EDITORIAL

ASIA & THE PACIFIC POLICY STUDIES

Local politics for democratic quality and depth: Lessons from South Korea

1 | INTRODUCTION

A vast literature debates the causes, workings and consequences of democracy: a Google Scholar search returns some 3.6 million studies on the subject; by way of contrast, studies on authoritarianism or populism barely reach 350,000. Importantly, the expansive interest in democracy is not merely academic. Instead, studies on democracy are irrefutably empirically driven. Earlier work on the causes and effects of democracy—such as when, why and how do democratic transitions occur, and who are the proponents of transitions—was spurred in no small part by the expansion of liberal democracies in the Second Wave of democratisation following World War II that, set against the backdrop of economic crises and the rise of fascism that preceded the war, saw economic booms and an expanding middle class in the United States and across Europe (Huntington, 1991; Lipset, 1959; Moore, 1966).[1] These themes persisted through scholarship on the Third Wave of democratic transition between 1974 and 1990, with voluminous works on the relationship between democracy and economic development explaining or predicting the spread of democratisation in Southern Europe, Latin America, and East and Southeast Asia, which appeared to coincide with economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s in these regions (Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell et al., 1986; Przeworski, 1991; Remmer, 1991). Notably, events on the ground in the Third Wave also brought new research pursuits, such as the regional and international diffusion of democracy, the effects of democracy on economic growth, and popular support for democracy (Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Helliwell, 1994; Pevehouse, 2002).

Unsurprisingly, then, recent trends of democratic stalling, reversals, backsliding and deconsolidation are driving the latest research about the quality and depth of democracy, which may be defined as the extent to which democracy in practice approximates its philosophical foundations of 'government by the people' (Fishman, 2016).[2]

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[1]Huntington's (1991) waves of democratic transitions provides a useful heuristic to curate the immense literature. The scholar saw the First Wave of democracy as occurring between the 1820s and 1926, with the Second Wave starting at the end of World War II and peaking in 1962, and the Third Wave as between 1974 and 1990.

[2]While studies generally focus on democratic quality and depth to encompass consolidation, Fishman (2016) discusses four dimensions of democracy—authenticity, quality, depth and consolidation—for use in theory-building and empirical assessments.

Recent studies of democracy have called attention to the need for more robust and systematic evaluation of democratic variability, democratic consolidation, or the demise of democracy, with an emphasis on political factors that have received little attention beyond earlier generations of work (Haggard & Kaufman, 2016, p. 126; see also Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Foa & Mounk, 2017; Fuchs & Roller, 2018; Kadivar et al., 2020; Yap, 2006).

The articles in this special issue respond to these calls for new treatments. In particular, we point out the need to take account of local or subnational[3] politics and their consequences in studies of democratic quality and depth.

There are at least four reasons to study subnational politics that go beyond the *prima facie* case that its examination furthers understanding of democratic depth and quality. First, studies show that 'nation fixation', where a focus on democratic advances at the national level supplants interest in local-level politics and processes, has enabled subnational undemocratic regimes (SURs) to coexist within a national democratic framework (Gibson, 2012; Giraudy, 2015). Thus, contrary to conventional optimism that democracy at the national level trickles down to the local level over time, studies show that democratic national-level politics may coexist with SURs due to inattention to subnational experiences. Empirically, events in East and Southeast Asia suggest such SURs. Thus, in 2016 in the Philippines, the 30-year anniversary of the ouster of President Ferdinand Marcos from office in 1986 by the People Power revolution was marked by the political resurgence of the Marcoses: wife Imelda was a provincial congress representative in Ilocos Norte, daughter Imee was governor of the same province at that time, and son Ferdinand Jr. made a competitive run for the vice presidency in the 2016 elections (Cha & Yap, 2020). Clearly, such subnational political developments affect democratic variability and consolidation, despite the success of democracy at the national level. Systematic study and evaluation of local politics, then, must complement and complete the study of national-level democracy.

