

Article

Systemic Crises and Democratic Consolidation: Exploring Citizen Perceptions in South Korea

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Abstract

The present study examines the role of systemic crises in democratic consolidation or backsliding, focusing on how these outcomes shape citizen preferences and institutional responses. Using South Korea as a case study, the analysis combines Luhmann's systemic theory with empirical data on demographic variations in issue salience and trust in institutions. In the 1990s, South Korea experienced major systemic crises that revealed weaknesses in its political and financial institutions, but the stability of its democratic system remained intact. The present study explores whether Korean systemic crises exhibit a self-referential or autopoietic nature, as Luhmann theorizes, and investigates citizens' preferences for systemic crises, particularly when social movements lack institutional access and have weak support structures. We analyze data from 1800 respondents using an individual-level field survey dataset to understand these preferences, variables such as gender, education, and individual income. Our findings indicate that the age, gender, income, and social class of an individual significantly influence citizens' preferences for systemic crises. Specifically, younger individuals and those with higher incomes preferred systemic crises as opportunities for institutional reform. These results suggest that ascribed factors are critical in understanding the linkage between systemic crises and the functioning of democratic processes. The study underscores the importance of examining citizens' preferences in systemic crises to provide an alternative understanding of democratic consolidation.

Keywords

Systemic crisis, Democratic consolidation, South Korea, Political institutions, Citizens' preferences

Introduction

Systemic crises refer to legitimacy-threatening effects disordering the functional interdependence of political, economic, and civil society subsystems (Im, 2020; Kim, 2011), such as the 1997 financial crisis or the 2016 impeachment crisis. Systemic (Han, 1997) political crises occur when a country's political system faces severe and prolonged disruption that affects its ability to

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function effectively. Such crises often involve multiple interconnected issues, including economic instability, political corruption, social unrest, and institutional dysfunction. These crises can be triggered by external shocks like wars, natural disasters, and financial crises or by internal factors such as political polarisation, weak institutions, or a breakdown in the rule of law. Systemic crises can have profound consequences for democratic governance, leading to the erosion of public trust in government, the rise of popular movements, and the potential for authoritarianism. However, these crises can also catalyze democratic consolidation, prompting necessary reforms and strengthening institutions. These crises reveal vulnerabilities in institutional arrangements and often necessitate systemic reforms.

In the late 1990s, South Korea (henceforth Korea) experienced significant systemic crises, particularly during a major downturn that exposed vulnerabilities in the country's political and financial institutions. This period tested the resilience of South Korea's democratic system, which had only recently transitioned from decades of authoritarian rule, unlike North Korea. Various theoretical frameworks, including institutionalism, social movements, theory of democratization, and structuralism, provide complementary insights into understanding these systemic crises and their implications for Korea's democratic trajectory.

Building on Niklas Luhmann's theory of systemic crises, we hypothesize that outcomes depend on demographic factors, public trust, and political instability. The analysis incorporates both theoretical insights and empirical evidence, focusing on demographic variations in attitudes during crises to explore their implications for democratic outcomes. The article proceeds as follows: The theoretical framework explores Luhmann's systemic theory and its relevance to crises in South Korea, providing examples of systemic crises in South Korea, such as the 1997 financial crisis and the 2016 impeachment, acknowledging that there are many such before 1997. It precedes the examination of demographic variations in preferences and the role of political instability and their links to institutional responses in the Findings and Analysis section. The discussion and conclusion synthesize findings to address the role of systemic crises in democratic consolidation or backsliding.

The Theoretical Structure

Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) developed a theory of systemic crisis that focuses on the interdependence and complexity of modern societies. According to Luhmann (2013), contemporary societies are highly differentiated, with subsystems such as the economy, politics, and culture, each operating independently with logic and rules. He posited that a systemic crisis occurs when the interdependence between these subsystems breaks down, leading to a situation where the subsystems can no longer coordinate their actions effectively. This breakdown results in a loss of trust, legitimacy, and meaning within the affected society. However, Luhmann emphasized that systemic crises are not necessarily negative phenomena; they can also be opportunities for social change and transformation, forcing society to reorganize and adapt to new conditions.

According to Luhmann, systems are self-replicating, self-referential, or autopoietic. He argued that a systemic crisis occurs when the interdependence between subsystems breaks down, leading to a situation where the subsystems can no longer coordinate their actions effectively. He saw the systemic crisis as a breakdown of the functional differentiation between subsystems, resulting in a loss of trust, legitimacy, and meaning. Systemic crises can occur in different forms, such as economic, political, or ecological. The theory of systemic crisis highlights the importance of understanding the complex interdependence and interactions between various subsystems in

modern organizations. It also underscores the potential for the systemic crisis to create social transformation and changes.

Systems continuously replicate and refer to themselves once they have been established. The mechanism involves self-correction through performative measures within the boundary of the environment, like protest movements and demonstrations; these performative acts are the break and not complete disjuncture or shift in the positional stance of the political institutions' vis-à-vis citizens' normative or conscious acts within the system. Like all social crises, the systemic crisis involves some social costs where the intrinsic bias is towards social disorganization. In many modern liberal societies, the crisis can act as a process in which most conflicts administered through institutions evoke compliance of the relevant political forces that can give birth to a consolidated democracy (Aleman, 2005, p. 71). Korea is no exception. This article posits those events as systemic crises of the Korean political system, viz., the 1991 June democratic struggle, Beef export 2008, and the Presidential impeachment of 2017/2016. The time interlude between the events proves that these crises are responses from external-to-state mechanisms, like civil society (Kim, 2012; Kim, 2003) and student associations, which the citizens dominate. Some scholars (Shin, 2018; Cho, 2014) state that the Confucian legacies of political paternalism imbue the inherent psychological culture of Korean citizens due to state-sponsored economic development, and the rise of big business conglomerates (재벌, *jaebols*) prevents the political system from taking the courses not so frequently.

Luhman's theory is particularly relevant for understanding the systemic crises that Korea faced. The country's crises, as mentioned above, including the Asian financial crisis, highlighted the weaknesses of its political and financial institutions. These crises threatened the stability of Korea's democratic system but also provided an impetus for significant reforms. For instance, the financial crisis led to the restructuring of Korea's economy and the implementation of more transparent and accountable governance practices.

During systemic crises, political instability often emerges as a response to weakened institutional performance or public dissatisfaction with the governance. Political instability refers to a period of significant disruption within the system characterized by institutional gridlock, mass protests, application of martial laws and change of government. From a systemic perspective, instability interrupts the functional differentiation of subsystems, creating strains for adaptation. If institutions counter effectively by implementing reforms, political instability can act as a catalyst for democratic consolidation (imposition of Martial Law by President Yoon Suk Yeoul was short-lived due to severe democratic backlash from the opposition parties and citizen engagement in December 2024 is a case in point.) Conversely, prolonged or unresolved instability may erode public trust and lead to democratic backsliding as institutions fail to regain legitimacy. Political instability is a critical factor in determining the trajectory of systemic crises, as it shapes public preferences for reform or stability. For instance, mass protests may signal collective demands for systemic change, while government inaction during instability can foster disillusionment with democratic processes. This dual role of political instability aligns with the present study's probe of systemic crises as opportunities or threats to democratic outcomes.

Systemic crises can indicate both democratic backsliding and democratic consolidation. These crises are often accompanied by a decline in public trust towards government institutions and the emergence of popular movements. Moments of political uncertainty and instability can be interpreted as warning signs of potential democratic backsliding where established democratic norms, principles, and institutions may be threatened. Conversely, systemic crises can also be viewed as opportunities for democratic institutions, as they may prompt efforts to address underlying issues, strengthen democratic institutions, and restore public trust in the government. For instance, during the 2008 protests against the import of US beef, widespread public

discontent led to mass demonstrations. These protests were sparked by concerns over the safety of imported beef and the government's handling of the issue. The movement saw significant participation from civil society groups, student associations, and ordinary citizens, highlighting the role of grassroots activism in holding the government accountable. While the protests posed a challenge to the government, they also demonstrated the vibrancy of Korea's civil participation and its capacity to mobilize in defence of democratic principles.

