# When Foreign Adversaries Go Local: The Electoral Politics of External Threats in South Korea

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November 12, 2026

*Work in progress.*

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**Abstract**

When and why do electoral candidates politicize external security threats, and with what electoral consequences? While existing research examines how political leaders exploit external threats and how such threats influence public opinion, less is known about their strategic use in constituency-level electoral competition. This study addresses this gap by examining candidates' rhetoric concerning authoritarian threats from North Korea and China in South Korean legislative and local elections. I argue that external-threat rhetoric serves as a strategy of right-wing partisan mobilization. Candidates from right-wing parties are more likely to invoke external threats, particularly in conservative strongholds, where such rhetoric can reinforce partisan loyalties and mobilize core supporters. I further expect this strategy to generate electoral advantages by increasing candidates' vote shares. To test these arguments, I construct a candidate-level dataset covering 926 electoral debates and 3,028 candidates across elections between 2020 and 2026, combining debate transcripts, candidate characteristics, historical electoral support, and electoral outcomes. The findings suggest that right-wing candidates are more likely to invoke external threats in districts with stronger historical conservative support and that such rhetoric is positively associated with candidate vote shares. This study contributes to understanding how external security threats become instruments of partisan mobilization in domestic electoral competition.

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# Introduction

Foreign security threats have become a recurring theme in electoral campaigns across democracies, including in parliamentary and local elections. During Taiwan's 2022 local elections, Taipei mayoral candidate Chen Shih-chung embraced the slogan "Resist China, Protect Taiwan," emphasizing the threat posed by Beijing to Taiwan's security and sovereignty (Smith, 2022). Similarly, in the 2024 U.S. congressional elections, Republican incumbent Mike Flood released a campaign advertisement depicting a Chinese surveillance balloon flying over Nebraska, which he dramatically shot down to emphasize the perceived security threat from China (Bonderson and Naqi, 2024). During India's 2024 parliamentary elections, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath invoked the threat from Pakistan while campaigning for Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidates in Rampur and Amroha, portraying Pakistan as fearful of India's military strength under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (The Indian Express, 2024). These examples illustrate how political actors strategically bring foreign adversaries into domestic electoral competition, even when the offices being contested have limited direct influence over foreign and security policy. Why, then, do political candidates emphasize external threats in such electoral contests, and under what conditions does this campaign yield electoral benefits?

Existing research provides important insights into the domestic political consequences of external security threats, yet offers limited explanations for why political candidates strategically invoke such threats during electoral competition. Diversionary theory and the rally-round-the-flag literature primarily examine how national executives exploit international crises or conflicts to consolidate domestic political support (Levy, 1989; Mueller, 1973; Mitchell and Prins, 2004). A related literature investigates how exposure to terrorism, military conflict, and perceived security threats shapes voting behavior and electoral outcomes, highlighting the conditional roles of partisanship and political ideology (Berrebi and Klor, 2008; Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014; Singh and Tir, 2018). Although recent studies recognize that political rhetoric and media coverage can shape public perceptions of external threats and their electoral consequences (Watanabe et al., 2022; Arya and Bhatiya, 2025), comparatively little attention has been devoted to the strategic use of external-threat rhetoric by electoral candidates themselves, particularly those

without direct authority over foreign or security policy. Consequently, we know relatively little about which candidates invoke foreign adversaries, how their rhetorical choices vary across electoral constituencies, and whether such strategies generate electoral advantages.

I argue that the strategic invocation of external threats is shaped by partisan issue ownership and constituency-level electoral incentives. Candidates affiliated with parties that have established hawkish reputations toward particular foreign adversaries have stronger incentives to emphasize these threats, as doing so increases the salience of issues on which their parties enjoy perceived advantages. Moreover, these incentives are particularly pronounced in partisan strongholds, where threatening narratives about familiar foreign adversaries are more likely to resonate with voters' preexisting political attachments and security perceptions. Rather than primarily seeking to persuade opposition voters, candidates may employ such rhetoric to reinforce partisan identities and mobilize their core supporters. Finally, I expect that invoking external threats can generate electoral benefits for candidates from hawkish parties by strengthening partisan support and increasing the importance of national security in voters' electoral decisions. Together, these arguments suggest that foreign security threats can become strategic electoral resources even for political actors who lack direct authority over foreign policy.

To test these arguments, I construct an original candidate-level dataset covering South Korean legislative elections in 2020 and 2024 and local elections in 2022 and 2026. The dataset combines 926 electoral debate videos involving 2,391 candidates with administrative election records covering 3,028 candidates, including their partisan affiliations, demographic characteristics, historical electoral support, and electoral outcomes. I identify external-threat rhetoric through a multistage text-classification procedure combining keyword-based searches, large language model screening, and manual validation, yielding threat-related statements made by 158 candidates. Using logistic regression models, I examine whether candidates' partisan affiliations and historical conservative electoral support predict their propensity to invoke external threats. I then estimate linear regression models to assess whether such rhetoric is associated with candidates' electoral vote shares, controlling for candidate characteristics, debate participation, and election- and district-level differences.

The findings provide evidence consistent with the argument that external-threat rhetoric

serves as a strategy of partisan mobilization. First, right-wing candidates are substantially more likely to invoke external threats during electoral debates than candidates from other parties. Second, this tendency is more pronounced in constituencies with stronger historical conservative electoral support, suggesting that right-wing candidates strategically emphasize foreign threats where their partisan constituencies are more established. These patterns remain consistent across alternative measures of historical conservative support and when the analysis is restricted to debate participants. Finally, candidates who invoke external threats receive higher electoral vote shares, with the association remaining positive after accounting for candidate characteristics and election and district fixed effects. In the most comprehensive specification, external-threat rhetoric is associated with approximately 3.1 percentage points higher vote share.

