

The Paradox of Institutional Deliberation in Democratic Recovery*

Hwayong Shin[†]

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Abstract

After a democratic violation, do strong checks and balances help a country recover? Unlike typical cases of democratic backsliding, some incumbents' actions prompt democratic institutions to hold them accountable. As institutional deliberation unfolds, institutional signals that accountability is underway may inadvertently weaken pressures from citizens and the media to punish the incumbent. Meanwhile, violation-justifying narratives can gain traction and polarize public perceptions of democratic legitimacy. Leveraging South Korea's 2024–2025 martial law crisis, I find that the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling was followed by polarization in evaluations of martial law and trust in democratic institutions. Analyses of protest dynamics—mobilization, media coverage, and online search interest—reveal that as institutional deliberation unfolded, accountability pressures weakened while countermobilization gained traction. Institutional deliberation intended to preserve legitimacy can inadvertently foster conditions that polarize perceptions of democratic legitimacy: the paradox of institutional deliberation. The very processes designed to protect democracy can also make it fragile.

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[†]Postdoctoral Fellow in Survey Research, Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government and Public Policy, Washington University in St. Louis, Email: hwayong@wustl.edu.

Democratic backsliding goes unconstrained when the government and citizens fail to notice or punish the incumbent’s violations of democratic rules (Druckman 2024; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Ingham 2026; Waldner and Lust 2018). Yet not all incumbents’ actions escape institutional or public oversight. Sometimes an incumbent’s highly visible actions trigger institutional checks from other branches of government. Recent examples include cases where elected officials’ salient actions faced institutional deliberation over their culpability, whether through judicial review or impeachment proceedings: Boris Johnson’s 5-week prorogation of Parliament in 2019, which resulted in the U.K. Supreme Court ruling that the prorogation was unlawful; Donald Trump’s 2021 impeachment proceedings in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate on a charge of inciting the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol; and Yoon Suk Yeol’s declaration of martial law in 2024, followed by South Korean National Assembly’s impeachment vote and the Constitutional Court’s ruling to uphold impeachment. When checks and balances work, do they repair the damage to democracy, or does an incumbent’s violation of democratic rules still leave lasting scars?

This study shows that even when checks and balances work, democracy may not fully recover. Even when democratic institutions ultimately determine that an incumbent’s act constitutes a violation of the law,¹ public opinion may become polarized after the recovery process. One reason is that, while a democratic violation can happen instantly, democratic recovery takes time: democratic institutions must follow constitutionally required procedures before reaching a final judgment. I refer to these deliberative procedures that unfold across and within branches of government as *institutional deliberation*, including both public deliberation (e.g., legislative sessions, court hearings) and private deliberation (e.g., judges’ deliberation outside public view). Deliberative procedures are normatively desirable and designed to preserve the legitimacy of institutional judgments (Curato and Steiner 2018;

¹Ahmed (2023) conceptualizes four types of democratic transgressions: violations of the law, democratic norms, democratic ideals, and power-consolidating institutional reforms. Compared to violations of the law, other forms of transgressions are harder to detect, but can be applied to my theory if such actions initiate institutional checks and balances.

Dryzek 2009; Smart 2024), but they may have unintended consequences. The time required for institutional deliberation and its inclusive consideration of competing viewpoints can inadvertently create time, space, and public visibility for violation-justifying narratives to spread and gain traction. Institutional deliberation, while designed to preserve democratic legitimacy, can paradoxically foster conditions that polarize public perceptions of the very legitimacy it is intended to protect: *the paradox of institutional deliberation*.

One pathway through which the paradox emerges is the interaction between accountability exercised by democratic institutions and accountability pressures exerted by civil society. I focus on protests as a key manifestation of civil society’s accountability pressures. While prior research assumes that formal institutions and civil society reinforce each other in exercising accountability (Laebens and Lührmann 2023), I highlight a previously unrecognized tension between them. Whereas the existing literature on protest mobilization primarily emphasizes that expectations about others’ participation boost collective action (Chong 2014; Ingham 2026), I argue that protest mobilization depends not only on social cues but also on institutional signals. Specifically, progress in institutional deliberation can weaken accountability pressures from civil society, especially when formal institutions signal that they are responding to public demands to hold the incumbent accountable. In such cases, citizens seeking punishment may perceive less need to participate in protests. These same signals can reassure incumbent supporters that extreme escalation has been averted while heightening their fear of the incumbent’s removal, thereby driving countermobilization. As the media amplify these competing narratives and public attention to them increases, institutional deliberation can inadvertently foster an environment in which public perceptions of democratic legitimacy become polarized. While Grillo and Prato (2023) and Ingham (2026) develop theoretical accounts of related mechanisms (fear-and-relief mechanism, seeds-of-doubt mechanism), I evaluate the proposed paradox empirically by examining changes in public opinion alongside three observable indicators of protest dynamics: protest mobilization, media coverage of protests, and public attention to protests.

South Korea’s 2024–2025 martial law crisis provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the paradox of institutional deliberation. Unlike typical cases of democratic backsliding, the episode involved an incumbent’s action that was sufficiently visible to trigger institutional checks by other branches of government. On December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, but strong checks and balances constrained his attempt and ultimately removed him from office. While the declaration of martial law occurred instantly, democratic recovery required five months of institutional deliberation by the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court. During this period, civil society actors—including citizens and news organizations—exerted accountability pressures through impeachment protests and media coverage (Hong 2024; Rashid 2024). The case offers a rare window into how accountability pressures and public opinion evolve as institutional deliberation unfolds and in its aftermath.

Leveraging public opinion surveys, I find that that public perceptions of democratic legitimacy polarized following the Constitutional Court’s ruling. A two-wave national panel survey (Wave 1: pre-ruling; Wave 2: post-ruling; $n = 840$) shows post-ruling polarization in perceptions of martial law’s legitimacy, support for impeachment, and trust in implementing institutions, such as the Constitutional Court. Three waves of cross-sectional national surveys (pre-ruling, post-ruling, and one year after the ruling; $n \approx 1,000$ per wave) reveal similar patterns and further demonstrate that these trends persist for at least one year after the ruling. These findings point to concrete harms to democracy, because public disagreement over democratic legitimacy weakens citizens’ collective capacity to constrain future democratic transgressions (Ingham 2026; Svobik 2019). Moreover, polarization in support for unlawful acts signals serious democratic decay (Ahmed 2023). The observed polarization in institutional trust contrasts with recent cross-national evidence showing that, although trust in political institutions (e.g., legislatures) has declined, trust in implementing institutions has remained stable or even increased (Valgarðsson et al. 2025). My findings suggest that democratic recovery can come at the unexpected cost of polarizing trust in the institutions responsible for carrying it out.

Analyses of protest dynamics provide evidence that, as institutional deliberation unfolded and signaled accountability was underway, protests demanding presidential impeachment weakened while countermobilization gained traction. I find consistent patterns across three observable indicators of protests: protest mobilization (ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data) protest events; $n = 1,341$), media coverage of protests (articles from national news outlets, $n = 18,508$), and public attention to protests (search interest on Google and Naver)² from November 4, 2024, to May 4, 2025, spanning one month before the declaration of martial law through one month after the Constitutional Court’s ruling. I find that accountability pressures from citizens and the media were strongest before the National Assembly’s impeachment vote but subsided after the Assembly passed the impeachment motion and during the Constitutional Court’s deliberation. During the Court’s deliberation, media coverage of and public search interest in anti-impeachment protests increased, indicating that public disagreement became more salient. The remarkably consistent patterns across three types of data suggest that institutional deliberation can inadvertently foster an environment conducive to polarization in perceptions of democratic legitimacy.

What does this study reveal about the limits of checks and balances in democratic recovery? At the Constitutional Court hearings, Yoon and his attorneys argued that because martial law had been constrained by other branches of government, it had caused no serious harm.³ My findings show otherwise: institutions alone cannot shield a democracy from the damage of an incumbent’s violation of democratic rules. While South Korea’s recovery from the martial law crisis is celebrated as a successful defense of democracy (Lee 2026), this study identifies an overlooked vulnerability of established democracies: the very procedures designed to protect democracy can also make it fragile. Then, is a quicker institutional

²Naver is a major South Korean search engine.

³During the second hearing, Yoon’s attorneys claimed that “because nothing ultimately happened, the martial law would seem like a joke from citizens’ perspectives” (Bae 2025). In the eleventh and final hearing, Yoon defended his actions in a 67-minute statement, asking, “Is there such a thing as a two-hour insurrection?” (Hong 2025).

resolution the answer? Not necessarily. This study is not an argument against institutional deliberation. Deliberative procedures remain essential to democratic principles (Davis 2025; Dryzek 2009)—bypassing them undermines democratic legitimacy⁴ and a quick decision may deprive citizens opportunities to voice their opinions. Striking the right balance between thorough deliberation and timely action—without sacrificing civil society oversight—thus remains an open question for democratic recovery.

Accountability in the Face of Democratic Transgressions

While the literature is rich with cases of prolonged democratic backsliding (Frantz et al. 2025; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Orhan 2022), democracies do sometimes halt erosion through accountability mechanisms. Accountability is conceptualized as “constraints on the government’s use of political power through [...] sanctions by both citizens and oversight institutions” (Lührmann, Marquardt and Mechkova 2020, p. 812). Laebens and Lührmann (2023) distinguish among three types of accountability mechanisms: vertical (electoral competition), horizontal (parliamentary and judicial oversight), and diagonal (pressures from civil society and the media). The theoretical framework I propose focuses on non-electoral forms of accountability—horizontal and diagonal—and applies to incumbents’ actions that are sufficiently visible to trigger formal institutional deliberation over whether and how to hold the incumbent accountable within or across branches of government.⁵

In the face of a potential democratic transgression, horizontal accountability—the institutional checks and balances—takes time because most established democracies require constitutionally prescribed deliberative procedures (Ginsburg, Huq and Landau 2021). Such

⁴In Paraguay, the impeachment proceeding for the removal of Fernando Lugo in 2012 was concluded in less than 24 hours, prompting international concern that its extreme speed undermined due process (Ginsburg, Huq and Landau 2021).

⁵The theory does not apply to democratic transgressions that are difficult to detect (e.g., gradual power-consolidating changes to democratic institutions; Ahmed 2023) or to cases in which expedited procedures offer little opportunity for institutional deliberation before a final judgment (De Micheli, Sanchez-Gomez and Roberts 2022).

institutional deliberation is widely regarded as essential and desirable for democracy. Research on procedural justice shows that institutional decisions lacking transparency or established procedures can undermine the perceived legitimacy of institutional decisions (e.g., the shadow docket; Davis and Benesh 2023; Davis 2025; Smart 2024). Likewise, theories of deliberative democracy expect democratic institutions to be equipped with deliberative capacity, meaning that they consider the “full pool of perspectives” in reaching an institutional decision (Curato 2015; Dryzek 2009; Parkinson 2018).

