Partisan Polarization in the Mass Public in South Korea and the United States

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Abstract

In this chapter, I compare trends in partisan polarization in the United States and South Korea. I show that the mass public's partisan polarization in the United States has increased across every issue domain. It has also increased in terms of the public's symbolic ideology. There are now substantial gaps between the views of Democrats and Republicans in the United States. In South Korea, there are much smaller differences in the mass public's issue opinion and ideology across parties. Moreover, unlike in the United States, there is also little evidence that polarization in the public's policy preferences is increasing in South Korea. The lack of partisan polarization in South Korea's mass public has important implications for elections, political accountability, and democratic stability.

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The magnitude of political polarization in a country has important implications for the democratic process (McCarty 2019). Previous work has shown that polarization can inhibit compromises and slow policymaking. It can raise the stakes of elections and increase animus between people in different partisan camps (Iyengar et al. 2019). It can decrease electoral accountability for scandals and poor performance (Hamel and Miller 2019; Hopkins 2018). Polarization can even diminish support for democracy and undermine democratic stability (Svolik 2019; Graham and Svolik 2020).

The United States has seen a dramatic increase in polarization over the past several decades. Polarization has increased dramatically among elected officials in Congress (Mc-Carty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016) and among state legislators (Shor and McCarty 2011). Partisan polarization has also increased among the mass public (Caughey, Dunham, and Warshaw 2018). There has been less work on polarization in South Korea. But recent work has shown that there appear to have been much smaller increases in partisan polarization among the mass public in South Korea than in the United States (Lim 2019).

In this chapter, I compare trends in partisan polarization in the United States and South Korea. I use a survey that fields identical questions in both countries. This enables me to compare public opinion in both countries on the same scale. Consistent with prior work, I find that the mass public's ideological polarization in the United States has increased across every issue domain. It has also increased in terms of the public's symbolic ideology. There are now substantial gaps between the views of Democrats and Republicans in the United States.

In South Korea, there are much smaller differences in the mass public's issue opinion and ideology across parties. The largest differences are on issues related to women's rights. But even on this domain, the differences across parties in South Korea pale in comparison to partisan differences in the United States. Unlike in the United States, there is also little evidence that polarization in the public's policy preferences is increasing in South Korea. The only area where I find some evidence of increasing partisan polarization in South Korea

is in terms of the public's symbolic ideology on a left-right scale.

The low level of partisan polarization in South Korea's mass public has important implications for elections, governmental performance, and the stability of the political system. It makes the party structure fluid and largely personality driven. But it also likely strengthens both electoral accountability and democratic stability.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the background literature on mass polarization in the United States and South Korea. Next, I discuss my data and methods. I then discuss my results, including changes in polarization on individual issues, policy ideology, and symbolic ideology. Finally, I briefly conclude and discuss the implications of my findings.

1 Background

There is a large literature that has examined trends in polarization in the United States. It has been widely documented that partisan polarization in Congress has grown significantly in recent decades. This research has shown that congressional voting is increasingly polarized by party. Indeed, the gap between the roll call behavior of the two parties has grown substantially over the past fifty years (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Bartels, Clinton, and Geer 2016). This is even true of legislators who represent the same constituency. Poole and Rosenthal (1984), for instance, show that Democratic and Republican senators from the same state vote very differently. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2009, p. 671) demonstrate that over three-quarters of contemporary congressional polarization is explained by "intradistrict divergence," and less than a quarter to "sorting" of Democratic and Republican members into ideologically congenial districts. Congressional politics, in short, has become much more nationalized, with members' roll call records overwhelmingly determined by their party affiliation (see Caughey, Dunham, and Warshaw 2018).

There is also a growing body of work on changes in partisan polarization in the mass public in the United States. This work has shown that while the public is less polarized than elites (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015), Democrats and Republicans have become much more polarized overtime (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Pew Research Center 2017; Caughey, Dunham, and Warshaw 2018). This is largely because liberals have tended to sort into the Democratic party, while conservatives have sorted into the Republican party (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; Levendusky 2009). As a result, the two parties are much more internally homogenous on most policy issues than in earlier eras. There are now few conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans.

There has been less work on polarization between the parties in South Korea. This could be because the parties have been a "carousel of party creations, mergers and dissolutions." Moreover, the parties have generally lacked "distinguishing ideological or programmatic markers and remain cadre parties, [instead] focusing on their charismatic leader and their home regions" (Hermanns 2009). However, there is evidence that partisan polarization among elites has increased in recent years (Lim 2019), as the parties have increasingly offered "distinguishable policy platforms" (Wang and Kitschelt 2012). Previous work finds less evidence though of increases in polarization among the mass public (Lee 2018; Lim 2019).

2 Data and Methods

In order to examine trends in polarization in the mass public, I use data from the World Values Survey. (WVS) (Inglehart et al. 2014). This is a large-scale probability survey conducted every 3-5 years in about 77 countries around the world. The fact that respondents in both South Korea and the United States receive the same questions enables us to directly compare public opinion in both countries. Moreover, we can compare the levels of partisan polarization in the two countries.

