

The Influence of Civil Society on Welfare Expansion in East Asia: A Comparative Study of Singapore and South Korea

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Abstract

East Asian countries are often characterized as productivist welfare states whose social policies are subordinated to economic growth. However, in the past decade, public pressure for welfare expansion (or welfarism) has built up across all East Asian countries – including China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Therefore, this paper asks: How has pro-welfare civil society influenced welfare expansion in East Asia over the past decade? Addressing this research question will help fill the theoretical gap on the relationship between contemporary pro-welfare civil society activism and welfare state expansion in East Asian countries. I address this theoretical gap by devising the New Power Approach which argues that pro-welfare civil society is the main driver of welfare expansions when the incumbent government is conservative. By implication, the stronger the pro-welfare civil society in generating political impetus for reforms, the greater the extent of welfare expansion in the country with a conservative government.

Keywords

Civil Society; East Asia; Political Economy of Welfare; Welfare Expansion

Introduction

East Asian countries – including China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore – are often characterized as *productivist* welfare states whose social policies are subordinated to economic growth (Holliday 2000). Other aspects of their welfare states follow from this basis: citizens' social rights and entitlements are minimal with some extensions linked to productive activity; the position of capital is reinforced in the stratification of society; and citizens are heavily dependent upon their families and the market for social protection. However, over the past decade, pro-welfare civil societies have been pressuring East Asian governments to expand their welfare policies. The rise in precarious work arrangements, slower growth of real wages, and ageing populations imply that the income of many workers is no longer enough to finance health, education, and housing expenditure for them and their family members (Lee and Qian 2017). As such, pro-welfare civil societies have been advocating for *protective* social policies that safeguard people's finances from future risks – like sickness, maternity, injury, old age, or the death of a family's breadwinner – which may cause a substantial reduction in earnings or unemployment (Low 2002).

Therefore, this paper asks: how has pro-welfare civil society influenced welfare expansion in East Asia over the past decade? Formally, I define pro-welfare civil society as the subset of civil society – the arena outside of the family, the state, and the market – that is created by individual and collective actions to advance the expansion of welfare policies. It encompasses formal organizations that follow explicit rules, procedures, and strategies to champion welfare expansion, as well as informal groups that are more ad-hoc, and loosely structured around social networks and a shared belief in welfarism. Formal and informal pro-welfare civil society organizations (CSOs) often operate in unison during moments of public outcries over social inequalities and poverty. Together, they advance the expansion of welfare policies in terms of their depth and breadth. Here, depth refers to the total amount of social expenditure, while breadth refers to the portion of the population that benefits from welfare spending.

Addressing this research question brings about two key contributions. Firstly, it fills the theoretical gap on the relationship between contemporary pro-welfare civil society activism and welfare state expansion in East Asian countries. The main school of thoughts explaining welfare state expansion exclude pro-welfare civil societies from their analysis, despite its significance in influencing welfare reforms in the recent decade. Secondly, understanding the extent of pro-welfare civil societies' influence on welfare expansion, as well as their pathways of influence, may help observers forecast the trajectory of contemporary welfare reforms in East Asian countries.

I argue that pro-welfare civil society is the main driver of welfare expansions when the incumbent government is conservative. This is because conservative governments actively resist

welfare expansions and needs to be coerced or persuaded into enacting pro-welfare reforms. In contrast, progressive governments might enact such reforms regardless of the existence of a strong pro-welfare civil society. By implication, the stronger the pro-welfare civil society in generating political impetus for reforms, the greater the extent of welfare expansion in the country with a conservative government. I term this theory as the New Power Approach (NPA) because it is an extension of the Power Resource Approach (PRA) pioneered by Korpi (1983), Esping-Anderson (1989), and Stephens (1979). Rather than focusing on the working class, the NPA centers pro-welfare civil society as the main defender and proponent of welfarism in contemporary times. It elucidates the interactions between pro-welfare civil society, political parties, bureaucrats, and employers; and maps the process through which pro-welfare civil society drives welfare expansions.

I derive the NPA through a most similar systems design (MSSD) case-study of Singapore and South Korea. By minimizing extraneous variance from other key factors driving welfare expansion, MSSD enables us to assess the causal impact of pro-welfare civil society. Singapore and South Korea were selected because both countries demonstrate similarity across most relevant extraneous variables.

This paper begins by providing an overview of the main school of thoughts on welfare expansion and highlighting the theoretical gap on the relationship between civil society and welfare reforms. Next, I elaborate upon the core tenets of the NPA in describing the process to which pro-welfare civil society drives welfare expansion. Finally, I compare between pro-welfare civil society activism in Singapore and South Korea over the past decade and illustrate how stronger activism in South Korea has led to more welfare expansion.

Literature Review

Theories of Welfare Politics

Theories explaining variations in welfare regimes across countries center around four political actors: the working class, political parties, bureaucrats, and employers. The Power Resource Approach (PRA) contends that the strength of class mobilization and class coalitions determines the trajectory of welfare state development. It begins with the observation that labor commodification is a core process in contemporary capitalist societies. This process results in the formation of a working class whose livelihoods rely on the sale of their labor power, or sustained employment throughout their life course (Esping-Anderson 1989). Crucially, their employment is constantly threatened by social risks that are conditioned by societal structures – for example, work accidents, skills redundancy, sickness and old age. To insure themselves against these risks, the

working class become the champions of welfare state expansion (Korpi 1983). However, PRA notes that welfare expansions are often resisted by capitalists who stand to lose their economic privileges. Because workers typically have less bargaining power than the capitalists in these conflicts, their success depends on the collective mobilization of their power resources (Korpi and Palme 2003). According to PRA, labor unions play a central role here because they develop the repertoires of collective action and accumulate the resources necessary to enact them (Korpi 1978). Workers are also dependent on partners who would join them in their political struggle for more social justice and equality (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). Therefore, PRA argues that the strength of class mobilization and class coalitions determines the trajectory of welfare state development.

PRA is complemented by partisan politics theories which emphasize the role and impact of political parties on the generosity of welfare regimes. Traditional partisan theories view parties as representatives of social constituencies and bearers of clear ideological stances for social-democratic or conservative welfare policies. They assume that left control of the government will lead to social-democratic welfare regimes (Huber and Stephens 2001). By contrast, the “new school” of partisan politics deviate from the assumptions of the traditional theories in three important ways. Firstly, it maintains that post-industrial socio-structural changes have altered the electoral constituencies of parties and hence their policy preferences (Allan and Scruggs 2004). Secondly, it argues that the policy preferences of parties depend on their interaction with competing parties too. Lastly, it examines that parties may choose to mobilize voters along clientelist lines, subverting expectations of the policies they advocate. Therefore, analyses of the policy preferences of parties must consider their electoral constituencies, dynamics of party competition and electoral strategies.

In response to PRA and partisan theories, scholars have argued for “bringing the state back” into the studies of welfare states (Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996; Skocpol 1996). State-centered theories find that bureaucrats exercise a significant degree of power and autonomy in advancing welfare state expansion. Bureaucrats commit to doing so for several reasons. From a mercantilist perspective, the state institutes social policy to explicitly facilitate industrialization (Pierson 2004). Similarly, neo-Marxists argue that the state implements welfare policies to sustainably maintain capitalist industrialized economies (Mishra 1984). In contrast, public choice theorists suggest that bureaucrats seek the expansion of welfare policies to enlarge the size and budget of their bureaus in enriching their careers (Buchanan and Tullock 1977).

The employer-centered approach further challenges the PRA. It contends that while employers are often antagonists and rarely open proponents of welfare state expansion, they do support specific social policies (Swenson 2002). In particular, Varieties of Capitalism (VoC)

scholars propose a distinction between coordinate market economies (CME) and liberal market economies (LME) (Hall and Soskice 2001). In CMEs, firms rely on workers with specialized skills that are tied to their company or industry. Firms here hence support complementary social policies targeted at facilitating individual investment into specialized vocational training and education. Whereas in LMEs, employers rely on a mobile workforce with general skillsets and thus prefer a residual welfare state regime (Hall and Soskice 2001).