This study contributes to the literature on democratic resilience and backsliding by highlighting how the electoral politicization of external threats may undermine democratic accountability. Existing research demonstrates that external security threats can weaken political tolerance (Peffley et al., 2015) and facilitate the centralization of political power (Gibler, 2010). More recent studies examine how threats of interstate conflict shape electoral support for candidates exhibiting undemocratic behavior (Frederiksen and Laustsen, 2025) and for far-right political parties (Alrababah et al., 2026). Extending this literature, this study highlights how the strategic politicization of external threats may undermine democratic accountability by allowing candidates from parties traditionally associated with national security to gain electoral advantages even in the absence of immediate international crises. By encouraging voters to prioritize partisan security appeals over candidates' policy performance and governing competence, such rhetoric may weaken electoral accountability and create incentives for political actors to amplify external threats for electoral gain.

Moreover, this study contributes to the growing literature on partisanship in international politics by challenging the conventional notion that "politics stops at the water's edge." While existing research has demonstrated how partisan divisions shape political elites' foreign policy preferences and public responses to national security issues (Milner and Tingley, 2015; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017; Kertzer et al., 2021; Leeds and Mattes, 2022; Myrick, 2025), less attention has been paid to how political actors strategically invoke external security threats

to gain electoral advantages. This study extends this literature by examining how candidates strategically invoke external threats in South Korea's parliamentary and local elections, where national security issues are deeply intertwined with domestic partisan competition and serve as instruments of electoral mobilization.

## The Domestic Politics of Threats from Foreign Adversaries

How do political elites exploit international conflicts and external threats to advance their domestic political interests? Existing research on diversionary conflict and the rally-round-the-flag effect offers two complementary explanations for the domestic political incentives and benefits associated with international confrontation. Diversionary theory suggests that incumbent state leaders facing domestic political difficulties, such as economic downturns and growing political opposition, may initiate or escalate international conflicts to consolidate political support by diverting public attention to foreign adversaries (Levy, 1989; Mitchell and Prins, 2004; Williams et al., 2010). This argument is closely linked to the rally-round-the-flag effect, whereby international crises temporarily increase public support for incumbent leaders (Mueller, 1973). Scholars attribute this effect to heightened patriotism, national solidarity, bipartisan elite consensus, and reduced opposition criticism (Brody, 1991; Baker and Oneal, 2001), while informational accounts emphasize credible signals of leadership competence and commitment (Colaresi, 2007). However, the domestic political benefits of diversionary conflicts and rally effects are not universal, beign conditional on voters' partisanship and prior political attachments (Baum, 2002; Singh and Tir, 2018), domestic economic conditions (Williams et al., 2010), human costs (Karol and Miguel, 2007), and elite communication and media coverage (Arya and Bhatiya, 2025).

The domestic political incentives to exploit external threats may be particularly pronounced in the context of enduring international rivalries. Such rivalries, exemplified by U.S.–China strategic competition, India–Pakistan relations, and Israel–Iran tensions, are characterized by longstanding antagonism, mutual distrust, and persistent perceptions of security threats (Diehl and Goertz, 2001; Colaresi et al., 2007). These conditions may make foreign adversaries particularly attractive as diversionary targets, as leaders can draw on existing hostilities and distinct

national or ideological identities to appeal to public fears and mobilize domestic support (Jung, 2014). As Mitchell and Prins (2004, p. 946) argue, "It is also easier to exaggerate a threat against a rival state (as opposed to a nonrival state) in times of domestic turmoil," since long-standing antagonism makes external threats more credible and confrontations more politically justifiable to domestic audiences. Yet, exploiting these rivalries through military confrontation entails substantial risks. Conflicts between enduring rivals tend to be more violent, difficult to resolve, and susceptible to escalation into full-scale war (Mitchell and Prins, 2004; Brecher, 2013). Particularly in democracies, the human and financial costs of military confrontation can undermine public support and threaten incumbents' political survival, as leaders remain accountable to voters for the consequences of their foreign-policy decisions (De Mesquita and Siverson, 1995; Reiter and Stam, 2002). Thus, while enduring rivalries provide favorable opportunities for exploiting external threats, the risks of military escalation may constrain leaders' ability to capitalize on these opportunities.

Given the risks of military confrontation, political leaders may instead exploit enduring rivalries by invoking threats from familiar foreign adversaries to mobilize domestic support. Such rhetorical strategies can generate political benefits without initiating actual conflicts through several mechanisms. First, emphasizing external threats can increase the salience of national security in public discourse and redirect public attention away from domestic problems toward foreign adversaries (Blaydes et al., 2021; Yilmaz and Tokdemir, 2026). Second, threatening narratives can heighten perceptions of insecurity and evoke emotional responses, potentially increasing public support for hawkish foreign policies and political leaders perceived as capable of addressing external dangers (Gadarian, 2010b; Huddy et al., 2005; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2013). These mechanisms may be especially effective in enduring rivalries, where established perceptions of foreign adversaries make threat narratives recognizable and credible even in the absence of an immediate international crisis. Empirical research provides evidence consistent with these arguments. Studies of Japan and Israel document how political leaders have amplified perceived threats from North Korea and Iran through political communication and media coverage to advance domestic political objectives (Watanabe et al., 2022). Experimental evidence from these countries further suggests that emphasizing external threats can increase

public support for incumbent leaders without actual military escalation (Segev et al., 2022). Similarly, research on India demonstrates how political rhetoric and media coverage can make conflict-related events electorally salient, contributing to increased support for the incumbent party (Arya and Bhatiya, 2025).

