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## **Populism and the Pretentious Promise for Parity: How Antifeminism Has Shaped Political Narratives in South Korea**

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# Populism and the Pretentious Promise for Parity: How Antifeminism Has Shaped Political Narratives in South Korea

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## Abstract

Despite being a modern and innovative country, antifeminism has seen a surge in recent years in South Korea. Plagued by economic insecurities, young men in the country are increasingly directing their anger towards their female counterparts, who receive structural preferential treatment in their eyes. Men’s rights groups and politicians have boldly taken hold of such rhetoric. No long-term study into exactly how these sentiments have influenced Korean politics beyond merely the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-Yeol during the 2022 presidential elections has been conducted, however. Using the research question ‘*How did the antifeminism of the Korean men’s rights movement affect the main two parties’ narratives during and after the 2022 South Korean presidential elections?*’, this thesis aims to go beyond this, analyzing statements by the conservative and democratic political camps alike during and after the elections through a wide set of collected news articles. As is found, despite democratic politicians being less severe in their antifeminism and going into a more feminist direction since the 2022 elections, both the Democratic Party and the conservative People Power Party have made extensive use of a populist form of antifeminism in their political narratives. These findings not only contribute to the growing field of academics on populist antifeminism but are similarly an important warning for the societal dangers of division beyond electoral politics.

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## Introduction

It is the summer of 2021, the Olympics in full swing, when a 20-year-old female Korean gold medallist archer gets caught up in national controversy, the size of which according to some warranted returning her earned medals. The crime in question: having a short haircut, and thus being deemed a feminist (Choe, 2022).

Occurrences like these are not incidental. In a recent survey, 58% of young Korean men stated they were vehemently opposed to feminism, and cyberbullying of those considered feminists has become a widespread phenomenon (M.-N. Kim, 2021; Park, 2021; Yun, 2018). South Korea (hereafter Korea), despite its economic and technological prowess, seems to have found its Achilles heel in gender equality. In 2022, the country was ranked merely 99th out of 146 states in gender equality progress (World Economic Forum, 2022). Korea has similarly occupied the top position for its gender wage gap among OECD countries, with a gap centring around the 30% in recent years (H.-J. Lee, 2022).

Feminist movements have erupted as a response, flared up by nationwide sex crime scandals (Kim et al., 2020; Luu, 2022; Molisso, 2023). Their efforts are left unappreciated by the country's young men, who increasingly take on a stance on gender issues that is even more conservative than the one of their fathers (Park, 2021). A separate term has even been coined for Korea's young men due to their overall ideological similarities: *idaenam* (literally: men in their twenties) (Chan, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2022). Although not exclusively related to antifeminism, many of these 'idaenam' seem to have occupied it as a shared belief, finding brotherhood in a common fear for the movement. Importantly, many of these men merely regard certain aspects of feminism as going 'too far' and do not outright oppose women's fight for gender-related rights. Fear of misandry and frustration with the obligated military service often occupy such men's minds (Brown, 2023; Chan, 2023; Yun, 2018).

A prominent and loud part of 'idaenam', however, does harbour exceptional hate towards feminism and bases its argumentation around the supposed structural oppression of men in Korean society. Their frustrations did not erupt out of thin air: despite working tirelessly, many are still left dangling at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy due to the country's fiercely competitive job market (Chan, 2023). In the eyes of such men, however, women are cheating this competition by receiving an unfair head-start. Women already perform better in school and can continue their professional and academic careers while their male counterparts are stuck in the military. On top of this, gender quotas lead to better

chances of getting high-placed positions (Chan, 2023; Kim, 2019). Feeling trapped in a sense of structural injustice in a highly competitive society, young Korean men increasingly regard these gender-related policies as unfair treatment. It is this feeling of insecurity and perceived societal unfairness that has rallied them around a shared hatred for feminism (Chan, 2023).

Building on this shared sentiment, men's rights groups have emerged and flourished around the country, with most members in their 20s and 30s. While these groups claim to advocate for the struggles of men, they have also frequently stated that discrimination towards women no longer exists in contemporary Korean society (Kim & Lee, 2022; Yun, 2018). Women-only spaces and the quota system in governing bodies have also faced criticism from such groups, and feminists are frequently blamed and demonized (Yun, 2018).

In June of 2021, this movement gained new traction when politician Lee Jun-Seok was elected as the chairman of the People Power Party (hereafter PPP) (M.-N. Kim, 2021). As a male in his 30s, his engagement with other young antifeminist men on online forums quickly gained him a large following and a great deal of popularity. These online men-centred groups are known to harass and bully those considered feminists, like Olympic archer An San (Chan, 2023). While cyber misogyny was not new in any way, Lee Jun-Seok's popularity emboldened antifeminist groups both online and offline, providing them with an even larger platform (Chan, 2023; M.-N. Kim, 2021).

