

Mind Over Martial Law: Emotion Regulation Amidst Martial Law and Its Turmoil

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Politics, as a chronic stressor, can significantly impact psychological well-being. Prior research suggests that emotion regulation strategies like reappraisal—used to reduce system-based negative emotion (i.e., emotions triggered by aspects of the social system)—can enhance well-being, but at the cost of reduced collective action. This raises the question of whether strategies that function differently, such as amplifying system-based negative emotion (i.e., rumination) or directly addressing the stressor (i.e., planning), show similar trade-offs. We examined this question during South Korea's recent martial law crisis ($N = 400$). Consistent with past findings, reappraisal was associated with better psychological well-being but lower political action through reduced system-based negative emotion. In contrast, rumination and planning were linked to lower psychological well-being but greater political action through sustained system-based negative emotion. Together, these findings underscore that different ways of regulating system-based negative emotions are associated with varying effects on both individual and societal well-being, highlighting the importance of adopting a multifaceted, context-sensitive approach to understanding emotion regulation in politically distressing situations.

Keywords: system-based emotion, politics, emotion regulation

Introduction

Politics, as a chronic stressor, significantly influences individuals' well-being. For example, Ford et al. (2023) found that people experienced negative emotions (NE) related to politics 81% of the time in daily life. Although it is natural for individuals to want to feel good (Larsen, 2000), recent research highlights a critical trade-off: emotion regulation (ER) strategies that reduce structurally triggered NE (i.e., *system-based NE*, Solak et al., 2012) can improve

well-being but may suppress collective action—a cornerstone of democratic societies (for review, Ford & Feinberg, 2020). Yet, most studies focus on strategies that dampen system-based NE, overlooking strategies that function differently, such as those that sustain system-based NE, which may enhance collective action (Borders & Wiley, 2020), albeit with potential psychological costs (Ford & Feinberg, 2020). Examining a broader range of ER strategies can offer a more comprehensive understanding of how people navigate the tension between individual well-being and societal implication.

To address this gap, this article aims to examine the trade-off between psychological well-being and collective action, focusing on how individuals regulate system-based NE, in the context of South Korea's recent political crisis—the martial law revelation (Table 1 for definitions and detailed context). Far from an isolated event, this crisis reflects a deeper rupture in South Korea's turbulent democratic history, marked by 16 instances of martial law¹.

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Table 1. Description and Detailed Timeline of Martial Law

Martial Law	Description	
	2024 Martial Law in South Korea is classified as <i>emergency martial law</i> , declared in cases of war, incidents, or national emergencies that disrupt state functions. Under martial law, the commander gains full authority, imposing restrictions on movement, speech, and the press, conducting arrests and searches, and controlling resources.	
Timeline	Date	Event
	Dec 3, 2024	Yoon declares martial law; armed forces enter the National Assembly.
	Dec 4, 2024	National Assembly unanimously votes to lift martial law (01:00). Yoon announces its end (04:27). Opposition submits first impeachment motion (14:43).
	Dec 7, 2024	Impeachment vote fails due to ruling party boycott.
	Dec 12, 2024	Opposition submits second impeachment motion.
	Dec 14, 2024	National Assembly passes impeachment, suspending Yoon's authority.
	Dec 15–30, 2024	Yoon refuses multiple summons; CIO requests arrest warrant.
	Jan 3, 2025	CIO fails to execute arrest due to presidential security resistance.
	Jan 15, 2025	CIO arrested Yoon.
	Mar 7, 2025	Yoon was released following the cancellation of his detention.
	Apr 4, 2025	Yoon was impeached for the illegal declaration of martial law, deploying military forces to the National Assembly, issuing a decree, raiding the National Election Commission and other institutions, and ordering the arrest of legal professionals.

Description of martial law and its influence was stated in Constitution of the Republic of Korea (1988). Data collected during the grey phase timeframe. CIO = Corruption Investigation Office.

For example, the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, a protest against one such imposition, led to 165 deaths, 76 disappearances, over 3,000 injuries, and nearly 1,500 arrests in ten days (UNESCO Korea, n.d.). While older Koreans remember it firsthand, younger generations inherited its trauma through education. Given its psychological significance and the surge of collective action it prompted, we believe this crisis provides a meaningful context to test how the trade-off between personal well-being and collective action—critical in a democracy—manifests in relation to how individuals regulate their system-based negative emotion.