Overall, pro-welfare civil society is largely absent from the main school of thoughts that explain welfare expansion. The PRA positions the working class and the trade unions that represent them as the key protagonists of welfare expansion, but they are – in contemporary times – only part of the broader pro-welfare civil society. Other civic actors including CSOs, influential advocates, and ordinary citizens across socio-economic statuses have become integral to initiating and shaping the trajectory of welfare expansion across East Asian countries. Identifying this theoretical gap, scholars have recently begun to theorize the relationship between pro-welfare civil society activism and welfare expansion.

Civil Society's Influence on Welfare Expansion in East Asia

Kim (2015) and Lee and Kim (2019) are both notable works that examine the influence of pro-welfare civil society on recent welfare reforms in East Asia, albeit from different theoretical perspectives. Kim (2015) proposes that pro-welfare CSOs can be roughly categorized into two groups: service-oriented CSOs that focus on providing social services to the vulnerable, and advocacy-oriented CSOs that prioritize research, campaigns, and dialogues on issues of inequality and poverty. She argues that a stronger presence of advocacy-oriented CSOs lead to more welfare expansion. In contrast, Lee and Kim (2019) argue that pro-welfare CSOs have become important actors – alongside trade unions – in driving welfare expansion. In particular, they demonstrate that solidarity networks among CSOs, as well as the strategic coalitions between CSOs and political elites, are important power resources for CSOs.

There are several limitations with both analyses. Firstly, both papers are narrow in their conceptualization of pro-welfare civil society. They only consider formally organized CSOs and hence overlooked the significance of informal CSOs and network movements in pro-welfare activism. As Shin (2020) demonstrates, civil society has extended beyond cultural elites and organized activists to encompass a huge number of ordinary citizens, who communicate and interact through decentralized social networks. Secondly, both papers neglect the importance of culture in shaping the strength and strategies of pro-welfare CSOs. Civil activism involves the cultivation of a collective identity based upon a common cause and foundational symbols (Melucci

1995). These collective identities then not only constitute the movement motivation, but also emergent structures and mechanisms, and the movement trajectory and outcome (Broadbent 2011). Thirdly, both papers fall short of theorizing and elucidating the process through which pro-welfare civil society drives welfare expansion. Understanding this process requires us to go beyond studying the strength of pro-welfare CSOs, to appreciate the strategies that CSOs utilize to generate political pressure and how the influence of CSOs are mediated or amplified by political parties, bureaucrats, and employers. Given the limitations of existing theories, I devised the New Power Approach (NPA) to fill the theoretical gap on the relationship between pro-welfare civil society and welfare expansion in East Asia over the past decade.

The New Power Approach

This section presents the New Power Approach (NPA) as a theory on the influence of pro-welfare civil society on welfare expansion in East Asia over the past decade. I demonstrate that the NPA is an extension and revision of the PRA, and consists of four propositions which I explore below.

NPA's first proposition is that pro-welfare civil societies are the main defenders and protagonists of welfare expansion. This stance broadens PRA's focus on the working class, trade unions, and class coalitions. NPA concurs with PRA that class cleavages remain politically salient in East Asian societies (London 2018). However, NPA argues that the social composition of pro-welfare movements has well expanded beyond the working class. It now includes a variety of formal CSOs who are dedicated to promoting pro-welfare reforms, such as think tanks and research centers, media outlets, social service agencies, and advocacy groups; and informal CSOs built around a shared belief in welfarism and the social networks of cultural elites, social activists, and ordinary citizens across socioeconomic statuses (Shin 2020). The work of formal and informal CSOs are often intertwined and complementary to one another. Together, they develop the repertoire of collective action, devise policy solutions, and galvanize the political impetus for pro-welfare reforms.

NPA's second proposition is that the strength of pro-welfare civil societies (in generating the political impetus for welfare expansion) varies across East Asian countries and time according to three key factors: welfare attitudes, social networks, and civil liberties. Welfare attitudes refer to the general public sentiment towards welfare expansion. It is a product of the intersection of identities, interests, ideas, and emotions, and is fundamentally a socio-political construction that is fluid and constantly negotiated by societal members. This view corresponds with findings that welfare attitudes are driven by individual characteristics such as economic class, political affiliation,

and job type (Bailey et al. 2013), as well as societal and political trends (Wang et al. 2013; Svallfors 2011). Significantly, the dominance of conservative sentiments erodes public support for pro-welfare activism and hence weakens the political pressure on governments to expand their welfare policies, or worse, encourages the retrenchment of welfare (Ng 2015).

Social network, the second factor, refers to the social relationships that enhance the capabilities and/or influence of pro-welfare civil societies. These relationships include the solidarity networks among domestic and international CSOs, ties between bureaucrats and CSOs, alliances between political parties and CSOs, and affiliation between members of the public and CSOs (Lee and Kim 2019). They are always governed by cultural norms of conduct, and may sometimes be formally institutionalized through written agreements and rules. In other words, social networks are socio-political constructs formed through negotiations between CSOs and other societal stakeholders. Crucially, social networks are a power resource for CSOs. They provide pro-welfare CSOs with moral legitimacy, access to other forms of resources (such as knowledge, skills, manpower, and material), a direct pathway to influencing social policy, and a means of activating mass support for social movements (Lee and Kim 2019). This insight stems from the original power resources model developed by Korpi (1983) and Epsing-Anderson (1999), which stresses the importance of the strength of class mobilization and class coalitions in advancing the development of welfare states. Therefore, pro-welfare civil societies are more able to generate political pressure for welfare expansion when their social networks are stronger.

The third factor, civil liberties, refers to the freedoms of citizens to exercise customary rights (as of speech or assembly) without unwarranted or arbitrary interference by their government (Britannica 2020). The extent of civil liberties accorded to citizens differ across the East Asian countries, and reflect the political culture that govern state-society relations in each country. Significantly, pro-welfare activists benefit from more civil liberties because it affords them more opportunities to advocate and convert members of society to their cause (Hsiao 2018). In turn, the more political pressure that pro-welfare civil societies can apply on the incumbent government, the greater the likelihood of pro-welfare reforms (Baum 2011; Canaes-Wrong 2015).

NPA's third proposition is that pro-welfare civil society may generate significant political impetus for politicians and bureaucrats to implement pro-welfare reforms. Pro-welfare civil societies may adopt an array of advocacy activities, such as coalition building, public engagement and mobilization, information campaigning, policy monitoring, demonstration projects, litigation, and direct engagement with politicians and bureaucrats (Gen and Wright 2020). The feasibilities, risks, and outcomes of each advocacy activity will depend on the capabilities of the CSO undertaking it, as well as the political opportunities available to the CSO. If successful in their

advocacy, CSOs may (re)shape the public discourse on issues of social welfare to gain support for pro-welfare reforms and transform it into a key policy agenda. This places pressure upon politicians and bureaucrats, especially those who are hostile towards government welfare programs, to enact pro-welfare reforms or risk losing favor among the public (Hausermann et al. 2013). At the same time, the advocacy of CSOs may genuinely convince politicians and bureaucrats of the necessity of pro-welfare reforms (Gen and Wright 2020). This adds to the political impetus for the government to expand their welfare programs.

