

The Public's Declining Trust in Government in Korea

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Abstract

This study investigates to what extent and for what reasons people have been losing their trust in the government in Korea. The level of people's trust in government has been declining continuously and relatively more rapidly in the world since the country's democratic transition in the late 1980s. Democratization raised people's expectations of government so high that they have become easily dissatisfied with its ways of operation and policies. Government's occasional policy failures and public officials' malpractices are significant factors that lead to mistrust in the government. Harsh criticism toward the government by the media, including SNS, is another factor that leads to public mistrust in the government. Too much competition between the polarized parties under the new constitution, with its five-year one-term presidency, after the democratic transition has also negatively affected the peoples' trust in government as a whole. Such continuous decline of public trust may act as a burden in the national competitiveness in Korea.

Keywords: trust in government, democracy and public trust, Korean public administration, Korean government

Introduction

People's distrust in the government is higher than ever in Korea. Several surveys show that the level of trust of Koreans in social institutions is lower in the 2000s than it was in the 1990s. Measured by component, trust drops even more steeply in this order: civil society organizations, mass media, the courts, public bureaucracy, the National Assembly and, at the bottom, political parties. Korean people have become increasingly distrustful in the government since the country's transition to democracy in 1987 when the new constitution established a five-year election cycle for its one-term presidency.

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It is generally known that a low-trust level in public organizations has an undesirable impact on national governance. As Banfield (1958) pointed out, using an example of a poor region in southern Italy, government distrust results in cynicism and weak support, engagement and participation in collective action and motivation. Due to the public's negative outlook, the government is not encouraged to make up for its failure or to initiate reforms, which in turn, further deteriorates its performance and, eventually, the public's confidence, causing the so-called fatalist syndrome, a vicious cycle in a society of low trust (Hood, 1998).

The extent of trust in government worldwide varies from country to country. It also changes over time. For instance, government distrust might be higher in Anglo American countries, where the government is merely considered a "necessary evil," than those on the European continent, which holds the tradition that the "reason of state" should go beyond selfish civil society (Wills, 1999; Kickert & Stillman, 1999). Naturally, people would not trust in an authoritarian government, but in many cases, this habitual distrust tends to intensify as a new democracy develops. It will also vary according to the government's performance on socioeconomic policies as well as administrative competence and perceived integrity. There is a study that a corrosive criticism of the government by mass media also plays a significant role (Nye et al, 1997).

This study investigates how much and why people have been losing their trust in the government in Korea. Taking notice of the fact that declining public trust in the government began at the point of the democratic transition, it will focus especially on analyzing whether democratization raised the people's expectations on the government so high that they became more easily dissatisfied with its ways of operation and policies. At the end of this article, we will discuss whether the expanding government distrust is positive or negative for statecraft and what would be necessary to boost confidence in the government.

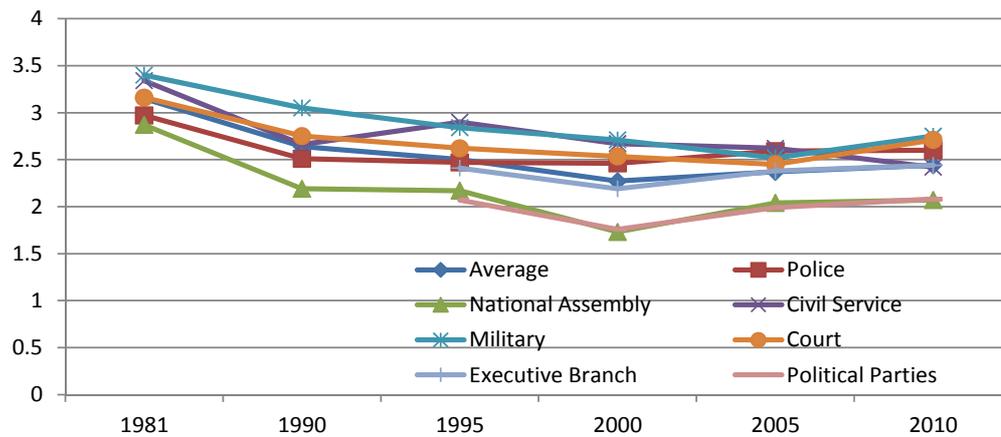
Trends

In Korea, the people's trust in the government has changed according to the times. There is no time series statistics measuring the changes in the level of people's trust in the government that apply the same criteria since the foundation of the Republic. It is possible however to get a rough idea of the trend by looking at data from surveys on trust toward political institutions conducted regularly by the World Values Survey (WVS) from 1981 to 2010.