Trade-off in Regulating System-based Negative Emotion

Although people are generally motivated to avoid negative feelings (Larsen, 2000), emotions also serve important instrumental functions (Tamir, 2009). System-based NE, in this sense, can be functional responses to perceived injustice affecting one's group and often motivate action, such as political engagement (see meta-analysis, Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021). Thus, while reducing these unpleasant emotions may support individual's well-being, it can also diminish their broader social value—highlighting the complexity

of regulating system-based NE (Ford & Feinberg, 2020).

Indeed, Ford and Feinberg's (2020) framework suggests three ER pathways in political distress, emphasising the tension between well-being and collective action. (1) Individuals may regulate their emotions to feel better (e.g., by rationalising the unjust status quo), which *reduces system-based NE*, thereby enhancing well-being but dampening collective action (Ford et al., 2019). (2) Others may sustain or *amplify system-based NE* (e.g., by persistently focusing on unpleasant political events), which can fuel collective action (Borders & Wiley, 2020), but may harm well-being due to prolonged distress. (3) Lastly, individuals may *focus on changing the situation*. This action-focused coping strategy is hypothesised to directly lead to greater collective action as well as improved well-being, as addressing the source of the problem may alleviate frustration, either through or independent of reducing system-based NE. Although not all pathways have been empirically examined, the framework underscores the theoretical importance of a complex trade-off that may vary in degree depending on how individuals regulate their system-based NE in political contexts.

We tested this framework by examining three ER strategies,

1) In our data, participants reported being highly aware of martial law ($M = 9.60$, $SD = 2.20$) and its severity ($M = 9.16$, $SD = 1.72$) on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 11 (*Very much*).

each reflecting a distinct pathway. For the *reducing NE pathway*, we focused on positive reappraisal (i.e., reframing a situation in a positive way), a strategy shown to reduce unpleasant emotions (Webb et al., 2012). Specifically, we hypothesised that reappraisal would be negatively associated with system-based NE, which in turn would relate to better psychological well-being (H1.1) but reduced collective action (H1.2). In contrast, the *amplifying NE pathway* involved rumination (i.e., repetitive focus on negative content), which has been found to intensify emotions (e.g., Ayduk & Kross, 2008). We expected that higher rumination would relate to higher system-based NE, which in turn would relate to lower well-being (H2.1) but increased collective action (H2.2). For the *changing the situation pathway*, we focused on planning (i.e., thinking through steps to deal with the event), a cognitive component of action-focused coping that does not always lead to action, but reflects active engagement with the stressor (Garnefski et al., 2001). Given limited and mixed findings on planning—some showing no association (Garnefski et al., 2001) and others showing negative associations with distress (Domaradzka & Fajkowska, 2018; Sacchi & Dan-Glauser, 2021)—we did not propose specific hypotheses. Instead, we explored the role of planning in relation to well-being and collective action, fully or partially mediated by system-based NE (Exploratory Aim 1 and 2).

Methods

Transparency and Openness

This study was not pre-registered. Data and code from this study are available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/expcj/?view_only=8fdd0ecd42c74e3ab2d84b5bde1c2fe9

Participants

Four hundred Korean adults aged 19–65 ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.05$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.48$, Female = 50%), in South Korea and recruited from the Macromill Embrain Panel, participated in an online survey in December 2024 during the ongoing turmoil of martial law (Table 1). Stratified sampling was used to ensure equal representation across age groups ($n = 80$ per group: 19–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–65), as older generations may have experienced martial law firsthand, while younger generations were passively exposed. Participants were also stratified

by gender, given the possibility that willingness to engage in political action may differ across genders (see review, Pandolfelli et al., 2008). Participants were compensated with credits redeemable for cash or gift cards. A post-hoc power analysis using *semPower* ($\alpha = .05$; Jobst et al., 2023) indicated that the probability of rejecting an incorrect model exceeded 99.99% for $N = 400$. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of [Blinded] University.