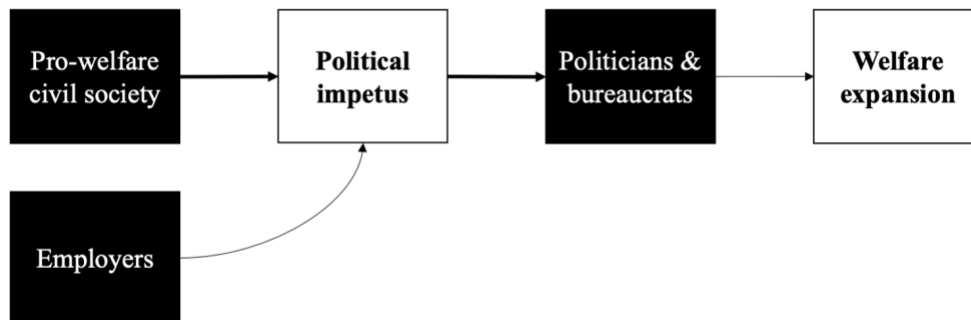
Critically, the strength of pro-welfare civil society determines the extent to which it can create political impetus for pro-welfare reforms. The more support that CSOs can muster and mobilize, the higher the likelihood that politicians will feel compelled to implement pro-welfare reforms to preserve or enhance their popularity (Hausermann et al. 2013). Furthermore, the greater the intensity of popular appeal, the more likely that politicians and bureaucrats would be persuaded of the need for such reforms (Shin 2020).

NPA's fourth proposition is that the political impetus created by pro-welfare civil society does not directly lead to actual reforms. It can be resisted or leveraged by politicians and bureaucrats according to their agendas. This is because the authority to implement welfare policies ultimately lies in the hands of the government, consisting of elected politicians and bureaucrats, rather than civil society. On the one hand, *conservative* government officials can resist and dampen public demands for pro-welfare reforms. They can challenge the political discourse of pro-welfare civil society by problematizing the expansion of government welfare (Richards-Gray 2018; Grewig et al. 2020). A common rhetoric is that welfare expansion would discourage benefit recipients from working, while placing a larger tax burden upon taxpayers to finance the programs (Richards-Gray 2018; Grewig et al. 2020). *Conservative* government officials may also shape policy proposals to reduce welfare spending, or at least limit welfare expansions, to the extent that their electoral popularity is threatened (Abou-Chadi and Immergut 2019). On the other hand, *progressive* politicians and bureaucrats who favor welfare expansions play a critical role in creating the political momentum for actual reforms. They extend the political impetus generated by pro-welfare civil society by tabling and advancing pro-welfare reforms on the policy agenda of governments.

Significantly then, the extent to which pro-welfare civil society can translate their political impetus into actual welfare reforms depends on the support of politicians and bureaucrats, especially the incumbent government. After all, the incumbent government is principally responsible for the formulation and implementation of pro-welfare reforms. In turn, the extent to which the incumbent government distains (or favors) pro-welfare reforms is heavily contingent upon the ideology of its leadership, party competition dynamics, and its electoral strategy

(Hausermann et al. 2013). It must also balance popular demand for pro-welfare reforms with the interests of employers who are selective about the social policies that they support (Hall and Soskice 2001).

Figure 1: New Power Approach (NPA)



Source: Author.

Figure 1 connects and illustrates the four propositions. Overall, NPA argues that pro-welfare civil society is the main driver of welfare expansions when the incumbent government is conservative. By implication, the stronger the pro-welfare civil society in generating political impetus for reforms, the greater the extent of welfare expansion in the country with a conservative government.

Research Design

This paper applies the MSSD in comparing the extent of welfare expansion between Singapore and South Korea from 2010 to 2017. I select the MSSD for three reasons. One reason is that, as I elaborate later, Singapore and South Korea display considerable similarity across all relevant extraneous variables. By minimizing extraneous variance from other factors, MSSD enables us to elucidate how the strength of pro-welfare civil society affects the extent of welfare expansion in both countries. Specifically, I demonstrate that a stronger pro-welfare civil society led to more welfare expansion in South Korea than in Singapore. The MSSD comparison is outlined in Table 1. The shaded cells indicate the key independent variable (strength of pro-welfare civil society) and the dependent variable (extent of welfare expansion). Another reason is a MSSD comparative case study allows us to detail the circumstances in which pro-welfare civil society drives welfare expansion. A third reason is that robust quantitative data on the key independent variable and the dependent variable in East Asian countries are largely unavailable. This alone makes the MSSD comparative case study more feasible than a quantitative study.

Table 1: MSSD Comparison Between Singapore and South Korea (2010-2017)

Country	Strength of pro-welfare civil society	Incumbent government	Bureaucrats	Employers	Level of social expenditure	Level of social protection	Extent of welfare expansion
Singapore	Weak	Conservative	Considerable influence in policymaking	Mixed-market economy	Low	Moderate	Low
South Korea	Moderate						Moderate

Source: Author.

Having clarified the rationale of using the MSSD, I now move to demonstrate the suitability of Singapore and South Korea as case studies for the comparison. Firstly, we can eliminate the proposition that differences in the nature of the incumbent government – i.e., pro-welfare or conservative – explain the differences in the extent of welfare expansion in both countries. This is because the incumbent government in both countries were conservative from 2010 to 2017. In Singapore, the conservative People's Action Party (PAP) held a supermajority in parliament. Similarly, in South Korea, President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and President Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) were both from the Saenuri Party (formerly the Grand National Party), which is widely recognized as conservative. Secondly, we can reject the proposition that differences in the capacity and power of bureaucrats can explain why welfare expansion was greater in South Korea than Singapore. This is because the bureaucracy in both countries are rather similar in their roles in welfare policymaking. They both command strong institutional resources afforded by historical legacies of the developmental state and are generally effective at developing and implementing welfare policies but largely remain subordinate to the policy objectives of the executive branch (Ringen et al. 2011; Jones 2016). Third, we can dismiss the proposition that differences in the form of capitalism and the role of employers have led to more welfare expansion in South Korea than Singapore. This is because Singapore and South Korea are both broadly recognized as mixed-market economies (MME), which combine features of CMEs and LMEs, because they utilize a mix of state coordination and market institutions to drive economic development (Hundt and Uttam 2017). Following the VoC theory, we can expect both governments to commit towards providing considerable social protection for employees (Hall and Gingerich 2009). Lastly, we can reject the hypothesis that differences in the level of social expenditure and social protection led to more welfare expansion in South Korea than Singapore. The logic is that the lower the level of social expenditure and protection, the easier it is for governments to pursue and register a larger expansion of welfare policies. In both Singapore and South Korea, as I detail later, the level of social expenditure and social protection remains modest

(Ministry of Finance Singapore 2020; OECD 2020), and hence cannot explain their differences in the extent of welfare expansion from 2010 to 2017.

One notable difference between Singapore and South Korea is the state of democracy in each country. In the Polity IV index, Singapore is recognized as a “closed anocracy” in which one party, the PAP, has maintained parliamentary supermajority since the country’s independence in 1965 (Marshall and Gurr 2020). In contrast, South Korea is considered a “democracy” because it features regular rotations of power and robust political pluralism (Marshall and Gurr 2020). Significantly, this hints at the presence of more intense party competition in South Korea than in Singapore. The intensity of party competition is often associated with higher levels of social spending by parties across the political spectrum in contemporary times, as parties attempt to appeal to their voter base (Abou-Chadi and Immergut 2019). However, upon deeper investigation, I argue that this broad difference in the type of democracy is not relevant to understanding why welfare expansion was greater in South Korea than Singapore. This is because dominant ruling parties in autocratic regimes – like their counterparts in democratic regimes – are responsive to negative electoral shocks. Specifically, negative electoral shocks to ruling parties is associated with an increase in social welfare spending following elections (Miller 2015). Just as the conservative Saenuri Party experienced intense electoral competition with the Democratic Party of Korea in the 2012 Presidential and Legislative Elections (Gajdos and Bendini 2013), the PAP returned to power with the smallest margin of popular votes since Singapore’s independence in the 2011 General Election (Elections Department Singapore 2011). In short, the incumbent government in both Singapore and South Korea faced considerable electoral competition to increase social welfare spending.

Crucially too, differences in the extent of civil liberties enjoyed by citizens in Singapore and South Korea, which partially stems from the type of democracy practiced in each country, is already captured in the key independent variable – the strength of pro-welfare civil society. As such, the broad difference in the type of democracy is not relevant to their comparison. Then, having shown that Singapore and South Korea display similarity across all relevant extraneous variables, we can confidently apply the MSSD in comparing both cases.

