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**Citation for published version:**

Kim, Y 2021, Evolution of political parties and the party system in South Korea. in S Lim & NJP Alford (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*. 1 edn, Routledge, London, pp. 65-81.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003026150>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.4324/9781003026150](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003026150)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea on 31 August 2021, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Contemporary-South-Korea/Lim-Alsford/p/book/9780367458201>

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## **Evolution of political parties and the party system in South Korea**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding the origins and transformation of South Korea's party and party systems is critical to making sense of the country's main political trends, especially since democratization. Korea's party system has been a moderate multiparty system with two main parties dominating the political landscape. Its key features are an overall low level of institutionalization and deeply-rooted cleavages such as regionalism and ideology, with generation, class and gender divides emerging in recent years. Political parties, often relabelled following mergers and splits before and after elections, remain largely leader-led and -centred, displaying considerable factionalism and personalism.

**Keywords:** political parties; party system; institutionalization; political cleavages; leadership; regionalism; ideology; direct democracy; online activism.

**Short bio:** Youngmi Kim is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland (UK). Her main research interests lie in the study of government, populism, internet activism, and inequality on the Korean peninsula. Her articles have been published in *Electoral Studies*, *Korea Observer*, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, and *Cities*. Other publications also include the edited volume *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization* (2018) and the monograph *The politics of coalition in South Korea* (2011) [youngmi.kim@ed.ac.uk](mailto:youngmi.kim@ed.ac.uk) .

### **Introduction**

Judging by the limited life-span of its political parties and the number of fusions (mergers) and fissions (splinters and factionalism), observers could be forgiven for thinking that Korean politics is fraught with permanent instability. Political re-branding of political organizations has been an ongoing feature of life in the Republic of Korea, appearing under both authoritarian rule and in democratic times, as parties attempt to distance themselves from embarrassing legacies of individual presidents, especially those tainted by corruption and trials. Coalition-building, another tool used by parties to contest elections and attain majority

in parliament, also contributes to the apparent flux of parties. Identifying political parties and their roots and political supporters can therefore be highly confusing and challenging, even for scholars of parties and party systems.

Yet at the same time there are also deeply-rooted regularities. First and foremost, history weighs heavily on the Korean peninsula, with the memory of Japanese colonial rule (1910-45), the Korea war (1950-53) and the ensuing division of the peninsula. Closer to our times, the Gwangju massacre of 1980, the painful social and economic consequences of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the neo-liberal economic policies that followed, and the Global Recession of 2008, have provided some parameters, some ‘regularity’ of sorts, if not stability to a notoriously ‘unstable’ political system. Secondly, leadership and personalities matter deeply in Korean politics: parties are to be understood as the projects of individual leaders or a small group thereof. Thus, a history of Korean political parties is necessarily more a tale of its leaders than a map of specific political formations. Thirdly, new forms of political participation and activism enabled by advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) have modified traditional ways of ‘doing politics’, augmenting demands for direct participation and democracy, whilst weakening representative institutions and intermediary bodies such as political parties and parliaments.

The rise of digital populism, defined as ‘a new type of political behaviour marked by the political use of the internet as both a form of political participation and an instrument of mobilization’ (Kim, 2009) has weakened the role of both parties and party system. Yet both retain relevance in Korean politics by serving as the glue between popular demands and government. While weakened and challenged, they continue to perform their linkage role, crucial in representative democracies. Understanding the origins and transformation of Korea’s party and party systems is thus critical to making sense of the country’s main political trends, especially since democratization.

The chapter’s aim is two-fold: to characterize the nature and evolution of Korea’s party system and political parties, and to identify long-term continuities and some changes, where and when they have arisen. Due to space constraints this cannot include detailed profile of individual political organizations. Rather, the objective here is to contextualize the Korean case in the broader party politics and party systems scholarship, so that the country’s distinctive features are captured, alongside some commonalities with other democracies. With this in mind, the chapter is structured as follows. The next section briefly introduces key concepts and debates in the party politics literature, crucial to understand Korea’s party systems and political parties, both in themselves and comparatively. The chapter

subsequently examines the origins and evolution of Korean political parties, by highlighting its broad long-term trends rather than offering a descriptive account of individual political formations.<sup>1</sup> Next, attention shifts to the structure of the party system, the key characteristics of which are outlined. Lastly, the reform of electoral laws is discussed, as this has potentially transformative implications for both party system and political parties.

### **Understanding and explaining party and party systems**

To more clearly frame the empirical discussion of Korean politics in the remainder of the chapter it is important first to define key terms used some of the main debates in the more theoretical scholarship.

#### *Political parties*

What are political parties and what are their objectives? How do parties interact and compete with other parties? Whom and whose interests do these political organizations represent? How do they contest and win elections? How do parties survive and what financial sources can they rely on? How are candidates recruited for elections and what is the role of party members? These are some of the most common questions driving the scholarship of party politics and party systems. The scholarly literature on democracies recognises parties as the core actors enabling popular participation in politics, articulating and representing grievances and demands, and providing a linkage role with government. A party is a ‘political part, representing certain group of people and run its organization for its political goals’ (Sartori, 2005). According to Huckshorn, a political party is ‘an autonomous group of people with political purpose via nominating candidates for elections to win office and governing power’ (Huckshorn, 1984). Its functions and activities are manifold and include competency, environmental relations, internal communication, formal rules, organizational financing and recruitment (Panebianco, 1988). Depending on its relationship with the grassroots (the rank and file) and the role of its members, a political party can be a mass party (with extensive membership), cadre or cartel party, run by a narrow circle of elite party members. The relationship with grassroots and civil society is often crucial to its functioning and shaping its agenda, but so is the relationship with the state, as Katz and Mair observe (1995). Especially

