Differences in the COVID-19 Pandemic Response between South Korea and the United States: A Comparative Analysis of Culture and Policies

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Abstract
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has varied across countries. Some countries controlled the virus relatively well, while others did not. In the United States, almost a million people died. However, South Korea’s death toll is only about 12,000 even though its population is about one-sixth of the United States. What caused the difference? We argue that public compliance to government direction is the primary reason. South Korea’s collective culture valuing communal benefits helped the people conform to government directions, such as mask wearing in public places. By contrast, American people resisted the government policies that restrict individual freedom due to the individualistic culture. In South Korea, historical experiences of relatively frequent national crises led to the rise of defensive nationalism, resulting in national union. However, the United States had relatively fewer national crises, and thus nationalism did not rise. Instead, national division, xenophobia, and hatred toward Asians prevailed in the United States. Besides the cultural differences, differences in national leader’s characteristics, past experiences of public health crisis, and political system also contributed to the different outcomes of the crisis.

Keywords
COVID-19 pandemic, collectivism, individualism, defensive nationalism, leadership style, cultural difference, mask mandate, public compliance

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Introduction

The biggest story around the world over the past few years has been the COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease 2019) pandemic. The outbreak of the virus started in Wuhan, China, with the first infection case reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on 31 December 2019. The virus spread rapidly and became a worldwide pandemic in 2020, persisting with multiple variants through 2022. According to Johns Hopkins University’s COVID-19 data, more than 330 million people have been infected, and among these people 5.54 million have died as of 17 January 2022 (Corona Virus Resource Center, 2022). At first, the etiology was unidentified, but it did not take long for scientists to find the causative agent: a novel coronavirus officially named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), known as COVID-19 (Global Health Network, 2020; see Heo, 2021; Wang and Cheng, 2021; Ye, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant confusion worldwide, triggering political, economic, and social issues. To cope with the crisis, governments across the world adopted policy response measures such as testing, social distancing, mask mandates, lockdowns, school closures, travel bans, vaccination campaigns, limiting of social gatherings, economic stimulus packages, and quarantines.

South Korea is one of the countries where policy measures were successful. The public complied with government directions and wore masks in public places, limiting infection cases and deaths. As of 21 March 2022, South Korea had approximately 9.5 million infection cases (18% of the population) and 12,000 deaths, while the American people resisted mask mandates in public places. As a result, the United States had more than 79 million infection cases (24% of the population) and almost a million deaths despite vaccine development by American pharmaceutical companies (Corona Virus Resource Center, 2022). What caused the difference between these two countries? In this paper, we comparatively analyze these two cases to answer this question.

Contributions of this study are twofold. First, few studies have comparatively analyzed two countries with respect to the cause of differences in public response vis-à-vis government’s policies dealing with the pandemic, such as mask mandates, from an interdisciplinary approach. Analyzing cultural differences along with other social and political differences, we explain why the public responses between the United States and South Korea have been so different in regard to mask wearing. Second, we examine how history affects the birth of defensive nationalism (or nationalism), which in turn influences public response during national crises. Because of the past experiences of relatively frequent foreign invasions and national crises, South Korea developed defensive nationalism, which rose during the pandemic whereas nationalism did not rise in the United States because nationalism tends to increase only when a nation senses external security threats.

Mask mandates and citizens’ reactions

Since COVID-19 is highly contagious, governments around the world have employed various response measures such as wearing masks, vaccination, limiting the size of social gatherings, and lockdown. Given the dampening effects of lockdown and limiting the size of social gatherings on the economy, wearing masks is one of the most effective and economically efficient tools available to slow the spread of the virus. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) strongly recommends that people wear a facial covering in public places. According to the CDC (2022) homepage, “When you wear a mask, you protect others as well as yourself. Masks work best when everyone wears one.”

The effectiveness of wearing masks to contain the virus is scientifically proven. A joint research team at Miyazawa Clinic in Japan and University of Houston-Victoria in the United States found
that there is an inverse relationship between rates of mask wearing and COVID-19 deaths. Data show that countries with a high portion of the population wearing masks tend to have lower infection rates and deaths compared to the countries that do not (Cha, 2020). Although governments around the world strongly recommended that people wear masks in public places, People’s reactions to wearing facemasks have varied across countries due to a variety of reasons.

In South Korea, from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, health officials promulgated the effectiveness of wearing facemasks as well as social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus. They emphasized the efficacy of the policy from scientific and economic perspectives as other policy measures could entail substantial economic costs. Most citizens of South Korea trusted the government health officials and followed their direction without resistance. To make sure everyone wore masks in public, the government passed the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act, mandating mask wearing in public places, which went into effect on 13 October 2020. Violators were subject to a fine of 100,000 Korean won, approximately $87 (Hahm, 2021; Lee, 2020).