Clearly, antifeminism is a prevalent issue in Korean society and has been cleverly employed by politicians like Lee Jun-Seok, causing further societal polarization. Partly due to these serious societal stakes, the infiltration of these sentiments into Korean society and politics has enjoyed academic attention. Such works have especially focused on the movement as a whole or on the antifeminist rhetoric used by conservative PPP candidate Yoon Suk-Yeol in the 2022 presidential election, where he battled Democratic Party (hereafter DP) rival Lee Jae-Myung (Di-Penti, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2022; Yun, 2018). This academic focus on Korea is unsurprising, as the Korean case is an interesting one in its uniqueness. While studies find that younger people are typically less anti-feminist, this is not the case in Korea, where young men make up the largest antifeminist group. It has similarly been found that partisanship is a strong determinant of feminist attitudes, whereas in Korea, both conservative and liberal supporters hang onto antifeminist sentiments (Di-Penti, 2023; Elder et al., 2021; Reingold & Foust, 1998; Rich et al., 2022). But while there are works that have discussed the potential implications of the men's rights movement's antifeminism and the narratives of Yoon Suk-

Yeol during the 2022 presidential elections, none have empirically examined these influences at a larger time scale, nor have they included a focus on the DP, the other major political party of the country. This thesis thus opts for a study that includes a systematic analysis of the narratives of both of the two biggest political parties (PPP and DP), thus including Democratic candidate Lee Jae-Myung's, as well as a scope that goes beyond just the 2022 elections. Using the research question "*How did the antifeminism of the Korean men's rights movement affect the main two parties' narratives during and after the 2022 South Korean presidential elections?*", this thesis aims to gain a more holistic and long-term view of just how antifeminism has gained its footing within Korean politics.

## Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Apart from merely the Korean case, studies on antifeminist movements in the modern era have been numerous over the past decades (Bridges, 2021; Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987; Himmelstein, 1986; Keskinen, 2013). Research has found that the existence of the internet and social media has been a major facilitator when it comes to the spread of such ideas (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Huang, 2023; Nagle, 2015). Although the internet has surely contributed to the spread of malicious rhetoric and the isolation of extremist groups into hateful bubbles, the interplay of both cyber antifeminism and social movements and the integration of such ideas into mainstream policies is often less studied. As has been mentioned, South Korea trumps regarding online antifeminism, with large online communities creating separate cultures and phrases (Chan, 2023). As will be clear later on, however, the spread of an antifeminist movement like the Korean one may not be facilitated by the internet on its own: it is political strategies that are increasingly seen as the crucial drivers for antifeminist rhetoric in much of the literature (Chan, 2023; Dupuis-Deri, 2016; Eisenstein, 1981; Gwiazda, 2016; Kampwirth, 2008; Shvanyukova, 2022; Wojnicka, 2016)

To start, however, it is crucial to get a grip on how antifeminists themselves express their distastes. The label of "deviant women", or of national traitors, for example, is often employed against feminists in China (Huang, 2023). "Feminazis" is another term that is used frequently, especially in the West (Jordan, 2016). Oftentimes, the most publicized criticism of feminism comes from so-called men's rights groups. Like in the Korean case, these groups are not necessarily but nevertheless frequently linked to antifeminism and are often its prime promoters through their organizational strength (Chan, 2023; DiPenti, 2023; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Jordan, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2022). Men joining these groups often feel

victimized due to perceived societal injustices and seem to think that the reason for this lies in their gender. According to them, men are treated unfairly in society compared to women and feminism is effectively worsening their situation (Nurminen, 2020; Saresma, 2017).

Importantly, some participants in this movement do emphasize that women face discrimination just as much, although this subgroup is less prominent and receives less attention than their antifeminist counterparts (Jordan, 2016; Shvanyukova, 2022; Yun, 2018)

In the United Kingdom, some men's rights groups have accused feminism of becoming a near-militant movement (Ging & Siapera, 2019). Similar narratives describing feminists as related to terrorism and mental illness can be found in the case of Korean men's rights groups (Khil, 2022; Park, 2021). What is similar in all cases, however, is that such narratives divert the attention from actual inequality, onto some sort of inherent war between feminists and anti-feminists, between the irrational radicals and the rational moderates (Huang, 2023). This strategy of divide-and-conquer will be especially relevant when applied to the Korean case later on in this thesis' analysis.

At its basis, though, most academic work establishes a solid yet simple link between conservative partisanship and antifeminist rhetoric. We can see this clearly in examples separate from the Korean case. The 2016 United States presidential elections, where the conservative Donald Trump battled Hillary Clinton, are a prime example of a major election fuelled by gendered rhetoric and antifeminism. Indeed, partisanship is often seen as *the* determinant for antifeminist narratives (Di-Penti, 2023; Elder et al., 2021; Reingold & Foust, 1998). Conservative politicians have similarly made extensive use of antifeminist rhetoric in Poland and Italy (Gwiazda, 2021; Shvanyukova, 2022; Wojnicka, 2016). Some other, specific case studies, however, like Kampwirth's (2008) analysis of Nicaragua, show how antifeminism can be used by left-wing parties just as viciously. A case where anti-feminist rhetoric seems to be connected to both conservative and liberal ideas at the same time, like in South Korea, is however rather unique and has not yet been explored from this view.

If it is not either left- or right-wing that is accurately able to fully capture antifeminist dynamics in certain unique cases, another set of research has found that populism might be more useful when it comes to analyzing the phenomenon. As has been found, frequently, populist political parties use antifeminist rhetoric to garner popular support for their agendas (Gwiazda, 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Kaul, 2021; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Wojnicka, 2016). In this view, Donald Trump was not just a conservative, but mainly a populist

presidential candidate. In Europe as well, mainly populist parties (like the National Front in France and Alternative for Germany) are seen as being accompanied by emerging antifeminist sentiments (Gwiazda, 2021; Hajek & Dombrowski, 2022; Heinemann & Stern, 2022; Wojnicka, 2016). Applying this to the Korean case can thus prove to be helpful.

