The Politics of the Abolition of Women's Student Councils and the Depoliticized Campus in Korea*

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This article analyzes the political contentions on depoliticized campuses through interviews, on-campus media, and propaganda of those involved in the abolition of women's student councils, the strongholds of the feminist movement at universities, following the popularization of feminism in Korea. As the student movement gradually weakened in the wake of democratization, undergraduate students have come to be regarded as indifferent to politics and in-school political issues were rare in the last decade. However, at a time when the feminist movement on university campuses was rekindled through the "feminism reboot," some students began their own "activism" based online to eliminate feminism. The abolition of women's student councils by means of such activism is regarded as a symbol of backlash. By revealing how feminism and democracy are being defined and exploited in this process, this study argues that the understanding of democracy should be rethought in Korea's political decision-making process.

Keywords: democracy, feminist movement, digital activism, backlash, student movement

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*This article is based on the author's MA thesis (2020).

Introduction

In 2018, the women's student councils (WSCs) at three of the top ranked universities in Korea were abolished via university referendums. Though a suborganization of the general student councils (GSCs), WSCs were elected and controlled by female students. WSCs were founded as part of the student movement when student unions were organized amid the pro-democracy movement and have played a crucial role in the feminist movement on campuses since the 1990s. These universities whose WSCs were abolished were also universities with histories of active participation in student movements and feminist movements over the past decades. With the "feminism reboot" in South Korea following mid-2010s (Son 2015), WSCs seemed as though they would be able to enter their second heyday. Paradoxically, in 2018, the councils at several universities in Seoul were abolished. The media called this process a "backlash" against feminism (*Hankyoreh,* November 25, 2018; *Sisa In,* July 3, 2018), a term coined by Faludi (1991). On the one hand, the language of feminism such as "the third sex" was appropriated to justify their abolition. It is necessary to go beyond simply defining this event as a backlash against feminism and to analyze how understandings of feminism popularized through the "feminism reboot" were distributed and used.

This article also aims to reveal how, during this series of events, student subjects perceived politics and democracy on campus by looking at the process of abolishing WSCs. Since WSCs were abolished through university referendums, "democracy" was one of the main keywords used by the abolitionist side. The university referendums were a rare symbolic event, as they were the first of their kind since the 2000s at the three universities. The abolition of these WSCs and more is an event that illustrates how Korean university students, who were once one of the main agents of social movements, were transformed into another sort of agent through neoliberalism. The details behind the abolition differed in each case, but what the three universities had in common was that their abolition bills were proposed by students or student representatives and passed through the process of university referendums. University referendums to abolish WSCs divided students into those who demanded abolition and those who were eager to defend the WSCs. Both sides advanced democracy as their main discourse. At one of the universities, well-known as the alma mater of Martyr Lee Han-Yeol who was killed in the 1987 June Democratic Uprising, the

martyr was summoned as the symbol of the democracy of abolition. The slogan of their opponents was "That Democracy is Wrong."

Finally, this paper shows how digital space, as a major venue for political upheaval, affected the formation of politics on campus. One other common aspect found in the cases of the three universities is that digital platforms served as a major media outlet. Digital space, where the debate on abolition first arose, enabled the spread of the discourse that considers abolition as democracy among students, making it the dominant discourse. Opposition to WSCs was formed on the Facebook community pages of universities in addition to a campus digital platform called Everytime, and a Google survey form was used to collect signatures from students demanding a referendum at their school. Posts on Everytime were shared on other social media such as Facebook, proliferating public opinion on abolition formed on one campus to others. Students had fierce arguments over the issue in the digital sphere but few debates took place offline. Therefore, the current study also shows how digital space has an impact on the formation of politics as a major venue for political upheaval.

Methodology

All three universities discussed in this study are located in Seoul and were established over one hundred years ago. The universities will be referred to as Universities A, B, and C in the article. Though the universities have already been specified in media reports, the university names were treated anonymously at the request of several research participants. University A, where the controversy on the abolition first surfaced, is the main subject of this study. The pro-abolition parties at Universities B and C were groups of half-anonymous students who did not organize themselves, while at University A, a referendum promotion group (RPG) was organized and exhibited the most visible action. Thus, this article focuses on the case of University A, and Universities B and C will be covered as reference cases.

In-depth interviews were conducted to find the motives, opinions, and affects of those who participated in the process. The interviews were conducted with semi-structured questions in either one-on-one or focus group interview format between February and August 2019. The list of participants in the study is as follows.

TABLE 1
LIST OF INTERVIEWEES FROM UNIVERSITIES A, B, AND C

Name	University	Admission year / gender	Note
DK	A	'13 / male	Member of Feminism Network in A University and "We need WSC"
CL	A	'18 / female	Member of Feminism Network in University A
MJ	A	'14 / female	Member of RPG
JK	A	'17 / female	Participant in university referendum (supported the referendum but did not support the abolition)
YJ	A	'15 / female	Board member of WSC in 2018
LJ	A	'13 / female	Member of "We need WSC"*
SJ	A	'14 / female	Member of Feminism Network in University A
JH	A	'12 / male	Participant in university referendum (supported the abolition)
LK	A	'16 / female	President of College Student Council
JM	B	'18 / male	Participant in university referendum (supported the abolition)
MI	B	'17 / female	Member of Human Rights Council
SY	B	'15 / female	Member of reconstruction group for WSC
KH	C	'16 / female	Board member of WSC in 2018
JZ	C	'16 / female	Member of general assembly for WSC
UJ	C	'14 / female	Member of general assembly for WSC

* "We need WSC" was the emergency response group formed to oppose abolition in A University, organized in 2018."'Hannam larva, Sexual offenders Even in Kindergarten', Uncomfortable Courage, hate speech controversy in the Katok." *World Daily*. July 1, 2018. Retrieved November 29, 2020 (https://news.v.daum.net/v/20180709160825169).

