

Refugee Perceptions toward Democratic Citizenship:

A Narrative Analysis of North Koreans

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Abstract

This article examines the informal dimension of political integration for refugees: how, after a lifetime of authoritarianism, do they make sense of their newfound democratic citizenship? I identify the perceptual lenses that refugees use through a narrative study of North Korean refugees in South Korea. Discourse analysis of 31 personal narratives and 20 paired debates on topics about democratic citizenship reveals a surprising phenomenon. For refugees who feel co-national identification with South Koreans, a deeply communal script of duty to the nation—socialized in the authoritarian North—is extended toward South Korea, framing new democratic roles such as voting as a matter of obligation. Those who lack such identification tend to rely on an instrumental approach instead, with implications for divergent trajectories of political integration.

Introduction

In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that twenty refugees are newly displaced due to authoritarian repression or conflict every minute. While most refugees resettle locally, an increasing number are seeking asylum in democracies. Between 2015 and 2016, for instance, asylum applications to democracies such as Germany and the United States more than doubled, in Germany reaching numbers above 722,000.¹

Increasing migration from non-democracies to democracies raises urgent questions about political integration. Much of that debate among policymakers and scholars alike has focused on access to naturalization in host democracies.² Less attention has been paid, however, to the formative step that comes after obtaining formal citizenship. How do refugees, often coming from a lifetime of authoritarian repression, make sense of their newfound democratic rights and responsibilities? For continued political stability, host democracies need these new members to actually fulfill the roles of their legal membership—to vote, pay taxes, engage with and contribute to the larger community as democratic citizens.

Full integration is a multifaceted process that likely takes generations. Like the beginning of any relationship, however, the way that these individuals first approach and understand the roles of democratic citizenship is likely to color their future interactions with the host democracy. In the long-term, then, such initial perceptions could shape refugee trajectories toward successful integration or withdrawal from democratic politics.

Prior scholarship on how ordinary citizens understand democratic citizenship has usefully applied the communitarian versus contractual archetypes from political theory as benchmarks for analysis.³ Yet most of these studies focus on native citizens in advanced democracies. This article extends the approach to an increasingly important stakeholder to democratic stability in light of

global migration: newly naturalized refugees. The aim is to see whether such theoretical frames are used, if at all, and how they are repurposed or rejected by individuals navigating the contours of democratic citizenship for the first time.

I examine the initial brush with democratic citizenship in the context of North Korean refugees adapting to South Korean democracy. This group offers two inferential advantages. First, coming from one of the most closed-off authoritarian regimes means minimal exposure to democratic propaganda from foreign media or humanitarian organizations prior to entry. This offers a cleaner setting than most migration contexts to examine what perceptual lenses refugees themselves bring to democratic citizenship.

Second, the national identity politics of the Korean peninsula offers a rare opportunity to disentangle communitarian and contractual approaches in refugees. The two Koreas have radically different states, but see themselves as part of the same national community, such that North Korean refugees enter South Korea under the premise of putative co-nationality. This means that membership in the host nation predates interactions with the host state. In most other migration contexts, refugees enter a host nation that is different from their origin, such that attachments to a new nation and state develop concurrently, making it nearly impossible to distinguish whether a communitarian lens is not simply the result of satisfactory contractual interactions with the host state. For the purpose of designing effective integration policies, however, there is real value to teasing apart whether fostering identification with the host nation matters in its own right.

To assess the perceptual lens that North Koreans bring to democratic citizenship, I examine how they talk about it in their own words. I collected two types of data: 31 personal narratives and 20 paired debates on statements about the roles of democratic citizenship for a total of 71 observations, both conducted and responded to in the refugees' native Korean language.⁴ The

personal narratives are first analyzed to identify the typology of frames used by refugees and how they are developed over the life course. Then the debate data are used to see how those frames manifest toward specific practices of democratic citizenship: voting, paying taxes, and volunteering. This two-step analysis combines both inductive and deductive approaches to small-N discourse data.

North Korean refugees mix communitarian and contractual elements in surprising ways. Most refugees enter South Korea with a deeply internalized communitarian script, socialized in the North, that emphasizes sacrifice and duty to the Korean nation. For those who strongly identify with South Koreans as co-nationals, this communitarian lens is extended to the South Korean state, framing new democratic roles as a matter of communal duty. Those who feel weak co-national identification tend to rely on a kind of rudimentary contractual lens instead: tit-for-tat evaluations of how the South Korean state treats them loom large in what they believe they owe back as new citizens. At least in the short-term, these frames appear quite sticky, as refugees reason away alternative approaches. Relative strength of co-national identification can often be traced back to a critical juncture in the border crossing process—length of stay in a third country—that widens or narrows the subjective boundary around who belongs to “my” Korean nation. In this way, a physical aspect of border crossing appears to significantly shape the dominant perceptual lens toward democratic citizenship after entry.

Two implications follow for the political integration of refugees moving from authoritarian to democratic contexts more generally. First, the findings recast identification with the host nation—typically seen as the consequence of political integration—as a potentially powerful cause that can foster commitments to a new state. Second, while the transition to democracy for refugees is often seen as the shedding of their authoritarian past, I find that certain aspects of authoritarian

socialization—namely the internalized scripts or behavioral norms that they leave behind—can sometimes lay the perceptual foundations for a fledgling democratic duty.

Approaches to Citizenship and Political Integration

Integration in the fullest sense entails becoming part of “the mainstream of economic, academic, and political life of the country.”⁵ Most refugee studies, however, focus on the most practically necessary dimension of economic integration.⁶ A steadily growing literature also examines the complicated political dimension,⁷ but such studies in the context of North Korean refugees have tended to focus on policies of formal inclusion, such as access to and the process of procuring legal citizenship in different host democracies.⁸

This study builds on prior works that show that for many refugees, including North Koreans, there is a critical informal space between gaining legal citizenship and becoming a full-fledged citizen.⁹ Refugees who are naturalized in their host states are often acclimating to an entirely new set of democratic roles and expectations. It is not simply the act of gaining democratic citizenship, but also how that new citizen-state relationship is understood, that matters for whether and why refugees participate in their democracies. Yet little is known about the perceptual frames refugees apply, where they come from, and how they might relate to trajectories of political integration.