In order to measure partisan polarization, I focus on differences between the average

opinions of supporters of the major partisan groups in each country.[1] In the United States, I focus on Democrats and Republicans. The 'Democratic Party' is the major liberal party in the United States, while the 'Republican Party' is the major conservative party.

In South Korea, it is more challenging to define the major parties since the partisan coalitions have changed substantially over the past few decades (see Hermanns 2009; Wang and Kitschelt 2012; Lee 2014). The main conservative party in South Korea has been primarily known as the 'Grand National Party' or, more recently, the 'People Power Party'.[2] The main liberal party is the 'Democratic Party'.[3] 'Our Open Party' was another left-of-center party in the early 2000s that later merged with the 'Democratic Party'. For simplicity, I code these as a single party throughout the time period. The 'Justice Party' is another left-wing party that emerged in recent years, and the 'People's Party' is a centrist party that emerged recently.

I evaluate the public's average opinions in a number of different ways. The results using each approach are oriented on a left-right scale so that positive values are more conservative. Moreover, the usage of a common survey and common questions renders the results comparable across countries. Finally, I weight all the results to ensure they are representative of the national population in each country.

First, I measure the average opinion in each party on a number of individual policy issues. I focus separately on public opinion on issues on the economic domain, the cultural domain, and on women's rights. While the public's views on these domains are highly

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1. Unlike most surveys in the United States, the WVS does not ask respondents to identity whether they usually think of themselves as a member of a particular party. Instead, it asks them to identify the party they supported in the most recent national election.

2. The Grand National Party's name has changed over the past two decades as several offshoot parties have split-off and/or merged with it. For instance, it was known for several years as the Saenuri Party and more recently as the Liberty Korea Party. In recent years, the Bareun Party broke off from the Grand National Party. For simplicity, however, I code the Bareun Party as part of the Grand National Party. Finally, it is important to note that the 2017 WVS was conducted when the approval ratings of the country's president from the Grand National Party dipped to historic lows due to several scandals. Perhaps as a result, the proportion of respondents that indicated support for the Grand National Party dropped substantially compared to the 2010 WVS.

3. The Democratic Party's name, and composition, has changed over this period as several offshoot parties have split-off and/or merged with it. For instance, the modern Democratic Party was formed as a merger between the previous iteration of the Democratic Party and the New Political Vision Party (NPVP).

correlated in recent years in the United States (Jessee 2009; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013; Caughey, Dunham, and Warshaw 2018), past work has shown the public's views across domains are often negatively correlated in other countries (Malka, Lelkes, and Soto 2019; Caughey, O'Grady, and Warshaw 2019). In other words, people with liberal cultural attitudes tend to have more conservative economic attitudes (and vice versa).

There are at least half a dozen questions in the World Values Survey on each domain. The economic domain includes questions related to economic redistribution and the size of government. The cultural domain includes questions related to abortion, divorce, views about gays, and suicide. The women's rights domain includes questions related to women's role in society, women's civil rights, and sexism.

Second, I summarize the public's ideological preferences on each issue domain using Bayesian latent variable models (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Treier and Jackman 2008; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013).[4] This approach enables me to aggregate opinion across the individual issue questions and produce summary measures of the public's policy ideology on each issue domain.

Finally, I examine the public's left-right symbolic ideology on a ten-point scale. These scales provide an important indication of the public's self-evaluation of their ideological views. But these proxies are not ideal measures of citizens' policy preferences per se. Left–right self-placement can depend greatly on political context, which makes it difficult to compare self-placements across countries and time. It can also be driven as much by partisan and symbolic attachments as by "operational" policy preferences (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Thorisdottir et al. 2007; see also Ellis and Stimson 2012). In addition, it presumes that ideological variation takes place along a single left–right dimension. This assumption is unlikely to be true in all countries given the increasing salience of political conflict over non-economic issues (Inglehart 1990; Kitschelt 1994; Knutsen 1995; Kriesi et al. 2006). Indeed, recent studies have found that there is often little relationship between the public's symbolic

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4. I used the `MCMCordfactanal` function in the R package `MCMCpack` (Martin, Quinn, and Park 2011) to estimate the ideal points. The results are post-processed to be on a standard, normal scale.

ideology and their ideological views on policy issues (Caughey, O'Grady, and Warshaw 2019).

3   Results

This section discussed my main findings. First, I discuss the public's polarization on economic issues in each country. Next, I discuss polarization on cultural issues. Third, I discuss polarization on women's rights issues. Finally, I discuss trends in partisan polarization on symbolic left-right ideology. All of the plots are oriented on a left-right scale so that positive values represent more conservative views.

3.1   Polarization on Economic Issues

I start by examining trends in the mass public's views on economic issues, including questions related to redistribution and the size of government. Figure 1 shows the public's views on several individual economic issues. The top plot shows public opinion about whether 'People receiving state aid for unemployment' is a key component of democracy. The middle plot shows opinion about whether 'taxing the rich and subsidizing the poor' is a key component of democracy. The bottom plot shows public opinion about whether income should be made more equal.