In general, populism distinguishes itself by seeking an enemy on which to project society's faults. Populists often promise to "make the nation great again", by saving the people from this group of antagonists, which can range from foreigners to elites, or, in this case: feminists/women (Moghadam & Kaftan, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). Using empty signifiers, phrases with no clear objective meaning but a high normative charge that can be employed as the populist sees fit, such as 'freedom', they put themselves in charge of 'saving' the people (Laclau, 2005; Savage, 2010). As such, populism in itself does not have to be inherently antifeminist. In many instances, however, current-day populism has employed these strategies to demonize feminists, accusing them of social issues such as lowering birth rates (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Kaul, 2021; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). Populist leaders in general are also often aggressively masculine and misogynistic in their behaviour (Casullo & Colalongo, 2022; Eksi & Wood, 2019; Sanders & Jenkins, 2022).

Some scholars perceive this connection between populism and feminism as something inherently undemocratic, as the rhetoric used seems to want to exclude women from public influence (Hajek & Dombrowski, 2022; Heinemann & Stern, 2022). Others, however, simply state that antifeminism is but an expression of (perceived) structural injustice and frustration (Chan, 2023; Laclau, 1996). The latter view applies particularly well to the Korean case, where young men have been left disillusioned and discontent when it comes to the structure of their society. Although the focus of this thesis will be laid on the structural injustice part of populist antifeminism, it is nonetheless important to recognize its dangers for contemporary democracy.

### Conceptualization of Antifeminism

The conceptualization of a phenomenon like antifeminism, although seemingly straightforward, nonetheless contains many nuances. Roughly, two academic camps can be established: those who see it as a 'backlash' movement directed solely as a response to feminism, and those who perceive it as a social movement with an identity more complex than simply the 'opposite' of feminism.



Those upholding the ‘backlash’ definition see current antifeminism as a conservative backlash in response to achievements by progressive women and feminists (Butler, 2019; Faludi, 1991; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). Although the term backlash was first coined in the early ‘70s, the phenomenon it describes has existed for centuries, with progressive attempts having always been met with resistance (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2012; Faludi, 1991). Backlash, in this context, generally seeks to prevent further progressive change or advocates for a return to the situation of the past (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2012; Flood & Dragiewicz, 2021; Faludi, 1991). However, more specific definitions of antifeminism as backlash persist that are either more broad or narrow. Faludi (1991), who put the term into the mainstream, defined it more broadly as a cultural counterreaction to feminism. Other accounts of backlash, however, are narrower, restricting its application only to the use of coercive power (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008), or focusing only on organised, public resistance (Flood & Dragiewicz, 2021; Flood, 2010).

In general, backlash theory is the definition most often applied in major works on antifeminism (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2012; Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987; Faludi, 1991; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). Some scholars, however, heed this type of classification. In short, they state that we should be careful to treat antifeminism simply as a countermovement, as it homogenizes a movement that is internally extremely complex and diverse (Braithwaite, 2004; Elder et al., 2021; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2023).

This criticism is especially relevant when we try to apply traditional backlash theory to the Korean case. According to Mansbridge and Shames (2008), backlash, particularly in the context of feminism and antifeminism, consists of three components: conservative reactions to progressive change, coercive power, and the reinstatement of lost power. Korea provides a unique case in this regard. Young Korean men *do* want progressive change, especially when it comes to gaining economic and societal leverage, and their antifeminist backlash does not stem from a wish to return to traditions. Most antifeminists in Korea are not against a progressive view on gender roles per se: in fact, many despise traditional patriarchal family roles forced upon them (Korean Women’s Development Institute, 2019).

In line with this, some scholars have argued that antifeminism is not merely the opposite of feminism but instead constitutes a separate social identity (Braithwaite, 2004; Elder et al., 2021; Ging & Siapera, 2019). Equating backlash and antifeminism is problematic, as it hides

the variety inherent to the social movement and its supporters. For example, Kalm and Meeuwisse (2023) find 4 types of antifeminism, all of which vary widely in their emphases and the way they relate to feminism.

The most used definition of antifeminism stemming from this view is Kenneth Clatterbaugh's (2007, pp. 21-22) in which anti-feminists deny at least one of the following statements: (1) gendered social arrangements do not (need to) stem from God or some sort of 'natural order' (2) gendered social arrangements favour men; and (3) action needs to be taken to make these social arrangements more equal (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2022; Tskhvariashvili & Saghinadze, 2020; Wojnicka, 2016). Different strands of antifeminism consequently put different emphasis on the three statements, and cannot all be equated under the same umbrella of a backlash movement per se. In Korea, the latter two are prominent, with a strong focus on the second component and the third component being argued in favour of men. Honouring this definition, this thesis, while recognizing that it is a movement that has nonetheless reacted to many components of feminism, will thus regard antifeminism as a movement comprised of views and narratives that are unique, and not simply the opposite of feminism, while using Clatterbaugh's (2007) definition as a guideline.

