



Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of South Korea

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Introduction

South Koreans have historically been active participants in their democracy. This is evidenced by the high-level protests the country has experienced since its democratic transition in 1987, including the 2016 protests regarding the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye. Such engagement is as important today as it has ever been. There are a variety of challenges in the country which must be addressed by its democratic institutions.

Beyond its ageing population, lack of affordable housing and job insecurity, South Korea has had to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. There has also been an increased awareness of social issues, such as gender inequality and the effects of climate change.¹ Elections in March 2022 showcased increased disparity between South Korea's liberal and conservative parties in their campaigning strategies.² This election saw a rise in negative campaigning similar to that observed in the United States, with candidates Lee Jae-Myeong and Yoon Seok-Yeol and their family members coming under heavy media scrutiny.³ This led to growing public dissatisfaction with both candidates, particularly among younger voters. As a country with mandatory military service for male citizens, feminism has also become a hot-button issue in South Korea, with more young men becoming involved in conservative politics as a result.⁴ Despite young people being less involved politically, in general, South Koreans are highly motivated in playing a role in their country's political future and are very capable of doing so given South Korea's highly educated and digitalised society.

This paper examines three examples of democratic innovation in South Korea that have sought to improve levels of such participation: active citizen participation in online platforms, citizen participation in pandemic countermeasures, and public participation in nuclear energy policy. These initiatives show that the space for civic engagement is widening and offer several lessons for democratic innovation more generally.

Active citizen participation in online platforms

Created by President Moon Jae-in's administration in 2017, Gwanghwamoon 1st Street provides citizens with an online platform for sharing suggestions, opinions and ideas regarding politics and policies, establishing a direct link between the public and policy-makers.⁵ While other online platforms of this kind already exist, South Korea's is arguably unique for a number of reasons: it streamlines all of the national government's online citizen participation platforms, improves accessibility and categorises discussions and policy suggestions on a variety of issues, such as social welfare, education and unification diplomacy/security. This innovative design encourages increased interaction and democratic participation, providing a means for the public to informally engage with authorities on local and national issues. Citizens can post suggestions and ideas on the easy-to-use website; these are then sorted through by experts from research institutions and government officials.⁶

After its launch in May 2017, the Gwanghwamoon 1st Street site garnered 180,705 suggestions in its first 49 days; 99 of these suggestions were reflected in the national agenda and 1,718 are directly reflected in policies that will continue to roll out into 2022.⁷ These figures represent a big increase from previous online platforms provided by city halls and government

1 Jun-Young Kim, "66% of Men in their Twenties prefer Eun-hye Kim, 66% of Women in their Twenties prefer Dong-young Kim...the Gap in Gender Perspectives is Increasing," The JoongAng, June 2, 2022 (in Korean). <https://n.news.naver.com/article/025/0003199397>; Yoon Seok Lee, "Nothing is More Important than Climate Change in the Election!" YWCA, November 12, 2021 (in Korean). https://ywca.or.kr/webzine_content/대선에서-기후보다-더-무엇이-중한디/

2 Jong Bin Ban, "Lee Jae-Myeong and Yoon-Seok Yeol's Pledges on the Economy, Foreign Policy, and Security," Yonhap News, November 7, 2021 (in Korean). <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/GYH20211107000200044>

3 Soo Kim, "2022 Look Ahead: Mudslinging Dominates South Korea's Election," Nikkei Asia, December 31, 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/2022-look-ahead-Mudslinging-dominates-South-Korea-s-election>

4 Ji Sook Kim, "How Will the Younger Generation Vote? Men in their Twenties for Yoon Seok-Yeol, Women in their Twenties for Lee Jae-Myeong," KBS News, March 10, 2022 (in Korean). <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=5412212>; Young Rim Hong, "Differing Choices Among Young Voters... Men in their Twenties for Yoon Seok-Yeol, Women in their Twenties for Lee Jae-Myeong by a Landslide," Chosun Ilbo, March 10, 2022 (in Korean).

5 "Gwanghwamoon 1st Street (People's Transition Office)," Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, May 22, 2017. <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/gwanghwamoon-1st-street-peoples-transition-office-2/>

6 Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, "Gwanghwamoon 1st Street."