On the first two issues, the public in South Korea is clearly to the left of the public in the United States. On the third issues (income inequality), the average opinion in both country are similar. Crucially, however, on all three issues there is much more partisan polarization in the United States than in South Korea. The Democratic and Republicans parties in the United States are roughly three times further apart on these economic issues than the major parties in South Korea

Figure 2 summarizes the public's ideological preferences across all of the economic questions in the World Values Survey. The results are very similar to those on the individual issues. Figure 2 indicates that the public is South Korea is more liberal (left-wing) than

Figure 1: Economic Issues. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on three economic issues. The size of the dots is proportional to each group's size.
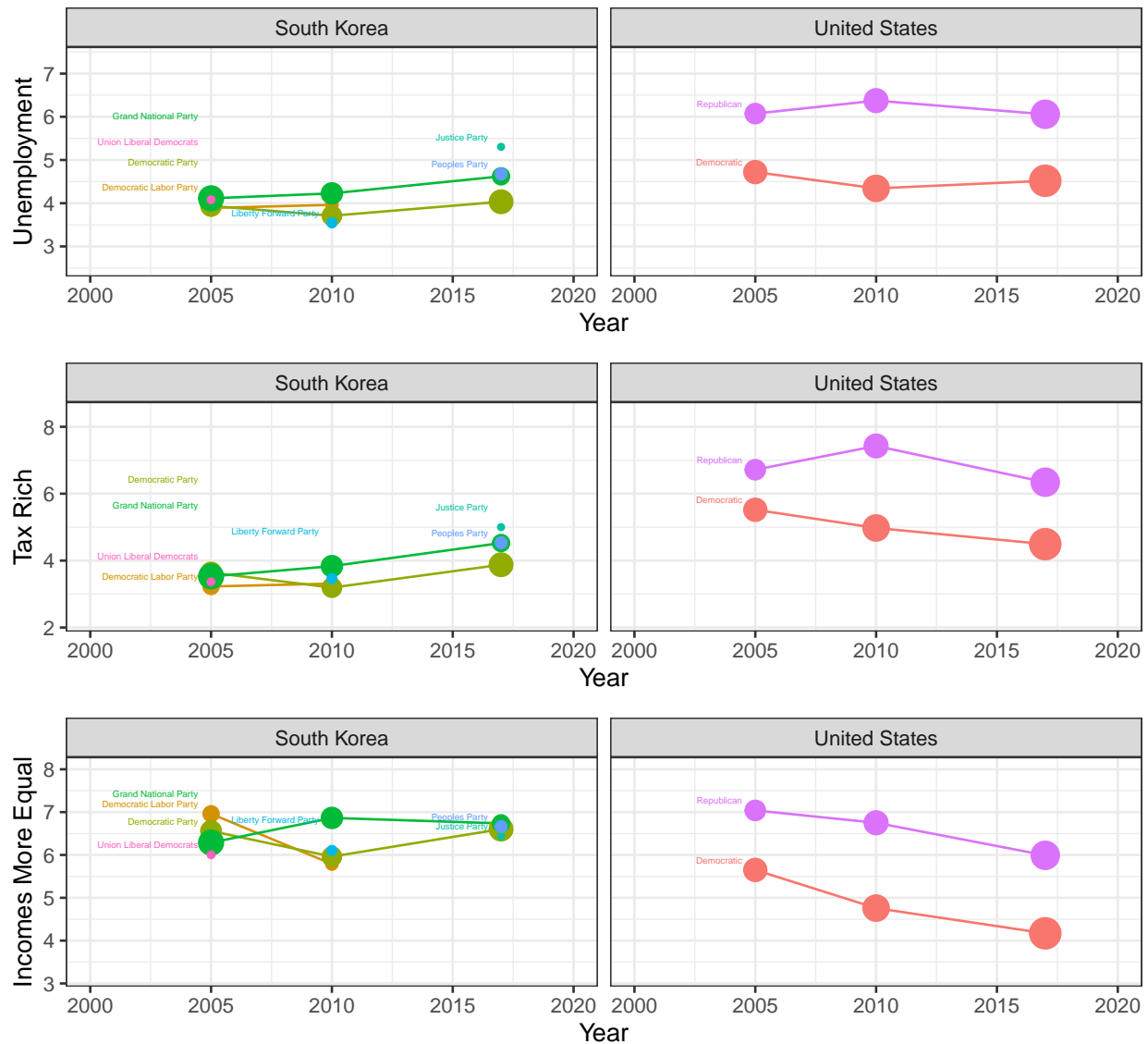
the public in the United States on the economic domain. However, partisan polarization is much more muted in South Korea. The average economic ideology of supporters of the two largest parties in South Korea is only about a quarter of a standard deviation apart, while the views of Democrats and Republicans in the United States are about a standard deviation apart. There was also only a modest increase in polarization in the South Korean public's polarization between 2005 and 2018 (and most of this occurred between 2005 and 2010).