Despite optimistic expectations, I argue that institutional deliberation may have unintended consequences. First, by ensuring that competing perspectives are represented, deliberative procedures provide even accused incumbents with high-profile opportunities to communicate with the public—not only through formal venues such as court hearings, but also by creating time for communication through informal channels. Second, when institutional deliberation signals that accountability is underway, mobilization for protest demanding punishment may weaken, while countermobilization can gain traction. In consequence, the heightened salience of disagreement can generate uncertainty and polarize public perceptions of democratic legitimacy. I term this dynamic *the paradox of institutional deliberation*: institutional deliberation, while designed to preserve democratic legitimacy, can inadvertently foster conditions that polarize perceptions of the very legitimacy it is intended to protect.

The implication of the paradox is not that institutional deliberation is itself detrimental. Rather, because institutional deliberation takes time to unfold across gradual steps, strategic actors may exploit the space and time it creates to disseminate narratives that justify the transgression. Ironically, the more deliberatively institutions assess an incumbent’s action, the more time such narratives have to gain visibility and influence. In the sections that follow, I develop theoretical expectations for the observable outcome of the paradox of institutional deliberation—public opinion—and for three observable mechanisms around protest dynamics: protest mobilization, media coverage of protests, and public attention to protests.

How Citizens Infer Democratic Legitimacy: Social Cues

Citizens evaluate political events not only based on the events themselves but also on perceptions of how fellow citizens evaluate them. Research on social influence shows that individuals rely on their perceptions of what others think when forming political judgments (e.g., descriptive social norms, second-order beliefs; Carlson and Hill 2022; Farjam and Loxbo 2024; Jost, Baldassarri and Druckman 2022; Mernyk et al. 2022). Consequently, visible expressions of collective support or opposition serve as informational cues that shape perceived credibility of a position (Wang, Chu and Huang 2023).

Perceptions of fellow citizens’ opinions also matter when individuals assess the legitimacy of a politician’s actions or democratic institutions. Ingham (2026) argues that when public opinion diverges on the legitimacy of an officeholder’s action, that observed disagreement itself can trigger the “seeds-of-doubt” mechanism. The divergent public reaction to a norm-violation “sows seeds of doubt and mistrust” in democratic institutions, thus the uncertainty of legitimacy gives transgressors the power to undermine democracy’s foundations (Ingham 2026, p.2). The seeds-of-doubt mechanism suggests that observing public disagreement can polarize citizens’ evaluations of the legitimacy of both the transgression itself and the institutions responsible for adjudicating it.

Such polarization is likely to emerge along ideological cleavages, because citizens tend to interpret political events through partisan and ideological lenses, selectively assigning responsibility to political opponents (Bisgaard 2015; Graham and Singh 2024; Kolberg-Shah and Shin 2024). Following the conclusion of institutional deliberation, citizens who are ideologically aligned with the incumbent are more likely to view the incumbent’s action as justified and to distrust the institutions responsible for holding the incumbent accountable. In contrast, those who oppose the incumbent are likely to maintain—or even strengthen—their view that the incumbent’s action was illegitimate and their trust in those institutions. Such polarization may suggest a threat to democracy, as it weakens citizens’ collective capacity to constraint future transgressions (Svolik 2019).

As indicators of public perceptions of democratic legitimacy, I focus on the following outcomes. The first is citizens’ perceptions of the legitimacy of the incumbent’s action and their support for institutional sanctions. When the incumbent’s action involves violations of the law, segments of the public supporting such an action will signal a serious concern for democracy (Ahmed 2023; Svolik 2019). The second is trust in democratic institutions, “the reservoir of goodwill” that supports democratic stability by enabling institutions to withstand political challenges (Easton 1965). Following Valgarðsson et al. (2025), I distinguish between implementing institutions (e.g., Constitutional Court, National Election Commission) and representative institutions (e.g., National Assembly). Polarization in trust in implementing institutions—which are responsible for enforcing democratic checks and balances—would be concerning given that trust in these institutions, unlike trust in representative institutions, has remained stable or increased globally. The discussion above leads to the following hypothesis:

Post-Deliberation Polarization Hypothesis: Following institutional deliberation over a potential democratic transgression, perceptions of the legitimacy of the incumbent’s action and trust in democratic institutions will diverge across ideological lines.

Protests as Signals of Public Opinion

Because citizens rarely observe others’ private opinions directly, protests provide important social cues that citizens use to infer broader public sentiment. As a major form of accountability pressure from civil society, protests reveal not only whether particular views exist but also how widespread and intense they are, thereby influencing political representatives and institutions (Gause 2022; Wouters and Walgrave 2017). Historically, protest movements have also played important roles in democratization and democratic consolidation across diverse contexts (e.g., Arab Spring, South Korea, Poland; Ekiert and Kubik 2010; Laebens and Lührmann 2023; Kolberg-Shah and Shin 2024; Magee and Massoud 2022).

In the context of accountability against a democratic violation, institutional deliberation

creates a period during which institutional decisions remain incomplete. During this period of institutional uncertainty, citizens will likely become increasingly reliant on perceptions of fellow citizens’ views when forming political judgments. As highly visible signals of public opinion, protests therefore become a key source of information through which citizens form their own views. Against this backdrop, I consider three observable manifestations of protest: protest mobilization, media coverage of protests, and public attention to protests.

Mechanism 1: Protest Mobilization

When an incumbent’s action is concerning and salient enough to initiate institutional sanctions, citizens are also likely to perceive it as threatening democracy and initially mobilize to demand punishment. As institutional deliberation proceeds, gradual institutional milestones (e.g., impeachment vote, indictment, court hearings) can signal that the transgression is being constrained and that formal institutions are responding to citizens’ demands for punishment. Adapting the “fear-and-relief” mechanism from Grillo and Prato (2023) to the context where formal institutions constrain an incumbent and prevent a full escalation of a democratic crisis, I argue that a similar psychological mechanism operates during institutional deliberation.⁶ Progress in institutional deliberation can induce relief by signaling that democratic breakdown has been averted and accountability is underway. Among citizens seeking punishment, this relief may reduce incentives for continued protest mobilization. Among incumbent supporters, the same relief may restore support for the incumbent and encourage countermobilization.

The theory I propose departs from existing theories in two respects. First, contrary to theories that expect protest participation to encourage further participation (Chong 2014; Ingham 2026), institutional deliberation can interrupt—and even reverse—those dynamics before a final institutional judgment is reached. Second, I argue that institutional deliber-

⁶In Grillo and Prato (2023)’s theory, when autocratic incumbents themselves prevent a full escalation, citizens who were initially fearful about democratic breakdown feel a sense of relief, which restores their support for the incumbent.

ation does not merely respond to accountability pressures from civil society but can itself reshape those pressures. Contrary to existing theories that view horizontal and diagonal accountability as mutually reinforcing (Laebens and Lührmann 2023), my theory suggests that the two forms of accountability can instead become substitutes.

These dynamics imply that protest mobilization will vary across stages of institutional deliberation. In legislature–court models of impeachment, citizens may perceive protest as more consequential during legislative deliberation than judicial review because legislatures are expected to be more responsive to public pressure than courts (Mueller 2024; Wouters and Walgrave 2017; Gibler and Randazzo 2011). Once the legislature has rendered its decision, citizens seeking institutional punishment may perceive that accountability is already underway and reduce further mobilization, whereas supporters of the incumbent may become more willing to countermobilize. More generally, this logic extends to other models of institutional deliberation. For example, in bicameral models of impeachment, passage in the lower chamber may similarly reduce accountability pressures from citizens while the upper chamber continues deliberation. Consequently, accountability pressures from civil society may gradually weaken and become increasingly fragmented as institutional deliberation progresses. The discussion above leads to the following expectation:

Mechanism 1 (Protest Mobilization): Does protest mobilization demanding punishment weaken as institutional deliberation progresses?

Mechanism 2: Media Coverage of Protests

The media play a central role in democratic accountability by shaping both citizens’ and formal institutions’ responses to democratic violations. Because citizens learn about political events and collective experiences that they cannot directly witness through the media (Fetzer et al. 2025; Mutz 1998), coverage of protests can shape mass mobilization and public opinion. Because politicians and governmental actors also learn about public opinion through the media, media coverage of protests demanding punishment likewise exerts pressure on

democratic institutions (Laebens and Lührmann 2023; Walgrave and Soontjens 2023).

Then how do the media cover protest mobilization over the course of institutional deliberation? The media as a “passive mirror” of society (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014) would require coverage to reflect, to the extent possible, the relative scale of protests demanding and opposing punishment. Yet not only is the ground truth often difficult to ascertain, the media may also have incentives that lead them to under- or overrepresent particular directions of protest mobilization. Consequently, the media face at least three choices: coverage focused on (1) demands for accountability, (2) opposition to punishment, or (3) both sides.

One approach is for coverage to focus on protests demanding punishment (e.g., pro-impeachment protests), which theories such as “democracy-framed electoral coverage” (Jang and Kreiss 2025; Peterson, McGregor and Block 2025) would view as desirable if the incumbent’s action is a blatant violation of democratic rules.⁷ Yet some journalists may instead pursue balanced coverage of both sides to avoid audiences perceiving the outlet as biased or lacking credibility (Lawrence and Schafer 2012; Shin 2026), especially during periods of heightened uncertainty. However, balanced coverage can drift into conflict or game framing (Hitt and Searles 2018; Patashnik 2023), presenting a democratic violation as a matter of contested legitimacy. A third approach is to primarily cover protests opposing punishment (e.g., anti-impeachment protests). Such coverage is likely when countermobilization constitutes a novel development during the crisis, making it attractive as drama- or novelty-driven news content (Boydston 2013). Yet its risk is that protests defending democratic violations often draw on anti-democratic narratives questioning electoral integrity and legitimizing political violence—a pattern observed across countries (Lugosi-Schimpf and Thorlakson 2021; Kwak 2024; Prochaska et al. 2023).

