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Let them speak out: from the social homogeneity to affective democracy

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Introduction: What does democracy require to survive authoritarian threats? While Hermann Heller prescribed social homogeneity, John Dewey emphasized communicative infrastructure, and contemporary scholarship highlights institutional checks by citizen mobilization, these frameworks struggle to explain how citizens rapidly recognize threats, forge solidarity across differences, and sustain commitment through uncertainty. This study examines democracy's affective infrastructure as a critical but overlooked dimension of democratic resilience.

Methods: We analyze 483 speeches from 38 rallies during the critical initial 41 days of South Korea's 122-day lightstick protests (2024–25), spanning from President Yoon's December 3, 2024, martial law declaration to his arrest. Our analysis examines how participants expressed democratic commitments and sustained solidarity through protest discourse.

Results: Protesters employed distinct emotional repertoires, expressive practices, and material-institutional anchors to recognize authoritarian threats, build solidarity across differences, and sustain mobilization pressure on democratic institutions. These affective practices functioned as critical infrastructure linking individual emotional responses to collective democratic action.

Discussion: This study demonstrates that democracy's resilience depends not merely on formal institutional design but on cultivating emotional capacities through which citizens feel, speak, and sustain democracy together. Affective infrastructure bridges micro-level emotional experience and macro-level institutional dynamics, offering new insights into democratic resilience against authoritarian challenge.

KEYWORDS

democratic resilience, authoritarian threats, affective infrastructure, citizen speech, historical memory, solidarity across difference, South Korea, lightstick rallies

1 Introduction: democracy at the edge

The 21st century has often been described as an age of “democratic crisis.” From Europe to the United States, scholars and commentators lament the erosion of civic trust, the rise of populism, and the decline of deliberative politics (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018). Within this global context, the experience of South Korean democracy holds particular theoretical and practical significance.

On December 3, 2024, at 10:23 p.m., President Yoon Suk-yeol declared martial law, suspending civil and press freedoms and deploying military forces to the National Assembly. Within hours, however, citizens opposing the martial law mobilized en masse in front of the legislature. At 1:00 a.m. on December 4, the National Assembly voted 190–0 to nullify the

martial law decree, and the President rescinded it approximately 6 h after its declaration. Over the following 122 days, citizens demanding President Yoon's impeachment participated in near-daily mass rallies. These actions exerted sustained pressure on both the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court, ultimately securing the President's impeachment and its judicial affirmation.¹ This experience offers a critical lens for examining what democracy requires to endure in a digitalized mass society.

The swift resolution of this crisis sharpens a fundamental question: What does democracy require to endure in contemporary mass society—especially in moments when executives deploy emergency powers and other legal instruments to erode constitutional order from within? To clarify why similar crises yield sharply divergent outcomes, we juxtapose Weimar and South Korea as a high-contrast comparison, focusing on the interaction between executive legal use of emergency powers and citizen–institution co-activation. Weimar is not treated here as a closest analogue to contemporary South Korea, but as a canonical case in which constitutional emergency provisions enabled executive decree-making under conditions of parliamentary fragmentation (Ginsburg and Huq, 2018). This pairing allows us to specify—more sharply than institutional accounts of emergency legality typically do—how publics are affectively organized (or disorganized) in the midst of institutional fragility.

The Korean case, however, highlights a dimension that institutional accounts often leave underspecified: how citizens sustain mobilization once a crisis begins. The speed and emotional intensity of Korea's 2024–25 democratic response—recognizing the threat within hours, mobilizing en masse overnight, and sustaining commitment over 122 days—illustrate the role of affective infrastructure: the emotional repertoires and relational resources through which citizens recognize democratic threats, mobilize collectively, and sustain resistance over time. These observations lead us to propose, as a working hypothesis, the cultivation of an affective infrastructure for democracy—the historically accumulated emotional repertoires and relational resources through which citizens recognize democratic threats and maintain collective resistance (Gould, 2009; Berlant, 2016). South Korea's resilience in 2024–25 drew upon such an infrastructure, forged through a century of popular resistance from the March First Movement (1919) to the Candlelight Revolution (2016–17).

This emphasis on democratic endurance as a socially and affectively sustained achievement echoes a longer lineage in political theory and comparative democratization research. A century ago, in response to Weimar's democratic crisis, Hermann Heller argued that democracy cannot survive on procedural legitimacy alone but requires an underlying social foundation (Heller, 1971). Contemporary scholarship has refined this insight: even functioning institutions cannot guarantee resilience when executives exploit legal mechanisms

to erode democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Successful resistance requires not only institutional checks but citizens' capacity to mobilize rapidly, creating accountability pressure that enables institutional actors to resist executive aggression (Waldner and Lust, 2018; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). Where such co-activation is suppressed or fragmented, institutional checks fail to function effectively—as Weimar cautions.

This study examines how citizen speeches during the 2024–25 lightstick rallies both drew upon and renewed this affective infrastructure. We take these speech acts as a starting point and test what affective infrastructure explains. Specifically, we ask: How did citizens' vernacular emotional practices—especially open-mic testimony—help sustain democratic mobilization through moments of institutional fragility? We analyze 483 citizen speeches from 38 rallies during the initial mobilization phase (December 5, 2024–January 14, 2025).² Our analysis traces how speakers publicly articulated anger, vulnerability, and solidarity across difference, revealing the affective repertoires that maintained democratic pressure during this critical period.

By attending to both the cultural specificity and theoretical generalizability of the Korean rallies, we show that democracy's affective foundations—long marginalized in Western political theory—operate as constitutive dimensions of democratic life everywhere, not as regional peculiarities. The Korean case challenges us to rethink democracy not merely as a matter of institutional design but as an ongoing affective practice: a capacity to feel and speak democracy together, cultivated through historical struggle and renewed in each moment of crisis.

2 Theoretical frameworks—the affective bases of democracy

2.1 From social homogeneity to emotional capacity: what does democracy require?

Democratic crises often look alike from a distance: executive overreach, institutional paralysis, polarized publics. Yet trajectories split in different ways. In 1933, Germany's Weimar Republic collapsed within 2 months of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. Fast forward 90 years: South Korea, facing a midnight martial law declaration and months of presidential defiance, restored constitutional order within days and sustained mobilization for 4 months. To clarify the stakes, we turn to Weimar's late theorists of democratic fragility.

Writing in Weimar's final years, Hermann Heller made explicit why institutional safeguards can fail: democracy needs a social base. Democracy, he argued, cannot survive on institutions alone but requires a social foundation—what he termed *soziale Homogenität* (social homogeneity) within a *sozialer Rechtsstaat* (social state under the rule of law) (Heller, 1971). His analysis emphasized material, institutional, and cultural preconditions such as economic security and legal equality. He also stressed broadly shared access to political and

1 Public opinion during the four-month crisis fluctuated substantially across polling agencies and over time: support for impeachment exceeded 70% in early December, declined to around 58% by mid-March, and acceptance of the Constitutional Court's final ruling rose to over 80% immediately thereafter. In light of this variability, we do not treat any single polling figure as evidence of a stable nationwide "emotional consensus." More importantly, the rapid escalation of events—from the declaration of martial law to the Court's decision—was decisively shaped by sustained citizen mobilization, a role explicitly acknowledged in the Constitutional Court's ruling as central to the defense of constitutional order. Accordingly, our analysis focuses not on aggregate national sentiment, but on affective alignment within mobilized publics themselves, through which coordination and democratic pressure were maintained.

2 The 41-day period marks the crisis's formative phase, when emergency response crystallized into sustained democratic mobilization; citizen rallies continued thereafter until the Constitutional Court's ruling on April 4, 2025.

cultural participation, mediated by the state, to keep political conflict within democratic bounds.

Yet these conditions, while necessary, proved insufficient to explain Weimar's central paradox. The republic witnessed intense democratic mobilization—millions joined the Iron Front, communists battled Nazis, and republicans defended constitutional institutions—yet mobilization fragmented rather than consolidated. Mutual hostility on the left, strategic miscalculations by conservative elites, and escalating political violence eroded the possibility of collective will-formation. Democracy collapsed not from a lack of democratic actors, but from the failure to transform mobilization into solidaristic coordination across divisions. In such crises, executive escalation can outpace institutional defense when mobilization remains fragmented.

