

Consenting to Dictatorship?
Explaining Voter Behavior and Authoritarian Power Institutionalization in
Thailand's 2019 Elections

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August 2023

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO MCGILL UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Political Science

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Abstract

Inspired by Thailand's long-standing struggle for democracy and the middle class' recent astonishing support for military coups and the pro-regime Palang Pracharath party, this study examines how authoritarian regimes pursue consent from citizens. It argues that although coercion and electoral manipulation are important tactics frequently employed by authoritarian regimes, authoritarian incumbents solidify power and institutionalize themselves during a transition by acquiring consent from citizens. Voter consent bestows legitimacy to authoritarian incumbents, which in turn buttresses regime stability. Focusing on Palang Pracharath's surprise "victory" in Thailand's 2019 general elections, this study finds that voter consent stems from three primary sources—the MP candidate, policy, and ideology—and thus identifies three pathways to consent accordingly. To explain consent, this study divides voters according to their socioeconomic dependence on the state and politicians and contends that dependent voters are more likely to vote based on material interests whereas independent voters are more likely to vote based on their ideological interests. Some voters, however, engage in strategic voting, choosing a party they less prefer but believe has a better chance of winning to avoid wasting their votes. The different voting behaviors lead to different types of consent. This study, therefore, develops a new typology, which classifies consent into "sincere" and "strategic" consent. A vote for authoritarian incumbents is considered "sincere consent" if the voter votes for a pro-regime party out of sincere preference. Conversely, a vote for authoritarian incumbents is considered "strategic consent" if the voter votes for a pro-regime party strategically. The two types of consent have different implications for the future of the authoritarian successor party and the regime. While sincere consent could cultivate political loyalty for the party and bolster regime stability, strategic consent is a product of one election and thus ephemeral.

Résumé

Inspirée par la lutte de longue date de la Thaïlande pour la démocratie et par le soutien étonnant récent de la classe moyenne aux coups d'État militaires et au parti pro-régime Palang Pracharath, cette étude examine comment les régimes autoritaires recherchent le consentement des citoyens. Elle soutient que bien que la coercition et la manipulation électorale soient des tactiques importantes fréquemment utilisées par les régimes autoritaires, les dirigeants autoritaires consolident leur pouvoir et s'institutionnalisent lors d'une transition en acquérant le consentement des citoyens. Le consentement des électeurs confère une légitimité aux dirigeants autoritaires, ce qui à son tour renforce la stabilité du régime. En se concentrant sur la “victoire” surprise de Palang Pracharath lors des élections générales de 2019 en Thaïlande, cette étude constate que le consentement des électeurs provient de trois sources principales : le candidat député, la politique et l'idéologie, et identifie donc trois voies vers le consentement en conséquence. Pour expliquer le consentement, cette étude divise les électeurs en fonction de leur dépendance socio-économique à l'égard de l'État et des politiciens, et affirme que les électeurs dépendants sont plus susceptibles de voter en fonction de leurs intérêts matériels, tandis que les électeurs indépendants sont plus susceptibles de voter en fonction de leurs intérêts idéologiques. Cependant, certains électeurs adoptent un vote stratégique, choisissant un parti qu'ils préfèrent moins mais qu'ils estiment avoir une meilleure chance de gagner pour éviter de gaspiller leurs votes. Les différents comportements de vote conduisent à différents types de consentement. Cette étude développe donc une nouvelle typologie, qui classe le consentement en “consentement sincère” et “consentement stratégique.” Un vote en faveur des dirigeants autoritaires est considéré comme un "consentement sincère" si l'électeur vote pour un parti pro-régime par préférence sincère. En revanche, un vote en faveur des dirigeants autoritaires est considéré comme un “consentement stratégique” si l'électeur vote

stratégiquement pour un parti pro-régime. Les deux types de consentement ont des implications différentes pour l'avenir du parti successeur autoritaire et du régime. Alors que le consentement sincère pourrait cultiver la fidélité politique envers le parti et renforcer la stabilité du régime, le consentement stratégique est un produit d'une élection et donc éphémère.

Acknowledgements

If it takes a village to raise a child, I believe that it takes a town to raise a Ph.D. student. Words cannot express how grateful I am to everyone who has played a role in my Ph.D. journey. Without the generosity and support of my family, friends, and faculty, as well as the many acquaintances and informants I encountered during my field research, this endeavor would not have been possible. This dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine.

First and foremost, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my professors for their guidance, support, and mentorship throughout my Ph.D. journey. I cannot envision a better Ph.D. supervisor than Professor Erik Kuhonta whose expertise, guidance, encouragement, and countless feedback have been instrumental not only to my dissertation but also to my academic and personal growth. Thank you, Ajarn Erik, for seeing my potential and helping me harness it. I am also indebted to Professor Allen Hicken for the time and effort he invested in reviewing my work and offering intellectual insights that significantly improved the quality of this dissertation. Ajarn Allen, I highly valued every conversation we had and every piece of advice you gave. I am also grateful for other members of my dissertation committee, including Professor Rex Brynen, Professor Khalid Medani, and Professor Attasit Pankaew whose insightful questions and constructive feedback have pushed me to think more deeply about my dissertation and refined my ideas. I also extend my gratitude to Professor Pitch Pongsawat for inspiring my research.

In addition to my professors, I am thankful for my friends at McGill for making this challenging journey less arduous and more meaningful. I thank Vertika for being the best Ph.D. comrade I could ask for—I would not have survived the program without her encouragement. I would also like to thank the Thai student community at McGill for making my time in Montreal

memorable. My appreciation extends to my friends in Thailand who supported me throughout this process. Special thanks go to Tao, P' Iti, Joe, Chawin, and Boss for making focus groups less intimidating!

I am indebted to each of my informants for opening their world to me and contributing to my research. While their identities shall remain anonymous, their voices and experiences resonate throughout this work, breathing life into the findings and adding authenticity and depth to the study. Without their willingness to share their thoughts and life stories and allow me to immerse myself in their world, I would not have been able to gain the profound insights and deep understanding that have shaped this research. I hope this dissertation does justice to their contributions, and I take full responsibility for any shortcomings in representing their experiences or any errors of interpretation.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family, especially Mom, Dad, Na Dang, P' Meng, and Pimpisa, for their unwavering support during my Ph.D. journey. Their love and encouragement have been my guiding light during moments of uncertainty. I cannot thank them enough for always believing in me and pushing me to the finish line. Thank you, Poppy, Pui, Popeye, Piroj, Noo Oreo, Noo Muek, Mali, and Pikul for always cheering me up and reminding me to take breaks. Special thanks to my beloved sister Pimsiree for spending sleepless nights proofreading every word of my dissertation.

List of Abbreviations

ASP	Authoritarian Successor Party
CDC	Constitution Drafting Committee
ECT	Election Commission of Thailand
MMA	Mixed Member Apportionment System
MMM	Mixed-Member Majoritarian System
MMR	Mixed-Member Proportional Representation
MP	Member of Parliament
NACC	National Anti-Corruption Commission
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
NHRC	National Human Right Commission
NLA	National Legislative Assembly
PAO	Provincial Administrative Organization
PDRC	People’s Democratic Reform Committee
PM	Prime Minister
PPP	Palang Prachachon (People’s Power) Party
PPRP	Palang Pracharath Party
PT	Pheu Thai
TAO	<i>Tambon</i> Administrative Organization
TRT	Thai Rak Thai
SAO	SAO

Glossary

<i>akatanyoo</i>	ungrateful
<i>bap</i>	sin
<i>boonkoon</i>	favor
<i>jaosua</i>	large, powerful corporations or conglomerates,
<i>katanyoo</i>	grateful
<i>kon roon mai</i>	young generation
<i>krasoon</i>	bullet, a political slang term used to refer to money
<i>krengjai</i>	consideration for others
<i>Loong Pom</i>	General Prawit Wongsuwan or “Uncle Pom”
<i>Loong Tu</i>	General Prayut Chan-o-cha or “Uncle Tu”
<i>nee boonkoon</i>	debt of gratitude
<i>nerakhun</i>	ungrateful (stronger than <i>akatanyoo</i>)
<i>wat</i>	temple

Dedication

To Thailand's Democracy

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I. Background

As the third wave of democratization hit ashore, political scientists were filled with optimism at the prospects for democracy around the world. Elections were widely regarded as harbingers of democracy, as Samuel Huntington confidently declares, “elections are not only the life of democracy; they are also the death of dictatorship.”¹ However, instead of heading toward liberal democracy, full-blown autocracies have transformed into various forms of illiberal regimes and grown resilient over time. It seems that elections have gradually lost their democratizing power, as they are utilized by dictators to legitimate undemocratic rule, thereby prolonging their regime.

After five years of military rule and repeated election postponements, Thailand’s ruling junta finally allowed the kingdom’s first parliamentary elections in eight years. To the dismay of many, the long-awaited March 2019 elections were widely perceived as rigged in favor of the junta. Not only did the junta handily manipulate the electoral system through the new constitution, but it was also alleged to commit outright vote fraud on election day. Winning merely 116 seats of the 500 in the lower house, the junta-backed Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) managed to form a coalition government with several other small parties. The new parliament voted to elect junta chief Prayuth Chan-ocha as prime minister, extending the general’s rule and cementing the junta’s control over the country. In spite of allegations of electoral irregularities, Palang Pracharath leaders

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 174.

frequently claimed that they have been chosen by the people.² Once hailed as one of the fastest growing economies and most stable democracies in Southeast Asia, Thailand has been see-sawing between democracy and military dictatorship since the birth of its inchoate democracy. Contrary to conventional wisdom in political science that economic development brings about democracy, the Thai military has repeatedly returned to the political scene and now secured political space. Thailand appears to be the trouble child in the democratization literature—despite a strong economy and an independent middle class, the kingdom has yet to democratize. In fact, it is the Bangkok middle class that has repeatedly questioned the compatibility of Western-style liberal democracy and invited the military to the political arena.

Inspired by Thailand's long-standing struggle for democracy and the middle class' recent astonishing support for military coups and the pro-regime party, this study seeks to explain how authoritarian regimes pursue consent from citizens. It asks, "How do authoritarian incumbents institutionalize themselves in the process of a democratic transition?" In order to develop the central research question, this study asks the following sub-questions. How do we understand the behavior and decision-making of voters in authoritarian elections? Why do voters, when given the right to choose their leaders through relatively free and fair elections, vote for parties that emerge from dictatorship? Are they voting sincerely or strategically? To what extent does a vote for an authoritarian successor party represent consent? What shapes voter consent?

Dictators have at their disposal a repertoire of tools that can be used to secure political control and prolong their survival. In addition to repression, authoritarian regimes have also utilized elections and other supposedly democratic institutions to secure their power. Most

² For example, Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020; Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

importantly, they require support from citizens. No matter how manipulative or fraudulent the elections are, electoral authoritarian incumbents cannot return to power if no single voter votes for them. This study argues that although coercion and electoral manipulation are important parts of the authoritarian repertoire, authoritarian incumbents require consent of voters to stay in power. Focusing on Palang Pracharath's surprise "victory" in Thailand's March 2019 general elections, this study examines the mechanisms the junta employed to preserve political influence after the transition to the new regime. It explores how the junta and Palang Pracharath managed electoral competition and enticed voters to vote for them. Beyond the electoral behavior and strategies of dictators, it also looks at the factors that influence voters to vote for pro-regime parties, thus bestowing legitimacy to authoritarian incumbents. This study focuses on the three-way strategic relationship among dictators, political actors, and citizens. Both the relationship between authoritarian elections and democratization or authoritarian stability, and the relationships between (1) authoritarian regimes and political actors; (2) political actors and citizens; and (3) authoritarian regimes and citizens will be explored. This study is hence divided into two sub-parts: a top-down analysis of the mechanisms the military regime uses to institutionalize themselves and an individual-level analysis of the factors that influence voters to consent to dictatorship. More generally, this study seeks to explain the persistence of the entrenched position of the military in politics, which is part of the global reverse process of de-democratization and examines the factors that shape voters' attitudes about democracy and governance in developing democracies.

II. Summary of Argument

Contrary to popular belief that dictators can command citizens, this study argues that authoritarian incumbents require *consent* of citizens to legitimize their power and institutionalize themselves after a transition to the new regime. Although coercion and electoral manipulation are important tactics frequently employed by authoritarian regimes, authoritarian incumbents solidify power and institutionalize themselves during a democratic transition by acquiring active consent from citizens. Voter consent bestows legitimacy to authoritarian incumbents, which in turn buttresses regime stability.

The focus of this study is to explain *consent* as the outcome of political choices made by the regime, politicians, and voters. It defines consent as the voluntary permission an informed individual gives someone to do something when other choices and dissent are possible. In the context of transitional elections, the study argues that voting for a pro-regime party while having the option to vote for opposition parties implies consent to authoritarian incumbents. Therefore, not voting for the pro-regime party indicates no consent. Given the widespread association between Palang Pracharath and the NCPO, a vote for the party in the 2019 general elections signifies consent for the authoritarian incumbents.

This study classifies consent into “sincere” and “strategic” consent, which can be distinguished by whether Palang Pracharath was the voter’s first choice. If a voter chose Palang Pracharath out of genuine preference for the party, its policies, candidates, or what it represents, his or her vote is considered “sincere consent.” In this case, the voter preferred Palang Pracharath to any other parties and truly believed it was the best option for the 2019 elections. In contrast, if a voter selected Palang Pracharath as a strategic vote, not necessarily his or her first choice, but because he or she believed it was the best option given the political context or the likelihood of his

or her preferred party winning, his or her vote is considered “strategic consent.” These two types of consent have different implications for the future of Palang Pracharath and the junta. While sincere consent may lead to long-term support and loyalty for the party and the regime, strategic consent indicates a lack of attachment to the party and a readiness to switch allegiances, making the support short-term and not lasting beyond one election.

Based on major approaches to vote choice, the present study identifies two primary sources of consent: state-driven factors, which encompass the mechanisms employed by the military regime and its successor party to elicit consent, and non-state, individual-driven factors, which arise from a voter's personal political attitudes, beliefs, values, and emotions. In other words, the individuals who expressed consent to the authoritarian incumbents consisted of both those who based their electoral decisions on material interest and ideological predilections. Building on the Valence Politics model, Rational Choice Theory, and, to a lesser extent, the Sociological model, the present study argues that consent stems from (1) the member of parliament (MP) candidate, (2) policy, and (3) ideology. The junta and Palang Pracharath used mechanisms such as policy and the co-optation of candidates and vote canvassers or *hua khanaen* to acquire consent from voters. However, consent is not only generated by what the state is doing, but it is also rooted in psychological, socialization processes—ideological factors also shape voting behavior.

To explain consent, this study divides voters according to their socioeconomic dependence on the state and politicians and contends that dependent voters are more likely to vote based on material interests while independent voters are more likely to vote based on their ideological interests. Some voters engage in strategic voting, choosing a party they less prefer but believe has a better chance of winning to avoid wasting their votes. The different voting behaviors lead to different types of consent as discussed above. The study further divides voters into subcategories

based on their primary sources of consent. Within the group of sincere consenters, there are individuals who voted for Palang Pracharath because of their support for the MP, the party's policies, and ideological reasons, hence referred to as "sincere-MP," "sincere-policy," and "sincere-ideology" voters, respectively. On the other hand, strategic voters preferred another party but voted for Palang Pracharath for either material or ideological reasons, hence referred to as "strategic-material" and "strategic-ideological" voters, respectively. Finally, this study presents three pathways to consent. When forced to make one choice under the single-ballot system, voters made decisions based on their priorities. In the first pathway, dependent voters who relied on their MPs supported Palang Pracharath because of the party's co-optation of their MPs. In the second pathway, dependent voters who relied on the state favored Palang Pracharath because of the welfare card policy. In the final pathway, independent voters concerned about political instability and the threat from the pro-democracy side chose Palang Pracharath because of Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva's stance against General Prayut Chan-o-cha and Palang Pracharath's final campaign "*Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu*" [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)].