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of specific political parties over time, during authoritarian rule and in the democratization era see chapter 2 in KIM, Y. 2011. *The Politics of Coalition in Korea : Between Institutions and Culture*, London, Taylor and Francis.

cartel parties tend to rely on state subventions more than membership dues for financial support (Kats and Mair, 1995). Scholars have also explored the relationship between parties and government including government stability and governability (Ware, 1996) as well as the relationship between parties, in government and opposition (Kim, 2008b, Martínez-Gallardo, 2012, Bevan and Greene, 2018, Coppedge, 1994). Last, but not least, scholars have sought to uncover the main objectives of political parties, operating a key distinction between office-seeking and policy-seeking political parties (Laver and Schofield, 1990, Budge and Laver, 1986, Evans, 2018, Pedersen, 2012). While many assume a party's ultimate goal is to win seats in parliament or office (form government), by failing to turn party objectives into policies it will risk losing the support of its voters and lose subsequent elections to competing parties. Beyond the pursuit of either office and policy (or both), some parties are more interested in maintaining their ideology and core beliefs than expanding supporters or increasing seat numbers in the legislature.

### *Party systems*

A party system refers to 'interactions among parties and the number of parties in the parliament and patterns of competition' (Sartori, 1976, Blondel, 1968, Almond, 1956, Neumann, 1956). Discussions of party systems have tended to revolve around a key set of questions: how many parties exist in a party system? What is the role of social cleavages? What is the impact of electoral laws on party systems?

The number of parties is a relevant question when discussing party systems. In this regard Sartori contends that party systems should only include the number of effective parties. That is to say, if a party plays a crucial role in a coalition or as a veto player, meaning that its behaviour is consequential, then it should be counted in the party system. The US system is a typical illustration of this situation. More often, however, a country is home to more than two parties, but the others tend to be much smaller in either number of votes or seats than the dominant ones. In such cases, Sartori notes, parties with small number seats in the parliament could therefore be excluded (Sartori, 1976). Ware is more specific, arguing that parties with less than 3% of the total votes in the elections can be excluded when counting party systems (Ware, 1996). In this case for Sartori British party systems can be viewed as a two-party systems or two and a half party systems, depending on how the Liberal-Democratic Party performs in a given electoral round. The same point would be applied to the Scottish National Party. In other terms the UK party system can be seen as a moderate multiparty system with two main parties. Regardless of the exact number of parties, there has long been a consensus

in the party politics scholarship that dual party systems have tended to be more stable and thus more conducive to government stability (Sartori, 1976). Whether the number of parties present in a system depends on a country's political history or culture or institutional design has been hotly debated in the literature, with some scholars e.g. Norris noting that electoral systems play a crucial role in shaping the outcome (the number of parties a given system has) and that first-past-the-post majoritarian electoral systems are more likely to produce and support dual party systems (Norris, 2004). Although this has long been the case in some western democracies and especially Anglo-Saxon ones (especially the UK), political realities have changed there too, with the rise of important political parties, the formation of political coalitions and the decline in government stability and governability even in countries hitherto considered as paragons of political stability.

The study of parties and party systems has also been conducted in conjunction with the study of regime types (presidential, semi-presidential, parliamentary). Under parliamentary systems party stability is connected with government stability or governability. Research on coalition studies has been driven by the fundamental question of stability, namely whether several parties should build a coalition to win elections, how long coalitions of two or more parties last in government as opposed to single-party governments (minimal winning coalition theories, minimum winning coalition theories, bargaining position theories), or whether parties that are ideologically close make for 'better' coalition partners in government (minimal connected winning theory, minimal range coalition theories) (Budge and Laver, 1986, Cheibub et al., 2004, Neumann, 1956, Riker, 1962, Axelrod, 1970, Laver and Schofield, 1990, Kim, 2008a, Kim, 2008b). Scholars of regime types have examined whether the stability of parties and government is determined by a particular regime type. Although parliamentary systems were initially regarded as more conducive to political stability compared to presidential systems (Linz, 1990), more recent research, focused primarily on the European and American experiences, has shown that it is not necessarily regime types that determine the longevity or durability of governments (Przeworski et al., 1996, Cheibub and Limongi, 2002, Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997). Work on South Korea, however, has shown that many of the claims of the scholarship on regime types and coalition theory do not travel well to Korea, as the system displays a number of distinctive features that are quite different from the Western European systems that have informed much of the scholarship on parties and party systems (Kim, 2008a, Kim, 2011).