When mask supplies fell short of the rapidly rising demand, the government put a cap on the number of masks each person could purchase at a drugstore and strictly rationed mask purchases. People had to wait in line to purchase masks. Nevertheless, complaints were limited, and people conformed to government direction. In general, the public perceived that complying with government direction was the best way to deal with the virus.

Due to these collective actions, South Korea effectively flattened the surge of COVID-19 spread without shutting down most public facilities and offices. Mask wearing even prevented the spread of the virus on the subway, which is one of the main forms of public transportation in major cities. Despite subways becoming packed with people during rush hour, wearing masks prevented people from contracting the virus. South Korea set an exemplary model of public compliance to government direction leading to a desirable outcome.

US Government’s primary action on mask wearing was different from that of South Korea. Mask wearing was discouraged in the United States at the beginning of the pandemic. This was because the national stock of face masks was limited as mask wearing was not common. Hence, US government health officials told the public that it was not necessary for citizens to wear masks out of worry for a potential shortage of masks for healthcare workers. American people, however, understood this discouragement of mask wearing as an indication of the uselessness of mask wearing in preventing the spread of the virus. After mask supplies were secured, US health officials changed their position and strongly recommended mask wearing in public places while explaining the effectiveness of the measure. Nonetheless, many American people questioned the efficacy of this safety measure.

President Trump’s leadership also played a key role in the public’s misconception of mask wearing since President Trump raised a question on the usefulness of mask wearing. In an interview with Fox News host Chris Wallace on 19 July 2020, Trump stated, “I don’t agree with the statement that if everybody wears a mask, everything disappears (Victor et al., 2020).” Given the impact of a presidential statement on the public, Trump’s statement led to public suspicion about the value of mask wearing, which considerably undermined the authority of health officials.

Some politicians in the United States publicly questioned the effectiveness of mask wearing and discouraged people from doing so based on inaccurate information as well. For example, Lt. Governor of North Carolina Dan Forest, a Republican candidate for the state governorship, stated in an interview with local newspaper Hendersonville Times-News, “There have been multiple comprehensive studies at the deepest level held to scientific standards in controlled environments that have all said for decades, masks do not work with viruses.” On the contrary, liberal media have shown that there is significant scientific evidence of the efficacy of mask wearing for containing the virus (Politifact, 2022).
After President Biden came to office, he issued executive orders to implement his national COVID-19 strategies including facemask mandates for travel, which was applied to airports and planes, ships, intercity buses, trains, and public transportation. He also mandated mask wearing for federal employees in addition to strong promotion of mask wearing in public places. That said, Biden’s policies faced vehement opposition in many parts of the country, which hardly happened in South Korea.

Differences in the public reaction to mask wearing policies between the two countries are unequivocally clear. According to a survey by Gallup International in March 2020, 94% of Korean respondents said that they wear masks to prevent COVID-19, while a mere 9% of American respondents indicated that they wear masks (Gallup International, 2020). Considering that the number of infection cases and deaths in the United States has been much higher than in South Korea, why are the public responses toward mask wearing so different between the United States and South Korea? To answer this question, we developed a theory and comparatively analyzed the two cases.

**Theory**

There are many possible reasons for the difference in public response toward mask wearing between South Korea and the United States. One of the primary reasons stems from the cultural values of the two countries: collectivism in South Korea and individualism in the United States. Korean society is based on collective cultural values where individuals tend to prioritize collective interests and community benefits. Thus, they are willing to sacrifice their individual freedom for collective gains. By contrast, American culture is based on individualism, which appreciates individual freedom more than public interests. As a result, many people in the United States resisted public response measures like mask wearing in public places on the grounds that it should be based on individual choice rather than a public mandate (Festing et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2021; Mickiewicz et al., 2020).

Another distinction comes from the historical differences between the two countries. South Korea has suffered numerous foreign invasions as well as natural disasters throughout its history. These experiences inflicted tremendous hardships for Koreans, which led to the development of defensive nationalism. As a result, Koreans tend to unite when the nation experiences a crisis regardless of the type of the crisis (e.g. foreign invasion, economic, public health) (Badie, 2021; Tudor, 2012).

Compared to South Korea, the United States has hardly experienced foreign military attacks on their main continent or natural disasters since the country was founded. Therefore, defensive nationalism has not developed. Instead, American nationalism seems to erupt when the country perceives an external security threat or is involved in war. Since the pandemic is not an external security threat to the United States, it did not lead to a rise in nationalism (McCartney, 2004). Instead, political ideologies and racism played a considerable role in handling the crisis as President Trump blamed China for the pandemic. Hatred toward Asians and Asian Americans soared, which seriously divided the country.

There are other factors that contributed to the differences in public response to government policy measures, including dissimilar behaviors and approaches employed by presidents, past experiences of health crises, and political systems. The theoretical link of the variables included in this study can be illustrated as follows (Figure 1).