Political theory offers a useful starting point for conceptualizing different approaches to democratic citizenship. The contractual versus communitarian ideals of citizenship have long animated philosophical debate within liberal democratic theory. Of course empirically, citizens almost never sort neatly into such dichotomies, and few contemporary theorists would agree with

all of the claims attached to either side. As such, I take the two frameworks not as mutually exclusive or even normative categories, but rather, useful benchmarks for analytical structure.

The two approaches fundamentally diverge on how they see the citizen as an individual. The contractual approach sees the individual as an autonomous and rational being, such that a fair society is one that allows all members to pursue their own interests freely and equally. Naturally, there is strong emphasis on rights and what Isaiah Berlin calls “negative freedoms”—the freedom not to be interfered.¹⁰ In this framework, political legitimacy rests on the Lockean “consent of the governed” or the Rawlsian notion of a “social contract”, where citizens are willing to contribute to the state in so far as it provides what Max Weber calls procedural rationality: the “‘conditions’ or means’ for the successful attainment of the actor’s own rationally chosen ends.”¹¹

In contrast, the communitarian approach sees the individual as part and product of community. A society is seen as more than a collection of autonomous individuals, but a community of people tied together by special bonds based on shared myths of origin, history, or values.¹² Obligations to community are therefore central to this framework, and the citizen-state relationship “has much to do with [...] identities.”¹³

Applied to migration, the different frameworks of citizenship lead to differing visions for what successful integration should look like. In the contractual framework, the goal is to equip refugees with the resources and skills to participate as equals, and there is great emphasis on building a fair and trusting give-and-take relationship with the host state. In the communitarian framework, shared identity is seen as a key part of political integration. Thus, successful integration is where refugees see themselves as part of the new host community and therefore feel an obligation to contribute politically.

If integration regimes reflect deep-seated understandings of citizenship,¹⁴ then host democracies tend to lean contractual. Germany, for example, requires asylum grantees to take a “pre-integration course” that includes training for German language and society, and upon entry, offers further job assistance for youth.¹⁵ Similarly in South Korea, North Korean refugees receive an aid package for living, housing, and medical costs and longer-term assistance for employment and education.¹⁶ This “workfare” approach to North Korean refugees focuses on “fostering healthy democratic citizens by establishing the foundation for self-reliance and a self-supporting capacity”.¹⁷

How well does the contractual approach of most integration policies reflect the political reality of refugees? Before moving to the findings, I provide the empirical context around North Korean refugees and explain why, despite common perceptions of North Korea as an exception even among authoritarian regimes, this group makes for a strong analytical case.

Empirical Context: North Korean Refugees

More than 30,000 North Korean refugees currently reside in South Korea. For most of them, South Korea is their first direct exposure to democracy. Refugees usually defect by crossing the northern border into China, and spend anywhere from several months to years residing in countries such as China, Mongolia, Thailand, or Cambodia before brokering their entry into South Korea. After being scrutinized by the National Intelligence Service for espionage or other crimes, cleared refugees then spend the requisite three months at *Hanawon*, the government rehabilitation center, before beginning their lives as newly naturalized citizens.

North Korea is a peculiar regime. It is one of the most isolated and brutally oppressive authoritarian states in the world, where external information is obsessively embargoed, travel

freedoms are restricted for ordinary citizens, and market trade is insular. It is also the only surviving authoritarian regime that has an adjacent sister democracy with which it shares nationalist claims. For such reasons, the hermit kingdom is often seen as a category in its own.

The individuals who exit the regime, however, are not unlike refugees elsewhere in terms of the challenges they face in integration. Many of the tools of repression used by North Korea, which directly or indirectly drive most refugees to flee, are part of a general repertoire of authoritarian control.¹⁸ And the post-traumatic stress experienced by many North Korean refugees, while sometimes exceptionally acute, is not different in kind to the experiences of refugees escaping from other repressive regimes.¹⁹

Moreover, the usual reasons for North Korean exceptionalism serve as inferential advantage for this study. First, the closed-off nature of the regime offers a more organic window into how refugees make sense of democracy after authoritarianism. Even during the limbo period post-defection but pre-entry into South Korea, most North Korean refugees live in seclusion since China does not recognize their refugee status and repatriates them. This means that North Korean refugees have far fewer opportunities for sustained interaction with international aid organizations that are active in other conflict areas, through which they may receive explicit or implicit democratic propaganda.²⁰ Exposure to such information itself is not problematic, and in some cases may even help eventual integration. But for inference, minimal exposure to such externally crafted messages maximizes clarity around the perceptual frames that refugees themselves bring to democratic citizenship.

This is not to say that North Korean refugees have no democratic exposure prior to entry into South Korea. Even North Korean authoritarianism embeds elements of “democratic practice”—activities that mirror democratic rituals, at least in form. For instance, like many hybrid

authoritarian regimes,²¹ North Korea holds national elections in which citizens cast a consensus ballot (*chanseongtupyō*). There is no formal taxation, but the state regularly calls for “loyalty offerings”—in-kind contributions to the state—and bribery to local cadres is rampant.²² The tolerated growth of grey markets in response to the 1990s famine also fostered illicit voluntary associations, in which women—who also comprise the majority of refugees—are particularly active.²³ Such experiences of democratic practice are part of the authoritarian priors that North Korean refugees bring to democracy. To the extent that subjects bring up such references in the narrative interviews, I pay special attention to how they connect to perceptions of democratic citizenship in the South.

The second advantage of North Korean refugees is that the unique identity politics of the Korean peninsula offers a rare opportunity to robustly assess both communitarian and contractual frames. Despite radically different governments, both states still claim the people on either side as belonging to a singular Korean national community tied by bloodline—one *minjok*.²⁴ This belief largely owes to the “racialization” of Korean national identity as a survival response to Japanese colonialism, which predated the division: even if not politically autonomous, the Korean nation would remain unbroken as a blood-based ethnic community.