Singapore

Weak Pro-Welfare Civil Society

Between 2010 and 2017, Singapore had a weak pro-welfare civil society because of the dominance of conservative welfare attitudes among the public, limited social networks among pro-welfare CSOs and with the state, and restricted civil liberties for social activism. Qualitative and

quantitative surveys on the welfare attitudes of Singaporeans revealed that most believed in the necessity of expanding welfare provision to better help the poor, but only to the extent that it promoted self-reliance and meritocracy in Singaporean society (Chong and Ng 2017; Institute of Policy Studies 2013; Matthew and Ng 2016; Ng 2015). Time-series data is unavailable because each of these surveys were conducted independently; they nonetheless provide insights into the conservative attitude of Singaporeans then. The Institute of Policy Studies (2013) found that 45% of Singaporeans favored more welfare provisions, yet only 33% were willing to pay higher taxes to fund it. Similarly, Ng (2015) showed that 64% of Singaporeans supported an increase in welfare expenditure, though only 40% were willing to pay higher taxes for it.

While these quantitative findings present mixed results on the preferences of Singaporeans, available qualitative studies more decisively demonstrate Singaporeans' wariness towards welfare expansion. According to a survey by Chong and Ng (2017), supporters of welfare expansion generally believed in limited forms of reforms that were consistent with the Singaporean government's anti-welfarist discourse. That is, they believed in limiting welfare provisions to encourage citizens to take personal responsibility in generating sufficient income through formal employment to provide for themselves and their dependents, relying on family members if one was unable to work. In their view, the state was the supporter of last resort (Chong and Ng 2017). Matthew and Ng (2016) further confirmed this finding through their qualitative survey on the working poor in Singapore. Even those who are the most supportive of welfare expansion in earlier quantitative surveys generally believed that welfare recipients should be encouraged to work and family members should remain the primary social safety net rather than the government. In short, Singaporeans generally favored very limited forms of welfare expansions that were aligned with the incumbent government's anti-welfarist rhetoric.

Crucially too, pro-welfare civil society in Singapore was weak because its CSOs had been unable to develop strong social networks. This is evident from two key indicators. One indicator is that CSOs rarely engaged or collaborated on research and advocacy activities to advance pro-welfare reforms (Tan 2010). The deliberate channeling of state and private funding towards the provision of social services, as opposed to advocacy and research activities, incentivizes CSOs to focus on delivering social services often in isolation or in competition with their counterparts (Chong 2005). As such, few CSOs command the necessary financial resources to carry out research and advocacy. Hence, there exists little grounds of solidarity among the CSOs over welfare issues and policies.

Another indicator is that CSOs largely remain disengaged from bureaucrats and politicians in the policymaking processes. Bureaucrats and politicians are sometimes compelled to work with

CSOs to implement social policies and programs, especially when these CSOs have the expertise and ground connections that the bureaucracy lacks (Chua 2014; Hong 2017). However, for the most part, policymaking remains a technocratic exercise confined within the walls of the bureaucracy. Politicians and bureaucrats define what issues are available for dialogue, controls who gets access to opportunities for collaboration, shapes the form and extent of that access (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2007).

The weakness of pro-welfare civil society in Singapore is further compounded by the pervasiveness of formal and informal restrictions on civil liberties. Formal restrictions are utilized to inhibit political dissent and collective organization (Bal 2015). Some key legislations include the Societies Act, which requires “societies” of ten or more persons to be approved; the Public Order Act, which require individuals and organizations to have state-issued permits for protest activities; the Trade Union Ordinance, which empowers the state to deregister or to reject the registration of unions; and the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, which enables the state to control the appointment of the management board of local media outlets. Informal restrictions also hindered political dissent and collective mobilization by pro-welfare CSOs in Singapore. As Chua (2014) describes, there exists an obscure and unwritten code of conduct for CSOs involved in advocacy, especially when speaking out against the government. These CSOs and activists must avoid direct confrontation with the state, make narrow claims that appeal to the value of social stability and avoid claims to greater rights, ensure the legality of their public actions, and protect the international image of Singapore. A failure to adhere to this dance of “pragmatic resistance” may evoke extraordinary repression including hefty lawsuits, exclusion from state funding, and loss of employment or promotion opportunities in state-linked institutions such as think tanks and state-owned enterprises (Abdullah 2020; Chua 2014). Yet, in adhering to the dance of “pragmatic resistance,” CSOs find themselves dampening their creativity into a form of routinization of strategy and repression that culminates into self-regulating their actions according to accepted and expected norms (Chua 2014). In essence, CSOs either practise self-censorship and blunt their advocacy or risk surviving at all.

Limited Political Impetus for Welfare Expansion

Having discussed the fundamental weaknesses of pro-welfare civil society in Singapore, I will now elaborate how it led to the limited success of pro-welfare activism in creating political impetus for change between 2010 and 2017. For analytical clarity, I distinguish between two broad forms of pro-welfare activism – protests and non-protest – and evaluate their ineffectiveness independently.

I begin by discussing the limited success of protests in driving pro-welfare reforms. Table 2 lists out all protests that propagated some form of welfare expansion, occurred between 2010 and 2017, and were covered by local or foreign mainstream media outlets. A couple of key points are salient from Table 2. Firstly, pro-welfare protests were fairly infrequent in Singapore. Secondly, only a small segment of Singaporeans participated in these protests. Together, these two points reveal that the protests had limited appeal among the wider population. This can, in part, be explained by the fundamental weaknesses of pro-welfare civil society in Singapore. For starters, while Singaporeans favoured welfare expansions in these protests, the reforms demanded remain poorly articulated and conservative. Moreover, the organizers behind these protests lacked strong social networks with established CSOs and credible political elites (Goh and Pang 2016). The latter group largely distanced themselves from these protests as part of their broader strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with the state (Sim 2015). As a result, these protests generally faded out of existence without much impact on the policy discourse of pro-welfare reforms.

Table 2: List of public demonstrations in Singapore from 2010-2017

S/N	Public demonstration	Date	No. of participants	Source
1	White Paper Protests	Feb 2013	4000	Hodal 2013
		May 2013	4000	Chang 2013
		Oct 2013	1000	Chang 2013
		May 2014	350	Xu 2015
2	Return Our CPF Protests	Jun 2014	2000	Aripin 2014
		Jul 2014	Unknown	Yong 2014
		Aug 2014	Unknown	Chen 2014
3	Water Hike Protest	Mar 2017	100	Yong 2017

Source: Author.

This can be illustrated with the Population White Paper Protests (2013-2014), of which the February session is widely recognized as the biggest protest in Singapore since its independence. The protests centered on the opposition towards the government's plans to allow more immigration to increase the population size to 6.9 million by 2030, with foreigners making up 45% of that number, and the variety of welfare issues associated with it: the rising cost of living,

deepening income inequality, and job insecurity among locals (BBC 2013). Notably, the series of protests did not seek to pursue deep pro-welfare reforms but was fixated with tightening immigration flows. This is remarkable because it reflects the implicit acceptance of most Singaporeans over the existing welfare regime – excessive immigration, and not the limited welfare regime, was perceived to be the main issue. Moreover, the Population White Paper Protests were mainly organized by the activist Gilbert Goh, who belonged to the fringe opposition and was unaffiliated to any well-established CSOs (Vasu 2014). As such, there lacked a strong network of CSOs to support and strengthen demands for pro-welfare reforms at the protests. Crucially, as the government took measures to tighten foreign workers inflows, support for the protests – and the demands for broader pro-welfare reforms associated with it – dissipated almost completely by 2014 (Agence France-Presse 2014).

