

MEASURING THE LEVEL OF POLITICAL SYSTEM LITERACY THROUGH THE ELECTION PLEDGES OF SOUTH KOREAN ELECTORAL CANDIDATES

Yeon-soo Shim

Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Honam University,
Gwangju, South Korea, 62399

Email: shim4822@naver.com, shimys@honam.ac.kr

ABSTRACT

I analyze unfamiliar aspects of the political system in the South Korean local elections held on June 13, 2018. In particular, an analysis of the election promises made by the mayoral candidates of Gwangju Metropolitan City and superintendent candidates of the Gwangju Metropolitan Office of Education suggest that they lack political system literacy, a concept that is defined in general and as a means of cultivating democracy in South Korea. The election promises presented to voters are analyzed in terms of political system literacy in relation to current issues in city governance and to problems in public education. One conclusion from this analysis is that better efforts must be made to educate the future leaders of the South Korean political system from an early age to improve their political system literacy.

Keywords: system literacy, political system literacy, election promises, South Korean politics, Gwangju Metropolitan City

I. INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades the Republic of Korea has employed a democratic political system in a president-centered division of power among the branches and geographical divisions of government, with periodic elections at most levels. Under the current constitution, the revision of which has become a constant topic of debate in Korea, the election for a five-year unrepeatable presidential term usually does not coincide with the four-year election cycles for local officials (province governors, metropolitan mayors, etc.) and members of the unicameral national legislature, with the local and legislative elections alternating in years ending with even numbers.

Since the establishment of the first Democratic Republican government in 1948, the Republic of Korea has carried out numerous elections, the oversight of which has now been delegated by the Korean constitution to the National Election Commission. Despite many problems, most Koreans seem to feel that, at least since the transition from military-controlled governments two decades ago, the election process has been managed with reasonable transparency and fairness. However, one area that could stand improvement would be the legally required promulgation of party promises for candidates at all levels of the election process. Experience has shown that these

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platforms, which must be submitted to the National Election Commission during the election period, are exposed to many problems endemic to contemporary South Korean political culture, and, I will argue in this paper, need to be managed with a more systematic mindset.

To explain what I mean, I would like to conduct a systems literacy (Dubberly 2014a and 2014b) analysis of the policy promises made by each party and its candidates in preparation for the 7th national regional elections that were held on June 13, 2018. Specifically, I will analyze the systems literacy of the policy promises of political parties and mayoral and other local candidates in Gwangju Metropolitan City, a major urban center in the Honam area of western central Korea. The election promises will at one point receive contextualization in terms of the national party platforms in the most recent presidential election in May 2017, to fill the office vacated after the impeachment and removal of President Park Geun-hye.

II. POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND POLICY PROMISES

The importance of systems literacy as applied to political systems has been a subject of rich scholarship for two thirds of a century now, although many of the core terms and concepts involved actually antedate modern systems theory by many centuries. As Hugh Dubberly has reminded us, government is, after all, one of the large-scale systems with the most direct impact on humans – indeed, that “‘government’ simply means ‘steering’ and that its root, the Greek work *kybernetes*, is also the root of cybernetics, the study of feedback systems and regulation” (Dubberly 2014b). But the contemporary discussion of political systems began in earnest sixty-five years ago with the publication of David Easton’s classic introduction of systems theory to political science, in which he divided input into political systems between new demands and support of the existing structure (Easton 1953). Subsequently Almond and Powell brought a more dynamic perspective to political systems by emphasizing the interrelationship of roles, structures, individual psychologies, and subsystems (Almond and Powell 1969b).

More specifically, Almond and Powell argued that input into a modern political system can include, among other factors: 1) demands for the distribution of goods and services, whether of wages, hours of work, educational opportunities, amusement facilities, transportation, or other objects of desire; 2) calls for participation within the system often articulated in terms of “rights” – for example, the right to vote, to enjoy public services, to petition government officials, and to organize political organizations; and 3) the need for communication and information, including actions to ensure norms, communicate the policy intentions of the political elite, and demand power, dignity, empathy, and focused attention in the face of disasters and other traumatic events. These demands affect the political system’s policies and goals. On the other hand, input in terms of support, including the goods and services themselves and obedience and respect of the governed, also shape the system’s goals. On these bases it can be argued that communication of input and output is a key function of the political system (Almond and Powell 1969a).

It is therefore clear that the political system can be characterized in terms of three critical functions in political analysis: capabilities, transformation processes, and system

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maintenance and adaptation (cf. Sikander 2015). Systemic capacity can be described as the ability to maintain the order of the political system, divided into regulatory, extractive, distributive, and reactive capacities, which are input by the demands of the members of the political system. The transformation process is a form in which the political system transforms input into output, while the system maintenance and adaptation functions are performed by socialization and recruiting within the political system. In the political system, the function that expresses interests, claims and demands for political action is related to the function of political socialization, and therefore to the type of political culture created by it.

