

# **Confucianism and Coalition Politics: Is Political Behavior in South Korea Irrational?**

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## **Confucianism and Coalition Politics: Is Political Behavior in South Korea Irrational?**

This paper examines the extent to which rational choice and culture can be accommodated in explanations of political behavior and party politics in non-western settings. It discusses the case of coalition politics in post-democratization South Korea. By looking at how Confucian political culture provides the environment in which political actors devise strategies in accordance with the prevailing cultural norms, continuous party switching and defection no longer appear irrational, but represent a way to secure positions and interests for the political actors and the voters on whose loyalty they depend.

**Keywords:** coalition politics, Confucianism, cultural norms, political behavior, party politics, Korean politics

# Confucianism and Coalition Politics: Is Political Behavior in South Korea Irrational?

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This paper asks if rational choice and culture can be accommodated in explanations of political behavior and party politics in non-Western settings. It examines the case study of post-democratization South Korea, where electoral democracy has given rise to a process of continuous fission and fusion of political actors, without paving the way to stable governments. Quite the contrary, political actors appeared engaged in what is a seemingly irrational behavior characterized by continuously switching of sides and political affiliations dictated not by ideology or party loyalty, but by allegiance to a particular *persona*: the leader.

Party politics in South Korea has witnessed the sudden rise and demise of political parties, accompanied by switching and defections of legislators. As parties emerged and faded, the names of these political formations kept changing, making it very difficult for observers of South Korean politics to make sense of the post-authoritarian party political

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system (see figure 1). In addition, and despite the continuous fission and fusion of political actors, voters remained loyal to their political leaders. Why was this the case?

Hahm notes that “no cultural influence in this region [East Asia] runs deeper or wider than Confucianism.”<sup>1</sup> This is particularly the case in South Korea. Politics in South Korea is often explained with reference to strong leadership, patron-client relations, regionalism, and lack of internal democracy in the process of decision-making.<sup>2</sup> Research has often emphasized how these factors are embedded in the East Asian Confucian culture.<sup>3</sup> Accounting for political behavior in non-Western countries through the lenses of rational choice theory encounters some problems especially where emphasis is given to society as a whole (and the harmony therein) over the individual and where strong family values are extended to the community, larger (the nation) or smaller (local or regional) community. If an individual follows the social norms of his/her context of belonging, it is natural that the individual will secure his/her social interests or environment. Abiding by social norms is another way of securing personal interests.

The South Korean case is particularly interesting as it challenges the existing consensus in coalition theories in political science where political behavior has traditionally been explained with reference to rationality and not in relation to the specificity of the context.<sup>4</sup> Since

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<sup>1</sup> Chaibong Hahm. (2004). The Ironies of Confucianism. *Journal of Democracy*, 15(3), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Diamond & Byung-kook Kim. (2000). *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Choe Jang-jip. (2002). *Minjuhwa ihu ui minjujuui: Hanguk minjujuui ui bosujeok giwon gwa wigi (Democracy After Democratisation: The Crisis and Origin of Conservative Democracy in South Korea)*. Seoul: Humanitas; Youngmi Kim. (2011). *The Politics of Coalition in Korea: Between Institutions and Culture*. London: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Byung-man Ahn. (2003). *Elite and Political Power in South Korea*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; Dohcheol Shin. (1999). *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>4</sup> Michael Laver. (1989). Party Competition and Party System Change: The Interaction of Electoral Bargaining and Party Competition. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1, 301-325; Hanna Bäck.

democratization, coalition-building has played a crucial role in determining electoral success in presidential elections. A serious drawback, however, is represented by the fact that electoral success is no guarantee of effective governability or political stability either.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, governability has been constantly undermined by permanent factionalism internal to the coalition and to the parties themselves.

This paper argues that rational choice theory and cultural explanations need not be seen as mutually incompatible, but rather can be effectively integrated in the same explanatory framework. I will attempt to show why this is the case by examining the process of coalition-building among political actors and the strong regional voters' behavior in post-democratization South Korea. By doing so the paper builds on recent debates between political scientists and area specialists where attempts have been made to reconcile rational choice and culture, and also makes two main contributions.<sup>6</sup> First, it brings the debate outside the

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(2003). Explaining and Predicting Coalition Outcomes: Conclusions from Studying Data on Local Coalitions. *European Journal of Political Research*, 42, 441-472; Lieven De Winter, Rudy B. Andeweg & Patrick Dumon. (2002, March). The State of Art in Coalition Research: Critical Appraisals and Alternative Avenues. Paper presented at The Joint Sessions of European Consortium for Political Research; Carol Mershon. (2001). Party factions and coalition government: portfolio allocation in Italian Christian Democracy. *Electoral Studies*, 20, 555-580; Youngmi Kim. (2008). Intra-party politics and minority coalition government in South Korea. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 9(3), 367-398.

