

The Democratic Benefits of Devolution: *A Comparison of South Korea and the United States*

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Abstract

One argument made in favor of devolution of policy authority to local governments is that it will promote citizen participation by moving decision-making authority “closer” to the people. This paper examines the merits of this argument: will increasing local autonomy have the desired effect of enhancing citizen participation? Based on an examination of citizen participation in the United States and South Korea, I find that even though local governments are not inherently more responsive or open to citizen influence, devolution has democratic benefits because it allows for different types and forms of citizen activity that are limited on the national level. Devolution creates participatory spaces that, if utilized, could enhance civic learning and governmental responsiveness.

Keywords: devolution, policy making, local autonomy, Korean local governments, governmental responsiveness, citizen participation

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Introduction

The issue of local autonomy—the ability of local governments to initiate policies and act independently from state and federal governments (Clark 1984)—is one that surfaces in both established democracies as well as newly democratizing ones. The desirability of local autonomy is a multifaceted question, with numerous potential benefits and downsides (Turner 1999; E. K. Park 2007). Involved in this debate are concerns over democracy, popular control of government, corruption, economic growth, and efficiency in delivering public services (Manor 1999; Campbell 2003; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Treisman 2007). Despite significant prior research, it is still unclear whether, and under what circumstances, decentralization will yield the desired benefits.

This paper will explore one specific aspect of the decentralization debate: whether devolving policy-making authority¹ promotes citizen participation. One of the arguments made in favor of devolution is that local governments are more accessible and open to citizens wishing to participate in politics (Frug 1999; Turner 1999; Van Cott 2009). As citizens have more options for influencing local policy, devolving policy authority to local governments will increase their capacity to influence government and enhance the democratic character of the political system generally. Thus, the central research question in this paper is: what effect will enhancing local autonomy through devolution have on the form and extent of citizen participation?

The two cases used in this study—South Korea and the United States—highlight variation in intergovernmental relations as well as stages of democratization. The United States is a federal system with dual sovereignty between states and the federal government. Local governments, however, lack constitutional standing and are under the control of states. Korea is a unitary state with a history of a

1. There are many different types of decentralization. This paper will focus on “devolution,” which refers to moving policy-making authority from higher tiers to lower tiers.

strong central government (J. S. Lee 1996; Seong 2000; Ahn 2005; Kihl 2005), but grants—at least in theory—a measure of constitutional autonomy to its local governments. Further, the United States is a long-standing democracy that has developed intergovernmental relations over hundreds of years, while Korea is a more recent democracy with ongoing processes of democratization (Diamond and Shin 2000; S. S. Kim 2003).² A comparison between the United States and Korea can help illuminate the democratic effects of local governance by exploring similar processes in different political and institutional settings.

Despite varying institutional settings, both Korea and the United States have similar policy debates regarding local autonomy and devolution. In the latter country, the debate focuses on the extent to which municipalities and other local entities should be granted home rule, as well as conflicts over state and federal unfunded mandates (Lovell 1981; Clark 1985; Frug 1999; Krane, Rigos, and Hill 2001). Local governments in the United States have been alternatively hailed as beacons of democratic hope and disparaged as its most potent nemeses. They have been praised as being exceptionally responsive as the government “closest” to the people but also criticized for being dominated by interest groups, governing regimes, or growth machines. As a result, the devolution debate is intertwined with competing conceptions of the political characteristics of local governments themselves. In Korea, the debate revolves around implementation of the Local Autonomy Law and disconnection between local government’s formal constitutional standing and the reality of highly constrained local power (Seong 2000; C. Park 2006; S. Kim 2006). Local autonomy was on President Roh Tae-Woo’s democratization agenda in 1987, as a means to counter the centralizing and dominating tendencies of the

2. There is a debate over whether Korea is a fully “consolidated” democracy (J. I. Kang 2000; Seong 2000; S. S. Kim 2003; Hahm 2008). The stage of democratization in Korea, however, should not concern us here; the important point is that, unlike the United States, Korea has recently democratized and does not exhibit the same level of consolidation as the United States, as evidenced by the recent debates over press freedoms and protests.

national government, but it has not been fully implemented (E. K. Park 2007).

My approach in this paper is to focus on democratic practices at the local level: elections, direct involvement of citizens in the policy-making process, and unconventional politics. For each, I examine the extent and form of citizen activity on the local level and make comparisons to national-level activity. I argue that local autonomy enhances citizen participation not because local governments are inherently more responsive but because they alter the political landscape in a way that creates new and more substantive opportunities for citizens to participate in politics. Local governments allow for different forms of participation that are either unavailable or not feasible on a national level, specifically through citizen involvement in the policy-making process. Devolution does not enhance all forms of citizen participation: it creates minimal value for the electoral process and social movements engaged in unconventional politics do not necessarily benefit. But it does enhance the democratic potential of the policy-making process, which in turn adds to the democratic capacity of the political system as a whole. By creating opportunities for participation and civic learning, devolution could lead to greater governmental responsiveness if civil society groups and individual citizens utilized these opportunities. Devolution does not directly lead to increased participation or responsiveness, but could do so indirectly by enhancing the participatory capacity of the policy-making process overall.

The evidence supports the claim that enhancing local autonomy in Korea could potentially yield participatory benefits. Participation in Korean local politics is not widespread (Sohn and Ahn 2005), but strengthening local governments will nonetheless have a positive impact on participatory efforts. Devolution will not automatically increase participation, but by altering the form and substance of participation in the policy-making process, it creates conditions that enable citizens and civil society groups to participate more effectively which, in turn, can improve governmental responsiveness.

Local Governance in the United States and Korea

Both Korea and the United States have local governmental systems with multiple layers. Korea has 16 regional governments (provinces and metropolitan governments) as well as over 200 other local governments (cities, counties, and districts). In the American federal system, sovereignty is constitutionally divided between the federal and state governments, with local governments subordinate to state governments. The local government system includes over 85,000 counties, cities, towns, villages, school districts, and special districts. In this paper, local governments will refer to all governments below the national level in Korea and all governments below the state level in the United States. Even though Korea has provinces which could be considered equivalent to states (and hence a “middle tier”), since they do not have any constitutionally-granted sovereignty, they are more akin to local governments.

Article 117 of the Korean Constitution states that “Local governments deal with administrative matters pertaining to the welfare of local residents, manage properties, and may enact provisions relating to local autonomy, within the limit of laws and regulations.” This grant of authority is highly limited, as it puts no limits on the extent of central government involvement in local affairs. Efforts to decentralize have been piecemeal and only partially successful (E. Lee 2006; C. Park 2006; S. Lee 2007). Despite this, it is at least a formal recognition that local governments should have a role to play in the political life of the republic. In the United States, on the other hand, local governments are not mentioned whatsoever in the federal constitution. Despite the preoccupation of the Constitution’s authors with dividing power between state and federal governments, they made no effort to carve out a place for governmental entities below the state level. It was left up to the courts to determine the extent, if any, of local autonomy. This matter was settled in the 19th century with the doctrine of Dillon’s Rule, which posits that local governments are “creatures of the state” with no inherent constitutional autonomy (Frug 1980; Clark 1985; Briffault 1990a, 1990b). This rul-

ing gave states complete control over localities within their borders. In response to calls for more local autonomy, most states have enacted “home rule” provisions that limit state power and carve out a sphere of local autonomy. Home rule is a move by states to voluntarily cede power to local governments.

Legal provisions, however, are only part of the story; political dynamics also influence the extent of autonomy that local governments exercise. The primary reason why American localities enjoy greater autonomy than their Korean counterparts is because state legislators and governors have political incentives to maintain the autonomy granted to local jurisdictions. Local governments possess a long history of independence and the public has come to expect that they will continue to exercise political power. This creates a path dependence that makes it more difficult for states to undermine local power. Of course, states do remove power from localities when political incentives present themselves, but the historical legacy presents a barrier to these actions. Korea, on the other hand, exhibits the exact opposite dynamic; historically Korea has been a strong centralized state (J. S. Lee 1996; Seong 2000; Ahn 2005; Kihl 2005). This creates a different set of political dynamics which favor centralized control. There is less public expectation of local autonomy and fewer local interests who exist to fight for it. Maintaining the status quo of minimal local autonomy in Korea has fewer political risks for legislators in contrast to the potential risks of undermining a longstanding tradition of autonomy in the United States; politically, taking away local power is more difficult than refusing to grant it in the first place.

Given these political dynamics, we can characterize Korean local governments as having less power than what we would expect given their constitutional standing, and their American counterparts as having greater power than what we would predict. Whether these countries have “low” or “high” autonomy depends on the point of reference. Clark (1984) and Frug (1999) argue that American local governments are mostly powerless, although we could make a case that compared to most other countries in the world, they are quite power-

ful. Despite Dillon's Rule and fiscal constraints, American local governments do exercise significantly more autonomy than their Korean counterparts, largely due to political factors operating in their favor.

Elections

Korea held the first elections for local councilors in 1991, with elections for all local officials following in 1995. Turnout for local elections has been consistently lower than for the national assembly or president, hovering at around 50 percent for the 1998, 2002, and 2006 local elections (C. W. Park 2005; Hwang 2006; E. Lee 2006, 137; www.nec.go.kr). An identical pattern exists in the United States; despite significant variation, studies have found that turnout rates in local elections are typically well below 50 percent (Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Kelleher and Lowery 2004; Caren 2007). In both countries, turnout is highest in presidential elections, lower in national legislative elections, and lowest in local elections.³

There are a number of plausible hypotheses for why local turnout is lower. For example, Frug (1999) argues that it is a function of local powerlessness: citizens don't participate in local politics because localities don't have the capacity to influence their lives. This hypothesis is questionable, however, because local governments in the United States do perform functions (such as public safety and urban redevelopment) that directly impact citizens' quality of life. Further, applying Frug's argument to elections rests on an assumption that the decision to vote is instrumental (attempting to influence public policy outcomes), when most research has indicated that the primary motivation for voting is symbolic (Edelman 1964; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Another explanation for low local turnout focuses on the media. Local elections do not dominate news coverage in the same manner as presidential or national assembly elections, and thus

3. Other countries exhibit similar patterns. For example, English local elections have lower turnout than parliamentary ones.

the public may not be so that familiar with the issues and candidates, leading to lower interest. A third possibility is that regional splits in party support leads to local elections dominated by one party or another. Even though both Korea and the United States have nationally competitive parties, variation in the regional strength of the parties means that any given locality is likely to be one-party dominant. This reduces the competitiveness of elections, which in turn reduces voters' incentives to participate.

Even without sufficient empirical evidence to reach a definitive explanation, the fact of lower local turnout indicates that the participatory benefits of devolution do not lie in the electoral realm. In principle, local elections can act as a means through which citizens can enhance their influence over government. National elections may not accurately reflect local preferences and the size of national electoral districts may hinder elected officials' responsiveness. Having autonomous local governments can enhance the capacity of citizens to influence public policy through their vote. Low turnout, however, undermines both the representativeness and responsiveness of local officials. With only half the population voting in Korean local elections, and frequently much less in the United States, the victors in local elections may not be representative of public opinion, instead representing an active minority. Further, with citizens demonstrating minimal activity and knowledge of local elections, officials can effectively ignore public wishes and focus instead on narrow interests. Growth machine and regime theorists have documented this pattern in the United States (Elkin 1985; Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1989).⁴ Without active and widespread citizen involvement in local elections, the benefits of local elections are limited.

4. Scholars have different views on the existence and form of growth machines in Korea (cf. E. Lee 2006; M. Kang 2006; C. Park 2006; Bae and Sellers 2007). Regardless of whether growth machines exist, low turnout opens the door for disproportional impact of narrow interests, whether they are growth-oriented or not.

Direct Citizen Involvement in the Policy-Making Process

We should not dismiss the democratic benefits of local governments based simply on electoral dynamics, as voting is just one form of citizen participation. Citizens have many non-electoral means of participating, such as attending government meetings, circulating petitions, and contacting government officials. Rather than trying to influence government policy indirectly by electing representatives, citizens can try to directly influence the policy-making process by participating through these means.

Citizens can engage in participatory activities on any level of government. For example, they can contact both national and local officials, and they can circulate petitions on a federal issue just as well as on a local issue. While some activities may require additional resources on a national level (for example, attending a public meeting in Washington D.C. may require travel costs), many do not: citizens can call their local member of Congress as easily as calling their mayor. However, even though citizens are able to engage in most of the same participatory activities nationally as they do locally, greater resources are needed to leverage those activities towards accomplishing political goals. Size does not necessarily make the activities themselves more costly or more difficult, but it does influence the ability of participants to accomplish their political goals. In larger jurisdictions, participants need additional resources to accomplish goals such as demonstrating popular support for a proposal or applying electoral pressure on officials. Participants need to mobilize more citizens, gather more petition signatures, or prompt more people to call an elected official's office in order to have the desired effect; accomplishing the same goals requires greater amounts of time, money, and effort.