III. Contributions

This study offers valuable contributions to both the academic literature and practical applications. In terms of the literature, it adds to the existing body of knowledge on authoritarian resilience and voting behavior in at least five crucial aspects. First, this study contributes to the existing research on institutionalization, which has traditionally centered on democratic regimes and viewed institutions as constraints, and addresses the underexplored topic of authoritarian successor parties, which has received insufficient scholarly attention until now. Unlike existing literature that focuses on elections and political parties separately based on their functions,

ideologies, or policies, this research takes a distinct approach. It examines authoritarian elections in the context of how they contribute to the institutionalization of authoritarian regimes and studies authoritarian parties in relation to these regimes. The study views elections as the platform through which authoritarian incumbents secure and institutionalize the consent of citizens. Additionally, it considers authoritarian successor parties (ASPs) as integral components of authoritarian regimes. This research sets itself apart from typical studies of political parties in democratic systems by analyzing the relationship between the party and the authoritarian regime. Moreover, it diverges from previous scholarship on authoritarian parties by focusing on Palang Pracharath, a party that does not fit the mold of a hegemonic ruling party or a military party. As part of the research on authoritarian successor parties, this study aims to contribute significantly to a relatively underexplored area in the empirical literature. Second, the existing literature on authoritarianism faces the key issue of being predominantly top-down, focusing primarily on state actions with little consideration for the voters. Conversely, mainstream research on voting behavior focuses on individual-level determinants of attitudes and preferences. In contrast, this study combines both levels of analysis, exploring the strategic relationship between dictators, political elites, and citizens. It examines the strategies employed by authoritarian rulers to gain active consent from citizens and the factors that influence voters to provide consent and legitimacy to the regime, hence bridging the gap between macro-level regime behavior and micro-level individual preferences. Third, this study challenges existing top-down approaches to authoritarian endurance that depict voters as passive participants. Instead, it argues that voters' behavior is not entirely predictable, and despite repression and manipulation, citizens can still vote against authoritarian incumbents, leading to unexpected electoral outcomes. The study highlights the need to pay attention to the complex relationship between the regime and voters, moving beyond simplistic vote functions. It

draws attention to instances like Thailand, where millions of votes cast for opposition parties in the 2019 general elections indicated public discontent with the regime despite the pro-junta party winning the most popular votes. Fourth, contrary to existing studies on authoritarian resilience, which assume that the state has a significant degree of control over its population and can act according to its preferences, this study shows that maintaining authoritarian control involves negotiations with various actors at different levels. While attention is often focused on the laws and policies enacted by autocrats, the party and local mechanisms are overlooked. To address the complexity of political realities involving multiple levels of bargaining, this study proposes a theory on the mechanisms used by dictators to institutionalize the consent of citizens. Finally, the primary contribution of this study lies in its integration of the concept of consent into the study of authoritarian stability. Despite increasing interest in the concept of legitimacy in the study of authoritarian stability, little attention has been given to the mechanisms through which these regimes obtain consent from citizens. Consent is crucial for understanding regime stability as it lies at the core of legitimacy. Additionally, while related concepts like conformity and obedience have gained attention, consent has not been thoroughly studied in political behavior research. Hence, this study seeks to systematically define, conceptualize, and operationalize consent, introducing a new typology of “sincere” and “strategic” consent. It demonstrates that different types of consent have varying implications for authoritarian regimes.

In terms of practical implications, this research provides valuable guidance for policymakers, political parties, candidates, campaign strategists, and democracy advocates to create more effective political campaigns, make informed policy decisions, and build a stronger, more democratic political system. At the broadest level, the identification of different types of voters and their reasons for supporting a particular party can inform policy formulation and aid in

designing effective campaign strategies. The study provides insights into voter behavior, highlighting the importance of and the distinction between material and ideological factors. Political parties and candidates can use this information to tailor their electoral strategies and campaign messages to resonate with different segments of the electorate. The identification of different pathways to consent can assist political parties in planning their election strategies. Parties can focus on the issues and policies that are likely to gain support from various voter groups, ultimately improving their chances of winning elections. Policymakers, armed with insights into the drivers of voter consent, can develop policies that address the unique needs and concerns of different voter segments. Most importantly, a deeper understanding of the mechanisms employed by the regime to acquire consent and the factors influencing this consent is vital for promoting democracy and countering authoritarianism. The study's examination of the junta's consolidation of authoritarian power offers valuable insights that can aid pro-democracy legislators in their efforts to reform or dismantle these structures, thus advancing the restoration of democracy in the country. Equipped with this knowledge, pro-democracy legislators can effectively advocate for reforms and safeguard democratic institutions for the future. Furthermore, the study's analysis of the structural problems that foster clientelism and the impact of socioeconomic dependence on voter consent provides valuable insights that could aid pro-democracy legislators to empower the poor and the marginalized. By tackling the root causes of clientelism and dependence, pro-democracy legislators could strive to create a more inclusive and equitable political system that ensures the needs of the poor are met. As citizens become more independent, their political decisions will be guided more by ideological than material interests, hence reducing their susceptibility to clientelist inducements that perpetuate clientelism and enable clientelist politicians and authoritarian incumbents to maintain their power. Lastly, the study's analysis of

strategic voting behavior can aid in predicting and interpreting election outcomes, facilitating informed decision-making for various stakeholders in the political process.

IV. Methodology

To identify and assess voter consent, this study will be divided into two sub-parts: (1) a top-down analysis of the mechanisms employed by the junta to achieve voter consent and (2) a bottom-up individual analysis of the factors that influenced voters to vote for Palang Pracharath and consent to authoritarian rule. The first part will utilize a combination of process tracing and semi-structured interviews to unravel the strategies employed by the regime. It will rely on primary sources, such as the 2017 constitution, policy reports, campaign speeches, and other party documents. This study will first examine the constitution to understand how the junta has achieved consent from citizens through the constitutional referendum and embedded it into the law. It will then investigate how Palang Pracharath inherited resources from the ruling junta, enabling the party to survive and thrive in the new regime. Notably, Palang Pracharath's populist policies have contributed significantly to its popularity and voter support. The study will analyze how the party continued the NCPO government's policies to appeal to voters. Furthermore, the study will explore how Palang Pracharath co-opted former MPs, local politicians, existing vote canvassing networks, and small and medium-sized parties to systematically acquire and institutionalize voter consent.

However, to answer the broad question of how authoritarian regimes acquire consent and institutionalize their power requires not only a top-down analysis but also an individual-level analysis of voter behavior, which is related to but separate from what the state does. While the state plays a crucial role in shaping political behavior in a country like Thailand, voter consent is not driven solely by state mechanisms. As the theory operates at the voter level, the primary focus will be on individual voters. To explore why citizens consent to dictatorship, this study will employ

a qualitative approach, which includes (1) one pilot focus group, (2) nine formal focus groups and several informal small-group discussions, and (3) semi-structured interviews.

A. Pilot Focus Group

The first step was to conduct a preliminary focus group to get a sense of what might be puzzling and determine the focus for the formal focus groups. The initial plan was to conduct two pilot focus groups—one in Bangkok and one in the provinces. However, due to the time constraint imposed by the COVID-19 situation in Thailand and the amount of information gathered from the first pilot focus group, I decided to proceed directly to formal focus groups. Sing Buri was selected as the location for the pilot focus group because of both its political significance and recruitment convenience. The province's history of oscillating between dominant parties—Pheu Thai and the Democrats—and its recent shift from Pheu Thai to Palang Pracharath in the 2019 general elections offered an intriguing case to study the factors behind such changes. Additionally, it offered convenience in contacting local politicians and vote canvassers and recruiting participants, as it is my family's hometown. The pilot focus group consisted of five diverse participants in terms of age, gender, occupation, and political orientation. The insights acquired from this pilot focus group guided the design of the focus group questionnaire for the subsequent formal focus groups.

B. Formal Focus Groups

The second step was to conduct formal focus groups, which provided an opportunity to engage with participants and gain valuable insights, including non-verbal responses, to assess the extent of consent. These focus groups proved instrumental in obtaining a deeper understanding of participants' thoughts, revealing mechanisms, and capturing details that might not have been

accessible through other research approaches. The objective was to uncover the factors motivating voters to consent to authoritarian incumbents and the extent of their consent. I conducted a total of nine formal focus groups in Bangkok and three other provinces in the sNorth, the South, and the Northeast, each chosen for its political significance and regional diversity. In Bangkok, two focus groups were conducted: one in the Ratchathewi district and one in the Bangkok Yai district. Moving to the North, three focus groups took place in the Kamphaeng Phet province—one in the Mueang Kamphaeng Phet district (the capital), one in the Khlong Lan district, and one in the Phran Kratai district. In the South, two focus groups were conducted in the Nakhon Si Thammarat province—one in the Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat district (the capital) and one in the Pak Phanang district. Finally, two focus groups were held in the Ubon Ratchathani province in the Northeast—one in the Det Udom district and one in the Pho Sai district.

As will be described in the subsequent sections, the case selection revolves around political significance and regional variation. Given the time constraint imposed by the COVID-19 situation in Thailand, one province of political significance was selected from each region to offer a comprehensive understanding of voter behavior and the factors influencing consent to authoritarian incumbents in the 2019 elections. In terms of group composition, the study, despite its focus on Palang Pracharath supporters, included both participants who voted for Palang Pracharath and those who did not to observe the dynamics between the two groups and investigate their perceptions of each other. Each focus group consisted approximately of 8 to 12 participants, representing diverse ages, genders, professions, and, in some cases, political orientations. Participants were selected from the same khet but represented different sub-districts or villages, providing localized insights into their political decisions. Furthermore, participants were also

selected based on their political priorities—MP candidate, policy, and ideology—as well as their socioeconomic dependence on the state and/or politicians.

Table 1. Focus Group Information

Focus Group	Location	Region	Group Composition	Voter Type	Priority
1	Bangkok-Ratchathewi	Central	Mixed	Dependent	Mixed
2	Bangkok-Bangkok Yai	Central	PPRP	Mixed	Mixed
3	Kamphaeng Phet-Mueang Kamphaeng Phet	North	Mixed	Independent	Ideology
4	Kamphaeng Phet-Khlong Lan	North	PPRP	Dependent	MP
5	Kamphaeng Phet-Phran Kratai	North	PPRP	Dependent	MP
6	Nakhon Si Thammarat-Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat	South	Mixed	Independent	Ideology
7	Nakhon Si Thammarat-Pak Phanang	South	PPRP	Independent	Ideology
8	Ubon Ratchathani-Det Udom	Northeast	Pheu Thai	Dependent	MP
9	Ubon Ratchathani-Pho Sai	Northeast	PPRP	Dependent	Policy

First, Ratchathewi and Bangkok Yai present intriguing contrasts in terms of the election outcomes of Palang Pracharath. While Palang Pracharath fielded brand-new candidates with no prior political background in both districts, the party secured victory in Ratchathewi but faced defeat in Bangkok Yai, warranting an examination of the factors contributing to the divergent election outcomes in these two districts. Additionally, apart from the election results, another significant difference lies in their geographical locations, with Ratchathewi situated in inner Bangkok and Bangkok Yai in outer Bangkok. Historically, voters in these areas have displayed distinct political preferences—the former leaning towards the Democrats and the latter for Pheu Thai. This divergence could further explain the contrasting election results in the two districts. Furthermore, Ratchathewi’s status as a gerrymandered district adds another layer of significance, as it lacked an actual incumbent, making it worthy of special attention in this study.

Next, Kamphaeng Phet emerges as an ideal location for testing the effects of co-optation, as Palang Pracharath successfully co-opted all Pheu Thai incumbents in the province. Due to its political significance, I opted to conduct three focus groups in Kamphaeng Phet instead of the initially planned two. The capital district, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, showcases political behaviors similar to those observed in Bangkok. Phran Kratai, on the other hand, represents the northernmost district in the Kamphaeng Phet province and is characterized by intensive rice cultivation, making it home to a significant number of farmers. Lastly, Khlong Lan was selected as the final focus group location in Kamphaeng Phet due to its population of the Lahu, one of Thailand's seven major hill tribes. As an ethnic minority group facing geographical and social marginalization, the Lahu perspective promises to provide valuable and intriguing insights.

Moving down to the South, Nakhon Si Thammarat shares substantial political significance similar to Kamphaeng Phet. Historically, it has been a major stronghold of the Democrat Party (and even referred to as “the capital of the Democrats”) since 1957. However, in the 2019 elections, three Palang Pracharath candidates emerged victorious, among whom two were without prior political experience, and one was co-opted from the Democrat Party. The ability of Palang Pracharath to make inroads into a long-standing Democrat stronghold warrants a closer examination of their strategies and appeal to the voters. Additionally, the study finds relevance in the deal-making between Prime Minister Prayuth and the major, resulting in the major’s return to office in exchange for his political support. This aspect adds an interesting dimension to understanding the factors contributing to Palang Pracharath’s success in Nakhon Si Thammarat.

Lastly, Ubon Ratchathani stands as one of the largest cities in Thailand, boasting a significant population and geographic size. As a major city in the Northeast, it has been historically dominated by Pheu Thai, while also harboring a few Democrat strongholds. However, Palang

Pracharath managed to co-opt a key politician, who was formerly one of the Thai Rak Thai Party executives (although his daughter did not win the election). Moreover, Ubon Ratchathani is not only a major rice-producing province, with a substantial number of rice farmers, but it also houses Ubon Ratchathani University, serving as a central hub for the Future Forward Party hence adding further complexity to the political landscape. Not only is the competition in this region intense, but it also presents an intriguing opportunity to observe the voting behaviors of two generations of voters.

C. Semi-Structured Interviews

Finally, to gain a deeper understanding of what shapes consent, I conducted semi-structured interviews with voters with particular roles in society. While focus groups offer valuable insights through the interaction of participants, the dynamics of a small group has its drawbacks. One key disadvantage of a focus group is preference falsification as a result of group pressure—participants may be unwilling to express their true preferences when they contradict the views of the majority. For instance, voters may say that they support Palang Pracharath when they do not. This is going to pose a challenge especially when participants are recruited from a Palang Pracharath-dominated town. Individual interviews thus proved useful for this project. I not only interviewed a few individuals after the focus group in order to zero in further, but I also conducted several informal small-group discussions with voters and vote canvassers to make the most of my research field trips. Additionally, to learn about the state mechanisms the NCPO employed to manage the election outcome and the electoral strategies Palang Pracharath used to gain consent from voters, I conducted interviews with Palang Pracharath officials, leaders, and members of

opposition parties, constituency candidates, members of the parliament, vote canvassers, and experts simultaneously with the focus groups.

