Analyzing the Influence of COVID-19 on Overseas Korean Voting Intentions: Insights from Twitter Discourse

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Abstract

We investigate the discourse on Twitter among overseas Koreans regarding voting intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing Snscrape 0.3.4 for data collection, we gathered tweets using a set of predefined keywords related to voting, COVID-19, and overseas Korean experiences. Our content analysis, grounded in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, followed a rigorous coding scheme developed iteratively to capture the essence of the discourse, focusing on attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived barriers to voting during the pandemic. We found a significant shift in discourse, from initial information sharing and voting encouragement to a focus on the obstacles posed by COVID-19, including the closure of diplomatic missions and the impact of social distancing measures. The findings reveal a strong collective self-efficacy among overseas Koreans, who actively sought and shared voting-related information, encouraged participation, and proposed alternative voting methods. Theoretical implications extend to the realms of self-efficacy and the theory of planned behavior, illustrating how digital platforms can mediate political mobilization and participation in unprecedented circumstances. This study contributes to the understanding of global citizenship and political engagement in the 21st century, emphasizing the importance of structural support and digital platforms in facilitating the exercise of citizenship rights during global crises.

Keywords: COVID-19, election, overseas voting, overseas Koreans, Twitter; content anal

1. Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has precipitated unprecedented changes across all facets of life, profoundly affecting healthcare, employment, education, and the political landscape globally [1-4]. In response to these shifts, individuals have increasingly turned to social

media platforms to seek and share information, thereby playing a pivotal role in shaping public discourse and influencing political engagement [5-10].

Despite the extensive exploration of COVID-19's impact on various aspects of daily life, there exists a significant gap in understanding its specific effects on the political engagement and voting intentions of overseas Koreans, especially during critical political events such as the 21st general election in South Korea on April 15, 2020. This election highlighted a stark disparity in voter turnout, with only 23.8% of overseas Koreans participating, compared to a 66.2% domestic turnout, the highest since the 1992 general election [11, 12]. This discrepancy underscores the need to examine the democratic engagement of overseas Koreans during the pandemic, considering the unique challenges posed by COVID-19 that may have hindered their ability to vote, potentially affecting the democratic process and future electoral participation.

Prior research on overseas voting behavior has largely focused on demographic factors such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and media use [13-17]. Yet, there is a dearth of studies specifically investigating the public discourse and sentiment towards overseas voting among Koreans on social media platforms, which have become crucial arenas for political expression and mobilization [18].

This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing the discourse on Twitter regarding overseas voting among Koreans during the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to answer two critical research questions: (1) How has the public discourse on Twitter regarding overseas voting among Koreans evolved in response to the pandemic and over time? (2) What are the perceptions and intentions of individuals regarding overseas voting during the COVID-19 pandemic? By examining these questions, this research intends to shed light on the challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic for overseas voting, contributing to a deeper understanding of its implications for democratic processes and the safeguarding of electoral integrity and independence.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

2.1 Overseas Koreans and Overseas Voting

Overseas Koreans, defined as individuals residing outside Korea while maintaining Korean nationality, totaled about 7,493,587 in 2019, with significant populations in China (32.85%), the U.S. (33.99%), and Japan (11.05%) [19]. The 2012 amendment to the Public Official Election Act allowed overseas Koreans to participate in presidential and general elections. Voter turnout increased in presidential elections from 71.1% (2012) to 75.3% (2017), while general election turnout dropped from 45.7% (2012) to 23.8% (2020) [11].

Studies on overseas voting, particularly among Latino immigrants in the U.S., found that higher educational attainment and transnational ties increased participation [20, 21]. Other studies revealed that men and older individuals showed higher interest in overseas voting, while the country of residence was a significant factor [22, 23]. Among overseas Koreans, polling station proximity in the U.S. and lack of a favorite candidate in China were cited as reasons for abstaining from voting [23,24]. Political developments in South Korea, such as partisanship and political polarization, can impact overseas voting behavior [25-28]. Socio-economic factors, including employment conditions in South Korea, also influence the political participation of overseas Koreans [29, 30].

2.2 The role of social media in political engagement and the COVID-19 pandemic

Social media has revolutionized political communication, transforming how information is spread, opinions are shaped, and movements are organized. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow political campaigns and activism to rapidly reach global audiences. Beyond consuming political content, users actively engage in discussions, share opinions, and mobilize support, democratizing political communication and amplifying diverse voices [31].