Facebook page *Ewha Feminist Union Rad-E.* Retrieved November 29, 2020

In addition, to follow the course of the WSCs and their abolition, primary and secondary materials about WSCs were collected and organized. Miscellaneous campus newspapers, magazines, and articles on websites were

gathered, and handouts such as propaganda materials from both sides as well as online materials that were released on social media or campus media were used as data for the research. Among the materials are posts made on the digital platform Everytime, to which only students attending a university are permitted to sign up. Only content that had already been released and distributed through other media such as Facebook were utilized to follow research ethics.

Historical Context of Feminism and the Student Movement

The Feminist Movement after the Era of Student Movements

Students have formed an essential part of various political movements or uprisings around the world, such as the May 68 protests of 1968 in Europe, the Tiananmen Square Protests in 1989, and the protests in Hong Kong ongoing since 2019. In South Korea, too, the activism of students has had a critical influence on the national historical path (Lew 1993). Undergraduate students were at the center of social movements, and universities' student councils took the role of leading rallies and demonstrations. Participants in the student movement of the 1980s were called (and call themselves) "the million student soldiers," as there was a total of one million undergraduate students at that time (Kang 2013).

However, the student movement that peaked with the 1987 Democratic Uprising slowly faded away during the 1990s. The role of college students as the agents of collective action disappeared. This was related to the transformation in the role and position of the university. Universities in South Korea started to expand quantitatively during the 1980s, and the number of college students increased 1.7 times from about 900,000 in 1979 to 1.6 million in 1985 and reached 2.5 million in 1995 (Choi 2008). The social understanding of the university changes from an institution for the elite to a public education system when more than 15% of people of the same age enter university (Trow 1973). Following the popularization of university, during the 1990s, the marketization of universities expanded as the government established an intercollegiate competition system and cut back on the injection of public funds (Son 2002). With the conversion of the social position of the university, its role started to change "from the stronghold for a revolutionary movement to a space of neoliberal domination" (Kang 2013). The marketization of university education is associated with the spread of

neoliberalism in higher education, which began in Europe and the United States and spread throughout the world (McGettigan 2013; Mettler 2014).

The institutional conversion of the university also affects college students' lives and politics, as college students facing increasing employment uncertainty are focused on résumé-enhancing instead of social activities and lack daily time for interaction and solidarity between students (Smelzer and Hearn 2015). Brown (2005, 2015) also stresses that a new subject who applies the logic of economic rationality in non-economic areas and systems has been created, dubbing them Homo economicus. This new human being assumes themselves to be a piece of human capital rather than a political entity.

Korean college students have also evolved into Homo economicus, the neoliberal subject. In the Korean context, this trend came with changes in the university community. Lee (2018) analyzes the 1987 Democratic Uprising in South Korea as Homo politicus' resistance to Homo economicus' life. Ironically, after the achievement of procedural democracy, neoliberalization accelerated and the so-called self-development subject was born (Seo 2009). Seo points out that the discourses of "self-improvement" and "human capital" were led by the government and have served as keywords for undergraduates since the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s.

The most significant diversion was the emergence of the self-identified *bi-kwon,* which is the shortening of non- (*bi-*) student movement sphere (*-kwon*), in mid-1990s. During that period, the role of the student councils in universities changed from the strongholds of education and social movements to organizations representing the interests of students. Throughout the mid-1990s, several candidates ran for student president as *bi-kwon,* winning the election against the candidates who participated in student movements (*JoongAng Ilbo*, November 27, 1993).

Meanwhile, a civil movement developed in Korean society amid the decline of democracy movements that had protested the military regime. The civil movement was formed around the middle class and intellectuals after the 1987 Democratic Uprising. The civil movement is similar to the new social movements in Europe in that it concerns itself with environmental problems, women, and human rights, but differs in that it takes more moderate actions within existing institutions (Jeong 2006).

WSCs were created as organizations for the "female student movement" at a time when student councils were rebuilt in numerous universities in the 1980s. As part of the student council that organized the student movement at the time, the WSCs pursued not only a women's movement but also a student

movement. On the other hand, since the 1990s, a feminist movement emerged on campuses as well as in civil society, along with the increasing number of female students (Kim 2008, pp. 196-197). Feminists who have put feminism at the forefront of their movement since the mid-1990s critically evaluate the previous female student movement as having been subordinate to the student movement (Jun 2001, p. 56). However, one of the reasons behind the emergence of feminists at universities in the 1990s was the increase in women's studies courses at the request of WSCs in the 1980s (Kim 1998). Thus, the changes in the women's movement in the 1990s occurred both in continuity with and as a break from the previous women's movement.