As institutional deliberation progresses and signals that accountability is underway,

⁷Jang and Kreiss (2025) and Peterson, McGregor and Block (2025) caution that neutral media coverage of democratic norm-violations can mislead the public, and thus encourage journalists to anchor their coverage on democratic norms.

protests demanding punishment become less novel, while countermobilization may become increasingly salient. Combined with journalistic incentives to pursue balanced, conflict-oriented, or novelty-driven coverage, institutional deliberation may therefore shift media attention away from accountability demands and toward protests opposing punishment or both sides of protests. Such shifts in media coverage can weaken accountability pressures and sow doubt about the legitimacy of both the incumbent’s actions and the institutions responsible for adjudicating them. The preceding discussion leads to the following expectation:

Mechanism 2 (Protest Coverage): Does media coverage of protests demanding punishment decrease as institutional deliberation progresses?

Mechanism 3: Public Attention to Protests

Political attitudes are strongly shaped by the considerations that are most accessible and salient in citizens’ minds (Zaller 1992). As political actors and the media devote greater attention to particular aspects of politics, citizens become more likely to rely on those considerations in evaluating political actors and events (Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Tesler 2015). I argue that institutional deliberation can reshape these accessible considerations by reducing the visibility of accountability pressures. As protests demanding punishment diminish and media attention to those protests declines, citizens become less exposed to signals of broad societal condemnation. At the same time, growing countermobilization and media attention to it create opportunities for the narratives defending the incumbent to enter citizens’ information environment. The increased salience of competing narratives can activate the “seeds-of-doubt” mechanism (Ingham 2026), generating uncertainty about the legitimacy of the incumbent’s action and democratic institutions, thereby polarizing public perceptions.

One observable manifestation of the shifting considerations in citizens’ minds is public attention to protests demanding and opposing punishment. Online search behavior provides a useful proxy for public attention because it reflects salient issues in citizens’ information

environment (Chen et al. 2024; Dancy and Fariss 2024). Building on the expectation that accountability pressures from citizens and the media weaken as institutional deliberation unfolds, I expect public attention will similarly evolve as follows:

Mechanism 3 (Public Attention to Protests): Does public attention to protests demanding punishment decrease as institutional deliberation progresses?

Case Selection: The 2024-25 Martial Law Crisis in South Korea

The 2024–25 Martial Law Crisis in South Korea provides a unique opportunity to examine the paradox of institutional deliberation. On December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, suspending all political activities—including National Assembly, local councils, political parties, and demonstrations, placing the media under military control, and prohibiting strikes, among other measures (Oh 2024). Beyond the official proclamation, he ordered military forces to secure the National Assembly, raid the National Election Commission, arrest prominent political figures, and cut off electricity and water to selected media organizations (Kim 2025*b*; Ng, Bicker and Marsh 2024; Yang and Lee 2024). Yoon justified these actions by claiming that election fraud and the opposition-controlled National Assembly posed an existential threat to the country. A president from the conservative People Power Party (PPP), Yoon argued that the opposition Democratic Party had abused its legislative majority to paralyze state affairs (Ji 2024). Ultimately, both the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court determined the martial law unconstitutional, making the episode an unusually clear case of a democratic violation constrained by institutional checks and balances.

The institutional response unfolded over five months through successive stages of deliberation (for detailed timelines, see Choi 2024, 2025; Jung 2025). On the night martial law was declared, the National Assembly voted (190–0) to lift the order despite military attempts to block access to the National Assembly. After an initial impeachment motion failed for lack of quorum on December 7, 2024, the National Assembly impeached Yoon

by the constitutionally required two-thirds majority (204–85) on December 14. The process then moved to the Constitutional Court, whose proceedings were initially complicated by the fact that only six of the Court’s nine seats were filled. Yoon questioned the legitimacy of the six-judge bench, while the acting president, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, refused to appoint additional justices nominated by the National Assembly (Yoon and Kim 2024; Iordache 2024). The National Assembly subsequently impeached (192-0) Han on December 27, after which two additional justices were appointed, allowing the Court to proceed with an eight-member bench.

Institutional deliberation across the legislative and judicial branches, which included constitutionally required procedures, created opportunities for Yoon to communicate with the public. During the legislative stage of the impeachment process, Yoon delivered five nationally televised public addresses defending himself. During judicial review, the president or his attorneys participated in eleven public Constitutional Court hearings, including Yoon’s 67-minute closing statement at the final hearing. Even while detained between January 19 and March 8, 2025, Yoon continued communicating with supporters through statements released by his legal team and messages disseminated on social media. In contrast, after the final Constitutional Court hearing on February 25, the Court remained publicly silent until announcing its ruling on April 4, 2025.

The case closely matches the conditions under which the paradox of institutional deliberation is expected to emerge. The alleged democratic violation was highly visible, triggered formal institutional intervention across branches of government, and unfolded through an extended period of institutional deliberation. Progress in institutional deliberation—including the legislative impeachment vote, the president’s detention, and Constitutional Court hearings—signaled that accountability was underway and that formal institutions were responding to public demand, before a final judgment was reached.

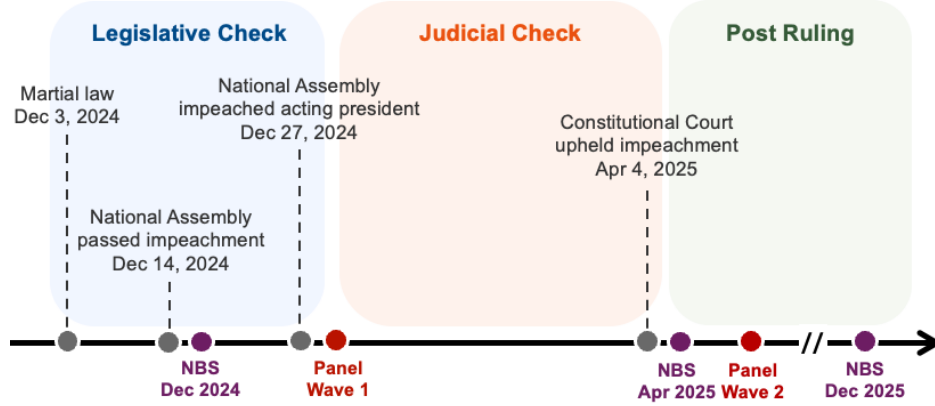
This political episode is well suited to examining how accountability pressure from civil society evolves during institutional deliberation. Protest has long served as a central mecha-

nism of democratic recovery in South Korea, from the June Democratic Struggle of 1987 to the candlelight demonstrations preceding President Park Geun-hye’s impeachment in 2017 (Hayes 2005; Kolberg-Shah and Shin 2024). Protest activity therefore provides a particularly informative measure of accountability pressure from citizens, while media coverage of protests captures the extent to which such pressure is amplified in the public sphere. The evolution of protest activity and media coverage across the stages of institutional deliberation makes the crisis a suitable setting for evaluating the paradox of institutional deliberation.

Public Opinion in the Aftermath of Institutional Deliberation

In the aftermath of institutional deliberation over an incumbent’s potential violation of democratic rules, do public perceptions of democratic legitimacy remain intact? To answer this question, I analyze two complementary sets of survey data. First, to examine within-individual changes, I designed and conducted a two-wave panel survey before and after the Constitutional Court’s impeachment ruling (Panel Waves 1 and 2; red dots in Figure 1). Second, to examine aggregate-level shifts in public opinion, I analyze three waves of the National Barometer Survey (NBS; purple dots in Figure 1) before and after the ruling (December 2024 and April 2025, respectively), as well as a year after the crisis (December 2025). The pre-ruling waves were fielded during or shortly after legislative check, whereas the post-ruling waves were fielded after judicial deliberation had concluded, by which point the public had experienced the institutional deliberation leading up to the Court’s final judgment.

Figure 1: Timeline of the Martial Law Crisis and Timing of Surveys



Note: Field dates for each survey are as follows: NBS Dec 2024 (December 16–18, 2024); Panel Wave 1 (December 30, 2024 – January 3, 2025); NBS Apr 2025 (April 7–9, 2025); Panel Wave 2 (April 17 – May 7, 2025); and NBS Dec 2025 (December 22–24, 2025).

Data and Methods

Two-Wave Panel Survey

To examine within-individual shifts in public opinion, participants were recruited through the Macromill Embrain, a survey firm widely used for research in South Korea (e.g., Kolberg-Shah and Shin 2024). The survey firm applied quotas on gender, age, and region, resulting in a sample that broadly reflects the national population, albeit without being fully nationally representative. Wave 1 was fielded from December 30, 2024 – January 3, 2025, shortly after National Assembly impeached the acting president, then-Prime Minister, for resisting the appointment of Constitutional Court judges. Additional judges were appointed shortly afterward so that the Court could begin deliberation. Thus, the timing of Wave 1 captures the transition from a legislative to a judicial check in institutional deliberation. Wave 2 was conducted on April 17 – May 7, 2025, approximately two weeks after the Constitutional Court’s ruling. Of the 1,200 respondents who participated in Wave 1, 819 respondents (68%) completed Wave 2.⁸ The distribution of demographic variables is presented in Table S1.

⁸The survey firm initially projected a recontact rate of approximately 70%. Yet the ruling came 111 days after the impeachment motion, taking longer than in previous presidential

Question wordings are provided in Sections 8.1 and 9.1 of the Supplementary Materials. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at [redacted for peer-review], and the ethics statement is provided in Section 6 of Supplementary Materials.

Analyses of attrition and attention checks support the overall quality of the sample. Attrition does not appear to be systematically related to respondents' baseline characteristics (Table S2). Comparisons of Wave 1 characteristics between respondents who completed both waves and those who did not reveal no statistically significant differences across key outcome variables. The sample also performed well on attention checks, with only 0.4% of respondents failing both checks (Table S3). Because excluding respondents based on attention checks may introduce bias (Berinsky, Margolis and Sances 2014), all observations are retained in the analysis.

In both waves, perceptions of democratic legitimacy and ideology were measured as follows. First, to measure perceptions of Yoon's declaration of martial law, respondents were asked the extent to which they agree with statements characterizing the declaration as (1) an anti-constitutional insurrection aimed at restricting the authority of the National Assembly or (2) a legitimate exercise of presidential authority as provided under the Constitution respectively, on a four-point scale ("do not agree at all" – "strongly agree") with a "don't know" option. Second, for trust in institutions, respondents indicated the degree to which they trusted: Constitutional Court, courts, National Election Commission, the military, National Assembly, and the president's office, on a five-point scale ("do not trust at all" – "trust very much"). Lastly, ideology was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on a five-point scale ranging from very conservative to very liberal, with moderate as the mid-point. Because South Korea has a multiparty system in which multiple parties can align with the same ideological camp, the analysis focuses on ideology rather than partisan identity.

impeachment cases. The interval between waves extended beyond initial expectations and likely contributed to the lower-than-projected recontact rate.