Similarly, the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in 2016-17 was a critical moment for Korean democracy. The outrage surrounding President Park involved allegations of corruption and abuse of power, leading to massive protests calling for her resignation. The public outcry and subsequent legal proceedings underscored the importance of accountability and the rule of law in a functioning democracy. The successful impeachment and peaceful transition of power reinforced Korea's democratic institutions and demonstrated the system's ability to self-correct in response to crises.

The present study explores the dual role of systemic crises in Korea, questioning whether they act as catalysts for democratic consolidation or signals of potential democratic backsliding. Luhmann's theory posits that systemic crises arise when the functional links between subsystems break down, leading to a phase of disruption and possible reorganization. However, the outcomes of such crises—whether democratic consolidation or backsliding—depend on specific conditions. Democratic consolidation occurs when institutions implement adaptive reforms that restore legitimacy, civic engagement strengthens democratic norms, and public trust in governance is maintained.

Conversely, backsliding emerges when institutions resist reform, erode trust, or exploit crises to centralize power. This study integrates Luhmann's systemic perspective with an analysis of human agency, focusing on how citizens' preferences influence these outcomes. By linking systemic structures to individual responses, we address critiques of structural functionalism's inability to predict change or account for agency.

Conditions for Democratic Outcomes

Systemic crises can catalyze democratic consolidation when institutions implement adaptive reforms that enhance accountability, transparency, and citizen trust. Conversely, crises can lead to backsliding if institutions resist reform, resulting in diminished trust and the rise of authoritarian tendencies. The institutional adaptability and reform that respond to crises with transparency, accountability (Yun & Min, 2012; Im, 1996), and reforms are more likely to reinstate public trust and consolidate democracy. Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that reform-oriented responses to crises strengthen institutional legitimacy and public trust, paving the way for democratic consolidation. South Korea's 1997 Asian Financial Crisis led to significant reforms, including greater financial transparency and restructuring of *jaebols* (*sizeable family-owned business conglomerates*). These measures augmented public trust in governance and coagulated democratic practices (Im, 2020; Lee, 2007).

Civic engagement during crises can pressure governments to adopt democratic reforms. The 2016–2017 impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye demonstrated how mass protests, led by civil society groups, held institutions accountable and reinforced the importance of democratic principles such as the rule of law (Kim, 2017; Shin, 2018). Trust in democratic institutions enables citizens to view crises as opportunities for positive change rather than systemic failures. The judiciary's impartial handling of President Park's impeachment trial reinforced public confidence, reinforcing the democratic process (Im, 2020). Social movements

are not anomalies within democratic systems but integral components of democratic participation. They challenge institutional inertia and encourage adaptive reforms, particularly during systemic crises. This study conceptualizes social movements as “popular” to reflect their broad-based, citizen-driven nature and alignment with democratic principles.

Conversely, systemic crises can lead to democratic backsliding when institutions resist reform or exploit crises to centralize power. Leaders who use crises to consolidate personal or executive power often undermine democratic norms. In the Philippines, former President Rodrigo Duterte leveraged the “drug war” crisis to justify extrajudicial killings and weaken democratic institutions, leading to significant democratic backsliding (Thompson, 2016). The erosion of institutional legitimacy by an authoritarian creates crises through democratic processes.

When institutions fail to address crises effectively, public trust erodes, creating fertile ground for anti-democratic movements. For example, during South Korea’s early 1990s political scandals, failures to address corruption led to temporary declines in public trust, exposing vulnerabilities in the country’s nascent democratic system (Kim & Voorhees, 2011). It may lead to polarization and weak civic participation: Crises may deepen political polarization or discourage civic participation, exacerbating democratic decline. Hungary’s 2008 global financial crisis heightened political divisions, enabling authoritarian leaders to exploit public dissatisfaction and undermine democratic institutions (Bánkuti et al., 2012).

Public preferences and attitudes toward systemic crises are pivotal in determining outcomes. For instance, citizens demanding reforms can act as catalysts for consolidation, whereas apathy or acceptance of authoritarian responses may reinforce backsliding. Studies show that younger, educated, and urban populations are more likely to demand reforms, whereas older, wealthier groups often favour stability and the status quo (Goerres, 2007; Kim et al., 2018). South Korea provides a compelling case to examine these dynamics. Its crises, ranging from the 1997 financial collapse to the 2017 impeachment, highlight the dual role of systemic crises. When institutions adapt and civil society is engaged, crises have strengthened South Korea’s democracy. However, resistance to reform or exploitation of crises for political gain could threaten its democratic trajectory, as seen in the pre-1990s.

The present study examines whether these crises affect citizens’ preferences regarding political and institutional responses, focusing on age, gender, and financial status. By analyzing citizens’ opinions on the government’s response to systemic crises, the potential rise of any popular movements, and the role of civil society in mitigating crisis impacts, we aim to contribute to the literature on political culture and the dynamics of democratic governance in Korea. The primary objective was to understand how much systemic crises, such as economic instability, political corruption, social unrest, and institutional dysfunction, impact an individual’s daily life and well-being. It also measured citizens’ opinions regarding government institutions’ ability to address and resolve systemic crises in society effectively and the fundamental factors that contribute to systemic crises in society. The following posers are primarily dealt with:

- 1) How much trust do citizens have in the government’s response to systemic crises, such as their ability to implement effective policies and measures to address the underlying issues? (Research Question/RQ 1)
- 2) Do citizens of every age believe popular movements can emerge due to systemic crises? (RQ 2)
- 3) Are the levels of education necessary for the awareness of the measures taken by the government to prevent or mitigate the impact of systemic crises on society and its citizens? (RQ 3)
- 4) How important is the role of political (in)stability in addressing systemic crises, maintaining

- public trust, and safeguarding democratic values? (RQ 4)
- 5) To what extent should citizens be involved in the decision-making processes during systemic crises, such as through participatory mechanisms or civic engagement? (RQ 5)
 - 6) What role do regions play in addressing systemic crises and promoting citizen preferences in policy responses? (RQ 6)
 - 7) Are citizens aware of the measures taken by civil society to prevent or mitigate the impact of systemic crises on society and its citizens? (RQ 7)

It is crucial to study the population's preferences to verify whether systemic crises are linked to the issue of citizens' awareness. Specifically, we seek to understand whether there are differences in how Koreans interact with and perceive systemic crises based on factors such as age, gender, and financial status. By doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the literature on political culture by assessing the effect of these variables on the salience of systemic crisis issues in Korean society.

Literature Review

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu (1977), Barton (1970), Koselleck and Richter (2006) and Gills (2010), the term 'crisis' is primarily conceptualized as being closer to the concept of social crisis. From a multidimensional perspective, a crisis can be understood as a general failure occurring within a social system during a specific historical period, resulting in a collective state of distress. This crisis may be provoked by incongruities between the social system's ideas and material structure or by failures within a particular social system.

Studies have explored the factors contributing to systemic crises, including economic, political, and social factors (Lim & Han, 2003; Pamungkas, 2017). The impacts of systemic crises on citizens' daily lives, well-being, and trust in government (Kim, 2010; Kim & Krishna, 2018) investigated the role of government responses in addressing systemic crises and citizens' confidence in their effectiveness (Kim & Voorhees, 2011; Kim et al., 2018). The relationship between systemic crises and democratic backsliding or democratic consolidation has also been examined, with some scholars arguing that crises can undermine democratic governance and lead to popular movements (Cho et al., 2019), while others suggesting that they can also serve as opportunities for democratic consolidation and reform (Im, 2020; Lee, 2007).

Systemic Crises and Democratic Processes: One of the critical areas of inquiry in the literature is the relationship between systemic crises and democratic governance. The dual nature of systemic crises—where they can either undermine democratic governance or serve as opportunities for democratic consolidation—has been extensively debated. Some scholars argue that systemic crises can lead to democratic backsliding, where crises erode democratic norms, weaken institutions, and pave the way for authoritarianism or popular movements (Cho et al., 2019), even leading towards an Anglo-American model and challenges democratic consolidation (Lee & Rhyu, 2019). For instance, economic crises/systemic crises can lead to decreased satisfaction with democracy due to policy ineptness in addressing rising inequality, potentially hindering democratic consolidation (Kang, 2015). Conversely, other scholars suggest that systemic crises can also create opportunities for democratic consolidation and reform. Crises can expose the weaknesses within a political system, prompting efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, increase transparency, and restore public trust in government (Im, 2020; Lee, 2007). The Cheonan incident tested South Korea's democratic institutions, revealing strengths and

vulnerabilities. Civil society and the public sphere play crucial roles in maintaining democracy. The much-known and debated event, the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in Korea, was a response to widespread corruption and abuse of power, and the subsequent legal proceedings and public mobilization were seen as a reaffirmation of democratic principles and the rule of law. Systemic crises can challenge democratic consolidation in Korea and have a significant social and political impact, potentially influencing the consolidation of democratic institutions and norms.