Second, local politics and developments are key to political decentralisation—that is, the devolution of authority from national governments to elected officials at subnational levels. The global push for political decentralisation increased prior to the turn of the 21st century, aimed at improving government responsibility and responsiveness through citizens' ability to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with elected representatives by removing them from office (Diaz-Serrano & Rodríguez-Pose, 2015; Gélineau & Remmer, 2006). Given the political and policy drive for political decentralisation, expanding the study of political developments at the subnational level is *sine qua non*. This may be particularly relevant for East and Southeast Asia, where political decentralisation is practised in a majority of the non-communist, multiparty countries,[4] including the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Korea, Japan and Taiwan, where local elections are held.

Third, local-level processes and institutions affect accountability, a critical element of democratic quality (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). Accountability can be vertical and horizontal, where vertical accountability refers to the ability to hold governments responsible, usually evident when dissatisfied voters throw their governments out of office, and horizontal accountability characterises the capacity of other institutions or officials to monitor and check government powers (Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Yap, 2006). Local-level governance may

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[3]The terms 'subnational' and 'local' are used interchangeably in this special issue.

[4]The list of 17 countries in East and Southeast Asia are: China, Mongolia, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, North Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei and Timor-Leste. See Nations Online at https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/about.html.

capture elements of both horizontal accountability, through the capacity to check excesses of national government, and vertical accountability, if voters are able to hold governments responsible for performance at the national and local levels. The extent to which answerability exists at the local level, then, directly affects accountability processes and, consequently, democratic quality and depth in a nation. Government accountability is particularly relevant to East and Southeast Asia, where politicians have asserted the uniqueness of Asia and 'Asian values' in order to slow or stop democratic developments (Kim, 1994). If and how government accountability is practised at the local level, where less attention is directed, promises to be revealing.

Fourth, related to the consideration of democratic quality, the narrative of exceptionalism through 'Asian values' has re-emerged with the resurgence of the East Asian development model—where strong, unconstrained governments are credited with directing their economies to success by motivating or compelling their citizens' cooperation—across less-developed countries in Asia and Africa (Cha & Yap, 2020). While 'Asian values' may be particular to East and Southeast Asia, this narrative of exceptionalism is used to justify democratic slow-down in developing or less-developed countries where economic growth is prioritised. Yet, as Cha and Yap (2020) point out, systematic evidence to support exceptionalism, even in East and Southeast Asia, is absent. Examination of democratic quality and depth across local and national politics, then, is highly relevant now, as narratives of the 'Asian values' and the East Asian development model are adopted to stymie developments towards accountability and democracy. And, it may be especially useful for East and Southeast Asia, which are emulated globally.

The articles in this special issue focus on local- and national-level politics in South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea). With a single country case, national-level political, social and economic variances are held constant, so that findings on local-level politics may be broadly generalisable.

Korea provides a useful study on several grounds. The country was among the original 'Asian Tigers', which included Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, and among the first of these Asian Tigers to transition from decades of autocratic or military-supported governments to democracy. Importantly, despite popular perceptions regarding the East Asian development model, Korea has stayed the democratic course through economic challenges even as its contemporaries in the Third Wave democracies have struggled with backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Huntington, 1991; Yap, 2005). Given this success, it pays to examine the quality and depth of Korea's democracy.

Korea is also a country that has formally devolved power to the local level. The *Local Autonomy Act* was enacted in 1988—that is, immediately following Korea's democratic transition—to pave the way for the development of local-level governments. Political decentralisation followed, with local council and local government elections instituted in 1991 and 1995, respectively (Lee et al., 2021; Shin & Jhee, 2021).

Finally, the 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution—where a million-strong protestors demonstrated in the capital, Seoul, and across cities in Korea against then-president Park Geun-hye leading to the first impeachment and ouster from office of a sitting president—underscores the considerable might of civil society, which has emerged as a critical driver of democratic transition, progress and consolidation in the literature (Fuchs & Roller, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Kadivar et al., 2020). Thus, the magnitude and force of the seismic shifts in Korean politics in at least two instances—constitutional democratisation in 1988 and the constitutional removal of a president from office in 2017—warrants an examination of the role

of civil society in local- and national-level politics in Korea and what they mean for democratic accountability and support.