At the same time, non-protest forms of welfare activism had limited success in creating political impetus for pro-welfare reforms. For analytical clarity, such efforts can be categorized into those occurring on the domestic and international stage. Domestically, pro-welfare CSOs and activists produced critical commentaries and research that challenged the dominant policy discourse of anti-welfarism. Notable works include prominent economists Linda Lim and Lee Soo Ann's (2010) academic publication which criticized the PAP government for exacerbating income inequality through its staid policies; former senior civil servant Tan Jee Say's (2011) policy document which ignited much debate on the implementation of minimum wages during the 2011 election; and Donald Low and Sudhir Vadaketh's (2014) book which called for stronger welfare support in Singapore. Importantly too, CSOs and activists organized and participated in public dialogues where they advocated for pro-welfare reforms. In particular, the advocacy of prominent establishment figures – such as former chairman of the National Wage Council (NWC) Lim Chong Yah and Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh – against the PAP government's anti-welfarist principles and policies captured the headlines of mainstream media (Rahim 2015). These CSOs and activists not only reflected public grievances, but also fueled them by highlighting the flaws in the socio-economic policies of the PAP government.

However, such domestic efforts had limited success at generating political impetus for pro-welfare reforms. As explained later, the PAP government introduced several piecemeal initiatives that do not substantially alleviate the economic pressures of the working poor (Rahim 2015). Again, this can be attributed to the fundamental weaknesses of pro-welfare civil society in Singapore. CSOs and activists rarely have social networks with bureaucrats or political elites, who could bring their concerns and suggestions into the policy discourse within the bureaucracy (George 2020). This creates the oft-mentioned perception that the Singaporean government

remains isolated and distanced from conversations on the ground (George 2020). Furthermore, opportunities for non-protest forms of welfare activism remained restricted too. As George (2021) writes, individuals who participate in activism risk becoming blacklisted or greylisted by the government. That is, the state's security apparatus would open files on individuals containing observations that they would never have a chance to see or counter; and word would get around within the bureaucracy that these individuals might be "controversial." Once on the blacklist or greylist, it is common for activists to be shut out of employment in the public sector, which includes the think tanks, institutions of higher learnings, bureaucracies, and more (George 2021). Furthermore, these activists become shunned from Singapore's mainstream media, which in effect mutes pro-welfare activism and amplifies dogma (George 2021). Consequently, pro-welfare activists either practise self-censorship in their activism to remain friendly to the government, or risk becoming "cancelled" by the government.

Pro-welfare activism on the international stage did not generate much political impetus either. One of the most important form of pro-welfare activism on the international stage occurs at the United Nations' (UN) review of the implementation of UN conventions, which are legally-binding international agreements that set out the social entitlements of certain vulnerable populations. At these reviews, the UN will evaluate the progress of countries at implementing the Conventions by engaging the civil society (and government) of each countries to each produce a report, and later provide recommendations for improvements. Significantly, this opens up space for civil society to advocate for pro-welfare reforms through the UN. Between 2010 and 2017, the UN began conducting reviews on two conventions: the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

While Singapore's civil society had participated in the review of the CEDAW and CRPD, little political impetus for pro-welfare reforms was created. This can be explained by the fundamental weakness of pro-welfare civil society again. Social networks among CSOs were weak – few participated in the review of the Conventions, especially as many were primarily focused on the provision of social services rather than advocacy and concerned about repercussions from the government for participating in the review. For instance, in the 2017 review of CEDAW, a coalition of 13 CSOs submitted a joint report, while 47 other CSOs declined to participate in the review (Toh 2017). In the 2019 review of CRPD, only one CSO submitted a solo report while all other CSOS in the disability sector chose to abstain from the review (Disabled People's Association 2019). Furthermore, while the civil society should have remained independent in its reports on the Conventions, there was considerable interference by the Singapore government –

such as reviewing initial drafts – to ensure the report remained friendly to them. This shows how limitations on civil liberties impeded pro-welfare activism in Singapore.

Limited Welfare Expansion

Whatever limited political impetus created by civil society was further dampened by the incumbent government's resistance towards pro-welfare reforms. In particular, the PAP government has been effective at co-opting the narratives of pro-welfare activism to promote their conservative stance. Stemming from the self-realization that it has overextended itself in the management of society, the PAP government deliberately permits and encourages civil society to initiate and sustain discussions of civic concerns but attempts to either control or mold them to suit its agenda (Birch and Phillips 2003). It hence responds to pro-welfare activism in three ways. Firstly, it cooperates with pro-welfare activists to galvanize political support for the reforms that it favors, to understand the situation on the ground, and to implement new policies or programmes (which it then takes credit for). In these instances, pro-welfare CSOs become co-opted as “junior partners” to the state (Chua 2003).

Secondly, the PAP government justifies the productivist limits of its welfare reforms by appealing to Singaporeans' belief in meritocracy. It reiterates its social policy objectives in supporting Singaporeans to become self-reliant and economically productive, rather than making them immune from market dependency. It argues that such policies accord dignity to welfare beneficiaries, discourage free-riding on taxpayers' monies, and respect the merits of talented and hardworking Singaporeans (Zulkifli 2021). Thirdly, it consistently and convincingly promotes the notion that the state has provided sufficient welfare to Singaporeans through their parliamentary speeches, government campaigns, news reports and social media. Even critical-minded Singaporeans would have difficulties looking beyond the rosy picture portrayed by the PAP government (Teo 2018).

Ultimately, the limits of pro-welfare activism are evident from the modest increase in Singapore's social expenditure as a percentage of GDP over the past decade. While the PAP government has almost doubled their social expenditure from \$17 billion in Financial Year (FY) 2010 to \$31 billion in FY2019 (Ministry of Finance Singapore 2020), this marks only a 1.2-point increase in social expenditure as a percentage of GDP from 7.1% to 8.3%. (Annual data on Singapore's social expenditure is unavailable as the government does not publish them.) Singapore's size of social expenditure hence remains significantly lower than Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries which averaged 20% in 2019 (OECD 2020).

The PAP government often justifies its low social spending by pointing to Singapore's remarkably high performance in income, education, and health. It ranks 11th globally in the 2019 United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (UNDP 2020). Its students also ranked second overall in the OECD's PISA test in 2018 (OECD 2018a). However, beyond these broad-based indicators, little is known about the detailed performance of the Singapore's welfare system. Information on common indicators of welfare performance – including insurance replacement rates, coverage of benefits, beneficiary incidence, benefit levels and distributional effects – remains inaccessible to researchers, even though they might provide a more nuanced picture of Singapore's successes. For instance, OECD (2018b) estimates that net pension replacement rates for a median income earner in Singapore is 58.6%, which is well below the World Bank's (1994) recommendation of 78% to ensure that seniors can maintain their lifestyle in their old age. Therefore, it might be presumptuous to justify Singapore's low social spending on its performance on broad-based indicators such as the HDI and PISA.

The inefficacy of pro-welfare activism is further reflected by the limited transformation of the logic and principles of welfare in Singapore. Here, two features of recent welfare reforms need to be explored. Firstly, the Central Provident Fund (CPF) continues to play the central role in financing social expenditure in Singapore (Lee and Qian 2017). The CPF is a mandatory savings system wherein a proportion of an individual's income from formal employment is deposited into his or her individual account monthly, with matching contributions from the employer. It fulfils the state's vision of ensuring that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own housing, healthcare and retirement needs through sustained employment.

Secondly, increases in direct spending on citizens have been largely limited and conditional on specific behaviors or demographics, rather than universal (Teo 2015). Low-income citizens must stay employed to benefit from wage subsidies under the enhanced workfare schemes, and to gain full access to available subsidies for childcare (ECDA 2021). Enhanced healthcare subsidies have been distributed according to age-cohorts: the Merdeka Generation born between 1950 and 1959, and the Pioneer Generation born before 1950. Social assistance, or ComCare, are mostly made available only to households with per capita income below \$650 on a modest and short-term basis (Ministry of Social and Family Development Singapore 2021). Exceptions to this trend are the introduction of a universal health insurance MediShield Life in 2015 and national disability insurance CareShield Life in 2020 as the state aims to defray rising healthcare expenditures by relying on more risk-pooling among citizens (Ministry of Health Singapore 2020). Even here, however, citizens are expected to be self-reliant in financing the insurance premiums. Premium

subsidies are given only to citizens who cannot finance them independently or through family members, and after a stringent application and assessment processes (Hansard 2021).