**Research design**

To explain the cause of the differences in public response to government policies between the South Korean and the United States, we employ a comparative analysis approach. In the social sciences, two of the most commonly used comparative analysis designs are the most similar system design and the most different system design. The former is employed when two countries have
similar systems, meaning all of the independent variables but one are the same, but the outcomes are different. The latter approach is applied when the outcomes are the same, but the systems are different, meaning all independent variables except one or two are different although the outcomes are the same. Unfortunately, we cannot employ either research design because our dependent variable, public response to government policies, is different but our independent variables also vary.

In order to empirically show what caused the differences between the United States and South Korea vis-à-vis public responses to government policies, we individually compare each of the independent variables, culture, nationalism, past experiences, and other factors. By showing dissimilarity in these variables, we demonstrate that these differences led to the divergent public responses between the United States and South Korea.

Cultural differences: collectivism and individualism

Culture is an umbrella term that describes the beliefs, customs, religion, tradition, values, language, and social behavior of a specific group or society. Each society has culturally ingrained behaviors based on cultural norms, which lead to different mindsets and belief systems of the people. Since each culture has multiple layers of specific elements/guidance/values made up of unique features of a specific community as well as universally common characteristics, certain cultural norms are not always exposed explicitly in everyday life. They become apparent when the society faces a serious problem as government policies may force the people to follow.

Culture functions as a guideline for people’s behavior in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic because government policies require restrictions of individual liberty. The dominant cultural norms of each society are evidently revealed as they become the basis of people’s reaction to government policies (Maresca, 2020). A comparison of South Korea and the United States in that respect is an excellent example as it shows the stark contrast in public reaction to the mask wearing policy, revealing cultural differences (Dizikes, 2020). Therefore, it is useful to look at social reactions to mask wearing from cultural perspectives.2
Like most other East Asian cultures, Korean culture focuses on collective orientation, emphasizing interpersonal harmony, in-group identity, social conformity, and communal gains. The society tends to be hierarchical and appreciates formal approaches. Emotion also plays a significant role in public decisions, such as voting behavior and policy decisions. Hence, family ties, academic connections, and regionalism often play a greater role in elections than policies and candidates’ qualifications (Heo and Hahm, 2014; Park and Shin, 2006). Social norms and manners function as a social protocol in daily life, which dictate people’s behavior and tightly braids society (see Song, 2012).

In collective cultures, individuals are perceived to gain by taking a fractional place and making contributions to society. They are expected to have a desire to be a meaningful member of the society, which is the fundamental reason for stressing social harmony, politeness, hierarchy, stability, and cooperation. Nonetheless, individuals do not automatically achieve the in-group identity by simply wanting to be a meaningful member of the society. It depends on public perception and social acceptance, which require people’s behavior prioritizing public interests before individual gains. This is why people in collective cultures emphasize public benefits over individual interests, which makes people comply with government policies and communal decisions (Matsumoto, 1988; Song, 2012). This is also one of the reasons why countries with collective cultures (e.g. South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) tend to conform to government policies such as mask wearing to slow the spread of the virus.

On the contrary, the United States is grounded on an individualistic culture. Individualism stresses independent self-control and unrestricted personal freedom. People prioritize themselves over society and tend to be distinct, equality-oriented, pragmatic, and rational. They also value privacy, autonomy, and independence and do not easily accept government interference with personal liberty. If the government adopts policies that restrict individual freedom, people often resist and demand that the government respect their freedom (Kubba, 2021; Mickiewicz et al., 2020).

In individualistic societies, individuals are loosely connected and tend to be emotionally detached from each other. They tend to have no trouble meeting outsiders or new people to form a new in-group. Members of the society are defined by individual accomplishments. Since individual interests are prioritized, consideration of collective benefits is rather limited except within the immediate family. Social relationships are established by contract, and people prefer direct communication styles expressing the message the speaker intends to deliver (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Song, 2012).

In a nutshell, individualism and collectivism can be distinguished by whose interests are prioritized. Individualistic societies highlight individual benefits, not necessarily at collective expense whereas collective cultures emphasize communal interests not necessarily at the price of individual sacrifice (Schwartz, 1990).

According to Kotsubo (2021), the cultural values of collectivism have positive effects on the implementation of government policies such as mask wearing. This is because people in the collective culture are willing to limit their individual rights and freedom for public benefit whereas members of individualistic societies are not (see also Lu et al., 2021). Kubba (2021) also contends that people in a collective culture follow government policies submissively unlike individualistic societies.

In collective societies, social responsibility is also highly emphasized. If anyone is responsible for spreading the virus, incurring high social costs, they feel shame and guilt because of the social responsibility stressed by their cultural values. However, in individualistic societies, those who are responsible for the spread of the virus do not feel the same kind of guilt or remorse for society. Rather, they focus on their own health and recovery (Kubba, 2021).

For the reasons described above, Kotsubo (2021), referring to a study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, asserts that there is a positive association between collective culture and COVID-19 control. He contends that individualism tends to be associated with the rise of infection cases and deaths (e.g. USA and UK). Kotsubo (2021) even applied the assertion to US states,
claiming that Hawaii and other US states with a higher portion of the population with a collective culture mark higher mask wearing compared to states like North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana, where the dominant culture has individualistic orientations. All in all, cultural differences between individualism and collectivism do make differences in complying with mask wearing policies and are one of the reasons for the difference between South Korea and the United States with respect to the number of infection cases and deaths (Festing et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2021; Mickiewicz et al., 2020).

In a collective society like South Korea, cultural norms and values also create peer pressure and a sense of social responsibility. They serve as a social fabric to direct people’s conduct in the community. Cohesive behavior aligned to group norms such as commitment and loyalty are highly respected. Because of these cultural values, people feel pressure to wear face masks in public places, as mask wearing is publicly considered a norm of societal responsibility and discipline against the common enemy, the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, mask wearing functioned a social responsibility to protect neighbors as well as oneself. To people in a collective cultural society, mask wearing also creates a sense of group identity and affiliation among the people wearing them, indirectly creating peer pressure (Ladner, 2020). In other words, social responsibility and peer pressure in South Korea facilitate mask wearing in public places that is not seen in the United States.

Besides the cultural differences of collectivism and individualism, there are other reasons for the different public reactions to mask wearing between South Korea and the United States. One is social perception vis-à-vis mask wearing. In South Korea, wearing a mask is culturally accepted without any negative connotation, whereas it is regarded as a means for hiding in Western societies like the United States and Europe (Wiks, 2020). In South Korea, mask wearing in public places is regarded as a considerate and thoughtful behavior for public health. By contrast, in Europe and North America, mask wearing implies anonymity and concealment, which is utilized to encourage revelry, drunkenness, and lustful behavior. They also view public mask wearing as a symbol of collective conformity to the government authority. In fact, the traditional view of mask wearing in Europe denotes sickness or depraved intention (Cowen, 2020).

Another difference between the two countries vis-à-vis mask wearing is that South Koreans got used to wearing masks prior to the pandemic because of fine dust blankets. Every spring, yellow dust (fine dust or dust storm) plagues the Korean peninsula. Sand and dust picked up from the Chinese and Mongolian deserts blows into the peninsula by westerlies. After the industrialization of China, this sand and dust now contains particulate matters known as PM 2.5. These are serious airborne pollutants smaller than 2.5 µm in diameter that can penetrate the human respiratory system and cause various illnesses including cancer. Elderly and children are especially susceptible because the pollutants can cause severe lung damage. As a measure of public health dealing with this issue, health officials recommend that people wear masks when they go out during the yellow dust season, typically winter and early spring. Weather forecasts even issue alerts and warnings according to the level of fine dust in the air. K-pop idol group members also frequently wore face masks at the airport when meeting their fans prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For these reasons, South Koreans became accustomed to mask wearing, which removed possible negative perceptions of wearing masks.

These differences are revealed in people’s attitude toward complying with government policies to cope with the pandemic. According to a survey by Gallup International in March 2020, 80% of Korean respondents stated that they are willing to give up their partial freedom to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The same organization conducted another survey a month later to improve the validity of the survey result. This time, 84% expressed their willingness to restrict their freedom for the same reason. In the same surveys, 45% and 68% of Americans, respectively, agreed to sacrifice their individual freedom to deal with the pandemic (Gallup International, 2020).
The reason for these contrasting results is that American people believe that mask mandates in public places intrude on their personal freedom. Traditionally, individual rights and freedom have been highly esteemed in the United States, and American citizens tend to decide their own reactions to government policies. In their decisions, individual freedom is stressed over social responsibility and solidarity. According to a study by the Social Science Research Network, only 49% of American people agreed with public orders of mask wearing and social distancing (recited from Kubba, 2021). The voices of people claiming their personal freedom over public safety have been louder and clearer.

**Defensive nationalism versus nationalism**

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health crisis, but an issue of national security given that countries around the world have declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national emergency. French President Emmanuel Macron explicitly stated, “We are at war (against the virus) (Vogel, 2020).” This national crisis elevated the sentiment of nationalism in some countries. A narrative of nationalism is one way to interpret how each country coped with the crisis considering that eliciting a collective imagination may cause a variety of mobilization (Badie, 2021).

According to Stefija (2010), defensive nationalism is created in the process of protecting collective solidarity and internal unity of a group against external threats. These threats could be misfortune, hardships, and/or preoccupation with the excruciating past that a country went through, which often have substantial effects on current politics due to its impact on elections, legislation, and policy making and implementation. Countries that experienced relatively frequent national crises often develop defensive nationalism, and politicians in these countries take advantage of that to mobilize the public or encourage public compliance to national policies (see Pfaffenberger, 1994).