In the following sections, we briefly survey the literature on democratic studies to situate the current calls and responses for new or previously overlooked political factors in studies of democratic quality and depth. We go on to provide overviews of the papers in this special issue and then conclude with implications of the findings.

2 | EXAMINING DEMOCRATIC QUALITY AND DEPTH: WHY AND HOW

According to Huntington (1991), at least 30 countries pursued democratisation during the Third Wave of democracy between 1974 and 1990, the largest wave to date. Democratic study flourished during this period and the decade that followed, building on pioneering works such as Lipset (1959) on the social requisites and economic foundations for democracy, and Moore (1966) on the multiple political outcomes from transitions driven by class conflict that is amplified by modernisation. Debates on how economic performance may precipitate democracy or the primary drivers of transition—specifically, whether growth or crises led to transitions, and whether by labour, the middle class, the elites, or their conflict—drew on examples from Latin America and Southern Europe. Meanwhile, cases from East and Southeast Asia were cited to show how these countries responded to the inevitable sweep of democracy, which varied from democratisation by revolutionary people's power, to political liberalisation led by elites as a top-down, slowly calibrated change (Jones, 1998; O'Donnell et al., 1986; Przeworski, 1991; Remmer, 1991). However, just as the number of democracies in the Third Wave looked set to outpace the number of non-democracies, democratisation for many of the liberalising countries in the Third Wave began to stall and even reverse; at the same time, democracies saw erosions to government accountability gain pace even as autocracies seemed poised to remain in office (Gandhi, 2019; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016). With recent democratic stalling, reversals and backsliding, examination has shifted from 'why' democratisation occurs, to 'what' constitutes democracy (Diamond & Morlino, 2004, p. 20, emphasis in original; see also Fuchs & Roller, 2018; Gandhi, 2019; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Kadivar et al., 2020; Yap, 2006).

Given recent democratic reversals, it is useful to ask: how popular is democracy? The good news is: democracy is highly valued across democratic and less-democratic countries. Witness, for instance, responses to the question 'How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?', captured in the most recent public opinion survey by the World Values Survey (WVS). Of 125,000 participants of the total of 79 democratic and less-democratic countries in the wave 7 survey conducted between 2017 and 2020, a clear majority of 51% responded it is 'absolutely important', that is 10 on the 10-point scale, while a supermajority of over 75% of respondents ranked it from 8 to 10 (Haerpfer et al., 2020). Democracy is also found to be highly sought after among respondents in East and Southeast Asia; this is despite popular perceptions that citizens in these countries are willing to trade democratic progress for economic development per the East Asian development model (Yap, 2005). Thus, the WVS wave 7 survey reports that over 39% of 18,000 respondents from 11 countries or special autonomous regions in East and Southeast Asia said it is 'absolutely important', that is 10 on the 10-point scale, to live in a country that is governed

democratically, while 72% of respondents ranked it at the top end of the scale from 8 to 10 (Haerpfer et al., 2020).

This wide and popular embrace of democracy contrasts with the recent spate of democratic decline, as described in the introduction, and is all the more reason to examine democratic quality and depth. In this section, we discuss recent democracy studies to situate the relevance of local-level politics to democratic depth and quality.

Earlier studies of '*what*' constitutes democracy focused on formal elements and institutions of democracy, including the rule of law, participation, competitive elections, executive and legislative institutions, and public sector reforms (Diamond & Morlino, 2004, p. 20). In the process, studies found these formal or institutional elements of democracy may be manipulated to maintain autocrats' tenure in office (Gandhi, 2019; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Howard & Roessler, 2006). Illiberal democracies, hybrid regimes, and the like, then, may be the result of deliberate and purposeful design rather than opportunistic responses. Indeed, Gandhi (2019, p. e13) notes that institutional reforms carried out under the guise of populist rhetoric of 'diminish[ing] the power of elites' is among one of the easiest ways to target and incapacitate opposition.