Overall, owing to its weaknesses, pro-welfare civil society has been unable to create the political impetus for significant welfare expansion in Singapore. This is reflected in the limited growth of social expenditure (as a percentage of GDP) and the persistence of productivist principles underlying the PAP government's welfare policies.

South Korea

Contentious Pro-Welfare Civil Society

South Korea (herein after Korea) has a strong pro-welfare civil society because of the presence of popular support for welfare expansion, extensive social networks among CSOs and connections to state actors, and robust civil liberties for social activism. In the past decade, the majority of Koreans have consistently supported welfare expansions although demonstrating some reluctance to contribute more taxes to fund them. This is most evident from the Surveys on Welfare Perception (SWP) that is conducted every three years within the Korea Welfare Panel Surveys (KoWEPS) and constitutes the only nationally representative database on welfare attitudes in Korea. Table 2 draws upon the SWP of 2010, 2013 and 2016 to analyze longitudinal trends in the level of support for an increase in government spending across nine welfare policies and for higher taxes to fund them (KoWEPS 2017). All socioeconomic classes generally favor some welfare expansion across the nine areas of welfare in all years, as reflected by their mean scores being moderately greater than the median of three, with low-income Koreans consistently being the most supportive. However, support for increases in taxes to fund welfare expansions is generally lackluster. The 2016 Survey registered a mean score of 2.9, which is slightly below the median level. Lim (2018) explains that such mixed attitudes mainly result from Koreans' perception that the existing system of risk pooling is unfair. The upper-middle and upper classes think they pay more taxes than others with similar economic capacity. Furthermore, Koreans' trust in the tax system has been hampered by repeated allegations of a waste of taxpayers' money to government corruption and mismanagement. Hence, Koreans believe that the government should be able to offer more generous protection without collecting more taxes from them and have become more reluctant to increase their contributions. Ultimately, the SWP reflects that Koreans hold pro-welfare attitudes which are moderated by perceptions of unfairness in their risk-pooling system.

Table 2: Average Scores of the Variables of Welfare Attitude on Five-Point Scales
from 2010 to 2016

Policy	Income	2010		2013		2016	
		Mean	s.d	Mean	s.d	Mean	s.d
Health insurance	All	4.6	9.03	3.5	0.79	3.4	0.84
	Middle	4.5	9.11	3.5	0.81	3.4	0.86
	Low	4.6	8.68	3.6	0.68	3.4	0.69
Public pension	All	4.6	9.07	3.4	0.88	3.2	0.80
	Middle	4.6	9.16	3.4	0.89	3.2	0.82
	Low	4.6	8.69	3.6	0.79	3.2	0.69
Unemployment insurance	All	4.5	9.05	3.4	0.75	3.3	0.85
	Middle	4.5	9.13	3.4	0.76	3.3	0.87
	Low	4.6	8.71	3.6	0.70	3.3	0.71
Support for the poor	All	4.7	9.04	3.6	0.71	3.4	0.85
	Middle	4.7	9.12	3.6	0.71	3.3	0.86
	Low	4.7	8.69	3.7	0.72	3.5	0.83
Support for the elderly	All	4.6	9.02	3.5	0.73	3.3	0.88
	Middle	4.6	9.11	3.5	0.74	3.3	0.89
	Low	4.6	8.67	3.7	0.63	3.5	0.79
Support for people with disabilities	All	4.7	9.21	3.8	0.64	3.7	0.83
	Middle	4.7	9.10	3.8	0.65	3.7	0.85
	Low	4.8	9.75	3.9	0.56	3.7	0.73
Support for families with children	All	4.8	9.01	3.4	0.89	3.4	0.88
	Middle	4.8	9.09	3.4	0.89	3.5	0.90
	Low	4.7	8.66	3.5	0.88	3.4	0.67
Support for higher taxes to increase welfare	All	3.1	1.07	3.2	0.94	2.9	0.93
	Middle	3.1	1.07	3.2	0.93	2.9	0.95
	Low	3.2	1.04	3.3	0.98	2.9	0.83

Source: KoWEPS (2017).

The pro-welfare sentiments of Koreans are activated through the extensive layers of social networks among CSOs and their connections to state actors. Firstly, institutionalized CSOs have developed a tradition of forging strong inter-organizational ties among themselves to advocate for pro-welfare reforms. This tradition emerged from the confrontational oppression-resistance relationship between the civil society and state during Korea's democratization between the 1970s to 1990s. In spearheading democratic and welfare reforms, CSOs achieved more success in mobilizing the masses by relying on more moderate and institutionalized means of action and seeking the participation of a broader spectrum of citizens. This led to the formation of *simin undong*, or citizens' movements, that emphasized the development of inter-organizational ties to unify and coordinate the goals and strategies of different CSOs, so as to amplify the impact of their advocacy (Shin 2020). Secondly, ordinary citizens and communities are loosely connected through informal activism networks that have been critical to the emergence and spread of spontaneous and decentralized collective actions which Castells (2015) terms as "networked social movements". A new form of protest in Korea called *chotbuljiphoe*, or candlelight protest, symbolizes this trend. It involves the rapid mass mobilization of citizens who are diversified in their age, sex,

occupation, and prior experience in activism. Participants independently coordinate their actions and recruit more participants through digital communications, and without reliance on the leadership of political parties or formal CSOs (Shin 2020). Thirdly, pro-welfare CSOs have established informal strategic alliances with bureaucrats and political elites to drive welfare reforms. Given the popularity and strength of CSOs at the national level, CSOs have become critical partners for political entrepreneurs seeking to generate policy alternatives and mass support for pro-welfare reforms (Lee and Kim 2019). In turn, CSOs leverage political entrepreneurs to table pro-welfare reforms on the national policy agenda and to pass them in the legislature.

Pro-welfare attitudes and solidarity networks are, moreover, facilitated by the broad civil liberties enjoyed by Korean civil society. While restrictions on certain civil society activities persist – especially those sympathetic to North Korea – Koreans are generally guaranteed rights to freedom of speech, press, association, and peaceful assembly (Freedom House 2020). This allows for the active campaigning and collective mobilization for pro-welfare reforms in Korea.

Political Impetus for Welfare Expansion

Having discussed the fundamental strengths of pro-welfare civil society in South Korea, I will examine how it succeeded in generating significant political impetus for pro-welfare reforms between 2010 and 2017, owing much to its strengths.

Between 2010 and 2012, pro-welfare civil society pressured Lee Myung-bak's administration into increasing the government's subsidies on university education for South Koreans. During this period, public spending on higher education as a proportion of the total is below the OECD average of 69%, leaving most of the tuition burden on students and parents (Kim 2011). Moreover, in another OECD survey, South Korean universities were ranked last among the member countries in terms of college education environment, which suggests that their students get little in return for the exorbitant charges (Kim 2011). Lee had promised to halve university tuition fees and improve the quality of university education in his 2007 election campaign, but displayed little commitment towards fulfilling this promise up till 2011 (Kirk 2011a). In 2011, as part of an annual ritual in late May after semester examinations, university students in Seoul and other cities held protests almost daily, with some shaving their heads, holding candle-lit vigils, and shouting their pet slogan "Halve Tuition Fees!" (Borowiec 2011). Critically, the students drew support from some 510 civil society groups, which formed a coalition to support the students in a clear escalation of the campaign in 2011 (Kim 2011). The students also garnered support from the opposition political elites, who helped push the students' demands through cross-party talks with the incumbent government (Kim 2011). Impressively, the 2011 student protests elicited

concessions from the Lee administration to cut tuition fees by 30% over the following three years (Kim 2011).

Significantly, this instance demonstrates that the success of pro-welfare civil society in generating political impetus for pro-welfare reforms is intimately linked to their strength. The Korean public supported an increase in government subsidies on university fees and could effectively mobilize through its extensive social networks to pressure the government into passing the reforms. Furthermore, pro-welfare civil society could utilize their civil liberties to organize annual protests that captured the attention and sympathies of the broader public to galvanize more support for educational reforms.