North Korean refugees therefore enter South Korea with putatively the same national identity—one that they were socialized into before any exposure to democracy. This setup allows me to better trace the effects of shared national identity, independently from contractual experiences with the host government. In nearly every other case, refugees enter a host democracy of a different national community than their origin. Thus, attachments to a new nation and interactions with a new state build concurrently. This endogeneity makes it difficult to know whether a communitarian lens is real or simply reflective of satisfactory treatment by the host state.

Of course, over the long term, it is likely that contractual experiences with the South Korean state feed back into the national identification of North Koreans, such that the inferential leverage is strongest among recent refugees. The narrative sample therefore only includes refugees with less than two years of residence in South Korea.²⁵

North and South Koreans share national unity in principle, but in practice, there are subtle undercurrents that open up room for subjectivity around national boundaries. For instance, North Korean textbooks define South Koreans as part of *minjok*, but as a degenerate or racially contaminated subgroup corrupted by foreign influence. In one textbook parable, for example, impoverished South Korean children beg North Koreans to “take us to North Korea with you.”²⁶ For many North Koreans, South Koreans are therefore a nationally ambiguous group: objectively, they are members of the same in-group, but subjectively, there is ample room for feelings of difference to emerge. As the data show, the latter matters critically: whether North Korean refugees see South Koreans as a national “us” or “them” significantly shapes how they approach democratic citizenship.

Data and Method

How do North Koreans make sense of their newfound democratic citizenship? In order to identify refugees’ deeply embedded, often subconscious worldviews, I analyze how they choose to tell their personal histories in their own words.²⁷ Participants for the 31 personal narrative interviews and 20 paired debates were recruited in 2013, using snowball sampling through refugee job training centers in Seoul and satellite cities. The total 71 person sample included 58 women and 13 men between the ages of 22 and 56. The narrative interviews took between two to five hours, sometimes across multiple days to accommodate refugees’ work schedules, whereas the

debates typically lasted about an hour and a half. All subjects received \$50 for their time and vocal consent was obtained before recording. To ensure the privacy and safety of participants, interviews were conducted in places with no stationary audience, such as subway platforms, open parks, closed cars, and refugee apartments.

Personal narratives are stories that individuals tell about their own lives. Because subjects are free to define characters and connect events in ways that make most sense to them, such storytelling is richly informative of how subjects see the world around them—their sense of right or wrong, agency and blame, and cause and effect. They reveal “the cultural frameworks in which individuals interpret their social situations, imagine themselves in other situations, and make choices about who they want to be and how to behave.”²⁸ I told subjects that I was interested in their life story of how they ended up in South Korea, and asked them to describe in free form their daily life and memorable events from three periods: pre-defection in North Korea, during defection, and post-entry into South Korea.

In contrast, the debate data are more structured and specific. After a basic set of questions on demographics and defection details, refugee pairs were given specific statements about democratic citizenship to debate. Since most refugees were unfamiliar with the concept of political debate (*to-lon*), they were told to pick a side that was closest to their personal opinion (as opposed to what they thought one should do) and explain—using reasons, examples, or experiences—why they agree or disagree with their partner. The list of topics included questions such as “do you think voting is a matter of duty or choice?” or “how important is paying taxes to being a good citizen?” The full protocol is in Appendix 1.

Debates are inherently about justifications or rationalizations. The goal was to see whether refugees actually draw upon the perceptual frameworks identified in the narratives to think about

specific aspects of democratic citizenship. Since justifications will tend to be sharper in the face of opposing opinion, every effort was made to pair a politically “active” refugee—one who either voted in the most recent national election and/or regularly attends a voluntary association, such as church—with a “passive” refugee. The logic was that such pairing would maximize the potential to observe different applications of frames. Aside from level of political activity, refugee pairs were matched on gender and length of residence,²⁹ and drawn from pre-existing networks of family, friends, or co-workers.³⁰ While this was primarily a function of snowball sampling, it also created an ideal debate environment where subjects were comfortable openly disagreeing with each other.

The data were analyzed in two steps. First, the personal narratives were analyzed inductively for model building: to identify the typology of perceptual frames refugees use and how they are developed over the life course. Following general guidelines for within- and cross-case qualitative analysis,³¹ I coded the transcripts by recurring schema to create a “data map” for each narrative, shown in Appendix 2, and further condensed them into a matrix display to identify thematic progressions across narratives.

Once the typologies were identified, they were tested out-of-sample on the debate group to see how the frames manifest toward three roles of the democratic citizen: voting, paying taxes, and volunteering. Paying taxes is not uniquely democratic, but it is a significant part of adapting to democratic citizenship for North Koreans, who did not experience formal taxation in the North. The deductive aim in this second step is to see if the frames serve as consistent logical frameworks for understanding different aspects of democratic citizenship, rather than being an epiphenomenal response to specific roles.

Findings

Model building: Typology and triggers of frames

To navigate the uncertainty of entering democracy, many North Koreans resort to familiar political frames at their disposal. Two factors emerge as significant in shaping the dominant frame. “Strength of co-national identification” refers to how much North Korean refugees actually feel national unity with South Koreans. “Evaluation of state treatment” encompasses a summary attitude toward specific cues or policies that refugees receive in the resettlement process, such as satisfaction with the aid package, experience at *Hanawon*, and quality of support afterwards.

Between the two, co-national identification is the primary driver. That is, weak identification gives way for state evaluations to matter, but for those with strong identification, evaluations—whether positive or negative—appear to make little difference in the dominant frame. Similar to motivated reasoning, but going beyond simple confirmation or disconfirmation bias of facts, such subjects would actively “frame out” poor evaluations of the state by couching it in moral terms.³² As the excerpt below illustrates, a subject with strong identification reacts to a policy change that reduced the refugee aid package by rendering dissatisfaction with it as morally impermissible and therefore irrelevant to how he thinks about his roles as a citizen:

“There are people here living in boxes in the street, and we were given a house. It is our duty to have children, educate them, and improve ourselves. It is not a matter of satisfied or not satisfied” (Male, 47).