7 Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, "Gwanghwamoon 1st Street."

ministries.⁸ According to an official involved with Gwanghwamoon 1st Street, the site has gained 550,000 users in the four and a half years since its creation. Over the past four years, “Gwanghwamoon 1st Street Open Communication Forums” have been held 58 times, with 10,159 citizens participating, resulting in 229 policy proposals being put forward and 176 being reflected in policies.⁹ The site has also incorporated features allowing users to search for proposals by keyword and within a set timeframe, as well as a comment section on each proposal to increase interaction.¹⁰ The governance of Gwanghwamoon 1st Street is also unique: it is composed of a staff of young government officials and social innovators.¹¹ This team is granted an unusual level of autonomy in its decision-making and is independent from its parent organisations.¹²

One area for improvement for the site would be its qualitative performance; Gwanghwamoon 1st Street lacks technical information which would improve the quality of policy suggestions. Additional features that could encourage policy discussion and collaboration between users could also improve the quality of proposals submitted, the comment section feature is a positive step in this direction. There is still room for future growth, including increasing the number of proposals that are actualized in policy. It is likely the Open Communication Forum will also continue to evolve in the future. Expanding offline public participation to increase the probability of suggestions being enacted into policy and diversifying how each theme for a discussion is decided are two ways in which the forum can continue to evolve and improve its communication with the public.¹³

South Korea has a history of active netizen participation in the democratic process. For a population with one of the highest percentages of internet access in the world, a well-designed and functional website has proven to be an effective way to encourage public participation, as demonstrated by the high levels of engagement with Gwanghwamoon 1st Street. As a country accustomed to democracy being supported by the use of the Internet, it is unsurprising that South Korea has been at the cutting edge of such innovation, evidenced by the creation of this online public platform empowering participatory democracy. Gwanghwamoon 1st Street is a prime example of government and civil society working in harmony and building more trust in one another.

Citizen participation in pandemic countermeasures

In August 2020, Icheon City created a contest for citizens to participate in finding COVID-19 countermeasures. The contest challenged citizens to come up with “ideas for daily social distancing”, creating awareness of the disease and increasing public participation in social distancing measures. The contest was posted on the city website for ten days, in this time citizens could submit their ideas and suggestions for the municipal administration to consider in the fight against COVID-19. Ten people received awards for their submissions, and their ideas were incorporated into the municipal administration’s social distancing policy.¹⁴

The contest was unique in that it took a grassroots, bottom-up approach, rather than the top-down one generally used for generating and implementing pandemic countermeasures. The contest was held to help prevent the spread of the virus and to increase public participation in generating new ideas. The theme of the contest, “ideas for daily social distancing,” was left broad to allow for a range of creative ideas to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. 56 proposals were submitted in total, from which eight were selected, some of which are still in use, while others are still being pushed forward.¹⁵ These included a proposal laying the groundwork for a one-way street for physical exercise which maintains social distancing, as well as social challenges such as “Icheon City, lets social distance together! Stay-At-Home Challenge”. Another proposal permitted small businesses to adhere to their own COVID-19 preventative protocols and execute disease prevention measures related to disinfection and ventilation.¹⁶ Icheon City worked to equip businesses and restaurants with the information and tools, such as quarantine documents and a promotion plan to provide education on social distancing measures, in order to prevent the spread of the virus.¹⁷

Since the contest was conducted at the municipal level, the scope of the policies enacted was limited to the municipal level as well. Due to the power structure of the South Korean government, it could easily override or prevent these policies from being enacted through

8 Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, “Gwanghwamoon 1st Street.”

9 Officer from the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, e-mail message to the author, February 14, 2022.

10 “Public Contests,” Gwanghwamoon 1st Street. Last modified June 3, 2022. https://www.gwanghwamoon1st.go.kr/front/epilogue/epilogueBbsListPage.do?menu_id=422

11 Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, “Gwanghwamoon 1st Street.”

12 Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, “Gwanghwamoon 1st Street.”

13 Officer from the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, e-mail message to the author, February 14, 2022.

14 Officer from the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, e-mail message to the author, February 14, 2022.

15 Officer from the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, e-mail message to the author, February 14, 2022.

16 Officer from the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, e-mail message to the author, February 14, 2022.

17 Officer from Icheon City Hall, e-mail to the author, February 10, 2022.

its own decree. This limited the adoption of suggested policies and ideas to the local level. Thus, while this is a successful example of participatory democracy on a smaller scale, the lack of interest in the policies from other areas in the country or the national government is illustrative of the limits of participatory democracy at this scale. On the other hand, the contest was highly successful at finding creative new ideas, engaging the public, and increasing awareness of social distancing measures. It successfully provided citizens with an opportunity to voice their own ideas for COVID-19 prevention and to play an active role, alongside the government, in combating a societal problem.