These findings, in turn, have catalysed the next generation of studies on democracy into examining 'political factors that have received little attention' for defending democracy, that is factors beyond the evaluation of formal institutional or operational elements in assessments of democratic quality and depth (Haggard & Kaufman, 2016, p. 126). Civil society, or citizen support for democracy, is one such factor (Fuchs & Roller, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Kadivar et al., 2020). At its most elementary, democratic quality and depth rely on the depth and breadth of citizens' support for democracy, which may be captured through their 'commitment to democratic values and principles', beyond their stated support for or satisfaction with democracy (Fuchs & Roller, 2018, p. 25). Thus, studies have examined democratic attitudes and support in East and Southeast Asia since the onset of the Third Wave (Park & Shin, 2006). Indeed, Nobel peace prize winner and former president of Korea, Kim Dae Jung, has taken on the discussion of citizens' democratic values, motivated by apparent contradictions between Confucian values of respect for and obedience to authority and democratic challenges (Kim, 1994). Collective action by civil society counteracts democratic stalling or decline (Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Kadivar et al., 2020). As Haggard and Kaufman (2016, pp. 135–136) note, their study found mass mobilisations of civil society not only led to half of all democratic transitions between 1980 and 2008, but also had enduring effects on democratic quality and depth. This is echoed in Kadivar et al. (2020), which found that the length of social movements prior to democratic transition significantly explained democratic depth and quality, due in part to capacity-building that maintained civil society as a key actor to demand democratic deepening.

We contend that subnational politics is another such political factor, in ways highly congruent with the contributions of civil society. In particular, local offices are often springboards to higher offices, whether at the local or national levels (Stolz, 2003; Thiébault, 1991). Thus, similar to civil society and its mobilisation, local politics are capacity-building and experiential training grounds for elected or appointed officials; further, these officials remain key political actors for the future. In the next section, we provide an overview of the articles in this special issue that investigate if and how local-level politics operationalises as capacity-building and experiential training grounds.

3 | HOW LOCAL POLITICS MATTERS TO DEMOCRATIC QUALITY AND DEPTH: OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES

With democracy so widely and highly prized, and extensively researched, it may be surprising to learn that there are a remarkably small number of studies on subnational or local democracy: a Google Scholar search yields a mere 64,000 results, or less than 2% of the 3.6 million total studies on democracy to date. The neglect overlooks the fact that local politics matter to democratic quality and depth in at least four ways. Briefly, to recap, they are: first, the existence of SURs that coexist with democracy at the national level (Gibson, 2012; Giraudy, 2015); second, political decentralisation in the region that places local politics front and centre of government responsibility and responsiveness considerations; third, vertical and horizontal accountability through local governments and politics; and fourth, interrogation of the exceptionalism of the East Asian development model that is emulated globally with democratic quality and depth. Here, we summarise the findings in the articles in this special issue to show how local politics operationalises as capacity-building and experiential training grounds where elected or appointed officials remain as current and future key players in politics in Korea.

Lee et al. (2021) assess political decentralisation and accountability in local-level politics: the authors weigh legislative productivity and performance of the Busan Metropolitan Council from 2006 to 2018 (the 5th to 7th Councils), with particular attention to the legislation of laws and ordinances. Legislative performance is much studied at the national level, often as a consequence of examination of horizontal accountability—where legislatures provide checks and balances against executive authority—and vertical accountability, where legislators are elected representatives for their constituencies. By contrast, the performance of local-level legislatures is generally overlooked, notwithstanding the same import of accountability and responsiveness at subnational levels as national ones. Working through ordinances proposed by the Busan Metropolitan Council, the authors apply negative binomial regressions to measure the effects of individual attributes on legislative performance and network analyses to explore the effects of legislative networks on the institutionalisation of local councils, and reach three important findings. First, local-level legislators as council members proposed more ordinances over time, and this increase displaced the number of ordinances made by the local-level executive, the mayor, suggesting an erosion of executive dominance of policymaking in local councils. Second, recently elected council members are more active with ordinance proposals, which suggests an effort to demonstrate representation and connectivity to voters. Third, spatial network analyses show that ordinance proposal network communities have become more diverse and multi-centred over time, suggesting a move from personalistic politics to institutionalised politics. These results show, individually and together, that local politics are capacity-building and experiential training grounds for elected or appointed officials.

