



## CONFERENCE REPORT

AUGUST 2025



# 2025 CHEY-STANFORD-KFAS SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY ROUNDTABLE



| 한국과 미국 |

# 민주주의 도전과 과제

Session 2 세계의 정치 양극화 (Global Political Polarization)

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# OPENING REMARKS FROM THE CONFERENCE ORGANIZERS



It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 2025 Sustainable Democracy Roundtable (SDRT), jointly hosted by the Chey Institute for Advanced Studies and Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center (APARC).

This year marks our third gathering since the program was first launched as a joint initiative between the Korea Foundation for Advanced

Studies and Shorenstein APARC. I extend my deepest gratitude to Professor Gi-Wook Shin, whose intellectual leadership and unwavering partnership have been indispensable to this roundtable from the very beginning. The 2025 SDRT held particular significance as it took place at the National Assembly, the symbolic seat of popular sovereignty, and provided a rare opportunity to engage lawmakers from both the ruling and opposition parties in a substantive discussion on the democratic challenges we have long examined. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Speaker Woo Won-shik, as well as to all of the scholars, lawmakers, and opinion leaders whose active participation greatly enriched the discourse.

This year's discussions took place at an especially consequential moment. In Korea, we have witnessed a series of dramatic political developments, from the imposition of martial law to (thankfully) the peaceful inauguration of a democratically elected president. In the United States, we have seen intensifying polarization, the resurgence of Trumpism, and renewed questions about the strength and resilience of democratic institutions. In particular, seeing the "No Kings" signs on the streets in the very country that helped define modern democracy, a nation that has long championed liberty and freedom,

reminds us just how essential conversations like these are.

What began in 2023 with the fundamental question "Is liberal democracy sustainable?" has evolved into a sustained and multifaceted dialogue. Over the past two years, we have examined a range of structural and normative challenges to democracy, including institutional fragility, partisan media and disinformation, and the growing crisis of political leadership. We have also identified shared concerns in both Korea and the United States, including ideological and generational divides, political fatigue, and deepening socioeconomic inequality.

This year, we sought to go a step further. In addition to diagnosing the challenges facing our democracies, we aimed to explore concrete and sustainable solutions. During the two-day program—including a closed-door roundtable and a public conference held at the National Assembly—we engaged in dialogue with legislators, scholars, and civic leaders from both sides of the Pacific. We placed particular emphasis on the issue of political polarization and examined practical approaches to democratic reform and renewal.

As we reflect on the insights shared throughout this roundtable, I am reminded that democracy is not a finished product, but a living system—one that must be constantly protected, renewed, and reimagined. I hope that the conversations reflected in this report will continue to resonate and that they may offer meaningful perspectives to those working to defend and sustain democracy around the world.

Thank you.

**KIM YOOSUK**

PRESIDENT, CHEY INSTITUTE AND THE KOREA  
FOUNDATION FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere thanks to President Kim Yoosuk for his warm partnership, and to the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies and the Chey Institute for their continued support of the Sustainable Democracy Roundtable. We are honored to co-host this program once again in South Korea, alongside participants from both Korea and the United States, including many returning colleagues and new faces joining us for the first time.

At last year's roundtable, I noted the growing pressures on liberal democracy amidst ongoing international crises. Unfortunately, those challenges have only deepened. Russia's war in Ukraine continues without resolution. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has expanded into a broader regional confrontation. Illiberalism and political polarization persist across many democratic societies.

In 2024, the crisis of democracy has become more acute, particularly in South Korea and the United States. Korea has undergone a series of extraordinary events: martial law by President Yoon Suk Yeol, his impeachment, and yet another presidential snap election. These events have reminded us of the fragility of democratic institutions, even in countries with strong civic traditions and robust political systems.

In the United States, the 2024 presidential election marked another turning point for American democracy. With the re-election of Donald Trump, we are witnessing a renewed challenge to the institutions and norms that underpin the country's democratic system. Many of the anti-democratic tendencies seen during his first administration, ranging from attacks on the judiciary and the press to efforts to undermine electoral legitimacy, have reemerged with even greater intensity. Even higher education is under attack.

These developments hold profound implications not only for our own countries but also for the future of liberal democracy worldwide,

especially as authoritarian models continue to gain global traction. Through this roundtable, we seek not only to understand the sources of democratic erosion, but also to explore potential solutions—pathways for renewal, reform, and resilience.