Importantly, the political opportunities created by enduring rivalries are not necessarily confined to incumbent leaders. Unlike the conventional rally-round-the-flag effect, which primarily concerns increased public support for incumbent executives during international crises (Mueller, 1973; Baker and Oneal, 2001; Baum, 2002; Colaresi, 2007), the rhetorical invocation of external threats may offer political benefits to a broader range of political elites, including those without direct authority over foreign or security policy. Indeed, existing research suggests that security threats can shape public evaluations of political candidates and parties depending on their perceived competence and partisan reputations, rather than simply their incumbency status (Gadarian, 2010b; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2013). Moreover, unlike the initiation or escalation of military conflict, invoking threats from established foreign adversaries does not require control over foreign-policy decisions, allowing political elites across different institutional positions to pursue potential domestic political benefits. Nevertheless, existing research on rally effects and external-threat rhetoric has predominantly focused on national executives, examining how incumbent leaders strategically emphasize foreign threats or manipulate international confrontations to divert public attention from domestic problems and consolidate political support. Consequently, comparatively little attention has been devoted to how political elites beyond the national executive, particularly those without direct authority over foreign and security policy, strategically invoke external threats to pursue domestic political objectives.

## The Politicization of External Threats in Elections

Beyond their implications for public approval and political support, external threats can have important consequences for electoral outcomes. Elections provide a central mechanism through which citizens select political representatives and hold elected officials accountable for their performance (Przeworski et al., 1999). For political elites, electoral success is therefore a fun-

damental objective that shapes their strategic behavior, including how they communicate with voters and emphasize particular political issues (Mayhew, 1974; Petrocik, 1996). Political communication can influence electoral competition by shaping the issues voters consider important and the criteria they use to evaluate candidates (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Dragu and Fan, 2016). In this regard, the political consequences of external threats extend beyond temporary increases in public approval to electoral gains and losses, making voting behavior and electoral outcomes important dimensions for understanding the domestic political implications of external threats.

A growing literature demonstrates that international conflicts and external security threats can significantly influence voting behavior and electoral outcomes, although the direction of these effects varies across political contexts and partisan constituencies. Some studies find that exposure to terrorist attacks increases electoral support for right-wing or nationalist parties, which are often perceived as more competent in addressing security threats (Berrebi and Klor, 2006,0; Kibris, 2011). For instance, Berrebi and Klor (2008) show that terrorist attacks in Israel increased support for right-wing parties in directly affected localities, particularly in traditionally left-leaning areas, while attacks elsewhere could reinforce left-wing preferences. However, external threats do not necessarily benefit right-wing parties or incumbent governments. Studies of the 2004 Madrid bombings demonstrate that terrorist attacks mobilized left-leaning and opposition voters, contributing to the electoral defeat of the incumbent conservative government (Bali, 2007; Montalvo, 2011). Similarly, military casualties can undermine incumbent electoral support, with these effects varying across partisan constituencies (Karol and Miguel, 2007). More broadly, Singh and Tir (2018) find that the electoral consequences of international conflicts depend on voters' partisan attachments and the characteristics of military confrontation, with non-copartisan voters exhibiting greater responsiveness than incumbent copartisans. Conversely, Arya and Bhatiya (2025) demonstrates that conflict-related casualties in India can increase incumbent vote share when political leaders and the media make these events salient to voters Together, these findings suggest that the electoral effects of external threats vary depending on voters' partisanship, ideological orientations, and perceptions of security competence.

It is important to note that the electoral influence of external threats does not necessarily require direct exposure to actual violence. Perceptions of potential security threats can indepen-

dently shape voting behavior by heightening public concerns about security and increasing the importance of national defense in electoral decisions. Examining Israeli elections, Getmansky and Zeitzoff (2014) find that localities within the range of rocket attacks exhibited substantially greater support for right-wing parties, even when they had not experienced direct attacks. Similarly, experimental research demonstrates that threatening imagery and emotionally evocative political communication can influence voters' evaluations of candidates and their foreign-policy positions (Gadarian, 2014). Relevantly, recent evidence from India suggests that the electoral consequences of conflict-related events depend not only on voters' exposure to violence but also on whether political leaders and the media emphasize these events during electoral campaigns (Arya and Bhatiya, 2025).

Nevertheless, existing research provides a limited understanding of how political elites strategically construct and invoke external threats to pursue electoral advantages. Much of the literature treats security threats as externally occurring events or conditions and examines how voters respond to them, rather than explaining when and why political actors actively emphasize particular foreign adversaries in their rhetoric. Although studies of political communication demonstrate that threatening messages can influence candidate evaluations and that elites can shape the electoral salience of security issues (Gadarian, 2014; Arya and Bhatiya, 2025), comparatively little is known about the strategic invocation of foreign threats by political elites themselves, particularly those without direct authority over foreign or security policy.