Twitter excels in political engagement due to its concise messaging, effective use of hashtags, and retweet functionality, which allow content to spread quickly and widely. It has become essential for political activists and policymakers to gauge public sentiment and mobilize supporters [32-34]. Despite its strengths, Twitter faces challenges, such as misinformation and echo chambers, which can negatively affect political discourse. Nevertheless, the influence of social media on political engagement continues to grow, highlighting the need for ongoing research to fully understand its effects. Recognizing its role is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of modern politics.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on voter turnout among overseas Koreans, with variations based on location. Diplomatic mission closures in countries like the U.S. and Canada resulted in a 0% voter turnout, while in Asia, countries such as Singapore and Indonesia saw much higher turnout, all surpassing the pre-pandemic average of 41.4% [11]. The closure of 91 diplomatic missions across 55 countries deprived about 88,000 overseas Koreans of their right to vote [12].

During the pandemic, social media platforms, especially Twitter, became critical tools for both observing public opinion and promoting civic engagement. Governments increasingly used these platforms to connect with citizens and encourage political participation [7, 32-34]. However, despite substantial research on voting behavior and social media's role in political engagement, there remains a gap in analyzing how Twitter influenced overseas voting among Koreans during the pandemic.

The present study seeks to address that gap by examining Twitter discourse related to overseas voting among Koreans during COVID-19. By analyzing tweet content, this research aims to provide insights into how the pandemic affected political engagement and the role social media played in supporting democratic participation during this crisis.

2.3 Theory of Planned Behavior

To understand overseas voting among Koreans during COVID-19, we applied the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [35,36], which adds perceived behavioral control to the Theory of Reasoned Action [37]. Perceived behavioral control refers to an individual's perception of how easy or difficult it is to perform a behavior. Studies on health-related behaviors have confirmed the importance of

perceived behavioral control in influencing behavioral intentions [38]. The Theory of Reasoned Action focuses on attitude toward a behavior and subjective norms as key factors influencing behavioral intention and actual behavior. Attitude is defined as the degree of favorability toward a behavior, and subjective norm is the perceived social pressure to perform the behavior [36].

TPB highlights how belief in control, based on perceived self-efficacy and controllability, can influence intention and behavior [36, 39]. It has been widely applied across disciplines, including public health, consumer behavior, and voting behavior [36, 40]. Some studies have applied TPB to voting behavior, but findings vary by region. For example, in Denmark, attitude influenced voting intention, but subjective norms and perceived control were irrelevant [41]. However, in the U.S. [42], Germany [43], and Indonesia [44], perceived behavioral control impacted voting intention and behavior. These inconsistencies highlight the need to consider regional contexts when applying the TPB to voting.

For our study, this theory is suitable for analyzing overseas Koreans' attitudes, norms, and control beliefs regarding voting, using tweets posted by them to explore voting intention and behavior.

3. Methods

3.1 Data Collection

We used Twitter data to examine overseas voting discourse among Koreans during COVID-19, collecting data with Snscrape 0.3.4 [45] from January 1 to April 30, 2020. Five initial keywords— 'voting', 'election', 'covid', 'corona', and 'overseas Korean'—yielded 1,638,124 tweets, reduced to 13,162 after duplicates were removed. Table 1 presents further manual preprocessing, which refined the keyword list to 30 terms in three categories: overseas voting, overseas Koreans, and COVID-19, enhancing the relevance of the data.

Table 1. The Final List of Keywords for Data Collection

Category (n of keywords)	Keywords (n=30)
Overseas voting (n=8)	overseas general election, overseas voting, remote-voting, overseas national election, ballot count, early voting, election commission, overseas voting management office
Overseas Koreans (n=15)	overseas Koreans, compatriots, Koreans abroad, overseas voters, oversea, abroad, Korean, embassy, diplomatic offices, consulate, absentee report, diplomatic pouch, return (to Korea), poll, passport
The COVID-19 (n=7)	Wuhan pneumonia, infection, pneumonia, quarantine, Wuhan, corona, COVID-19

Next, the data underwent three stages of preprocessing. The first pre-processing removed irrelevant data, such as commercials and entertainment, leaving 2,171 tweets in the data sample (745 from January-February and 1,426 from March-April). In the second phase, researchers manually filtered

out tweets with unnecessary elements, such as URLs, emoticons, symbols, and so on. As a result, 1,036 tweets (207 data in January-February and 829 data in March-April) remained. Lastly, three researchers manually checked and eliminated irrelevant tweets. After three stages of filtering irrelevant content, 987 tweets were selected for analysis.