V. Roadmap

This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 presents a conceptual framework to elucidate how authoritarian incumbents obtain consent from citizens and establishes a theoretical basis for understanding the decision-making and voting behavior of different types of voters, which result in distinct forms of consent. The chapter provides an overview of existing scholarship on authoritarian resilience, examines the instruments used by autocrats to strengthen control, and explores the history of authoritarian successor parties in Thailand. Additionally, it reviews the literature on consent, presents the author's contributions, and fleshes out the theory of consent in full detail. The chapter also examines the traditional voting typologies, introduces new typologies for explaining consent, and discusses sincere and strategic voting, which lead to sincere and strategic consent, respectively. Finally, it applies this theory to Thailand's 2019 general elections, discussing the subcategories of and main pathways to consent.

Chapter 3 examines how dependent voters' socioeconomic reliance on politicians shapes voter preferences and electoral strategies and lays the groundwork for co-option, which leads to consent. It defines clientelism and its main components and discusses the structural problems in Thailand that contribute to clientelism. The role of MPs as "coordinators" who link citizens with state resources and the concept of *boonkoon* are explored. The chapter also examines the structure and functions of vote-canvassing networks as well as the role of political dynasties. Lastly, it analyzes the effects of dependent voters' socioeconomic dependence on their political preferences and MP candidates' strategies to gain their support.

Chapter 4 explores the NCPO's efforts to manipulate the electoral system in favor of Palang Pracharath and set the stage for co-optation. It examines how the interplay between "the rules of the game" and the electoral context influences "the behavior of the players," including voters, politicians, and political parties. The chapter provides a historical overview of the relationship between military coups and constitutions, emphasizing their role in ensuring a smooth transition after a coup. The focus then shifts to the NCPO's use of the 2016 constitutional referendum to "engineer consent" for designing electoral rules. The second part examines the two main mechanisms employed by the NCPO to shape the rules: the Mixed Member Apportionment System (MMA) and the appointed Senate. It analyzes the shift from Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMR) to MMA, the formula for calculating party-list seats, and its impact on political behavior. The effects of the appointed Senate on the behavior of voters, candidates, parties, and local actors are also explored. The third part explores how the NCPO "controlled the referees," namely the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT). The final section briefly discusses how the junta and Palang Pracharath used the Constitution Court and state apparatuses to "handicap other players" and manage the competition.

Chapter 5 examines the three primary sources—MP, policy, and ideology—and their respective pathways to consent. It explores both the strategies employed by the NCPO and Palang Pracharath and the decision-making and factors influencing voters' decisions to vote for the party and provide consent to the regime. The first section of the chapter examines Pathway I where the combination of dependent voters' reliance on politicians and the single-ballot MMA system shaped Palang Pracharath's strategies to co-opt former MPs, local politicians, and vote canvassers to secure their political bases. It explores the methods used, including both incentives and pressures, to recruit politicians and maintain supporters. The chapter then examines the impact of

MPs' switches to Palang Pracharath and how voters responded. The second section explores Pathway II where the combination of dependent voters' reliance on government assistance and the MMA system resulted in the implementation of the welfare card. It analyzes the rhetorical strategies used by Palang Pracharath candidates and the policy's effect on voters' decisions. The final section investigates Pathway III where the combination of independent voters' desire for peace and stability and/or antagonism towards Thaksin and/or Thanathorn and the MMA system influenced Palang Pracharath's final campaign slogan. This chapter concludes by discussing the strategies used to co-opt small and medium-sized parties, leading to a successful coalition government formation, despite not securing the majority of seats.

The conclusion chapter summarizes the arguments presented in this dissertation and discusses the implications of sincere and strategic consent on the future of Palang Pracharath and regime survival. It assesses and ranks the stability of each source of support for Palang Pracharath with sincere consent being the most stable and strategic consent being the least stable. Moreover, the chapter discusses the political developments since the 2019 general elections, focusing on the change in the political context underlying the 2023 general elections and analyzing how each source of support plays out in the 2023 elections and what it means for regime survival. Lastly, the chapter identifies and discusses the areas for future research.

Chapter 2

The Theory of Consent

I. Introduction

On March 24, 2019, 8,433,137 Thai voters cast their votes to put authoritarian incumbents back into power. Wrapping himself in a “democracy” cloak, former coup leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha now leads the country as civilian prime minister. Following its “victory,” the pro-regime Palang Pracharath Party claimed that it came to power through the people. The election results, nevertheless, raised many eyebrows, especially from the pro-democracy camp. It has been argued that the regime has done everything possible, including constitutional engineering, electoral manipulation, cooptation, launching populist programs, vote buying, and even vote rigging, to tilt the elections in its favor.¹ However, regardless of what the regime did, the authoritarian incumbents would not have been able to claim legitimacy without the 8,433,137 votes cast for their party. This is where consent becomes important for explaining regime survival.

This chapter provides a conceptual framework for explaining the ways in which authoritarian incumbents acquire consent from citizens. It offers a theoretical basis for understanding how different types of voters make decisions and engage in different types of voting behavior, which lead to different types of consent. This theoretical basis, in turn, enables a better understanding of why voters elect authoritarian incumbents back into power. The chapter begins

¹ See, for example, 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 (2019): 52–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119892321>; Kanokra Lertchoosakul, “Thailand in 2019: The Year of Living Unpredictably,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2020, no. 1 (2020): 336–354, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814881319-019>; and Punchada Sirivunnabood, “Thailand’s Puzzling 2019 Election: How the NCPO Junta Has Embedded Itself in Thai Politics,” *ISEAS Perspective*, 44, no. 2019 (May 29, 2019): 1–9, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/>.

by providing an overview of the current scholarship on authoritarian resilience and examines both authoritarian and democratic instruments autocrats use to strengthen their control. I then examine the history of authoritarian successor parties in Thailand and discuss the similarities and differences between Palang Pracharath and its predecessors. After that, I explore the literature on consent and review the definitions and types, the conditions and indicators, as well as the potential sources of consent. In the following sections, I discuss my contributions to the literature and present my theory of consent. I then discuss the traditional voting typologies that have been used to explain the behavior of Thai voters and introduce my typologies for explaining consent. I then define and discuss two forms of voting behavior—sincere and strategic voting—which in turn leads to two forms of consent—sincere and strategic consent—respectively. In the final part of this chapter, I apply the theory of consent to voting behavior in Thailand’s 2019 general elections and discuss the subcategories of consent as well as the main pathways to consent.

II. Literature Review

A. The End of the Transition Paradigm and Authoritarian Survival

The role of elections in fomenting meaningful political change was downplayed by earlier generations of political scientists.² However, after the third wave of democratization,³ elections

² According to classical theories of modernization, such as those proposed by Seymour Martin Lipset and Karl Deutsch, democratization is caused by gradual structural changes, such as urbanization and economic development. Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731>; Karl W. Deutsch, “Social Mobilization and Political Development,” *American Political Science Review* 55, no. 3 (1961): 493–514, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952679>.

³ There was a global trend in which many regions of the world followed Portugal’s transition to democracy. The world had experienced a continuous growth in the number of democracies every year from 1975 until 2007. Larry Diamond, “Facing up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of*

were placed directly in the center of theories of democratic change. Scholars began to use the framework of the “transition paradigm” to analyze electoral processes in non-democratic regimes.⁴ A wealth of literature has discovered a robust causal relationship between repeated multiparty elections and democratization at both the global and regional levels.⁵ According to the theory of democratization by elections, even flawed elections in authoritarian regimes can lead to democracy.⁶ Nevertheless, political realities have demonstrated otherwise.⁷ Despite their adoption of some democratic features, autocrats around the world have maintained a tight grip on political power instead of moving toward liberal democracy. Contrary to conventional wisdom, semi-

Democracy 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>. Such transitions have captured considerable scholarly interests and produced an expansive body of research.

⁴ For further discussion of the end of the transition paradigm see Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5–21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003>.

⁵ See, for example, Lee Morgenbesser and Thomas B. Pepinsky, “Elections as Causes of Democratization: Southeast Asia in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 1 (2019): 3–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018758763>; Daniela Donno, “Elections and Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013): 703–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12013>; Amanda B Edgell et al., “When and Where Do Elections Matter? A Global Test of the Democratization by Elections Hypothesis, 1900–2012,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2638285>; Marc Morje Howard and Philip G. Roessler, “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2006): 365–81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00189.x>; and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

⁶ Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, “Elections as Causes of Democratization.”

⁷ The world has observed a stagnation of the number of electoral democracies, the decline of freedom and the rule of law, or democratic breakdown, and authoritarian resurgence and a retreat of Western democracy, including the United States. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York, NY: Crown, 2018); See also Carothers, “End of Transition Paradigm”; Larry Jay Diamond, “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 21–35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0025>; Larry Diamond, “Facing up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>; and Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

democratic regimes, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand appear to be stable.⁸ Many have interpreted the current patterns of de-democratization as the end of the transition paradigm,⁹ and Thailand has long been part of this trend.

The end of the transition paradigm has led to a switch in research interests from democratization to authoritarian resilience. Earlier scholarship in authoritarian survival argues that

⁸ William F. Case, “Can the ‘Halfway House’ Stand? Semidemocracy and Elite Theory in Three Southeast Asian Countries,” *Comparative Politics* 28, no. 4 (1996): 437, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422052>; Chai-anan Samudvanija, “Thailand: A Stable Semidemocracy,” in *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy*, ed. Larry Diamond, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 1995), 323–68.

⁹ Carothers, “End of Transition Paradigm.” Other scholars have introduced concepts such as “democratic recession” (Larry Diamond) and “democratic backsliding” (Nancy Bermeo) to account for such political phenomena. Larry Diamond, “Facing up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>. Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>. Instead of transitioning into democracy, most of the “transitional countries” are trapped in political “gray zone” or “foggy zone” between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism. Carothers, “End of Transition Paradigm.” Andreas Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 36–50, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0031>. Scholars have therefore proposed terms like “semi-democracy” and “semi-authoritarianism” (William Case), “electoral democracy” and “electoral authoritarianism” (Andreas Schedler), “competitive authoritarianism” (Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way), and more generally “hybrid regime” to fill the conceptual space between the two ideal regime types. William F. Case, “Can the ‘Halfway House’ Stand? Semidemocracy and Elite Theory in Three Southeast Asian Countries,” *Comparative Politics* 28, no. 4 (1996): 437, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422052>. Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation,” Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026>. Proposing electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism as two symmetrical categories to describe the regimes located in the “foggy zone,” Schedler posits that elections’ compliance with minimal democratic norms is what distinguishes the former from the latter. Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation,” 38. While closed authoritarian regimes have become increasingly rare, electoral autocracies constitute more than two-thirds of all autocracies, making it the most common regime type. Ibid., 48. Finally, Levitsky and Way argue that competitive authoritarian regimes neither pass as democracy nor full-scale authoritarianism. While manipulation of formal democratic rules by incumbents is frequently observed in competitive authoritarian regimes, such rules cannot be completely removed. Levitsky and Way, “Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” 53.

dictators secure power primarily by repressing or co-opting their rivals.¹⁰ Regarded as one of the backbones of autocracies,¹¹ *repression*¹² is employed by dictators to disunite the opposition¹³ and channel public demands vis-a`-vis the political system without putting the regime in danger.¹⁴ However, scholars have argued that repression by itself is insufficient for explaining regime durability.¹⁵ Not only is repression too costly to maintain stability in the long run,¹⁶ but this strategy can also backfire.¹⁷ Regardless of their repressive power, autocrats cannot use force or threats of

¹⁰ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279–1301, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414007305817>; Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Repression is regarded as one of the backbones of autocracies. Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860>.

¹² Repression is defined as the "actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities" Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2007): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.143216>, 48.

¹³ At least some degree of repression is employed by most authoritarian regimes to disunite the opposition. Wintrobe, *Political Economy of Dictatorship*; Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. New York, N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken, 1951; Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). Alfred Stepan, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). Robert Alan Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971). Examples of repression include vicious policies and violent actions such as murder, torture, and imprisonment against opposition leaders and general population.

¹⁴ Gerschewski, "Three Pillars of Stability."

¹⁵ See, for example, Gerschewski, "Three Pillars of Stability"; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.

¹⁶ Gerschewski, "Three Pillars of Stability."

¹⁷ For example, Wood contends that repression of the opposition may result in insurgency, which could lead to a deposition of the dictator through civil war. Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Forging Democracy from Below: Insurgent Transitions in South Africa and El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

force alone to govern—they require some form of popular support.¹⁸ In addition to repression, the stability of authoritarian regimes, therefore, depends on the regime elite’s ability to incorporate all relevant actors into the regime. Autocrats can *co-opt*¹⁹ actors through both formal channels such as parliaments, parties, or elections and informal channels such as patronage, clientelism, and corruption.²⁰

Nevertheless, as Johannes Gerschewski points out, the extant literature has overlooked the importance of *legitimation*,²¹ which has been linked to the stability of autocracies.²² While earlier

¹⁸ Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*, 19; A burgeoning body of research has highlighted the significance of political institutions as a means autocrats use to implement rewards and punishment to both the elite and the masses to induce their support. See, for example, Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Beatriz Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 4–5 (2008): 715–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414007313124>. Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Joseph Wright and Abel Escribà-Folch, “Authoritarian Institutions and Regime Survival: Transitions to Democracy and Subsequent Autocracy,” *British Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 2 (2011): 283–309, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123411000317>; Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Benjamin Smith, “Life of the Party: The Origins of Regime Breakdown and Persistence under Single-Party Rule,” *World Politics* 57, no. 3 (2005): 421–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2006.0004>.

¹⁹ Co-optation is defined as “the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite,” co-optation serves as a “transmission belt to ensure both the intra-elite cohesion and the steering capacity of the political elite.” Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability,” 22. In Bueno de Mesquita et al.’s account, autocrats must co-opt members of the “selectorate” into the “winning coalition” so that “the actor is ‘persuaded not to exercise his power to obstruct’ and instead to use the resources in line with the ruling elite’s demands” Ibid.

²⁰ Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability”; Lee Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade: Elections Under Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

²¹ Defined as “the process of gaining support, which is based on an empirical, Weberian tradition of ‘legitimacy belief’” Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability,” 8.

²² See, for example, Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability”; Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation”; Lee Morgenbesser, “In Search of Stability: Electoral Legitimation Under Authoritarianism in Myanmar,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2015): 163–88, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700615-01402002>; Lee Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade: Elections Under Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016); Peter Burnell, “Autocratic Opening to Democracy: Why Legitimacy Matters,”

scholarship has argued that legitimacy is either unattainable or unnecessary for autocracies,²³ empirical evidence demonstrates that the use of co-optation, legitimation, and repression is institutionalized in more authoritarian regimes.²⁴ Citizens provide the most critical source of legitimacy after which dictators seek.²⁵ Because their power is not based on the principle of popular sovereignty, dictators must entice citizens into believing that they are entitled to govern²⁶—that “they are backed by consent and not merely tolerated through acquiescence.”²⁷ A body of literature in political philosophy regards consent as a source of political obligation and legitimacy—when citizens comply and consent, states and laws become legitimate.²⁸ As Hobbes and Locke argue, the legitimacy of state authority is based on the consent of the governed, and the lack of consent can result in a legitimation problem.²⁹ Given the significance of consent, autocratic regimes also rely on their performance just as their democratic counterparts.³⁰ As demonstrated by a growing literature on “popular autocrats” which attributes regime stability to the popularity of authoritarian

Third World Quarterly 27, no. 4 (2006): 545–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600720710>; Stephen White, “Economic Performance and Communist Legitimacy,” *World Politics* 38, no. 3 (1986): 462–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010202>. Legitimation is one of Gerschewski’s three pillars of stability. He contends that the longevity of authoritarian regimes rests on three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and cooptation, which can preempt the danger of regime breakdown. Such threats emerge from three sources: the ordinary citizens, oppositional actors, and intra-elite splits. Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability.”