There is a policy commitment function in the election process as a device to express these needs. The policy commitment in the election affects the economic, social and cultural structure of the political system through the regulation of taxes, services and benefits or behavior. In the end, politics is, as David Easton explained (1953, 130ff), the “authoritative distribution of values,” and the policy pledges offered by parties and candidates should offer guidelines as to how and why the authority will be exercised.

III. THE MEANING OF LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE SOUTH KOREAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

In a modern democratic/republican political system, elections allow voters to elect leaders who can in this way be held accountable for their performance. Election legitimizes the actions of those who exercise power, strengthens the stability and legitimacy of the political community, and promotes socio-political integration by linking citizens with one another, by establishing the dignity and worth of voters as human beings, and by confirming the very feasibility of politics. Control of the state through elections makes democracy work as well as it does; they provide the saving grace of what Winston Churchill characterized as “the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (Langworth 2009). But for the citizens’ input into the system to function as efficiently as possible (with all the necessary caveats about how efficient that could be), political education on elections is needed. One form of education favored by the Korean political system is the mandate for policy statements from candidates and parties so that voters can evaluate the probable consequences of their choice.

The role of policy statements is also related to one of the unique structural elements of the political system in the Republic of Korea. According to the Local Autonomy Law of Korea, local councilors and heads of municipalities are now voted into office through elections rather than, as used to be the case, selected by higher-ups in the government. The position of local officials, however, is still circumscribed by the higher-ups. Under the present constitutional structure of Korea, local government budgets are submitted to the central government, specifically the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, after deliberation by the local council. At that point the National Assembly deliberates on the local budgets in tandem with the budget of the central government.

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The theory is that, while the financial resources and overall priorities must remain national in scope, local governments should autonomously determine welfare policies and local amenities directly related to the lives of local residents in their budget submissions. It is natural, given this structure, that the power of the central administration, represented by the ministry the leaders of which are selected by the president, and of the National Assembly will affect local elections, while in turn perceptions as to whether local needs are being met have an unavoidable structural impact on the central government and the power of the National Assembly. The inevitable conflicts built into the current political system in South Korea have led to demands for amendments to the Constitution to address the unbalanced relationships.

IV. GWANGJU METROPOLITAN CITY MAYOR CANDIDATES, SUPERINTENDENT CANDIDATES, AND POLITICAL PARTIES' POLITICAL COMMITMENT

However the anomalies of the Korean political system are readjusted in the future, it is very important to specify the extent to which the policy pledges offered by candidates running for local elections deal with the unique budgetary process. For the local elections to be reviewed here, it is important, in order to maintain the physical infrastructure, meet social needs, and support the public education system of Gwangju Metropolitan City, to ascertain the relation, if any, between the total budget and the promised pledges, and to establish how well candidates differentiate between the one-year budgetary process and the four-year terms of office.

Here, we analyze policy commitments that each party and its candidates were obliged to present during the local elections process culminating on June 13, 2018 (Policy Local List 2018). I will sequentially present the results of analyzing the ten major pledges of the political parties, the ten major policy commitments of the Gwangju Metropolitan City mayors, and the five major policy commitments of the Gwangju Metropolitan City Superintendents of Education.

First, the policy promises of political parties are analyzed and examined in terms of literacy of political system. In this local election, the ten policy commitments of each political party are presented and presented to the National Election Commission to help voters judge between the candidates for local and provincial office as representatives of their respective parties. The voters review proposed commitments for regional development that are feasible and desirable in order to select candidates to work for their region. However, Korean political parties are seldom focused on the policy promises offered in local elections except to the degree that they may affect the balance of power in the legislature (for example, the 2018 local election cycle also includes by-elections for the legislature); even the legislative elections are viewed primarily as referenda on the president, who under the current system is only rarely (once every twenty years) up for election – and never for re-election – at the same time as local officials or national legislators.

Thus, in the 2018 local elections, the Democratic Peace Party was the only political organization to make concrete commitments to the Honam region of which Gwangju is a part. While the Democratic Party, Right Futurist Party, and Justice Party did not offer itemized promises for the region, they did, however, commit to working on

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decentralization, although this pledge has been regularly offered and as regularly ignored after the elections. In addition, the Democratic Party and the Free Korean Political Party presented as part of their local platforms diplomatic and security pledges that would have been more relevant at the central government level.

Missing throughout has been a more systematic commitment to the allocation of human and material resources that are central to local administration and management. There is a lack of consciousness about the political system which distinguishes between whole and part in the political system, and there is also a lack of will to interconnect the parts of the system. And if you look at the promises made by political parties, it is not easy to find within them an underlying conception of the “authoritative distribution of values.” The platforms are instead poorly executed billboards designed (ineffectively) to attract passersby.

In a democratic/republican political system, output according to the needs of the members and the continuity of the support should be represented by the identity and ideology of a specific political party. However, there is no ideological policy-oriented party in Korea that continuously filters out the needs of voters during the election and creates sustained support. This is partly because the political party system is still very much in flux in South Korea. In this local election, for example, the names of all three major political parties in Gwangju Metropolitan City differed from those offered to voters only four years earlier.