The significance of this capacity-building and experiential training cannot be overstated, as the articles by Shin and Jhee (2021) and Lee and Suh (2021) show. Shin and Jhee (2021) evaluate the effects of decentralisation on citizens' satisfaction with public service delivery. Using confirmatory factor analyses and structural equation modelling on data from 17 provincial-level governments, the authors assess the extent to which fiscal and administrative decentralisation in Korea have improved both local-government capacity and citizens' satisfaction with public service delivery at the local level. On the one hand, they find that both fiscal and administrative decentralisation improve local government capacity, lending weight to the relevance of local politics in capacity-building and experiential training. On the other hand, the authors also find that citizens' satisfaction with public services are lower despite improved

government capacity at the local level. They conclude that this may spring from citizens' perceptions of low levels of accountability at the local level, a finding that supports the positive impact of political decentralisation, and not merely fiscal and administrative decentralisation, improving government responsibility and responsiveness.

Lee and Suh (2021) link accountability at the local level with citizens' trust and support, to affirm that local-level politics are important barometers for evaluating democratic quality and depth. Specifically, using data from the first and fourth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey, the authors apply seemingly unrelated regressions to assess whether citizens' trust of local government is a reflection of their trust at the national level, or whether the constituents of political trust at the two levels are dissimilar. The question takes off from studies that show political trust buffers democratising systems but not governments from public pressures for performance (Citrin, 1974; Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016; Yap, 2019). If political trust at the local level is influenced by different components to those at the national level, then it follows that (a) political trust at the local level potentially buffers democratising systems from the pressures of performance; and (b) local-level politics, therefore, offers experiential training and capacity-building grounds for building citizens' support and trust in democracy. The results show that the bases of local trust are differentiated from national trust to affirm both conclusions—that is, local-level politics provide distinctive measures of democratic quality and depth; and further, local-level politics may serve as capacity-building of political trust.

To summarise, the articles in this special issue show if and how local-level politics are distinct from national-level democracy to warrant separate treatment and use in calibrating democratic quality and depth. Relatedly, they also show how local politics operationalises as capacity-building and experiential training grounds to ensure their relevance for democratic deepening. The findings strongly support the examination of local politics in assessments of democratic quality and depth.

4 | CONCLUSION

With the vast literature on democracy, it bears reminding that democracy studies are empirically driven, fuelled in no small part by the ebbs and flows of the waves of democracy on the ground. While earlier studies focused on institutional and structural foundations of democracy, which leading democracy scholars Diamond and Morlino (2004) refer to as '*why*' democratisation occurs, recent democratic stalling, backsliding, reversals and deconsolidation have led to calls for more robust and systematic evaluation of democratic variability, democratic consolidation, or the demise of democracy, effectively shifting research gears to '*what*' constitutes democracy (Diamond & Morlino, 2004, p. 20).

In this special issue, we answer the call and bring attention to local-level politics as a means of exploring democratic quality and depth. Knowledge accumulation has led to an admonishment by prominent scholars Haggard and Kaufman (2016, p. 126) to investigate 'political factors that have received little attention' in defending democracy. Civil society has emerged as one of these political factors; we contend that local politics is one factor that has been mostly overlooked.

In this introduction to the special issue, we offer four reasons to study local politics as relevant to democratic variability or consolidation. Through their examination of local-level politics in Korea, the authors in this special issue provide evidence that subnational politics may be distinct from national-level institutions and democratic progress; indeed, citizens'

responses to subnational- and national-level politics are also different. The articles also affirm local politics are capacity-building and experiential training grounds to further vertical and horizontal accountability, including through strengthening legislative checks of executive performance, or building citizens' political trust and satisfaction in local government.

Study of local politics, then, provide theory building and empirical evidence to plumb democratic depth and quality. The introduction and articles in this special issue invite further examination of local politics and their resonance with national-level democracy. We look forward to more studies that search out the effects of little researched political factors on robust democratic depth and quality.

O. Fiona Yap

Crawford School of Public Policy,
The Australian National University,
Canberra, ACT, Australia

Correspondence
O. Fiona Yap,
Crawford School of Public Policy,
The Australian National University,
Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia.
Email: fiona.yap@anu.edu.au

ORCID

O. Fiona Yap https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1287-3768

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