<sup>5</sup> Governability here is understood as the government's ability to implement reform policies. For further detail see Youngmi Kim. (2008). Explaining the Minority Coalition Government and Governability in South Korea: A Review Essay. *Korea Observer*, 39(1), 59-84; Youngmi Kim, "Intra-party politics and minority coalition government in South Korea."

<sup>6</sup> Junko Kato. (1996). Institutions and Rationality in Politics – Three Varieties of Neo-Institutionalists. *British Journal of Political Science*, 26, 553-582; Ian S. Lustick. (1997). The Disciplines of Political Science: Studying the Culture of Rational Choice as a Case in Point. *Political Science and Politics*, 30, 175-179; Ian Shapiro. (1998). Can the Rational Choice Framework Cope with Culture? *Political Science and Politics*, 31, 40-42; Stephen Whitefield & Geoffrey Evans. (1999). Political Culture Versus Rational Choice: Explaining Responses to Transition in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *British Journal of Political Science*, 29, 129-155; Daniel Little. (1991). *Varieties of Social Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Dennis Chong. (1996). Rational Choice Theory's Mysterious Rivals. In Jeffrey Friedman (Ed.), *The Rational Choice Controversy: Economic*

traditional terrain of western cases by focusing on the case of South Korea as an illustrative case of a problematic that has wider resonance in the East Asian region (coalition politics is a common feature in Japan and Taiwan as well). Second, it discusses the politics of coalition-building not by relying on a quantitative methodology commonly adopted in coalition research, but through a thick descriptive analysis of party politics in South Korea. By examining political actors' behavior and their culture and the way political parties are organized the question over how coalitions form and collapse (and therefore the question of stable and unstable government) can be answered and simultaneously a deeper understanding of intra-party politics promoted.

The South Korean case has remained at the margins of studies on coalition formation and governability. Certainly the presence of a Confucian culture embedded in society distinguishes it from other countries otherwise examined in the literature. Neither the voters nor political actors appear to behave on the basis of rational calculation, as understood in the rational choice theory literature.<sup>7</sup> However, what is rational in one country may not be rational in another. Continuous fission and fusion of legislators, regional loyalty from the voters for a certain leader, and the emergence and demise of parties contribute to the creation of a rather complex picture of South Korean politics. Taking Confucianism into account allows us to understand why voters follow loyally and support certain leaders from their own region and how the leaders establish new parties based on their own will and why legislators

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*Models of Politics Reconsidered*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Daniel Diermeier. (1995). Rational Choice and the Role of Theory in Political Science. In Friedman (Ed.), *The Rational Choice Controversy*.

<sup>7</sup> David Kang. (2003). Regional Politics and Democratic Consolidation in Korea. In Samuel Kim (Ed.), *Korea's Democratization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Jo Gi-suk. (2006). Hapnijeok seontaek gwa Hanguk jeongchi: Hanguk ui jiyekjuui seongeo wa minjuhwa (Rational Choice and Politics in South Korea: Democratization and Regionalism in Election in South Korea). Hanguk Jeongchi Yeonguwonhoe (Korean Political Studies Researchers' Conference).

defect and join parties regardless of their policy preferences.

Understanding on what basis legislators were moving around remains puzzling: if the ruling political parties can attract so many defectors from the opposition why can they not create any mechanisms of compromise and negotiation which would bring some stability and governability to South Korean politics? The uncompromising behavior of political actors, who either obey party whips or defect from the party, has undermined the creation of potential mechanisms of compromise and negotiation. As a result deadlocks in the legislature are extremely common.

In this paper I first review the debate that has opposed scholars in political science and area studies over the possibility of reconciling rational choice and cultural factors in an explanation of political behavior. Second, I provide a brief outline of Confucianism paying special attention to its political implications, which is in terms of how the values emphasized by this system of belief informs and shapes political behavior, including the choices and strategies of political actors and ordinary voters. I then move on to illustrate the influence of Confucian norms on political behavior by focusing on the case of post-democratization South Korea.

## **Can Rational Choice Theory and Cultural Explanations be Reconciled?**

Can rational choice theory accommodate culture? This question has been long debated in recent years and continues to raise strong debates between political scientists and area specialists.<sup>8</sup> Ian Shapiro notes that while rational choice theorists tend to neglect the importance of context

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<sup>8</sup> Chalmers Johnson. (1997). Preconception vs. Observation, or the Contributions of Rational Choice Theory and Area Studies to Contemporary Political Science. *Political Science and Politics*, 30, 170-174.