Another important line of enquiry concerns the role and impact of social and political cleavages. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) have examined whether social cleavages reflect party

systems, or party systems are constructed by social cleavages. For them social cleavages are constructed by critical events and conflicts within society. The nation-building process in Europe created critical social cleavages over the tensions between the core and the peripheries and the state and church in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Industrial Revolution brought other emerging cleavages between the urban/industrial and rural/agricultural populations, and between workers and employers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian Revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also created social and political cleavages between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. After achieving universal suffrage, social cleavages were reflected in political party systems, and proportional representative electoral systems impacted on the frozen cleavages in the party systems (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Scholars have subsequently extended research on social cleavages representing party systems to address left and right ideology, class, economic liberal values, and religion. Various scholars have also criticised Lipset and Rokkan's cleavage theories for being too rigid, focusing on communal and regional divisions, and for not providing a sufficiently rich analytical tool to explain much more diversified society in present (Rose and Urwin, 1969, Rose and Urwin, 1970, Inglehart, 1997, Kitschelt, 1994, Kriesi, 1998, Enyedi, 2008, Ufen, 2012). Korean party systems also do not comply with the classic cleavage theories, as Korea's class cleavage did not emerge after industrialisation, but after the financial crisis (Kim and Park, 2018). Researchers on institutions have also explored the causal relations regarding whether electoral laws impact on party systems (Norris, 2004, Birch, 2001, Reilly, 2007) and what number of party systems is more stable for governability. Sartori originally suggested that dual party systems were more likely to be stable (Sartori, 2005); however, recent party system research has suggested that multi-party systems can also prove stable, especially in many new democracies in Eastern European countries, following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Cheibub and Limongi, 2002, Cheibub et al., 2004).

Taken as a whole the set of rules that regulate the interactions between parties determines the level of institutionalization of the party system, which in turn shapes the behaviour of political parties. This matters because it has an impact on its stability and longevity (Kim, 2008b, Hicken and Martinez Kuhonta, 2011, Mainwaring, 2018, Mainwaring, 2016, Hellmann, 2014, Bértoa, 2014). Systems with a higher level of institutionalization tend to have more stable political formations. In contrast, weakly institutionalised party systems see recurrent coalition formations and changes (collapse), the frequent rise and demise of political parties, typically involving the same political actors. Such systems tend to be home

to highly-personalised elite-based political parties (Kim, 2011). South Korea is one such example, as shown in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Structure and agency in Korean party politics and party system**

Although they may not determine the present or the future trajectory of the country, Korea's past and its legacies have shaped the evolution of the country's politics. The painful memory of colonial rule in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the unresolved historical tensions with Japan, the Korea war and the division of the peninsula into North and South, and the ideological polarization that followed, all provide an important context for understanding the contours of Korean party politics and the party system today. Such issues have shaped starkly different views between the conservative and progressive governments (see details on ideological cleavages and the debate over the National Security Law in (Kim, 2011)).

#### *The macro-structural context*

Historical tensions, ideological divides and geopolitical competition may have left North Korea with the USSR and China, and South Korea allied with the US (as well as Japan and other western countries), but they also had repercussions within South Korea itself. Memories of colonial rule, the war experience and the Gwangju uprising and massacre created and reinforced social cleavages between conservative and progressive camps, in politics as much as in society. Broadly speaking, conservatives are typically very supportive of the alliance with the US and Japan and are in favour of strong containment policies toward North Korea. Progressives by contrast, tend to support engagement with North Korea; they also value the alliance with the United States, but their stronger nationalism (paradoxically, perhaps, on the centre left) leads to different positions towards Japan and China.

This point is well illustrated by the resurfacing of tensions with Japan over the issues of forced labour and sex slaves during the Moon Jae-in administration, and the very vocal street protests by the elderly opponents of the Moon administration in the heart of Seoul portraying him as a puppet of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Although the rise of China and the decline of US hegemony is making Korea's regional neighbourhood and international alignments more challenging and less predictable than in the past, the foreign policy orientation inherited from the Cold War period remain influential in Korean politics and society.



A landmark in Korean politics was of course the democratization in 1987, when authoritarian rule and the dominance of one party gave way to competitive electoral politics, direct presidential elections, government turnover, and the consolidation of democratic institutions. The evolution of Korean parties and the party system since democratisation is defined by a number of common features: the recurrent recourse by parties to the formation of electoral coalitions to contest and win elections, the break-up of such coalitions and individual parties with subsequent mergers, the patterns of regional voting behaviour, the persistence of some social cleavages and the emergence of new ones. Additionally, there are growing calls for direct participation and direct democracy, fuelled by socio-economic inequalities and polarization, and aided by technological advances in the form of social media (Facebook, Twitter) and instant messaging such as the Kakaotalk mobile application. To make sense of all this it is useful to think of political parties and the party system as the institutions playing the linkage role between these two levels and corresponding sets of actors. Korean party politics by and large remains elite- and personality-driven, although demands for greater participation and inclusion have grown substantially in recent years.

In the area of elite politics, the main features are the role of individual leaders and the politics of coalition. While a narrative history of individual Korean politics is possible (see figures 1 and 2 for a visualization) it would be misleading to revisit the specifics of individual political parties from independence to the present. The reality of Korean party politics at elite level is one of individual leaders, from Park Chung-hee to Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-Jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Moon Jae-in, among others. Korean politics has been shaped by the pacts (coalitions) between some of them, the collapse of agreements, personal feuds between them (such as between opposition leaders Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam in the 1970s and 1980s or conservatives Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye in the 2000s). The modus operandi of Korean politics thus consisted of forming (and disbanding) new political organizations which were in fact top-down and elite-driven political creations rather than western-style mass parties. Leaders made parties, not the other way around, especially during the three Kims' era. The fact that personalities dominates the political landscape in Korea rather than political organizations is captured by the expression of the 'three Kims' era', with Korean politics being shaped by the actions and choices of three political leaders: Kim Jong-pil from Chungcheong province, Kim Young-sam from Gyeongsang province and Kim Dae-jung from Jeolla province (Diamond and Kim, 2000). Importantly, their political power and success were rooted in different regions. Geographical and administrative differences became salient political cleavages.

If until the turn of the millennium Korean politics had been primarily top-down and leader-centred and -driven, this began to change in 2002, when Roh Moo-hyun's presidential campaign saw a much more systematic and organized role of the grassroots. This was then followed by greater intra-party dynamism, including primaries and more open procedures for leader selection, further contributing to counter-balance the role of political leaders. This was also the moment when online activism started to become politically relevant in Korean politics, a phenomenon which became even more widespread during the protests over the death of two junior high school girls killed as a result of a US tank incident (see in detail in (Kim, 2009)).

On the societal level, Korean party politics has manifested itself through voting behaviour. Although, as noted later in this chapter, the exact causality in the relationship between social and political cleavages is disputed, Korean voters have displayed regular patterns of voting behaviour along regional lines. Typically, this has meant the south-eastern provinces (Yeongnam) leaning towards conservatives, with south-western provinces (Honam) voting for progressive candidates and parties. The central regional areas and the Seoul metropolitan area have been home to swing voters. Regionalism has been a constant feature of Korean elections since democratization. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, history and memory heavily influence Korean politics and voting patterns. The Gwangju massacre by the Chun Doo-hwan regime on demonstrators on 18 May 1980 remains vivid in the memory of the local population and partly explains its opposition to conservative parties. The experience of living through the Korea war, its aftermath (including split families across the border) and the ideological divide during the Cold War, as well as the experience of living through the 'economic miracle on the Han river' during the Park Chung-hee administration in the 1970s goes a long way towards explaining the popularity of conservative parties among the older strata of the population. These are not clear-cut divides and nor are they immutable, but they nonetheless reflect broad patterns of political behaviour that have remained constant since democratization (Kim and Park, 2018). While politicians tried to broaden party support beyond their regional voting bases, they also appealed to their regional voters to consolidate their support, raising the issue of the concentration of resources around Seoul and the metropolitan area to the detriment of specific regions or playing on the divide between the Honam and Yeongnam regions, thus contributing to further entrenching regionalism in society and politics.

Since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, regional or generational social cleavages have been 'complemented' with another fissure cutting across society. Korea's gradual integration in

the global economy, globalization, the financial crisis of 1997 (compounded by the IMF structural adjustment and the neo-liberal reforms that followed) and that of 2008 have deepened the divide between social groups. It is impossible to understand the polarization of Korean society – and politics – of the past two decades without taking into account the social-economic duress part of the population has been placed under. The post-1997 flexible labour policies resulted in severe competition among youth to enter the job market, starting from the non-regular job category (Bijeonggyujik), which gave rise to the expression of ‘880,000 won generation’ (approximately £600 as of mid-2020) (Woo and Park, 2007). Older generations were not better off, with white-collar workers in their forties and fifties forced into ‘honourable retirement’ (basically laid off), pushed into self-employment owning small shops or restaurants or taking up positions as taxi drivers or in the delivery/courier business. The recent book on the irregular workers’ story (Imgyejang iyagi)<sup>2</sup> illustrates such cases well through the diary of an early retired man from a white collar permanent job falling into an irregular job category (Cho, 2020). Although both generations are mired in a similar socio-economic predicament, inter-generational conflicts also arise due to the generation’s different cultural referents, as captured by the expression Kkondae “condescending older person” (Kim, 2019) by which young people refer to older Koreans, whom they often regard as very stubborn and old-fashioned in their ideas, while abusing their power at work and expecting obedience in deference to their seniority (Lauer, 2019).

Economic difficulties compound generational differences.

The famous K-drama ‘My Mister’ vividly illustrates the different and increasingly divergent experiences of youngsters in their twenties and middle-aged white-collar workers. Despite their differences these two groups both currently live in ‘Hell Joseon’ (Kim, 2018). Their experiences stand in stark contrast with the ‘top 1%’ (Milanovic, 2013, Piketty, 2014, Yates, 2016). Korea’s Chaebols, the family-owned multinational conglomerates were bailed out during the 1997 crisis in Korea over cheap oppressed labour thus anti-sentiment of Chaebols is also pervasive along with resentment against the corrupt elites. Numerous new words have been created, such as Sampo generation (generation giving up three – dating, marriage and having children) to N generation (generation giving up numerous things such as having a job, owning house, hope etc) and also Saojeong or Oryukdo (if people at 45 years old or 50s are not retired they are thieves, so they are pushed to retire at work) (Kim, 2018, Yun, 2019). Such attitudes reflect the struggle both groups, those in their 20s and their mid 40s and above

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<sup>2</sup> The word ‘Imgyejang’ is the colloquial abbreviation of ‘old men with irregular jobs’.

experience to get and keep a job, as well as the cultural conflict arising from the transition from democratisation to globalization.