Table 1 shows the typology of frames toward democratic citizenship identified from the narratives. Each quadrant is a distinct worldview, not a type of individual. Most subjects exhibited some weighted mix of more than one quadrant. *Communitarian acceptance* describes most refugees who feel strong co-national identification with South Koreans. That shared identity is

used, almost as a subconscious heuristic, to gauge how they should behave in the new political environment. Because South Koreans are seen as “my” national people, and the South Korean state as an extension of that community, contributing to its democracy is seen as intimately tied to being Korean itself. Thus, this communitarian lens frames new democratic roles as a matter of national obligation, seeding a fledgling sense of democratic duty to fulfill them, as thin as it may be.³³

Table 1. Typology of perceptual frames toward democratic citizenship

		Strength of co-national identification	
		Strong	Weak
Evaluation of state treatment	Positive	Communitarian acceptance	Contractual acceptance
	Negative	Communitarian acceptance	Contractual rejection

Surprisingly, this communal approach to democratic citizenship appears to be largely based on a nationalist “script” socialized from the authoritarian North. Across both *juche* and competing racial accounts of North Korean ideology, the idea of the nation as a singular body or family is central.³⁴ The Kim dynasty is the “mother” and the people the “children”: the two are symbiotically tied through deep and mutual obligation. Subjects were mostly unaware about the specifics of ideology, but most had internalized the strongly communal, ethno-nationalist script that derives from such principles: “[North Korea] will say things like, the nation is the warm mother’s bosom that birthed you, it is your mother, your captain. So those feelings are still there” (Male, 52). Such references to family or one body were common when subjects spoke about politics.

For North Koreans who see South Koreans as part of that national body, the communal script is quite naturally extended to the South Korean state, even though it is a democracy. I illustrate this fluidity through a particular subject, whose full data map is in Appendix 2. The subject first uses the family-body schema to describe life in the North: “The leader is supposed to be like the center of the family, but the family was broken.” It appears again as she talks about her life in China after defection and the intense longing she felt for “my” people: “There is a certain temperament (*jungsuh*) that defines Koreans, almost like a scent...we are one by blood.” Ultimately, the singular body metaphor undergirds her belief that “this country [South Korea] is my country” and extends the communal script—internalized under authoritarianism—toward her new democratic citizenship: “A state is made up of all the individual families and people. So when I think about that, when [South Korea] is in danger, it’s like bleeding from one body.” Another subject with a similar thematic progression puts it explicitly:

“If a child didn’t think of his mother as his ‘mother,’ then he wouldn’t follow her. It’s the same thing. Honestly, North Korea does a good job with this. They always say, the country is the mother. It’s just that my country has changed [to South Korea].” (Male, 42)

Sociologists argue that cultural scripts are realized in the vocabularies individuals use to explain or describe their actions. Such scripts can serve as a “‘tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.”³⁵ For North Korean refugees who see South Koreans as part of the national “we,” a deeply communitarian nationalist script gained from the North ironically serves as that tool for navigating the new, democratic polity in the South.

For refugees who feel only weak co-national identification, that communitarian script does not extend very well to South Korea. These individuals therefore fall back on what can be

described as a bare-bones contractual approach. In principle, the contractual model of citizenship assumes a foundational level of trust in the state, which forms the root of consent. North Korean refugees, however, lack that kind of base trust as they are experiencing South Korean democracy for the first time. Thus, they exhibit what is akin to a contractual lens in the absence of political priors, where specific evaluations of the state are aggregated in real time and political participation is seen in a tit-for-tat manner.

Within this contractual lens, refugees who are generally satisfied with state treatment exhibit a *contractual acceptance* frame. As new citizens, they are willing contribute, but for instrumental reasons—either to repay the state or continue the benefits they receive from it: “South Korea is so prosperous. I want it to stay that way. Without the state, there is no citizen. I came here to try to have a good life, so I want South Korea to be as successful as it can be” (Male, 22). But for most others with weak co-national identification, feelings of difference from South Koreans tend to negatively bias their evaluations of state treatment, resulting in a predominantly *contractual rejection* frame. These individuals tend to see the demands of their new citizenship as a burden, leading to reluctant obedience or non-compliance. One subject said “it is hard to understand the reason” for some of the new roles, but that “whether you like it or not, that is what you do to live here” (Female, 36). Another subject said that while she enjoys her new freedoms, “the responsibility that comes with that gives me a lot of mental stress. All the electricity bills, water bills, taxes you have to pay...why do I have to pay when I didn’t eat it or I only used the elevator once” (Female, 29)?³⁶

What differentiates refugees who feel strong versus weak co-national identification, the key lever? I identified a recurring critical juncture through the matrix analysis of the narratives: the length of third country stay—usually in China—before entry into South Korea. Because of the

threat of repatriation and ineligibility for formal identification, North Koreans who end up staying in China for a long time typically resort to exploitative jobs or are sold off in marriage to rural families. The narratives reveal that such long-term arrangements expose refugees to significant discrimination and abuse based on their North Korean identity. Stories about Chinese employers refusing to pay knowing there was no recourse, or Chinese mothers-in-law rebuking them for not knowing the customs, were quite common among refugees who had longer stays of several years. Such stories were much less common, and less elaborated on as a formative experience, among refugees with shorter stays of several months. After entry into South Korea, the former group often used family and body imagery to describe South Koreans, whereas the latter group tended to harp on specific—usually negative—interactions with South Koreans.