The feminist movement at universities started with interest in sexual politics and anti-sexual violence activism. The discourse of sexual politics sped up on campus in South Korea with the popularization of sexuality theory after the Cultural Festival of Sexual Politics: "Rape Me" (like the song by Nirvana) was held at University A in 1995 in protest of the sexual objectification of female students (Jeong 2018). Throughout the 1990s, WSCs functioned as the center of sexuality politics that raised issues such as sexual desires of women, homosexuality, various gender identities, and so on. In addition, they formed a network among universities and carried out a campaign to establish Students Rules for Anti-Sexual Violence (Kim 2008).

Although WSCs were welcomed as they reenergized student activism that had been stagnant for a while, ironically, feminism on campus was neglected by the students involved in student movement (Heo 2001). Only movements against macro-power were deemed worthy and the feminist movement was even regarded as a crisis of the "revolutionary student movement." Furthermore, newly emerging feminists caused friction with student movement activists as they criticized the patriarchal characteristics of the "revolutionary" student movement, like the "breaking away from the left" early on in the second wave of feminism in the United States (Jun 2001; Ecoles 1989, pp. 103-138).

The Challenges that WSCs Faced on Depoliticized Campuses

As neoliberalism intensified over time, the "self-improvement" discourse continued and was further sharpened into a discourse of "not taking care of others" in order to "survive" (Kim 2015; Yum 2009). In particular, college students following the mid-2000s who experienced the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, during their adolescence when they began to be incorporated into the social order, acquired their own discourse on

competition and self-improvement through their own pedagogy (Min 2014).

Therefore, following the mid-2000s, the student council system was weakened by decreasing attention from the student community and very often failed to elect a student council president through campus referendum. Student councils would become the object of criticism and disgust in the university's online community if they participated in social movements or were linked to social movement organizations (Ko 2013). Discussions on the depoliticization of college students and young people took place in academia and media. The low turnout of young people, who were largely college students, in general and presidential elections was considered the result of depoliticization (Chung 2009). Meanwhile, the main agenda of student councils changed from student-led social and political reform to the representation of the welfare and interests of students. As Young (1990) noted, this shows an evident attribute of depoliticized public life in which the issue of conflict is limited to the economics of distribution, and no questions are raised about decision-making procedures and the allocation of power.

Student activism did emerge, as students resisted neoliberal higher education policies that led to high tuition fees with the so-called "half-price tuition activism," but even this was only the concern of a few student activists (*Hankyoreh,* December 15, 2011). Porta and Cini (2020) analyze the influence of student politics on student movements against neoliberalization in four countries and point out that even if the student organization is institutionalized, it is easily ignored or less fruitful when student politics is divided. Likewise, in South Korea, struggles against neoliberal higher education emerged once as a social issue but did not have much impact on the student community.

In the midst of the depoliticization of the campus and the acceleration of neoliberalism, the WSCs suffered two-fold difficulties. The first challenge, one that was common to most student councils, was the difficulty of operating an organization due to weakened social participation from students. The second difficulty was the hostile sentiment against the WSCs that derived from hostility against feminism. This sentiment prevented students from taking part in WSC activities (Lee 2012). A statement found in the magazine put out by University A's WSC describes the atmospheres of the time: "Becoming and Saying I am WSC is like 'Coming Out.'"[1] Antipathy against feminism is partially the result of a deepening economic crisis which creates the discourse that compares men who suffer the obligation of compulsory military service in their 20s to women who do not (Bae 2000), and that leads to witch hunts against feminists. However, the discourse does

not reflect the reality that male students who have completed military service are the most favored human resources by enterprises and that female students choose to be silenced in a male-centered culture (Nah 2007, 2005). In addition, in the tide of post-feminism (McRobbie 2004), young women emerged as subjects of "self-improvement" (Yum 2016).

However, the feminist movement has re-emerged since the mid-2000s. As feminist activism centered online resurged in Europe, studies that analyze the phenomenon as a "fourth wave" have been conducted (Chamberlain 2017). Similarly, in South Korea, starting with the hashtag movement #I_am_ a_feminist, digital feminist activism that has emerged since 2015 made the feminist movement into a social issue (Kim 2017; Kim 2019). Like the worldwide re-emergence of feminism, Korea is seeing a popularization of feminism called a "feminism reboot" (Son 2015). WSCs have also been gaining more attention. Feminists at University B tried to restore their WSC, which had been nullified for some years, and the WSC at University C was also restored in 2017. Interviewees YJ and KH, both board members of their respective WSCs, mentioned that they had anticipated that the circumstances around WSC would be much easier than they had been before because of the rise of feminism on campuses. However, contrary to their expectations, feminists had to fight the abolition of their own WSCs.

The Rise of Digital "Activism" to Eliminate the Feminist Movement

The controversy surrounding the abolition of the WSC at University A and debates about whether the WSC should be abolished were formed online in May 2018. All debates regarding the abolition of the WSC were conducted on the social media platform Everytime. Everytime is the "center of college life in name and reality," which ranks first in mobile application downloads among undergraduate students. Approximately 3.66 million students from 400 universities and colleges have made accounts on the site (*Allure Korea*, August 2017). Originally created as a timetable application for undergraduate students, Everytime is an online community/social media site accessible only by students registered at a college or university. As users are permitted to post anonymously, they post gossip about students, professors, and lectures.