The Role of Citizen Participation and Civil Society: Citizen participation and civil society engagement play crucial roles in shaping the outcomes of systemic crises. The literature emphasizes the significance of involving citizens in crisis decision-making, mainly through participatory mechanisms and civic engagement (Yun, 2019). This involvement ensures that the government's response to crises effectively reflects the public's needs and preferences. Moreover, civil society organizations (CSOs) often serve as intermediaries between the government and the public, advocating for policy changes, holding the government accountable, and mobilizing citizens to participate in the political process.

The role of regionalism and other actors in addressing systemic crises and promoting citizen preferences in policy responses has also been examined (Sonn, 2003). Regional disparities can influence how crises are perceived and experienced by different population segments, leading to varying demands for government intervention and policy solutions. Understanding these regional dynamics is essential for designing inclusive and effective responses to systemic crises.

Political Parties and Systemic Crises in South Korea: The democratization of South Korea up to the 1990s, followed by the challenges of "democratization after democratization" in the early 2000s, has been a significant area of study (Kil, 2001; Im, 1996; Mosler et al., 2018). These studies have provided a detailed analysis of South Korea's political system, highlighting the underperformance of political parties (Lee, 2016) and the weakness of civil society as contributing factors to democratic backsliding. However, despite these challenges, the literature has largely refrained from using voting behaviour indices to analyze these trends, representing a gap in the existing research.

Moreover, the role of political parties in shaping citizens' ideological and policy preferences has been explored (Reilly, 2007), with findings suggesting that citizens tend to support candidates who best reflect their ideology and policy preferences (Hinich & Munger, 1997). This behaviour is particularly evident in elections that garner significant voter interest, where policy preferences are crucial in determining electoral outcomes (Kim, 2017; Lee, 2007).

However, the literature also acknowledges the inherent weaknesses of the Korean political party system (Kim, 2008), which is characterized by a lack of ideological diversity and the dominance of parochial interests over universalism in public policy formation (Lee, 2009). These weaknesses have limited the capacity of political parties to serve as effective agents of democratic governance, raising concerns about the stability and sustainability of Korea's democratic system.

Overall, the literature on systemic crises and citizens' preferences highlights the complex nature of these crises and their impacts on societies, as well as the significance of government responses, democratic governance, citizen participation, and civil society engagement in addressing these challenges. Moreover, literature has explored the importance of citizen participation in decision-making processes during systemic crises, including participatory mechanisms and civic engagement (Yun, 2019, p. 16). The role of regionalism and other actors in addressing systemic crises and promoting citizen preferences in policy responses has also been examined (Sonn, 2003, p. 32).

From a comparativist viewpoint, the democratization of Korea up to the 1990s, followed by

democratization after democratization (Mosler et al., 2018, p. 1) through the early 2000s, was used as a reference case. Mosler et al. (2018) have provided a carefully reviewed comparison against earlier methods and have analyzed the ineffective political system by exploring the narratives of the underperformance of political parties and a weak civil society for democratic backsliding but refrained from using any index of voting behaviour. Other studies also shed light on the impact of age on citizens' political attitudes, ideological orientations, party support, and policy preferences (Kim, 2003).

Citizens possess ideological and policy preferences. Since political parties and politicians are ultimately the political agents of voters, the latter opt for candidates who best reflect their ideology and policy preferences (Hinich & Munger, 1997); this behaviour also plays a crucial role in elections that draw a great extent of voter interest (Snyder & Ting, 2002). Policy preferences also affect citizens' presidential and general elections (Lee, 2015).

We have intentionally left out the effect of political parties as a confounding variable because the political party system in Korea is primarily weak due to its initial congenital disability. Along with this defect, some scholars argue that political parties themselves 'have posed serious predicaments for the deepening of Korean democracy by limiting the ideological diversity of political choices, making party politics unstable, unaccountable, and breeding parochial interests instead of universalism in public policy formation' (Lee, 2016, p.29).

Reports show (Seo, 2017) that the changing relationship between Korea's legislative and executive branches for the past thirty years since democratization summarises growing legislative power over executive actions. This dominance is exemplified through its subnational party control index (a single party controlled almost 90% of the policy-making bodies across regional and local governments from 1987 to 2020). Similarly, the V-Dem index (Fig. 1; divided party control index) for the years 1987-2020 shows, barring the period 1992- 2000, that there was a unified party control of the government, i.e., a single party controls the legislature and the executive branches of the government. However, most parties have a permanent organizational presence at the national level (Fig. 1; party organizations index). One probable outlier can be party competition across regions (index in Fig. 1) of Korea, where major parties do not have the same control across Korea.

Negating the factor of the presence of a 'single dominant party' (from 1987-2002) along with a centralized President changes the level of analysis from regimes to subsystems or, in Schmitter's (2009) terms, to "partial regimes". Thus, democratic deconsolidation comes to be synonymous with weak 'institution-building. It suggests weakening every one of those vast associations that make up the trademark foundation of present-day liberal democracies— parties and party systems, legislative bodies, state bureaucracies, and systems of interest intermediation. Some scholars stated that, at most, ordinary citizens could identify its particular dimensions (Choi, 2014), and Korean democracy shows a significant deficit in the liberal and civic domains. Hence, the citizens' perception of the role of policy preferences, political parties, and other institutions in Korea requires a more concise understanding of this causality (systemic crisis). Studies on policy-based preferences have predominantly addressed whether specific policies or issues influence citizens' decisions. Hence, age- and generation-related studies have attempted to make sense of political orientation or voting behaviour variances based on age and political experience categories. However, dissimilarities in perception between the younger, middle-aged, and elderly populations on the importance of specific issues or policies remain relatively unexplored. Overall, the literature on systemic crises and citizens' preferences highlights the complex nature of these crises and their impacts on societies, as well as the significance of government responses, democratic governance, citizen participation, and civil society engagement in addressing these challenges.

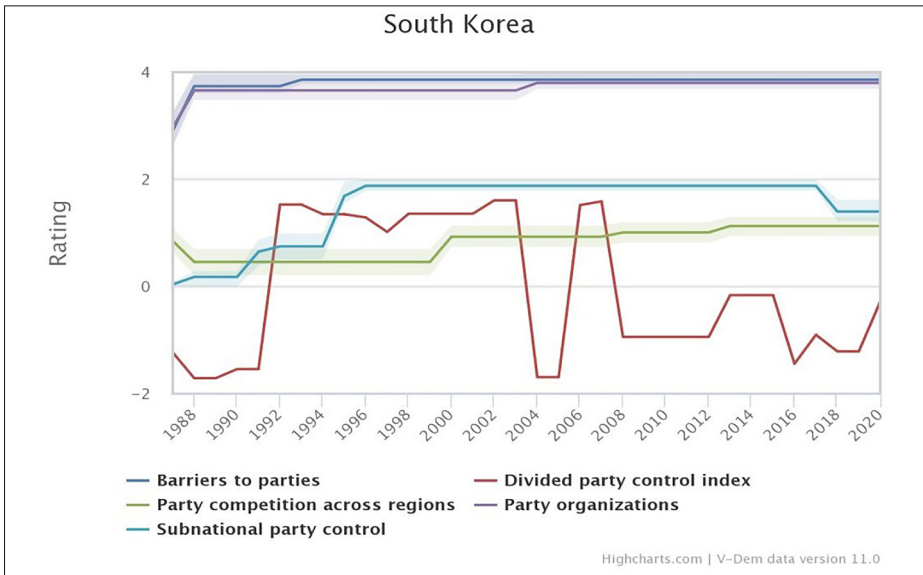


Figure 1. V-dem indices showing various indices

Source: Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2020. "V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v10". Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20>.