Even more than the political organizations in most other countries, South Korean parties have not focused on ideology or on policies, but on facilitating political power. In this context, political campaigns of the parties in local elections have naturally been limited in ideas, resources, and knowledge, with inevitable repercussions on the possible educational contribution of the mandatory party platforms. There is no evidence that political culture has changed about policy commitments; voters in this local election had no more reason than in the past to look closely at the commitments delivered to their addresses.

Next, I will analyze the five major policy commitments proposed by the ten major policy promises and presidential candidates proposed by the municipal mayors, and examine them in terms of the literacy of the political system.

The budget used by local governments in Korea in 2018 is 310.61 trillion won (roughly equivalent to \$280 billion US dollars or 240 billion euros), while the governors of provinces also elected on June 13, 2018 will have combined budgets of 1240 trillion won during their four-year terms. Gwangju Metropolitan City's 2018 budget is 4,513.9 billion won (US\$4 billion), of which the subsidy of 1.39 trillion won (US\$1.25 billion) from the central government accounts for 30.8% of the total.

All but one of the major party candidates for mayor of Gwangju Metropolitan City used the platforms to show in a general way how they would procure funding to realize their policy commitments. This was in refreshing contrast to the vagueness of the presidential candidates in last year's election as to how their promises could be met. However, details were lacking as to the precise relationship of the pledges to the budget. Also lacking was any analysis of trade-offs between new and existing commitments in what will be four years of annual budgets during their term of office. In this sense, consciousness of city administration as a system is weak.

The same imprecision about how to pay for proposed changes and the same lack of systems thinking marked the campaign promises of the candidates for Superintendent of

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Education of Gwangju. This was to be expected, because the budget process works in the same way for education departments, which are divided into 17 offices comprising the nation's provinces and metropolitan cities. The current combined budget for the 17 departments of education is 68 trillion won (US\$61 billion). The superintendents selected in local elections make policy decisions related to their districts and decide on teacher licensing and other policy issues for public preschool, primary, and secondary education. The 2018 budget of the Gwangju Metropolitan Office of Education is 2.25 trillion won (US\$2 billion). It received 1.62 trillion won from the central government of Korea, and 326.4 billion won from the metropolitan government. The Gwangju Metropolitan Office of Education also operates a citizen participation budget system as of 2018.

All three candidates running for the position of Superintendent of Education for Metropolitan Gwangju displayed a lack of systematic thinking about the sources of funding to implement their electoral pledges. They referred vaguely to local governments, state subsidies and self-revenues as providing the financial resources to somehow automatically fulfill their commitments. The candidates themselves did not provide a specific amount of resources for the policy commitments promised to voters. For its part, Gwangju Metropolitan City did not present a concrete and systematic budget proposal for solving the local education problems, while most voters seem to have treated the education agendas and issues they raised as posters to be cursorily glanced at on the way to the polls.

V. PROBLEMS OF POLITICAL SYSTEMS LITERACY FOUND IN THE LOCAL ELECTION PROCESS IN SOUTH KOREA

I would like to summarize the problems of the political system literacy in this local election in terms of complementary aspects of the political culture and constitutional system in South Korea.

First of all, the South Korean political system is so unbalanced that it is impossible to analyze the process of the South Korean political system scientifically or to predict political change. In this local government is no different from national government. In South Korean political culture, voters do not have confidence in politicians' pledges, and because candidates and their backers know this, they are only interested in developing issues and agendas for winning in elections. For this reason, policy commitments in the South Korean elections are fundamentally lacking in binding power.

But the problem for local elections is worse, because in the South Korean political system, it is difficult to distinguish between central and local political system boundaries. In particular, the policy commitments of political parties and candidates submitted to the South Korean Central Election Management Committee at every election are not differentiated in terms of local elections, parliamentary elections, and presidential elections. In short, within the current South Korean political system there is no boundary between election systems. In system theory, unclear boundaries with other systems ultimately lead to system identity crisis. Therefore, South Korean political leaders and voters need to have a systematic mind that distinguishes the boundaries of the environment. In future years this must become an important element in democratic citizen education. The underlying reason why the boundaries are smudged, though, is

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simply that any pledges presented in the various elections in South Korea are tools for political victory rather than tools for effective administration of the political system.

Moreover, local elections are still caught in the old politics of top-down control by the central government authorized by traditional Confucian authoritarianism. The system cannot function well as a whole because the local subsystems are not allowed to function well. Local autonomy is based on self-regulating spirit. In this respect, it is possible to ask whether the spirit of local self-government can coexist with the current constitutional structure.

To achieve a higher level of political systems thinking in South Korea, then, the local elections of June 2018 as manifested in the campaigns in Gwangju Metropolitan City indicate that three levels of education will be necessary. First, voters need to be educated more systematically, both in general, through a public education system that will allow them to think critically about promises made in the political arena, and specifically, about the policy promises offered in the mandatory platforms promulgated before each election. But the second form of education means that the politicians need to learn how to critique their own and their opponents' policy proposals with higher standards of systems thinking. Even this form of education, however, will be of limited value unless national leaders in the political, educational, legal, and business sectors come together to implement the necessary constitutional changes that can allow subsystems within the Republic of Korea's political system to function effectively.

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