

Democratic Integration of Migrants from Autocracy: Lab-in-the-Field Evidence from North Korean Defectors

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Abstract

Movement from autocracies to liberal democracies is a prominent pattern in contemporary international migration. Yet existing research provides limited understanding of what hinders the democratic integration of migrants from authoritarian regimes. A central challenge is that migrants and host populations often differ in ethnicity, language, and culture, making it difficult to isolate the effects of authoritarian socialization. We address this challenge by leveraging a co-ethnic setting in which North Korean defectors and South Koreans share language, history, and ethnicity but experienced sharply divergent political institutions. We examine two competing explanations for democratic integration: lack of social capital and unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices. By combining surveys and lab-in-the-field experiments, we compare North Korean defectors and native South Koreans. We find that despite South Korea's favorable institutional environment for democratic integration, defectors participate less in democratic politics than native South Koreans do. Contrary to conventional expectations, however, defectors possess levels of social capital comparable to those of native South Koreans. Instead, they exhibit lower political interest and knowledge, weaker democratic orientations, and greater implicit bias toward authoritarian political institutions. These findings suggest that unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices, rather than a lack of social capital, poses the greater obstacle to democratic integration for migrants from authoritarian regimes.

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1 Introduction

Cross-regime migration has become an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary international politics. Migrants today move across fundamentally different political environments in both directions—from authoritarian regimes to democracies and from democracies to autocracies (Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth, 2026a,b). Among these patterns, a substantial share of migrants originate from authoritarian regimes and settle in liberal democracies. This pattern of cross-regime migration exposes migrants to new institutional environments while carrying forward prior political socialization shaped under authoritarian rule. As a result, migrants from autocracies must adapt to unfamiliar democratic norms and practices. This setting raises a central question for the study of political institutions and international migration: what factors hinder the democratic integration of migrants from autocracies into liberal democracies?

Despite the growing prevalence of cross-regime migration in international politics, existing research has paid limited attention to the challenges and integration outcomes of migrants from autocracies settling in democracies.¹ In particular, we know relatively little about the underlying factors that shape their democratic integration. As the number of cross-regime migrants continues to grow, understanding these factors is important not only for theory but also for informing policies designed to facilitate migrant integration. To address this gap, we draw on insights from the study of political institutions and political socialization to identify two factors through which pre-migratory socialization may hinder the democratic integration of migrants from autocracies: (1) lack of social capital and (2) unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices. We conceptualize democratic integration as engagement in democratic political life and distinguish two components: social capital, which captures the social networks and norms that facilitate such engagement, and democratic attitudes, which capture individuals’ intrinsic preferences for democratic institutions and participation.

A central challenge in studying cross-regime migrant integration is that migrants

¹But see important work on how labor migration to autocracies shapes attitudes and behaviors Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth (2026a,b); Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth (2025).

and host populations typically differ along multiple dimensions—language, ethnicity, and cultural background—that confound the effects of political institutions (Alarian and Neureiter, 2021; Holland, Peters and Zhou, 2024; Alrababa’h et al., 2021; Sides and Citrin, 2007). As a result, it is difficult to isolate how prior exposure to authoritarian institutions shapes subsequent democratic integration (Bilodeau, 2008; Gülzau, Helbling and Morgenstern, 2025; Bilodeau, McAllister and Kanji, 2010). We address this challenge by leveraging what Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) called the “Korean experiment.” The division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 created two populations that were initially homogeneous but subsequently experienced sharply divergent political institutions, with limited mobility and interaction between them. This setting allows us to attribute differences between North Korean defectors and South Koreans to institutional exposure rather than pre-existing social, ethnic, or cultural differences. Leveraging this variation, we examine how authoritarian socialization shapes cross-regime migrant integration.

We compare North Korean defectors (NKs) and native-born South Koreans (SKs) using original data collected through extensive fieldwork. We examine whether democratic integration is hindered by a lack of social capital or by unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices. We combine survey measures and lab-in-the-field experiments to measure democratic integration and its two components. Political participation, an observed measure of democratic integration, is measured using both survey responses and behavioral tasks, including a lab-based petition task and deliberative discussion games. Social capital is measured using survey indicators as well as behavioral games capturing altruism, trust, and cooperation. Democratic attitudes are measured using survey items and an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to elicit implicit biases toward political systems.

We find that North Korean defectors exhibit lower levels of democratic integration than native South Koreans. Across survey measures and behavioral tasks, NKs are less likely to engage in political participation. To assess the sources of this gap, we evaluate two competing explanations: lack of social capital and unfamiliarity with democratic

norms and practices. We find no evidence that NKs lack social capital. Across survey and behavioral measures, NKs exhibit levels of altruism, trust, cooperation, and civic engagement comparable to those of SKs. By contrast, NKs lag behind SKs in democratic attitudes. They report lower political interest, possess less political knowledge, express less favorable views of democracy, and exhibit an implicit bias that is relatively more favorable toward authoritarian political institutions.

To further probe the mechanisms underlying these patterns, we draw on semi-structured interviews to examine why defectors lag in democratic attitudes. NKs consistently attribute their reluctance to participate in public discussion to authoritarian socialization, including ideological indoctrination, surveillance, and punitive “group criticism” practices. These experiences leave them unfamiliar with the democratic norms and practices required for deliberative discussion and political participation. These qualitative findings indicate that authoritarian socialization continues to shape defectors’ democratic orientations and suggest that unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices is a central barrier to their democratic integration.

South Korea provides an exceptionally favorable setting for democratic integration: North Korean defectors are automatically granted citizenship and receive extensive state support for resettlement, substantially lowering the costs of political participation. The persistence of lower democratic integration even under these highly favorable conditions suggests that our findings likely represent a lower-bound estimate of the challenges facing migrants from authoritarian regimes. In many other cross-regime migration contexts, migrants confront additional barriers—including differences in language, ethnicity, and cultural background—alongside weaker institutional support from host states. These factors may further intensify the difficulties of democratic integration beyond those observed in the Korean case.

Taken together, this article makes three contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on migrant integration by shifting attention from host-society attitudes toward migrant-side factors shaping democratic integration. Existing research has primarily examined how host populations perceive migrants, emphasizing concerns about

economic competition (Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2016; Gaikwad and Nellis, 2017; Mayda, 2006), political and cultural differences (Holland, Peters and Zhou, 2024; Alrababa'h et al., 2021; Sides and Citrin, 2007), and conflict (Zhou and Shaver, 2021; Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006; Masterson and Yassenov, 2021). By contrast, we examine how pre-migratory political institutions and the resulting authoritarian socialization shape migrants' integration into democratic politics. Our design compares migrants and hosts with the same language, ethnicity, and cultural background, allowing us to isolate the effects of authoritarian socialization through a direct comparison between migrants and host-country natives. In doing so, the article links the literature on migrant integration to research on political institutions by showing how authoritarian legacies shape democratic orientations after migration (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007; Simpser, Slater and Wittenberg, 2018; Mishler and Rose, 2007; Neundorff and Pop-Eleches, 2020). More broadly, it advances our understanding of cross-regime migration in international politics by identifying the factors through which exposure to authoritarian institutions influences democratic integration in host societies.

Second, this article improves the measurement of democratic integration of migrants from autocracies in migration research. Existing studies rely primarily on survey-based measures such as self-reported voting and attitudes toward democracy, implicitly assuming that responses reflect underlying preferences (Harder et al., 2018; Jacobs and Tillie, 2004; Bratsberg et al., 2021; Ferwerda and Finseraas, 2025). This reliance may be particularly limiting for migrants from authoritarian contexts, where responses to political questions may not reflect genuine preferences due to fear of surveillance, repression, or the sensitivity of political expression (Bilodeau and Dumouchel, 2023; Méndez and Font, 2025).² To address this limitation, we measure democratic integration and its core components using multiple instruments. Democratic attitudes are captured through survey measures and an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to elicit implicit evaluations of political systems; social capital is measured through behavioral

²See also Jiang and Yang (2016); Tannenber (2022); Robinson and Tannenber (2019); Carter, Carter and Schick (2024)

games capturing altruism, trust, and cooperation; and political participation is measured through both self-reported and observed behavior in lab settings. By combining survey, behavioral, and implicit measures, this approach provides a more comprehensive and fine-grained assessment of democratic integration and moves beyond reliance on self-reported measures.

Lastly, the article carries important implications for migrant integration policies pursued by governments and international organizations (UNHCR, 2026). Existing integration frameworks often emphasize rebuilding social capital and strengthening community networks as central mechanisms of migrant integration. Our findings suggest that such approaches may be insufficient for migrants from authoritarian regimes. While social capital remains important, unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices may constitute a more fundamental barrier to democratic integration among migrants socialized under repressive political institutions. These findings suggest that successful integration may require not only social embedding but also sustained exposure to democratic participation, deliberation, civic practices, and civic and democratic education.

2 Relation to the Literature

This study examines the democratic integration of migrants from autocracies into liberal democracies. Migration from autocracy to democracy has become a prominent pattern in recent international migration. As shown in Figure 1, the stock of migrants residing in democratic regimes after originating from autocratic regimes increased substantially between 2015 and 2024, making it the second-largest global migration pattern after movements between autocracies.³

These movements often take the form of survival migration: individuals who flee in response to violence, repression, famine, or state failure in their countries of origin

³We use the UN DESA International Migrant Stock dataset (2024), merged with V-Dem to classify origin and destination regimes. The analysis is restricted to dyads covered by V-Dem, and regime-to-regime shares are calculated as the proportion of total migrant stocks in the matched sample.