Defensive nationalism can also be formed in connection with cultural trauma, social crisis, or collective consciousness of a group’s hardships (Alexander, 2004; Pfaffenberger, 1994). This is because one of the primary concerns of defensive nationalism is shielding the nation with their national identity from external influence. Thus, defensive nationalism can facilitate public mobilization and compliance, leading to successful policy implementation (Cillespie, 2020).

Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as a national battle against an invisible enemy in a war. Defensive nationalism can rise, which has significant implications pertaining to policy implementation. The South Korea case is a paragon of defensive nationalism implemented to deal with a national crisis given that the government induced public compliance by appealing to defensive nationalism. Due to the defensive nationalism in Korea, Korean citizens readily accepted the government’s response measures although they restrict everyday life (see Heo and Roehrig, 2014).

What is the source of Korean defensive nationalism? Korea is a peninsular country surrounded by superpowers such as China, Japan, and Russia. Throughout its history, Korea has experienced security threats and invasion from its neighboring countries. In the 20th century, Japan even colonized the Korean peninsula. Moreover, South Korea went through a devastating civil war with North Korea. In fact, South Korea is technically still at war given that the South Korean government never signed the armistice in 1953 when the war stopped. Because of these hardships, older generations of Korean people had to make a lot of sacrifices to develop the economy. As South Korea had to start from ash due to the civil war, economic development was difficult, but the country pursued it in a swift manner. The economy is the 10th largest in the world and the country has become a powerhouse of soft power (see Hahm and Song, 2020; Song, 2020). The story of South Korean economic development is a modern version of the Cinderella story. In the process of rapid economic development despite a large population with scarce natural resources, defensive nationalism played a significant role. In other words, defensive nationalism often rose when the country needed it.
Korea’s defensive nationalism can be linked to one of the unique mentalities called *Han* in Korean, which is a melancholy, emotional feeling, containing grief, devastation, frustration, exasperation, helplessness, and grudge. This feeling makes Korean culture unique as it is not common in other cultures. *Han* is deeply rooted in the fact that Korean history is filled with difficulties and hardships. The *Han* mentality is the source of Korea’s defensive nationalism as it leads to the Korean people’s desperate efforts to overcome helplessness (Tudor, 2012).

With the economic development, South Koreans’ national pride soared, and the feeling of helplessness diminished. The *Han* mentality and defensive nationalism has also declined particularly among the younger generation, and it may continue to decline over time. However, it is still present especially in the older generation who experienced hardships such as Japanese colonization, civil war, and extreme poverty. Even in modern history, South Korean people demonstrated their defensive nationalism when the financial crisis broke out in 1997 (see Heo and Roehrig, 2014).

During the crisis some *chaebol* and financial institutions went bankrupt, and the country had to be bailed out by a $46 billion financial package provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The rescue package did not come without conditions. It required tight fiscal policies and high interest rates. Double-digit interest rates made it difficult for small and medium size enterprises to access capital resources. Many went bankrupt and suicide rates skyrocketed. South Koreans considered the IMF bailout a national humiliation. To increase the country’s foreign currency reserve to pay the debt, the government launched a campaign to collect gold and employed economic, financial, and labor reforms that entailed massive layoffs. However, the Korean people complied with government direction and donated their personally possessed gold. With these collective efforts, the country paid off the debt earlier than scheduled (Heo and Kim, 2000; Heo and Roehrig, 2010). Tudor (2012) labels this type of “hard-fought war” mentality in Korea as “bunker mentality” and argues that it is a form of defensive nationalism. He further asserts that this bunker mentality is embedded in Korean culture, leading to collective response with solidarity when faced with a national crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a type of national crisis. As noted earlier, the Korean government’s response measures demanded restricting individual freedom. For example, in order to contact-trace the government collected personal information and traced an individual’s location. The government required self-quarantine for people who traveled to foreign countries or those who had close contact with infected people. During the self-isolation period, the government traced the location of the quarantined people.

The Korean government also limited the size of social gatherings, which had substantial effects on private businesses such as restaurants, clothing and shoe stores, amusement parks, art galleries, and movie theaters. Nonetheless, Korean people complied with the government direction without resistance because they treated the COVID-19 pandemic like a war against an invisible enemy. The rise of national solidarity stemmed from defensive nationalism which facilitated a prompt and unified response to the COVID-19 threat. Badie (2021) calls this public behavior “civic nationalism,” which is another label for the bunker mentality.³