and of culture in particular, area specialists by contrast may explain any case study and the peculiarities in terms of cultural uniqueness. Shapiro contends that rational choice can cope with culture if we add “cultural components to the definition of rationality.”<sup>9</sup> Chong and Diermeier also call for a re-conceptualization of rational choice models in a way that embraces variables “that seem at odds with strategic accounts.”<sup>10</sup> To develop an explanation of cultural variables in the rational choice framework Shapiro suggests that scholars should seek “amalgams of strategic and cultural explanations.”<sup>11</sup> If cultural factors are included in a rational choice framework, then theory can be enriched thus be able to travel to non-Western settings. As Green and Shapiro point out, rational choice theorists need to be better equipped rather than just “having a hammer so they will only look for the nail.”<sup>12</sup> If they also had other supplementary “tools” such as a screwdriver or spanner they would be able to see screws, nails, nuts and bolts, so to say. The possibility of overcoming the dichotomy between rational choice theories and culture has been explored by Daniel Little. Little maintains that rational choice theory can be legitimately applied to non-Western culture because “the notion of goal-directed rationality is not an ethnocentric concept.”<sup>13</sup> The original rational choice theory is based on individual self-interest which neglects the influence of social norms and values in the cultural context. This is simply characterized as a “thin” theory of human action and

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<sup>9</sup> Ian Shapiro. (1998). Can the Rational Choice Framework Cope with Culture? *Political Science and Politics*, 31, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis Chong. (1996). Rational Choice Theory’s Mysterious Rivals. In Jeffrey Friedman (Ed.), *The Rational Choice Controversy: Economic Models of Politics Reconsidered*; Daniel Diermeier. (1995). Rational Choice and the Role of Theory in Political Science. In Friedman (Ed.), *The Rational Choice Controversy*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Shapiro & Donald P. Green. (1994). *Pathology of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, cited in Shapiro, “Can the Rational Choice Framework Cope with Culture?,” 41.

<sup>13</sup> Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, 36.

provides an abstract description of goals in a market environment. Little argues that the dimension of rationality needs to be extended. For the concept of economic rationality and the model of the maximizing egoist, individuals calculate the costs and benefits of each possible choice in the most abstract way.

However, when individuals make their optimal choice the utility does not always reflect narrow self-interest in strictly economic terms. If individuals have a list of goods that they value according to their own preference, the individual choice will not always be the same as they value the same goods in many different strategies. Individuals can choose their own utility without assuming precise or quantifiable estimates of probabilities for the cost and benefit can be assessed not only by narrow economic calculation, but also by their social norms and values. Utility can be valued or calculated differently as a result of the “local normative commitment” of each individual, that is, voting for regional leaders can be rational in South Korea. Individual actors will make a choice dependent on their own strategy and the social and cultural context. Little refers to this concept as “broadened practical rationality.” Through this approach little manages to relax restrictive egoistic assumptions based on utility maximization while still retaining one fundamental pillar of rational choice theory – calculation of the costs and benefits of various possible actions.

In order to explain coalition politics in South Korea it is crucial to take into account the way the specificity of the context affects general political dynamics of interaction between political actors. Fission and fusion among parties in the last two decades have been the main features of South Korean party politics and this is often considered as a barrier to consolidating democracy and maintaining government stability.<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>14</sup> Diamond & Kim, *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea*; Choi, *Minjuhwa ihu ui minjujuui*; Kim, *Hanguk jeongdang jeongchi ui ihae*; Youngmi Kim, “Explaining the minority coalition government and governability in South Korea”; Youngmi Kim, *The Politics of Coalition in*

means that understanding why legislators and voters behave the way they do is of fundamental importance for making sense of why coalition forms and why and how they collapse. The South Korean case is not unique and coalition politics is now spreading from its European core to Latin America (Mexico, Uruguay) and in East Asia (South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan in the form of intra-party coalitions) accommodating context with explanations of political behavior and party politics has important comparative implications. Confucianism is a region-specific factor, but political culture (in the form of Confucianism in East Asia, or a particular civic culture in some western contexts such as the United States or Italy) intervenes to give local politics a particular twist.

## **Confucian Culture as an Intervening Explanatory Factor**

In the previous section it was also argued that cultural and rational choice explanations need not be seen as mutually exclusive; there are instead margins for combining the two into a single theoretical framework. I now will discuss a specific dimension of culture which is - for its implications in terms of political behavior - particularly relevant to the study of East Asia and, for the purpose of this paper, South Korea: Confucianism. Confucianism was introduced into Korea when the Joseon Dynasty was founded in 1392. King Taejo, whose personal adult name was Yi Seong-gye, founded the Joseon Dynasty when the Goryeo dynasty was corrupted by Buddhist politics and introduced Confucianism as the national ideology to legitimate his kingdom with Confucian tenets that encourage filial reverence (*hyo* [孝]), political loyalty (*chung* [忠]), and virtuous manner (*ye* [禮]).