According to that data, people's trust in political institutions has declined in Korea during the past three decades (Figure 1). The Korean people's trust in seven of the country's public institutions, including its public officials, military, national assembly, and police force, declined as time passed, leading to a trend of declination in the total average as well. There was a slight recovery of trust in 2005 in the executive branch, national assembly, and political parties—with an exception of the continued fall in trust in civil service—and this led to a slight overall *improvement* in trust in political institutions.

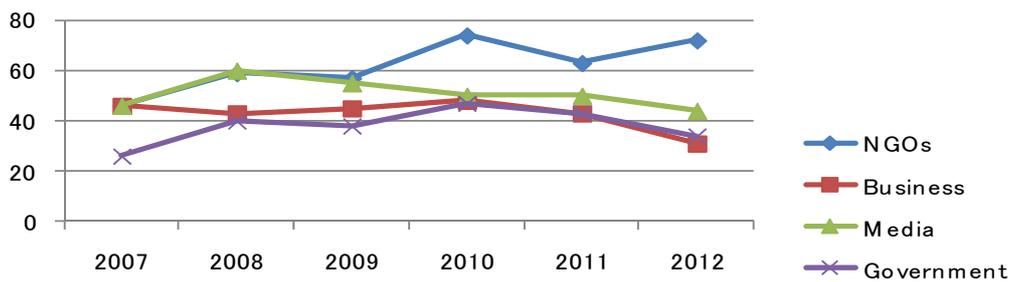
Based on the data of the Edelman Trust Barometer, however, Figure 2 shows the changes of the level of people's trust in social institutions such as the government, media, companies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). According to the figure, trust in the government institutions is generally lower than that in NGOs and the media. Trust in the government improved slightly during the period from 2007 to 2010, but it has begun to decline again from 2010 onward. As a whole, trust in the government in Korea has steadily declined since the 1980s, entering a period of slight recovery in 2000, and then began to fall again in 2010.

Figure 1: People’s Trust in the Political Institutions in Korea, 1981–2010



Sources: Designed based on the data of the annual World Values Survey and You, 2005. Scale: 1–4.

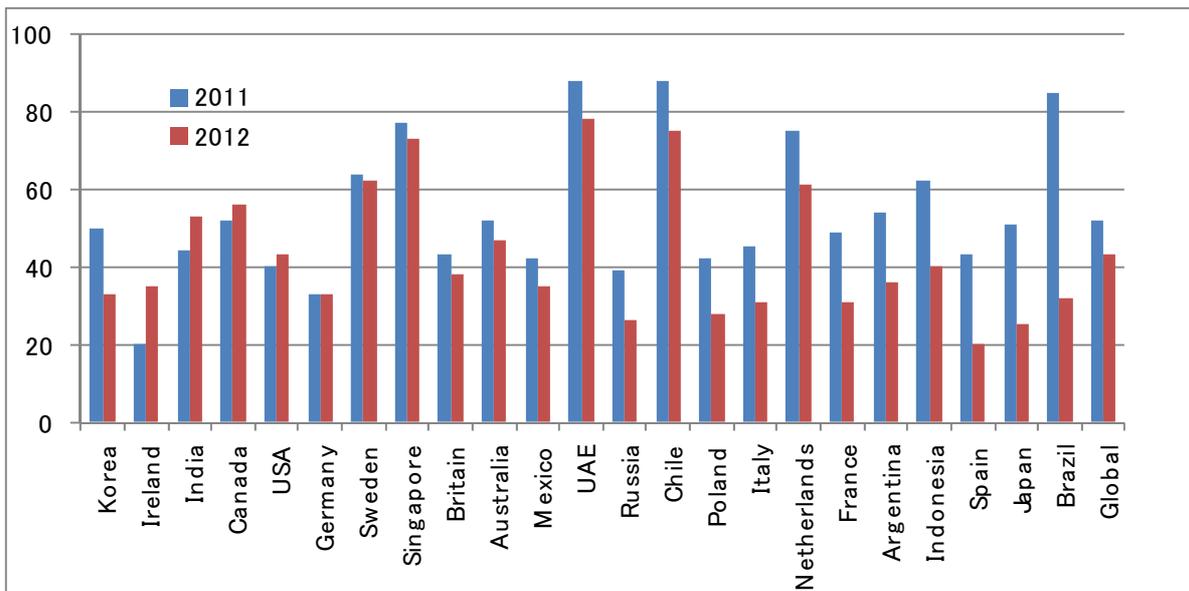
Figure 2: People’s Trust in the Social Institutions in Korea, 2007–2012