John Dewey (1927) approached the problem from a different angle—not material conditions, but the communicative foundations of democratic life. Engaging Walter Lippmann's (1922, 1925) claim that citizens were too incompetent for self-governance, Dewey countered that democracy's problem was not citizen incapacity but the destruction of communicative infrastructure. Publics emerge when individuals recognize shared problems and communicate about them. Weimar collapsed not because the state failed to redistribute wealth adequately but because violence, propaganda, and polarization destroyed the spaces. These included town halls, independent press, cross-partisan associations where citizens could deliberate and forge solidarity through communication. Democracy requires three interlocking conditions: face-to-face spaces enabling deliberation, free media amplifying diverse voices, and institutions responsive to citizen concerns. Dewey's framework, insightful though it remains, leaves critical gaps unaddressed.

Contemporary scholarship on democratic backsliding echoes these questions through comparative institutional analysis. Nancy Bermeo (2016) demonstrates that modern authoritarians concentrate power gradually through legal means—"executive aggrandizement"—packing courts, harassing media, manipulating electoral rules. Waldner and Lust (2018) show democracies prove vulnerable when repression costs are low—when media is captured, civil society fragmented, and international pressure absent. Analyzing 16 cases across four decades, Haggard and Kaufman (2021) reach a sobering conclusion: institutional checks—judicial independence, legislative oversight—prove insufficient without sustained citizen mobilization. Mobilization alone, however, does not guarantee success. Comparative cases show that mobilization can fragment or succeed under similar institutional conditions.

Korea's 2024–25 experience illuminates what distinguishes successful from failed resistance. Institutional checks functioned as predicted—but only because citizens mobilized rapidly and persistently despite obstacles typically suppressing resistance. Unlike fragmented mobilization in failed cases, Korean citizens sustained coordination across political divisions throughout the crisis. This pattern suggests a conclusion neither Heller's socio-material conditions nor Dewey's communicative spaces alone can explain. What enabled citizens to recognize the threat collectively within hours, trust one another despite deep political disagreement, and maintain commitment through months of uncertainty?

The answer points to something both frameworks overlook: the emotional capacities that, in interaction with shared problem recognition and collective purpose, enable citizens to transform individual anxiety into collective democratic action. The theoretical question shifts accordingly—from what material or institutional conditions

democracy requires to what enables citizens to feel democracy as worth defending, trust it can be defended collectively, and sustain that commitment through crisis. Recent scholarship on affect offers such a framework.

2.2 Theoretical foundations of affective democracy

Political theory has been ambivalent about emotion; alongside cautionary accounts of passion, it has also treated civic bonds (e.g., Aristotle's *philia*) as part of democratic life (Aristotle, 1999, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books VIII–IX). The past two decades' "affective turn" is thus a re-engagement that clarifies how relational feeling can become solidarity and collective action. Emotions are constitutive of political life. Three claims structure this turn: emotions are social and relational, circulating through interactions to form collective identities (Ahmed, 2004); they are productive, opening new possibilities and mobilizing action rather than merely accompanying it (Massumi, 2002); and they require infrastructure—sustained mobilization depends on material spaces, cultural forms, and institutional anchors that enable emotional expression (Gould, 2009; Berlant, 2016; Bosworth, 2023). For democracy, mobilization begins not with rational calculation alone but with shared affects that enable coordination and endurance.

2.2.1 Affective empathy and democratic solidarity

Accordingly, democratic empathy differs from general compassion—it involves recognizing others as fellow citizens sharing a political project despite profound differences. Research on empathy shows that recognizing others' suffering as relevant to shared goals motivates collective action (Zaki, 2014). In democratic contexts, such empathy enables citizens to perceive threats to fellow citizens not as isolated incidents but as threats to shared democratic life.

Individual empathy, however, remains insufficient. Sara Ahmed (2004) demonstrates that emotions circulate between bodies, creating "affective economies" where feelings gain political force. Anger spreads contagiously—one person's outrage activates others' latent frustrations, cascading into collective indignation. Zizi Papacharissi (2015) terms this phenomenon "affective publics"—citizens constituting themselves as democratic actors through shared emotional expressions rather than deliberation alone. Papacharissi also warns that emotions disperse as quickly as they coalesce. Online outrage exhausts itself without sustained action; frustration curdles into cynicism when quick results fail; digital platforms amplify emotions but fragment them into echo chambers. Rapid emergence becomes weakness—formation without relational depth that sustains commitment through months of struggle. Because affect can also polarize or exclude, we treat failures of solidaristic broadening as scope conditions for the argument.

2.2.2 Affective infrastructure for democratic action

Lauren Berlant (2016) conceptualizes affective infrastructure as the accumulated resources—both material and symbolic—that enable collective life and sustain affective attachments. Building on this framework, we understand affective infrastructure as resources that enable citizens to feel collectively and translate feelings into sustained action. Four components are central. First, repertoires of historical memory—inherited ways of expressing democratic emotions learned

from past struggles. Deborah Gould's (2009) study of ACT UP reveals how activists developed "emotional habitus" over years: learning when to express rage versus grief, how to maintain hope through losses, how to channel despair into defiant creativity. Societies accumulate emotional repertoires: chants, gestures, and narratives that make feelings immediately recognizable during crisis.

Second, material and symbolic anchors—spaces and objects embodying collective memory. Kai Bosworth (2023) demonstrates how affective infrastructures function as "the specific social and spatial settings, contexts, or conditions that generate affective forms," serving as mediating objects through which collective feelings can be sustained over time (p.66). These anchors give emotions durability beyond any single mobilization, available for reactivation when new threats emerge.

Third, cultural expressive forms—speeches, songs, collective performances articulating democratic emotions. Jeffrey Alexander (2006) shows how movements succeed through "performative power": when ordinary citizens visibly embody courage and vulnerability in public settings, they generate empathetic identification that rational arguments cannot produce.

Fourth, institutional responsiveness—the capacity of parliaments, courts, and media to recognize citizens' emotional claims (Papacharissi, 2015). When institutions respond substantively, they validate emotional expression, creating reinforcing cycles: emotional expression generates institutional action, which validates that emotions have political efficacy, encouraging sustained engagement. Conversely, when institutions dismiss citizens' feelings—treating anger as "hysteria" or hope as "naïveté"—they sever this connection, teaching citizens their emotions have no democratic purchase.

This infrastructure accumulates through repeated mobilizations. Each struggle refines emotional repertoires, strengthens material anchors, develops expressive forms, and either confirms or erodes institutional responsiveness.

2.2.3 Enacting democracy: making visible, contesting, and listening

Affective infrastructure provides resources, but democratic life requires enactment through three practices. First, citizens make democracy visible—staging public expressions of collective capacity that persuade others mobilization is possible (Alexander, 2006). Second, citizens practice agonistic pluralism—Chantal Mouffe's (2013) framework for passionate disagreement within shared democratic commitment, where conflicts are channeled through democratic procedures that transform antagonism into agonism. Third, democracy demands listening—Susan Bickford's (1996) insistence that citizens attend to others' emotional expressions, especially uncomfortable ones. Democratic listening recognizes anger from those experiencing injustice as legitimate political speech, expressions of vulnerability as valid democratic claims. Without infrastructure establishing spaces and practices supporting such listening, citizens retreat into affective echo chambers.

This synthesis provides an interpretive lens for understanding democracy's affective foundations. The framework illuminates dimensions often marginalized in institutional analysis: the emotional repertoires citizens inherit from past struggles, the spatial anchors embodying collective memory, the cultural forms making democratic emotions expressible, and the institutional responsiveness that validates or erodes civic commitment. These resources accumulate

gradually through repeated mobilization. Korea's 2024–25 resistance drew on a century of such accumulation.

3 Decentering democratic theory: Korean civic voice as counter-western genealogy

Before turning to the speeches themselves, we must address whose experiences count as evidence in democratic theory—a question that directly shapes how we interpret the 2024–25 lightstick rallies. We argue that these rallies cannot be adequately understood within the Orientalist and Occidentalist binaries that have long framed East Asian politics. Instead, their significance emerges when Korean experience is repositioned from the periphery toward the center of democratic thought.³ This repositioning reveals practices of democratic subjecthood forged through a distinctive historical genealogy of resistance, offering insights that complement existing scholarship on affect and mobilization. The historical reconstruction that follows demonstrates that the emotional repertoires and solidaristic practices observed in the lightstick rallies draw upon over a century of Korean popular resistance traditions.