In larger jurisdictions, however, citizens have more resources to draw upon. When trying to influence national policy, organizations can recruit participants and solicit funds from across the country; when operating on the local level, the options for acquiring resources will likely be constrained geographically. In other words, the poten-

tial resources available to citizen participants increase along with jurisdiction size. Thus, the greater resources needed to participate nationally does not mean that citizens will be less effective when trying to influence national issues. The ability to gather sufficient resources is not a function of jurisdiction size, but of other factors, such as the nature of the issue, organization, and strategy.

The greater resources required at the national level does not necessarily prevent citizens from accomplishing their political goals, but it does alter the nature of their involvement. The central difference between local and national citizen participation is that on the local level, citizens engage in both participatory activities and political strategizing; on the national level, citizens engage in activities, but the strategic function of using these activities to accomplish political goals is transferred to interest groups. This is because citizens do not have the organizational capacity to perform the latter function on a national scale. As jurisdiction size increases, organizational demands similarly increase, requiring greater levels of coordination and direction that can only be provided by formal organizations. This results in a division of labor between organizers and activists. On the local level, citizens' social networks and interpersonal relationships can be sufficient to effectively organize political action (Adams 2007). Locally, citizens are activists, strategists, and organizers, engaging in a host of political activities to support political strategies that they have formulated. Nationally, citizens are just activists: they attend meetings, contact officials, and circulate petitions, but do not partake in the development of strategy nor in the organization of participatory activities to obtain political goals. The capacity to engage in strategic behavior on the local level allows citizens to engage policy making in a more substantive way, which is the central difference between national and local participation.

To further explore the differences between national and local participation, I examine three forms of non-electoral participation: speaking at public hearings, working through civil society groups, and contacting officials.

In the United States, attending congressional or state legislative

hearings is logistically difficult given the size of the country and most states. Further, citizens are frequently unable to participate unless specifically invited. On the other hand, most local jurisdictions not only allow citizens to attend meetings, but also set aside time for a “public comments” period where citizens can offer opinions and arguments on public matters. Any citizen can speak up to a specified time limit (two minutes is a common one). This practice is widespread and institutionalized in city governments, county governments, and school districts. In most states, public hearings are mandated by state law. Public hearings are less institutionalized in Korea, although sometimes local governments are mandated to hold hearings, and other times they will voluntarily do so.

Critics have argued that public hearings are empty democratic rituals because citizen comments do not influence legislative outcomes and elected officials do not take citizen comments into account (Checkoway 1981; Cole and Caputo 1984; Rowe and Frewer 2000). Sohn and Ahn (2005, 186-7) point out that in Korea, hearings are frequently manipulated by government officials to justify their policy proposals and occur too late in the policy process to have much of an impact. Yet the fact that this is a common form of participation indicates that hearings do serve some purpose for citizens. For example, Adams (2004) points out that even if elected officials have made up their minds prior to public hearings (as is often the case), citizens can use hearings to publicly shame officials, disseminate information, or communicate with other citizens. Public hearings may not be the most effective form of participation, but they do provide for an additional means of activity that citizens can (and often do) choose. And it is a participatory option that is mostly available on the local level.⁵

Politics is fundamentally a group activity. Even though a vote is

5. Occasionally there will be federal or state hearings in the United States open to public comment, typically by rule-making agencies that are required to solicit input before making decisions. However, they are often limited in scope and are subordinate to congressional policy-making.

cast by an individual in isolation, most other participatory acts are engaged in by groups. One of the most effective ways to become involved in the policy-making process is to form a group to represent collective interests. These are alternatively called community groups, civil society groups, or interest groups (here I will refer to them as civil society groups). Many scholars have pointed out that Korean civil society is “underdeveloped,” a legacy of the military dictatorships and a history of strong central government, although the number and types of groups over the past two decades have grown significantly (H. Kim 2000; Sohn and Ahn 2005; Cho 2006; D. Kim 2006; Shin 2006). There have been some notable instances of groups effectively accomplishing their political goals, such as those involved with the “blacklisting” campaigns in the 2000 and 2004 elections (A. E. Kim 2006; Chang and Lee 2006; Shin 2006). Some groups, such as the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) and the Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) have not only accumulated impressive political victories but have developed into permanent fixtures on the political landscape (Cho 2006). The United States has a broad array of civil society groups, many of which are involved in political activities. Even though the number of Americans joining these groups is on the decline (Putnam 2000), the country still possesses a vibrant and diverse civil society sector, providing citizens who desire to engage in the political system an opportunity to find a group that shares their political philosophy.