Source: Designed based on the data of Edelman Trust Barometer (annual).

People’s trust in the government also continues to decline in Western countries (Porta, 2000; Pharr, Putnam & Dalton, 2000). However, the degree of trust in the government in Korea is generally lower than in these countries. According to a survey on trust in the authority of social institutions conducted in 1996, Korea ranked 22nd among the 23 countries surveyed, including Slovenia, Chile, Germany, Switzerland, Lithuania, Nigeria, the United States, Sweden, Russia, Norway, Spain, Mexico, Belarus, Japan, Finland, Turkey, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, Korea, South Africa, and China (Inglehart, 1999; Park, Lee & Cho, 2003).² In the survey on government trust that the Edelman Trust Barometer (www.trust.edelman.com) conducted on 23 countries in 2011 and 2012, Korea scored far below the world average and ranked in the bottom segment. In 2012, trust in the government declined at a steeper rate than in 2011 (Figure 3).

² Each country’s level of authority is different from trust in the government. Comparing the level of trust with those of other countries is difficult because of differences in measurement standards and timing.

Figure 3: People's Trust in the Government

Source: Designed based on the data Edelman Trust Barometer (www.trust.edelman.com)

Explanations

There are many studies and different approaches to explain why people's trust or distrust in the government changes. In this article, we intend to analyze the declining public trust in the government of Korea by focusing on the following four factors: political culture and democratization, public officials' competence and corruption, criticism from the media and post-modernist trends, and political institutions and competition of political parties.

Political Culture and Democratization

One key factor that affects people's trust in the government is the political culture. In particular, the kind of attitude people have toward the state is closely related to the level of trust they have in the government (Wills, 1999). In the past, for example, the idea of *raison d'état* was spread throughout continental Europe as the philosophy behind the reason for the existence of states. The concept of *the reason* (rationale) of state or national interest was championed by monarchs in the Middle Ages as a means to stand up to the Church, which reigned as the dominant force throughout the period, and it contained standards for maintaining and reinforcing a self-purposed state. Based on the concept of reason of state, the "purposive state" developed in countries such as Germany (Spicer, 2001). Out of this tradition, countries in continental Europe tend to view civil society as inherently selfish in nature and so have high expectations toward the state.

On the other hand, the concept of reason of state failed to flourish in the United Kingdom, which completed social integration and established an absolute monarchy at an early stage. In the modern United Kingdom, individuals that constitute the state were regarded to be free to seek profit and value at their own will. Thus the British view was that the role of the state is limited to protecting individuals through rules that regulate behavior, and then executing these rules. This perspective of regarding the state as a "civil association" was later spread to the United States, and thus it took root as the underlying idea of politics in Britain and the United States (Spicer, 2001). This perspective contrasts with the perspective toward the state in continental European, even going as far as to consider the state only a

“necessary evil” (Wills, 1999). In particular, the United States has a history of seeking and achieving independence in resistance to the evils of absolute power (Wills, 1999). Views toward religion and humanity—based on Protestantism and Puritanism—also affect the political cultures and national characters of Britain and the United States, even arguably forming the basis of their cultures. Distrust in the government tends to be more widespread in political cultures that regard governments as a necessary evil.

In the case of Korea, a sort of *purposive* state has been imbedded since the late nineteenth century, when the country began to follow a version of the “modernization from above.” Since then, the modernization process of the country has been initiated mainly by the political and bureaucratic elites with the strong influence of foreign powers, but without consensus-building from the common people (Jung, 2005). Thus, a strong bureaucratic state was first institutionalized, which then initiated state-led industrialization while marginalizing democratic institutions. Since the late 20th century, however, state-led modernization or a “developmental state” began to take a turn for the better amid booming industrialization, the development of civil society, and political democratization.