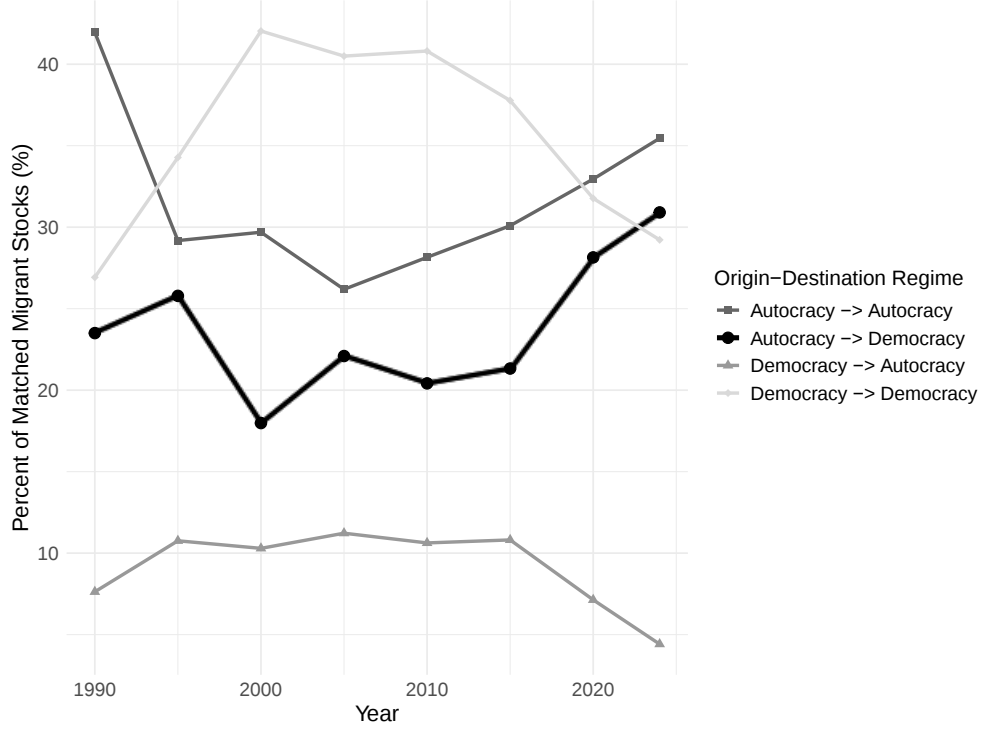


Figure 1: International migrant stocks by regime type

(Betts, 2013).⁴ UNHCR data reinforce this pattern, with leading countries of origin—including Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and the Central African Republic—characterized by violent conflict, authoritarian repression, or state collapse.⁵ Accordingly, the scope condition of this study is migrants who move from repressive autocracies to liberal democracies in response to systemic violence, repression, or state collapse. For clarity, we use the terms *migrants* and *refugees* interchangeably, and refer to countries of origin as *autocracies*, *dictatorships*, or *repressive regimes*.

Building on prior research on the legacy of political institutions, we assume that institutions in migrants' countries of origin shape their integration into host liberal democracies (Howard, 2003; Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007; Bernhard and Karakoç, 2007; Bó, Foster and Putterman, 2010; Simpson, Slater and Wittenberg, 2018; Neun-

⁴See also Holland and Peters (2020), who argue that violence not only drives displacement but also increases migrants' responsiveness to political information and policy environments.

⁵See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Refugee Population by Country or Territory of Origin.

dorf and Pop-Eleches, 2020). Migrants examined here were socialized in repressive authoritarian contexts where coercion, surveillance, and curtailed civic life dominated (Mishler and Rose, 2007). Their trajectories of integration are therefore shaped not only by conditions in host states but also by the institutional legacies of the regimes they fled. From this perspective, we identify two factors that systematically hinder the democratic integration of migrants from autocracies into liberal democracies.

One factor is the erosion of social capital among refugees from autocratic regimes. Research on the legacies of repressive regimes underscores the fragility of civil society in these contexts (Jowitt, 2023; Ekiert, 1996).⁶ Repressive regimes erode interpersonal trust and dismantle autonomous civic organizations by embedding surveillance and coercion into everyday life. They socialize citizens into suspicion and compulsory, state-controlled associations rather than generalized trust and voluntary networks. This legacy weakens interpersonal trust, produces mistrust of collective organizations, and entrenches reliance on private, kin-based networks that constrain the growth of voluntary civic associations (Howard, 2002; Xu and Jin, 2018). Comparative evidence further shows that individuals exposed to repressive regimes exhibit lower levels of trust and participation in voluntary organizations than their counterparts elsewhere (Bernhard and Karakoç, 2007; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013; Xu and Jin, 2018).

This lack of social capital poses major obstacles to democratic integration. Refugees face two distinct challenges. First, authoritarian surveillance and repression erode trust and dismantle autonomous associations, leaving refugees without the habits of cooperation, generalized trust, and civic skills required for democratic participation. Because social networks facilitate integration into democratic politics (Jacobs and Tillie, 2004; Berger, Galonska and Koopmans, 2004), this deficit directly constrains participation. Second, voluntary associations provide, as Skocpol notes, “a source of considerable popular leverage” over the political process (Skocpol and Fiorina, 2004), enabling cit-

⁶Following Linz (2000), authoritarian regimes are generally characterized by limited pluralism, low mobilization, and the absence of a comprehensive ideology. Yet the most repressive forms approximate totalitarian regimes—as exemplified by communism—which combine monopolistic control, pervasive mobilization, and an all-encompassing ideology.

izens to aggregate preferences, protect themselves from unjust policies, and press for legislative change (Howard, 2002). Refugees from authoritarian regimes therefore face a compounded disadvantage: they lack opportunities to acquire civic skills, and their interests remain underrepresented in political decision-making.

Another important factor is attitudinal and behavioral unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices. Political socialization under authoritarian rule has enduring negative effects on migrants' political integration. Individuals raised in non-democratic contexts are not only less exposed to democratic norms and civic responsibilities but also acquire fewer skills and less knowledge necessary for effective engagement in liberal democracies (Black, Niemi and Powell, 1987; Ramakrishnan, 2005; White et al., 2008). This deficit in both civic capacities and democratic norms reduces political participation and undermines the quality of engagement in democratic politics.

Policies in host democracies that seek to instill democratic attitudes and encourage compliance with democratic norms often encounter resistance rooted in prior authoritarian socialization (Joppke, 2007, 2017; Gebhardt, 2016; Barreto et al., 2022). This resistance arises because orientations and learning acquired under non-democratic regimes hinder migrants' ability to internalize democratic norms in host societies (White et al., 2008). A large body of empirical evidence shows that migrants from authoritarian regimes are less likely to endorse democracy (Bilodeau, McAllister and Kanji, 2010; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2020), participate in politics (Bueker, 2005, 2006; Bilodeau, 2008; Just and Anderson, 2012; Lazarova, Saalfeld and Seifert, 2024), and trust political institutions (Voicu and Tufiş, 2017).⁷

We examine which of two factors—the lack of social capital or unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices—poses the more consequential obstacle to democratic integration among migrants from authoritarian regimes. We focus on North Korean defectors in South Korea to assess the relative importance of these factors. North Korea represents a paradigmatic closed autocracy, where coercion, surveillance, and

⁷Unlike other studies in this line of research, Bilodeau, McAllister and Kanji (2010) report that “there is little evidence that pre-migration experience of authoritarianism influences immigrants’ participation in electoral activities in the host country,” a finding that contradicts the research cited above.

ideological indoctrination permeate social life (Byman and Lind, 2010; Lankov, Kwak and Cho, 2012; Dukalskis and Joo, 2021). Defectors typically leave not for economic opportunity but to escape famine, surveillance, coercion, or threats to personal safety. This pattern is reflected in South Korea’s settlement survey, where many cite “avoiding the regime’s surveillance and control” or “perceived risks to personal safety” as their primary motivations for fleeing (Korea Hana Foundation, 2025). Their resettlement in South Korea—a liberal democracy—places them within our scope condition: migrants emerging from repressive autocracy who must adapt to democratic institutions. At the same time, the North Korean context generates strong theoretical expectations for both factors. Extensive repression may undermine social capital—including both bridging ties between defectors and South Koreans and bonding ties among defectors—while the absence of even quasi-democratic institutions may limit exposure to democratic norms and practices. This combination enables a direct empirical assessment of the relative importance of these factors in shaping democratic integration.

3 Case

3.1 The “Korean Experiment”

A central challenge in the study of cross-regime migrant integration is that migrants and natives typically differ along multiple dimensions—ethnicity, language, cultural practices, and historical background—making it difficult to isolate the role of political institutions in shaping democratic integration (Alarian and Neureiter, 2021; Holland, Peters and Zhou, 2024; Alrababa’h et al., 2021; Sides and Citrin, 2007). These factors are often intertwined with both social capital and democratic attitudes, complicating efforts to distinguish among competing explanations for migrants’ political integration (Holland, Peters and Zhou, 2024; Esser, 2006; Tsuda, 2009; Maxwell, 2012; Fouka, 2020). As a result, despite the growing number of cross-regime migrants and the challenges they face in integrating into democratic societies, systematic research on

cross-regime migrant integration remains scarce.

A few notable exceptions attempt to address this important gap by comparing migrants and host-country natives to examine how pre-migratory political socialization shapes integration in new political environments (Gülzau, Helbling and Morgenstern, 2025; Bilodeau, 2008; Bilodeau, McAllister and Kanji, 2010; Fuchs, Fan and von Scheve, 2021). However, because migrants in these settings differ from host populations—and often from one another—along key dimensions such as ethnicity, language, and cultural background, it remains difficult to attribute observed patterns specifically to political socialization under distinct political institutions rather than to these confounding differences.

We address this challenge by leveraging what Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) describe as the “Korean experiment.” The division of the Korean peninsula following World War II created two populations that were historically, ethnically, and linguistically homogeneous but subsequently exposed to sharply divergent political institutions—authoritarianism in the North and democracy in the South—due to exogenous geopolitical forces. This setting holds constant many of the confounding factors that typically complicate migration research while generating substantial variation in political institutions. Building on prior research leveraging the “Korean experiment” (Kim et al., 2017; Hong, Mo and Paik, 2025; Hur, 2023), we directly compare North Korean defectors and native South Koreans in a co-ethnic context to assess how prior exposure to authoritarian institutions shapes democratic integration.⁸ More specifically, we examine whether the challenges of democratic integration stem primarily from a lack of social capital or from unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices.

3.2 North Korean Defectors in South Korea

North Korean defectors in South Korea constitute a distinct population shaped by the legacies of authoritarian rule in their country of origin and unusually favorable

⁸Refer to previous studies that find shared ethnicity facilitates acceptance by host societies (Card, Dustmann and Preston, 2005), but also see work showing that co-ethnic migrants may still face substantial discrimination (Tsuda, 2009; Adida, 2011).

institutional conditions in the host society.

Figure 2 shows annual entries of North Korean defectors to South Korea since the early 2000s. Arrivals peaked in the late 2000s and declined sharply following tightened border controls in the early 2010s under Kim Jong-un, with further reductions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite modest recent increases, inflows remain well below earlier levels. Approximately 35,000 North Korean defectors currently reside in South Korea. Women constitute a substantial majority of this population, reflecting gendered asymmetries in mobility and labor allocation, as men are tied to military service and state institutions under the North Korean regime.

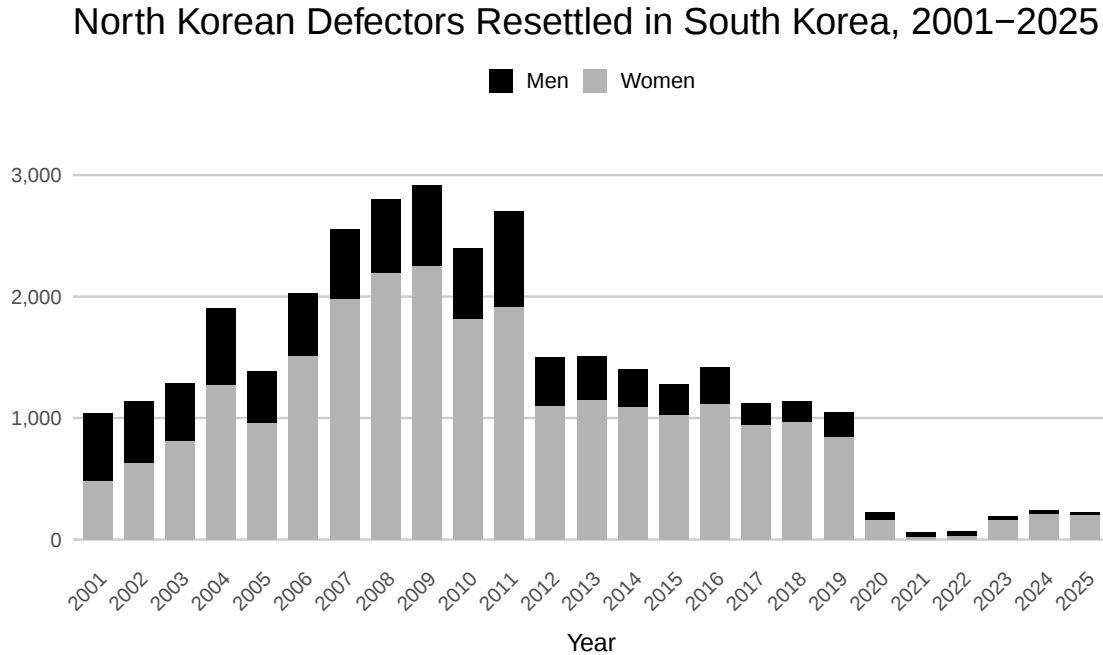


Figure 2: The number of North Korean defectors in the 21st century, by year

North Korea is one of the world’s most closed autocracies: unmonitored social interactions are punished, autonomous civic life is virtually absent, and political surveillance is pervasive ([Lankov, 2015](#)). Although conditions have modestly improved with the rise of the *jangmadang*—quasi-illegal grassroots markets tolerated but not formally sanctioned by the state ([Haggard and Noland, 2010](#))—most citizens continue to live under dense systems of control. Decades of ideological indoctrination have fostered habitual self-censorship, deference to authority, and limited exposure to open disagreement or

deliberation (Lee, 2003, 2024). These conditions hinder both the formation of social capital and the acquisition of democratic attitudes and behaviors, posing significant challenges for democratic integration.

As (Haggard and Noland, 2010) observe, these constraints extend beyond material adaptation to the skills required for functioning in a democratic society:

“Educated in a highly authoritarian and economically decaying state socialist system, North Koreans clearly have remarkable survival skills. Nonetheless, they may or may not possess the skills required to navigate an advanced industrial democracy even where the language barrier is (at least partially) neutralized, as in South Korea.”

Despite these constraints, North Korean defectors enter one of the most favorable institutional environments for democratic integration. The South Korean government provides substantial resources to support defectors’ integration. All defectors complete a 12-week residential program at Hanawon, which offers instruction on South Korean society, career counseling, and basic vocational training. They also receive resettlement support from NGOs (Williams, 2019; Ministry of Unification, 2024) and face no meaningful language barrier (BBC Monitoring, 2019). Crucially, upon arrival, defectors are automatically granted South Korean citizenship,⁹ a factor widely recognized as facilitating political incorporation (Just and Anderson, 2012; Hainmueller, Hangartner and Pietrantuono, 2015, 2017).¹⁰ Taken together, these features create an institutional environment that is among the most favorable for democratic integration.¹¹

Consistent with the theoretical framework developed in the previous section, existing research provides two main accounts of why North Korean defectors struggle to integrate into South Korea. The first highlights a lack of social capital, arguing that

⁹In many contexts, political inclusion is conditional on host-society preferences. Alarian and Zonszein (2025) show that support for extending voting rights to noncitizens varies with their expected partisan alignment, increasing for co-partisans and decreasing for counter-partisans.

¹⁰Refer to Alarian and Goodman (2017) for a general discussion of how citizenship policies in both sending and receiving states shape migration flows.

¹¹While much of the literature emphasizes host-state policies and institutional design, recent work highlights the role of migrants’ beliefs about national belonging in shaping integration outcomes (Hur, 2023).

defectors lack both bonding ties within their own community and bridging ties to South Koreans. [Bidet \(2009\)](#), for example, argues that defectors have “especially low social capital” due to weak ties both within and across communities, a deficit that may undermine integration. Public discourse frequently echoes this view by portraying defectors as isolated and lonely.¹² At the same time, recent research suggests that social capital in North Korea has not simply eroded but has been restructured through marketization: while traditional workplace-based ties have weakened, new forms of market-based social capital have emerged, fostering trust and networks among participants ([Whang et al., 2025](#)). These forms of social capital, however, remain largely instrumental and confined to economic exchange, limiting their relevance for democratic integration.

The second explanation emphasizes unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices resulting from authoritarian socialization. From this perspective, defectors carry norms and behavioral dispositions formed under North Korea’s political institutions that impede adaptation to democratic life in the South. Prior work shows that political socialization in North Korea has durable post-migratory effects on refugees’ political behavior and attitudes, even after resettlement ([Kim and Ishiyama, 2026](#)). Studies further find that early socialization through schooling or party membership is associated with anti-democratic attitudes ([Oh and Park, 2019](#)) and support for strong, unconstrained leadership ([Ishiyama and Kim, 2024](#)). At the same time, some forms of political participation—most notably voting—may persist after migration, reflecting habitual or duty-based behavior rather than full adaptation to democratic norms. Importantly, [Hur \(2018, 2019\)](#) show that co-national identification with South Koreans can extend a “communal script of duty to the nation,” leading defectors to view democratic acts such as voting as civic obligations. This finding highlights that participation may be motivated by perceived duty rather than by internalized democratic norms. Overall, however, the broader evidence suggests that prolonged exposure to North Korea’s political institutions leaves many defectors unfamiliar with democratic

¹²In contrast, [Choi, Lee and Lee \(2020\)](#) find that defectors behave more altruistically than South Koreans in dictator games—even when allocations are based on individually earned income—suggesting prosocial orientations that do not map neatly onto a simple social-capital-deficit narrative.

norms and practices and hesitant to engage in deliberative or participatory aspects of democratic life after resettlement.

Taken together, existing research provides important insights into the challenges North Korean defectors face after resettlement. However, it remains unclear which of these factors poses the more consequential obstacle to democratic integration. Existing studies typically rely on within-defector variation, comparing individuals with different backgrounds or levels of exposure within the defector population (Hur, 2018; Whang et al., 2025; Ishiyama and Kim, 2024). While informative, this approach lacks a clear counterfactual relative to the host population and therefore provides limited leverage for adjudicating between competing explanations. As a result, existing evidence cannot determine whether lower democratic integration is driven primarily by deficits in social capital or by unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices.

4 Concepts, Hypotheses, and Measurements

We study democratic integration as reflected in observable political behavior, such as voting, participation, and public deliberation. A central challenge is that such behavior may arise from two distinct sources: intrinsic democratic attitudes or social compliance. To clarify this distinction, we define three related concepts—democratic attitudes, norms, and social capital—and map them onto our empirical strategy.

Norms are informal behavioral rules based on shared expectations about what others will do and what people believe others think they ought to do (Helmke and Rath, 2025). Norms involve preferences that are conditional on mutual expectations and inherently social (Bicchieri, 2016). Democratic *attitudes* are a person’s innate ranking of policy or regime options without regard to others’ perceived expectations or behavior. Both democratic attitudes and norms uphold democratic principles such as voting, voluntary public deliberation, and tolerance. People who engage in these behaviors unconditionally and without regard to what society requires because they enjoy them or obtain utility from doing them are motivated by democratic attitudes. The defining

feature of democratic norms, by contrast, is their conditionality: individuals comply only if (1) they expect others to comply and (2) they believe others expect them to comply.