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[1] Amudo. 2006 "Some of their Misconceptions about the 'Extreme Feminists'", Open-ended, No.5 (the magazine of the 15th WSC in University A).

The anonymity of such a platform allowed for the rise in calls to abolish WSCs despite the popularization of feminism in Korea. A lecture by a queer feminist speaker at A University was the starting point. Some Protestant students, who at the time claimed that the lecturer was "misandric," began to object to her lecture. The WSC put up a hand-written poster in response to such objections stating that "Feminism cannot be canceled," later sparking the argument that the WSC should be removed. After the first referendum held at University A, people who demanded the abolition of the WSCs at Universities B and C referred to the case of University A. The argument was built mainly on Everytime. It was on this mobile application that signatures for abolition of the WSC were collected through Google survey forms that were shared and an RPG was organized at University A. Posts from Everytime spread across different social media like Facebook, affecting the public opinion on WSC abolition at other universities. The RPG was the first to post its positions and notices "publicly" on Everytime for University A. Interviewee SJ stated as below:

> Before that, I'd never seen a student council use Everytime. I think it was the first attempt to use it as a political platform. . . . I thought it was a place where there's very light information going around, like, "How about this class?" I didn't think it was a place where you had to approach it with some kind of politics, and the discourse on there was like the male-dominated online community. (Interview with SJ)

As SJ points out, Everytime had previously been viewed as a male-dominated online community where trivial information was exchanged but became a "politically organized" space starting with the movement for the abolition of WSCs. Those who called for the abolition of WSCs were anonymous on Everytime and opinions that many could not speak out about offline spread online. Interviewee MJ who participated in an RPG told me, "Since it's anonymous, public opinion is formed even without face-to-face meetings, so I saw a lot of opinions and left comments." But MJ and other interviewees stated that it was hard to have debates or arguments in offline communities.

On the other hand, many interviewees including JK pointed out that Everytime is "male-oriented," and that "antipathy toward social movement activists is deep-rooted in their minds." Its misogynic atmosphere is consistent with the male-dominated online culture in Korea where biased views on feminism and women are built up (Kim and Choi 2007; Kim and

Lee 2017). As in online male-dominated communities, users often posted sexually harassing and sexist remarks about female classmates on Everytime. One campus newspaper from University C denounced Everytime, stating that it had turned into another Soranet, the infamous revenge pornography site.[2] Just as group polarization intensifies in online spaces (Wallace 1999), Everytime strongly attracts people who are favorable to existing homosocial sentiments, while further shutting out those who feel uncomfortable about those sentiments. Therefore, those who opposed the abolition of WSCs told me that they view Everytime negatively and do not use it. Interviewee CL stated that "one of the attacks feminists made on the anti-feminists was saying 'You are [an] *et-byeong*.' It stands for 'Everytime asshole.'"

That a university referendum to abolish the WSCs was first proposed by Everytime users and that their assertion became the dominant discourse on WSCs means that this once informal and trivial platform had now become a political space for public opinion. Since the universities no longer had a space that could function as a forum for public discussion, Everytime, an application run by a private company, came to serve as the "public sphere." Student councils in departments and colleges no longer lead discussions on in-school political issues. Most universities in Korea have a student council system based on the university system in Korea. A university comprises several colleges that are themselves composed of several departments or majors. Likewise, the structure of the student council system has the general student council (GSC) at the top, which consists of college student councils (CSCs), that themselves consist of the department student councils (DSCs). However, there is no record of conducting an official forum or discussion, and the interviewees from all three universities also confirmed that there had been no such process and no political debate in the spaces formed through classes and club activities on campus with the exception of LJ, who was a member of the social sciences library club that put up a poster opposing the abolition.

In the meanwhile, students also kept aloof from talking about political issues. Interviewees MJ and JK mentioned that they do not talk about controversial issues offline because there can be conflicts over "political correctness" or worries about being "the object of gossip." They instead post their opinions on Everytime. Instead of pursuing discussions in class or through the student council system, students use digital spaces to express

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[2] IBID. 2018. "Everytime where became the sphere of digital violence against women", Opener, No.3 (The feminist magazine in University C).

their opinions anonymously. The anonymity provided by digital space has allowed students to talk about what cannot be conveyed offline because of "political correctness."

In addition, the failure of the student council-based decision-making system also demonstrates that the student council system is not suitable for reflecting the way students communicate in this day and age. These organizational structures are vertical structures that were formed in the 1980s to suit the student movements of the time so that political information and power were concentrated in student councils. These days, however, digital spaces allow students to easily acquire information and organize networks among students. As a result, collective action is personalized, that is, individuals and not organizations appear as subjects of activism on campuses (Bennett and Segerberd 2011). However, unlike other areas of society, at universities, digital space became monopolized by Everytime. On this platform, a particular sentiment was dominant and prevented the guarantee of a diversity of opinions being represented.