The strategic invocation of external threats also raises important questions about democratic accountability and representation. A central premise of electoral accountability is that voters evaluate political representatives based on their policy commitments and governing performance, thereby creating incentives for politicians to remain responsive to citizens' preferences (Fiorina, 1981; Przeworski et al., 1999). However, political elites can strategically influence the criteria voters use to evaluate candidates by emphasizing issues on which they enjoy perceived advantages (Petrocik, 1996). In this regard, external-threat rhetoric may enable political elites to redirect electoral attention away from domestic policy performance toward national security concerns, potentially benefiting candidates perceived as more capable of addressing foreign threats regardless of their actual policy responsibilities. Such dynamics may be particularly

consequential when political actors have limited authority over foreign and security policy, as voters may reward them for their positions on issues beyond their institutional responsibilities rather than their performance on policies they can directly influence. Consequently, the strategic politicization of external threats could weaken the connection between electoral outcomes and policy accountability, with broader implications for democratic representation.

# Theoretical Argument

## *Partisan Issue Ownership and External-Threat Rhetoric*

I argue that political candidates strategically invoke external threats during electoral campaigns to mobilize domestic political support, and that their incentives to do so depend on partisan reputations and constituency-level electoral conditions. Because enduring international rivalries are characterized by longstanding antagonism and persistent perceptions of security threats, political candidates can invoke familiar foreign adversaries without necessarily responding to an immediate international crisis. However, the political advantages of emphasizing such threats are unlikely to be equally distributed across candidates. Instead, I argue that the strategic use of external-threat rhetoric depends on whether candidates' partisan affiliations and political positions align with established public perceptions of foreign adversaries.

The first expectation draws on partisan issue-ownership theory, which suggests that political parties have incentives to emphasize issues on which they possess established reputational advantages (Petrocik, 1996). Rather than merely responding to voters' preexisting concerns, candidates can strategically select and emphasize issues to influence the criteria voters use to evaluate political alternatives (Aragonès et al., 2015; Dragu and Fan, 2016). This mechanism is particularly relevant to national security, where parties often differ in their reputations for confronting foreign adversaries. Research demonstrates that voters' foreign-policy preferences influence their evaluations of political candidates differently depending on partisan reputations, while threatening security environments may favor candidates perceived as more hawkish (Gadarian, 2010a; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2013). Accordingly, candidates affiliated with

parties that have established hawkish positions toward particular foreign adversaries may have stronger incentives to emphasize threats from those adversaries. By doing so, they can increase the salience of national security, reinforce their parties' perceived competence in addressing foreign threats, and distinguish themselves from political opponents associated with more conciliatory positions. Conversely, candidates from parties with less hawkish reputations may have weaker incentives to emphasize such threats, as doing so could increase attention to issues on which their opponents enjoy perceived advantages.

***Hypothesis 1 (Partisan Issue Ownership):***

> *Candidates affiliated with parties that hold hawkish positions toward a foreign adversary are more likely to invoke threats from that adversary during electoral campaigns.*

## *Constituency-Level Partisan Mobilization*

However, partisan issue ownership alone does not explain when candidates choose to invoke external threats. I further argue that the strategic incentives to employ such rhetoric depend on the partisan composition of electoral constituencies. Political communication does not necessarily influence all voters equally, as its effectiveness depends on individuals' prior political attachments, ideological orientations, and perceptions of security threats. In particular, threatening messages may be more persuasive when they resonate with audiences' preexisting concerns about foreign adversaries. Experimental evidence demonstrates that emotionally evocative threat coverage has stronger effects among citizens already concerned about terrorism (Gadarian, 2010b). Similarly, research on securitization emphasizes that the effectiveness of threatening narratives depends on historically embedded understandings of danger and audiences' interpretations of security threats (Van Rythoven, 2015). These findings suggest that candidates may have stronger incentives to emphasize external threats in constituencies where voters are already receptive to such narratives.

Building on this logic, I expect candidates affiliated with hawkish parties to invoke external threats more frequently in their parties' traditional electoral strongholds. Such constituencies

contain larger concentrations of voters who identify with the candidates' parties or share their broader ideological orientations, potentially making them more receptive to established partisan narratives about foreign adversaries. Research further suggests that information about foreign threats can generate divergent political responses when accompanied by partisan elite cues, reinforcing existing partisan divisions rather than producing uniform national solidarity (Myrick, 2021). In this context, emphasizing external threats may allow candidates to activate shared security concerns, reinforce partisan identities, and encourage political participation among existing supporters. Rather than primarily attempting to persuade opposition voters, candidates may strategically employ threat rhetoric to consolidate and mobilize their partisan constituencies.

This argument differs from the conventional diversionary logic, which emphasizes political vulnerability as a motivation for exploiting international conflicts. It also contrasts with perspectives suggesting that fear appeals may be particularly attractive in competitive electoral environments, where candidates seek to persuade undecided voters or disrupt existing political attachments (Brader, 2005; Nai and Maier, 2024). Instead, I propose a partisan mobilization mechanism in which candidates have stronger incentives to invoke external threats where their messages are more likely to resonate with established supporters. Thus, the electoral usefulness of external-threat rhetoric may depend not only on the intensity of competition but also on the concentration of voters who share candidates' partisan and security orientations.

***Hypothesis 2 (Partisan Stronghold Mobilization):***

> *Candidates affiliated with hawkish parties are more likely to invoke external threats when competing in districts where their parties have stronger electoral support.*

## *Electoral Returns to External-Threat Rhetoric*

Beyond explaining the strategic use of external-threat rhetoric, I expect such rhetoric to generate electoral benefits for candidates whose parties possess established hawkish reputations. By emphasizing threats from foreign adversaries, candidates can increase the salience of na-

tional security and encourage voters to evaluate political alternatives according to their perceived competence in addressing external dangers. Issue-ownership theory suggests that partisan reputational advantages are more likely to influence vote choice when the corresponding issues become electorally salient (Petrocik, 1996; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008). Consequently, highlighting external threats may benefit candidates whose parties are perceived as more capable of confronting foreign adversaries, even when those candidates lack direct authority over foreign or security policy.