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to briefly outline what is

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*Korea.*

meant by Confucian behavior in politics (what counts as Confucian and what does not). Confucianism's emphasis on top-down hierarchy praises loyalty and respect toward those in a more senior position and acknowledges the strong responsibility of seniors towards their juniors. This translates well in how political relationships develop in Korea, when seeking to account for the conduct of ordinary legislators and ordinary voters. At the central level, party leaders are in charge of raising funds, allocating subsidies to the legislators or the party, and appointing candidate for the next general election. Local candidates or legislators play fatherly figure roles taking care of potential voters by sending envelopes containing cash or gifts for supporting family events such as funerals or weddings. Although this is no longer allowed by law, attending funerals and weddings with an envelope containing cash is still common. This is not conceived as a type of bribery but as a part of a culture which places special emphasis on mutual help. Mutual help reinforces the sense of community and is built along ties that involve family, school, or regions of belonging.<sup>15</sup> Common family ties, or school background or regional origins reinforce a sense of community and create expectations that individuals should help one another. Mutual help is not contested and this means that, for example, when legislators switch their party affiliation their decision is not questioned because voters assume that the duty of care will not cease. As a common Korean proverb says, "An arm can only bend toward his/her own body." This means that family or friends will always stand on the same side regardless of their policy position or party affiliation. This arises not from economic calculation or a cost-benefit analysis, but from longer term considerations about the good that such a decision will bring to

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<sup>15</sup> Strong school ties are common to Korean society. Their importance in politics dates back to the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). Factional clashes between different schools of thought within Confucianism used to cause changes in the balance power in state politics or even lead to revolts against the rule of the king.

family, friends, fellow alumni, or people from the same region.

What can a focus on Confucianism tell us about the specific features of economic development and political systems in East Asia? How does Confucianism fit into explanations of political behavior? What should we be looking for to understand its role in Korean politics? Many scholars, such as Chalmers Johnson, Samuel Huntington, Chaibong Hahm, and Francis Fukuyama, are concerned with Confucianism with regard to economic development or the development of authoritarian regimes.<sup>16</sup> Johnson notes how rapid economic development in East Asia is due to the state leading development under bureaucrats who are influenced by Confucian values such as hard work, self-discipline, and high education. Huntington sees Confucianism as an obstacle to democracy. On the other hand, with the presence of Christianity, he maintains, the process of democratization also accelerated in South Korea. In other words, Huntington argues that liberal democracy is embedded with Christian values. By contrast, Fukuyama contends that Confucianism is not necessarily incompatible with liberal democracy:

First, the traditional Confucian examination system was a meritocratic institution with potentially egalitarian implications. ... The second main area of compatibility is the Confucian emphasis on education itself. ... Finally, like most Asian ethical systems, Confucianism is relatively tolerant.<sup>17</sup>

Lipset argues that there is a strong correlation between economic development and stable democracy. In this framework the place of Confucian-

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<sup>16</sup> Chalmers Johnson, "Preconception vs. Observation"; Francis Fukuyama. (1995). *Trust: The Social Virtue and the Creation of Prosperity*. London: Penguin Books; Hahm, "The Ironies of Confucianism"; Samuel Huntington. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

<sup>17</sup> Fukuyama, *Trust*, 25.

ism appears problematic. According to Huntington, Confucianism represents an obstacle on the path to democratization because of its emphasis on family (and community more generally) values and ties, with less importance attached to the individual as a basic social unit.<sup>18</sup> However, if economic development brought democracy and economic development was introduced by authoritarian regimes in Confucian societies, then the relationship (between economic development and democracy) becomes less linear than commonly believed. Moreover, this calls upon us to revisit some of the previously held assumptions on the negative influence of Confucianism in the democratization process. Of course, Confucianism was used as political resource by the ruling authoritarian elites for rather different political purposes. Hahn points out that state leaders Park Chung Hee (South Korea), Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ching-kuo (Taiwan), and Lee Kwan Yew (Singapore) greatly benefited from the instrumental use of Confucianism (and the emphasis on loyalty and deference to authority) to buttress a strong state.<sup>19</sup> In all these cases, Confucian rhetoric extolling filial piety and political loyalty accompanied the building of a strong, centralized, intrusive, and bureaucratic state capable of generating momentum for modern industrial development. Today, the nominally Marxist rulers of China, Vietnam, and North Korea seem to be adopting this approach despite prior communist claims that Confucianism is “reactionary.”

The political salience of reverence and loyalty is thus extended to school and regional ties. Once people within this extended circle meet, profound and immediate trust develops and expectations that they will take care of each other and be responsible for each other as well arise. As a father is responsible for the wellbeing of the family, the rest of the family members are obliged to remain in harmony by being obedient to

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<sup>18</sup> Seymour M. Lipset. (1959). Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy. *American Political Science Review*, 53, 69-105.

<sup>19</sup> Hahn, “The Ironies of Confucianism,” 100.

the authority and expectation of their roles as son and daughter or wife.