While it is easy to assume that the level of trust in the government will be much lower in authoritarian regimes, in reality, trust in the government can be lower as democratization proceeds. According to a survey conducted by the World Public Opinion (worldpublicopinion.org) in 2008 with 17,525 persons across 19 countries, many countries, Latin America for example, are currently suffering from low trust in the government after democratic transitions in the 1970s and 1980s. Only 23% and 22% of the populations of Argentina and Mexico, respectively, reported trusting their governments in 2008. On the other hand, 83% and 64% of the populations of Russia and China, where democratic transition has not been achieved, trust their governments.

The recent trend of declining trust in the government in Korea may well be an effect of the progression of democracy. As observed above, trust in the government proceeded in a downward trend during the period which marks the era of democratic transition and consolidation in Korea. According to a 2005 survey on trust in the government in 15 Asian countries, the level of trust in the government was shown to be low in the relatively democratized ones of Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (Joong-Ang Sunday, 2012).

One possible interpretation of the effect of democratization on the decline of trust in the government is that the public’s expectations of government increase as democratization proceeds. And while the Korean public’s expectations toward the government did continue to increase, the government was facing many obstacles in meeting those expectations. Above all, under Korea’s new constitution, which stipulates a single five-year term for the presidency, the elected leaders lacked the time that their long-reigning predecessors enjoyed to achieve tangible results. It may be that the public expected presidents serving five-year terms to deliver results matching those that the long-serving presidents of the past were able to achieve over many years, in some cases, up to eighteen years (Jung et al., 2010). Moreover, the *long-serving* presidents were able to manage their policies effectively thanks to a top-down way of governing under a centralized system. The Korean people may have continued to expect their presidents, even after the democratic transition of 1987, to achieve similar levels of effectiveness under a democratized and decentralized government system.

The public demand for more social services as democratization proceeds is another factor that leads to excessive expectations toward the government. According to a 2006 survey of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) on the role of government, Koreans strongly agree that the government should be accountable in a wide and diverse range of areas. In other words, Koreans today tend to favor

state activism with a small government (Park C., 2008).³

Public Officials' Competence and Integrity

Public policy failure is another factor that damages people's trust in the government. Defeat in wars or economic recessions significantly damage the public's trust in the government. Significant decreases of people's trust in the government are observed between 2011 and 2012 in Spain, Italy, and France that have been suffering from financial crises (Figure 2). Trust in the government dwindles when economic performance plummets (Hetherington, 1998), but it can also improve again when the economic situation becomes better (Citrin & Green, 1986).

In a comparison of post-1960s implementations of 60 identical, public policy goals of each of seven countries, the performance of the United States was only two-thirds of that of the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and Sweden, and this affected the decline in trust in the government in the United States (Bok, 1997). However, there are examples of low trust in the government even during times of economic boom: Japan before its "lost decade" era and present-day Russia (Joong-Ang Sunday, 2012/02/19).

Korea also experienced a financial crisis in the late 1990s when the government failed to adapt to the rapidly changing global economic environment. As seen in Figure 1, trust in the executive branch and the national assembly dropped more significantly than other public institutions in the period between 1995 and 2000. Trust in the government as a whole recovered slightly after 2000, when the country overcame the financial crisis. However, mistrust in the government was already on the rise in Korea, starting in the 1980s, well before the financial crisis. Therefore, it is uncertain how much government failures like the financial crisis affected trust in the government. What is certain is that the financial crisis provided a reason for the public to seriously doubt the capabilities of the government (Park, T., 2008).

According to a study on trust in the Korean government during the then authoritarian regime in 1980s, mistrust in the government and a sense of unfairness tended to increase when people were dissatisfied with government achievements. In addition, during the same period, while the government's policy achievements regarding the economy and national security did not have much impact on trust in the government, those relevant to politics and society were found to have significant impact (Park, C., 1991).

In another study, an individual's subjective evaluation of their economic situation based on personal benefit was found to have no effect on trust in the government, while subjective evaluation of the situation of the national economy based on social benefit was found to have an effect (Lee, S., 1993).

