



PARTY POWER AND LEGISLATIVE DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH KOREAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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Abstract

This paper examines the core role of political parties in influencing legislative politics in the National Assembly of South Korea. Based on institutional and electoral politics, legislative committees, and contemporary political phenomena, it explores the role of party constellations in shaping lawmaking outcomes. This study focuses on the dominance of the Democratic Party and the People Power Party, the political importance of negotiation groups, and the procedural advantage of majority blocs. Supported by cases related to legislative deadlock, committee proportionality, and major legislative reforms, this paper argues with evidence that legislative output and policy agenda-setting in South Korea are dominated much more by strongly disciplined party teams rather than legislator-level decision-making.

Evidence from this paper shows that despite legislative design principles aimed at ensuring a proper sharing-of-power arrangement for minorities within a majority governance situation, the actual politics in the National Assembly live with fluxes of power positions, political party rivalries, and leadership-driven politics with party control standing out most prominently as the key political activation force within the South Korean legislature.

Keywords: South Korean National Assembly, political party influence, legislative gridlock, party discipline and negotiation groups, committee politics.



Introduction

The National Assembly of the Republic of Korea represents one of the most institutionalized legislatures in Asia; yet, its formal design often deviates sharply from actual political practice. While the Korean Constitution and the National Assembly Act lay out mechanisms aimed at balancing majority governance with minority rights, legislative outcomes are largely determined by partisan control and strategic party behavior. Since the democratic transition in 1987, South Korea has established a competitive electoral environment and a mixed-member legislative system that, in principle, incorporate elements of majoritarian and proportional systems. In reality, however, legislative politics continue to be dominated by two powerful blocs, the liberal Democratic Party (DP) and the conservative People Power Party (PPP), whose organizational strength, electoral performance, and internal discipline essentially decide the direction and effectiveness of lawmaking.

Parties in South Korea's legislature exert influence not just by way of electoral mandates but through institutionalized control of negotiation groups, standing committees, agenda-setting bodies, and floor procedures. Committee chairmanship distribution, floor leadership coordination, and the procedural advantages given to negotiation groups reinforce this hierarchy in which major parties maintain disproportionate influence over legislative priorities. In consequence, the Korean legislative process often reflects partisan strategies rather than deliberative consensus, with the majority party able to hasten bills while the minority parties rely on procedural obstruction, negotiation, or public mobilization to voice opposition.

Against this background, this research looks at how political parties function as key motors of legislative politics in South Korea. It concludes, through the investigation of institutional structures, committee dynamics, party organization, and recent case studies of legislative proceedings, that intensely disciplined party teams are in fact the drivers of policymaking outcomes, rather than individual legislators. By examining the mechanisms through which parties solidify their authority and shape legislative interaction, this article contributes to broader debates regarding party institutionalization, legislative governance, and democratic development in contemporary South Korea.



Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design based on the analysis of legislative documents, party records, and secondary academic literature concerning the South Korean National Assembly. Parliamentary proceedings, committee reports, election data, and publicly available news sources were examined to trace patterns of party influence on legislative behavior. Comparative institutional analysis was used to evaluate how negotiation groups, committee structures, and partisan leadership shape lawmaking outcomes. Case studies, including the 2024 committee chair dispute and the 2025 Commercial Act revision, were selected to illustrate the mechanics of partisan conflict and cooperation. All sources were analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns in party strategies, institutional constraints, and legislative productivity.

The National Assembly of the Republic of Korea is a unicameral legislature composed of 300 members, of whom 253 are elected from single-member districts and 47 through proportional representation. This mixed electoral system reflects both majoritarian and pluralistic principles, designed to balance regional representation with party proportionality (Jun & Hix, 2010). Since the adoption of the 1987 democratic constitution, political parties have played a pivotal role in the legislative process, functioning as the primary vehicles for political organization, policymaking, and governance.

The party system in South Korea is characterized by the dominance of two main political blocs: the liberal Democratic Party of Korea (DP) and the conservative People Power Party (PPP). Despite the presence of minor parties such as the Justice Party, legislative influence remains largely concentrated in the hands of these two dominant forces. Parliamentary influence is institutionalized through the formation of “floor negotiation groups” (gyoseop danche), which are formal party blocs that require a minimum of 20 members. Attainment of this status confers procedural advantages, including increased state subsidies, access to leadership negotiations, and strategic influence over the legislative agenda (Kim, 2011).

The functional core of the National Assembly lies in its standing committees, whose composition mirrors the proportional strength of party representation. Committee chairmanships are crucial political assets, typically allocated to members of the ruling coalition. These positions significantly influence legislative scrutiny and policy formulation, particularly in key bodies such as the Legislation and Judiciary



Committee or the Steering Committee. A notable example occurred in June 2024 when the 22nd National Assembly experienced a protracted deadlock over committee chair allocations. The Democratic Party, holding a majority, unilaterally assumed leadership of 11 out of 18 committees, prompting a boycott by the PPP. This impasse was eventually resolved through inter-party negotiation, illustrating the extent to which procedural conflicts over committee control can either facilitate or obstruct legislative functioning.