Figure 2: Economic Ideology. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on economic ideology. The size of the dots is proportional to each group's size.
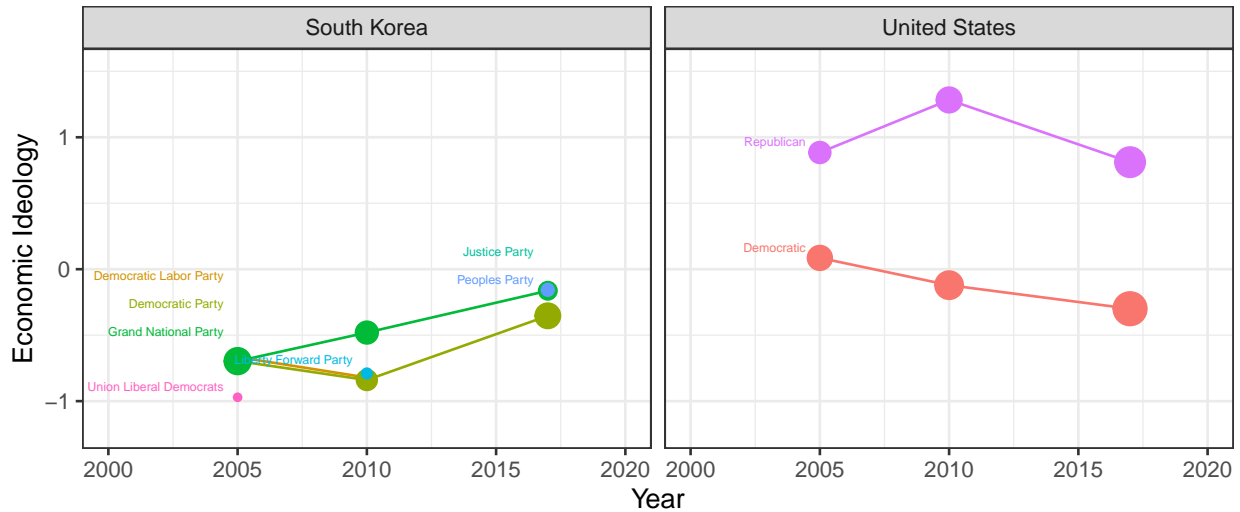

3.2 Polarization on Cultural Issues

Next, I examine trends in the mass public's views on cultural issues. Figure 3 shows the public's views on several individual cultural issues. The top plot shows public opinion about whether abortion is justifiable. The middle plot shows public opinion about whether homosexuality is justifiable. The bottom plot shows public opinion about whether 'civil rights protect people's liberty' are an important part of democracy.

On all three issues, the public in South Korea is clearly to the right of the public in the United States. In fact, all of the major parties in South Korea are generally to the right of both the Democratic and Republican parties. There is also relatively small amounts of partisan polarization in South Korea, and no evidence of an increase in partisan polarization there. In contrast, supporters of the two parties are far apart on cultural issues in the United States and these differences are increasing overtime. The differences on these issues between members of the two parties there have doubled over the past two decades.

Figure 4 summarizes the public's ideological preferences across all of the cultural questions in the World Values Survey. The results are very similar to those on the individual issues. Figure 4 indicates that the public is South Korea is more conservative (right-wing) than

9

Figure 3: Cultural Issues. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on three cultural issues. The size of the dots is proportional to each group's size.
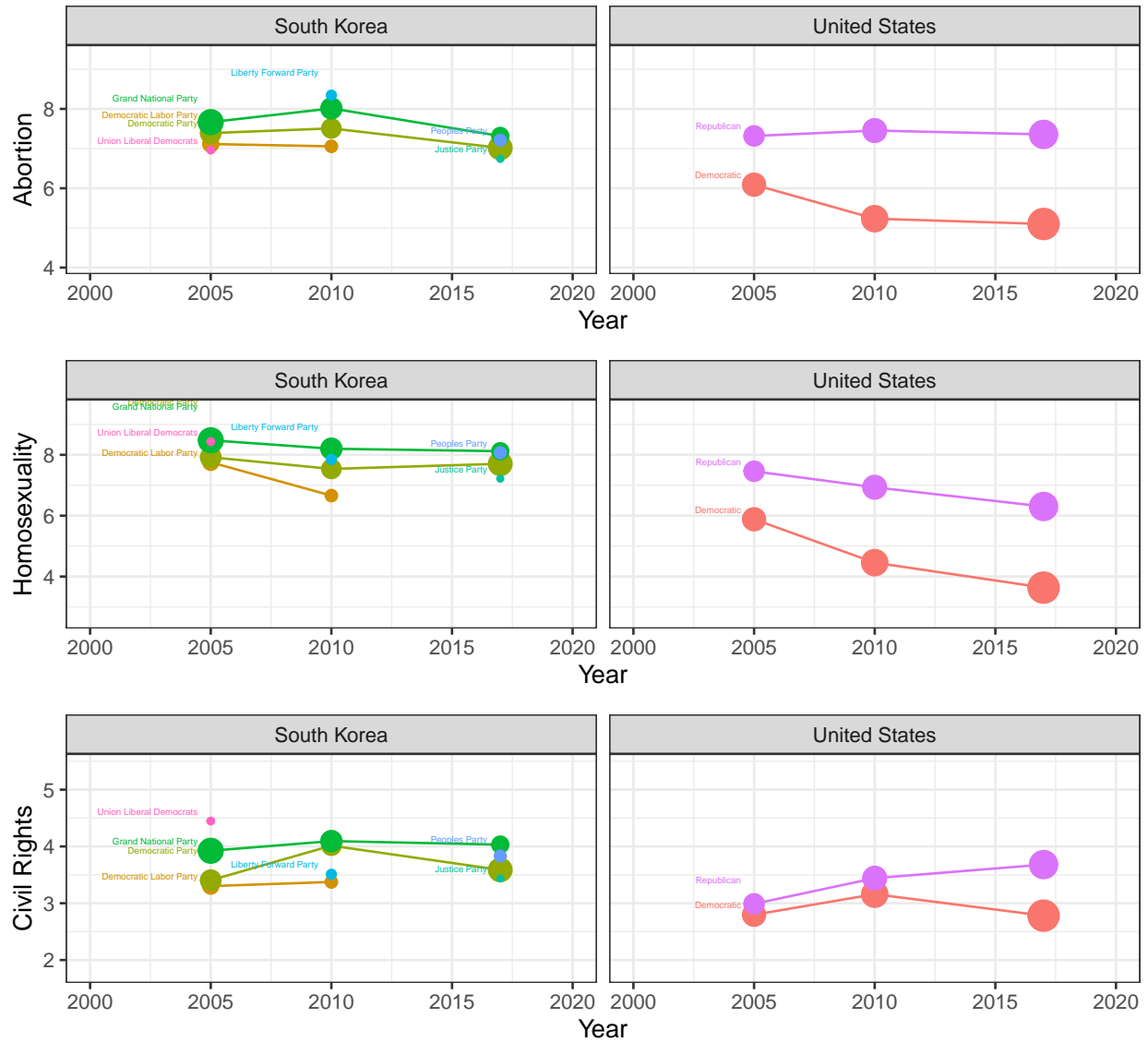
the public in the United States on the economic domain. However, partisan polarization is much more muted in South Korea. The average cultural ideology of supporters of the two largest parties in South Korea is only about a fifth of a standard deviation apart, while the views of Democrats and Republicans in the United States are about three quarters of a standard deviation apart. There was also no increase in polarization in the South Korean public's views across parties over the past 15 years, while polarization in the United States has steadily increased.