Social capital provides the context in which social expectations are formed and enforced. Following Putnam (2000b), we define social capital as social norms and the social networks that support them. It captures individuals’ exposure to social expectations and their responsiveness to them. This includes prosocial orientations—such as altruism, trust, and cooperation—as well as network characteristics—such as membership in social organizations—that shape the scope of social influence.

In this article, we do not directly measure democratic norms. Instead, we treat norms as latent expectations about democratic behavior and assess their role indirectly by comparing observed behavior with independently measured democratic attitudes and social capital. This approach allows us to adjudicate whether limited democratic integration is primarily driven by weak democratic attitudes or by lack of social capital.

To formalize this distinction, we introduce a simple framework. We define a bit of notation to clarify the discussion of our understanding of various claims about the democratic integration of migrants from autocratic regimes and about our measurement of key concepts. We assume a person i will participate in a democratic process (*e.g.* vote, attend a rally, publicly discuss policy) if

$$U_i = v_i + s(n_i) - e_i > 0$$

where:

- $v_i \in \mathbb{R}$ is i ’s net intrinsic utility from engaging in political action for their preferred cause. As such it is determined by i ’s *democratic attitudes*¹³.
- $s(n_i) \in \mathbb{R}$ is the social benefits that i obtains and the social costs that are avoided

¹³Two further remarks on v_i : Political participation may be costly (time lost from waiting in line to vote, the stress one feels from expressing one’s political views publicly). As stated above v_i is the net utility for participation after subtracting these costs and v_i may be less than zero. Second, we can safely assume that none of the people in our sample will have an appreciable effect on the adoption of policy so we dispense with concerns about participating instrumentally to effect the policy outcome.

for complying with social norms. $s(n_i)$ is assumed to be increasing in the size of i 's social network, n_i .

- e_i is random variable with cumulative distribution function $F(e)$.

Person i will participate politically if $U_i = v_i + s(n_i) > e_i$ which can be estimated in various ways depending on assumptions about the distribution of e_i .

From our reading of the literature, each of these parameters (with the exception of e_i obviously) is hypothesized to differ between NKs and SKs in ways that can explain NKs' lesser democratic integration. The parameter v_i captures i 's democratic *attitudes*. Because SKs were well-socialized into a vibrant democratic polity they are hypothesized to gain greater intrinsic utility from democratic institutions and political participation than NKs are who were actively punished for expressing themselves politically in ways that were not encouraged by the state. By this hypothesis, a preference for political participation was nurtured in SKs but subdued in NKs. For the same reason SKs are assumed to be more interested in and better informed about politics and policy than their NK counterparts. On average then v_i is hypothesized to be greater for SKs than NKs. Similarly due to their socialization from a young age in a democratic country SKs should bear fewer costs of participation than NKs. It may be easier for them to gather the information necessary to participate. They will be more accustomed to voting their conscience and engaging in deliberative discussion and therefore find those activities less stressful. NKs, by contrast, learned from their youth that such activities were shameful and dangerous. This indoctrination may be deeply rooted in the two populations, thus v_i should be lower on average for NKs than SKs.

The role of social capital in shaping political participation has been widely debated in the literature. The argument that social capital fosters democratic political participation and that a shortage of social capital erodes it is most famously associated with Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993). Others have corroborated the claim empirically since that time (Krishna, 2002; Nyqvist et al., 2024). However, the claim was met with skepticism almost immediately. Studies showed that the link was weak or non-existent (Booth and Bayer Richard, 1998; Teney and Hanquinet, 2012) or that social capital

might even be pernicious to democratic political participation (Berman, 1997; Portes, 1998; Satyanath, Voigtländer and Voth, 2017). In the context of migrant integration, research suggests that social capital—particularly associational embeddedness within ethnic and cross-ethnic networks—facilitates political participation by strengthening civic community and network-based mobilization (Fennema and Tillie, 1999; Jacobs and Tillie, 2004).¹⁴ Some sources, mentioned above, claim that NKs’ social networks are woefully sparse. If Putnam’s hypothesis is correct this relative lack of social capital may explain NKs’ non-compliance with social norms, including democratic norms.

For all of these reasons, NKs are hypothesized to have a relatively low value of U_i , like $\underline{\underline{U}}$, and SKs are hypothesized to have a relatively high value, like $\underline{U}$, as shown in Figure 3. A person with $U_i = \underline{\underline{U}}$ will participate only if they draw an e_i in the dark gray region, while a person with $U_i = \underline{U}$ will participate with a draw of e_i in the union of the dark gray and light gray regions. The former occurs with probability $\underline{\underline{F}}$, while the latter occurs with probability $\underline{F} > \underline{\underline{F}}$.

The foregoing discussion generates hypotheses that we test using surveys and behavioral observation in the lab in Seoul, South Korea. Table 1 summarizes how we operationalize each of the main concepts.

The first set of hypotheses—indeed the ones that motivated this research—is the concern that NKs are not fully integrating into South Korean society and that their political participation is lower than that of their SK counterparts.

Hypothesis 1 *NKs participate less in political activities than SKs.*

We collected several survey-based measures of political participation. We asked respondents whether they voted in the most recent national and local elections (coded as one if they did and zero otherwise). We also asked about other forms of political participation, including attending a rally or campaign event related to elections, joining a political party, donating money to a political party or candidate, persuading others to vote for a specific party or candidate during an election, volunteering for a party or

¹⁴While our results do not go as far as that last claim they do raise questions about the strength of the link between social capital and political participation, at least for NKs.

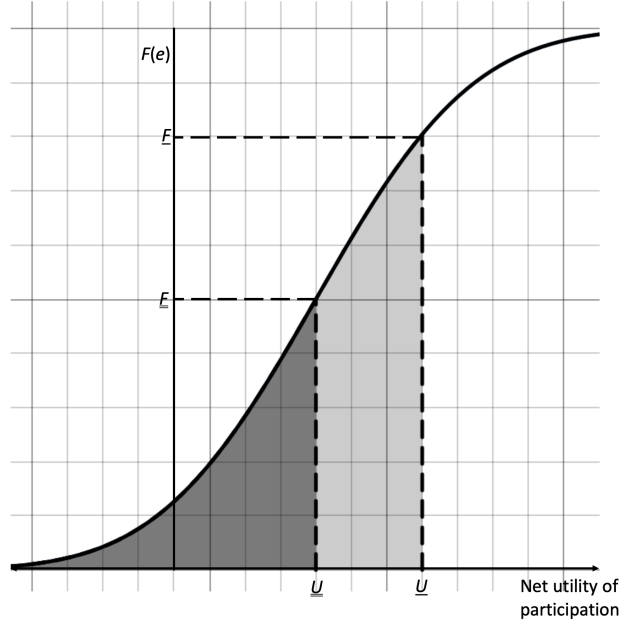


Figure 3: $F(e)$ is a hypothetical cumulative distribution function for the error term e_i . NKs are hypothesized to have a relatively low value of U_i like $\underline{U}$ and SKs are hypothesized to have a relatively high value, like $\bar{U}$. A person with $U_i = \underline{U}$ will participate only if they draw an e_i in the dark gray region, while a person with $U_i = \bar{U}$ will participate with a draw of e_i in the union of the dark gray and light gray regions. The former occurs with probability $\underline{F}$ while the latter occurs with probability $\bar{F} > \underline{F}$.

Table 1: Summary of measures of concepts

Concept	Measures
Total utility from participation, U_i	Survey: Self-reported voting Survey: Other forms of political participation Survey: Frequency of political discussion Lab: Signing a petition Lab: Participation in public deliberation
Social capital, $s(n_i)$	Survey: Prosocial behavior Survey: Membership in social organizations Lab: Prosocial behavior
Democratic attitudes, v_i	Survey: Political interest Survey: Anti-democratic attitudes Survey: Political knowledge Lab: Implicit Association Test (IAT)

candidate during an election, joining an online community related to politics or current affairs, posting or commenting on a political or current affairs topic on an online forum, posting online in support of or opposition to a party or candidate during an election, and participating in a protest or demonstration, either online or offline. These items were coded as one if the respondent reported participation and zero otherwise. While these measures capture a broad range of political activities, they rely on self-reports and may not fully reflect willingness to engage in politically sensitive or socially costly actions.

To address this limitation, we measure political participation using a petition experiment in which participants were asked whether they would sign a petition criticizing China’s policy of forced repatriation of North Korean refugees living in China. The issue is directly tied to the protection of vulnerable minorities, a core principle of liberal democracy (Kymlicka, 1995; Rawls, 1971), and is highly salient among North Korean defectors, many of whom face this risk during their escape. Following Paler, Marshall and Atallah (2018), we introduce social costs by informing participants that their signatures could be publicly disclosed online, allowing us to capture willingness to engage in politically sensitive action under potential social exposure and stigma rather than abstract support for a cause. Because participation in this issue is expected to be relatively high compared to more general political issues, any observed gap between NKs and SKs should therefore be interpreted as a conservative estimate of differences in democratic engagement. The outcome is coded as one if the participant signed the petition and zero otherwise.

Hypothesis 2 *NKs participate less in political discussions than SKs do.*

In addition to these measures, we examine a specific form of political participation—public discussion of policy preferences. We expect that NKs, who were socialized to suppress personal political views, will be less willing to engage in such discussions. To capture this, we ask a survey question on how frequently respondents participated in political discussions with other Koreans over the past year, measured on a five-point

scale from one (never) to five (almost every day).