Cross-sectional Surveys

To examine aggregate-level changes in public opinion over time, I analyze the National Barometer Survey (NBS), which is a repeated cross-sectional national survey series in South Korea. NBS is conducted jointly by Embrain Public, KStat Research, Korea Research, and Hankook Research, which are among the major South Korean survey firms. Each wave includes approximately 1,000 respondents, where population benchmarks are based on the Ministry of the Interior and Safety’s monthly resident registration statistics (NBS N.d.).⁹ Samples are drawn using stratified random sampling by region, gender, and age, with proportional allocation across strata. I leverage three waves of NBS: (1) Pre-ruling, conducted two days after the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion (December 16-18, 2024, NBS Wave 137); (2) Post-ruling, conducted three days after the Court’s impeachment ruling (April 7–9, 2025, NBS Wave 150); and (3) one-year post-crisis (December 22–24, 2025; NBS Wave 171). The distributions of demographic variables are presented in Table S10, and the question wordings are provided in Sections 8.2 and 9.2 of Supplementary Materials.

The surveys included the following measures. First, to measure support for presidential impeachment, respondents in the pre-ruling wave were asked whether the National Assembly’s impeachment vote against President Yoon was “a good decision” or “a bad decision.” In the post-ruling wave, respondents were asked whether the Constitutional Court’s decision to uphold the impeachment and remove President Yoon from office was “a good decision” or “a bad decision.” These items are substantively equivalent, as both measure support for institutional decisions to impeach the president at different stages of institutional deliberation—the legislative and judicial stages. In both waves, “don’t know” responses were excluded from the analysis. Second, institutional trust is measured in the pre-ruling wave and the one-year post-crisis wave. Respondents indicated how much they trusted Constitutional Court, courts, and National Assembly on a four-point scale (“do not trust at all” – “trust very much”).

⁹The sampling frame is based on mobile phone virtual numbers provided by the three major telecommunications companies, ensuring near-universal population coverage.

Lastly, ideology was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on a five-point scale ranging from very conservative to very liberal, with moderate as the midpoint.

Results

Within-Individual Changes Before and After the Ruling

To examine whether within-individual changes following the conclusion of institutional deliberation varied by ideology, I follow the two-wave fixed-effects framework of Bøggild and Jensen (2025) and the Factorial Difference-in-Differences (FDiD) design proposed by Xu, Zhao and Ding (2026). Unlike a typical event-based difference-in-differences (DiD) design, where both treatment and control groups exist, these studies consider contexts in which everyone is exposed to a common treatment—COVID in Bøggild and Jensen (2025) and famine in Xu, Zhao and Ding (2026)—and instead estimate differences in effects across groups. Following this approach, I treat the impeachment ruling as a common event experienced by the South Korean public and examine heterogeneous changes across ideological groups.

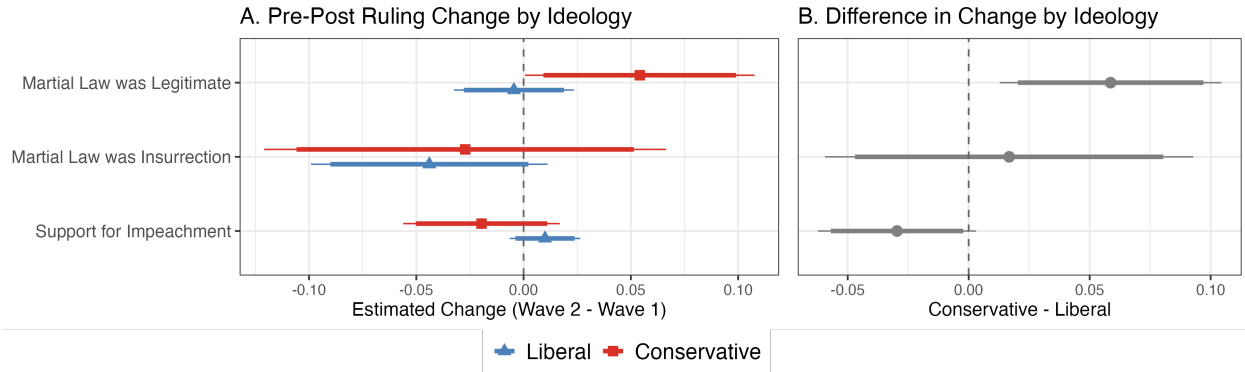
I use two-way fixed-effects estimation that controls for time-invariant within-individual factors through individual fixed effects and society-wide time-varying factors through wave fixed effects, with standard errors clustered at the individual level (Bøggild and Jensen 2025). The key estimand is the interaction between the post-ruling indicator and group indicator, capturing the differential within-person change across groups following the ruling. In the FDiD design, this interaction term between the treatment (i.e., the event) and the factor (i.e., group indicator) captures how the effect of the treatment varies across subgroups under assumptions analogous to no anticipation and parallel trends in the canonical DiD design (Xu, Zhao and Ding 2026). While these assumptions cannot be directly tested with only two waves, the institutional context provides some theoretical support for their plausibility. Following the final hearing on February 25, 2025, the Constitutional Court ceased public communication and isolated itself from outside contact, both physically and virtually, generating considerable uncertainty about both the timing and outcome of the decision (Heo

2025; Song 2025). Uncertainty was further heightened as the Court’s deliberation lasted longer than expected¹⁰ and when the Court dismissed Prime Minister Han’s impeachment on March 24, 2025, in a divided decision, raising concerns that the justices might also be divided over Yoon’s case and that the Court could become paralyzed with two justices approaching retirement in mid-April (Cha 2025; Kim 2025a; Park 2025). These circumstances make anticipation of the ruling less likely and provide no clear reason to expect systematically diverging trends across ideological groups prior to the decision, lending theoretical plausibility to the no-anticipation and parallel-trends assumptions.

The results reveal substantial ideological differences in shifts in perceptions of democratic legitimacy following the Court’s impeachment ruling, as shown in Figure 2. Panel A displays within-group changes for descriptive purposes, whereas Panel B shows the key estimand—the differential pre-post ruling change between conservatives and liberals. Compared to liberals, conservatives indicate relatively greater increases in the belief that martial law was legitimate ($p < .05$). Additionally, conservatives show a relatively greater shift toward opposing the presidential impeachment compared to liberals ($p < .10$).

¹⁰The Court’s deliberation was substantially longer than in prior presidential impeachment cases. The Court ultimately took 111 days to uphold Yoon’s impeachment, compared with 63 days to reject the impeachment motion against Roh Moo-hyun in 2004 and 91 days to uphold Park Geun-hye’s impeachment in 2017. Notably, in Yoon’s case, the Court deliberated for 39 days after the final hearing before announcing its ruling, compared with 14 and 11 days between the final hearings and rulings in the Roh and Park cases, respectively.

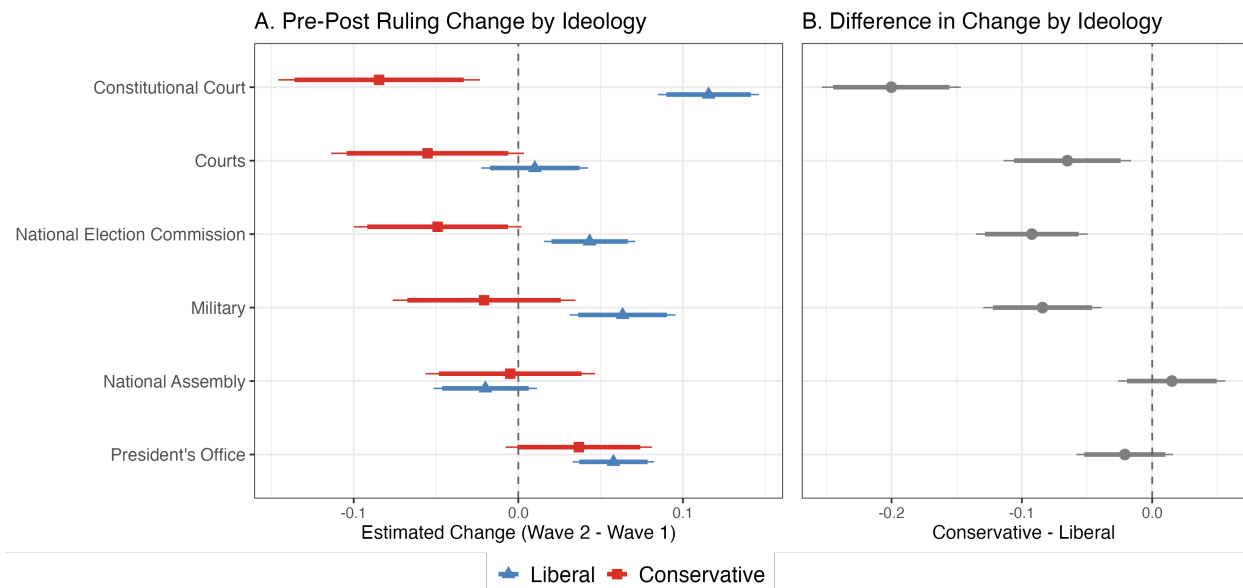
Figure 2: Pre-Post Ruling Democratic Legitimacy Perceptions by Ideology



Note: Panel A displays the within-individual pre-to-post ruling change in democratic legitimacy perceptions. Panel B displays the difference-in-differences estimate (difference the pre-to-post change between conservatives and liberals, capturing the differential change between ideological groups). Estimates are based on two-way fixed effects OLS regression models with individual fixed effects and clustered standard errors at the individual level. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Thick and thin horizontal lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. Table S4 presents these results in tabular form.

As for institutional trust, the Court's impeachment ruling was associated with different shifts among liberals and conservatives, as shown in Figure 3. Patterns of findings differed across implementing and representative institutions. Conservatives exhibited greater decreases in trust compared to liberals for implementing institutions such as Constitutional Court, the military, and the National Election Commission ($ps < .01$) and for the courts ($p < .05$). In contrast, there were weaker ideological differences in pre-post changes in trust toward representative institutions—the National Assembly and the president's office—suggesting more muted divergence across ideological cleavages.

Figure 3: Pre- and Post-Ruling Institutional Trust by Ideology



Note: Panel A displays the within-individual pre-to-post ruling change in democratic legitimacy perceptions. Panel B displays the difference-in-differences estimate. Estimates are based on two-way fixed effects OLS regression models with individual fixed effects and clustered standard errors at the individual level. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Thick and thin horizontal lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. Table S5 presents these results in tabular form.