Measures

Martial Law Emotion Regulation Strategies

We assessed ER strategies related to martial law using the reappraisal, rumination, and planning subscales from the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Garnefski et al., 2001), adapted for martial law (e.g., reappraisal, “*I think I can learn something from the martial law and its related incidents*”; rumination, “*I dwell on the feelings and thoughts evoked by martial law and its related incidents*”; planning, “*I think about how to best cope with the situation regarding martial law and its related incidents*”). Each strategy had four items rated from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very much*), with the average score for each strategy used to create composite scores ($\alpha_{\text{reappraisal}} = .87$, $\alpha_{\text{rumination}} = .90$, $\alpha_{\text{planning}} = .92$).

System-based Negative Emotion

System-based NE was measured by averaging responses to eight emotions about martial law (anger, anxiety, outrage, shame, disgust, regret, sadness, and worry; $\alpha = .94$ in this sample) (e.g., “*As a Korean, I feel angry about the martial law and its related incidents*”) on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*).

Collective Action

Participants indicated whether they had engaged in the following activities *opposing* martial law: (1) signing/writing petitions, (2) creating/sharing protest materials, (3) joining protests, and (4) making financial/material contributions. Responses were coded as 0 for *never*, and, if applicable, rated from 1 (*Very infrequently*) to 7 (*Very frequently*). The four items were averaged to create a composite index ($\alpha = .65$).

Psychological Well-being

To capture psychological well-being, we examined three indices:

psychological distress, positive affect, and negative affect. Psychological distress over the past two weeks was measured using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21; Henry & Crawford, 2005), with items rated from 0 (*Never*) to 3 (*Almost always*) and summed to create a composite score ($\alpha = .65$). Affective states were assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule–Expanded Form (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). Participants rated six negative emotions (nervous, angry, guilty, sad, distressed, ashamed; $\alpha = .89$) and six positive emotions (happy, enthusiastic, proud, confident, determined, calm; $\alpha = .89$) on a scale from 1 (*Very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). Ratings were averaged to create global negative affect (NA) and positive affect (PA) scores.

Statistical Analysis

To examine how individuals' ER regarding martial law relates to their collective action and psychological distress through system-based NE, we tested a structural regression model using *lavaan* package in R. We conducted two analyses: one with collective action as the outcome and another with psychological well-being as the outcome. Following Kline's (2023) recommendation that a valid measurement model should be identified prior to testing the structural model, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with latent variables to assess whether the indicators adequately fit the data. Model fit was evaluated using the maximum

likelihood chi-square statistic. However, given its sensitivity to sample size, we also examined the comparative fit index (good fit if $> .96$, Hu & Bentler, 1999) and the root mean square error of approximation (good fit if $\leq .05$, Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

In addition, given previous findings that ER strategies have direct effects on collective action and psychological well-being (Ford et al., 2019), we compared both models with and without the direct paths from ER strategies to collective action and well-being. For the structural model testing, we estimated the standardised indirect effects and their 95% confidence interval (CI) using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, considering effects significant if the 95% CI did not include zero. Throughout the analyses, we controlled for demographic factors that may play a role (i.e., age, gender, political orientation, and socioeconomic status).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlational coefficients among variables are in Table 2.

We began by examining the fit indices of the initial measurement model. For the collective action outcome model, the initial fit was marginal, $\chi^2(242) = 904.53$, $p < .001$, CFI = .91, TLI = .89, RMSEA = .08, 90% CI [.08, .09]. After adding error covariances based on model modification indices—within the same latent variable that exceeded a threshold of .10—the revised model demonstrated

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analysis

	<i>M (SD)</i>	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Reappraisal	2.29 (1.01)	.49*	.33*	-.26*	-.01	.28*	-.03	-.02	-.05	.09	.16*	.13*
2. Rumination	2.60 (.99)	-	.55*	.22*	.18*	.08	.14*	.25*	-.01	.06	-.13*	.18*
3. Planning	3.09 (1.02)		-	.34*	.34*	.14*	.10*	.20*	.02	.07	-.15*	.14*
4. System-based NE	5.69 (1.33)			-	.27*	-.19*	.21*	.31*	.12*	-.09*	-.38*	.63
5. Collective Action	0.59 (1.21)				-	-.03	.17*	.32*	-.08	.14*	-.08	-.01
6. PA	2.75 (.89)					-	-.27*	-.32*	.00	.12*	.03	.31*
7. NA	2.21 (.86)						-	.58*	-.11*	-.03	-.12*	-.13*
8. DASS	27.83 (26.03)							-	.02	-.03	-.12*	-.09
9. Age	44.04 (13.49)								-	.01	-.02	.11*
10. Sex	50%									-	.72	.05
11. Political orientation	5.80 (1.94)										-	.06
12. SES	5.24 (1.59)											-