In all this socio-economic transformation technology plays an important role. Korea is the most wired society in the world and has exploited more than other countries the possibilities offered by new media. Combined with the country's history of social and political contention during and after authoritarian rule, and people's propensity to take to the streets to air discontent, an exceptional blend of technological protest and dissent has emerged. The emergence of online support groups during Roh Moo-hyun's presidential campaign in 2002, the anti-American protests over the criminal conduct of US soldiers and the mad cow dispute in 2008 over the Korea-US FTA agreement showed people's power on and off line and, most recently, the nationwide demonstrations over the influence-peddling scandal that eventually led to the impeachment and imprisonment of former president Park Geun-hye during the winter of 2016-2017 seemed to embody the empowering and emancipating potential of 'liberation technology'. Mobile applications allow social mobilisation to take place quickly and cheaply (Kim, 2009). The shift from grievance to mobilization can be extremely rapid, with mass protests gathering on the streets within hours of the issue having first appeared online. The twenty consecutive demonstrations demanding the impeachment of (then) President Park Geun-hye from 26<sup>th</sup> October 2016 to 29<sup>th</sup> April 2017 showed both the rapidity and the effectiveness of mobilization and protest in the age of social media (Statista, 2020). Individuals can also directly submit petitions to the Blue House (the residence of the Korean President). More recently, mobile applications have been especially effective in the government's track-and-trace efforts to contain the spread of the Coronavirus (Kim, 2020a). Yet, there is a darker side too. While Korea has not been affected by the current wave of populist leaders as have the US, the UK, the Philippines or even Japan, digital populism has emerged as a phenomenon that combines online and offline features and augments us vs. them dichotomies as well as hate speech, which spreads uncontrolled in the virtual world (Kim, 2009). Geopolitical competition, socio-economic inequalities and polarization and advances in ICT constitute the broader trends in which Korea's party system and party politics have evolved in recent decades. The next sections trace the origins and development of Korea's political parties and their leaders, before sketching the key feature of the party system.

*Contemporary features of Korean parties and party system: A brief party genealogy*

A genealogy of political parties in Korea needs to take into account the role of individual leaders and the politics of coalition-building, as these two dimensions run through both authoritarian and democratic periods, although their importance increased after democratization.

As figures 1 and 2 below show, political parties have changed name multiple times over a timespan of over sixty years. Although the official denomination has varied, the visualization shows that what often appears as a complex and confusing picture of Korean party politics can be simplified without excessive loss of nuance. Broadly speaking, two camps have dominated the country's post-war political life: the conservatives and the progressives. Although this distinction is not a perfect depiction of the divisions on all issues (neo-liberal economic policies were introduced during the Kim Dae-jung administration, and cultural conservatism runs deep in Korean politics) these two broad political camps can be identified. The key differences lie in ideological orientation and foreign policy preferences, although regionalism play an important role too as will be discussed below. An important feature of Korean party politics is the recurrent use of coalition-building among political actors.<sup>3</sup> Coalition building among political leaders and parties began with democratization in 1987 (fig. 1). The first coalition of political parties took place in 1990 with the establishment of the Democratic Liberal Party, born out of the merger of the Democratic Justice Party, led by then President Roh Tae-woo, the New Democratic Republican Party headed by Kim Jong-pil, and the Unification Democratic Party led by Kim Young-sam. Such party mergers and coalition building involving regional leaders Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-pil gave the period from 1987 until 2003 the name 'three Kims' era', an era which ended when Roh Moo-hyun was elected by a more nation-wide and less regionally-rooted social movement which, for the first time, leveraged ICT advances to mobilise support (Im, 2004). After the democratization in 1987 political leaders build coalition to secure majority seats in the parliament in 1990 but in the next general elections, voters only returned a minority ruling party, with large opposition parties in the legislature. Another electoral coalition took place prior to the 1997 presidential elections between presidential candidate Kim Dae-jung from the National Congress for New Politics and the United Liberal Democrats party leader Kim Jong-pil. When the ruling party and the coalition partner could not pass any reform policies in the National Assembly and could not even appoint a prime minister and ministers,

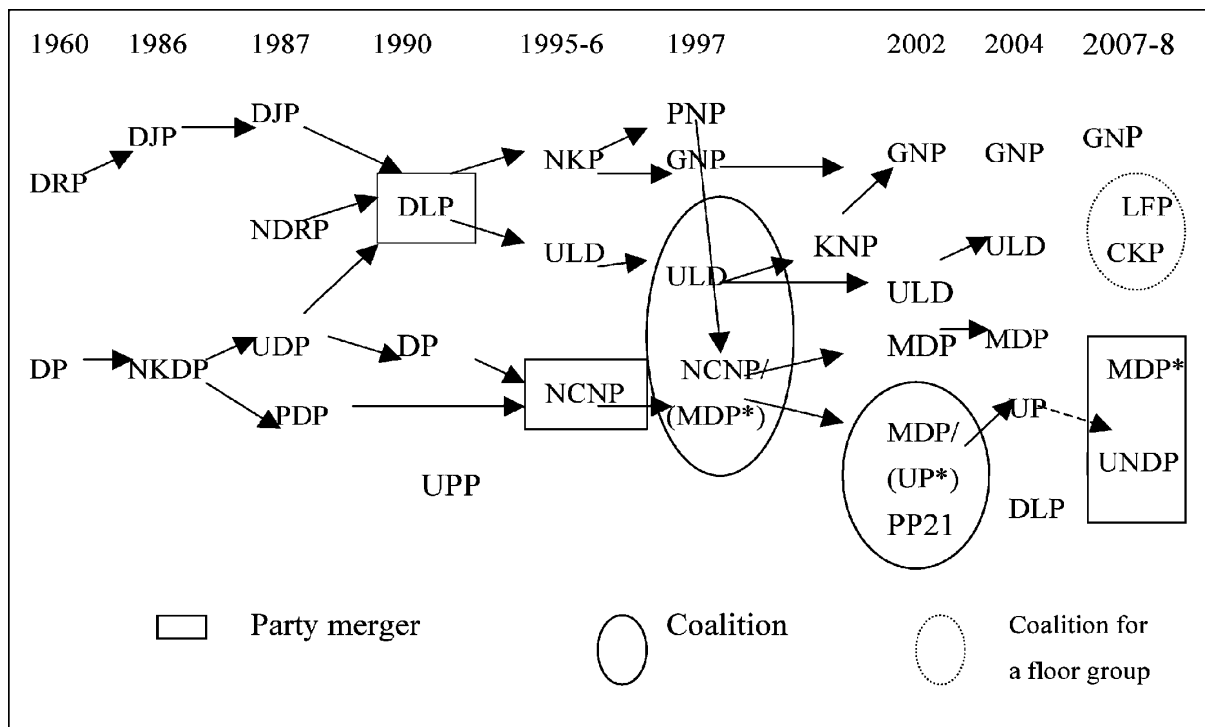
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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the institutional and cultural roots of Korea's coalition politics see KIM, Y. 2011. *The Politics of Coalition in Korea : Between Institutions and Culture*, London, Taylor and Francis.