Another key instance of successful pro-welfare activism during the Lee administration was their victory at the 2011 Seoul free lunch referendum. In 2011, Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon campaigned to end free lunches for all elementary and middle school students and replace it with a limited free meal service to children from the poorest 30 percent of households only (Kirk 2011b). Pro-welfare CSOs and activists responded, in support with the Democratic Party, by calling for a boycott of the referendum. For example, Superintendent Kwak No-hyun – the city's top school official – filed a lawsuit against the city government to the Constitutional Court, claiming that the government has no right to make a decision on free school meals (Shin and Kim 2011). Due to low voter turnout, the referendum failed and Oh Se-hoon resigned. Instead, Seoul's education office expanded the free lunch program to cover fifth- and sixth-grade students who were previously excluded from the program (Na 2011). This again demonstrates how the strength of pro-welfare civil society – public preferences for welfare expansion, CSO networks, and civil liberties to organize and dissent – is crucial to its success at galvanizing political impetus for reforms.

Besides episodes of social mobilization, sometimes the credible threat of it by pro-welfare civil society is sufficient to galvanize reforms. Following the outbreak of the 2008 global financial crisis, the Lee administration were concerned about the political costs of mass unemployment and associated income deterioration among the populace (Yang 2017). They hence quickly responded with specific and targeted labor policies – including the simple expansion of unemployment benefits, targeted job creation programs for the youth and the elderly, assistance for workers on leave without pay, creation of temporary employment, and so forth – to help prevent mass unemployment. These initiatives caused the government spending on labor market measures to increase by threefold from 2009 to 2012 (Yang 2017).

Moreover, non-protest forms of activism have also contributed towards reshaping the political discourse to favor pro-welfare reforms. The everyday grievances and complains of

ordinary South Koreans, alongside the production of critical commentaries and research by pro-welfare CSOs and activists, helped create a socio-political environment that was increasingly discontented with the growing socioeconomic inequality in Korean society and the predatory practices of *chaebols* at the expense of smaller businesses. This propelled pro-welfare reforms to the forefront of policy discourse as the Lee reached the end of his tenure in 2012.

This is evident from Park Geun-hye's political positioning in the 2012 presidential elections. Cognizant of the electorate's demand for pro-welfare reforms and the dwindling approval rate of the GNP, Park reformed the ruling party to aggressively embrace welfarism upon assuming the party's leadership in December 2011. She changed the party's name to Saenuri Party, or "New Frontier Party", and adopted red as its new official color to signal its turn to the left. Under Park, the Saenuri Party began competing aggressively with the Democratic Party on generous social policies such that there was no major difference in the locus and magnitude of Park's and Moon's pledges in the 2012 presidential elections (Yang 2017). Specifically, Park promised free childcare and education for all children under six years old, free education for high school, free healthcare services for four critical illnesses, and a doubling of monthly basic pension to \$181 for seniors above sixty-four (Yang 2017). At the same time, Park promised to review the current rules which benefitted the *chaebols* at the expense of small-to-medium enterprises (Gajdos and Bendini 2013). Crucially, this demonstrates the effectiveness of pro-welfare civil society in bringing reforms to the forefront of the policy debate in the Korean elections.

Pro-welfare civil society maintained political pressure for welfare expansion throughout Park's presidential term, especially as her administration sought to backpedal on its electoral promises. The Park administration had promised to expand the welfare without raising taxes which, not surprisingly, has proven impossible. Realizing the fiscal impracticability of their welfare pledges, the Park administration scraped out many pledges like free tuition for high school and made cost-cutting modifications on key pledges such as basic pension and free medical services for four critical diseases (Yang 2017). The Park administration further promoted deregulation and quantitative easing that mainly benefitted the *chaebols* while betraying her campaign promises on economic democracy (Lee 2019).

In response, pro-welfare civil society mobilized to demand the reforms that Park had promised. It actively transformed citizens' resentment over welfare issues into a broad and fundamental critique of Korean society by actively problematizing the soaring inequalities. Neologisms like *hell Joseon*, *gapjil*, and the "spoon class theory" emerged in the everyday discourse of Koreans, which transpired diverse imaginings about a fairer Korean society that addresses welfare issues. *Hell Joseon* denotes Koreans' frustrations with present-day social hierarchies that

resemble the rigidity of those during the Joseon dynasty (Kim 2018). *Gapjil* reflects the pervasiveness of abusive practices by employers on salaried workers (Shin and Moon 2017). The “spoon class theory” signifies popular sentiment about the impossibility of class mobility for low-income families (Kim 2017). Significantly, such everyday political discourse would help transform pro-welfare reforms into a key priority for politicians.

Most evidently, pro-welfare discourse formed the discursive basis of the Candlelight Protests that erupted against Park Geun-hye from October 2016 to March 2017 (Lee 2019). Prompted by the unprecedented political irregularities committed by then President Park Geun-hye and her confidante, Choi Soon-sil, citizens (with candles in their hands as a symbol of peaceful dissidence) began to protest in October 2016 (Jhee and Park 2019). The ensuing protests continued every Saturday for almost six months in the nation’s major cities, in particular Seoul’s Gwanghwamun Square, and even in Korean communities worldwide. It would draw a culminative total of 17 million participants over these six months, making it the largest weekly protest in South Korean history (BBC 2016). The *toejin haengdong*, or People’s Action for the Immediate Resignation of President Park, was formed as an umbrella group of some 2,3000 civic organizations to coordinate their action for mass demonstrations (Lee 2019).

Crucially, as the extent of the massive corruption scandal became more apparent to the public, popular resistance grew to raise a fundamental critique of the inequality in Korean society and demand various pro-welfare reforms to curb the unbridled power of the chaebol, improve labor laws, and enhance public safety and accountability (to prevent instances such as the Sewol ferry disaster) (Lee 2019). This was encapsulated in the agenda for each rally organized by the People’s Action, who was chiefly responsible for preparing the protest logistics, arranging the speakers and artists for performances, and managing the finances for the protests, especially for those at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul (Lee 2019). Therefore, the Candlelight Protests not only led to the impeachment of Park, but also elevated pro-welfare reforms to become a key priority in Korean politics. In fact, Moon Jae-in from the Democratic Party would emerge victorious at the 2017 presidential elections, in part because of his ambitious welfare pledges that were aimed at meeting the demands of protestors at the Candlelight Protests (Dostal 2017).

Again, the Candlelight protests was successful at creating political impetus for change because of the fundamental strengths of pro-welfare civil society in South Korea. The populace generally favored pro-welfare reforms, enjoyed the freedom of speech and assembly, and could be mobilized through the social networks of CSOs.

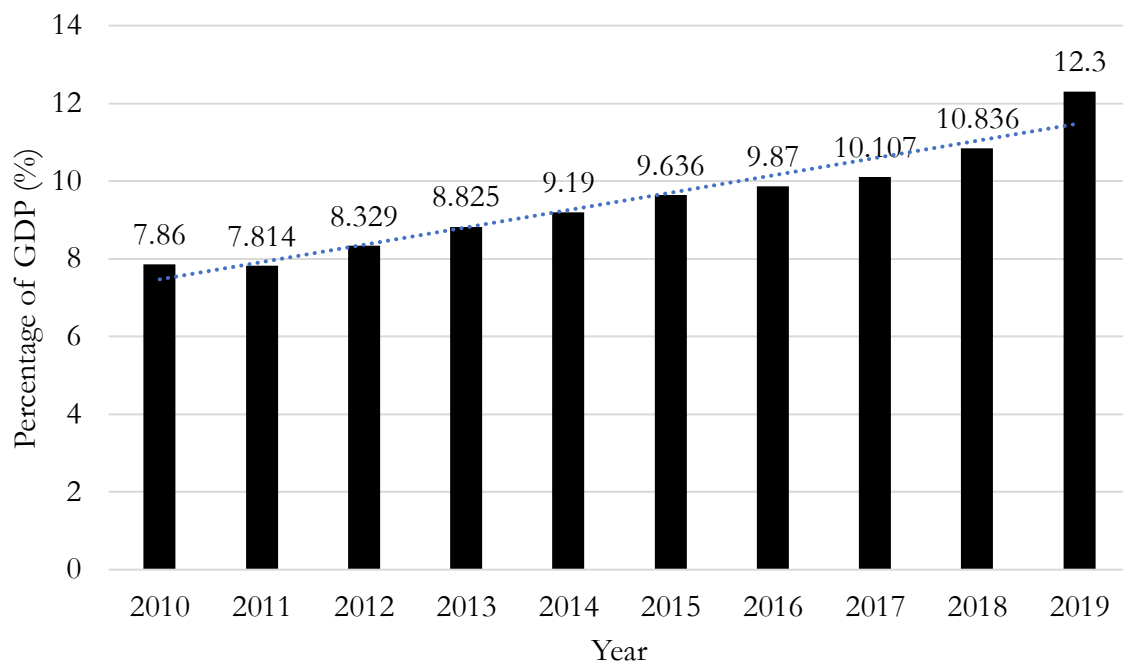
All in all then, owing to its fundamental strengths, pro-welfare civil society in South Korea was generally successful at organizing public demonstrations, shaping the policy discourse, and