The findings indicate that public opinion did not uniformly evolve before and after the Court's decision. Instead, perceptions of the legitimacy of the president's action and trust in implementing institutions diverged across ideological lines rather than converging following the ruling. The results are robust to the inclusion of demographic controls. As shown in Figure S1, the estimated differences in pre-to-post changes between conservatives and liberals remain substantively similar across specifications that separately control for differential changes by age, gender, education, and income. The observed patterns also contrast with the global trend, where trust in implementing institutions has remained stable or increased (Valgarðsson et al. 2025). The martial law crisis and subsequent institutional deliberation instead polarized trust precisely in those institutions tasked with upholding constitutional order, thereby weakening the bipartisan foundation for democratic stability.

Because media environments play an important role in shaping political attitudes, I

additionally examine whether within-individual shifts differ by respondents' consumption of conservative and liberal media (Figures S2–S3 and Tables S6–S7). The results closely mirror those by ideology, with similar polarization observed between consumers and non-consumers of both conservative and liberal media. Conservative media users became more likely than non-users to believe that martial law was not an insurrection and to distrust the Constitutional Court and National Election Commission, whereas liberal media users became more likely than non-users to trust the Constitutional Court, courts, and military.

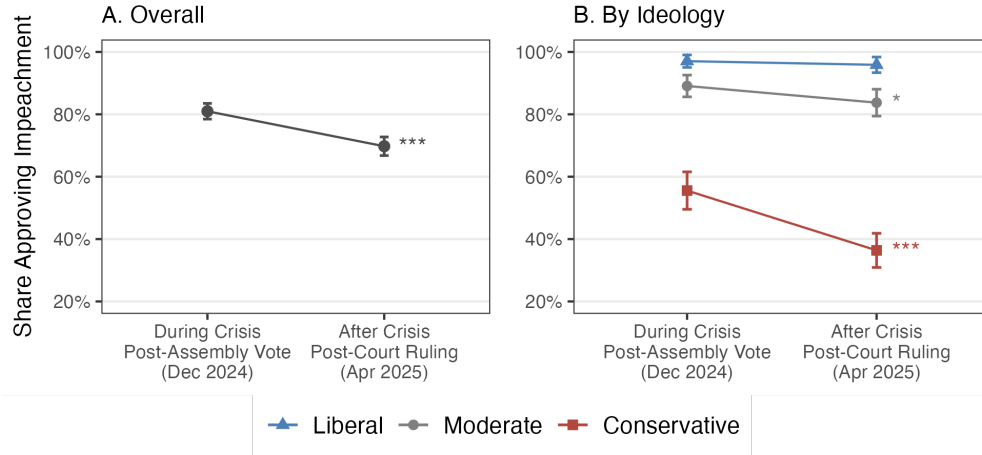
While the main analyses focus on differences between liberals and conservatives because prior theories of selective blame attribution most directly apply to these groups (e.g., Bisgaard 2015), I also estimate models using moderates as the reference category. As shown in Figures S4–S5 and Tables S8–S9, the results are consistent with the main analyses: liberals and conservatives exhibit the patterns consistent with those reported above, whereas moderates show minimal change before and after the Court's ruling for most outcomes, consistent with the lack of clear theoretical expectations for this group.

Aggregate-Level Changes Before and After the Ruling

For aggregate-level public opinion, I test whether support for impeachment and institutional trust changed significantly across waves using weighted independent-samples t-tests, applying survey weights with the `weights` package in R (Pasek et al. 2025). The analyses compare (1) the pre-ruling wave (December 2024) with the post-ruling wave (April 2025), and (2) the same pre-ruling wave with the wave collected one year after the crisis (December 2025).

The results from the pre- and post-ruling waves of the NBS reinforce the patterns found in the panel survey, showing that perceived legitimacy of the president's action and trust in implementing institutions polarized after the Court's ruling, as shown in Figure 4. While almost all liberals supported the impeachment both pre- and post-ruling, the share of respondents supporting the impeachment decreased after the ruling among independents ($p < .10$) and conservatives ($p < .01$). The increased ideological gap indicates polarization in public perceptions of the legitimacy of the president's imposition of martial law.

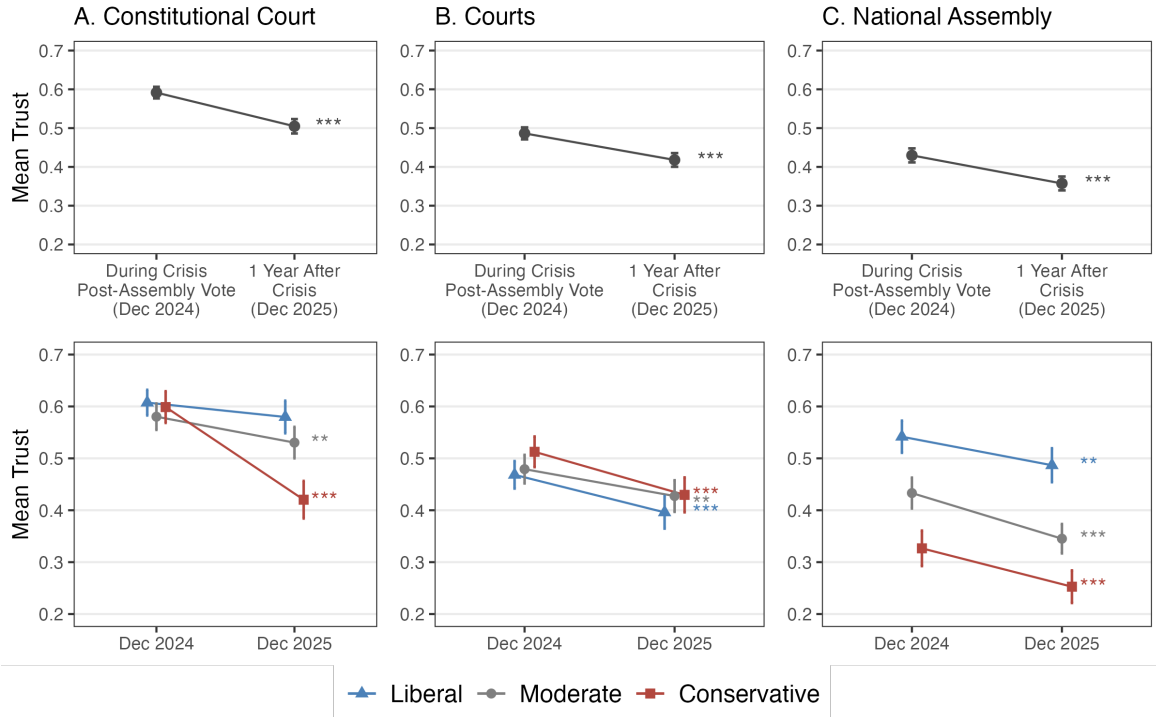
Figure 4: Support for Presidential Impeachment Before and After the Ruling



Note: Estimates represent weighted averages and error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference between the two waves in a weighted independent-samples t-test. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Table S11 presents the results in tabular form.

Complementing the panel survey findings, the long-term trends shown in Figure 5 reveal that institutional trust had not recovered one year after the martial law crisis. Instead, overall trust significantly decreased for the Constitutional Court, courts, and National Assembly ($ps < .01$). The pattern of ideological divergence also persisted over the longer term, although it varied across institutions. One year after the crisis, polarization was most pronounced for the Constitutional Court—the institution that directly held the president accountable—where trust decreased among conservatives ($p < .01$) and moderates ($p < .05$) but remained relatively stable among liberals. On the other hand, trust in the National Assembly and courts decreased across ideological groups ($ps < .05$). Although these long-term trends cannot be attributed solely to the Court’s ruling, trust across institutions remained below levels observed during the crisis, suggesting that the passage of time alone did not restore institutional trust.

Figure 5: Institutional Trust During and One Year After the Crisis



Note: Estimates represent weighted averages and error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference between the two waves in a weighted independent-samples t-test. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Table S12 presents the results in tabular form.

While pre-crisis trends immediately preceding the crisis cannot be fully examined, I leverage NBS waves collected one and two years before the crisis (December 12-14, 2022, NBS Wave 86; December 4-6, 2023, NBS Wave 111) that included measures of trust in the courts and the National Assembly.¹¹ Figure S6 shows that trust in the courts and the National Assembly remained stable between December 2022 and December 2023, increased in December 2024 following the National Assembly's impeachment vote against Yoon, and then declined by December 2025, after the period of institutional deliberation culminating in Yoon's impeachment. Although only suggestive, the stability of institutional trust during the two years preceding the crisis and its subsequent deviation from prior trends suggest that the martial law crisis and subsequent institutional deliberation constituted an exogenous shock.

¹¹Trust in the Constitutional Court was not measured by NBS prior to December 2024.

How Accountability Pressures Evolve During Democratic Recovery

Having shown that public perceptions of democratic legitimacy polarized following institutional deliberation, I turn to the mechanisms underlying the paradox of institutional deliberation. Specifically, I examine whether, as theorized, accountability pressures from civil society decrease as institutional deliberation proceeds, as manifested in three observable indicators of protest dynamics. First, I examine protest mobilization by analyzing the magnitude of mobilization for pro- and anti-impeachment protests. Second, I examine media coverage of protests by documenting how South Korean national media (broadcast, liberal, and conservative outlets) covered protests demanding or opposing impeachment. Third, I examine public attention to protests by analyzing online search interest on Google and Naver, the latter being South Korea’s dominant domestic search engine. For all three mechanisms, I collected and analyzed data from November 4, 2024, one month before martial law, to May 4, 2025, one month after the Constitutional Court’s impeachment ruling.

To examine how accountability pressures from citizens and the media evolve as institutional deliberation progresses, each analysis compares two stages of institutional checks and balances—legislative and judicial checks. Based on the timeline discussed in the case selection section, the legislative check period spans December 4 through December 28, 2024, whereas the judicial check period spans December 29, 2024, through April 4, 2025.