The divergent pattern can be explained through social theories of national boundary-making.³⁷ Coming from an enclosed, nationally homogeneous regime, North Korean refugees first experience national identity as a contested social category after defection. For those with longer stays in China, that initial push comes from a national out-group. This strengthens identification with the putative national in-group, leading them to draw an inclusive national boundary around South Koreans based on, as one refugee put it, “*hyeolsaek*” (literally blood color). In contrast, refugees with relatively efficient entry into South Korea experience their first sustained discrimination from the putative national in-group. That sense of betrayal appears to affirm the subtle within-group hierarchy they were taught in the North and in some, incites a “black sheep effect,” where deviant in-group members—the South Koreans—are judged more harshly than out-group members.³⁸ Thus, these refugees end up drawing a narrower national boundary that excludes South Koreans from “my” people:

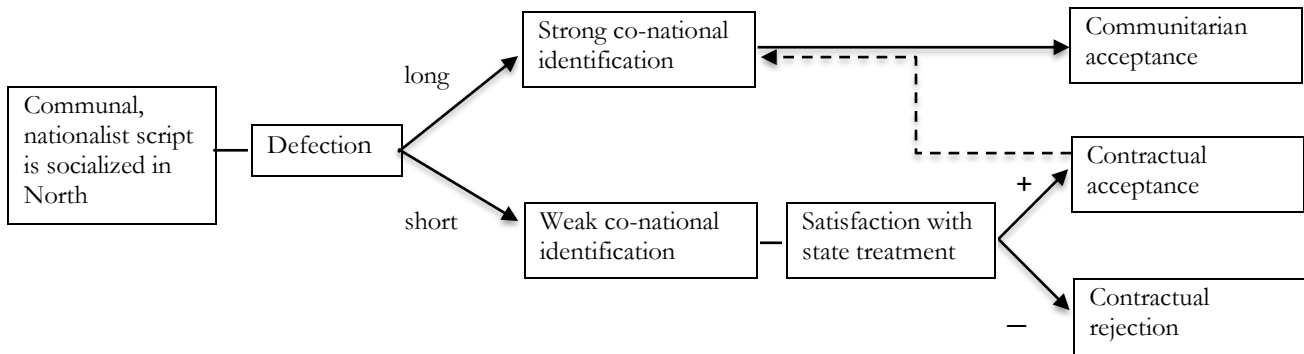
“It is almost harder to adapt here than it is in a foreign country. In North Korea, we struggled a lot economically, but we never had this human-to-human kind of discrimination. I think that kind of treatment [from South Koreans] makes many defectors feel dejected and give up. I can understand why some even go back.” (Female, 26, 8 months in China and Thailand)

Length of third country stay—a largely uncontrollable, physical aspect of defection—therefore significantly shapes the perceptual lens toward democratic citizenship after entry. North Koreans of higher class may be able to afford “better” brokers, but the minimal two-step brokerage necessary to reach South Korea through China means that there are multiple points of miscommunication, betrayal, or luck that effectively make the length of stay unpredictable, even for refugees who escaped together. For instance, one subject said that not long after arranging their leave from China, her friend became unexpectedly pregnant by her new Chinese husband and opted to stay behind for the child. Thus, length of third country stay is highly unlikely to be something that is selectable by North Koreans of particular national leaning, class, or underlying penchant for democracy.

Figure 1 shows the full model of how personal histories and situational triggers interact to produce different perceptual approaches to democratic citizenship. In an unexpected way, the physical path of defection—through how it widens or narrows the subjective boundary around “my” nation—sets North Korean refugees onto different perceptual paths. While the frames appear to be self-reinforcing in the short run, there was evidence for potential feedback between them in the long run. Specifically, it appeared that sustained *contractual acceptance*—by providing an alternative means of belonging not initially based on strong co-national identification—could eventually lead to *communitarian acceptance*. As one subject tellingly said: “I think I am part of

this community. I go to work, I pay taxes, and I do all the things that other South Koreans do. So I feel that I am South Korean, at least a little” (Female, 37).

Figure 1. Model of perceptual approaches to democratic citizenship among North Korean refugees



Model testing: Manifestations toward Democratic Roles

Do the identified perceptual frames actually matter for how refugees think about specific roles of democratic citizenship? In what forms do they manifest? To answer such questions, I turn to the debate data on voting, paying taxes, and volunteering. Based on Figure 1, I compare debate participants with long versus short third country stays—the observable juncture that should predict different frames. To assess framing effects, I treat the debates as discourse data and code for Gamson and Modigliani’s five framing devices.³⁹

Framing effects were most pronounced for voting, where participants debated the following statement: “Do you think voting is a matter of duty or choice?” Table 2 shows that subjects with longer defections indeed framed voting in starkly communitarian terms and as a duty. They described voting as a special marker for being Korean—“If I don’t vote, it makes me feel that I am not Korean”—and justified this by drawing comparisons to Chinese laborers in South

Korea who cannot vote. Subjects focused on the communal significance of voting—“I did something that was helpful and good for the country”—regardless of who actually won. In contrast, subjects with shorter stays framed voting in overwhelmingly instrumental terms, specifically as a way to “do something to help *saeteomins*.⁴⁰” There was greater emphasis on freedom of choice in voting and the actual result of which candidate wins.

Table 2. Refugee perceptions of voting

“Do you think voting is a duty or choice?”	
Communitarian frame	Contractual frame
<p>“I think voting is a duty. If I don’t vote, it makes me feel that I am not Korean. A Chinese laborer here cannot vote even if he wants to because he is not eligible. I have eligibility, so I feel that I have the duty to express my opinion, regardless of whether the outcome goes favorably or not. Actually, I think I would feel unjust or sad if I do not. If I do not, then am I not a Korean?” (Female, 39)</p> <p>“I voted because as a proud citizen of South Korea, I can now vote. Whether or not my candidate gets elected, I did something that was helpful and good for the country, so I think I should vote.” (Female, 56)</p> <p>“I know voting is a choice and not required, but I feel that there is some pride as a Korean—a kind of feeling part of the Korean citizenry—that comes from being part of the election. It is the right thing.” (Male, 52)</p>	<p>“I was never really interested in politics, but I voted for Park Geun-hye because her father had relations with North Korea. I thought she would do something to help <i>saeteomins</i>. So I voted to help the defector community.” (Female, 36)</p> <p>“I vote only to improve relations with North Korea and move toward reunification. I said I still feel like North Koreans are my real people, so that is the only way I think about voting, as a way to help them.” (Female, 29)</p> <p>“Voting is a choice. You are free to do what you want. I wanted to vote this past election because I really thought Park Geun-hye would be a good leader.” (Female, 35)</p>