### Theoretical Expectations

Considering the suitability of the theory to the Korean case, his thesis will build especially on the established link between antifeminism and populist strategies. Relying on such foundations, some expectations about the research project can be constructed. To start off, a strong expectation can be established for populist tactics to be found engrained in the use of antifeminism. Strategies like scapegoating problems onto women and feminists and wrongfully painting men as society's victims are thus expected to be used by the Korean democratic and conservative parties alike. Simultaneously, most prior theories on the topic have nonetheless shown how the politicization of antifeminism is most frequently used by conservative politicians (Chan, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2022; Reingold & Foust, 1998). Relying on these findings, we should thus still expect the conservative PPP and Yoon Suk-Yeol to use anti-feminist rhetoric more extensively than the democratic DP and Lee Jae-Myung.

Another, though less central and significant theoretical expectation can also be established. Previous works have shown how political parties shift their policies in the same direction as their rival party when the latter has had electoral success. This is the so-called by Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009), "Party Dynamics Hypothesis" (Adams et al., 2004; Erikson, 2012;

Ezrow, 2007). There has similarly been a great deal of theory focused on how parties are highly responsive to voter shifts if a previous election provided a lot of information about voters' views. (Adams et al., 2009; Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009; Lindvall et al., 2023). This effect is shown to be even stronger after an electoral loss (Budge 1994; Schumacher et al., 2013; Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009). As democratic candidate Lee Jae-Myung suffered defeat against conservative Yoon Suk-Yeol during the 2022 presidential elections, we would thus expect the Democratic Party to shift, in the post-election period, more towards the narrative on antifeminism employed by Yoon and the PPP.

## Methodology

To conduct this research, a qualitative content analysis was chosen as the most suitable methodology. A deep-dive single case study is necessary to capture the full intricacies, but a discourse analysis is not preferable as several data sources have been directly or indirectly translated from Korean to English. This could cause the loss of the intricate subtleties of language which are tied to a method of discourse analysis.

The main data source has been news articles, from which reported statements by politicians and parties were subsequently coded and analyzed. The English versions of major Korean news websites were used to collect this data while considering the political bias inherent to these news agencies and incorporating a wide variety of journalistic stances. As such, reports from the Chosun Ilbo, a well-known conservative Korean news agency, as well as reports by The Hankyoreh, which is known to have a liberal stance, were used to balance each other out (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Similarly, English-language Korea-focused news sites like The Korea Times and The Korea Herald were used, the former being known as moderate to liberal, while the latter is generally seen as moderate to conservative (Einhorn, 2022). Lastly, the major and most trusted Korean news website Yonhap News Agency has been chosen as an addition to the other news websites (N.-Y. Kim, 2021).

The time frame for the study has been consciously laid out to capture the most relevant data. To be able to fully capture the campaigns and their run-up for the 2022 presidential elections in March, the time frame starts in October of 2021. The post-election period that will additionally be researched has been chosen to be terminated in December of 2023. This was done to keep the April 2024 National Assembly elections and their campaigning out of the picture, as these elections are not the focus of this research project.

As a means to filter out useful news reports, the names of the parties and their presidential candidates have been used. In addition, keywords like ‘gender’, ‘women’, and ‘feminism’ were added. While the use of such keywords may hide articles portraying the most subtle forms to be considered antifeminism, such outings are not the focus of this research, which is mainly interested in blatant antifeminism and denial of women’s rights. Through this filtering, over 60 news reports from the various news websites mentioned above were collected, which generated nearly 200 coded statements and quotes. The coding of these articles was done with a pre-determined coding frame on the various outings of antifeminism, with specific regard to populist incitements of feminism and women’s rights as being detrimental to society. The data was subsequently coded using a method of colour coding, with yellow coding regarding Yoon and the PPP, and blue corresponding to Lee and the DP.

Several coding categories of antifeminist mentions were employed, based on both prior theory on the phenomenon and case-specific context as found in the literature review. As shown in the literature review, works into antifeminism in the past have often included both the denial of a certain issue for women and also the possible rejection of the need/responsibility to solve this specific issue, based on the definition by Clatterbaugh (2007). The same structure was employed here. The classic female issues of the gender wage gap and reproductive rights were chosen as the first two main categories. Here, government cuts related to childcare spending, and work-related childcare rights were also included. The political discourse surrounding the Korean Ministry of Gender Equality received its own coding category. Prior literary research into female rights in Korea and the 2022 presidential elections show the importance of this Ministry in the (anti)feminism and gender debate in the country (Chan, 2023; Park, 2021). The next category concerns rights and remarks regarding sexual assault and the protection of victims, which is another classic component of antifeminism. A category for general sexist and misogynistic remarks by politicians has also been added, which may reflect personal sexism inherent to these persons and has similarly been a tactic to demonize women and feminists that is frequently used by Korean online antifeminist communities and men’s rights groups (Capelos et al., 2023; Chan, 2023; M.-N. Kim, 2021).

The category ‘reverse discrimination’ is possibly the broadest, most interesting, and most significant one. It includes a type of antifeminism that is primarily used as a populist rhetoric to win over men in their 20s, by painting women as the ones advantaged, and young men as those who suffer (Chan, 2023; Nurminen, 2020; Park, 2021; Saresma, 2017). Full-on denial

of women’s disadvantages, or even mentions of how women are currently overpowering men in society in numerous ways are included in this category. Lastly, a category of direct and explicit backlash to feminism itself exists. As has been argued in the literature review, antifeminism is not merely just the opposite of feminism, and it is not merely a criticism of feminism itself. However, objection directly to the movement of feminism is nevertheless an important category, and another one that is heavily influenced by populism in its methods of painting the ‘feminists’ as the ones causing damage to society, and the movement itself as something unnecessary or even dangerous (Chan, 2023; Huang, 2023; Jordan, 2016; Yun, 2018). Personal attacks on those considered feminist on the grounds of them being feminist are also included in this coding category.