In contrast to South Korea, the United States has not experienced frequent foreign invasions or economic hardship, so defensive nationalism has never been a part of its history. Instead, the United States has become one of the most powerful and affluent societies. That said, nationalism erupted when the country experienced external security threats in the United States. To bring about national unity to help public policy implementation, the Trump administration appealed to nationalism. Nationalism inspires people’s strong feelings for collective benefits as a nation, which leads to citizens’ willingness to make sacrifices. By the same token, it can inflict hatred and violence against some groups or other countries, which can be called “aggressive nationalism” (Bieber, 2018).
President Trump’s attempt to induce the rise of aggressive nationalism did not lead to a desirable outcome. He invoked nationalism by publicly blaming China as the source of the virus and disregarded the concept of global security and global cooperation. With Trump’s instigation, aggressive nationalism arose among some conservative Americans, which resulted in a destructive outcome. Since Trump publicly called the COVID-19 virus “Kung flu” or “Chinese virus,” Anti-Asianism and anti-Asian Americanism as well as anti-China sentiment soared in the country. Some Americans blamed China and/or all Asians for the cause of the global crisis. Xenophobia and hostility toward Asians substantially increased (Badie, 2021).

As a result, rift at the national level was introduced instead of national cohesion. In less than 6 weeks after the civil right groups of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States launched a new webpage, more than 1700 anti-Asian hate crimes were reported (Lee and Yadav, 2020). Legrain (2020) describes the status of the nation during the Trump administration as amplification of nationalist sentiment and politics of blame. Woods et al. (2021) also conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered the rise of nationalistic sentiment and ethnic conflict in the United States as President Trump attributed the pandemic to a specific nation while using the term “enemy.” Thus, Schertzer and Woods (2020) insist that the real spirit of nationalism should be rediscovered in the United States to regain a sense of national unity that can provide effective energy to battle the COVID-19 virus.

In summary, defensive nationalism arose in South Korea, and the public conformed to government policies, sacrificing individual freedom for public benefits. Because of their past experiences with national crises, defensive nationalism was easily invoked. By contrast, Trump administration’s attempt to appeal to nationalism only resulted in national schism, and most American people were not willing to restrict their individual freedom for public health.

**Other differences**

**Leadership style**

A leader’s characteristics and leadership style are always important, but they become more important when the nation faces a crisis. The effectiveness of President Trump’s handling of the pandemic is called into question given the number of infection cases and deaths. His ineffective management of the pandemic may be associated with his personality. Trump is often characterized by his narcissistic persona as well as being ambitious, gregarious, and outgoing (Appelbaum, 2021; MacAdams, 2016). These types of people tend to be bold and competitive. When in power, they expect others to recognize their special qualities and evoke obedience and respect. Moreover, they enjoy being at the center of public attention (Immelman and Griebie, 2020). Meyer (2020) calls this type of person a cultural populist. Cultural populists often come to power by fueling cultural schism. They take advantage of national crises as an opportunity to expand their power and gain control over their opponents. To this end, they often downplay the crisis and take illiberal responses to deal with the crisis (Meyer, 2020).

Trump’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis well fits the characteristics of cultural populist. He was erratic and unstable during his time in office. He acted like an expert in all fields and personally went to the COVID-19 briefing every day. In this process, a lot of misinformation was provided, unnecessary confusion was triggered, and friction with some media was generated. For example, he recommended ingestion of disinfectants as treatment, which can be lethal. He also promoted hydroxychloroquine, a drug used to treat or prevent malaria, which was not scientifically proven to prevent or cure COVID-19. President Trump also posted his opinions or policies on his personal Twitter account. They were often infamous and inaccurate. For example, he wrote “at the
end of March, we should be able to open everything up by Easter.” He also repeatedly clashed with public health officials, most notably Dr Anthony Fauci, the president’s chief medical advisor (Meyer, 2020). Moreover, there was no control tower of the crisis. Health officials promoted social distancing, mask wearing in public places, and limiting of social gatherings. Although national leaders were expected to have set an example for these to the public, President Trump held political events with thousands of people, telling supporters that the pandemic is “ending” although infection cases were rising (Pazzanese, 2020). He also pushed for economic reopening despite the fear that the country was entering a second wave. Even with the high death toll, he touted his leadership by stating that without his leadership it would have been much worse, indicating no sense of objectivity (Meyer, 2020).

Compared to Trump, South Korean President Moon Jae-in tends to be rather quiet and introverted (Kim, 2012; Shim, 2018). At the beginning of the pandemic, President Moon and Minister of Health and Welfare Park Neung-hoo handled daily briefings. As the crisis escalated, he delegated the role to the Commissioner of Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) Jeong Eun-kyeong, who became the control tower of handling the crisis as well as communicating with the public and media. To endow greater discretion and authority, the Moon administration upgraded KDCA.

President Moon learned from his predecessor’s experience as well. In 2015, South Korea experienced an outbreak of Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). During the crisis, former President Park Geun-hye told the public not to eat camel meat, which is not a cause of MERS. This statement received backlash, and President Park’s job approval ratings considerably declined (Pressian, 4 June 2015). Learning from his predecessor’s error, President Moon refrained from making unnecessary public comments (Bennett and Howlett, 1992).