Beyond committee politics, legislative agenda-setting in the Assembly is centrally coordinated by leadership councils composed of floor leaders and party whips. These actors play a decisive role in determining which bills reach the floor, while enforcing party cohesion through mechanisms of discipline and vote coordination. Due to strong party discipline, legislation endorsed by the ruling party often passes with minimal intra-party dissent. Conversely, when the ruling majority is narrow, opposition parties frequently resort to procedural tools to amend or block government bills (Moon & Kim, 2020). Thus, while formal institutional design supports legislative deliberation, the actual functioning of the National Assembly is deeply contingent on partisan negotiations and strategic interactions among dominant party elites.

Participation of parties in the National Assembly.

Parties' formal participation in South Korea's National Assembly is structured by the National Assembly Act as well as the Assembly's internal regulations, which delineate both procedural mechanisms and resource allocations. Central to this structure is the formation of negotiation groups (*dangwon hoeui*), which require a minimum threshold of twenty seats. These groups not only receive proportional state funding and administrative support, including staff offices and research infrastructure, but also enjoy privileged access to legislative agendas and committee assignments. Such provisions have institutionalized a tiered system of parliamentary influence, whereby parties below the threshold function with severely curtailed procedural rights. For instance, lawmakers from smaller parties may participate in standing committees only at the invitation of dominant party groups and are systematically excluded from chairing committees or panels, irrespective of expertise or seniority. This institutional design effectively reinforces the dominance of major parties and constrains pluralistic deliberation within the legislature. (Kim, 2011)



Leadership within the Assembly reflects this asymmetry. The Speaker of the National Assembly is elected by members, with the convention that the elected Speaker formally severs partisan ties to ensure institutional neutrality, a symbolic but politically meaningful gesture. The two Deputy Speakers, however, typically represent the leading parties, and along with floor leaders from each party, coordinate the legislative timetable, manage inter-party negotiations, and allocate plenary session time (Kim and Kuk, 2025). When a single party secures a legislative majority, it often monopolizes committee chairmanships and unilaterally controls the procedural instruments of the Assembly, such as the calendar, the docketing of bills, and the invocation of “fast-track” procedures (Kim and Kuk, 2025). This not only centralizes legislative authority but also marginalizes minority voices in the policymaking process.

The 2020 legislative elections marked a critical juncture in the post-authoritarian history of the Assembly. The Democratic Party (DP), along with its satellite entity, the Platform Party, secured a supermajority of 180 seats, 163 from district-level contests and 17 from proportional lists, enabling it to override filibusters, expedite legislative procedures via the fast-track mechanism, and pass contentious bills without opposition consent. This was the largest number of seats held by a single political bloc since the inception of the Sixth Republic. Conversely, the People Power Party (PPP), formerly the Liberty Korea Party (LKP), suffered a significant electoral defeat, garnering only 103 seats, and for the first time in decades found itself unable to block or meaningfully amend government legislation. As Carl Saxer notes, this shift toward asymmetric parliamentary power has deepened legislative polarization, with fewer incentives for bipartisan collaboration or procedural compromise (Saxer, 2025).

Yet, party participation in legislative processes is not static. Across different National Assemblies, institutional control has alternated between one-party dominance and scenarios of legislative deadlock or “hung parliaments.” In all cases, however, legislative behavior has reflected not only the formal rules of procedure but also the strategic calculations of party elites, their alignment with executive agendas, and their responsiveness to electoral incentives. Consequently, while the institutional framework of the Assembly seeks to balance majoritarian governance with minority rights, in practice it is the prevailing partisan configuration that determines the substantive nature of lawmaking.



Legislative Initiatives and Party Influence

All members of the National Assembly, and the cabinet, hold the formal right to introduce legislation. However, in practice, legislative initiative is overwhelmingly shaped by partisan dynamics, with political parties acting as the central agents in the initiation, drafting, and passage of significant bills (Baek et al., 2020). Government bills, often prepared by ministries and submitted through the president or cabinet, are typically aligned with the ruling party's agenda. These bills usually reflect the programmatic preferences of the ruling coalition, as ministries tend to act in coordination with partisan leadership to ensure coherence between policy and electoral commitments. Conversely, opposition parties predominantly focus on introducing private members' bills that articulate alternative visions or propose changes in key policy domains, particularly when seeking to challenge or redirect the prevailing legislative discourse.

A telling illustration of this partisan alignment occurred in mid-2024, when the Democratic Party (DP), holding a legislative majority, successfully passed several controversial reforms. These included bills affecting broadcasting governance, labor regulations, and corporate oversight, areas long contested between progressive and conservative forces (Kim and Choi, 2023). In March 2025, the DP achieved a landmark revision to the Commercial Act, broadening the fiduciary responsibilities of corporate boards to include explicit protection of minority shareholders¹. This reform represented a significant shift in corporate governance norms, aligning with broader efforts to restrain the dominance of chaebols (family-run conglomerates), which have historically undermined equitable shareholder rights. The People Power Party (PPP) strongly opposed this reform, voicing threats of a presidential veto, but ultimately failed to prevent its enactment due to the DP's numerical advantage in the Assembly.