The conventional canon—from Athens through the Enlightenment to postwar liberalism—has narrated democracy as a Western achievement, with Asia appearing as its mirror opposite: hierarchy over freedom, obedience over voice. This Orientalist binary has shaped not only Western political theory but also East Asian self-understanding, creating what Chen (2010) calls "Occidentalism"—an internalized veneration of Western modernity that treats Western paths as civilization's sole route. Within this double frame, Korean political actions have been read as belated imitations rather than original democratic accomplishments.

However, Korean history suggests an alternative genealogy. The March First Movement of 1919 was not simply anti-colonial protest but a public declaration of political subjecthood, through which participants publicly enacted collective political agency under colonial rule (Kim, 2012; Lee, 2024). When participants publicly proclaimed independence by shouting *Manse* (long live)⁴ in public squares, they constituted themselves as a sovereign people whose legitimacy derived from collective will rather than imperial recognition (Kwak, 2019). Organizers appropriated Christian and Buddhist ritual forms, making participation accessible across class and regional divisions. Though violently suppressed—with over 7,500 killed—*Manse* became a founding word of Korean democratic voice, invoked by every subsequent generation.

The 1960 April Revolution continued this practice of self-declaration, as students mobilized against Syngman Rhee's rigged election through direct action, demonstrating that street politics

³ This argument builds on Lee (2019), which demonstrated how both Orientalist and Occidentalist frameworks have systematically marginalized political agency to East Asian citizens.

⁴ The cry of "*Manse!*(long live)"—traditionally an expression of loyalty to monarchical authority—was transformed into "*Daehan Dongnip Manse*" (Long Live Korean Independence), a revolutionary declaration that appropriated imperial idiom for popular sovereignty. This speech act itself did not merely demand independence; it enacted the very sovereignty it proclaimed.

could achieve what electoral politics could not. Yet the movement that most profoundly shaped Korea's democratic memory was Gwangju. In 1980, citizens resisting Chun Doo-hwan's military coup faced overwhelming force that killed hundreds, turning Gwangju into a site whose very name invoked both state violence and citizen solidarity. Survivors' testimonies circulated underground throughout the decade, forging affective bonds across generations (Lewis, 2002). Every subsequent mobilization explicitly summoned Gwangju, constructing a chronology of legitimacy independent of—often opposed to—official state narratives. The 1987 June Democratic Struggle built on this legacy, mobilizing millions to secure direct presidential elections—a victory that vindicated Gwangju's sacrifice while institutionalizing the principle that democratic legitimacy required popular consent. The 2016–17 Candlelight Revolution, following a series of large-scale candlelight vigils from the early 2000s, marked both continuity and innovation. Participants held candles, transforming public squares into sites of democratic assembly while appropriating cultural forms to make participation accessible and joyful. Beneath this festive surface lay the inherited repertoire: invocations of Gwangju, chants of *toejin* (step down), insistence on direct popular voice. Park Geun-hye's impeachment demonstrated that institutional responsiveness had become a stable feature of Korean democracy.

Several recurring patterns emerge from this genealogy. Korean citizens have claimed democratic voice through the act of public speech itself—self-declaration without institutional permission. These movements mobilized primarily through shared affect—grief, anger, defiance, hope—creating bonds across social divisions in ways that earlier rational-deliberative frameworks did not fully capture. Participants consistently appropriated everyday cultural forms—religious rituals, student songs, popular entertainment—to articulate political demands in accessible idioms. Each generation explicitly invoked its predecessors, constructing a temporal chain of democratic legitimacy outside state control. Rather than culturally specific expressions of “Korean-ness,” these patterns reveal dimensions of democratic practice that were not systematically developed in Heller's framework, though recent scholarship has begun to address affective dimensions more explicitly.

Recognizing this genealogy expands rather than displaces the theoretical foundations of democracy. The Korean experience illuminates dimensions that have been underexplored in earlier institutional frameworks—not to replace but to pluralize our understanding of how democracies form and sustain themselves. Affect operates constitutively in democratic practice, particularly where institutional channels have been blocked. Cultural forms shape rather than merely express political possibilities, especially in contexts with rich traditions of collective performance. Democratic temporality operates recursively in post-authoritarian contexts where historical injustices remain unresolved. When citizens draw on historical memory as active political resource, they create resonances between past struggles and present claims.

The 2024–25 lightstick rallies represent the most recent articulation of this tradition. But how exactly did this century-long inheritance manifest under the immediate threat of martial law? What emotional work did citizen speech do in constituting democratic subjecthood? To answer these questions, we turn to systematic analysis of the voices themselves.

4 Study design and methods

4.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in discourse and affect analysis. It treats the 2024–25 winter lightstick rallies as a critical case through which to examine how citizens mobilize affective resources to defend democracy under conditions of institutional crisis. Rather than aiming at statistical generalization, the analysis traces how patterns of speech and emotion coalesced into an affective infrastructure for democracy.

4.2 Data collection and sampling

The empirical material consists of 483 spontaneous citizen speeches delivered during 38 lightstick rallies livestreamed on OhmyTV, the YouTube channel of OhmyNews. The dataset covers 5 December 2024 (immediately following the declaration of martial law) to 14 January 2025 (the day before President Yoon's arrest). While the rallies continued for 122 days, our analysis focuses on the formative 41-day period. This timeframe includes key junctures: the failed first impeachment vote (7 December), the successful second vote (14 December), the Namtaeryeong rally (22 December), the Hannamdong rallies (3–5 January), and the mobilization leading to the President's arrest (15 January). This early phase captures how affective democratic practices emerged, consolidated, and became routinized.

These rallies represent a distinctive form of political assembly. Unlike conventional demonstrations organized by sponsoring groups, the lightstick rallies allocated the majority of their time to open-mic citizen speeches where any participant could articulate their concerns, experiences, and political claims. This structure makes the rallies an exceptional site for examining unmediated citizen voice under crisis conditions.

OhmyTV was selected because it provided the only comprehensive, uninterrupted livestream coverage of these rallies throughout the entire period. While OhmyNews is recognized as a progressive news outlet, the livestreams were broadcast without editing or commentary, capturing citizen speeches as public acts of democratic voice in their original context. This sampling strategy prioritizes analytical depth over representational breadth. The rallies studied were explicitly organized around demands for impeachment and democratic accountability; they do not represent the full spectrum of South Korean public opinion during this period. Our research question concerns how citizens sustain democratic mobilization under crisis—a dynamic most visible in the rallies that maintained sustained institutional pressure throughout this formative period.

While the rallies were multimodal events involving music, visual displays, and choreographed movements, this study focuses specifically on the verbal content of citizen speeches. Our research question concerns how citizens articulated political commitments, identities, and emotions through speech—the practice of standing before fellow citizens and voicing convictions. Following [Arendt \(1958\)](#) and [Rancière \(1999\)](#), we treat public speech as a privileged site for examining democratic subjectivity and affective solidarity. From the livestreams, all open-mic speeches by ordinary citizens were extracted, excluding cultural performances, emcee remarks, and addresses by invited political figures.

4.3 Transcription and data processing

Transcription relied on a hybrid procedure combining YouTube's auto-captions with real-time processing in ClovaNote. The automatically generated transcripts were carefully checked and manually corrected while watching the original videos to ensure that key nuances of language, tone, and affective expression were preserved. The final transcripts were imported into MAXQDA for coding and analysis.

4.4 Coding and analytical strategy

The analysis proceeded in three iterative phases. First, positional profiling identified how speakers positioned themselves socially and morally through self-identifications and moderators' introductions, providing a basis for understanding participant diversity and relational dynamics. Second, thematic and affective coding traced recurring rhetorical and emotional patterns, with particular attention to how anger, fear, and hope were articulated and circulated. Third, contextual interpretation situated these themes within the spatial and temporal dynamics of the square, examining how individual emotions were collectively processed and transformed into sustained democratic commitment.