Figure 4: Cultural Ideology. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on cultural ideology. The size of the dots is proportional to each group's size.
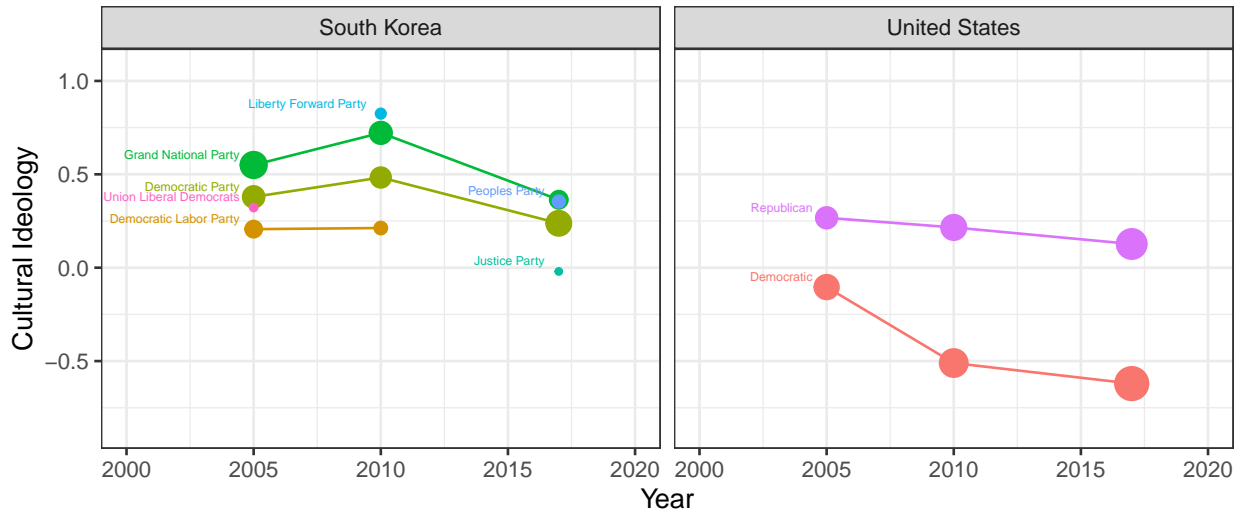

3.3 Polarization on Women's Rights Issues and Sexism

Next, I examine trends in the mass public's views on women's rights issues. Figure 5 shows the public's views on several individual women's rights issues. The top plot shows public opinion about whether 'Men make better business executives than women do.' The middle plot shows opinion about whether the public believes that 'University is more important for a boy than for a girl'. The bottom plot shows public opinion about whether 'Women should have the same rights as men.'