For paying taxes, framing effects were most distinct in the justifications subjects gave for why one should pay. Since paying taxes is a legal obligation, participants debated the question:

“How important is paying honest taxes to being a good citizen?” As shown in Table 3, those with longer defections tended to see taxes as a form of communal sustenance. For example, one subject compared federal taxes to a neighborhood credit association. Taxes were seen as something owed on a “person to person” level, “to help others a little, too.” In fact, there was little mention of the state itself. In contrast, the need to support the state as a means of self-preservation loomed large in the way subjects with short defections talked about taxes. In their descriptions, a clear causal chain was evident, wherein citizens pay taxes to the state, so that the state can help them in return. Often, subjects explicated the conditionality of this relationship: “. . .if [the state] is not good at that and wasteful, then I would never pay them.”

Table 3. Refugee perceptions of paying taxes

“How important is paying honest taxes to being a good citizen?”	
Communitarian frame	Contractual frame
“Everything I received has come from the taxes others have paid, even if it comes through the state. So person to person, I believe that when I can, I will always pay my taxes.” (Male, 49)	“Tax helps the country function. And in reality, a lot of tax money goes to supporting defectors and keeping us alive. So I definitely think you should pay.” (Female, 31)
“If you have had enough and lived a good life, then I think it’s our duty to pay taxes to help others a little, too.” (Female, 50)	“We should pay what we owe to the state. The taxes are what help the state function and help its citizens. But if it is not good at that and wasteful, then I would never pay them.” (Female, 29)
“There must be a reason why the country has decided a certain amount of tax for myself. I think you should always pay. Even when we collect money for the neighborhood, that helps pay for the cleaner, the patrol—all these people that we need for the neighborhood.” (Female, 41)	“Right now, just starting out again, taxes are honestly burdensome. In North Korea, we don’t have taxes, and in China, I didn’t have an identity so I didn’t pay anything. So the concept is foreign to me.” (Female, 35)

The third role—volunteering to help the state—is particularly important for democracies, which lack the coercive capacity of authoritarian states. Participants debated the following scenario: “If the South Korean state were in crisis, would you volunteer to help it?” Most said that they would, but framing effects emerged in their reasons. As Table 4 shows, subjects with long defections tended to cite communitarian reasons, such as “you have to hold that hand because that is your home,” and framed the crisis itself as a communal one—“the problem of everyone in that state” and “our people.” But this also meant that such willingness was conditional on shared identity. When asked by her partner if she would feel the same toward a different host state, such as the United States, one subject replied that “I just wouldn’t have that same feeling.” In contrast, subjects with short defections focused on functional dependency with the state: “If there is no state, then there is nowhere for me to live.” Because this contractual frame is not dependent on identity, their willingness to volunteer appeared to be more principled: “Even if I were a citizen of a different country, I should.”

Table 4. Refugee perceptions of volunteering

“If the South Korean state were in crisis, would you volunteer to help it?”	
Communitarian frame	Contractual frame
“Of course you need to help—the state is holding out its hand for help. You have a duty to hold that hand because that is your home. It is not just the problem of that one area, it is the problem of everyone in that state.” (Male, 52)	“I would give a little, but I have to live too. If there is no state, then there is nowhere for me to live. The state needs to be strong for us people to live well.” (Female, 37)
“Of course I would help. That is our people who are suffering.” (Female, 44)	“I would help, because without a state, there is no me. Even if I were a citizen of a different country, I should.” (Female, 45)
“I would help. It has something to do with a sense of them being my people...[if it were a different country] honestly, I don’t think I	“I would give some, out of my conscience. It’s not really because everyone else is doing it, but because I live here and the country is

would give anything. I know that I shouldn't think this way, especially if the country has given me housing and food just as South Korea did. I just wouldn't have that same feeling." (Female, 50)

in trouble. But not all of it, since I have to live, too. So maybe half." (Female, 28)

The ways in which the perceptual frames manifest toward specific democratic roles reveal normative trade-offs for liberal democracy. While the communitarian frame proved to be more internally consistent across the three roles, it also carries certain drawbacks: it sometimes leads to an uncritical (toward voting and taxes) and insular (toward volunteering) view of democratic citizenship. The contractual frame was more varied in how it manifested toward different citizen roles, but an instrumental view of citizenship served as the common basis. Such a lens appears to yield a more evaluative (toward voting and taxes) and universally principled (toward volunteering) approach to democratic citizenship. Yet it also implies a more conditional commitment, where the host state must continuously provide in order to sustain compliance.

Stable democracies require a balanced mix of attitudes toward democratic citizenship.⁴¹ What the analyses reveal, however, is that most integration policies fail to reflect or accommodate the diversity of perceptual approaches that refugees actually use to adapt. In particular, few formal policies leverage the communitarian approach. Aside from the historical re-education about the Korean division at *Hanawon*, North Korean refugees are largely on their own to navigate their national belonging. A powerful pathway to kickstarting democratic duty therefore remains largely at the whims of serendipitous interactions, community volunteers, or non-government organizations. The lack of formal effort to foster national belonging among refugees is certainly not unique to South Korea, and is reflective of a general shift toward civic integration regimes that

prioritize providing refugees with resources and social skills.⁴² The findings here suggest that such trends likely come at the cost of increasingly instrumental attitudes toward democratic citizenship.

Conclusion

For many refugees, naturalization into a host democracy marks the start of a different kind of uncertainty: navigating an entirely new, democratic political system after authoritarianism. One of the first steps in this process is making sense of new democratic roles and responsibilities. This article sheds light on that formative phase of political integration through the case of North Korean refugees in South Korea.

I found that North Korean refugees navigate this uncertainty by mixing communitarian and contractual frames in sensible yet surprising ways, based on what cultural scripts they possess for use. For those with strong co-national identification with South Koreans, a deeply communal and nationalist script socialized from the authoritarian North is quite seamlessly applied to the democratic South and its citizen expectations. In contrast, those who lack such identification tend to fall back on a rudimentary contractual approach, evaluating tit-for-tat how the new state treats them. To which dominant frame they gravitate has implications for why North Korean refugees decide to vote, pay taxes, and volunteer as democratic citizens and the conditions under which they will do so.

How applicable are the findings to cases of refugee integration more generally? Unlike North Koreans in South Korea, most refugees enter a host democracy of a different nation than their origin. Without even the putative assumption of co-nationality, is the communitarian pathway essentially blocked for such refugees? Does a co-national premise essentially grant host democracies more buffer against unsatisfactory or inadequate resettlement policies? The most

empirically rigorous way to answer these questions, which future work should pursue, is to replicate the present study to North Koreans resettled outside of South Korea, such as in the United States or Britain—an extension that holds as much of the migration context constant except for the co-national premise.

What the South Korean case demonstrates, however, is that even in the rare migration context of putative co-nationality, how to mobilize that shared “ethnic capital”⁴³ in support of integration is not at all straightforward. In fact, for some subjects, the expectation of national unity backfired, inciting a “black sheep” rejection of South Koreans and blocking a communitarian lens. Sense of identification with the host nation is subjective, not structural, and therefore never a given, whether in migration contexts with or without co-national cues. Thus, the dynamics of national belonging and its link to perceptions of democratic citizenship uncovered in the South Korean case highlight an issue that is shared by, and applicable to, most other host democracies.

Two general implications then follow. The first is that in most host democracies, there are real democratic payoffs to investing in national inclusion policies toward refugees. A significant finding from this study is that national identification with the host state is as much of a cause as it is a consequence of successful political integration. The communitarian lens that results from co-national identification with the host community yields the beginnings of a democratic duty that requires less political upkeep. While there is yet a clear consensus on how to best foster such belonging, this study highlights the experience of border crossing as a pivotal lever. For many North Korean refugees, the physical pathway of defection—specifically the duration of third country stay—served as a window for national reconstruction, where origin identity was contested and re-negotiated in unexpected ways.⁴⁴ Parallel situational triggers for refugees elsewhere might

include their experiences in refugee camps, the wait time for asylum decisions, and the requirements and rituals for naturalization—all useful starting points for policies on integration.

A second implication is that certain aspects of authoritarian socialization can actually help, not hinder, the democratic integration of refugees. Prior work on legacies of authoritarianism have focused on how institutional or attitudinal shadows dampen civic engagement.⁴⁵ This study highlights a different aspect of authoritarian socialization: the cultural scripts they leave behind on how to behave toward the political collective. Perhaps the most remarkable finding from this study is the ease with which many North Korean refugees repurpose the communal script from North Korea toward a new, democratic state based on the perception of shared identity. Of course, the ethno-nationalist ideology underlying that script is unique to the North Korean regime, but the communal norms of behavior it embeds into everyday life is a common tool of legitimatization in many other authoritarian states as well. To the extent that host democracies can re-contextualize such cultural scripts, this behavioral legacy of authoritarianism can sometimes seed the beginnings of a fledgling democratic duty.

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¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Global Trends in Forced Displacement 2016.”

² See, for instance, the UNHCR’s #IBelong campaign to eradicate statelessness of refugees by 2024 and various policy efforts to facilitate naturalization in more host states.

³ Pamela Johnston Conover, Ivor M. Crewe, and Donald D. Searing, “The Nature of Citizenship in the United States and Great Britain: Empirical Comments on Theoretical Themes,” *Journal of Politics*, 53 (August 1999), 800-832; Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, “Conceptualizations of Good Citizenship and Political Participation,” *Political Behavior*, 15 (December 1993), 355-380.

⁴ Qualitative data collected in the subject’s native language is always ideal, but in this case critical to the analysis. Narrative and discourse analysis relies on identifying rhetorical patterns, schema, and cues, such as the use of analogy, imagery, and normative language. Such subtleties can be lost when relying on interpreters or having subjects speak in a non-fluent language.

⁵ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.

⁶ For an example of the dominant approach to refugee integration, see Kirk Bansak, Jeremy Ferwerda, Jens Hainmueller, Andrea Dillon, Dominik Hangartner, and Duncan Lawrence, “Improving Refugee Integration through Data-driven Algorithmic Assignment,” *Science*, 359 (January 2018), 325-329.

⁷ These include the works of Jurgen Habermas, “Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe,” in Bryan S. Turner and Peter Hamilton, eds., *Citizenship: Critical Concepts, Volume II* (London: Routledge, 1992); Christian Joppke, “Beyond National Models: Civic Integration Policies for Immigrants in Western Europe,” *West European Politics*,

30 (January 2007), 1-22; Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006).

⁸ Andrei Lankov, “North Korean Refugees in Northeast China,” *Asian Survey*, 44 (November/December 2004), 856-873; Nora Hui-Jung Kim, “Naturalizing Korean Ethnicity and Making ‘Ethnic’ Difference: Comparison of North Korean Settlement and Foreign Bride Incorporation Policies in South Korea,” *Asian Ethnicity*, 17 (February 2016), 185-198; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Human Rights or Citizen Rights? Explaining Global Policies toward North Korean Refugee Resettlement,” unpublished manuscript, 2018.

⁹ Bloemraad; Hae Yeon Choo, “Gendered Modernity and Ethnicized Citizenship: North Korean Settlers in Contemporary South Korea,” *Gender and Society*, 20 (October 2006), 576-604; Aram Hur, “Adapting to Democracy: Identity and the Political Development of North Korean Defectors,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 18 (January 2018), 97-115.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in Ricardo Blaug and John Schwarzmantel, eds., *Democracy: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

¹¹ Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of World Religions,” in Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 15; see also John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹² See Michael Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” *Political Theory*, 12 (January 1984), 81-96; Bernard Yack, *Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); David Miller, “The Ethical Significance of Nationality,” *Ethics*, 98 (July 1998), 647-662.