3.2 Data Analysis

We applied both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, based on grounded theory principles. Open coding of 300 tweets established 11 codes related to overseas voting behavior during the pandemic, including: information seeking, voting rights, concerns about voting, perceived control, diplomatic mission closures, and alternative voting methods.

As presented in Table 2, each variable was coded as present or not present. Kohen's Kappa scores ranged from 0.80 to 0.94, ensuring high intercoder agreement. The final dataset of 987 tweets provided insights into overseas Koreans' voting intentions and COVID-19-related barriers.

Table 2. Operational Definitions and Intercoder Reliability

Variable	Kappa	Presence (%)	Definition/description	Example
Information	.89	41.7	References to the overall information needs, seeking, and sharing about overseas voting.	How many of those foreign missions have been closed?
Voting encouragement	.90	11.4	Tweets promoting overseas voting encouragement. When an individual Twitter user encouraged voting, we also assumed that he/she has voting intention, thus coded code #9, voting intention.	Let's vote. The only way to keep the country from running at will is to tell the people's meaning. The country that goes wrong is due to the firmly closed people.

| Voting right | .88 | 13.4 | Tweets referring to that overseas voting is the right of overseas Koreans. | The Korean government must safeguard the rights of overseas citizens to vote. If you are unable to travel to the polling station due to COVID-19, you have the option of voting absentee or postponing the April 15 general election. |
| Concern about the impact of voting | .89 | 16.0 | Tweets relating to the effects of overseas voting, including help for the political party or politicians. | Under democratic institutions, the effective judgment is that the election is null and void if no favorite candidate participates in casting any votes this election, and overseas Koreans will vote in Japan. |

Perceived behavioral control	.80	40.4	Perception of how difficult overseas voting would be or perceived barriers/individual cost. Usually associated with COVID-19 but also includes	In some areas, Koreans must travel more than ten hours by bus and give up their jobs to vote. There are many Koreans who want to vote but are unable to do so due to physical obstacles... Is it too soon to implement electronic voting?
Closure of diplomatic missions	.91	15.2	A situation in which the diplomatic missions were closed, thus unable to vote.	We can't vote because the overseas missions are closed.
Dissatisfaction with the cancellation of overseas voting	.81	24.2	Regret and dissatisfaction over the cancellation of overseas voting. When a Twitter user expressed dissatisfaction with the cancellation of voting, we assumed that he or she intended to vote, and thus coded code #9, voting intention.	I'm so upset. The polling stations are closed. No way to vote in Germany. My right to vote was taken away. The NEC didn't prepare a backup plan.

Completion of pre-registration	.93	11.1	Twitter users report completing pre-registration for overseas voting. The simple information about pre-registration was coded as code #1, information. When a Twitter user completed pre-registration for overseas voting, we assumed he or she intended to vote and assigned code #9, voting intention.	I've registered to vote from abroad, but how do I get to the assembly... It's a matter of whether I can go.
Voting intention	.86	44.7	A tweet that acknowledges the plans or aspirations to vote from abroad.	I did not register to vote because I intended to vote in Korea. My right to vote is at risk because of COVID-19! I am in tears.
Voting behavior	.94	2.9	References to the Tweeter users' actual voting	I'm voted today at the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Iran.
Desire and suggestion for alternative voting method	.93	6.3	Tweets relating to wishes and aspirations for the introduction of alternative voting methods, such as postal voting or internet voting.	Can't we vote online on mobile?