There is less polarization in South Korea than in the United States. But the partisan polarization there appears to be growing on these issues overtime. Polarization is also increasing in the United States on women's rights issues. Once again, on all three issues, the public in South Korea is clearly to the right of the public in the United States. All of the major parties in South Korea are generally to the right of both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Figure 6 summarizes the public's ideological preferences across all of the questions in the World Values Survey related to women's rights and sexism. The results are very similar to those on the individual issues. Figure 6 confirms that the public is South Korea is much

Figure 5: Women's Rights Issues. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on three women's rights issues. The size of the dots is proportional to each group's size.
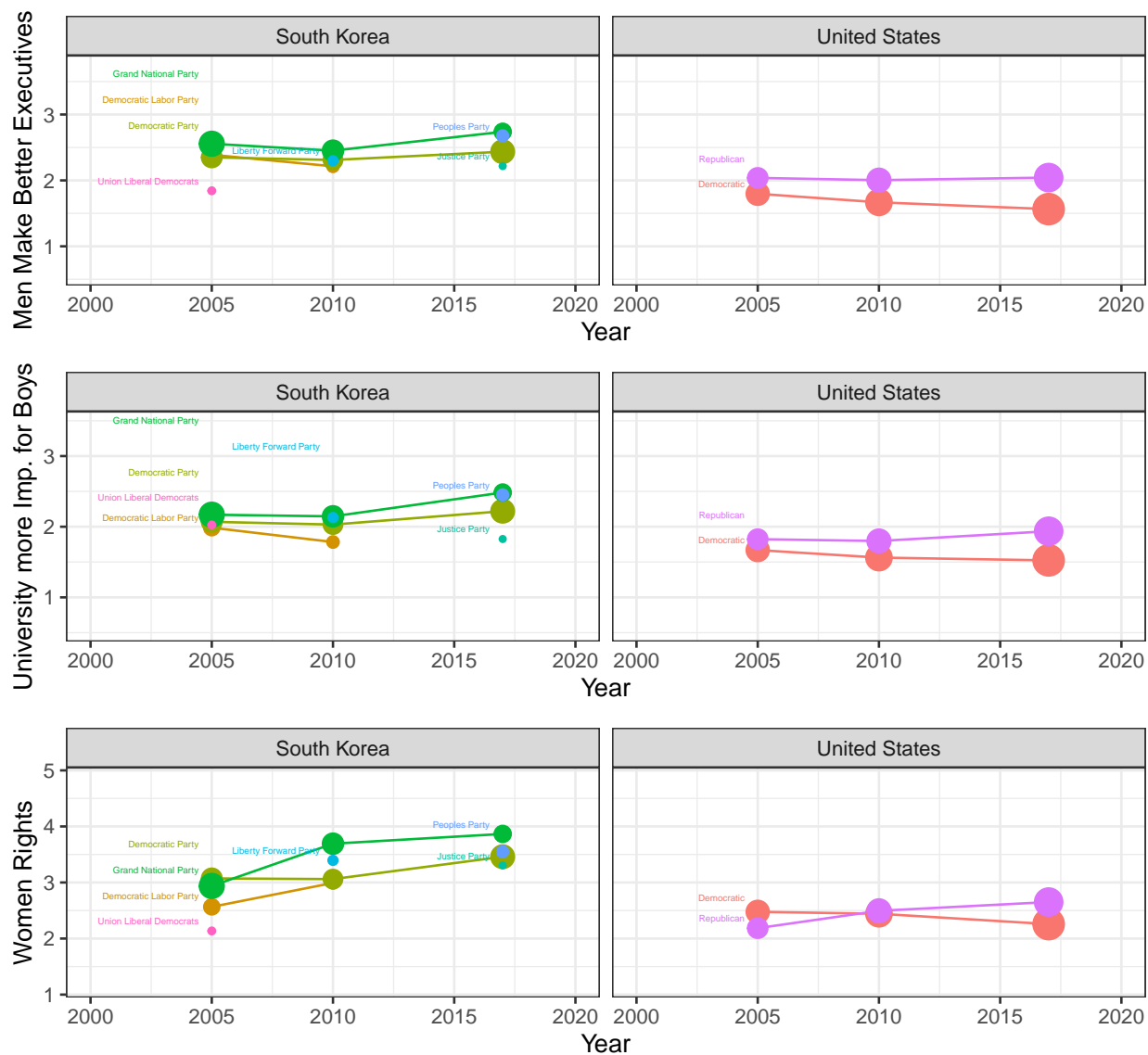
more conservative (right-wing) than the public in the United States on women's rights. Like on the economic and cultural domains, however, partisan polarization is much more muted in South Korea. The average ideology of supporters of the two largest parties in South Korea is only about a third of a standard deviation apart, while the views of Democrats and Republicans in the United States are about three quarters of a standard deviation apart. Polarization is also growing in the United States. Unlike the other two issue domains, there has also been a modest increase in partisan polarization in the South Korean public's views

over the past 15 years, especially since 2010. Supporters of the conservative and centrist parties now take markedly more conservative positions than supporters of the more liberal parties.