Mechanism 1: Protest Mobilization

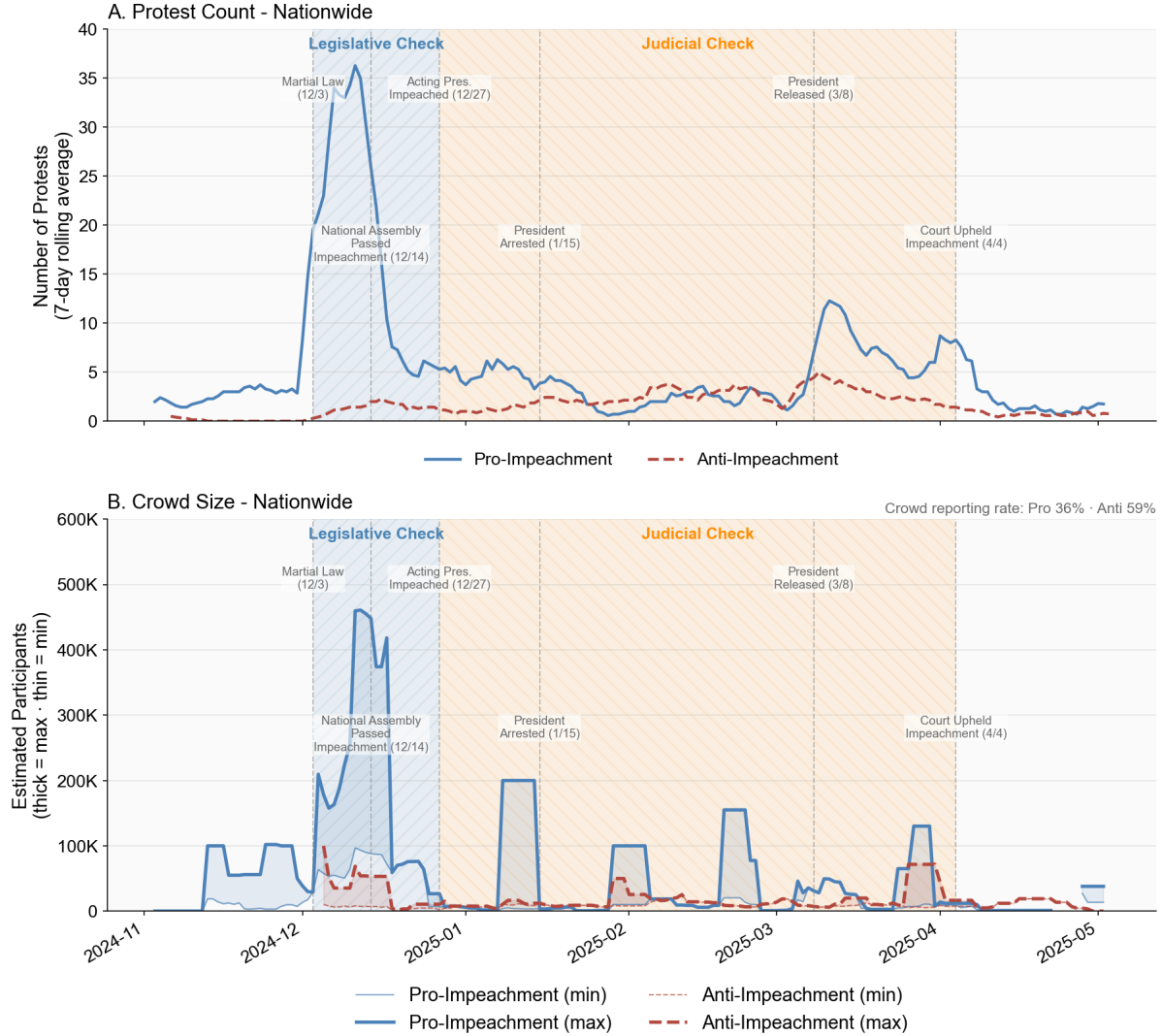
Protest mobilization data were collected from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED; Raleigh et al. 2010). The data were restricted to events coded as “protest” occurring between November 4, 2024 and May 4, 2025. Geographic location and actors were restricted to ‘Republic of Korea,’ resulting in a total of 3,562 protest events during the specified period. These observations are unique protest events with distinct combination of date and location at the city or district level. To classify protests as pro-impeachment or anti-impeachment, I text-annotated the event descriptions using LLM, verified by human

expert coding by two research assistants, both native Korean speakers. The LLM-human validation achieved reliable inter-coder reliability (percent agreement = .95; Cohen’s κ = .87) (Törnberg 2024; O’Connor and Joffe 2020). After applying the validated LLM prompt (GPT 4o-mini, temperature set to 0 to ensure deterministic outputs) and keeping only the protests by South Korean participants demanding or opposing Yoon’s impeachment, the data identified a total of 1,341 protests, among which 1,045 were pro-impeachment and 296 were anti-impeachment.¹² Prompt language and validation details are available in Sections 3 and 7.1 of Supplementary Materials.

Crowd size estimates were extracted when available and parsed into lower- and upper-bound values when reported as ranges (see Section 3 of the Supplementary Materials for parsing details). The gap between the lower- and upper-bound estimates typically reflects the divergence between police and organizer estimates. The median for this min-max ratio is 2.0, whereas the mean is 4.2, with an extreme outlier of 78.9 (Figure S7). To prevent this outlier from distorting the results, it is excluded from the upper-bound estimate.

¹²According to ACLED’s categorization, 1,332 were ‘peaceful protests’ whereas only 9 were ‘protest with intervention.’

Figure 6: Mobilization for Impeachment Protest



Note: Dates on the horizontal axis are shown in year-month format. In Panel A, lines represent centered 7-day moving averages of daily protest counts. In Panel B, lines represent centered 7-day moving averages of daily crowd size estimates, based on events for which participant estimates were reported (reporting rates noted in the upper right corner). Shaded bands indicate the range between the reported minimum and maximum crowd size estimates. When only a single estimate was reported, the minimum and maximum coincide and no shaded band is visible. One event with an extreme ratio of 78.9 is excluded from the maximum crowd size estimate.

The results are consistent with the theoretical expectation that protest mobilization would decrease as institutional deliberation proceeds. In Figure 6, daily protest counts and crowd-size estimates are visualized as centered 7-day moving averages to smooth day-of-week fluctuations, as protests were heavily concentrated on Saturdays. Protest counts indicate

that accountability pressure was strong during the legislative check but substantially decreased during the judicial check, as shown in Figure 6A. Pro-impeachment protests peaked at approximately 35 events per day prior to the National Assembly’s impeachment vote and declined sharply as the crisis entered the judicial-check phase, consistent with the theoretical expectation that progress in institutional deliberation would reduce accountability pressure from citizens. Anti-impeachment protests became somewhat more frequent during the legislative check and again after the president’s detention, suggesting that institutional deliberation can create space for countermobilization. Pro-impeachment protests increased again following the president’s release, which occurred during the Constitutional Court’s prolonged silence after the final hearing, but did not recover to the level observed during the legislative-check period. This renewed mobilization is consistent with the theoretical expectation that citizens’ accountability pressure subsides when institutions appear to be constraining the incumbent but can reemerge when institutional developments cast doubt on whether accountability will ultimately be enforced.¹³

Crowd size exhibits a similar pattern, with pro-impeachment mobilization peaking during the legislative check phase but declining during judicial deliberation, as illustrated in Figure 6B. Although pro-impeachment protests substantially exceeded anti-impeachment protests in crowd size during the legislative-check phase, as institutional deliberation proceeded, the size of pro-impeachment protests subsided, while anti-impeachment protests sometimes became more comparable in size. Despite the caveat that crowd-size estimates were available for 36% of pro-impeachment and 59% of anti-impeachment protest events, the pattern largely mirrors the protest-count results in Figure 6A.

I additionally examine protests in the Seoul Metropolitan Area, where major impeachment-related protests were concentrated, particularly near key national political institutions (e.g.,

¹³Notably, Figure 6 shows that pro-impeachment protests existed even before the martial law declaration. Calls for Yoon’s resignation or impeachment had already emerged under his administration, including criticism of media and labor suppression and alleged abuses of executive power (Lee 2024; Nord et al. 2024).

National Assembly during the legislative check; Constitutional Court during the judicial check). The patterns remain broadly similar, as shown in Figure S8. Overall, the results support the protest-mobilization mechanism underlying the paradox of institutional deliberation: accountability pressure through protest mobilization weakened as institutional deliberation proceeded.

Mechanism 2: News Coverage of Protests

I next examine whether accountability pressure from the media subsides as institutional deliberation proceeds, as theoretically expected. The media coverage data were collected from the Korea Press Foundation’s BigKinds archive. To identify news articles covering protests for or against the presidential impeachment during the martial law crisis, I retrieved articles using the search query “impeachment”¹⁴ from November 3, 2024 to May 4, 2025. The outlets of interest included national news outlets: broadcast networks (KBS, MBC, SBS), liberal partisan newspapers (Hankyoreh, Kyunghyang Shinmun), conservative partisan newspapers (Dong-A Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo). The search result included a total of 18,508 articles. Using the URLs provided by BigKinds, I scraped the full text with the `newspaper3k` Python library.¹⁵

Using LLM-based text annotation, I then classified articles into three categories: coverage of (1) pro-impeachment protest only, (2) anti-impeachment protest only, or (3) both. Each article was also classified based on whether it referenced anti-democratic narratives, such as election fraud claims or political violence.¹⁶ In doing so, I followed a systematic prompt development and refinement procedure based on established best practices (Halterman and

¹⁴Search term in Korean: 탄핵

¹⁵Chosun Ilbo, a major conservative outlet, was initially included in the corpus of interest, but was excluded because the article text could not be reliably scraped due to its website configuration (details in Section 4 of the Supplementary Materials).

¹⁶Yoon cited alleged irregularities at the National Election Commission as a justification for declaring martial law. Political violence was particularly salient when the Seoul Western District Court riot happened on January 19, 2025, involving pro-Yoon protesters after the court issued a warrant.