Political orientation was measured on a scale from 1 (*Very liberal*) to 11 (*Very conservative*); SES denotes individuals' socioeconomic status, assessed using MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status - Adult Version (Adler et al., 2000).

NE = Negative Emotion; PA = Global Positive Affect; NA = Global Negative Affect; DASS = Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21.

* $p < .05$.

acceptable fit, $\chi^2(222) = 455.33$, $p < .001$, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.05, .06]. A chi-squared difference test confirmed a significant improvement in model fit compared to the initial model, $\Delta\chi^2(20) = 449.2$, $p < .001$. For the psychological well-being outcome model, the initial model also showed suboptimal fit, $\chi^2(1,304) = 3,648.54$, $p < .001$, CFI = .86, TLI = .85, RMSEA = .07, 90% CI [.06, .07]. After incorporating error covariances based on the same criteria, the revised model showed acceptable fit, $\chi^2(1,243) = 2,477.04$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.047, .05], with the chi-squared test indicating a significant improvement, $\Delta\chi^2(61) = 1,171.50$, $p < .001$. Thus, we retained the models with error covariances for both outcomes. Additionally, models including direct effects fit significantly better than those without (for collective action as outcome model: $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 29.49$, $p < .001$; for psychological well-being as outcome model: $\Delta\chi^2(9) = 49.76$, $p <$

.001). Therefore, we selected the partial-mediation models as our final models.

Moving on to the structural model, as predicted, reappraisal was associated with a more favourable psychological well-being index via lower system-based NE (H1.1): it was linked to greater PA, partially mediated by reduced system-based NE ($B = .08$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.01, .15]). Additionally, reappraisal was negatively associated with NA and DASS, with the effect on NA fully mediated by lower system-based NE (NA: $B = -.08$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.15, -.02]), while the effect on DASS was partially mediated lower system-based NE ($B = -.07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.13, -.02]). In contrast, rumination was linked to a dampened well-being index via higher system-based NE (H2.1): it was associated with increased NA and DASS, but decreased PA, fully mediated by heightened system-based NE (NA: $B = .05$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.07, .09]; DASS: $B = .04$,