Figure 6: Ideology on Women's Rights. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on ideology about women's rights and sexism. The size of the dots is proportional to each group's size in the survey.
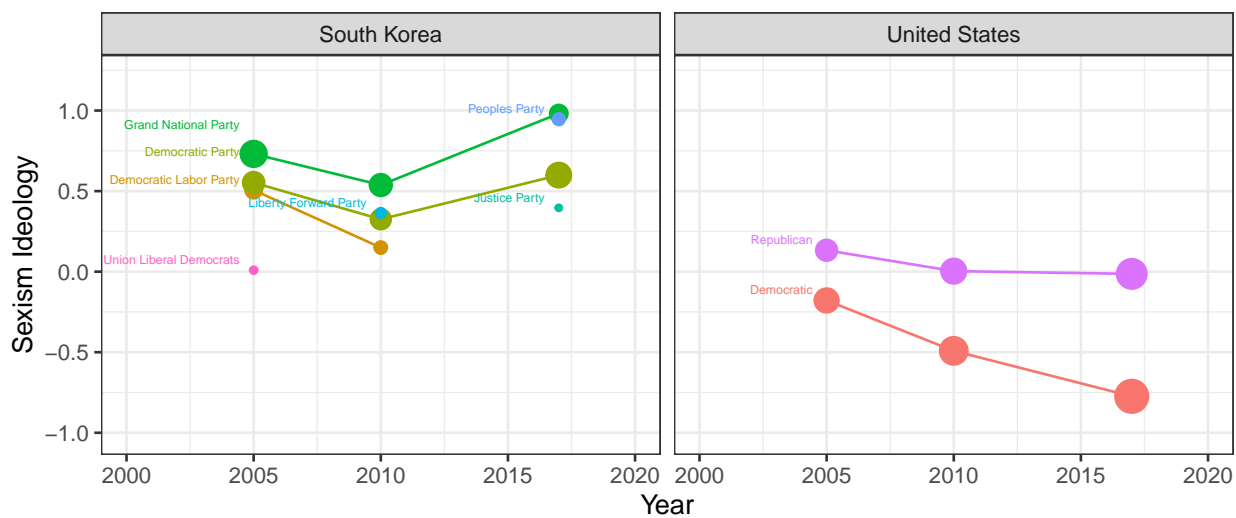

3.4   Polarization on Symbolic Left-Right Ideology

Finally, Figure 7 examines trends in the symbolic left-right ideology of the mass public in South Korea and the United States. This represents respondents' evaluations of their position on a 10-point left-right continuum. The figure shows that partisan polarization on this scale has increased in both South Korea and the United States over the past 15 years. However, partisan polarization remains much larger in the United States.

In the United States, polarization has clearly grown over the past two decades. Supporters of the Republican party placed themselves about 2 points to the right of supporters of the Democratic party in 2005. In 2017-2018, this gap had grown to about 3 points, driven largely by supporters of the Democratic party moving to the left in terms of their symbolic ideology.

In South Korea, there was about half a point separating supporters of the major parties

Figure 7: Symbolic Ideology. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on symbolic left-right ideology on the World Values Survey. Higher values indicate more conservative ideological self-placements. The size of the dots is proportional to each group's size in the survey.
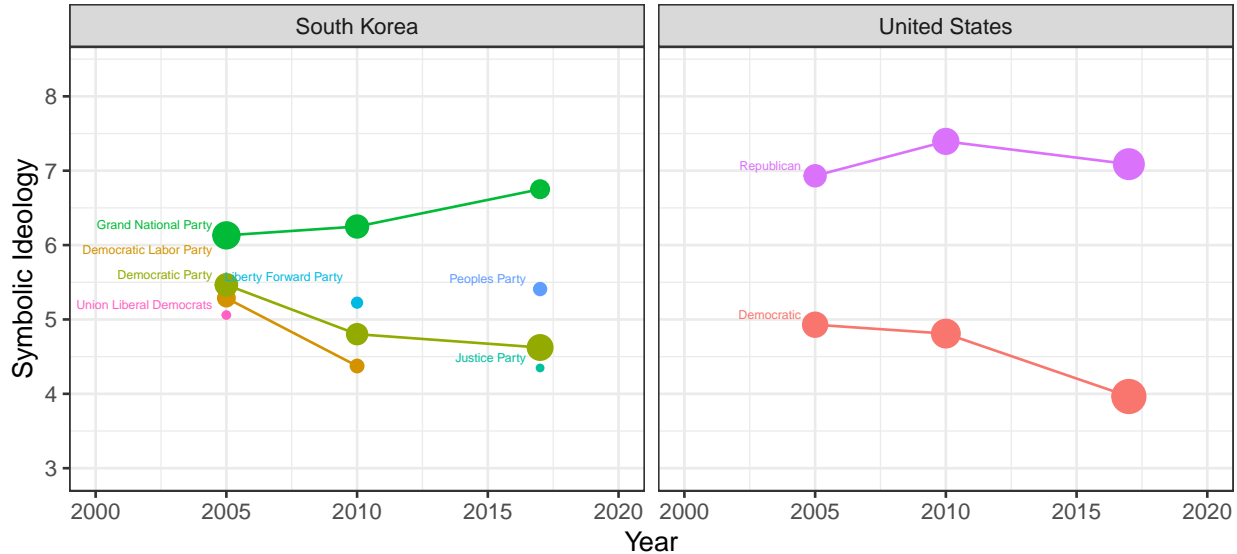

in 2005. Today, supporters of the left-wing parties are about 2 points more liberal than supporters of the main right-wing party. This suggests some growth in partisan polarization. One potential explanation for the apparent increase in polarization on left-right symbolic ideology could be an increase in constraint across policy issues (i.e., a high correlation in the public's views across domains). This growth in issue constraint appears to be driving some of the partisan polarization in the United States (Caughey, Dunham, and Warshaw 2018). However, I find no evidence that issue constraint is increasing in South Korea.

