korea: the Bosu (right wing) and Jinbo (left wing). Note that to achieve the intended goals of these large electoral districts, each party should only be able to nominate a single candidate to the district. Moreover, although numerous scholarly works are attempting to find the best candidate-selection method for democracy (Aragón 2014; Rahat and Cross 2018; Rahat and Hazan 2001; Slough, York, and Ting 2020), we argue that the method should be tailored to each political party's needs, organizational structure, and culture. To further strengthen democratic competition, these reforms should enhance constructive competition that fosters democratic values. Parties should compete not merely for power but based on policy proposals, governance capacity, and responsiveness to public needs. A political environment that rewards such behavior would reduce the prevalence of populist appeals and contribute to democracy.

While institutional reforms, such as establishing a more diverse party system or restructuring electoral districts, offer practical solutions for alleviating polarization and personalist politics, these measures alone cannot fully safeguard democracy. Institutional design operates within broader political and social contexts (Yun 2023), and sustaining improvements requires robust civic engagement and a democratic political culture that values compromise, policy-driven debate, and institutional norms. Ultimately, addressing South Korea's democratic vulnerabilities will demand not only

institutional innovation but also the active participation of political actors and the public in upholding democratic values.

CONCLUSION AND SPECULATION: PATHWAYS FOR DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

The recent political crisis in South Korea, marked by the president's declaration of martial law and subsequent impeachment, highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of its democratic institutions. While the National Assembly's swift response demonstrated elements of democratic resilience, the events exposed deeper vulnerabilities that threaten long-term stability. We have examined these issues in the context of democratic backsliding, resilience, and institutional fragility, emphasizing the role of institutional design and party politics in shaping South Korea's democracy.

The crisis revealed a deepening executive–legislative standoff, attributed by some to presidential actions and by others to the highly centralized presidential system. However, as we have seen, institutional factors like the rigid two-party system and the resulting legislative gridlock also played a major role in escalating tensions.

By examining the 2024 martial law crisis through the lens of South Korea's presidential system, polarized party structure, and electoral framework, we have directly addressed the earlier question of democratic consolidation. While South Korea has undeniably met the minimalist criterion of repeated peaceful transfers of power, the recent political crisis reveals latent structural vulnerabilities that challenge a purely minimalist interpretation. From a maximalist perspective, the crisis underscores that deeper institutional robustness, a less polarized political culture, and reforms that address systemic issues beyond mere procedural transitions are necessary for lasting democratic stability.

Addressing this polarization will require reforming the party system to foster greater political diversity and balance. A National Assembly with three to five moderately sized parties could distribute power more evenly, reducing legislative paralysis. One way to achieve this is by adopting a presidential runoff system, as seen in France, to discourage opportunistic party mergers and promote genuine ideological and policy-driven competition. South Korea should also consider transitioning from single-member districts to a system with three to four representatives per district to mitigate

polarization. This change would improve proportionality between party votes and legislative seats, creating space for smaller parties. However, for this system to be effective, parties must nominate only one candidate per district, to avoid reinforcing factionalism and the two-party duopoly.

The competition between South Korea's two dominant parties, representing the country's conservative-versus-progressive social divide, has evolved beyond mere political expression into a "fight to the death." This means that political competition now assumes either the complete surrender of one side or its judicial punishment. Instead of forming policy coalitions for effective policy development, the Korean political process is characterized by party mergers and realignments focused on winning elections and gaining power, regardless of the methods employed (Jin 2019). Sudden and extreme actions by the president—so-called *golpes* (Riedl et al. 2024), such as the 2024 martial law crisis—only benefit representatives of one particular political camp.

The legal and political fallout from the crisis has deepened societal divisions, contributing to international assessments downgrading South Korea's democracy from "stable" to "fragile." Even with a constitutional resolution, national reconciliation remains challenging. A resilient democracy demands more than legal decisions or institutional adjustments: a transformation in political culture is crucial to break the entrenched cycle of extreme political competition.

Beyond institutional reforms, an enlightened civic culture and participatory democracy are crucial for democratic stability (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart and Welzel 2003). Civic education should equip citizens to resist populist rhetoric and engage constructively in governance, recognizing that in the social media era, a well-informed electorate is democracy's first line of defense. The mobilization following the martial law crisis showed civil society's power, but civic engagement must extend beyond crises to sustained participation in candidate selection, policy debates, and community decision-making. Participatory democracy should be an everyday practice, with political parties institutionalizing transparent and inclusive candidate-selection processes that ensure accountability to members and voters rather than being elite-driven (O'Leary 2006). Encouraging competition based on policies rather than personalities is key to sustainability. This South Korean case thus underscores the significance of cultural variables alongside institutional discussions.

South Korea's experience shows that democratic resilience depends on a combination of strong institutions, civic engagement, and a participatory political culture. While institutional reforms might provide stability, the true

strength of democracy lies in an active and politically aware citizenry. By expanding political participation, strengthening civic education, and fostering constructive party competition, South Korea can transform moments of fragility into opportunities for democratic renewal. This will safeguard its democratic future while serving as a model for resilience in an era of global political uncertainty.

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