### Coding Frame

<b>Coding Category</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Gender wage gap</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denial of the existence of a gender wage gap</li> <li>• Rejection of the need to close the gender wage gap</li> </ul>
<b>Reproductive rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mention of restricting abortion rights</li> <li>• Denial of need for further maternal leave rights</li> <li>• Mentions of possible cuts in childcare spending</li> </ul>
<b>Ministry of Gender Equality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denial of need for a Ministry of Gender Equality</li> <li>• Mentions of abolishing the Ministry</li> <li>• Mentions of rebranding the Ministry</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual assault</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denial of need to protect female sexual assault victims</li> <li>• Mentions of women purposely misusing sexual assault allegations</li> <li>• Denial of the threats of sexual assault to women</li> </ul>
<b>Reverse discrimination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criticizing quotas</li> <li>• Denial of a need for quotas</li> <li>• Mention of how women are advantaged due to exemption from military service</li> <li>• Mentions that women are simply complaining while they have nothing to complain about</li> <li>• Mentions that women and feminists are disproportionately in</li> </ul>

	<p>charge/advantaged in the political system and work environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentions of women seeking to overpower men</li> <li>• Mentions of the demonization/villainization of men</li> <li>• Mentions how (young) men are severely disadvantaged in the current Korean society and economy</li> </ul>
<b>General sexist remarks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misogynistic/sexist remarks about female politicians</li> <li>• Downplaying women's achievements</li> <li>• Sexist jokes</li> <li>• Use of slurs degrading women</li> </ul>
<b>Direct backlash to feminism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General negative mentions of feminists (ugly, not real women...)</li> <li>• Use of slurs to denounce feminists</li> <li>• Mention of feminism as a conspiracy to rule over men</li> <li>• Harassment of women considered feminist</li> <li>• Mentions of feminism as something dangerous</li> </ul>

Lastly, some notes need to be made regarding positionality as a researcher. To start off, as a female researcher who is emotionally invested in the issue of antifeminism, it is important to stick to methodological research. Thus, using theory to create a wide variety of concrete coding categories, the coding was done as systematically as possible. Secondly, limited knowledge of the Korean language and culture could have proven a hindrance to the research. To combat this, extensive contextual research was conducted, and English-language Korea- and/or international-based news reports were used, many of which explained the contextual intricacies of important Korean phrases used in public and political discourse.

## Analysis

### Yoon Suk-Yeol and the People Power Party

Both during and after the presidential campaign, Yoon and the PPP showed antifeminist rhetoric in a colourful range of ways. To start off, despite numbers showing otherwise, Yoon took to denying that there are any work-related structural inequalities for women (“Korea’s presidential race”, 2022). Childcare and reproductive rights were not as much of an issue as

expected in antifeminist discourse, and mainly became an issue after the election, when critical comments on abortion were made by the PPP proposed minister for The Ministry of Gender Equality (Jun, 2023). Most statements surrounded birth rates in any case, with the PPP-led government trying to improve the country in this regard, but without any mention of gender equality and its effects on birth rates (J.-H. Lee, 2023; Oh, 2023).

The Ministry of Gender Equality (MOGEF) has probably been the most highly politicized issue for the PPP. During his campaign, Yoon vowed to abolish the ministry on multiple occasions (Kim et al., 2022; ‘‘Korea’s presidential race’’, 2022; Lee & Ko, 2022).

Surprisingly, at first, he still merely mentioned his will to create a ‘‘Ministry for the Equal Rights of both Sexes and Family’’, thus only changing the Ministry’s name (Kim et al., 2022). Yoon’s exaggerated focus on MOGEF is nonetheless unsurprising. Even though the percentage of its budget going to actual gender equality policy has been very small, for a while, men’s rights activists have been claiming that the ministry enforces reverse discrimination and is infested in some sort with feminist ideology. Yoon himself had argued that the ministry’s policies were decidedly unfair to men during his campaign (‘‘Korea’s presidential race’’, 2022). The PPP did not, however, directly accuse the ministry of feminist infiltration in this regard, although Yoon did note that MOGEF was no longer necessary due to gender equality for women having been reached in the country (B. Kim, 2022; K.-P. Kim, 2022). This framing of equal rights having already been reached was frequently employed by the PPP. Even after the elections, the PPP stuck to its will to abolish MOGEF. According to the party’s plans, the tasks of MOGEF would be divided among other ministries and agencies after its abolishment (H.-R. Lee, 2022; K.-P. Kim, 2022; Lee, 2022a). Notably, however, the reasoning for the ministry’s abolishment dwindled down in antifeminist severity, although the PPP’s determination was no less strong. The newest proposed reason was simply that MOGEF’s tasks already overlapped with other ministries and agencies anyway (K.-P. Kim, 2022). Although the ministry is yet to be abolished, it has still suffered severely since the instalment of the PPP government. The ministry’s budget for those projects raising gender sensitivity has been cut by over 40%, and funds aiding women’s social opportunities have been cut completely. It was also announced that sexual rights education for students, which focuses on raising awareness for stereotyping and discrimination as well as consent, would be removed (Oh, 2023).