One trend that has been well documented in the United States is the tendency of national civil society groups to lose their “grass-roots” character. Many of the major groups active on the national scene limit participation by their members to financially supporting the organization, dubbed “checkbook participation” (Skocpol 2003; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005). These organizations have been accused of being “citizens’ movements without citizens,” no different than a typical interest group. Similarly, some scholars have noted the potential for large Korean civil society organizations (such as the PSPD and CCEJ) to become bureaucratized and institutionalized, losing their grass-roots character (D. Kim 2006). There are multiple rea-

sons behind this trend, but for our purposes here, the role of organizational size is critical. As organizations expand in size and the division of labor between activists and organizers takes hold, civil society groups move away from their participatory roots. Even though this trend is also possible on the local level, their smaller size and scope will translate into less of a tendency to bureaucratize. Local groups have less of a need to raise funds from members, as they can use other resources (such as social networks and volunteers' time) to accomplish their political goals. Even though civil society groups exist on all levels of government, only on the local level do they routinely incorporate average members deeply into the political process itself. In this sense, civil society groups serve different functions on a local versus national level. Locally, they incorporate citizens directly into policy making; on the national level they aggregate members' preferences and lobby for desired policy outcomes.

Another way citizens can attempt to influence public policy is by writing a letter to or meeting with elected officials in person. Most written communications are received by elected officials' staff and duly filed; few politicians at any level of government spend their time reading constituents' letters (although general trends in letters received are usually brought to officials' attention by staff). Speaking directly with officials is a more effective method of attempting to sway officials' actions. In most jurisdictions, elected officials do not have the time to meet face to face with constituents; only in very small jurisdictions can officials meet regularly with them. That said, they can make efforts to meet with some of them. For example, former Seoul mayor Goh Kun implemented a "Saturday date with the mayor" initiative that allowed citizens to petition the mayor directly and discuss their concerns (I. Kim 2002). Many American elected officials at all levels of government have created similar opportunities for citizen interaction.

The ability of citizens to communicate directly with elected officials is a function of jurisdiction size and the time available to officials. Some local officials, especially city council members, can engage in extensive communication with citizens because they have

fewer constituents, and thus can be more accommodating. But not all local officials are in this position; for example, the mayor of Seoul has a greater number of constituents than any national legislator. Furthermore, in both Korea and the United States, many local officials are part-time, limiting the time available to meet with constituents. Despite this, on average, local officials have a greater capacity to meet with constituents because they have fewer of them. The capacity of citizens to directly speak to local officials can enhance their ability to participate in the policy-making process. Officials may not listen, but at least citizens have the option of direct communication if they feel it will help them accomplish their political goals. Given the larger number of constituents, “communication” on the national level frequently takes the form of letter-writing campaigns organized by interest groups, which may be effective but is a form of participation that entails less substantive involvement of citizens in political discussion.

Public hearings, civil society groups, and contacting officials are three examples of participatory forms that are more robust on the local level, illustrating how the local policy-making process provides greater opportunities for citizens to get involved than its national counterpart. These participatory spaces are not the result of local officials being more amenable to citizen input, but rather results from the mechanics of participating in large and small jurisdictions. In smaller jurisdictions, citizens have more feasible options for participating. Local governments create additional venues where citizens can attempt to influence government, opening up new strategic and tactical opportunities. They alter the democratic terrain, allowing for different forms of citizen participation that are either unavailable or impractical on a national level. As Ahn (2005) notes, local autonomy in Korea has created new ways that citizens can approach government and new “spaces” for participation. Citizens do not always take advantage of these opportunities, but this is not surprising: sometimes citizens will find that a national approach is best strategically. But in other circumstance they may choose to develop a local approach. The opportunity to make this choice enhances the tactical

and strategic options for citizens. Further, the local option is one where citizens can get deeply involved in the policy making process. Rather than just showing up at a public meeting, they can speak themselves; rather than just sending a check to an interest group, they can become an officer; and rather than just sending off a form letter to an elected official, they can engage in a back-and-forth exchange.