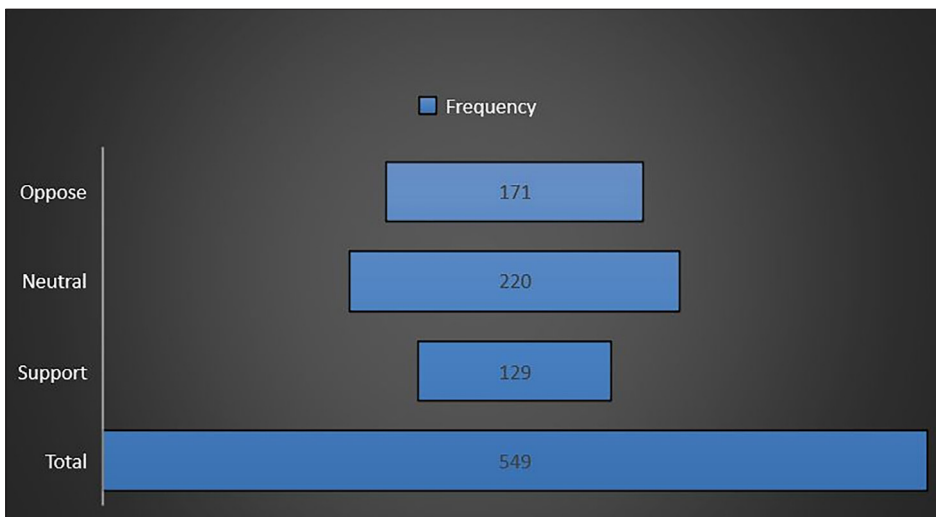


Figure 2. Current perception level about political party

Source: Opinion Survey undertaken by the author

Research Gap

Despite the extensive literature on systemic crises, several research gaps remain. First, while the literature discusses the impact of systemic crises on citizens' preferences and political attitudes, there is insufficient exploration of how these preferences vary across different demographic groups, particularly regarding age, gender, and regional differences. Understanding these variations is crucial for understanding how systemic crises influence political behaviour and attitudes across different population segments.

Second, although the literature touches on policy-based preferences, it does not explore deeply the specifics of how particular policies or issues shape these preferences. There is a gap in understanding the nuances of policy preferences among different demographic groups and how these preferences interact with systemic crises. This is particularly important in Korea, where policy preferences may be influenced by factors such as regionalism, social class, and ideological orientation.

Third, there is an overreliance on established theoretical frameworks, with limited discussion of empirical studies that validate these theories in Korea. This gap highlights the need for more context-specific research that empirically tests these theoretical perspectives in real-world settings.

Finally, the literature provides limited discussion on the interaction between institutional weaknesses, such as the fragility of political party systems, and systemic crises. A deeper analysis of how these institutional weaknesses exacerbate or mitigate the effects of systemic crises would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing South Korea's democracy.

Hypothesis

The existing literature review and the prospective research gap lead us to explore the following hypotheses, which aim to explore how various demographic, behavioural, and contextual variables shape the salience of different issues during crises, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding citizen behaviour and preferences.

Related to RQ1 - H1 Gender and Prioritization of Issues: Gender influences the prioritization of systemic issues during crises, with males more likely to support institutional reform and political development, while females prioritize social stability and welfare, reflecting differing pathways toward systemic adaptation or resistance (Burns et al., 2001; Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

Related to RQ2 - H2 Age and Engagement with Systemic Crises: Younger individuals are more likely to view systemic crises as opportunities for reform, reflecting a preference for democratic consolidation. Older individuals, in contrast, tend to favour stability and the status quo, which may align with resistance to change and potential backsliding. (Goerres, 2007).

Related to RQ3 - H3 Education and Trust in Institutions: Higher education levels correlate with increased trust in institutions (Hillygus, 2005) and a preference for systemic resilience, promoting democratic consolidation through informed advocacy for reform. Lower education levels may lead to greater susceptibility to crisis-related discontent, increasing the risk of institutional distrust.

Related to RQ4 - H4: Political Instability, Public Preferences, and Democratic Outcomes:

Periods of political instability during systemic crises amplify public preferences for institutional reforms aimed at restoring stability and accountability, fostering democratic consolidation. However, if public preferences are ignored or institutions fail to respond effectively, instability may erode trust, leading to democratic backsliding.

Related to RQ5 - H5: Regionalism and Institutional Engagement:

Strong regional affiliations enhance trust in institutions and encourage community-based democratic engagement, fostering consolidation. Weaker regional ties may contribute to feelings of alienation and disengagement, increasing the risk of backsliding.

Related to RQ6 - H6: Trust in Government:

Citizens with higher levels of trust in government institutions are more likely to prioritize government interventions and policy responses during systemic crises, while those with lower trust levels are more likely to support alternative solutions, such as civil society initiatives or market-based approaches (Hetherington, 2005; Levi & Stoker, 2000).

Methodology

Employing our survey analysis, we tried to fill the void in this area of understanding the dynamics between systemic crises and citizens' preferences and to inform policy and practice for effective crisis management and governance by studying the extent of public perceptions in today's systemic crisis in Korea. To test the study's hypothesis, we conducted a field survey that explored this causal relationship pattern from the survey-type research perspective. The survey also kept the decisive 'regionalism' factor while recruiting the respondents because empirical results (Lee & Repkine, 2020, p. 419) suggest that voters' region of origin and age, rather than socioeconomic factors, affect Korean voters' electoral choice most.

The survey was preliminary conducted on twenty hundred and twenty-nine adult voters aged over eighteen and residing across the country. Data were collected from March 2019 to June 2019 under the aegis of the Korea Foundation as a Field Research Fellow. The survey sample was proportionally adjusted by gender, age, and region with a confidence level of 95 per cent $\pm 2.2\%$. Respondents are evenly represented in males (49.7%) and females (50.3%). The respondents' regional distribution is as follows: Seoul (22.4%), Gyeonggi-do, Incheon (27.9%), followed by Busan, Ulsan, Gyeongsangnam-do (16.4%), Daejeon, Chungcheong-do, Sejong (0.4%), Gwangju, Jeolla-do (10.9%), and Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do (8.9%).

Regarding age distribution, respondents aged 18–29 comprise 17.6 per cent of the sample, followed by ages 30–39 (15.9%), ages 40–49 (19.1%), ages 50–59 (20%), and senior voters over age 60 (27.4%). In addition to the sociodemographic background of the respondents, seventy-three of the survey questions are related primarily to seven broad areas: perceptions regarding political parties in general, political awareness, political attitude, systemic crises, and the overall evaluation of the current government. For instance, we designed questions such as the recently concluded event of national importance you considered when voting in the recently concluded election, what current challenges require urgent addressing in our society, and how you think government action to prevent these events in the future should be structured.

Priorities assigned by the voters to the policy issues are categorical variables whose values are assigned based on the following question: "What do you think is the most important symptom of systemic crisis?" The significant dependent variables in this study are the systemic crises

that occurred in different phases after 1990 and voters' perceptions of government attitude on effective policies to curb those events. The perception of citizens' attitude, awareness and trust in government was measured on a five-point scale, with a score of one corresponding to "very high" and five corresponding to "very low."

In the present study, systemic crises are the key independent variable, providing the central context for analyzing their impact on democratic consolidation or backsliding. Political instability and demographic factors are treated as mediating influences, shaping public preferences and institutional responses during these crises. Political instability is operationalized through key indicators from the data collected through questions capturing public perceptions of governance stability and institutional effectiveness during crises. This variable is analyzed alongside demographic factors to assess its impact on public preferences and broader democratic outcomes.