Trust in the government also decreases when the public is more aware of corruption carried out by public officials (Citrin & Green, 1986). In a comparative study on ten central and eastern European countries, trust in the government was reported to be lower when the level of corruption was higher (Mishler et al., 2001). The level of corruption is considered an important factor for evaluating political institutions and their legitimacy (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003).

According to a comparative study of the World Values Survey on the 17 newly democratized and the 17 advanced democratic countries, it was the corruption of the elites in the newly democratized countries that had a more negative impact on people's trust in their state institutions (Jang, 2008).

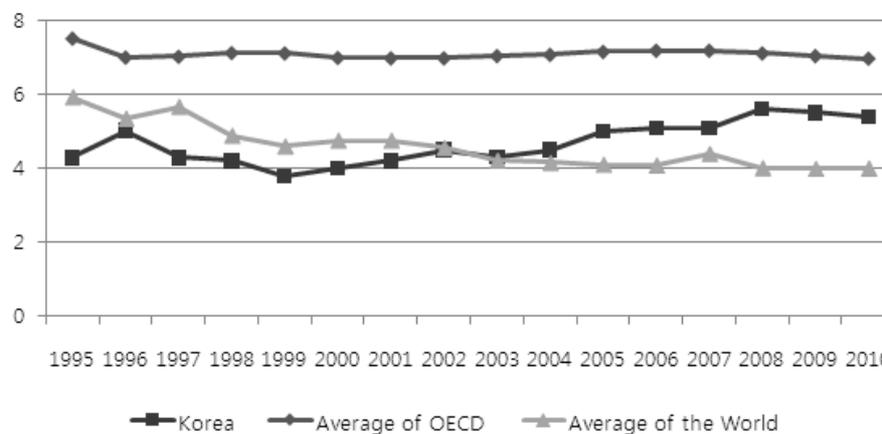
The level of corruption of public officials in Korea is far below what is expected from a country of its international economic status. According to the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) announced

³ An empirical study suggests that while strong religious beliefs has a positive effect on government trust, active participation in religious organizations has a negative impact in Korea (Lee, S. J., 2010).

by Transparency International, Korea scored a mere 5.4 points (on a scale of 1 to 10) and ranked 39th among 178 countries. While Korea's CPI scores began to exceed the world average in 2000, they are still below the average of the OECD member states (Figure 4). Considering the fact the Korea's GDP surpassed the OECD average in the early 2000s, the country's level of corruption does not meet its economic advancement (Jung et al., 2011). In the 2009 Korean General Social Survey, 51.5% of respondents agreed that corruption is a prerequisite for a man or woman to reach the top position in his or her field in Korea, while only 27.4% disagreed (Shin K., 2011).

Such a relatively high level of perception of corruption may explain Korea's relatively low trust in the government. According to a study, public officials who possess purity, consistency, fairness, and efficiency are better trusted by the public (Lee, J., 2001). Another study suggests that the government's morality has more impact on public trust than its capability (Park, S., 2006), while another found the factors that the public considered the most when determining their trust in public officials to be in the order of fairness, sincerity, goodwill, execution of regulatory measures, and ability (Lee, H., 1999).

Figure 4: Corruption Perception Index of Korea, OECD, and World, 1995–2010



Source: Jung, et al. 2011

One study suggests that trust in government agencies increases when fairness of compensation is guaranteed, and more when penalties are toughened for crimes committed by the elite class over that for “ordinary” crimes (Park B., 2004). Another suggests that a citizen's trust in the government was higher when he or she received fair treatment in comparison to the standard group and when policy decisions were made following a fair procedure, concluding that distributive and procedural fairness in policy processes had more correlation to public trust in the government than the level of benefit from the policy (Park & Bae, 2007).

Criticism from the Media and Post-Modernism

Some studies claim that the media's corrosive criticism of the government is another factor that undermines public trust in the government. Based on analyses of media reports in the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Italy since the 1960s, Patterson (1993) points out clear trends: First, mass media, including newspapers and broadcasts have become more negative in tone toward the government. Second, they place more emphasis on conflict than on the essence of the news. Third, in this manner, the media has become a participant in politics, transforming itself into another means of politics. Fourth, the audience's level of trust in the government gets worse as media becomes more critical.