Two coders conducted the analysis: both Korean nationals with advanced training in qualitative research methods and discourse analysis, one positioned as politically progressive, the other as centrist. Coding proceeded collaboratively, with initial independent coding of 50 speeches (approximately 10% of the corpus) followed by discussion to establish shared interpretive guidelines. For the full corpus, disagreements were resolved through iterative discussion until consensus was reached. Given the interpretive nature of the analysis and the collaborative coding process, we prioritized consensus-building through ongoing dialogue. This approach was chosen over statistical inter-rater reliability metrics (Garrison et al., 2006; O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). This iterative process ensured consistency in identifying and categorizing affective and discursive patterns.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Under Freie Universität Berlin IRB guidelines, research using publicly available data without direct interaction with participants does not require formal ethical review. The speeches were drawn from open YouTube livestreams and accessed through the platform's standard interface. Personal identifiers were removed in transcription and analysis, though self-identifications voluntarily expressed in public speech (e.g., gender, occupation, activist affiliations) were retained where analytically necessary, as they constitute essential material for understanding how speakers positioned themselves and claimed political presence.

5 Analysis of citizen speeches

Building on the study design outlined above, this section presents the results of the analysis of 483 citizen speeches from the 2024–25 lightstick rallies. The analysis proceeds in three phases: positional profiling examines how speakers positioned themselves through self-naming practices; thematic and affective coding traces patterns in how democratic voice was claimed and sustained; and contextual interpretation situates these practices within the spatial and temporal dynamics of the square.

The demographic composition reveals the movement's wide reach. Of the 483 speakers, 60.2% identified as women, 29.8% as men, and 9.9% as third-gender or non-binary. Age distribution suggests that participants under 30 accounted for at least one-third of speakers, with 33 teenagers and 77 university or graduate students. Occupations ranged from ordinary citizens and office workers to fandom members, activists, irregular workers, artists, and feminists. Speakers introduced themselves in their own words, often combining multiple affiliations—"a queer care worker," "a gamer and feminist"—reflecting situational intersectionality (Yuval-Davis, 2011). This practice of self-identification functioned as an act of political self-definition, asserting presence in public space.

At the discursive level, the analysis examined how speakers structured their addresses—introductions, anecdotes, calls to action, and closing slogans. At the affective level, attention was given to how emotions such as anger, sorrow, fear, hope, and shame were expressed and transmitted. Each speech was read both as individual narrative and as part of a broader chorus of public feeling.

5.1 Positional profiling: self-naming and social positioning

The act of introducing oneself through identity claims became a defining rhetorical convention of the lightstick rallies. Drawing on Rancière (1999), self-naming can be understood as a political act in which those previously unheard claim voice and thereby redraw the boundary of who counts as visible and audible in democratic space. Speakers' opening declarations were not merely informational but constitutive, asserting presence and legitimacy in the public sphere.

What distinguished these self-introductions was their complexity and inventiveness. Speakers routinely combined multiple, overlapping identities, often including unconventional markers alongside conventional demographic categories.

"I am a feminist, a non-disabled person, and heterosexual, and I love sundubu (soft tofu) so much that I had sundubu-jjigae (soft tofu stew) for lunch today as well. I am a woman, a worker in my thirties who rents a room in my parents' house." (BS1224-1)⁵.

"I did not come up here representing any particular organization or with any specific identity. I'm just a female dieter in my twenties who started dieting two months ago" (BS0103-104).

These unconventional identifiers—"a person who loves sundubu-jjigae too much," "a dieter who started two months ago"—functioned as symbolic markers that enriched and diversified the individuality of rally participants, challenging both state categorizations and activist conventions of political subjectivity.

Yet speakers were acutely aware that such acts carried ethical weight. Self-naming inevitably situates individuals within a community, making them conscious of their relationship to collective norms and ideologies.

"When I first came up here, I really agonized over how I should introduce myself. Who am I, everyone? In answering this question, I would like to explain myself not in terms of how I have been designated as a person, but rather how I have defined myself as a person, and where I have stood at every moment of my life." (BS0103-94).

⁵ Speech codes indicate organizing group, date, and sequence. BS: Bisanghaengdong (Emergency Action for Yoon's Immediate Resignation and Social Reform); CB: Chotbulhaengdong (Candlelight Action); date in MMDD format; sequence number indicates speaking order. Speakers self-identified in various ways—disclosing full identities, using pseudonyms, or remaining anonymous—which we preserved as presented.

Another speaker deliberated over calling himself “ordinary,” recognizing that “the moment I call myself ordinary, it could be tantamount to saying that only the elements that constitute me are the standard of ordinariness” (CB0108-2). These reflections reveal self-naming not as spontaneous expression but as deliberate ethical positioning—a negotiation between personal identity and collective responsibility.

For marginalized speakers, self-naming carried particular political urgency.

“Identity is language. And language is the horizon of thought. The horizon of thought, I believe, is the range within which one’s thinking can reach. Someone has taken that language away from us. The majority does not need to identify themselves through language, but minorities—minorities like us—need to express our identities through language. I have stood here to reclaim that language.” (BS0103-90).

This testimony underscores how self-naming became a practice of reclaiming visibility—asserting not only the right to speak but the right to define the terms of one’s own appearance in public life.

A significant subset of speakers explicitly identified as politically inexperienced or previously disengaged, framing their participation as narratives of awakening. By emphasizing their ordinariness and prior disengagement, speakers authenticated their presence as autonomous moral agents responding to conscience rather than manipulation, countering the regime’s narrative that protests were orchestrated by elites.

Conversely, some speakers remained partially anonymous, identifying only by broad category—“a citizen,” “a parent,” “a young person.” This variation reflects different risk calculations and strategic choices about visibility. For some marginalized speakers—particularly LGBTQ+ individuals, undocumented migrants, or those facing workplace retaliation—strategic ambiguity offered protection while still claiming voice.

The diversity of self-naming practices reveals the square as a space where multiple forms of citizenship and belonging were enacted and contested. This practice transformed personal identity into a site of political contestation, where the act of naming oneself disrupts hegemonic categorizations and redefines the terms of visibility within democratic struggle.

5.2 Thematic and affective coding

The thematic analysis identified three major clusters through which speakers articulated democratic voice: claiming identity and solidarity, articulating political demands, and mobilizing cultural and historical resources. These clusters were not discrete categories but interwoven dimensions of speech that functioned together to constitute the rallies’ affective and political force.

5.2.1 From the margins to mutual liberation: solidarity across difference

A remarkable transformation unfolded over the course of the protests: individuals who had long remained silent found the courage to speak, and their once-invisible identities came into view. While early speeches were largely delivered by college students (particularly women), organized laborers, and activists, the spectrum of speakers expanded to include diverse groups such as precarious workers, sexual minorities, and individuals with mental illness. Many shared deeply

personal experiences and disclosed aspects of their lives rarely voiced in public.

This change reached a turning point during the December 22–23 protest at Namtaeryeong. When farmers who had driven tractors from rural areas were blocked from proceeding and staged an overnight sit-in, young women and other citizens spontaneously joined them. In the absence of organized performances or schedules, participants took the microphone and shared life stories late into the night. Many testified to the sense of empowerment they experienced in this horizontal and open atmosphere. From this moment, the practice of open, late-night testimony became a hallmark of the movement.

“I felt a bit sad as I spent the past Saturdays in front of the National Assembly. While a young person was speaking, asking people not to call them cute, I still heard people saying ‘cute,’ and while a woman was speaking, asking people not to use misogynistic language, I saw people shouting ‘later, later.’ And yet, I also saw this: the flags of women’s groups, sexual minority groups, youth organizations, and disability rights groups fluttering among the crowd. Despite everything, I saw them standing in solidarity. I believe that in our square, where we defend democracy, no one should be marginalized or excluded. Am I right? I send my solidarity and love to the diverse beings who have blossomed in this place.” (JN1222-22).

This speech encapsulated both the frustration and the fragile hope that defined this moment. Even in this unplanned setting, speakers voluntarily upheld the “Pledge for an Equal and Democratic Assembly”⁶ established during earlier Emergency Action rallies. Despite growing calls to narrow the agenda solely to impeachment, especially under the looming threat of martial law, protesters resisted silencing. Their collective assertion—“If not now, when?” and “No one should be muzzled”—reflected a moral commitment to pluralism.

For those who had previously felt alienated because of their identities, the rallies’ openness rekindled a sense of political belonging. As Fraser (2003) contends, the struggle for recognition is a demand for justice. The presence of marginalized voices challenged hierarchies and redefined the boundaries of political participation.