To complement this self-reported measure and address concerns about reporting bias, we measure deliberative participation using structured discussion settings in the lab. Deliberative participation is central to democratic integration, as it reflects individuals’ willingness to express their views in public and engage with disagreement through discussion in the public sphere (Habermas, 1985; Cohen, 2005). Participants are assigned to groups of twelve and engage in moderated discussions on two policy issues: (1) the use of personal data for COVID-19 control without explicit consent, which highlights the trade-off between individual privacy and public health, and (2) the legality of sending propaganda balloons into North Korea, which raises tensions between freedom of expression and national security. These topics are designed to capture value trade-offs central to democratic politics. Our outcome measure is the number of times each participant speaks during the discussion, capturing their willingness to express political views in a public setting. This provides a behavioral measure of deliberative participation.¹⁵

While these measures capture democratic integration as reflected in observable political participation, they do not directly identify the underlying components of the model. None of these measures provide data on the individual parameters v_i and $s(n_i)$. By hypothesis, people participate when $v_i + s(n_i) \geq e_i$, so we only retrieve a reduced form. To get more fine-tuned measures of v_i and $s(n_i)$, we therefore gathered other measures. First, we gathered measures of their social networks and compliance with non-political social norms. These hypotheses claim that NKs’ lack of political participation is a symptom, and perhaps an effect, of a broader lack of social integration and social capital, which brings us to the hypotheses about social capital.

Hypothesis 3 *NKs will be less compliant with social norms than SKs.*

Hypothesis 4 *NKs will have smaller social networks than SKs.*

¹⁵Detailed procedures and implementation of the deliberation experiment are provided in the Supplementary Information.

Using Putnam’s (2000a) well-known definition of social capital as “... social networks and the norms ... that arise from them,” we measure social capital in three ways. First, we measure compliance with social norms using survey-based measures of civic engagement. Respondents were asked about their participation in a range of public-oriented activities, such as joining a civic organization to address public issues, engaging in collective action with other citizens, participating in public hearings or meetings hosted by government agencies, visiting government offices to address public concerns, and contacting government officials via letter, email, or phone.

Second, we measure social networks through self-reported membership in social organizations, including civic organizations, labor unions, political organizations, neighborhood associations, volunteer clubs, religious groups, alumni associations, hobbies or sports groups, and occupational organizations.¹⁶

Third, we use behavioral games in the lab to measure compliance with social norms, each designed to capture a distinct component: altruism (dictator game), trust (trust game), and cooperation (public goods game). While these norms may support democratic functioning, we do not treat them as democratic norms per se. Rather, they capture general pro-social norms that are necessary for any well-functioning society, including non-democracies, and we therefore distinguish them from democratic attitudes and behaviors.¹⁷

Once we have addressed NKs’ stock of social capital and compliance with social norms we will turn to a second explanation for their lack of political participation—their attitude toward democracy, which we discussed above as a net intrinsic utility for democratic participation, v_i .

Hypothesis 5 *NKs will express less political interest than SKs do.*

Assuming people spend less effort learning about things they are less interested leads to:

¹⁶We also asked about membership in a North Korean defector organization but do not include it in the estimates because it is perfectly collinear with our main independent variable, defector status. About 39 percent of defectors report membership in such organizations.

¹⁷See the Supplementary Information for detailed experimental procedures.

Hypothesis 6 *NKs will possess less political knowledge than SKs do.*

Assuming people feel less efficacious about things they know less about leads to:

Hypothesis 7 *NKs will express less political efficacy than SKs do.*

To test hypothesis 5, we use a survey question that asks respondents how interested they are in politics. This variable takes on values from one (no interest) to five (very interested). For hypothesis 6, we measure respondents' political knowledge using a battery of nine factual questions about the Korean political system.¹⁸ We measure political efficacy for hypothesis 7 using respondents' level of agreement with a set of statements, each on a four-point scale from one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree).¹⁹

Hypothesis 8 *NKs will express more implicit bias in favor of North Korea's political institutions than SKs do.*

Hypothesis 9 *NKs will express more anti-democratic attitudes than SKs do.*

We collect two additional measures of attitudes toward democratic political systems: survey responses capturing support for democracy and an Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Schimmack, 2021). The IAT is a reaction-time-based measure that captures automatic associations between concepts and evaluative attributes. Participants categorize stimuli consisting of political institutions—such as the South Korean National Assembly, a ballot box icon, the emblem of the Workers' Party of Korea, and North Korean political symbols—alongside evaluative adjectives. The evaluative dimension includes positively valenced words (“smart,” “trustworthy,” “competent,” “honorable”) and negatively valenced words (“foolish,” “untrustworthy,” “incompetent,” “shameful”). Differences in reaction times across tasks provide a measure of implicit attitudes toward political systems. More negative scores indicate a stronger

¹⁸See the Supplementary Information for the full list of items.

¹⁹See the Supplementary Information for the full list of items.

implicit preference for North Korea, while more positive scores indicate a stronger implicit preference for South Korea.

To cross-check this implicit measure, we also collect survey-based indicators of democratic attitudes using a set of eight questions about respondents’ support for democracy and autocratic alternatives. Six of the items express anti-democratic sentiments, while two express pro-democratic views; the latter are reverse coded so that higher values consistently reflect more anti-democratic attitudes.²⁰

5 Data Collection

One important concern in studying North Korean defectors is the possibility that recalling experiences from North Korea or discussing politically sensitive topics may induce retraumatization among vulnerable participants. Many defectors have experienced famine, surveillance, coercion, violence, or prolonged insecurity prior to migration, raising important ethical concerns about research participation. To address these concerns, before data collection, we implemented a three-step precautionary protocol to prevent retraumatization among vulnerable participants (Son, 2025).

First, we collaborated with local experts to review all survey instruments and lab-in-the-field experimental protocols. These included officials from North Korean defector associations and NGOs working on resettlement and welfare. Based on their feedback, we revised all materials to remove or modify content that could trigger post-traumatic stress.

Second, we conducted pilot surveys and lab-in-the-field experiments with a small sample of North Korean defectors ($N = 30$) in partnership with the Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights. We closely monitored participants during and after the pilot to detect any signs of distress or unintended harm, and further adjusted the protocols accordingly.

Third, we recruited and trained research assistants in research ethics and study

²⁰See the Supplementary Information for the full list of items.

protocols. Training was conducted by one of the PIs and included both instruction and supervised field practice during the pilot phase. Research assistants were continuously monitored, and we provided individualized feedback to ensure strict adherence to ethical standards and experimental procedures.²¹

After addressing ethical concerns, we collected samples from North Korean defectors and native South Koreans. Most existing studies recruit North Korean defectors through survey firms such as NK Social Research and Woorion. While this approach provides convenient access to respondents, it may introduce selection bias, as such firms often operate in close collaboration with NGOs, potentially skewing the sample toward individuals already embedded in civic networks and more likely to be socially connected, institutionally engaged, and better adapted to democratic settings. In addition, repeated exposure to survey instruments—particularly on political and democratic topics—may prime respondents, potentially shaping their responses in systematic ways.

To mitigate these concerns, we adopted a prolonged and decentralized recruitment strategy rather than relying exclusively on commercial survey firms. We recruited participants through multiple channels commonly used by North Korean defectors, including official websites of defector organizations, KakaoTalk group chats composed primarily of defectors, church-based communication networks, NGO contact networks, and cohort-based associations organized around year of defection or resettlement. We also hired a local field manager who had worked for more than a decade in North Korean defector NGOs. This enabled us to approach potential participants through established outreach channels, particularly among defectors who were unfamiliar with or hesitant to participate in academic research. By diversifying recruitment channels beyond established survey panels, our strategy aimed to reduce dependence on respondents who were already highly exposed to civic organizations, advocacy networks, or repeated survey participation.

²¹We also recruited a subset of research assistants from North Korean defector college students to help anticipate and address potential issues arising from interactions between participants and research staff.

Using this recruitment strategy, 342 individuals applied to participate, from which we constructed a sample of 189 North Korean defectors that approximates the population distribution in terms of age and gender.²² For the South Korean comparison group ($N = 179$), we recruited participants through an online survey platform using quota sampling to match the national distribution of age and gender. We do not balance the two groups on socio-economic characteristics, as doing so would obscure meaningful structural differences between North Korean defectors and native South Koreans—differences that likely shape how post-migration environments influence political attitudes and behaviors.²³

Fieldwork, including surveys and lab-in-the-field experiments, was conducted between July 2024 and January 2025. Participants were assigned to sessions in groups of twelve, all of which took place in a seminar room. Each session was conducted by one PI, one local manager, and at least six research assistants. The PI provided standardized instructions and administered the study in the following order: survey, implicit association test (IAT), lab-in-the-field experiments (dictator, trust, and public goods games), and a discussion game. Research assistants each assisted two participants and intervened only when clarification of procedures was required. All responses were recorded individually on separate laptops in private settings to minimize social influence and ensure confidentiality. To further protect anonymity, participants were identified by numeric ID badges rather than names throughout the sessions. Sessions typically lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours.

6 Results

6.1 Main Results

We estimate the following specification:

²²Although we do not formally quantify prior survey exposure, a substantial share of participants indicated during recruitment that this was their first time participating in a study of this kind.

²³Refer to the Supplementary Information for detailed sample characteristics.

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 NK_i + \beta_2(NK_i \times Years_i) + X_i' \gamma + \varepsilon_i,$$

where NK_i is an indicator equal to one for North Korean defectors and zero for South Korean natives, $Years_i$ measures the number of years defectors have spent in South Korea, and X_i is a vector of individual-level controls, including sex, age, income, marital status, education, religion, and employment status.

In all of the tables that follow, we present three estimates of interest. The first, which we call $\hat{\beta}_1$, is the estimated coefficient on the variable that equals one for NKs and zero for SKs. Second, we report the estimated coefficient $\hat{\beta}_2$, which is an interaction term between the NK indicator and the number of years NKs had spent in South Korea at the time of our survey. We expect differences between NKs and SKs to be greatest for recent defectors and to diminish over time as NKs increasingly come to resemble SKs in their attitudes and behaviors. Third, we are interested in an overall measure of differences in attitudes and behaviors between NKs and SKs. To that end, we present an estimate of the linear combination $\hat{\beta}_1 + 12 \times \hat{\beta}_2$. Twelve is the median number of years NKs in our sample had spent in South Korea, so this linear combination provides an overall estimated difference between NKs and SKs.