Moreover, the spread of social networking services such as Twitter and Facebook provides an

environment where criticism toward the government by the media and individuals can be quickly spread to others. As Korea enters the age of digital information, public opinion established in cyber space through participation by the masses has come to have significant influence on society. Thus, criticism toward the government by the digital press influences the judgment of the masses by being indiscriminately supplied to society (Park, T., 2005). There are also cases where negative issues are intentionally created for the purpose of "buzz marketing." Thanks to its advanced Internet infrastructure, Korea now has an environment where such types of criticism against the government spreads quickly. Meanwhile, the spread of post-modernist value lessens the authority of existing social institutions. In Korea, this trend is much more common among the generations born after the period of industrialization and democratization.

A key example of the media undermining trust in the government in Korea through criticism toward government policies is the "candlelight rally" held in 2008 to protest the threat of mad cow disease when the Korean government began renegotiating to import American meats. This example shows the relationship between the influence of television reports, the spread of digital media, and mistrust in the government (Ryu & Lee, 2008).

The podcast *Na neun Ggomsu-da* (roughly translated "I Am a Trickster"), which gained wide popularity since its first airing in April 2011, is another example of damaging criticism by media. The podcast, which consists mainly of satirical and malicious content against the incumbent president and his administration, is particularly popular among the younger generations. The program contributed greatly in increasing public mistrust in the government by exposing issues such as the president's purchase of his personal home and a ruling party member's cyber attack on the National Election Commission's website, and so on. The founder of the program, Eo-Jun Kim, claims that approximately 10 million people now listen to the podcast (*The Economist*, 2012/01/21).

According to an empirical study on the influence of media in Korea, people who read newspapers more often tend to harbor more distrust toward the government (Park, 1989). In addition, in a study on the political attitudes of middle and high school students, those who participated more in political conversations had lower trust in the government (Auh, 1989). Some studies suggest higher education levels also leads to lower trust in the government in Korea (Yoon, 1985; Lee, J., 2001).

It may be necessary to focus on a view based on a more fundamental change in society than other factors like incompetence and corruption within the government, criticism from the media; public distrust in the government has increased as society has shifted from the modern age, where nationalism and statist ideas were a dominant paradigm, to the post-modern age, which challenges the authority of conventional ideas and existing institutions and focuses on late-materialistic values. Since the 1960s, this view began to spring up in the West, weakening respect toward almost all social institutions. This naturally led to mistrust in political leaders and government (Inglehart, 1997). Moreover, participation in volunteering diminished during the same period, and this caused an overload on government as it was forced to assume responsibility to resolve countless social problems (Putnam, 1995).

Such weakening of the authority of existing social institutions and the concurrent waning in volunteerism are phenomena that are occurring in Korea as well. Some studies suggest a significant correlation between the decline in the number of volunteer associations and the drop in public trust in the government (Suh, 2001). Other studies suggest that the level of trust in others, participation in organizations, method of participation in politics, and the area of residence affect the level of trust in the government (Park, Lee & Cho, 2003). Above all, people who have post-modernist or post-materialistic values tend to have a higher level of mistrust in the government (Park, 2004).

Relative deprivation is also closely related to trust in the government. An empirical study of Korean blue-collar workers found a significant correlation between their perception of relative deprivation and

trust in the government (Yoo, 1987), while another study found the sense of relative deprivation felt by residents of agricultural areas significantly correlated to their mistrust in the government (Moon, 1990).

Political Institutions and Competition

In American politics, the ideological polarization of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party since the 1960s has contributed to the worsening of mistrust in the government there (King, 1997). In contrast to the popular preference for seeking moderation, the country's two-party political system continues to emphasize distinction of detail and head toward the extremes. According to a report of the National Academy of Public Administration (1999), the public's trust in the political leaders was only 16%, which is far lower than that in the civil servants with 67%.

A similar situation is unfolding in Korean politics, and ideological conflict between the parties continues to intensify since the democratic transition of 1987. One study suggests that such polarization is not caused because the general public has become polarized, but rather because the ideological differences between lawmakers that form the leadership of each party have widened (Lee, N., 2011). Politicians must compete all the time now for power under the current five-year single-term presidential system, and this negatively impacts trust in the government by causing incumbent presidents to become "lame ducks" at an ever earlier stage in their terms.