¹³ Conover, Crewe, and Searing, p. 802.

¹⁴ For instance, see Sara Wallace Goodman, “Fortifying Citizenship: Policy Strategies for Civic Integration in Western Europe,” *World Politics*, 64 (October 2012), 659-698; Heather L. Johnson, *Borders, Asylum and Global Non-citizenship: The Other Side of the Fence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, April 2018, Country chapter: Germany.

¹⁶ From the Republic of Korea’s Ministry of Unification, “White Paper on Korean Unification,” 2018. It is important to note, however, that such policies only extend to North Koreans, not all refugees. This is because the Constitution, Article III, defines the territory as “the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands” and effectively claims all inhabitants, in both North and South, as its citizens.

¹⁷ Cited from Seo Yeon Park, “Street-level bureaucracy and depoliticized North Korean subjectivity in the service provision of Hana Center,” *Asian Ethnicity*, 17 (February 2016), 199-213.

¹⁸ David Kang, “Rethinking North Korea,” *Asian Survey*, 35 (March 1995), 253-267; Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security*, 35 (July 2010), 44-74.

¹⁹ Derrick Silove, “The Psychosocial Effects of Torture, Mass Human Rights Violations, and Refugee Trauma: Toward an Integrated Conceptual Framework,” *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 187 (April 1999), 200-207.

²⁰ There is some descriptive evidence that exposure to foreign media and communications in North Korea, while still minimal, is on the rise. For instance, see Jieun Baek, *North Korea’s Hidden Revolution: How the Information Underground is Transforming a Closed Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). However, that exposure is rarely political or pro-democratic

propaganda, but rather, easily understood stories about individual freedom—usually in the form of Korean soap operas—or personal communications between separated families or friends across the border.

²¹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²² Young-ja Park, “Informal Political System in North Korea: Systematic Corruption of ‘Power-Wealth Symbiosis,’” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, 24 (April 2015), 123-156.

²³ Kyungja Jung and Bronwen Dalton, “Rhetoric versus Reality for the Women of North Korea: Mothers of the Revolutionk,” *Asian Survey*, 46 (October 2006), 741-760; Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, “Gender in Transition: The Case of North Korea,” *World Development*, 41 (January 2013), 51-66.

²⁴ See Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003); Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Length of residence includes the three-month mandatory stay at *Hanawon*, such that the period of regular life in South Korea—after the initial period of adjustment—is closer to a year.

²⁶ Dong-bae Lee, “Portrayals of Non-North Koreans in North Korea Textbooks and the Formation of National Identity,” *Asian Studies Review*, 34 (September 2010), 365; see also Dennis Hart, “Creating the National Other: Opposing Images of Nationalism in South and North Korean Education,” *Korean Studies*, 23 (1999), 68-93; Bryan Reynolds Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2011).

²⁷ For a similar approach in North Korean refugee studies, see Sandra Fahy, *Marching through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

²⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to be a Better Nation Fall Short* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 59; see also Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, “Narrative in Political Science,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1 (June 1998), 315-331; Joseph Gone, Peggy Miller, and Julian Rappaport, “Conceptual Self as Normatively Oriented: The Suitability of Past Personal Narrative for the Study of Cultural Identity,” *Culture and Society*, 5 (December 1999), 371-398.

²⁹ All of the pairs were women, except for two male pairs. Length of residence was matched by short (two years, 9 pairs), medium (between two and five years, 8 pairs), and long (more than five years, 3 pairs).

³⁰ Refugees’ social networks were surprisingly heterogeneous in terms of level of sociopolitical engagement. Once an “active” refugee was identified, it was relatively easy to find a “passive” pairing from his or her personal network. At maximum, there was a two degree separation.

³¹ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd Edition (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994).

³² Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 50 (July 2006), 755-769; Pamela J. Conover, “The Influence of Group Identifications on Political Perception and Evaluation,” *The Journal of Politics*, 46 (August 1984), 760-785.

³³ The kind of democratic duty observed here is “thin” in the sense that it is more a function of duty to the nation, rather than a commitment to the principles and values of democracy *per se*.

³⁴ Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997); Michael Robinson, “National Identity and the Thought of Sin Ch’ae-ho: *Sadaejui* and *Chuch’e* in History and Politics,” *Journal of Korean Studies*, 5 (1984), 121-142.

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- ³⁵ Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review*, 51 (April 1986), 273; see also Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman, "Culture in Interaction," *American Journal of Sociology*, 108 (January 2003), 735-794.
- ³⁶ Such statements also reflect the challenge of adapting to a capitalist economy, which for North Korean refugees, comes in tandem with adapting to democracy. Instead of trying to separate the two different kinds of integration, I take them as intimately related, as they are in reality for many North Koreans.
- ³⁷ Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- ³⁸ José M. Marques, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt, and Jacques Philippe Leyens, "The "Black Sheep Effect": Extremity of Judgments towards Ingroup Members as a Function of Group Identification," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18 (January 1988), 1-16; for an application to the Korean context, see Gi-Wook Shin, James Freda, and Gihong Yi, "The Politics of Ethnic Nationalism in Divided Korea," *Nations and Nationalism*, 5 (October 1999), 465-484.
- ³⁹ William Gamson and Andre Modigliani, "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructivist Approach," *American Journal of Sociology*, 95 (July 1989), 1-37.
- ⁴⁰ The phrase, meaning "settlers in a new place," was coined as a more politically neutral term for North Koreans in South Korea, as opposed to the term "defectors."
- ⁴¹ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).
- ⁴² Joppke.
- ⁴³ Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey, "New World Orders: Continuities and Changes in Latin

American Migration,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 630 (July 2010), 20-52.

⁴⁴ Jaeun Kim, *Contested Embrace: Transborder Membership Politics in Twentieth-Century Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁵ Marc Morje Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Joshua Tucker and Grigore Pop-Eleches, *Communism’s Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).