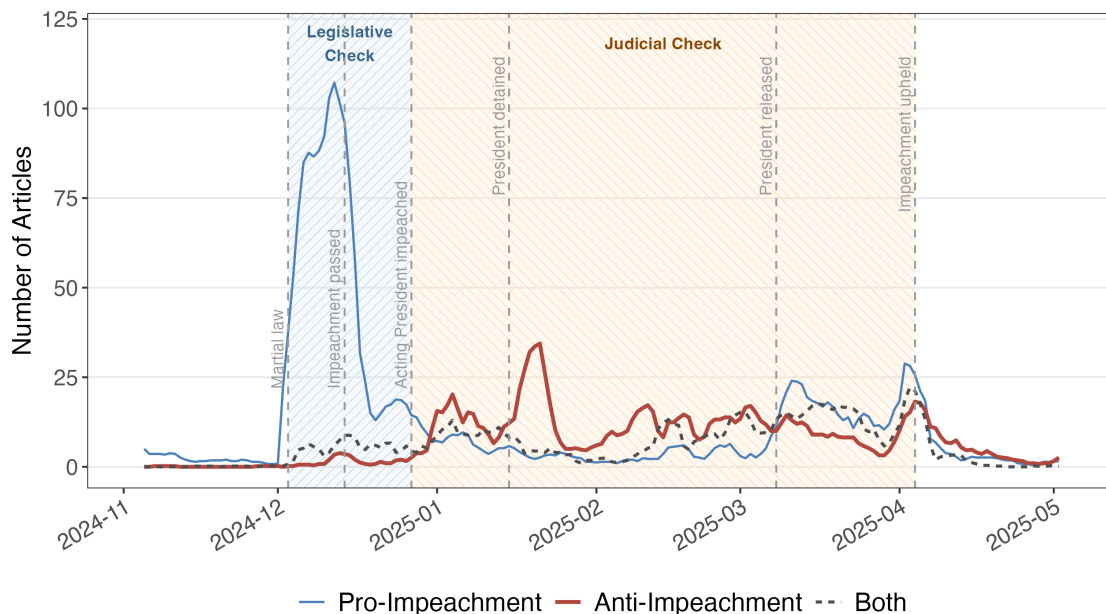
Keith 2025; Törnberg 2024; Lavigne et al. 2026). The coding prompt was refined through multiple iterations of coding with two research assistants, both native Korean speakers. I compared human annotations with LLM-based classifications generated by GPT-4o and GPT-4o-mini (with temperature set to 0), and also assessed consistency across the two LLM models. At each stage, I conducted intercoder reliability checks and refined the prompt until acceptable levels of agreement were achieved (e.g., agreement $> .80$; Cohen’s $\kappa > .70$; O’Connor and Joffe 2020). The final analysis on the full sample was conducted using GPT-4o, because it demonstrated higher agreement with human coding than GPT-4o-mini. The final prompt and validation details are available in Tables S13–S20 and Section 7.2 of Supplementary Materials.¹⁷ The finalized LLM prompt revealed that, out of 18,508 articles mentioning impeachment, 4,784 (25.8%) covered impeachment-related protests (the full list of media outlets and article counts are reported in Table S21).

The results are consistent with the theoretical expectation for the protest-coverage mechanism underlying the paradox of institutional deliberation: media attention to pro-impeachment protests declines as institutional deliberation proceeds. Because news coverage tends to be similarly distributed across days, Figure 7 presents the number of articles using 5-day moving averages (Hart, Chinn and Soroka 2020). Accountability pressure from the media—through coverage of pro-impeachment protests—was strongest during the legislative check phase, with a notable peak during the week in which the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion. During the judicial check period, the overall volume of protest coverage declined, while the proportion of coverage focusing exclusively on anti-impeachment protests or covering both sides increased. During the president’s detention, anti-impeachment protests received relatively greater media attention. After the president’s release, media attention to pro-impeachment protests increased but did not return to the levels observed during the

¹⁷Final prompt also identified both-sided coverage outside protest context. Such case was not prevalent, as shown in Figure S9.

early stage of the crisis, while coverage of both sides remained relatively high.¹⁸

Figure 7: Over-Time Media Coverage of Impeachment Protest



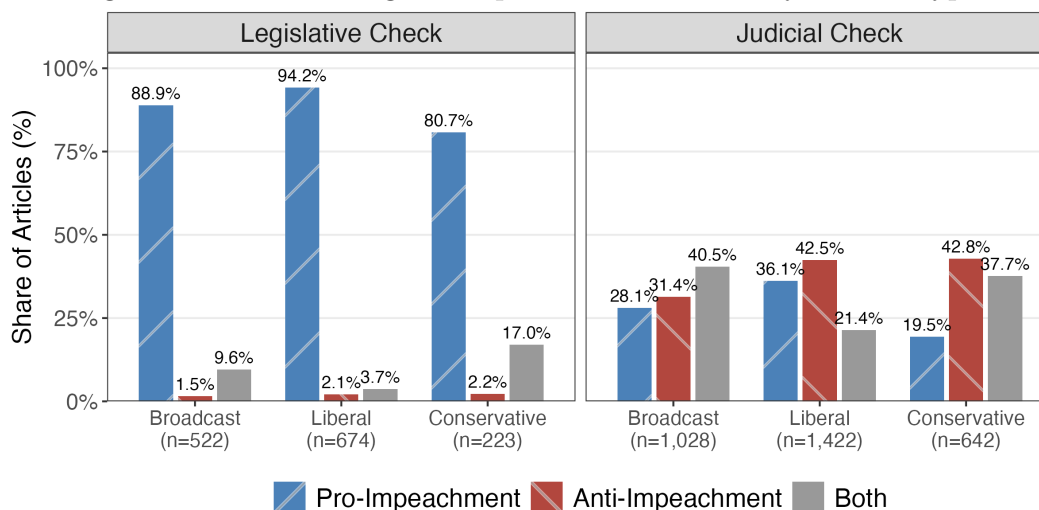
Note: Dates on the horizontal axis are shown in year-month format. Lines represent centered 5-day moving averages. Each line represents coverage of pro-impeachment protests only, anti-impeachment protests only, or both sides of the protests. The analysis includes national media outlets: broadcast (MBC, KBS, SBS), conservative (Donga, JoongAng), and liberal (Hankyoreh, Kyunghyang).

The composition of protest coverage, illustrated in Figure 8, reveals that accountability pressure was initially uniformly strong across media types but became more fractured as institutional deliberation proceeded—again consistent with the theoretical expectation underlying the paradox of institutional deliberation. During the legislative check period, about 80-95% of articles on impeachment protests covered pro-impeachment protests only, signaling strong accountability pressure even among conservative outlets. Yet during the judicial check period, protest coverage became more fractured and accountability pressure weakened. The proportion of articles covering pro-impeachment protests only decreased to about 20–36%,

¹⁸I additionally examine protest coverage over time by outlet type in Figure S10. Conservative media devoted less coverage to pro-impeachment protests than broadcast and liberal media, a pattern consistent with the partisan coverage bias, given that the incumbent was from a conservative party (Haselmayer, Wagner and Meyer 2017).

whereas coverage of anti-impeachment protests or both sides increased, together accounting for 64–80% of coverage across outlet types.¹⁹

Figure 8: News Coverage of Impeachment Protest By Outlet Types

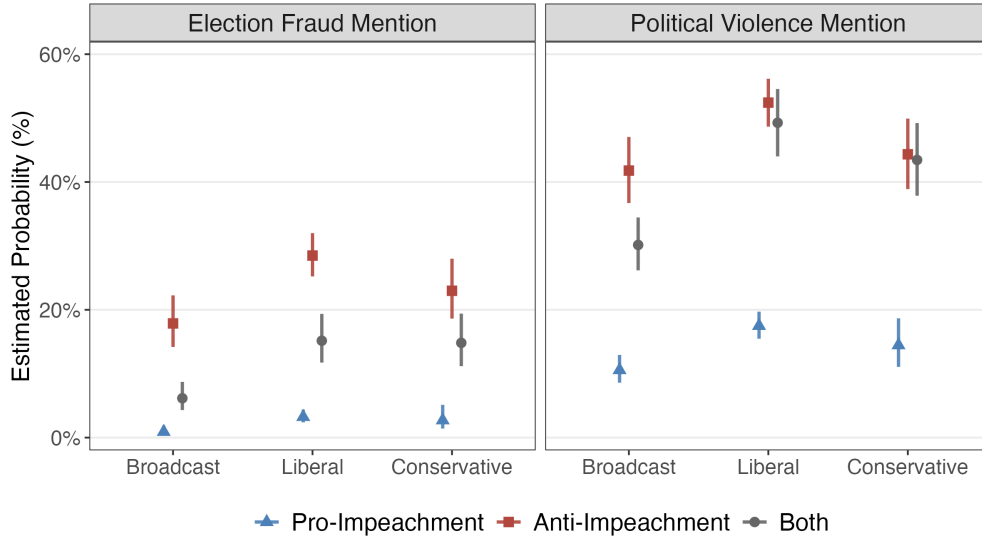


Note: Bars represent coverage of pro-impeachment protests only, anti-impeachment protests only, or both sides of the protests. The analysis includes national media outlets: broadcast (MBC, KBS, SBS), conservative (Donga, JoongAng), and liberal (Hankyoreh, Kyunghyang).

The results on coverage of election fraud and political violence, shown in Figure 9, reveal that these anti-democratic narratives were more prevalent in anti-impeachment protest coverage across outlet types. Election fraud was mentioned most frequently in articles covering only anti-impeachment protests, followed by articles covering both sides, whereas articles covering only pro-impeachment protests rarely referred to election fraud claims. Political violence exhibited a similar pattern, with mentions concentrated in anti-impeachment-only and both-sided coverage. Because coverage focusing on anti-impeachment protests or both sides became more prevalent during judicial deliberation, the media environment increasingly contained coverage featuring these anti-democratic narratives. To the extent that protest coverage conveyed such narratives, they likely became more accessible and salient in citizens' minds through the media as institutional deliberation proceeded.

¹⁹Figure S11 further shows that, although the overall volume of impeachment coverage was comparable across outlet types, conservative media devoted a substantially smaller share of their impeachment coverage to protests than broadcast and liberal media.

Figure 9: Coverage of Anti-democratic Narratives by Protest Coverage



Note: Estimated probabilities of mentioning election fraud and political violence in news articles, by media outlet type and protest coverage. Estimates are derived from logistic regression models with an interaction term between protest coverage type and media outlet type. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Table S22 presents the results in tabular form.

Mechanism 3: Public Attention to Protests

Having shown that accountability pressure from citizen mobilization and the media weakened as institutional deliberation proceeded, I now turn to public attention to protests, the third mechanism theorized to underlie the paradox of institutional deliberation. This mechanism concerns whether public attention to protests demanding punishment decreases as institutional deliberation proceeds. To assess public attention, I examine online search interest, which captures public information seeking and salient public concerns (Chen et al. 2024; Dancy and Fariss 2024). Online search interest is also closely associated with political engagement, including protest mobilization (Timoneda and Wibbels 2022).