The key explanatory variable in this study is age. The respondents were divided into age groups: 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and over 60. The critical explanatory and control variables include party identification, ideology, income level, subjective class awareness, and socioeconomic background. The age variable is important since elderly voters may not only express their policy preferences according to their age or the circumstances of the time, but they may be influenced by their previous party identification, ideological orientation, or income levels (Lee, 2019). The study kept age, socioeconomic divisions, educational achievements, and regional variations in mind while the strata were finalized. Due to random attrition, our sample is unlikely to reproduce any well-defined population perfectly. Still, our study participants' demographic features are similar to those of other study participants. The study sample is comparable to the population's gender, income, education, and age. It also shows that our final sample participants were demographically similar to the 1800 participants who accepted the survey. In our final sample, the median age is 38 years old ($SD=11$), the median highest level of completed education is a "4-year college degree," and the median financial status level is "28-30 million won." The household income variable was categorized into seven groups representing the following monthly income brackets: less than one million won, between one and three million, between four and seven, between seven and ten, between ten and fifteen million, and over and above fifteen million.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles for research involving human participants, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Although Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not sought for this research, every effort was made to uphold the ethical standards outlined in the [e.g., Declaration of Helsinki, Belmont Report, or relevant national guidelines]. We acknowledge this limitation and encourage constructive dialogue to strengthen ethical practices in similar research contexts.

Findings and Analysis

The study measured the respondents' awareness level regarding issues related to systemic crises. Table 1 indicates that some issues have higher levels of awareness, while others have lower levels or are not well-known among the respondents. This suggests further investigation and efforts to increase our understanding of citizens' awareness and the issues relevant to a systemic

crisis. Statements, “I am aware of the candlelight protest in favour and against the President,” with 56.9% of respondents expressing “well aware”, followed by two statements- “I am aware of the country of origin of the 2003 ban on Beef exports” and “I am aware of the neurologically transmitted diseases that cows were susceptible to at that point,” (45.0% and 41.9% respectively). These statements seem to have relatively higher levels of awareness among the respondents. Statements 4 and 5, related to the government’s actions regarding lifting the ban on beef imports and the transparency/public consultation, have relatively lower levels of awareness. Only 9.5% and 11.1% of respondents are “well aware” of these issues.

In general, there seems to be a higher percentage of respondents who are “not aware” of the statements compared to those who are “well aware” or “somewhat aware” regarding institutional technocratic issues. However, there is a high and moderate awareness among the respondents for statements that deal with incidents at a general level. Overall, the respondents are aware of the systemic crisis but may not be aware of the specific definition of the systemic crisis or the responses from the government or civil society. To affirm our objective about the respondents’ awareness level regarding the systemic crisis, we narrowed down the definition of systemic crisis by giving six specific points of reference to it. The percentage distribution in Fig. 3 provides insights into the relative importance attributed by respondents to different factors contributing to a systemic crisis. Economic instability and “all of the above” are the most commonly selected factors, followed by institutional dysfunction, social unrest, and the option of political corruption. The option of “none of the above” has the lowest percentage of responses. The category ‘economic instability’ is preferred over all other indicators in the Likert scale (Fig. 4), where “agree” got the highest preference, followed by ‘political corruption’. In “strongly agree”, the indicator ‘all of the above’ gets the highest preference. Thus, the distribution of preferences is slightly skewed as variables play an essential role. For this reason, we attempted to measure the citizens’ awareness level by introducing different demographic factors.

The level of trust, awareness, and belief in government and civil society, broken down by

Table 1. Level of awareness regarding issues relevant to a systemic crisis, arranged in descending order of awareness

Statements	Well aware	Somewhat aware	Not aware
1. I am aware of the country of origin of the 2003 ban on Beef exports.	45.0	27.2	27.1
2. I am aware of the neurologically transmitted diseases that cows were susceptible to at that point.	41.9	31.9	26.2
3. I am aware of the mad cow issues exporters faced then.	39.2	33.2	27.6
4. I am aware of why the government lifted the ban in 2008.	9.5	23.7	66.8
5. I am aware that the government had negotiated the resumption of U.S. beef imports without proper transparency and public consultation.	11.1	26.5	62.4
6. I am aware of the 2016 and 2017 events related to Presidential Impeachment.	56.9	27.4	15.7
7. I am aware of the candlelight protest in favour and against the President.	48.6	37.5	23.9
8. I am aware of corruption issues specifically related to the abuse of power in government related to President Park's impeachment	35.3	40.8	23.9
9. I am aware of the impeachment process followed by a series of legal and political battles, including a Constitutional Court review.	25.3	27.5	57.2

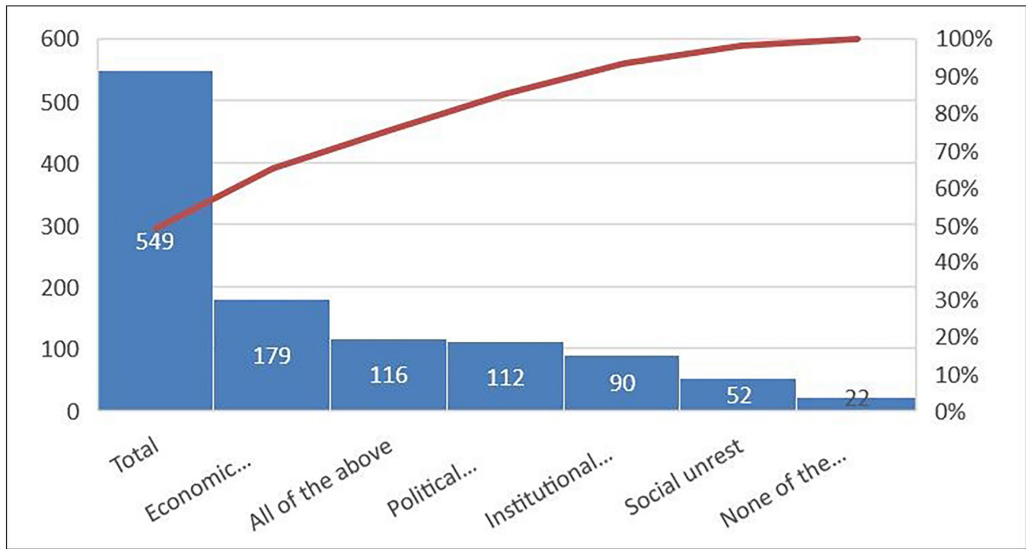


Figure 3. Citizen’s response regarding the definition of systemic crisis
 Source: Opinion Survey undertaken by the author

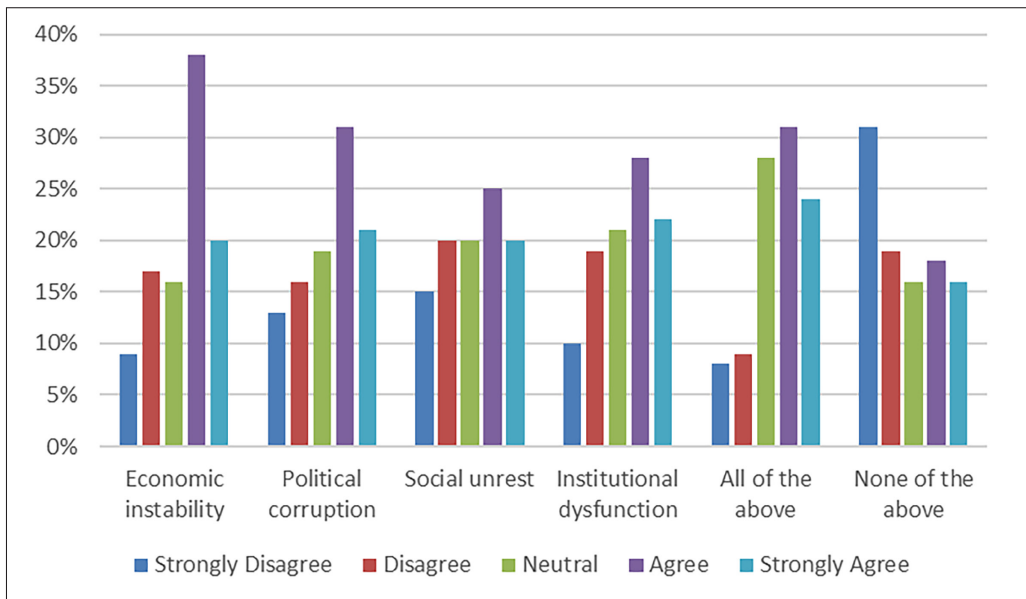


Figure 4. Assessment of systemic crisis from citizens’ response
 Source: Opinion Survey undertaken by the author

different demographic categories, such as age, gender, financial status, region, and education, are analyzed at the next level (see Fig. 5). Trust and belief seem to be identical. However, herein we equated ‘trust’ with the capacity of the functioning of the government/civil society to deal with