Over the course of our two-day program, we explored the fragility and resilience of Korean democracy, assessed global threats to democratic norms, and discussed practical strategies for strengthening democratic institutions. I am especially encouraged by the richness of our discussions and the diversity of perspectives represented.

At APARC, we continue to advance this work through the Stanford Next Asia Policy Lab (SNAPL), launched in 2023. One of our lab's central initiatives is the "Democratic Crisis and Reform" research track, which explores how liberal democracies, both in Asia and globally, can adapt and endure in the face of growing authoritarian pressures. This roundtable is a core part of that mission.

As we reflect on the challenges ahead, I encourage each of you to sustain the relationships built through this program. Democracy is not sustained by institutions alone; it depends on collaboration, conversation, and community. It is not the work of a moment, but the work of a generation. And it is work that we must carry forward—together.

Thank you.

**GI-WOOK SHIN**

DIRECTOR, SHORENSTEIN APARC AND THE KOREA PROGRAM







# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Liberal democracy worldwide faces increasingly complex and urgent challenges in 2025. Public distrust in democratic institutions has deepened, fueled by rising polarization, algorithm-driven disinformation, and the growing appeal of illiberal and authoritarian leaders. Against this backdrop, the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS), the Chey Institute, and Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center convened the third installment of the Sustainable Democracy Roundtable (SDR) series, held in Seoul, South Korea. This year's discussions were particularly urgent, taking place in the aftermath of martial law, impeachment, and a snap presidential election in Korea, as well as amid escalating political polarization and continued democratic erosion in the United States.

The 2025 Sustainable Democracy Roundtable convened leading scholars and public officials from Korea and the United States to assess and address ongoing global democratic crises. Building on past dialogues, the conference focused on the fragility and resilience of democracy in South Korea, democratic backsliding in the United States, and the urgent need for institutional reform and civic education. The convening featured closed-door sessions among scholars on June 18 at the Walkerhill Acadia and a public day on June 19 at the National Assembly in Seoul, which included both scholars and government practitioners. Across five sessions, speakers reflected on current democratic crises, rising polarization, and actionable pathways for reform.

Key themes from the roundtable included the unique challenges faced by Korea's presidential system, judicial politicization, and the deepening gender divide. Civil society was lauded for its enduring role in defending democratic

norms, though its polarization and fragmentation were also noted. Comparative perspectives emphasized the threats posed by populism and ultra-majoritarianism in both the United States and Korea. The conference concluded with a call for reform across institutions, renewed civic education, and efforts to bridge social divides.

## Key Takeaways

- Korea's democratic institutions proved resilient but remain vulnerable. The declaration of martial law and impeachment proceedings against President Yoon placed Korea's institutions under extreme pressure. Civil society mobilized in defense of democracy, but underlying institutional frictions and entrenched polarization signaled the need for systemic reform.

Polarization has deepened beyond party lines. Identity-based conflict around gender, class, and region has made compromise increasingly elusive in both Korea and the United States.

- Gender polarization emerged as a defining fault line in Korea. While young women led pro-democracy protests against martial law, young men voiced growing political disillusionment, often influenced by algorithm-driven platforms like YouTube. These gender cleavages now rival traditional divides and challenge long-term civic unity.
- The United States continues to face democratic backsliding under Trumpism. Participants warned that the MAGA movement seeks to erode institutional independence and concentrate executive power. While civil society and courts remain active checks within the government, their power appears to be waning, while

polarization and distrust undermining governance are on the rise.

- Polarization has deepened beyond party lines. Identity-based conflict around gender, class, and region has made compromise increasingly elusive in both Korea and the United States. Participants called for renewed efforts to build bridging social capital and trust.
- Digital media amplifies division. Platforms like YouTube reward outrage-driven content and misinformation, weakening democratic

discourse. Participants highlighted the urgent need for media literacy and regulatory responses.

- Democratic renewal must go beyond institutional fixes. Civic education, inclusive norms, and shared democratic narratives are critical. Sustainable reform depends on both systemic changes and engaged, empathetic citizenry.