If the legislator does not take care of them he is more likely to be criticized as one who does not respect tradition or who lacks manners, thereby risking the loss of votes in the following election. In return the legislator receives (loyal) votes. In this system the voters who have benefited from the legislator on previous occasions, would vote for the legislator again regardless of his or her policy orientations or party affiliation. Pye describes such leadership as follows:

Korean rulers, like Korean fathers, are expected to be embattled, needing to prove themselves in adversary contacts; but they are also expected to be masterful at all times, for like the Chinese leader-father, the Korean is supposed to be an aloof, lonely authority figure, able to cope single-handedly with all of his wishes. Yet again like the Japanese leader-father, he is expected to be sympathetic, nurturing, and sensitive to the wishes of his followers' family, though at the same time vicious and aggressive in fighting external foes.<sup>20</sup>

The behavior of the legislators and voters within and outside of the legislature can be better explained and understood with reference to the actors' values and beliefs that are embedded in their daily lives. How do we explain high levels of party discipline (especially that of opposition parties) that have been main causes of deadlock in the legislature? If the party could consolidate its organization through a high level of party discipline, why can the party leaders not control and reduce the high numbers of defectors? These questions can be better answered by bringing culture back into the study of coalition politics. Confucianism values the harmony of society as a whole more than individual

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<sup>20</sup> Lucian Pye & Mary Pye. (1985). *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 67; Geir Helgesen (1998), *Democracy and Authority in Korea: The Cultural Dimension in Korean Politics*. Surrey: Curzon Press, 221.

preferences. Top-down hierarchy is conceived as virtue and explained as an instance of filial reverence and political loyalty. Legislators are thus constrained to abide by party rules and “stick” with party whips in a context where the organization (party) lacks internal democracy - otherwise the only option would entail leaving the party itself, especially when they are offered better benefits and higher positions. How do we explain the father figure-like roles of party leaders in the legislature or local party elite at local level who are solely in charge of fund raising and allocating funds to the followers in the legislature and the potential voters in the local districts?

## **The Politics of Coalition-building in South Korea**

As noted above, coalition scholarship has traditionally downplayed the importance of context, focusing instead on the motivation and behavior of individual actors acting out of self-interest, that is, framing the research within a rational choice approach. Without denying the variation that exists across various rational choice frameworks, rational choice theories are mostly based on the assumption that an individual strives to maximize utility on the basis of the information available and of a cost/benefit analysis. If an individual acts to maximize his/her interests after calculating all the possible gains and losses, this is considered to be rational. However, if an individual acts the way s/he does because of the influence of cultural norms, then action does not seem reconcilable to rational choice. Rational choice theory seems to have no place for culture due to the universalistic premise of the view of human agency and the parsimony of the “thin” approach. This thinness inevitably leads to losing out in terms of understanding how a particular society and by extension its political system works. The study of why coalitions form, endure, and break can shed significant insights on the driving motives of individual political behavior and, in fact, on the types of values and norms that inform behavior in a particular society.

Coalition governments in Western Europe achieve (or seek to achieve) stability through the formation of minimal or minimum winning coalitions.<sup>21</sup> Existing studies on government termination and duration also do not explain what is actually going on inside the party and government or why the coalition governments are unstable and fail, and rather privilege the study of the government's stability by its length of time in office or by its size. Despite the flourishing research on coalition theories, answers to any of these questions, posed within the context of traditional coalition theories, have shown poor empirical performance overall. Michael Laver ascribes this to the fact that theories are tested against a high number of cases while neglecting the specificities of each. Laver argues that, because "the differences between the national systems are 'so significant,' sensible tests of coalition theories must be conducted on a country-by-country basis."<sup>22</sup> De Winter, Andeweg, and Dumon also have noted that in light of the outdatedness of the large amount of empirical data used in cross-country studies, single or "small-N" comparative studies should occupy a more central place in coalition studies.<sup>23</sup> What coalition research seems to be lacking is in fact "thick" descriptions or in-depth qualitative studies.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Axelrod. (1972). Where the votes come from: an analysis of electoral coalitions, 1952-1968. *The American Political Science Review*, 66, 11-20; Michael Lieserson. (1968). Factions and Coalitions in One-Party Japan: An Interpretation Based on the Theory of Games. *The American Political Science Review*, 62, 770-787; William Riker. (1962). *The Theory of Political Coalitions*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Michael Laver & Norman Schofield. (1990). *Multi Government: The Politics of Coalition in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Laver, "Party Competition and Party System Change," 16, 17, cited in Hanna Bäck (2003), *Explaining Coalitions: Evidence and Lessons From Studying Coalition Formation in Swedish Local Government*, Doctoral dissertation, Department of Government. Uppsala University; Youngmi Kim, "Intra-party politics and minority coalition government in South Korea"; Youngmi Kim, "Explaining the Minority Coalition Government and Governability in South Korea: A Review Essay."