The above specification is based on two competing theoretical perspectives on migrant integration. On the one hand, the settled disposition or resistance model predicts that pre-migratory political socialization has enduring effects and may be resistant to change (White et al., 2008; Merelman, 1986). In this framework, β_1 captures the initial gap in democratic attitudes and behaviors between North Korean defectors and South Korean natives. On the other hand, the exposure or active updating model predicts that migrants revise their attitudes and behaviors as they are exposed to new political institutions (White et al., 2008; Kiley and Vaisey, 2020). To capture this adaptation process, we interact the North Korean indicator with years spent in South Korea, where β_2 reflects how the initial gap changes over time. We further evaluate the linear combination $\hat{\beta}_1 + 12 \times \hat{\beta}_2$ to provide a summary measure of the difference after sustained

exposure to democratic institutions in South Korea.

In several cases, we used multiple measures for the underlying latent variables of interest. In those cases, we estimated average effects using all measures of each latent variable, as recommended by Kling, Liebman and Katz (2007) and Clingingsmith, Khwaja and Kremer (2009). We label columns reporting these estimates as “Avg. Effects” to distinguish them from standard regression estimates. Furthermore, as mentioned above, we used both behavioral and survey measures in this research. We use “Lab” to label columns where estimates are based on behavioral observations in the lab and “Survey” when estimates are based on survey responses. We estimate models with dichotomous dependent variables using the linear probability model.

We tested hypothesis 1 by examining NKs’ political participation compared to SKs. Consistent with hypothesis 1:

Finding 1 *NKs participate less in democratic politics than SKs.*

Table 2 contains the relevant estimates. We use four different measures of political participation, one based on observed behavior in the lab and the other three based on self-reported behavior in our survey. As shown in the first column of Table 2, we found no significant differences in linear probability estimates of NKs’ and SKs’ willingness to sign the petition in the lab, contrary to our expectations. North Korean defectors were only about three percentage points less likely to sign the petition on average, and this difference dissipated by about one-half of a percentage point per year the defector lived in South Korea, as shown by the estimate $\hat{\beta}_2$ in Table 2. All of these estimates are associated with high p -values.

Our first two survey measures of political participation use responses to questions about whether subjects reported voting in the latest national and local elections. These variables are coded as one if they voted and zero otherwise. Both coefficients $\hat{\beta}_1$ are negative, indicating that North Korean defectors are less likely to self-report voting in either election. For the national election, the estimate is significant at the two-percent level, and for the local election it is significant at the 6.7-percent level. These effects dissipate over time for national elections but not for local elections. North Korean

defectors appear to be less likely to vote in local elections regardless of how long they have lived in South Korea. Even after twelve years, NKs are almost 18 percentage points less likely to vote in local elections, although they do appear to vote similarly to SKs in national elections.

Table 2: Political participation of North Korean defectors

	Avg. Effect				
	Lab: Signed Petition	Survey: Voted National	Survey: Voted Local	Survey: Political Participation	All Four Measures
NKs ($\hat{\beta}_1$)	-0.0332 (0.775)	-0.211* (0.020)	-0.174+ (0.067)	-0.119 (0.322)	-0.220+ (0.053)
Years since arrival ($\hat{\beta}_2$)	0.00520 (0.429)	0.0156* (0.005)	-0.000265 (0.962)	0.00179 (0.811)	0.00756 (0.274)
$\hat{\beta}_1 + 12 \times \hat{\beta}_2$	0.0291 (0.682)	-0.0239 (0.550)	-0.177* (0.002)	-0.0975 (0.193)	-0.129* (0.049)
N	368	368	368	368	368
adj. R^2	-0.003	0.103	0.068		
p -values in parentheses				+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$	

The fourth column of Table 2 presents average-effects estimates based on subjects' answers to nine questions about their political participation. For each of these activities, subjects were assigned a score of one if they reported participating and zero otherwise, creating nine different dichotomous measures of political participation. Across these nine indicators, defectors were about 0.12 standard deviations less likely to self-report participating in these activities on average, but this effect is not significantly different from zero and dissipates slightly over time. A defector who had spent twelve years in South Korea was almost 0.10 standard deviations less likely to participate, with a p -value of 19 percent.

Finally, in the fifth column we estimated the average effect across all four of these measures. NKs were about 0.22 standard deviations less likely to participate than native SKs, and this effect is significant at the 5.3-percent level. It dissipates over time, but even after twelve years NKs were almost 0.13 standard deviations less likely

to participate in these ways than SKs were, and this difference is significantly different from zero at the 4.9-percent level. Overall, then, the conventional wisdom is supported by these results—NKs participate less in politics than SKs do. These results were particularly pronounced in (self-reported) voting.

Another important element of democratic political participation that we study is policy discussion and deliberation (Manin, 1987; Myers and Mendelberg, 2013). In Table 3, we turn to the topic of NKs’ participation in political discussions. We used both self-reported behavior from a survey and observed behavior in our two discussion topics in the lab. The results show notable reticence among NKs to engage in political discussions.

Finding 2 *NKs participate less in political discussion and deliberation than SKs.*

This finding supports hypothesis 2.

The first column reports coefficients from responses to the question about how often subjects participated in political discussions with other Koreans over the past year. We used a five-point scale ranging from one (never) to five (very frequently). On average, North Korean defectors’ responses were almost one full point lower on that five-point scale than those of their South Korean counterparts. This difference was less pronounced for defectors who had spent more time in South Korea, as shown by the coefficient in the second row of the table, but even this coefficient indicates that a defector would have to spend approximately 30 years in South Korea before their responses would resemble those of the average South Korean. The linear combination in the third row shows that even a defector who had spent the median number of years in South Korea (twelve) still scored one-half point lower on this scale than SKs did, and this difference is highly significant.

The next two sets of estimates use our observations during subjects’ discussions in the lab. The second column in Table 3 presents results using the data on the COVID discussion, and the third column presents results using the data from the balloon discussion. The dependent variable in these results takes on a value of one

Table 3: Participation in political discussion

	Survey: Political Discussion	Lab: COVID Discussion	Lab: Balloon Discussion	Avg. Effect All Three Measures
NKs ($\hat{\beta}_1$)	-0.963* (0.000)	-0.224+ (0.071)	-0.0157 (0.901)	-0.498* (0.003)
Years since arrival ($\hat{\beta}_2$)	0.0351* (0.013)	0.00636 (0.353)	-0.00793 (0.251)	0.0110 (0.231)
$\hat{\beta}_1 + 12 \times \hat{\beta}_2$	-0.542* (0.000)	-0.148* (0.044)	-0.111 (0.143)	-0.366* (0.000)
N	368	368	368	368
adj. R^2	0.072	0.111	0.061	
p -values in parentheses			+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$	

if the subject spoke at all during the discussion and zero otherwise. We estimate the coefficients using a linear probability model. The results in the second column, which are significant at about the seven-percent level, show that the probability that a defector would speak in these sessions was about 22 percentage points lower than it was for South Koreans. This difference was reduced for each additional year an NK spent in South Korea, but even after twelve years NKs were almost 15 percentage points less likely to speak at all, as shown by the linear combination in the third row. The results for the balloon discussion, listed in the third column, do not show any significant differences between the propensity of NKs and SKs to speak. The estimated difference is only about 1.6 percent for a newly arrived NK. Unlike the other estimates in this table, the coefficient on the interaction term was negative, but one should not read too much into these results. The p -values on all of the coefficients in this specification are high, so the results are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Finally, the fourth column presents the average effect across all three of these measures. It shows that North Koreans were almost one-half of a standard deviation less likely to participate in a discussion (either in the lab or self-reported) than South Koreans were. This effect does not appear to change much with the time North Koreans

spend in South Korea. As indicated by the linear combination in the last row and column of the table, NKs were still over 36 percent of a standard deviation less participatory even after being in the country for twelve years. North Koreans' willingness to engage in political discussions does not seem to improve with time in South Korea. Even after a fair amount of time in South Korea, NKs find it difficult to participate in democratic deliberation compared to their SK counterparts. Again, the conventional wisdom is supported. NKs are less willing to engage in political discussions than SKs are.

We have established that NKs are less politically engaged than SKs according to our measures of political participation. We next turn to the question of diagnosis with an eye toward developing a cure. There are two kinds of diagnoses in the literature. The first is that NKs lack social capital (have low $s(n_i)$ in our terminology). Lacking social capital—norms and the social networks that support them—NKs do not comply with democratic participatory norms, or so the argument goes.

Recall that we measure compliance with social norms of altruism, trust, and contribution to the public good using three behavioral activities in the lab and survey questions about subjects' participation in other public-goods activities in their communities.

Finding 3 *NKs exhibit levels of compliance with the social norms of altruism, trust, and contribution to public goods comparable to those of SKs.*

Thus we can reject hypothesis 3.

We measured subjects' networks using survey questions about the groups to which they belong. The results indicate that NKs are not significantly lacking in social capital compared to SKs.

Finding 4 *NKs have social networks comparable to those of SKs.*

This finding is inconsistent with hypothesis 4.

None of the three coefficients on the defector indicator are remotely significantly different from zero. Furthermore, the coefficients on defectors' years since arrival in

South Korea show that their social capital improves with time spent in South Korea. The combined effects of these two coefficients for a defector who had spent 12 years in South Korea are presented in Table 4. The median number of years since arrival is 12. In short, even North Koreans who recently defected are statistically indistinguishable from native South Koreans in terms of social capital and, for the median defector, belong to significantly *more* groups than our South Korean subjects.