In summary, Moon Jae-in’s introverted personality and lessons from his predecessor’s mistakes in a similar crisis helped him handle the COVID-19 crisis effectively. Unlike Moon, Donald Trump’s narcissistic and arrogant personality as well as lack of past experiences with handling crises created public confusion and a disastrous outcome by providing incorrect information and misguiding the public.

Media and past experience

The COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea has been rightly treated as a public health crisis. In the United States, however, the pandemic was treated like a political issue between Republicans and Democrats because of President Trump’s stance on the COVID-19 pandemic, inflicting national division. President Trump publicly denied the pandemic and downplayed the seriousness of the disease, which was amplified by conservative media such as Fox News. Conspiracy theories and misinformation were rampant through social media, which instigated science skepticism. They even argued that COVID-19 is similar to the flu and there was nothing to be afraid of despite the high death toll. Fox News also questioned the efficacy of mask wearing, which undermined health officials’ efforts to promote mask wearing to prevent the spread of the virus (Leonhardt, 2020).

Due to President Trump and Fox News, many conservative American people treated the COVID-19 pandemic as a political issue and questioned scientific evidence. As a result, national division became a serious issue, and the level of government trust plummeted. According to a poll by NPR/PBS New Hour/Marist, approximately 60% of the respondents did not trust the Trump administration (Long, 2020; Pazzanese, 2020). In a nutshell, many American people interpreted information from the media based on their political orientation. They believed what they wanted to believe regardless of the accuracy of the information. The Trump administration and conservative media overlooked scientific evidence and expertise, which led conservative Americans to do the same.
President Moon in South Korea delegated power to government health officials who gave twice-daily briefings to provide up-to-date information. Since the government carried out their policies in a transparent manner, the Moon administration earned public trust. Making the KDCA Commissioner Jeong Eun-kyeong the control tower of government handling of the pandemic worked effectively. In addition, the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act was amended to require the government to “promptly disclose information” that could prevent the spread of infectious diseases. This information included “the movement path, transportation means, medical treatment institutions, and contacts of patients of the infectious diseases” (Lee, 2020). Furthermore, no Korean media ignored scientists’ opinions, creating a unified voice regarding the crisis handling.

Past experiences of public health crises in the recent past between the two countries also made a huge difference. As noted earlier, South Korea experienced an outbreak of MERS in 2015. The unsuccessful control of the epidemic provided an opportunity for the country to better prepare for future crises. After the MERS epidemic ended, the Korean government reformed the health system and relevant laws to improve institutional settings and preparedness (Moon, 2020; Park et al., 2020; Shin and Lee, 2020). In addition, expert resources, institutional capacities of controlling infectious disease, and collaborative partnerships with local governments and private organizations have significantly improved, which helped the Moon administration to establish procedures for testing, tracing, and preventing the spread of COVID-19 (Lee et al., 2020; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2015; Moon, 2020; Oh et al., 2020). Moreover, empirical studies have shown that countries with past experiences of health crises in the recent past tend to deal with a similar crisis better than countries that did not because of the lessons they learned from those past experiences (Fotiou and Lagerborg, 2021).

Different from South Korea, the United States hardly experienced an outbreak of infectious disease in recent history. The flu pandemic of 1918 is the most recent experience of a public health crisis, which is too long ago, and few Americans remember it. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 hardly touched the United States as only eight cases were confirmed (CDC, 2003). As a result, the United States had no opportunities to improve its institutional preparedness for a pandemic (Long, 2020). To make matters worse, the institutional capacity to identify and respond to public health crises has diminished because the positions of White House National Security Council’s Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense and a key homeland security adviser focused on biodefense strategies against pandemics have remained vacant (Comfort et al., 2020).

**Political system**

The United States is geographically a large country with a nearly 330 million population. It has a federal system made up of 50 states. Each state has its own government system and functions autonomously. The federal government has limited authority to restrict individual freedom nationally, and American people are not used to having a policy that mandates all American people regardless of the state.

When the pandemic started, many governments across the world employed a lockdown policy to contain the virus. Due to the political structure, the US constitution grants such authority to state governments instead of the federal government. This situation made it almost impossible to have a universally applicable policy to fight COVID-19. To make matters worse, some state governors did not take COVID-19 seriously and opposed the lockdown policy, leading to varying COVID-19 response policies across states. Some states employed aggressive disease-mitigation measures, while others had little regulations (Long, 2020). For instance, states like Pennsylvania and Michigan announced plans to close their schools as early as 13 March 2020. On 19 March 2020, California
became the first state to issue a statewide stay-at-home order. Other states waited until April to do so. Eight states with Republican governors chose not to issue stay-at-home orders (John, 2020).