<sup>23</sup> De Winter, Andeweg & Dumon, "The State of Art in Coalition Research: Critical Appraisals and Alternative Avenues," 32.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. Youngmi Kim, *The Politics of Coalition in Korea*.

This paper takes up the challenge by suggesting a detailed “thick” descriptive analysis of the South Korean case through a study of the political coalitions which emerged and collapsed during the democratizing period (1987-2003). Instead of focusing on “who gets in” or “how many get it” (the coalition), research should now extend to investigate questions such as “why it (the coalition) fails?” “what are political actors bargaining for?” “how does the process of decision making work?” and “how do coalitions work?” in different countries.

Since the start of democratization in 1987, two political leaders won political elections through a strategy based on coalition-building in South Korea: Kim Young-sam (1993-97) and Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003).<sup>25</sup> More recently, the former president Roh Moo-hyun (formerly the presidential candidate of the New Millennium Democratic Party), also greatly benefited from entering a coalition with Chung Mong-joon, the leader of the People’s Power 21 (PP 21) Party in order to win the 2002 presidential election, even though Chung Mong-joon withdrew his support for Roh Moo-hyun eight hours before the presidential election on December 18, 2002 (*Donga Ilbo*, December 20, 2002). Owing to popular frustration over the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration’s economic and political performance, the Lee Myung-bak administration won office without building any coalition in 2007. At the time of writing (December 2012) coalition-building seems none the less on its way back to South Korean politics. After months of intra-progressive disputes between supporters of presidential elections candidates Ahn Cheol-Soo and Moon Jae-In, it seems that the former’s withdrawal should pave the way to a coalition between the otherwise fractured progressive factions

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<sup>25</sup> This is one of the consequences of the rapid economic development promoted by the authoritarian governments from 1960 to 1987 (under the respective rules of Presidents Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan) was an increase in demands for democracy from civil rights movements. This brought authoritarianism to an end. President Roh Tae-woo announced the “6.29 declaration” on June 29, 1987, basically accepting fair presidential elections. This signalled the start of the democratization era in Korea.

in the upcoming presidential elections. Of course, should the progressives win, the making of an electoral coalition tells us little about the extent to which this will be durable and whether governability will follow. Because of its constant role in South Korean politics, it is important to examine the factors prompting parties to enter a coalition, and whether coalition-building is a main factor of instability within the government and a factor negatively affecting governability, here understood as the government's ability to implement state reform policies.<sup>26</sup>

Since democratization, coalition-building has played a crucial role in determining electoral success in presidential elections. A serious drawback, however, is represented by the fact that electoral success is no guarantee of effective governability or political stability. As a matter of fact, governability has been constantly undermined by permanent factionalism internal to the coalition and to the coalition parties themselves. Apart from the continuous fission and fusion of political parties, the behavior of voters also contributed to the creation of minority governments and large oppositions. Where voters have various preferences of policies and/or parties it seems fairly common and ordinary to find that voters do not converge on support for a single majority party but spread their preferences across the political spectrum. This is all but ordinary in a democratic country. The problem with South Korea was that facing large opposition parties, winning office did not guarantee the administration's governability.

In the first time the opposition party won office through democratic elections, the Kim Dae-jung administration set out with an extensive agenda. Yet the ruling party found it difficult to implement its policies

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Coppedge. (2001, June). Party Systems, Governability and the Quality of Democracy in Latin America, Paper presented at Representation and Democratic Politics in Latin America; Youngmi Kim, "Explaining the Minority Coalition Government and Governability in South Korea."

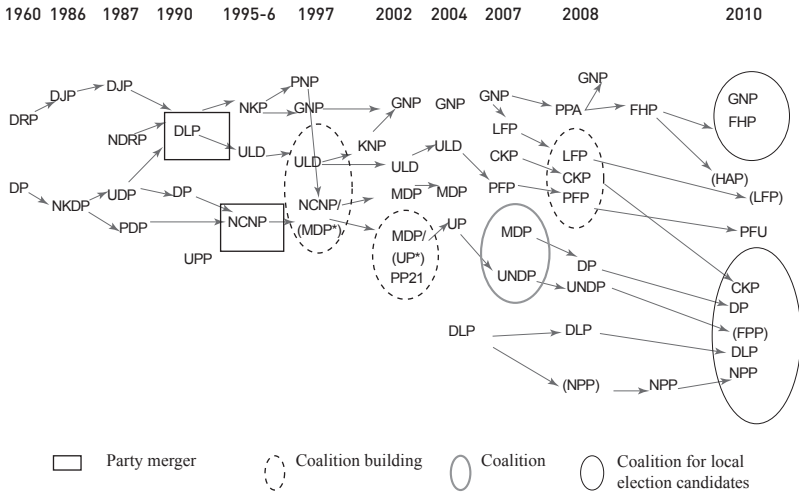


Figure 1. Coalition-building in South Korea since Democratization  
 Source: (Kim, 2011)<sup>27</sup>