Table 4: Social capital of North Korean defectors compared to native South Koreans

	Average Effects Estimates		
	Lab: Social Norms	Survey: Civic Particip.	Survey: Member- ships
NKs ($\hat{\beta}_1$)	-0.0245 (0.867)	-0.108 (0.446)	0.00952 (0.926)
Years since arrival ($\hat{\beta}_2$)	0.0104 (0.189)	0.0171 ⁺ (0.058)	0.0107 ⁺ (0.082)
$\hat{\beta}_1 + 12 \times \hat{\beta}_2$	0.100 (0.310)	0.0979 (0.308)	0.138* (0.047)
N	368	368	368
p -values in parentheses		⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$	

Together, **Findings 3** and **4** indicate that NKs do not lack social capital compared to SKs and suggest that NKs' lower levels of political participation may be due to other factors.

The second possible reason for NKs' relative lack of political participation is weaker innate preferences for democracy/democratic attitudes, v_i in our terminology. We measure u_i in four distinct ways: a survey question about respondents' interest in politics, respondents' performance on a quiz testing their political knowledge, their performance on an implicit association test (IAT) measuring their innate bias in favor of North Korea and against South Korea, and respondents' answers to survey questions about the pros and cons of democracy.

One way a lack of democratic attitudes may manifest is through a lack of interest in democratic politics. We turn to this explanation in the first column of Table 5. The

estimates show that North Korean defectors are significantly less interested in politics. The political-interest dependent variable in this regression takes on values from one (no interest) to five (very interested). The estimates suggest that a defector who has just arrived will express political interest more than one-half point lower on this five-point scale than a native South Korean. This effect dissipates over time spent in the country, so at the median number of years since arrival (twelve), a defector is about 0.26 points lower on that five-point scale of political interest than a native South Korean in our sample. To summarize:

Finding 5 *NKs have lower levels of political interest than SKs do.*

This finding supports hypothesis 5.

Citizens with weak pro-democratic attitudes would be expected to spend less of their scarce time learning about their democratic government; thus, another way that a lack of pro-democratic attitudes may manifest is as a low level of political knowledge. We asked each subject nine questions. This variable measures the number of correct responses. “Don’t know” responses were counted as incorrect. A newly arrived NK answered about one additional question incorrectly on this nine-question test. After twelve years in the country, NKs still answered more than one-half question incorrectly on average compared to SKs.

Finding 6 *NKs possess less political knowledge than SKs do.*

This finding is consistent with hypothesis 6.

Surprisingly, and contrary to our expectations, NKs do not feel particularly inefficacious. Coefficients on average effects can be interpreted as percentages of a standard deviation of the dependent variables. The coefficients on both the zero-one DPRK variable and its interaction with years in South Korea are substantively small, and they are statistically close to zero. This result is somewhat unexpected given NKs’ relative lack of political knowledge, but some of it may be explained by their lack of political interest—it is possible that they do not feel inefficacious about activities in

Table 5: Political interest, knowledge and efficacy of North Korean defectors

	Political interest	Political knowledge	Avg. Effect: Political efficacy
NKs ($\hat{\beta}_1$)	-0.560* (0.005)	-0.986* (0.014)	0.181 (0.264)
Years since arrival ($\hat{\beta}_2$)	0.0250* (0.024)	0.0330 (0.163)	-0.0057 (0.554)
$\hat{\beta}_1 + 12 \times \hat{\beta}_2$	-0.260* (0.030)	-0.589* (0.004)	0.113 (0.241)
N	368	368	368
adj. R^2	0.046	0.110	
p -values in parentheses		+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$	

which they have little interest. An alternative explanation is NKs' frame of comparison. Even though they may have less political efficacy compared to SKs, they have a great deal more political efficacy than they did in North Korea.²⁴ These interpretations are speculative, and we must reject Hypothesis 7:

Finding 7 *NKs express similar levels of political efficacy as SKs.*

Finally, we turn to more direct measures of democratic attitudes: the IAT and a survey of anti-democratic opinions. The densities of the IAT scores for North Korean defectors and native South Koreans are shown in Figure 4. One can observe from visual inspection that the density for native South Koreans is more negatively skewed than that for defectors. The results in the first column of Table 6 corroborate this initial impression. North Korean defectors exhibited a significant implicit bias against South Korea. Their score was 0.552 lower, a very large difference comprising about one-third of the total span of the measure. This bias dissipates over time, as shown by the estimate $\hat{\beta}_2$ in the second row, but it apparently does so quite slowly. Even after

²⁴This explanation is consistent with previous studies showing that migration experience increases individuals' knowledge and confidence in dealing with complex situations (Pantoja and Segura, 2003; Williams and Baláz, 2005). See also Johns, Langer and Peters (2022), who show that migrants can act as agents of transnational justice.

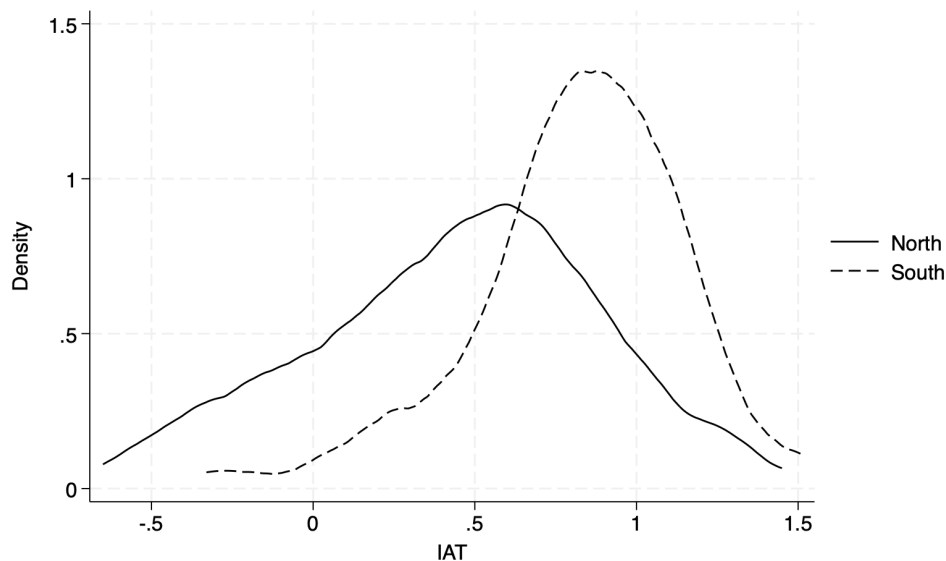


Figure 4: Kernel density plots of IAT scores for North and South Koreans

12 years, defectors still show a significant implicit bias of almost 0.4 in favor of North Korea. In summary:

Finding 8 *NKs exhibit significantly less implicit bias in favor of South Korea’s democratic institutions than SKs do.*

This finding supports hypothesis 8.

For the estimates in the second column of Table 6, we used subjects’ responses to the eight questions about their level of agreement with statements about democracy, ranging from one (strongly agree) to four (strongly disagree). The responses were coded so that anti-democratic responses were always higher. The results indicate that NKs’ agreement with anti-democratic statements (or disagreement with pro-democratic ones) was almost 50 percent of a standard deviation higher than that of native South Koreans. This effect is substantively large, at the high end of a “medium” effect according to Cohen’s d , and it is highly significant statistically. As in other estimates in this study, these differences dissipated over the course of defectors’ time in South Korea, but as shown by the linear combination in the final row, even after twelve years defectors agreed with anti-democratic sentiments almost 29 percent of a standard

Table 6: Implicit bias for North Korea and anti-democratic opinions

	Lab: IAT	Avg. Effect Survey: Anti-democratic Opinions
NKs ($\hat{\beta}_1$)	-0.552* (0.000)	0.469* (0.002)
Years since arrival ($\hat{\beta}_2$)	0.0130* (0.019)	-0.0151+ (0.066)
$\hat{\beta}_1 + 12 \times \hat{\beta}_2$	-0.395* (0.000)	0.288* (0.001)
N	368	368
adj. R^2	0.188	
p -values in parentheses, + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$		

deviation more than SKs did, and this difference has a p -value of 0.001. These results clearly indicate:

Finding 9 *NKs exhibit greater implicit bias toward autocratic institutions than SKs do.*

This finding is consistent with hypothesis 9.

Taken together, the results show that the democratic integration of North Korean defectors (NKs) is hindered not by a lack of social capital, but by weaker democratic attitudes. NKs exhibit levels of altruism, trust, cooperation, and social-network membership comparable to those of South Koreans (SKs). Instead, they display lower political interest and political knowledge and hold more anti-democratic views and stronger implicit bias toward autocratic political institutions.

6.2 Alternative Explanations

We conduct additional tests to address two alternative explanations. The first concerns pre-arrival experiences. North Korean defectors often spend time in transit—such as in China or other neighboring countries—before entering South Korea. If these

experiences shape social capital or democratic attitudes, estimates based on years since arrival may confound post-arrival exposure to democracy with pre-arrival exposure. To address this concern, we replace *years since arrival* with *years since defection*, which captures both the transit period and post-arrival experience. Results reported in the Supplementary Information remain unchanged: NKs continue to exhibit lower political participation, comparable levels of social capital, and weaker democratic attitudes. This suggests that our findings are not driven by pre-arrival experiences or by how exposure is measured.

The second alternative explanation concerns state-directed social capital. North Korea may have fostered social networks and cooperative norms among defectors, but these may be concentrated within in-group ties rather than generalized across society. This account predicts stronger bonding social capital toward other defectors than bridging social capital toward South Koreans. To test this implication, we disaggregate our behavioral games by partner identity and compare in-group and out-group interactions. The results reported in the Supplementary Information do not support this claim. NKs do not exhibit higher altruism, trust, or cooperation toward other defectors, and in some cases display lower altruism toward in-group members. These findings indicate that lower democratic integration among NKs is not explained by deficits in social capital or by an alternative, state-directed form of in-group social capital.