The complex identities articulated in speeches reflect the multifaceted nature of discrimination experienced by speakers. Identities such as “queer female high school dropouts living independently,” and “non-binary transgender unemployed individuals” show how intersecting identities create compounded inequalities. This intersectional marginalization inflicted not only physical hardships but also profound psychological damage. Several speakers disclosed mental health struggles—depression, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, insomnia—stemming from “the guilt of existing” due to poverty and social exclusion. Following the December 3 martial law declaration, many reported worsening symptoms as fears grew over unaffordable medical bills and potential loss of access to treatment. They condemned the Yoon administration’s push for healthcare privatization as an existential threat, framing his removal as a matter of life or death.

Speakers openly acknowledged that solidarity cannot be reduced to mere words. Many confessed to previous complacency—thinking “‘solidarity in heart’ was enough”—but witnessing the courage of frontline activists sparked self-reckoning. Female speakers in their

⁶ At rallies hosted by Emergency Action, moderators often recited often the “Pledge for an Equal and Democratic Assembly,” establishing norms against discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, or nationality, and prohibiting objectifying language and unwanted physical contact toward marginalized groups.

twenties, upon learning about issues like shipyard workers’ strikes and disability mobility rights, willingly visited these sites to offer support. When news spread at the Namtaeryeong rally that shipyard union leaders had been on hunger strike for over a month, hundreds to thousands of small donations were made starting that very day (Park, 2024). Speakers testified that these experiences of solidarity served as sources of “healing,” “renewal,” and “the strength to continue the struggle.”

“When the SADD (Solidarity Against Disability Discrimination) protests first gained attention, I was swept up in the hatemongering by the media and certain politicians and criticized them. Why cannot they just be quiet? However, those I actually witnessed at various solidarity sites were neither demons nor public nuisances, but simply citizens claiming their rights and courageous activists. Now I know where the essence of the problem lies. Now I curse the Seoul Metropolitan Government, not SADD. Now I am their unequivocal advocate.” (BS0105-4).

This aligns with bell Hooks’ (2003) conception of solidarity as “mutual liberation”—where both giver and receiver are transformed. The open-mic format was crucial in enabling this transformation: unlike traditional rallies with curated speakers, anyone could request the microphone, making the square a space where multiple forms of citizenship and belonging were claimed and recognized.

5.2.2 Political demands and institutional critique

While the speeches were deeply affective, they were also explicitly political. Speakers articulated a wide range of demands—from immediate accountability for the December 3 martial law declaration to long-term visions of social justice and institutional reform. The analysis categorized fifteen thematic issue areas into four clusters based on how speakers linked these demands (see Table 1).

The most urgent demand was the impeachment and prosecution of President Yoon Suk-yeol. The post-martial law shift also widened the scope of accountability, extending it beyond the president and State Council members to People Power Party legislators and institutions such as the Corruption Investigation Office and the Presidential Security Service. Speakers characterized the December 3 martial law as insurrection requiring immediate accountability, censuring not only the president but also government officials, the ruling party, and complicit state institutions for protecting the alleged insurrectionist over serving the citizenry. Grounded in constitutional discourse and invoking Article 1 of the Constitution, speakers asserted popular sovereignty in defense of the constitutional order, framing the demonstrations as direct democracy—a collective reassertion of sovereign power when representative institutions had failed.

Speakers articulated demands for social equity and protection of marginalized communities, linking the fight against authoritarianism to struggles against discrimination. The discourse of intersectional solidarity was prominent: the movement’s strength lay in its diversity, and love and mutual recognition were antidotes to the regime’s politics of hate. Economic grievances—rising costs, stagnant wages, precarious labor—were framed as symptoms of authoritarian neglect: a government serving corporate interests while abandoning ordinary citizens.

Speakers called for systemic reforms across multiple sectors. In education, they criticized competitive exam systems and called for curricula fostering democratic citizenship. Disaster safety was a recurring theme: invoking tragedies like Sewol (2014), Itaewon (2022),

Osong (2023), and Jeju Air (2025), speakers attributed these to government negligence and demanded accountability. Calls for healthcare reform addressed medical cost burdens, privatization fears, and inadequate social safety nets, demanding universal healthcare as a right. The media was criticized for disinformation and serving power, with calls for press freedom and journalistic integrity.

A smaller but significant cluster addressed peace, militarism, and the politics of life. Speakers condemned provocative actions toward North Korea and warned of war risks, particularly for young men facing conscription. They emphasized the role of culture and arts—K-pop, films, webtoons, games—as sources of democratic values and emotional resilience, calling for protection of cultural freedom from censorship. Some speeches articulated an expansive politics of life, expressing solidarity with Palestinian refugees, advocating animal rights and ecological justice, and envisioning democracy rooted in interdependence and care across borders and species.

TABLE 1 Four clusters of political demands.

Cluster	Issue areas
(1) Accountability and constitutional restoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impeachment, prosecution, and removal of President Yoon Critique of ruling forces (Acting Presidents Han Duck-soo and Choi Sang-mok, and ‘People Power Party’ members including Representative Han Dong-hoon) and complicit institutions (police, prosecutors, security services, CIO) Defense of constitutional order and popular sovereignty
(2) Social justice and inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rights of marginalized groups (women, LGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, workers, farmers, migrants) Anti-discrimination and intersectional solidarity Economic grievances (rising costs, precarious labor, livelihood security)
(3) Institutional reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational reform (democratic citizenship, human rights education) Disaster safety accountability (Sewol, Itaewon, Osong, Jeju Air) Healthcare and social welfare expansion Media responsibility and press freedom
(4) Peace, culture, and life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-militarism and peace with North Korea Role of arts and culture in democratic resistance Expansive politics of life (solidarity with Palestinians, animal rights, ecological justice)

These four clusters were not discrete categories but interwoven themes within individual speeches, reflecting participants' holistic understanding of democracy—not merely procedural but substantive, encompassing justice, inclusion, safety, care, and dignity. Moreover, demands were temporally layered. Early speeches (December 5–14) focused almost exclusively on impeachment and constitutional crisis. As rallies continued into late December and January, speeches increasingly incorporated broader social justice issues—economic inequality, educational reform, healthcare, cultural freedom. This progression suggests the square functioned as a space for collective deliberation, where participants refined a shared vision of democracy. The movement's demands thus evolved from reactive (stopping a coup) to generative (imagining what democracy could become).

5.2.3 Cultural and historical resources

Building upon affective and political mobilizations, participants engaged with both contemporary popular culture and historical memory as active frameworks through which citizens made sense of crisis and sustained collective action.

5.2.3.1 Popular culture as democratic mediation

Speakers introduced themselves through cultural identities—“an ordinary baseball fan,” “a virtual streamer,” “a K-pop fan who postponed ticket purchasing to be here”—repositioning protest participation as an extension of daily cultural practices. The appropriation of fan culture proved particularly generative. One speaker unified these vocabularies:

“Sports fans, we will confront this like national athletes until the end. Gamers, we will retry as many times as needed for the just ending. Otaku, we will protect democracy like our ultimate bias. K-pop fans, we will wait for democracy's brilliant sun to rise, just as we stayed up all night to see our favorite artists.” (BS1214-8).

Fan practices—streaming parties, overnight queuing, collaborative information-sharing—translated directly into protest tactics. The cultural competencies cultivated through fandom became civic competencies: sustaining attention over extended durations, coordinating collective action without hierarchy, deriving joy from solidarity itself. Popular narratives provided frameworks for interpreting political crisis—references to anime, musicals, and webtoons functioned as moral compasses, translating complex struggle into narratives already emotionally inhabited by speakers.

The lightstick itself epitomized this cultural-political synthesis. Originally a device for expressing devotion to K-pop artists, it became a technology of democratic synchronization. Unlike individuated candle flames in 2016–17 protests, lightsticks enabled choreographed rhythms—waves of color making collective presence visually legible. Their material properties mattered: battery-powered, durable, bright enough to register on aerial cameras.