The capacity to engage in the policy-making process in a more substantive way—by participating as strategists, organizers, and entrepreneurs—provides opportunities for citizens to enhance their civic skills and increase their political knowledge. As John Stuart Mill (1951), Alexis de Tocqueville (2003), and Thomas Jefferson (1999) have argued, local governments can act as “training grounds” for democratic citizenship; the additional opportunities to participate in policy making is what gives local governments their “training ground” quality. This can indirectly lead to greater effectiveness, as skillful and knowledgeable participants will be more likely to accomplish their political goals. Thus, even though local governments may not be inherently more responsive to citizen demands, devolution can enhance responsiveness by fostering the development of civic skills and knowledge among the citizenry.

Not all scholars support greater citizen participation in the policy-making process. Many argue that citizens who take advantage of these opportunities are not representative of the public, distorting policy outcomes (Fiorina 1999). They claim we are better off with elections as the primary mode of citizen participation because, even though electoral processes have biases of their own, they are less than those in non-electoral participation. Others argue that citizens utilize participatory opportunities for their own interests at the expense of the public interest. For example, NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) behavior is often cited as a negative consequence of citizens’ capacity to influence the policy-making process. If one conceptualizes democratic politics as contests between competing groups of elites, along the lines of Schumpeter’s (1942) minimalist approach, there is little need for subnational governments to act as a forum for democratic participation. This is especially true in models where the

primary activity of citizens is to vote for representatives. Here is not the place to engage in a debate over the proper role of citizens in a democracy, a topic that has been addressed extensively elsewhere (Pateman 1970; Barber 1984; Mueller 1999). Suffice it to say that if we desire to promote citizen participation and enhance citizens' civic skills, then engagement in the local policy-making process is a primary means of accomplishing that.

Unconventional Politics

If citizens determine that influencing government through elections or by participating in the policy-making process is ineffective, they can attempt to influence through other means, such as protests, boycotts, strikes, or sit-ins, generically referred to as unconventional politics. Both the United States and Korea have long histories of social movements employing these tactics. In Korea, the democratization movement was able to undermine the military dictatorship through mass protests (Chung 1997; S. Kim 2000; N. Lee 2007), and protest activity remains quite high today (S. Kim 2009; Y. Lee 2009). The women's suffrage movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is an example of a successful democratization movement in the United States, and the civil rights movement is often held up as exemplary of a successful social movement, although it was more successful at expanding political rights than economic ones (Piven and Cloward 1977). All of these social movements utilized conventional participation in elections and policy making, but they also employed unconventional tactics effectively.

Because they seek broad social change, social movements tend to focus on the national level; if the goal is to bring about fundamental change, such as democratization or civil rights, it needs to be society-wide. Yet, many social movements target local governments as part of a strategy to accomplish their larger goals. For example, during the 1980 Gwangju pro-democracy movement, protestors occupied the provincial government building, and American civil rights protesters

in the 1950s frequently targeted municipalities' segregationist laws and practices. Further, when Korea created an elected local governmental system in the mid-1990s, many national civil society groups created local branches throughout the country (Shin 2006, 19). The reason for the local targets is twofold: they are more accessible and victories are more readily achieved on a local scale. It was more feasible for pro-democracy activists to take over the provincial government building in Gwangju than to storm the National Assembly or Blue House. Likewise, organizing the Montgomery bus boycott required fewer resources than staging the march on Washington. Local governments provide convenient targets for protesters, strikers, or boycotters, providing a venue where they can achieve concrete victories that can help them build towards their goal of social change.

The existence of autonomous local governments can both assist and hinder social movements. On the one hand, devolving power to local governments provides "multiple cracks" for citizens engaged in unconventional politics. The concept of "multiple cracks" was first developed by Morton Grodzins (1966) to describe the permeability of the American federal system. Federalism, he argued, gives individuals and groups ample opportunities to influence public policy because there are so many different governmental units that they can target. Even though state and local governments may not be more responsive per se, having multiple levels of governmental authority provides a greater number of access points, increasing citizens' chances of accomplishing their political goals. On the other hand, divided authority can make it more difficult for citizens to influence all the levels of government involved in a given policy decision. A fragmented political system requires citizens to target different levels of government to accomplish their policy objectives, requiring greater resources. This, in turn, can make the comprehensive change that social movements desire more difficult to achieve. Strategically, having one power center to target has its benefits.