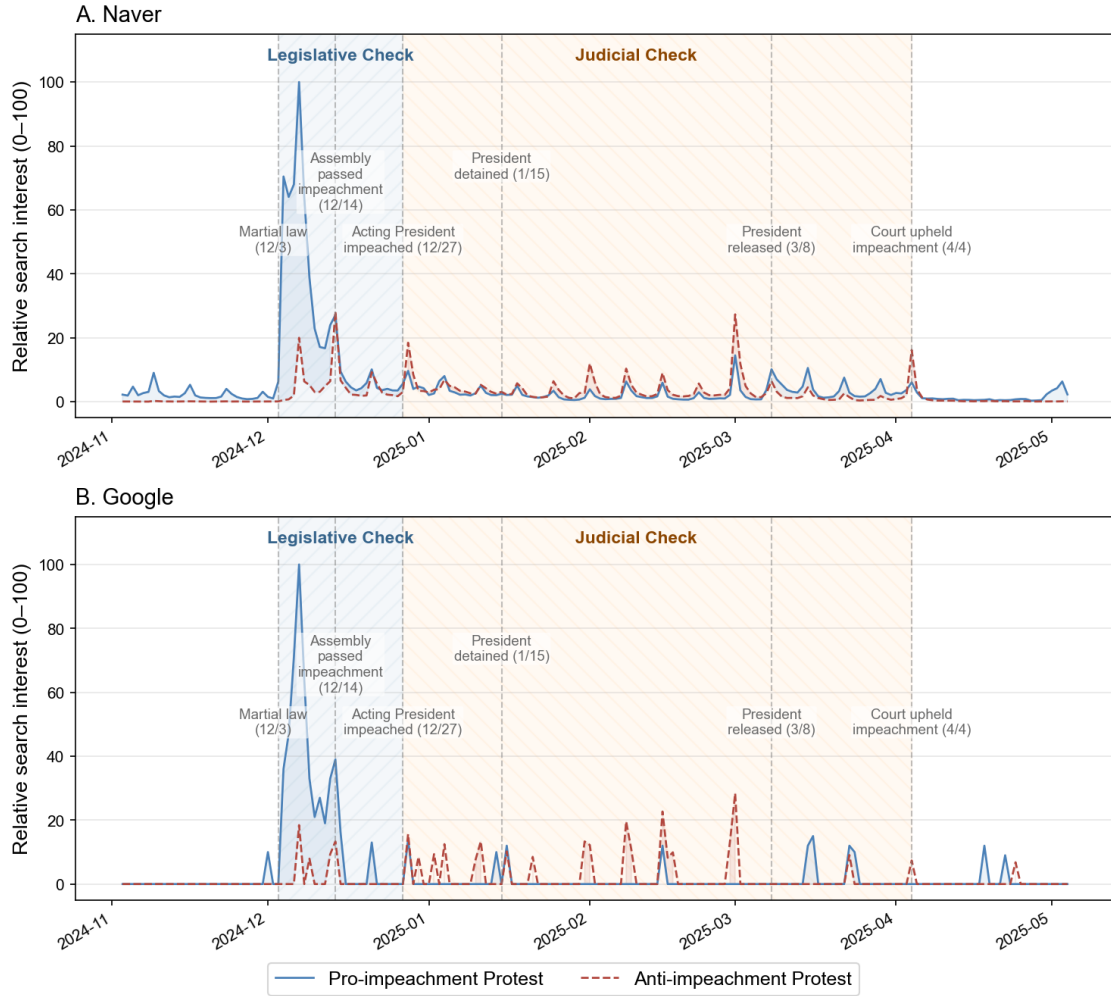
To examine public search interest in protests, I collected search interest data from Google Trends and Naver DataLab spanning from November 3, 2024 to May 4, 2025. All search data were geographically restricted to search activity within South Korea. Because Naver is a dominant search engine in South Korea, using Naver DataLab alongside Google Trends allows me to assess whether similar patterns emerge across two major search platforms, strength-

ening confidence in the observed pattern. Search interest in pro-impeachment protests was measured using the keywords “pro-impeachment protest,” “pro-impeachment rally,” and “candlelight protest,” while search interest in anti-impeachment protests was measured using the keywords “anti-impeachment protest,” “anti-impeachment rally,” and “Taegukgi (national flag) protest.”²⁰ To enable comparison on a common scale, both groups of keywords were submitted in a single query alongside a shared anchor keyword pair, with the resulting scores rescaled proportionally based on the aggregate ratio between the anchor keywords and their respective groups.

The results are consistent with the theoretical expectation for the public-attention mechanism underlying the paradox of institutional deliberation: public attention to pro-impeachment protests declined as institutional deliberation proceeded. As shown in Figure 10, across Naver and Google, interest in pro-impeachment protests peaked during the legislative check phase, but declined sharply during judicial deliberation, whereas interest in anti-impeachment protests increased. Although overall protest-related search activity diminished during judicial deliberation, search interest in anti-impeachment protests remained relatively elevated, particularly during the president’s detention. As with the protest-mobilization and protest-coverage mechanisms, institutional signals about the trajectory of accountability appear to matter: following the president’s release, public attention shifted back toward pro-impeachment protests, although overall search activity remained substantially lower than during the early phase of the crisis.

²⁰The search terms in Korean are: 탄핵찬성집회, 탄핵찬성시위, 촛불집회 (Pro-impeachment), 탄핵반대집회, 탄핵반대시위, 태극기집회 (Anti-impeachment). From a wider pool of potential keywords, terms for pro- and anti-impeachment protests that had non-zero search volume during the analysis period were selected while ensuring comparability between the two sets (Table S23).

Figure 10: Search Interest in Pro- and Anti-Impeachment Protest



Note: Dates on the horizontal axis are shown in year-month format. Keywords for pro-impeachment included “pro-impeachment protest,” “pro-impeachment rally,” and “candlelight protest”; keywords for anti-impeachment included “anti-impeachment protest,” “anti-impeachment rally,” and “Taegukgi protest.” Anchor terms were used to enable cross-group comparisons on a common scale. Values are normalized to a peak of 100 within Google Trends and Naver DataLab respectively, allowing comparison between pro- and anti-impeachment search interest within each platform. Cross-platform comparisons should be interpreted with caution.

These findings suggest that, as institutional deliberation progressed, particularly when institutional developments signaled that accountability was underway, citizens became less attentive to protests demanding impeachment while becoming more attentive to protests defending the incumbent. The results further suggest that the existence of citizens defending Yoon—and potentially the narratives they advanced—became more salient as institutional

deliberation progressed. To assess the generalizability of this pattern, I additionally examine parallel data of online search interest in protests during the preceding presidential impeachment of Park Geun-hye in 2016–2017. Figure S12 reveals a similar pattern: public attention to pro-impeachment protests peaked before the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion and then declined during judicial deliberation, while attention to anti-impeachment protests increased.

Across the three mechanisms, and despite the distinct nature of the data used to examine each, the patterns are remarkably consistent: accountability pressure from citizens and the media, as well as public attention to such pressure, weakened as institutional deliberation proceeded, particularly when institutional developments signaled that accountability was underway. Combined with the psychological mechanisms theorized earlier, these patterns help explain why public perceptions of democratic legitimacy may become polarized following institutional deliberation, even when strong checks and balances ultimately constrain and punish an incumbent’s democratic violation.

Discussion

This study highlights a fundamental dilemma in how democratic institutions defend democracy against violations of democratic rules. While institutional deliberation is essential for safeguarding the legitimacy of institutional decisions, it can inadvertently foster conditions in which accountability pressure subsides and transgression-justifying narratives gain traction. Consequently, even when institutions ultimately rule an incumbent’s action unlawful, the public may become polarized over the legitimacy of both the incumbent’s action and the institutions responsible for adjudicating it. The very process through which democratic institutions achieve democratic recovery can simultaneously weaken the societal pressures that hold the incumbent accountable and ultimately leave the public more divided over democratic legitimacy, a dynamic I term the paradox of institutional deliberation.

To explain the mechanisms underlying the paradox of institutional deliberation, I high-

light a previously underappreciated tension between two forms of democratic accountability. Horizontal accountability exercised by formal institutions and diagonal accountability exercised by citizens and the media may not always reinforce each other but can instead operate as substitutes. When progress in institutional deliberation signals that accountability is underway, it can create a sense of relief among citizens as democratic breakdown appears to have been averted and accountability is underway. This relief may inadvertently reduce citizens' incentives to sustain accountability pressure while creating space for countermobilization and competing narratives to gain traction.

In the context of South Korea's 2024–2025 martial law crisis, I find empirical evidence consistent with both the predicted consequences and the proposed mechanisms of this paradox. Panel and cross-sectional surveys indicate that perceptions of the legitimacy of martial law, support for impeachment, and trust in democratic institutions became polarized following the Court's impeachment ruling. Three observable indicators of protest dynamics—protest mobilization, media coverage, and public attention—show a remarkably consistent pattern. Accountability pressure was strongest during the early stage of the crisis but weakened after the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion. As institutional deliberation continued at the Constitutional Court, countermobilization and narratives defending the incumbent became more salient.

The results indicate that institutional checks and balances, even when they undergird democratic recovery, may not produce a shared understanding of democratic legitimacy. In the aftermath of institutional deliberation, segments of the public endorsed a violation of the law, signaling a serious challenge to democratic commitments (Ahmed 2023). Trust in institutions likewise became polarized, particularly for institutions such as the Constitutional Court that are responsible for enforcing constitutional rules. Such divergence in public perceptions may threaten democratic stability: polarized perceptions of democratic legitimacy may weaken citizens' collective capacity to protect democracy from future transgressions, while polarized trust in non-electoral institutions may undermine the institutional goodwill

that enables democratic institutions to endure despite disagreements over specific outcomes (Gibson, Caldeira and Spence 2003; Svolik 2019).

Like any study, this research has limitations. Although I examine the predicted consequences and proposed mechanisms using multiple sources of evidence—including panel and cross-sectional surveys, protest mobilization, media coverage, and public attention—the relationship between these mechanisms and changes in public opinion remains correlational. Future research could strengthen causal inference through experimental or quasi-experimental designs when opportunities arise in comparable episodes. Still, the convergence of evidence across multiple data sources provides support for the proposed theoretical framework.

For the literature on democratic backsliding, this study offers both a theoretical framework and an empirical strategy for identifying democratic transgressions and examining accountability mechanisms. While prior research emphasizes that democratic backsliding often unfolds gradually without clear breakpoints and often go unnoticed (e.g., Waldner and Lust 2018; Druckman 2024), my theory applies to incumbent actions that are sufficiently visible to trigger accountability pressures from both formal institutions and civil society actors. The framework specifies the onset and institutional resolution of democratic transgressions, as well as the sequence of institutional milestones that structure accountability dynamics. By doing so, this study provides researchers with a common set of temporal markers for identifying, coding, and comparing democratic transgressions across cases.

The polarized perceptions of democratic legitimacy following institutional deliberation suggest that checks and balances alone do not fully safeguard democracy. Yet the alternative is not straightforward: accelerating institutional decisions may undermine their legitimacy by bypassing constitutional procedures and limiting opportunities for citizens to express their demands. A key lesson, therefore, is that an incumbent’s violation of democratic rules can leave lasting scars even when institutional safeguards ultimately succeed. Institutions alone cannot fully repair the damage, because their deliberative processes unfold alongside—and interact with—the responses of citizens and the media.

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