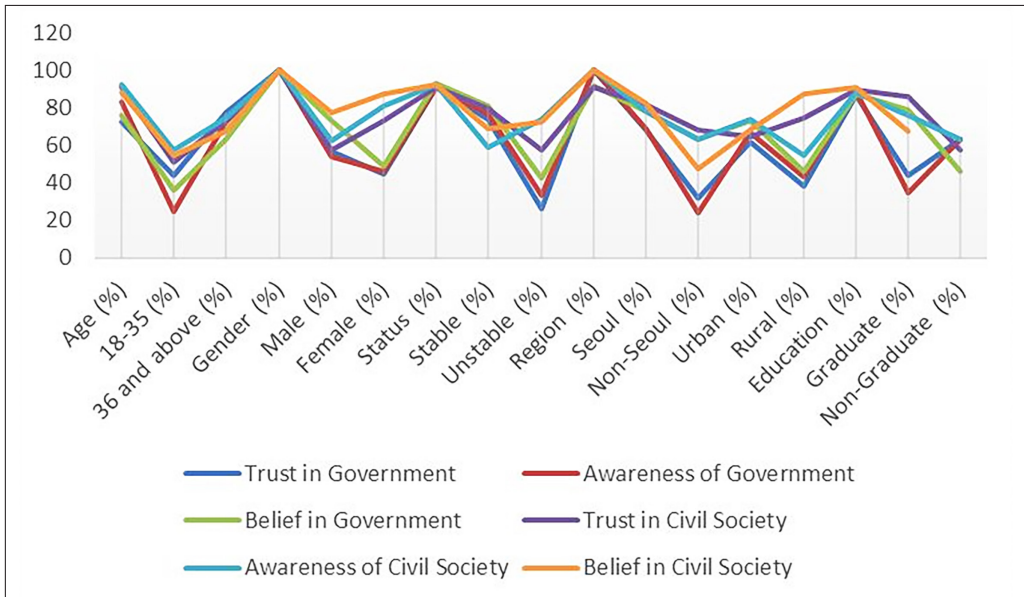


Figure 5. The percentage of response for the level of trust, awareness, and belief of citizens in South Korea regarding the government and civil society in response to a systemic crisis

Note: The Percentage Values are calculated based on the respondents for each row, assuming 100% as the total. Please Note that the “Not Sure” response is 0% as it does not represent a positive response regarding trust, awareness, or belief.

Source: Opinion Survey undertaken by the author

the crises and ‘belief’ referred to the anticipation of the respondents that the government/civil society can take effective reformatory measures/alternative or counter-response to overcome the crisis.

Trust in Government: The data shows that 72.14% of respondents trust the government. Trust in government appears to be higher among older age groups (83% among those aged 36-65 and 91% among those aged 65 and above), females (44.5%), those with stable status (91%), and those in non-Seoul regions (63%). Trust in government also appears to be higher among those with higher levels of education (87% among graduates).

Awareness of Government: The data indicates that 83% of respondents know the government. Awareness of government appears to be lower among younger age groups (24.6% among those aged 18-35), females (46.3%), those with unstable status (33%), and those in non-Seoul regions (23.7%). Government awareness also appears to be lower among those with lower levels of education (34.5% among non-graduates).

Belief in Government: The data shows that 76.19% of respondents believe in government. Belief in government appears to be lower among younger age groups (36.12% among those aged 18-35), females (49.13%), and those in non-Seoul regions (46.12%). Belief in government also appears to be higher among those with higher levels of education (79.23% among graduates).

Trust in Civil Society: The data indicates that 91.14% of respondents trust civil society. Trust in civil society appears to be higher among older age groups (51.19% among those aged 36-65 and 73.29% among those aged 65 and above), females (73.29%), those with stable status (79.28%), those in non-Seoul regions (81.73%), and those with higher levels of education (85.91% among graduates).

Awareness of Civil Society: The data shows that 92.47% of respondents are aware of civil society. Awareness of civil society appears to be higher among older age groups (57.74% among those aged 36-65 and 81.18% among those aged 65 and above), females (81.18%), those with stable status (92.72%), those in Seoul regions (78.16%), and those with higher levels of education (88.32% among graduates).

Belief in Civil Society: The data indicates that 88.16% of respondents believe in civil society. Belief in civil society appears to be higher among older age groups (54.75% among those aged 36-65 and 87.12% among those aged 65 and above), females (87.12%), those with stable status (92.19%), those in Seoul regions (82.29%), and those with higher levels of education (91.1% among graduates). The responses suggest that trust, awareness, and belief in government and civil society vary across different demographic categories. Older age groups, females, those with stable status, and those with higher levels of education tend to have higher levels of trust, awareness, and belief in government and civil society. Additionally, those in Seoul regions tend to have higher awareness and belief in civil society. These findings highlight the importance of considering demographic factors in understanding attitudes towards government and civil society, but they failed to specify anything but individual self-interest.

This explains that self-interest or motivation is integral to defining the support needed for the systemic crisis. To understand the associational relationship among the variables, we ran a Chi-square test of Independence, which offered a detailed analysis of salience issues across various demographic categories during a crisis to identify significant relationships between demographics (gender, age, education, ideology, household income, and class identification) and the importance of issues like education reforms, unemployment, welfare, environment, security, housing, political development, regional healthcare, inflation, and population.

Gender-Based Differences in Crisis Response

The data indicate a significant relationship between gender and issue salience during crises ($p < 0.001$). Gender differences in political attitudes and priorities are well-documented, and these differences are further accentuated during times of crisis.

Male Responses: Men are more likely to prioritize issues such as unemployment (18.6%), political development (23.4%), and security (5.5%). This preference could be linked to traditional gender roles where men may feel a greater responsibility for economic stability and national security, particularly during crises that threaten these areas. The heightened concern for political development among men might also focus on the structural aspects of governance and leadership in times of crisis.

Female Responses: Women, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on welfare/social healthcare (19.6%), regional issues (24.4%), and housing (6.3%). This prioritization aligns with existing literature suggesting that women often focus more on social and community welfare, particularly in times of crisis when vulnerable populations (such as children, older adults, and

people with low incomes) are at greater risk. The significant attention to regional issues among women might reflect concerns about local community support systems and access to essential services during crises. These gender-based differences suggest that crisis response strategies need to be gender-sensitive, addressing both the economic and security concerns more prevalent among men and the social welfare and regional development issues that are more salient for women.

Table 2. Chi-square independence test of issue salience by citizens during crisis