When the abolition of WSCs emerged as a hot potato on campus, the most widely used platform, Everytime, naturally became the arena for heated debates. Where the student council system had collapsed and failed to lead the process of collecting political opinions from students, digital spaces such as Everytime monopolized the status of public sphere. In addition, the experience of abolishing the WSC through online discussions amplified the influence of digital spaces on campus. In our interview, YJ explained that after the abolition, the most important official channel of communication on campus became that "the student presidents 'take the mound' to write comments or post statements on Everytime." This is a new phenomenon that followed the abolition of WSCs. Meanwhile, candidates for CSCs or DSCs often pledge to create and engage in mobile chat rooms that guarantee-anonymous participation (interviewee MJ). In order to win back the atten tion of students for the student councils that had practically fallen apart, candidates are making attempts to form a student network through anonymous digital platforms.

Controversy played out in digital spaces eliminates deliberation on several layers. First of all, it prevents deliberation on who can actively participate or what kind of affect or participation is formed in an anonymous digital place. Assuming "as if" there are no differences in gender, class, race, and so on is the key to operating inequality in the public domain (Fraser 1992, pp. 118-119). Likewise, although Everytime is based on conservative and misogynic culture, it was adopted as a public sphere "as if" there were no

inequalities resulting from such cultural traits. Most feminist interviewees did not use Everytime as a communication tool because they found it misogynic. Interviewee CL even mentioned that feminist posts on Everytime were at risk of being deleted as many users reported them. Although the desire for WSC abolition on Everytime was formed on the basis of this cultural atmosphere, such underlying conditions that influenced the abolition decision were not considered in the discussion process surrounding abolition.

Moreover, the meaning of deliberation was tarnished by ignoring the meaning of political action outside of digital spaces. In the GSC assembly where CSC representatives reviewed the referendum on the abolition of WSC, the meaning of what the RPG and some Everytime users called "activism" became more evident. After signatures urging for a referendum were collected, a GSC assembly was held for seven days to decide whether to conduct a university referendum at University A. There was a stark contrast in the atmospheres inside and outside the conference hall, that is, offline and online. Supporters of the WSC tried to persuade representatives of CSCs that the referendum was depriving the WSC of its autonomy offline, but students on Everytime shared stenographic records of the meeting in real-time and pressured CSC representatives by posting comments insulting them. Interviewees LJ and DK who observed the assembly stated that "representatives looked at Everytime and checked 'How am I under attack' and then changed their opinion" and "the faces and personal information of those who opposed the abolition of the council were exposed, and the users kept making insulting remarks." Almost all interviewees who attended or observed the assembly offline mentioned that while the majority of observers at the assembly were there opposing the abolition, the threat of anonymous users on Everytime worked much more effectively.

The "digital activism" on Everytime was close to cyberbullying by anonymous people. For example, posts that secretly broadcasted the daily life of University A's WSC president were posted on Everytime (Lee Minsun 2019). A live video of someone tearing up a banner belonging to the WSC at University C was also posted online and later deleted. On the other hand, the collective actions taken by feminists, such as the actions of General Assembly of Female Students that objected to the abolition of the WSC at University C and the anti-abolition rallies held at Universities B and C, became the laughingstock of many Everytime users. Of course, not all participation on Everytime was considered political action by onlookers and not all participants/posters considered themselves as doing activism. Interviewees JZ and UJ viewed the participation on Everytime as "hero syndrome" that seeks

attention on Everytime rather than extreme hatred of WSCs and feminism. However, it was consumed as if it were gossip or a meme, earning more likes on Everytime and Facebook and creating a homosocial play culture. In a network-style public space based on social media, the value of information is determined by the number of retweets, shares, and likes. Everytime also pins posts with many likes to the top. These actions have dampened feminist counteractivities and have had a profound impact on the decision-making process of student representatives, as shown by the above remarks from interviewees LK and DK.

According to Rheingold (2002), "smart mobs" arising from political communication and political participation online in the digital age are viewed as enabling horizontal and reciprocal communication and the creation of new political citizens equipped with digital technology. What should be noted, however, is the manner as well as the substance of political participation online. The people who anonymously advocated for the abolition of WSCs online did not actually stop to discuss whether or why the council is needed or not. A stance that advocated for the abolition of the WSC was already firmly established and the participants to the discussion were only interested in what comments would help reinforce this stance. They did not hesitate to cyberbully certain students for their purpose. Political participation online is said to enable horizontal discussions, but in this case, it helped nullify the offline discussion process in the public forum.

Appropriated Feminist Language for the Abolition

Indeed, the abolition of WSCs cannot be seen simply as a result of cyberbullying and homosocial play culture. Although people like interviewee JM agreed with the abolition out of worries over "extreme" feminist movements, those who called for abolition acquired legitimacy by borrowing feminist language to confront current feminist trends.

One of the most noticeable changes in Korean society since the popularization of feminism is that many people have gradually learned and become accustomed to the terms derived from feminist theories such as "sexual objectification" and "misogyny." However, these terms were mainly introduced through social media, not through related texts or lectures. As a result, people started to understand and interpret the meaning of such terms differently, depending on the medium through which they encountered them. For example, one post on Everytime titled "Trusted filter for feminist

terms" stated that women who use certain expressions such as "Me Too," "misogyny," and "gender power" are "feminists who shouldn't be dealt with."[3] This shows that the concepts of feminism that have been circulating among college students through the popularization of feminism are not considered knowledge for understanding feminism but rather are used to stigmatize feminist users in digital spaces.