from the early outset of the legislature. The administration could not follow up its first coalition agreement, which consisted of appointing its coalition partner as a prime minister, because it faced a large opposition in the legislature. Facing a political deadlock in the National Assembly, the ruling coalition parties immediately started to enlarge the size of the ruling parties by attracting defectors from the opposition parties. Enlarging the government's size at all costs did not seem to bring any solution to the political deadlock, however. Quite the contrary: the conflicts in the legislature grew deeper not only with the opposition parties but also with the coalition partner(s) as well as with factions within the ruling party.

The dynamics of politics in South Korea has shown two major features since democratization in 1987: (1) the political salience of a

<sup>27</sup> Youngmi Kim, *The Politics of Coalition in Korea*.

regional cleavage as shown in presidential and parliamentary elections; and (2) a high rate of fission and fusion among political actors across parties. The South Korean case, with seemingly non-rational factionalism, regionalism, and continuous splitting of political parties, well illustrates the problems that rational choice theorists encounter when coming to terms with cultural specificities (that is, different contexts). Different patterns of cultural behavior are assumed rather than explained, or even relegated to the condition of the “structural problems” of the South Korean political system. Furthermore, scholars of South Korea have seemed unwilling to explore the extent to which these “non-rational” phenomena could actually be explained in a way that recognized both their specificity (due to the Confucian legacy, for example) and the rationality of such behavior from the vantage point of the individual political actors in the specificity of the South Korean socio-political and cultural context. What is rational in one culture may not be rational in another. Can rational choice and culture be accommodated in an explanation of the formation, instability, and collapse of South Korean political coalitions?

In the case of South Korea, voting behavior has traditionally been explained with reference to the existence of a regional cleavage in South Korean politics and also of the importance of personal networks in South Korean society. Confucianism and its emphasis on authority and the community, rather than rational interests and the individual, has been used as a device to explain the political behavior of South Korean political actors. In fact, one of the main tenets of Confucianism is the concept of *gunsabu ilche* (君師父一體): king, teacher, and father are regarded as “one body” that people are taught to respect and obey.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This is one of the main tenets of Confucianism recorded in *Samgang-rok* (三綱錄), a government text published every year (in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) under the Joseon Dynasty, retrieved January 3, 2004, from <http://hometopia.com/cgi/bbs/bbs.cgi?db=provQnA&mode=read&num>

Rationality seems out of place, or at least inappropriate, when dealing with certain non-Western countries where strong family values are extended to the community, larger (the nation) or smaller (local or regional) community. For many economists, rationality is in general understood as maximizing utility of selfish human beings.

However, as Fukuyama notes, the rationality of human beings does not only rely on the calculation of maximizing the utility but also on culture that is “inherited ethical habit.”<sup>29</sup> In the case of South Korean voting behavior or political actors’ factionalism, their rationality thus comes from the “inherited ethical habit” embedded in culture and history. If an individual follows the social norm of his/her context of belonging, it is natural that the individual will secure his/her social interests or environment. Put simply, abiding by social norms is another way of securing personal interests. Voting for the leader from one’s own region used to be quite common for South Koreans and to some extent remains so. For example, if the election were to be held in Gyeongsang Province and the leader were to be from the same province, the party the leader belongs to will prove very popular there. South Koreans are traditionally viewed as a homogeneous and collective-oriented people, largely as a result of their Confucian culture and also of a long history as an agrarian society. Working for the community or the family is believed to bring wellbeing to everyone in the future.<sup>30</sup>

Classical coalition theories used to consider political parties as unitary actors, pursuing their own interests, which are to form and remain in government. Thus, a people or a community with a Confucian background can be considered as a unitary actor when they vote for their own region or community’s welfare. There is no reason to assume that it is irrational when they act collectively without hesitation or question. For

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<sup>29</sup> Fukuyama, *Trust*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Soong Hoom Kil & Chung-in Moon. (2001). *Understanding Korean Politics: An Introduction*. New York: State University of New York Press, 19.

their actions are derived from old beliefs and social norms. In short, rationality differs depending on cultural context. Can rationality indeed be separated from the culture within which it is embedded? Individual belief is socially structured and the calculation of costs and benefits is based on the person's preference, which in turn is influenced by the society and culture to which the person belongs. Human behavior is not always the outcome of calculation based on individual utility maximization in the market.