## SESSION 1: THE FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCE OF KOREAN DEMOCRACY

On December 3, 2024, then-President Yoon Seok Yeol declared martial law in South Korea for the first time since 1980. He stated that it was necessary to fight “anti-state” forces who sought to undermine his administration, create a “legislative dictatorship,” and collaborate with North Korean communists. This extreme political maneuver, announced on national television without warning in a country regarded as one of the strongest democracies, shocked the nation. Unlike previous declarations of martial law by South Korean presidents that led to prolonged autocracy, this martial law was lifted just six hours after President Yoon’s declaration. What ensued was a tense impeachment process, with much of the country torn and reminded of the nationwide protests around the 2017 impeachment of conservative President Park Geun Hye. Yoon was ultimately impeached, with a snap election taking place in June 2025, electing liberal candidate Lee Jae Myung to the presidency.

The recent political developments in South Korea have placed the strength and stability of its political system under intense scrutiny. South Korea stands as one of the few nations that have successfully established democracy through a relatively short yet volatile history following independence. Although the nation has once again proven its resilience, the recent and recurring turbulence also exposed underlying vulnerabilities. Political polarization, judicialization of politics, institutional friction, and widespread public distrust continue to challenge

Although the nation has once again proven its resilience, the recent and recurring turbulence also exposed underlying vulnerabilities.

democratic governance. This session explored both the strengths and shortcomings of Korean democracy, analyzing whether recent crises have genuinely strengthened the democratic norms and institutions or have instead exposed deeper systemic flaws.

### Guiding session questions

1. What key factors have contributed to the resilience of South Korean democracy amidst recent political crises?
2. What role has civil society played in reinforcing democratic norms during times of political instability?
3. In what ways do institutional shortcomings and political polarization contribute to public distrust and democratic vulnerabilities?
4. How can South Korea leverage its recent experiences to strengthen democratic processes and institutional accountability moving forward? Identify reform measures that can be most effective in these endeavors.

In their discussions, participants agreed that although the political system withstood extraordinary pressure, including the declaration of martial law and a presidential impeachment, the crisis revealed the fragility of Korea’s institutional safeguards. Civil society played a crucial role in resisting authoritarian overreach, demonstrating that democratic values remain strong among the populace. However, this popular mobilization operated in the context of polarized media, weak cooperation between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and growing mistrust in democratic institutions.

The discussion highlighted how democratic resilience must be understood not simply as the capacity to endure crises, but as the ability to avoid them altogether. Korea’s highly centralized presidential system, the lack of legislative oversight, and the erosion of informal norms of

restraint were seen as underlying risk factors. Panelists noted that the repeated recourse to impeachment reflects both the constitutional system's deficiencies and the lack of viable alternatives for resolving conflicts between the executive and legislative branches. Several participants advocated for constitutional reform to reduce the concentration of power in the presidency as well as other reforms to build mechanisms for inter-branch negotiation. Proposals included limiting presidential influence in the prosecutor's office and reducing the presidential term from five years to four, but allowing the possibility of one re-election.

Beyond formal structures, the session emphasized the role of civic culture in shaping democratic outcomes. Gender emerged as a key axis of civic engagement, with participants noting the visible leadership of young women in pro-democracy protests, in contrast with the growing sense of political alienation among

young men. Although the political consequences of this divide remain uncertain, it is already reshaping electoral alignments and public discourse. Participants cautioned that a democratic system that does not address the grievances of all social groups risks long-term fragmentation.

Proposals for institutional reform focused on expanding proportional representation, strengthening legislative committees, and enhancing the independence and capacity of the judiciary. However, participants also stressed that institutional redesign must be accompanied by broader cultural change. The cultivation of civic norms—such as tolerance, trust, and compromise—was seen as essential to a durable democratic order. In this view, civic education is not a peripheral concern, but a central strategy for democratic renewal.





## SESSION 2: DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES AND IN THE WORLD

This session focused on the challenges facing liberal democracy in the United States and other parts of the world. Scholars analyzed the rise of populism and authoritarian tendencies, particularly in the United States under Donald Trump, whose actions have posed significant challenges to democratic norms and institutions. Similar developments in other countries were also examined to draw broader lessons about the global state of democracy, including Korea.

### Guiding session questions

1. How do the recent examples of democratic backsliding in the United States compare with those in other advanced democracies? What structural or cultural factors make some democracies more vulnerable than others?
2. How has Trump reshaped the global perception of American democracy, and what implications does this have for the United States as a model or promoter of democratic governance abroad?
3. Can international institutions and norms meaningfully counter domestic democratic erosion, or is democracy ultimately a nationally determined project?
4. What lessons can be drawn from non-Western democracies in sustaining democratic legitimacy and civic trust amid rising authoritarian pressures?