On the one hand, in the process of naming the abolition of WSC a "democratic" decision, feminist concepts were appropriated by anti-feminist language. Such appropriation appears in the propaganda of the abolitionists at Universities A and B. The statements below show how feminism and queer theory are deployed by abolitionists as they construct a democratic legitimacy of their own.

> As the purpose and main activities of WSC are "anti-gender violence" and "anti-gender discrimination" (according to answer of the 26th WSC of University A), I do not think it is right to organize WSC with only "female students" following the SC's rules. Sexual violence and gender dis-crimination could happen to all [University] A students, so the name of WSC should change to the Student Human Right Council (tentative name), and the number of members and voting rights should be expanded. (RPG in University A 2018[4])

> If the debate over WSC is concluded based on gender, the opinions of classmates who recognize themselves as a third sex, not a man or a woman, will be ignored. If you are seriously thinking about gender equality and WSC for minorities, you should accept the university referendum. (SC of Global Leadership Department in University B 2018[5])

Abolitionists at University A argued that the voting rights of the WSC should be expanded on the grounds that any student can become a target of sexual violence, citing the words of the previous WSC. While it is true that anti-sexual violence activism has been one of the main activities of WSCs,

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[3] Lee Ohoo. 2019. "Recent Condition of Everytime in University A." Facebook Post, August 12. Retrieved November 5, 2020 (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=901958090173875&id=100010790773904).

[4] Referendum Promotion Group in University A. 2018. "We want a sincere conversation. — In response to the request of WSC," May 2018.

[5] Student council of Global Leadership Department in University B. 2018. "The response to the statement of Feminist group in University B." August 2018.

what they truly aimed for was to reconstruct women's experience from a gender perspective and to reveal patriarchy on campus (Kim 2008). However, the abolitionists disregarded the objectives of WSC activism, and selectively quoted WSC statements to build their argument.

Similarly, the abolitionists at University B argued that the WSC should be abolished because it excludes people of the third sex. The rationale for the abolition of the WSC was that WSC membership should be granted to "all students" rather than just women, because granting it to a designated sex would exclude gender minorities such as non-binary or transgender students. As Lorde (1984) has already noted, "dividing and conquering" is the primary governance strategy of the patriarchal system, making differences a tool of division. However, the point of the abolitionists' remarks on the third gender was not to encourage actual division. The LGBT movements was part of the main activism done by WSCs starting in the mid-1990s, so, in reality, LGBT campus clubs and committees at these universities all expressed opposition to the abolition of the WSCs, publishing statements and acting in defense of them. Nonetheless, the people pushing for abolition did not make any attempt to persuade queer parties and allies to support abolition, and did not even respond to the rebuttal of a queer campus club at University B. One important point to note is that despite the realities just stated, the discourse of the abolitionists was justified on Everytime. Interviewees MI and SY mentioned that they saw a post on Everytime that said, "I don't know why they (queer parties) support people who hate them," and explained that regardless of the support of the queer parties, "this assertion enhanced the perception that the supporters of WSC were female chauvinists."

One of the interviewees who was an executive member of a WSC in 2018 commented on this situation as follows:

> The biggest issue I think is that I've lost some of my language. They (abolitionists) are saying what I was saying. You know, [things] such as 'identity,' 'minority.' They've already started to learn all the language, so I felt like I couldn't fight. . . . They kept using 'democracy,' 'minority,' 'queer,' and so on. (YJ)

As YJ noted, in the process of abolishing WSCs, the language of the anti-sexual violence movement and queer theory were used as tools without context. Accordingly, the legitimacy of the feminist movement was lost to the abolitionists.

The appropriation of this language shows that abolitionists have become

familiar with feminist language amid the popularization of feminism but have not acquired an understanding of feminist perspectives. The lexical definition of popularization is "the act of making a difficult subject easier to understand for ordinary people," according to Oxford English Dictionary. What was made "easier" for the abolitionists was only the ability to borrow the language of feminism such as "third sex" and "anti-sexual violence." However, without consideration for the partiality and situation of knowledge as emphasized by Haraway (1998), the abolitionists' language did not take into account the context of the knowledge required by feminist epistemology, and the situatedness of speakers and listeners. That is, their language was not accompanied by understanding.

This phenomenon is not unique to universities. As feminism emerged as an irresistible common sense, the discourse of anti-feminism has changed into one of "That Feminism is Wrong," like the title of a book published in 2018 that "criticizes" the feminist trend in South Korea. The book argues that "the patriarchal system has already collapsed" and that "Korean feminists promote hatred of men." Similar to what appeared in the process of abolishing WSCs, the author borrows feminist language and argues for the need a new term, "gender equalism (equality-ism)" instead of feminism. Immediately after the publication of the book, the author became a "feminism expert" by appearing on the radio program *Kim Eo-jun's News Factory* which ranked number one in the current affairs category (Kkingkkang 2019). Interestingly, abolitionists from University A invited the author and held a forum named "That Feminism is Wrong." Meanwhile, at the exact same time, a forum titled "That Democracy Is Wrong," co-hosted by groups supporting the WSCs of the three universities was held at University A.