Another of Yoon’s major campaign topics was his promise to introduce stricter criminal measures against the false reporting of sexual assault (Kim et al., 2022; ‘‘Korea’s presidential

race”, 2022; M.-N. Kim, 2021). Similarly, Yoon vowed to change the “Nth room prevention law”, an act drawn up after the “Nth room” scandal of digital sex crimes in online communities in the country, which obligates large social media platforms to filter out illegal content (“Yoon vows”, 2021). Central to Yoon’s campaigning here is his fear of censorship and false accusations, rather than the protection of victims of sexual violence, a crime which is especially prevalent in online platforms as well as work environments in Korea, and his framing of the country’s men being falsely accused as predators by ill-meaning women. It is clear who is to be ‘protected’ through this rhetoric. Tellingly in this regard, Yoon’s wife was revealed to have made disrespectful comments on MeToo accusations, mocking Democratic politicians for getting into such affairs, while adding that conservatives avoid such accusations by paying people off (“If Kim Keon-hee”, 2022).

The PPP’s focus on protecting perpetrators instead of victims persisted after the elections when MOGEF tried to introduce a bill which would include all non-consensual sex into the criminal definition of rape. Various PPP politicians immediately stepped in to show their disdain for the revision, sharing their concerns for a deepening of gender division, as well as, once again, the possibility of false allegations (H.-J. Lee, 2023). Sexual activities were portrayed not as a state responsibility, but as a private matter (B. Kim, 2022; K.-P. Kim, 2022; Pasquini, 2022). This frame of gendered issues as something private is seen in other categories as well but takes the crown on policies related to assault, combined with a narrative claiming such policies are “unfair” to men. In line with this, initiatives to create a safer environment for women on the streets of one district of Seoul were blocked by a PPP member, stating his reasoning that this would prove unfair to men, who would be left unprotected (Kim et al., 2023). An unexpected finding in the sexual assault category, namely the issue of the South Korean comfort women, came up as a pretty significant point of discourse after the elections, with Yoon being accused of not taking the victims’ suffering seriously by making agreements with Japan on the historically sensitive issue (C.-K. Kang, 2023; J.-Y. Park, 2022; Lee, 2022b; Park & Baek, 2023; W.-Y. Lee, 2022).

The PPP’s central reasoning of equality-affirming policies as “unfair” to men provides a strong bridge to the next category, namely the one on reverse discrimination. Undeniably, a great deal of this rhetoric during Yoon’s campaign originated from (at the time) PPP chairman Lee Jun-Seok (“Korea’s presidential race”, 2022). Yoon abolished the gender quota policy for the Cabinet, which had been introduced by the Moon administration, after he had outed his disdain for the policy, calling it unfair (Choi, 2022a; Choi, 2022b; Jang & Kim,



2022). While he admitted that there was a great deal more men than women in the Cabinet, Yoon argued that women would take over in the future anyway (Choi, 2022a). He also consistently denied the struggles that women face in society and instead focused on ways in which men are disadvantaged (Joo, 2022; Lee & Ko, 2022; Pasquini, 2022). After the elections, general women's issues were set aside at large (Kim & Kim, 2022). Downplaying the severity of discrimination in the country, however, persisted (Choi, 2022a; Choi, 2022b).

Yoon also portrayed a strong direct backlash to feminism. From the start to the end of the presidential campaign, he made critical comments on online forums, blamed feminism for the low birthrates in the country, as well as for the increasing divide between young men and women and claimed feminism was essentially bad (Kang, 2022a; Kang, 2022b).

Surprisingly, though important to note, some tentative feminist moves were made during his campaign. In an interview with the Washington Post, Yoon had described himself as a feminist, but later backtracked when the interview was released in March of 2022, claiming an administrative error in the transcript (Pasquini, 2022). He also employed an openly feminist woman in his campaign, who however left after merely two weeks due to facing strong resistance and receiving constant blame for Yoon's low ratings (Lee, 2022a).

Another surprising finding is the way Yoon did not hide his overall populist campaigning in any shape or form, making frequent use of empty signifiers like "fairness", "freedom", and "common sense" during his campaign in 2022 (Ahn, 2022; Jang & Kim, 2022; Lee, 2022a; Lee, 2022c; "Yoon vows", 2021). As will be clear shortly, unfortunately, neither Yoon nor Lee shied away from such populist tactics.

### [Lee Jae-Myung and the Democratic Party](#)

Even more so than Yoon and the PPP, Lee Jae-Myung seemed unsure of which course to take during the presidential elections. Being the liberal successor to openly proclaimed feminist president Moon Jae-in, Lee's politically progressive standing led him to be a more expected candidate for promoting feminism. However, the campaigning of the DP, especially during the 2022 presidential elections, was ideologically inconsistent at best, and downright electorally opportunistic at worst. Whereas the PPP decided to take on their strong antifeminist standpoint pretty early on, Lee Jae-Myung seemed to be indecisive about who to target at first: young women or young men.

Lee did however refrain from denying the existence of structural barriers for women in Korean society, and never once did he mention that there is no such thing as discrimination

for women in the country. Regarding the MOGEF category, although not calling for its complete abolishment, he did call for the changing of the name of the ministry. He argued for the removal of the word ‘women’ in the Korean name of the ministry, which directly translates to Ministry of Women and Family. Instead, the Korean name of the ministry was to become ‘Ministry of Gender Equality and Family’ (‘Korea’s presidential race’, 2022; Seo, 2022a). Although changing the name from women to ‘gender equality’ in itself would not constitute an antifeminist move per se, the actions and statements of Lee especially during the start of his campaign do provide an antifeminist context in which to situate such arguments.