Discussion centered on the risks posed by illiberal movements that seek to centralize power and discredit democratic institutions. Participants analyzed the implications of ongoing democratic backsliding, emphasizing that the erosion of institutional independence and the rise of populist authoritarianism are not confined to any one country. This has become a concern even in the United States; once viewed as a model for democratic governance, the country experienced growing polarization, executive

overreach, and declining trust in electoral processes.

The most significant regressions in the latest wave of democratic backsliding have occurred primarily within established democracies, rather than authoritarian regimes. They have been mainly the result of populist leaders who often exploit democratic processes to gain legitimacy, only to erode the very institutions and safeguards that uphold liberal democracy. While this may be unsurprising, what is striking is that authoritarian countries are not experiencing similar levels of decline; in many cases, they are simply maintaining the status quo. In the United States, efforts by the ruling party to consolidate executive control over the judiciary, civil service, and media have raised fears that democratic erosion could become systemic. Currently, the Republican administration controls the executive and legislative branches of government, including the House of Representatives and Senate; it benefits from a Supreme Court shaped by a significant number of Trump-appointed justices, which has streamlined regressive policies that harm the tenets of democracy: mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance.

In the face of this one-party dominance, the enduring strengths of civil society and the judiciary, particularly the lower courts, have been acknowledged as bulwarks against authoritarian consolidation. Citizens have taken to the streets to protest some policies and have won. For example, the selling of public lands was removed from the Trump administration's "Big, Beautiful Bill" in the wake of public backlash. The lower courts have continued to strike down several executive orders issued by President Trump. However, the ability of these institutions to maintain independence is not guaranteed, particularly in the face of partisan polarization and declining public trust. This seems increasingly pressing as the Supreme Court has recently repeatedly ruled in President Trump's

favor, limiting the power of federal judges and contesting birthright citizenship—elements long considered hallmarks of U.S. democracy. Participants warned that democratic institutions cannot be expected to defend themselves without active civic support and political leadership committed to democratic norms.

Comparative analysis drew parallels between the United States and other democracies experiencing democratic fatigue. Countries such as Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and the Philippines were highlighted as cases where populist leaders have used electoral legitimacy to weaken institutional checks, politicize civil services, and concentrate executive power, moves that mirror concerning trends in the United States. In contrast, Japan was discussed as a relatively resilient case, where structural features of its parliamentary system, low public expectations, and a conservative civic culture have so far tempered populist mobilization, even as discontent with mainstream politics and the growing influence of social media raise new concerns. In many countries, growing inequality, cultural fragmentation, and media disinformation have fueled public disillusionment with mainstream politics, creating fertile ground for populist appeals that emphasize grievance over governance and identity over inclusion. The discussion underscored

Participants warned that democratic institutions cannot be expected to defend themselves without active civic support and political leadership committed to democratic norms.

that the crisis of liberal democracy is not only institutional but cultural and epistemological.

Policy recommendations included reforms to reduce hyper-partisan incentives in the political system, such as implementing ranked-choice voting and reforming campaign finance, as well as making new investments in civic infrastructure and education. Participants stressed the importance of reimagining democratic institutions to promote deliberation, inclusion, and accountability. They also emphasized the need for international coordination among democracies to share lessons, support democratic activists, and counter transnational authoritarian networks.





## SESSION 3: ACTIONABLE SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY

The final closed session focused on identifying actionable solutions to strengthen democratic institutions and resilience. In particular, participants sought to make policy recommendations, suggest civic engagement strategies, and search for potential international collaborations to address the current and future threats to democracy worldwide. While acknowledging the distinct institutional structures and political cultures of Korea and the United States, the discussion converged on a set of shared principles for democratic renewal.

### Guiding session questions

1. What are the most effective policy reforms that democratic governments can pursue today to build institutional resilience against authoritarian threats?
2. How can civil society organizations be better supported, domestically and transnationally, to serve as long-term stewards of democracy?
3. What role should education, civic, and media literacy play in revitalizing democratic culture, particularly among younger generations?
4. What strategies have proven most effective in rebuilding public trust in democratic institutions, especially in the context of recent democratic crises or corruption scandals?

The institutional reforms proposed by participants focused on reducing executive overreach, enhancing legislative capacity, and erecting stronger mechanisms for horizontal accountability. In the Korean case, the concentration of power in the presidency was identified as a recurring source of political crisis. Therefore, proposals included shifting toward a parliamentary or semi-presidential model, redesigning electoral systems to enable better proportional representation, and clarifying

constitutional procedures to prevent the abuse of impeachment. U.S. participants also expressed support for limiting executive power amid growing concerns about President Trump's perceived encroachment on the legislative and judicial branches. Many also proposed reforms to reduce partisanship and polarization, including redesigning electoral systems (i.e., ranked-choice voting) and formalizing previously informal norms of presidential restraint into enforceable rules.

Civic education emerged as a central theme once again. Participants argued that no institutional reform will succeed without an informed and engaged citizenry. A reinvigorated civic culture, one that fosters mutual respect, political tolerance, and shared commitment to democratic values, is essential. Civic education initiatives should target not only students but also the broader public, including efforts to combat misinformation and strengthen media literacy.

The role of intermediary institutions was also emphasized. As polarization deepens and partisan identities harden, there is an urgent need for spaces that can foster cross-cutting dialogue. Local civic organizations, professional associations, and deliberative forums were cited as critical venues for building the trust and empathy necessary for democratic compromise.

Finally, participants underscored that democracy must deliver—economically, socially, and politically. Democratic systems that fail to meet citizens' needs risk losing legitimacy. As such, governance reforms should be designed with an eye toward responsiveness, inclusion, and transparency. Participants agreed that the renewal of democracy will require both institutional innovation and sustained civic investment.

## OPENING REMARKS BY WOO WON-SHIK, SPEAKER, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY



As we all recognize, democracy today faces a wide range of challenges. Korea is no exception. In the aftermath of the 2024 martial law crisis, we are now engaged in serious discussions about both our democratic resilience and our vulnerabilities. Particularly alarming is the rise of hatred, hostility, exclusion, and violence — phenomena fundamentally incompatible with democratic values. These forces have become more extreme and, at times, destructive to our communities, shocking Korean society.

Good to see you all. I am Woo Won-shik, Speaker of the National Assembly. It is a pleasure to join you for this meaningful event. I would like to thank the Chey Institute for Advanced Studies, Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, and the Indo-Pacific Democracy Forum for organizing today's forum. I would also like to warmly welcome Professor Francis Fukuyama, Professor Kiyoteru Tsutsui, Professor Gi-Wook Shin, and all the distinguished scholars from Korea and abroad who have traveled far to be with us today.

Over the past six months, the world has watched with admiration as Korean democracy demonstrated remarkable resilience. Two forces were at play: the public's strong desire to restore democracy and constitutional order in the face of martial law, and the steadfast commitment of constitutional institutions to fulfill their duties. Together, they helped safeguard democracy at a moment of crisis and revealed the strength of Korea's democratic capacity. I believe this experience confirms a fundamental truth: when the aspirations and participation of the people are matched by institutional support, democracy can endure and grow.

I understand that today's forum will address where these threats to democracy originate and how we can overcome them. In particular, I would like to draw attention to the socioeconomic conditions that underlie these challenges: deepening polarization, inequality, injustice, and the pressure of relentless competition. In an economic reality where today is difficult and tomorrow is uncertain, core democratic values such as civic participation, respect for differing views, empathy, and tolerance can lose their power. When livelihoods are at risk, trust in democracy can falter; and when democracy is shaken, people's livelihoods suffer in turn.

For political democracy to be truly robust, we must move toward socioeconomic democracy. We must ensure that people's hopes for a better life are supported by fair and inclusive economic institutions. In short, we must be able to answer the question, "Can democracy put food on the table?" with a firm "Yes." Democracy must prove itself through the lived experiences of its citizens.

Korean democracy is now lacing up its shoes—not only to recover, but to move forward. I hope that today's discussions offer valuable wisdom and insight to support this journey. Thank you.

