

Topic and Research Question

Vulnerable populations are often dependent on state-provided social assistance, making them particularly sensitive to changes in a state's social system. In this context, this thesis investigates the potential link between democratization and social protection policy development with the focus on vulnerable groups. Additionally, this research also strives to detect possible disparities or similarities within social protection systems of democratized countries with diverse pre-democratization backgrounds, such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Czechia, to explore whether and how varying pre-democratic conditions may have shaped their respective social systems.

Thus, the research question this thesis seeks to answer is: "Did democratization contribute to the expansion of social protection policies targeting vulnerable groups in South Korea, Taiwan, and Czechia, and were there discernible differences among these cases due to their varying pre-democratization regimes?"

This thesis offers valuable insights into the inclusiveness and effectiveness of social protection systems in fostering social cohesion and guiding possible policy improvements.

State of the Art

The impact of regime change, particularly the transition to democracy, on welfare states has long been a subject of extensive research. Kotera and Okada's (2017, 153-155) findings suggest that democratization-induced changes in social spending vary based on the type of redistributive policy. They also find that different stages of democratization impact government spending in specific welfare areas. Similarly, Niño-Zarazúa and Santillán Hernández (2021, 528) found a positive correlation between the level of democratization and the expansion of social assistance programs in low- and middle-income countries.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2005, 358-60) argue that new democracies are more redistributive than older ones, as democratization initially promotes left-wing policies to improve conditions of vulnerable populations through redistributive programs. However, Keefer (2007, 804-8) argues that young democracies, often lacking political credibility, tend to prioritize targeted goods, such as localized public investments or job creation, over inclusive goods like universal education or healthcare to bolster their credibility.

Additionally, some authors focus on democratization-related factors like electoral competition (Shim 2022, 100) and coalition building (Fleckenstein and Lee 2017, 6) in social policy development. Others argue that factors not directly linked to democratization, such as economic development (Papaioannou and Siourounis 2008, 1523-25) and pre-democratic political background (McClelland 2020, 11-12), must also be considered when assessing post-democratic social policy changes.

Methodology and Approach

This study examines the relationship between democratization and social protection policies by analyzing key factors in welfare system transformations. These factors include pre-democratic political contexts, stages of democratic transition, electoral competition, coalition building, democratization levels, and economic development. The democratic transition is divided into pre-democratization, transition, and post-democratization periods, focusing on their distinct impacts on welfare expenditures until 2019, excluding pandemic effects. Electoral competition and coalition building are assessed for their roles in policy expansion. Economic development, measured via GDP per capita, is analyzed to determine its influence relative to democratization. This approach integrates historical, ideological, and social contexts, aiming to identify how these factors shape redistributive policies and their inclusivity in different political and economic settings.

	Factor	Indicator
1.	Pre-democratic political contexts	Autocratic regime history and its societal impacts
2.	Stages of democratic transition	Social protection reforms by timeframe
3.	Electoral competition	Voter-driven social protection reforms' impact
4.	Coalition building	Coalition-driven social protection reforms
5.	Democratization levels	Correlation between democratic shifts and social protection changes
6.	Economic development	GDP per capita changes and their correlation with social protection reforms

Main Facts

Post-democratization, South Korea made significant improvements in social protection, including reforms to the NBS System and enhanced rights for persons with disabilities, but faced challenges like ineffective elderly poverty assistance and limited childcare benefits. Taiwan expanded programs for children, relaxed eligibility for elderly poverty assistance, introduced universal healthcare, and strengthened child protection laws, though issues like low-income thresholds and disability policy execution remain. Czechia shifted from generous unemployment benefits and indexed pensions to a more restrictive system focused on active labor policies and material need, with improvements in child protection and disability benefits starting in 2011.

Electoral competition advanced welfare policies in South Korea and Taiwan, with South Korea focusing on inclusivity and Taiwan prioritizing elderly welfare but showing sign of clientelism, while in Czechia, political discord often delayed progress despite some gains like increased parental benefits.

Regarding coalition building and its impact on post-democratic social protection development, in democratized South Korea, civil society worked effectively with the government to expand social protection for vulnerable groups. In Taiwan, civil society coalitions played a significant role in shaping policy, often fostering welfare clientelism that benefited influential groups. In Czechia, civil society gained policy-shaping channels but often faced antagonism from the government, particularly under right-leaning leadership.

With regard to correlation between democratic levels and social protection advancements, increased democratization in South Korea and Taiwan led to more inclusive social protection policies, while in Czechia, a shift to productivist policies coincided with lower democratization levels and less inclusivity.

Concerning the role of economic development, social protection reforms advanced in all three countries despite economic challenges, with South Korea introducing new benefits like long-term care insurance and child birth pensions during a global financial downturn, Taiwan expanding benefits for the disabled and implementing more generous childcare benefits during a recession, and Czechia tightening unemployment benefits in response to economic setbacks while maintaining support for other vulnerable groups.

Results

After democratization, South Korea, Taiwan, and Czechia expanded their social protection policies, influenced by both democratization-related factors (electoral competition, civil society coalition building, and democratic institutions) as well as other factors (economic conditions and external influences). South Korea developed strong pension and health insurance systems, but gaps in elderly poverty and inadequate post-childbirth protections persist, reflecting its pre-democratic military regime's labor-focused approach. Democratized under its former one-party nationalist regime, Taiwan sought international recognition, leading to rapid advancements in health and social insurance post-democratization. However, it still lacks a universal pension system and faces challenges with clientelist social assistance. Czechia has generous family policies and pensions but faces sustainability concerns and selective unemployment benefits, reflecting its communist-era selective social protection system.

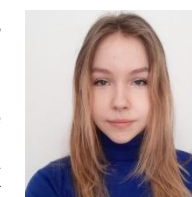
The research shows that democratization generally improved social protection. Nonetheless, factors like historical legacies, economic conditions, and external pressures also shaped outcomes. Strong democratic institutions played a crucial role, and the study suggests that democratization positively impacts social protection development, though it may also result in biases toward certain vulnerable groups. Further research, including broader case studies and longer timeframes, is needed to assess the broader applicability of these findings and examine the effects of shifting political regimes on social protection.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/>

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