First of all, in any case, it is important to acknowledge the substantial number of sexual assault cases within the DP. To serve as an example, the Democratic mayor of Busan was sentenced to prison for workplace sexual assault in 2021, and the former DP mayor of Seoul similarly faced accusations (‘3-yr prison term’, 2022; G.-E. Park, 2022). Needless to say, such cases have a damning effect on the party’s believability when they do advocate for women’s rights. The DP similarly made statements downplaying the severity of assault cases, and, as for Lee himself, referring to a case of femicide as dating violence (Ko, 2021; Park, 2023).

Lee made the argument of reverse discrimination numerous times during the start of his campaign. This went from criticizing MOGEF policies, to statements on Facebook calling for a halt to male discrimination, to his engagement with online communities dominated by men’s rights activists (Ko, 2021; ‘Korea’s presidential race’, 2022; Seo, 2021).

Additionally, he frequently outed direct criticism towards feminism in the earliest months of his campaign, with fellow party members even distancing themselves from these actions (Seo, 2021). Although not every party member agreed with these statements, they were part of a bigger plan for the presidential campaign, as revealed in a DP party meeting in early November regarding the upcoming elections, when Lee mentioned the need to divert from Moon Jae-in’s feminist policy in order to win over young male voters (Rashid, 2021). It was clear, then, that Lee would not shy away from populism to achieve his goals, even mentioning directly that he would use such a strategy if it were needed to save the country (Shim & Oh, 2021).

Surprisingly, the campaign stance seemed to shift as the elections came closer. A more root-on approach to young males’ dissatisfaction was taken, with promises to fix joblessness and housing problems (‘Korea’s presidential race’, 2022). A popular feminist activist also

joined the campaign, who, unlike in the case of the PPP, managed to stay (Lee & Ko, 2022). Instead of denying female discrimination, Lee eventually took on a stance in which he claimed both genders are discriminated against and accentuated his desire for equality (Joo, 2022b). As March came around, Lee affirmed that he would like to alleviate gender discrimination and women's social conditions and showed his support for sexual assault victims (H.-R. Lee, 2022; Pasquini, 2022; Seo, 2022a; W.-Y. Lee, 2022).

Strikingly, the DP took on an even more feminist stance after the elections, despite having just lost to a party using the opposite strategy. The party actively opposed continuing PPP calls for abolishing MOGEF, and focused on improving childcare (B. Kim, 2022; C.-K. Kang, 2023; J.-E. Kang, 2023; Seo, 2022a). It also supported former comfort women, although this is also tied to the party's more critical stance towards Japan compared to the PPP (Lee, 2022b; W.-Y. Lee, 2022). Unfortunately, frequent misogynistic remarks by party members occurred simultaneously ('DP imposes 6-month', 2023; 'DP issues warning', 2023).

As mentioned, however, the comparatively strong feminist stance compared to the start of the Presidential elections is nonetheless striking. Despite losing to a candidate strongly playing into the antifeminist sentiment of young men, the DP did not decide to continue or ramp up such sentiment in their own party's policies after the elections had finished, despite what had been theoretically expected. Crucial to this decision is probably the fact that the DP had already seen the results of using such rhetoric during the start of Lee's campaign. Although pandering to young male voters and applying a populist divide-and-conquer strategy seemed a good move at first in order to compete with Yoon, the latter's ratings soon trumped those of the DP anyway. Yoon's severe statements seemed to have already won over antifeminist young men. Making Lee into a last-minute feminist was a move to garner support of young women instead, although this move may have come too late. In any case, the Democratic Party seemed to have already realized the little value that lay in populist antifeminist rhetoric in the long term.

## Comparison

Evidently, both differences and similarities persisted between the two camps. As expected, however, Yoon and the PPP went much further with their antifeminist rhetoric than Lee and the DP. This difference lies especially in the different ways they treated the narrative of

structural setbacks in society existing for women, with Yoon denying the existence of such setbacks altogether and the DP showing a much more moderate view.

Differences between the two regarding birth rate solutions were also apparent. The PPP seemed to completely ignore the importance of childcare, women's assumed social responsibilities regarding their children, and the direct influence of gender inequality on the low birthrate itself. The DP and Lee have, since the last straws of the 2022 election campaign, focused on childcare and subsidies instead. While neither party cites gender inequality and the enormous pressures and expectations faced by women to combine their work and family as contributing to the low birth rates, the DP's approach is undeniably more female-friendly.

In the critique on MOGEF, the two candidates started off relatively similar. Both cited the ministry's faults, criticizing it for its alleged reverse discrimination ingrained in its policies. In fact, Yoon started with a position similar to the one Lee would keep a hold on: that the ministry should remove the word "women" from its Korean name. As the campaign progressed and the elections came to an end, however, the two polarized in their stances, with the DP vehemently criticizing the PPP's calls for MOGEF's abolition.

Both camps have mocked victims of sexual assault in the past, but Yoon and the PPP have shown to have a stricter preference for men's feelings and the possibility of false accusations over women's safety in society. Although the DP nonetheless was plagued more by sexual misconduct cases than the PPP, an important note needs to be made regarding this, highlighting the earlier mentioned comment made by Yoon's wife. Although the statement was made as a mocking towards DP members and should thus be taken with a grain of salt, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that, just because it has not been extensively covered by the media, does not mean that conservative Korean politicians are more innocent in the regard of sexual assault affairs.

On reverse discrimination, both parties seemed to want to gain the favours of *idaenam*, stating that men should not be discriminated against. It is here that populist strategies used by both parties were most apparent. But whereas the DP later turned this around into a more root-on approach to young men's struggles, the PPP capitalized off of sketching a fantastical society where men were unfairly treated, and equality affirming policies should be eradicated lest women take over.

Lastly, the two parties' direct backlash towards feminism was a rollercoaster all throughout the election campaigning. Starting off with Yoon having stated to consider himself a feminist and Lee engaging with antifeminists and their rhetoric online, positions soon shifted. Both parties used populist tactics and strategies in order to gain electoral support, focussing on victory points rather than genuine personal ideology. Yoon, copying Lee Jun-Seok's success, soon began showing hard hostility towards feminism. But while Yoon tried to thrive off of the misplaced antifeminist wishes of young men, the DP eventually took their focus to young people's structural improvements.

## Conclusion

By analysing the narratives of the two major Korean political parties, this thesis has shown just how deeply antifeminist sentiments have been engrained in Korean politics, right- and left-wing alike. Although the Democratic Party articulated these sentiments less severely, both the DP and the PPP candidates found themselves using antifeminism as a populist strategy. By further blaming feminism for the country's structural problems and using populist empty signifiers in his campaign, PPP's Yoon's divide-and-conquer strategy pitted young men and women even further against each other. Even after the elections, instead of tackling the problems at the root of young men's frustrations, the PPP played into these frustrations further. In turn, instead of fully devoting to a similar narrative, the DP and Lee used a trial-and-error tactic on which side to pick during the 2022 elections. After realizing the difficulty of trumping Yoon's antifeminism, however, a move towards a more feminist narrative was employed at the end of the campaign. Making this decision has led the Democratic Party to avoid radicalizing their antifeminism after the elections, despite losing to a politician who had used that exact tactic. This new route seems to be taking fruit: instead of pandering to the antifeminist sentiment in young Korean men like the PPP proceeds to do, the DP has offered more structural solutions to their struggles.

Compared to previous research on the topic, this study has employed a long-term time range that extends beyond the 2022 election campaign and employs a systematic comparison of both democrats and conservatives, thus portraying a more holistic result. The research has similarly shown strengths within its use of a wide variety of both Korean and international news outlets of different ideological origins, as well as a systematic operationalization of the broad concept of antifeminism. Even so, a comparable weakness can be found in the fact that most previous work on the topic has been conducted by Korean scholars, who have a wider

set of opportunities available for the use of Korean and primary sources, leading them to have the opportunity to create an even deeper and direct cultural understanding of the issue. It is also important to note that, despite using a wide ideological variety of news sources, liberal news sites like The Hankyoreh did cover gender issues more extensively than the conservative Chosun Daily, which could have led to a slight distortion towards the more liberal side of reporting.

Nevertheless, this research has important implications and contributions towards both the wider understanding of antifeminist rhetoric and the specifics of the Korean case. Regarding Korean antifeminism in politics, as has been mentioned earlier, this study has contributed a more long-term study of antifeminism in Korea, with a focus that is not just reserved for the PPP and Yoon. It has similarly portrayed unique findings, showing how the use of antifeminist populist narratives is not merely reserved for conservative and right-wing politicians, but can similarly persist within liberal circles, something which has been left relatively unhighlighted up until now in academics. Additionally, the case examined has shown another set of unique results, defying theoretical expectations by showing a party moving further away from their rival party's political standpoints instead of moving towards them after losing to that rival party in elections.

Needless to say, research on the topic has not been completed, however. Specifically, the interplay between the politicization of gender issues in Korea and the polarization of the gender divide deserves further looking into. Was the antifeminist rhetoric used in the elections of 2022 and afterwards a pure reflection of the societal beliefs of the country, or did politicians simply make use of the extremist views of a small, well-organised voting bloc that has now been enlarged through populist political rhetoric as a result? In other words, finding out how antifeminist politics and societal sentiments reciprocally influence each other in the Korean case can prove to be crucial in order to grasp the phenomenon fully. Possibly, a combined qualitative and survey-based research could provide further insights in this regard.

Such further insights could carry great significance, as the gender divide is increasingly proving more polarizing to Korea's young population. As such, the importance of the results of this thesis extends even beyond the academic field. Antifeminism and its politicization are already critical issues in Korea, and these findings have shown just how these sentiments can be abused as an opportunistic and populist electoral strategy by politicians. Such a phenomenon is dangerous for polarization in society and for democracy as a whole. It diverts

attention from the underlying struggles causing young Korean men's frustration, while simultaneously creating an increasingly hostile environment for women, who were never well protected to begin with. Some light is on the horizon, however. Yoon may have divided the country, but he did not conquer it in the long run. The DP's more root-on strategy has proven resilient, winning the parliamentary elections of April 2024. It remains to be seen to what extent this victory will truly alter the landscape of gendered politics in the country. What is clear, however, is that something needs to change for Korea: from a country where young people are left to their own devices, to one where young women do not need to be scared when advocating for their rights. Maybe someday then, Korea's future can be female.

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