*Translated from Korean*



## PUBLIC SESSION 1: POLITICAL REFORMS IN KOREA

MODERATOR: Kang Won-Taek

SPEAKERS: Kim Sunhyuk, Heo Seongwook,  
Kim Young-bae, Choi Hyung Du, Lee  
Sun-Woo

The global crisis of democracy underscores the imperfections within current political systems. Nevertheless, democratic values and the pursuit of systemic fairness have continued to inspire people toward democratic governance. Given the recent crisis, this session focused on reforms in Korea and addressed how political establishments and institutions might evolve to better meet contemporary political demands, whether through constitutional amendments, by reforms to the entrenched two-party system, or through civic education. Participants discussed various reform proposals, including amending the constitution to change the power structure, limiting presidential powers, reforming the judiciary to strengthen its independence, and changing the electoral system.

### Guiding session questions

1. What specific constitutional reforms could address current weaknesses in the political systems?
2. How should presidential powers be adjusted to enhance checks and balances?
3. In what ways might legislative reform increase democratic responsiveness and effectiveness?
4. How can public engagement and deliberation processes be improved to ensure successful political reforms?

This public session brought the conversation to the Korean National Assembly, where speakers addressed Korea's ongoing debates over constitutional and electoral reform. The focus was on recalibrating power between branches of government, building a more inclusive party system, and strengthening judicial independence.

Several speakers highlighted the limitations of the current presidential system, particularly its tendency to create zero-sum political competition. Proposed alternatives ranged from introducing a semi-presidential model to enhancing legislative oversight through expanded committee authority. This would entail handing over some responsibilities, such as setting the budget, to either the prime minister or the legislatures. There was broad agreement that a more balanced institutional structure could reduce polarization and improve democratic responsiveness.

Electoral reform was another key theme. Participants discussed the potential for a mixed-member proportional system to improve party representation and reduce vote distortion. Concerns were raised about political resistance to reform, particularly among incumbents who benefit from the status quo. To address this, speakers emphasized the importance of public education campaigns that explain the benefits of reform in accessible terms.

Judicial independence was also debated. Proposals included revising judicial appointment processes to reduce political interference and increase public trust. Some participants suggested creating mechanisms for citizen oversight or independent commissions to insulate courts from partisan dynamics. Throughout the discussion, there was a strong emphasis on transparency, accountability, and civic engagement as prerequisites for successful reform.

Ultimately, speakers emphasized that institutional change alone is insufficient; durable democratic reform will require sustained public pressure, cross-partisan cooperation, and a shared commitment to building a political culture founded on trust, fairness, and democratic inclusion.

## PUBLIC SESSION 2: GLOBAL POLITICAL POLARIZATION

MODERATOR: Gi-Wook Shin

SPEAKERS: Frank Fukuyama, Didi Kuo,  
Kiyoteru Tsutsui, Lee Sook Jong

In recent years, democratic societies worldwide have witnessed a sharp increase in political polarization. As partisanship intensifies and compromise between the divided becomes increasingly elusive, these divisions pose significant threats not only to political stability but also to overall societal cohesion. Political polarization undermines trust in democratic institutions, weakens effective governance, and hampers the collective ability to address critical societal challenges. Special attention was paid to how identity-based divisions—particularly those based on gender, class, and generation—are reconfiguring political alignments and eroding the foundations of civic trust.

### Guiding session questions

1. What factors contribute to political polarization, and how does this polarization challenge democratic governance?
2. What are the similarities and differences between political polarization in Korea and the United States?
3. What role do social media and digital algorithms play in exacerbating polarization?
4. What effective strategies can be drawn from international experiences to address polarization?
5. How can we bridge political divides and foster dialogue? What kinds of institutional reforms can resolve deepening polarization?

In terms of polarization in Korea, the gender divide is considered one of the most salient issues among the current generation. This has been most evident in the recent presidential elections (2022 and 2025) as well as online. Algorithmic media environments are fueling divergent political worldviews between young

men and women, with platforms like YouTube reinforcing grievance-based narratives in their respective echo chambers. These dynamics have begun to eclipse traditional regional divides, suggesting a new form of polarization grounded in social identity rather than geography or ideology.

Comparisons were drawn with the United States, where media fragmentation and affective polarization (disagreement beyond ideology into an “us versus them” divide) have similarly transformed political discourse. Participants noted that in both contexts, the collapse of shared information environments and the rise of adversarial media ecosystems have made democratic deliberation increasingly difficult. While traditional journalism struggles to retain its audience, digital platforms incentivize outrage and misinformation.