External-threat rhetoric may also shape electoral behavior through its psychological and emotional effects. Research on political communication demonstrates that threatening messages can influence citizens' policy preferences and candidate evaluations by heightening perceptions of external danger (Gadarian, 2010b,0). Although fear and anxiety do not necessarily produce uniform support for hawkish policies (Huddy et al., 2005), rhetoric that reinforces established partisan security concerns may strengthen support for candidates associated with assertive foreign-policy positions. Moreover, existing research suggests that candidates' use of fear appeals can be associated with electoral advantages, although these effects vary across political contexts (Gerstlé and Nai, 2019). Evidence from India further demonstrates that political speeches and media coverage can make conflict-related events electorally salient, contributing to increased support for the incumbent party (Arya and Bhatiya, 2025). Together, these findings suggest that candidates from hawkish parties may benefit electorally from invoking external threats by reinforcing partisan attachments, increasing the salience of favorable issues, and mobilizing voters who share their security concerns.

Nevertheless, these electoral benefits are not guaranteed. Threatening narratives may generate different responses depending on voters' partisan affiliations, perceptions of danger, and assessments of the credibility of political elites. In particular, voters may discount or reject threatening messages when they perceive them as politically motivated or inconsistent with their existing beliefs (Colaresi, 2007; Van Rythoven, 2015). I therefore expect the electoral returns to external-threat rhetoric to be conditional on candidates' partisan reputations and their ability to communicate threats that resonate with voters' preexisting security perceptions.

***Hypothesis 3 (Electoral Returns):***

*Among candidates affiliated with hawkish parties, greater use of external-threat rhetoric is associated with higher electoral vote shares.*

# Research Design

## *Case Selection: Multilevel Elections in South Korea*

To examine the strategic use of external-threat rhetoric during electoral competition, I focus on legislative and local elections in South Korea between 2020 and 2026. South Korea provides a particularly suitable setting for investigating how political candidates invoke threats from foreign adversaries to pursue domestic electoral objectives. Its longstanding confrontation with North Korea and increasingly contentious relations with China make external security issues salient in domestic political discourse. Moreover, South Korea's national security and inter-Korean relations have long been characterized by partisan divisions, with conservative parties generally adopting hawkish positions that emphasize military deterrence and a tougher stance toward North Korea, while progressive parties have traditionally favored diplomatic engagement and inter-Korean cooperation (Cheong and Haggard, 2023). These partisan differences provide an opportunity to examine whether candidates' incentives to invoke external threats vary across party affiliations and the political orientations of their electoral constituencies.

The analysis covers four electoral cycles: the 2020 and 2024 National Assembly elections and the 2022 and 2026 local elections. Examining both legislative and local elections provides variation in the institutional responsibilities of the offices being contested. While national legislators participate in foreign-policy decisions, local elected officials generally exercise limited authority over these issues. This variation is particularly relevant to the argument that political candidates can strategically exploit external threats even when the offices they seek have little direct influence over foreign policy. The inclusion of multiple election cycles also allows the analysis to account for changes in the broader political environment while examining patterns of threat rhetoric across different electoral contexts.

### *Data: Electoral Debates and Candidate Characteristics*

I construct an original dataset combining electoral debate transcripts, candidate characteristics, and election results. The primary source of political communication data consists of candidate debate videos published on YouTube by South Korea's National Election Commission (NEC). These debates provide a systematic source of candidates' public statements during electoral campaigns, allowing me to examine how candidates from different political parties invoke external threats in their electoral appeals. The collected data cover 926 electoral debates involving 2,391 candidates, with an average video duration of approximately one hour and fourteen minutes.

To obtain information on candidates and electoral outcomes, I collect administrative election records through the NEC's Open API. These records include candidates' party affiliations, electoral districts, vote shares, and demographic characteristics, including age, gender, education, and incumbency status. The candidate dataset contains 3,028 observations across the four election cycles. I further collect historical electoral results to measure the partisan composition of electoral constituencies prior to the elections under investigation. These data include results from earlier elections in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2022, and 2025, which provide alternative measures of previous conservative electoral support. The debate and electoral datasets are linked using candidate and election information to construct a candidate-level dataset that connects political rhetoric with partisan affiliations, constituency characteristics, and electoral outcomes.

### *Measuring External-Threat Rhetoric*

The main variable of interest is candidates' use of external-threat rhetoric during electoral debates. I conceptualize external-threat rhetoric as statements that portray foreign adversaries, particularly North Korea and China, as threats to South Korea's national security, political system, or broader national interests. This definition distinguishes the strategic invocation of external threats from general references to foreign countries, diplomatic relations, or international affairs. Importantly, the measure captures candidates' rhetorical representations of external danger rather than the actual occurrence of international conflict or security incidents.

To identify such rhetoric, I employ a multistage text-classification procedure. First, I search the captions of electoral debate videos using keywords associated with North Korea, China, national security, and ideological confrontation. These include references to North Korean nuclear weapons, inter-Korean relations, the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, communism, national security, military alliances, and related concepts. This initial procedure identifies 15,439 potentially relevant statement entries. Second, I use GPT-6 to conservatively screen these statements for potentially relevant external-threat rhetoric, reducing the set to 2,317 entries. Third, I manually review the remaining statements to distinguish explicit invocations of external security threats from references that do not portray foreign adversaries as threatening. This process identifies 364 statements classified as external-threat rhetoric, produced by 158 candidates.