the ruling party and the coalition partner party persuaded a number of politicians to defect from their own parties and join the coalition ruling parties. Coalition building became a tool to win elections and attain majority in the legislature.

Beyond the two broad camps Korea also has a number of leftist parties, which have also changed names multiple times, but have remained on the fringes of the political spectrum, struggling to achieve representation in parliament, as in the case of the current Justice Party led by Sim Sang-jeong, whose small size in parliament means it struggles to be heard or be relevant in national politics, let alone government.

**Figure 1. Genealogy of Korean political parties (1960-2008)**



(Source: Author, revised from author's other work (Kim, 2011))

**Figure 2. Genealogy of Korean political parties (2008-2020)**

Year/Ideological stance	2008	2010	2012/ 13	2016	2017	2020
Conservative parties	GNP	NFP		LKP	KPP, ORP	UFP/ FKP
	LFP			PP	RP/ RFP/ DPP/	PP/ PLP
Progressive parties	MDP/ UDP / DP	DUP/DP	NPDP	DP		DP / PFC
Leftist/ labour parties	DLP	UPP/PJP / JP		JP		JP
	Party merger					

(Source: Author)

**Party lists**

DRP Democratic Republican Party led by Kim Jong-pil (1963)

DP Democratic Party led by Park Sun-cheon 1963 (later, New Democratic Party in 1964 and its former party of the New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP) in the 1980s led by Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung)

DJP Democratic Justice Party – ruling party led by Chun Doo-hwan (1980) and later by Roh Tae-Woo (1987)

NKDP New Korea Democratic Party led by Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung (1985)

UDP Unification Democratic Party led by Kim Young-sam (1987)

NDRP New Democratic Republican Party led by Kim Jong-pil (1987)

PDP Peace Democratic Party led by Kim Dae-jung (1987)

DLP Democratic Liberal Party after the three parties' merger (1990)

UPP United People's Party led by Chung Ju-young (1992)

NKP New Korea Party led by Kim Young-sam (1996)

PNP People's New Party led by Lee In-je (1997)

GNP Grand National Party led by Lee Hoe-chang (1997)

ULD United Liberal Democrats led by Kim Jong-pil (1995)

KNP Korea's New Party led by Kim Yong-hwan (2000)

NCNP National Congress for New Politics led by Kim Dae-jung (1996)

MDP New Millennium Democratic Party led by Kim Dae-jung, later Roh Moo-hyun (2000)

PP 21 People's Power 21 led by Chung Mong-joon (2002)

UP Uri Party led by Roh Moo-hyun (2002)

NF New Frontier (Saenuri Party) led by Park Geun-hye (2008, 2012) Previously GNP (Grand National Party)

UDP United Democratic Party 2008 / DUP Democratic United Party 2012

DLP Democratic Labour Party 2008 / UPP United Progressive Party 2012

LFP Liberty Forward Party 2008/2012

LKP Liberal Korea Party 2017

RP Right Party (Bareun Party) 2017

RFP Right Future Party (Bareunmirae Party) 2018

NAP New Alternative Party  
 PDP Party for Democracy and Peace  
 JP Justice Party led by Sim Sang-jung 2013  
 DP Democratic Party led by Lee Hae-Chan 2020  
 UFP United Future Party led by Hwang Kyo-Ahn 2020  
 PP People's Party led by Ahn Chol-Soo 2020  
 PPL Party for People's Livelihood led by Yu Sung-Yup  
 PFC Party for the Citizens (Satellite party of DP 2020)  
 FKP Future Korea Party (Satellite party of UFP 2020)

*Korea's party system: a moderate multiparty system with two main parties*

As figures 1 and especially 2 show, over time Korean party politics has become home to political parties other than the two main ones often referred as conservatives and progressives and currently named the United Future Party and the Democratic Party respectively. As mentioned earlier, a party system refers to the interactions between parties. The number of such parties is important of course, but in itself does not determine the nature of the system. Korea has long been characterised as a multi-party system, as the constitution allowed several political formations. Yet in practice there has been historically been a moderate multiparty system with two dominant parties. Party politics has become gradually more diverse since the early 2000s. The constant mergers and break-ups of political parties (fission and fusion) and the fact that these were primarily leader-centred political formations has created a rather unstable system, which has been seen either as 'institutionalisation without parties' (Hellmann, 2014) a low level of party system institutionalization (Kim, 2011), or indeed that very notion of party system institutionalization in Korea might be a 'misnomer' (Steinberg, 2005).