leveraging its social networks with political elites (especially those from the opposition Democratic Party) to create political impetus for reforms.

Moderate Welfare Expansions

Overall, we examine that this political impetus generated by pro-welfare civil society had compelled the two conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008-2012) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) to steadily expand South Korea's welfare programs. This is clearly evident from the increase in South Korea's social expenditure (as a percentage of their GDP) by 4.44 percentage points from 7.86% to 10.107% between 2010 to 2017 (OECD 2020). In contrast, the average social expenditure across the OECD fell from 20.6% to 19.9% over the same period. This stands as testimony to the effectiveness of pro-welfare activism in driving welfare expansions in South Korea.

Figure 2: South Korea's Social Expenditure as Percentage of GDP from 2010 to 2019



Source: Author.

Notably, despite resistance by both the Lee and Park administrations to implement pro-welfare reforms (which they promised in their electoral campaigns), Korean pro-welfare civil society was successful in pressuring them to fulfil their welfare pledges at least partially through a variety of means. The Lee administration represented the conservative forces in Korea and remained wary of non-market based, pro-welfare reforms. Nonetheless, the 2011 student

demonstrations had compelled Lee to expand government subsidies on university education; pro-welfare civil society also defeated the Lee administration's attempt to end the free lunch program in Seoul; and the threat of mass demonstrations alone had compelled the Lee administration to expand the government's labor market policies. Similarly, the Park administration was deeply conservative. But the outpour of public grievances had compelled it towards making bold welfare pledges. While the Park administration failed to fulfil its promises, political pressure by pro-welfare civil society ensured that these pledges were, at least, partially implemented. Moreover, pro-welfare activism would see to the electoral victory of Moon Jae-in (from the left-leaning Democratic Party), who would indeed demonstrate more commitment to expanding the welfare state in South Korea than his predecessors. Welfare expenditure ballooned by 2.19% just within the first half of Moon's term in office (2017–2019). Therefore, it is demonstrated that the political impetus for pro-welfare reforms was primarily created by pro-welfare civil society in South Korea.

Discussion

Having examined the cases of Singapore and South Korea independently, this discussion section will directly compare pro-welfare activism in both countries from 2010 to 2017 to elucidate two salient points about the NPA. Firstly, the NPA illustrates that pro-welfare civil societies play a critical role in generating the political impetus for welfare expansions, especially when the incumbent government is resistant towards such reforms. This is demonstrated in both Singapore and South Korea. In Singapore, pro-welfare civil society (despite its weaknesses) was the chief driver of reforms, especially as the PAP government remained resistant towards welfare expansion. It represented and fueled the populace's dissatisfaction with growing socioeconomic inequality and woes. Crucially, this weakened the PAP's popularity at the 2011 general elections, thereby prompting the PAP government to introduce some piecemeal, pro-welfare reform after 2011.

Similarly, in South Korea, pro-welfare civil society was at the forefront of advocating for reforms in the face of two conservative administrations. Both the Lee and Park administrations tried resisting pro-welfare reforms, even going as far as going silent or cutting back their welfare pledges. The onus for creating political impetus for reforms had, therefore, fallen into the hands of pro-welfare civil society and their political allies. A stark difference between Singaporean and South Korean pro-welfare civil society, however, is that the latter was more successful at overcoming the incumbent government's resistance towards welfare expansions than the former. This difference is because South Korean pro-welfare civil society is generally stronger at generating political impetus for welfare reforms than its Singaporean counterpart.

This brings us to the second point of the NPA. The NPA argues that the strength of pro-welfare civil societies (in generating political impetus for welfare expansion) differs across countries. Here, their strength is a function of three factors: (1) the extent of pro-welfare attitudes among the general population; (2) the extensiveness of the social networks of CSOs (with other CSOs, ordinary citizens, and political elites); (3) the level of civil liberties afforded to pro-welfare civil society. This is illustrated through a juxtaposition of Singapore and South Korea. In Singapore, pro-welfare civil society was unable to mount impactful protests to promote welfare reforms, because its organizers were unable to build a strong coalition of supporters (especially in a political climate of oppression). At the same time, non-protest forms of activism – such as the production of critical commentaries on the domestic and international stage – were constrained by government surveillance and interference, which mutes dissidents and induces self-censorship among activists.

In contrast, South Korean pro-welfare civil society could generate more political impetus for welfare expansion. It was successful at mounting protests against the Lee and Park administrations to attain pro-welfare reforms, because of the presence of widespread support for pro-welfare reforms, which could be mobilized through strong networks of CSOs that enjoyed the freedoms of speech and assembly. Moreover, sometimes the credible threat of mass dissatisfaction and protest is sufficient to motivate the incumbent government to implement pro-welfare reforms, as with the Lee administration between 2010 and 2012 in response to the 2008 global financial crisis. Importantly too, non-protest forms of activism – such as critical commentaries and everyday disobedience – played a critical role in bringing pro-welfare reforms to the forefront of the political discourse in South Korea. Therefore, we observe more welfare expansion in South Korea than Singapore from 2010 to 2017.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper argues that pro-welfare civil society is the main driver of welfare expansions when the incumbent government is conservative. This is because conservative governments actively resist welfare expansions and needs to be coerced or persuaded into enacting pro-welfare reforms. In contrast, progressive governments might enact such reforms regardless of the existence of a strong pro-welfare civil society. By implication, the stronger the pro-welfare civil society in generating political impetus for reforms, the greater the extent of welfare expansion in the country with a conservative government. I demonstrate the theory of NPA through a comparative case study analysis of Singapore and South Korea, where the latter had a stronger

pro-welfare civil society which could generate more political impetus for reforms, and hence experienced more welfare expansion from 2010 to 2017.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. On the theoretical front, the NPA fills a theoretical gap in current literature on the relationship between contemporary civil society and welfare expansion, at least in East Asia. On the practical front, researchers and policy analysts studying the trajectory of social policies may utilize the NPA as a rudimentary framework to account for the influence of pro-welfare civil society.

There remains much for scholars to explore. Firstly, the relationship between CSOs and employers has not been explored, despite the regularity of engagement between both parties on issues of welfare. Secondly, the dilemmas and interests of political parties when responding to pro-welfare activism requires more investigation to understand when they might respond favorably or not. Of particular concern is how political parties might juggle vested interests in small welfare states, fiscal discipline, and public demand for welfare expansion. Thirdly, the operationalization of welfare state expansion can be improved by developing uniformed quantitative indicators that track the actual change in the coverage and depth of social policies. The lack of quantitative data on the level of social expenditure and other indicators in some countries, such as Singapore, hinders such efforts. Overall then, the NPA provides a foundational framework to advance future research on the relationship between civil society and welfare state expansions.

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