4. Results

4.1 Variations in Overseas Voting-Related Topics across Circumstances and Time

Our analysis revealed dynamic shifts in the discourse on Twitter regarding overseas voting among Koreans from January to April 2020. March emerged as the most active month, with 682 tweets, reflecting the community's response to the Korean government's decision to close numerous diplomatic missions. This period saw a surge in discussions about voting intentions, indicating a strong desire among overseas Koreans to exercise their voting rights despite the pandemic. Notably, information-seeking behavior was consistent, with a significant portion of tweets across all months dedicated to sharing and requesting details on voting procedures. During January and February, the discourse predominantly focused on disseminating information about voting processes and encouraging participation. For instance, a tweet from early February stated, "Only 9 days left to apply for the overseas election. Don't miss your chance to make a difference!"(posted February 2nd, 2020) This period of proactive engagement shifted dramatically in March and April, as discussions increasingly centered on the challenges posed by COVID-19, including fears of infection, the impact of diplomatic mission closures, and frustration over the cancellation of voting opportunities. Figure 1 includes several findings and contains a representation of the monthly code changes. The sections below provide descriptions of the emerging topics based on related codes.
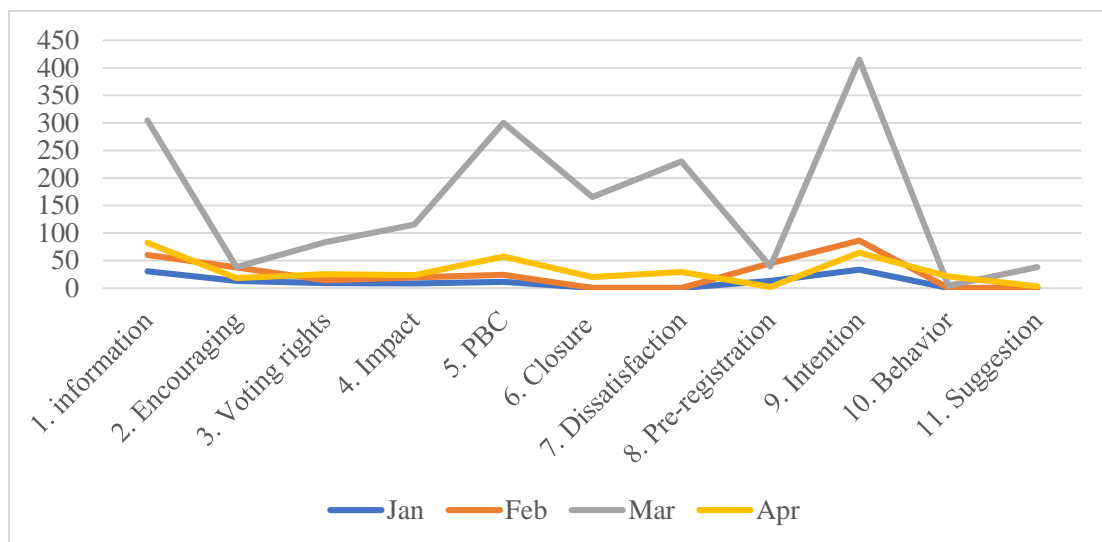

Figure 1. Changes in code by month

4.2 Attitudes and Intentions Regarding Overseas Voting

The discourse on Twitter highlighted three main attitudes influencing voting intentions: the perceived impact of voting, the pursuit of information, and the encouragement of participation. Some overseas Koreans revealed their attitudes toward overseas voting through tweets that emphasized the impact of overseas voting. For example, "Your voting is making history" or presenting the case of a member of the National Assembly whose election was overturned by overseas voting.

In January and February, prior to the closure of diplomat+ic missions, the primary information sought and shared on Twitter pertained to the process, date, and locations of polling stations for

overseas voting. Above all, tweets about overseas voting information encouraged others to participate in the upcoming election, as shown in Tweet [A]:

> Ready to vote for the general election? For your information, the deadline for applying for registration of overseas electors is 60 days before the election day. If there's anyone overseas who hasn't done it, please do it! (Tweet [A], posted on January 17, 2020)

Institutions also engaged in this behavior, including various Korean embassies that posted tweets encouraging overseas Koreans to participate in voting. This is shown in Tweet [B]:

> Hello, this is the Embassy of Finland. From April 1st to 6th, we will hold a vote during the period we set. As soon as the date is confirmed, we will notify you on the website and SNS. Thank you for your interest in overseas elections. (Tweet [B], posted on February 7, 2020)

A notable tweet exemplifies the community's recognition of their electoral power and the consequences of restricted voting access:

> The Democratic Party would suffer if the overseas referendum was put on hold. Because the general election was frequently decided by dozens of votes, it was overturned by the overseas referendum, as it had previously been. (Tweet [C], posted on March 26, 2020)

By contrast, disappointment and calls for action were evident in tweets like one stating, "It's unjust to deprive overseas voters of their rights. We demand alternative solutions!" (posted March 30th, 2020). This sentiment underscores the perceived duty to vote and the expectation for the government to facilitate this right, even under challenging circumstances.