		Education unemployment		Welfare	Environment security housing political			Regional	Inflation population		Social healthcare	$\chi^2(p\text{-values})$	
		Reforms development											
Gender ***	Male	2.4	18.6	17.0	2.1	5.5	3.4	23.4	21.0	4.0	1.4	1.1	50.135 (.000)
	Female	5.7	13.1	19.6	2.8	4.0	6.3	16.4	24.4	5.3	0.8	1.7	
Age ***	18-29	5.0	22.8	21.1	3.0	4.0	4.6	13.2	21.1	3.0	0.7	1.7	161.462 (.000)
	30s	6.1	9.1	22.7	2.7	1.9	4.9	14.0	28.4	5.7	2.3	2.3	
	40s	8.5	9.6	21.3	2.9	1.7	5.2	21.6	21.6	6.4	0.3	0.9	
	50s	2.2	19.5	17.3	2.2	3.3	5.1	20.3	24.1	4.1	0.8	1.1	
	60 and over	1.0	16.8	13.0	1.9	9.9	4.4	25.5	20.3	4.3	1.5	1.4	
Education level*	High school	4.2	17.0	18.8	3.0	4.8	4.4	20.5	20.9	5.4	0.5	0.5	36.573 (.013)
	University (2-4 years)	3.7	15.3	18.7	2.0	4.7	5.5	18.9	23.5	4.0	1.7	2.0	
	Graduate and beyond	5.5	11.8	10.9	0.9	5.5	2.7	23.6	30.0	3.6	1.8	3.6	
Ideology***	Liberal	4.2	11.2	21.6	2.4	1.0	4.6	23.8	25.9	3.0	0.6	1.6	160.442 (.000)
	Center	5.4	16.8	19.9	2.0	3.1	4.9	15.5	22.5	7.0	1.3	1.5	
	Conservative	2.2	21.2	11.4	3.1	12.2	5.1	20.0	18.2	3.9	1.6	1.0	
Household income*	Less than 2 million (KRW)	3.8	19.9	25.9	1.5	7.9	3.0	16.9	13.5	5.6	0.4	1.5	86.136 (.015)
	2-3 million	2.6	15.7	17.5	3.5	4.1	4.7	19.2	25.7	5.0	1.5	0.6	
	3-4 million	6.1	15.2	19.1	2.7	3.3	5.8	17.6	24.3	3.3	1.5	0.9	
	4-5 million	4.3	13.7	15.4	2.3	4.3	4.0	20.7	25.8	6.4	0.7	2.3	
	5-6 million	5.0	16.3	13.9	4.0	6.4	3.5	19.8	23.8	4.0	2.5	1.0	
	6-8 million	2.5	15.3	17.8	1.5	3.5	7.9	26.2	20.3	2.5	0.5	2.0	
Class identification	8 million and over	3.9	14.8	16.8	0.6	4.5	5.8	21.9	23.9	5.2	0.6	1.9	51.877 (.099)
	Lower	3.5	19.3	14.0	3.5	3.5	5.3	22.8	19.3	5.3	1.8	1.8	
	Lower-middle	4.6	14.8	15.1	3.2	6.7	3.9	22.5	21.5	3.9	1.8	2.1	
	Middle	4.5	14.5	20.4	2.9	3.4	5.3	17.0	25.0	4.4	1.5	1.1	
	Upper-middle	3.9	17.0	15.8	2.0	4.7	4.9	21.7	24.3	4.2	0.3	1.0	
	Upper	2.7	17.0	24.1	1.3	6.7	4.5	19.2	13.8	7.1	1.3	2.2	

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Age-Related Variations in Crisis Priorities

Age is another significant factor influencing citizens' prioritization of crisis issues ($p < 0.001$). The table illustrates that different age groups have varying concerns, reflecting the various life stages and responsibilities associated with each age group.

Young Adults (18-29): This group shows a strong concern for unemployment (22.8%), welfare/social healthcare (21.1%), and regional healthcare (21.1%). Young adults are often in the early stages of their careers and may be particularly vulnerable to economic disruptions caused by crises. Their focus on welfare and healthcare may also reflect concerns about accessing affordable health services and social safety nets, which are crucial during financial instability.

Middle-Aged Adults (30s and 40s): The 30s age group has the highest concern for regional issues (28.4%) and welfare/social healthcare (22.7%), while the 40s age group continues to prioritize welfare (21.3%) and political development (21.6%). Middle-aged adults often balance career advancement with family responsibilities, leading them to focus on stable employment, social services, and effective governance to ensure a secure environment for their families.

Older Adults (50s and 60+): Older adults, particularly those over 60, place significant emphasis on political development (25.5%) and security (9.9%). This age group may be more concerned with the long-term stability of political institutions and personal security, especially in crises that could threaten retirement savings, health, and overall well-being. Their focus on political development might also stem from a desire to ensure that the government remains responsive and effective in managing crises. These age-related differences highlight the need for age-specific policies during crises. Younger adults may benefit from policies focused on job creation and accessible social services, while older adults might require political stability and security assurances.

Educational Influences on Issue Salience

Education level also significantly influences issue salience during crises ($p < 0.05$). Education is often linked to political awareness and engagement, with higher levels of education typically associated with greater involvement in civic activities and a more nuanced understanding of political issues.

High School Graduates: Individuals with only a high school education are more likely to prioritize unemployment (17.0%) and political development (20.5%). This may reflect concerns about job security and the effectiveness of government policies in managing the economy and maintaining political order.

University Graduates (2-4 years): University graduates also show concern for unemployment (15.3%) but place a higher emphasis on political development (18.9%) and regional healthcare (23.5%). This group may have a broader perspective on the importance of effective governance and regional disparities in healthcare access, particularly during crises.

Graduate and Beyond: Those with graduate degrees or higher are significantly more focused on political development (23.6%) and regional issues (30.0%). This group will likely be more politically active and aware of the structural and regional challenges that crises can exacerbate.

Their higher educational attainment may lead them to prioritize systemic solutions that address these broader issues. The differences in issue salience based on education suggest that crisis response policies should consider the educational background of the population. More educated individuals may demand comprehensive, systemic changes, while those with less education may be more concerned with immediate economic and political stability.

Ideological Differences in Crisis Prioritization

Ideology is a critical factor in shaping how citizens perceive and respond to crises, and the table indicates a significant relationship between ideology and issue salience ($p < 0.001$).

Liberals: Liberal respondents prioritize welfare/social healthcare (21.6%) and political development (23.8%). This reflects a focus on social equity, government accountability, and protecting civil liberties during crises. Liberals will likely support policies that strengthen social safety nets and ensure that political institutions remain transparent and responsive.

Conservatives: Conservatives are more concerned with unemployment (21.2%) and security (12.2%). Their focus on economic stability and national security is consistent with conservative values that emphasize the importance of a strong economy and a secure state, particularly during periods of crisis.

Centrists: Those with centrist ideologies show a balanced concern across various issues, with significant emphasis on welfare (19.9%) and regional healthcare (22.5%). Centrists may support a combination of social welfare policies and economic measures that address immediate needs and long-term stability.

These ideological differences underscore the need for a balanced policy approach that can address the diverse concerns of citizens across the political spectrum. During crises, governments should implement policies that protect social welfare, ensure economic stability, and maintain security while upholding democratic principles.

Political Instability, Crisis Responses and Democratic Outcomes

A significant association was observed between periods of political instability and public preferences for institutional reforms: $\chi^2 = 24.57$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$. 68% of respondents preferred systemic reforms during high instability, compared to 35% during low instability. It suggests that political instability intensifies public demand for accountability and systemic change. Logistic regression analysis demonstrated a significant positive relationship between high political instability and the likelihood of democratic consolidation ($\beta = 0.45$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$), mediated by public preferences for reforms. Respondents with reform-oriented preferences were significantly more likely to associate instability with democratic consolidation ($\beta = 0.67$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$). The interaction effect between political instability and public preferences was also significant ($\beta = 0.33$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$), highlighting the role of instability in amplifying reform preferences.

Class Identification: Although less statistically significant, class identification still varies in issue salience, suggesting that socio-economic status shapes how citizens perceive and prioritize issues during crises.

Discussion

Demographic Insights and Democratic Outcomes: The study’s rationale is to understand the preferences for systemic crisis as proxied by the citizens and advance the understanding of complicated associations of variables and their effects on democratic processes. The Chi-square test indicates a linkage between ascribed factors and systemic crises in understanding democratic consolidation. However, the model we propose is not only to predict the associations but also for multiple variables, quantifying effects and modelling complex relationships. The findings from the logistic regression (Table 3) highlight the critical role of Gender, Education and regionalism in influencing the likelihood of the outcome during the crisis. Males, individuals with lower levels of education, and those with weaker regional ties are more susceptible to the outcome. Conversely, age showed a minimal effect, and factors such as religion, urban/rural status, and financial condition did not significantly impact the outcome.

Meanwhile, variables like females, regions and poor are significantly negative in the context of systemic crises. Likewise, the spatiality and religion variables are the two variables from which we cannot draw any significant conclusions. It does not mean that they tend to oppose systemic crises. We cannot verify its negative effects by using our sample. Overall, our model reflects the opposition to the systemic crises with the caution that it needs to be tested against some other data pool. By linking these findings to the broader theoretical framework, the study underscores the importance of demographic diversity in shaping the outcomes of systemic crises. Institutional responses that acknowledge and address these variations are more likely to foster democratic consolidation (Schedler, 1998, 2001) and prevent backsliding. The findings highlight that demographic factors such as gender, education, and regional ties significantly influence susceptibility to systemic crises, with males, less-educated individuals, and those with weaker regional ties more likely to view crises as opportunities for change. These variations suggest that systemic crises can foster democratic consolidation when institutional responses address the reform demands of these groups, but risks of backsliding arise if their concerns remain unaddressed or are exploited.