7 Semi-structured interviews

Our empirical results show that North Korean defectors do not lack social capital relative to native South Koreans but instead exhibit weaker democratic attitudes. Building on this pattern, we conducted semi-structured interviews to understand why many defectors remained silent during the discussion games, which were designed to measure a core dimension of democratic integration: deliberative participation. Deliberative participation—expressing and sharing one’s political views in public—is a foundational

democratic competency that supports meaningful civic engagement. The interviews allow us to identify the factors that underpin defectors’ reluctance to speak in these settings.

Age group	Silent participants	Active participants
20-39 years	N=3 (A1, A2, A3)	N=2 (B1, B2)
40-59 years	N=3 (A4, A5, A6)	N=2 (B3, B4)
60 years +	N=3 (A7, A8, A9)	N=2 (B5, B6)
Total	N=9	N=6

Table 7: Summary of interviewees by age group and discussion participation: Interviewees were selected on the basis of their age group and their level of participation during the discussions. Silent participants did not speak at any point, whereas active participants contributed at least twice during the discussion.

Silent participants frequently cited their experiences in North Korea as a primary reason for their reluctance to speak during the discussions. Interviewees (A1, A2, A7) referred to Saenghwal Chonghwa (group criticism) sessions, where individuals were required to confess personal failings or denounce others, followed by collective criticism. For instance, one interviewee (A2) explained: “The ‘discussions’ we had in North Korea were completely different. If someone said something, you had to criticize it. Even if you didn’t want to speak, they’d call your name, drag you up front, and make you insult your friends. There was always a ‘correct’ answer, and if you didn’t say it, you’d be criticized no matter what. There was no need for my own opinion, and if I said something different, I’d get pulled into ideological ‘re-education.’ Those experiences made me feel an almost physical fear of speaking up.”

Other interviewees also mentioned ideological indoctrination (A3, A7) and surveillance (A5, A6, A7) as reasons for their reluctance to actively engage in group discussion. One interviewee (A3) emphasized that years of ideological indoctrination in North Korea impaired individuals’ capacity for critical thinking and habituated them to passive compliance, ultimately discouraging voluntary participation in open discussion: “After undergoing years of indoctrination, people don’t really think critically about their soci-

ety. Instead, they're used to simply following whatever is dictated to them, so they're not accustomed to voluntarily expressing personal opinions." Other interviewees (A5, A6, A7) cited past and ongoing surveillance by the North Korean regime as a reason for their reluctance to speak in public settings.

However, a more fundamental issue is that not only do many defectors hold negative perceptions of discussion itself, but there appears to be little to no normative foundation for democratic deliberation and public discourse within the defector community. Silent participants commonly believe that discussion in a democracy is symbolic, performative, and a source of conflict (A1 to A9). Defectors frequently describe discussion using terms like "fights" or "conflicts" and exhibit little respect for pluralism or tolerance of divergent viewpoints. As one participant (A5) explained, "I feel particularly uneasy when I hear views that don't match mine. I believe that everyone from North Korea should hate North Korea, so when I encounter people who don't feel that way, I can't understand them and feel uncomfortable hearing those opinions." Another participant (A6) remarked, "I don't think debates can really change someone else's opinion. Instead, people just keep pushing their own thoughts, and you never know where it's going to end—it feels like it has to be cut off at some point... Different views don't really change." These statements reflect a broader belief that discussion rarely leads to meaningful change and reveal a lack of normative commitment to pluralism or democratic tolerance in deliberation.

Critical evidence for the absence of deliberative norms among North Korean defectors emerges from participants' reflections on the prospect of engaging in discussion with South Koreans. When asked whether they would be more or less likely to participate actively in a discussion with South Koreans rather than with fellow defectors, all but one interviewee (A8) stated that they would be more willing to do so. Participants commonly justified their answers by emphasizing what they perceived as South Koreans' democratic education, civic competence, and ability to engage in reasoned debate. This perception reflects a broader absence of shared deliberative norms that support mutual respect, open dialogue, and collective reasoning among defectors themselves.

Notably, multiple interviewees echoed a common perception that South Koreans are better equipped for discussion than fellow defectors. This view reinforces the earlier finding that many defectors see themselves as lacking the deliberative norms and civic competencies necessary for meaningful engagement. One interviewee (A1) explained, “South Koreans naturally engage in conversations and listen well. They’ve also had many opportunities to present their views and are familiar with these kinds of discussions, so I think they have a sense of leadership. If South Koreans lead and guide the discussions, I think I could participate more comfortably than when only defectors are having discussions.” Another interviewee (A2) noted, “South Koreans already have the basic groundwork for doing discussions — they’ve learned a lot and tend to listen to whatever someone says, so conversations go smoothly. But North Koreans aren’t like that — if they don’t agree with what you’re saying, they immediately criticize, and when they talk, they just state their opinions without listening to the other side.”

In fact, although active participants (B1 to B6) expressed generally positive views on discussion and demonstrated some internalization of democratic deliberation norms, they also indicated that they would be more likely to participate actively in discussions with native SKs than with fellow defectors. The NKs we interviewed reasoned that SKs, having grown up under democratic institutions, are more adept at respectful and constructive dialogue than defectors, who remain shaped by more rigid and confrontational discussion norms. One interviewee (B2) noted, “South Koreans, even when their opinions are different, at least try to listen to what others have to say. Maybe this is because South Koreans receive democratic education from a young age, so they’re capable of having their own thoughts and also of listening to others’ views.” Another interviewee (B3) contrasted this with defectors, explaining, “Defectors have a very rigid way of thinking. On the other hand, South Koreans grew up with democracy and have experienced it, so they tend to respect ‘diversity.’ But defectors are often used to a very critical mindset, always pointing out faults or criticizing, and they struggle to accept diversity.”

The interview results indicate that democratic deliberation-related attitudes and

behaviors have not been internalized within the defector community, largely due to the enduring effects of authoritarian socialization. Years of ideological indoctrination, compulsory “group criticism” sessions, and pervasive surveillance conditioned defectors to associate political expression with risk and disagreement with deviance, fostering avoidance and rigid conformity rather than voluntary expression, reciprocal discussion, or tolerance for divergent views. As a consequence, defectors continue to rely on pre-defection political interaction norms—viewing discussion as conflictual, performative, or futile and perceiving themselves as less competent than South Koreans in democratic dialogue—leaving them without the attitudinal foundations or behavioral repertoires required for intragroup deliberation, collective interest articulation, and meaningful democratic integration.

8 Discussion

In this section, we discuss generalizability and policy implications. This article offers a cautious claim about generalizability. Challenges in democratic integration—measured by political participation—persist even in a highly favorable setting, where migrants share language and ethnicity with natives, face no language barrier, and receive automatic citizenship and extensive state support. This pattern implies that the constraints identified in the paper—especially unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices resulting from authoritarian socialization—are not merely context-specific and may establish a lower bound on the challenges of democratic integration. Our findings suggest that, among the factors examined in this study, unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices poses a more consequential obstacle to democratic integration than deficits in social capital. More broadly, this mechanism may also apply to other contexts of cross-regime migration from authoritarian regimes to liberal democracies, even if its magnitude varies across institutional and social environments.

These findings also carry important implications for migrant integration policy. Building social capital has been the dominant principle guiding migrant integration

policy. The UNHCR migrant integration framework assumes that migrants from crisis-affected or authoritarian contexts suffer from disrupted social ties and that rebuilding networks is the primary mechanism of integration (UNHCR, 2026). This logic is reflected in policy design across advanced democracies, where programs assign community groups a central role in facilitating integration through social and relational support.²⁵ UNHCR has promoted the expansion of this model through community sponsorship and related programs in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany, where sponsor groups provide cultural adaptation guidance, language assistance, and access to employment and housing networks as core integration instruments.

Our findings point to a refinement of this policy framework. While social capital remains important, it may not be the primary constraint on democratic integration, particularly for migrants from repressive autocracies. In our case, migrants exhibit levels of altruism, trust, and cooperation comparable to those of natives. Instead, the binding constraint lies in unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices, reflected in lower political interest, weaker political knowledge, and a reduced willingness to engage in public discussion. These deficits are rooted in authoritarian socialization and are not resolved through network formation alone. As a result, policies that focus primarily on building social connections are likely to be insufficient for promoting democratic integration. Integration therefore requires more than social embedding; it requires sustained efforts to develop democratic attitudes and behavioral repertoires, including the ability to express political preferences, engage in public deliberation, and translate shared interests into collective political participation and representation.

²⁵See, for example, Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees program, which explicitly treats social capital formation as a core mechanism of integration; the U.S. Welcome Corps (2023), which relies on community networks to facilitate integration; and Germany’s National Action Plan on Integration, which emphasizes network formation and community participation as central policy tools.

9 Conclusion

Cross-regime migration from authoritarian regimes to liberal democracies has become an increasingly prominent pattern in contemporary international politics. Yet relatively little is known about why migrants from authoritarian regimes often struggle to integrate into democratic political life after resettlement. In this article, we compared the democratic integration of 189 North Korean defectors (NKs) and 179 native South Koreans (SKs) to examine whether these challenges stem primarily from deficits in social capital or from unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices resulting from authoritarian socialization. Despite an exceptionally favorable institutional environment for democratic integration, NKs participate significantly less in democratic politics than SKs do. Our findings suggest that this gap is not primarily explained by deficits in social capital. Instead, the evidence points more strongly toward unfamiliarity with democratic norms and practices resulting from authoritarian socialization. Taken together, these findings suggest that authoritarian socialization can continue to shape democratic attitudes and participation long after migration to a liberal democracy.

One is reminded of the words of the Soviet poet, musician and reform activist Bulat Okudzhava who remarked in 1989

During the past 70 years, a new man has been created who is obedient and easily frightened. What has been created over decades cannot be undone in a day (quoted in Isaacson [1989](#)).

It would seem that there is some truth to this statement even for the dauntless North Korean defectors in our sample.

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