Such episodes illustrate a general rule: when the president's party controls the Assembly, legislative outcomes tend to reflect the executive's agenda with little resistance. In contrast, when partisan control is divided, opposition parties can obstruct, dilute, or delay the executive's initiatives, although they rarely override them outright unless they form temporary coalitions.

¹ South Korea Parliament Passes Bill Expanding Duty of Boards to Shareholders," *Reuters*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-parliament-passes-bill-expanding-duty-boards-shareholders-2025-03-13/>.



Beyond plenary votes, party influence is embedded in committee work—often the locus of legislative negotiation and amendment. Committee members are typically selected by party leadership and function under strict partisan discipline. Legislators rarely act as autonomous policy entrepreneurs; instead, they co-sponsor legislation in bloc formation, and party whips enforce cohesion through internal disciplinary mechanisms. The result is a legislative process where party positions drive the policy agenda. As observed by Croissant, such practices underscore the predominance of elite-centered, personalized political parties with weak internal democracy, despite formal institutional rules of representation and participation (Croissant, 2002).

High party discipline in the Korean Assembly also limits the capacity of minority or niche parties to influence major legislation. Although exceptions exist transformative legislation nearly always proceeds along party lines. The 2023 “special counsel” law, which authorized an independent prosecutor to investigate executive misconduct, offers a salient example: the DP, then holding a parliamentary majority, passed the law over strenuous PPP objections. This reflects a broader pattern identified by Hellmann, whereby Korean politics is characterized by system-level institutionalization (e.g., electoral stability and regularity) without corresponding development of party-level institutionalization, such as coherent organization or ideological programmatic identity (Hellmann, 2014).

Political Balance: Government vs. Opposition

The balance of power between the government’s party and the opposition critically conditions legislative productivity. When one party holds a comfortable majority, the government’s legislative program tends to advance quickly. For instance, after President Moon Jae-in’s party gained a supermajority in 2020, it enacted major reforms on social welfare and governance with minimal gridlock. In contrast, when the president’s party is weak in the Assembly, stalemate often ensues. This was the case in 2023–2024 under President Yoon Suk-yeol: Yoon’s PPP held a small minority while the DP controlled the Assembly. Analysts observed that the DP majority “hindered” Yoon’s agenda, predicting continued gridlock on key issues (e.g. corporate tax incentives, labor reform). As the Council on Foreign Relations noted in April 2024, Yoon’s policies were “severely limited” by the opposition legislature, and his remaining years were likely to be marked by “the same legislative gridlock” as



before. Reuters likewise reported that “Opposition control of parliament will continue a government stalemate” on legislation requiring new laws.

Nonetheless, even in deadlock there are constitutional checks. Notably, the Assembly wields strong oversight powers: it may override a presidential veto with a two-thirds supermajority, and it alone can impeach the president. The 2023–24 crisis over President Yoon’s brief declaration of martial law demonstrated this. When Yoon ordered martial law in December 2023, the Assembly (despite tensions) followed procedure and voted at 1:00 a.m. to invalidate the decree (Delury, 2025). Eleven days later, legislators from all parties had cobbled together the required supermajority to impeach the president. This shows the legislature’s ultimate authority: even a ruling party president can be checked by Congress when that supermajority is formed. After impeachment, however, the Assembly quickly reverted to partisan tactics: the DP majority resumed blocking PPP initiatives, and vice versa, illustrating how inter-party balance shifts the legislative climate.

Conclusion

This study shows that political parties are at the center of driving legislative behavior and policy outcome in the National Assembly of South Korea. While there have been formal institutional arrangements that balance majority rule with minority rights, the actual functioning of the legislature is largely dominated by partisan strength, negotiation group status, and committee control. Reinforced by strong party discipline, leadership-driven coordination, and procedural advantages, the dominance of the Democratic Party and the People Power Party created a legislative environment in which collective party strategies outweighed individual lawmaker initiative. The case studies, including the 2024 committee chairmanship deadlock and the 2025 Commercial Act revision, further reveal how partisan balance shifts create either rapid legislative action or its prolonged gridlock.

The analysis also indicates that constitutional oversight mechanisms, such as the use of veto overrides and impeachment, serve as important checks on executive overreach, as in the 2023–24 martial law crisis. These most exceptional interventions themselves often produce a return to partisan competition. The overall results highlight that the trajectory of legislative productivity, policymaking direction, and institutional stability in South Korea are determined substantially by prevailing party power configurations. The understanding gained should serve as a foundation for deducing



the pattern of Korea's democratic governance and the developing position of parties within its political institutions.

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