Table 3. Variables of support for the systemic crisis in South Korea –Logistic regression analysis

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Gender	.366	.106	11.982	1	.001	1.443	1.172	1.775
Education	-.225	.045	24.779	1	.000	.799	.731	.872
Religion	.001	.001	.653	1	.419	1.001	.999	1.002
Regionalism	-.146	.051	8.054	1	.005	.864	.781	.956
Urban/Rural	.000	.000	.038	1	.845	1.000	1.000	1.001
Financial Status	-.002	.001	2.741	1	.098	.998	.996	1.000
Age	-.021	.021	1.021	1	.012	1.021	.997	1.001
Constant	.178	.269	.334	1	.563	1.168		

Variable 1: Age, regionalism, education, family income, Gender, Religion, and Urban/Rural have been entered.

For H1: The Chi-square test confirms the significant role gender plays in how citizens prioritize issues during crises. ($p < 0.001$). Men were more likely to prioritize economic and political issues, while women focused more on social and regional concerns. The logistic regression analysis further supports this hypothesis, showing that gender is a significant predictor of the outcome ($p = 0.001$), with males being 44.3% more likely to experience the outcome. The analysis suggests that males are more likely to prioritize institutional reform and political development during systemic crises, aligning with a proactive approach to addressing systemic issues, which could foster democratic consolidation.

In contrast, females' preference for social stability and welfare indicates a cautious approach, reflecting concerns about the social costs of reform. If institutional responses fail to account for these gendered differences, it may lead to disengagement from certain groups, posing challenges to democratic consolidation.

For H2: Age was a marginally significant predictor in the logistic regression model ($p = 0.012$), with older individuals slightly less likely to experience the outcome. Although the effect size was small, this still supports the hypothesis that age influences how citizens respond to crises. Younger individuals' more significant engagement with systemic crises, particularly their demand for unemployment reform and systemic adaptation, demonstrates their openness to democratic reforms, fostering consolidation. Older individuals' preference for preserving the status quo while stabilizing in some respects risks slowing down necessary reforms. If left unaddressed, this resistance could result in institutional stagnation, ultimately jeopardizing democratic consolidation and increasing the likelihood of backsliding.

For H3: The result aligns with the existing literature that education was a significant negative predictor in the logistic regression model ($p < 0.001$), with higher education reducing the likelihood of the outcome. It supports the hypothesis that higher education correlates with a preference for political development and regional issues, suggesting that educated individuals support systemic reform through informed advocacy, strengthening democratic consolidation. On the other hand, lower education levels are associated with greater susceptibility to systemic discontent, reflecting potential distrust in institutions. If institutions fail to address the concerns of less-educated individuals, their disengagement could weaken democratic norms and risk backsliding.

For H4: The results showed significant differences in issue salience based on political instability ($p < 0.01$). The findings underscore the dual role of political instability in shaping democratic outcomes. Periods of instability significantly amplify public preferences for reforms to restore stability and accountability. This aligns with the theoretical argument that political instability and responsive institutional reforms can catalyze democratic consolidation. For example, high instability during South Korea's 2016–2017 impeachment crisis led to mass public mobilization and institutional reforms that strengthened democratic governance.

However, the analysis also reveals potential risks. If public preferences for reform are ignored or institutions fail to respond effectively, prolonged instability can erode public trust and increase the likelihood of democratic backsliding. This is evident from cases where institutional inaction or resistance exacerbated public dissatisfaction, leading to further erosion of democratic norms.

The interaction effect between political instability and public preferences suggests that responsive governance plays a pivotal role in shaping the outcome of instability. Governments that address reform demands are more likely to stabilize the political environment and foster democratic consolidation, while those that resist change may deepen disillusionment and fuel anti-democratic tendencies.

For H5: The results indicate that Urban/Rural status does not significantly impact the outcome variable in this model. Whether a person resides in an urban or rural area does not affect their

Table 4. Logistic regression analysis of trust in government

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for Exp(B)
Trust in Government	0.500	0.120	17.361	1	0.000	1.649	1.291 – 2.108
Gender (Male)	0.366	0.106	11.982	1	0.001	1.443	1.172 – 1.775
Education	-0.225	0.045	24.779	1	0.000	0.799	0.731 – 0.872
Regionalism	-0.146	0.051	8.054	1	0.005	0.864	0.781 – 0.956
Urban/Rural	0.000	0.000	0.038	1	0.845	1.000	1.000 – 1.001
Age	-0.021	0.021	1.021	1	0.012	1.021	0.997 – 1.001
Constant	0.178	0.269	0.334	1	0.563	1.168	

likelihood of experiencing the outcome. This is evident from the coefficient of zero, the non-significant Wald statistic, and the odds ratio 1. It does not significantly influence public attitudes or preferences during systemic crises, suggesting that geographic location alone does not determine the likelihood of supporting institutional reform or stability. This neutrality implies that other factors, such as trust in institutions or socioeconomic conditions, play a more critical role in shaping responses to systemic crises and their impact on democratic outcomes.

For H6: The logistic regression analysis (Table 4) shows that “Trust in Government” is a significant and strong predictor of whether citizens prioritize government intervention during a crisis. This variable has the most critical effect among the predictors, with a substantial increase in the likelihood of supporting government intervention as trust in government increases. High levels of trust in government during crises correlate with public support for institutional reforms, enabling consolidation by fostering cooperative engagement between citizens and institutions. Low trust levels, however, indicate skepticism toward institutional responses, which, if persistent, could lead to alternative (potentially anti-democratic) solutions, increasing the likelihood of backsliding. These findings highlight the critical role of trust in government in shaping public responses during crises and suggest that demographic factors like gender and education further modulate these responses.

In the future, a different dataset can replicate this model to conform to these two variables and reach a point of conclusion about the interaction of these two variables, if possible, and other variables. The absence of interaction between variables underlines the limitation of our data, where the characteristics of the sample need to be altered to match the variance of the actual population.

Conclusion

It has been frequently observed that citizens’ preferences have severe implications for policymakers (Burnstein, 2003 ; Wlezien & Soroka, 2016). From that point of view, our study adds to the literature that argues that democratic consolidation is a gradual process with various forms, depending on the country’s starting point. It reflects the public’s dissatisfaction towards party politics; most even hold them responsible for the systemic crisis. Although Korean citizens aspire to participate actively in political decision-making, the evidence shows uneven results, especially when we see the role of political parties while rendering their services for participatory democracy that should ideally be widely accessible to the citizens. Even more broadly, the system of political representation has been perceived as problematic due to the absence of cross-political

communication. It makes us believe that Korea presents more dilemmas and a more significant challenge to fully realizing democracy without the proper functioning of the political party. Citizens' expression through civil society and not through political parties can ultimately take the shape of the democratic consolidation of the regime. In this scenario, the study predicts that the moderators' intersection pattern significantly influences people's awareness of political systems and those beyond the control of political parties. It is observed that the state's role, along with its institutions, is to play a decisive role in shaping people's attitudes, not vice versa.

This study validates that systemic crises can strengthen or undermine democracy, depending on institutional responses and public preferences. In South Korea, crises like the 1997 financial collapse and the 2016 impeachment focus on how citizen engagement and institutional compliance contribute to consolidation, whereas resistance to reform risks backsliding. Demographic perceptions emphasize the diagnostic role of public trust and diverse citizen perspectives in affecting these outcomes.

Moreover, the subsequent phases of democratic deconsolidation have risen, creating the need for new political, democratic and social reforms to protect freedom and allow the people's will to rule without fitting into the convention. Korea is a liberal democracy with a robust state of law and a vibrant civil society. In our judgment, two dimensions of the political context seem especially relevant- namely, the political system institutionalized within the central authority that allows cultural diversity and a robust capacity for political participation (Brady, Verba & Scholman, 1995) and a general standard of equality among their citizens are the intrinsic features of the self-corrected mode to avert social crisis rather than systemic crisis..

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