More generally, I think that caution is warranted in interpreting the apparent increase in left-right polarization in South Korea's mass public. First, the sample sizes in each party in the World Values Survey (WVS) are very small. Thus, the changes could be largely statistical noise. Second, Figure 8 shows that the increase in polarization on symbolic ideology in the WVS is only partially corroborated in the South Korean General Social Survey (Kim et al. 2019).[5] Third, the modest changes in polarization observed in the GSS could be partially

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5. Note that I simplified the party structure in the General Social Survey data to be as similar as possible to the parties in the World Values Survey.

driven by changes in the composition of the parties. For instance, the People's Party appears to have peeled off some of the moderate supporters of the other parties in 2016.

Figure 8: Symbolic Ideology. These plots show changes in partisan polarization on symbolic left-right ideology in the South Korean General Social Survey. Higher values indicate more conservative ideological self-placements.
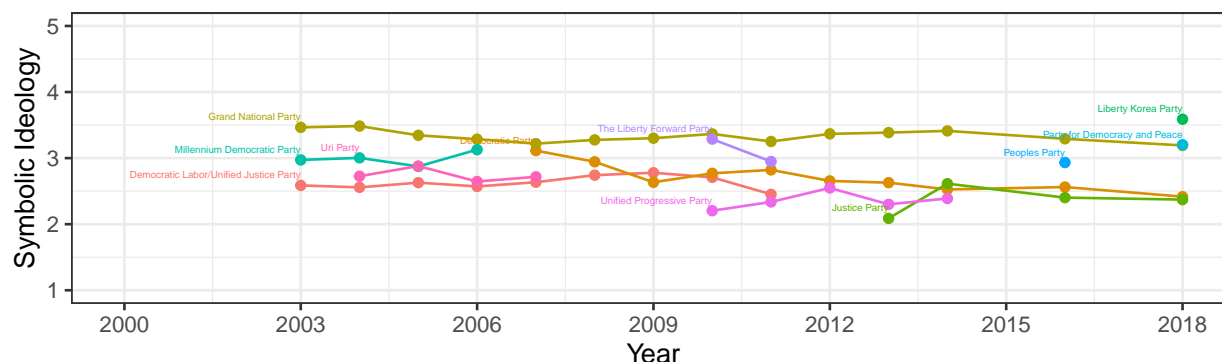
4 Discussion

In this chapter, I have examined partisan polarization in the United States and South Korea. I show that ideological polarization between supporters of the two major parties is large and growing across all policy domains in the United States (Caughey, Dunham, and Warshaw 2018). In contrast, there is generally much less partisan polarization in South Korea and there has been little or no increase in polarization on the public's policy preferences there. The only area where polarization may be increasing in South Korea is in the public's symbolic left-right ideology. As I have discussed, however, caution is warranted in interpreting these results.

The lack of partisan polarization in South Korea's mass public has important implications for elections and political accountability. The lack of polarization makes it easier for voters to take into account valence considerations, such as the economy or success at foreign policy. This makes it more likely that voters will reward politicians for strong performance, and punish them for scandals or policy failures. It also helps facilitate the fluidity of the partisan

15

coalitions in South Korea, where the strong impact of valence considerations has led to much larger swings in recent election results from election-to-election than in the more polarized environment in the United States. For instance, the Democratic Party won a resounding victory in South Korea's 2017 presidential election after the impeachment for corruption of the previous president from the conservative, Grand National Party.[6] The Democratic Party also won a landslide victory in recent legislative elections.[7] The strong electoral check provided by the public in South Korea incentives re-election seeking politicians to avoid scandals, grow the economy, and achieve other policy successes.

In contrast, polarization may be weakening political accountability in the United States. Scandals appear to have modest, and diminishing effects, on elections in the United States (Hamel and Miller 2019). Polarization may also be decreasing the effect of other valence factors, such as the economy, on elections (Hopkins 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019).

The low level of partisan polarization in South Korea also has implications for democratic stability. Recent work has shown that polarization undermines the public's ability to serve as a democratic check (Svolik 2019; Graham and Svolik 2020). As one scholar recently wrote, "in polarized electorates, voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests" (Svolik 2019). Thus, the low level of partisan polarization in South Korea's mass public helps reduce the odds of democratic breakdowns there.

Future research should continue to examine how changes in the party structure in South Korea at the elite level filter down to the mass public. Previous work has shown that the public tends to follow the views of party elites (Lenz 2013; Barber and Pope 2019). Thus, growth in elite polarization in South Korea could eventually lead to increases in polarization among the mass public as well. This could lead to more issue-based campaigns where voters have a clear choice between the policy agendas of the two parties (APSA Committee on Political Parties 1950). But it could also have negative implications for both political accountability and democratic stability.

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6. See https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/09/asia/south-korea-election/index.html.

7. See https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/15/asia/south-korea-election-intl-hnk/index.html.

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