Another regular feature of Korea's party system is that of regionalism and regional voting behaviour, evident in most presidential elections since 1987 (table 1). The authoritarian government's development strategy favoured the south-eastern Youngnam province where its leaders were from, while south-western Honam region, home to opposition leader Kim Dae-jung was discriminated against by the government's industrial strategy. The Gwangju massacre which caused at least 250 deaths among civilians and thousands of injuries further reinforced regional animosities. Voting behaviour along regional lines has deepened since democratization. Today's Democratic Party dates back to the authoritarian time when Kim Dae-jung was contesting the presidential elections against Park Chung-hee in 1971. Since then the Democratic Party has had loyal voters in Jeolla province (Honam Region/ South west) and the conservatives have their stronghold in Gyeongsang province (Yeongnam region/ South East) where both Park Chung-hee and Kim Young-sam (and most of other



presidents) originated from. Individual leaders have sought to mobilize and capitalise local support (region/province-based) in their political careers. While, as in most countries, some local and regional differences exist, Korea's political leaders have deployed this resource to their political advantage, reifying such differences and rendering them a politically salient cleavage.

**Table 1. Presidential Elections (1987-2017)**

Presidential elections	Presidential candidates	Province							Total
		Gyeon g-gi	Chung-cheong	Jeolla	Gyeong-sang (North)	Gyeong-sang (South)	Gangwon	Jeju	
the thirteenth 1987	Roh Tae-woo	34.4	33.1	9.9	68.1	36.6	59.3	49.8	38.6
	Kim Young-sam	28.7	20.1	1.2	26.6	53.7	26.1	26.8	28.0
	Kim Dae-jung	28.4	8.9	88.4	2.5	6.9	8.8	18.6	27.1
	Kim Jong-pil	8.4	34.6	0.5	2.4	2.6	5.4	4.5	8.1
the fourteenth 1992	Kim Young-sam	36.0	36.2	4.2	61.6	72.1	40.8	15.2	42.0
	Kim Dae-jung	34.8	27.3	91.0	8.7	10.8	15.2	32.9	33.8
	Chung ju-young	19.8	23.8	2.3	17.0	8.8	33.5	15.4	16.3
the fifteenth 1997	Lee Hoe-chang	37.8	25.7	3.2	65.7	53	42.4	35.9	38.15
	Kim Dae-jung	41.4	43	93	12.9	13.4	23.3	39.8	39.65
	Lee In-je	18	26.1	1.5	17.4	29.5	30.4	20.7	18.91
the sixteenth 2012	Roh Moo-hyun	50.58	52.55	93.37	20.16	30.73	41.51	56.05	48.91
	Lee Hoe-chang	44.56	41.31	4.79	75.60	62.37	52.48	39.93	46.58
the seventeenth 2007	Lee Myung-bak	51.44	37.37	8.95	70.97	55.63	51.96	38.67	48.67
	Chung Dong-young	23.94	22.47	80	6.39	13.14	18.88	32.96	26.14

the eighteenth 2012	Park Geun- hye	50.06	54.27	10.32	80.48	60.90	61.97	50.46	51.55
	Moon Jae-in	49.55	45.25	89.16	19.07	38.66	37.53	48.95	48.02
the nineteenth 2017	Moon Jae-in	41.86	42.8	61.93	21.75	37.83	34.2	45.5	41.1
	Hong Jun-pyo	20.83	21.65	2.46	47	32.23	30	18.3	24
	Ahn Cheol- soo	23.1	22.37	28.2	14.95	15.83	21.8	20.9	21.4

(Source: Author – data from the National Election Commission and also revised from the previous work in Kim and Park 2018 (Kim and Park, 2018))

To be clear, regionalism or ideology are not the only political cleavages relevant in contemporary Korea. An analysis of the Korea Barometer survey from 1998 to 2010 shows that class and generation have also emerged as new political cleavages (Kim and Park, 2018). Future research might explore the extent to which gender may now constitute another political cleavage. What is clear is that Korean politics has long been an affair for a narrow group of political (and business) elites, with various social groups either under-represented or at the margins of the country's politics. The initiative to introduce a wide-ranging electoral reform under President Moon, examined in the next section, should be read in this context.

### **Efforts at party system transformation: The 2019 electoral laws and the 2020 general elections**

The evolution of Korean politics has been explained as a case of 'crisis of success'. When the authoritarian government performed well in terms of achieving an economic miracle, the regime faced nation-wide demands for democracy. Electoral democracy was achieved in 1987 when Roh Tae-woo declared the June 29 democratization, and Kim Dae-jung achieved the first political turnover in 1997. When the conservative party led by Lee Myong-bak won the elections in 2007, political scientists saw this moment as a marker of democratic consolidation as South Korea had achieved two political turnovers, from the progressive party to the conservative party. The conservative administration faced another crisis in 2012 as calls for 'economic democratization' increased, fuelled by the deepening socio-economic inequalities and polarization (Kim, 2018). Park Geun-hye was able to win the presidential

election through rebranding her party platform by appropriating the progressives' agenda (Kim, 2014). The two crises of success, first economic development, then political democratization, have made further transformation of the country's politics in a more inclusive manner increasingly urgent.

#### *Attempts at electoral reform<sup>4</sup>*

Korea has been a multi-party democracy for more than three decades; in practice, however, it has been a dual dominant party system. Although much of the party systems literature has regarded the presence of a dual party system as conducive to government stability, research has also shown that party systems of five or even eight parties can also be stable (Cheibub et al., 2004). Furthermore, they are more likely to offer better chances of representation to different social groups. Attempts to achieve this are not new in Korea. To avoid the excessive dominance of the two main parties in the parliament and also enhance representation of the minority groups such as women, labourer, foreign laborers, or LGBTs the electoral reform has been long term driven strategies since the Kim Dae-jung administration.