²³ See, for example, Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market. Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith. *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics*. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2011.

²⁴ Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability.”

²⁵ Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*.

²⁶ Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*, 23.

²⁷ Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*, 213 quoted in Russell Hardin and Susan C Stokes, “Compliance, Consent, and Legitimacy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 1.

²⁸ Hardin, “Compliance, Consent, and Legitimacy,” 1.

²⁹ John Gelissen, *Worlds of Welfare, Worlds of Consent? Public Opinion on the Welfare State* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

³⁰ Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability”; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.

incumbents,³¹ some authoritarian regimes are genuinely popular among their populace.³² In fact, non-democratic regimes sometimes enjoy higher levels of regime legitimacy than emerging democracies.³³ Since consent serves as the basis for legitimacy, it is vital for regime survival. While scholars have drawn connections between legitimacy and stability,³⁴ and consent and legitimacy,³⁵ the relationship between consent and regime stability has yet to be explored. This is the gap in the literature which the present study seeks to fill.

B. The Use of Democratic Elements to Bolster Authoritarian Control

1. Authoritarian Parties, Legislatures, and Elections

In addition to authoritarian instruments for regime survival, autocrats have also adopted and institutionalized democratic features to strengthen their autocratic control. Contrary to earlier research, which perceives institutions as constraints,³⁶ new literature on authoritarianism argues that *prima facie* democratic institutions such as legislatures, political parties, and elections are created specifically to provide dictators with the infrastructural power to control and co-opt

³¹ Martin K Dimitrov, “Debating the Color Revolutions: Popular Autocrats,” *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 1 (2009): 78–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0057>.

³² James Loxton, “Conclusion,” in *Life After Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide*, ed. James Loxton and Scott Mainwaring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 336–59.

³³ Chang, Chu, and Welsh, “Sources of Regime Support,” 161 quoted in Loxton, “Conclusion” 337–338.

³⁴ See, for example, Gerschewski, “Three Pillars of Stability”; Morgenbesser, “In Search of Stability”; Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*; Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation”; Burnell, “Autocratic Opening to Democracy”; White, “Economic Performance and Communist.

³⁵ See, for example, Hardin, “Compliance, Consent, and Legitimacy.”

³⁶ See, for example, Douglass Cecil North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” *Political Studies* 44, no. 5 (1996): 936–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x>; Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Joseph Wright, “Do Authoritarian Institutions Constrain? How Legislatures Affect Economic Growth and Investment,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008): 322–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2008.00315.x>.

political elites, opponents, and the masses.³⁷ An extensive body of research shows that authoritarian parties and elections help dictators stabilize their power, thus prolonging regime survival.³⁸ Political institutions such as parties and legislatures serve as critical arenas through which dictators create incentives for elites to remain united with the regime.³⁹ By regularizing

³⁷ A brief but non-exhaustive list includes Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions”; Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*; Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski Przeworski, “Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships,” *Economics and Politics* 18, no. 1 (2006): 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0343.2006.00160.x>; Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115–44, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115>; Dan Slater, “Iron Cage in an Iron Fist: Authoritarian Institutions and the Personalization of Power in Malaysia,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 1 (2003): 81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150161>; and Thomas Pepinsky, “The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2013): 631–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123413000021>. In Pepinsky’s words, “elites purposefully create institutions that consolidate their hold on political power to foster durable authoritarian rule.” Pepinsky, “The Institutional Turn, 631. Rather than constraining elites or undermining their hold on power, “authoritarian institutions do exactly what their creators want them to do, and leaders adjust institutional forms when doing so is in their interest.” Ibid., 632. A growing number of scholars have also conducted systematic studies of the role of authoritarian political institutions such as political parties, legislatures, and elections: Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*; Smith, “Life of the Party”; Geddes, et al., “Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions”; and Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁸ See, for example, Gandhi, and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions”; Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and Longevity”; Geddes, “Democratization After Twenty Years?”; Geddes et al. *How Dictatorships Work*; Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*; Lust-Okar, “Elections under Authoritarianism”; Wright and Escribà-Folch, “Authoritarian Institutions and Regime Survival.

³⁹ Geddes, “Democratization After Twenty Years?; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Since elite cohesion is central to regime survival, autocrats must provide incentives to elites to remain united with the regime. Elite defections can make the regime crumble—splits within military governments could lead to regime breakdown and/or democratization. Geddes, “Democratization After Twenty Years?; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in Age of Democratization*; As O’Donnell & Schmitter famously declare, “[t]here is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence—direct or indirect—of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself.” *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 19. Authoritarian institutions—powerful states, well-organized parties, cohesive militaries, and durable authoritarian regimes—all require elite collective action to function effectively. Slater, *Ordering Power*, 5-6. Building on Geddes’ “Democratization After Twenty Years?, Magaloni points out that elites’ incentives to stay loyal to the regime are also a function of popular support for the ruling party: “[e]lite possess strong incentives to remain

payments to its supporters and implementing punishments to its enemies, elections give citizens and ruling party politicians a vested interest in the survival of the regime.”⁴⁰ Due to their ability to withstand elite splitting, single-party regimes have been argued to be more resilient than military and personalist dictatorships.⁴¹ In addition to co-optation and distribution of patronage, dictators also use elections to collect information, gain domestic and international legitimacy, and signal

united as long as the population supports the ruling party. If electoral support begins to wither, so do incentives to remain united with the ruling party. Therefore, hegemonic-party autocracies strive to sustain an oversized governing coalition rather than a minimally winning one because they want to generate an image of invincibility to discourage party splits.” *Voting for Autocracy*, 12-13; There are at least four ways in which authoritarian parties and legislatures help stabilize authoritarian regimes. First, authoritarian parties, legislatures, and elections serve as arenas through which to solicit cooperation from potential opponents or broader groups within society. Gandhi and Przeworski, “Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion”; Gandhi, and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions”; Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*; Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and Longevity.” Second, authoritarian legislatures, parties, and elections minimize the risks of deposition by making bargains between the dictator and potential opposition credible, thus contributing to the regime’s longevity. Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and Longevity”; Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*; Wright and Escibà-Folch, “Authoritarian Institutions and Regime Survival. Third, authoritarian parties serve as a system for career advancement, the distribution of patronage, and the mobilization of regime supporters. Gandhi, and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions”; Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Pepinsky, “The Institutional Turn; Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*. Finally, authoritarian parties also help stabilize dictatorships by serving as a buffer against military power and helping the autocrat separate moderate opponents from radical opponents Wright and Escibà-Folch, “Authoritarian Institutions and Regime Survival, 286.

⁴⁰ Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*. However, since elections can create both political security and insecurity, such an institution must be controlled. In an analysis of legislative elections under the rule of Egyptian President Husni Mubarak, Kevin Koehler argues that by including opposition forces into the electoral arena, autocrats enjoy a wider range of means to control these actors, both in terms of carrots and sticks (982). On the one hand, the electoral arena serves as carrots in that it enables autocrats to make selective concessions to oppositional demands or initiate reforms, thus creating a reformist image. On the other hand, since the informal institutions of neopatrimonialism place restrictions on oppositional action, authoritarian elections increase the regime’s leverage over oppositional actors, hence acting as sticks. “Authoritarian Elections in Egypt.”

⁴¹ Geddes, “Democratization After Twenty Years?; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*; Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and Longevity”; Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

regime strength. Elections reveal information about regime supporters and opponents, which can be used to punish, buy off, or repress the opposition; or adjust policy.⁴² Moreover, dictators contrive legitimacy through electoral processes and victories.⁴³ Elections can be used to mobilize citizens—high voter turnout and support for authoritarian incumbents can be interpreted as an expression of consent and a sign of their legitimacy.⁴⁴ Finally, dictators can use authoritarian elections to send signals of the regime’s strength, which helps deter potential defections from the ruling coalition and buttress authoritarian rule.⁴⁵ Scholars working on authoritarian institutions

⁴² See, for example, Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, “The Single-Party Dictator’s Dilemma: Information in Elections without Opposition,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2011): 491–530, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-9162.2011.00025.x>; Michael K. Miller, “Democratic Pieces: Autocratic Elections and Democratic Development since 1815,” *British Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 3 (2013): 501–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123413000446>; Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and Longevity”; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in Age of Democratization*; Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles*; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, “Elections Under Authoritarianism.”; Ronald Wintrobe posits that dictators’ lack of means to obtain information about citizens puts them in what he calls a “Dictator’s Dilemma”—“[d]ictators cannot—either by using force or the threat of force, or by promises, even of vast sums of money or chunks of their empires—know whether the population genuinely worships them or worships them because they command such worship.” *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, 20. An underestimation of the level of public discontent could lead dictators to overlook the threat of a coup or revolution. By providing dictators with an opportunity to collect genuine information about the population, national elections help them alleviate the dictator’s dilemma. However, elections require a certain degree of openness, which decreases the certainty of victory. Hence, dictators face a trade-off between the desire to manipulate the elections to ensure victory and the desire for complete information. Malesky and Schuler, “The Single-Party Dictators Dilemma,” 497.

⁴³ Burnell, “Autocratic Opening to Democracy”; Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*; According to Morgenbesser, elections help dictators achieve autonomous and mass legitimation at the domestic and international levels. At the international level, elections are used to “feign conformity to established rules of the political system and shared beliefs of citizens.” Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*, 2. At the domestic level, not only can authoritarian elections be used as “release valves” when there is a risk for popular uprisings, but they can also be used to restore legitimacy when there is a legitimacy crisis, such as economic downturns. Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*, 24; White, “Economic Performance and Communist Legitimacy.”

⁴⁴ Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*, 24.

⁴⁵ Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Alberto Simpser, *Making Votes Not Count: Strategic Incentives for Electoral Corruption*, 2005; Malesky and

have expended much energy in their investigation of the regime elite's strategies. The top-down depiction of the elite-mass influence process has led scholars to overlook the strategic behavior of voters. To understand the bigger picture, more emphasis should be placed on the strategic interactions among all groups of actors, and capturing such interactions through a combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches is one intervention of the present study.

2. Authoritarian Successor Parties and Thai Politics

As previously discussed, authoritarian institutions are created to serve their creators. Defined as “parties that emerge from authoritarian regimes, but that operate after a transition to democracy,” authoritarian successor parties (ASPs) are created by authoritarian incumbents to preserve their power in a new regime.⁴⁶ Not only do these parties frequently compete in elections under a new democracy, but they also frequently win them.⁴⁷ The resources that ASPs inherit from authoritarian regimes—a party brand, territorial organization, clientelistic networks, sources of

Schuler, “The Single-Party Dictators Dilemma.”; Magaloni posits that elites’ incentives to remain united with the ruling party are a function of electoral support. Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; See also Geddes et al. Electoral victory allows authoritarian incumbents to project an image of invincibility to potential elite defectors. This explains hegemonic-party autocracies’ efforts to sustain an oversized governing coalition rather than a minimally winning one. Ibid.

⁴⁶ Loxton, “Authoritarian Successor Parties”; As Loxton contends, “there is life after dictatorship ... authoritarian parties are a normal part of democracy: it is normal for them to exist, it is normal for them to win large numbers of voters, and it is normal for them to return to power.” “Introduction,” 1; “Conclusion,” 358.

⁴⁷ As Slater and Wong assert, “For authoritarian parties, democratization entails the concession to *hold* free and fair elections, but not necessarily to *lose* them. Hence, they can maintain incumbency without maintaining authoritarianism.” Dan Slater and Joseph Wong, “The Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental Asia,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 3 (2013): 717–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592713002090>. While democratization changes “the regime *type*,” it may not necessarily change “the regime’s leading players,” Slater and Wong, 1. Dan Slater and Joseph Wong, “Game for Democracy: Authoritarian Successor Parties in Developmental Asia,” in *Life After Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide*, ed. James Loxton and Scott Mainwaring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 284–313, 288, italics added.

party finance, and sources of party cohesion—help them survive or even thrive under democracy.⁴⁸ Palang Pracharath exemplifies the prototypical image of ASPs. However, a look into Thailand's political history since the Siamese revolution of 1932 reveals that the formation of an ASP is not a novel phenomenon. At least three political parties have been established by the ruling junta, namely Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram's "Seri Manangkhasila Party," Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn's "Saha Pracha Thai Party," and "Samakkeetham Party," which supported General Suchinda Khra-prayun's premiership. Many more parties have been created to support military governments.⁴⁹ These ASPs serve as a vehicle through which the ruling junta enters politics and contests in elections. Moreover, the formation of ASPs allows the ruling junta to mobilize the electorate and build political bases, thus preparing for future political positions.⁵⁰ Since ASPs are constructed to preserve the junta's political influence in the subsequent regime, they are typically viewed as "temporary" parties and thus often short-lived.⁵¹ These parties either vanished shortly after the election or got merged with another party. Splits among military leaders are frequently identified as the main culprit of the demise of ASPs in Thailand.⁵² Emerging from

⁴⁸ Loxton refers to such resources as "authoritarian inheritance." "Introduction."

⁴⁹ For instance, in the March 2019 general election, People's Reform Party leader Paiboon Nititawan pledged support for Prime Minister Prayuth's second term as premier.

⁵⁰ For instance, power competition between the three military factions—that of Phibun; Field Marshal Phin Choonhavan and Police General Phao Sriyanonda who controlled the police; and Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat who controlled the military—led Phibun to establish the Seri Manangkhasila Party as an attempt to secure his political influence through the electorate instead of relying on the support of the police and the military. Muksong, "Kaan Luek Tang Sok Kaprok."

⁵¹ Seri Manangkhasila Party lasted for 2 years and 83 days; Sahaphum Party 6 months; Chat Sangkhom Party 1 year; and Samakkeetham 7 months. Karavekpan, "Palang Pracharath Mai Chai Pak Raek Nai Prawattisat Kaan Mueng Thai Ti Took Mong Wa Pen 'Pak Rang Song Tahan.'"

⁵² Muksong argues that while the "dirtiest election" of 1957 was perceived as the cause of popular protests, which gave a pretext for a military coup by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, it was, in fact, a mere trigger that accelerated the existing split among the military leaders. "Kaan Luek Tang Sok Kaprok." Similarly, the downfall of Saha Pracha Thai was caused by "the dissent

the NCPO's attempts to institutionalize its power after a transition to the new regime,⁵³ the Palang Pracharath Party makes a good illustration of the institutionalization of authoritarian regimes. In spite of their similar origins, Palang Pracharath differs from its predecessors in many aspects. Not only does the party have substantive policies, but its membership also consists of individuals from diverse segments of the population. Moreover, the party has co-opted the existing clientelistic networks and used them to expand its electoral bases. Given the party's similarities with and differences from a typical authoritarian successor party and a typical military party in Thailand, Palang Pracharath will shed light on authoritarian institutionalization, a topic that has garnered scant scholarly attention until the present.

C. Voter Consent

1. The Definitions and Types of Consent

The concept of "consent" can be traced back to John Locke's social contract theory in *Two Treatises of Government*.⁵⁴ Despite the widespread use of this concept, the precise definition of consent is rarely given. There have been scant attempts to define or operationalize this concept, especially in political science. C. W. Cassinelli was among the few scholars who provided an explicit definition of what constitutes consent in their studies. According to Cassinelli, the literal

among the military factions in the party and the fear of communist insurgency [which] led Thanom to stage a coup against his own government on November 17, 1971, putting an end to the hybrid regime and bringing back military government." Bamrungsuk, "Development of Hybrid Regime," 89-90.

⁵³ The Palang Pracharath Party originates and benefits from the 2017 constitution, which is designed specifically to favor medium-size political parties and put large parties like Pheu Thai at a disadvantage. The appointed Senate and outsider prime minister clauses as well as the strange party-list MP calculation formula are designed to facilitate Prayuth's return to the premiership. See Chapter 4 for an in-depth examination.

⁵⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Hamilton: McMaster University Archive of the History of Economic Thought, 1999).

meaning of “consent” is “*voluntary*, accordance with, or concurrence in, what is done or proposed by another.”⁵⁵ Similarly, most dictionaries define “consent” in terms of “permission” or “agreement.”⁵⁶ For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines “consent” as “permission for something to happen or agreement to do something.”

The two main types of consent include “overt” or “explicit” consent and “tacit” or “implicit” consent. Explicit consent occurs when “the governed perform a specific act or group of acts which can accurately be described as observable voluntary agreement to accept the control of government.”⁵⁷ It has been argued that explicit consent can only exist in a representative government—individuals must explicitly consent with others to unite under one government and thus have an obligation to obey the law.⁵⁸ Given the difficulty of obtaining explicit consent, Locke proposed a theory of “tacit” consent, which posits that an individual provides tacit consent merely by living within the jurisdiction of government.⁵⁹ In contrast with explicit consent, tacit consent is not spoken but understood to have been given. Moreover, it can be acquired in non-democratic regimes.⁶⁰ However, tacit consent is subject to two objections: that individuals do not have a choice to dissent except to leave the country and that tacit consent might not necessarily be understood

⁵⁵ C.W. Cassinelli, “The ‘Consent’ of the Governed,” *Western Political Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1959): 391-409, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591295901200202>, italics added.

⁵⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica defines “consent” as “an act of permitting something to be done or of recognizing some authority.” The Cambridge Dictionary defines “consent” as “permission” or “agreement.” Likewise, the Collins English Dictionary defines “consent” in terms of “permission” and “agreement.” Finally, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “consent” as “compliance in or approval of what is done or proposed by another” or “agreement as to action or opinion.”

⁵⁷ Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed,” 392.

⁵⁸ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Ch. 8 §95.

⁵⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Ch. 8 §119-121; Thus, it is only when an individual remains within a government’s jurisdiction that he or she is bound by consent. Bookman, “Locke’s Contract,” 360.

⁶⁰ C.W. Cassinelli, “The ‘Consent’ of the Governed,” 392–393.

by the consenter as consent.⁶¹ Additionally, “hypothetical consent” is based on appropriateness or rationality.⁶² The belief that governmental control is “convenient” and “morally good” induces an individual to consent to it.⁶³ The final type of consent is called “engineered” or “manufactured” consent, which occurs when politicians use the media to manipulate voters to vote for a particular candidate.⁶⁴

2. The Conditions and Indicators of Consent

“Voluntariness” is commonly identified as a necessary condition for consent, as consent must be “freely and independently given by citizens.”⁶⁵ Moreover, meaningful consent requires “rationality,” the ability to determine what is right and wrong, and “knowledge” about the terms they are consenting to from the consenting parties.⁶⁶ Consenting parties must also understand their act of consent as consent.⁶⁷ Finally, there must be a “possibility of dissent,” for consent cannot be meaningful unless consenting parties have a “choice.”⁶⁸ Voting is typically interpreted as an

⁶¹ Michael Lacewing, “Political Obligation and Consent,” n.d., <https://michaellacewing.com/writings/introductory-and-popular-writing/political-philosophy/>.

⁶² Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed”; Lacewing, “Political Obligation and Consent”; Hanna Pitkin, “Obligation and Consent—II,” *American Political Science Review* 60, no. 1 (1966): 39–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953805>.

⁶³ Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed,” 406–407.

⁶⁴ John C. Livingston and Robert G. Thompson, *The Consent of the Governed* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Bernays 1955, 1947; Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

⁶⁵ The conditions necessary for consent include “voluntariness, a specific act on the part of the consenters, a particular action consented to, and specific agents who perform this action,” all of which are present in a social contract. Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed,” 39; Livingston and Thompson, *The Consent of the Governed*, 6.

⁶⁶ Some consent-based theories of legitimacy and obligation also require that consenting parties are “rational agents, capable of understanding moral categories such as right and wrong” and “...sufficiently informed about the terms they are consenting to...” King, “Consent.”

⁶⁷ Lacewing, “Political Obligation and Consent.”

⁶⁸ Lacewing, “Political Obligation and Consent.”

expression of consent.⁶⁹ By participating in an election, voters consent to the fundamental principles of a representative government and the specific acts of given governmental personnel,⁷⁰ thus providing “a tacit endorsement of the existing regime.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, critics contend that since there is always a sizeable segment of the electorate that votes for the opposition, their mere participation in an election should not be viewed as consent to the existing regime.⁷² Additionally, since elections do not serve as a platform through which voters approve or disapprove of the general principles of a government, an act of voting should not be construed as direct consent to such principles.⁷³

While a mere act of voting cannot be interpreted as an expression of consent, an act of voting *for a pro-regime party* may. However, a non-verbal act of voting fits the characterization of tacit consent more than explicit consent, for a voter does not explicitly consent to something until he or she says so. Hence, the only way to discover and measure voters’ *explicit* consent is through interviews that inquire whether and why respondents voted for the pro-regime party—did an individual cast his or her vote for the Palang Pracharath Party as an expression of consent for the military or something else? Understanding the meaning of a vote for a pro-regime party and the implications of consent for the future of authoritarian regimes is the thrust of this study.

⁶⁹ Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed”; Lacewing, “Political Obligation and Consent”; Matthew R. Miles, “Turnout as Consent: How Fair Governance Encourages Voter Participation,” *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2015): 363–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915573282>; Mark E. Kann, “Consent and Authority in America,” in *The Problem of Authority in America*, ed. John P. Diggins and Mark E. Kann (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 59–83.

; William Graebner, *The Engineering of Consent: Democracy and Authority in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

⁷⁰ Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed,” 393.

⁷¹ Miles, “Turnout as Consent,” 363.

⁷² Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed,” 393; Lacewing, “Political Obligation and Consent.”

⁷³ Cassinelli, “‘Consent’ of the Governed,” 394.

Although the existing scholarship has addressed some essential aspects and conditions of consent, no single work has provided a comprehensive definition or scrutinized this concept in a systematic way. Despite the attempts to categorize consent, the existing typologies are inadequate for explaining the critical dimensions of this concept. The present research hence contributes to the accumulation of knowledge by introducing a new typology of consent.

3. The Potential Sources of Consent

While the concept of consent has captured considerable interest in political theory, there is scant literature on consent in political behavior and political psychology research. However, political scientists have discovered a multitude of factors that influence political behavior and vote choice, thus potentially driving individuals to vote for an authoritarian successor party. There are four major approaches to the study of vote choice: Rational Choice, Social-Psychological, Sociological, and Valence, which identify (1) self-interest (policies), (2) party identification, (3) social group memberships, and (4) voters' perceptions of each party's competence, as the key determinants respectively.

First, rooted in Anthony Down's (1957) theory of voting, the Rational Choice approach argues that voters' decisions are driven by *self-interest*, "the tangible, relatively immediate personal or family benefits of a policy."⁷⁴ This argument is drawn from Rational Choice Theory, an empirical model of behavior, which assumes that a rational individual has a complete and coherent set of preferences that reflect his or her desires and goals. When making political decisions, self-interested individuals acquire relevant information, weigh the costs and benefits of

⁷⁴ Dennis Chong, "Degrees of Rationality in Politics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. Leonie Huddy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–36.

different actions, and select the course of action that maximizes their expected utility.⁷⁵ Therefore, when deciding which party and/or candidate to vote for, voters calculate and compare the benefits they expect to receive from the *policies* and political activities of each party and/or candidate after the elections and vote for the party and/or candidate whose policies are most consistent with their policy preferences or yield the optimal benefits to them.⁷⁶ However, the political reality demonstrates that individuals lack rational consistency in their preferences, often make mistakes, and do not always make optimal choices.

Since voters do not always act according to their self-interest, cognition is often contrasted with *emotion*,⁷⁷ which is equally, if not more, important for shaping political behavior.⁷⁸ Scholars disagree on whether emotions have indirect or direct effects on political preferences. For example, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen's theory of Affective Intelligence (AIT)⁷⁹ posits that emotion affects vote choice *indirectly*—generalized anxiety about politics drives citizens to search for and

⁷⁵ Chong, “Degrees of Rationality in Politics,” 101.

⁷⁶ Attasit Pankaew, เลือกเพราะชอบ [*Voting out of Preference: The Electoral Behavior of Thai Voters in the 2007 General Elections*] (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2013), 39.

⁷⁷ Political emotion is defined as a fleeting response to a specific stimulus that dissipates quickly. Diana C. Mutz, “Political Psychology and Choice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert Goodin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 345–64. It involves a “negative and/or positive reaction to a political object, along with a concurrent experience of arousal.” Ibid., 82; Studies have demonstrated that voters exhibit different behavior in different emotional states. See, for example, Ted Brader, “Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions,” *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2005): 388–405, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0092-5853.2005.00130.x>.

⁷⁸ Brader, “Striking a Responsive Chord”; Mutz, “Political Psychology and Choice”; George E. Marcus, Michael MacKuen, and W. Russell Neuman, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jonathan McDonald Ladd and Gabriel S. Lenz, “Reassessing the Role of Anxiety in Vote Choice,” *Political Psychology* 29, no. 2 (2008): 275–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00626.x>; Ted Brader and George E. Marcus, “Emotion and Political Psychology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. Leonie Huddy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165–204.

⁷⁹ AIT is the most prominent theory connecting emotions to political behavior to date.

process information more thoroughly, thus improving the quality of political decision making⁸⁰ whereas Ladd and Lenz argue that anxiety does not simply serve as a moderator of party identification but has a *direct* effect on preferences.⁸¹ Critics point out that emotion is subject to manipulation, as politicians frequently appeal to the emotions of citizens.⁸² As demonstrated by Brader, political ads are employed by politicians to cue fear and influence vote choices.⁸³ Furthermore, studies have found that emotions inform preferences and policy-related attitudes across several policy domains.⁸⁴

Second, pioneered by political scientists at the University of Michigan who investigated the 1952 Presidential election,⁸⁵ the Social-Psychological approach focuses on *party identification*, issue attitudes, and leader/candidate evaluations. However, as William G. Jacoby points out, party identification neither requires an individual to be a formal member of nor engage in overt activities in support of a political party. Rather, it is simply a feeling of emotional attachment to a political

⁸⁰ Voters thus rely less on political heuristics and more on substantive information. Marcus et al., *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*; George E. Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); George E. Marcus and Michael B. MacKuen, "Anxiety, Enthusiasm, and the Vote: The Emotional Underpinnings of Learning and Involvement During Presidential Campaigns," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 672–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938743>; George E. Marcus and Michael MacKuen, "Emotions and Politics: The Dynamic Functions of Emotionality," in *Citizens and Politics: Perspectives from Political Psychology*, ed. James H. Kuklinski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41–67.

⁸¹ They also suggest the possibility that the relationship is reversed, and preferences drive emotions. Ladd and Lenz, "Reassessing Role of Anxiety."

⁸² Mutz, "Political Psychology and Choice"; Brader, "Striking a Responsive Chord"; Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet-Erskine, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

⁸³ Brader and Marcus, "Emotion and Political Psychology," 183.

⁸⁴ For example, anger and anxiety have been the focal emotions for studies of public reactions to terrorism. Ibid.

⁸⁵ Angus Campbell, *The American Voter* (New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1960).

party.⁸⁶ Party identification appears to be the result of socialization. Scholars are, however, divided about the period during which socialization occurs and political attitudes are formed. According to the “pre-adult years” model, childhood and adolescence are the most critical.⁸⁷ While family exerts the greatest influence on the development of a child’s political behavior,⁸⁸ other agents, such as schools, teachers, peers, communities, and mass media also play a role.⁸⁹ Parents who are highly engaged in politics and provide frequent and consistent political cues increase the likelihood that their children will adopt similar political views and retain them as they transition to adulthood.⁹⁰ While such predispositions may not persist through adulthood, they influence later development. However, the limited parent-child similarity in political attributes has raised questions about the extent to which socialization was taking place in American families.⁹¹ An alternative school of thought identifies the “impressionable years” of early adulthood—a period from the late teens to the mid- or late twenties—as pivotal to the development of the political self.⁹² Since substantial learning and development take place in early adulthood, political orientations fluctuate

⁸⁶ William G. Jacoby, “The American Voter,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior*, ed. Jan E. Leighley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 263.

⁸⁷ Political orientations, such as party identification, ideological leaning, and attitudes on social issues as well as prejudice (Sears and Levy 2003) are formed during this period. Laura Stoker et al., “Political Socialization: Ongoing Questions and New Directions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 453–70; David O. Sears and Jack S. Levy, “Childhood and Adult Political Development,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 60–109.

⁸⁸ Kent M. Jennings, “Political Socialization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, ed. Russell J. Dalton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 29–44.

⁸⁹ Stoker and Bass, “Political Socialization,” 454.

⁹⁰ Stoker and Bass, “Political Socialization,” 455; See also M. Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers, “Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined,” *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (2009): 782–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381609090719>.

⁹¹ See, for example, M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *The Political Character of Adolescence* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1974).

⁹² Stoker and Bass, “Political Socialization,” 455.

significantly during this period.⁹³ They subsequently crystallize and become relatively stable as we age.⁹⁴ Once party identification is formed, voters will vote for the party they identify with unless induced by short-term factors (e.g., issues, candidates, or leaders) to defect.

Third, pioneered by political scientists at Columbia University who studied voting behavior in the 1940 and 1948 Presidential elections,⁹⁵ the Sociological approach identifies *social group memberships* (e.g., family, friends, coworkers, clubs as well as social, religious, and racial groups) as the key factors in shaping political behavior. According to this approach, the political preferences of an individual are influenced by his or her interaction and exchange of opinions with other group members. Such interaction and exchange produce social and political norms of the group and group members, which are different from other groups in society. Therefore, the political behavior of an individual can be explained by the political behavior of the group to which he or she belongs.⁹⁶

Finally, the Valence approach focuses on *individuals' perceptions of each political party's competence in solving problems*.⁹⁷ According to this approach, attitudes toward the candidates and parties serve as “heuristic devices” that help voters navigate the complexities of an election

⁹³ Stoker and Bass, “Political Socialization,” 458.

⁹⁴ Jennings, “Political Socialization,” 38; Hence, our political behavior is heavily influenced by the political predispositions developed in the impressionable years, and scholars have found support for their persistence through the lifespan. See, for example, David O. Sears and Carolyn L. Funk, “Evidence of the Long-Term Persistence of Adults Political Predispositions,” *The Journal of Politics* 61, no. 1 (1999): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647773>; Jack Block and Jeanne H. Block, “Nursery School Personality and Political Orientation Two Decades Later,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 40, no. 5 (2006): 734–49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2005.09.005>.

⁹⁵ Lazarsfeld, et al., *The People's Choice*.