4.3 Subjective Norms: Viewing Overseas Voting as a Right and Duty

The analysis also uncovered a strong normative belief in voting as both a right and a civic duty, a sentiment that was particularly pronounced in tweets expressing disappointment over the inability to vote. For example, a tweet highlighting the intergenerational transmission of democratic values shared:

> My daughter is voting in her first overseas election this year. She must be excited and looking forward to it. We must exercise our sovereignty even though we are abroad! In the 2012 presidential election, I went to the polls first thing in the morning. My daughter must have learned a lot from her mother, who served as an election commissioner in the 2017 presidential election and stressed the importance of voting. (Tweet [D], posted on January 30, 2020*)*

As overseas Koreans inherently do not reside in Korea, there was a belief that they fulfill their civic duty and engage in Korean solidarity through voting, as presented in Tweet [E]:

> They [Koreans in Korea] believe that overseas Koreans do not vote, but we do participate in general elections. We are also the Republic of Korea's people. Then see you [at the election]! (Tweet [E], posted on January 30, 2020)

4.4 Perceived Barriers to Overseas Voting and Recommendations

As previously mentioned, overseas Koreans have expressed their enthusiasm and determination to vote even amid a global pandemic. In our study, we observed that during January and February 2020, over 10% of the codes analyzed pertained to the completion of pre-registration for overseas voting.

These tweets, primarily from that period, conveyed individuals' intentions through sentiments like, "I made sure not to forget and completed my pre-registration for overseas voting," and "I have applied for the overseas national election, but the issue is that we have to travel all the way to Osaka." Some tweets highlighted challenges encountered during the pre-registration process, such as the long distance to the polling station or difficulty accessing the station during working hours.

It is intriguing that despite these immense challenges, their determination to vote remained unwavering. However, the discourse revealed significant barriers to voting, particularly related to the pandemic's logistical challenges. A tweet voiced a common frustration:

> If you're worried about the spread of the coronavirus on the plane, you have to block all flight paths. Or make plan B. This entire situation is understandable, but a little bitter. Even if we live abroad, we want to vote and support our country with the same zeal as non-overseas Koreans. Don't you think it's selfish of you to suspend overseas voting? (Tweet [F], posted on March 18, 2020]

This reflects a broader concern among the community for the need for alternative voting methods, a sentiment echoed in another tweet suggesting online or postal voting:

> I want the Korean government to consider allowing overseas voting on the Internet or by mail. And if that doesn't work, postpone the election. I don't think it is proper to notify the deprivation of voting rights by e-mail. (Tweet [G], posted on March 29, 2020]

The Twitter discourse among overseas Koreans regarding voting during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates a community deeply engaged with the democratic process yet confronted with unprecedented challenges. The analysis not only sheds light on the evolving nature of this discourse but also highlights the resilience of democratic values amidst a global crisis. The specific tweets cited provide a window into the collective mindset of overseas Koreans, revealing a blend of determination, frustration, and innovation in the face of adversity.

5. DISCUSSION

This study provides key insights into the evolving nature of digital political engagement among overseas Koreans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media played a crucial role in facilitating political participation, especially when traditional voting mechanisms were disrupted. The concept of "collective" self-efficacy, reflected in the active sharing of voting information, extends Bandura's theory into the digital domain, demonstrating how collective beliefs in achieving political outcomes can be mediated online [46].

Moreover, the findings align with the theory of planned behavior [36], illustrating how external factors, such as the pandemic, impacted perceived behavioral control and influenced voting behaviors. This highlights the theory's applicability in crisis situations, where barriers to participation were prominent. The role of social media in shaping political opinions and fostering a sense of community also aligns with media effects theory, showing how platforms like Twitter can drive collective action and political mobilization during crises.

The increased political engagement among overseas Koreans can be understood within the context of South Korea's polarized political landscape, where rising divisiveness likely fueled participation [25]. Social media amplified societal issues during the pandemic, connecting political engagement

with broader concerns, such as the plight of delivery workers, and mobilized both local and diaspora communities.

While this study offers valuable insights, it has limitations. The reliance on Twitter data doesn't fully capture the diversity of political engagement or participant demographics. Future research should integrate interviews, surveys, and demographic data for a more comprehensive analysis. Additionally, comparative studies across different diaspora communities could shed further light on global patterns of digital political engagement.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the crucial role of social media, particularly Twitter, in facilitating political participation among overseas Koreans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analyzing Twitter discourse, we revealed how attitudes, norms, and perceived barriers shaped voting intentions, illustrating the platform's ability to foster community and collective efficacy among diasporas. The findings emphasize the need for governments to harness social media's potential in supporting democratic participation, especially during crises. Innovations like online and postal voting have been illuminated to ensure that all citizens can exercise their voting rights.

Overseas Koreans' engagement on Twitter during the pandemic underscores the enduring importance of democracy and the role digital platforms play in sustaining political participation. Moving forward, this study stresses the need for inclusive democratic systems that adapt to an evolving global landscape.

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