

The Emotional Institutionalization of Democracy in Korean News Discourse (1990–2025): Implications for AI-Mediated Political Understanding*

Oul HAN

This study examines how democracy has become emotionally institutionalized in South Korean news discourse. It shifts attention from assessments of democratic quality to the recurring emotional framings through which democratic meaning is stabilized in media texts. Drawing on BERTopic modeling of 69,767 democracy-related news articles from four major Korean newspapers (1990–2025), the study identifies three key findings. First, democracy rarely appears as a standalone institutional concept but is embedded in issue-centered configurations such as elections, protests, and political crises. Second, while progressive and conservative outlets share a largely common topic structure, they systematically emphasize different emotional orientations. Progressive newspapers foreground civic mobilization and participation; conservative outlets emphasize security, leadership, and legal accountability. Third, these differentiated framings persist across three decades, showing recurring discursive patterns across the full period. To conceptualize this process, the study introduces the concept of *emotional institutionalization*, defined as the sedimentation of recurring emotional framings into durable discursive structures. This concept is distinguished from individual affect, fluctuating public opinion, and short-term media bias. The findings show that democracy operates as a historically conditioned discursive formation shaped by Korea's compressed democratization and persistent sense of democratic fragility. Finally, the study suggests that language models trained on large-scale news archives may learn democracy through these emotionally stabilized discursive structures, incorporating them as default interpretive baselines that may appear as neutral representations.

Keywords: Political communication, democracy, topic modeling, polarization, emotional institutionalization, normative boundary bias, AI bias

*This article was prepared in association with the Center for Hallyu Studies at Seoul National University. The author thanks the two anonymous reviewers for their highly valuable comments and suggestions.

Oul Han (okh@sogang.ac.kr) is an assistant professor in the Department of Global Korean Studies, Sogang University

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 39, no. 1 (June 2026): 199–224.
© 2026 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies