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The Politics of Giving: Patterns and Evolution of Patronage and Electoral Networks in Thailand

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Abstract

In a wide range of political systems, political parties and politicians deliver special favors and material benefits to their constituents as a means of mobilizing their support during elections. This phenomenon, called patronage politics, is the focus of this dissertation. Although existing research has uncovered important variations in the patterns of patronage politics across different contexts, theories that spell out how these variations emerge over time in a single country remain relatively underdeveloped. This dissertation uses the case of Thailand to shed light on the circumstances and mechanisms that account for change and continuity in the patterns of patronage politics, relying on secondary literature, fieldwork, and face-to-face interviews with a range of political actors who have played a prominent role in upholding or contending with the use of patronage at different levels of politics at different times (1997 – 2019). This dissertation argues that in a context where getting votes by means of patronage is the pathway to gaining and holding on to power, crises that create new sources of patronage or reshape who has access to and control over preexisting ones have the potential to disrupt how patronage politics is organized. During these crises, the struggle to maintain or challenge the status quo through elections leads actors to either devise new arrangements made possible by the timing and magnitude of those crises or seize new opportunities by working through old arrangements—or sometimes do both. These choices and strategies, strongly influenced by both the characteristics of crises and features of preexisting patronage networks, give rise to different patterns of patronage politics with distinct implications for party-voter linkages and regime dynamics.

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Finally, words cannot express how much my family, especially Mom, Dad and Ping, has supported me during my graduate study and research. When I felt like I had lost direction, they were my light. Thank you so much for always being there for me and keeping me going. Thank you Pran, for coming into my life and making the journey meaningful.

List of Abbreviations

ECT	Election Commission of Thailand
FFP	Future Forward Party
ISOC	Internal Security Operations Command
MP	Member of Parliament
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
PAO	Provincial Administrative Organization
PPP	Palang Prachachon Party
PPRP	Palang Pracharath Party
TAO	*Tambon* Administrative Organization
TRC	Thai Raksa Chart Party
TRT	Thai Rak Thai Party

Glossary

amnat	authority
amphoe	district
bap	a Buddhist term for demerit
ha khanaen	to generate votes
ha siang	to generate popular support
huakhanaen	vote canvassers
itthiphon	influence or informal power
jao pho	local godfather
kamnan	subdistrict chief
khet	electoral district
khum	village block or cluster
krasae	popularity or wave
nakleng	local strongman
noklae	"parrot"
phon ngan	achievements or local contribution
phu noi	small man
phu yai	big man
phuak, phak phuak	faction or group, usually limited and exclusive
phuyaibaan	village head
prachaniyom	populist, populism
rabob huakhanaen	vote-canvassing network
rabob uppatham	patronage system or network
sai	connection
saofaifa	"utility pole"
tambon	subdistrict
thesaban	municipal

Dedication

To Ping and Pran

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In a wide range of political systems, many ordinary citizens often gain access to significant improvements in their living circumstances by methods outside of articulating their demands through formal institutional channels. Instead, they enter into informal, and usually unequal, exchange relationships with powerful individuals, including politicians, businessmen, state officials, and local leaders, whose exercise of personal influence makes possible the downward flow of various critical resources otherwise difficult to obtain—resources that shall henceforth be referred to as patronage. In the classic scenario, the patron, the one who dispenses patronage, is showered with displays of loyalty and pledges of obedience by the client, the recipient. It is assumed that the client engages in these displays out of either a sense of obligation to return the favor or because they perceive it as necessary for the relationship, and whatever instrumental benefits it entails, to continue.

The fact that elections, by themselves, do not necessarily uproot the informal structures of power that typically arise through patron-client arrangements, even though they may lessen the power differential between the patron and client, constitutes one of the core paradoxes of democratic politics.[1] Instead, elections often end up both reflecting and reproducing these very structures. As citizens are armed with the right to vote and the few elites lose alternative pathways to power, a new supply of potential clients and new demand for their services during elections is created. What results is perhaps unintentional but familiar: political parties,

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[1] James C. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia," *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972): 91–113, https://doi.org/10.2307/195.

candidates, and elected officials who seek to attain or maintain power through elections will

offer anything from free car rides to get-out-of-jail-free cards, but only to the extent that these

special favors can be expected to generate popular support and, sometimes more directly, be

returned accordingly by individual recipients in the form of votes.

      The reality that political actors compete for votes by engaging their supporters not as

rights-bearing citizens, but as clients who depend on their patronage, reflects how representative

democracy operates in many countries around the world.[2] This mode of politics, usually termed

patronage politics, is the focus of this dissertation. When the representational logic of democratic

politics is superseded by one centered around patronage politics—a situation widely referred to

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[2] This distinction is based loosely on Chatterjee's framework of political society. In contrast to
civil society, where individuals exercise political agency by invoking the language of citizenship,
equality, and rights, typically in the context of formal association and autonomous groups,
political society is defined as the residual domain in which its inhabitants, as governed subjects
or populations, express their interests, make demands, and negotiate the terms of their
vulnerability and marginalization through informal, face-to-face relationships with various
entities of power. These alternative avenues of gaining access to security and government
benefits tend to deviate from the more lawful and normatively desirable forms of interest,
representation, and welfare provision, giving rise to a mode of governance that "secures
legitimacy not by the participation of citizens in matters of state but by claiming to provide for
the well-being of the population." Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on
Popular Politics in Most of the World*, University Seminars/Leonard Hastings Schoff Memorial
Lectures (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34. Walker previously adapted this
framework to the context of rural Thailand as a way of problematizing the deeply pervasive
image of rural voters as vote sellers who abuse democratic principles for material gains, drawing
attention to a wide set of activities that Thailand's middle-income peasantry have engaged in as a
means of improving their livelihood—activities which sometimes fall outside the purview of
civil society. Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural
Economy*, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison: University of Wisconsin
Press, 2012). In line with this tradition, this dissertation recognizes that political agency is
frequently exercised on the part of the recipients of patronage in ways that are not always
immediately legible. However, this dissertation focuses on the more obvious strategic maneuvers
by those who dispense patronage for electoral ends, highlighting how much democratic
accountability and responsiveness are conditional on, and sometimes undermined by, personal
interventions.

as patronage democracy—political actors can be expected to cultivate electoral support, not by making ideological appeals or offering policies grounded in universalistic principles, but by delivering or promising to deliver cash, material goods, jobs, personal favors, and privileged access to state resources to groups or individuals, anticipating that these recipients will support the political actors in return.[3] When the distribution of patronage is noticeably contingent on a return favor, such as when the giving of cash during election time is accompanied by active efforts on the part of the patron or their networks to monitor the compliance of the recipients of their handouts or to frame the handouts as a debt that must be repaid, this gives rise to electoral dynamics known as political clientelism. The quid pro quo nature of clientelist politics is what distinguishes it from programmatic politics, where voters become eligible to receive the benefits not as a direct consequence of their vote choice or their support for particular candidates or parties but according to some other criteria of distribution, usually formal ones.[4]

The relationship between patronage politics and democracy is ripe with contradictions. On the one hand, patronage politics underpin the democratic process. It gives some value to elections for the millions of voters who otherwise would not vote and whose particularistic interests and multifarious wants and needs would otherwise go unfulfilled by legislative affairs, constrained as these are by universalistic norms and formal rules. Insofar as they generate

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[3] For usage of the term "patronage democracy," see Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108573481; and Ward Berenschot and Edward Aspinall, "How Clientelism Varies: Comparing Patronage Democracies," *Democratization* 27, no. 1 (2020): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1645129.

[4] Herbert Kitschelt, "Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities," *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6–7 (September 1, 2000): 845–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/001041400003300607.

turnout and respond to voters' demands for certain goods and services, politicians and political

parties who specialize in patronage politics, or clientelistic politics, might instead be viewed as

engaging in "request fulfilling" or at worse "turnout buying."[5] On the other hand, patronage

politics threaten to undermine the norms of equality and autonomy on which all democracies are

founded by equipping those who can most afford to give the means to take the reins of power

from those who can least afford to resist their offers. Especially when the distribution of

patronage is clientelistic in nature, for example, when it is supplied along with threats of

punishment in the form of benefit withdrawal or outright violence, voters are often seen as

vulnerable victims who are held accountable for their votes rather than autonomous actors with

the ability to hold politicians and political parties accountable for their actions.[6] Not only is it

unclear whether elections can be expected to dilute or intensify patronage politics, it is also

ambiguous whether patronage politics uphold or undermine democracy.

  Existing studies have produced a rich and vast body of literature on patronage politics

and political clientelism with striking empirical details on how political parties and politicians in

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[5] Simeon Nichter, "Vote Buying or Turnout Buying? Machine Politics and the Secret Ballot," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (2008): 19–31, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055408080106; Simeon Nichter, *Votes for Survival: Relational Clientelism in Latin America*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316998014.

[6] Susan C. Stokes, "Perverse Accountability: A Formal Model of Machine Politics with Evidence from Argentina," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 315–25, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055405051683. One possible counterargument has been advanced by Nichter, who draws an explicit distinction between vote-buying and turnout-buying. The former implies persuading voters to change their preferences while the latter entails mobilizing voters to show up at the polls. When clientelistic bargains are weakly enforced, for example, when brokers do not have the capacity to monitor vote choice, it is more likely that clientelism promotes rather than undermines democracy by increasing voter turnout. Nichter, "Vote Buying or Turnout Buying?"

many parts of the world distribute tangible goods and services to voters in return for their

electoral support. However, current theorization of the factors that influence the dynamics of

these modes of politics has primarily been preoccupied with explaining their decline or

persistence.[7] While this has led to significant progress in terms of understanding the

circumstances that favor or curtail strategies of patronage and clientelism, changes in the broader

patterns or forms that these modes of politics adopt, which often do not conform to clear-cut

cases of decline or persistence, remain inadequately addressed. As a result, the implications that

these dynamics have for the development of party-voter linkages and democracy have yet to be

fully explored.

Partly, the overwhelming attention given to the decline and persistence of patronage

politics and clientelism reflects an ongoing scholarly concern with addressing what the literature

has failed to acknowledge. In place of an explicit theory specifying the causes and mechanisms

accounting for the different patterns of change, early scholars operated under the assumption that

patronage politics and clientelism were bound to wither away as modernization and political

development took hold.[8] In other words, the disappearance of patronage politics and clientelism

is not so much explained as assumed. In response, later studies have highlighted abundant

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[7] For example, see Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro, "What Wins Votes: Why Some Politicians Opt Out of Clientelism," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (July 1, 2012): 568–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00578.x; Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107324909; and Nichter, *Votes for Survival*.

[8] Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change"; Ernest Gellner and John Waterbury, *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies* (London: Duckworth, 1977); and Steffen W. Schmidt, James C. Scott, Carl H. Landé, and Laura Guasti, eds., *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

evidence of the remarkable durability of patronage politics and clientelism in a wide range of

historical and institutional contexts.[9] These studies indicate that it is a mistake to assume the

inevitable demise of patronage politics and clientelism in response to forces of development.

Rather, variations in historical patterns of development, examined through institutional rather

than purely economic lenses, offer an equal, if not more convincing, explanation for why

patronage politics and clientelism are more persistent than previously theorized and more

prevalent in some countries.[10]

These scholarly debates have culminated in different theoretical perspectives on what

factors contribute to the presence or absence of patronage politics and clientelism in each

political system. In the case of clientelism, major strands of literature have developed around the

plausible link between economic development and political clientelism[11] and the role that formal

and electoral institutions play in enabling or curbing clientelistic practices.[12] These approaches

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[9] S.N. Eisenstadt and Luis Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Simona Piattoni, "Clientelism in Historical and Comparative Perspective," in *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation: The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, ed. Simona Piattoni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[10] The fact that patronage politics and political clientelism have been shown to thrive where early theories predicted their decline is not evidence of their tendency to resist change or be static. In fact, as this dissertation attempts to demonstrate, the networks through which patronage politics and political clientelism are organized and deployed are in fact prone to change, in turn enabling these practices to persist or continue to shape political outcomes despite radical transformations in the political landscape or institutional environment.

[11] Steven I. Wilkinson, "Explaining Changing Patterns of Party-Voter Linkages in India," in *Patrons, Clients, and Policies*, ed. Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Herbert Kitschelt, *Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2013), https://sites.duke.edu/democracylinkage/data/; Weitz-Shapiro, "What Wins Votes"; and Stokes et al., *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism*.

[12] Allen Hicken, "How Do Rules and Institutions Encourage Vote Buying?," in *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, ed. Frederic Charles Schaffer (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007); and Schaffer 2007.

have produced powerful explanations for variations in the role of political clientelism. However, these explanations have mostly been concerned with accounting for why clientelism is present or absent rather than exploring how changes in the role and organization of clientelistic politics occur over time. In part, this stems from scholars adopting conceptual differences between clientelistic and programmatic linkages as the features that matter most for establishing comparisons. This has the effect of blurring out important variations among cases in which both types of linkages coexist, in addition to generating the impression that change should occur as a dichotomous transition from one type of system to another.

The most recent wave of studies have only begun to recognize variations in the forms that patronage politics and clientelism assume in and across countries as outcomes that are fruitful for theory building.[13] This analytical shift has resulted in the broadening of the research agenda to include not only cases of clientelism, but also the full spectrum of patronage politics to yield comparative insights. In addition, building on the foundation pioneered by Martin Shefter, this shift has also led to a renewed emphasis on the historical and institutional pathways through which patronage politics and clientelism become viable political instruments.[14] Recent scholarship has more explicitly acknowledged that patronage politics and clientelism are not simply behavioral or strategic dispositions, but practices laden with history and institutional inertia. This is a remarkable development in this line of research, considering that most comparative analyses in political science have been narrowly concerned with political

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[13] Berenschot and Aspinall, "How Clientelism Varies"; Edward Aspinall, Meredith Weiss, Allen Hicken, and Paul Hutchcroft, *Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[14] Martin Shefter, "Party and Patronage: Germany, England, and Italy," *Politics & Society* 7, no. 4 (December 1, 1977), https://doi.org/10.1177/003232927700700402.

clientelism and primarily occupied with identifying the factors that explain variations in the scope and intensity, absence or presence, of clientelist politics.

Considering this, this dissertation begins from the analytical starting point that change and continuity in patterns of patronage politics and clientelism are not reducible to their decline or persistence. Rather, they are better understood as disruptions to prevailing patterns or the resurgence of old ones, reflecting ongoing processes of negotiation and contestation by actors seeking to defend the established way of doing things from those seeking to introduce new arrangements or reorganize and redeploy old arrangements for their own ends. This shift in how to theorize change and continuity contributes to a new way of addressing the question of how variations in patronage politics and clientelism occur and with what consequences.

Based on a single country study, this dissertation has much in common with recent studies concerned with spelling out the conditions that induce parties to sustain[15] or forego clientelist strategies in a particular national context.[16] Yet I have tried to be cognizant of the diverse patterns of transformation that tend to be overlooked by a narrow focus on the presence or absence of clientelist politics. This dissertation focuses on changing and continuing patterns in the composition of patronage and clientelistic networks, how and by whom these networks are created and maintained, the circumstances under which different patterns occur or recur, and the implications that different patterns have for party-voter linkages and democracy.

Specifically, this dissertation draws on the political experience of Thailand as a case study for developing a framework for understanding how and through what mechanisms distinct

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[15] Nichter, *Votes for Survival*.
[16] Weitz-Shapiro, "What Wins Votes."

patterns of change and continuity in the role and organization of patronage politics emerge and with what implications for democracy. Due to the suspension of elections and return of military rule from 2014 to 2019, research on the form and pattern of patronage politics in Thailand has lagged behind research on other Southeast Asian contexts, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.[17] Thailand as a case study shares important commonalities with the Philippines, with regards to how patronage politics is often organized by local machines outside the framework of political parties, and Indonesia, with regards to the predominance of military-bureaucratic authoritarian regimes. Due to the brief period in which Thailand approached a one-party dominant system, Thailand also shares similarities with Malaysia, with regards to how ruling parties control the flow of patronage at the national level. However, Thailand has also experienced a series of democratic transitions and authoritarian reversals that differentiates it from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. While these fluctuations reflect broader struggles over the distribution of power in Thai society, they are also intimately linked with different patterns in which patronage had made and unmade political parties and governments, leading to unconsolidated democracy, interrupted democracy, and transitory authoritarian regimes. Therefore, beyond introducing additional variations in the forms and patterns of patronage politics in Southeast Asia, focusing on Thailand offers a fruitful context for developing a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between patronage politics and political regimes.

The Puzzle

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[17] Aspinall et al., *Mobilizing for Elections*.

To most observers, Thailand exemplifies the prototypical image of a polity in which patronage politics and clientelism have been the dominant and persistent features of electoral politics. In fact, the Thai case was originally central to the development of classical theories of patron-client relationships, on which contemporary notions of patronage and clientelism have been loosely based.[18] In contemporary studies of Thai politics, researchers have reached similar conclusions regarding the widespread use of vote buying in Thai elections through networks of local *huakhanaen* or vote canvassers. Yet they continue to debate whether vote buying is decisive for electoral outcomes, what purpose or meaning underlies vote buying, and whether the identities, intentions, and motivations of the participants of vote buying are consistent with the usage of the term.[19] Beyond this focus on vote buying, the findings of a cross-national survey of experts by

[18] For example, see Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change"; and Carl H. Landé, "Networks and Groups in Southeast Asia: Some Observations on the Group Theory of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 67, no. 01 (March 1973): 103–27, https://doi.org/10.2307/1958529.

[19] A brief but non-exhaustive list would include: James Ockey, "Political Parties, Factions, and Corruption in Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 251–77; William A. Callahan and Duncan McCargo, "Vote-Buying in Thailand's Northeast: The July 1995 General Election," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 4 (1996): 376–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/2645405; Daniel Arghiros, *Democracy, Development, and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*, Democracy in Asia, no. 8 (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001); Ruth McVey, ed., *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); Allen Hicken, "The Market for Votes in Thailand," International Conference, Center for International Studies, MIT, 2002; James Ockey, "Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (2003): 663–80, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.4.663; William A. Callahan, "The Discourse of Vote Buying and Political Reform in Thailand," *Pacific Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2005): 95–113; Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin," *New Left Review* II, no. 39 (2006): 5–37; Katherine A. Bowie, "Vote Buying and Village Outrage in an Election in Northern Thailand: Recent Legal Reforms in Historical Context." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (2008): 469–511; Andrew Walker, "The Rural Constitution and the Everyday Politics of Elections in Northern Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (February 2008): 84–105; Anyarat Chattharakul, "Thai Electoral Campaigning: Vote-Canvassing Networks and Hybrid Voting," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 29, no. 4 (February 24, 2011): 67–95; Prajak Kongkirati, ed., การเมืองว่าด้วยการเลือกตั้ง : วาทกรรม อำนาจ และพลวัตชนบทไทย [*Electoral Politics: The Discourse of Power and the Dynamics in*

Herbert Kitschelt indicate that the exchange of material benefits for electoral support seems to be the norm rather than the exception in Thailand.[20] However, since the landslide victory of the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) in 2001, it has become more difficult to interpret the situation in Thailand as one in which political clientelism clearly predominated.

Unlike in the past, when political parties distributed patronage to voters via local electoral networks, the TRT relied heavily on *policy instruments* as an alternative channel through which to deliver concrete benefits to its supporters. This development suggests that Thai electoral patronage politics can no longer be framed as a matter of buying up votes through vote-canvassing networks. Instead, populist-redistributive policies, known as *prachaniyom* policies, that originally propelled the TRT to power, have become more central to building electoral support, especially at the grassroots level. Similar policies have been adopted or imitated by other political parties across the spectrum. For example, in 2011, the Pheu Thai Party, an incarnation of the TRT, promised and carried out a scheme to buy an unlimited supply of rice from Thai farmers at nearly twice the market rate.[21] More recently, in the run-up to the 2019 election, the junta-backed Palang Pracharat Party (PPRP) promised to expand the scope and scale of cash transfer programs to low-income earners.[22] These policy-based strategies differ markedly from prior modes of patronage politics in that they not only seem to bypass local networks of

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Rural Thailand] (Bangkok: Faadiawkan Press, 2012); and Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, "Democracy of the Desired: Everyday Politics and Political Aspiration in the Contemporary Thai Countryside," *Asian Democracy Review* 2 (2013): 5–37.

[20] Kitschelt, *Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project*.

[21] "The Rice Mountain," *Economist*, August 10, 2013, Asia edition, https://www.economist.com/asia/2013/08/10/the-rice-mountain.

[22] "PPRP Shares Its Election Manifesto," *Bangkok Post*, January 25, 2019, https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1617370.

electoral intermediaries, but also enjoy a high degree of legitimacy flowing from their formal appearance, pro-poor agenda, and, most importantly, the people whose demands they fulfill.

What is puzzling about this development is that despite observable signs of transformation in the pattern of party-voter linkages over two decades, this transformation has not yielded a wholesale transition to programmatic political competition. In the Thai case, the emergence of policy-based linkages has led neither to the institutionalization of a programmatic political system nor to the breakdown of the preexisting patronage system and clientelistic arrangements. Even while parties have begun to embrace the use of policy instruments, the benefits promised or delivered as part of party policies or under government programs have been framed, to varying degrees of success and intensity, as flowing directly from the party, owing largely to the personal intervention of party leaders or party politicians. At the same time, even as policies have become more central to election campaigns, political parties continue to mobilize electoral support through patronage networks and vote-canvassing networks.

On the one hand, the fact that political parties like the TRT have successfully developed the means to appeal to voters directly based on their policies represents an important development in Thailand's electoral landscape. This achievement is especially noteworthy considering most parties in the past have been forced to rely almost exclusively on locally embedded, informal networks of electoral intermediaries to mobilize electoral support. The TRT provides the model of a political party capable of building an electoral base independent of the influence of those who organize and exercise control over the *huakhanaen*, typically the leaders of regional factions, local political machines, and political dynasties.

On the other hand, the linkages forged based on the TRT's policies have not been institutionalized through the party structure or founded on principles that tend to accompany programmatic political appeals. In particular, the case has been made that, under Thaksin, the policies which brought tangible benefits to the rural grassroots and informal population were deployed as part of a broader populist mobilization strategy, in which the only linkage that mattered was the direct connection between the leader and the people, a connection sometimes used to commit and justify abuses of power.[23] In other words, the old ways of dispensing patronage were disrupted by "the promise of legal forms of patronage on a large scale"[24] or "big money politics."[25]

Furthermore, the development of new, however direct, linkages has not led to the disappearance of old ones, whether for the TRT or other political parties in Thailand. To the contrary, many political parties including the TRT continue to enlist the support of factions and candidates who command large networks of vote canvassers and routinely distribute handouts through these networks during elections. The 2019 elections, held after an extended period of military rule, saw the resurgence of these trends and retrenchment of policy-centered campaigns. The ruling PPRP, founded on a pact between military elites, technocrats and local political factions, selected its candidates based on the relative breadth and depth of the vote-canvassing networks under their command, in addition to using these networks to distribute handouts as a means of generating support. In short, the bypassing of preexisting patronage-ridden and

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[23] Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Chris Baker, "Thaksin's Populism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (February 2008): 62–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701651960; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Pluto-Populism in Thailand: Business Remaking Politics," 2018.
[24] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 679.
[25] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai, TH: Silkworm Books, 2009), 97.

clientelistic arrangements remains incomplete while the development of programmatic linkages has been uneven or subject to populist whims. This blurring suggests that the transition is neither sweeping nor linear but subject to significant negotiation and contestation by the stakeholders under both the preexisting and emerging institutional arrangements, resembling a pattern of institutional layering rather than the displacement of one system with another.[26]

The central puzzle this dissertation aims to address is twofold. First, in a political system in which parties have long relied on the support of electoral gatekeepers able to mobilize voters through local networks under their control, how do new patterns of electoral mobilization emerge and with what consequences for these networks and their leaders? Second, despite a major disruption to the established way of mobilizing electoral support, why do old patterns of patronage politics continue to thrive? To shed light on these questions, this dissertation examines the circumstances under which political parties uphold or contend with existing patterns of patronage politics and the mechanisms through which patronage networks are maintained or reconfigured as a consequence of these choices.

This analytical focus on political parties is not meant to suggest that political parties somehow solely determine which pattern of patronage politics is ultimately favored at a particular juncture. In fact, as this dissertation illustrates and as most previous studies have already shown, patronage politics is often organized by brokers and intermediates—factions, candidates, and *huakhanaen* in Thailand's case—and occasionally with a high level of initiative

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[26] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, eds., *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806414.

by the voters themselves, who may not be as vulnerable as conventional theories of patronage and clientelism usually suggest.

However, as this dissertation demonstrates, the strategic choices made by parties or party leaders vis-à-vis the use of patronage politics reflect not only the underlying structural conditions, including the sum of actions taken and considerations made by other political actors outside the framework of the party, but also possess the potential to set in motion epic transformations in a given political system.[27] In the words of a former MP who leveraged the party's dominance to entrench his own patronage network at the local level, the structure of patronage politics is "shaped very much like a tree."[28] Taking a closer look at the roots of the tree, for example at the level of interaction between vote canvassers and individual voter, often reveals the microfoundations of how patronage politics is organized. Yet to fully grasp the reasons for change or continuity in the pattern of patronage politics, one must look beyond the roots and consider the forest in which the tree grows or the manner in which the tree was planted or transplanted. Rather than revealing a monolithic picture, this sheds light on important differences in the nature of patronage politics, not simply across different levels but also across time. The arguments of this dissertation are summarized in the following section.

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[27] The need for such a macro-level framework is best summarized by Kitschelt: "the choice of linkage mechanisms is not just predicated on formal democratic institutions but also on substantive economic and political power relations that manifest themselves in socioeconomic development, patterns of state formation and democratic suffrage diffusion, and the control of the political economy by markets or political regulatory mechanisms." Herbert Kitschelt, "Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities," *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6–7 (September 1, 2000): 872, https://doi.org/10.1177/001041400003300607.
[28] A former MP in Roi Et province, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 6, 2020.

Summary of Arguments

In Thailand, political parties have traditionally mobilized electoral support by distributing all manner of goods and services to voters through locally embedded, loosely integrated networks of vote canvassers, frequently anticipating that these networks would be able to deliver in turn the votes of recipients. As a result, the individuals who command these networks, usually leaders of local machines, political dynasties, and influential figures at the subnational level, have been able to play a gatekeeping role vis-à-vis voters, regarding their control over the flow of patronage resources, and vis-à-vis political parties, regarding their influence over the flow of electoral votes.[29] In return for delivering votes to political parties, they are rewarded with money, concessions, shares in the spoils of government, and favorable appointments, which they can then use to furnish their own networks, deliver local public goods or club goods to favored constituencies ,and meet the highly particularistic and personal needs of their individual supporters, with considerable autonomy and discretion and in a clientelistic manner or otherwise. In this way, influence over votes is parlayed into access to patronage and vice versa.

The degree to which political parties are reliant on these gatekeepers as the core infrastructure of their party organization and election campaigns often reflects a lack of the

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[29] For contemporary accounts of these broker-type figures in Southeast Asian politics, see John T. Sidel, "Bossism and Democracy in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia: Towards an Alternative Framework for the Study of `Local Strongmen'," in *Politicising Democracy: The New Local Politics of Democratisation*, ed. John Harriss, Kristian Stokke, and Olle Törnquist (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005). https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230502802_3; Prajak Kongkirati, "Evolving Power of Provincial Political Families in Thailand: Dynastic Power, Party Machine and Ideological Politics," *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 386–406, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828X16659570; and Edward Aspinall, Michael Davidson, Allen Hicken, and Meredith Weiss, "Local Machines and Vote Brokerage in the Philippines," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (2016): 191–96.

means and resources for delivering patronage to voters outside the gatekeeper's mediation, or

lack of motivation to seek the support of voters on the basis of other appeals, including

programmatic ones. This reality confirms a longstanding historical-institutional pattern.[30] In the

absence of the capacity to bypass the gatekeeper's existing networks or centralize these networks

under party direction, political parties have little recourse but to conform to and perpetuate the

informal rules of the game, whereby parties bid for the support of the leaders of the most

prominent networks in order to compete electorally. In turn, this arrangement tends to reinforce

the gatekeepers' privileged access to state resources from which patronage is derived and, by

extension, their bargaining power relative to parties.

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[30] The difficulty that political parties often face in terms of reaching and connecting to voters at the base independent of the gatekeepers' mediation does not simply reflect the weaknesses of parties relative to the factions, local political machines and dynasties in terms of their proximity to voters and organizational capacity at the local level. As I discuss in Chapter 3, this could also be interpreted as the byproduct of a longstanding historical-institutional pattern in which the development of political parties has been hampered or hijacked by bureaucratic and military elites. Their distrust of mass participation in politics and monopolized access to the resources concentrated in each government ministries contributes to either the absence of competitive elections or the dominance of government-affiliated parties with few actual linkages to voters except through representatives of the state at the local level. Subsequent to a short-lived democratic opening in 1973, the temporary withdrawal of the state from the electoral arena and increasing significance of elections as a meaningful pathway to power did not jumpstart the development of political parties. Given the rising dominance of provincial elites armed with influence over local electoral networks—influence based on violence and control over economic resources—factions organized by these elites, rather than parties, were the preferred organizational vehicle for competing for power, culminating in a system whereby cabinet seats, as well as the patronage resources that flow from them, are ceded to factions based on their relative size and contribution. Factional dominance is further exacerbated by electoral rules that favor candidate-centered campaigns and the parties' repeated failure to develop tangible policies or ideological positions that could reliably distinguish them from one another. For additional insights on the relationship between factions and parties in Thailand, see Ockey, "Change and Continuity."

A slight modification to the mechanics by which the game is played may occur when parties are in control of independent sources of leverage in the form of financial backing or control over state resources with which to gain the support of the gatekeepers or overcome their resistance during recruitment. Yet without developing the capacity to circumvent or impose organizational discipline on such gatekeepers, arming parties with leverage only gives them a strategic advantage over other like-minded parties without equipping them with the means to reconfigure or overturn the existing rules of the game, however informal these rules may be.

These were the circumstances that confronted many political parties in Thailand when elections were allowed and were competitive, at least prior to the critical events that occurred in 1997. Thailand's electoral dynamics during this era were strongly influenced by the activities of the vote-canvasing networks, a type of informal political organization that candidates frequently rely on to reach and mobilize ordinary voters during elections. Chapter 2 provides an overview of how these networks, which still play a prominent role in electoral politics today, operate from the standpoint of candidates and vote canvassers. In addition, this chapter defines and elaborates on the distinction between patronage and clientelism and offers an explanation for why the organizational configuration of vote-canvassing networks is better understood through the lens of patronage.

Chapter 3 offers a dynamic, bird's-eye view of how this pattern of patronage politics, as a broader set of institutional arrangements rather than simply discrete practices by individual politicians or brokers, emerged in the Thai context. This chapter explores how the mobilization of *rabob uppatham,* or patronage networks, became routinized in Thai elections and imbued with certain cultural values, as well as how institutional inertia created the widespread impression

that they were a necessary if not sufficient part of electoral success—a perception that contributes to their persistence and prevalence in Thai elections even today.[31] In particular, this chapter highlights how prior to 1973, patronage politics was subdued or dominated by a centralized bureaucracy that ruled either through "government parties" when elections were held or military rule, in which coups rather than elections were decisive in capturing state power.[32] However, ruptures in bureaucratic control over *rabob uppatham,* or patronage networks, in response to capitalist development in the countryside and the withdrawal of government parties in 1973, led to the concentration of power in a small number of subnational and provincial elites. This set in motion a pattern of patronage politics in which the vote-canvassing networks became the primary mode of distributing patronage for electoral purposes, enabling the leaders of these networks to subordinate both parties and voters to their own interests.

Following Martin Shefter in his assertion that the means by which political parties mobilize voters in prior periods creates durable constituencies, making future changes to the pattern of mobilization unlikely, one should expect in the case of Thailand a highly robust "constituency for patronage."[33] The political parties' stake in the continuation of one pattern of patronage politics should reproduce its dominance while crowding out fundamentally different linkage patterns or smaller variations in the preexisting pattern. Yet since 2001, the prevailing

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[31] Institutionalization here implies both "behavioral routinization" and "value infusion." See Steven Levitsky, "Institutionalization and Peronism: The Concept, the Case and the Case for Unpacking the Concept," *Party Politics* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 77–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068898004001004.

[32] I am using the term "government parties" to refer to a pattern whereby the bureaucracy establishes its own party to compete in elections, using control over local bureaucrats and the Ministry of Interior to tilt the balance in its favor. For additional insights, see McVey, *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, 83.

[33] Shefter, "Party and Patronage."

pattern of patronage politics in Thailand has been subject to a major reconfiguration under the TRT and its leader Thaksin Shinawatra.

The circumstances of the TRT's origin, an unprecedented economic crisis and radical institutional overhaul, created unique conditions for the development of a mass constituency and newly centralized system of party-directed patronage. This rendered the leaders of factions, who had traditionally played a gatekeeping role by promising or projecting access to and control over vote-canvassing networks, more pliable to party discipline than ever before. Under the new arrangements, patronage politics in Thailand were arguably approaching a pattern of national party machines, as exemplified by Malaysia's United Malays National Organization (UMNO) or Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), where affiliation with the party or party leader is synonymous with access to and control over the distribution of patronage resources. These dynamics are explored in Chapter 4, which focuses on the rise of the TRT and the consequences of its innovations in the development of party-voter linkages.

Since the military coup in 2014, Thailand has seen a major reversal of these trends. Founded at the intersection between interest in authoritarian survival and the reconsolidation of local political machines, the PPRP represents the antithesis of the TRT and its many interventions. Though armed with unbridled authoritarian power by virtue of its alliance with the military regime, the PPRP neither developed an independent base of electoral support nor incorporated local networks of vote canvassers into a framework that it dominated. Instead, pressed by time constraints and a legitimacy deficit, the party traded its unique structural advantages for a short-term, ad-hoc amalgamation of local networks, ceding much control over the organization of patronage politics to the de facto leaders of these networks. These leaders, in

turn, leveraged their ties to the party and the authoritarian high command to reaffirm their own dominance exercising influence over the flow of votes and patronage at the subnational level. Chapter 5 sheds light on these recent developments and discusses the role of patronage politics in the context of authoritarian survival.

These changes and continuities in the patterns of patronage politics at three different historical junctures reveal an overarching theme, which is the central theoretical framework of this dissertation: in a context in which getting votes by means of patronage is the pathway to gaining and holding on to power, crises that create new sources of patronage or reshape who has access to and control over preexisting sources have the potential to disrupt how patronage politics is organized. These crises can take a variety of forms, for example, the breakdown of bureaucratic hegemony in response to a convergence of democratization and capitalist transformation of the countryside, the coincidental collapse of a system of money politics due to far-reaching constitutional reforms, and a devastating financial crisis, as well as the dismantling of populist challenges and democratic institutions by a military regime. During these crises, the struggle to maintain or challenge the status quo through elections leads actors to devise new arrangements made possible by the timing and magnitude of these crises and sometimes seize new opportunities by working through old arrangements. This produces different patterns of patronage politics with distinct, underlying implications for party-voter linkages and regime dynamics.

In this framework, a fundamental transformation of the political system away from patronage politics is impeded by the striking capacity on the part of patronage networks to not only resist but also adapt to different party arrangements and regime structures, whether under a

dominant political party in a democratic regime or an authoritarian successor party under competitive authoritarian rule. As shown in the rise of the TRT, the weight of historical contingency was sufficiently disruptive to reshape the contours of patronage politics, for example, by altering the source from which patronage flows or introducing a new kind of patronage, but not substantial enough to overturn the pattern wholesale or alter its trajectory towards programmatic politics in a linear or decisive fashion. In contrast, the return to authoritarian rule and authoritarian party-building have proven sufficient as factors revitalizing dormant arrangements and old networks, although TRT-inspired populist appeals and macro-patronage strategies continue to play a pivotal role in election campaigns.

Scope and Methods

To shed light on the patterns of patronage politics in Thailand and how they have changed or continued over time, this dissertation relies primarily on semi-structured and informal, face-to-face interviews with a group of actors who took part in upholding or contending with different arrangements of patronage politics over time. The sample includes a mix of former and current party leaders, executives and officials, faction leaders, cabinet ministers, Members of Parliament (MP), political candidates, local politicians, and vote canvassers. Most were selected and recruited in a snowball manner, although considerable effort was made to narrow the sample to those who were well-positioned, whether organizationally or temporally, to shed light on the elements of change and continuity in the electoral landscape, especially during the rise of the TRT (2001–2006) and in the post-2014 coup period. As a result, many of the individuals interviewed in this research were active either during the TRT's

founding and administration (1998–2006) or in recent years, while almost all were active for a long enough duration to notice or comment on notable changes or continuities in the pattern of patronage politics. This strategy yielded a sample that predominantly consisted of current and former members of parties, factions, and networks affiliated with the TRT and the ruling PPRP.[34] This potentially limits the generalizations possible from this study regarding the dynamics of patronage politics across the entire political system. To adjust for this, additional interviews were conducted with MPs and candidates from other parties, such as the Democrat Party and Chart Thai Pattana as well as with former election commissioners and a political journalist, who offered the perspectives of regulators and the media.

Although most of the interviews were conducted in a free-flowing manner, all were designed specifically with the intention to inductively assess the role that patronage politics plays in elections (i.e., how it is perceived and talked about, how it shapes campaign strategies, in which provinces or regions, and whether candidate selection and recruitment are influenced by considerations about patronage and control over vote-canvassing networks), to collect detailed information on how patronage politics is organized and deployed electorally (i.e., who organizes, what kind of organization, how, when and for whom, what resources are distributed, to whom and with what intentions, and whether concrete efforts are made to monitor the vote or turnout of the recipients), and to explore the dynamics of change and continuity in the pattern of patronage

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[34] The final sample includes 21 former and current cabinet ministers, 31 former and current MPs or MP candidates, 24 local politicians or vote canvassers, 2 former election commissioners, and 1 journalist. This does not include other conversations with political actors in a more informal setting, especially during fieldwork, which inform the bulk of the analysis in Chapters 2 and 3.

politics (i.e., how does the pattern of patronage politics in the present compare to what came before and vice versa).

To get to the bottom of how patronage politics is organized in Thailand, I seized all available opportunities to personally observe the campaigning, vote-canvassing, and everyday activities of the MPs, MP candidates, and their networks whenever the opportunity presented itself. These field observations were done in shorter bursts, in part due to the timing of campaigning and vote-canvassing activities, beginning from the March 2019 general elections until local elections for the Provincial Administration Organization (PAO) were held in December 2020. This fieldwork was concentrated primarily in provinces and constituencies located in Thailand's North and Northeast regions, where the conventional mode of patronage politics, as organized through networks of vote canvassers, was most visibly affected by the national appeals of Thaksin-affiliated parties. Most of these visits were possible only once a certain level of trust had been established with the MPs, candidates or faction leaders, who either made the introductions or accompanied me directly to their home constituencies. As a result, on several occasions, I was allowed to interview and engage in conversations with the members of their networks and closely observe how they interacted with voters with relatively little barrier and concern for social desirability.

The informal setting of the field research brought out the everyday nature of the vote canvassers' activities, including their personal relationships with their leaders and voters, whereas the more formal setting of my interviews with many MPs and candidates, based primarily in Bangkok or candidates' war rooms tended to reveal the more strategic and instrumental calculations associated with patronage politics and vote-canvassing networks,

themes sometimes left tacit due to their sensitivity or illegality.[35] In one interview, a faction leader accidentally revealed too many zeros in the amount of money he had spent on campaigning and quickly suggested to change the subject and "begin a new paragraph."[36] Ultimately, the research was a constant traversing of these jarring differences in social space and environments. Once collected, the data from the interviews and field notes were compiled and organized according to the themes and patterns that emerged throughout the course of the research. The analysis of the data proceeded in an iterative and reflective manner with the twin purposes of putting together a catalogue of evidence for making descriptive and causal claims and yielding broader theoretical insights for understanding how patronage politics operates and how different patterns of change and continuity emerge.

Short-term political ethnography at the village level was originally planned but was canceled as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, most of my direct interactions and exchanges with ordinary voters took place intermittently during each visit to different constituencies and mostly via the mediation of local community leaders, many of whom were part of the vote-canvassing networks I approached for interviews. Beyond face-to-face interviews and personal observations, this dissertation also draws heavily on secondary literature as evidence that speaks to the phenomenon of patronage politics in Thailand (Chapter 3), circumstances surrounding the rise of the TRT (Chapter 4) and the characteristics of Thailand's military regime after the 2014 coup (Chapter 5)

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[35] For this reason, their identities will remain confidential. Unless otherwise indicated, the names of all informants that appear in this dissertation are pseudonyms. Any resemblance to actual persons is purely coincidental.

[36] A cabinet minister and leader of a faction within the PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 22, 2020.

Chapter 2

Patronage, Clientelism, and the Vote-Canvassing Networks

We need to have someone represent us in every community so that when community events are held, we would have someone attend them on our behalf. Like I said, voters value candidates who are consistent in making face-to-face contact. So, if we can't go personally, we must have someone go in our stead, which is the same as us going. The problem is that we live in a Buddhist country. Most people believe in superstitions and believe that some days are more auspicious than others to hold religious ceremonies and community festivities. So, what happens is that these important events end up taking place at the same time. For example, the end of Buddhist Lent must be held within one month whether there are hundred or thousand temples in the province. As for wedding and ordainment ceremonies, all monks consult the same scriptures. What ends up happening is that these events are held on the same dates. It is important that we attend all these events and be involved in communal life in order to forge and maintain personal connections with voters. But with my formal duties, I cannot always afford to go personally. This is the reason why I have to have representatives at every level from the districts to the subdistricts to the villages.[1]

—MP from a province in Northern Thailand

Introduction

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[1] MP from a province in Northern Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 30, 2020. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes presented in this dissertation were conveyed to the author in Thai, with English translations provided by the author.

During the rice pledging scheme under the Yingluck Shinawatra government in 2011, a local politician in Northern Thailand informed the MP that the farmers in his community could not reap the benefits offered by the government's policy because they did not own the land they were using to grow rice. The MP then intervened personally in the bureaucratic procedures in order "to make an exception" for these individuals who were not formally recognized as rice growers in the eyes of the state but were dependent on the policy to sustain their livelihoods.[2] This type of discretionary manipulation has been identified by Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro as a factor that enables politicians to "plausibly threaten to withdraw benefits in the future from recipients who fail to give their political support as expected," in other words, what makes political clientelism possible in the context of national programs.[3] Here, instead of making implicit threats to take away what is rightfully theirs, the MP makes what is not theirs by right accessible through their relationship with him via the mediation of a local leader.[4] The source of the MP's influence in this context is rooted in the shared understanding that access to the policy benefits was possible only through his network and at his discretion. Yet the notion that the MP might refuse to lend a helping hand should the farmers fail to support him during elections is never so much as implied. Such is the nature of patronage politics, not of political clientelism per se.

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[2] Local politician from a province in Northern Thailand, interview with the author, a Northern province, November 7, 2020.

[3] Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro, "Choosing Clientelism: Political Competition, Poverty, and Social Welfare Policy in Argentina," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2009), 7, https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1450238.

[4] This type of problem-solving is possible in the first place because of the bureaucratic obstacles put in the pathway to obtaining benefits voters are, or at least should be, entitled to. The more confusing or treacherous the pathway, the greater the number of potential clients and the more easily someone like this MP can claim credit for smoothing or getting around them on behalf of his constituents.

When politicians are seen as delivering some sort of goods and services to a narrow group of voters, presumably in an attempt to gain their political support, this practice is often viewed by political scientists through the lens of political clientelism, a concept which has now come to mean "the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you (will you) support me?"[5] Implicitly, a litmus test is employed to determine how much the practice in question deviates from more normatively desirable forms of distributive politics in a properly functioning democracy. Either the practice follows the programmatic pattern, where voters receive the material benefits according to some formal criteria rather than as a direct consequence of their voting behavior, or it falls under the category of political clientelism, where voters receive material benefits only because they vote for the politician or make credible promises to do so in the future.[6] Clientelism is assumed to be present only in those exchanges which involve some element of contingency.[7]

The focus on targeting criteria according to which goods and services are delivered yields a high level of parsimony, giving researchers a common denominator for drawing comparisons across different political contexts. This also draws a clear conceptual boundary distinguishing

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[5] Susan C. Stokes, "Political Clientelism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert E. Goodin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[6] Herbert Kitschelt, "Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities," *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6–7 (September 1, 2000): 845–79, https://doi.org/10.1177/001041400003300607; Susan C. Stokes, "Pork, by Any Other Name...Building a Conceptual Scheme of Distributive Politics," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2009), https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1449057.

[7] Allen Hicken, "Clientelism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2011): 289–310, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.031908.220508.

clientelism from other modes of distributive politics or linkage strategies that share similar appearances or characteristics which may confound or obscure key underlying conceptual differences. Yet the framework of political clientelism is not a substitute for a complete explanation as to why politicians deliver goods and services to voters as a means of competing electorally, let alone offer a convincing argument as to why they build or rely on informal networks to do so on their behalf. Instead, the narrowing of the scope of inquiry to how politicians enforce clientelistic exchanges often leads to misleading interpretations and assumptions about the role that giving plays in politics and the organizational features of the networks that perform the act of giving. As this chapter illustrates, using evidence from field research in Thailand, what is usually construed as clientelist strategies frequently relies on already existing social ties built through activities that fall largely outside the scope of contingent exchanges that typify clientelism. This finding coincides with recent studies on electoral mobilization in Southeast Asia, which have found little evidence of contingency-based strategies.[8]

Although political candidates often build networks through which to distribute particularistic benefits to voters for the express purpose of winning elections, these practices do not always reflect a concerted effort to ensure that the individual recipients of their assistance will support them in exchange. In many cases, the networks are organized as a way to project the

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[8] Allen Hicken and Noah L. Nathan, "Clientelism's Red Herrings: Dead Ends and New Directions in the Study of Nonprogrammatic Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 23, no. 1 (May 11, 2020): 277–94, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-032657; and Edward Aspinall, Meredith Weiss, Allen Hicken, and Paul Hutchcroft, *Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

image that the candidates are equipped with the reach and resources necessary for addressing the everyday problems of ordinary voters in ways no other actor could.[9] Given that this projection is more consistent with patronage politics than with political clientelism, explanations for why vote-canvassing networks are built have to be sought elsewhere, that is, beyond the focus on how such networks monitor voters or enforce clientelistic bargains.

This chapter begins by revisiting the existing definitional approaches that scholars have relied on for conceptualizing patronage and clientelism. Using examples from field research of both seemingly ad hoc "war-room" networks and the networks that thrive on everyday forms of patronage, this chapter then examines how the organizations and activities of the vote-canvassing networks are not reducible to the logic of contingent exchange usually assumed by researchers as both the means (how electoral support is generated) and ends of such networks (why they are built).

Defining Clientelism and Patronage

In this dissertation, both clientelism and patronage are invoked as concepts to describe the pattern of goods and services deliveries facilitated by political candidates and their networks for the purposes of winning elections. It is necessary, therefore, to clarify what is meant by these terms and how they differ. Although important conceptual distinctions have emerged between clientelism and patronage, some of which will be highlighted in a moment, both concepts can be

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[9] For additional insights on how what is usually construed as "vote buying" may be more accurately understood as "credibility buying," see Eric Kramon, *Money for Votes: The Causes and Consequences of Electoral Clientelism in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Aspinall et al., *Mobilizing for Elections*.

traced back to an early strand of literature that focuses on patron-client relationships, a pattern or

structure of exchange relationships between two actors of unequal socioeconomic status, where

the "patron" of higher status offers protection to the "client" of lower status in return for their

services.[10]

The patron-client framework traditionally places emphasis on how the giving and

receiving of goods and services between two actors can give rise to an exchange relationship of

unequal power with unique self-reinforcing tendencies.[11] It is generally assumed that the

relationship between the patron and client reflects an unequal balance of power because, even in

situations where entering into these relationships is voluntary and the benefits are mutual, the

more powerful actor can leverage existing inequalities in the ownership and control of material

resources to influence the less powerful actor in determined ways. The highly personal, informal

and face-to-face qualities of these relationships serve to distinguish them from the Weberian

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[10] Alex Weingrod, "Patrons, Patronage, and Political Parties," *Comp Stud Soc Hist* 10, no. 4 (1968): 377–400, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500005004; James C. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia," *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972): 91–113, https://doi.org/10.2307/195; Steffen W. Schmidt, James C. Scott, Carl H. Landé, and Laura Guasti, eds., *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and S.N. Eisenstadt and Luis Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[11] Although different versions of the framework exist, the version that has become dominant in political science, advanced by Scott, is based implicitly on social exchange theory, which derives central insights from Marcel Mauss' 1954 formative study of gift-giving, *The Gift*, to address how reciprocal obligation and inequality in power may arise in a given exchange. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change." Peter Blau, a social exchange theorist cited in Scott's work, argues that "a person who gives others valuable gifts or renders them important services makes a claim for superior status by obligating them to himself." Peter M. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: J. Wiley, 1964), 108. In contrast, those who are not able to return the favor on equal terms "must subordinate himself to the other and comply with his wishes, thereby rewarding the other with power over himself." Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, 21.

ideal type of impersonal, formal, and rational-legal bureaucratic relationships. Their vertical organizational structure, on the other hand, serves to differentiate them from class-based, horizontal, or categorical patterns of association in the traditional Marxian framework.

Although the essential characteristics of patron-client relationships are static in the sense that all such relationships are based on dyadic exchanges between actors of unequal status, there is possible variation in terms of the intensity of the relationship. According to Scott, "the degree of compliance a client gives his patron is a direct function of the degree of imbalance in the exchange relationship—of how dependent the client is on his patron's services."[12] One possible source of this variation in the power differential between the patron and client may rest on the lack of capacity on the part of the client, or conversely the capacity on the part of the patron, to seek alternative sources of benefits (or services) outside their relationship with one another. For instance, the patron in question might exercise a monopoly on resources badly needed by the client, whereas the client has little to offer but personal service that, while desirable to the patron, can be obtained elsewhere or worse, obtained through means of violence, in which case the relationship ceases to be one based on exchange and instead becomes one based purely on coercion. In this way, the power differential between the patron and client is presumed to be based on the logic of supply and demand of certain critical resources in society and of unequal distribution of the means of violence.

Subsequent studies, especially those in the field of political science, have moved decisively away from the patron-client framework and instead adopted clientelism and patronage as analytical lenses through which to examine the pattern of exchange relationships that take

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[12] Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change," 94.

place in the context of electoral politics. The shift was accompanied by a new theoretical

orientation as scholars developed a way of seeing patron-client relationships or features of a

patron-client system not as structural givens but as outcomes of historical institutional

development or strategic choices made by purposeful actors. This is most evident in the work of

Martin Shefter who sees patronage not simply as a reflection of the social characteristics of the

electorate, waiting to be transformed by development or modernization, but as a strategy of

distributing state resources for political ends—a strategy which becomes available or unavailable

to political parties thanks to the historical timing of democratization relative to the development

of an autonomous state bureaucracy.[13]

Building on a similar analytical foundation, Piattoni argues that the prevalence of

patronage and clientelism in a given political system "is connected with, yet not determined by,

the emergence, transformation, and demise of constellations of institutional and historical

circumstances which make these strategies politically more or less viable and socially more or

less acceptable."[14] These approaches make visible how the actions taken by political actors have

the capacity to reproduce or overturn existing patterns of patronage and clientelism, providing a

much-needed antidote to prior approaches which tend to treat such patterns as a symptom

peculiar to certain cultures or to the developing world in general.

Patronage and Patronage Politics

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[13] Martin Shefter, "Party and Patronage: Germany, England, and Italy," *Politics & Society* 7, no. 4 (December 1, 1977), https://doi.org/10.1177/003232927700700402.
[14] Simona Piattoni, ed., "Clientelism in Historical and Comparative Perspective," in *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation: The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

Current definitions of patronage still track closely to the meaning implied in Shefter's formulation, that is, as "a divisible benefit that politicians distribute to individual voters, campaign workers, or contributors in exchange for political support" or a political strategy that "involves the exchange of public benefits for political support or party advantage."[15] It is often left unspecified whether patronage is taken to mean the resources that are distributed or the strategy of distributing those resources for the purpose of electoral support. Privileged access to the state or the discretionary use of state resources is sometimes implied by the term patronage, as this grants political parties the capacity to distribute government posts and other spoils of government in a manner that serves them politically.

This dissertation refers to patronage in these terms but sees access to the state or use of state resources not as a rigid definitional attribute of patronage but as an empirical manifestation of how patronage derives power from the fact that it is fundamentally rooted in resources which are highly concentrated, or monopolized in the case of state resources, and which, other than via one's connection with the patron, would otherwise be difficult or impossible to obtain. This extends the potential use of the term patronage to describe not only privately sourced benefits such as money, food or medicine but also local development projects, government jobs and other special favors that typically require some degree of state capture.

With these considerations in mind, in this study patronage is defined as special favors or material benefits delivered to individuals or groups in order to obtain their political support. Patronage politics, on the other hand, refers more specifically to the use of patronage for

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[15] Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 283, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/29626.

electoral purposes, whether to generate support among ordinary voters, to mobilize informal electoral intermediaries and networks or to maintain party organizations. The emphasis on "special" is meant to capture important differences between patronage and other types of benefits delivered programmatically in fulfilment of one's formal duties as well as to allow for variation in the degree of power differential or intensity of the relationships that may arise as a consequence of patronage delivered. How special depends on the vulnerability profile of the clients, the availability of the resources desired by the clients outside their relationship with the patron, and the extent of discretion that the patron can exercise over the distribution of the resources in question, whether simply for the sake of claiming credit or for making their delivery contingent on support in a manner consistent with clientelism. If the client does not find the resources offered by the patron sufficiently valuable, if the resources are easily obtainable elsewhere, and if the patron has little discretion over their distribution or lack the means to generate the appearance of discretion, then those resources and their delivery fall definitively outside the framework of patronage and patronage politics and are unlikely to give rise to any unequal power dynamics that these terms usually convey.

Since patronage is often in short supply and access to patronage is frequently highly restricted in nature, what usually gives rise to variation in the potency of patronage is not its scarcity but the degree of vulnerability and discretion. In some cases patronage is dispensed without significant vulnerability on the part of the client, for example, a political candidate calling a hospital to get a constituent admitted to a VIP room for an overnight stay in a private hospital, presumably in anticipation that this would generate goodwill and reputation that may

eventually translate into votes.[16] Even if the patient failed to secure the VIP room, this would

presumably have little effect on his or her wellbeing, so long as the patient is admitted to the

hospital. Nonetheless, the assistance remains a special favor in the sense that, for a non-VIP

patient, gaining access to the VIP room was possible only through the candidate's discretionary

intervention.

In some cases, the vulnerability of the client is more evident, for example, a local

politician leveraging an MP's official position to bail out several members of a hill tribe who

were arrested for foraging near their ancestral home, now a National Forest.[17] Both cases qualify

as patronage, as both candidates delivered what would otherwise have been difficult to access or

obtain and did so in a manner in which they could claim personal credit, yet the intensity of the

relationships that potentially arose between the patron and clients in these two cases most likely

differed in terms of degree.[18] In comparison to gaining access to the VIP room in a hospital,

getting out of trouble with local police is likely to contribute to a more intense relationship

between the dispenser of patronage and his or her recipient.

Still in other cases, the discretion exercised by politicians over the distribution of favors

or benefits exists as a matter of degree. For example, in the case of the state welfare card scheme

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[16] The sibling of an MP, interview with the author, a province in Northern Thailand, November 7, 2020.

[17] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to a hill tribe village located in a province in Northern Thailand, November 7, 2020.

[18] According to Nichter, vulnerability as a concept encompasses both poverty and risk on the part of citizens who are on the receiving end of the distribution of material benefits. The more vulnerable, the more willing citizens would be in terms of participating in what Nichter calls "relational clientelism." Simeon Nichter, *Votes for Survival: Relational Clientelism in Latin America*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316998014.

in Thailand, for which all Thais classified as low-income earners are eligible, ruling party

politicians regularly attempt to construe the welfare benefits as hinging on their personal

intervention even when they cannot direct the flow of such benefits to some individuals but not

others.[19] They do so by collecting detailed records of those who registered for the welfare

scheme and helping them navigate the complexities of the bureaucratic process.[20] This practice,

which Aspinall et al. refer to as "facilitation," enables such politicians to claim personal

involvement in bringing welfare benefits to those who are formally entitled to receive them in

the first place.[21] By contrast, the exercise of discretion is more palpable in cases involving

private goods or in which formal criteria are subverted directly, as previously illustrated in the

case of the MP in a province in Northern Thailand who pulled the strings to make an exception

for farmers who did not qualify for the rice-pledging scheme. In brief, variation in the degree of

vulnerability on the part of the recipients of patronage and the degree of discretion exercised by

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[19] The degree of discretion is frequently shaped by the characteristics of the goods or services (the degree to which certain goods or services are excludable by virtue of their inherent properties) or how they are meant to be distributed (the extent to which rational-legal, codified, and objective criteria exist and are complied by actors distributing the goods or services). For additional insights, see Jonathan Hopkin, "Conceptualizing Political Clientelism: Political Exchange and Democratic Theory," in *APSA Annual Meeting, Philadelphia*, 31:46–18, 2006; and Susan C. Stokes, "Pork, by Any Other Name...Building a Conceptual Scheme of Distributive Politics," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2009), https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1449057.
[20] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Ubon Ratchathani, February 21, 2020.
[21] In their comparative analysis of electoral mobilization strategies in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, Aspinall et al. find that varying degrees of discretion exercised by politicians over the distribution of resources give rise to different patterns of "hijacking" benefits distributed as part of national programs or policies. Edward Aspinall, Meredith Weiss, Allen Hicken, and Paul Hutchcroft, *Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

the dispensers of patronage gives rise to relationships of varying degrees of intensity and reciprocal obligation.

Political Clientelism and Contingency

In contrast to patronage, which has not significantly changed in terms of its underlying conceptual attributes, in the case of clientelism, the renewed focus on strategy and political action has led to something like a procedural or behavioral turn. Increasingly, scholars found the need to prevent conceptual stretching and to distinguish clientelism from other strategies of distributive politics, ranging from those widely regarded as desirable, for instance programmatic politics, to those deemed as problematic or unsavory, for instance vote buying or pork-barrel politics.[22] The most dominant approach has been to measure the practice or strategy in question against an idealized benchmark of programmatic politics. "In definitional terms," Kitschelt argues, "only the procedural nature of relations count to separate clientelist from programmatic linkage."[23] In practice, this has led scholars to emphasize contingency as an element that is central and necessary to all instances of political clientelism: clientelistic strategies are essentially quid pro quo in the sense that "politicians supply benefits only to individuals or groups that support or promise to support the politician" and that "the client supports only the politician who delivers, or promises to deliver, a valued benefit in return for the client's electoral

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[22] For examples of how scholars have attempted to provide conceptual clarity to the term political clientelism, see Stokes, "Pork, by Any Other Name"; Allen Hicken, "Clientelism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2011): 291, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.031908.220508; and Tina Hilgers, "Clientelism and Conceptual Stretching: Differentiating among Concepts and among Analytical Levels," *Theory and Society* 40, no. 5 (2011): 567–88.

[23] Kitschelt, "Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities," 853.

support."[24] This is the definition of clientelism that will be adopted in this dissertation to describe the delivery of benefits that are noticeably contingent on some form of support in return on the part of the recipients.

Despite recent attempts to refine the conceptual underpinnings of political clientelism, there remain important commonalities that both clientelism and patronage share in their current usage in scholarly works. For example, both concepts are used to describe the delivery of material benefits for the purpose generating political support that occurs in a particularistic manner, in the sense that the benefits are distributed only to individuals or groups in society while excluding others. However, clientelistic strategies are distinct from patronage strategies in terms of how they exclude the potential beneficiaries.[25] Clientelistic strategies reward only those who return favors or display credible commitment to do so in the future. Yet, the distinction often becomes blurred in practice because the underlying distributional criteria are usually hidden while only the distributional outcomes are visible. Furthermore, political parties and candidates deliver not only private goods to individuals but also distribute a wide array of small-scale club goods to communities, in which case the individuals in those communities receive the benefits regardless of who they support.

Although there is no consensus on the degree of excludability that is sufficient for a particular exchange to be considered clientelistic, scholars generally agree that the more individualized the exchange, the more likely clients will experience the rewards as a direct

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[24] Hicken, "Clientelism."
[25] See Hicken for the distinction between "targeting" and "the criterion by which targeting decisions are made." Hicken, "Clientelism."

consequence of their own actions.[26] Nevertheless, the fact that distributional outcomes do not

always offer reliable cues for identifying cases of clientelism has led some scholars to infer the

existence of an underlying criteria of distribution, according to which political parties, candidates

or brokers reward those who vote in their favor while punishing those who fail to do the same,

on the basis of whether these actors make an active effort to monitor the compliance of those

they target.[27] Other studies merely emphasize the plausibility of the threat to withdraw benefits

from recipients on the basis of whether those who deliver the benefits, in fact, possess the

capacity to exercise discretionary control over the flow of benefits.[28]

The problem with these approaches is that contingency in a given clientelistic exchange

does not always arise simply because parties, politicians or brokers enforce such exchanges. The

presence of contingency may be explained, for instance, as a consequence of the distributive

expectations that voters develop as a result of prior experiences,[29] as a result of the cultural

context in which the exchange is embedded,[30] or as part of voters' own initiatives in publicly

declaring their support for different parties or candidates.[31] Furthermore, the potential alignment

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[26] Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients, and Policies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[27] Kitschelt and Wilkinson, *Patrons, Clients, and Policies*; Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107324909.

[28] Weitz-Shapiro, "Choosing Clientelism."

[29] Ernesto Calvo and Maria Victoria Murillo, "When Parties Meet Voters: Assessing Political Linkages Through Partisan Networks and Distributive Expectations in Argentina and Chile," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 7 (July 1, 2013): 851–82, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012463882.

[30] Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2001).

[31] Nichter, *Votes for Survival*.

of interests between the dispensers of patronage and their recipients may even result in self-enforcing dynamics, for example, in the provision of government jobs or lands in which ongoing benefits are conditional on the patron remaining in power.[32] The mechanisms through which contingency arise in a given clientelistic relationship are, therefore, diverse and are not limited to the enforcement activities of the patron.[33]

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[32] Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511510274; Catherine Boone, "Politically Allocated Land Rights and the Geography of Electoral Violence: The Case of Kenya in the 1990s," *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 10 (October 1, 2011): 1311–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011407465; James Robinson and Thierry Verdier, "The Political Economy of Clientelism," *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 115, no. 2 (2013): 260–91; Allen Hicken and Noah L. Nathan, "Clientelism's Red Herrings: Dead Ends and New Directions in the Study of Nonprogrammatic Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 23, no. 1 (May 11, 2020): 277–94, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-032657; and Michael Albertus, *Property without Rights: Origins and Consequences of the Property Rights Gap* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[33] Regardless of the conceptual disagreements on the level at which targeting decisions are made or the means through which clientelistic exchanges are enforced, many of the studies that see clientelism in procedural terms share the understanding that the strategic role played by political actors, and sometimes citizens, are essential to the ways in which clientelistic politics operates. This stands in sharp contrast to prior approaches which tend to emphasize the characteristics of the relationships over the mechanisms which give rise to them. The dichotomy between the substantive and procedural view of political clientelism maps onto a larger debate in the social sciences over the influence of structure versus agency in shaping human actions. At one extreme, it is the presence of clientelistic relationship, the socioeconomic context within which the relationship is situated and the roles that individual actors assume in that relationship that best explain their behavior, for instance, why the patron offers protection and assistance to the client or why the client demonstrate obedience and loyalty in return. At the other extreme, such behaviors are best explained as a consequence of more immediate, strategic interactions between actors rather than as a mere product of preexisting relationship between those actors. This dissertation does not claim to put to rest the question of how political clientelism should be defined but it does attempt to highlight how, under some circumstances, political clientelism is ill-equipped for explaining the activities that "clientelistic" networks and organizations engage in during election time. Such activities are more legible through the analytical lens of patronage.

As this chapter will demonstrate, clientelism constitutes only a small part of what vote-canvassing networks in Thailand actually do while contingency, an element theorized to be necessary for clientelism, is notably absent at the level of the interaction between vote canvassers and voters. The next section offers examples of two distinct but often overlapping patterns of patronage politics in Thailand that assume the form of vote-canvassing networks, illustrating that neither fit the image of clientelism as defined above.

The War room

During a visit to Ubon Ratchathani in Isan, Thailand's Northeast, I was escorted by Nin, an MP candidate, to a small meeting room in a private business building. This was neither the local party branch nor the candidate's office but a "war room," as it was colloquially referred to, where Nin's trusted subordinates would gather to plan and coordinate strategies to get Nin elected. There, Nin introduced me to his campaign team, a small group of four local politicians, who helped him put together a vote-canvassing network for the 2019 general elections. These individuals, all of whom were members of the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO), received instructions to fetch one or two vote canvassers under their direct supervision, who then brought along a couple of their own subordinates. This continued, like a chain reaction, until the network finally reached the village level. What I got was a small glimpse of how a vote-canvassing network is organized and mobilized—informal, dyadic and penetrating, from the provincial level down to the level of individual households. Suffice it to say, the war room could not fit everyone who assembled, even on such short notice. Most were told to go home and come back in a few hours for a chat while some returned the next day.

What left the deepest impression during that visit, however, was not the detail that emerged from our conversations, no matter how intriguing, but the aesthetics of the war room itself. I was captivated by how decorated the place was with maps, calendars, lists and records. The spectacle of the war room, laden as it was with technological devices meant for organizing and turning the physical space, time and individuals into abstractions, alerted me to the possibility that the vote-canvassing network was, like many theories of clientelism might suggest, a real-world manifestation of candidates' agenda to develop a means of social control, using geographic, demographic and calendrical knowledge to their advantage. After all, much of vote-canvassing activities revolve around reaching, or delivering to, the right communities, the right people and at the right time.

The room itself was as impressively organized as the network that assembled on that day. On the side of the room facing the entry, there were maps of the electoral district, divided into municipalities (*thesaban*) and subdistricts (*tambon*), showing not only where the roads, bridges, markets, schools and temples are but also the distribution of eligible voters and the number and location of polling stations. These maps were punctured and punctuated throughout by colored pins—green for loyal, yellow for swing and red for opposition.[34] Next to these maps were calendars with detailed plans to visit different communities going back at least six weeks before the election. On an adjacent wall were spreadsheets large enough to cover the entire surface area, detailing the names and phone numbers of all district chiefs (*kamnan*) and village heads

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[34] See Anyarat for a similar observation regarding how communities and voters are classified in the making of an "election campaign map." Anyarat Chattharakul, "Networks of Vote-Canvassers in Thai Elections: Informal Power and Money Politics," PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2007.

(*phuyaibaan*), the number of households in each subdistricts and villages, the number of males and females, and the total number of residents. Like the electoral maps, the names of these community leaders were highlighted to distinguish friends from foes.

Catching me staring at the wall, Nin explained, "I will mark who's loyal to whom, which political party is this person affiliated with, and whether this person is for or against the military. We try to recruit the village heads first. If a particular village head doesn't want to support us, we try to get the assistant village head. If we can't get these official leaders to be on our side then we must get the leaders of health volunteers, community organizations, teachers or even monks, using whatever we have at our disposal."[35] Like most candidates who are intimately familiar with organizing vote-canvassing networks, Nin took advantage of inherent political divisions at each and every administrative level, strategically sought out and appealed to the most influential leaders, or their rivals, and count on these leaders to canvass for votes on his behalf. In this case, the term vote canvassers or *huakhanaen* is used to refer to a group of leaders ranging from village heads, subdistrict chiefs, members of the mayoral council, TAOs, PAOs to the leaders of community-level organizations such as the Village Health Volunteers, Village Funds Council, housewives' associations or any other natural leaders who, by virtue of their proximity to voters, reputation or other qualifications, are in a unique position to campaign on behalf of candidates at the local level.[36]

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[35] Nin, a PPRP candidate in Ubon Ratchathani province, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani province, February 21, 2020.

[36] On several occasions, I heard the term vote canvassers or *huakhanaen* being used, mostly by party or faction leaders, to describe even the MPs themselves. This illustrates that the term is not limited to local level brokers but instead, includes national politicians who are perceived as having some influence over the activities of other candidates, vote canvassers, or voters in their region, province, or electoral district. Furthermore, many high-level local politicians, for

In addition to collecting detailed information on these leaders and to discriminate between supporters and oppositions, Nin was also in possession of several other lists which indicated that he was interested in recruiting individual members of community-level organizations and using the network for mobilizational purposes. Adding to the posters on the wall were piles and piles of spreadsheets sitting idly on the tables. These provided details similar to the ones displayed on the wall but at an even more granular level. For example, one list featured the names of the members of health volunteer organizations and housewives association, along with their shirt size, interestingly. A different spreadsheet listed the name of the village and village number, number of persons in charge, license plate number and the driver's name, presumably for arranging transportation of people to rallies or voting stations. Rendering the landscape and people "legible," to use James Scott's terminology, went hand in hand with the efforts to recruit and mobilize.[37] Like following a technical blueprint, the network was put together using instruments meant for governing a population, which helped to identify and classify groups of supporters and oppositions at different levels and in different communities.

Nin was not the only candidate who organized his network in this way, though his meticulous attention to detail was more visible than others and left obvious imprints on the

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example, the chiefs of the PAO, seemed to take offense at being described simply as vote canvassers who do the bidding of MPs. If anything, individual MPs have become increasingly dependent on those who occupy local offices for patronage resources with which to furnish and mobilize electoral networks. This reflects changing power dynamics between actors in local and national politics in response to the decentralization reforms carried out since 1997.

[37] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

physical space.[38] Four days before the 2019 elections, I visited a different candidate's war room, a room in an automobile dealership in a nearby province, where there was little sign the room was being used for election campaigning activities—a stark contrast to Nin's. Yet similar dynamics were present. Mon, the candidate's brother and de facto leader of the network, explained to me how critical it was to acquire government records and develop a way of classifying voters based on them. Long before the election campaign officially began, Mon obtained a household registration from another relative who was a local government official. Based on this registration, he would compile a series of smaller lists, each more granular than the one before, based on the residential area and neighborhood. The final lists each contained no more than one to three hundred names and addresses, which corresponded to those who reside in the smallest geographical unit, at least on paper, typically the village or the village's block (*khum*), where Mon's network reached its most granular level. The lists would then be entrusted to the rank-and-file members of the network along with cash handouts in proportion to the number of the individuals on the list.[39] To show me an example, Mon placed one of the lists in

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[38] I visited Nin's war room almost one year after the 2019 elections, yet everything was still intact. Presumably, he was preparing for the upcoming local elections held later that year.

[39] Mon acknowledged that the vote canvassers who received the envelopes may not end up distributing the cash on his behalf and that even those who do may not spend the full amount but instead pocket some of the money to themselves. Under normal circumstances, when local elections were held, these elections would serve as opportunities for Mon to conduct an early screening for vote canvassers who have proven to be true to their word to assist him during the next parliamentary elections. In Mon's case, since he previously supported his family members during previous municipal council elections, he was aware of which vote canvassers would turn out to be credible or least likely to defect, at least within the municipality. The election in 2019 was special in that it was held after an extended period of military rule during which no elections, local or national, were allowed and that it was held under the watchful eye of the military regime. This was detrimental to Mon's vote-canvassing strategy, although under new electoral rules the votes that his networks successfully captured still counted for determining the allocation of party-list seats. This was part of the reason why, even though Mon did not control

an envelope along with some cash, five hundred baht per head. He then sealed the envelope and wrote "Seng" on the back. "Seng" then entered the room, picked up the envelope and left without having to be instructed, as if the ritual had been rehearsed many times over.[40]

Once we were alone, Mon disclosed that there were around two thousand and five hundred individuals like Seng dispersed throughout the electoral district, both above and below his station, each tasked with distributing money to voters or others who could do this on their behalf, with strategies and tactics that are largely their own design.[41] Through this network, Mon would pay out money twice—once three days before the election and once the night before the election. In total, Mon had spent up to 35 million baht, sourced from at least two individuals in the party that Mon was affiliated with. According to Mon, "fighting political battles" in order to gain access to state power necessitated the use of vote canvassers and money in the same way that warfare required soldiers, swords, spears, guns, and bullets.[42] Legitimate or illegitimate, these instruments were deemed crucial for "a competitive struggle for the people's vote" in the

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district-wide network of vote canvassers and only specialized in municipal council elections, he and his family members were still recruited to compete in parliamentary elections in 2019.

[40] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to a province in Northeastern Thailand, March 20, 2019.

[41] Typically, the distribution of handouts shortly before elections involves vote canvassers making rounds to visit each household for which they are responsible or gathering representatives from each household at a single location, for example, the vote canvassers' home, where cash could then be handed out. Yet, some vote canvassers have their own unique ways of getting cash into the hands of voters. One of Mon's family members who runs a local market disclosed that, prior to elections, he would use the money to provide relief to the people who rent the spaces in his market, as in making adjustment to the balance sheet, and settle their debts with third-party loan sharks. Technically, there is no direct payment from him to voters but they certainly experience the benefits in concrete terms. To show their appreciation, the renters would frequently gift him with fresh produce which he would then donate to funerals or other community festivities being held in the district on behalf of Mon.

[42] Mon, leader of a political dynasty and brother of MP candidate in a province in Northeastern Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 14, 2020.

Schumpeterian view of democracy, even if they did not always guarantee favorable electoral outcomes or economic payoffs. The use of vote-canvassing networks also offered a way for Mon to quantify his brother's chances of winning into numbers that he could use to play up to actors within the party's inner circle who possessed the financial resources to help Mon and his brother increase their odds but lacked other means to verify their credibility. Mon understood not all voters were likely to be responsive to cash handouts, especially since Mon's network competed in a constituency in which a significant number of voters publicly supported his opponent's party in the past based on its policies. Yet using lists of households with seniors and newborns which he had obtained from his other relative, Mon also knew that those who could not be enticed with money might be responsive to other material incentives such as food or medicine, or that they could be convinced by their elders if they lived together or nearby.

At first glance, the organization of vote canvassers in these two cases seems to fit the Machiavellian portrayals of political clientelism sometimes conveyed in the literature. The dynamics of the war room were characterized by the use of administrative maps, lists, and records to classify voters and vote canvassers according to their political affiliation, which translated into elaborate electioneering schemes that, shortly before elections, were performed and acted out to perfection by guns-for-hire vote buyers. Both networks were organized almost purely from the top down and served primarily as vehicles for the competitive recruitment of vote canvassers and competitive distribution of cash. On closer inspection, however, neither Nin or Mon made any significant investment in assembling the kind of network usually presupposed by prevailing theories of clientelism—the kind that specializes in monitoring the voting behavior

of the individual recipients of their handouts so that defection could be prevented or the benefits could be selectively allocated only to those who supported them electorally.

It is true that the leaders of both networks collected demographic information on voters in each community and actively sought the support of community leaders who, in their perspective, were positioned to influence voters. Yet by comparison, they made strikingly little effort to ensure that individual voters, the intended final recipients of their handouts, returned the favor accordingly.[43] Presumably, they might hope that their vote canvassers would do this on their behalf, for example, in cases where the vote canvassers served as presiding officers in polling stations or possessed enough negative influence (*itthiphon*) such that "looking them in the eye is sufficient."[44] However, it is not clear that Nin or Mon expected this to be the case for most of their vote canvassers.

Since both of their networks consisted primarily of local politicians and local state representatives, Nin and Mon expected that their vote canvassers would be able to deliver most of the votes at least in the subdistricts and villages they oversaw by virtue of their positions. As a result, they were much less concerned with attempting to monitor individual voters. Nin, for example, acknowledged that political divisions among voters at the village level were "naturally occurring" in the sense that voters were naturally supportive of either their village heads or their rivals, who were constantly competing to maintain their leadership roles in their locales.[45] Therefore, their strategy was to provide support and secure the loyalty of whoever appeared to

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[43] This finding corresponds to what Aspinall et al. discovered, especially in the case of the Philippines, where patronage politics is facilitated primarily through local political machines. Aspinall et al., *Mobilizing for Elections.*
[44] Mon, interview with the author, January 14, 2020.
[45] Nin, interview with the author, February 21, 2020.

control the local majority or, where this was not possible, the local minority so that on the whole

the vote-canvassing network would end up with more likely supporters than their rival

networks.[46] Based on this observation, one might conclude that even though electoral handouts,

special favors, and material benefits are routinely distributed to ordinary voters through vote-

canvassing networks, voters themselves are not part of said networks, at least not in the same

way that vote canvassers and brokers are. Expectations of some degree of voter compliance is, of

course, built into the logic of recruiting vote canvassers but this does not strictly imply that voter

compliance is ultimately a function of what the network does.

The absence of concrete efforts on the part of candidates like Nin and Mon to screen the

individual voters who received their handouts underscores a broader trend whereby politicians

build impressive networks through which to deliver goods and services to voters without

investing in monitoring and enforcement, as many existing theories of clientelism usually

assume. Of course, many vote canvassers frequently succeed in terms of reliably delivering the

votes of the individuals to whom they distribute handouts on behalf of candidates like Nin and

Min. However, it is often difficult to construe these votes strictly as the outcome of contingent

distribution by the candidates, even though the absence of handouts during elections was

sometimes sufficient for voters to renege on their commitment to support candidates.[47]

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[46] For similar insights on the ways in which the locus of competition is on securing the support of brokers rather than individual voters, see Allen Hicken, Edward Aspinall, Meredith L. Weiss, and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "Buying Brokers: Electoral Handouts beyond Clientelism in a Weak-Party State," *World Politics* 74, 1 (2022): 77-120.

[47] The phenomenon that handouts are often necessary for securing the support of even the most loyal of voters should not be interpreted as evidence that their loyalty is somehow dubious but as an indication that their loyalty is often uniquely conditional on the ability of the patron to maintain a consistent flow of material benefits, which handouts usually signal. Furthermore, even among loyal supporters, some are more firmly in a position to credibly threaten to defect

As the next section illustrates, much of what can be characterized as clientelist exchanges occurs only between the candidates and core members of their networks, while it is generally accepted as conventional wisdom that not all voters will necessarily comply with the vote canvassers' requests in return for cash handouts. As Mon repeatedly emphasized, distributing handouts was merely a strategy to "get the votes" (*ha khanaen*) which was qualitatively distinct from a strategy to "gain popularity" (*ha siang*).[48] The latter, which was perceived by candidates like Nin and Mon as key to a more enduring electoral base, entails a fundamentally different kind of organizational investment—the kind that only becomes visible by moving beyond the candidate's war room and its theatrics.

The Everyday Forms of Patronage

It is ironic that the usually secretive electioneering activities that occur in the context of the war room often overshadow the everyday forms of patronage that political candidates and voter canvassers deliver to voters, usually outside the scope of election campaigns. What separates the two set of practices maps closely the distinction that Nichter draws between electoral clientelism, in which the provision of contingent benefits is exclusive to election campaigns, and relational clientelism, in which the provision of contingent benefits extends beyond election time.[49] However, what separates the everyday forms of patronage from the "war room" is not simply an issue of temporality but the range of activities across which the

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than others, leading to a situation whereby the patron will invest in buying their support even when they have proven themselves to be loyal. See Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.

[48] Mon, interview with the author, a province in Northeastern Thailand, March 20, 2019.

[49] Nichter, *Votes for Survival*

candidate, vote canvassers, and voters enter into relationships with one another—activities which are neither confined to elections nor strictly based on contingent distribution.

The fact that the vote-canvassing networks are most clearly visible during election time and operate as a channel through which handouts are distributed should not be interpreted as evidence that these networks exist simply to facilitate clientelist strategies on behalf of the candidate. In fact, the building of these networks sometimes entails dispensing patronage to groups whose individual members may or may not support the candidate in return, generating the impression that the candidate, or the leader of the network, is armed with the reach, resources, and credibility necessary for addressing a wide array of problems that other leaders lacking similar qualifications cannot. Elements of contingency might still be found at the level of the interaction between the candidates and vote canvassers, or between vote canvassers of different ranks, but they do not determine the networks' organizational configuration in the manner usually implied by prevailing theories of clientelism. Rather, the focus of organizational investment is on developing the kind of network with unique resource capabilities from which patronage might be derived and on mobilizing already existing social ties which would make the enforcement of clientelistic exchanges unnecessary to begin with.

Take, for example, Sunai, a long-time MP in a province in the same region as Nin and Mon, who boasts an impressive track record for switching parties. Following in the footsteps of his father, who had served as a sponsor of several political parties and a former vote canvasser during the Chatichai era (1988–1991), Sunai established a formidable political dynasty with members of his family occupying key positions in local and national governments, a substantial network of vote canvassers numbering five thousand spanning across multiple constituencies,

and alliances with local businesses and construction contractors counting on him to deliver concessions and development projects their way. Despite ongoing allegations of corruption against him, Sunai's reputation as a man of power, influence, and wealth enables him to continue to portray himself as a generous patron to the ordinary voters and an indispensable ally to the political elites and party leaders. There is nothing unique about Sunai's style of politics. In fact, he is the archetypal image of old-style Thai politicians who build their political networks and business enterprises based on their extraordinary capacity to channel benefits and favors to their supporters and, in turn, deliver the votes of their supporters to the highest-bidding political party. Yet Sunai's approach to building and managing his vote-canvassing network differs in important ways from what is usually depicted by many theories of clientelism:

> I don't really pay attention to the details of screening my supporters. I don't ever need to monitor their actions because I trust most of them wholeheartedly. I have nothing but confidence in my followers. If a candidate says he needs to screen *huakhanaen* it means that he doesn't have such confidence, because he is distant, because he only treats them like *huakhanaen*, or he might not even know them personally. He might just think that they are good at canvassing votes and then approach them with money during election time. I'm not like that. Ours is a *phuak*-based [factional] relationship. For example, this mayor is someone we've built from the ground up. This subdistrict chief is someone whom we helped reach that position. For these people, there's really no need to monitor them at all. Do you really think anyone can buy them from me?[50]

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[50] Sunai, MP in a province in Northeastern Thailand, interview with the author, a province in Northeastern Thailand, January 30, 2020.

Sunai is barely interested in the activities that conventional theories of clientelism usually suggest candidates are most invested in. He is offended, even, by the thought that someone of his reputation and stature would need to safeguard against defection by his followers by monitoring their behavior during elections. Doing so would make him no different from the type of politician he speaks of with disdain, the type that sees relationships with vote canvassers in purely transactional terms, mediated only through money and completely devoid of trust. Sunai places emphasis, instead, on the fact that he has played a crucial role in placing every single one of his followers into different positions of power and, based on this undeniable performance of patronage, he is confident they will uphold their commitments to him. These commitments, according to him, are not available for purchase but are rooted in personal relationships developed over time. Elements of contingency remain but the mechanism through which they arise are notably different from the one specified by many existing theories of clientelism—the one that focuses on monitoring and enforcement.

Beyond placing his subordinates into local government offices, Sunai also delivers a range of other goods and services, some of which are better understood through the lens of patronage while others, quite simply, are typically regarded as appropriate behaviors expected of any serious candidate. From local development to attending life-cycle ceremonies, from finding employment to getting people out of trouble, all seems to go together in a way that the usual focus on individualized, contingent exchange tends to miss. According to Sunai,

> The important thing is, from thirty years ago when this place had absolutely nothing to today when it now has everything, I have always been there for them, from cradle to grave. By that I mean, when they have children and need my connections to get these

children into the right schools, I help them. When these children are out of schools and need my connections to get the right jobs, I help them. When they marry, I oversee their weddings. And when they have children, the cycle repeats. But it doesn't end there. When they die, I oversee their funerals too. I'm with them at all stages of life—birth, aging, sickness and death. This is why I have a personal motto, that "life is uncertain but you can call on Sunai to ease your burden." It's true. Life is uncertain. Sometimes when they go driving and drinking at night and get caught by the police, they call on me for help. Why? Because I am someone who can help them with any problems they run into.[51]

The extent to which Sunai had been integral to addressing the everyday problems in his province is probably overstated, but the general point remains. What is conveyed in his description is that, on the basis of the services he performs for his supporters, accumulated over time, whether bringing development projects to the province, enrolling children in schools through special means, or making charitable donations to people's wedding ceremonies, he has developed a reputation as a patron—someone others cannot do without, not just during elections but "from cradle to grave."[52] The term "from cradle to grave" can be interpreted quite literally. By sheer coincidence, during a visit to a nearby province, I interviewed a vote canvasser, a former bureaucrat, who used to work for Sunai. He told me that he was responsible for going to funerals to make donations on Sunai's behalf and "steal the microphone" from other contenders in order to claim credit for Sunai. This is what he had to say:

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[51] Sunai, interview with the author, January 30, 2020.

In funerals, the one who holds the microphone has the advantage. Why? Because with the microphone I can declare that Sunai was the host. There were 5-6 other MPs sitting there but I announced that my boss was the host. I could say that Sunai did this and that and they wouldn't be able say anything. And I would place *puang reed* [wreaths of flowers] on display at funerals whenever someone in our district passed away—they would have Sunai's name on them. You really can't be stingy with *puang reed*. Sunai would pay us 1,200 baht each. We would buy them at 800-900 baht and the remainder we keep as our wage or gas fee. We would take the photos of the job we did, collect the receipts and report to Sunai. But he didn't really have to tell us what to do. We knew what we had to do, in terms of sending *puang reed*, attending funerals and bribing the MC to get the microphone.[53]

The focus of Sunai's organizational investment, therefore, is qualitatively different from what is depicted in the example of the war rooms of Nin and Mon. Here, the network was mobilized during funerals, not during elections, to generate a reputation that Sunai was not simply charitable but also considerate of the well-being of those in his district, signaling that he was someone positioned to solve a range of other problems for his constituencies. Compared to what was depicted in the war room example, this was a very different kind of competition but still a competition—and an even more costly one to compete in.

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[53] A former bureaucrat in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, February 21, 2020.

To be sure, nothing prevents Sunai from partaking in the war-room type of strategy that

Nin and Mon are engaged in, no matter how reluctant Sunai might be to admit it.[54] In fact, it

seems that he is quite adept at it. According to Sunai,

> First there are heads of *khet* [electoral districts], then heads of *amphoe* [districts], then
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> heads of *tambon* [subdistricts], then heads of *moo baan* [villages], then heads of *khum*
>
> [village blocks or clusters], and then heads of households, until we finally have one
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> person in charge of around five to six people.[55]

These canvassers are armed with "weapons," a shorthand for money. The same network of

individuals who attended funerals on Sunai's behalf was redeployed for the purpose of

distributing cash handouts during elections, presumably with additional recruits at the village and

subdistrict level.

Despite having clearly stated that he was not interested in monitoring his followers, when

it comes to distributing handouts, he was nevertheless willing to make implicit threats as a

mechanism to ensure that his vote canvassers made a serious effort to boost his popularity. "If

for example, a village has 100 votes, but they delivered only 30, I will tell them this is a problem.

You need to improve. In the end, they will get around 38. But if I didn't bluff at all then they

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[54] By the same token, both Nin and Mon have their own styles of everyday forms of patronage, distinct from their "war room" type of strategies. In Sunai's case, however, his engagement in the form of patronage delivery is significantly more apparent, presumably due to his established presence in the province and influence over local politicians and government officials. Another way of putting this is that, for candidates or MPs like Nin and Mon who have yet to build a solid reputation or expand the scope of their influence, the electoral returns associated with the "war room" type of strategies may be higher, as they have yet to reach the point at which they would be able to reap the benefits offered by the increasing returns to scale associated with the everyday forms of patronage.

[55] Sunai, interview with the author.

might end up delivering only 20."[56] This was not so much a way to prevent vote canvassers from switching their allegiances but simply a means to get them to work harder and maximize his returns on investment, most likely reserved only for the rank-and-file members of his network responsible for distributing handouts to voters. If these vote canvassers ended up succeeding at delivering the satisfactory number of votes, this would be perceived as a demonstration of their credibility which makes them worthy of his trust and continued support. Yet it appears as though their failure to deliver the votes in the amount promised is accepted as natural—something that Sunai has already taken into his consideration, hence the bluff. What this implies is that Sunai neither expects all his vote canvassers to perform their duties as promised nor does he expect every single individual recipient of his handouts to necessarily comply with his vote canvassers' requests. In this context, the delivery to vote canvassers is only weakly enforced while the delivery to voters is not expected to be enforced at all. Rather than binding voters to vote for him, the handouts serve primarily as a last-minute, sometimes necessary reminder that Sunai and the members of his network were interested in their electoral support, conveying the possibility of plenty more to come if Sunai is elected.

Therefore, the fact that Sunai was interested in being seen as someone in a position to dispense everyday forms of patronage to his followers was not at all a contradiction to his engagement in the distribution of handouts during elections. In fact, the handouts might be understood as a key ingredient serving to reinforce this perception in the eyes of voters rather than aimed at generating the impression that his intervention is somehow contingent on their support. Even though the network he assembled, which consisted of local politicians, subdistrict

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[56] Sunai, interview with the author.

chiefs, and village heads, sometimes gave Sunai the potential to insist on a return favor in the

form of electoral support, the notion that he would deliver benefits only to those who voted for

him while punishing others who failed to do so is never communicated or followed through on

with actions—and if it were, it would probably be detrimental to his image as a generous

patron.[57]

If a political candidate like Sunai neither expects nor take concrete steps to ensure that

the individual recipients of his goodwill return the favor in the form of a vote, then what

accounts for the appearance of contingent behavior on the part of those who do vote for him after

having received his handouts? Most existing theories of clientelism suggest that the brokers, or

vote canvassers in this case, monitor the behavior of voters or at least cultivate a sense of

reciprocal obligation on the part of the voters on behalf of the candidate. Yet this is not the only

or even predominant mechanism through which the handouts or favors from the candidate can be

expected to generate support in return. To address the puzzle of why vote canvassers frequently

succeed in getting voters to support politicians in response to their handouts or delivery of

patronage, it is important to focus attention on the everyday activities of vote canvassers beyond

the scope of elections and monitoring voters.

Som is a subdistrict leader of Village Health Volunteers, a public health organization

established as part of the Thai government's response to the "communist problem" during the

Cold War era and lack of access to healthcare in rural areas. In addition to providing primary

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[57] I do not have substantial information to report on how Sunai got the money to fund his massive campaign, aside from the financial support from the party that he was associated with. However, based on a conversation with the previously mentioned former bureaucrat, who used to work for Sunai, it is likely this money came from corruption through the allocation of government funds for construction projects.

health care to rural communities, the health volunteers, numbering more than a million

nationwide, the majority of whom are women, are responsible for disseminating public health-

related information to locals, conducting health surveys and implementing disease prevention

campaigns. Som's story sharply contradicts the conventional view of who vote canvassers are or

what they do:

Author: What is your responsibility?

Som: I oversee 8-15 households. I visit them once a week, because I have to check

for signs of mosquitoes laying eggs and eliminate their breeding places, in

addition to evaluating the cleanliness of the household and getting rid of waste

if needed. I also have to compile reports. For example, for each household,

how many water containers do they have, how many are used for drinking and

how many are used for other purposes. And if there are mosquito larvae, then

how many containers contain the larvae this week.

Author: Do you also check temperatures or take blood samples?

Som: Yes, I do. I also measure blood pressure and blood sugar. Basically, I am

responsible for everything from cradle to grave.[58] Even after death, I have to

check for the cause of death and report this information to health

organizations.

Author: What is your relationship with the people like?

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[58] Again the expression "from cradle to grave" is mentioned, signifying the building of
potentially long-term relationships rather than simply short-term transactional ties.

Som: I think 99% is good. If health volunteers like us have helped them in the past,

we can make a good impression on behalf of the candidate. But we don't

control everything.[59]

In the simplest terms, Som is a care provider. The fact that she is held in high regard in her

community is due primarily to her formal leadership role and responsibility rather than her

informal ties to a candidate like Sunai. Furthermore, the services she performs for her

community does not necessarily make her a patron in the eyes of her recipients, at least not in the

same manner as described by Sunai. Mostly, she appears to be fulfilling her formal duties as a

health volunteer, offering her assistance to everyone regardless of their political affiliation. At

the same time, this does not preclude her from gaining influence in her community or

participating as a member of a vote-canvassing network. There are good reasons why Som was

recruited as a vote canvasser.

First, her formal duties as a health volunteer meant that she could reach where others

could not and possessed knowledge others did not about the personal living circumstances of

each household, for instance, how many mosquito larvae are in their water containers. Som

explained,

it's because we are so involved with the locals that we know everything. We know how

many people there are in the households and who they are. And as a network we can

extend our reach into the community, offer people help where they need and participate

in community events at local temples.[60]

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[59] Som, a chairwoman of the subdistrict Village Health Volunteers, interview with the author, Nakhon Ratchasima, March 1, 2020.
[60] Som, interview with the author.

The emphasis on knowing "who they are" is not necessarily an indication that Som is somehow interested in discerning their political leanings and, perhaps, telling on them with the candidate she canvasses for, although clearly, she is in a position to do so. Rather, this merely indicates proximity and the presence of an ongoing, face-to-face relationships with ordinary voters.[61]

Second, in contrast to other types of vote canvassers who might be office holders or bureaucrats, health volunteers are overseen by the Ministry of Health and are not part of the state. This means that health volunteers like Som are able to campaign legally on behalf of political candidates during election time.

Third, her role as a member of a community organization means that she is positioned to engage other members of the organization who are part of her connection (*sai*), identify their wants and needs, and relay this information to political candidates who, in turn, could distribute club goods to the group, like sponsoring a vacation or t-shirts.

The fact that someone like Som is sought after by the leaders of vote-canvassing networks like Nin, Mon, or Sunai is not necessarily a sign that she is in possession of the means to hold others accountable for how they vote.[62] The reality is more mundane—Som has a solid reputation in her community and assumes a leadership role in a community organization with a network that reaches all the way down to the village and household level, one which operates all

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[61] The fact that she was a woman also means she was able to engage other women in her communities in ways a male canvasser could not, for example, in a more private setting.
[62] Susan C. Stokes, "Perverse Accountability: A Formal Model of Machine Politics with Evidence from Argentina," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 315–25, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055405051683.

year round outside the context of elections. Simply put, allocating club goods and individual gifts through someone like Som is bound to be more effective than doing so through other individuals who lack the same type of reach, reputation, and consistency.

Ironically, if she succeeds at delivering the votes of the members of her organization or the voters residing in the villages that she is responsible for, it is more likely that her success would stem from her ability to perform her formal roles and serve as a good representative rather than from her capacity to make her service or delivery of handouts from the candidates contingent on votes. It is true that her link to political candidates like Nin, Mon, or Sunai may enable her to perform her formal duties better, for instance, using their connections with private hospitals or universities to establish a medical training program for health volunteers.[63] Yet the language of brokers and clientelism, defined as contingent exchanges, sometimes obscures the reality that the source of Som's local influence is not tied exclusively to her relationship with these candidates and their resources nor does this influence necessarily rest on the contingent distribution of goods and services.[64]

Of course, not every vote canvasser can be expected to operate in the same manner as Som does. According to rumors and gossip that emerged from my conversations with other vote canvassers, there are still those who rely on threats, for example, making throat-slitting gesture

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[63] Som, interview with the author.

[64] There are important consequences to choosing the wrong politician to serve. In Som's case, the candidate that she supported has a good reputation but is not well-equipped financially. Meanwhile, this candidate's opponent was backed by the extremely wealthy owner of a flour factory, who has been very aggressive and assertive in recruiting the members of Village Health Volunteers, to the point of collecting their Thai national identification cards. Som mentioned that she was offered a sum of cash to switch her allegiance, but she ended up refusing. She disclosed that she felt excluded by her peers in her organization as a result of her supporting a different candidate.

or forcing voters to consume a certain drink as part of a sacred vow to uphold their promises.[65]

However, given that vote-canvassing networks increasingly consist of locally elected

representatives or community leaders who could be removed from official positions via

elections, these predatory practices are likely shunned or simply held in reserve due to their

potential damage to candidates' reputation, which is the key for staying in power in the long

term. As a result, vote canvassers are now more invested in making local contributions as an

alternative to intimidation and monitoring. Their capacity to deliver the votes of the recipients of

electoral handouts of parties and MP candidates now rests in seemingly mundane forms of giving

such as sponsoring weddings, funerals, and ordainment ceremonies or building local roads,

bridges, and dams. These activities, which occur year-round but are most intense during election

season, usually require vote canvassers to seek the support of wealthy and influential individuals

above their station. Yet this only induces vote canvassers to become part of patronage

networks—it rarely compels them to engage in political clientelism to capture votes.

Conclusion

  If the vote-canvassing networks widely depicted as organizations that facilitate clientelist

strategies on behalf of candidates do so by means that have little to do with contingent

exchanges, then the term "clientelism" or "clientelistic networks" would be a grave

mischaracterization of how the networks operate. How, then, should the vote-canvassing network

be understood?

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[65] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Nakhon Ratchasima, March 1, 2020.

Although vote-canvassing networks have been and continue to be highly diverse in terms of their organizational configuration and activities, there is one interpretation that appears more convincing than others: a vote-canvassing network consists of local leaders who serve as the eyes and ears of the candidate and the party. Their relative proximity to individuals or groups of ordinary voters enables them to identify and convey the everyday problems of the people in their communities to the members of the network above their station, enabling these actors to tailor their messages, development projects, and special favors to suit local, sometimes individual, circumstances and personalize the distribution of a wide range of goods and services that, through a different set of individuals, would otherwise generate little to no electoral support in return. In many cases, these local leaders also serve as the arms and legs of the candidate. They may attend life-cycle ceremonies or directly address the problems of the people in their communities on behalf of the candidate, using whatever budget and connection available to them, whether in an official capacity or by virtue of their relationship to the candidate.

During elections, political candidates often selectively distribute handouts to voters through these leaders, who may or may not have a prior relationship with the candidates and who sometimes pocket a small sum as a retainer fee for their services. Yet the votes they deliver in return are not always the direct product of contingent distribution, whether in the framework of electoral or relational clientelism.[66] On the contrary, these votes often reflect the sum of the work of local leaders who have earned the trust of the people in their communities through practices and interactions that do not involve clientelistic arrangements. By enlisting the support of these local leaders, candidates appear more credible and more capable of responding to the particular

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[66] Nichter, *Votes for Survival*

needs of ordinary voters. In other words, they appear as patrons, not simply in the eyes of voters but also in the perspective of political parties.

The fact that neither the organizational configuration nor the activities of vote-canvassing networks are reducible to the logic of contingent exchange contains a series of implications. The first concerns the methodological approaches that are used to infer the existence of clientelism, namely, that the criteria by which candidates distribute benefits to voters are somehow shaped by the past or future behavior of the latter. Since these criteria are usually hidden, researchers generally rely on proxy measures, for example, demonstrating that candidates make concrete efforts to monitor or enforce clientelistic bargains, which provides evidence for passing a "smoking gun" test. Alternatively, researchers might examine distributional outcomes, showing that only the individuals who support the candidate end up receiving the benefits, or vice versa, which provides evidence for passing a "hoop test."[67] Yet as this chapter has illustrated, candidates often do not take concrete steps to engage in monitoring and enforcement, and neither do their vote canvassers. More importantly, when candidates deliver benefits to individuals or groups of voters via local leaders in the hopes that these leaders will succeed in obtaining the votes of the recipients, in case that they do succeed and the return of votes is observed, this outcome may be due to reasons other than contingent exchanges. What this means for researchers is that, in the absence of concrete efforts on the part of the candidate or their network to monitor or enforce clientelistic exchanges, inferring the use of clientelistic strategies entails moving beyond an explicitly behavioral framework and requires examining substantively how

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[67] James Mahoney, "The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences," *Sociological Methods & Research* 41, no. 4 (November 1, 2012): 570–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124112437709.

much the relationship between the vote canvasser and the voter resembles the kind of relations of power that clientelism, at least in theory, tends to generate.[68]

The second implication has to do with the limited explanatory power of the framework of political clientelism in accounting for why informal networks are built for electoral purposes. Since the delivery of benefits contingent on support constitutes only a fraction of the activities that vote-canvassing networks are typically engaged in and is generally limited to the interaction between candidates and vote canvassers, these networks are not clientelist to the core. This means that clientelism is not suitable as a primary heuristic tool for examining why these networks are organized or why concrete benefits are distributed through these networks for the purpose of competing in elections. Doing so tends to lead to a set of misleading assumptions, for example, that vote-canvassing networks are organized for the purposes of carrying out clientelistic strategies or that vote canvassers are selected and recruited primarily because they enable candidates to monitor or enforce clientelistic strategies.

Last, if most informal electoral networks are similar to vote-canvassing networks in Thailand in that they are built not simply for monitoring and enforcement but for generating the impression that the leaders of the networks are capable of addressing the everyday problems of the people, then researchers may have been looking in the wrong place for factors that are likely to shape the organizational configurations of these networks. These factors may not be related in any way to the mechanisms that explain voter compliance once the delivery of goods and

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[68] It is possible, for example, to define such a relationship as an exchange relationship in which shared expectations in the recipients' obligation to reciprocate a favor constitute the basis on which the donor will be positioned to influence the recipient in determined ways, including to vote for a candidate of the donor's choosing.

services has been made, for example, the violation of ballot secrecy or norms of reciprocity.

Rather they may have to do with a broader set of circumstances that enable candidates to claim

credit for providing benefits to voters and claiming ownership over the networks through which

these benefits flow.

As the following chapter illustrates, individuals who monopolize patronage resources and

networks frequently assume the role of gatekeepers vis-à-vis political parties and voters. Yet

since their gatekeeping power is conditional on their ability to concentrate resources in their

hands and exercise discretion over the distribution of those resources against bureaucratic, party,

or populist challengers, their dominance is never truly secure—especially not in the face of a

major realignment in power, whether permanent or temporary.

Chapter 3

The World is Built on Patronage

We call them hard-earned votes, meaning that they didn't just come out of thin air or out of social media buzz. These votes were built on the back of someone who devoted his entire life to caring for the people in his network. So no matter what comes and goes, the foundation remains solid. It's just like building a house. Nowadays, we have new construction technologies like prefab, 3D printing, or autoclaved aerated concrete, but if you're talking about the best way to build a strong and sturdy home, you're talking about brick and mortar. Brick by brick, person by person. This isn't easy to do. Just like how Rome wasn't built in a day, maintaining relationship with voters in this old school manner takes a lifetime. But don't forget that old school is what survives until today. People might say that our politics has changed with social media and policy-based competition but that's not proof that the new system will last—it works now but that doesn't mean it will last. But old school system, I don't know for sure if it always works but I know that it lasts. Like bricks and mortar, it stands the test of times. *The world is built on patronage*.[1] No matter what political system we are in, we live in an *uppatham* [patron-client] world.[2]

—MP associated with a province in Central Thailand

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[1] The italics indicates that the phrase was spoken in English.
[2] An MP associated with a province in Central Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 26, 2020.

Introduction

Patronage politics, the delivery of special favors or material benefits to individuals or groups for electoral purposes, is fundamentally a product of the social context within which it resides. Circumstances particular to each society, whether conceived in terms of distinct patterns of state formation, capitalist development, democratization, or cultural formations, norms, and values, tend to influence how patronage politics is organized and deployed. For example, in the context of Peronism in Argentina, it is by invoking Peronist discourse and cloaking themselves in Peronist identities that networks of brokers in the shantytown of Villa Paraíso assume their role as brokers.[3] According to Auyero, what ultimately imbues the distribution of patronage with dynamics that resembles what most scholarly observers regard as political clientelism is not simply the fact of giving or granting favor in a contingent manner. Rather, the dynamics are often rooted in a performance, for example, in "publicly [representing] the thing given, or the favor granted, not as a bribe, but as a gift bestowed because of a great love for the people, because of one's duty as a good *referente*, because it is what Evita would have done, because it is what a good Peronist does."[4]

To proceed by arguing that there is a set of identifiable, core characteristics that all cases of patronage politics necessarily share undoubtedly permits theoretical generalizations and makes useful comparisons possible. But without accounting for how patronage politics becomes embedded in local and national political life, a stripped-down, parsimonious understanding of

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[3] Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2001).
[4] Auyero, *Poor People's Politics,* 123.

patronage politics cannot fully explain how this mode of politics is organized in practice, becomes pervasive in the political system, and becomes prone or resistant to change.

No study of patronage politics is complete without taking into consideration how the contextual features of a given case may impart different properties and profiles that make this mode of politics salient, persistent, and contingent in that political system than others. In the previous chapter, I illustrated that patronage politics in Thailand assumes the form of vote-canvassing networks, whose activities are not limited to delivering cash handouts to voters shortly before elections but encompasses a broad range of goods and services delivery outside the scope of election campaigns. These networks are typically assembled and deployed, outside the formal framework of party organizations, by individual leaders who leverage these networks to establish themselves as patrons vis-à-vis parties and voters. In this chapter, I show that this pattern of patronage politics has a definite historical origin, developing a more dynamic perspective on how patronage politics became the norm rather than the exception by 1997, the starting point for the bulk of the analysis in subsequent chapters.

Based on a review of the literature in the study of Thai politics and face-to-face interviews, I argue that patronage politics in Thailand emerged not simply as a consequence of increasing material needs and demands of a society undergoing rapid socioeconomic changes but rather as the result of a dramatic opening in and expansion of *rabob uppatham*, a structure of patronage or patron-client system previously exclusive to the members of the Thai bureaucratic elite. A shift in the balance of power between bureaucrats and elected officials over access to and control over state resources, from which *rabob uppatham* is forged and maintained, made

competing in elections worthwhile at the same time it made the particularistic distribution of these resources indispensable to the ritual of elections.

This argument contains broader implications for theorizing how or why patronage politics, as a historical-institutional product, emerges in different contexts at different times. According to Martin Shefter, who offers one of the most influential accounts, the relative timing between democratization and bureaucratization is decisive for shaping in the long run the balance of power between the stakeholders of patronage versus the stakeholders of bureaucratic autonomy which, in turn, determines whether political parties will rely on patronage as a tool for building electoral support.[5] When bureaucratic reform is carried out in advance of the introduction of mass suffrage, parties that are formed by those who occupy positions of power in the regime are thought to be constrained in their attempt to tap state resources for patronage delivery. Meanwhile, parties that emerge from outside the regime do not have access to state resources to begin with. As this chapter illustrates, this theory needs fine-tuning to properly address the pattern in Thailand, where parties post-1973 have been able to use state resources to create and maintain patronage networks for electoral purposes despite the fact that administrative reform took place much earlier than the first major democratic opening. To account for this, the theory needs to revise two assumptions regarding the characteristics of the state and role of economic elites.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, based on evidence from face-to-face interviews, I propose a working definition of *rabob uppatham* and explain why the concept

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[5] Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 14, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/29626.

matters for understanding the nature of patronage politics in Thailand. Second, I provide a brief overview of the literature on Thai politics, focusing on how scholarly interpretations of *rabob uppatham* have changed over time in response to changing political landscapes. Last, I discuss several implications that emerge both for the study of Thai politics and the study of patronage politics, specifically for Shefter's theory of patronage.

Rabob Uppatham

In the same manner that patronage politics in Indonesia is not fully comprehensible without taking into consideration the implications of the breakdown of Suharto's political patronage system or, in the case of the Philippines, the institutional legacy of American colonial rule, the structure and organization of patronage politics in Thailand, including the role it has played in electoral politics, are difficult to make sense of unless one first attends to *rabob uppatham*, a broader structure of patronage or patron-client system that exists somewhat independently of electoral competition.

The term *uppatham,* loosely translated as patronage or patron-client relationships, is usually accompanied by the term *rabob* or system. Taken together, *rabob uppatham* describes a pyramidal system of informal, face-to-face exchange relationships between actors of unequal standing. The system is more than the sum of the individual relationships that give rise to it because the patronage resources that flow down from the apex to the base are not directly owned by any one actor but derived from the network.[6] While the precise meaning of *rabob uppatham*

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[6] Nidhi Eoseewong, "Rabob Uppatham Nai Karn Mueang Thai [Patronage System in Thai Politics]," *Prachathai*, accessed November 27, 2021, https://prachatai.com/journal/2017/06/72194.

is open for interpretation, the system might be best understood in terms of how it appears to most

actors, that is, as a set of informal arrangements that make possible against all odds the

downward flow of various exclusive benefits, ranging from cutting bureaucratic red tape to

securing privileged access to government programs and services. These special favors are

usually granted, of course, with the understanding that the recipients or the clients are bound by

obligation to fulfill what is expected of them by the benefactors or the patrons in return, usually

by showing loyalty and deference, which are sometimes expressed through acts of personal

services or offers of manpower. Those in possession of *rabob uppatham*, therefore, are typically

regarded as influential individuals others can depend on, especially "to subvert, mitigate the

effects of, substitute for, or enhance the efficiency of formal institutions," to use Helmke and

Levitsky's concept of informal institutions.[7]

While *rabob uppatham* as an informal institution is indeed reproduced and perpetuated

by politicians who leverage the system for electoral ends, it encompasses a much broader scope

of activities, in contexts that are beyond the confines of formal politics. The goal of this chapter

is to shed light on the development of *rabob uppatham*, not only as a structural antecedent that

influences the dynamics of change and continuity of patronage politics but also as a social and

academic construct that gives meaning and substance to patronage politics in Thailand.

By focusing on *rabob uppatham* or the patron-client system that manifests itself in

Thailand, I am not suggesting that the structural characteristics or essential features of these

systems are somehow unique to the Thai context. The larger point is that patronage politics in

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[7] Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A
Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004): 736n103.

Thailand, specifically how it operates and welcomes or resists change, becomes legible only in reference to the broader framework of *rabob uppatham*. Despite the universalistic, in fact instrumental, property that political scientists generally ascribe to the concept of patronage and political clientelism, the delivery of goods and services for political ends carries its own set of meanings and cultural significance. When party leaders, candidates, MPs, canvassers, voters, and informed observers discuss these practices, they do so by invoking the language of *rabob uppatham*, often to note their appropriateness or sometimes even their necessity, given how Thai society functions. According to Wong, a leading member of a political party that competed in the 2019 elections,

> We have to accept that *rabob uppatham* is the foundation of Thai politics, a deep-rooted one. Not just Thai politics but Thai society in general. It's a complex web of overlapping exchange relationships in which people help out one another and in which there is no real distinction between political affairs or everyday affairs. Politicians simply take advantage of this underlying structure or system on a regular basis. This makes them the primary movers and stakeholders of the system. In order to compete with other like-minded politicians, they recruit bureaucrats like district chiefs, governors, agricultural or health agency officials to form their own networks. The same goes for local politicians, community leaders or heads of local associations. They then use these networks to take care of their families, friends, followers and supporters. Of course, from the standpoint of political parties, we have to select winners. And one of the dominant characteristics of these winners is their possession of *rabob uppatham*—it's the central foundation of the

votes. On the basis of this alone, one can almost predict whether the probability of

winning an election for a given candidate is high or low.[8]

Wong's carefully worded explanation of the role of *rabob uppatham* in Thai electoral politics—

as if to distance himself from it and at times to justify his involvement in it—suggests something

that a purely choice-based understanding of patronage politics and political clientelism tends to

miss: the seeming inevitability of such arrangements in the context of electoral politics. For

example, in one model, political parties and candidates are seen to be making portfolio

investments, performing a balancing act between delivering clientelistic and programmatic

rewards to maximize electoral returns or minimize electoral risks.[9] There is little denying that

these strategic calculations frequently do take place. However, in the Thai context, there is also

room to argue that parties and candidates arrive at the conclusion to rely on *rabob uppatham* as

an infrastructure for organizing election campaigns not simply by weighing different alternatives

but conforming to what is already widely perceived to be the tacit rules of the game. The

strategic maneuvers on the part of politicians like Wong seem to take place within a normative

structure that already privileges patronage politics as the natural, sometimes even appropriate,

means of electoral competition. Here, the choice also happens to be rational given the

circumstances of the party and the electoral landscape.

In my conversation with Wong, candidates who are preferred or are targets of recruitment

from Wong's standpoint are, of course, the "winners" who exhibit the highest probability of

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[8] Wong, a party executive of PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.
[9] Beatriz Magaloni, Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, and Federico Estévez, "Clientelism and Portfolio Diversification," in *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, ed. Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

winning. Yet, it becomes apparent that by "winners" Wong means candidates who are in possession of *rabob uppatham*, something any serious contender is expected to have. Ownership of *rabob uppatham* suggests that the candidate is positioned to leverage already existing networks for electoral purposes which, in the language of political scientists, typically means to engage in political clientelism or distribute patronage resources in order to generate electoral support. In this context, selecting candidates according to their possession of *rabob uppatham* is not simply rational in the sense that it is in the interest of the party leader to do so to produce favorable electoral outcomes. It is also appropriate given the party leader's belief in the implicit rules of the game—that Thai society is organized according to *rabob uppatham* and leveraging *rabob uppatham* is how one "plays politics." Rational calculation serves to confirm this existing belief.

To clarify, *rabob uppatham* is closely related but not synonymous with *rabob huakhanaen* or the vote-canvassing networks described in the previous chapter. During elections, candidates seeking political office frequently assemble informal networks of intermediaries to campaign on their behalf, for example, in areas where those candidates have yet to build a solid reputation or where the competition is highly intense and these candidates only need a marginal boost to gain the upper hand. As previously mentioned, not all vote canvassers engage in activities that could readily be classified as political clientelism. Yet since vote-canvassing networks typically consist of community leaders, local government officials, and local politicians and often appeal to ordinary voters by delivering selective goods and services, candidates who are in possession of *rabob uppatham* and are capable of distributing patronage resources down the pipeline tend to have greater leverage when recruiting and, more importantly, managing vote

canvassers. Therefore, the distinction between *rabob uppatham* and *rabob huakhanaen* is often blurred in practice since the ability to put together a large canvassing network during election time may serve as an indicator of one's possession of *rabob uppatham*, in much the same way that filling local political offices and state bureaucracies with one's relatives does. Although vote-canvassing networks often appear to be formed on an ad hoc basis just before elections, the raw materials which serve as their foundation are rooted not simply in money-driven, short-term transactional ties, as the flow of cash during elections usually conveys. On the contrary, as already illustrated in the case of Sunai's network in the previous chapter, vote-canvassing networks are often derived from durable loyalties and affinities that characterize *rabob uppatham*. Take, as an additional example, the following origin story of Phet's family, one of Thailand's most prominent political dynasties:

> My father has a kind personality. He likes to help people in their time of need, even if it's purely a private matter or money matter. If people have problems, he would take care of them. I was fairly close to him when I was growing up. I recall that he had a lot of *phuak* [followers/friends] and helped out so many people. When he became a village headman or when he became a subdistrict chief, he did the same without fail. In terms of helping, he took care of not only people in his area but also outsiders who came to seek his help. Just like what they say, Thai society was an *uppatham* society. If we are talking about politics back in those days, we are talking about *rabob huakhanaen*.[10]

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[10] Phet, a former cabinet minister and leader of a political dynasty in Central Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 29, 2020.

Notice, here, that the term *rabob huakhanaen* or vote-canvassing network appears to be the logical conclusion that flows from the preceding statement that Thai society was structured according to *uppatham*. Phet continues this conversation, shedding light on the fact that his father's vote-canvassing network thrived on existing *uppatham* ties outside the scope of elections:

> Parties and candidates would seek out reputable individuals to help out in terms of assembling vote-canvassing networks that can deliver the votes reliably. My father was someone like that. At a moment's notice, he was able to gather a network of village headmen and subdistrict chiefs in many districts and subdistricts—these people were either his *phuak,* friends or followers who helped each other out in the past. So when elections were held, national politicians in those times would come to my father to ask for his help. If and when he accepts, he would send a message to his friends who are either district chiefs or leaders and are able to serve as a core vote canvasser on his behalf. These people would then do the same in their area but at a more micro-level.[11]

In my interview with Phet, it became clear that he and his father were not simply "buying" vote-canvassing networks in the manner that has become infamous in the Thai media. Instead, they were leveraging already existing *rabob uppatham* that, quite literally, took a lifetime to build. In practice, this means getting on a phone call with friends and followers who received their help in the past and are strategically positioned to help with mobilizing the votes in different constituencies. The remainder of the work, some of it based on patronage and clientelistic politics, is outsourced to these individuals. Yet without someone like Phet or his

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[11] Phet, interview with the author.

father, the organization of the vote-canvassing network is bound to take a very different form, for example, using money as the primary social glue.

The fact that *rabob huakhanaen* or vote-canvassing networks are built on top of the infrastructure that *rabob uppatham* offers raises an important question about the extent to which the existence of *rabob uppatham* is prior to or larger than electoral considerations—whether someone like Phet or his father built and maintained *rabob uppatham* because they wanted to be strategically positioned during elections or because *rabob uppatham* served some other purpose but happened to be the source of their influence in the electoral domain. In any case, the fact that *rabob uppatham* sometimes constitutes the basis on which electoral politics is organized suggests that any convincing explanations for the prevalence or persistence of patronage politics in Thailand's electoral politics must at least attend to the historical and institutional pathways through which *rabob uppatham* emerged and adapted to electoral competition. Phet goes on to recount his father's legacy, which demonstrates so clearly the notion that individuals who are in control of *rabob uppatham* at the subnational level are able to assume the role of gatekeepers vis-à-vis even the most powerful political figures or parties at the national level:

> He was quite successful at this game. Because I was close to him when I was growing up, I saw national political elites come to our doorstep all the time, many of them became prime ministers, for example, Kukrit, Banharn or Big Jiew [Chavalit Yongchaiyudhi], Narong, Big Jod [Sunthorn Kongsompong], Siri Siriyothin, Sompong Amornwiwat, and so many others. It became like a system. These people are outsiders but my father would always help them out. The Chart Thai Party and Social Action Party were among the political parties that came into *our* orbit [emphasis added]. We didn't have our own

political party at that time. We just relied on the fact that we were *phak phuak* [faction].

Like I said, Thai society is an *uppatham* society. When we ask for support from the

people in our network during election time, they come to help us. When my father

eventually became a mayor, it was the same pattern. The foundation of Thai politics is

something like this—helping and *uppatham*. He can facilitate things and make things

happen. He can get on a phone call with influential people, which makes it possible for

him to *doolae* [take care of] more people. When people had economic problems, he

would lend a hand. Sometimes even in private matters. For example, he would mediate

conflicts between family members. When they can't sort things out themselves, they

would ask him to resolve these conflicts. Sometimes this required him to use his own

money to settle these conflicts. This happened all the time. This was the source of their

admiration and respect for him. Comes election time, all he needed to do was say the

word. Or sometimes, he didn't even have to do that. They just do it by themselves. We

inherit his merit. [12]

Two important insights can be derived from Phet's recollection. First, the fact that Phet's father

was an intermediary between national political elites and local leaders did not in fact suggest that

his power in the system of *rabob uppatham* was somehow intermediate. Instead of a strict power

hierarchy running downward from political parties and national politicians, this is something like

a solar system where the gravitational pull of influential individuals like Phet's father brings big

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[12] Phet, interview with the author.

and small planetary systems—national level and local level actors—into orbit. In short, power

was arranged according to a "galactic scheme" rather than a strictly pyramidal one.[13]

The implication of this is that political parties or party leaders are not always the apex of

rabob uppatham even though the language of brokers invoked in much of the literature on

clientelism and patronage might imply otherwise. Leaders of political parties like Wong,

equipped as they are with financial backing, ties to national-level businesses and conglomerates

and even the military, are not always the quintessential patron. Instead, in some of Thailand's

constituencies and provinces, they become eligible to participate in the game of electoral politics

only by entering the "orbit" of influential figures like Phet and his father who command control

of provincial, sometimes regional, *rabob uppatham,* which gives them monopolized access to

large blocs of voters. Given the many orbital centers of *rabob uppatham* that political parties in

Thailand have had to work with or offer tribute and concession to in order to establish a coalition

government or secure a parliamentary majority, the term "patronage democracy" paints a vivid

picture.

Second, the fact that Phet and his father could switch their allegiance and swing the

support of their network from one party to the next does not imply that the network is loosely

assembled or put together as a temporary measure for competing in elections. Quite the contrary,

this fluidity implies a high degree of internal coherence, the capacity to organize interests and

sort conflicts among its members, as well as autonomy vis-à-vis external powers, or the capacity

to deal with outside challenges to their authority. These attributes enable the network to operate

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[13] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, "The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013): 32.

under the banner of political parties or sometimes even as its own political party, depending on the nature of electoral rules, without ceding its decision-making power or losing members to institutions or organizations other than its own.

Political parties or party leaders were not always clients, however, to actors like Phet and his father, who possess regional or provincial *rabob uppatham*. In fact, the rise of the Thai Rak Thai and populist leadership under Thaksin Shinawatra might be interpreted as something like a breakdown or temporary disruption to a system dominated by these informal structures of power. Nevertheless, the language of *rabob uppatham* remains firmly intact and sits solidly in the imagination of political leaders and observers even today, perhaps thanks to its association with vote buying and corruption. In fact, missing in Phet's somewhat romanticized description of *rabob uppatham* is its deeply problematic image permanently etched into the minds of those who saw through the language of *phak phuak*, friendship, and mutual assistance. Leng, a political journalist offers his opinion on the matter, which is likely to be more representative of the views most people hold regarding the role of *rabob uppatham* than Phet's relatively innocuous portrayal:

> The thing about *rabob uppatham* in politics is that in order to campaign for electoral votes, you need vote canvassers. These are people who depend on you for money and who you depend on for votes. Their power and influence are basically micro, only confined to their own locality, in contrast to you, the MP, whose power and influence are more macro, sometimes at the provincial level or even at the national level if you manage to become a cabinet minister. You need vote canvassers to buy the votes of the grassroots during election time. Every vote costs money—500 baht to 1000 baht per head. Vote

canvassers maintain their status as vote canvassers by not spending every penny and dime

they receive from the politician. They have spec, for example, out of 100 baht they

receive, they only spend 50 baht during the election and pocket the rest. They need that

remaining amount to buy the goodwill of others because as long as they can control a

group of people, they will continue to have value in the eyes of the politician. If they

don't have such control then they no longer have any value. In order to control, you need

to be able to provide financial support to others, maybe not substantially but at least

consistently, for example, by making charitable donations during religious ceremonies,

hosting dinner and birthday parties, or offering help with tuition. [14]

Leng's perspective sheds light on the deeply transactional aspect of vote-canvassing networks.

Vote canvassers, in his view, are keenly aware of their position as brokers in the system, and

seek to maintain this position by tapping into the flow of financial support from MPs. He

continues by highlighting how MPs are also involved in a similar game vis-à-vis political parties,

cabinet ministers, or party leaders:

Just as vote canvassers depend on you for financial support, you, the MP, also need

financial support from your own political party, better yet, a party that is part of a

coalition government. This is why you often see political parties that don't give a damn

about ideology. Ideology has no meaning. What's meaningful is "can I join you?"

because once you join, you can access government positions or your party has a cabinet

minister from whom you can skim off large sums of money from whatever resources that

flow from such positions, whether in the form of concession auction or government

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[14] Leng, a political journalist, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 23, 2020.

budget. For example, if your party controls the Ministry of Transport, you might be able

to lobby organizations or departments that are overseen by that ministry to make requests

for a budget to do this and that in your own district, perhaps where you or your relatives

own a company. Then you go and lobby the minister to approve of the proposal and

submit the bid to the Bureau of the Budget to be included in the government budget in the

next fiscal year. Then you go and work out the mechanics as usual.[15]

From Leng's perspective, *rabob uppatham* transforms the political system into a hotbed of vote

buying, patronage, and corruption. Community leaders, local state officials and politicians

become professional vote canvassers and vote buyers in the hope of improving their station and

striking a bargain with national politicians and political parties. Meanwhile, national politicians

and political parties win or maintain their parliamentary seats only by greasing the wheel of

rabob uppatham, which requires or incentivizes them to use their access to and control over

cabinet positions, state resources, and the budgetary process to keep patronage flowing.

Despite occupying three different vantage points, Wong, Phet and Leng share the

understanding that *rabob uppatham* is the basic building block of Thailand's electoral politics.

Although the three of them differ in terms of whether they saw *rabob uppatham* as a natural

reflection of Thai society or something created purposefully by actors for their own interests,

they all perceive *rabob uppatham* as politics as usual. It is taken for granted that to establish and

maintain political alliances is to facilitate and engage in relationships through *rabob uppatham*.

In this political environment, candidates recruit vote canvassers and parties recruit candidates

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[15] Leng, interview with the author.

based on their possession of *rabob uppatham*, the leading performance indicator of electoral success. In other words, they choose winners, not *rabob uppatham* per se.

Based on this discussion, the role that patronage politics plays in Thailand is inseparable from the broader context of Thai society that actors interpret through the lens of *rabob uppatham.* Given that *rabob uppatham* shapes the basic contours of patronage politics and provides the organizational infrastructure on which vote-canvassing networks are built, it is important to account for how this informal institutional arrangement emerged and came to dominate the electoral landscape in Thailand, at least prior to 1997. To address these questions, I turn to examining the historical junctures at which *rabob uppatham* became important, politically, as the means through which formal political authority is pursued and, academically, as an object of inquiry in the perspectives of those who study Thai politics.

A Brief History of Patronage and Patronage Politics in Thailand

In this section, I trace the emergence of patronage politics in Thailand, highlighting specifically the junctures at which *rabob uppatham* became important in the context of elections. As the following overview of the literature will make clear, the prevalence of patronage politics in Thailand is not a historical or cultural given. Rather, it is a product of historically contingent processes that acquired definite political forms and institutional underpinnings thanks to the ways in which modernization and democratization unfolded in Thailand. More specifically, patronage politics in Thailand emerged in response to an opening in and expansion of *rabob uppatham,* which was previously an exclusive domain for members of the bureaucratic elite. As the balance of power between bureaucrats and elected officials over access to and control of state

resources shifted from the former to the latter, electoral competition became more significant while patronage politics became available, if not necessary, as the means to compete electorally. This argument reveals that the nature of state development, in particular the relative timing of democratization and emergence of provincial capitalists, matters in giving rise to a pattern whereby patronage politics became dominated by gatekeepers at the subnational level, outside the framework of political parties and with money as their signature mode of politics.

To briefly summarize, the patron-client system or *rabob uppatham* first gained real currency within the framework of bureaucratic polity as a model that explained the patterns of informal alliances within the bureaucracy and between bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic elements in Thai society in the 1950s.[16] While early scholars found the patron-client model useful for understanding how Thai bureaucracy deviated from the Western ideal type and why broader societal forces failed to hold this bureaucracy accountable, later scholars adopted and adapted the model as a way to challenge these portrayals of the Thai political order, which became increasingly out of touch with the realities of post-1973 Thailand. As capitalist enterprises overshadowed the bureaucracy as a new locus of power, even if informally, scholarly attention also moved away from the holders of official authority and towards *jao pho,* provincial business figures who came to dominate the political scene by virtue of their economic influence, often derived from both legitimate and criminal activities. This marked a decisive shift in the study of Thai politics, which was previously concerned with clique-based competitions within the Thai bureaucracy. Elections and the parliamentary system became the new locus of

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[16] For "bureaucratic polity," see Fred Warren Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu, East-West Center Press, 1966).

competition, while money became widely regarded as both the means and ends of politics.

Amidst this change in the scope of analytical inquiry, some scholars saw provincial business

figures, rather than Bangkok-based capitalists who often preferred to participate indirectly in

politics, as the new patron in Thai society. Others saw their heavy reliance on money and crass,

short-term, transactional ties as a major deviation from, not a continuation of, the patron-client

system or *rabob uppatham*. Still others found the narrow focus on *jao pho*'s activities and vote

buying as contributing to a misleading characterization of the rural electorate which,

consequently, produced an ill-conceived solution to the supposed rural problem.

The Bureaucratic Polity Paradigm (1932-1973)

In one of the most influential studies on patron-client structures, James Scott argues that

elections do not simply uproot these structures but instead may transform them in various

ways—for instance, improving the client's position vis-à-vis the patron, linking local patron-

client structures to national ones, creating new patron-client structures while politicizing old

ones, or intensifying competition between patron-client structures at the local level.[17] According

to Scott, however, these effects are not universal but contingent on the characteristics of the

political system in a given society. Scott writes,

> The effects we have attributed to elections can be compared to the situation in Thailand,
>
> where elections have only rarely been any more than a device to legitimate self-selected
>
> rulers. There the local client's vote is not important enough to materially improve his
>
> bargaining position with a patron, and the vertical integration of patron-client clusters had

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[17] Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change," 109.

not gone very far beyond the central institutions of the bureaucracy and armed forces. In

Thai villages unlike the electoral settings of Java in the 1950s, or the Philippines, many

patron-client clusters are of purely local significance and are not highly politicized. Local

factional conflict, as a result, is much less striking in Thailand than where competitive

elections have helped to subsidize it.[18]

In contrast to the situation in the Philippines where elections were competitive and

meaningful, in Thailand it was not the electoral system but the bureaucracy, civil and military,

that was the real locus of political competition. Absent in Thailand were the structural conditions

that produce relatively non-ideological party organizations that supply short-term, particularistic

material inducements to voters as a means of securing their political support and, by extension,

transform the nature of patron-client relationships.

Scott's assessment of the Thai case is built on conclusions reached by many studies on

Thai politics available at that time. In a formative study on Thailand's political system, Fred

Riggs argues that the struggle over power and legitimacy in Thailand in the 1950s was best

characterized as a narrow competition within the bureaucracy among cliques and elites for the

express purpose of securing the spoils flowing from government.[19] This bureaucracy, by and

large accountable only to itself, sits on top of a relatively undifferentiated and unorganized mass

excluded from the system. According to Riggs, despite a bloodless revolution that replaced the

absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy in 1932, the institutional arrangements that

were established as a result resembled a "bureaucratic polity" rather than a democratic one. He

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[18] Scott, 111.

[19] Riggs, *Thailand.*

points, for example, to the composition of cabinet members, the majority of whom were civil servants and military officers, and their responsiveness to the demands of their subordinates rather than to the general public as indicators of the extent to which the political system was dominated by the bureaucracy. The implication of Riggs' analysis is more controversial than it seems, as it questions whether the intention of the revolutionists, the People's Party, had been "to place commoner officials in the cockpit of power and to organize a polity that would rule on behalf of the bureaucracy," rather than to commit to parliamentary rule and popular participation.[20] In short, what is usually presented as a successful revolution from below had all the markings of Vilfredo Pareto's circulation of elites.[21]

To be sure, in Riggs' perspective, the system of bureaucratic polity that was established thereafter was highly competitive, although competition was limited only to the members of bureaucratic cliques and, perhaps more interestingly, followed the pattern of a "clientele system" in which the clique is the principal unit of political organization.[22] By clientele, Riggs is referring not to the relationships between elected officials and voters but to the relationships among the members of the bureaucracy, civil and military, who occupy the seats of various government apparatuses, the cabinet being the primary focus. According to David Wilson, from whom Riggs draws much inspiration, to accumulate power in this clientele system, individuals would form a clique, which is "fundamentally a face-to-face group because the characteristic ties binding it together are personal in nature—ties of personal love and loyalty based on the relationship

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[20] Riggs, *Thailand*, 312.
[21] Vilfredo Pareto, *The Rise and Fall of the Elites: An Application of Theoretical Sociology.* (Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press, 1968).
[22] Riggs, *Thailand*, 312.

between the leader and the follower."[23] Clearly, relationships within cliques do not fit neatly into the Weberian ideal type of relationships within a modern bureaucracy. Instead, these seemingly formal relationships are permeated by deeply personal and informal ones, based on which advancements, promotions, and access to state resources are secured. To illustrate the logic of clique-based organization, Wilson writes,

> A minister, when he steps into his ministry, possesses the traditional authority of the office, and he can expect to get the deference, respect, and obedience from his subordinates which tradition demands. He is obligated by tradition to look out for these subordinates, however. In order not to disturb his authority and perhaps that of the whole clique, he must look to this obligation. His ministry then becomes his constituency, and he represents it in the cabinet. He fights for its budget, and he protects its employees.[24]

Wilson's portrayal of relationships in the Thai bureaucracy is a perfect description of *rabob uppatham* at work. The question as to why men obey, in this context, is answered not by referencing the concept of rational-legal authority but by highlighting the patterns of loyalty that revolve fundamentally on the discretionary distribution of spoils of government from clique leaders to subordinates in return for their support. Like the *sakdina* or feudal system that predates it, in the bureaucratic polity framework it is control over manpower that matters for political power.[25] If the bureaucracy, and by extension the cabinet, provided the means for individual clique leaders to amass control over manpower, a coup d'état was the ultimate expression of the

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[23] David A. Wilson, *Politics in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 116.
[24] Wilson, *Politics in Thailand*, 161.
[25] Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873,* Cornell Thailand Project, Interim Reports Series, No. 12 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, July 1969).

conflict between rival cliques, since coups—not elections—were demonstrated to be decisive for gaining control over the state.

This bureaucratic polity framework, with all its assumptions and simplifications, is not without empirical substance. In fact, to those who observe the political dynamics in Thailand from 1932 to 1973, there was every reason to conjecture that the struggles between bureaucratic cliques rather than between political parties were the stuff of politics. Despite the transition to the constitutional monarchy in 1932, formal party organizations remained either prohibited or absent from 1933 to 1946.[26] This has been interpreted as the outcome of an ongoing struggle between the old and new regime. On the one hand, the ruling clique associated with the 1932 Revolution sought to concentrate political power in their own hands and prevent power from falling under the control of royalists who posed a major threat to the consolidation of the new regime. Attempts to organize political parties which consisted of individuals outside the ruling circle thus appeared as potential challenges, rather than genuine commitments, to the newly formed political order.

While these counterrevolutionary threats eventually proved to be real, as evidenced by a failed rebellion by Prince Boworadet later in 1933, political parties were not the culprit. On the other hand, King Prajadhipok and his supporters reportedly shared with the People's Party a common distrust for party organizations. When political parties did not seem to offer a reliable vehicle to represent royal interests, the king reportedly voiced support for the abolition of political parties, a compromise which the People's Party eventually agreed to.[27] Even after King

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[26] Eiji Murashima, *Democracy and the Development of Political Parties in Thailand 1932-1945* (Bangkok: National Research Council of Thailand, 1991).
[27] Murashima, *Democracy and the Development*, 23–26.

Prajadhipok's abdication and in spite of repeated calls for political parties, all transitions of power from 1933 to 1946 were carefully managed by the members of the People's Party and took place outside the framework of political parties. This trend was exacerbated not only by the informal norms among the ruling circle to choose leaders from those who participated in the Revolution but also, more formally, by the composition and selection of members of the national assembly, half of whom were appointed and half elected. In practice, this counter-majoritarian safeguard led to competition among the ruling circle to place their subordinates and followers into parliamentary positions. This antecedent condition marks the beginning of a persistent institutional pattern in which competition between parties appealing to a popular base was supplanted by competition between and in cliques of individuals rising through the ranks of civil and military bureaucracy, usually based on their personal ties to leaders.

This pattern would continue, although the growing influence of the military led to a decisive shift in the balance of power. After only three years of civilian-led governments from 1945 to 1947, the military returned to the center of the political scene. Competition between various factions within the military regularly manifested in cycles of coups and elections, at least until 1957 when the country relapsed into outright military dictatorship, this time for almost two decades. In those short-lived occasions when political parties were allowed to exist, the party system remained dominated by "government parties," usually established by military leaders in the aftermath of a coup d'état to retain or legitimize power through elections. Operating through the Ministry of Interior, these "internally mobilized parties," to use Martin Shefter's term, typically enjoyed monopolized access to state resources and control over the appointments of

local bureaucrats and state officials.[28] During election time, extreme concentration of these political resources ensured an uneven playing field, guaranteeing favorable results only to political parties that were aligned with, and therefore responsive to, the interests of the bureaucratic elites. In short, elections were rendered essentially non-competitive while political parties were reduced to personal vehicles of power by factions within the bureaucracy. Such is the implication of the bureaucratic polity framework for the development of elections and political parties.

This bureaucratic polity framework, despite having originated from a study of the Thai bureaucracy primarily by foreign observers during the late 1950s, became something like a theoretical paradigm that informed many subsequent studies on Thai politics. It is taken to be self-evident, for example, that the entire political process in Thailand was dominated by a handful of bureaucratic elites, that societal actors outside the bureaucratic networks had no organized interests or bargaining power vis-à-vis the elites, and that elections were nothing more than a legitimizing ritual. Similar both in tone and implications to Guillermo O'Donnell's concept of "bureaucratic authoritarianism," the bureaucratic polity paradigm has over time led to a narrow understanding of Thai politics.[29] Its treatment of Thai society as a black box, in particular, has generated a wide range of debates on the question of how ordinary citizens and the popular sector fit into the picture and the extent to which ideological and class conflicts were destabilizing for the system.

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[28] Shefter, "Party and Patronage."

[29] Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina, 1966-1973, in Comparative Perspective*, trans. James McGuire in collaboration with Rae Flory (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

The second wave of studies on Thai politics, taking place during a turbulent period of communist insurgency and ideological demonstrations by students, did not directly challenge the bureaucratic polity framework but instead reproduced it. The continuity of the dominance of the bureaucracy despite significant changes remains central to the representation of Thai political realities by foreign and Thai academics alike. Quite interestingly, the concept of patron-client relationships or *rabob uppatham*, previously reserved primarily for the analysis of relationships within bureaucratic cliques, was extended to other patterns of association outside of the formal bureaucratic framework. This concept was not simply invoked but given a historical and cultural underpinning. Tracing back to the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods, Morell and Chai-Anan write,

> Throughout Thai history there has been this continuing dialectic between bureaucratized, formal hierarchy and personalized, informal clientship. This dialectic reflects both the contrasts and the interaction in Thai society between the individuality that is customarily permitted (particularly at the family and village level) and the severe limitations on individualism imposed by status differences, obedience toward those in authority, and dependence on power…Patriarchy and bureaucracy; the informal and formal; individualism and belief in authority; freedom and obedience; merit and power: each is logically incompatible with the other. And yet in the Thai context they are as much complementary as contradictory. Thus the characteristic mode of patron-client relations mediates the individual and society, superior subordinate, householder and administration…The patron is the *phu yai* or "big man" and the client is the *phu noi* or "small man," considered in terms of status, power and wealth: for example, a senior

official and a young entrant to the civil service, respectively; or a member of a wealthy

family and a poor relative from the provinces. Theirs is essentially an exchange

relationship: each party benefits, but to an unequal degree (reflecting their superior or

subordinate status) and in different forms. The patron, displaying generosity and

providing protection, assures himself of a loyal following, which he uses to enhance his

influence and power. The client is at the beck and call of his patron, and in return for

these "services" benefits from the advancement of his patron's interests: he will rise in

the social hierarchy (and receive incremental rewards) as his patron rises. Indeed, patron-

client relationships provided (and still provide) the main channel of social mobility in

Thailand. A poor relative or acquaintance, taken into the service of a prosperous or

powerful patron, receives in this way the education, training, personal contacts, and

"sponsorship" required to launch him on his own career.[30]

Clearly, the analytical leverage offered by the concept of patron-client relationships or *rabob*

uppatham is not limited to explaining how relationships within the Thai bureaucracy deviated

from their Western counterparts. Here, the aim is much broader but perhaps less explicit—to

explain why "extra-bureaucratic forces" in Thai society failed to organize or disrupt the status

quo despite radical changes in the economic and social landscape. The concept has indeed

proven useful for understanding state-society relations—previously a black box in the

bureaucratic polity paradigm—by examining how bureaucratic actors forge patron-client ties

with other societal actors outside the framework of formal organizations. The study by Girling,

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[30] David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1981), 37–40.

for instance, specifically applies the patron-client framework to the relationship between the Chinese, who constituted the dominant economic class in Thailand, and the Thai bureaucracy.[31]

Drawing on William Skinner's study of the Chinese in Thailand,[32] Girling conjectures that the status of the Chinese as a pariah capitalist class meant that they were marginalized and excluded from the political system. Their precarious situation required them to depend on the support from the Thai bureaucratic elites to pursue their business interests. The Thai bureaucratic elites found in their Chinese business counterparts a new source of wealth and economic extraction. In turn, Chinese businessmen found protection, special privileges, and access to monopolistic enterprises in the Thai bureaucratic elites. The consequence of this pattern of bureaucratic-business relations, which Skinner describes as a "patron-client" relationship, like the relationship between Thai kings and Chinese tax farmers of the previous century, is that the urban bourgeoisie failed to develop as a truly autonomous force for change.[33] A class presupposed by Barrington Moore as a necessary condition for democracy reaffirmed rather than undermined the dominance of the bureaucracy, as tends to happen in cases where the state plays a major role in forming the commercial class—the patron-client relationships between the bureaucratic elites and commercial class was to blame.[34] Interestingly, Girling also cites the absence of direct colonial rule by foreign powers, which in the rest of Southeast Asia had disruptive and sweeping effects on society and politics, as a potential explanation for the

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[31] John Lawrence Scott Girling, *Thailand, Society and Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

[32] William G. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).

[33] Girling, *Thailand, Society and Politics*, 72–81.

[34] Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

dominance of the bureaucracy and durability of its way of enforcing compliance from societal

actors. The picture illustrated by Girling instead resembles a situation of internal colonial rule by

the Thai bureaucratic elites:

> In Thailand the bureaucracy was the "nation"; it claimed to embody the national
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> ethos…Precisely because of the assumed identity of interest of national and bureaucracy
>
> in Thailand, resulting from the lack, after the end of absolute monarchy, of an alternative
>
> conception or practice, bureaucratic power has normally been expressed in a paternalistic
>
> fashion. The bureaucracy tolerates the activities of intellectuals, professionals, workers,
>
> and peasants provided they conform, but reacts sharply to any assertion of an
>
> independent, and hence "unauthorized" role, which is regarded as an unacceptable
>
> challenge to bureaucratic order. The other side of the coin, historically, has been the
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> recognition by extrabureaucratic elements of the limits imposed by military-dominated
>
> regimes. Bureaucratic "tolerance" within those limits gave a sense of freedom (without
>
> the substance) which did more to sap the struggle for autonomy than severe repression
>
> would have done…consciousness of power on the part of the bureaucratic elite
>
> accompanied by consciousness of lack power by the rest were the twin norms of Thai
>
> politics.[35]

The logical conclusion reached by these second-wave studies is that, despite the development of

new social forces outside the Thai bureaucracy, they did not fundamentally disrupt the nature of

the political system and institutional arrangements that came before. What remained unchanged,

according to this view, was that "extra-bureaucratic forces," whether business associations,

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[35] Girling, *Thailand, Society and Politics*, 164.

technocrats, and agricultural peasants, had no recourse except to enter informal, unequal arrangements with the bureaucratic elites to thrive. In other words, they entered the picture only as clients who sought protection, security, and mobility from their patrons in the bureaucracy.

This paradigmatic conception of the Thai political order as rule by bureaucrats has relied principally on the framework of *rabob uppatham* and patron-client relationships as an explanatory mechanism in at least two different dimensions: 1) to explain the patterns of conflict and alliance formation within the bureaucracy; 2) to explain the relative weakness or absence of organized challenges from extra-bureaucratic forces, whether the urban commercial class or the rural peasantry. The bureaucratic polity paradigm would, however, be fundamentally shaken when student-led demonstrations successfully toppled an entrenched military regime that had been in power since 1957. Although the democratic aspirations of the 1973 movement proved to be short-lived, snuffed out three years later by a violent crackdown by right-wing paramilitary forces and a coup d'état, the spell of bureaucratic polity, both in real terms and the scholarly community, had been shattered for good.

Jao pho and Money Politics (1973-1997)

In contrast to the first two waves of studies on Thai politics, third-wave studies emerging in the late 1980s to early 2000s began to recognize electoral competition as the domain in which societal actors situated outside the traditional ruling circle could amass substantial political as well as economic power. Against the backdrop of a short-lived democratic revival in 1973, which signaled a significant deviation from the established pattern of Thai politics, what was previously understood to be no more than a reflection of struggles between rival factions within

the civilian and military bureaucracy over the spoils of government now appeared a serious object of analytical inquiry. New generations of scholars took notice not only of the consequences of 1973, which led for the first time in a long time to an opening in the electoral system, as well as broader structural changes in Thai society that made the democratic movement possible to begin with.

Many studies see Thailand's economic transformation as an important source of change in the political landscape. Rapid expansion in the economy that had taken place due to the influx of American and Japanese capital under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat's military regime was understood to have contributed to a significant growth of new social groupings that could no longer be understood simply as clients of the bureaucracy or extensions of its networks. On the one hand, with massive expansion in education, it became possible for commoners to access the upper ranks of the bureaucracy, previously enshrined as the pinnacle of social status, exclusive to the elites, in Thai society. The idea of social mobility had been introduced in such a way that, in the words of Benedict Anderson, "it was possible to imagine within the confines of a single household a successful dry-cleaner father and an embryonic cabinet secretary son."[36]

On the other hand, the development of the economy also produced, on a large scale, classes of "people who dressed like bureaucrats, lived in the new suburban housing complexes alongside bureaucrats, and dined, partied, shopped and travelled in the same places as bureaucrats."[37] At the same time that positions within the bureaucracy could now be attained by

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[36] Benedict Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9, no. 3 (1977): 17.
[37] Benedict Anderson, "Murder and Progress in Modern Siam," *New Left Review*, no. 181 (1990): 39.

outsiders, the status, privilege, and power accorded to bureaucratic positions were being matched, or sometimes outmatched, by the influence of business enterprises in the provinces and Bangkok. These developments combined with fact that the military had been forced to return to its barracks in 1973 and accept electoral competition as the means to produce legitimate governments, made for a political landscape sharply contradictory to Rigg's image of a polity comprising an elite group hovering on top of a homogenous and undifferentiated mass. Such a model can only explain the absence of social forces and does not offer sufficient analytical leverage for understanding the sometimes conflicting political roles played by new economic strata, both in Bangkok and the provinces, which by 1973 had become more apparent.

As the bureaucratic polity paradigm waned in influence, scholars began to consider more seriously the role of social groups that were previously viewed as absent or considered to be subordinate to the bureaucracy. Scholars quickly turned their attention to the role played by businessmen who, by the 1990s, had left large, noticeable footprints on the political sphere. Using a variety of evidence, ranging from the occupational distribution in the House of Representatives and the Cabinet to reports on the activities of business associations, Anek Laothamatas makes the case that businessmen have become the dominant force in shaping policy outcomes.[38] Their direct participation in parliamentary politics and indirect participation via lobbying institutions suggest a major turning point in the development of the Thai political system in which social groups other than the bureaucrats or monarchy were able to steer public policies to their advantage.

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[38] Anek Laothamatas, "Business and Politics in Thailand: New Patterns of Influence," *Far Eastern Survey* 28, no. 4 (April 1988): 451–70. https://doi.org/10.2307/2644738.

Focusing on the relationship between bureaucrats and businessmen at the provincial and local level, Yoshifumi Tamada builds a similar argument but extends the logic to less formal and visible forms of participation, for example, in matters of corruption or in working through politicians to selectively promote, demote, or transfer bureaucrats.[39] Central to his analytical framework is the conceptual distinction made between the informal and formal dimensions of political power in Thai society. According to Tamada, most theorists who subscribe to Riggs' framework tend to see power only in terms of *amnat,* which "derives from any official position or is sanctioned by law."[40] The fact that power was generally treated to be synonymous with *amnat* or authority speaks to the hegemonic status of the Thai bureaucracy as well as the influence of bureaucratic polity paradigm in the scholarly community. However, Tamada argues that the emphasis on official authority as the sole source of power is no longer adequate, or has never been adequate to begin with, while its inadequacy has become more apparent as businessmen no longer fit the conventional portrayal as clients who had to depend on the bureaucrats, their patrons, to thrive economically. Instead, Tamada sees *itthiphon*, defined as "the power which a man in authority exerts beyond his authority or which a man without an official exerts," as an alternative source of power that was not only available to the businessmen but also instrumental to their ability to exert control over bureaucrats or politicians who hold official positions.[41] In addition to offering an explanation for the presence of political parties backed by businessmen and active participation of businessmen as political candidates

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[39] Yoshifumi Tamada, "Itthiphon and Amnat: An Informal Aspect of Thai Politics," *Southeast Asian Studies* 28, no. 4 (1991): 455–66.

[40] Tamada, "Itthiphon and Amnat," 455.

[41] Tamada, 455.

themselves, this sharp theoretical critique warns against a simplistic usage of the clientelist framework, which generally assumes the bureaucrat to be the patron.

These studies by Anek and Tamada provide the basis on which to challenge the simplistic view of Thai society offered by Rigg's bureaucratic polity model. Moreover, they also serve to confirm the reality that parliamentary politics in Thailand was no longer merely subject to the guidance and authority of bureaucratic elites but was instead captured by economic forces in society that operated on very different principles. Their interventions reflect a broader trend in the study of Thai politics which, by the 1990s to early 2000s, had coalesced into a recognizable strand of literature that was no longer explicitly concerned with breaking the spell of the bureaucratic polity model but explaining the pattern of electoral politics that increasingly involved the use of violence and money. In fact, it might be argued that the sheer intensity of Thai elections since 1973, measured in terms of the number of violent incidents against political candidates and the amount of cash handouts distributed during election time, made the study of electoral politics worthwhile on its own merits.

The fact that the use of violence and money had become widespread in parliamentary elections has two important implications. First, according to Benedict Anderson, the rising number of assassinations of MPs suggests that "not only does being an MP offer substantial opportunities for gaining wealth and power, *but it promises comfortably to do so for the duration.*"[42] In other words, parliamentary positions became worth killing for. Implicit in this argument is the idea that parliamentary positions now offered a way for those formerly situated as clients to the bureaucracy, for example, businessmen or entrepreneurs, to exercise control over

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[42] Anderson, "Murder and Progress in Modern Siam," 46.

the bureaucracy or circumvent the bureaucracy in their pursuit of profit. Direct political

participation meant unmediated access to monopoly, concession and contracts, which had

become extremely lucrative due to rural infrastructure development and programs. Second,

according to Arghiros, the fact that money had become crucial for mobilizing voters also implies

the decline of traditional patron-client relationships and the rise of relationships that are

"instrumental, short-term, without any personal component and may be mediated only by a cash

transaction."[43] Electoral votes could not be readily claimed on the basis of a candidate's status as

a patron but needed to be bought. While counterintuitive, electoral violence and money politics

together show that elections had become more competitive and meaningful, although in ways

that did not conform to the pattern usually envisioned by democratization theorists.

Nowhere is the tension between the ideals of democracy and the reality of democratic

politics more apparent than in the study of the role played by *jao pho* or local godfathers in

Thailand's elections. Although there is no real consensus on what characteristics make certain

individuals a *jao pho*, the term is generally used in public and academic contexts to refer to

provincial businessmen who specialize in making business out of politics and politics out of

business.[44] Using income derived from their businesses, *jao pho* develop informal connections

with local officials, furnishing these individuals with financial support and assistance.

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[43] Daniel Arghiros, *Democracy, Development, and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*, Democracy in Asia, no. 8 (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001), 7.

[44] See Sombat Chantornvong, *เลือกตั้งวิกฤต : ปัญหาและทางออก [Thai Election in Crisis : Problems and Solutions]* (Bangkok: Kob Fai, 1993); Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsit Phiriyarangsan, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* (Chiang Mai, TH: Silkworm Books, 1996), https://books.google.co.th/books?id=60a4AAAAIAAJ; Ruth McVey, ed., *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); and James Ockey, "Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (2003): 663–80, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.4.663.

Leveraging these connections, they secure contracts, permits, concessions to maintain or expand their businesses, and, more generally, acquire the ability to act without regard for the law. Possessing both vast amount of wealth, by virtue of their monopolistic and often illegitimate businesses, and influence, by virtue of their control over local networks of officials, *jao pho* were highly sought after by political parties, which were primarily Bangkok-based, to win parliamentary seats in the provinces. Yet parties or candidates do not choose *jao pho*; only a *jao pho* gets to choose which parties or candidates to support. *Kamnan Poh*, one of the most prominent *jao pho,* never committed himself to one party until 1988 when he announced his support for the Boonchu Rojanasathien of Social Action Party, only to switch his support to the Samakkhi Tham Party in 1992 and, subsequently, any political parties his family members were a part of.[45]

The figure of the *jao pho*, which by the 1990s had become the face of Thailand's elections, is a good reflection of how much the distribution of power in the Thai political system had changed and of how much *itthiphon*, to recall Tamada's distinction, had become dominant relative to *amnat.* The clearest representation of the supremacy of *jao pho* in Thai elections is Banharn Silpa-archa, a construction business tycoon turned politician. During the Chatichai administration (1988–1991), Banharn, nicknamed "Mr. ATM" for his infamous use of money to win political support, became the Minister of Interior, a position historically reserved for bureaucratic elites and one that gave him control over the promotion and appointment of state officials. In 1995, he rose to the rank of Prime Minister, demonstrating what was hitherto unimaginable in terms of direct political participation by a business figure, especially a

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[45] McVey, *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, 64.

provincial one. Possessing control over these posts accorded him the influence with which to monitor and control the activities of civil servants in his home province Suphanburi, ensuring that local development projects were implemented in a manner that was free from corruption.[46] The fact that Suphanburi became widely known as "Banharn-buri" is a testament not only to his political dominance in the province but also his enormous contribution to local public goods, which bureaucrats have long failed to deliver. One Pheu Thai MP who once helped campaign against Banharn recounted his encounter with Banharn's supporter in the following way: "I asked them why they still supported him despite his alleged corruption. They replied, yes, he eats but he does not shit on his own roof."[47]

Scholars who observed the rise of *jao pho* like Banharn may have recognized a trend— that power resources based on holding official positions may have been depreciating in comparison to those based on control of material resources. This trend was perhaps most visible in provincial areas, owing to the fact that bureaucratic directives emanated unevenly from Bangkok while business enterprises and economic bases at the rural level were being consolidated and concentrated in the hands of a small number of provincial leaders, *jao pho* among them.[48] Despite the fact that the Thai state had been described as despotic and

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[46] Yoshinori Nishizaki, "The Domination of a Fussy Strongman in Provincial Thailand: The Case of Banharn Silpa-Archa in Suphanburi," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 267–91.

[47] A Pheu Thai MP from a province in Northern Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 30, 2020.

[48] See Mann and O'Donnell regarding the need to revise assumptions about the state. Both the dispersion of the state, its institutions and agencies, across the territory and the regularization of its rule are always subject to some level of contestation and negotiation by actors who are part of power circuits at the local level. The fact that the state is more "privatized" in some regions than in others suggest possible variation in the forms of accountability and governance across regions supposedly governed under the same set of formal rules. Michael Mann, "The Autonomous

paternalistic,[49] large-scale projection of bureaucratic power over everyday activities, especially

in the provinces, was far from complete. In Thailand, as in many other societies, the state's

infrastructural power, defined by Michael Mann in terms of "the capacity of the state to actually

penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm,"

did not live up to the state's image as bureaucratic polity.[50] In practice, the Thai state has long

exercised control over its territory, and continues to do so, by relying on a patchwork of

arrangements between state officials and local leaders, many of whom became subdistrict heads

(*kamnan*) or village heads (*phuyaibaan*).

Even though these local-level community leaders are overseen by the Ministry of

Interior, subdistrict heads and village heads are elected.[51] At first glance, their role as

representatives of the people who elect them and their status as office holders seem

contradictory. Yet these leaders' influence over local communities made them necessary for

bureaucratic governance, while their access to the bureaucrats made them influential in their

communities. Prior to 1973, during the brief periods in which parliamentary elections were held,

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Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 185–213, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975600004239; Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries," *World Development* 21, no. 8 (1993): 1355–69, https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(93)90048-E.

[49] Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, Studies on Southeast Asia, no. 42 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2007).

[50] Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State," 189.

[51] Villagers elect village heads who elect a subdistrict chief. According to Bowie, village-level elections have taken place since at least 1914, with the Local Administration Act, although village heads and subdistrict chiefs elected before 1992 were able to remain in office until they reached sixty years of age. Katherine A. Bowie, "Vote Buying and Village Outrage in an Election in Northern Thailand: Recent Legal Reforms in Historical Context," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (2008): 469-511.

these local leaders were the primary source of electoral support for government parties, who

would issue directives to these leaders to mobilize voters on their behalf. What changed by the

1970s, with rapid economic expansion and the flow of capital to the countryside and with

elections held for the first time without the presence of government parties, was that these local

leaders found a new source of social mobility outside the traditional bureaucratic framework.

They found in the *jao pho,* "provincial businessmen who have wealth and power but operate

above the law" and who "operate legitimate and illegitimate businesses and combine informal

connections and coercion to establish themselves politically and economically," an alternative

pathway to tremendous wealth and influence.[52] Elections provided ample opportunities for these

leaders to render important services to the *jao pho*—to mobilize support from people within their

communities to any candidates of the *jao pho*'s choosing. In return for delivering the votes to the

jao pho during election time, for example, local leaders at the subdistrict and village level might

be rewarded with government contracts, development funds, outright cash, or whatever valuable

resources that might be distributed based on the *jao pho*'s *itthiphon* or influence, which by the

1990s had reached all the way to ministerial positions. These local leaders, previously extensions

of bureaucratic power or representatives of local interests, were thus transformed into brokers or

vote canvassers accountable only to the *jao pho*.

It would be simplistic to assume that the transformation of local networks of power with

the rise of *jao pho* was merely a replacement of one type of patron with another, for the activities

of the *jao pho* and their networks do not neatly conform to a conventional patron-client

framework or match the pattern previously found in the relationship between bureaucratic elites

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[52] Arghiros, *Democracy, Development, and Decentralization*, 19.

and their local counterparts. According to Arghiros, it is not patron-clientage but patronage that best describes the ways of the *jao pho*.[53] While the former denotes relationships between unequal partners which are ongoing and all-encompassing, the latter is used by Arghiros to signify the instrumental relationships between *jao pho*-style politicians and their electoral networks which, by comparison, appear more short-term and exclusive to the political domain. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the ability of *jao pho*, who are either candidates or their sponsors, to present themselves as patrons vis-à-vis those who receive their support. Arghiros writes,

> While patron-client relationships are becoming scarcer in Thai society, the idiom or ideology of patron-client relations is still a very powerful one. It is a resource that politicians and others such as employers manipulate to their advantage. Without forming such relationships politicians, and employers, act and speak in ways to encourage the electorate, and their employees, to view them as benevolent patrons…When candidates are generous sponsors of community religious rituals, feed villagers without accepting a financial contribution (liang), and contribute to the upkeep of village infrastructure, they present themselves as a patron and put recipients of their largesse in their debt.[54]

The implication of Arghiros' argument is that *real* patron-client relationships, as in organically created and rooted in dependency relationships, were being fabricated and imitated as part of a broader design to accumulate political support for the purpose of winning elections. Arghiros finds that the appearance of patron-client relationships or *rabob uppatham* is usually the result of careful, strategic calculation and not certain structural conditions that somehow necessitate the

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[53] Arghiros, 8.
[54] Arghiros, 8.

politician to assume the role of the patron while the voters assume the role of the client. In short, it is not patron-client relationships per se but patronage politics that should be adopted as a heuristic device for understanding the pattern of giving and taking that had become dominant in Thailand's elections.

The analytical shift from patron-client relationships to relationships based on patronage politics also directed attention to the role played by money, typically used as a medium of exchange in the most impersonal of transactions. Although money was regularly distributed as part of electoral campaigns in prior periods, with the dominance of *jao pho*-style politicians, money eventually became both the means and ends of electoral competition. Most scholars reach similar conclusions regarding the prevalence of money in electoral politics from the late 1970s to 1990s.

First, it was understood that money represents an investment on the part of the political candidates who see elections as opportunities to reap substantial economic benefits. As investors, these candidates expect a return on investment not only in terms of the votes but also the material advantages associated with parliamentary positions that could be capitalized on to advance their business interests. For example, an MP candidate who provides financial support to several other candidates can expect to accumulate a parliamentary faction large enough to bargain for a ministerial position, which may then be used to promote his business interests, in addition to channeling spoils and rewards to his followers. Observing the 1995 election, which was widely viewed as the most money-driven election in history, Callahan and McCargo describe this type

of political actor as engaging in a "commercialization of parliamentary elections."[55] According

to Ruth McVey's deeply influential edited volume on provincial politics in Thailand, the

situation was that "one must have money to run, and one must make money from office too."[56]

Second, money was thought to be central to running a successful election campaign, not

only in parliamentary elections but also local elections, because it was necessary for garnering

support from voters and recruiting *huakhanaen* or vote canvassers through whom the money

would be distributed "to ensure the vote stayed bought."[57] Although the term vote buying is often

used to describe the exchange of money for votes, explanations with regard to the role of cash

handouts vary quite significantly. The giving of cash during election time, for example, might be

interpreted as "a sign of puissance and largesse appropriate to a man of power," in which case

money functions as part of a performance or ritual for those who aspire to assume leadership

positions.[58] In some cases, money is simply given as "a sign of goodwill, compensation for

taking time off work and a promise of things to come."[59] Still in other contexts, money might be

used "to supplement the absence or weakness of ties," especially for a new candidate or a

candidate running in a district in which he or she has no kinship network or prior contributions to

the public good, for instance, donations to a local temple or constructions of hospital, roads, or

bridges.[60] It was understood that the giving of money creates a specific obligation on the part of

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[55] William A. Callahan and Duncan McCargo, "Vote-Buying in Thailand's Northeast: The July 1995 General Election," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 4 (1996): 379, https://doi.org/10.2307/2645405.
[56] McVey, *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, 16.
[57] McVey, 86.
[58] McVey, 16.
[59] Arghiros, *Democracy, Development, and Decentralization*, 125.
[60] Arghiros, 96.

the recipient to return a favor in the form of a vote. On the other hand, in the Buddhist sense, "failing to vote for a candidate who had paid them would be a *bap*—an act of demerit."[61]

The giving of money to voters also ran parallel with the recruitment of *huakhanaen*. Ockey argues that, whereas government parties could mobilize votes via bureaucratic networks, non-government parties had to assemble their own networks of *huakhanaen*.[62] However, since 1973 when the bureaucracy loosened its grip on the election system, virtually all political parties adopted the *huakhanaen* system and were in a competition to recruit all types of individual leaders, formal or informal, who could facilitate the buying of votes or, at least in theory, enforce such exchanges. *Huakhanaen* networks are typically "organized into a makeshift hierarchy that extends into every village and every neighborhood."[63]

The study of money politics, with the focus on the influence of provincial businessmen and the role of money, gave rise to two distinct analytical perspectives on the state of Thai politics. First were groups of scholars who became increasingly concerned with the implications that money politics had for the electoral system and the party system. Some of these scholars saw the role of money, *jao pho*-style politicians and the system of *huakhanaen* as undermining the institutionalization of political parties.[64] With regional *huakhanaen* networks operating as gatekeepers of electoral votes, political parties were no more than political umbrellas under which these networks organized themselves formally. Informally, factionalism and not party

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[61] Callahan and McCargo, "Vote-Buying in Thailand's Northeast," 379.

[62] McVey, *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, 83.

[63] James Ockey, "The Rise of Local Power in Thailand: Provincial Crime, Elections and the Bureaucracy," in *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, ed. Ruth McVey (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 84.

[64] James Ockey, "Political Parties, Factions, and Corruption in Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 251–77.

institutionalism reigned supreme, as evidenced by the numerous incidents of party switching and buying of MPs. Furthermore, by design, the *huakhanaen* system did not promote ideological cleavages or horizontal, mass-based organizations. All of this was thought to have contributed to the weakness of political parties, intra-party conflicts, corruption, unstable, and short-lived coalition governments. Hewison offers a good summary of the ways in which money politics dominated the system:

> Parliamentary politics, while apparently established, is in danger of leading to 'revolving door' government as parties vie for their place at the cabinet table, which itself looks increasingly like a cash dispensing machine as the government parties scramble to recoup their investments in election campaigning.[65]

There are other scholars who saw the general deviation from the Western ideal types of political parties not as a sign of derailed development of the party system but as evidence of ongoing transformations, the complexities and nuances of which traditional models of political parties and party systems fail to capture. According to McCargo, political parties in Thailand, as in many other countries around the world, are "in a constant state of evolution."[66] Viewed in this light, the patterns of intraparty conflicts, personalism, and informal financial sponsorship from business interests appear not as symptoms of organizational weakness, instability, or failure but simply as real*,* raw materials from which political parties in Thailand are built. Building on a comparison of three political parties, the Democrat Party, the New Aspiration Party, and the

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[65] Kevin Hewison, ed., *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, Politics in Asia Series (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.
[66] Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's Political Parties: Real, Authentic and Actual," in *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, ed. Kevin Hewison, Politics in Asia Series (London: Routledge, 1997), 114.

Palang Dharma Party, McCargo concludes that, if anything, political parties in Thailand were tending toward "electoral professional" parties, characterized less by mass party membership than by direct linkages between personal leaders and voters via mass media.[67] For such parties, money politics and strategic alliances with *jao pho*-style, patronage-based politicians were costly and difficult to manage but ultimately consistent with their objectives.

Looking beyond political parties or the party system, a second perspective focused instead on the demand side of the equation, in terms of the preferences of Bangkok and rural voters which they saw as contributing to two very different perceptions and expectations of democratic politics. This dichotomy is best summarized in Anek Laothamatas's "A Tale of Two Democracies":

> For the rural electorate, democracy is valued not as an ideal, but as a mechanism to draw greater benefits from the political elite to themselves and their communities. To them, elections are very much local, not national, affairs, dealing with the exchange of votes for benefits of a non-policy type…For the educated middle class, influenced by Western thought, democracy is a form of legitimate rule adopted by most civilized nation…To the educated middle class, elections are means of recruiting honest and capable persons to serve as lawmakers and political executives, rather than a process through which voters get parochial and personal benefits.[68]

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[67] Hewison, *Political Change in Thailand*, 117.
[68] Anek Laothamatas, "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand," in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, ed. R. H. Taylor (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press, 1996), 221.

According to Anek, the most important source of conflict in Thai society is not simply between bureaucratic and extra-bureaucratic forces but between the urban and rural electorate who hold different set of beliefs about what constitutes proper democratic rule. The rural electorate choose politicians who are most responsive to their demands, which tend to be more particularistic and personal than the demands of their urban counterparts, presumably by virtue of longstanding patterns of uneven economic development as well as differences in political culture between the metropolitan and rural areas. Yet these politicians' extensive use of patronage, vote buying, and vote-canvassing networks also make them appear illegitimate and prone to corruption in the eyes of the urban electorate. The same government that succeeds, in the eyes of rural voters, in bringing development to their communities may be viewed by urban voters as failing to deliver on good governance and public policies. Performing democracy for the rural and urban voters thus implies two seemingly irreconcilable patterns of politics, clientelistic or patronage for the former and programmatic for the latter.

What are the implications of this contradiction in urban and rural worldviews? Anek identifies the urban middle class, in their role as public opinion leaders, as a potential player in a pro-coup alliance against the rural electoral majority and their corrupt representatives, preferring authoritarian solutions when democracy did not produce desired results, that is, when parliament is overcrowded with patronage-ridden politicians rather than morally upright and skilled technocrats. The contradiction culminates in the repeated cycles of elections and coups which Anek interprets as a paradox: "those who put a government into being and those who end its life are not the same people."[69] Here, Anek's analytical focus on the characteristics of voters,

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[69] Anek, "A Tale of Two Democracies," 221.

supporters, and followers parallels McVey's insights on the bifurcating structure of elite politics.

According to McVey, the system of money politics that had been introduced,

> shifted some of the perquisites of power away from those who had commanded them
> before. What had seemed to the Bangkok elite a gentlemanly flow of benefits among
> those fit to rule appeared less legitimate in the hands of crass outsiders.[70]

The urban-rural division highlighted by Anek maps itself onto an already existing pattern of contention at the top between the old bureaucratic elites and the new business-minded elites who are stakeholders, sometimes in an economic sense, in the continuation of democratic rule or its replacement by military rule.

Whether money politics presented an "efficiency" problem from the standpoint of party institutionalization or a "legitimacy" problem stemming from seemingly irreconcilable differences between urban and rural constituencies, these issues were thought, at least for a time, to have been addressed by a major constitutional reform in 1997.[71] The new constitution did much to shape the nature of parliamentary elections. It created the Electoral Commission of Thailand as an independent regulatory body in charge of investigating and disqualifying parties and candidates that engage in electoral misconduct or by replacing the block-vote, multimember system with a mixed system comprising single-member districts and party-list proportional representation. No less significant were the changes to the parliamentary system in general. The new constitution introduced a fully elected senate which, apart from filtering legislation, was empowered with the authority to appoint or remove members of independent agencies and non-

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[70] McVey, *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, 13.
[71] Sombat Chantornvong, "The 1997 Constitution and the Politics of Electoral Reform," in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen, DK: NIAS Press, 2002).

governmental, monitoring bodies. It also placed restrictions on party switching, requiring a candidate to be a member of a political party for at least 90 days to be eligible to run. In addition, members of parliament were required to hold a bachelor's degree.

Opinions diverged significantly about whether the 1997 Constitution represented a project driven by conservative elites who sought to check or bypass provincial businessmen-cum-politicians who "bought their way into power" or whether it represented the fruit of popular efforts, befitting its title of the "People's Constitution," by civil society groups and organizations. Regardless of these divergent views, the widely shared consensus was that the constitution had failed to produce the intended effects, whether to produce a clean government, curb the influence of rural politicians, promote party system institutionalization, or produce a constitution that would last. The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and the Thai Rak Thai party, which were eventually met with an authoritarian response, is proof that a radical overhaul of the political system is not without unintended consequences and that formal institutional changes are always subject to ongoing contestation and negotiation, both by those seeking to manipulate the existing institutional arrangements in their favor and those seeking to alter or deny these arrangements altogether.

Vote Buying and Everyday Politics

The study of money politics and *jao pho* did much to direct public and academic attention to differences, real or imagined, between urban and rural electorates in their modes of political participation and worldview. As reflected in many of the provisions introduced by the 1997 Constitution, scholars and reformers had come to share the view that vote buying and rural

patronage networks were the underlying causes of Thailand's many political diseases. According to this view, rural voters were either gullible victims of corrupt politicians who bought their way into power or, worse, accomplices seduced by the prospect of short-term gains. Their poverty, lack of education, and moral deficiencies all fed into their misuse or abuse of democratic rights. Nowhere is this view more pervasive than in the context of vote buying, in which rural voters are regularly portrayed as those who surrender their votes to vote canvassers or politicians in exchange for a few hundred baht. By contrast, urban voters were assumed to operate according to liberal principles and participate in democratic politics in the context of civil society, as autonomous and rational individuals. This was Anek's conclusion in "A Tale of Two Democracies" taken to extreme, where the construction of the problem defined the solution: either educate rural voters in the civilized ways of their urban counterpart or limit the role of patronage-oriented representatives that rural voters elect.

The final wave of literature that makes references to the role of patron-client relationships, patronage politics, and clientelism does so to problematize these frameworks, largely in retaliation against the aforementioned portrayal of rural voters. According to Callahan, to the extent that vote buying had captured the attention of public media, scholarly community, and reformers, vote buying had also become something like a "red herring that defers attention away from another set of structural and ideological issues."[72] Callahan's point was not that vote buying was not "real" but that vote buying had been fundamentally blown out of proportion and removed from its context so as to parochialize the problem of politics to the rural domain.

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[72] William A. Callahan, "The Discourse of Vote Buying and Political Reform in Thailand," *Pacific Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2005): 96.

Against this backdrop, the urban middle class emerged as those who uphold liberal democratic values and good governance—the support they lent to authoritarian regimes in the past forgotten, erased, or rewritten.

What took shape since the reform of 1997, in Callahan's perspective, was a discourse that served not only to delegitimize particular types of electorate and politicians, but also to legitimize reform attempts that imposed legal and technical restrictions on the power of elected representatives—attempts that would only benefit the military-bureaucratic-royal complexes that had previously dominated the political order and were similarly, if not more, corrupt. Callahan saw many of the provisions that were instituted as part of the 1997 reform, for example, requiring political office holders to hold at least a bachelor's degree or requiring that cabinet ministers could not be constituency MPs, as a legal or technical manifestation of what he calls a *coup de technocrat*.[73] Against these measures, Callahan argues,

> the solution to vote buying is not to cut relations, and thus turn rural clients into proper liberal autonomous rational individualist citizens. Rather than reform leading to a privatization of social life, the relations need to be transformed from clientelism to something else – rural civil society or community culture – which better addresses these relations of power, and thus better empowers Thai people.[74]

If Callahan challenges the crude demarcation between rural and urban modes of political participation by problematizing vote buying as a discourse, other scholars, primarily political anthropologists, do so by contextualizing vote buying. The underlying motivation of these

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[73] Callahan, "The Discourse of Vote Buying," 112.
[74] Callahan, 113.

approaches is no longer simply to address the flaws of any specific reform measures but specifically to challenge the characterization of rural voters as passive and obedient recipients of patronage and money.

By 2006, this mischaracterization had become central to a strongly held belief among the urban middle class that Thaksin's government was illegitimate and removing him from power via a coup d'état was justified not only ideologically but also morally. According to this belief, the Thai Rak Thai-led government had implemented a series of redistributive policies that not only lacked financial discipline, but also were designed to manipulate the rural electorate into surrendering their votes outright. These policies, a 3-year agricultural debt moratorium, million-baht village funds, and universal healthcare, have been widely criticized by the TRT's opponents as an extension of vote buying and patronage politics or, at best, instruments of populist politics, often to downplay the reality that these policies had brought genuine improvements especially to the grassroots population. These criticisms thrive on the existing portrayal of rural voters as clients who, trapped by poverty, have little choice but to exchange their votes for handouts— either they were vulnerable victims of vote buying or opportunistic vote sellers, not agents capable of making rational choices based on policy issues. Rural support for the TRT was, therefore, rendered comprehensible to its opponents, especially the urban middle class, through these distorted lenses.

Several studies, primarily by those who conducted ethnographic research in Thailand at the time, have challenged this characterization. For example, based on ethnographic research in Northern Thailand, Bowie has argued that the practice of vote buying, usually blamed on traditional village culture, was in fact the exception rather than the norm in village-level

elections at least until the mid-1990s.[75] Furthermore, when vote buying eventually became endemic at the local level, it was not always received with open arms but occasionally, as in the case of Baan Dong village, with grievances. These grievances, in the absence of a clear legal framework to address them, led villagers to sell their votes during national elections as a unified block to secure the support of an MP candidate who offered leverage for punishing the vote-buying candidate at the local level. The irony of the story, to cite Bowie, reflects "legal ambiguities and legal lacunae, not rural apathy or ignorance."[76]

Other scholars pay attention to the ways in which cash handouts during elections become part of everyday politics. Walker, for instance, has argued that even when cash handouts have been shown to be pervasive in Thai elections, these practices are not always understandable in commodity-transactional terms.[77] Based on ethnographic research in Baan Tiam, a village in Chiang Mai, Walker posits the existence of a "rural constitution of politics" that "regulates, constrains and legitimates the exercise of political power" and "sets out the desired type of political representative, proposes ideal types of political behaviour and proscribes various forms of abuse of public office."[78] The set of values that define the "rural constitution" is subject to local evaluation and always negotiated through everyday activities and interactions. Vote buying or the practice of giving out cash during elections is best understood as part of "culturally valued strategies of material assistance," inseparable from other types of giving such as "personal loans; donations to temples; support for household rituals; payment of (appropriately inflated) expenses

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[75] Bowie, "Vote Buying and Village Outrage," 505.
[76] Bowie, 505.
[77] Andrew Walker, "The Rural Constitution and the Everyday Politics of Elections in Northern Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (February 2008): 84-105.
[78] Walker, "The Rural Constitution," 87.

for attendance at meetings; payment of children's education expenses; provision of low cost

transport services; and support for budgetary shortfalls in local development projects."[79] In this

framework, what usually appears as a crass attempt to buy votes is interpreted as a demonstration

of credibility and commitment on the part of the candidate, in consideration of locally held

values.

Elsewhere, Walker argues that the use of money in a given exchange is not sufficient for

the exchange to function as a commodity exchange.[80] Instead, it is the presence (or absence) of a

personal relationship between those partaking in the exchange that makes the exchange more like

a gift exchange or commodity exchange. One implication of this analytical perspective, which

informs the conceptualization of patronage politics in the previous chapter, is that local vote

canvassers who are widely portrayed as enforcers of compliance in clientelist exchanges are not

"buying" votes in a contingent manner per se but are instead engaged in the building of everyday

relationships (based on which handouts and votes might be exchanged as gifts). Building on a

similar theoretical foundation, Jakkrit argues that the giving and receiving of cash during

elections plays a symbolic role as an expression of political recognition.[81] Based on ethnographic

fieldwork in a village in the Northeast of Thailand, Jakkrit finds that

> Rural political society today is no longer a traditional patron-client society wherein
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> clients would be satisfied with minimal provision of fundamental security. The members
>
> in modern rural political society, such as residents of the Community of Desire, yearn for

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[79] Walker, 90.

[80] Andrew Walker, "Vote Buying–Commodity or Gift?," *New Mandala*, April 13, 2014, https://www.newmandala.org/vote-buying-commodity-or-gift/.

[81] Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, "Democracy of the Desired: Everyday Politics and Political Aspiration in the Contemporary Thai Countryside," *Asian Democracy Review* 2 (2013): 5–37.

recognition of their existence, whether as friends, networks, group members, or house-

hold members, and want to be acknowledged that they are equal actors in the political

system. In this context, money is not a "bribe" that is devoid of any socio-cultural

meaning. It is an "affirmation" or a "gift" that symbolizes the acknowledgement of the

recipients' existence and political recognition by politicians, canvassers, or candidates in

local elections.[82]

Regardless of their analytical perspectives on the role of vote buying, these studies reach the

same fundamental conclusion—that "vote buying" does not always preclude rural voters from

exercising political agency; on the contrary, it occasionally provides the means to do so.

Attempts to construe rural voters as abusing democratic rights either by apparently selling their

votes or by voting for Thaksin on the basis of his populist policies are, at best, misguided in their

assumptions and, at worst, serve as a thinly veiled justifications for stripping democratic rights

away from the majority of the Thai population, whether through constitutional means or via a

coup d'état.

Shefter's Theory of Patronage Revisited

The fundamental conclusion that emerges from this review is that patronage politics has

become the principal means to compete electorally thanks in part to the ways in which the Thai

state lost its grip on the resources critical to the formation of patron-client relationships, both in

its ranks and between the bureaucracy and other forces in society. Capitalist development, which

provided new-found sources of power, and democratization, which provided newfound sources

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[82] Jakkrit, "Democracy of the Desired," 29.

of legitimacy, ensured some degree of devolution of control over the political system to influential figures such as *jao pho* who were in a unique position to pioneer and perfect the use of patronage politics for winning elections and, by extension with control over cabinet ministries and elected office, for furnishing their business empires. The timing with which this process—or more accurately a series of three interrelated processes involving the state's retrenchment from politics and society, the expansion of provincial economy, and the revival of democratic politics—unfolded cannot be overstated. It is true that the *jao pho* were primed to take advantage of a major opening in the electoral arena in 1973. However, had this opening occurred before the *jao pho* could amass significant political and economic leverage relative to state officials or after some manner of bureaucratic reform could be achieved, it is plausible that patronage politics would have assumed a different role or organizational form than it did. In a counterfactual scenario, the emerging pattern might be characterized, for example, by purely ad hoc networks with minimal involvement by state officials or, at the other extreme, by the dominance of the state apparatus and government parties.

The configuration in Thailand is a good test of the strength of the argument first made by Martin Shefter on the role of the state and the use of patronage in the electoral arena. According to Shefter, "the relative timing of democratization and bureaucratization" rather than on the nature of societal demands, as implied in Anek's urban-rural interpretation of political conflicts in Thailand, is what determines the nature of party organization and the strategies that political parties adopt in order to compete electorally.[83] To elaborate on this logic further, Shefter's

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[83] Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 14, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/29626.

analysis follows from the understanding that political parties whose leaders do not occupy office or are allied with state elites are blocked from accessing the state apparatus and using its resources for the purpose of party building or appealing to their support base. Internally mobilized parties, whose leaders are themselves members of the bureaucracy, are likewise unable to tap state resources for politicized distribution, so long as the bureaucracy is sufficiently insulated from political control. Here, the balance of power between a "constituency for bureaucratic autonomy" and a "constituency for patronage" becomes decisive, while the timing of bureaucratization relative to democratization becomes critical for shaping the nature of this balance.[84] This leads Shefter to conclude that, for cases involving internally mobilized parties, when broad democratic participation by a mass electorate occurs after the introduction of a modern, formal bureaucracy, the bureaucracy is given ample time and opportunity to develop a set of stakeholders in the autonomy of the bureaucracy vis-à-vis outside influence, including the use of state resources for electoral purposes. Conversely, when democratic politics is in full swing prior to the establishment of a modern, formal bureaucracy, the distribution of patronage becomes unbridled as the stakeholders in the patronage system ultimately trump those willing to defend bureaucratic autonomy in both number and influence.

Shefter's theoretical framework is not so much mistaken as it is incomplete for any sort of straightforward analysis of the emergence and evolution of patronage politics in Thailand. In the Thai context, the introduction of modern bureaucracy and administrative reform took place during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, well in advance of elections by at least thirty years.

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[84] Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 29, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/29626.

Assuming that the reform was in fact successful, following Shefter's path dependent explanation, we should expect that political parties in Thailand, internally or externally mobilized, would lack the capacity or will to access state resources for politicized distribution. Yet, this was only partly true for the first forty years of elections before 1973. Prior to that, the situation in Thailand was indeed more like Shefter's depiction of Germany than of Italy—the presence of an absolutist regime meant that little to no concession in the form of patronage was made beyond the ruling circle. The Thai bureaucracy was thought to be highly autonomous—so autonomous that many scholars including Fred Riggs and David Wilson viewed it as accountable only to itself. According to most metrics, the bureaucracy was also surprisingly well-insulated against pressures coming from colonial powers and the communist threat. The establishment of government parties as an extension of bureaucratic power guaranteed the absence of meaningful electoral competition and thus restricted the flow of patronage to members of the bureaucratic polity and only a handful of clients, not the masses. What was the missing link that might explain why Thailand turned out to be more like Italy than Germany in the post-1973 era?

As the literature on the role of *jao pho* makes clear, the Thai state and its bureaucratic institutions, centralized as they were, had long relied on the cooperation of local influential figures for the enforcement of its rules and administrative control. The blurring of lines between state and non-state actors at the local level can be seen most clearly in the role of subdistrict heads (*kamnan*) or village heads (*phuyaibaan*) who were elected officials but, thanks to the delegation of authority from the state, lifetime post, and other administrative rituals, were akin to state officials in every sense of the word. The reliance of state control on these patchwork arrangements of local strongmen meant that state power at both the national and subnational

level was up for grabs, for a price of course. The *jao pho* needed control over the levers of the

state at the local level for acquiring monopolized access to contracts and concessions, while

Bangkok-based businesses and patrons themselves needed access to the electoral majority in the

provinces to compete with one another or with parties affiliated with the government. In a way,

an unholy marriage was forged between business and politics, as local leaders and officials were

transformed into instruments both for capital accumulation (via corruption) and the accumulation

of votes (via their role as vote canvassers). What made the difference was not simply the timing

between democratization and bureaucratization (or debureaucratization) but rather how these two

processes interacted with capitalist development in the countryside. This argument is best

captured in John Sidel's analysis of local bossism:

> the transfer of control over the state apparatus to elected officials came relatively late vis-
> à-vis the process of capitalist development, with enormous Bangkok-based financial,
> agro-business, and industrial conglomerates and up-country magnates with province- or
> region-wide empires already entrenched and equipped with ample resources for electoral
> competition. Thus prominent Bangkok bankers and industrialists have themselves
> assumed political party leadership posts or otherwise engineered alliances with regional
> clusters of chao pho, and provincial businessmen have in some cases exercised chao pho-
> like influence over multiple constituencies or even provinces.[85]

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[85] John T. Sidel, "Bossism and Democracy in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia: Towards an Alternative Framework for the Study of `Local Strongmen'," in *Politicising Democracy: The New Local Politics of Democratisation*, ed. John Harriss, Kristian Stokke, and Olle Törnquist (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 7, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230502802_3.

In summary, the missing ingredients in Shefter's framework appear to be, first, the characteristics of the Thai state and how it relates to society at the margins, which in some ways deviate from what the notion of a modern bureaucracy implies and, second, how economic influence and commercial capital provided alternative sources of patronage as well as alternative pathways to securing access to existing patronage resources. By 1973, these ingredients combined in such a way that put in place a set of informal institutional arrangements for electoral competition, involving competitive recruitment of local leaders and officials to form a vote-canvassing network and the use of money for buying political support. Despite the modifications to Shefter's analytical framework, the argument remains supply-driven, in the sense that patronage politics entered the picture not due to a drastic change in the demand or voting preferences of the electorate but due to a change in the system that regulated access to patronage or *rabob uppatham* in response to economic transformation and a brief but consequential democratic opening.

The form and pattern that patronage politics assumed in Thailand, with the dominance of provincial bosses and rural strongmen, the prevalence of money politics and factionalism, eventually proved to be incompatible with the interests or ideology of more conservative, bureaucratic minded Bangkok-based elites. From their standpoint, the system was costly to maintain, inherently illegitimate, and ultimately at odds with their version of good governance. With short-lived governments and corruption scandals serving as justifications, a new constitution was promulgated in 1997. For a brief period, it was thought that the "good and able" people had successfully cleansed Thailand's electoral system of politicians whose patronage-ridden and clientelistic ways led, in a manner of speaking, to an overfunctioning of

representative democracy that was subversive to whatever remained of the old, bureaucracy-centric political order. Yet with the rise of Thai Rak Thai in 2001, many of the old faces who had perfected the art of forging patronage ties with local leaders and the populace also returned to the political scene. While the institutional reform had failed on this front, much of the same sentiments remained, in the form of a moralizing discourse of vote buying and rural apathy, which eventually found expression in the removal of an elected government via a coup d'état. As we shall see in the next chapter, a change in the institutional design was not sufficient for rewriting the unwritten rules that made patronage politics the default mode of electoral politics. What made the difference in shaping its contours was the resulting change in the nature of party leadership, as reflected in the development of party control over patronage networks and novel policy innovations that provided the basis for direct ties between party leaders and followers.

Conclusion

This chapter situates patronage politics in Thailand in its proper cultural and historical setting, using evidence gathered from face-to-face interviews and a review of secondary literature on Thai politics. Through the lens of *rabob uppatham,* Thailand's version of patron-client or patronage system, it is evident that the use of patronage politics in elections appeared as a natural and not simply rational choice for many of the actors for whom access to factions, candidates, or vote canvassers who controlled *rabob uppatham* appeared to be a necessary condition for winning elections. The fact that patronage politics is rooted in actors' perception and subjective evaluation within the framework of *rabob uppatham* contains several important implications.

First, this implies the existence of a certain cultural blueprint that gives rise to a recognizable pattern for organizing and deploying patronage networks. Even when these networks are built or maintained only for short-term electoral gains, those who are part of the networks are expected to act as though they are engaged in ongoing at least potentially durable relationships which exist not only in the context of electoral politics, but also in the everyday politics of survival and mobility. The deliveries of goods and services in return for support during election times are therefore embedded in this larger system of meaning—these practices are imbued with certain normative values that render them generative or performative of enduring alliances despite the obvious strategic, instrumental calculations that seem to produce them in the first place. This suggests that the causal power of patronage politics is at least partly rooted in the context in which it operates.

Second, the fact that candidates and parties sometimes view the organization and deployment of patronage politics as not only rational but also appropriate courses of action suggests that patronage politics may reflect a general preoccupation with meeting the design or arrangement that *rabob uppatham* typically calls for. Put differently, the fact that political parties or candidates put together a network of vote canvassers during elections and distribute a range of goods and services through these networks does not simply reflect a vote-maximizing strategy. It may also be understood as actors taking part in performances that are geared, no less strategically, towards bringing about social relations consistent with *rabob uppatham*— performances which sometimes prove to be quite costly and ineffective for generating votes from the standpoint of such parties or candidates.

The predominance of *rabob uppatham* in shaping the circumstances under which political parties or candidates engage in patronage politics has a definitive origin. In this chapter, I have outlined the historical juncture at which *rabob uppatham* became the object of analysis in the work of scholars interested in the politics of elections. This provides important insights into how patronage politics in Thailand assumed the form and pattern it did. Further empirical investigations must be done to verify, based on historical evidence, how the process unfolded in reality and not simply in the eyes of informed academic observers. Nevertheless, the insights derived from this review are interesting enough on their own terms to warrant further analytical attention, perhaps for forming the foundation of theoretical claims or hypotheses pertaining to the emergence of patronage politics or political clientelism in Thai elections. Specifically, how the Thai state, originally understood as a bureaucratic polity, lost monopoly control over access to and distribution of patronage resources in response to provincial capitalist development and a short-lived democratic revival appears to have important consequences for the role and organization of patronage politics henceforth.

Last, the critical examination of the discourse of vote buying and rural apathy by a group of political anthropologists offers fertile ground on which existing theorists of patronage politics and political clientelism might revise their understanding of the role of money in elections. Rather than functioning merely as a medium of exchange transmitting monetary value, money is shown to play a symbolic role in the everyday interactions between local leaders and their constituents. The notion of a vote being crassly bought is revealed to be a discourse that, once pitted against the political correctness of civil society and liberal democracy, provides legitimacy

to anti-vote buying measures and institutional reform that excludes rather than allows for openness in democratic participation.

In the next chapter, the focus of this dissertation will shift from examining the contextual background that shapes the emergence and evolution of patronage politics in Thailand to investigating the factors that cause this pattern of politics to undergo significant change. It might be observed that political parties prior to 1997 long relied on the support of intermediaries in order to win elections, often at a premium, as resources had to be allocated in order to assemble and maintain a winning coalition, and at the cost of organizational cohesion, as factions determined the fate of political parties and not vice versa. The situation from 2001 to 2006 saw a reversal of this trend, but I will show, although the new dynamics did much to disrupt the nature of patronage politics in Thailand, this contributed to its continuation, not disappearance.

Chapter 4

The Thai Rak Thai Transformation

Thaksin was the cause. The transformation of the electoral base was the outcome. In the

past, voters were linked to political parties on the basis of candidates, never party

policies. They would choose candidates who they were familiar with, candidates who had

phon ngan [local contribution], candidates with good reputations, candidates that had

itthiphon [influence] in each area. But when the Thai Rak Thai rose to power and

implemented policies like 30-baht healthcare and village funds, this created an alternative

source of support. Of course, this doesn't mean that TRT's dominance was built on its

policies alone. TRT eventually abandoned the idea of building a new type of political

party and instead relied on absorbing old faces into the party as a way to remain in power.

The dominance of TRT was therefore the result of a combination of old and new

approaches to politics.[1]

—Former cabinet minister and TRT MP

Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, an overwhelming sense of dynamism pervaded Thailand's

political, economic and social landscape. The country had just weathered a historic economic

crisis. A "People's Constitution" had recently been promulgated to rebuild the political order

from the ground up. Against this backdrop, it must have appeared as though Thailand was on the

verge of a radical break with the past. Due to a remarkable coincidence of economic and

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[1] Former cabinet minister and TRT MP associated with a province in Northern Thailand,
interview with the author, Bangkok, January 16, 2020.

constitutional reform, the vicious cycle of money politics, corruption, and short-lived

governments that had plagued the country for nearly two decades prior was disrupted. In 2001,

as if to usher in a new era, 11 million voters elected Thaksin Shinawatra, a tycoon-turned

politician, and the newly formed Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). Thaksin's landslide victory was

soon followed by a narrow escape when the Constitutional Court ruled 8-7 in his favor on

charges of concealment of assets filed by the National Counter Corruption Commission.[2] The

perception that Thaksin was destined to become the prime minister was confirmed on both

occasions.

Electoral dominance aside, many things about Thaksin and the TRT were unprecedented.

To name a few, no prime minister ever came close to Thaksin in terms of personal wealth, which

was in the billions of US dollars. No individual in recent memory, perhaps except for the late

Thai monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej, ever reached the heights of Thaksin's popularity or

commanded such a strong claim to a popular mandate. No party leader ever enjoyed the extent of

control that Thaksin had over a party organization, factions, candidate selection, and cabinet

portfolios. His political party, the TRT, is similarly groundbreaking and, in many ways,

inseparable from his personal charisma. No democratically elected political party had ever

completed a full four-year term and yet, TRT was widely anticipated to remain in power for

decades. No party had ever made such bold policy promises and delivered them on such a large

scale in the manner that TRT had done in its first few months in government. No party ever

matched TRT in terms of cultivating a mass support base so durable and visible that the removal

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[2] Seth Mydans, "Thailand's Popular Premier Cleared in Corruption Case," *The New York Times*, August 4, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/04/world/thailand-s-popular-premier-cleared-in-corruption-case.html.

of the party and its leader from office meant decades-long political turmoil. No party in government ever made the conspiratorial charges of parliamentary dictatorship and tyranny of majority sound so persuasive. And finally, no single political entity ever provoked such a strong and unified authoritarian reaction as Thaksin and the TRT did.

Explaining the rise of Thaksin and the TRT and making sense of the transformative effect the party had on the established way of doing things in Thailand has been and remains one of the core agendas in the study of contemporary Thai politics. To date, an abundance of books and journal articles have been dedicated to Thaksin and the TRT. To provide a few examples, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, renowned authors of the most widely read books on Thai politics, wrote not one but two editions of a book called *Thaksin.* Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand titled their formative work on Thaksin *The Thaksinization of Thailand*. These accounts provide deep insights into the role and emergence of Thaksin, his style of leadership and implications for Thailand.

Scholars have also broadened the focus beyond Thaksin to situate the role he and his political party played with regards to other historical processes, political practices, and objects of academic inquiry, including the economic crisis, constitutional reform, the party system, and populism.[3] The academic debates that have emerged not only have addressed the structural

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[3] James Ockey, "Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (2003): 663–80, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.4.663; Paul Chambers, "Evolving toward What? Parties, Factions, and Coalition Behavior in Thailand Today." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 495–520; Allen Hicken, "Party Fabrication: Constitutional Reform and the Rise of Thai Rak Thai." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2006): 381–407; Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin," *New Left Review* II, no. 39 (2006): 5–37; Anyarat Chattharakul, "Networks of Vote-Canvassers in Thai Elections: Informal Power and Money Politics," PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2007; Somchai Phatharathananunth. "The Thai Rak Thai Party and

conditions that enabled TRT to rise to and stay in power but also deepened our understanding of how TRT came to "reshape" the political landscape in Thailand.[4] Despite this abundance of attention, a scholarly consensus has yet to emerge on a range of issues.

First, how Thaksin and TRT became the dominant force in Thai politics remains an intriguing puzzle given the entrenched pattern of weak or fragmented parties and overriding influence of the military and the bureaucracy. This puzzle can be broken down and reassembled into a more discrete set of questions: To what extent has Thaksin pioneered change in the Thai political, economic, and social landscape since 1997? To what extent was he a consequence of that change himself? How much of the TRT's rise and dominance should be attributed to the historical circumstances and institutional environment of the time, in comparison with Thaksin's leadership capabilities, financial resources, and the gravitational pull of the TRT's policy platform?

Second, coming to terms with the many legacies of Thaksin and the TRT raises a different set of questions: To what extent did the TRT deviate from what came before in terms of its mode of party building and campaigning? To what extent are changes to the party system, party politics, and the development of policy-based competition attributable to Thaksin and the TRT? How far did Thaksin and the TRT go in terms of penetrating, bypassing, and dismantling the preexisting networks of influence?

Elections in North-Eastern Thailand." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 106–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701651986.
[4] Kevin Hewison, "Thaksin Shinawatra and the Reshaping of Thai Politics," *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 2 (June 2010): 119–33.

This chapter engages these debates through the lens of patronage politics, contributing to an already rich literature on the causes and consequences of Thaksin and the TRT. Building on the conceptual foundations presented in the previous chapters, the focus here is on how Thaksin and the TRT upheld or contended with the preexisting institutional legacies of patronage they inherited from the past. Against a historical backdrop in which the prevailing electoral strategy had been to rely exclusively on vote-canvassing networks, the TRT represents an ambitious attempt to develop new ways of mobilizing electoral support, amounting to what Hewison has called the "renegotiation of social contract" with the rural poor majority by a political party that mostly represented the interests of domestic capital.[5] The nature of the contract was such that, "If the electorate supported TRT, then TRT promised that its government would ensure enhanced social protection and economic opportunities for the relatively poor majority of the population."[6] In 2001, the TRT proposed bold policy initiatives with important distributive implications, especially for the rural and grassroots population. For example, they proposed a three-year debt relief scheme for farmers, a village-level microcredit scheme, and a universal healthcare program. On coming to power, the TRT fulfilled its policy promises in a quick and decisive manner. This led for the first time to the development of a mass constituency who, in response to the TRT's policies, subsequently voted as a block to keep Thaksin and his party in power, to the exclusion of other players in the game of democracy.

[5] Kevin Hewison, "Crafting Thailand's New Social Contract," *The Pacific Review* 17, no. 4 (2004): 504, https://doi.org/10.1080/0951274042000326041.
[6] Hewison, "Crafting Thailand's New Social Contract," 515.

Yet in other dimensions, the TRT exemplifies the continuation rather than the disruption of a prevailing pattern.[7] Despite having clearly succeeded in forging a direct link to voters based on its policies, the TRT continued to invest heavily in recruiting the leaders of various factions and their vote-canvassing networks to form the party's electoral base. If the TRT's policies kept the party in power, these leaders guaranteed the TRT's rise to power. Surpassing most political parties in the past, the TRT sought to create what Ockey has called a "grand coalition" by absorbing factions and parties into an organizational framework resembling that of a party machine.[8] To maintain their loyalty, the TRT developed a centralized system for delivering spoils and patronage. The introduction of a new social contract was thus accompanied by the redeployment of old arrangements.

This combination of old and new patterns of electoral politics that culminated in the TRT poses a series of questions with important implications for understanding how change and continuity in the pattern of patronage politics occur. First, given a longstanding pattern in which political parties competed almost exclusively by accumulating factions and networks of vote canvassers, what caused the TRT to diverge from this prevailing pattern in its attempt to cultivate a direct, unmediated linkage between the party and its voters on the basis of its policy initiatives? Second, despite this pathbreaking endeavor, why did the TRT continue to recruit a large number of factions and candidates whose expertise in patronage politics and control of vote-canvassing networks appeared inconsistent with the party's programmatic platform? Finally, what

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[7] For how both elements of change and continuity can be observed after 1997, see James Ockey, "Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (2003): 663–80, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.4.663.

[8] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 674.

institutional patterns or processes did this combination of choices set in motion and with what implications for the development of party-voter linkages in Thailand?

Based on secondary literature and face-to-face interviews with former TRT leaders, MPs, and vote canvassers, I argue that the TRT's simultaneous adoption of policy-based linkage mechanisms and reliance on old-style patronage politics is best understood as the outcome of attempting to establish and maintain a dominant political party in a context in which party-voter linkages had been predominantly captured by locally embedded vote-canvassing networks and the factions that claimed ownership over them. The historical circumstances under which the TRT's party building took place played a decisive role in shaping the contours of its strategy and the choices made by the party leaders in ways that subsequently led to the emergence of a mass constituency on the one hand and the persistence of patronage politics on the other.

The coincidence of the economic crisis and constitutional reform loosened the structural constraints that once required political parties to compete for power and stay in power exclusively by yielding to the demands of the gatekeeping factions, MPs, and candidates who controlled personalized, patronage-based networks of political support. On the one hand, the crisis had depleted the existing sources of financial sponsorship on which factions and MPs depended for facilitating vote-canvassing and vote buying, putting these traditional gatekeepers of electoral votes in a vulnerable position. It also created an environment conducive to the inclusion of technocrats, entrepreneurs, and businessmen in electoral politics and the formulation of policies and new economic ideas designed to alleviate the grievances of those hurt by the crisis.

The constitution, on the other hand, introduced the national party list tier which made campaigning based on these policies rewarding not only with regards to capturing surplus electoral votes but also with regards to consolidating mass support for the party at the national level. It also imposed new restrictions on party switching and required MPs to resign their parliamentary positions to serve in the cabinet, which enhanced the bargaining position of the party-leader-cum-prime minister relative to faction leaders, creating highly favorable conditions for policy implementation and stability of government.

In comparison to other parties, the TRT, with its strong leadership and financial resources, was uniquely placed to take advantage of this window of opportunity. It captured parliamentary majority by appealing to voters based on policies and incorporating a large number of factions and candidates based on its financial superiority and popularity. Once the TRT was in power, these choices led to the formation of a mass constituency among the rural and poor population and the development of a centralized system of MP, candidate, and campaign financing, enabling the TRT to sustain party dominance despite its continued reliance on factions and the networks of MPs and vote canvassers they claimed to control.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I elaborate on the TRT's pursuit of a dual strategy of appealing to voters based on policies while actively recruiting factions, MPs, and vote-canvassing networks via traditional methods. Second, I provide an explanation of how the coincidence of the crisis and the reform constituted a critical juncture that enabled the TRT to engage in modes of campaigning and party building that both diverged from and conformed to the established pattern of electoral politics. Last, I offer an analysis of how the consequences of these choices—a loyal mass base and centralized system of party-directed patronage—fueled the

TRT's dominance and allowed it to exercise and maintain control over patronage networks in ways that sharply diverged from other past political parties. In the conclusion, I discuss the long-term implications of the TRT's intervention in electoral politics on the change and continuity of patronage politics in Thailand.

Unlike the breakdown of bureaucratic hegemony which reconcentrated power in the hands of provincial capitalists highlighted in the previous chapter, the critical historical moment between 1997 and 2001 led to both the collapse of a system of money politics and its renewal under the framework of a dominant political party. This ensured the survival of the networks that thrived under old arrangements, although their leaders were now situated in a much more subordinated position vis-à-vis the party.

Old Wine in New Bottles or New Wine in Old Bottles?

In 2001, the TRT captured 248 out of 500 seats. It formed a coalition government with the Chart Thai Party and the New Aspiration Party. Shortly afterwards, it absorbed the Seritham Party and the New Aspiration Party, giving the coalition a comfortable majority in parliament. After another landslide election in 2005, its share of seats grew to 377 out of 500 seats, enabling it to form a single-party majority government, the first since Phibun's Serimanangkasila party in 1957.[9] Never before in Thailand had a party come to power with such a large share of seats in parliament and managed to stay so long in power without crumbling due to factional disputes or intra-coalitional struggles. As a means to mitigate these factional sources of party instability, in

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[9] *การเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎรเป็นการทั่วไป เมื่อวันที่ 6 กุมภาพันธ์ 2548 [House of Representative Elections on 6 February 2005]* (Office of Election Commission of Thailand, Election Commission of Thailand, 2005).

the past most parties formed relatively modest, minimum winning coalitions in which the

number of seats each party controlled would be used to bargain for ministerial posts using a

mutually agreed on quota system.[10] In contrast, it would appear that the TRT sought to establish

a grand coalition in which intra-coalitional, intra-party and factional disputes would be diluted

and the bargaining power of the TRT's leader and prime minister would be enhanced, though not

without significant startup costs.[11] To assemble this grand coalition, the TRT engaged in both a

"new" style of politics, using policies and modern marketing techniques, and "old" tactics,

absorbing a large number of factions and traditional politicians who controlled local networks of

vote canvassers. This combination of programmatic and patronage-based linkage strategies lies

at the core of the TRT's electoral success and sets in motion a pattern that subsequently

reproduced the TRT's dominance. In the next section, I describe some of the notable

characteristics of these strategies.

Think New, Act New

From the beginning, the TRT's party building process was informed by a clear

understanding and appreciation of the role that policies and policymaking would play, both for

the party and the governance of a country that had bottomed out as a result of the economic

crisis. On July 14, 1998, Thaksin founded the TRT with 23 individuals.[12] Many were academics,

while others were business or corporate figures. Most were, however, new to politics. All were

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[10] Paul Chambers, "Evolving toward What? Parties, Factions, and Coalition Behavior in Thailand Today." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 495–520.

[11] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 675.

[12] The exception was Sarasin Viraphon who appeared on the list but later withdrew at the behest of the Democrat Party.

handpicked individually and deliberately by Thaksin and his closest advisors to generate an impression that the TRT was going to be a new type of political party fit for a new era. This highly media-focused, strategic launch positioned the TRT as a viable alternative to the Democrat Party, an established political party whose popularity had been on the decline due to the widespread public perception that it had surrendered to the mandate of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its response to the economic crisis.

Although the TRT's leader, Thaksin, had been part of the old order in the pre–1997 political system, the newness of the party was not altogether a mirage, or an empty promise concocted for sheer appearance. The intention to form a new type of political party, one that embodied clear developmental objectives and policy priorities, was evident in the day-to-day operations of the party and, particularly, in its organizational structure. Thaksin worked with a small team of advisors consisting of technocrats and former activists who brainstormed policy ideas. These ideas were then translated into a coherent and communicable platform, guided by modern marketing principles drawn from books written by Northwestern University marketing professor Philip Kotler and Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter.[13] The party hired SC Matchbox, an advertising agency under Shin Corp, to oversee party advertisement and design the party brand down to the font and color of the texts that appeared on brochures and banners. Some of the work on polling, focus groups, and development of campaign message and public relations was outsourced to a team of foreign consultants from Washington DC, who had supposedly worked for the Republican Party. All signs pointed to the fact that the party was in

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[13] Chuang, a former cabinet minister and TRT party official, interview with the author, Bangkok, July 20, 2021

the business of formulating policies and advertising them to voters—both the TRT's product and packaging were meticulously designed and tailored to meet the demands and preferences of different segments of the Thai political market.

The policy-centered and systematic nature of the TRT's electoral campaign, now common knowledge, is a far cry from how political parties in Thailand, the Democrat Party included, usually operated. Chuang, a former TRT executive and cabinet minister recalled,

> They [referring to the team of consultants that worked with TRT] were conducting tests every week. For example, we once proposed a policy on education. Their test showed that education was not important at all to voters. By contrast, the results indicated that low income and poverty issues were things that people cared about the most…Their tests were extremely detailed. For example, based on their surveys, we were able to estimate something like, if the Democrat Party were to criticize us on this or that issue, what would be our best course of action in terms of responding to their criticism in the media and how much would this or that response impact our approval rate. It was as though we knew in advance that if we were to say certain things at a certain time, our popularity would increase.[14]

Sai, a southern MP from the Democrat Party at the time, was aware of these developments inside the TRT party and expressed grave disappointment in the failure of the Democrat Party to compete with the TRT on equal footing. According to him,

> there were certain keywords to be used each week during the course of the campaign. It was highly systematic. As for the Democrat Party, we conducted everything in-house.

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[14] Chuang, interview with author.

Suthep assigned these tasks to people like Tharin and Supachai. But clearly what we were doing didn't match up to what Thai Rak Thai was doing. We were like dinosaurs that didn't get the big picture.[15]

The Democrat Party was forced to play catch-up and criticize the TRT's policy platform rather than offering a better alternative. According to Sai: "We were also the government at the time, so we couldn't really campaign on policy promises."[16]

As many observers have already noted, policy platforms are not particularly novel in Thailand. The government of Chatichai Choonhavan was well-known for developing and carrying out policy initiatives. In fact, Pansak Vinyarat, one of the architects of the TRT's policies, was the head of Chatichai's policy advisory team.[17] However, it is evident that the TRT went much further than any other political parties in terms of making policy instruments the centerpiece of their electoral campaign. In the run up to the 2001 general election, the TRT had campaigned heavily based on its policies, appealing to all sectors rather than targeting the rural and poor population exclusively. These included, for example, the 30-baht universal health insurance program, three-year agricultural debt moratorium, one-million-baht village development funds, "One Tambon, One Product" (OTOP), and small and medium-sized enterprise (SMEs) development schemes. During the campaign, the party also engaged in policy rhetoric, declaring war on poverty, drugs, and corruption. According to one informant, even prior to the election, some of the measures that eventually became TRT's official debt relief policy

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[15] Sai, Democrat Party MP, interview with the author, February 13, 2020.

[16] Sai, interview with the author, February13, 2020.

[17] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai, TH: Silkworm Books, 2009), 67.

were already being implemented informally.[18] Unlike most political parties in the past, the TRT

was a policy vehicle just as much as it was a political vehicle—its political priorities were

expressed through its policy pursuits, thanks in particular to the new rules and circumstances in

the post-financial crisis period, both of which are discussed in this chapter.

In with the Old

If the TRT's attempt to forge direct party-voter linkages on the basis of its policies under

the slogan "think new, act new" represents its most innovative aspect, its strategy in selecting

and recruiting candidates reflects its adherence to the unwritten rules of the game, which

remained firmly intact despite the introduction of new formal electoral rules under the 1997

Constitution. As the election day approached, the party was increasingly flooded with old-timers

and politicians who looked very different from the image the party projected. Deals were made

between Thaksin and several prominent provincial politicians to recruit *en masse* the factions

and electoral networks they controlled to form the TRT's electoral base. Altogether more than

100 incumbents and former MPs were recruited into the TRT.[19] The list went on to include local

politicians and members of local administrative organizations who, by many accounts, were

synonymous with vote canvassers. Among those recruited the most infamous was Sanoh

Thienthong, whose faction previously played a decisive role in making at least two other party

leaders prime ministers, Banharn Silpa-archa and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh.

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[18] Chuang, interview with the author.
[19] Sombat Chantornvong, "The 1997 Constitution and the Politics of Electoral Reform," in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen, DK: NIAS Press, 2002).

As Ockey has already pointed out, the TRT "had more former MPs contesting the election than any other party," which would certainly explain its seemingly sudden electoral dominance.[20] It is difficult to provide a precise estimate of the extent to which these political candidates engaged in traditional modes of patronage politics in the 2001 election, although the ECT did receive a large number of complaints regarding electoral malpractice and issued "yellow cards" to several TRT candidates, ordering election reruns in multiple constituencies.[21] It is, however, reasonable to assume that these candidates were recruited not for ideological but pragmatic reasons, rooted in the perception that they possessed vote-canvassing networks and were therefore likely to win.

The TRT's heavy-handed recruitment of veteran politicians is hardly surprising given the entrenchment of *rabob uppatham* in Thailand's rural regions, where the majority of seats were allocated. To capture a dominant share of votes, new faces alone were not sufficient. Jit, a former TRT party executive and cabinet minister conveyed this point explicitly:

> Even for TRT, candidate selection remained very much about finding and recruiting influential individuals in each community. This is true regardless of the era or political parties. We have to get the people with the influence. Even on social media, you need influencers to carry out your marketing strategies. In politics too, you need people who are part of the political structure to facilitate your electoral strategies. These people might be actual political leaders like local politicians, subdistrict chiefs or village heads. Or they might be governors or high-ranking bureaucrats who have some degree of influence or

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[20] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 672.

[21] *สถิติการวินิจฉัยชี้ขาดเรื่องคัดค้านการเลือกตั้ง พ.ศ. 2543 ถึง พ.ศ. 2558 [Statistics on Electoral Disputes, 2000 - 2015]* (Office of Election Commission of Thailand, Election Commission of Thailand, 2015).

control over their locales. Or they might be big political families or big businesses in the

area. The lines between these roles are all blurred since families and businesses would

send their members to fill the ranks of the bureaucracy and the elected office. These are

two of the same coin, whether at the national or at the local level. For example, the

Thienthong family or the Khunpluem family. They are political dynasties and business

empires that have both the influence and the reputation. And they are popular with the

people too. We had to get these families to be on our side…Before polling or formal

candidate selection was a thing, this is the way things were done. But even after polling

and formal candidate selection was introduced, nothing really changed. The fact remains

that we had to seek out influential individuals.[22]

After pointing out the centrality of influential figures in the TRT, Jit then went on to highlight

how their activities sharply deviated from the image that the party attempted to project. Yet, he

still acknowledged that this was not an error but, rather, a deliberate strategy:

In practice, this meant turning a blind bye, meaning that the nature of their political

influence and business activities is never a hundred percent legitimate. They might be

construction contractors, automobile dealerships or they might have links with the

military and the police—as long as they are not involved in the drug trade, it's ok. But

sometimes individuals with such dark influence made it into the system. As you can see,

there's a lot of grey area. This is simply a reflection of the Thai economy, half of which is

either underground or informal. There's a lot of room for influential individuals. When

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[22] Jit, a former cabinet minister and TRT party executive, interview with the author, Bangkok,
February 24, 2020.

these individuals stand for elections, they win. Because they are fully equipped with all

kinds of resource, including coercive ones. They can support themselves. If you go to

Nakhon Pathom, you have to deal with the Sasomsap family. If you go to Srakeaw, you

need to deal with the Thienthong family. These people were political dynasties that had

bargaining power over political parties. Political parties were weak because these

dynasties controlled the votes. And party leaders held on to the belief that if I want to be

the PM, I would have to court these 7-8 individuals and cut a deal with them, give them

cabinet seats or whatever.[23]

In terms of recruiting influential figures to stand for elections, in the past, Thaksin and the TRT

did not deviate so significantly from other party leaders and political parties. Despite an

attractive policy platform and popular leader, they could not imagine a major electoral victory

without working through some of the existing political dynasties, factions, and rural political

machines. These "7-8 individuals" possessed formidable control over local *rabob uppatham* and

vote-canvassing network that had been integral to the electoral success of many political parties

in the past two decades. This was the reality facing all political parties, the TRT included. What

was innovative, however, was that the TRT was built "like *khanom chan,* starting with the top

layer and moving down to the bottom."[24] *Khanom chan* is a Thai variant of kue lapis, a

traditional Southeast Asian layered-cake dessert. Like *khanom chan*, the TRT was organized into

several layers—the top layer, the leader, technocrats and policy elites, made the cake palatable

while the bottom layer, the politicians and faction bosses, kept the cake upright as a whole.

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[23] Jit, interview with the author.

[24] Chuang, interview with the author.

The Two Faces of TRT

What to make of the TRT's dual layers and the two fundamentally different modes of politics that the party was engaged in? Beyond the claims that the TRT's direct appeal to voters on the basis of its policies were attempts to "bypass the existing linkages between ordinary voters and local politicians and MPs,"[25] that the TRT engaged in a "hybrid form of election campaigning" as a means to capture the support of fundamentally different types of voters,[26] or that its electoral success was based on mixing old-style political tactics and the appeal of its policies,[27] there have been few attempts to theorize the relationship between the TRT's extensive use of policy-based distribution of goods and services and its recruitment and outright buying of MPs and candidates—a relationship which speaks volumes to larger debates on how parties combine programmatic politics and patronage or clientelistic politics.[28] Given the formal rules of the game in 2001, a mixed electoral system with single-member district and national party list tier, this combination did not appear to be inconsistent with the party's electoral objective. The real contradiction lies, however, in the balance of power between the party leader and faction

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[25] Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Copenhagen, DK: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2005), 110,

[26] Anyarat Chattharakul, "Thai Electoral Campaigning: Vote-Canvassing Networks and Hybrid Voting," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 29, no. 4 (February 24, 2011): 67–95.

[27] Somchai, "The Thai Rak Thai Party and Elections."

[28] Matthew Singer and Herbert Kitschelt, "Do Everything (DoE) Parties: When Can Politicians Combine Clientelistic and Programmatic Appeals?," in *Paper Sketch Prepared for Presentation at the Workshop on Democratic Accountability Strategies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Beatriz Magaloni, Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, and Federico Estévez, "Clientelism and Portfolio Diversification," in *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, ed. Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

leaders who formerly operated as the gatekeepers of patronage resources and electoral votes at the subnational level.

On the one hand, the TRT's programmatic appeals limited the ability of factions and candidates to claim personal credit for the TRT's electoral success. Furthermore, the development of direct policy-based linkages between the party and voters, if successful, would be detrimental to a whole range of intermediaries and stakeholders of patronage politics. It is true that the MPs and candidates of the TRT benefited from the strength of their party's policy platform in the sense of improving their likelihood and margin of victory. However, taken to the extreme, reliance on party labels also implied that the TRT's MP candidates were becoming more replaceable and pliable to party directives, both of which would significantly jeopardize the bargaining power of factions and, by extension, access to patronage resources.

On the other hand, the TRT's patronage strategy, characterized by its decision to recruit factions and vote-canvassing networks, meant greater constraints on the party leadership since both power and benefits had to be shared. To hold the party together, the party leader would have to maintain a steady flow of patronage and distribution of spoils to the leaders of factions or risk defection. In the long run, filling the party with those loyal to factions also meant enlarging the influence that such factions would have not only on the management of the party but also on the allocation of cabinet portfolios, which would critically affect the prospect of successful policy formulation and implementation and, more importantly, the stability of the party in government.

Over time, the dual tactics of TRT had fostered an uneasy alliance between various forces within the party. The tensions became quite apparent between 2001 and 2005. Suriya Jungrungruengkit, a wealthy businessman whose family owned the automobile parts supplier

Summit Group, replaced Purachai Piumsombun, a longtime friend of Thaksin from cadet school and by most accounts a clean and incorruptible figure, as the secretary general of the party. It is widely known that the formal role of party secretary general is secondary to its informal one—to keep the party's well-oiled political machine running smoothly. In this regard, the replacement was welcomed by both Sanoh Thienthong and Thaksin's sister, Yaowapha Wongsawat, who led the TRT's two largest factions. Similar tensions might be observed when comparing the names that appear on the TRT's party list in 2001 and 2005. In 2001, the top 20 candidates on the TRT's list were filled by a mix of the TRT's founding members, faction leaders, and representatives of business conglomerates. In 2005, the top 20 candidates predominantly consisted of faction leaders. In addition, in 2001, all but two of the top 20 candidates were picked to become cabinet ministers, while in 2005, only eight out of 20 were chosen to serve in the cabinet. Changes in both the composition of the TRT's party list and the role of the party list in general are evidence that the party was, to use McCargo's term, in "a constant state of evolution" and that the management of the leaders of patronage networks became more, not less, central to the TRT's quest for power even when its policies were already bearing some fruits in the form of a mass electoral base.[29]

According to Martin Shefter, "the circumstances of a party's origins…can influence the party's subsequent behavior," sometimes in enduring ways.[30] The case of the TRT is deeply perplexing from this theoretical standpoint, as the party continued the patronage-oriented

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[29] Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's Political Parties: Real, Authentic and Actual." In *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, Politics in Asia Series, edited by Kevin Hewison (London: Routledge, 1997), 114.

[30] Martin Shefter, "Party and Patronage: Germany, England, and Italy," *Politics & Society* 7, no. 4 (December 1, 1977): 411, https://doi.org/10.1177/003232927700700402.

traditions of party building and campaigning by absorbing existing leaders of the most prominent patronage networks nationwide, yet departed so significantly from its predecessors in its attempt to establish a linkage with a mass base via policy instruments. What explains this unusual combination between TRT's programmatic appearance and patronage undertones? How and why did the TRT deviate from the previous pattern of electoral politics in one dimension while reproducing this pattern in another?

The TRT's two modes of politics are best explained as an outcome of a careful balancing act in party building. Both were crucial for the creation and maintenance of a dominant political party in an environment in which party-voter linkages had been based exclusively on vote-canvassing networks and in which the distribution of patronage constituted the primary currency of loyalties and alliances. The economic crisis and introduction of new rules under the 1997 Constitution played a decisive role in the 2001 Election in loosening the constraints facing all political parties. Yet only the TRT, with its financial superiority and leadership capability, was able to seize the opportunity to create an alternative avenue to power outside the mediation of factions and the vote-canvassing networks they possessed. The selection and recruitment of politicians and factions who engaged in patronage politics remained necessary for capturing parliamentary majority and successful implementation of policies. Once in power, however, the TRT's policies created a durable mass constituency based on which unprecedented degree of leverage and control over the subnational leaders of patronage networks could be established. In short, the party's dual strategies had conditioned the survival of patronage politics while putting in place a mechanism that would ensure its subordination to party control rather than factional control.

The Coincidence of Economic Crisis and Constitutional Reform

The historical moment from 1997 to 2001 might be appropriately characterized as a critical juncture in which significant divergence from prior patterns of electoral politics and party-voter linkages became possible and, in many ways, irreversible.[31] I argue that the TRT's attempt to establish a dominant political party, using a combination of both programmatic and patronage political strategies, is the immediate outcome of this critical juncture. This argument has three defining elements: the preexisting party-voter linkages based exclusively on vote-canvassing network and money politics (antecedent condition), the coincidence of the economic crisis and constitutional reform (critical events or permissive and productive condition), and the development of a mass electoral base and centralized system of party-directed patronage (mechanisms of reproduction).[32] Since I have already elucidated the nature of party-voter linkages in the period prior to the 2001 elections in the previous chapter, in this chapter I focus more on how this antecedent condition interacted with the emergence of mass constituency and the development of party-directed patronage in ways that produced and reproduced distinct patterns of continuity and discontinuity in the role of patronage politics.

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[31] Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[32] Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*; James Mahoney, "Path-Dependent Explanations of Regime Change: Central America in Comparative Perspective," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 111–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02687587; Hillel David Soifer, "The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures," *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 12 (December 1, 2012): 1572–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012463902.

In what sense were the events between 1997 and 2001 critical for change? Which specific elements of the economic crisis and the constitutional reform allowed the TRT, in contrast to other political parties in the past, to develop programmatic appeals and forge direct ties with its voters? How did these elements interact with the nature of the Thai political landscape in which vote-canvassing networks constituted the primary building block of electoral politics? What explains why certain patterns of continuity, for instance, the recruitment of the leaders of patronage networks, were favored while others, for instance, the subordination of the party to such leaders, were disrupted? I attempt to address these questions in this section.

The Economic Crisis and the Influx of New Ideas

Following the crash of the Thai economy and devaluation of the Thai baht that saw the currency losing nearly half of its value relative to the US dollar by the end of 1997, the New Aspiration Party (NAP) leader and Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was forced to resign after having been in office for only eleven months. The Democrat Party-led coalition under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai was left in charge of the Thai economy from 1997 to 2001 and undertook several economic reforms under the guidance of the IMF. Despite moderate signs of economic improvement, the neoliberal measures that it had adopted proved increasingly unpopular with the Thai public and especially with the business community. The crisis brought the Thai economy to its knees and the Democrat Party, by yielding to the demands of the IMF, was perceived as having failed to get it to stand back up. A widespread sense of economic nationalism was clearly fomenting, as were the sentiments that the crisis had definitive political origins and, thus, required political solutions. According to former Prime Minister Anand

Panyarachun, "Thailand's business community has only itself to blame for this passage of

events…for it was negotiation and compromise between politicians and business that held the

foundations for the bust. The current recession in the Thai economy is a direct result of the

political mismanagement of recent years."[33] Dhanin Chearavanont, the head of the CP group, one

of Thailand's largest conglomerates, stated that "This is an age of economic war. It's crucial that

we have a prime minister who understands business and the economy."[34] This statement was not

made lightly. At least four individuals associated with the CP group, including Dhanin's own

son-in-law Virachai Virameteekul, played a role in the TRT's formation, eventually became TRT

MPs or chaired cabinet positions in the TRT administration.[35] Recall that due to the fact that

rural network politicians and factions had crowded out political space for the past decade, big

businesses participated from the sidelines as the major financiers of political parties but rarely

ever played a direct role in electoral politics. By 2001, many of these groups had been calling for

a more direct representation of business interest in politics.[36]

The foundation of the TRT—with its inclusion of prominent intellectuals, technocrats,

and representatives of business groups among its ranks and a party leader who sent satellites into

space, built two companies listed in the Stock Exchange of Thailand and had his name listed on

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[33] Seth Mydans, "Thai Prime Minister Quits, a Casualty of Economic Crisis," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/04/world/thai-prime-minister-quits-a-casualty-of-economic-crisis.html.

[34] *Bangkok Post*, October 31, 2000, as quoted in Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai, TH: Silkworm Books, 2009).

[35] The list includes Sarasin Viraphon, a CP executive, Virachai Virameteekul, Dhanin's son-in-law, Pitak Intarawitayanunt, a political ambassador of CP group, and Watana Muangsook, a son-in-law of Dhanin's brother. See Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, 70.

[36] Kevin Hewison, "Crafting Thailand's New Social Contract," *Pacific Review* 17, no. 4 (2004): 503–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951274042000326041; Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*.

Forbes 500—was very much a direct response to these sentiments. At its launch, the TRT sought

to distance itself from the Democrat Party and present itself as a party with an entirely new

approach to economic crisis management. It did this first and foremost by emphasizing the

novelty of its members. According to one of the TRT's founding members, "the initial 23

members weren't all that popular to begin with but when we put them in the same basket, it

formed a very new image that sharply contrasted with the old and the rotten. This is what

Thaksin wanted and demanded—a new image."[37] Presumably, the "old" refers to the Democrat

Party while the "rotten" refers more broadly to provincial politicians, the majority of whom were

blamed for running the country into the ground with their money politics and corruption. This

TRT founding member continued, "we had no intention of developing a party brand. We only

thought about using policies to campaign. Don't forget that the economy collapsed. Our first

target was small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)."[38] The decision to select new people to

found the party was made with the intention of campaigning with policies that targeted economic

recovery. These policies had to be presented along with the right set of people—they were part

of the same package under the "think new, act new" slogan.

The economic crisis therefore influenced both the dynamics of party building and the

content of the TRT's policies in a fairly direct manner. Although the composition of the party

eventually shifted to match the political realities, the fact remains that the party was founded first

and foremost as a policy vehicle. In the absence of the crisis, one might imagine a very different

makeup of party leaders and mix of policy initiatives, if any. The founding of the TRT, with the

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[37] Chuang, interview with the author.
[38] Chuang, interview with the author.

party leader surrounded by advisors, intellectuals, and new people rather than faction leaders and traditional politicians, had long-term implications for the organizational structure and management style of the party for many years to come. It had established a pattern that allowed for academics, activists, and businessmen—in other words, those previously excluded from direct participation in party politics—to play a pivotal role in formulating policies and shaping party strategy. While many of these individuals faded away by the time the TRT had formed a government in 2001, some went on to become members of the TRT's inner circle and cabinet, equipped with considerable influence over party activities via their close working relationship with the party leader. Officially, there were two advisory teams that held frequent meetings at Ban Phitsanulok and Ban Manaangkhasila in the vicinity of the Government House. Unofficially, weekly meetings were also held among select advisors at the Shinawatra Tower on Phaholyothin Road:

> On the 32nd floor, the top floor, was Thaksin's. On the 12th floor was Potjaman's. Thaksin's team was fairly lean, just a few advisors and secretaries. Potjaman's on the other hand was an empire, filled with people like Ming (Prommin Letsuridej), Liab (Surapong Suebwonglee), Aun (Phumtham Wechayachai), Kriangkamol (Kriangkamol Laohapairoj), and two or three others. These people were the brains behind party's political activities.[39]

By most accounts, these individuals were also the source of the TRT's novel policy ideas including the 30-baht healthcare scheme, widely credited to Surapong Suebwonglee in conjunction with Sanguan Nitayarampong, and the agricultural debt moratorium, credited to

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[39] Chuang, interview with the author.

Prapat Panyachatiraksa, a former student leader in the democratic movements of 1973.[40] This influx of ideas, fortuitous timing, and the proximity between their advocates and those who wielded real political influence enabled the TRT to diverge from the theoretical expectations which predicted that the TRT, like other parties, would have relied exclusively on money politics and patronage politics as a way to garner electoral support even in the new electoral system. This was in contrast to most past political parties, which were run by faction leaders, according to McCargo and Ukrist,

> The Thai Rak Thai administration was essentially run by the prime minister in
> conjunction with a small team of trusted advisors, who were closely involved in both the
> formulation and presentation of policy. These advisors helped empower the party
> leadership and the office of prime minister, at the expense of the faction bosses and
> cabinet ministers who had typically played central roles in previous governments. They
> helped to professionalize the decision-making process, insulating Thaksin from other
> political and social forces ranging from parliament to the electorate.[41]

Were these developments the result of changes in the constitutional rules, which introduced the national party-list proportional representation, allowing individuals with no constituency base to

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[40] For recent discussions on the role of professionals versus institutions in the passage of the universal healthcare scheme, see Joel Salwat Selway, "Electoral Reform and Public Policy Outcomes in Thailand: The Politics of the 30-Baht Health Scheme," *World Politics* 63, no. 1 (2011): 165–202. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887110000316; Joseph Harris, "'Developmental Capture' Of the State: Explaining Thailand's Universal Coverage Policy," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 40, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 165–93, https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-2854689; and Joseph Harris and Joel Selway, "Exchange: Explaining the Passage of Universal Healthcare in Thailand," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 99–119, https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2019.42.

[41] Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Copenhagen, DK: NAIS Press, 2005), 99.

become MPs? The institutional design that the 1997 Constitution put in place clearly incentivized political parties to broaden their appeal with the addition of 100 party list seats.[42] In addition, the constitution also required that MPs who wish to serve as cabinet ministers must give up their parliamentary seats, which meant that only party list MPs or whoever the prime minister wished, as opposed to constituency MPs, were viable candidates for ministerial positions. Yet while these rules created conditions ripe for the development of policy platforms with national appeal and the inclusion of new types of political actors, they alone were not sufficient in producing a party like the TRT, let alone shape the content of its policies.[43] In this regard, the economic crisis played a much more decisive role, although the constitutional reform nevertheless put in place rules that were necessary for the TRT to be rewarded for its business-like management of the political party and bold policy offerings. Here, the coincidence of economic crisis and constitutional reform cannot be understated in terms of its critical importance in shaping the TRT's approach to campaigning and party building.

The Thai Rak Thai's Nok-Lae

According to at least two of the TRT's former executives, Thaksin's ambition was initially quite modest in the 2001 election campaign. This finding is also confirmed in Pasuk and

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[42] On the role played by the constitutional reform, see Allen Hicken, "Party Fabrication: Constitutional Reform and the Rise of Thai Rak Thai." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2006): 381–407; and Erik Martinez Kuhonta, "The Paradox of Thailand's 1997 'People's Constitution': Be Careful What You Wish For." *Asian Survey* 48, no. 3 (2008): 373–92. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2008.48.3.373.

[43] For recent discussion of the causes that led to the rise of TRT, see the debate between Teri L. Caraway, Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Joel Sawat Selway, and Allen Hicken in "Roundtable on Teri L. Caraway's 'De-Thaksinizing Thailand: The Limits of Institutional Design,'" *Journal of East Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (2020).

Baker's account.[44] One informant, Chuang, remarked that the TRT did not see itself becoming a dominant political party until after the election. As for Thaksin, according to this informant, he had been humbled by his previous ventures in politics, all of which ended in disappointment. This includes his approximately 100 days as foreign minister under Phalang Dharma Party's quota, during which he managed to run the party under his leadership to the ground, his two brief tenures as part of Banharn's and Chavalit's cabinets and his bid in 1996 to become a member of the Constitutional Drafting Committee for Chiang Mai, in which he lost to Sawat Amornwiwat, during the selection phase in parliament. According to Chuang, "He almost didn't get his wife's permission to enter politics again, but she eventually came around after seeing how unhappy and unmotivated he was outside of politics."[45] Another former TRT party executive, Jit, recalled the following:

> I remember that when he walked past the party meeting room, which was just a moderate-sized conference room, he uttered that he wasn't sure if the room would be filled. We all thought that we would get at most 100 seats. When the polling results came in and projected that we could win up to 200 seats, nobody believed it. We didn't know where the other 100 seats would come from.[46]

These accounts provide evidence which attest to the highly unpredictable nature of the electoral landscape at that time and that the TRT party and its leaders were not fully aware of the potential consequences of their actions or strategic choices. The political circumstance was characterized by a high level of uncertainty coming from both the constitutional change and economic crisis.

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[44] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai, TH: Silkworm Books, 2009).
[45] Chuang, interview with the author.
[46] Jit, interview with the author.

On the one hand, the formal rules had been completely rewritten under the new 1997 Constitution in ways that mattered greatly for electoral politics and parliamentary politics. For example, the block-vote, multimember system was replaced by a mixed system of parallel voting comprising of single-member districts and party-list proportional representation. New restrictions on party switching were also introduced. These two aspects of the reform have been discussed and debated at great length regarding the incentives they put in place for party-centered versus candidate centered strategies and the constraints they imposed on factional politics.[47] In addition, voting was made compulsory. An anticipated higher level of turnout, according to a former MP, played an important role in shaping the prevalence of vote-canvassing activities and patronage politics:

> In Bangkok, the Democrat used to control most of the vote canvassers, 3,000–4,000 votes in each district. This seems kind of small but if voter turnout is also small regardless of whether the district is small or large, these 3,000 to 4,000 votes become meaningful. But if voter turnout is large, then the influence of vote-canvassing networks is diluted.[48]

The Electoral Commission of Thailand (ECT), an independent regulatory body in charge of investigating and disqualifying parties and candidates that engage in electoral misconduct, was also established. This was a significant institutional development given that elections were previously organized and overseen by the Ministry of the Interior, which meant that incumbents were at a considerable advantage both in terms of appointing officials who are their loyal

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[47] For an analysis of how these institutional reforms affected the party system, see Allen Hicken, "Party Fabrication: Constitutional Reform and the Rise of Thai Rak Thai," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2006): 381–407.

[48] Jit, interview with the author.

supporters and manipulating formal rules or selectively enforcing these rules to produce

favorable but unfair electoral outcomes. The success of the ECT with regards to preventing

electoral fraud and conducting a free and fair election has previously been called into question

but its impact on electoral politics nevertheless deserves recognition.[49]

According to a leading member of public-private election monitoring agency, People's

Network for Elections in Thailand (PNET), who later became an election commissioner,

> When elections were held under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, there were
>
> *phuentee itthiphon* [areas of influence] everywhere. Observing elections in these areas
>
> was a dangerous activity with substantial risk of intimidation and violence…for example,
>
> in Pathum Thani, they were trafficking in people who weren't eligible to vote, each van
>
> containing roughly 6-7 passengers and going to at least 10 polling stations. What does
>
> this mean? It means that the authorities were in cahoots with the politician. After these
>
> passengers got off the van, they went to the bulletin board and looked through the names
>
> of the candidates as if they were real voters. Then they went to the ballot box, showed
>
> their IDs and were allowed to vote even when their identifications didn't match the
>
> electoral register. The officials would scratch some names off the list. And when people
>
> with these names actually showed up to vote they were told that they already voted. And
>
> they didn't dare to file a report or do anything because they knew what was up…One
>
> time we reported on someone who was affiliated with an influential figure in the
>
> province. We were told to wait outside the police station while the culprit was brought to
>
> an air-conditioned room upstairs for interrogation. Not a single person was

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[49] See Ockey, "Change and Continuity."

arrested…This kind of thing happened regularly, and no one could intervene. This one time, in the same province, a former high-ranking bureaucrat at the Ministry of Interior accompanied us during our investigation. He witnessed some abnormality with how votes were counted and intervened personally, asking the officials to conduct the affairs in a more transparent manner. Nobody recognized this former high-ranking bureaucrat. A *nakleng* [local strongman], looking very big and intimidating, shouted back at him and told him to screw off. This was how things were back then.[50]

In addition to the establishment of the ECT, there were other changes to the formal rules of the game that are noteworthy. How votes were counted, for instance, seemed to matter a great deal. According to one former TRT MP in Northern Thailand, vote buying on a large scale in his province was greatly reduced in the 2001 elections. He makes the following connection,

This is because of the design whereby votes were counted at the district rather than at the polling station. If you count the votes at the polling station, this gives vote canvassers the ability to monitor who voted or didn't vote but if you count the votes collectively at the district, you don't really know who voted or didn't vote since you don't know which subdistrict or which village the votes came from. What I'm saying is that, when it comes to vote buying, money is not the only factor. Money is only one out of three factors. For vote buying to work, the most important factor is not money but *itthiphon* over the voters outside the framework of money and transactions. *Itthiphon* might be positive or negative. For example, this person has taken very good care of his people. So, giving his people a little bit of money during election time, he is guaranteed to succeed. Conversely,

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[50] Former election commissioner, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 22, 2020.

this person has never taken care of his people, but he is very ruthless and brutal. In other words, he has negative *itthiphon*. If you don't do what he tells you to after you took his money, you will face the consequences. In this way, positive or negative, *itthiphon* matters for vote buying. The last factor is state power, whether the various offices and state resources are used to facilitate both the giving of cash during election time or the use of *itthiphon*. Vote buying depends on these three variables. In 2001, the new set of electoral rules weakened the third factor. I was very relieved. The fact that I didn't run in the previous two elections prior to 2001 was precisely because I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of the system or get crushed by it.[51]

These accounts are not evidence that vote buying, intimidation and electoral malpractice were eradicated in the 2001 election. According to the Thai Farmers Research Center, for example, an estimate of 25 billion baht ($625 million) went into circulation, which was significantly more than the amount of money put into circulation in the previous election in 1996.[52] What they do show, however, is that changes to the rules of the game in 1997 were sufficient for changes in the pattern in which vote buying and vote-canvassing activities were facilitated. For example, Ockey claims that stricter regulations and monitoring meant that trustworthy vote canvassers were at a premium, that gifts would be used in lieu of cash, and that money would be put into circulation much earlier than before.[53] There is evidence to support some of these claims. A former TRT MP recalled,

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[51] Pheu Thai MP in a province in Northern Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 30, 2020.
[52] *Bangkok Post*, January 4, 2001, B10, as quoted in Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 671.
[53] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 671.

I would visit roughly 10 villages per day. And if I had some rice, instant noodles or things to give away I would tell the children to line up and ask them who's visiting them today. If they couldn't recite my name, I would remind them again and again until they know my name. When they do, I would give them instant noodles and move on to another village. I did this every week, on Saturdays and Sundays, until everyone remembered who I am. But due to strict regulations, I couldn't do this during election time. I only did this some other time.[54]

The introduction of new rules, therefore, played a significant role in shaping the form of electoral campaigns even if they did not fundamentally transform the nature of party-voter linkages in the manner originally anticipated. This was clearly one major source of electoral uncertainty.

On the other hand, the economic crisis had dealt a devastating blow to the credibility of the Democrat Party. Its widespread image as the IMF's lapdog and its failure to rejuvenate the economy in the public eye proved difficult to shed. Neither could the party campaign effectively based on its own set of policies since it was in an incumbent position and had failed to introduce concrete policies. Yet no single party was seen as a clear winner in the game, at least initially. These uncertainties serve to distinguish the period between 1997 to 2001 as a critical historical moment which, while not truly a blank slate, contained potential for fundamental changes in the development of political parties and electoral politics.

As the election approached, however, the vision became less blurry and the TRT's eventual victory more certain. The TRT succeeded in capturing almost twice the number of seats

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[54] Pheu Thai Party MP in a province in Northern Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 30, 2020.

it had originally anticipated. According to Jit, this was due to the appeal of the TRT's policies in combination with the timing of the TRT party:

> I mean, these other 100 or so seats were literal no names that we paid to register as candidates in districts that we had no viable candidates and to campaign on their own. But the fact that they managed to win suggests that the Thai Rak Thai brand was strong. And timing was critical. It was a new millennium. It was the age of globalization. It was the era of new information communication technology. Even the electoral rules were new. People wanted a new product. And we just happened to be there at the right time.[55]

The TRT's victory in 2001 was surprising not simply in terms of the scale of victory but also in terms of the triumph of these "no names" over long-time politicians, many of them members of the largest factions and political dynasties in Thailand. Although the new rules which increased the number of seats to 500 guaranteed the inclusion of new MPs, as some observers have already noted, the losses of prominent politicians in their home provinces to the TRT's no name candidates were quite extraordinary, nevertheless. Examples of these "provincial notables" included candidates affiliated with the Asawahaem, Prachuapmoh, Tangthong and Hansawat families.[56] In contrast to these political *chang* (elephants), the TRT's no name MPs were nicknamed *noklae* (parrots). Don, another former TRT MP, describes the significance of the elephants' losses and parrots' victory in the following terms:

> In the era before TRT, political parties were basically organized into *mung* [literally, mosquito nets, a shorthand or metaphor for factions]. Let's say you have 10 MPs in your

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[55] Jit, interview with the author.

[56] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 667.

faction. You will get one cabinet seat. So, whoever wants to be a cabinet minister must secure at least 10 MPs. This was the norm. But during the Thai Rak Thai [2001 – 2006], what changed was that the party won 248 seats, nearly half of which consisted of new faces that people called *noklae*. And in reality, some of the *noklae* [parrots] actually managed to overthrow the elephants [a reference to experienced politicians, usually members of prominent political dynasties] in several constituencies. This was so recognizable that both critics and supporters of TRT agreed that TRT's electoral success was due to the strength of its policies and not simply due to the personal appeal of TRT candidates.[57]

To highlight just how much the electoral landscape had changed, Don gave the following example:

The case of Wirat Ratanasret is quite interesting. He was defeated by a nurse who had never stepped a foot in politics before, didn't have any money and didn't have any vote canvassers of her own. The party gave her 200,000 baht for putting up posters, but she ended up beating a big shot in Korat like Wirat. There are many other stories like this. Soon, people began to realize that TRT's victory wasn't solely based on Thaksin's money. Of course, money mattered, but what really mattered was TRT's policies. This became even more obvious once we formed the government. The fact that our policies were implemented promptly and successfully meant that our party label became somewhat sacred. Being affiliated with TRT gave the candidates a considerable electoral

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[57] Don, a former cabinet minister and TRT MP, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 27, 2020.

advantage and improved the odds of being a part of the government. This was the source

of Thaksin's bargaining power. If you take your MPs and bargain with him like you

would have in the 1990s and he decides not to field you in the next round of election, you

are in trouble.[58]

Strong attachment to party labels as opposed to the personal appeal of the candidates is

not entirely unprecedented in Thailand. The Democrat Party had achieved something similar in

Thailand's South decades earlier.[59] There, the Democrat Party gave rise to a phenomenon known

as *saofaifa* (utility pole), suggesting that the party could field a utility pole as a candidate and the

people would elect it to office. The TRT's phenomenon of *noklae* is, however, qualitatively

different in the sense that these 100 or so seats were claimed not simply as evidence of the

party's popularity or attractive platform, but also as a measure of Thaksin's personal popularity.

During the formation of the TRT-led government and selection of cabinet members,

typically an event in which factions and parties would flex their muscles to maximize their

prospects of capturing favored ministerial positions, these *noklae* seats were treated as the prime

minister's own seats. According to Jit,

In a government that is one hundred percent elected, why do you think Thaksin was

capable of appointing people like Somkid, Phumtham or me? We were technocrats in

each field but we didn't belong to any electoral factions. Thaksin had a personal quota,

10 out of 30 seats, that he could readily appoint his people without giving a damn about

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[58] Don, interview with the author.
[59] Marc Askew, *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai, TH: Silkworm Books, 2008).

what the factions would say. He didn't need to divide 30 by the number of factions in

TRT. He is his own faction. And these 140 *noklae* were his.[60]

Contained in these descriptions of the TRT's party dynamics is a shared understanding that the

TRT's use of policy instruments had created an independent basis of political power that offered

Thaksin considerable leverage vis-à-vis the TRT's factions and electoral networks that they

controlled leverage that did not exist for any other civilian party leaders in Thailand until that

point in time. As the blueprint for winning elections on a large scale changed, so too was the

power equation and the balance of power between the party and its factions. However, this

causal narrative, that the crisis had enabled the TRT to introduce new people and policies, while

the reform gave rise to an institutional environment that rewarded these choices, remains

incomplete without accounting for the TRT's extraordinary success in another dimension—its

recruitment and maintenance of many former MPs and candidates. In this aspect, both Thaksin's

extraordinary financial leverage at a time of severe economic downturn and executive authority,

thanks to the new constitution, proved critical. The sheer concentration of economic resources in

the TRT, for use at the discretion of its leader, greatly outweighed those of other parties and

factions.[61] If the crisis put the existing parties and factions that ran on patronage fuel in a

financially vulnerable position, the rise of the TRT amounted to the collapse of the system of

money politics that previously dominated the landscape. In its place, a new system was

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[60] Jit, interview with the author.

[61] This goes for both formal party donations and informal sources of financial support. For an analysis of party financing and the role played by private wealth, see Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, *Thai Political Parties in the Age of Reform* (Bangkok, TH: Institute of Public Policy Studies, 2006), 96–98.

established under the TRT, although with very different implications for the bargaining power between the party leader and leaders of networks.

Money Politics Continued

If the TRT's 100 or so surplus votes came from the strength of its party labels and policies, where did the other half come from? The answer would appear to be the TRT's reliance on old-style vote-canvassing networks via its numerous factions. According to some estimates, the TRT had as many as fifteen factions, the two largest of which were Wang Nam Yen, led by Sanoh, and Wang Bua Ban, led by Thaksin's sister Yaowapha.[62] Both the recruitment of factions into the TRT and the management of these factions have important implications for the role of patronage politics since they both assure its survival while shaping its organizational pattern. What led the TRT and its leaders to select and recruit the type of candidates who were engaged in a game of patronage politics, which stood in sharp contrast to the party's image as a programmatic political party?

This question has already been answered partly with reference to the thought process of a member of TRT's inner circle. To reiterate, in the run up to the 2001 election, TRT's leaders could not envision a major election victory without enlisting the support of provincial bosses and the electoral networks they controlled at the provincial, sometimes regional, level. These influential figures, the Thienthong family, the Khunpluem family and the Chidchob family among them, were seen as gatekeepers of the votes in in their respective provinces. According to

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[62] Paul Chambers, "Evolving toward What? Parties, Factions, and Coalition Behavior in Thailand Today." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 495–520.

Jit, "if you ask me whether *rabob uppatham* still matters, the answer is yes it does. Thaksin still depended on vote canvassers through his reliance on factions and dynasties. And many candidates still needed to depend on vote canvassers to compete."[63] According to another former party member, Chuang, "once our party image was solidified, then came the real thing."[64] This suggests that despite the appearance of a major rupture in the electoral landscape, stemming from the coincidence of a constitutional reform and an economic crisis, such a seismic shift had done little to shatter the belief that most political actors held regarding the sheer necessity of patronage politics. At least before the election results came in and before the TRT's policies were implemented, the "long-established informal political structures in provincial Thailand" had remained undisturbed for the most part and were perceived as such.[65] Yet Thaksin accomplished something that no other party leaders could, taking advantage of both the crisis and new rules under the constitution. He dictated the terms under which politicians and factions were recruited into the party. MPs and factions did not merely switch into the TRT—they were absorbed.

There is considerable agreement that Thaksin possessed extreme financial superiority over other party leaders and party financiers in part due to the economic crisis and that he had used this to his advantage in the recruitment of MP candidates. According to Ockey, "provincial notables, and indeed many wealthy Bangkok entrepreneurs, suffered heavily from the crisis. This eroded the power of the provincial notables in the election process, as they became increasingly

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[63] Jit, interview with the author.
[64] Chuang, interview with the author.
[65] Michael H. Nelson, "Institutional Incentives and Informal Local Political Groups (Phuak) in Thailand: Comments on Allen Hicken and Paul Chambers," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (April 2007): 142, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1598240800004872.

dependent on external financing from a more limited set of patrons."[66] Somchai argues that, "TRT was able to recruit a large number of former MPs first of all because of its money power," consisting of transfer fees, monthly salaries and election funds.[67] More recently, Teri Caraway offers a similar view, going as far as to argue that Thaksin's financial power was sufficient for the TRT's dominance.[68] Although it is not clear that the TRT "bought" all of its former MPs, there is substantial evidence backing the claim that Thaksin's own financial leverage played a necessary role in the recruitment of former MPs and candidates. The plausibility of this claim rests first and foremost on evidence of Thaksin's superior financial position after the crisis relative to the financial position of self-funded former MPs and other business groups that provided informal financial support to political parties. The absence of such evidence would be sufficient to invalidate the claim. Second, for the claim to be valid, it must also be backed by evidence that attests to the presence of the mechanisms linking Thaksin's financial advantage vis-à-vis these groups to their eventual decision to join or support the TRT, whatever these mechanisms may be. Both types of evidence exist.

Consider, first, that the Shinawatra group had lost little due to the 1997 Financial Crisis relative to its rival companies: "the exchange losses in 1997 were 26.1 billion baht for CP TelecomAsia, 11.1 billion for Jasmine, 17.7 billion for Ucom, and only 1.1 billion for

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[66] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 673.

[67] Somchai Phatharathananunth, "The Thai Rak Thai Party and Elections in North-Eastern Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 108, https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701651986.

[68] Teri L. Caraway, "De-Thaksinizing Thailand: The Limits of Institutional Design," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (2020): 403–18, https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2020.14.

Shinawatra".[69] There is also evidence that, given their concession-oriented business strategy, all

telecommunications companies were major party financiers in the pre-2001 era, although all of

these groups, the CP group included, eventually "restricted their donations to Thai Rak Thai".[70] I

questioned a former TRT executive as to why this was the case. This was the reply: "in the first

election [2001], these companies were left in a dire financial state. In the second election [2005],

they didn't dare sponsor any other political parties but TRT…otherwise, it would be like

challenging state power."[71] This would explain both the TRT's financial advantage in the 2001

election and why, according to some accounts, it had also used considerably less money in the

2005 elections. Most of the financial sponsors had flocked to the TRT and, hence, there was no

major competition in terms of buying candidates or buying votes.[72]

What about former MPs and local politicians that the TRT recruited? What was the

nature of their financial position? In the previous chapter, I established that electoral campaigns,

especially when they involve the use of vote-canvassing networks and clientelistic politics, can

incur significant costs which formal party donations and support do not cover. After the crisis,

these former politicians, many of them provincial business figures, lacked the funds and saw the

TRT as a viable source of financial assistance. A politician in Northeastern Thailand who

eventually joined the TRT stated that, "around 1996 or 1997, our group was in a serious debt.

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[69] Ariwat Sapphaithun, *Trakun Chinnawat* [The Shinawatra family] (Bangkok: Wannasat, 2003), as quoted in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai, TH: Silkworm Books, 2009), 58.
[70] McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 243n46
[71] Chuang, interview with the author.
[72] Prior to the TRT, billionaires and oligarchs also provided informal financial support to political parties but did not always back the same party or sponsor only a single party.

Luckily, we were able to address our problem by consulting with a TRT leader. He went to negotiate with our creditor on our behalf so that we wouldn't go bankrupt."[73]

An exhaustive list is not available for detailing which MPs were bought or the sort of financial arrangements between Thaksin and faction leaders who joined the party prior to 2001.[74] However, there is evidence that Thaksin was not new to the game of money politics, despite his deliberate attempt to generate the impression that the TRT was a new type of political party with a new type of leader. In fact, by all accounts, he was quite adept at money politics. When he was only twenty-six years old, Thaksin served as a personal assistant to Preeda Pattanathabut, a former Chiang Mai MP and former cabinet minister during the Kukrit Pramoj administration. It was an open secret that Thaksin's informal responsibility was to carry bags of cash for Preeda and deliver them to MPs and influential figures to get things done. In Thaksin's own words,

> when important bills reached the House floor, bananas (money) must be handed out. Back then, the bananas were cheap, around 50,000 baht. For a budget bill, since failing to pass the bill could topple the government, it was a little more expensive, 100,000 baht. For opposition MPs, 200,000 baht was what it took to get them to abstain…I was in charge of it all. I was responsible for every issue on behalf of the government.[75]

That Thaksin would distribute large sums of money to get certain provincial bosses on board with the TRT would not be unexpected or out of character considering his former role. He was

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[73] TRT party candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 14, 2020.
[74] Sombat also insinuates that some of the MPs who defected were given financial incentives to do so. See Sombat, "The 1997 Constitution," 215.
[75] Voice TV, "*CareTalk x CareClubHouse: อดีต ปัจจุบัน อนาคต ของการเมืองไทย - แล้วอนาคตของเยาวชนไทยจะเป็นอย่างไร,*" *YouTube* video, September 14, 2021, 2:58:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRKjB62olmM.

used to dealing with politicians, especially using money. At the peak of Thaksin's financial

power (prior to becoming prime minister) and at a time when most businesses in Thailand were

in shambles, one can only imagine the sway of the party based on the financial resources its party

leader had to offer.

These illustrations are not meant to suggest that all former MPs who joined the TRT were

enticed by financial incentives but instead to shed light on the role of the financial crisis and

plausible mechanisms through which the crisis may have enabled Thaksin and the TRT to

engage in the recruitment of candidates and factions without simply yielding to their demands, as

political parties in the past may have. The reality is, of course, far more complex than the

sweeping generalization that the TRT was simply buying out former MPs and local politicians at

a time when they were financially vulnerable. According to one former MP who joined the TRT

in its early stage,

> we saw that Thaksin was a *naitun* [capitalist] but he wasn't just rich and willing to pay,
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> he was also extremely popular. So, we joined him. Once we did and got elected, we were
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> able to use our formal position as MPs to send our own people to fill the various offices
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> at the provincial and local level from the top down to the bottom. This is post-1997
>
> politics. It's like transplanting a tree—we let the roots grow.[76]

This particular MP had joined the TRT for at least three reasons, two of which were unrelated to

the party's financial capabilities: 1) to tap into the TRT's financial resources and reduce the

electoral expenses incurred personally by the candidate; 2) to use the TRT's party label, party

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[76] Former TRT MP associated with a province in Northeastern Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 6, 2020.

policies, and Thaksin's personal popularity to increase the candidate's appeal to voters; 3) to

improve the odds of being affiliated with a party in a coalition government, deemed necessary

for establishing the candidate's own network at the local level. In more than one sense, the TRT

"became like a giant umbrella that everybody needed to shelter from the rain or harsh

sunlight."[77] It is important to situate these considerations with regards to the institutional

environment since 1997, both at the local and national level.

At the local level, the decentralization reform led to the reshaping of the characteristics of

local governance in ways that made competition over local government offices the new locus of

electoral politics. The 1997 Constitution signifies an important milestone in this process. For

example, Section 284 stipulated that laws must be implemented to delegate functions, personnel,

and budgets from the central government to local government.[78] Section 285 stipulated that local

government organizations would have assemblies, committees and administrators who are

elected.[79] Various acts pertaining to decentralization, local government, and local administrative

organizations were also drafted and issued as a result.[80] These developments created an

alternative pathway to acquiring access to the state budget for cultivating political support,

making local offices and local politicians more imperative to the building of local electoral

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[77] Jit, interview with the author.

[78] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, BE 2540 (1997)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, 1997).

[79] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, BE 2540 (1997)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, 1997).

[80] Supasawad Chardchawarn, *Local Governance in Thailand: The Politics of Decentralization and the Roles of Bureaucrats, Politicians, and the People*, Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, 2010.

networks relative to local bureaucrats and other *jao pho* figures.[81] This heightened competition at the local level implies that MPs who previously depended on networks of local influence, whether to get elected or selected by political parties, now had to sustain these networks and fend off potential challengers by fielding or supporting their own candidates in local elections.

At the same time, the 1997 Constitution also formally abolished the Provincial Development Fund or "MP's Fund" as it was colloquially known. Prior to 1997, MPs were given access to substantial budgets to be used for developing their provinces. In practice, these budgets were often used at the discretion of MPs as pork to deliver and claim personal credit for the improvements of local constituencies (*phon ngan*) or funneled through companies and businesses owned by members of the MP's vote-canvassing network to maintain or reward their support. The abolishment of a formal framework for discretionary spending meant that MPs were often left to their own devices to find alternative pathways to steer the funds from the central budget to projects or organizations in their provinces. In practice, under the Thai Rak Thai administration and subsequent governments, portions of the national budget were routinely allocated to the Central Fund which, due to a legal technicality, operated as a blank cheque to be spent at the discretion of the prime minister. The fund could then be used to cover emergency expenses and other expenses which could not be calculated in advance for the fiscal year, as it was intended, or to meet the request of individual MPs, usually part of the ruling coalition, with relatively little scrutiny. The implication of this change in informal budgetary practice is that, without some degree of influence over parliamentary committees overseeing the national budget or affiliation

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[81] Viengrat Netipho, หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ: การเมืองการเลือกตั้งและการเปลี่ยนแปลงเครือข่ายอุปถัมภ์ *[The Ballot Box and Indebtedness: Electoral Politics and Changes in the Patronage System]*, Center for ASEAN Studies, Chiang Mai University, 2558.

with the ruling party or prime minister, it has become significantly harder for individual MPs to acquire the funds to engage in pork-barrel politics and distribute benefits to favored constituencies.

The decentralization reform and abolishment of the Provincial Development Fund, therefore, created an environment conducive to the localization of patronage politics and the concentration of bargaining power over discretionary government spending in the prime minister. This shifting of political competition downward and political leverage upward produced a trend that greatly reinforced the dominance of the TRT: tapping into the TRT's power network at the national level became imperative to the successful maintenance of patronage networks at the local level, whether channeling resources to assist local politicians during their campaigns or influence the transfer of local bureaucrats.

To add to this trend, the TRT proposed a set of policies that could serve as potential substitutes for material inducements during election time. When asked about the underlying motivations of the MPs who had joined the TRT, Chuang replied, "the product that Thaksin was trying to sell wasn't TRT's political candidates. He was trying to sell a political party and its policies…the politicians saw what TRT had to offer as a pathway to power."[82] The fact that some of these politicians were embraced and welcomed aboard should not be interpreted simply as a sign of the TRT's weakness or conformity to prior patterns of candidate recruitment. On the contrary, it was a sign that the TRT's business model was working in its favor and granting it competitive advantage over other political parties in terms of recruiting former MPs and candidates.

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[82] Chuang, interview with the author.

Clearly, there were incentives for joining the TRT other than the money that the former MPs would receive from the party. These incentives were rooted in local dynamics and the new rules that made affiliation with a popular party like the TRT meaningful for capturing constituency votes and building local networks. In a counterfactual scenario, in the absence of a large-scale economic crisis, the TRT would not have been endowed with an equally overwhelming financial advantage with which to win over a large number of former MPs, local politicians and factions.[83] Similarly, in the absence of a constitutional reform, it is unlikely that the TRT would have been perceived as a reliable vehicle to governmental power by former MPs and factions. The coincidence of economic crisis and constitutional reform was crucial both in terms of disrupting the preexisting pattern of patronage politics and giving rise to a different pattern.

Thai Rak Thai Incorporated

What were the legacies of the TRT's engagement in two fundamentally distinct modes of politics? I argue that the most important outcome is the transformation of party-faction dynamics stemming from the consolidation of rural mass support and centralization of party patronage system. This is not a new argument. Ockey argues,

> The strength of the faction remains its control over electoral networks. For the 2001 election, parties again went to great lengths to recruit those with existing electoral networks rather than build their own party-oriented networks. As long as the electoral

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[83] See the debate between Teri L. Caraway, Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Joel Sawat Selway, and Allen Hicken in "Roundtable on Teri L. Caraway's 'De-Thaksinizing Thailand: The Limits of Institutional Design,'" *Journal of East Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (2020).

networks remain in the hands of the factions, the latter will continue to hold some sway over parties. On the other hand, the Thai Rak Thai party was able to exert control over policy formation, beginning with the formulation of its election platform, and then worked to implement those policies after gaining control of the parliament. Here, Thai Rak Thai undermined the power of the provincial and local notables who comprise most faction leaders. By formulating party policies that appealed directly to rural people, Thai Rak Thai was able to take credit for improvements in the lives of villagers, at the expense of the provincial and local notables who had previously characterized such resource allocation as personal rather than party patronage.[84]

McCargo and Ukrist offer a similar interpretation but with a slightly more conclusive argument regarding party-faction dynamics:

The acid test for Thai Rak Thai concerns the extent to which the national appeal of the party and its leader, fostered through marketing campaigns and policies calculated to reach out directly to rural voters, can transcend the traditional political realities of *phuak*-based local canvassing and campaigning. There are two ways in which this could happen: traditional canvassers could be incorporated into a new party-led system; or local networks could be completely bypassed by a different mode of political participation. So far, the evidence for either of these trends is patchy. Rather, Thai Rak Thai takes old-fashioned *phuak*-based politics to new heights, transforming political factions into extensive and complex networks centering on Thaksin himself.[85]

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[84] Ockey, "Change and Continuity," 679.

[85] McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 112.

Two decades later, however, there is now abundant evidence to support both the claim that the TRT succeeded in bypassing vote-canvassing networks and monopolized these networks under the party umbrella. These outcomes appear contradictory but, from the standpoint of party leadership, are two sides of the same coin. Both were integral to the management of the party and gave the party leader a high degree of autonomy from and leverage over factions. Popularity derived from the party's policy platform and the presence of mass electoral base served to insulate the party leader from political pressure stemming from faction leaders. Authoritarian, centralized management of factions ensured that locally embedded vote-canvassing networks and MPs would be beholden to party leaders rather than faction leaders, enabling a smooth and uninterrupted administration. This was the nature of "Thai Rak Thai Incorporated," a mode of party building that approximated single-party dominance without the usual route of party institutionalization.[86]

A Loyal and Enduring Mass Constituency

Once their policies were implemented, the TRT was rewarded with overwhelming popular support for its commitment to policymaking, especially from the country's rural and poor voters. According to a local politician who once served as a vote canvasser for a candidate who competed against a TRT candidate, the TRT had introduced policies that dramatically improved people's lives in a way that made one-time cash handouts during elections pale in comparison:

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[86] Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, "The Conundrum of a Dominant Party in Thailand," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 102–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891118774643.

You have to understand that Isan people, not just Isan people but grassroots people in general, have lived in a state of poverty. In the past, if they became ill and had no money to receive treatment, they would simply sleep it out until they're dead. Or they become "the dead who sold the living" (*khon tai kai kon pen)*. When they go to the hospital, they would sell their farms, their lands, their cows, their houses and everything they have. And the people who suffer when they die are their family members. How many of these people do you think Thaksin saved as a result of his policies?[87]

While the economic implications and poverty reduction goals of the TRT's policies have been and remain the subject of scrutiny, the popularity that Thaksin and the TRT generated as a result of the policies they implemented on coming to power is more difficult to deny. The number of votes for the TRT in the national party list tier grew from 11 million in 2001 to nearly 19 million in 2005, more than twice the votes for the Democrat Party, its main competitor. These votes were claimed as evidence of mass approval of the TRT's policies. According to a former TRT MP who played a pivotal role in developing the 30-baht healthcare program,

In the beginning, there was nothing concrete or tangible about our policies, whether we are talking about the Village Fund or the 30-baht healthcare. When we campaigned using these policies, nobody believed that what we were promising was credible or even feasible. Some voters were willing to give us a try. And when we delivered on these policies, when most political parties have never offered concrete policies or delivered on their policies, this generates a sense of trust between the party and its voters.[88]

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[87] Pai, a member of PAO in Khon Kaen, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 14, 2021.
[88] Don, interview with the author.

This was the narrative that prevailed not only among the members of the TRT but also in the media and public debates. Today, this is also how former leaders want the party to be remembered, instead of for allegations of corruption, human rights violations, or abuses of power. By promising and delivering tangible benefits directly to the people, the TRT had done something that no other political party could—it circumvented a whole host of traditional intermediaries consisting of influential figures, MPs, local bureaucrats, and politicians that once constituted the bedrock of *uppatham* networks and Thailand's democracy. In practice, however, the programmatic appearance of the TRT's policies was less compelling due to some degree of local manipulation and political realities on the ground. This former TRT MP continued,

> Welfare is based on rights. Patronage is based on favors. But in practice it's difficult to draw a distinction. Even in our universal healthcare scheme, not all of those who received a gold card [to prove eligibility for receiving affordable healthcare as a low-income earner] were actually low-income earners. And certainly not all low-income earners received the card either. The reality is, if you are a friend of somebody or know somebody, you get the card. This is patronage, not welfare. Welfare should be based on rights. If it's universal welfare, then it's your right to receive the welfare…In the beginning, [the beneficiaries of the policy] didn't think of health care as a right. They saw it as a favor from TRT government. And since no governments ever delivered something like this, they also felt obligated to return the favor like never before.[89]

Although its commitment to bypassing influential figures at the local and provincial level or developing a rights-based approach to government welfare remains unclear, the TRT

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[89] Don, interview with the author.

nevertheless succeeded in terms of developing an alternative pathway through which concrete benefits would flow from the government to the people. No other political party in Thailand has ever made such bold policy pledges and delivered on them so rapidly and effectively. And, certainly, no party ever received such overwhelming, predominantly rural, support based on policies promised or delivered. Although the TRT had initially offered "something for everybody" in its 2001 platform, the rural recipients of its policies had coalesced into a highly visible group of supporters. This was not only impressive but also deeply alarming to the established stakeholders, particularly those based in Bangkok. Take for example, Kasian Tejapira's portrayal of rural voters prior to the arrival of TRT:

> At the base of the electocracy lay the 40 million voters, the majority of whom were poor, ill-educated and rural based. With most of their constitutional rights routinely trampled by arrogant officials, local mafia bosses and politicians, they had to take advantage of the one that remained: to sell their votes to their local political patrons for money, jobs, protection or informal welfare benefits. Their interests long ignored by urban policymakers, their local resources depleted by both state and private sectors, these voters perforce became willing accomplices of the electocrats in the systematic corruption of electoral 'democracy.' They learned the hard way that, unless they sold their votes at election times, they would have no other tangible benefits from the system. The rural majority thus formed a massive, rock-solid electoral base that secured the victory and political power of the electocrats and were conveniently inaudible when it came to policymaking.[90]

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[90] Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin," *New Left Review* 2, no. 39 (2006): 14.

The sweeping generalization of rural voting behavior notwithstanding, Kasian correctly spells

out how Thaksin's direct appeal to rural and grassroot supporters would prove to be detrimental

to the monopoly of the "electocrats" and ripe with the potential to unleash a major

transformation of the Thai political order. These "40 million voters," previously a cacophony of

voices whose unmet demands and particular needs were fueling the power of the traditional

gatekeepers of electoral politics would be translated into a coherent and unified base of political,

ideological and moral support for a single leader. For his part, Thaksin became attuned to the

implications of his policies for the rural mass just prior to his second term. He quickly grew to

fill the role that history had opened for him. He began to dress, speak, and carry himself

differently, making use of every tour and mobile cabinet meeting in the countryside as an

opportunity to present himself to the rural electorate as a man of the people, vividly described by

Pasuk and Baker as "emerging from a village bathhouse in a *pakoma* (common man's lower

cloth); transported on a village tractor (*i-taen*); riding a motorbike down a dusty village street;

accepting flowers from toothless old ladies."[91]

      The case can certainly be made that, without the 1997 Constitution and the introduction

of the national party list tier, TRT's rural support would have been considerably less robust or

less visible. However, the development of this mass constituency, the beginning of what was to

become Thailand's populist movement, would not have been possible either without the

historical pattern of urban-rural division, dominance of rural political machines, and deep-rooted

sense of marginalization and exclusion of a segment of the Thai population from the fruits of

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[91] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Thaksin's Populism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 67, https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701651960.

economic development and the nation's "imagined community."[92] Against this backdrop, TRT's direct appeal to the rural poor on the basis of its policies could be interpreted as a populist response to long-fomenting societal demands[93] or manifestations at the national level of moral economy and everyday politics in rural Thailand.[94] The particular circumstances pertaining to rural conditions prior to 1997 did not cause the TRT to adopt the policies it did but ensured that, once delivered, these policies would produce an outpouring of support from the rural population, unparalleled not only in terms of its numerical strength but also in terms of its visibility and durability.

A Centralized System of Party-Directed Patronage

Another development that had important implications for the TRT's party building was the centralized management of the distribution of spoils within the party. This was present at least from the time when the TRT began to incorporate existing factions and former MPs into its party organization prior to 2001. As previously mentioned, the party did more than simply "buying" these networks of influence. According to Jit,

> [Factions] were widely perceived as gatekeepers of the votes. What Thaksin did, though, was to put this perception to a test. Using the new set of rules that placed importance on

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[92] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1983).

[93] Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin"; Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*.

[94] Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy*, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); Jakkrit, "Democracy of the Desired"; and Mark R. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of Electoralism and the Rise of Populism in the Philippines and Thailand," *Journal of Developing Societies* 32, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 246–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X16652028.

party membership, he told these faction leaders to recruit party members as a way to

determine their credibility. Some of them actually managed to do this reliably. They took

control of people's identification cards and made people sign up to be members of the

Thai Rak Thai. But a portion of these individuals probably felt like they were becoming a

part of something bigger, something much larger than their localized network of

canvassers and *rabob uppatham*. They were party members that were directly linked to

the party and its leaders and only loosely affiliated with the vote canvassers, candidates

or factions. They liked Thaksin. They liked the Thai Rak Thai.[95]

Following the 1997 reform, the Organic Act on the Political Parties (1998) formally established

state subsidy for political parties.[96] Parties would receive funding from the ECT based on the

number of party members and number of party branches that they maintained. In practice, these

branches were often no more than empty shells, set up to tap the financial resources the state

provided for political parties under the new constitution. To meet the requirements, cash

handouts were sometimes offered as incentives for becoming members of political parties. These

unintended design flaws notwithstanding, the new rules did offer the TRT a way to screen the

credibility of faction leaders who boasted of the strength and reach of their vote-canvassing

networks. The TRT leaders also did not simply outsource candidate selection to factions in the

typical manner. In certain districts, the party conducted its own polls to check whether the

candidate proposed by the faction leaders were viable candidates.

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[95] Jit, interview with the author.

[96] *Organic Act on the Political Parties, B.E. 2541 (1998)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, 1998).

Candidate selection in the case of the Democrat Party in the South around the same period offers an interesting point of comparison:

> Chuan [Leekpai, party leader] had to set up a meeting with the vote canvassers and party supporters in the district, roughly 30-40 people, and he asked them to step into the room with him individually, one by one, to decide who the candidate for the district should be. Then he asked me, "if they don't choose you would you go join other party?" I said, "No." And then he told me that I was chosen.[97]

The Democrat Party was widely considered as the most well-institutionalized of all political parties and had the most extensive party branches and members, yet its leaders did not attempt to exercise direct, centralized control over candidate selection but outsourced this task to vote canvassers.

Once factions and candidates were recruited, the TRT proceeded to impose a highly centralized informal arrangement to provide financial support for its MPs and finance the party machine. According to a former MP in Udon Thani, prior to the TRT, it was commonplace for political parties to provide financial support beyond what was permitted by law for its candidates during election campaigns. However, parties were often not the primary source of sponsorship. Candidates needed to find financial backing on their own. Furthermore, when parties did provide funds, these funds were usually distributed only to the leaders of factions, who then exercised substantial discretion over how they should be spent and which candidate should be the recipient.[98] Under this arrangement, candidates expected to receive financial backing but rarely

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[97] Democrat Party MP, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 13, 2020.
[98] Mon, interview with the author, a province in Northeastern Thailand, March 20, 2019.

looked to the party directly for support, while candidates who could support themselves were in a position to choose parties rather than be chosen. The need for financial support is sometimes interpreted as a phenomenon stemming from the MPs' engagement in some form of patronage politics or, quite simply, politics as usual:

> For example, Somsak and Suriya might control Lower Northern provinces, like Sukhotai. Twenty or so candidates may have relied on their financial support to make it to parliament. So after the election they would readily claim that these twenty MPs were members of their factions. And once in parliament, these MPs still needed someone to take care of them and to foot their bills. They have expenses, you know? When their people go to funerals or ordainment ceremonies, they need to give out cash. Do you really think that their monthly salaries as MPs would be enough to cover these expenses? For this, they would look to the leaders of their factions. Their financial vulnerability gave these leaders considerable bargaining power within political parties, including TRT.[99]

Between 2001 and 2005, however, several MPs were beginning to perceive the TRT's *suan glang* (the center) as a complementary source of financial support both during election time and when in parliament. A former TRT MP in another Northeastern province portrays this development as follows:

> what voters wanted didn't really change. What changed most was how the flow of financial support for MPs was managed and how the *thonamliang* [pipeline] operated. Before, much of the money came from their own pockets or from their factions. But

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[99] Jit, interview with the author.

Thaksin assumed the direct role of party financier. He paid MPs and candidates monthly, sometimes even weekly, salaries, including offering additional funding during election campaigns…the system that came with Thaksin transformed MPs into vote canvassers who depended on party patronage for survival and transformed relationships within the party into patron-client ones.[100]

The point is not that relationships within political parties were anything but patron-client relationships. Rather, what was so disruptive to the established way of doing things was the fact that Thaksin had assumed the singular role of patron in the TRT when, previously, all faction leaders were at least potentially equals at the bargaining table. This had much to do with the restructuring of informal arrangements pertaining to party financing and MP financing.

Under the Organic Act on the Political Parties (1998), all donations to political parties had to be declared.[101] However, informal contributions generally outweighed what appeared on the official records and, in the case of the TRT, were sourced primarily from the party leader and a small number of party financiers rather than from the MPs themselves or their sponsors.[102] This fact alone afforded the party leader a significant degree of leverage vis-à-vis its members. At the same time, according to Siripan, the party also "increased its autonomy vis-à-vis its environment

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[100] Chuang, interview with the author.

[101] *Organic Act on the Political Parties, B.E. 2541 (1998)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, 1998).

[102] I was informed by an anonymous source that the funds for the TRT were sourced from major business conglomerates in addition to Thaksin's or Potjaman's own pockets. To stay under the radar, a system called *poiguan*, a kind of underground banking system for sending remittances overseas developed by Chinese diaspora and Sino-Thai business communities in Thailand, was used. Before elections, Thai-owned subsidiary companies located overseas would leverage this system to deliver cash to party leaders and faction leaders. This was primarily a means of avoiding alerting banking regulators who, by 2001, had already become aware of seemingly coincidental shortages of cash during elections.

by securing financial resources in the hands of its party leader in order to safeguard the party

from external control."[103]

The party's involvement in sponsoring its candidates and MPs is most visible to the

naked eye during election campaigns. One informant said,

> they would conduct a poll to estimate the candidates' popularity, check these candidates'
>
> track record whether they won or lost in previous elections and by how much, find out
>
> who their rival candidates were, and predict their odds of winning…Candidates who won
>
> previously would receive more funding, for certainty. Candidates who have never won
>
> would not receive the same opportunity, only in case of a fluke.[104]

This practice, now a common practice for political parties, served as both a tool to resolve

conflicts between factions with overlapping territories, who sometimes had preferred nominees

to run as TRT MP candidates in the same districts, as well as a countervailing measure against

attempts by these leaders to exaggerate the viability of their candidates to get more funding from

the party.

The details pertaining to how financial support was given to TRT MPs were often vague

but the notion that Thaksin and TRT had somehow reconfigured the arrangement of party

financing and informal sponsorship is a theme that recurred constantly in conversations with the

former TRT MPs. According to this theme, TRT's organizational dynamics and bargaining

relationship between its leaders and factions were directly related to how the flow of financial

resources was structured. In my conversation with Chuang, for example, he revealed that the

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[103] Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, *Thai Political Parties in the Age of Reform* (Bangkok, TH: Institute of Public Policy Studies, 2006), 97.
[104] Faction leader and former TRT MP, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 16, 2020.

party was offering financial support to its MPs beyond the scope of elections and was doing so without going through the leaders of factions:

Chuang: In the past, the politicians had significant bargaining power over financing.

Author: What do you mean?

Chuang: They would form their own *mung* [mosquito nets] which gave them the leverage to bargain for funding from parties. But this was not the case in TRT, because Thaksin personally oversaw the maintenance of his party. These groups were taken under his own wing. If there were expenses, these had to be paid directly from *suan glang* [the center]. Before, the leader of these groups would demand something like, 'how much are you going to pay me? I have 100 MPs, multiply it and hand it over.'

Author: And ministerial positions were considered separately?

Chuang: These positions too depended on the number of MPs in the factions but this was not always the case when Thaksin was in power. He paid directly. Suppose this faction had 10 people. He paid these 10 individuals directly, although they might still receive some bonus toppings from their faction leaders. But everybody knew. Whenever we held a conference or a meeting, people were holding and carrying bags. This was Thaksin's way of undermining the bargaining power of faction leaders.[105]

From this conversation, it is evident that, just as the TRT had forged a direct relationship between the party and its supporters via policies, the party was also attempting to foster a direct

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[105] Chuang, interview with the author.

connection between the party leader and party MPs. In return for financial support, the MPs would be beholden to the party leader and not faction leaders. The distribution of patronage within the TRT was not limited to monthly allowances and campaign finance but included the allocation of government posts such as ministerial advisors, secretaries, and assistants. These organizational dynamics might be described as resembling a corporate or conglomerate, rather than simply patron-client, structure. Our conversation continued:

Chuang: Everything came from *suan glang* [the center]. Every month, allowances would be given to MPs. When party meetings were held, gifts were given and received. This was different from before. In the past, faction leaders were the ones holding the purse. MPs were paid through them.

Author: What does *suan glang* mean?

Chuang: Thaksin, Potjaman plus their secretaries. Basically, the Shinawatra Building. [You would see] people carrying bags and lugging around suitcases like they were at the airport. Everything was centrally managed.

Author: So you are telling me that money politics or *rabob uppatham* did not really disappear with TRT but that these became centralized under TRT.

Chuang: They were reorganized and managed like a company. Before, power rested in the hands of each faction leaders. The old system was feudalism. In the new system, they became wage workers. They had monthly allowances. And when they campaigned, financial support would be provided. But they were

not independent…This was [the result of] a change in the channel of

distribution.[106]

From the standpoint of MPs, this must have appeared as a sea change in intraparty dynamics.

Before, factions were everything to MPs. They were critical to their political and sometimes

economic survival—the appointment of one's faction leader to a ministerial position was

sufficient to guarantee the downward flow of patronage, either in the form of direct financial

backing or other forms, such as government jobs to their followers and family members and

government projects and concessions for their provinces or constituencies. Under the TRT, the

role of faction leader was systematically replaced by the party leader and his direct subordinates.

Factions remained but new hierarchies were superimposed on top of old loyalties: "He

designated new regional leaders. Before these leaders were by default the leaders of factions. But

Thaksin appointed his own people, his own *sai* [connection]. Like in the Northeast, for example,

he got General Thammarak to control Isan MPs."[107]

A few cabinet positions, on the other hand, were used to fund the party, not simply to fill

the pockets of faction leaders as before. According to another insider, although there was "no

definite pattern or form to contribution to the party's coffer," at least one or two individuals,

representatives of business groups, allegedly had to pay 300 million baht in order to acquire a

cabinet seat.[108] There is no overstating that fact that the organizational dynamics and managerial

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[106] Chuang, interview with the author.
[107] Chuang, interview with the author.
[108] Noi, a former TRT MP and party executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 22, 2020.

style of the party resembled that of a company, in which the MPs were now behaving in ways they had not before:

> It was run like a company. Even the party office was at the Shinawatra building. Like a company, there was a canteen, a fitness and conference rooms. Everything that a company has, TRT had. There were monthly salaries, employees and executives. According to the law, the party must have an executive committee right? We had a 15-member board of directors overseeing that committee. At first there were 9 but the members increased to 15 because the faction leaders in the party desperately wanted to make their way in. The actual party executive committee didn't matter very much in comparison. The party was run by these 15 individuals, most of them close associates of Thaksin and Potjaman rather than traditional politicians.[109]

This organizational configuration was not always well-received by the leaders of factions. Under the 1997 Constitution, many of these leaders were already facing institutional constraints on their ability to get their factions to switch parties. The 90-day rule required that MPs had to belong to a political party to be eligible for elections. Since elections must be held within 45 to 60 days in the event of dissolution of parliament, a power reserved for the Thai monarch at the formal request of the prime minister, this ensured that factions could not make credible threats to leave the party.[110] And even if these threats were credible, they were considerably less consequential than before, given the size of the TRT's comfortable majority in parliament and popularity. All things considered, the faction leaders were now in the TRT's orbit rather than

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[109] Noi, interview with the author.
[110] Allen Hicken, "Party Fabrication: Constitutional Reform and the Rise of Thai Rak Thai." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2006): 381–407.

vice versa, thanks not only to formal rules but also to the centralized management of party financing and Thaksin's own popularity.

In my interview with Phet, the leader of one Thailand's most prominent factions, Phet revealed that his own core vote canvassers convinced him to bring his entire faction to join the TRT after its initial victory in 2001. These vote canvassers saw that at the height of the TRT's popularity, joining TRT was the best course of action—their voters didn't need a lot of convincing and conflicts could be avoided. After joining the TRT, the faction achieved overwhelming electoral success in the 2005 elections since its support base and the party's support base were now combined, yet the faction was denied a cabinet seat despite meeting the informal quota. Although Phet claimed to maintain a good relationship with Thaksin despite this bargaining failure, he recalled that "Thaksin didn't allow for factions inside parties. If there were factions, he would try to negate them, like ours for example…He claimed that all the votes came from him, his policies, his money and everything that was his."[111] Phet was probably not the only one who felt this way.

Among other faction bosses, Sanoh Thienthong reportedly expressed major discontent with the new arrangements, which required him to work with and through Thaksin's representatives and other outsiders who controlled the various ministries necessary for his business dealings.[112] His wings were being clipped, as more and more MPs were brought under Thaksin while cabinet posts were distributed to party financiers rather than traditional faction leaders. This well-known kingmaker and leader of the largest faction in the TRT made several

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[111] Phet, a former cabinet minister and leader of a political dynasty in Central Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 29, 2020.
[112] Chuang, interview with the author.

attempts to undermine Thaksin's authority or even attempted to get the members of his own faction to defect. In the end, he was "never a serious threat."[113]

This was the turning point in party-faction dynamics. Factions formed the basis of the party's electoral strength, but they no longer possessed the capacity to bring it down. In the words of James Madison, the "mischiefs of faction" had been managed "by controlling its effects," using various remedies ranging from money, institutional rules, and the party's popularity stemming from its policies.[114] This is not to say that factional conflicts were no more. Intraparty struggle and competition between various factions within the TRT remained intense especially in provinces and regions where faction leaders had overlapping territorial claims.

In the PAO election in 2004 for Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, for example, multiple contending teams were backed by rivaling factions within the TRT, but all claimed to represent the TRT.[115] Yet, the TRT managed to keep a tight lid on these local struggles, circumscribe them within the framework of the party, and ensure that the rise or fall of any one faction would not seriously impair or destabilize the party. The party also initiated a plan to appoint its own "CEO" governors who would report directly to the prime minister, exercise control over the provincial budget, and oversee provincial administration.[116] This was not only an attempt to wrestle power away from the bureaucratic networks within the Ministry of Interior who controlled centrally appointed provincial governors but also an effort to downplay the role of locally elected leaders

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[113] Chuang, interview with the author.
[114] James Madison, "Federalist No.10," in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and John Madison, *The Federalist Papers* (Project Gutenberg, 1998).
[115] Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, 193.
[116] Supasawad Chardchawarn, *Local Governance in Thailand: The Politics of Decentralization and the Roles of Bureaucrats, Politicians, and the People* (Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, 2010).

and recentralize provincial governance around the TRT. The building of local networks and provincial political strongholds persisted under the TRT, but it had to serve the interests of the party.

Conclusion

The circumstances of the TRT's founding moment, with the coincidence of the economic crisis and constitutional reform, shaped the course of the TRT's party building in ways that led it to deviate significantly from the pattern that most parties in the past had conformed to. The TRT's successes in mobilizing a popular base using policies and developing a centralized system of party-directed patronage were decisive for reining in the factionalism that once prevented all democratically elected governments in Thailand from completing a full term. Yet amidst this significant divergence, there is a palpable sense of continuity.

Despite its accomplishment in forging a direct connection with its voters on the basis of its programmatic platform, the TRT was never fully committed to uprooting the vote-canvassing networks and patronage politics that formed the building blocks of electoral politics in the past two decades. In fact, the party's dominance thrived on incorporating such localized, informal structures of power into an even larger power network centered around a strong, personalistic, and, arguably, populist leadership. In other words, while the role that patronage politics played had been dramatically transformed within the framework of single party dominance, it nevertheless remained an essential tool for creating and maintaining political support. To the extent that candidates who possessed control over *rabob uppatham* and vote-canvassing

networks continued to be perceived as likely winners and treated as such by political parties, patronage politics was accommodated rather than rendered obsolete.

In the long term, however, the disruptive innovations that the TRT introduced set in motion a gradual transformation of the broader political landscape, particularly in the party system and pattern of distributive politics. After it was removed from power in a coup d'état in 2006, the TRT was dissolved in a court ruling in 2007. As it turned out, the most formidable threat to the TRT's dominance was neither its factions nor its opposition in parliament but a conservative alliance between royal-military-bureaucratic elites and the urban middle class. The dissolution of the party, however, failed to put an end to the TRT's legacy. Most notably, the party was reincarnated twice under the names of the People's Power Party and the Pheu Thai Party and went on to win all subsequent elections in 2007 and 2011, held under new electoral systems and rules designed to erode its dominance, giving TRT-affiliated parties four consecutive electoral victories.

One of the factors that enabled the TRT to come back to power against all odds was the support that the party had cultivated among the rural and poor electorate. With Thaksin in exile, his parties continued to churn out policies that appealed to groups of voters that had developed strong loyalty and attachment, if not political identity, in response to the TRT's policy intervention several years prior. The new set of policies invoked the spirit of the policies that the TRT implemented on coming to power in 2001, communicating Thaksin's recognition of the rural poor and his intention to bring dramatic and lasting changes to their wellbeing. Yet in the eyes of critics and those excluded from the policy benefits, these policies lacked fiscal discipline or, worse, looked and smelled like political patronage and vote buying on a large scale. These

included, for example, the first-car tax rebate scheme, the one-computer tablet per child scheme, and, most notorious of them all, the rice pledging scheme, in practice a promise to buy every grain of rice from farmers at nearly twice the market rate. In a way, the recipients of these policies were transformed into real economic stakeholders in the survival and victory of Thaksin's parties, since the continued downward flow of policy benefits were now contingent on the successful capture of state power at the national level by these parties—the only ones that could make credible policy promises and uphold them once in office.

Unlike conventional vote-buying and traditional modes of patronage politics which rely on the delivery of cash, goods, and services via vote canvassers and other informal intermediaries, these policies were programmatic in procedure. This means that individual MPs and vote canvassers have not been able to claim the benefits delivered under these national programs as a direct consequence of their personal intervention—only Thaksin's. This pushing upward of discretion concentrates power in the party leader while narrowing the space for personal involvement by faction leaders, individual MPs, and their vote canvassers. Although they continued to engage in traditional modes of patronage delivery or problem-solving, these special favors or benefits became increasingly overshadowed, especially in the context of parliamentary elections, by what was being offered through party policies. For most, it was better to sail with rather than against the tide of the TRT.

This seismic shift had important consequences for the party system in ways that a narrow focus on the TRT or the immediate effects of the processes and events from 1997 to 2006 would fail to register. The trend was noticeable early on in 2004 when the Chart Thai Pattana, a long-established political party, announced that it would merge with the TRT. This merger signaled

not only the dominance of the TRT as a party but also the emergence of a dominant-party system. Despite the TRT's declining popularity among the urban electorate and Bangkok by the beginning of its second term, the TRT had become so colossal that in several provinces refusing to join the TRT or withdrawing from the TRT meant risking political extinction.

The largest defection from the Palang Prachachon Party (PPP), the TRT's first reincarnation, came in 2008, when a significant number of MPs associated with Newin Chidchorb's faction were checked into a hotel at Soi Rang Nam and watchfully escorted, like hostages, to parliament to vote for Abhisit Vejjajiva, the leader of the Democrat Party, to become prime minister. According to one of the MPs who defected, each was offered a large sum of money for the vote and a promise of future financial support in the form of a local development budget.[117] At any rate, in 2011, this MP lost to a Pheu Thai candidate who "came from nowhere."[118] In fact, many others who defected suffered similar losses. In his words,

> we had a lot of vote canvassers and a lot of money. All we did was place these canvassers strategically, roughly 20-30 per village out of 800 villages, around 2000 canvassers in total. And we paid 200-300 baht per head through them. But it turned out that most of the votes went to Pheu Thai.[119]

He had done everything that would have been sufficient to win under the old system prior to TRT. Yet, changes to the political landscape, particularly the development of a mass

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[117] Pon, a former PPP and Bhumjaithai Party MP, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 2, 2020.
[118] Pon, interview with author.
[119] Pon, interview with author.

constituency loyal to Thaksin, meant that patronage or clientelistic politics in a traditional manner was no longer the only game in town.

Beyond the development of policy-based linkages, there were other broader trends that emerged with TRT but were not exclusive to the party nor tied to the party's grip on power. Local elections have become more important as the locus of patronage politics previously concentrated in the bureaucracy became available via elected offices in local administrative organizations. This resulted, to some extent, in the formalization and reorganization of vote-canvassing networks as such networks increasingly consisted of local office holders and other representatives of community organizations who are for the most part elected. As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, this accorded the new type of vote canvassers with a certain degree of influence independent of their affiliation with the network or political party. The fact that their influence has now become much more strictly tied to elections, however, also means that maintaining this influence entails giving more concessions to ordinary voters, which frequently poses a significant resource burden for individual candidates.[120] Since this transformation occurred under the TRT's dominance at the national level, the pattern that emerged was one in which local politicians were supported by individual MPs, especially those affiliated with the TRT party machine. Had democracy in Thailand not been interrupted by two military seizures of power in 2006 and 2014, it is likely that this alignment of local networks and party-centered

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[120] As one local politician revealed to me during fieldwork in Ubon Ratchathani, his official monthly salary was 19,000 baht but he had to spend up to 10,000 baht per day in order to compete with his rivals in making local donations and giving out gifts when they are called for To keep up with the amount of spending required, he needed to be sponsored by Nin, an MP candidate, who is relatively wealthier and had connections to party leaders. One of Nin's vote canvassers, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, February 21, 2020).

patronage would have evolved into something that now resembles the pattern observed in Malaysia.[121] Instead, as the next chapter illustrates, the pattern in Thailand subsequent to 2014 appears closer to the pattern of the Philippines, where local political machines rather than political parties predominate in the organization and mobilization of patronage networks.[122] Although the traditional patterns of patronage politics were disrupted by the coincidence of constitutional reform and financial crisis, this did not lead to a transformation that uprooted the stakeholders of old arrangements. Instead, it made their survival conditional on the TRT and Thaksin.

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[121] For a comparison of the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, see Edward Aspinall, Meredith Weiss, Allen Hicken, and Paul Hutchcroft, *Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[122] Underneath the ideological polarization that had crystallized into the Yellow-shirt and Red-shirt movements from 2008 to 2011, the vote-canvassing networks that once reliably delivered support to MP candidates regardless of party affiliation confronted a major challenge in the form of party loyalty. Organizationally, they remained intact. In fact, many were used to traffic people to protest on the streets of Bangkok This illustrates the surprising adaptability of vote-canvassing networks to the kind of political environments that should have made them irrelevant. Korn, a former red-shirt activist, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 14, 2020).

Chapter 5

Authoritarian Survival and the Revival of Local Machines

These subdistrict chiefs, village heads, leaders of local administrative organizations and

local government officials have their own electoral base. They are like political power

grids, and they are ready to plug into our power network.[1]

—PPRP MP and faction leader

Introduction

A few days before the 2019 elections, I attended the final political rally organized by the

Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) held in Sakon Nakhon, a province in upper northeast Thailand.

Although PPRP had succeeded in recruiting a team of local politicians who controlled the

provincial administration organization (PAO) to oversee its campaign and management of vote

canvassers in this and two adjacent provinces, the party was fighting an uphill battle. This region

was widely perceived as the stronghold of the Pheu Thai Party, the third reincarnation of the

TRT, the political party affiliated with Thaksin Shinawatra. Rural and grassroots support for the

exiled prime minister in Sakon Nakhon and across this region was thought to be rooted primarily

in the "populist" policies that his parties had introduced since 2001—policies for which Thaksin

usually claimed personal credit. During the rally, the PPRP shied away from criticizing these

policies directly in the way the Democrat Party had done in the past. Instead, aware of how much

policy promises increasingly mattered for creating and maintaining enduring linkages between

parties and voters, PPRP executives took the stage, touted the party's own brand of populist

policy platform, and vowed to continue and expand the state welfare scheme for low-income

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[1] PPRP MP and faction leader, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 5, 2020.

earners. These pledges were greeted with cheers and enthusiasm from the crowd, who waved the party's election banners and flags almost in perfect synchronicity.

Such a massive political gathering had become a rare occasion during the previous five years since the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) ousted Yingluck Shinawatra's democratically elected government in a coup d'état and installed a military-authoritarian regime with the NCPO leader, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, as prime minister. It was even rarer for parties that stood in direct opposition to the junta, as some were reportedly obstructed from organizing rallies in public areas by local government authorities.[2] At both the beginning and end of the rally, the crowd danced and sang along to an adapted version of "Your Heart for My Number," Yinglee Srijumpol's mega-hit single. The song's chorus goes:

You have reached a system for safekeeping Thailand

please vote with trust in our promise

What came before is guaranteed to be even better

Let Palang Pracharath take care of Thailand so it can grow[3]

The original lyrics describe a developing romance between potential lovers as they exchange phone numbers. In the modified lyrics, the phone numbers were swapped out for votes and political promises, but somehow the romantic exchange was preserved.[4] On our car ride back

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[2] "'เพื่อไทย' โวยถูกแกล้ง ไม่ให้ใช้สนามกีฬาอบจ.พะเยา ต้องปราศรัยท้ายรถกระบะ ชาวบ้านนั่งฟังบนพื้น," *Matichon*, January 10, 2019, https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1310835.

[3] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Sakon Nakhon, March 20, 2019.

[4] Love, romance and courtship are recurring themes in political rhetoric in Thailand. They might be interpreted as part of a broader set of cultural or normative attitudes that frequently accompany or even legitimize the practice of wooing voters, especially with gifts and favors, which might otherwise appear contrived or disingenuous. Thai Rak Thai, which translates to "Thais love Thais," did not start this pattern but made it more obvious, bringing what was previously understood as a "local moral economy of electoralism" to the national level. Mark R.

from the rally, one of the organizers disclosed to me that many attendees each received 500 baht

for showing up and 50 baht for food and beverage, paid via vote canvassers.[5] The rally had never

been solely about generating publicity or showcasing the PPRP's policy agendas. It was also

about getting a preliminary headcount, rewarding likely supporters, signaling that there is more

to come and, finally, putting vote canvassers' loyalty and mobilizational capacity on public

display for party executives and opposing parties to see, so that additional financial investment

could be arranged, and competition deterred.[6]

The political rally in Sakon Nakhon signifies the resurgence of an old pattern of

patronage politics in a new political landscape.[7] While paying lip service to the importance of

policies and platforms, thanks in no small part to the TRT's intervention nearly two decades

earlier, the PPRP invested heavily in vote-canvassing networks and the politicized distribution of

goods and services to build and mobilize electoral support. This approach was by no means

exclusive to the PPRP. In fact, most parties that competed in the 2019 elections failed to

differentiate themselves from one another based on policy platforms, given that the most salient

division was pro or anti junta. Instead, many returned to the more familiar, tried-and-true tactics

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Thompson, "The Moral Economy of Electoralism and the Rise of Populism in the Philippines and Thailand," *Journal of Developing Societies* 32, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 246–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X16652028.

[5] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Sakon Nakhon, March 20, 2019.

[6] For additional insights pertaining to the role of political rallies, see Paula Muñoz, *Buying Audiences: Clientelism and Electoral Campaigns When Parties Are Weak* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108525015.

[7] For a general discussion of how "old" tactics were revived in a "new" landscape, see Prajak Kongkirati, "Palang Pracharat Party: Can Old Tricks Win in a New Political Landscape?," *New Mandala*, March 23, 2019, https://www.newmandala.org/palang-pracharat-party-can-old-tricks-win-in-a-new-political-landscape/.

of delivering selective benefits to voters and counting on vote canvassers to mobilize them during elections.[8]

The case can be made, however, that the PPRP's unique status as a party aligned with the regime that seized power in 2014 served to amplify this trend to a scale rarely observed in the past two decades. After all, such a party had to mobilize support for an unpopular regime that not only had unparalleled access to patronage resources but also for whom losing the election could be detrimental to the survival of the regime. After the previous seizure of power in 2006, Thaksin-affiliated parties returned to power in a landslide whenever elections were reintroduced. This time, to prevent another wasted coup, the regime doubled down on its efforts, combining authoritarian powers and patronage politics to tilt the playing field in its favor.

This combination of authoritarianism and patronage is the focus of this chapter. Based on an examination of the circumstances of the PPRP's origin, its candidate selection mechanism, and implications of its linkage strategy at the local level, I argue that the PPRP represents an attempt to create vested interest in the survival of the military regime under a form of competitive authoritarian rule.[9] This attempt was geared specifically towards coopting patronage networks previously affiliated with other parties, especially Pheu Thai. In return for lending support to the regime's party, local machines, political dynasties, and other electoral gatekeepers in control of vote-canvassing networks would be rewarded with protection, privileged access to government resources monopolized by the regime, and the benefits of a highly uneven electoral

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[8] One notable exception was the Future Forward Party, a newly founded political party that campaigned heavily using social media. Its leaders declared on multiple occasions that the party would not rely on vote canvassers and traditional modes of campaigning to generate support.
[9] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Problems of International Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

playing field. In this way, the regime's attempt to retain power via elections was made possible with the support of the leaders of patronage networks who, in turn, were given opportunities to reconsolidate themselves at the subnational level under the dominance of the regime.

This attempt was successful from the standpoint that the PPRP coopted many incumbent MPs, politicians, and elites with local influence from other parties.[10] Mobilizing these forces on a large scale in an institutional landscape that favored those affiliated with the regime, the PPRP managed to keep Prayuth in power despite formidable resistance from Thaksin-affiliated parties and mounting challenges posed by the Future Forward Party (FFP), a newly established anti-military party. However, the fact that factions and electoral gatekeepers who supported the PPRP have been able to tap the resources under the regime's control for their own ends without necessarily building party loyalty or grassroots support for the party casts serious doubt on the sustainability of the arrangement, especially in the face of rising pressure from both in and outside parliament.

This argument has broader implications for understanding why authoritarian regimes build parties for contesting elections and why they tend to do so by relying on patronage.[11] According to Geddes, authoritarian regimes that assume the form of political parties typically enjoy greater durability when compared with military and personalist regimes.[12] The party

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[10] For an analysis of the pattern of defection from other parties to the PPRP, see Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, "Electoral Integrity and the Repercussions of Institutional Manipulations: The 2019 General Election in Thailand," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 52–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119892321.

[11] These questions are qualitatively distinct from the question of why authoritarian regimes hold multiparty elections.

[12] Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (June 1, 1999): 115–44, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115.

organization is expected to provide an infrastructure for institutionalizing the sharing of spoils

without exposing the regime to the usual threats that frequently bring down military or

personalist regimes, for example, splits within the military or succession crises. The durability of

the regime is, therefore, assumed to be conditional on the regime's ability to organize and

guarantee the future flow of patronage benefits to groups it can least afford to alienate, usually

the elite.

Extending this framework to account for the role of ordinary citizens, Magaloni argues

that the holding of multiparty elections does not simply confer legitimacy on party-based

authoritarian regimes, if it ever truly does, but also operates as "a means to regularize payments

to their supporters and implement punishment to their enemies, among both the elite and the

masses, so as to induce them to remain loyal to the regime and to have a vested interest in its

survival."[13] As such, elections serve as both a mechanism and occasion for authoritarian parties

to deliver patronage in a targeted and selective manner, thereby creating conditions for regime

survival while under the pretense of upholding electoral democracy.

The theoretical emphasis on the management of conflicts at the elite level via patronage

distribution has been problematized by Levitsky and Way, who argue that parties built on

systems of patronage are typically vulnerable to crises relative to those forged in the wake of a

violent struggle or rooted in non-material sources of party cohesion.[14] If anything, reliance on

patronage predisposes parties to adopt organizational structures that do not offer adequate

[13] Beatriz Magaloni, "Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico," Cambridge Core, September 2006, 19, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511510274.
[14] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "Beyond Patronage: Violent Struggle, Ruling Party Cohesion, and Authoritarian Durability," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 4 (2012): 869–89, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592712002861.

protection against defection in the context of severe crisis. The puzzle, then, becomes even more complex than it originally seems: if patronage has proven to be poorly suited as a political glue for crafting or maintaining a party organization, then why do authoritarian regimes continue to rely on patronage? In what way is patronage well-suited for mobilizing support for a party that enjoys authoritarian backing?

The case of PPRP illustrates that a party forged by authoritarian rulers to sustain their dominance in anticipation of the holding of competitive elections favors patronage as the raw material for party-building and campaigning for two important reasons. First, since authoritarian or competitive authoritarian rule implies a marked concentration of control over state institutions, local officials and government resources in the regime's hands, the burden associated with the use of patronage is significantly lower for a party that enjoys the backing of the regime. This burden may include, for example, the cost of recruiting the leaders of preexisting patronage networks, preventing defection, deterring challengers, obtaining privileged government positions or local offices, coordinating access to discretionary funds, exercising discretion over government transfers and budgets, circumventing the enforcement of electoral rules, and securing financial support from business groups. In a context in which patronage politics is central to producing a favorable electoral outcome, these comparative advantages translate into a highly uneven playing field, enabling the party that receives the support of the regime to dominate elections.

Second, while other political parties deliver patronage to generate electoral support, often to sustain a minimum winning coalition, only a regime-backed party like the PPRP rely on patronage to ensure the survival of the regime. Since losing an election may amount to a major

setback for the regime and conservative establishment that supports it, such a party places a premium on strategies that reduce this risk. Here, patronage politics stands out as the most effective tool to insure against the uncertainty of electoral competition for a regime bent on assuring its own survival.[15] Given that patronage politics is frequently organized into networks with countable nodes and neurons, a feature that allows for a high level of precision and predictability, risks of poor electoral performance, and potential turnover could be evaluated in advance. De facto control over state institutions means these risks could be adjusted, for example, by stacking the deck against other parties even further, stepping up the pressure on regime-appointed regulatory bodies or the state apparatus to tilt the balance in the party's favor. When deployed by a regime-backed party as an electoral linkage or mobilizational strategy, patronage thus offers a powerful means to reap the advantages of an uneven playing field and hedge against electoral uncertainties even if, in the long run or the face of a crisis, it may prove to be an inadequate source of party cohesion, as cautioned by Levitsky and Way.[16]

        This chapter is organized as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of the founding of the PPRP, highlighting the incumbency and constitutional advantages as well as the

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[15] A similar argument has been made by Magaloni et al. regarding how the distribution of private, excludable goods, as opposed to public, non-excludable goods, offers a way to avert electoral risks associated with free riding by non-supporters. However, according to their logic, this risk-aversion is only possible due to the monitoring and enforcement of voter compliance built into clientelist strategies. This chapter does not rule out this possibility, but highlights instead how vote-canvassing networks are often organized in a highly discrete and countable manner, which allows politicians to make predictions of their electoral performance well in advance of elections. Beatriz Magaloni, Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, and Federico Estévez, "Clientelism and Portfolio Diversification," in *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, ed. Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[16] Levitsky and Way, "Beyond Patronage."

overwhelming legal and coercive resources the party enjoyed by virtue of its alignment with the junta up to and beyond the 2019 elections. I then examine how these circumstances led to an extreme concentration of political power and government resources in the party, which created an environment that not only privileged the use of patronage politics but also made the recruitment of vote-canvassing networks the focal point of its party building and campaigning. In the final section, I offer an analysis of the implications of these arrangements from the standpoint of the factions that joined the PPRP, illustrating that the biggest winner in the return to old patterns of patronage politics was neither the junta nor the party but the leaders of patronage networks who, in return for shoring up the junta's legitimacy and propping up the party electorally, have been able to leverage authoritarian linkages to reconsolidate themselves at the subnational level.[17]

Getting a Dictator Elected: PPRP as an Authoritarian Successor Party

After Yingluck Shinawatra was removed from power in a coup d'état on May 22, 2014, Thailand returned to an extended period of military rule under the leadership of the NCPO. The

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[17] The building of authoritarian leviathans, according to Slater, typically calls for a "protection pact" in which political elites willingly surrender power and resources to the state in return for protection in the face of endemic and unmanageable threats. Organized in this way, power is "ordered" from the elites rather than vice versa. This was not quite the road taken by the authoritarian regime in Thailand. Instead, the political elites, namely the leaders of factions and patronage networks, used their linkages to the regime to reestablish themselves locally with relatively little regard for party coherence or loyalty to the regime. Power was not in fact "ordered" but repurposed for building and maintaining the patronage networks that formed temporary alliances under a "provision pact." Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

previous coup in 2006, which ousted her older brother Thaksin, was followed by an election in a short span of approximately fifteen months later. This time around, however, the coup-constitution-election cycle took much longer than usual. The delay may have had to do with the junta's plan to manage a long-anticipated but highly delicate royal succession and avoid the mistakes of previous coup makers, who had allowed Thaksin-affiliated parties to return to dominance.

On seizing power, the junta formed a regime consisting of several institutional apparatuses designed to incorporate participation by a narrow group of military and civilian leaders in decision-making processes under the direct supervision of the NCPO. These include the Cabinet, the National Legislative Assembly (NLA), a rubber-stamp parliament, the National Reform Council (NRC), and Constitutional Drafting Committee (CDC). These institutional arrangements represented the junta's attempt to reward the coup coalition, coopt various elements in Thai society to form its support base, and centralize power around itself. Prajak and Veerayooth have described the nature of the NCPO's rule as an "embedded military" regime which differentiates it from the previous military regime in 2006 in terms of the extent of institutional reach and entrenchment in society.[18]

Despite the numerous institutional tentacles grown by the NCPO to sustain its authoritarian rule, Thailand's eventual return to some form of democracy was nevertheless anticipated, especially given the longstanding cycle of coups and elections. This expectation was confirmed when the NCPO leader, General Prayuth, announced that a general election would be

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[18] Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, no. 2 (July 2018): 279–305, https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2018.4.

held by November 2018, a date postponed several times. It was also widely anticipated that

Prayuth himself was likely to remain in power and assume the premiership. This was due to a

deliberate design outlined by the newly drafted Constitution and transitory provisions of the

Constitution, which were approved in a carefully managed referendum in 2016, during which

campaigning against the charter and provisions was tightly suppressed by the regime. By design,

for the first five years, the equivalent of at least two House of Representatives election periods,

an appointed Senate would be allowed to participate in the selection of a prime minister in a

joint-session with the House of Representatives, creating highly favorable conditions for an

NCPO-backed nominee, in other words someone like Prayuth, to assume the role of prime

minister.

What surprised many observers was that the NCPO established its own political party

rather than merely presiding over electoral politics in the manner sometimes done in the past.

Initially, it was rumored that Prayuth would model the next phase of his rule after the semi-

democratic regime of General Prem Tinasulanonda, who served as a prime minister from 1980 to

1988 with backing from the palace, and appointed representatives and political parties that

operated somewhat autonomously from his leadership.[19] Yet it became increasingly clear that,

instead of following in Prem's footsteps, Prayuth was leaning much closer to the example of

General Suchinda Kraprayoon, who won the March 1992 elections by relying on the Sammaki

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[19] Duncan McCargo (2005) uses term "network monarchy" to characterize Prem's relationship
with the royal institution. Although this dissertation focuses predominantly on patronage politics
in the context of elections, I find the pattern of Prem's exercise of royal influence on behalf of
the "network monarchy" consistent with the use of the term patronage.

Tham Party, a party created in an ad hoc manner to sustain the dominance of the National Peace

Keeping Council (NPKC), which overthrew an elected government in 1991.

According to an informant, the plan to form a political party that would lend support to

Prayuth and allow him to maintain power through the parliamentary system was formalized

shortly after the constitutional drafting process.[20] Prayuth himself was, however, initially

indecisive as to what the party would look like, how the party would be managed and by whom,

what his role would be, or whether he would even need such a party. It was also rumored that a

party would be formed and led directly by members of the NCPO's inner circle, Interior Minister

General Anupong Paochinda, and Interior Permanent Secretary General Chatchai Promlert—a

plan that never came to fruition, presumably due to the need of these individuals to retain control

over the ministry for the duration.[21]

From outside the regime, there were also several contenders, including Paiboon

Nititawan's People's Reform Party and People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) leader

Suthep Thaugsuban's Action Coalition for Thailand Party, both of which publicly conveyed their

willingness to support Prayuth as candidate for prime minister. In the end, the party chosen was

the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP). The fact that the PPRP was meant to serve as a proxy for

safeguarding the interests of the regime was thinly veiled, as the party adopted the name

Pracharath from the vast array of policies already implemented by the NCPO government under

the same name several years before the formation of the party, a period during which no other

parties were allowed to campaign. Furthermore, in addition to the name coincidence, four cabinet

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[20] A technocrat who worked for the NCPO, interview with the author, Bangkok, July 20, 2021.
[21] A technocrat who worked for the NCPO, interview with the author.

ministers who had served under Prayuth, including Uttama Savanayana, Sontirat Sontijirawong,

Kobsak Pootrakool and Suvit Maesincee, went on to assume formal leadership roles in the PPRP.

Traces of linkage between the PPRP and the NCPO led many scholars to conclude that some

form of electoral authoritarianism,[22] semi-authoritarianism[23] or competitive authoritarianism was

under development.[24]

      Although the formation of the PPRP signaled the military regime's intention to compete

for power by electoral means, this should not be interpreted as its commitment to uphold or

promote democracy. In fact, the only version of democracy acceptable to the regime was one

with conditions that would guarantee the continuity of a set of institutional arrangements already

put in place by the regime and a highly uneven playing field favorable only to those loyal to it.

The 2019 elections, therefore, failed to meet even the Schumpeterian minimalist procedural

definition of "free competition for a free vote."[25] Nowhere is this reality more apparent than in

the fact that the PPRP was uniquely situated to reap the benefits from the distorted distribution of

power and resources in post-coup Thailand.

      As I illustrate in this section, the circumstances of the PPRP's authoritarian origin granted

the party distinct advantages that were not available to other parties competing in the 2019

elections. These were rooted in: 1) the PPRP's status as a policy incumbent; 2) a constitutional

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[22] Duncan McCargo, "Anatomy: Future Backward," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 153–62.

[23] Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, no. 2 (July 2018): 279–305, https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2018.4.

[24] Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, "Electoral Integrity and the Repercussions of Institutional Manipulations: The 2019 General Election in Thailand," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 52–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119892321.

[25] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942).

design that empowered appointed representatives relative to elected ones; 3) the NCPO's ad hoc

legal intervention and influence over the courts and other regulatory bodies; and 4) the NCPO's

control of the military's political arm, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). In a

patronage democracy such as Thailand's, some of these advantages significantly eased the

burden of engaging in patronage politics for the PPRP and politicians competing under its

umbrella. I argue that despite enjoying these overwhelming advantages, the fact that the PPRP

was formed towards the end of military rule only in anticipation of an imminent return to

democracy meant that it had neither fully operated as a ruling party prior to the elections nor

completely developed its own organizational network for electoral mobilization and social

control at the local level. This in turn had important consequences for its party building and

campaigning strategy by creating highly favorable conditions for the PPRP to invest heavily in

coopting the existing networks of local elites and political machines at the expense of developing

strong party organization—a pattern that may eventually prove to be critical for its viability as an

authoritarian successor party.[26]

From *Prachaniyom* to *Pracharath*

While the term *pracharath* is originally part of the Thai national anthem, signifying the

relationship between *pracha* (people) and *rath* (state), the NCPO's use of the term as a label for

its policy initiative was inspired by the title of a book by the Thai constitutional reformer and

political scientist, Chai-anan Samudavanija. Initially, the label described a set of policies and

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[26] James Loxton and Scott Mainwaring, eds., *Life after Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108560566.

projects that aimed to provide economic support for local and grassroots enterprises by tapping

the expertise, resources and market access of major conglomerates in the country, forging a kind

of joint venture involving the state, civil society and private business sector. In practice, twelve

steering committees were established under the *San Palang Pracharath* scheme. Each committee

addressed different development projects and was co-chaired by a pair of cabinet ministers and a

representative from the private sector. The vision underlying the initiative was credited to the

leader of the Right livelihood Foundation, Prawase Wasi, who is also a deeply influential social

critic and prominent actor in the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) circle in Thailand.

The *pracharath* initiative has previously been criticized as an attempt at "crafting a

hierarchical mode of economic participation and reinforcing power asymmetries in the Thai

economy, in the circumvention of a 'level playing field' competition."[27] It is unclear whether

such a "level playing field" ever existed to begin with and to what extent the *pracharath*

initiative represents an unholy marriage between an authoritarian regime and big business rather

than just another ambitious attempt at state-directed development. What is evident, however, is

that the NCPO government made concrete efforts to characterize the *pracharath* initiative as

distinct from the much-criticized *prachaniyom* or populist policies once undertaken by Pheu Thai

and other Thaksin-affiliated parties, no matter how reminiscent of these policies the *pracharath*

initiative may appear.[28]

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[27] Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, no. 2 (July 2018): 300, https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2018.4.

[28] The issue with the optics is more complex than it seems. First, one of the justifications for the military coup in 2014 was to address the wrongdoings of the Yingluck government in the handling of the rice-pledging scheme, the quintessential populist policy. Second, Somkid Jatusripitak, one of the architects of the *pracharath* initiative played an instrumental role in the

Suvit Maesincee, a key person in the development of *pracharath* policies clarified the

distinction in the following terms:

Pracharath is a tripartite alliance of the state, the private sector and civil society

involving economic co-creation and social co-creation, while *prachaniyom* merely

transforms those who suffer into those who survive and ends there. *Pracharath*

transforms those who suffer into those who survive and from those who survive into

those who can sustain themselves…*Prachaniyom* is like a symptomatic treatment that

creates short term gain with adverse side effects or long-term loss, like steroids. By

contrast, since *pracharath* involves the people's participation and not just government

handouts—it is like a bitter medicine that produces short term loss but with remarkable

potential for long term gain. Politically, the more *prachaniyom* is used, the more it

strengthens "vertical power relations" because *prachaniyom* is a mechanism that makes

people reliant and dependent on the state…*Pracharath* is about tempering "vertical

power relations" and fostering "horizontal power relations" since it emphasizes people

empowerment, potentially transforming state control over society into social control over

the state.[29]

Suvit's statement reflects the notion that *pracharath* is supposed to empower citizens in contrast

to *prachaniyom*, described using a vocabulary that might as well be reserved for *rabob*

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development and implementation of the TRT's original policies. From this standpoint, the
pracharath initiative, as well as a whole range of policies that eventually attained this label,
appear to be an attempt to continue what was started during the TRT administration rather than
an attempt to break away from the so-called "Thaksinomics" or *prachaniyom*, whichever term is
preferred.

[29] Suvit Maesincee, "'ประชานิยม' VS 'ประชารัฐ,'" *Facebook*, December 30, 2015,
https://www.facebook.com/drsuvitpage/posts/1392102447763148.

uppatham, which allegedly transforms the recipients of government welfare into subjects

entangled in a hierarchical relationship vis-à-vis the state. It is quite telling that these differences,

which are purely conceptual, needed to be pointed out explicitly by the regime's policymakers.

In practice, the commonalities are more obvious than the differences, as both *pracharath* and

prachaniyom were deployed to attract the support of the grassroots and low-income earners by

unleashing state power for economic ends. Furthermore, the goal to transform the role of the

state from a unidirectional, patronage-oriented framework into one characterized by welfare

capitalism and inclusive participation by civil society actors never quite came to fruition. Instead,

Prawase's original ideological vision became secondary to the need to create a political brand.

This need, which appeared increasingly urgent as a return to democracy was promised, created

an impetus for using the term *pracharath* as an all-encompassing term for labeling any policies

undertaken by Prayuth's government that had to do with economic stimulus or rural and

grassroots development. This was presumably done to generate brand awareness in advance of

the elections, especially among a population identified as the policy beneficiaries under the

former Pheu Thai-led government.

Among other policies under the *pracharath* umbrella, the state welfare card scheme for

low-income earners generated the most publicity and eventually featured prominently in the

PPRP's campaign in 2019. The program was initiated in 2016 as part of a systematic effort to

address the problem of chronic poverty through targeted welfare and develop a national e-

payment system. Eligible recipients were classified into two categories: Thais with an annual

income of not more than 30,000 baht and Thais with an annual income of more than 30,000 baht

but no more than 100,000 baht, granted that they owned no financial assets worth more than

100,000 baht, no real estate larger than 1 *rai* or 10 *rai* in the case of agricultural land.[30] Once

verified and registered with the Finance Ministry, the low-income earners numbering more than

14 million nationwide would be issued a "Government Welfare Card," through which they

would receive a monthly allowance to purchase consumer products from participating *Thong*

Fah Pracharath or "Blue Flag" stores, as well as fare allowances for public transportation,

discounts on cooking gas, and utility subsidies for water and electricity.

Although there was widespread criticism from the standpoint that the scheme had

benefited people who were neither poor nor eligible and had filled the pockets of the big

conglomerates that owned the "Blue Flag" stores, there was very little doubt that the policy was

popular among its recipients. The cash transfers from the government assumed the material form

of a card which could be handed out, even exchanged—this was as close to putting real money in

the hands of the people as it could get.[31] From this standpoint, despite rhetoric that says

otherwise, the *pracharath* welfare scheme operated not so differently from large-scale

government handouts, a label that critics once used to characterize many of the *prachaniyom*

policies undertaken by Thaksin-affiliated parties.

The controversy became more visible as the 2019 elections approached and there were

obvious signs that *pracharath* policies, including the state welfare card scheme, would serve as

the cornerstone of the PPRP's platform. During the campaign, PPRP executives regularly

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[30] มาตรการสวัสดิการแห่งรัฐ นวัตกรรมเพื่อแก้ปัญหาความยากจน *[State Welfare: Innovation for Addressing the Issue of Poverty]*, ไทยคู่ฟ้า (วารสารสำนักเลขาธิการนายกรัฐมนตรี, 2018).

[31] Some cardholders were not able to take full advantage of the benefits offered by the welfare scheme because they lived far away from banks, ATMs, and "Blue Flag" stores. In some cases, they would trade a portion of the cash allowance for those who arranged their transportation. In other cases, the "Blue Flag" stores illegally offered cash back to those who preferred cash rather than their products, charging a commission fee.

referred to the welfare card as a "*pracharath* card" or "*prachath* welfare" in an attempt to claim credit for the welfare benefits distributed through the scheme by the junta government years before the actual formation of the party.[32] Despite the programmatic nature of the welfare scheme, in the sense that the policy benefits were distributed according to formal and objective criteria of eligibility as opposed to conditional on political support for the regime, this did not preclude the PPRP from framing the policy benefits as stemming from the party's intervention. Its candidates, for example, were in possession of detailed registries of the individuals who had signed up for the welfare scheme in their constituencies and saw the card as a viable product to offer voters during their campaigns.[33]

The fact that the welfare benefits were framed as a handout from Prayuth's government does not imply that all voters saw the policy this way or that this was bound to translate into electoral support for those aligned with Prayuth. The PPRP's rival, Pheu Thai, claimed that the government and the PPRP saw the welfare card as a "poor people's card," insinuating that they failed to uphold universalistic principles or recognize the recipients as proper citizens and at least potential equals to the more affluent population who did not qualify for the scheme. Based on my personal observations during a visit to a village in Udon Thani, it seems that Pheu Thai's attempt to frame the welfare card as reflecting a patronizing attitude towards the poor was unnecessary to begin with.

During this visit, I asked a small gathering of villagers if they received the welfare cards. Every single person raised their hands, and some were able to draw the connection between their

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[32] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Udon Thani province, March 20, 2019.
[33] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Ubon Ratchathani province, February 21, 2020.

welfare benefits and Prayuth, the PPRP supported candidate for prime minister, while none

expressed any intention to vote for the PPRP on the basis of the policy even when they

benefited.[34] Clearly, either the framing of the policy or its content did not match up to what

Thaksin-affiliated parties have offered in the past, which was best summarized by one villager as

her "first love."[35] Nevertheless, the larger point remains. Thanks to policies like the state welfare

scheme, the *pracharath* brand had become ubiquitous and synonymous with economic and

welfare stimulus. In the 2019 elections, the PPRP was the only party in a position to credibly

claim credit for such policies, since it was seen as an extension of the NCPO government. This

was signified by the name of the party as well as by the familiar faces in the party executive

committee, who had served as ministers in Prayuth's cabinet. Moreover, in a political

environment in which, for the past five years, the only source of any real, tangible national

welfare benefits was associated with the junta, no other party, except for Pheu Thai, could have

made similar promises to uphold or extend welfare benefits to the grassroots and low-income

earners and appear as credible in doing so as the PPRP. This was the nature of the PPRP's policy

incumbency, made possible only due to the party's informal association with the NCPO.

A Constitution Designed for Us

In addition to the incumbency advantage that the PPRP enjoyed on the basis of the policy

initiatives already implemented under the name the party adopted, the institutional design of the

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[34] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Udon Thani province, March 20, 2019.
[35] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Udon Thani province, March 20, 2019.

electoral system and parliamentary system under the 2017 Constitution also served to enhance

the PPRP's strategic advantage in the 2019 election in several ways. The Constitution, along

with a transitory provision to allow an appointed Senate to participate in the selection of the

prime minister, was approved in a 2016 referendum, during which voices of dissent against the

charter were suppressed and dissidents jailed. From the outset, the new Constitution, drafted by a

committee chaired by Meechai Ruchupan, was designed to blunt the dominance of Pheu Thai

and undermine the prospect of Thaksin coming back to power.

It did this first and foremost by establishing a bicameral parliament consisting of an

elected 500 member House of Representatives and a 250 member Senate, in which, for the first

five years, the members would be selected under the guidance the NCPO, according to the

Transitory Provisions.[36] The selection process for the Senate involved the formation of a 9 to 12

member selection committee responsible for nominating 400 candidates, from which the NCPO

chose 194 members. Six seats were reserved for commanders of the armed forces, the national

police commander, and the Ministry of Defense. The remaining 50 members were also chosen by

the NCPO from a shortlist of 200 candidates voted on by fellow nominees and applicants among

occupational and social groups.

In practice, since the selection committee was chaired by members of the NCPO or its

affiliates and since all but six senators were handpicked by the NCPO, this guaranteed a

representative body that ended up more representative of the NCPO's network than any other

group in society. According to the Transitory Provisions, these 250 senators would take part in

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[36] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, BE 2560 (2017)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, 2017), section 269.

the selection of the prime minister in a joint-session with the House of Representatives.[37] Given

the five year term, they would preside over at least two election cycles. When the appointment

was made official, two months after the election, most of the seats were filled by relatives and

associates of the selection committee members, and even the selection committee members

themselves, as well as former cabinet ministers, former members of the NCPO, former members

of the NLA, and former members of the National Reform Steering Assembly.[38]

The concentration of parliamentary power in the hands of the junta via an appointed

Senate was combined with an electoral system designed to dilute the bargaining power of any

singular party and make single-party absolute majority unlikely. The Constitution replaced a

mixed-member majoritarian system (MMM) with 375 single-seat constituencies and 125 party

list seats with a mixed-member apportionment system (MMA) with 350 single-seat

constituencies and 150 party list seats.[39] Under the new electoral system, voters would cast only

one ballot used not only for the election of the MP candidate in a given district but also for the

calculation of the total share of seats to which the candidate's party was entitled. Party list seats

would be allocated to parties on top of their constituency seats until their share of seats met this

quota.[40]

Compared with the system under the previous Constitution, this newly designed electoral

system penalized political parties like Pheu Thai that exceled at competing for both single-seat

constituencies and party list votes, since the more constituency seats a given party won, the

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[37] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, BE 2560 (2017)*, section 272.
[38] iLaw, "รวมข้อมูล 250 ส.ว. แต่งตั้ง: กลไกหลักสืบทอดอำนาจจากยุค คสช.," *iLaw*, August 20, 2014,
https://ilaw.or.th/node/5366.
[39] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, BE 2560 (2017)*, section 83.
[40] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, BE 2560 (2017)*, section 86.

fewer party list seats that party was eligible to receive.[41] Just a few months prior to the election, Somsak Thepsuthin, one of the PPRP's leading members and former TRT executive, announced to his fellow party members that "this constitution was designed for us."[42] It was received with enthusiastic applause. A source from within the PPRP later clarified that the statement should be interpreted as suggesting that, under the new electoral system, every single vote mattered and therefore no candidates would be left behind by the party.[43] Nevertheless, the intended message was heard loud and clear—a pro-junta party was favored to win; join the PPRP to be part of the ruling coalition.

Legal Instruments and Judicial Politics

While both the unofficial incumbency status of the PPRP and newly designed Constitution granted unfair advantages to the PPRP, nothing speaks to the absence of a level playing field in the 2019 Elections more than the NCPO's discretionary use of legal powers and ad hoc interventions in judicial proceedings. Operating through a legal framework that empowered a politicized judiciary, the Constitutional Court and other NCPO-appointed, nominally independent institutional bodies, these practices became routinized in the post-coup political order as a means for the NCPO to tighten its grip on power and target individual political leaders to ensure that they did not oppose the regime. As the 2019 elections approached,

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[41] For additional insights on the implications of MMA, see Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, "The Effects of Thailand's Proposed Electoral System," *Thai Data Points* (blog), February 9, 2016, http://www.thaidatapoints.com/ project-updates/theeffectsofthailandsproposedelectoralsystembyallenhickenandbangkokpundit.

[42] "'สุริยะ' โว พปชร.ยิ่งใหญ่กว่าไทยรักไทย 'สมศักดิ์' ชี้ รธน.นี้ ดีไซน์มาเพื่อพวกเรา," *Matichon Online*, November 18, 2018, https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1232373.

[43] A PPRP MP, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 22, 2020.

however, the pattern of "judicialization of politics" became more coherent and consistent with

the objective of eliminating electoral uncertainties and creating favorable conditions for PPRP to

recruit and forge alliances the most formidable political groupings and influential figures

nationwide.[44]

Arguably, the most obvious exercise of legal power for the purposes of authoritarian

control was the use of Section 44 of the interim Constitution. Section 44 grants Prayuth, as head

of the NCPO, the "power to order, restrain, or perform any act, whether such act has legislative,

executive, or judicial force; the orders and the acts, including the performance in compliance

with such orders, shall be deemed lawful and constitutional under this Constitution, and shall be

final."[45] Section 44 is comparable to Section 17 of the Interim Constitution of Thailand, B.E.

2502 which gave Field Marshal Sarit similar unbounded authority, including to order executions

by firing squad.[46] The term "despotic paternalism" was previously used to denote Sarit's style of

leadership; it was now applicable for describing Prayuth's rule as well.[47] The fact that the NCPO

resorted to constitutional power instead of martial law or emergency decree should not be

interpreted as its adherence to rule of law but an attempt to normalize despotic power as business

as usual while extending the emergency or transitional period into the everyday.[48] Sovereign

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[44] On the "judicialization of politics" in Thailand see Duncan McCargo, "Competing Notions of Judicialization in Thailand," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 36, no. 3 (December 18, 2014): 417–41.

[45] *(Unofficial Translation) Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (Interim), B.E. 2557 (2014)* (Bangkok: Foreign Law Bureau, Office of the Council of State, 2014).

[46] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, BE 2502 (1959)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, 1959).

[47] Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, Studies on Southeast Asia, no. 42 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2007).

[48] These dynamics can be understood as part of an "autocratic innovation" designed to safeguard authoritarian dominance. See Lee Morgenbesser, "The Menu of Autocratic Innovation,"

power or the ability to call an emergency, to refer to Carl Schmitt's definition, is retained but is

significantly more diffused, encompassing and protracted.[49] The NCPO's legal intervention has

similar trappings to a "rule by law" regime but the lack of legal consistency in the administration

of justice and a high level of discretion in enforcement suggests that the arrangement is legal

only in appearance and purely political in practice, as obedience to the rules is primarily a direct

outcome of the authoritarian rulers' coercive capacity.[50]

In actual use, the sweeping powers of Section 44 have been deployed to address a wide

range of matters, ranging from suppressing freedom of expression and banning media reports all

the way to fixing Thailand's illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing problems (IUU) in

response to EU sanctions. The most common usage, however, was to order the appointment and

transfer of government officials and suspension of local political office holders, for example,

executives of local administrative organizations, mayors and councilors, pending a corruption

investigation. Presumably, this was both a move to root out insubordination to the NCPO's

directives at the various levels of the state and a plan to install and retain only government

officials and political office holders who had demonstrated their loyalty to the junta, either by

defecting from the Thaksin camp or promising to refrain from supporting him in the future.

Given the centrality of the role played by the leaders and members of local administrative

organizations and municipal governments in organizing and managing vote-canvassing

Democratization 27, no. 6 (August 17, 2020): 1053–72,
https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1746275.

[49] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[50] Tom Ginsburg and Tamir Moustafa, *Rule by Law: The Politics of Courts in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

networks, an informal pattern that had become commonplace due to decentralization reform since 1997, the use of Section 44 to intervene in local politics deserves an emphasis.

First, under NCPO Order 1/2014, local elections were suspended and office holders who had completed their full term were allowed to remain in office until further notice, with the exception of Bangkok and Pattaya, where the members of local councils and administrative organizations would be nominated on the completion of their term or when the remaining number of members was less than half of the total number of members, in accordance with NCPO Announcement 85/2014.[51] As a result, many local councilors and administrators nationwide served a much longer term than the official term limit, which many of them interpreted as a gift from the NCPO.[52] By the 2019 elections, many had already served almost seven years. One important outcome of these orders was the appointment of a new Mayor of Pattaya, replacing Itthiphon Khunpluem, a member of a prominent political dynasty in Chon Buri associated with his father, Somchai Khunpluem or Kamnan Poh.[53] The NCPO later issued an order to appoint Sontaya Khunpluem, Itthiphon's older brother and renowned leader of the

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[51] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 1/B.E. 2557 (2014)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, January 5, 2015); *National Council for Peace and Order Announcement No. 85/B.E. 2557 (2014)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, July 21, 2014).

[52] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Nakhon Ratchasima, March 1, 2020.

[53] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 6/B.E. 2559 (2016)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, February 5, 2016). Itthiphon had completed his term as mayor and had to step down, unlike other local office holders who were allowed to remain in office even after reaching the term limit (except for Sukhumbhand Paribatra, Governor of Bangkok, who was removed via Section 44 shortly before the completion of his term). According to NCPO Order 1/2014, instead of holding an election to select a new mayor, one had to be appointed by the NCPO.

dynasty, as the Mayor of Pattaya.[54]. Sontaya eventually served as an advisor to the Prime

Minister while Itthiphon was appointed as the Vice Minister For Tourism and Sports.

Second, among the orders issued for the suspension of local councilors and

administrators, many targeted individuals who had ties to Pheu Thai and Thaksin. For example,

Boonlert Buranupakorn, the chief executive of PAO in Chiang Mai and former political ally of

the Shinawatra, was singled out in NCPO Order No. 44/2016, which suspended him from duty

temporarily and without compensation.[55] Other notable figures who received similar treatment

included Anusorn Nakasai and Soontorn Ratanakorn, members of political dynasties and local

factions that previously lent electoral support to Thaksin. The NCPO later issued orders using the

authority of Section 44 to selectively return some of these local political office holders to their

posts. The common thread was that in the 2019 elections, their families and factions were seen to

have switched allegiance to the PPRP or, at the very least, remained neutral rather than

supporting Pheu Thai.

Other notable uses of Section 44 that had important implications for electoral politics

included: 1) a crackdown on offenses relating to national security, or violation of the NCPO's

orders and the laws on firearms, ammunition and explosives, including forbidding political

gatherings of more than five people, and on individuals who posed a threat to peace, the

economy, and society of the country, authorizing peacekeeping officers to summon, interrogate

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[54] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 15/B.E. 2561 (2018)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, September 25, 2018).
[55] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 44/B.E. 2559 (2016)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, July 26, 2016).

and arrest without a warrant for no more than 7 days[56]; 2) removing Somchai Srisutthiyakorn as election commissioner[57] and authorizing the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) to exercise discretion over the drawing of electoral district boundaries[58]; 3) easing certain restrictions on political activities and amending the Organic Act on Political Parties, which had the effects of requiring established political parties to verify and provide evidence of party membership status within a given period, canceling the primary vote as a mandatory process for candidate selection, extending the deadline for donations and collection of membership fees, and permitting political parties to recruit candidates until the election date.[59]

Even outside the framework of Section 44, the NCPO maintained a significant degree of legal and regulatory power over political opponents in ways that were potentially consequential for the election.

First, after removing the former set of election commissioners from office, the NCPO exercised considerable influence over the recruitment and appointment of the new ECT, working through the NLA, a rubberstamp parliament whose members were handpicked by the NCPO. In February 2018, the entire set of seven nominees were rejected by the NLA, while in July, only

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[56] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 3/B.E. 2558 (2015)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, April 1, 2015); *Head of the NCPO Order No. 13/B.E. 2559 (2016)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, March 29, 2016).

[57] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 4/B.E. 2561 (2018)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, March 20, 2018).

[58] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 16/B.E. 2561 (2018)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, November 16, 2018).

[59] *Head of the NCPO Order No. 53/B.E. 2560 (2017)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, December 22, 2017); *Head of the NCPO Order No. 13/B.E. 2561 (2018)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, September 19, 2018); *Head of the NCPO Order No. 16/B.E. 2561 (2018)* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, November 16, 2018).

five out of seven were approved. The final two members were selected in October.[60] The

multiple rounds of selection highlight the extent to which the NLA, and thus the NCPO,

possessed power over the appointment of a supposedly independent body of election

commissioners. Under the new Constitution and according to the Organic Act on the Election

Commission, the ECT was authorized to organize free and fair elections in keeping with the

Constitution and other laws, recruit election inspectors and volunteer observers, order an audit of

party financial statements, and conduct investigations, including to disqualify candidates on

charges of electoral fraud.

Second, the NCPO extended the tenure of the judges of the Constitutional Court while

approving two new members via the NLA. The Constitutional Court was empowered to uphold

the supremacy of the Constitution, including to ban political parties found to be in violation of

the laws on political parties or the Constitution. Historically, the court regularly featured in bitter

struggles for power in post-2006 Thailand as a player unto itself.[61] By keeping most of the court

intact and overseeing the appointment of two judges to the court, the NCPO fostered an

environment in which the independence of judges and the apolitical nature of their decisions

might be called into question. Both the Constitutional Court and the ECT would eventually prove

to be instrumental for producing a favorable outcome for the junta both during the elections and

once in parliament.

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[60] iLaw, "เลือกตั้ง 62: การเลือกตั้งไร้อิสระ - เมื่อ กกต. ถูกยึดด้วยอำนาจ คสช.," *iLaw*, October 24, 2018, https://ilaw.or.th/node/4982.

[61] Most infamously, it removed Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej from power in 2008 after he hosted a television cooking show while in office. The court was also responsible for dissolving the Phalang Prachachon Party, removing Yingluck Shinawatra from power and annulling the general election in 2014.

In the run up to the election, the Constitutional Court responded to the recommendation filed by the ECT and ordered the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart party (TRC) for nominating Princess Ubolratana as its candidate for prime minister, effectively removing one of the Thaksin-aligned parties.[62] The TRC, a sister party of Pheu Thai, was deployed as part of a tactical maneuver to mitigate the effects of an electoral system designed to subvert Pheu Thai's dominance. The party would field candidates in districts where Pheu Thai lacked strong candidates and accumulated party list seats which would otherwise be denied to Pheu Thai under the MMA system. This strategy to "break a one thousand baht bill into one hundred baht bills," as it was colloquially called, put Pheu Thai at a significant disadvantage once the TRC was dissolved since Pheu Thai had fielded candidates in only 250 out of 350 districts to avoid contesting in the same districts as the TRC.

More than a month after the election, the ECT formally announced the outcome of the election and the formula that it had used for calculating and allocating party list seats.[63] The ECT's interpretation of the Organic Law on Elections allowed for parties that won votes less than the minimum threshold, approximately 70,000 votes, calculated by dividing the total number of valid ballots by the total number of MPs. The announcement came after the Constitutional Court had ruled this method was not a violation of the Constitution. This interpretation of electoral rules granted one parliamentary seat to each of the 11 parties who

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[62] "Thai Court Accepts Party Dissolution Case over Nomination of Princess Ubolratana as PM Candidate," *Straits Times*, February 14, 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thai-court-accepts-party-dissolution-case-over-princess-pm-gaffe.

[63] "กกต. ประกาศผลการเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎรแบบบัญชีรายชื่อ [ECT Announcement of Election Results for Party List MPs]," (Office of Election Commission of Thailand, Election Commission of Thailand, May 8, 2019).

otherwise would not have won any seats had a different formula been used. Given the small margin of victory regarding the number of parliamentary votes the PPRP needed to approve a prime minister, the actions taken by the ECT and the court proved decisive for the formation of a PPRP-led parliament.

Third, less than a year after the election, the Constitutional Court dissolved the Future Forward Party (FFP) on charges filed by the ECT, which claimed that the party had violated the law on party financing.[64] The court ruled that the loan the party received from founder Thanathorn Jungroongruangkit was illegal. The members of the executive committee of the party were banned from politics for 10 years, although other FFP MPs retained their parliamentary seats if they registered as members of a new party within 30 days. Prior to its dissolution, the party and its leaders faced numerous other lawsuits ranging from a media-shareholding case which disqualified Thanathorn from serving in parliament to a conspiracy charge that the party had links to the Illuminati and were plotting to overthrow the monarchy.

In brief, authoritarian legal interventions, as characterized using Section 44 and the politicization of the courts and other independent bodies, worked to strengthen the dominance of a pro-regime party like the PPRP in electoral and parliamentary politics at the expense of opposition parties. The messages conveyed by these interventions were even more transparent than the statement that the Constitution was "designed for us." Those who dared oppose the regime would face undesirable consequences or be targeted with lawsuits in a system of courts and legal apparatuses that lacked independence.

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[64] Amy Gunia, "A Thai Opposition Party That Pushed for Democratic Reform Has Just Been Disbanded," *Time*, February 21, 2020, https://time.com/5788470/thailand-future-forward-party-disbanded/.

Autocratic-Bureaucratic Levers and Coercive Apparatuses

Thus far, this chapter has shown that the NCPO not only put in place a set of institutional arrangements that bestowed significant advantages to the PPRP but also intervened, through legal channels, to ensure that the PPRP had the upper hand in terms of recruiting influential figures to serve as the electoral foundation of the party. This section continues the analysis by focusing on the NCPO's extraordinary influence over the state bureaucracy and local officials via its control over the state's coercive apparatus, which represents the least transparent and perhaps most important component of the PPRP's informal alliance with the NCPO. This influence offered PPRP significant leverage with which to secure the cooperation of state agencies and local state officials, creating significant obstacles for opposition parties, especially when recruiting vote canvassers and candidates and during election campaigns.

Publicly, the military took an acute ideological stance. Just months before the 2019 election, the Commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army, Gen. Apirat Kongsompong, made regular appearances in the news, making a series of comments and taking actions that could be interpreted as a message to the opposition. In response to the holding of political rallies in January, Apirat warned, "do not cross the line."[65] Later, after Sudarat Keyuraphan, one of Pheu Thai's candidates for prime minister, proposed a policy to cut the military budget and end conscription, Apirat suggested that she should go and listen to "*nuk pan din,"* a song once used to indoctrinate and inculcate right-wing ideology to justify the killing of leftists prior to the

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[65] "Apirat Tells Protesters Not to 'Cross the Line,'" *Bangkok Post*, January 16, 2019, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1611754/apirat-tells-protesters-not-to-cross-the-line.

October 6, 1976 Thammasat massacre.[66] Later, in an oath-swearing ceremony, Apirat and

military officers kneeled before the statue of King Rama V and vowed to defend the monarchy.[67]

Apirat brushed the event off as a non-political gesture, but the peculiar timing and unprecedented

nature of the event indicate otherwise.

On a closer look, the military's involvement in the domain of electoral politics went

beyond mere symbolic acts and rhetoric. After the 2014 coup and in the run up to the 2019

elections, special units were formed and deployed to closely monitor the political activities of

candidates of rival parties.[68] These units reported directly to the Internal Security Operations

Command (ISOC), the socio-political arm of the military, underscoring a broader pattern of

authoritarian management of democracy and elections.

According to Puangthong (2017), ISOC has been active since the counter-insurgency

period, during which it engaged in the surveillance and suppression of communist movement but

has come to play a more expansive role in Thai society since the 2006 coup—a kind of "mission

creep" that has broadened the Thai military's involvement in traditionally non-military affairs.

These range from managing natural resources and forest reserves to overseeing development

projects and conducting criminal investigations in cases related to national security. The Internal

Security Act of 2008, approved by the junta appointed NLA, formally endowed ISOC with a

broad set of powers and duties, for example, to evaluate situations relating to internal security

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[66] "ผบ.ทบ.บอกให้ฟัง 'เพลงหนักแผ่นดิน' หลังพรรคการเมืองชงตัดงบกองทัพ-ยกเลิกเกณฑ์ทหาร [The Army Chief Said to Listen to 'Nuk Pan Din' Song after Political Party Proposed to Cut Military Budget and End Conscription]," *Post Today*, February 18, 2019, https://www.posttoday.com/politic/news/580630.

[67] "Apirat Orders Vigilance for Election," *Bangkok Post*, March 8, 2019, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1640880/apirat-orders-vigilance-for-election.

[68] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet province, November 17, 2020.

threats and propose plans and directions to the cabinet for approval, coordinate the activities of

government agencies in implementing the approved plans and directions, and raise public

awareness of their duties and loyalties toward the nation, religion, and king.[69] In addition,

branches of ISOC were formally established in all of Thailand's provinces and four regions.

Formally, provincial governors, who are appointed by the Ministry of Interior, serve as the

directors of the provincial branches. However, in practice, army-appointed officers reported on

the activities of provincial governors, resulting in a version of "deep state" in which the military

oversaw the state bureaucracy.[70]

Since the NCPO took power in 2014, the broadening of ISOC's powers and duties has

intersected with the use of Section 44, resulting in many arbitrary and ad hoc operations by units

under ISOC's command. According to Pich, an informant affiliated with a former Red Shirt

activist and former PPP MP, a militarized unit was assigned to his family as early as 2014:

> They arrived at our house with armored trucks and guns, barged into our home without
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> taking off their shoes, kicked our dogs and followed us everywhere we went…they did
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> the same for anyone in our province that had something to do with the Red Shirt
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> movement or Pheu Thai.[71]

This picture is remarkably consistent with Puangthong's assessment that color-coded politics and

military coups not only broadened the scope of ISOC's activities but also empowered the ISOC

with unprecedented authority over the activities of state agencies and citizens in ways that served

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[69] *Internal Security Act, B.E. 2551* (Bangkok: Office of the Council of State, 2008), section 7.

[70] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet province, November 17, 2020.

[71] Pich, a member of a local political family that previously supported Pheu Thai, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

the interest of the military and its political allies. There was, however, more to the ISOC's

activities in the electoral arena than surveillance and intimidation of political opposition or

influencing the appointment, removal, and transfer of local officials in state agencies under the

Ministry of Interior.

According to the same informant, the unit that was originally tasked with suppressing

dissidents and anti-military activities by the informant's family members ended up assisting them

with campaigning once they defected to the PPRP. The unit conducted weekly polls and surveys,

collecting information on candidates and potential candidates and held meetings with the PPRP

candidate's family every Monday night during the campaign, constantly informing them of

where potential electoral obstacles stemming from rival local factions might arise and where

conflicts between village-level or district-level vote canvassers might pose a threat to the success

of their electoral strategies.[72] Informal backing from the ISOC was, therefore, another possible

source of the PPRP's strategic advantage in the 2019 elections, although it is unclear to what

extent this was the underlying cause of defection from other parties.

Beyond the scope of the ISOC, a candidate affiliated with the PPRP revealed that most

PPRP candidates in districts and provinces with military bases were granted a distinct electoral

advantage for several reasons. First, the voting of lower ranking military officers was allegedly

monitored closely by higher ranking military officers who had some connection to the leaders of

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[72] It is important to note that this informant saw his working relationship with military officers as a deviation from a general trend even among candidates who were pro-junta or associated with the PPRP. The informant referred to the officers as *phee,* a term used to describe an older sibling, suggesting that the relationship was viewed in personal rather than formal, institutional terms. Support from the unit was interpreted as a special favor, although affiliation with the PPRP was identified as the root cause of their support during the campaign.

the NCPO.[73] Second, the intimidating presence of military officers made it difficult for vote canvassers working for rival parties to openly engage in the usual patronage-oriented and electioneering activities that election campaigns often call for. Third, handouts to vote canvassers and voters were in some instances distributed through military officers, reducing the risk of defection or betrayal.[74] This evidence is not meant to suggest that military networks were systematically used to provide campaign support to candidates who competed under the PPRP banner in all 350 districts or that this was the dominant pattern of support from the military. They are only meant to shed light on the possibility that joining the PPRP implied an informal partnership with powerful allies whose coercive capacities and organizational networks, for example the ISOC, made traditional political tactics, including patronage-based and clientelistic ones, not only less costly but also more effective at producing favorable electoral outcomes.

Forming PPRP: A Bird's Eye View

The preceding discussion offers substantial but by no means exhaustive evidence that the PPRP's affiliation with the military regime constituted the source of its strategic, institutional, and resource advantages in the 2019 elections. The analysis now turns to the question of how the PPRP's authoritarian legacy invigorated a longstanding pattern of patronage politics. I argue that several of the aforementioned advantages interacted with the characteristics of the regime and timing of the return to democracy in ways that critically influenced the PPRP's party building and campaigning strategies. Given the legitimacy deficit and time constraints faced by the

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[73] A PPRP candidate in Udon Thani, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 14, 2021.
[74] A PPRP candidate in Udon Thani, interview with the author.

regime, the PPRP's unprecedented political leverage accorded by its ties to the NCPO and the regime's need to insure against electoral uncertainty led the PPRP's leaders to privilege above all else the cooptation of former MPs, local politicians, and influential figures and the delivery of goods and services through these actors in the hope of generating support from voters.

From the outset, the goal of the PPRP was to safeguard the continuity of various arrangements put in place under the NCPO's leadership. According to a source from in the PPRP, this ranged from sustaining megaprojects and macro-policies that had already been implemented, for example, the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) and state welfare scheme for low-income earners to the need to prevent Thaksin's return to dominance and keep Prayuth in power, given the circumstances of the post-coup and post-King Bhumibol political order.[75] To achieve these objectives, the party needed to assume the leading role in forming a ruling coalition, which required it to overcome two primary constraints despite already having 250 senate votes.

Time constraint. In contrast to the TRT which had more than two years to build the party, develop a coherent platform and generate awareness among voters, the majority of the PPRP's party building and campaigning activities had to be done within the year prior to the election, although the case can still be made that the PPRP had more time to prepare than other parties did, given the party's proximity to the institutions that played a key role in enforcing the NCPO's ban on political activities and determining the election date.

Legitimacy deficit. The PPRP was deeply unpopular among voters who shared pro-Thaksin, pro-democratic and anti-military views. These voters, primarily residing in the rural

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[75] A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, March 9, 2020.

North and Northeast, saw Prayuth as an inherently illegitimate candidate for prime minister given his former role as the NCPO leader and coup maker. The fact that the party was short on time and popular legitimacy led to two strategic choices that had important consequences not only for the party's electoral performance but also organizational dynamics in the long run.

First, as previously mentioned, the party opted to name itself after the economic policies already implemented under the military regime, capitalizing on an already existing political brand and creating awareness of the party's association with the brand well in advance of the party's formal electoral campaign. Furthermore, as conveyed by the adapted lyrics of Yinglee's "Your Heart for My Number," casting a vote for the PPRP implied a continuation or expansion of the flow of economic benefits, particularly in the form of welfare cards to low-income earners. Associating the party brand with these policies was a design choice meant to capture grassroots support and on-the-fence voters who benefited from prior policy arrangements under the Pheu Thai government.

Second, lacking the time to build its own organizational networks at the local level, the party resorted to a candidate selection strategy that prioritized individuals and old-style politicians who were already in control of existing vote-canvassing networks and would be positioned to deliver the votes for the party in exchange for financial support during election time and patronage once in government. From a strategic standpoint, an electoral campaign centered around the role of vote-canvassing networks also offered a practical solution for addressing Prayuth's popularity problem in provinces previously dominated by Pheu Thai. Under a single ballot system, voters could be persuaded to cast a vote for a PPRP candidate even if they

did not prefer the PPRP as a party or Prayuth as a leader.[76] In addition, given the MMA framework, since constituency votes would be aggregated to calculate the allocation of party list seats, financial investments made for the organization and mobilization of vote-canvassing networks were not zero-sum even for a losing constituency candidate.

Indeed, while claiming credit and making credible commitments to continue the policies implemented under Prayuth's leadership were actions that could only be taken by the PPRP, the choice to engage in a candidate selection strategy with selection criteria that emphasized personal control over vote-canvassing networks was available to all parties that had ample financial backing and support from influential figures at the regional or provincial level. These included parties across the ideological spectrum, ranging from parties like Pheu Thai, which claimed to espouse pro-democratic values and parties like the Bhumjaithai Party, which had no real problem with lending support to the military so long as their place in the ruling coalition was guaranteed. More importantly, the recruitment of local elites and the vote-canvassing networks under their command, no matter how heavy-handed or transactional, does not strictly indicate the use of clientelistic politics; it merely reflects a high level of competition over access to the networks that have the potential for distributing patronage resources or facilitating the kind of electoral linkages implied by theories of clientelism. However, as I will demonstrate in the next section, the PPRP's authoritarian backing and baggage not only made coopting vote-canvassing networks appear attractive but also ensured that those networks were well-equipped for engaging

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[76] Note, however, only parties' names and not candidates' names were on the ballot. This makes it more striking that a candidate-centered strategy was still successful in some constituencies.

in patronage politics on a scale difficult to match by networks affiliated with candidates of other parties.

The Recruitment of Factions and Candidate Selection

According to the Organic Act on Political Parties, nomination committees would be formed in each electoral district, consisting of party executives, leaders of party branches and representatives of the party at the provincial level, and primary elections would be held to select the candidates from among the nominees.[77] Prior to the election, however, the NCPO, by the power of Section 44, later amended these provisions, allowing for the formation of nomination committees that included four party executives and seven representatives at every province (rather than every district), suspending the requirement for the holding of primary elections and empowering the party executive committee to select candidates directly from among the nominees. In practice, this made candidate selection a process that could be bypassed via informal practices or subject to the discretion of party leaders or party stakeholders with relatively little bottom-up participation by the party's rank and file members who, for many political parties except for the Democrat Party, were mostly nonexistent or inactive to begin with.

For the PPRP, circumventing the formal rules of candidate selection was especially important for its attempt to put together a viable electoral vehicle in a political landscape once dominated by Pheu Thai and to a lesser extent the Democrat Party. According to one of the PPRP's legal experts, "due to time constraints and political realities, we did not simply nominate

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[77] *Organic Act on the Political Parties, B.E. 2560 (2017)*, section 49–50.

and select candidates. We were competing with other political parties for candidates. We had to make sure that we had the upper hand in recruiting promising candidates in every district."[78] The underlying message of this statement is that actual recruitment had to take place long before formal candidate selection. Based on my own observations, in some cases these informal recruitment activities were plotted in absolute secrecy while defections were timed to make it difficult or impossible for rival parties to find suitable replacements before the official registration deadline set by the ECT. Furthermore, to secure "the upper hand," recruitment activities had to be conducted mostly in a wholesale manner rather than on an individual basis— that is, at the level of factional, provincial, or regional leaders who could, at a moment's notice, get a large number of potential candidates and local vote-canvassing networks to defect from other political parties.

These dynamics were clarified in another interview with Wong, one of PPRP's executive committee members who participated in the selection and nomination of candidates. According to Wong, "When we reached the formal stage of selecting candidates, the faction bosses were already with us."[79] Wong continued,

the actual process of candidate selection was completed in fulfillment of the legal requirements, but it was mostly just legal minutiae. In reality, the committees in each place were made up by the candidates or groups who had already been courted by the party. Our responsibility was to screen the list of names that they sent.[80]

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[78] A legal expert who worked for the PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 14, 2020.
[79] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.
[80] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.

Wong's statement is most likely generalizable to several other political parties in Thailand that placed a similar premium on recruiting regional and provincial leaders who controlled local vote-canvassing networks. For these parties, formal candidate selection represented the final rather than initial stage of recruitment; it served to confirm, legally, the candidates already chosen via informal competitions that took place locally and nationally, in and between the various political factions within the parties. Nevertheless, the PPRP took these politics-as-usual arrangements to new heights, as highlighted by the extent of leverage the party possessed by virtue of its affiliation with the NCPO.

The PPRP's attempt to coopt political factions nationwide began even before the party was officially formed. The first to demonstrate support to what eventually became the PPRP was Sontaya Khunpluem, leader of the Phalang Chon Party and Chonburi's dominant faction and a long-time friend of Apirat Kongsompong, the Secretary General of the NCPO. The news became official in April 2018 when Sontaya was appointed as a political advisor to the prime minister. The move was designed to send a signal that the NCPO was open to working with politicians, an NCPO-affiliated party was being formed, and the party, like a ship, was now "ready for boarding."[81] Sontaya's faction eventually joined the PPRP and fielded candidates in the party's name in all eight districts of Chonburi.

At roughly the same time, the Sam Mitr ("Three Allies") faction was founded by former TRT cabinet ministers and Wang Nam Yom faction leaders, Somsak Thepsutin and Suriya Jungrungreangkit, along with Anucha Nakasai and Pirom Pholwiset. The deal-making and recruitment activities of the Sam Mitr faction made national headlines regularly and sent

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[81] A technocrat who worked with the PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, July 20, 2021.

shockwaves to Pheu Thai, whose MPs, especially in the upper-Central, lower-Northern, and Northeastern provinces, had personal ties to Sam Mitr's leaders. Most notable was Sam Mitr's success in bringing on board Preecha Rengsomboonsuk, former Pheu Thai cabinet minister and MP, and his faction in Loey Province, which demonstrated the reach and credibility of Sam Mitr's connections and Pheu Thai's drastic failure to prevent defection by its political heavyweights.[82] According to a member of the Sam Mitr faction,

> since the law prohibited party and campaigning activities, we said we were just a group of friends meeting other friends. We made the headlines almost every week. We started small but we had both fame and power because of Suriya. He's the real deal in terms of funding…our recruitment strategy was to sell them policies first and money second.[83]

What was meant was that becoming friends with Sam Mitr would guarantee not only the right to use *pracharath* policies for campaigning purposes but also additional financial support during elections.

By September 2018, the PPRP had already succeeded in bringing on a large number of former MPs from other political parties, numbering almost a hundred.[84] The recruits did not consist only of former MPs but also local politicians who, according to one faction leader in the PPRP, "were like political power grids and they were ready to plug into our power network."[85]

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[82] Preecha and his faction members did not win seats in the 2019 elections. According to a party insider, the faction purposely withdrew from campaigning in the election. It was even rumored that he had used the funds he received from the party for purposes other than campaigning. After the election, Preecha's faction left the PPRP and formed a new political party under the name Pheu Prachachon.

[83] A PPRP candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 24, 2020.

[84] Regarding the details on the actual composition of those recruited, see Punchada (2019)'s analysis.

[85] A PPRP MP and faction leader, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 5, 2020.

Since recruiting Sam Mitr, the dynamics of recruitment became akin to a snowball effect, where one faction led to additional factions, families, and groups joining the party.[86] Beyond the three groups already mentioned, the PPRP was joined by Varathep Rattanakorn's faction in Kamphaengphet, Virat Rattanaset's faction in Nakhon Ratchasima, Supol Fongngam's faction in Ubon Ratchathani, Santi Prompat's faction in Petchabun, Pinit Jarusombat's Wang Phayanak faction, Suchart Tancharoen's Ban Rim Nam faction, Aekkarat Changlao's faction in Khon Kaen, the Thianthong family in Sakaew, the Asavahame family in Samut Prakan, and the Teekananond family in Udon Thani. All were prominent local political machines or dynasties that survived both the domination of Pheu Thai and extended military rule of the NCPO. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but instead to draw attention to how extensive the PPRP's electoral patchwork had become long before the party reached the formal candidate selection stage. While the PPRP did not have direct links to local factions in every district or province, its network of factions spanning across the nation made filling the gaps in the electoral map a relatively simple task.

Meanwhile, in Bangkok and a few provinces previously dominated by the Democrat Party, the PPRP relied on the support of Nataphol Teepsuwan and Buddhipongse Punnakanta, former leaders of the PDRC. In places where the party did not have identifiable factions representing the party, the PPRP designated its own set of regional leaders to handle matters of recruiting politicians. In several Northern provinces, for example, the party enlisted the support of Thammanat Prompao. In the South, the party relied on Colonel Suchart Chantarachotikul, Prayuth's old friend from cadet school, while the three Southern border provinces were left

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[86] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 11, 20201.

under the care of Anumat Amat, a former senator. Once these regional and provincial leaders were identified, recruited, or designated, the task of selecting candidates in each district was then outsourced to these individuals, although the party continued to rely on polling instruments and government personnel to verify the credibility and check the popularity of the candidates nominated against likely rival candidates in the same districts. On the surface, the PPRP maintained the appearance of a party organization, but the reality was that candidate selection was very much the business of political elites in no way loyal to the party. If anything, formal candidate selection operated as a power-sharing or provision-sharing arrangement for managing and organizing the party's most powerful factions and stakeholders, whose interests and territories sometimes overlapped.

The complexity of the PPRP's informal arrangement for candidate selection did not simply stop at the fact that the number of factions that joined the party had already exceeded a dozen by the time it formally launched in September. Beyond those who attended party meetings regularly, there were also affiliates of the NCPO and influential military officers, General Sontaya Sricharoen and General Akkanit Muensawat among them, who played an influential role in determining who got to run as the PPRP candidate in several districts. According to a member of the Sam Mitr faction, "the problem in the Northeast was that we already recruited Grade A candidates but the military wanted to field their own people, who weren't Grade A candidates, as a way to build their own political base."[87] Conflicts and tensions among different factions in the party, and between traditional politicians and military figures, became a common occurrence as

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[87] A PPRP MP and member of the Sam Mitr faction, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 24, 2020.

each leveraged their own personal ties (*sai*) to the powerholders both in and above the party to influence candidate selection and fill the roster with members of their own faction. Although the competition was narrow, it was nevertheless intense in provinces where multiple factions overlapped or factions were fragmented.

In Kamphaeng Phet Province, for example, a source indicated that Somsak Thepsuthin initially expressed an intention to field his own team of candidates for all four districts in the province or at least in districts that lacked strong candidates. The news was greatly upsetting to the members of Varathep Rattanakorn's faction, many of whom were incumbents in the province and had already defected from Pheu Thai in anticipation of running as candidates under the PPRP's banner. The conflict between the factions was brought, via a phone conference call, to the higher-ups within the party, whose decision-making authority appeared increasingly illusory given that the NCPO was the real locus of power. The dispute was eventually settled not through the party organization but bargaining with a third faction in the province.[88]

Elsewhere, in a district in Phatthalung Province, there were at least three contenders, each claiming to be a candidate chosen by the PPRP. Their vote canvassers placed bets that ran as high as 30 million THB (~990,000 USD) on which candidate would be selected by the party.[89] Each candidate boasted poll results from different polling agencies to assert their credibility. After witnessing that the party appeared to be reneging on the agreement to field candidates he

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[88] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet province, November 7, 2020.

[89] Polling agencies frequently play an important role in determining who gets selected as a candidate. Since these agencies sometimes outsource their work to members of local organizations or are owned by candidates, parties, or their affiliates, their results tend not to accurately reflect public opinion but instead indicate the underlying preferences of the elites who attempt to outdo one another by using the results as an excuse.

selected, Colonel Suchart, the regional leader of the PPRP in the South, threatened to get every single candidate under his wing to defect at the last minute, which would have ruined the party's momentum in the South. The fire was put out when the party finally stepped in but its failure to root out the conflict from the beginning indicates just how much the process of candidate selection was left to the discretion of individual actors, both those situated in and outside the formal organizational framework of the party.[90] The loose informal arrangements and absence of organizational discipline made for a framework that granted a high level of bargaining power to faction leaders and real power holders sitting behind the curtain at the expense of the party organization.

At the level of faction leaders, the motives for defecting from other parties and swinging their support in favor of the PPRP were highly diverse. These ranged from a general desire to be part of the ruling coalition or attain cabinet positions to the need for protection and legal assistance. On closer look, however, these motives were inextricably linked in one way or another to the PPRP's unique status as a party supported by the NCPO. Put another way, if time constraints and the NCPO's popularity problem steered the PPRP toward adopting an aggressive cooptation strategy of factions and former MPs, the party's affiliation with the NCPO was necessary for such a strategy to succeed. In the absence of the party's alliance with the NCPO, the strategy would have been unthinkable. This is because the NCPO's control over state institutions and government resources constituted a highly potent source of patronage, which

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[90] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 11, 2021.

mattered to the leaders of factions not only for competing in the 2019 elections but also for quite literally staying out of trouble.

An insider within the PPRP described the relationship between the party's linkage to the NCPO and its successful recruitment of factions and candidates in the following terms:

> Let's start with the fact that we worked with the military. They had their own teams and networks consisting of military officers, police officers and bureaucrats within the Ministry of Interior. These were the levers of the state that were deployed to assist us in recruiting factions and candidates. In plain language, state power always plays a role in every election in Thailand but [during this election] we were given total and exclusive access to state power which enabled us to persuade, coerce or offer protection to targeted individuals that had potential.[91]

The statement sheds light on the fact that the PPRP's affiliation with the NCPO critically shaped the course of the party's strategic pursuits and recruitment of factions and former MPs. Notwithstanding the fact that the PPRP stood a good chance to vote in a prime minister, considering the constitutional advantages that the party enjoyed via the NCPO's influence over the 250 appointed senators, the party had privileged access to state bureaucracies and coercive apparatuses that made joining the PPRP more attractive (or not joining PPRP more costly) than it otherwise would.

The "levers of the state" have always been important ingredients in any successful mobilization of vote-canvassing networks, as such networks often thrived on the influence of local government officials and political office holders. In the 2019 elections, these levers were

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[91] A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.

not up for grabs and could only be accessed by those with the regime's blessing, reinvigorating a pattern of "government parties" that dated back to elections pre-1973. The PPRP's leaders were not only keenly aware of but also capitalized on the unique position of the party vis-à-vis the NCPO to engage in a carrot-and-stick approach in its recruitment of individuals they perceived to be capable of influencing electoral outcomes on a large scale, not least due to the vote-canvassing networks under their control. The nature of the PPRP's cooptation strategy was therefore very much shaped by the regime's overwhelming political leverage stemming from its influence over the bureaucracy.

Aside from the NCPO's overwhelming control over government resources and state institutions, it is also worth mentioning its capacity to make credible threats of punishment or offer protection by virtue of its potential influence over the courts and other regulatory bodies, including the NCCC, whose president was a former advisor to General Prawit Wongsuwan, the NCPO's deputy chairman. Consider, for example, that at least five faction leaders who supported the PPRP in 2019, including Virat Ratanaset, Santi Prompat, Varathep Rattanakorn, Sontaya Khunpluem and Anucha Nakasai, had family members or were themselves facing ongoing charges and investigation or suspension from local administration organization. This does not include those who switched their allegiances on a more individual basis, for example, Dejnattawit Teriyapirom, son of Boonsong Teriyapriom, former commerce minister under Yingluck who took the fall for the rice pledging scandal, Boonlert Buranupakorn, a former Shinawatra ally who faced charges for his role in distributing a letter that criticized the draft of the Constitution in the run up to the referendum in 2016 and Suporn Utthawong, a former Red Shirt leader nicknamed "Rambo Isan."

In many cases, joining the PPRP appeared attractive not only because it improved their chances of getting elected and the PPRP was poised to be the ruling party but because doing otherwise could entail jailtime, obstruction to their political activities, or the demise of their local political influence. As such, the competition over the recruitment of influential political figures and leaders of local patronage networks, otherwise an everyday phenomenon that occurred in most previous elections, was characterized by an extremely uneven playing field.

Vote-canvassing Networks and Money Politics

The fact that the factions and candidates who controlled local patronage networks suitable for traditional vote-canvassing tactics were aggressively recruited by the party during candidate selection indicates that the PPRP was in a privileged position to engage in patronage politics without incurring the same burden that other parties had to bear. The reason for the party's interest in mobilizing voters through vote-canvasing networks went beyond its extreme comparative advantage, by virtue of its authoritarian linkages, in engaging in this style of patronage politics. To fully address the question of why patronage was favored as a tool for party-building and campaigning, it is important to shed further light on what problems patronage politics appears to solve for a party like the PPRP, aside from enabling the party to capitalize on its connection to the regime and dominating other players engaged in a similar game.

An important clue may be found in the fact that while many political parties regularly dispense patronage as a way to build electoral support, only an authoritarian successor party does so to ensure regime survival. What is at stake is not simply an election victory but the continuity of the structures of power put in place by the regime after its seizure of power. This does not

only mean that the PPRP was more prepared than most parties to go the extra mile in terms of striving to maximize its winning chances.[92] It also implies that patronage politics appeared as an effective tool to compete, given that patronage politics was organized in ways that offered a high level of countability and predictability. In other words, the factions' organizational resources and capacity to mobilize vote-canvassing networks at the local level were also sought after by the PPRP to insure against the uncertainties of elections, not simply to win elections. There is some evidence to support this claim. A PPRP executive had this to say about the role of vote canvassers and *rabob uppatham* in Thailand's elections:

> Our electoral system is underpinned by *rabob uppatham* at the subnational level. Don't believe for a second that they aren't real or relevant…We rely on these structures to form vote-canvassing networks. This person is in charge of these 1000 votes. This person is responsible for these 500 votes. This person monitors these 3000 votes. These mechanisms led us to compete not only for MPs but also for provincial councilors, subdistrict councilors, mayors, subdistrict chiefs and village heads. Because if these individuals were to serve as vote canvassers, it's equivalent to having a portion of the state in our hand, at least at the local level. Don't believe that you would be able to win elections without these components. No way. And when we claim that this or that

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[92] According to Magaloni, one possible reason for authoritarian parties to strive to win by a large rather than narrow margin is that they are fundamentally interested in "creating an image of invincibility" and to send a message that "outside of the ruling party there is nothing but limbo." Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511510274. In my reading of the case of PPRP, this was not the primary agenda given that the party leaders acknowledged the predominance of Pheu Thai. A Pheu Thai-led coalition government was an outcome both the party and regime sought to avoid. Loss aversion, therefore, offers a more convincing explanation.

candidate would win, we are not saying this just because we trust in the candidate's word of mouth. We evaluate the candidate based on the size and characteristic of their vote-canvassing networks. If the candidate has all the right qualifications but doesn't have this, then the candidate doesn't qualify in our opinion. And this has more weight than *krasae* (popularity) of the party…When we made local visits, [they] would line up their health volunteers, subdistrict chiefs and village heads. We expect to see these components because they tend to guarantee favorable electoral outcomes, whether *krasae* is positive or negative. It's like pushing a button. You push and the votes come out.[93]

The selection criteria of the PPRP's candidate selection strategy were, therefore, shaped by an understanding that vote-canvassing networks provided an important infrastructure for capturing electoral votes in a way that also yielded a high level of predictability and certainty, in the literal form of headcounts. In contrast, party popularity or *krasae*, conventionally viewed to be ephemeral or fluctuant, does not share this attribute. Furthermore, the newly introduced single-ballot system, which made losing votes in single-member constituencies count for determining the national party list seats, reinforced rather than attenuated the perception that vote-canvassing networks were integral for assuring the PPRP a presence in parliament. This was especially true in regions such as the North and Northeast, where the PPRP could not campaign effectively on the basis of its prime ministerial candidate or party brand. As such, organizational and resource capabilities to build and mobilize vote-canvassing networks were seen as essential prerequisites for a viable MP candidate.

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[93] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 11, 2021.

The relationship between predictability and vote-canvassing networks is underscored by the finding that the party relied on vote-canvassing networks as metrics for providing informal financial support. One PPRP informant revealed that the system the party used for providing financial support to fund electoral campaigns during the 2019 Elections was built around an informal ranking system that grouped the candidates into three tiers according to the candidates' track record and the size and reputation of their networks.[94]

Candidates in A-Tier, big-names who stood the highest chance to win, would receive the most funding from the party (30 million baht or more). B-tier candidates, those who may have lost by a small margin in the previous election or have smaller networks, would receive a smaller funding (20-25 million baht). Lastly, C-tier candidates would receive little informal funding from the party and are expected simply to run to gain votes for party list.[95]

This does not simply indicate that the party's underlying objective for recruiting vote-canvassing networks on a large scale by accumulating preexisting factions had been to distribute handouts through those networks in anticipation that the electoral support would be delivered in return. It also offers evidence that vote-canvassing networks were used as key performance indicators to quantify each candidate's likelihood of electoral success, which enabled the party to allocate its financial resources or supplement election campaigns by ramping up the pressure on the state apparatus accordingly. It is expected that vote-canvassing networks entail a high level of precision and predictability and delivering handouts through these networks was akin to "pushing a button" in the sense that votes would be delivered in the amount promised, granted

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[94] A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.
[95] A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

that the party or its candidates could mitigate the risk of defection by vote canvassers, for example, by hinting at the possibility of the military regime delivering punishment to those who fail to support the party.

This expectation was sometimes misplaced. In practice, the funds were not delivered directly from the party to individual candidates but instead given as lumpsums to faction leaders or designated regional leaders, who routinely pocketed portions of the funds for themselves.[96] These leaders exercised a high level of discretion over how the funds would be used while individual candidates, who may or may not have been particularly close to those leaders, were sometimes left to their own devices. To provide an example, four days before the 2019 Election, during a dinner conversation, a Northeastern PPRP candidate expressed grievances that the party's designated regional leader failed to provide the funds in full and in a timely manner.[97] The candidate had to make several phone calls, first, to the affiliate of a wealthy tycoon in the party and, second, to a high-ranking military officer in the region to secure an alternative source of financial support.[98] The candidate estimated that his vote canvassers numbered around 2,150 individuals and was intending to spend up to 35 million baht but he was at least 15 million short.

