

Politicizing Authoritarian Threats During Electoral Campaigns: Evidence from South Korea

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*This is a work-in-progress project with preliminary data analysis.
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Abstract

When and why do political candidates invoke external authoritarian threats during electoral competition? This project examines how candidates strategically politicize threats from North Korea and China in South Korean legislative and local elections between 2020 and 2026. Drawing on electoral debate videos, I construct a speech-level dataset to identify when candidates introduce authoritarian-threat narratives and how their use varies across electoral contexts. I argue that such rhetoric serves as a strategic tool for partisan mobilization, particularly by consolidating conservative voters while potentially dividing progressive voters. I examine two competing explanations: whether conservative candidates are more likely to invoke external threats in conservative strongholds, where mobilization is easier, or in closely contested districts, where partisan mobilization is more electorally consequential. This project contributes to understanding how international security threats are strategically incorporated into domestic electoral competition.

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