Following the "feminism reboot," as it has become hard to refute feminism itself, anti-feminists tend to choose the tactic of "flinging feminism into confusion" by disputing what counts as "authentic" feminism (Lee Layoung 2019, p. 77). Interviewees MJ, JK, and JH who supported the referendum at University A acknowledged the importance of feminism in Korean society but noted that they did not agree on the feminism represented by the WSCs. However, the discourse of "authentic feminism" also shares the assumption that gender discrimination and misogyny do not exist. It may be true that "sexual violence can occur to anyone" (RPG in University A 2018), but such a statement hides the fact that the majority of victims of sexual violence in a patriarchal society are, indeed, women. Abolitionists used the language of feminism to build their own logic to secure political legitimacy,

and to build a discourse that referendums are democracy in the name of feminism, while excluding the supporters of WSCs.

A Democracy That Excludes "Value Judgments"

Political participation on Everytime has the nature of cyberbullying, and the logic of abolishing WSCs borrows feminist language. These two aspects contributed to the exclusion of feminists from digital spaces and to the numerical superiority of abolitionists within them. Every step of the abolition proceeded thanks to this numerical advantage. First, online posts attacking WSCs defined the council as a problematic group and received a large number of likes. Then, some posted an online request collecting students' names to hold a referendum. Finally, the WSC was abolished through a university referendum.

Public discussions became very flat in the process of forcing the abolition of the WSCs through numerical aggregation. In the stenographic records of the GSC assembly at University A, where the first referendum agenda was proposed, the expression "value judgement" appeared frequently, 34 times total. Abolition based on numerical advantage might seem to be a classic problem of democracy, i.e. the possibility of suppression of the minority by the majority. However, the use of the term "value judgment" by several college representatives raises questions on their understanding about politics and democracy.

> I think we need [the] WSC, and I think there's a minority within the student community. (However) If we can't deal with this issue in the student referendum, I'm wondering what could be dealt in the student referendum. I think this part should be carried out by a student vote, not by value judgment, in the committee. (Stenographic records of the 55th GSC 15th assembly of A University, 72-73; author's emphasis)

This is a remark from a representative of the theology department CSC whom the users of Everytime applauded and nicknamed "Lightning Theology" according to interviewees DK and LJ. The representative was praised because he was the first to criticize the involvement of "value judgments" in the referendum, and to ask to withhold it. While stating that "We need [the] WSC," he insisted that the referendum should come first, building up the abolitionist argument that the implementation of a student

referendum was democracy in action. Other representatives followed his assertion and decided to proceed to a vote.

As shown above, even among student representatives from different universities, there was a widespread perception that the "democratic decision-making process" is a procedure of acquiring a numerical majority. As the abolition vote was carried out across numerous campuses, the elimination of deliberation grew worse and the time taken in the course of abolition grew shorter. At University C, the referendum passed even though the only action taken by the abolitionists was to collect signatures to request a referendum and the role of representatives was merely to proceed to a vote. The votes were counted on the same day that the General Assembly of Female Students was held. In neoliberal society, politics is regarded as an area of management or administration, and democracy is perceived as a form of procedural governance (Brown 2015). In Korea, the same phenomenon is observed on campuses that have been depoliticized through neoliberalism.

That this phenomenon was seen on campus in the course of a counterattack against feminism is also symbolic. It is one of feminism's long-standing goals to make apparent the gender inequality or sexual differences in democracy or in the exercise of citizenship (Pateman 1988; Scott 2005; Young 1990). The WSCs had been working in universities for nearly 30 years to realize these goals and been asking who is recognized as a citizen of the university. However, the long-standing demands of campus feminists and female students were ignored as their question was dismissed as being a "value judgment" to be left out of the referendum and as numerical superiority brought democratic legitimacy for abolition of WSC. When it was revealed that only 10% of female students had participated in the first referendum request at University A, a delegate of the RPG responded as follows: "stop judging the value and listen to the demand of 2,600 people."

The replacement of political discussion processes with aggregated high numbers of votes on digital spaces is not limited to the case of WSC abolition. The interviewee SJ noted that there were differences in the understanding of politics between student council candidates that belonged to student movements and those of *bi-kwon*.

> At that time, the campaign pledge of the student movement's side was a "policy pre-announcement system," and the so-called bi-kwon policy on the other side was a "policy vote system." The policy voting system is about whether or not to implement policies before implementing them. The policy was to vote and execute it according to the decision. (SJ)

Student participation in the policy-making process, according to the policy voting system, is limited to a binary choice of yes or no, and any attempt at a deliberative decision-making process is dismissed and replaced by a simple count of the votes. The policy voting system was introduced by the *bi-kwon* student governing body to overcome students' apathy towards their student councils by simplifying the decision-making process with easier options and calculations. Universities A, B, and C all had *bi-kwon* GSCs at the time of the abolition of the WSCs.