For the candidate-level analysis, I construct a binary indicator distinguishing candidates who invoke external threats at least once during the observed debates from those who do not. This measure captures the presence of external-threat rhetoric in candidates' public debate statements. Because the underlying data also retain individual statements, the dataset provides a basis for examining variation in the frequency and content of threat rhetoric.

### *Explanatory Variables and Empirical Strategy*

The empirical analysis proceeds in two stages. The first investigates the partisan and constituency-level conditions associated with candidates' use of external-threat rhetoric, corresponding to the first two hypotheses. The second examines the relationship between external-threat rhetoric and electoral performance.

To test the partisan issue-ownership argument, I use candidates' political party affiliations to distinguish right-wing candidates from candidates affiliated with other parties. The theoretical expectation is that candidates from conservative parties, which are generally associated with more hawkish positions toward North Korea, have stronger incentives to invoke external threats during electoral campaigns. I estimate binary-response regression models in which the dependent variable indicates whether a candidate employed external-threat rhetoric. The models include candidate-level characteristics, such as gender, age, education, and incumbency, as

well as election fixed effects to account for common differences across electoral cycles.

To examine whether the strategic use of external-threat rhetoric depends on constituency-level partisan support, I measure the historical strength of right-wing parties using previous electoral results. I construct three alternative indicators: (1) right-wing vote share in the most recent preceding election of any type, (2) right-wing vote share in the most recent preceding election of the same type, and (3) an aggregate measure based on the three preceding elections of any type. These measures capture the extent to which a district has historically supported conservative parties before the current electoral contest. I then interact historical right-wing vote share with candidates' partisan affiliation to examine whether right-wing candidates are more likely to invoke external threats in conservative strongholds. The interaction allows the association between historical partisan strength and threat rhetoric to vary between right-wing and other candidates. I also estimate models restricting the sample to candidates participating in electoral debates.

Finally, to examine the electoral consequences of external-threat rhetoric, I estimate regression models with candidates' electoral vote shares as the dependent variable. The principal explanatory variable is the indicator for whether a candidate invoked external threats during the campaign debates. The models progressively account for candidates' partisan affiliations, demographic characteristics, incumbency status, and debate participation, alongside election and electoral-district fixed effects. These specifications assess whether candidates who employ external-threat rhetoric receive higher vote shares than otherwise comparable candidates, conditional on the observed characteristics included in the models.

The analysis is observational, and the relationship between external-threat rhetoric and electoral outcomes should therefore be interpreted with caution. To mitigate potential confounding, I control for candidates' partisan affiliations, demographic characteristics, incumbency status, and debate participation, while incorporating election and district fixed effects to account for differences across electoral contexts. Nevertheless, these measures cannot fully address the potential endogeneity of candidates' rhetorical choices, as candidates may strategically invoke external threats based on their anticipated electoral prospects, constituency-level partisan support, or other unobserved factors that also influence voting outcomes. Consequently, although

the analysis provides evidence of an association between external-threat rhetoric and electoral performance that is consistent with the theoretical expectations, it cannot establish whether such rhetoric causally increases candidates' vote shares.

# Results

I begin by examining whether candidates' partisan affiliations are associated with their propensity to invoke external threats during electoral debates. Table 1 presents the results of logistic regression models in which the dependent variable indicates whether a candidate employed external-threat rhetoric. All three specifications control for candidates' demographic characteristics, incumbency status, and election fixed effects. The models differ in their measurement of historical right-wing electoral support: Model 1 uses the most recent preceding election of any type, Model 2 uses the most recent election of the same type, and Model 3 uses the three preceding elections.

Across all three specifications, right-wing candidacy is strongly and positively associated with the use of external-threat rhetoric. The coefficients are consistently positive and statistically significant, suggesting that candidates affiliated with conservative parties are substantially more likely to invoke external threats than candidates from other parties. This pattern is consistent with the partisan issue-ownership argument, which predicts that candidates associated with hawkish positions toward foreign adversaries have stronger incentives to emphasize national security during electoral campaigns.

The models also reveal a positive association between historical conservative electoral support and external-threat rhetoric. These results suggest that external-threat rhetoric is more prevalent in constituencies with stronger historical conservative support. However, the models in Table 1 impose a common relationship between constituency-level conservative support and threat rhetoric across candidates from different parties. The following analysis relaxes this assumption by allowing the relationship to vary according to candidates' partisan affiliations.

Next, I examine whether the relationship between historical conservative electoral support and external-threat rhetoric differs between right-wing and other candidates. This analysis di-

Table 1: Partisan Affiliation and External-Threat Rhetoric

| **DV: External-Threat Rhetoric** | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Right-wing Candidate** | **23.19*** ** | **23.19*** ** | **23.19*** ** |
| | **(0.135)** | **(0.135)** | **(0.135)** |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (one, any type) | 0.0176** | | |
| | (0.009) | | |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (one, same type) | | 0.0165* | |
| | | (0.009) | |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (three, any type) | | | 0.0174* |
| | | | (0.010) |
| Female | -0.1927 | -0.1670 | -0.1858 |
| | (0.401) | (0.397) | (0.399) |
| Age | -0.0009 | 0.0003 | -0.0006 |
| | (0.016) | (0.016) | (0.016) |
| Education level | 0.2446* | 0.2512* | 0.2494* |
| | (0.135) | (0.135) | (0.135) |
| Incumbent | 0.1500 | 0.1127 | 0.1281 |
| | (0.256) | (0.265) | (0.260) |
| Constant | -25.84*** | -25.93*** | -25.85*** |
| | (1.141) | (1.168) | (1.157) |
| Election FE | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 2,181 | 2,181 | 2,181 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.4271 | 0.4264 | 0.4263 |

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

rectly evaluates the constituency-level partisan mobilization hypothesis, which predicts that conservative candidates have stronger incentives to invoke external threats in their parties' electoral strongholds. To test this expectation, I introduce an interaction between right-wing candidate status and historical right-wing vote share. Table 2 presents three specifications using alternative measures of historical electoral support.