⁹⁶ Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 2004 Elections* (Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2006); See also Pankaew, เล็กเพราะชอบ, 38.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

campaign and make voting decisions.⁹⁸ In any given election, a voter often finds him or herself overwhelmed by a myriad of information. The lack of political knowledge or sophistication causes voters to look for heuristic devices, thereby making the candidate personal characteristics, feelings about the party leaders and political parties, as well as confidence in political parties particularly important in voting decisions.

III. The Proposed Contributions of the Thesis to Knowledge

While the literature on democratization and elections is voluminous, surprisingly little ink has been spilled over electoral processes in authoritarian regimes. Likewise, despite a vast body of research on institutionalization in democracies, scant attention has been paid to the institutionalization of autocracies.⁹⁹ A review of the ways in which autocrats use democratic institutions to bolster authoritarian control and institutionalize their regimes, thus stabilizing power, reveals that the current scholarship is insufficient for explaining the relationship between the regime and voters. Moreover, it has also been far too focused on the decision-making of the regime elite and structural factors with little consideration of the role of human agency. Most importantly, there is little, if any, literature on consent in the studies of authoritarianism or political behavior. This study thus contributes to the literature on authoritarian resilience and voting behavior in at least five important ways.

⁹⁸ Jacoby, “The American Voter,” 271.

⁹⁹ As Hicken and Kuhonta point out, the extant scholarship on institutionalization has emphasized explaining the characteristics of political parties, party systems, democracies, political stability, general patterns of political development, or, more recently, the factors that cause party system institutionalization. Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta, “Shadows from the Past: Party System Institutionalization in Asia,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 5 (2011): 572–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414010396460>. Moreover, it has drawn primarily from materials from the West.

First, this study contributes to the literature on institutionalization, which focuses primarily on democratic regimes and thus perceives institutions as constraints, and the literature on authoritarian successor parties, which has, to date, captured inadequate scholarly interest. As Pepinsky argues, institutions in authoritarian regimes do exactly what their creators want them to do.¹⁰⁰ Hence, they are employed by dictators as instruments to secure political control. In contrast with the extant literature, which studies elections with respect to their functions and studies political parties with respect to their political ideologies or policies, this research studies authoritarian elections *in relation to the institutionalization of authoritarian regimes* and studies authoritarian parties *in relation to authoritarian regimes*. The present study perceives elections as the arena through which authoritarian incumbents achieve and institutionalize the consent of citizens. Moreover, it perceives ASPs as one of the many components of authoritarian regimes. This study is distinct from a typical study of political parties in democracies in that it looks at *the relationship between the party and the regime*. Furthermore, it also departs from the earlier scholarship on authoritarian parties in that it focuses on Thailand's Palang Pracharath Party, which is neither a hegemonic ruling party nor a military party.

Barbara Geddes classifies authoritarian regimes into personalist, military, single-party, and mixtures of the pure types.¹⁰¹ This classification is based on the governing group, which exerts influence on policy and personnel decisions. While such classification captures most authoritarian regimes, it falls short of characterizing accurately the ruling party and the current regime in

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism," *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2013): 631–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123413000021>.

¹⁰¹ According to Geddes, in military regimes, power over policy and personnel decisions lies in the hands of a group of military officers. "Democratization After Twenty Years." in single-party regimes, it belongs to one political party. Finally, in personalist regimes, the decisions on access to political office and policy are made by an individual leader. *Ibid.*

Thailand. In terms of power-sharing structures, Thailand's Palang Pracharath Party can neither be classified as a military party nor a hegemonic party. Although the party originated from a military dictatorship under the NCPO, it is not dominated solely by military officers. While the ruling military elite constitutes the core of the party and makes important decisions, it is not the only group that possesses decision-making power, let alone the largest one. The regime-backed Palang Pracharath Party consists of diverse groups of actors in the regime, including members of the NCPO, military elite, political elite,¹⁰² bureaucrats, and technocrats. In fact, it is the former MPs, not the military elite, that compose the majority in the party. Despite its origin, Palang Pracharath has displayed attempts to distance itself from the military—though the party nominated General Prayuth as its prime ministerial candidate, the majority of the party's leadership positions, and MP candidacies are filled with civilians rather than military personnel. Therefore, neither the military, nor the party, nor an individual leader exercises independent decision-making power in the regime led by Palang Pracharath. Rather, control over access to power and policy involves multiple layers of decision-making and bargaining, which will be discussed subsequently.

To complicate the Thai case even further, the real power lies, in fact, outside formal political institutions. The military government and Palang Pracharath tell only one part of Thailand's long-standing authoritarian system. As Mérieau argues, Thailand's contemporary politics is best characterized in terms of the "Deep State,"¹⁰³ which consists of both political

¹⁰² This includes, for example, former MPs, former ministers, career politicians, and first-time candidates most of whom are from political dynasties.

¹⁰³ According to Mérieau, the Deep State refers to "a state within the state, composed of state agents over which civilian governments have limited or no control." "Thailand's Deep State," 446.

networks¹⁰⁴ and the institutions¹⁰⁵ in which they operate. Deep State agents “[s]eek to maintain and strengthen a particular and preferred social, political, and economic order with the monarchy as its symbolic keystone.¹⁰⁶ Created by authoritarian incumbents to maintain their political influence in a new regime, Palang Pracharath serves as a proxy¹⁰⁷ for Deep State actors to acquire and exercise power in formal politics. The relationship between the party and Deep State is thereby symbiotic—while Deep State actors act through Palang Pracharath, the party also relies on them for resources and legitimacy. If we were to incorporate both the long-standing Deep State and the current authoritarian government into Thailand’s authoritarian regime and define regime in terms of both the governing group and the state apparatus, Palang Pracharath should be characterized as a “regime” party, which serves as a proxy for the entire authoritarian system, rather than a traditional military party or a hegemonic ruling party. Hence, Palang Pracharath cannot be studied in the same way as military or hegemonic ruling parties. Similarly, Thailand’s autocracy cannot be studied in the same way as any of Geddes’ pure types or amalgams of them. Palang Pracharath is not a political party that exists and gains power—it is an extension of a group of individuals who are *already in power*. Therefore, this study will be part of the research on authoritarian successor parties. To date, there is only a small empirical literature on this topic,¹⁰⁸ and this study aims to improve it significantly.

¹⁰⁴ I.e., McCargo’s network monarchy consists of members of the palace, top military leaders, and bureaucrats. “Network Monarchy.”

¹⁰⁵ For example, the Constitutional Court and other independent organizations.

¹⁰⁶ Eugénie Mérieau, “Thailand’s Deep State, Royal Power and the Constitutional Court (1997–2015),” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2016): 446, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2016.1151917>, 445–66.

¹⁰⁷ In contrast with Prajak who argues that Palang Pracharath is the junta’s proxy party, I argue that the party, in fact, serves as a proxy for the entire Deep State.

¹⁰⁸ Examples of the works in this literature include Loxton, “Authoritarian Successor Parties”; James Loxton and Scott Mainwaring, *Life After Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Dan Slater and Joseph Wong, “The

Second, the main problem with the literature on authoritarianism is that it is top-down—the majority of studies are concentrated mostly on what the state is doing with little regard for the voters. On the contrary, mainstream literature on voting behavior focuses primarily on determinants of voting attitudes and preferences at the individual level. In contrast with both sets of literature, this study combines *both* levels of analysis. As exhibited in the literature review, most analyses of authoritarian resilience focus on the mechanisms—both authoritarian and democratic—through which dictators use to secure political control and stabilize their regimes. The emphasis on the strategic behavior and decision-making of the regime elite at the macro-level makes the extant literature inadequate for explaining the relationship between the regime and voters. Similarly, the studies of the factors that influence political behavior and public opinion look mainly at individual-level factors with little regard to the effects of what the state is doing. Focusing on the three-way strategic relationship among dictators, political elites, and citizens, this study examines both the strategies authoritarian rulers use to achieve and institutionalize active consent from citizens and the factors that influence voters to provide consent and hence legitimacy to dictators, thus bridging the gap between the two levels of analysis. Special attention will also be paid to how the military regime and royal endorsement and statements influence voters' decisions.

Third, since existing studies on authoritarian endurance are top-down, they tend to depict voters as passive. However, this study argues that voters are never entirely predictable. Despite repression, coercion, and manipulation, citizens may still vote against authoritarian incumbents.

Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental Asia,” in *Life After Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 284–313.

As Miller emphasizes, such electoral surprises can lead to democratic transitions.¹⁰⁹ In the case of Thailand, whereas more than half of the electorate voted to accept the 2016 draft constitution in a referendum, a majority of voters cast their votes for opposition parties in the 2019 general elections. Although the pro-junta coalition managed to form a government, the millions of votes cast for the opposition signaled public discontent with the regime. By portraying the regime as highly resilient and characterizing voters as passive recipients of patronage or targets of manipulation, existing explanations provide insufficient attention to the relationship between the regime and voters and how it is cultivated.¹¹⁰ Most importantly, they are inadequate for explaining

¹⁰⁹ Michael K. Miller, "Elections, Information, and Policy Responsiveness in Autocratic Regimes," *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 6 (2015): 691–727, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414014555443>; See also, Cox W. Gary, "Authoritarian Elections and Leadership Succession, 1975-2004." Department of Political Science, University of San Diego, 2009; Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme B. Robertson, "Elections, Information and Liberalization." Presented at the APSA annual meeting. Toronto, 2009.

¹¹⁰ Gerchewski identifies three research waves on authoritarian stability: "the totalitarianism paradigm until the mid-1960s that highlighted ideology and terror; the rise of authoritarianism until the 1980s that placed more emphasis on socio-economic factors; and, starting with Geddes' seminal article in 1999, a renaissance of autocracy research that centered mostly on strategic repression and co-optation." Gerchewski, "Three Pillars of Stability," 14-17. Using factors, such as "ideology and terror," "socio-economic conditions and informal politics," and "co-optation and strategic repression," the earlier literature places more emphasis on how regimes "build" stability than how voters respond to their actions and shape regime stability. Considerably less attention has been paid to the strategic interaction between the regime and voters, let alone the decision-making of voters, especially in the Thai context. More specifically, neo-institutionalist approaches to autocracy research focus on how autocrats manipulate seemingly democratic institutions to prolong their rule, hence depicting voters as esubjects of authoritarian manipulation. See, for example, Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions"; and Gandhi, *Political Institution under Dictatorship*. Likewise, regionalized explanations highlight neopatrimonialism as the key factor that contributes to authoritarian stability in many Arab countries and sub-Saharan Africa, thereby portraying voters as susceptible to patronage. See, for example, Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1987). Additionally, as Andrew Walker points out, existing studies on electoral politics in Thailand tend to place more emphasis on the deficiencies of the voting population, highlighting their susceptibility to vote buying and patronage, than the agency of voters. Andrew Walker, "The Rural Constitution and the Everyday Politics of Elections in Northern Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 84–105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701651978>. See, for example, Anek Laothamatas, "A Tale of

how autocrats achieve consent from citizens. Building on Magaloni,¹¹¹ this study moves beyond a general vote function (i.e., that voters are driven by issue voting factors such as policy or cultural issues or non-issue voting factors such as spoils, group affinities, or regime affinities) and focuses on the strategic interaction between the regime and voters.

Fourth, existing studies on authoritarian resilience share an assumption that the state possesses a degree of authority over the population and can exercise its will accordingly. However, political realities demonstrate that authoritarian control requires negotiation with multiple groups of actors at multiple levels. Contrary to popular belief that authoritarian rulers can simply pass laws and policies in their favor, there are party and local mechanisms they must go through. While the laws and policies autocrats pass to stay in power receive a surfeit of attention (hence leading many to think that the autocrats can do whatever they want), party and local mechanisms languish in neglect. For example, authoritarian parties continue to rely on a network of canvassers or *hua khanaen* to gain voter support during times of elections. To capture the political realities that require multiple levels of bargaining, this study proposes a theory of the mechanisms that dictators use to institutionalize the consent of citizens.

Finally, the main contribution of this study is its incorporation of the concept of consent into the study of authoritarian stability. Despite a surge of research interest in the concept of

Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand,” in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, ed. R. H. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 201–23; Kasian Tejapira, “Toppling Thaksin,” *New Left Review* 39 (2006): 5–37; and Daniel Arghiros, *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).

¹¹¹ Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Beatriz Magaloni, “The Game of Electoral Fraud and the Ousting of Authoritarian Rule,” *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 3 (2010): 751–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00458.x>.

“popular autocrats”¹¹² and the pursuit of legitimacy in the study of authoritarian stability, the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes achieve consent from citizens remain neglected. As previously discussed, consent lies at the root of legitimacy, which is one of the pillars of regime stability. Therefore, in order to fully understand the ways in which autocrats maintain stability, scholars must go beyond legitimacy and look at the sources of consent. It is unfortunate that the relationship between consent and stability has so far escaped scholarly attention. Furthermore, despite the burgeoning research interest in related concepts such as conformity, compliance, and obedience, few political behaviorists have given consent close scrutiny. Though the concept of consent has been floating around and become a source of interest in political philosophy, it has yet to be systematically conceptualized. However, it is a critical concept that helps explain the relationship between authoritarian regimes and voters. The present study therefore seeks to define, conceptualize, and operationalize consent in a systematic manner. Moreover, instead of submerging consent within general categories such as “explicit” and “implicit” consent, this study develops a new typology, which classifies consent into “sincere” and “strategic” consent. In what follows, this study will demonstrate that even when consent is given, different types of consent have different implications for the regimes.

IV. Conceptualizing Consent

Contrary to popular belief that dictators can command or manipulate citizens, this study argues that authoritarian incumbents require consent of citizens to stay in power. Although coercion and institutional manipulations are important tactics frequently employed by authoritarian regimes, authoritarian incumbents solidify power and institutionalize themselves

¹¹² Dimitrov, “Popular Autocrats.”

during a democratic transition by acquiring active consent from citizens. Voter consent bestows legitimacy to authoritarian incumbents, which in turn buttresses regime stability.

A. Dependent Variable (DV): Consent

Consent is the outcome this study seeks to explain. Drawing from the major dictionaries and the existing literature, this study argues that “consent occurs when an informed individual voluntarily gives someone permission to do something when other options are available, and dissent is possible.” Using this definition, an informed voter consents to authoritarian incumbents when he or she voluntarily gives them permission to rule by voting for an authoritarian successor party or a pro-regime party in the elections administered during the transition to a new regime when he or she has the freedom to vote for opposition parties—and thus dissent—but chooses not to. If an individual did *not* vote for the pro-regime party, it implies no consent given. On the contrary, a vote for the authoritarian successor or pro-regime party serves as an indicator of consent¹¹³ for authoritarian incumbents.

In this study, consent will be categorized into “sincere” and “strategic” consent. A vote for the authoritarian incumbents is considered *sincere* consent if the voter voted for the pro-regime party out of *sincere preference*. “Sincere” means that the voter voted for this party because he or she really liked the party, not because of other reasons—the voter sincerely prefers an element or some elements of the party, be it the party brand, the policies, his or her local MP candidate, the prime ministerial candidate, and/or what the party represents (e.g., regime continuity or military institution). The pro-regime party was the voter’s first choice, and he or she truly believed that it

¹¹³ This, according to the traditional definitions of consent discussed in the literature review, is also considered “tacit consent.”

was the best option in this election. Conversely, a vote for the authoritarian incumbents is considered strategic consent if the voter voted for this party as *a strategic vote* or *a means to another end*. The pro-regime party may not necessarily have been the voter's first choice, but he or she believed that it was the best option in this particular election and/or political context. The voter may not have necessarily preferred the pro-regime, his or her local MP candidate, and/or the prime ministerial candidate to the opposition. However, he or she did not believe that his or her most preferred party would win and/or was the best option in this particular election and/or political context. The key distinction between sincere preference and strategic vote, which indicate sincere and strategic consent respectively, is, therefore, whether the pro-regime was the voter's first choice. The two types of consent have different implications for the future of the authoritarian successor party and the regime. On the one hand, the voters who provided sincere consent to the authoritarian incumbents may become true supporters and cultivate political loyalty for the party and the regime in the long run. The consent given could thus be deepened and permanent. On the other hand, the voters who voted for the pro-regime out of strategic reasons are not attached to the party and ready to switch. The consent given is thus ephemeral—the voters' support for the party is a product of one election and thus not lasting.