In Korea, political factors, particularly the image the presidents sets causes the greatest affect on the public trust in government (Lee, S., 1993). In addition, an empirical study on the recent sinking of the warship in the West Sea found that while political ideology, age, and income level of respondents affected trust in the government, it was their overall opinion toward the current government that had the greatest impact (Lee, S. S., 2010).

Conclusion

Declining trust in the government is almost a global trend today. As observed above, however, Korea's trend over the past 30 years is one of the most serious cases in the world. People's trust in the government has continuously declined since the 1980s, entered a period of slight recovery in 2000, and then began to fall again in 2010.

There are many factors that have caused such a near-continuous decrease of public trust in the Korean government. While the democratization since the 1980s has raised the public's expectations and demands on the government, the government's ability to meet them is limited in many ways, and public mistrust toward government has increased as a result. Government's occasional policy failures and public officials' malpractice and corruption are also significant factors that lead to mistrust in the government. The private sector has developed relatively more rapidly than the public sector, due to both industrialization and democratization, and Korea's level of transparency is evaluated as relatively low compared to its global economic status. And while corruption among public officials has lessened over the years, the mere fact that it is still practiced in a "democratized" country is an important factor that negatively impacts on people's trust in the government. Lacking procedural fairness in public policymaking and implementation has made the Korean people distrust the government. Harsh criticism toward the government by the mass media is another factor that leads to mistrust in the government. As Korean society undergoes rapid democratization and digitalization, it has become possible for the media's criticisms against the government to be reproduced and shared with others broadly and quickly. The political institutions and legislative behavior, including the single, five-year-term presidency and too much competition between the polarized parties after the democratic transition of 1987 have also had a

negative impact on the peoples' trust in government. In order to achieve the same results in their short five-year terms—matching those achieved by past presidents who served for extended periods before the democratic transition—incumbent presidents tend to overreach and execute impractical policies (Jung, 2012).

People's trust in the government is one of the key factors that determine the government's competitiveness on the world stage. A high level of trust leads to better cooperation from the public in public policies, and this in turn improves effective policymaking and implementation. More people pay their taxes, for example, when their trust in tax-related administrative agencies is high (Murphy, 2002). When stakeholders' trust in a public organization in charge of mediating social conflicts is high, their compliance to the organization increases. The government that is distrusted cannot set priorities easily for allocating public resources to resolve public problems (Neustadt, 1990). A high level of public distrust threatens the legitimacy of the government (Miller, 1974) and leads to conflict and disruption within society (Lewis & Weigert, 1985).

It is true that there are some positive aspects also of people's mistrust in the government. The existence of mistrust means that the public is not indifferent to public affairs but rather pays close attention and holds expectations. Distrust in the government can play the role of safety net for social institutions, promoting government reforms and democratic administration (Barber, 1983).

In the case of Korea, however, continuous decline of public trust in the government has acted as a burden on national competitiveness, the ability of the country to develop a socioeconomic foundation strong enough to attract global attention. Taking notice of the trend of mistrust in Korea, Fukuyama (1995), identifies Korea as a low-trust society and warns that such a low level of trust will have adverse effects on the development of the country. In many cases, mistrust in the government acts as an obstacle in executing public policies (Son & Chai, 2005). For example, conflicts arising over the selection of radioactive waste disposal sites led to extremely high social costs due to a low level of trust in the government among residents of candidate locations (Park, S., 2006).

There is the possibility of the emergence of a vicious cycle in democratic countries like Korea, contrary to expectations of a *virtuous cycle* between participation in associations and in politics, and trust in the government (Yoo, J., 2000). Nonetheless, participation in politics has continuously increased since the 1981 survey, while trust in others and trust in the government has fallen, with people who participated more in politics tending to have more mistrust in the government. This shows that Korean society is manifesting a vicious cycle different in nature from the so-called "vicious cycle in low-trust societies" argued by Banfield (Jang, S., 2002). In order to improve its national competitiveness, Korean government and society need to boost confidence in the government by overcoming the factors that have caused such a continuous decline of public trust.

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