Flags and hand-held signs served as crucial mediators of humor and resilience throughout the 41-day struggle. While flags retained their traditional function marking labor unions and civic groups, they expanded dramatically to include parody- and meme-based banners that drew laughter from the crowd—virtual organizations like “National Association for Lying at Home,” or “Headquarters for Not Looking at Phones While Walking” that existed only in the rally square. Hand-held signs became canvases for wit and creativity: “Today's my birthday, impeachment is my gift,” “Job hunting is hard

enough, and now Seok-yeol's giving me headaches,” and countless references to K-pop lyrics, webtoon memes, and viral internet phrases. These signs circulated widely on social media, amplifying the movement's reach while maintaining its playful spirit.

By transforming anger into satire and exhaustion into creativity, participants made the long struggle bearable—even joyful. Day after day, new jokes emerged, flags multiplied, and the square became a space where resistance felt less like burden than collective celebration. The lighthearted tone did not diminish the movement's seriousness; rather, it sustained commitment when rage alone might have led to burnout. Through this creative mediation, popular culture functioned as vernacular infrastructure of empathy, making democratic commitment feel like care rather than duty.

5.2.3.2 Historical memory as counter-hegemonic discourse

Protesters revived the past not as distant commemoration but as living resource endowing present struggle with moral legitimacy. Historical events—such as May 18 Gwangju and March 1 Independence Movement—functioned as symbolic anchors framing the present crisis as another chapter in ongoing democratic battle.

“This protest is a continuation of March 1st, April 19th, May 18th, and the June 1987 Revolution that brought this republic into being, but it is also an extension of the two million candlelight vigils that brought down Park Geun-hye in the near past eight years ago” (JN1222-27).

Another speaker invoked temporal solidarity:

“The Republic of Korea is a country that has been protected by its people. From April 19th, May 18th, the June Democratic Uprising, the 2016 Candlelight Struggle, to today, it has been we the people who have protected the Republic of Korea. On December 22nd, the people crossed Namtaeyeong. In 2024, 130 years later, we crossed Ugumchi, which could not be crossed in 1894.” (CB0106-2).

Gwangju emerged as both tragedy and compass—a site conferring ethical weight on the square. Many speakers identified as “descendants of Donghak” or “a generation indebted to Gwangju,” declaring they were carrying out the people's century-long mandate. By likening Yoon to “the resurrected specter of Chun Doo-hwan” and exposing how Cold War rhetoric of “anti-state forces” had been revived, speakers turned memory into moral vigilance. The transmission of trauma across generations gave this affective force—what Hirsch (2012) calls “post-memory.” Younger participants, born decades after the Gwangju massacre, spoke of courage learned through memory rather than direct experience.

Such historical awareness did not merely invoke nostalgia but posed fundamental questions: “Can the past help the present? Can the dead save the living?”⁷ It illuminated the roots of injustice while summoning civic duty, revealing remembrance as a vital source of democratic resilience. By speaking history aloud, citizens renewed its force. The lightstick rallies demonstrated that democracy endures not merely through institutions but through memory itself—each act of

7 This question is from Han Kang's novel *Human Acts* (2014), which centers on the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement. Han was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in October 2024, bringing widespread attention in South Korea to this meditation on historical memory and sacrifice. The phrase became one of the most frequently cited quotations at the lightstick rallies, explicitly linking past democratic struggles to the present impeachment movement.

remembrance reaffirming that democracy must be continually re-spoken, re-felt, and re-made.

5.3 Contextual interpretation: the square as transformative space–time

Building upon identity claims, political demands, and cultural-historical resources, this section examines how the square functioned as transformative space–time—a site where individual experiences of isolation, fear, and despair were collectively metabolized into solidarity, hope, and sustained commitment. The analysis traces a dynamic affective journey across the formative 41-day period: from initial terror and paralysis, through shame and moral debt, to collective hope and historical optimism.

5.3.1 From paralysis to solidarity: the affective transformation

The December 3 martial law declaration triggered not immediate mobilization but paralysis. Many speakers confessed to overwhelming terror: “When martial law was declared on December 3, I truly felt like the world was collapsing” (BS0103-60). This fear was visceral, recurring at specific triggers: “Even now, when it becomes 10:30, my body trembles with fear” (BS1206-3). Yet alongside fear came fury—a visceral rejection that transformed passive suffering into active refusal. “Anger has one target: the dictator who has endlessly exploited the people. Step down from your position immediately and be punished” (BS1209-3).

What broke the cycle of fear and rage was mediated shame—seeing others already resisting while one remained home. “I watched the news and saw people holding lightsticks in the cold. I felt so ashamed. What was I doing safe at home? I could not sleep that night. The next morning, I came here” (BS1206-1). This shame generated moral debt, particularly acute when observers saw the young on the frontlines: “When I saw teenagers standing at dawn, I felt like I was betraying them by staying warm in my bed. That guilt brought me here” (CB1221-1).

The discourse of debt transformed shame into intergenerational obligation. One speaker in his sixties articulated this:

“I lived through dictatorship, through democratization. I thought my generation had done enough. But watching teenagers stand here in December cold, I realized: democracy is not a gift we give once. It is a debt we must pay again and again, in every generation” (BS0103-103).

Another defended the seemingly small act of presence: “Democracy is not something grand—it’s ordinary people coming out to stand in solidarity in these small ways. That’s what democracy is” (BS0103-21).

Yet the square did not merely reproduce shame and debt. Through sustained gathering, these heavy affects were metabolized into solidarity and hope. “At first, I came because I was afraid—afraid of dictatorship, afraid for my children. But after a few weeks, something changed. I’m not afraid anymore. Being here with all of you, I feel strong. I feel like we can actually win this” (BS0104-28). Another testified: “When I first came, I stood at the edge, alone. But then someone handed me a lightstick. Someone offered hot chocolate. By the end of the night, I was crying with people I’d never met. This place—it changes you” (BS0103-65).

Weekly (and often daily) gatherings cultivated enduring affective capacities through repetition. Participants practiced listening, chanting, linking arms during cold nights—not simply expressing pre-existing emotions but generating new ones. Physical co-presence

made solidarity tangible, registered through sight (lightstick waves), sound (collective chants), and touch (strangers sharing warmth). Citizens learned solidarity by practicing it.

By early January, speeches increasingly articulated historical optimism situating present struggle within Korea’s century-long democratic tradition. “130 years ago, our ancestors could not cross Ugumchi. But we have crossed Namtaeryeong. We have crossed every barrier they put before us” (BS0103-87). Another reflected: “When I look at history, I see that we always win. It takes time. There are setbacks. But in the end, the people prevail” (BS0105-31). This historical consciousness provided crucial counterweight to immediate frustrations—not naive optimism but vigilant hope, tempered by realism and committed for the long haul.

5.3.2 Temporal rhythms: oscillation and endurance

Temporal analysis reveals that emotions did not progress linearly but oscillated across 41 days. What sustained commitment was the square’s capacity to hold contradictory emotions simultaneously, without demanding affective uniformity. Unlike spaces demanding constant intensity, the rallies accommodated complexity—exhaustion alongside resolve, doubt alongside hope. Many testified to the costs of sustained participation yet continued to return. One speaker detailed her three-week attendance:

“Two weeks ago, I canceled the theater ticket I wanted most. Last week, I came even with finals two days away. And today, on my first weekend after semester end, I came out” (BS1221-8).

Another confessed with humor: “Three weeks ago I bought a bidet to install in my mom’s bathroom, but I still have not done it because of weekend rallies. Mom, I’ll impeach Yoon Seok-yeol and then come install it” (BS1221-10).

The temporal rhythm of rallies—daily actions consolidating into regular weekly gatherings—created structure for affective renewal. One speaker addressed those unable to attend: “Do not feel too sorry if you cannot come in person. We’ll keep moving forward with the spirit of passing the baton to each other” (BS0103-70). This mirrored the principle that citizenship is ordinary practice—sustained not through heroic peak moments but through patient, repeated showing up.

Movements endure not by maintaining constant fervor but by creating spaces where citizens metabolize shifting affects together, where canceled theater tickets and uninstalled bidets become badges of commitment rather than sources of guilt. Democratic commitment is measured not in intensity of feeling but in willingness to return—to come back week after week, despite exhaustion, despite setbacks, despite knowing the work is never finished. Democracy, the rallies taught, is made not in moments of triumph but in the patient accumulation of presence.