B. Independent Variables (IVs): MP, Policy, and Ideology

Drawing from the major approaches to vote choice, this study identifies two primary sources of consent: state-driven factors, which include the mechanisms by which the military regime and successor party use to induce consent, and nonstate, individual-driven factors, which originate from a voter's own political attitudes, beliefs, values, and even emotions. Building on the Valence Politics model, Rational Choice Theory, and, to a lesser extent, the Sociological

model, the present study argues that consent stems from (1) the member of parliament (MP) candidate, (2) policy, and (3) ideology.

1. IV₁: MP Candidate

As discussed in the literature review, voters' evaluations of the candidates' competence and personal characteristics serve as heuristic devices that assist their decision-making. Authoritarian incumbents are aware of the influence of attitudes towards the candidates on voters' decisions and thus co-opt the individuals with the largest political bases and/or the highest potential to capture votes for the party. As will be examined in Chapter 5, authoritarian incumbents acquire consent from voters through the co-optation of MP candidates.

In the case of Palang Pracharath, the party has engaged in at least two levels of co-optation: (1) former MPs from other parties and local politicians and (2) the existing network of vote canvassers or *hua khanaen* to secure voter support during the elections. Not only has the party co-opted a number of former MPs from the main opposition party Pheu Thai and other parties, but it has also recruited brand-new candidates with no political background from various sectors. In fact, none of its MP candidates in Bangkok come from a military background. Rather, a substantial portion of its candidates are young, highly educated individuals who have never been in politics. Nevertheless, clientelism¹¹⁴ remains an essential feature of Thai politics¹¹⁵—if a party successfully recruits incumbents, it will also often capture their vote canvassers and supporters. As many as fifty-one candidates from Pheu Thai, the Democrat Party (DP), Bhumjaithai (BJT), the Phalang

¹¹⁴ Clientelism generally refers to a relationship between two parties with unequal power, which involves an exchange of material benefits for political support.

¹¹⁵ Despite a shift toward programmatic politics in the post-1997 period, clientelism has been endemic in Thailand's political system.

Chon Party, and the Chartthaipattana Party have been roped into Palang Pracharath.¹¹⁶ The party used both monetary incentives and legal threats—hence, carrot and stick—to co-opt former MPs from other parties. Not only did the party offer these politicians lump-sum payments, but it also offered to finance all expenditures of their election campaigns. Moreover, it also offered them legal protection should they decide to join the party or threaten to prosecute them should they refuse. Finally, Palang Pracharath employed a similar approach to co-opt the Democrat Party, Bhumjaithai, and other small parties to join its coalition government. After intense bargaining, which resulted in the delay in forming the new government, several key Cabinet portfolios were given to the leaders of the Democrat Party and Bhumjaithai. In addition to former MPs, Palang Pracharath has also co-opted vote canvassers, which include influential individuals at the local level, such as *chao po* (local godfathers or bosses) or *hua khanaen* who serve as brokers between the local people and politicians. Multiple linkages exist between actors at the local level: (1) MP candidates and vote canvassers; (2) vote canvassers and local voters; and (3) MP candidates and local voters.¹¹⁷ By co-opting former MPs, Palang Pracharath also captures their networks of vote canvassers and electoral bases. Alternatively, Palang Pracharath could also co-opt *chao po* or *hua khanaen* directly and capture their electoral bases. Co-optation can be measured by whether the MP and/or *hua khanaen* has been co-opted into the party.

¹¹⁶ Kongkirati, ““Palang Pracharat Party”; For example, Palang Pracharath successfully co-opted former Pheu Thai candidates from all constituencies in the Kamphaeng Phet Province and hence won the entire province in the March 2019 elections (and May 2023 elections, respectively).

¹¹⁷ However, such relationships share the same basis: the more powerful actor gives material benefits to the less powerful actor in exchange for his or her political support.

2. IV₂: Policy

Despite the importance of voters' perceptions of the candidates' competence and characteristics, the co-optation of high-potential candidates by itself is not sufficient for acquiring consent from citizens. Authoritarian incumbents are aware that voters do not solely rely on heuristic devices or personal relationships with the candidates when making electoral decisions. As posited by the Rational Choice Theory, voters also engage in cost-benefit calculation and vote for the party whose policies align with their policy preferences or provide the greatest benefits to them. Given this voting behavior, authoritarian incumbents implement populist programs *prior to* the elections and make policy promises that attract the widest range of voters possible during the campaign. Therefore, in addition to MP candidates, authoritarian incumbents also use policies to gain consent from voters.

In the case of Thailand, the junta uses government programs and Palang Pracharath's campaign policies to woo voters. Palang Pracharath has pledged to carry on and expand the incumbent government's targeted welfare programs and direct subsidies, ranging from the Palang Pracharath welfare card (after which the party named itself), minimum wage increases, child welfare program, maternity welfare program, and cheap housing to debt reliefs to appeal to voters. Given their control of state resources, authoritarian incumbents can use populist schemes to buy voter support without having to finance their own programs. For example, the junta provided more than 10 million low-income earners with state welfare cards, making them entitled to various cash handouts to help cover their cost-of-living expenses. During the election campaign, Palang Pracharath promised to extend the coverage of the Pracharath welfare card to include an additional 2-3 million individuals from its current base of 15 million. Furthermore, Palang Pracharath proposed a maternity welfare program (Marnda Pracharath), which provides funding to mothers

with children aged 0 to 6 years and an increase in direct subsidies to farmers from the current level of 1,500 baht per rai to 2,000 baht per rai. While every political party proposed some sort of welfare measures, Palang Pracharath had an advantage in that the welfare measures launched by the current government had already created support bases for the party.

3. IV₃: Ideology

Voter consent cannot, however, be explained solely by what the authoritarian incumbents are doing—individual, ideological factors also influence voters’ decisions to provide consent. For the purpose of this study, ideology is broadly defined—it is not limited to voters’ ideas, values, or beliefs but also includes what the party and the party leader stand for as well as emotions about the current political environment or the opposition parties, such as fear, anxiety, and hatred. As will be discussed intensively in the section on sincere-ideology voters and Chapter 5, the ideological reasons that lead voters to consent to the authoritarian incumbents include but are not limited to support for the military and/or authoritarian rule, (in the case of Thailand) support for the monarchy, desire for peace and stability following the elections, and hostility to pro-democracy forces. Moreover, since the leader of an authoritarian successor party is typically closely linked to or, in the case of Thailand’s 2019 elections, the same person as the coup leader, thus representing military rule, voters’ attitudes towards his or her personal characteristics are also included in ideology. Lastly, as will be investigated in Chapter 5, a combination of voters’ internal factors, the political environment surrounding and the incidents leading up to the elections, and the party’s campaign that triggers fear and anxiety contributes to voters’ decisions to consent to authoritarian incumbents.

V. Voter Typologies and Voting Behavior

A. Classical Typologies

Prior to applying the theory of consent to Thailand, it is critical to first classify voters. In order to explain consent, it is important to understand the underlying differences between each group of voters, which in turn lead to different paths to consent. Political scientists have traditionally classified voters along political *cleavages*, social divisions that categorize citizens into groups according to their sociocultural or socioeconomic characteristics. Most of the extant literature on cleavages places an emphasis on the interaction between structural and attitudinal differences that produce issue divides.¹¹⁸ According to cleavage theory, political cleavages divide voters into voting blocs, thereby shaping both individual voting behavior and party systems. In their seminal article “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments” (1967), Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan identify four main cleavages that determined the party systems of the post-World War II Western Europe: (1) the “urban-rural” cleavage, (2) the “owner-worker” cleavage, (3) “center-periphery” cleavage, and (4) the “church-state” cleavage.¹¹⁹ Following Lipset and Rokkan, considerable effort has been given to the creation of comprehensive schemas of issue divides. Some of the categories proposed by subsequent scholars include Sartori’s programmatic left and right,¹²⁰ Inglehart’s generational difference and education level,¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Kevin Deegan-Krause, “New Dimensions of Political Cleavage,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, 2009, 538–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199270125.003.0028>.

¹¹⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction,” in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1967), 1–64.

¹²⁰ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977).

¹²¹ Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

Lijphart's foreign policy questions,¹²² Kriesi's economic sector,¹²³ and Brooks, Nieuwbeerta, and Manza's gender¹²⁴.¹²⁵ Despite the increased importance of issue divides, Kevin Deegan-Krause argues that the broad structural elements it covers and its high adaptability allow Lipset and Rokkan's list to remain relevant over time:

“urban–rural” cleavage now represents geographic difference;

“owner–worker” cleavage represents socioeconomic status;

“center–periphery” cleavage represents cultural difference, particularly ethnicity;

“church–state” cleavage represents differences in cultural values and religiosity.¹²⁶

As posited by Tóka,¹²⁷ cleavages can be formed by “only a few quasi-demographic differences (class, ethno-religious or regional identity, urban-rural residence).”¹²⁸

Like their Western counterparts, Thai voters have also traditionally been classified by class, regional identity, and urban-rural residence. The most prominent typology of Thai voters has arguably been proposed by Anek Laothamatas in his classical paper “A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand.”¹²⁹ In his attempt to explain the paradox of contemporary Thai politics, Laothamatas divides voters into two groups—“the urban,

¹²² Arend Lijphart, *Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

¹²³ Hanspeter Kriesi, “The Transformation of Cleavage Politics: The 1997 Stein Rokkan Lecture,” *European Journal of Political Research* 33, no. 2 (1998): 165–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00379>.

¹²⁴ Clem Brooks, Paul Nieuwbeerta, and Jeff Manza, “Cleavage-Based Voting Behavior in Cross-National Perspective: Evidence from Six Postwar Democracies,” *Social Science Research* 35, no. 1 (2006): 88–128, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2004.06.005>.

¹²⁵ Deegan-Krause, “New Dimensions of Political Cleavage,” 541.

¹²⁶ Deegan-Krause, “New Dimensions of Political Cleavage,” 541.

¹²⁷ Gábor Tóka, “Party Appeals and Voter Loyalty in New Democracies,” *Political Studies* 46, no. 3 (1998): 589–610, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00156>.

¹²⁸ Deegan-Krause, “New Dimensions of Political Cleavage,” 596.

¹²⁹ Anek Laothamatas, “A Tale of Two Democracies,” 201–23.

educated middle class and the rural farmers or peasants”—and argues that the clashing views and expectations of democracy, elections, and politicians between the two groups is the root cause of the military domination of politics.¹³⁰ According to Laothamatas, the rural farmers perceive democracy as “a mechanism to draw greater benefits from the political elite to themselves and their communities” and use their votes as “repayment to those who have been friendly, helpful, or generous in coping with daily difficulties while bringing progress and prosperity to their community.”¹³¹ On the contrary, the urban, educated middle class view elections as “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.”¹³² To put it simply, the rural poor make voting decisions based on material benefits and clientelist relationships with politics, whereas the urban middle class focus on factors such as political principles, policy issues, or national interests. In my interview with him, Laothamatas explained that while his “Tale of Two Democracies” thesis still holds true today, the divide has shifted from urban vs. rural residents to small vs. big city residents (some examples of major cities he gave include Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani, and Udon Thani), for rural areas have developed into small cities.¹³³ He deplored that the type of democracy that Thailand has not been able to integrate and reconcile the differences in voters’ demands.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Laothamatas, “A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand,” 209.

¹³¹ Laothamatas, “A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand,” 221.

¹³² Laothamatas, “A Tale of Two Democracies,” 221.

¹³³ Anek Laothamatas, interview with the author, Bangkok.

¹³⁴ Anek Laothamatas, interview with the author, Bangkok.

Since “A Tale of Two Democracies,” it has often been argued that class and geography serve as the bases of the political divide in Thailand¹³⁵ and hence predictors of voter decisions. Despite the kingdom’s changing political landscape (as the Future Forward Party started to penetrate into multiple regions), the North and the Northeast have traditionally been Thaksin’s and Pheu Thai’s strongholds. With the exception of the 2019 and 2023 general elections, the Democrats have historically dominated the South and Bangkok. An examination of past voting patterns points to geography as one key variable that predicts voters’ choices. However, geography is linked to class, another key predictor of voting behavior. While Thaksin and his parties have enjoyed immense popularity among the rural low-income earners and working classes, the Democrats have drawn support from the Bangkok and urban middle classes. During the political struggles in the 2000s, Democrat supporters transformed into the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) or the “Yellow Shirts” and subsequently the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) advocates, which called for military intervention to oust pro-Thaksin governments. Pro-democracy, Thaksin’s supporters then formed the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship or the “Red Shirts” as a countermovement.

After almost a decade of military rule, the political divide in Thailand has surpassed the regional and class war between the colored shirts. Political parties were trying to draw “new lines” to capture voters from both the Red and Yellow camps.¹³⁶ On the surface, the 2019 general elections seem to be split between the pro-regime and anti-regime forces, the former of which

¹³⁵ See, for example, Kevin Hewison, “Thailand: Contestation over Elections, Sovereignty and Representation,” *Representation* 51, no. 1 (2015): 51–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2015.1011459>; Kai-Ping Huang and Stithorn Thananithichot, “Social Divisions, Party Support, and the Changes in the Thai Party System Since 2001,” *International Area Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2018): 214–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865918776849>.

¹³⁶ Chaithawat Tulathon, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

supporting and the latter of which opposing the return of authoritarian incumbents. While pro-regime voters tended to vote for pro-regime parties, such as Palang Pracharath, Suthep Thaugsuban's Action Coalition for Thailand Party (ACT), or Paiboon Nititawan's People Reform Party (PPR), anti-regime, pro-democracy voters tended to vote for pro-democracy parties, such as Pheu Thai (PT), the Future Forward Party (FFP), or Sereepisuth Temeeyaves' Thai Liberal Party. However, closer scrutiny of the elections reveals other important variables that divide voters and influence their voting decisions. For example, in addition to their support for the regime, the voters can also be divided along generational lines—there was a sharp division between young, a majority of whom were first-time voters, and older voters in the 2019 elections. While Future Forward gained overwhelming support from the former, Palang Pracharath enjoyed immense popularity among the latter. Furthermore, the voters can be divided into those demanding change vs. those resisting change. In contrast with the former who were calling for change, the latter were seeking to preserve the status quo. In this light, Palang Pracharath can, in fact, represent either change or status quo. For those dissatisfied with the dominant parties (i.e., Pheu Thai and the Democrats), Palang Pracharath and Future Forward represented change, albeit in different directions. Nevertheless, in the eyes of those who supported regime continuation, Palang Pracharath represented the status quo while Future Forward and other anti-regime, pro-democracy parties represented change.