The interaction terms are positive across all three specifications, suggesting that the relationship between historical conservative electoral support and external-threat rhetoric varies systematically by candidates' partisan affiliations. Among non-right-wing candidates, stronger historical conservative support is negatively associated with the propensity to invoke external threats. In contrast, the combined coefficients for right-wing candidates are consistently positive, indicating that a one-percentage-point increase in historical conservative vote share is associated with approximately 1.6–1.8% higher odds of invoking external threats, depending on the specification. Substantively, a ten-percentage-point increase in historical conservative support

Table 2: Partisan Strongholds and External-Threat Rhetoric

| **DV: External-Threat Rhetoric** | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Right-wing Candidate | 20.64*** | 20.07*** | 19.95*** |
| | (0.372) | (0.458) | (0.391) |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (one, any type) | -0.366*** | | |
| | (0.017) | | |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (one, same type) | | -0.715*** | |
| | | (0.074) | |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (three, any type) | | | -0.754*** |
| | | | (0.033) |
| **Past Right-wing Vote Share** | **0.384*** ** | **0.731*** ** | **0.771*** ** |
| **× Right-wing Candidate** | **(0.015)** | **(0.076)** | **(0.031)** |
| Constant | -23.29*** | -22.82*** | -22.61*** |
| | (1.137) | (1.159) | (1.066) |
| Control variables | YES | YES | YES |
| Election FE | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 2,181 | 2,181 | 2,181 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.4271 | 0.4264 | 0.4263 |

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

corresponds to approximately 17–20% higher odds of using such rhetoric among right-wing candidates. These findings are consistent with the partisan mobilization hypothesis, suggesting that conservative candidates are more inclined to emphasize external threats in constituencies where their parties have historically enjoyed greater electoral support.

This pattern supports the proposed partisan mobilization mechanism. Rather than suggesting that candidates necessarily emphasize external threats most frequently in electorally competitive districts, the results are consistent with the argument that conservative candidates may find such rhetoric particularly attractive where their established partisan constituencies are larger and potentially more receptive to security-oriented appeals. These findings suggest that the strategic politicization of external threats depends not only on candidates' partisan affiliations but also on the partisan composition of the districts in which they compete.

One concern is that candidates who participate in electoral debates may differ systematically from those who do not. To assess whether the findings are sensitive to the inclusion of candidates without observed debate participation, I reestimate the interaction models using only candidates who participated in the debates. Table 3 reports the results which are consistent with the one with pooled data.

Table 3: Partisan Strongholds and External-Threat Rhetoric (Debate Participants Only)

| **DV: External-Threat Rhetoric** | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Right-wing Candidate | 20.63*** | 20.16*** | 19.93*** |
| | (0.388) | (0.479) | (0.397) |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (one, any type) | -0.386*** | | |
| | (0.016) | | |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (one, same type) | | -0.712*** | |
| | | (0.087) | |
| Past Right-wing Vote Share (three, any type) | | | -0.781*** |
| | | | (0.030) |
| **Past Right-wing Vote Share** | **0.406*** ** | **0.729*** ** | **0.800*** ** |
| **× Right-wing Candidate** | **(0.013)** | **(0.089)** | **(0.028)** |
| Constant | -23.36*** | -22.90*** | -22.65*** |
| | (1.166) | (1.197) | (1.122) |
| Control variables | YES | YES | YES |
| Election FE | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,563 | 1,563 | 1,563 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.3851 | 0.3836 | 0.3839 |

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

Finally, I examine whether candidates' use of external-threat rhetoric is associated with their electoral performance. The dependent variable is each candidate's vote share, measured in percentage points. Table 4 presents four regression specifications that progressively incorporate candidate characteristics, debate participation, election fixed effects, and district fixed effects. This analysis evaluates whether candidates who invoke external threats receive greater electoral support than those who do not, conditional on the observed covariates.

Across all four specifications, the use of external-threat rhetoric is positively and statistically significantly associated with candidates' electoral vote shares. Model 1, which includes only the external-threat rhetoric indicator, shows that candidates who invoke external threats receive approximately 8.60 percentage points more votes than those who do not. This initial association remains similar in Model 2, which accounts for candidates' partisan affiliations, demographic characteristics, incumbency status, and election fixed effects. The coefficient on external-threat rhetoric is 8.55 percentage points.