6 Discussion: the affective infrastructure of democratic defense

6.1 The central puzzle

On December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk-yeol’s martial law declaration posed an existential threat to Korean democracy. Within

hours, citizens assembled before the National Assembly; by dawn, legislators nullified the decree. Over 122 days, sustained mobilization secured impeachment and constitutional restoration. How did these rallies enable instantaneous response, sustained commitment, and sufficient pressure to restore democracy?

Existing frameworks illuminate necessary conditions but cannot fully explain Korea's trajectory. Recent scholarship on democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Waldner and Lust, 2018) establishes that formal institutional checks prove insufficient without citizen mobilization—yet offers no account of mobilization's mechanisms. Why did Korean citizens recognize the threat collectively within hours when key institutions actively obstructed democratic defense? Why did resistance succeed decisively when similar conditions elsewhere—captured media, fragmented civil society—produced authoritarian consolidation?

Our analysis reveals what these frameworks underemphasize: Mobilized citizens drew upon affective infrastructure—resources that enable collective life and sustain political organization (Berlant, 2016; Bosworth, 2023)—including historically accumulated emotional repertoires (Gould, 2009), relational practices, and material resources through which citizens recognize democratic threats collectively and sustain resistance over time. This infrastructure, cultivated across a century of struggle, was activated and renewed through the rallies. Three interrelated processes explain Korea's democratic defense: historical repertoires enabling rapid collective recognition; expressive practices through which solidarity was visibly enacted across profound difference; and spatial-cultural-institutional anchors sustaining commitment when formal institutions faltered. Understanding how these processes operated reveals dimensions of democratic resilience that institutional analysis alone cannot capture.

6.2 Why historical memory enabled instant mobilization

The velocity of Korea's response—citizens mobilizing within hours, legislators voting by dawn—cannot be explained through rational deliberation or institutional design alone. It required what Gould (2009) identifies as emotional habitus: learned dispositions for recognizing and responding to political threats, cultivated through repeated struggle and transmitted across generations.

The immediate invocation of Manse, Toejin, and Gwangju—documented throughout Section 5.2.3—exemplifies this dynamic. These were not rhetorical flourishes but what Ahmed (2004) terms elements of affective economies: words and memories circulating through bodies, activating shared emotional scripts without requiring explanation. When citizens declared “We remember Gwangju,” they simultaneously identified the present threat (state violence against democracy), authorized collective response (resistance is legitimate and necessary), and located themselves within a century-long tradition (current struggle continues unfinished work). This emotional script functioned because it had been transmitted intergenerationally—not through formal civics education but through testimony, commemoration, and repeated reenactment.

Why does this matter theoretically? It highlights a mechanism neither Hermann Heller nor John Dewey fully theorized. Heller identified the socio-material foundations necessary for democratic stability, but did not explain how mobilization becomes solidaristic coordination when political trust collapses. Dewey emphasized communicative infrastructures through which publics form, yet left

underexplored how collective action can emerge rapidly when deliberative channels are blocked or distorted. The Korean case points to a third dimension: affective capacities, shaped by historically accumulated emotional repertoires, that enable citizens to recognize democratic threats and coordinate action prior to deliberation.

The intergenerational transmission—teenagers hearing Gwangju stories from parents who participated in 1987, young adults recalling attendance at 2016–17 rallies—illustrates how this inheritance operates. One speaker testified to learning that “democracy is not a gift we give once. It is a debt we must pay again and again, in every generation” (BS0103-103). This transmission functioned not as abstract principle but as embodied capacity: learning to read political situations emotionally, distinguish genuine crises from routine conflicts, know viscerally when assembly is warranted. Institutional frameworks cannot explain this velocity because they focus on formal structures rather than the emotional competencies citizens cultivate through historical experience.

6.3 How expressive practices forged solidarity across difference

Historical inheritance remains inert without enactment. The rallies succeeded because citizens enacted democracy publicly—not merely defending existing institutions but publicly constituting themselves as collective demos capable of self-governance. This expressive dimension addresses what institutional theories systematically under-theorize: how do citizens who mobilize for democratic defense forge solidarity sufficient to sustain coordinated resistance despite profound differences within that mobilized coalition?

Our analysis focuses on the pro-impeachment coalition documented in these rallies—a diverse assemblage whose internal solidarity-building we examine. While approximately one-third of the population opposed impeachment, these forces occupied separate political spaces, preventing direct confrontation. Within the mobilized coalition, however, profound diversity existed—the spectrum of citizens participating in open-mic speeches ranged from progressive activists to conservative opposition supporters. What unified them was not ideological agreement on policy but convergence on constitutional procedure: presidential authority cannot override constitutional order through military force.

The self-naming practices reveal one mechanism through which this diverse coalition forged solidarity. When speakers introduced themselves through complex intersectional identities—combining marginality and privilege, political experience and newcomer status, conventional and unconventional markers—they enacted political self-constitution: making visible those previously unseen, making audible those previously unheard, thereby redefining who counts as legitimate participant in democratic space.

Consider the pattern documented through the Namtaeryeong turning point. Early rallies featured primarily students, organized labor, and opposition-aligned activists. After farmers were blocked overnight and citizens spontaneously joined in testimony, the spectrum exploded: sexual minorities, disabled persons, precarious workers, those with mental illness—populations rarely visible in political spaces—claimed voice. The square's declaration that “no one should be marginalized or excluded” (JN1222-22) was not aspirational rhetoric but constitutive practice: creating conditions where difference became source of strength rather than fragmentation.

Why did these expressive practices matter? They accomplished what neither socio-material redistribution nor communicative infrastructure alone can achieve: transforming diversity from source of fragmentation into source of strength. Heller assumed solidarity requires homogeneity; Dewey emphasized deliberative spaces. Both identified necessary conditions but missed the sufficient one: practices enabling citizens to feel with others across difference, sustain commitment despite disagreement, trust strangers as allies.

The Korean rallies created infrastructures enabling transformation through encounter: open-mic formats where any citizen could speak, testimonial rituals treating vulnerability as political resource, spatial arrangements bringing diverse bodies into proximity. Through these infrastructures, what [Ahmed \(2004\)](#) describes as emotional circulation acquired transformative depth. One speaker's anger activated others' latent frustrations; another's vulnerability authorized collective acknowledgment of fear; a third's hope restored commitment. Circulation functioned not merely as amplification but as catalyst for change. This dynamic process ensured that the square remained a site of active democratic renewal rather than static protest.

Operating across both physical and digital spaces, it created what [Papacharissi \(2015\)](#) terms affective publics while extending their typical duration. Live-streamed protests from the square reached citizens unable to attend, generating feelings of shared responsibility that motivated donations, messages of solidarity, and subsequent physical participation. Those present in the square encountered testimonies from diverse backgrounds—farmers, students, sexual minorities, precarious workers and persons with physical and mental illness—learning to recognize anger from marginalized voices as legitimate political claim and vulnerability as democratic resource. Digital circulation then amplified these encounters beyond physical boundaries, creating nationwide emotional synchronization. The synergy between face-to-face transformation and digital circulation produced feedback loops: assembly generated testimonies that spread online; online witnessing motivated further assembly; expanding participation reinforced collective commitment. Physical co-presence enabled depth of encounter digital platforms alone cannot provide, while digital amplification extended that encounter's reach beyond any single gathering.

The theoretical significance extends beyond Korea. Western deliberative theory, emphasizing dispassionate reason, systematically marginalizes precisely these practices—treating vulnerability as weakness rather than democratic resource, viewing emotional expression as threat to rational discourse rather than precondition for solidarity. The Korean case reveals that democracy's affective foundations are not cultural peculiarities but constitutive dimensions requiring cultivation everywhere: citizens must learn to enact solidarity across difference, practice empathetic listening despite discomfort, allow emotional encounter to transform understanding. These are not natural capacities but learned practices requiring infrastructure that creates and maintains spaces for democratic feeling.

6.4 Why material and institutional anchors sustained mobilization

Democratic emotions, however intensely felt, exhaust themselves unless translated into tangible political efficacy and integrated into routine practice. Korea's 122-day sustained commitment required more than rapid mobilization and solidarity-building—it demanded

infrastructures anchoring collective feeling across time: material spaces embodying memory, cultural forms adapting historical repertoires, temporal rhythms habituating democratic practice, and institutional responsiveness validating that emotional expression generates political change.