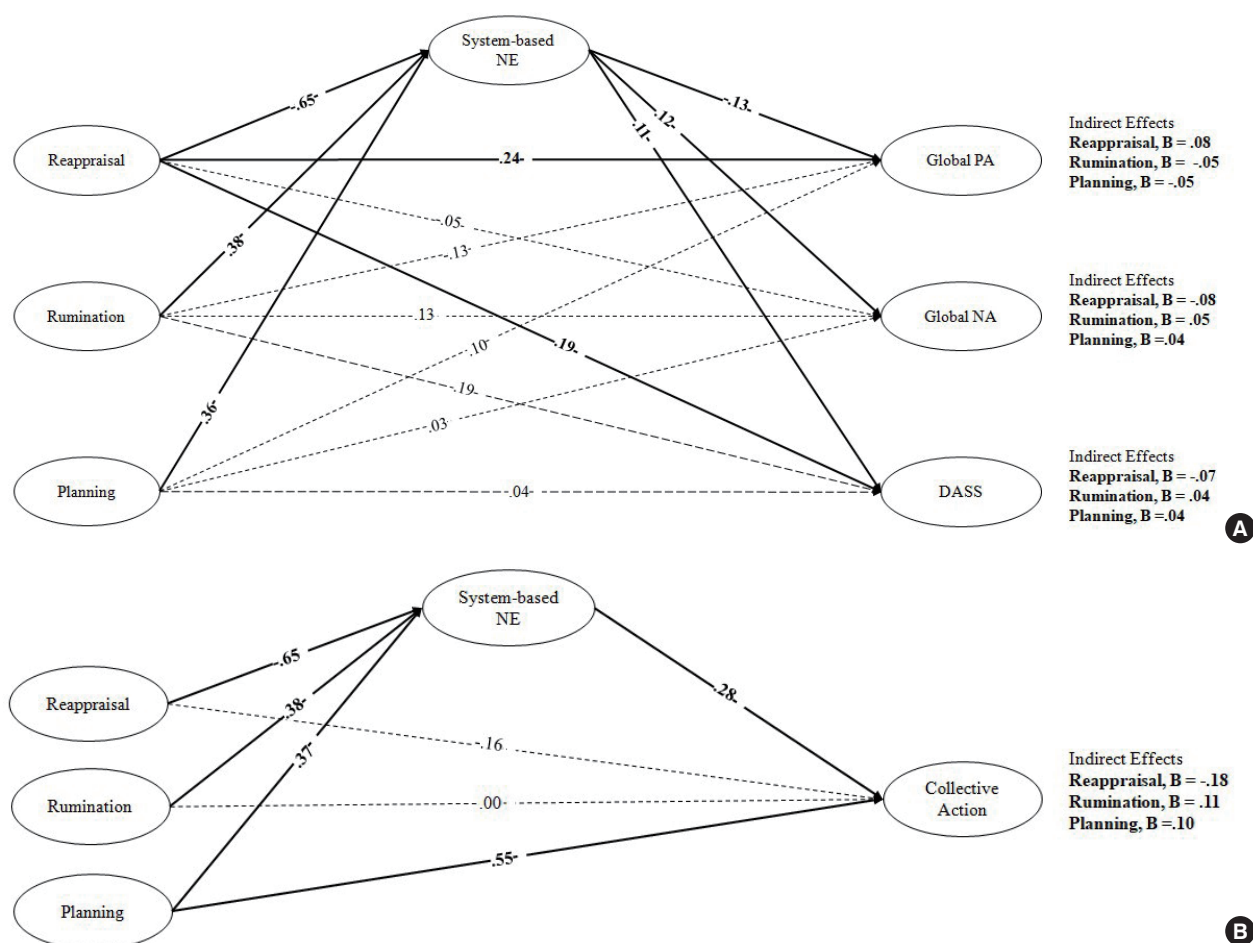


Figure 1. Focal SEM analysis examining the relationship between emotion regulation use and psychological well-being (A) and collective action (B). We presented standardised effects and bolded the significant paths. NE = Negative emotion.

$SE = .02$, 95% CI [.01, .08]; PA: $B = -.05$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.09, -.07]). Similarly, planning was associated with lower psychological well-being via increased system-based NE (Exploratory Aim1): fully mediated by heightened system-based NE, planning was associated with lower PA ($B = -.05$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.09, -.01]), higher NA ($B = .04$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.01, .08]), and increased DASS ($B = .04$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.01, .07]) (Figure 1A).

Turning to the collective action outcome model, reappraisal was associated with less collective action, fully mediated by system-based NE (H1.2), $B = -.18$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [-.30, -.08]. Contrarily, rumination was associated with greater collective action through heightened system-based NE (H2.2), $B = .11$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.04, .20]. For planning (Exploratory Aim 2), it was with greater collective action both directly, $B = .55$, $SE = .14$, 95% CI [.31, .79], $p < .001$, and indirectly through system-based NE, $B = .10$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.04, .17] (Figure 1B).

Discussion

Drawing on data from a nationally significant political crisis, we examined the trade-off between psychological well-being and collective action by differently regulate system-based NE. Our results indicated that differently regulating emotions about martial law were related to psychological well-being and collective action at varying degree: reappraisal, representing the (1) *reduced NE pathway*, was associated with better psychological well-being but reduced collective action through lower system-based NE. In contrast, rumination, representing the (2) *amplified NE pathway*, and planning, representing the (3) *changing the situation pathway*, were associated with worsened psychological well-being but increased collective action through heightened system-based NE.