In sum, the limitations of the municipal government's influence prevented the proposed policies from being widely adopted. However, the bottom-up method was a new way to approach pandemic countermeasures, and the attempt in and of itself was important as it clearly demonstrated that citizens are capable of generating new ideas for practical policy. This example creates a foundation for similar projects moving forward.

Public participation in nuclear energy policy (Shin-Kori Reactors No. 5 and 6)

Following his election in 2017, President Moon Jae-In chose to implement a deliberative, non-binding poll to help decide whether construction on the Shin-Kori nuclear power plants No. 5 and No. 6 should be continued.¹⁸ Moon's administration had advocated for denuclearisation but committed itself to respecting the results of the public poll.¹⁹ The poll followed a debate by 471 members of the public, selected randomly from a representative nationwide survey. 59.5 percent of those polled voted in favour of resuming construction; the government's pledge to the outcome of the poll resulted in the continued construction of Shin-Kori reactors 5 and 6. However, 53.3 percent of the electors also voted to reduce the country's reliance on nuclear power,

35.5 percent voted to maintain the status quo and 9.7 percent voted to expand nuclear power.²⁰ The science and technology sector is highly technical and has traditionally relied on expert and government decision-making, so it has been relatively undemocratic thus far. Yet, with increasing public awareness and interest in this field, public participation will become necessary as a way to maintain checks on energy procurement and policy-making. The consensus reached on the Shin-Kori nuclear reactors was an important and ground-breaking step in this direction, as the public poll proved that whilst a level of expertise is required in areas such as science and technology, it is possible for the public to be informed and offer constructive discussion. Members of the public who were involved in the debate indicated that they had prepared and increased their understanding of the topic in order to participate. Throughout the process, public understanding of the issue improved.²¹

Online participation, including an e-learning system of video lectures and a "Q&A Room" where group members could have questions answered by experts, were key to the project's success. This was combined with a deliberate process to educate participants, culminating in a final forum to encourage discussion and clear up any misconceptions regarding the topic. This process of using various methods to educate participants was crucial given that the poll was a direct vote, thus requiring a high level of expertise.²² This combination of participation and direct voting was unprecedented in South Korea, and it provides similar projects in the future with a reference case for how to ensure a high standard of information among participants using modern methods.²³

The government's choice to implement the final outcome of the poll can be considered another success. At the same time, the Moon administration's control of the process and debate through a nine-member public debate committee should be considered an area for future improvement; due to the high level of control exercised by the committee, the government was able to have a substantial influence on the final outcome. Government control for the sake of efficiency also limited the level of democratic participation.²⁴ Despite

18 Gillan Chi-Lun Huang, Rung-Yi Chen, and Byung-Bae Park. "Democratic innovations as a party tool: A comparative analysis of nuclear energy public participation in Taiwan and South Korea." *Energy Policy* 153 (2021): 112251.

19 "Moon Jae-in's Presidential Statement on the Results of the Public Debate on Shin Kori Reactors 5 and 6," *Seoul Sinmun*, October 22, 2017 (in Korean). <https://m.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?cp=seoul&id=20171022500047>

20 Huang, Chen, and Park, "Democratic Innovations."

21 Officer from the Shin-Kori Public Debate, e-mail to the author, February 8, 2022.

22 Officer from the Shin-Kori Public Debate, e-mail to the author, February 8, 2022.

23 Officer from the Shin-Kori Public Debate, e-mail to the author, February 8, 2022.

24 Huang, Chen, and Park, "Democratic Innovations."

the government's control over the process, the poll succeeded in building trust with both anti- and pro-nuclear groups, increasing the chance of future public participation in the democratic process. A key detail to consider for the future is the pro-nuclear lobby's ability to receive funding to promote their side of the argument, supplying electors with information prior to the debate. This means the two sides did not start from a level playing field, something that should be rectified in future polls.

The use of a public poll to arrive at a decision was a calculated choice by the Moon administration. It was an opportunity to test the position of the public and avoid making an unpopular decision early into the presidency, as shutting down construction of the Shin-Kori plants would be a difficult and divisive choice for economic and environmental reasons. There was no specific timeframe stating when denuclearisation would be complete, allowing for an opportunity for trust-building via public participation in the decision-making process. This context created an opportunity to attempt a new democratic practice in the field of science and technology.