The spatial, cultural, and temporal dimensions operated synergistically to maintain mobilization's momentum. Historically significant sites—Gwanghwamun bearing memories of previous candlelight protests including 2016–17 impeachment rallies, the National Assembly symbolizing sovereignty under threat—activated embodied memories lending present action the weight of accumulated struggle. Cultural objects like lightsticks appropriated from K-pop fandom enabled generational continuity while adapting affective infrastructure for contemporary contexts. Nearly daily protests established rhythms transforming emergency response into habituated practice—creating the ordinariness essential to sustaining collective commitment. These material and temporal anchors prevented emotional dissipation by embedding democratic feeling in concrete practices and spaces citizens could repeatedly inhabit.

However, material and cultural anchors alone cannot explain 122 days of sustained commitment. The institutional dimension proved decisive. The National Assembly's December 4 vote nullifying martial law validated that mobilization produces institutional response. The December 14 impeachment vote confirmed sustained pressure compels action despite obstruction. When the Corruption Investigation Office's first arrest attempt failed on January 3, three days of intensive rallies demanding accountability preceded the successful January 15 arrest, demonstrating that sustained mobilization overcomes resistance. Constitutional Court proceedings further validated citizens' claims: the Court's ruling cited citizens' immediate response and sustained impeachment demands as evidence that the President could no longer fulfill his duties, legitimizing collective emotional expression as constitutive of democratic judgment.

Each institutional response created reinforcing cycles: emotional expression generated institutional action, which validated that democratic feeling translates into political efficacy, encouraging continued engagement. This dynamic reveals why [Haggard and Kaufman's \(2021\)](#) framework, while correctly establishing that institutional checks prove insufficient without citizen mobilization, does not address mobilization's sustainability. The Korean case demonstrates that causation runs bidirectionally: citizens must mobilize to activate institutions, but institutions must validate citizens' emotional expressions to sustain mobilization.

The counterfactual illuminates this dynamic's significance. Had the National Assembly refused to convene on December 4, had legislators dismissed citizens' overnight assembly as “mob hysteria,” had the Constitutional Court rejected impeachment as premature, Korea's trajectory would have diverged dramatically. Institutional dismissal severs feedback loops, teaching citizens their emotions have no democratic purchase and guaranteeing mobilization's exhaustion. The impeachment campaign succeeded because institutions—however reluctantly, however slowly—ultimately recognized citizens' emotional expressions as legitimate political claims. This recognition, combined with material spaces and temporal rhythms, transformed isolated moments of protest into durable democratic infrastructure.

The 2024–25 democratic mobilization demonstrates that affective infrastructure operates as integrated system rather than isolated

mechanisms. Historical repertoires, expressive practices, and material-institutional anchors created escalating feedback loops: assembly activated inherited memory, which motivated testimony across difference, which generated institutional response, which validated further assembly. This integrated dynamic reveals what isolated theoretical frameworks cannot capture. Accounts focusing on institutional checks correctly identify that formal mechanisms require citizen mobilization, yet they cannot explain how mobilization emerges or sustains itself. Social movement theories analyze repertoires of contention but often treat emotions as byproducts rather than constitutive forces. Deliberative democratic theory emphasizes rational discourse but cannot account for rapid collective action when deliberative channels fail. Affective infrastructure integrates these insights while revealing democracy's survival depends not on heroic exceptionalism but on the patient, intergenerational work of building infrastructure robust enough to activate when institutions falter.

7 Conclusion

From Hermann Heller's Weimar to Korea's 2024–25 democratic crisis, a century of scholarship has asked what democracy requires to survive authoritarian threats. Heller (1971) identified the necessity of social homogeneity; Dewey (1927) emphasized communicative infrastructure; contemporary scholars emphasize institutional checks activated by citizen mobilization. Yet these frameworks cannot fully explain Korea's 122-day resistance following President Yoon's December 3 martial law declaration—how citizens recognized the threat within hours, forged solidarity across profound differences, and sustained pressure until institutions responded. Our analysis of 483 citizen speeches across 38 rallies reveals what existing theory has underemphasized: affective infrastructure—the intergenerational repertoires, expressive practices, and material-institutional anchors that enable citizens to feel democracy collectively, trust one another despite disagreement, and sustain commitment through institutional uncertainty. Rather than contradicting Heller's concern with social foundations, we show how solidarity across difference can be affectively produced and maintained. Where scholarship on democratic backsliding identifies mobilization as necessary but struggle to explain its emergence, we demonstrate that emotions are constitutive—shaping how threats are recognized and solidarity forged. And where deliberative theory centers rational discourse, we demonstrate that democracy requires affective foundations that work alongside deliberative processes, enabling rapid action when formal channels fail.

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, historical memory functions as active political resource. Inherited repertoires linking December 2024 to 1987, 1980, and 1919 enabled instantaneous threat recognition and provided tested scripts for collective response—challenging ahistorical models of democratic citizenship. Second, heterogeneity can be democratic strength when expressive practices build solidarity across difference. The 483 speeches analyzed here show marginalized voices—sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, precarious workers, individuals with mental illness—claiming democratic standing through rather than despite their particularity. Third, institutional checks and citizen mobilization operate through bidirectional

feedback loops: institutions require mobilization to activate, yet mobilization requires institutional responsiveness to sustain. Democratic durability depends less on institutional design per se than on whether design incorporates mechanisms treating citizens' emotional expressions as legitimate political force.

Four limitations frame these findings. First, the 41-day period analyzed captures Korea's mobilization at peak intensity but cannot account for its full trajectory or resolution. Second, this study examines only pro-impeachment rally participants; approximately one-third of citizens supported the president, raising questions about representativeness. Third, while our analysis highlights how emotional expressions sustained mobilization, we do not claim that affect operates in isolation—citizens must also recognize shared problems and perceive possibilities for effective action. Our focus on affective dimensions complements rather than displaces these cognitive factors. Fourth, the analysis cannot establish causal necessity: other democracies facing similar threats have collapsed despite comparable resistance, suggesting affective infrastructure is necessary but not sufficient.

One critical limitation merits explicit acknowledgment: this study does not address polarization. Even as rallies mobilized unprecedented coalitions, supporters of the president increasingly viewed opposition dominance as existential threat justifying rule-bending. This mutual threat perception creates conditions for competitive norm violation, where each side's defensive mobilization validates the other's fears. Future research should examine whether affective infrastructures enabling Korea's 2024–25 response can be sustained or whether polarization will erode solidarity across difference, rendering future crises less tractable.

For democracies confronting authoritarian threats, the findings suggest that affective infrastructure requires cultivation through education transmitting historical memory, commemorative rituals activating emotional repertoires, public spaces enabling diverse encounters, and institutional practices treating emotional claims as legitimate expression. Democracy's survival depends less on crisis heroism than on patient, intergenerational work building infrastructures robust enough to activate when institutions falter.

Korea's 2024–25 mobilization reframes Heller's century-old question. Democracy does require citizens' emotional commitment—but commitment need not rest on homogeneity. It can be built through practiced solidarity, inherited repertoires, and institutions designed to hear emotions as political claims. The 122 days of sustained rallies across multiple sites revealed a democratic public constituted through rather than despite its differences—where marginalized voices claimed standing, diverse bodies gathered repeatedly, and emotional expressions translated into institutional pressure. Whether such infrastructures can be sustained amid polarization remains democracy's central challenge—one answerable not through institutional design alone but through ongoing, uncertain work of making democracy real through emotional labor, historical memory, and courage to remain committed when outcomes are not assured.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Under Freie Universität Berlin IRB guidelines, research using publicly available data without direct interaction with participants and without processing private identifiable information does not require formal ethical review. The speeches analyzed here were drawn from open YouTube livestreams of public rallies and were accessed only through YouTube's standard streaming interface. Personal identifiers were removed in the transcription and analysis process. However, self-identifications voluntarily expressed in public speech (for example, references to gender, occupation, or activist affiliations) were retained where necessary, as they constitute essential analytic material for understanding how speakers positioned themselves and claimed political presence.

Author contributions

SJ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. E-JL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used only for English clarity/style editing under the authors' supervision. All outputs were human-reviewed and edited; the authors take full responsibility for the final text. No AI was used for content generation, analysis, results, figures, or references. Speech transcripts were obtained via ClovaNote (ASR) and then manually verified against the videos.

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