The electoral laws were designed with four major goals in mind: 1) to enhance the representation of various traditionally under-represented social groups; 2) to disperse the concentrated power of the political elites and the dominant parties so as to allow young, minority political groups to enter parliament; 3) to enhance a *de facto* – and not just *de jure* - multi-party system; and 4) to lower the number of 'wasted votes' due to the first-past-the-post majoritarian electoral law.

Over a year of political negotiations, wrangling and compromises the final version of the laws looked different from what had been initially envisaged. Filibustering from the opposition delayed the passing of the law in parliament, which was eventually approved in December 2019 by fast-tracking the vote. The largest conservative opposition party, the Liberty Korea Party, abstained from voting, while vigorously opposing the new electoral laws. The coalition between the Democratic Party, Bareunmirae Party, the Party for Democracy and Peace, the Justice Party and the Alternative New Party allowed the bill to be passed in the legislature.

According to the new electoral laws, the country still has a hybrid variant of the mixed members proportional system (MMP) with the number of seats unchanged at 300.

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<sup>4</sup> The electoral reform and the 2020 electoral campaign are discussed in greater detail in KIM, Y. 2020b. South Korea: Elections Amid a Pandemic. *The Diplomat*.

Of these, 253 MPs are elected through the first-past-the-post system. The changes affect the 47 seats allocated through proportional representation in a way that is more favourable, or compensatory, towards smaller parties. Of these 47 seats, 17 are still allocated through proportional representation. For the other 30, the system now works as follows. Among 47 seats they allocate 50% of the proportional vote rate up to 30 seats. In other words if party A gains 10% of votes (10% out of 300 seats is 30 seats) and 10 seats out of total 300 seats from electoral districts, party A has 30 seats out of 10 % party votes out of 300 total seats. Out of these 30 seats party A will deduct the actual seats they gain which is 10 seats which means 20 seats (30 seats – 10 seats = 20 seats) and then they add a further 50% or rate out of 20 seats (20 seats divided by 50% = 10 seats), so the actual proportional rate seat they gain would be 10 seats (mixed proportional rates) and 10 seats from the electoral district, resulting in a total of 20 seats. Another new electoral law lowering the voting age from 19 to 18, the age at which the majority of Koreans graduate high schools and enter university.

*Plus ça change? The formation of satellite parties*

Institutional design does not, in itself, radically change a country's politics. The opposition conservative Liberty Korea Party in December fiercely opposed the introduction of the new electoral laws, fearing that they would significantly reduce its presence in parliament; indeed it did so in the April 2020 parliamentary elections. In order to minimise the consequences of the electoral law, the Liberty Korea Party built a grand coalition with other small conservative factions and parties and founded the United Future Party. It then founded a satellite proportional representative Future Korea Party in February 2020. Five members of the United Future Party moved their party affiliation to the new satellite party, to be able to get support electoral subsidy from the National Election Commission. The ruling Democratic party and the Justice Party criticised the electoral strategy as illegal and unconstitutional – and contrary to the spirit of the new law – however, concerns over the impact of the conservative party's electoral strategy meant that the Democratic Party also set up its own satellite party just in time for the 2020 elections.

The Moon jae-in administration had already gone through a political crisis over the Cho Kuk scandal: former senior secretary for Civil Affairs, Cho Kuk, was reappointed as a Minister of Justice at the same time as a corruption scandal emerged in 2019 concerning his daughter's admission Korea University and Busan National University's medical school. The Moon administration was concerned over public fallout from the Cho Kuk scandal, given that former President Park's impeachment was precipitated by news about her close confidante's

daughter Chung Yura's illegal and non-transparent college admission to Ehwa Womans University, provoking the candlelight vigils of 2016-2017.

The ruling Democratic Party saw its support ratings fluctuate significantly in 2019 and early 2020, also as the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in Korea (Kim, 2020b). Exactly 30 days before the elections, on 15<sup>th</sup> March, the ruling party decided to establish a proportional representative party. Though they did not call it a satellite or sister party, but rather a coalition of the proportional representative party, the Party for Citizens, the move was effectively similar to that of the opposition party and has been widely criticised as running contrary to the stated objectives of the electoral law.

## **Conclusion**

Korea's party system has evolved significantly since electoral democratization in 1987. After decades when politics was centred around one dominant party with the minor vulnerable opposition parties, a degree of competition was introduced. Progressive and conservatives have vied for power since then. A small number of parties, typically on the left of the political spectrum, has also become a regular feature of Korean politics. In practice, the system has remained a moderate multiparty one with two main parties. These have often changed their names and rebranded themselves to disassociate themselves from past presidencies and their legacies, and corruption scandals.

The chapter has shown that in Korea leaders matter more than the specific organization, let alone its denomination.

Over the past two decades forms of political participation have significantly changed, with new forms of popular and political participation emerging, particularly around demands for direct participation and democracy. Online activism both strengthens and challenges representative democracy and its crucial bedrock, intermediary organizations such as political parties. Struggling to remain relevant in society, they nonetheless retain their role in parliamentary politics and government. Traditional cleavages remain relevant, such as regionalism and ideology, alongside newly-emerging fissures cutting across Korean society and politics, such as generation, gender and class.

Overall, like in other democracies, Korea's representative institutions are under stress as they struggle to retain their role and function, as socio-economic inequalities and polarization challenge social cohesion. The 2020 parliamentary elections followed new rules, but the

dominant parties set up satellite parties to tackle these new rules. Changes to the Korean party system may take longer to achieve their intended results.

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