Elsewhere, in a different Northeastern province, at least two A-tier candidates who received a large amount of funding from the party allegedly used the funds to pay off their debts instead of for financing their campaigns or mobilizing their networks.[99] These examples illustrate that although the party valued the predictability of outcomes that vote-canvassing networks could

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[96] A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.
[97] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Udon Thani, March 20, 2019.
[98] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Udon Thani, March 20, 2019.
[99] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.

deliver, the party was not always successful at or committed to ensuring that the funds allocated through the networks would make their way down the pipeline as intended. It is unclear whether such slippages represent a systematic and strategic failure in the party's campaign financing framework or relatively minor transgressions well within the party's expectation. If the former is true and the party truly spent up to 7–8 billion baht during the elections, as disclosed by one informant, then this amount should reflect the party's spending on generating an appearance of commitment and credibility (vis-à-vis politicians, vote canvassers, and voters) rather than simply on buying electoral support in a contingent manner.[100]

The implication of this discussion is not that selecting candidates and offering financial support based on their control over vote-canvassing networks was somehow unique to the PPRP. Rather, the point is that the PPRP's connection to the authoritarian regime sharply intensified the role played by patronage in party-building and campaigning, although it did not fundamentally change the properties of patronage politics or the characteristics of patronage networks. To summarize, the PPRP's reliance on patronage politics was motivated by the high stakes of the election for a regime bent on assuring its survival and overwhelming control over the levers of

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[100] A technocrat who worked with the PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, July 20, 2021. This staggering amount does not include the distribution of personal funds to candidates and faction leaders, which would have raised the total spending even higher. The party was notorious holding a fund-raising banquet in December 2018, where each of the 200 tables cost 3 million baht. The party reportedly raised almost 650 million during the event, although the final number disclosed to the ECT was 352 million baht which, despite the media uproar, was only a tiny fraction of the total informal sponsorship disclosed by this anonymous source. It is difficult to estimate or generalize just how much of the funds were used, per candidate, for organizational upkeep of vote-canvassing networks and how much was distributed to voters as cash handouts. What is clear, however, is that costs associated with mobilizing the electorate via vote canvassing networks were acknowledged and accounted for by the party.

the state and access to government resources from which patronage is derived and on which vote-canvassing networks generally thrived. Through patronage politics, the electoral playing field could be made uneven and electoral outcomes more certain.

One important caveat must be made regarding this central point. The fact that the PPRP did not develop the organizational and resource capabilities to build and mobilize vote-canvassing networks on its own but instead entrusted a handful of faction leaders and subnational elites to do this on their behalf introduces a potential source of variation and divergence from theoretical expectations. Despite its seemingly all-encompassing and omnipotent image as a party backed by the junta, the PPRP did not fundamentally transform the nature of vote-canvassing networks at any level, local or national, nor did it approach the TRT's attempt to make these arrangements viable in a dominant single-party framework. Instead, the party upheld and reaffirmed the established way of doing things, bringing back a pattern of patronage politics that had been pervasive two decades prior. As previously noted, part of this has to do with the fact that the PPRP had a relatively short timeframe to build a viable electoral vehicle and faced a legitimacy deficit due to its affiliation with an unpopular regime. Pressed for time and facing a shortage of nationwide popularity, the PPRP found the cooptation of factions and use of patronage politics to be the best strategies for party building and campaigning among other alternatives. A more complete explanation, however, must account for the fact that the long-term development of Thailand's authoritarian regime after the 2006 coup failed to translate into the building of enduring and centralized linkages to the regime at the local level.

While authoritarian control over the state bureaucracy and, to a lesser extent, Thai society at large were achieved in the post-2006 political order, this control emanated outward from the

center. At the periphery, the organizational resources for building *rabob uppatham* or mobilizing

vote-canvassing networks remained significantly decentralized and disaggregated in ways that

made these networks fall beyond the immediate grasp of the authoritarian regime. Put

differently, although the PPRP's connection to the authoritarian regime granted it significant

leverage for an aggressive cooptation of *rabob uppatham* or vote-canvassing networks, the PPRP

was not endowed with equally far-reaching capabilities to oversee the incorporation of these

networks or construct a coherent party organization with actual linkages to the population. The

circumstances of the regime ensured a successful cooptation of regional, provincial, and factional

leaders but only by empowering and giving autonomy to such leaders to the detriment of the

organizational coherence of the party. This echoes Scott's insight that "the essential distinction is

one between a party that has created its own network of patron-client linkages from the center

and a party that relies on preexisting patron-client bonds and merely incorporates them into its

organization."[101] In the case of the PPRP, the choice to do the latter would prove to have

important implications for the ability of factions to subvert party discipline or leverage the

party's authoritarian linkages to pursue their own interests at the local level.[102]

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[101] James C. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia," *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972): 111, https://doi.org/10.2307/195.
[102] The TRT appears to have succeeded where the PPRP failed, in terms of ensuring that co-opting politicians worked to the benefit rather than the detriment of the party. This might be explained in terms of important differences in formal institutional rules, the presence or absence of mass support for the party (in response to party policies or other benefits to voters that individual politicians or vote canvassers cannot credibly claim credit for), and the degree of organizational investment made by party leaders. This final point deserves emphasis. General Prayuth, the PPRP's candidate for prime minister, never assumed a leadership role in the PPRP, while the actual party leader at the time, Uttama Savanayana, was a leader in name only. During the campaign leading up to the 2019 election, Prayuth made public appearance as a PPRP candidate for prime minister only once at a rally in Bangkok on the final day of the election campaign. Even after he was elected, he was rarely involved in the party's activities directly.

Patronage Politics in a Changing Electoral Landscape

Before proceeding to analyze the local dynamics that developed as a result of the PPRP's cooptation strategy, it is important to qualify how much vote-canvassing networks contributed to the PPRP's electoral success in light of the election results. Despite having implied the necessity of and significant investments in these networks and the candidates who controlled them, the party leaders admitted that this was not sufficient for winning the elections in 2019. According to a party executive,

> It's not a hundred percent true that vote-canvassing networks and *rabob uppatham*
>
> guarantee a win. These are the primary basis of electoral votes only in rural areas or only
>
> in some areas within cities. In more developed and more urbanized communities, where
>
> universities and educational institutions are located, things have changed. In these areas,
>
> *rabob uppatham* is joined by another variable, *krasae* [popularity]. In my opinion,
>
> electoral politics in Thailand has become a hybrid. It's no longer dominated purely by
>
> *rabob uppatham*.[103]

This testimony makes sense considering the election results. First, of the 97 constituency seats that the PPRP won, only 32 were former MPs who had defected from other parties. The

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Unlike the TRT, the PPRP was not run by a party leader-cum-prime minister. To the contrary, before General Prawit Wongsuwan assumed direct involvement in the party, each faction operated as semi-autonomous entities in the party. As a result, there was a palpable sense of distance between the prime minister and party MPs which proved to be destabilizing not only for the party but also the coalition government.

[103] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.

remaining 65 seats were won by local politicians or first-time MPs.[104] The fact that most of these individuals were nevertheless associated with local factions or political dynasties makes a straightforward interpretation of the outcome as reflecting the weaknesses of vote-canvassing networks slightly more complicated. However, at the regional level in Bangkok, where the PPRP won the largest number of seats (12), none of the candidates that the party fielded in Bangkok had been incumbents, let alone MPs. Most were political no-names with little reputation for possessing control over vote canvassers in their districts, although many were members of the Bangkok Metropolitan Council or District Council, had previous ties to the Democrat Party, or were relatives of national politicians.

The situation in Bangkok is comparable with that in the South, where the PPRP outperformed expectations and won 13 seats despite having failed to recruit prominent local factions or political dynasties, which meant that the party did not secure the most promising or reputable candidates possible when compared with parties that had already developed organizational presence in the region, like the Democrat Party or Bhumjaithai Party.

Table 1. Results of Thailand's 24 March 2019 General Election

Party	Constituency Seats	Party List Seats	Total Seats	% Seat Share	Total Votes	% Vote Share
Pheu Thai	136	0	136	27.2	7,881,006	22.15
Palang Pracharath	97	19	116	23.2	8,441,274	23.72

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[104] My own estimates based on the election results published by the ECT and other publicly available data. I thank Pechsiree Pechvijitra for helping me with compiling and cross-referencing this data.

Party	Constituency Seats	Party List Seats	Total Seats	% Seat Share	Total Votes	% Vote Share
Bhumjaithai	39	12	51	10.2	3,734,459	10.50
Democrat	33	20	53	10.6	3,959,358	11.13
Future Forward	31	50	81	16.2	6,330,617	17.79
Chart Thai Pattana	6	4	10	2.0	783,689	2.20
Prachachart	6	1	7	1.4	485,032	1.36
Action Coalition	1	4	5	1.0	415,585	1.17
Chart Pattana	1	2	3	0.6	251,301	0.71
Seri Ruam Thai	0	10	10	2.0	828,366	2.33
New Economics	0	6	6	1.2	486,273	1.37
Pheu Chart	0	5	5	1.0	421,412	1.18
Thai Local Power	0	3	3	0.6	214,189	0.60
Thai Forest Conservation	0	2	2	0.4	135,444	0.38
Thai Teachers for People	0	1	1	0.2	56,633	0.16
Thai Civilized	0	1	1	0.2	60,354	0.17
People's Reform	0	1	1	0.2	45,420	0.13
Prachatum Thai	0	1	1	0.2	48,110	0.14
New Democracy	0	1	1	0.2	39,260	0.11
Prachaniyom	0	1	1	0.2	56,264	0.16

Party	Constituency Seats	Party List Seats	Total Seats	% Seat Share	Total Votes	% Vote Share
Prachapiwat	0	1	1	0.2	69,431	0.20
Thai Citizen	0	1	1	0.2	44,961	0.13
Palang Chart Thai	0	1	1	0.2	73,730	0.21
Palang Thai Rak Thai	0	1	1	0.2	60,949	0.17
New Palang Dharma	0	1	1	0.2	35,099	0.10
Palang Puangchon Thai	0	1	1	0.2	80,889	0.23

Source: Election Commission of Thailand, House of Representative Elections on March 24, 2019, https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/download/article/article_20201002121316.xlsx

The fact that a large share of the PPRP's constituency seats were drawn from newcomers and that in Bangkok and the South these newcomers did not strictly belong to any dominant faction suggests that the party's electoral performance could not be explained solely based on its success at coopting influential figures and the vote-canvassing networks under their control. While it is certainly true that, under the MMA electoral system, this strategy probably helped the party gain additional party list seats, the geographical distribution of the PPRP's factions tells a different story. Most of the factions the party coopted were in the North, Northeast, and Central regions. Outside of these regions, there is room to hypothesize that the PPRP's electoral success was an outcome of *krasae* (popularity) based on other things the PPRP had to offer. These include: 1) the party's ideological opposition to Pheu Thai and the Shinawatra, a position which the Democrat Party appeared to have failed to commit to when the Democrat Party leader

Abhisit Vejjajiva publicly announced that he would not support Prayut as prime minister; 2) the party's alignment with a prime ministerial candidate who symbolized an end to political conflict as well as loyalty to the monarchy, especially in light of Thaksin's two recent attempts to bring the monarchy into electoral politics, the first being the nomination of Princess Ubolratana as a Thai Raksa Chart prime ministerial candidate and the second being his appearance with Ubolratana at his daughter's wedding reception just two days prior to the election; 3) the party's commitment to continue and expand the welfare scheme for low-income earners.

Second, even in provinces or districts where the party succeeded in recruiting the most promising candidates, that is, those who claim to have the support of vote-canvassing networks, there were signs that the party's cooptation strategy had failed to translate into electoral votes as anticipated. In the North and Northeast, where the party faced the strongest opposition, the PPRP captured a relatively small vote share and only a marginal number of seats (see Figures 1 and 2).[105] Although the PPRP was able to break Pheu Thai's monopoly in both regions, it failed to secure the upper hand, except for the Lower North provinces, where the PPRP was able to capture constituency seats in a province wide manner. Evidence from field research suggests that there was more to the PPRP's struggle in these regions than the resistance of voters loyal to Pheu Thai.

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[105] *การเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎรเป็นการทั่วไป เมื่อวันที่ 24 มีนาคม 2562 [House of Representative Elections on 24 March 2019]* (Office of Election Commission of Thailand, Election Commission of Thailand, 2019).
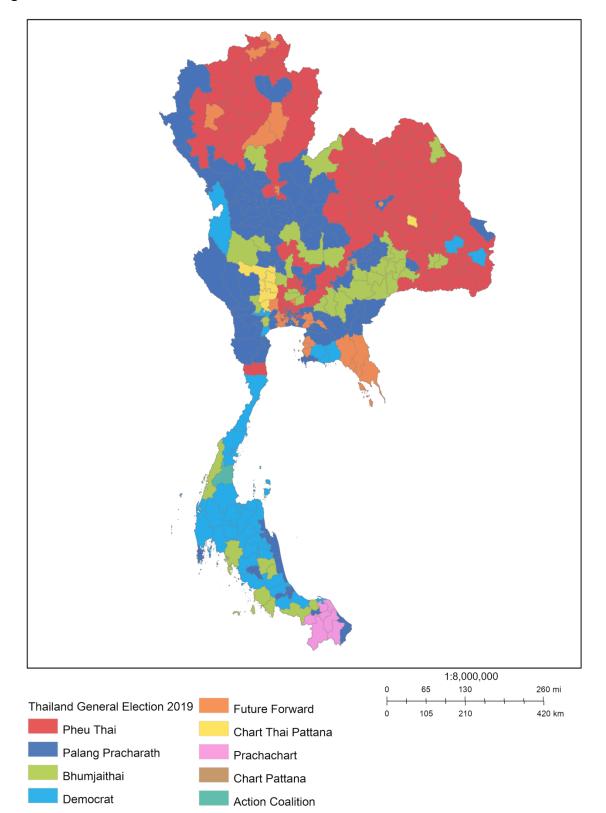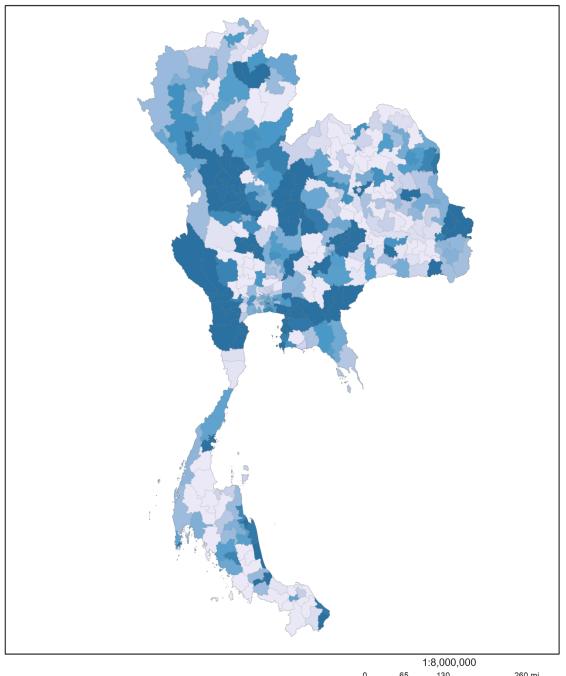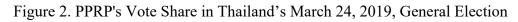
Figure 1. Thailand's March 24, 2019, General Election

Figure 2. PPRP's Vote Share in Thailand's March 24, 2019, General Election

In the eyes of one faction leader, the failure of the PPRP to secure electoral votes in these regions had to do with the changing patterns of voting behavior in response to advancements in social media and online communications technology, which made traditional vote-canvassing politics less reliable for generating votes:

> we lost because of advanced voting; we didn't really lose…these people were outsiders who registered to vote in the area. They had no idea how much the local context had changed. They preferred to vote on the basis of social media *krasae* rather on the basis of political reality on the ground.[106]

This leader's complaint that these voters were out of touch with local circumstances might be interpreted as suggesting that they were somehow outside the influence of vote-canvassing networks.

Where then did these votes go? Relative to other parties, the Future Forward Party (FFP) campaigned heavily through social media platforms in the 2019 elections, which had the effect of incorporating first-time voters into electoral politics and bypassing the traditional role of vote canvassers.[107] The presence of an urban-rural divide in access to information communications technology did not strictly imply that the FFP's campaign strategy was viable only in urban areas. Rather, since university students and workers in urban areas were often registered to vote in their original place of residence, many participated in advanced voting. Although in many constituencies these votes were trivial and certainly not all were cast in favor of the FFP, they

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[106] A chief executive of the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO), interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, February 5, 2020.

[107] Anyarat Chattharakul, "Social Media: Hashtag #Futurista," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 170–75.

determined the outcome where electoral competition between the first and second place was intense.

In fact, this is precisely what happened in one constituency in the Ubon Ratchathani province. Phum, a PPRP candidate running in that constituency, went to bed on election night as the winning candidate, only to wake up the next morning to find he had failed to win a seat when the advance votes came in. The FFP candidate in that constituency allegedly did not campaign or use vote canvassers. Even the election poster featured only the FFP leader Thanathorn and not the candidate. Yet the candidate attracted most of the advance votes that gave him an election victory. The candidate made the following remarks on hearing the news that the FFP was on trial and faced dissolution that morning:

> If Future Forward Party survives, it will become a very dangerous party. They knew how to spend money in the direction of the future, while other parties were still relying on old tactics. They weren't even like Thaksin who combined policies with old tactics like *rabob uppatham*. FFP didn't need anything like that. Their candidate got tens of thousands of votes without networks and without going door to door. He only showed up once, when Thanathorn visited. I think people between 18 and 30 years of age probably voted for them. These people didn't particularly prefer yellow, red or green…Before, they would vote however their elders instructed them. They would rely on cues given by their leaders such as village heads, subdistrict chiefs, subdistrict councilors or mayoral councilors. Within the household, they would rely on their parents or grandparents to instruct them how to vote. But now they were independent because they received

information from social media, from their phones. They don't even need to read the news

or watch TVs.[108]

A sense of admiration for the FFP's innovative campaign strategy is palpable in Phum's

assessment. His vote canvassers, on the other hand, were deeply frustrated. A local politician

who served as a core vote canvasser for Phum said, "Even if you were to hand them 500-1000

baht, they wouldn't take it. PPRP just wasn't their party."[109] He continued,

> our vote canvassers were able to convince their parents or grandparents to vote for our
>
> leader. But these elders could no longer tell their children to do the same. They would say
>
> that the decision was theirs and not their parents' or grandparents'. In worst case, they
>
> would convince their elders to vote otherwise.[110]

To vote-canvassers who expected to deliver votes wholesale from the households of the

individuals they targeted with handouts, this generational divide posed a significant obstacle.

Estimated electoral returns associated with vote-canvassing tactics had to be more modest since

they could no longer count on spillover effects at the household level. Another vote canvasser

who belonged to the same network suggested that, since the PPRP were aligned with the NCPO

government, these votes should have been opened in advance and thrown away if they did not

work in their favor:

> just subtract the votes that went to our rival, just a thousand will do so that we would win
>
> by a small margin, which is not too ugly in my opinion. Advanced votes weren't strictly

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[108] Phum, a PPRP candidate in Ubon Ratchathani province, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, February 21, 2020.
[109] Phum, interview with the author.
[110] Phum, interview with the author.

observed by the public like election day votes. We should have been able to manipulate the results since we were in control of the government. We would have won at least two or more districts in the province.[111]

This discussion serves to underscore two general points. First, in regions such as Bangkok and the South where national trends and the broad appeal of political parties were viewed as important factors shaping electoral outcomes, the success of the PPRP is not entirely attributable to its strategy of coopting local elites and vote-canvassing networks. Second, in other regions where the PPRP focused most of its recruitment efforts, the party faced a high level of resistance stemming from enduring loyalties to other parties and new electoral dynamics that made its cooptation strategy appear much less impressive and less effective than previously anticipated. As a result, even though the party had originated from an amalgamation of factions, regional groupings, and political dynasties, those who operated with clear factional allegiances only accounted for approximately half of the total number of party MPs, while the rest who made it to parliament were not strictly affiliated with any faction. This outcome would later have important consequences for the party's organizational dynamics, giving rise to a high level of intraparty competition for MPs and "fishing in each other's pond" by faction leaders.[112] Therefore, while the party's cooptation strategy did not come to fruition in terms of producing a favorable electoral outcome in many constituencies, it continued to shape the contours of the party in significant ways.

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[111] Phum, interview with the author.
[112] Wong, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 11, 2021.

Localizing Authoritarian Power

At the national level, it is difficult to dispel the image that the PPRP had leveraged the power of the NCPO to coopt faction leaders and regional and provincial elites to construct a vehicle for sustaining the regime's dominance as elections were reintroduced under a form of competitive authoritarian rule. A more accurate assessment, however, must account for the fact that, at the local level, authoritarian power was channeled not simply in fulfillment of the NCPO's goals but also in the interests of those who agreed to support the party during the 2019 Elections, many of whom were leaders of local political machines and dynasties that felt their supremacy threatened by the rise of Thaksin and his affiliated parties. Their alliance with the military-authoritarian powers was merely a provisional measure for maintaining the local status quo amidst extreme political uncertainties at the national level or reasserting their dominance against new challengers or old rivals who may or may not organize themselves under any given political party.

The fact that these actors and their networks of vote canvassers were situated in between the military-authoritarian regime and blocs of voters meant not only that they were capable of lending support to the regime in its quest to shore up its legitimacy via elections at the national level but also that they were positioned to tap the power offered by the NCPO to strengthen their own political base at the local level. In other words, factions did not simply survive but thrived under competitive authoritarian rule by lending support to a regime-backed party. Rather than being passively coopted, many factions made use of the fact that they were targets of cooptation to their advantage, including to reaffirm local organizational coherence against internal conflict or external pressure, using linkages to the party to maintain control over local officials, elected or

bureaucratic, and other community leaders who typically serve as vote canvassers during elections. This final section offers an analysis of the consequence of the PPRP's linkage strategy from a local standpoint. It also addresses the extent to which PPRP's reliance on the role of vote-canvassing networks contributed to the persistence and pervasiveness of patronage politics at the local level.

The Transition to the PPRP and Reconsolidation of Local Power

In Kamphaeng Phet, a small province located in Lower Northern Thailand, parliamentary elections were once dominated by a single faction under the leadership of Preecha Musikul or *Mor Preech*a, a doctor-turned Democrat MP. How someone like Preecha came to be synonymous with provincial development and progress is a story that should now have a familiar ring, given deeply persistent patterns of urban-rural inequality and uneven development across Thailand. Decade after decade, using his parliamentary position and the influence that this position afforded, Preecha singlehandedly built roads, dams, and bridges in the province's rural towns and claimed the sole credit for putting up streetlights in the provincial capital. Since 1992, however, Preecha, originally an outsider in Kamphaeng Phet, faced new challenges coming from local families headed by Ruangwit Lik, Sanan Sabaimuang and Varathep Ratanakorn, who rallied themselves into a new faction and were affiliated with different political parties over time. The two factions competed to place family members in local offices, both the elected and appointed kind, and built a reputation based on concrete achievements (*phonngan*) and patronage dispensed through their networks.

Since 2001, under political polarization and two-party competition between the TRT and the Democrat Party, the local rivalry between Preecha's faction and Varathep's faction intensified. Riding the waves of the TRT's national appeal, the challenger emerged victorious, although its dominant position in the province was continually being tested both in local and national elections, not only by its old rival but also by second generation heirs of the families in its own ranks, whose ambitions were growing larger than what the faction permitted. Switching to the PPRP was an important test of the faction's organizational coherence and influence over the voting population, both of which appeared fragile given that the faction had consolidated power under the TRT, PPP, and Pheu Thai and counted on the support of voters loyal to the Shinawatra. Furthermore, Varathep, the de facto leader of the faction, was a known associate of Thaksin's sister, Yaowapha Wongsawat. Additionally, Waipoj Apornrat, a former police officer and one of the faction's MPs, played a direct role as one of the leaders of the Red Shirt Movements in 2010, during which lives were lost due to a violent crackdown by government forces. At the time of the coup in 2014, the activities of those who were part of the faction were closely monitored by military officials, their houses raided by fully armed personnel in their Humvees, and their relatives detained or charged with lawsuits.[113] Considering these intricate histories, the faction was switching its allegiance to a party that might as well be its sworn enemy.

After the switch was announced in a highly abrupt manner, the faction had to justify and explain its position not only to its vote canvassers but also its electorate. According to a member of the faction,

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[113] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet province, November 7, 2020.

we told them that we were like students who changed schools. If the new school is bad, it's not as if we couldn't be good students. We were still the same people—their people…we told them that we couldn't sail against the tide and that there were a lot of people who were expecting to eat from this boat. We just got on that boat and did what was expected of us as representatives.[114]

Others reported that they were only able to persuade their vote canvassers and voters by conveying that local leaders who refused to support PPRP would be removed from local offices or that their usual activities during elections, much of which involved clientelistic politics to be sure, would be closely scrutinized or blocked by security officials.[115] Hidden in these words was an implicit threat that vote canvassers or voters who could not come to terms with the faction's decision to join PPRP would be the ones who end up suffering the consequences.

During the election campaign, the faction chose to mitigate the negative image of the PPRP as a military party by emphasizing the faction's longstanding local contribution to provincial development instead, leading to a strategy focused on localizing the electoral competition. Pich, a member of the Kamphaeng Phet faction said, "Loong Tu's (Prayuth) face never appeared on the campaign posters, not even a single one."[116] Pich continued,

in our electoral district, out of 200 posters, for example, the first 50 was just a picture of all Kamphaeng Phet's former MPs like Ruangwit Lik, Kanung Thaiprasit and others, basically to convey that we were uniting Kamphaeng Phet into one. The next 50 featured

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[114] Pich, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.
[115] Members of the Kamphaeng Phet faction, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 30, 2020.
[116] Pich, interview with the author.

our leader, Waipoj, and his personal motto 'Choose Waipoj, get water for rice farming.'

Then the final 100 was about the policies of PPRP. We put up the posters exactly in this

sequence just in case the party *krasae* [popularity] wasn't blowing in our favor."[117]

The faction was selling local, not national, unity.

Beyond the candidate-centered or faction-centered strategy, there were clear indicators

that the faction was invested in maintaining political support through its network of vote

canvassers, although to varying degrees depending on the electoral district. A member of the

faction disclosed that the faction was able to closely check for electoral support at the most

granular level by relying on village heads and subdistrict chiefs as well as on other community

leaders who were situated in each community:

> We have vote canvassers at the district level, subdistrict level and village level. So, we
>
> were able to listen to the echoes and whispers through these vote canvassers. When they
>
> visited their neighbors, they would be able to check how we were doing electorally.
>
> Based on the voices and behaviors of the people they monitored, they would be able to
>
> tell us if we were doing well or not.[118]

Based on personal observation, some of the vote canvassers who worked for the faction most

likely did more than simply take the political temperature in their local communities. In fact,

some were regarded as *phu mee bhun khun* or individuals who made significant merit or

contributions to local livelihood.

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[117] Pich, interview with the author.
[118] A member of the Kamphaeng Phet faction, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 16, 2020.

The most illuminating example comes from a short visit to a hill tribe village in the province. Most of the villagers were Christian Lahu who were forcibly removed from their original home in the highland areas after these areas were declared part of the National Forests. The government failed to provide permanent land rights to the villagers, which caused the group to become marginalized politically as well as economically, since they did not have access to agricultural land for cropping. For the past seven years, the villagers depended on their linkage to Dee, a member of the PAO, to find markets for village-produced handicrafts and settle disputes with law enforcement who discriminately targeted the villagers for their lack of national IDs or for foraging in areas where deforestation laws applied.

Dee's connection to the village ran deep. She attended the village meetings and Sunday Services held at the village's church so consistently that some of the villagers thought she was a Christian.[119] With the exception of the village elders, many of the villagers could not remember supporting the PPRP, let alone its MP candidate. What most recalled was "voting for Dee," even though she was not a candidate in the 2019 parliamentary elections. In this case, casting a ballot for the PPRP probably meant supporting their local benefactor rather than voting for the party or Prayuth.

Ultimately, the faction's gambit paid off. It won all four constituencies in the province in the 2019 elections. In contrast, Preecha, the faction's longtime rival, suffered a humiliating defeat. Preecha left the Democrat Party after representing the party in Kamphaeng Phet for more than 40 years. After the 2019 elections, the faction also won a by-election after Waipoj was disqualified as MP for disrupting the ASEAN summit nearly a decade earlier during his tenure as

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[119] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

a Red Shirt leader. Waipoj's son, Phetphum, was elected in his stead. Although Varathep himself did not serve as MP or cabinet minister, presumably due to past lawsuits incurred doing his tenure in Yingluck's administration, he assumed the role of deputy chairman of the budget scrutiny panel under the PPRP's quota. The faction also managed to resolve ongoing charges against Varathep's family members and returned his brother, Soonthorn, to the position of chief executive of the PAO. During a local election held almost two years later, a large number of village heads, subdistrict chiefs, and even district chiefs showed up to a rally to express support for Soonthorn's reelection bid, even though they were supposed to remain politically neutral by law.[120] Soonthorn won the election with little to no competition—his campaign felt much closer to a festival celebrating his certain victory than an attempt to woo voters.[121] In terms of ongoing disputes within the faction, Pai Lik, Ruangwit's son, who found a new ally in Thammanat Prompao and had previously lent support to a Pheu Thai candidate during a by-election in the province, reneged on his attempt to challenge the faction leader's choice for the chief executive of the PAO. In summary, the faction did not simply survive the transition to the PPRP—it emerged even stronger than before.

The case of Kamphaeng Phet underscores a trend in which the PPRP's cooptation strategy served to entrench factional bases of power at the local level, contributing to the durability and survivability of factions rather than the regime that the PPRP was meant to uphold in the first place. In Kamphaeng Phet, authoritarian power was localized and made to serve the

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[120] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet, December 15, 2020.
[121] Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet, December 15, 2020. Fish balls and beer were passed out to villagers who showed up to greet Soonthorn during his rallies. This was illegal according to formal electoral rules, but nobody seemed to mind.

interest of the faction that purportedly switched allegiances to the PPRP. During campaigning, the faction selectively used its affiliation with the PPRP and the military to prevent defection on the part of the rank-and-file vote canvassers. At the same time, when appealing to ordinary voters, the faction simultaneously downplayed or carefully framed this affiliation as a provisionary but necessary measure for ensuring the continuity of the faction's contribution to the province. Consequently, vote-canvassing networks and personal appeals of candidates became even more imperative to the faction's campaign strategy.

Given salient differences across provinces and regions, not only with regards to the characteristics of the electorate but also the dynamics of local factions, it is difficult to draw broader generalizations from the case of Kamphaeng Phet. However, based on face-to-face interviews with other faction leaders, it is evident that many of those who switched allegiances to PPRP were, like the faction in Kamphaeng Phet, targets of recruitment in the first place because they were positioned to switch allegiances without incurring significant damages to their political networks, rooted as they were in patronage ties rather than party loyalty. Yet the fact that these factions were well-equipped with local patronage networks also afforded them the capacity to derive whatever special privileges or resources that the authoritarian regime had to offer without ceding total control of their networks to the regime.

For example, one of the faction leaders who played an influential role in bringing on board candidates and politicians in Central Thailand gave the following response when asked whether it was challenging to persuade voters to vote for a party that supported the junta: "our *phuak* mostly lead the people. We are not followers. We are leaders."[122] This remarkable

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[122] A PPRP MP and faction leader, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 22, 2020.

confidence in one's potential for social control is what the PPRP leaders looked for and counted on. It mattered little to this faction leader that the PPRP was widely perceived as the military's party. He was convinced that the party's appearance would not hinder the capacity of his *phuak* and electoral networks to get people to vote in their favor. If anything, association with the military enhanced rather than diminished the electoral prospects of his faction members, as the association entailed not only support from security and state officials during election campaigns but also access to patronage resources and financial sponsorship, both of which were highly concentrated and in short supply under extended military rule. These factions were, in the words of one PPRP executive, "using the power of the military for their own benefits…they acted obedient and submissive in order to receive the money, protection, and the state's support during election campaigns."[123]

Given a different local political environment, switching allegiances to the PPRP could mean facing political demise rather than the reconsolidation of local dominance. Many factions, like the Kamphaeng Phet faction, operated with networks that consisted of vote canvassers with overlapping loyalties or competed in constituencies that encompassed groups of voters who remained devoted to Pheu Thai. The extent to which these factions were successful with regards to getting its networks to defect to the PPRP varied significantly. A faction leader made the following conjecture:

> It depends on the area—how concentrated each area is with the core beneficiaries of the
> policies introduced by TRT or Pheu Thai. For example, in rice growing areas where
> farmers received the benefits from the rice pledging scheme, we would clearly see the

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[123] A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, July 20, 2020.

negative effects on votes. Meanwhile, other areas that weren't affected were areas that

TRT's policies could not reach, for example in highland areas where people did not grow

rice. Or even in some areas where people migrated from Isan, they would still vote for

TRT or Pheu Thai. We wouldn't have lost these votes if we remained…Before, when we

switched to TRT, we didn't have to explain ourselves to our supporters. They would elect

us whichever party we decided to go with. But when we switched away from TRT or

Pheu Thai, we had a lot of explaining to do. This made our work much more difficult.[124]

It is clear, therefore, that in some areas joining the PPRP or, more accurately, defecting from

Pheu Thai could entail significant backlash from the voters who benefited under the policy

schemes undertaken by Thaksin-led governments. This faction leader was keenly aware of the

fact that those policy beneficiaries were not voters who could be persuaded through vote-

canvasing networks to vote against the party or leader who previously assisted them. These were

costs that had to be weighed against the potential benefits that could be gained from joining the

PPRP.

A similar logic extended to the members of the vote-canvassing networks themselves.

Given that a significant number of these individuals were members of provincial administrative

organizations or subdistrict administrative organizations, they were at risk of losing their grip on

local offices unless they supported the right party. In this way, the changing national electoral

landscape since the TRT had reshaped the dynamics of vote-canvassing networks at the local

level in ways that made a faction's monopolistic claim on votes less tenable than before.

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[124] The leader of a faction that supported the PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 29, 2020.

Regardless of these caveats, the fact remains that both those factions who could switch their allegiances with relative ease and those who faced more obstacles were aligned in their strategy to divert attention away from the issue of supporting a party with authoritarian leanings and use the election as an opportunity to tap state power for local improvements and nourishment of patronage networks.

On the one hand, the party brand of the PPRP meant little to the election campaigns undertaken by the leaders of factions, many of whom were themselves masters of candidate-centered or vote canvassing-centered strategies. According to one faction leader,

> I have never used the party's policy platform or party brand to cloak myself. Even when I was with TRT, I knew that I needed to establish my own foundation. The reason is that the Thai political landscape is inherently unstable and that Thai political parties are only temporary. I knew that to stay in this game, I have to ensure that voters choose me without even taking a second to think about which party I'm affiliated with.[125]

In regions previously dominated by Pheu Thai, the case for a candidate-centered or vote canvassing-centered campaign for PPRP candidates is even stronger due to the aforementioned possibility of negative reactions from voters with enduring ties to Thaksin-affiliated parties. The single-ballot electoral system under the MMA framework made it possible for adept candidates to communicate to their constituents and frame the electoral competition as a matter of choosing local representatives—after all, who could better serve the province or the community than a

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[125]A leading member of a faction in the PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, February 5, 2020.

trusted local leader or group that could now guarantee linkages to the most likely future ruling party?

On the other hand, many of these leaders also used their affiliation with the PPRP and the NCPO to their strategic advantage to ensure that their subordinates and the rank-and-file members of their vote-canvassing networks remained loyal to them. Presumably, most did not need a lot of convincing since staying on good terms with the MPs associated with the future ruling party was typically seen as necessary for gaining access to local development budgets, future campaign support for local offices, and other patronage resources. However, an anecdotal example should go a long way in demonstrating the extent of the PPRP's leverage over state officials, which the faction leaders were keenly aware of and exploited to their own benefit:

> I told them that if they didn't support me, I would tell on them with the district chief who will then report to the governor and get them all fired…that these village heads didn't support the military, that only 400 people from these two villages turned out to vote in total, or that I lost in these villages.[126]

It is not altogether surprising that many of the factions who joined the PPRP selectively downplayed their association with the military regime in the eyes of ordinary voters. What was more striking, however, were the ways in which they used whatever resources at their disposal by virtue of their affiliation with the military-authoritarian regime to shape the local political environment in their favor and claim credit for providing access to resources which were only available due to the affiliation. These ranged from projecting or exercising influence over the

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[126] A PPRP candidate in a province in Northern Thailand, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 30, 2020.

Ministry of Interior's appointment, transfer, and removal of local state officials to promising access to the levers of the state and parliamentary committees that oversaw the budgetary process and planning of local development projects.

Conclusion

The NCPO justified its power seizure and continued rule from 2014 to 2019 on the premise that the country was on the verge of collapsing due to extreme political polarization and large-scale corruption. If political parties and elected governments were blamed for the crisis, then the NCPO assumed the role of the savior who promised to unify and restore the country to its former glory, if this ever truly existed anywhere beyond Thailand's nostalgic, reimagined official history. This promise never came to fruition. Instead, the regime put in place a set of institutional arrangements that would safeguard its overwhelming capacity to shape the country's political course, dilute the powers of elected governments, and keep political parties and popular representation in check. It then experimented with building and sponsoring a political party that would reap the benefits of a highly uneven playing field, arming the party with an unprecedented leverage with which to co-opt factions and candidates who were equipped with the influence and networks to mobilize voters.

The case of the PPRP is a story of both remarkable success and failure. From a general standpoint, the reshaping of the institutional landscape and experiment with party politics which culminated in the PPRP were deeply successful given that Prayuth retained the position of prime minister and Pheu Thai was obstructed from gaining a parliamentary majority. The PPRP's cooptation of factions and politicians capable of mobilizing vote-canvassing networks on a large

scale was built on top of an authoritarian foundation. By introducing elections in a landscape in which it not only dominated access to state resources and institutions but also shaped the rules of the game, the regime ensured that affiliation with the regime would be crucial for the successful maintenance and deployment of these networks. In this way, patronage politics was used to sustain the regime and vice versa.

From a local vantage point, however, the fact that the PPRP's organizational infrastructure and electoral support for the party were forged out of patronage networks and vote-canvassing networks that were not under the party's or the regime's direct control implies that the regime was propped up, at least electorally, only by a hollow shell of an organization with shallow roots in the actual populace. Aside from the party name, its election posters, and logo, the PPRP's presence at the local level was sustained only by the subnational leaders of patronage networks whose loyalty to the regime was dubious at best and conditional on the regime's continued hold on the state apparatus. Of course, the same sense of organizational fragility might be observed in similarly nonexistent parties in Thailand that counted on local elites and vote-canvassing networks as substitutes for a robust party organization. However, the stakes were clearly higher for a party tasked with mobilizing support for an authoritarian regime and, more specifically, for Prayuth as the face of Thailand's conservative elites and pro-royal establishment.[127] Given the PPRP's ongoing factional turmoil, it is unclear whether the party

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[127] Political infighting within the PPRP occurred on multiple occasions since the 2019 elections and might be understood as a typical phenomenon for a newly established, if ill-institutionalized, political party. As usual, the factional conflicts revolved around the issue that there were not enough cabinet posts to meet the quota of each faction who claimed to have contributed to the PPRP's electoral success. This is most evident when the Sam Mitr faction was denied the coveted seat of Energy Ministry while Anucha Nakasai, one of its leaders, was left without a cabinet seat after the prime minister had granted a seat to Chart Pattana's Tewan Liptapallop.

would be able to continue to play this role in future elections unless the regime and the factions that made up the party reach some sort of settlement or pact such as the one that led to the formation of the party just before the 2019 elections.

That no authoritarian regime in Thailand has ever been successful at maintaining power for an extended period by ruling through party institutions, even when they seized power successfully through coups, has previously been interpreted as "Thai-style authoritarianism."[128] As this chapter has illustrated, there is a good chance that this phenomenon will once again be repeated in the case of the PPRP, for reasons that may have to do with how factions and leaders of local patronage networks have been able to retain a high level of organizational autonomy in spite of the regime's overwhelming leverage.

The fact that Thailand's authoritarian party is only weakly institutionalized while its presence is mediated by subnational elites whose loyalty is contingent on the regime's hold on power does not, however, suggest that Thailand's authoritarian regime is somehow weak or can be expected to crumble under its own weight. If anything, in the event of a crisis, the failure to maintain dominance through a party organization is likely to give rise to more obvious and

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Ongoing tensions between the various factions within the party, however, produced real effects on the party organization and coalition government when the factions tried to outmaneuver one another by appealing to General Prawit Wongsuwan, the real powerholder within the party. At a time when he was being sidelined from overseeing the Ministry of Interior and the military, Prawit found a stable footing in the party, as different faction leaders regularly courted him to intervene on their behalf. Prawit eventually assumed the formal role of the party leader, resulting in the ousting of several of the party's founding members and at least two rounds of overhaul of the party executive committee.

[128] Prajak Kongkirati, "Why Thailand's Generals Fail to Co-Opt Elections," *New Mandala*, January 15, 2019, https://www.newmandala.org/why-thailands-generals-fail-to-co-opt-elections/.

coercive exercises of authoritarian power, as alternative options outside the framework of parties and elections are considered.

A crisis of palpable significance is now unfolding in Thailand. It is characterized, first, by a new divide in Thai politics, as symbolized by the Future Forward Party, the Move Forward Party, and the youth-led, pro-monarchy reform movement and, second, by an unprecedented pandemic that has brought the country to its knees. Given the changing political climate and much-anticipated return to a set of electoral rules similar to those outlined in the 1997 charter, it is now more uncertain than ever whether patronage politics will be enough to produce an outcome that would safeguard the dominance of Thailand's authoritarian regime or whether the regime's hold on power will be sufficient for maintaining a political party built on patronage. Whatever happens will undoubtedly have important implications for the future of patronage politics and the survival of Thailand's authoritarian regime.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Shortly after the Constitutional Court ruled to dissolve the Future Forward Party (FFP) in February 2020, its founder Thanathorn Jungroongruangkit announced his plan to lead a second political campaign under the banner of the "Progressive Movement." The movement sought to provide a party-like organizational framework in the context of local elections, promote policy-oriented platforms, and support candidates committed to the ideologies that the FFP originally stood for. Reminiscent of the FFP's national election campaign one year earlier, the Progressive Movement's intervention in local elections sharply contrasted with and appeared disruptive to the established way of doing electoral politics in Thailand. In a speech delivered during the opening ceremony that marked the start of the movement's campaign for the elections of the chief executives and members of provincial administration organizations (PAO), Thanathorn proclaimed,

> The Progressive Movement competes in local elections by abiding by the principles originally embodied by the Future Forward Party. We campaign on the basis of policies and ideas, not by buying votes. We attest that vote buying is the origin of corruption. We attest that vote buying is the origin of the processes that lead to the building of *rabob uppatham* in Thailand. If we attain power by spending an enormous sum of money to buy votes, that power will in turn be used for the purpose of recouping vote-buying expenses.

Therefore, we will not play the game this way. If we don't buy votes, then what will we use for campaigning? We will use policies.[1]

Thanathorn's bold declaration registers both significant change and remarkable continuity in Thailand's political landscape. On the one hand, the ideological commitment to uphold programmatic principles by competing based on policies rather than cash handouts in the context of local elections represents the most ambitious political project since the TRT attempted its policy experiments at the national level nearly two decades ago. The fact that such an initiative is now being undertaken at the local level, where vote buying is thought to be most endemic, suggests that what was once unthinkable now sits in the realm of remote possibility. The focus on local elections also appears right in terms of striking at the base of patronage politics. After all, vote-canvassing and patronage networks are now widely made up of local political office holders, thrive on access to the resources that local political office holders can facilitate, and are funded through local development projects.

On the other hand, Thanathorn's speech also suggests that patronage politics has all but disappeared, whether at the local or national level. If anything, political events in Thailand have come full circle. Circumstances have once again led to the dominance of influential provincial bosses, local political machines, and political dynasties whose vote-canvassing networks and patronage-oriented methods have been blamed for the weakening of political parties and coalition government, commodification of votes, and manifestation of corruption at every level. Constitutional reform and amendments have been proposed. Against this backdrop, a tycoon-

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[1] Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, "เปลี่ยนประเทศไทยเริ่มได้ที่บ้านเรา เปิดตัวผู้สมัครเลือกตั้งท้องถิ่น" (Thai Summit Tower, October 9, 2020), https://fb.watch/arL67HbJw1/.

turned politician was able to assume a pioneering role, cloaking himself in anti-vote-buying, anti-patronage, and anti-corruption rhetoric, while signaling a serious intention to compete by means of policies—only this time the result was much less remarkable.

None of the candidates for the chief executive of the PAO that the Progressive Movement fielded in 42 provinces won in the elections held on December 20. The Election Commission was criticized for organizing the election between two holidays and forbidding advanced voting, which discouraged turnout among voters who live out of province, key supporters of the FFP in the 2019 elections.[2] However, even if the circumstances had been favorable for the Progressive Movement, it remains unclear whether the campaign to change the nature of local elections would have been successful. The Progressive Movement did slightly better in municipal elections and the elections for the chief executive of the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO), winning 16 out of 106 municipals and 38 out of 196 subdistricts in which it fielded candidates. Yet it seems unlikely that these marginal victories will translate into a major overhaul of Thailand's electoral politics, local or national.

As this dissertation has illustrated, significant changes in the broader political landscape and critical historical events have been crucial with regards to shaping the contours of patronage politics, yet not decisive with regards to bringing about a fundamental transformation of the system away from patronage politics. This mode of politics has demonstrated a striking capacity to survive and thrive even when it is no longer the only game in town. Yet important lessons can

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[2] "'ชำนาญ' ชี้ จัดเลือกตั้ง อบจ. 20 ธ.ค. สกัดคนใช้สิทธิ ปิดทางคณะก้าวหน้า," *Matichon*, November 20, 2020, https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_2450747.

still be learned from the patterns which have evolved in response to major discontinuities in the political order.

The first lesson concerns the circumstances under which patronage politics can be expected to take on new elements or undergo transformations. This dissertation has shown that the dynamics of patronage politics, its organizational configuration as well as its implication for political parties, the party system, and democratic rule, is strongly influenced by broader factors than those that are purely economic in nature. This is not to say that economic factors play no role. In fact, change frequently originates as a result of economic events, for example, capitalist transformation of the countryside or financial crisis. However, the impact of that change is always mediated by historical antecedents, institutional arrangements already in place, and preexisting stakeholders who seek to better their circumstances whether in the direction of change or against it.

As seen in Chapter 3, the long-term pattern of state-centered competition for power and relative absence or weaknesses of political parties created favorable conditions for the rise of *jao pho* and the concentration of both political and economic power in their hands. Under these provincial capitalists, the vote-canvassing network and *rabob uppatham* became the prevailing frameworks for organizing patronage politics, which kept political parties provisional or subordinate to their interests. However, this was not a direct consequence of economic change. Rather, it took a crisis of a certain type to disrupt the capacity of the previous gatekeeper, the bureaucratic elite, and maintain a grip on the flow of patronage resources in Thai society. Once the lock came loose, when capitalist development reached the countryside and elections became

competitive and meaningful, the door was pried open by the actors most capable of doing so. In this way, the crisis disrupted the preexisting pattern and enabled the formation of a new one.

The coincidence of the constitutional overhaul and financial crisis in 1997 set in motion yet a different type of political crisis, as highlighted in Chapter 4. This time the predominant stakeholders of patronage politics sought refuge under a well-oiled party machine, the TRT, mitigating some of the impact that these critical events could have had on their grip on power. Yet once in power, the TRT forged direct linkages between the party and voters via policies and attempted to centralize the flow of patronage around the party leader. This encroachment did not lead to traditional vote-canvassing networks being eradicated as a model of delivering patronage for electoral ends. They were instead reorganized under party control and made to complement the party's policy-based linkages to the rural and grassroots supporters, whose loyalty to the party increasingly undercut the gatekeeping role traditionally played by the leaders of vote-canvassing and patronage networks. These networks remained intact but their organizational characteristics and implications for political parties changed in comparison to what came before.

Ultimately, this pattern was interrupted by two military coups in 2006 and 2014 and the installment of an array of authoritarian institutions. In Chapter 5, I have shown that when elections were reintroduced, patronage politics was made to serve the interests of the authoritarian rulers, reap the benefits of an uneven playing field, and safeguard against electoral uncertainties. Yet the regime's extraordinary access to and control over state resources failed to translate into the building of a coherent party-based framework through which patronage might be distributed to create party loyalty or vested interests in the continued dominance of the regime at the level of ordinary voters. Instead, old patterns reemerged as local machines, political

dynasties, and subnational leaders of patronage networks seized new opportunities to tap authoritarian powers for their own ends.

These findings suggest that macro-level changes in the pattern of patronage politics are not solely determined by economic forces. Instead, they are significantly shaped by crucial historical moments that disrupt the concentration and distribution of power and resources in society in ways that make previous patterns untenable, whether temporarily or permanently. During these moments, processes of negotiation and contestation by different stakeholders, with different resources and endowments and for whom patronage represents different opportunities and challenges, impart unique characteristics to the emerging institutional patterns, even those elements that appear to be the legacy of old ones.

This introduces a second lesson on which mechanisms reproduce different patterns of patronage politics at the level of actors. In the case of vote-canvassing networks and *rabob uppatham*, this dissertation has demonstrated that candidate selection and recruitment represent an important pathway through which patronage politics shapes the course of party building and campaigning. To the extent that patronage networks or vote-canvassing networks are perceived as integral to, or at least treated as reliable cues for, electoral success, candidates who have the support of these networks are likely to be favored. This ensures not only that patronage-oriented strategies are likely to play a privileged role in election campaigns, but also that patronage networks will remain the building blocks of political parties.

As highlighted in the case of the TRT, however, investments made by party leaders in imposing organizational discipline on patronage elements within the party can reproduce a fundamentally different pattern, whereby patronage networks become party networks and the

individual leaders of these networks become cadres within the party's hierarchy. The extent to which these investments are successful depends on the relative bargaining power between the party leader and the leaders of patronage networks. Here, factors that shape the capacity of parties to maintain the loyalty of these individuals or those that enable parties to circumvent their role become crucial. These may be rooted in the endowment of resources, both the economic and coercive kinds, which allow parties, relative to other informal entities, to exercise considerable discretion in furnishing material rewards, government positions, and opportunities for promotion to supporters, or punish challengers. They may be institutional in nature, for example, decentralization, local bureaucratic autonomy, executive discretion over the use of government budget, a ban on party switching, or features of the electoral system that encourage party-oriented competition. They may also be technological, for example, policies or modes of communication that allow parties to cultivate direct ties with ordinary voters in the absence of electoral intermediaries.

The last and final lesson pertains to the relationship between patronage politics and regimes. It is taken for granted that, regardless of the regime type, patronage is usually dispensed as a means of garnering political support. In the context of democracy, usually assumed as the starting point in studies on elections and party-voter linkages, patronage exists as an electoral or mobilizational strategy that relies on the particularistic distribution of material resources as the primary means to obtain support from voters. In authoritarian regimes, patronage operates more broadly as side payments, often derived from state resources or by virtue of the state's coercive apparatus, delivered to groups or actors in society who are critical for regime survival, usually the regime's inner circle, the elite, military leaders, or party members. Apart from the obvious

differences across regimes in terms of the characteristics of groups or actors implicated in patronage-based relationships or in terms of the structures and institutions that govern access to state resources from which patronage is derived, patronage politics functions in more or less the same manner.

Yet distinct patterns of patronage politics produce different implications for the survivability of each regime. Before, a loosely assembled, weakly organized system of patronage networks produced a version of democracy that, however unstable, was mostly acceptable to the elites.[3] In the case of the TRT, however, a well-functioning, robust combination of policy-based and patronage-based modes of electoral mobilization highly responsive to the masses contributed to a version of democracy that had to be shut down. Finally, as demonstrated in the case of the PPRP, authoritarian management of patronage politics has at least allowed the regime to remain in power—but for how long depends on its capacity to guarantee protection and a steady flow of resources to the electoral networks that make up a significant portion of its support base, especially in the face of a looming crisis. The fate of Thailand's democracy and authoritarianism is, therefore, tied to the ebb and flow of patronage even if it encompasses a much broader set of factors and actors, both the visible and invisible kind.

These lessons are broadly applicable to a range of cases in which elections entail patronage deliveries, especially where the networks that facilitate them are constantly subject to

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[3] Discontent with the system did eventually lead to the 1997 Constitution, but for reasons that had to do with "problems of legitimacy and efficiency," mostly stemming from the needs of Bangkok elites to work through provincial politicians, Sombat Chantornvong, "The 1997 Constitution and the Politics of Electoral Reform," in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen, DK: NIAS Press, 2002), 203. See also Ruth McVey, ed., *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 13.

different forms of capture by bureaucratic, party, and subnational elites while remaining intact over time. On the other hand, they are less useful for making sense of dynamics in cases where societal cleavages based on programmatic politics or ideological differences are relatively more salient in shaping the characteristics of political parties or political outcomes. Likewise, the insights presented in this dissertation do not fully explain the transition to the kind of political systems that exist in these cases, given this dissertation's emphasis on variations in the patterns of patronage politics rather in party-voter linkages in general. This does not, however, suggest that Thailand's electoral politics or electoral politics in those countries that share similar features are inevitably mired in patronage. As displayed by the TRT and, to an even greater extent, the FFP, piecemeal movements toward programmatic political competition are possible. Yet as this dissertation has shown, these movements are inevitably subject to varying degree of contestation and negotiation by the stakeholders of different arrangements of patronage politics in ways that lead to some forms of compromise or settlements short of radical, durable, and irreversible transformation. This politics of giving and patronage evolves and persists in doing so.

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