Given that South Korea is one of the world's leaders in nuclear energy, President Moon's stated goal of denuclearisation has proven politically difficult.²⁵ South Korea's lack of natural oil, pressure to abandon fossil fuels due to climate change and a growing energy-dependent economy together make nuclear energy an option that must be considered.²⁶ The source of the country's energy is an increasingly important issue to address and the ability to engage an informed public and receive input on policy is invaluable for South Korea's democracy moving forward.

When asked about future efforts to promote future civic participation in the field of science and technology, a general administrative policy officer who was a part of the Shin-Kori public debate highlighted the importance of well-defined agenda setting and creating a sense of accountability for the results among the public.²⁷ The officer emphasises a clear, definite agenda should be supported by sufficient studies and debates, and also

stressed the importance of "assigning binding force to the results that the public produced".²⁸ This was seen in the success of the Shin-Kori public debate, President Moon's acceptance of the outcome meant that the public could feel the impact of their efforts reflected directly in policy.

According to the officer, improving public awareness and expanding citizens' contribution to the policy-making process is important to "let people feel the sense of efficacy brought by participation".²⁹ Despite previous worries that it would be difficult for the general public to participate in decision-making on complex topics such as science and technology, the Shin-Kori poll proved that it is possible for a citizen to "reach the level of making his [their] approval or opposition [to a policy clear] and be able to discuss about issues as long as he [they] take time".³⁰

25 "South Korea Is One of the World's Largest Nuclear Power Producers," US Energy Information Administration, August 27, 2020. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=44916>.

26 "The Current Status and Tasks Ahead for Our Country's Energy," Korean Ministry of the Environment, December 28, 2017 (in Korean). <https://www.keep.go.kr/file/attach/2017/12/28/AT15144217175960.pdf>

27 Officer from the Shin-Kori Public Debate, e-mail to the author, February 8, 2022.

28 Officer from the Shin-Kori Public Debate, e-mail to the author, February 8, 2022.

29 Officer from the Shin-Kori Public Debate, e-mail to the author, February 8, 2022.

30 Officer from the Shin-Kori Public Debate, e-mail to the author, February 8, 2022.

Conclusion

The country case study of South Korea's democratic innovations provides three key lessons. First, the role of technology in creating new ways to engage citizens is important. As a country with a population who have widespread access to the Internet and mobile phones, South Korea has been able to use technology, such as Gwanghwamoon 1st Street and its mobile phone COVID-19 contact tracing app to draw the public and government closer together and facilitate ease of communication. Many countries in the West also have high levels of access to this type of technology and would be able to utilise similar practices.

Second, given the tools, the public is highly capable of creating inventive and effective policy. This was demonstrated with the adoption and implementation of policy suggestions both on a national level with Gwanghwamoon 1st Street and on a municipal level with the Icheon City social distancing idea contest. The public's ability to make decisions in highly technical sectors, such as nuclear energy, was also evidenced by the Shin-Kori poll. By allowing public participation, citizens will become more aware and informed on important issues, such as social distancing and nuclear policy, as it is their responsibility to come to an informed consensus. Despite some challenges such as quality improvement and increasing the number of policies adopted, South Korea has demonstrated strong action towards improving public participation both on and offline.

The third lesson from South Korea's case is the importance of trust-building between the government and its citizens. The use of an effective online public forum for policy suggestions allows the public to see concrete examples of how their voice can have an impact and encourages further participation. In the case of public participation in the decision on what to do with the Shin-Kori reactors, the Moon administration was able to maintain some level of control with the committee it installed while still granting the public the agency to make the decision. It is also vital that the outcome of the poll was respected and that the will of the people was carried out, despite the fact that no legally binding legislation had been tied to the poll results. While trust

was improved through these democratic practices, it was also a crucial pre-existing condition for their success. Countries with excessive political polarisation can suffer from parts of the population having little respect for or belief in the legitimacy of the democratic process, which makes them unlikely to participate. This is something South Korea should remain wary of as the new administration takes office. However, these democratic practices can provide those with alternative views a platform for discussing and debating ideas and policy. It is important for citizens, not just elected officials, to engage in this type of action in order to create a healthy and vibrant democracy.

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About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations. The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.