After the abolition of the WSCs, during the general election for the GSC at University A, the difference between those who had participated in student movements and *bi-kwon* was even more pronounced. One candidate was the sole CSC representative who had campaigned against the abolition of the WSC while the other candidate was "Lightning Theology," the representative of the theology CSC who had been praised on Everytime during the GSC assembly. The election was considered an assessment of the abolition of the WSC. What the candidates suggested as solutions to make students participate in the student council system vastly differed. While the former focused on "establishing close relationships" among members of the university community, the latter focused on "digitizing the GSC's page, and one-click GSC" to make it easier for students to contact the student council with "one click" online (interviewee LK). In particular, the candidate who put forward the "online petition system" as their main motto pledged to create a "digital student council" that would directly answer petitions if they are filled out and signed by the required number of students. The method may be regarded as regularization of the procedure used to abolish the WSC. In such circumstances, digital space is not a space for more deliberation, but a device that aggregates numbers more easily and erases deliberation, which is the essence of politics (Arendt 2018).

In the course of abolishing the WSCs, to borrow Mouffe's (2013) distinction of "the political"—the dimension of antagonism which occurs in social relations—from "politics"—the establishment of practices, discourses, and institutions to organize human coexistence—the political was expanded, but the politics was missing. Those who called for WSC abolition were highly political in that they participated in political issues according to their interests, created antagonism by transforming a trivial digital platform into a public sphere, and appropriated feminist language. However, politics was not achieved because procedures were without political contestation about how to establish broader principles for coexistence or how to create a process of deliberation. At every stage of the abolition process, the number of those in

agreement was collected not for further deliberation but to overwhelm the opposition. The quality of online posts or the validity of the abolition discourse was easily overlooked in this mechanism of enhancing antagonism and overwhelming the opposition with the numbers of assenters. Since this mechanism was what many students understood democracy to look like, the politics of abolishing campus political institutions for minorities could take place under a discourse that supposed to promote democracy.

The difference between the two student council candidates cannot be interpreted as one between the political consciousness of abolitionists and supporters of WSCs, or one between feminists and anti-feminists. Slacktivism and national petitions are some of the main actions of today's feminism in Korea. What these actions have in common is that the success of the action is contingent on numerical advantage. The protests against non-consensual video recording in 2018 all required anonymous participation on the grounds of "safety" and the organizers communicated anonymously through mobile messengers. The protests were the largest in the history of Korea's feminist movement, but the fact that only "biological women" were eligible to participate prompted criticism among feminists. However, seeing as the organizers of the protest did not respond to such criticism suggests that feminists themselves did not regard deliberation among themselves as significant. The political consciousness of some feminists regarding democracy might not have been that different from the consciousness of abolitionists. However, considering that the main slogan of WSC supporters was "that democracy is wrong," the abolition incident might have given many feminists a chance to rethink their awareness of democracy today.

Conclusion: Democracy in South Korea and the Abolition of Wsc

The case of WSC abolition demonstrates how undergraduate students understand feminism and politics. The abolitionists who aggressively organized political action were not indifferent to political controversy, as they saw themselves, but extremely political. It could be said that their exploitation of feminist language just after the "feminism reboot" in South Korea demonstrates how they shrewdly chose their strategy. However, the political nature of the abolitionists does not mean that they are not depoliticized. Abolitionists understood democracy as a depoliticized process necessary to achieve their goals. The abolition process erased deliberation from every one

of its steps and replaced it with majority rule. As depoliticization has been going on for decades on campuses, abolitionists who made claims of feminism and democracy were "only saying what they want in clever rhetoric" (Young 1990, p. 72).

The analysis of this study that deals with the specific cases of a few high-ranking universities in Seoul cannot be generalized as an explanation of the entire university student body in South Korea. Nevertheless, the case of WSC abolition resonates with the how democracy is being understood throughout the country as a whole. One year before the abolition of WSCs at the three universities, former president Park Geun-hye was impeached, and a new government was installed following the 2017 Candlelight Demonstrations. In Korea, these events are seen as the eradication of corruption and the restoration of civil and political power (Puddington 2019, pp. 899-900). The new government introduced an online petition system called the National Petition that receives and collects suggestions and signatures from the people on different agenda items as a political communication channel. Over the last three years, more than 200 petitions have reached the number of signatures required to receive an official answer from the Office of the President.

Interviewee SJ pointed out that the Candlelight Demonstrations in 2017 and the new government's national petition system affected the abolition of WSCs. She noted what the two things had in common: they were both "the symbol of the political experienced by people in their 20s" and "made people perceive politics as a direct answer to requests without further deliberation." The Candlelight Demonstrations was civil politics through direct action, but the results were rapidly embraced as institutional politics, and did not achieve the re-democratization of the public life, but only focused on punishment of several "bad individuals" (Chun 2017). The national petition system does not take account of any other requirement but the number of signatures. Although some petitions garner controversy over their discriminatory nature, the government always responds to any request that meets the required number of signatories.

The policy promise of an online petition for the GSC at University A that was proposed after the abolition of the WSC was modeled after the national petition system. The more people experience political efficacy by getting involved in this type of political process, the more likely they will continue to participate in similar way and come to accept such practice as democracy. The case of WSC abolition might be a symptom of such malady. The political aspects around the abolition of WSCs reflect the depoliticization of universities, but also make one wonder how democratic and political

actions are currently understood in Korea. Democracy is always a controversial concept (Williams 1983), but rethinking its meaning makes democracy possible.

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