These differences in state policy responses created confusion and frustration among the public with respect to the risk posed by COVID-19. Given that people travel across states, different regulations and restrictions not only caused confusion but also made it difficult to implement effective policy measures. Since state governors are elected every 4 years, they are also concerned about the forthcoming elections. Some state governors prematurely lifted stay-at-home orders once some voters protested the lockdown policy (Chiu, 2020).

Compared to the United States, South Korea is much smaller in terms of population as well as territorial size and easier for the government to control. Local governments in South Korea financially depend on the central government and they do not have the same level of authority as US state governments do. It is much easier for the central government to adopt and universally implement COVID-19 response measures like lockdown and mask mandates.

South Korea also had an authoritarian government system for decades until it was democratized in 1987 (Heo and Roehrig, 2010, 2014). Authoritarian political cultures differ from those of democracy. Although people in an authoritarian society tend to be submissive and respect public authorities, people in a democratic society tend to respond to public authorities and do not accept public policies without critique. Cultural change takes time because it requires socialization, and an authoritarian cultural legacy lasts even after a country goes through the transition to democracy (Bernhard and Karakoç, 2007; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Neundorf, 2010; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2014; Sack, 2017). Because of the cultural legacy of dictatorship, public compliance to government direction in Korea seems proper to many citizens, particularly the older generations (Kim, 1998). This is another reason that Korean citizens complied with the government policies that imposed restrictions on individual freedom such as mask mandates in public places more easily than American people.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the biggest story around the world for more than 2 years. All governments have focused on preventing the spread of the virus to minimize the loss of lives. To this end, governments adopted policy response measures such as mask mandates, lockdown, vaccination campaigns, and so on. South Korea is one of the countries that successfully controlled the virus, while the death toll reached more than 850,000 in the United States. Thus, in this paper, we comparatively analyzed these two cases from cultural, historical, and leadership perspectives.

South Korean culture is collectivistic, which prioritizes communal interests over individual gains. Thanks to this culture, Korean people readily accepted the government’s restrictions on their personal freedom. By contrast, American culture is individualistic, putting more emphasis on individual freedom. Restrictions on individual freedom by the federal government were not amenable to some people despite the collective benefits, which aggravated the crisis.

South Korea has also experienced numerous external threats throughout its history because of its location surrounded by superpowers. Due to these historical experiences, defensive nationalism emerges when the nation faces a crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic was regarded as a national crisis, and Korean people complied with government directions due to defensive nationalism.

By contrast, the United States is a superpower and does not have a history of being repeatedly attacked by foreign countries. Defensive nationalism has not come into play, and nationalism arises only when the country is involved in a war. Many Americans did not see the pandemic as a national crisis despite the high death toll. President Trump and conservative media treated the pandemic like a political issue. As a result, science skepticism and conspiracy theories prevailed.
Differences in past experiences of public health crises and political system also contributed to the different outcomes of the pandemic between the two countries. Due to the legacy of decade-long authoritarian rule, South Koreans tended to comply with government directions whereas American people focused on their individual rights and freedom. Finally, given President Trump’s ineffective handling of the crisis, this study shows the importance of leadership style particularly during a national crisis.

Altogether, this study has important theoretical implications. By analyzing the cultural differences between South Korea and the United States, this study has shown how cultural norms play a role in public reactions to government policies. To this end, we underscore the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in studying governments’ COVID-19 policy responses and public reactions to better understand the differences across countries.

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**Notes**
1. Differences between the two countries in terms of infection cases and death were much more severe until early 2022. However, the South Korean government lifted most restrictions in February and early March 2022. As a result, infection cases and death in South Korea soared whereas they significantly declined in the United States recently, reducing the gap between the two countries.
2. Some scholars criticize the macro approach of classifying a society as one cultural category such as collectivism or individualism considering that few countries are ethnically homogeneous and culturally monolithic (Maresca, 2020). However, most, if not all, countries have dominant cultural values. Thus, to have a bigger picture of public behavior, it is useful to analyze cultural norms.
3. Cillespie (2020) argues that the greater the external threat, the higher the nationalism. Eilidh et al. (2021), however, contend that defensive nationalism is enhanced in national or global crisis to a certain extent. Even to see the rise of defensive nationalism, government response policies should not inhibit human rights or exacerbate people’s deprivation. They also claim that defensive nationalism that rises in a national crisis may inflict moral costs of national prejudice.
4. Leadership style refers to the patterns of behavior that a leader employ to influence his followers. That is, the way a leader gives directions to his or her subordinates and motivates them to accomplish objectives, which is often significantly influenced by the leader’s personality (MacAdams, 2016).
5. There are many experts who analyzed Trump’s personality and characteristics as narcissistic. For example, Sander Thomaes, a developmental psychologist stated, “My research is primarily focused on narcissism. There is no better example than Trump: he is a prototypical narcissist.” Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist at Harvard also said, “Trump is remarkably narcissistic” (Alford, 2015).

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