These findings highlight the need to view the implications of using ER strategies from multiple, context-sensitive perspectives. While ER research has traditionally focused on its effectiveness (e.g., feel better), our results suggest that ‘emotional’ effectiveness does not always equate to adaptiveness. In politically charged situations, regulating emotions hedonically predicted less collective action—a key mechanism for challenging unjust status quos—while a seemingly ineffective strategy fostered political engagement despite reduced well-being. Adaptiveness, however, also var-

ies by context. For example, Halperin et al. (2013) showed that reappraisal predicted Israeli support for conciliatory policies toward Palestinians through reduced NE, demonstrating that reappraisal can help alleviate intergroup conflicts and be perceived as a socially adaptive strategy in such contexts. These findings underscore the need to evaluate ER strategies from multiple perspectives, considering not only one’s well-being but also its broader, context-sensitive implications.

Although Ford and Feinberg’s (2020) framework suggests that *directly addressing stressors* can enhance well-being, we found that planning regarding the martial law was linked to dampened psychological well-being through heightened system-based NE. While this may appear to diverge from their framework, it is important to note that their assumptions were based on *actual engagement* in political action as an ER strategy. In contrast, our study focused on the cognitive aspect of action-focused coping (i.e., planning) rather than behaviour itself. This distinction underscores the need for further research to assess whether taking action, as opposed to merely planning, is positively linked to well-being. Nonetheless, our findings indicate that the cognitive component of action-focused coping was negatively associated with well-being. One explanation may be that planning involves breaking down complex problems (Gick, 1986), which can intensify engagement with the stressor and temporarily increase distress. Another possibility stems from the timing of data collection. While Ford and Feinberg (2020) expected that attempts to address stressor would alleviate system-based NE, our data were collected before tangible political outcomes emerged (e.g., arresting President Yoon for illegal actions, Table 1). Thus, system-based NE may have remained unresolved, contributing to increased distress. Future research should examine whether this effect changes as outcomes become evident using a longitudinal design.

Limitation and Future Research Suggestion

This study is not without limitations. First and foremost, although our mediation analysis using a cross-sectional design supports a framework proposing causal relationships, such a design cannot establish temporal order or confirm causality. Beyond its correlational nature, the cross-sectional design also fails to account for the dynamic and evolving nature of collective action, which often

shift as social movements unfold. As a result, our findings may provide only a limited understanding of how individuals respond to specific sociopolitical contexts over time (see review, Ulug et al., 2022). For instance, some individuals may initially engage in political action but later withdraw, while others may remain consistently active. Such patterns underscore the importance of examining how one's behaviour interact with changing political contexts over time. Furthermore, although we tested a model predominantly studied in Western cultures within the context of South Korea—thereby contributing to cultural generalisability—our findings may not extend to other political or cultural settings. To address these complexities, future research would benefit from a longitudinal approach that examines both the long-term effects of ER in politically distressing situations across diverse sociopolitical contexts and the dynamic nature of political participation as they evolve.

Next, this framework could benefit from further expansion by examining a broader range of ER strategies. One open question is how it accounts for ER strategies that differently impact emotional experience and expression. For example, expressive suppression, which decreases expression, may dampen political action that requires publicly expressing system-based NE (Solak et al., 2021), aligning with the *reduced NE pathway*. However, as it does not necessarily reduce emotional experiences (e.g., Kalokerinos et al., 2015) its association with well-being may follow the *amplified NE pathway* through increased system-based NE. Future research should explore ER strategies that differentially impact emotional systems (e.g., physiological, behavioural, experiential) to refine this framework.

This paper suggests that different ER strategies in politically distressed situations show varying relationships with political action and psychological well-being through system-based NE. Regulating emotions hedonically is linked to better well-being but may reduce political action by decreasing system-based NE. Meanwhile, ER strategies that worsen emotional experience or directly address stressors are associated with greater political action but come with worsened well-being due to greater system-based NE. These findings highlight the need to consider the complex trade-offs inherent in ER strategies, weighing both individual well-being and broader social implications. Together, these results call for a more context-sensitive and culturally informed under-

standing of ER in politically charged situations—one that considers not only its relation to psychological well-being, but also its deeper sociopolitical meanings.

Author contributions statement

Sooyeon Kim: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, visualisation, writing-original draft, writing-review and editing; Seojeong Kim: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing-review and editing; Eunseo Song: Visualisation, writing-review and editing; Jaeyeon Jang: Methodology, formal analysis, visualisation; Sunkyung Yoon: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing-review and editing, supervision, funding acquisition.

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