This way, Fukuyama argues that culture can have its own rationality in each different society. Culture is not irrational but “a-rational” – it is not derived from cost and benefit calculation. However, this a-rational behavior actually shows a high degree of rationality that is embedded in the society.<sup>31</sup> Non-Western culture such as the behavior of following “seniors” from the same high school or university regardless of rational choice may appear irrational. This is because rationality has so far been highly developed with a view of the market ignoring the fact that human beings are socially structured and beliefs and values in each society are not universal but contingent. Fukuyama maintains “[i]t is an act of considerable intellectual hubris to believe that only economic goals in the narrow sense can be considered rational.”<sup>32</sup>

This discussion of culturally-specific rationality is important for this analysis of political behavior in South Korea. It seems “non-rational” to explain the fact that people gather among alumni from the same universities or high schools and people start to trust each other *on the spot* when they recognize that they have common ties of some sort (school, region, etc.). Countries influenced by Confucianism show a low cost of social trust across the community, as their background (where

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<sup>31</sup> Fukuyama, *Trust*, 36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

they are from: schools, hometown, etc.) provides strong levels of social trust immediately. Fukuyama argues that South Korea has a lower degree of social trust compared to Japan and the United States. People in Taiwan, Hong Kong, France, Italy, and South Korea, he argues, are reluctant to trust people from different backgrounds or regions and have “a low trust, familistic society.”<sup>33</sup>

This means that people would not seem to trust each other when their social background is not revealed, or once this is known the gate toward trust is widely opened (or closed) just because they find they have family, regional or alumni ties in common and therefore assume that they can share much more compared to people with a non-relational background. The questions arising here, then, are (1) why can they immediately trust one another? and (2) is the choice to trust people with shared ties to be considered irrational? After all, according to Lee and Brinton, school background provides strong social capital in South Korea. Japan also shows an over-representation of top university graduates in Japan’s corporate and government elite.<sup>34</sup> For South Koreans *hakyeon* (學連, or school ties) provides a strong, informal network for gaining entrance into big firms or government and an important source of social capital. Lee and Brinton’s findings suggest that top ranking universities have a strong effect on the success of one’s work life and on social status.

Even though this situation is changing now, it is obvious that graduates from prestigious universities such as Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University are over-represented in most political and economic sectors of South Korea.<sup>35</sup> Among large

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>34</sup> Sunhwa Lee & Mary C. Brinton. (1996). Elite Education and Social Capital: The Case of South Korea. *Sociology of Education*, 69, 177-192; Youngmi Kim, “Intra-party politics and minority coalition government in South Korea.”

<sup>35</sup> These top ranking universities (Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei

firms, grouping by university and high school ties is informally important so that recruitment and promotion are also often informally related to the recommendation of seniors with the same school background. It is fairly natural for South Koreans to follow their personal networks and trust colleagues or seniors with common ties rather than calculating cost and benefit. They do not actually need to calculate the cost and benefit because where their personal network provides so much benefit (or low cost, that is) just because they belong to it, then their choice appears immediately rational in a country like South Korea.

## Conclusion

South Korean politics, driven by what on the surface appears as irrational behavior of its elites and the equally non-rational loyalty of ordinary voters to their local leaders regardless of his/her party of belonging and the decision to continuously switch party affiliation well illustrates the problems that rational choice theorists encounter when coming to terms with cultural specificities. Different patterns of cultural behavior are assumed rather than explained, or even relegated to the condition of the “structural problems” of the South Korean political system in an almost pathological manner: regionalism, crony ties, and blood ties. Furthermore, scholars of South Korea have seemed unwilling to explore the extent to which these “non-rational” phenomena could actually be explained in a way that recognized both their specificity and the rationality of such behavior from the vantage point of the individual political actors within the specificity of the South Korean socio-political and cultural context. Rationality is context-dependent.

In this paper I have argued that taking into account those cultural

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University) are often labelled “SKY members” from their initials. A common joke in Korea says, “Once you are member of SKY, you can fly wherever you want” in the Korean economic and political arenas. For further discussion see Youngmi Kim, *The Politics of Coalition in Korea*.

factors embedded in a particular society is a necessary step for scholars of party politics and political behavior. Far from adopting a culturalist and essentialist view of South Korean norms and behavior, I have shown how post-democratization South Korea provided an illustrative case of how rationality is context-dependent and especially of how the political behavior of South Korean political actors is shaped by local cultural norms (Confucianism).<sup>36</sup> South Korean political actors are neither irrational agents nor “cultural dopes.” In the era of democratic consolidation the elites were struggling to enlarge the size of the government to overcome deadlocks created by a large opposition in the legislature. Strong hierarchy within the party and lack of democracy within the party organization hindered the formation of mechanisms of negotiation and compromise thus causing political deadlock in the legislature.

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<sup>36</sup> In Kim, *The Politics of Coalition*, I have shown how institutional change has begun to affect the organization of Korean political parties, electoral campaign, recruitment, and funding, suggesting that even deeply embedded cultural norms are subject to change.

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