Whether devolving power to local governments will help or hinder social movements depends on the political context. For some movements, autonomous local governments may provide a means to

circumvent an unresponsive national government, creating additional tactical and strategic opportunities that can enhance the capacity of groups to accomplish their goals. They can focus their efforts at social change on those local governments that are most sympathetic to their cause, gaining a foothold into the political system. For other social movements, local autonomy may complicate an already difficult task. Or, even worse, powerful local governments may undermine gains made at the national level. This was a dynamic that was present in the 1950s during the civil rights movement. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that schools needed to be integrated, but segregationist school boards effectively blocked those efforts in many southern cities, an instructive example of local governments using their power to block social change favored by the national government. Thus, we cannot claim that devolution will either help or hurt social movements in some general sense; any effects will be case specific.

Conclusion: Strengthening Local Autonomy in Korea

Advocates of devolving policy authority in Korea argue that it is necessary to further democratization (C. Park 2006; E. K. Park 2007; P. S. Kim 2007). One of the many arguments made in favor of devolution is that it will allow for enhanced citizen participation in government. The evidence presented in this paper supports the conclusion that devolution will change the nature of citizen participation in ways that will promote civic learning and a more participatory democracy. If local participatory opportunities are utilized by citizens and civil society groups, this could lead to greater governmental responsiveness.

Low voter turnout in local elections and unresponsiveness of local governments is often used as evidence against enhancing local autonomy. Opponents of devolution argue that strengthening local governments in Korea will result little in the way of democratic benefits, as citizens will neither participate more nor be able to better con-

trol government; simply changing the venue where decisions are made will not enhance democracy. Further, citizens know less about local officials and policy issues and thus are less competent voters when it comes to local elections. Public opinion surveys provide additional evidence: Koreans do not believe local governments are more responsive or more amenable to citizen influence, and, similar to responses for the national government, 70 percent of Koreans have an unfavorable opinion of local government (Center for Civil Society with Comparative Perspective 2006).

This argument is compelling because its factual basis—low turnout and negative public opinion—is sound. However, it ignores the democratic benefits derived from local autonomy described above. Strengthening Korean local governments will enhance democracy by creating spaces where citizens can participate in ways that are not available on the national level. Even though local governments in Korea are not hotbeds of democratic participation (C. Park 2003; Sohn and Ahn 2005; S. Kim 2006), they can still make an important contribution to democracy. The existence of local governments promotes democratization not because they are inherently more participatory or responsive but because they create additional opportunities for citizen participation and promotes civic learning. Local autonomy will add to the democratic capacity of the Korean political system by altering the forms of citizen participation and the competence of citizens. Its contribution lies in its capacity to create spaces for different forms of participation that allow citizens to engage the policy-making process in more substantive ways.

A critical distinction needs to be made between creating the capacity for citizen participation and prompting actual participation. Devolution creates capacity: by moving policy authority to local governments, citizens have richer opportunities to engage in politics which in turn will enhance their civic skills. The actual decision to participate, however, will not be influenced by devolution. Citizens will not necessarily avail themselves of opportunities to participate in policy making; whether they do so is primarily influenced by mobilization dynamics, power considerations, issue agendas, and other

political factors. Devolution does not automatically lead to greater participation and governmental responsiveness; there is nothing about small units of government that would necessarily prompt elected officials to pay more attention to citizen demands, or for citizens to participate more extensively. However, if citizens have the desire to participate, devolution creates the capacity through which they could do so in a more substantive way, leading to both enhanced civic skills and increased governmental responsiveness. Devolution is a capacity-creating endeavor that, under the right conditions, could enhance democratic practice in both South Korea and the United States.

In this paper I have analyzed how devolution can create opportunities for substantive citizen participation in the policy-making process. Future research should examine to what extent citizens take advantage of these opportunities and what factors make citizens more or less likely to engage in local politics. Devolution may create capacity for enhanced participation, but we have little existing research to explain why, in many cases, this capacity is underutilized. Answering this question is the next step in analyzing the merits of devolution as a program to enhance democratic governance.

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