In response, speakers proposed a mix of educational, regulatory, and institutional strategies. Media literacy initiatives, reforms to platform algorithms, and public funding for independent journalism were all discussed. However, participants also cautioned that top-down interventions must be balanced with protections for free speech and democratic pluralism.

The session concluded with the understanding that addressing polarization requires more than just countering misinformation; it calls for a broader revitalization of democratic life. Rebuilding civic trust will depend on strengthening public institutions, investing in shared civic spaces, and fostering a culture of dialogue that can bridge identity-based divides. As polarization reshapes political landscapes around the world, the challenge is not only to mitigate its effects but to create new foundations for democratic resilience in an era of social fragmentation.



## CONCLUSION



The 2025 Sustainable Democracy Roundtable highlighted the urgency and complexity of sustaining democratic institutions in an era of global uncertainty. Discussions revealed a shared recognition that democracy cannot be taken for granted—not in Korea, the United States, or anywhere in the world. Participants stressed that democratic erosion often begins subtly: through the concentration of power, the undermining of judicial independence, and the steady decline of public trust. Still, they reaffirmed that democracy’s renewal is both possible and necessary.

The roundtable reinforced the idea that institutional reform and civic culture must advance hand in hand. It is not enough to revise constitutions or restructure electoral systems; there must also be sustained efforts to educate citizens, foster inclusive political narratives, and rebuild the social trust that enables democratic compromise. A particularly resonant theme was the need to reimagine civic education, not simply as the transmission of information,

but as a formative process that cultivates democratic values and habits of deliberation.

The inclusion of public sessions at Korea’s National Assembly signaled the importance of connecting academic insight with policymaking and public discourse. These sessions demonstrated that democratic renewal requires broad-based coalitions—spanning sectors, generations, and ideologies—that can identify common goals and work collaboratively to achieve them. Whether through

reforms to the presidential system, responses to digital disinformation, or initiatives to counter polarization, participants called for action that is bold, creative, and inclusive.

As liberal democracies face growing internal and external pressures, the 2025 Sustainable Democracy Roundtable served as both a diagnostic and a roadmap. It emphasized that, while the threats are real, so too are the resources for renewal: an engaged public, vibrant civil societies, and democratic traditions that, though strained, remain alive. In the face of populism, polarization, and authoritarian resurgence, the roundtable’s central message was clear: democracy endures not through inertia, but through effort. The work ahead will require courage, imagination, and resolve.

# 2025 SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY ROUNDTABLE

## AGENDA

### Day One: Wednesday, June 18 Closed Sessions

*Walkerhill Hotel Acadia*

- 09:00–09:15 Registration
- 09:15–09:30 Opening Remarks
- 09:30–11:30 Session 1: The Fragility and Resilience of Korean Democracy
- 12:00–13:00 Lunch
- 13:00–15:00 Session 2: Democracy in the United States and the World
- 15:00–15:30 Break
- 15:30–17:30 Session 3: Actionable Solutions for Sustaining Democracy
- 18:00– Dinner

### Day Two: Thursday, June 19 The Future of Democracies: US-Korea Challenges and Opportunities 민주주의 도전과 과제

*National Assembly Member Office Building, Seoul*

- 09:30–09:45 Opening Ceremony
  - Welcoming Remarks by Kim Yoosuk, President of the Chey Institute and Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies
  - Congratulatory Remarks by Speaker of the National Assembly Woo Won-shik
- 09:45–11:00 Session 1: Political Reforms in Korea 한국의 정치개혁
- 11:00–11:15 Intermission & Stage Setting
- 11:15–12:30 Session 2: Global Political Polarization 세계 정치의 양극화
- 12:30– Lunch



# LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

## Korea

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- CHOI Hyung Du**, Member, National Assembly of the Republic of Korea (People's Power Party)
- HEO Seongwook**, Professor, School of Law, Seoul National University
- KANG Won-Taek**, Professor, Department of Political Science & International Relations, Seoul National University
- KIM Gidong**, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies
- KIM Sunhyuk**, Professor, Department of Public Administration, Korea University
- KIM Young-bae**, Member, National Assembly of the Republic of Korea (Democratic Party)
- KIM Yoosuk**, President of the Chey Institute and Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies
- LEE Sook Jong**, Distinguished Professor, Sungkyunkwan University; Representative, Indo-Pacific Democracy Forum
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## United States

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