However, the magnitude of this association decreases substantially after accounting for debate participation. In Model 3, the estimated coefficient falls to 3.69 percentage points, suggesting that part of the initial relationship between external-threat rhetoric and electoral performance

Table 4: External-Threat Rhetoric and Candidate Vote Share

| DV: Candidate Vote Share | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **External-Threat Rhetoric** | **8.60*** ** | **8.55*** ** | **3.69*** ** | **3.07** ** |
| | **(1.15)** | **(1.19)** | **(1.20)** | **(1.47)** |
| Right-wing Candidate | | 15.39*** | 12.85*** | 10.73*** |
| | | (0.78) | (0.81) | (0.90) |
| Debate Participation | | | 16.60*** | 20.20*** |
| | | | (0.93) | (1.08) |
| Female | | -4.30*** | -2.77** | -2.68** |
| | | (1.23) | (1.10) | (1.24) |
| Age | | -0.08 | -0.07 | -0.09* |
| | | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Education level | | 2.73*** | 1.86*** | 2.06*** |
| | | (0.38) | (0.36) | (0.43) |
| Incumbent | | 19.31*** | 16.69*** | 16.13*** |
| | | (0.85) | (0.85) | (0.94) |
| Constant | 31.39*** | 6.40* | 1.61 | -7.37 |
| | (0.48) | (3.47) | (3.11) | (5.18) |
| Election FE | NO | YES | YES | YES |
| District FE | NO | NO | NO | YES |
| Observations | 2,839 | 2,181 | 2,181 | 2,181 |
| $R^2$ | 0.015 | 0.380 | 0.465 | 0.545 |

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

is associated with differences between candidates who participate in debates and those who do not. Nevertheless, the coefficient remains positive and statistically significant.

Model 4 further incorporates district fixed effects to account for persistent differences across electoral constituencies. The estimated coefficient on external-threat rhetoric remains positive and statistically significant at 3.07 percentage points. Thus, after accounting for the observed candidate characteristics and fixed effects, candidates who invoke external threats receive, on average, approximately 3.07 percentage points higher vote shares than candidates who do not. The explanatory power of the models also increases substantially, with $R^2$ rising from 0.015 in the baseline specification to 0.545 in the most comprehensive specification.

These findings are consistent with the expectation that external-threat rhetoric may provide electoral advantages. By emphasizing foreign security threats, candidates may increase the salience of national security and encourage voters to evaluate political alternatives on issues associated with partisan reputations for security competence. However, the analysis does not establish whether the observed relationship arises specifically through partisan mobilization or other mechanisms. Nor does the current specification determine whether the association is

stronger among right-wing candidates, as the theoretical argument predicts.

Overall, the results indicate that the strategic invocation of external threats is associated with both candidates' partisan affiliations and their constituency-level electoral environments, while also exhibiting a positive relationship with electoral vote shares. These findings are consistent with the broader argument that external threats can function as strategic political resources during electoral competition, even for candidates seeking offices with limited direct authority over foreign and security policy. Nevertheless, because candidates' rhetorical choices are endogenous to their electoral circumstances, the positive association between external-threat rhetoric and vote share should be interpreted as observational evidence rather than a causal estimate of the electoral effects of such rhetoric.

# Future Direction

This study provides preliminary evidence on the strategic use of external-threat rhetoric during electoral competition and its association with electoral outcomes. Nevertheless, several avenues for future research could further clarify the political motivations underlying such rhetoric and strengthen our understanding of its electoral consequences.

First, future research could examine variation in the content and context of external-threat rhetoric. Although the current analysis identifies whether candidates invoke external threats, it does not systematically distinguish between different foreign adversaries or rhetorical strategies. In particular, candidates may have different incentives to emphasize threats from North Korea and China, given their distinct roles in South Korea's domestic political discourse and partisan divisions. Moreover, external threats may be invoked directly, through explicit references to foreign adversaries and their hostile actions, or indirectly, through ideological accusations, partisan criticism, and broader narratives about national security. Distinguishing these rhetorical strategies would allow a more nuanced examination of how candidates strategically construct external threats. Future research could also examine the specific circumstances under which candidates invoke such threats during electoral debates, including whether they arise in response to opponents' statements or are proactively introduced to redirect political discussion.

Second, expanding the dataset to include candidates participating in by-elections and rerun elections would provide additional variation in electoral contexts. These elections may differ from regularly scheduled legislative and local elections in their levels of political competition, voter participation, and campaign dynamics. Incorporating them would help assess whether the observed patterns of external-threat rhetoric extend beyond regular electoral cycles and whether candidates' incentives to emphasize foreign adversaries vary across different electoral circumstances.

Third, future research could more explicitly account for actual external security threats, particularly military provocations and other hostile actions by North Korea. Although this study focuses on candidates' rhetorical invocation of external threats, such rhetoric may be influenced by changes in the international security environment. Incorporating information on actual security incidents would help distinguish candidates' responses to external events from their strategic emphasis on longstanding threats in the absence of immediate crises. This distinction is particularly important for evaluating whether external-threat rhetoric primarily reflects genuine changes in security conditions or serves as an electoral strategy independent of new international confrontations.

Finally, further research is needed to identify the electoral consequences of external-threat rhetoric more precisely. Although the current findings indicate a positive association between candidates' use of external-threat rhetoric and their electoral vote shares, the observational analysis cannot fully account for the possibility that candidates strategically select such rhetoric based on their anticipated electoral prospects. Incorporating pre-election polling data would provide information on candidates' electoral standings before their rhetorical appeals, helping distinguish preexisting electoral advantages from subsequent changes in voter support. Such data could also clarify whether external-threat rhetoric primarily reinforces support among existing partisan constituencies or persuades voters beyond candidates' traditional support bases. These extensions would strengthen the empirical assessment of how the strategic politicization of external threats shapes electoral competition and its broader implications for democratic accountability and representation.

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