B. The New Typology for Explaining Consent: Dependent vs. Independent

Voters

Building on two prominent scholars of Thai politics Stithorn Thananithichot and Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, the present study categorizes voters into *dependent voters* and *independent*

voters. Instead of classifying voters according to their socioeconomic status (rich vs. poor), place of residence (urban vs. rural), and age (old vs. young), this study argues that it is analytically more appropriate to categorize voters according to their socioeconomic dependence on the state, politicians, and/or their political networks in order to explain their different pathways to consent as well as the strategies authoritarian incumbents employ to acquire their consent. In contrast with traditional typologies, which overlook the common ground between the aforementioned groups of voters, the new typology cuts across all groups. A voter does not necessarily have to be poor or live in a rural area to depend on the state or politicians—a poor voter who lives in Bangkok or a rich voter who lives in a rural area may depend on them just as much. In other words, both wealthy and poor and urban and rural voters may have different reasons to depend on politicians.

As the name suggests, dependent voters are voters who depend on the state, politicians, and/or local political patrons for goods and services. Independent voters, on the other hand, rely on themselves and do not depend on the state, politicians, and/or local political patrons to survive. Low-come dependent voters typically rely on populist programs and government assistance to make ends meet. In the case of Thailand, some renowned examples of pro-poor populist programs launched by or associated with a political party include Palang Pracharath's welfare care policy and Thai Rak Thai's 30-baht health care scheme. Moreover, as it will be discussed more in-depth in Chapter 3, dependent voters often engage in clientelist relationships in which they provide electoral support to a politician (usually their local MP or vote canvassers) in exchange for the delivery or the promise of a good or service.¹³⁷ Contrary to popular belief that only poor voters in the rural areas develop clientelist relationships with politicians, poor voters in the urban areas and

¹³⁷ The forms of goods and services exchanged in clientelist relationships will be discussed in Chapter 3.

rich voters in both areas may engage in such relationships as well. Though they obviously do not need populist programs to survive, business tycoons (e.g., building contractors) and even government officials depend on politicians for concessions, business deals, positions, etc.

Due to their dependence on the state and/or politicians, dependent voters place more emphasis on *material interests* and make decisions based on MP candidates (i.e., what the candidates can offer and their clientelist relationships with the candidates) and/or populist policies. Conversely, independent voters' self-reliance allows them greater leeway in making decisions according to their *ideological interests*. As Stithorn asserted, "Those who rely on themselves ... they can decide based on ideology. But [for] those who rely on assistance [from the state or politicians], ideology comes after. These people, this group of people are who 'deal-maker' type of politicians meet their needs. But those who rely on themselves, 'I don't have problems ... [whether there is] a flood or a drought, I can survive. I do 'New Theory Agriculture.'¹³⁸ I can support myself. [When voting], I choose 'my choice.'"¹³⁹ To put it differently, because they are not constrained by their reliance on populist programs or clientelist relationships with politicians, independent voters tend to attach more weight to ideology. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, in Thailand's 2019 general elections, independent voters decided which party to vote for according to the party's political stance—whether it was pro-regime/military or pro-democracy. Dependent voters, on the contrary, paid scant attention to the candidate's political affiliation or the party's political stance. Rather, they focused on their clientelist relationships with the candidate, the candidate's ability to draw resources to the constituency and provide assistance to the constituents, and/or the party's pro-poor populist programs. It is critical to note, also, that

¹³⁸ New Theory Agriculture refers to King Bhumibol's agricultural theory, which was designed to help farmers become self-reliant.

¹³⁹ Stithorn Thananithichot, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020.

the distinction between dependent and independent voters is determined by whether a voter is reliant on the state and/or local political patrons rather than whether his or her voting decision is driven by material or ideological interests. In other words, one is either dependent or independent but not both. A poor, dependent voter can certainly be ideological in the sense that he or she considers ideological factors when making electoral decisions. However, if his or her vote choice is constrained and/or influenced by his or her dependence, then he or she is categorized as a dependent voter.

C. Sincere vs. Strategic Voting

Thus far, I have examined the classical typologies of voters and introduced a new typology for explaining consent. As demonstrated in the previous section, dependent and independent voters differ in their priorities when making electoral decisions. However, voters do not always cast their ballots for the party that they like the most—a fair share of dependent voters and, perhaps even more so, independent voters choose to vote for their second or even third choice. In this section, I will explore the literature on strategic voting and discuss the differences between sincere and strategic voting, which leads to different types of consent.

There is an enormous literature on strategic voting.¹⁴⁰ In their attempt to discover the conditions under which voters vote strategically as well as the different forms and main determinants of strategic voting, scholars have analyzed the behavior of voters in various

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, André Blais, “Why Is There so Little Strategic Voting in Canadian Plurality Rule Elections?,” *Political Studies* 50, no. 3 (2002): 445–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00378>; and Jennifer L. Merolla and Laura B. Stephenson, “Strategic Voting in Canada: A Cross Time Analysis,” *Electoral Studies* 26, no. 2 (2007): 235–46, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2006.02.003>.

institutional and electoral settings. In its simplest form, strategic or tactical voting¹⁴¹ refers to the act of voting out of strategic considerations as opposed to sincere preference. The study of strategic voting in political science was pioneered by Maurice Duverger¹⁴² and formalized by Gary W. Cox¹⁴³. Duverger argues that first-past-the-post plurality electoral systems lead to in two-party systems and draws a distinction between the mechanical and psychological effects, the latter of which serves as the basis for strategic voting.¹⁴⁴ The mechanical effect is that small parties are systematically underrepresented under such rules. The psychological effect is that supporters of small parties are aware of the rules and want to avoid wasting their votes on parties or candidates that have no chance of winning.¹⁴⁵ These voters, therefore, engage in strategic behavior by deserting their party and voting for one of the top two candidates. Contrary to Duverger's¹⁴⁶ conclusion that only plurality elections allow for strategic voting, subsequent scholars, such as Allan Gibbard, Mark Satterthwaite, and Gary W. Cox contend that voters may engage in strategic voting in any type of electoral system.¹⁴⁷

Numerous attempts have been made to define strategic voting. The most widely used definition is, however, provided by André Blais and Richard Nadeau who define strategic voting

¹⁴¹ Pedro Riera argues that the term “tactical” is more appropriate than “strategic” because it refers to a single maneuver (i.e., utility maximizing for a single election) rather than a sequence of actions. Riera, Pedro, “Tactical Voting” in *Oxford Handbook Topics in Politics* (online ed, Oxford Academic, 6 Aug. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.013.55>, 4.

¹⁴² Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties* (London: Methuen, 1954).

¹⁴³ Gary W. Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁴⁴ Duverger, *Political Parties*, 27.

¹⁴⁵ Duverger, *Political Parties*, 27.

¹⁴⁶ Duverger, *Political Parties*.

¹⁴⁷ Allan Gibbard, “Manipulation of Voting Schemes: A General Result,” *Econometrica* 41, no. 4 (1973): 587–601, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914083>; Mark Allen Satterthwaite, “Strategy-Proofness and Arrow's Conditions: Existence and Correspondence Theorems for Voting Procedures and Social Welfare Functions,” *Journal of Economic Theory* 10, no. 2 (1975): 187–217, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-0531\(75\)90050-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-0531(75)90050-2); Cox, *Making Votes Count*.

as “a vote for a second-preferred party (candidate) rather than for the first-preferred one, motivated by the perception that the former has a better chance of winning the election.”¹⁴⁸ To put it differently, voters engage in strategic voting when they perceive their most preferred party as having little or no chance of winning the seat and vote strategically for a party that they less prefer but has a better chance of winning in order to avoid wasting their vote and defeat the party they least prefer. Following Blais and Nadeau’s definition, Damien Bol and Tom Verthé identify two necessary conditions for a vote to be considered strategic.¹⁴⁹ The first condition requires that the voter votes for a party other than one’s first choice, and the second condition requires that the voter seeks to influence the electoral outcome.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, André Blais and Arianna Degan note that when voters vote for a party that is not their most preferred choice because they like a candidate from that party, their vote is also considered a sincere vote.¹⁵¹ While both sincere and strategic voting are based on preferences, sincere voters treat voting as a way to express their support for

¹⁴⁸ André Blais and Richard Nadeau, “Measuring Strategic Voting: A Two-Step Procedure,” *Electoral Studies* 15, no. 1 (1996): 39–52, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794\(94\)00014-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794(94)00014-x), 40.

¹⁴⁹ Damien Bol and Tom Verthé, “Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.932>.

¹⁵⁰ Bol and Verthé, “Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting,” 2–3. See also André Blais, Robert Young, and Martin Turcotte, “Direct or Indirect? Assessing Two Approaches to the Measurement of Strategic Voting,” *Electoral Studies* 24, no. 2 (2005): 163–76, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2004.03.001>; Stephen D. Fisher, “Definition and Measurement of Tactical Voting: The Role of Rational Choice,” *British Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 1 (2004): 152–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123403220391>; and Michael Herrmann, Simon Munzert, and Peter Selb, “Determining the Effect of Strategic Voting on Election Results,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A: Statistics in Society* 179, no. 2 (2016): 583–605, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rssa.12130>.

¹⁵¹ André Blais and Arianna Degan, “The Study of Strategic Voting,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Choice, Volume 1*, 2019, 291–309, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190469733.013.14>. See also Carolina Plescia, “Expected Electoral Performance, Candidate Quality, and Voter Strategic Coordination: The Case of Japan,” in *The Many Faces of Strategic Voting: Tactical Behavior in Electoral Systems Around the World*, ed. Laura B. Stephenson, John H. Aldrich, and André Blais (University of Michigan Press, 2018), 104–26.

their preferred candidate and hence act solely on their preferences without regard for expectations regarding the outcomes. Strategic voters, conversely, make voting decisions by combining their preferences among the parties with their expectations about the chances of each party and the behavior of other voters.¹⁵² In addition to the distinction between sincere and strategic voting, Blais and Degan also emphasize the need to differentiate between being a strategic voter and casting a strategic vote—that is, “[t]he sincere voter always casts a sincere vote, while the strategic voter casts a sincere or strategic vote depending on the context and the voting rule.”¹⁵³

Who are strategic voters? Several factors have been found to affect the probability of strategic voting. First, because of the high expressive benefit voters receive from supporting their most preferred party and the high psychological cost of defection, strong partisanship makes it less likely for voters to vote strategically.¹⁵⁴ On the same taken, voters are more likely to engage in strategic voting when they do not especially detest their second choices.¹⁵⁵ Second, a high degree of political knowledge, especially information about parties or candidates’ viability, as well as

¹⁵² Paul R. Abramson et al., “The Effect of National and Constituency Expectations on Tactical Voting in the British General Election of 2010,” in *The Many Faces of Strategic Voting: Tactical Behavior in Electoral Systems Around the World* (University of Michigan Press, 2018), 28–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh4zhzr.5>, 39. As Cox puts it, “a sincere vote consists of selecting the voter’s first preference, whatever the context, and an incentive for voting strategically is to “desert non-viable candidates.” Cox, *Making Votes Count*, 80.

¹⁵³ Blais and Degan, “The Study of Strategic Voting,” 292.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Gschwend, “Ticket-Splitting and Strategic Voting under Mixed Electoral Rules: Evidence from Germany,” *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 1 (2007): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00641.x>; Bol and Verthé, “Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting”; David J. Lanoue and Shaun Bowler, “The Sources of Tactical Voting in British Parliamentary Elections, 1983–1987,” *Political Behavior* 14, no. 2 (1992): 141–57, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00992239>; Richard G. Niemi, Guy Whitten, and Mark N. Franklin, “Constituency Characteristics, Individual Characteristics and Tactical Voting in the 1987 British General Election,” *British Journal of Political Science* 22, no. 2 (1992): 229–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123400006347>; Blais, “Why Is There so Little Strategic Voting in Canadian Plurality Rule Elections?”

¹⁵⁵ Riera, “Tactical Voting,” 12.

political sophistication increase the probability of strategic voting.¹⁵⁶ Third, voters with high cognitive abilities are argued to have a better understanding of the incentives created by the electoral system and the concept of utility maximization and are thus more likely to cast a strategic vote.¹⁵⁷ Fourth, emotion is also found to influence strategic voting. While voters with moderate levels of anxiety are more likely to defect, voters with high levels of anxiety are less likely to desert their preferred choice.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, strategic voting is also influenced by systematic factors such as the state of party competition and polarization.¹⁵⁹ Voters are more likely to behave strategically not only when the competition is close, but also when there is polarization between viable parties. Finally, strategic voting is higher among supporters of minor parties and voters who dislike the likely winner.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ André Blais and Marc André Bodet, “Does Proportional Representation Foster Closer Congruence Between Citizens and Policy Makers?,” *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 10 (2006): 1243–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414005284374>; Bol and Verthé, “Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting”; Merolla and Stephenson, “Strategic Voting in Canada”; R. Michael Alvarez, Frederick J. Boehmke, and Jonathan Nagler, “Strategic Voting in British Elections,” *Electoral Studies* 25, no. 1 (2006): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2005.02.008>.

¹⁵⁷ Jean-François Daoust and Damien Bol, “Polarization, Partisan Preferences and Strategic Voting,” *Government and Opposition* 55, no. 4 (2020): 578–94, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2018.42>, 580; Peter John Loewen, Kelly Hinton, and Lior Sheffer, “Beauty Contests and Strategic Voting,” *Electoral Studies* 38 (2015): 38–45, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.01.001>.

¹⁵⁸ Delia Dumitrescu and André Blais, “Anxiety and Vote Decision Making in Winner-Take-All Elections,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2014): 451–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008423914000742>, 453.

¹⁵⁹ Niemi et al., “Constituency Characteristics”; Daoust and Bol, “Polarization, Partisan Preferences and Strategic Voting.”

¹⁶⁰ Fred Cutler, Alexandre Rivard, and Antony Hodgson, “Why Bother? Supporters of Locally Weaker Parties Are Less Likely to Vote or to Vote Sincerely,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 1 (2021): 208–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008423921000755>; Niemi et al., “Constituency Characteristics”

According to Bol and Verthé, there are four different forms of strategic voting depending on the types of electoral systems.¹⁶¹ Under plurality rule, a voter may vote strategically by (1) “deserting a small party for a large one, to avoid wasting a vote” or (2) “deserting a large party for a small one to send a signal.”¹⁶² Under proportional representation, a voter may exhibit similar behavior to (1) but only focuses on district viability. Taking coalition politics into consideration, a voter may also vote strategically by (3) “a party that has no chance of entering the government for a party that has some, to pre-vent a wasted vote” or (4) “deserting a large party for its small coalition partner to ensure it conquers a seat and hence improve the chances of the pre-ferred bloc of parties forming the next coalition.”¹⁶³ Lastly, it is important to note that the second form of strategic voting is also called a “protest vote,” which occurs when a voter temporarily withdraws support for his or her most preferred party and votes for another party in order to signal discontent.¹⁶⁴ Protest voters are, nevertheless, distinct from their strategic counterparts in terms of underlying motives. While strategic voters are driven by short-term instrumental motivations to influence an election outcome, protest voters are motivated by their desire to influence the behavior of their preferred party in the long term.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Bol and Verthé, “Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting,” 12.

¹⁶² Bol and Verthé, “Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting,” 12. See, for example, Christian H. Schimpf, “Anticipated Election Result and Protest Voting: Why and When Canadian Voters Signal Discontent,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (2019): 847–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008423919000325>.

¹⁶³ Bol and Verthé, “Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting,” 12.

¹⁶⁴ Schimpf, “Anticipated Election Result and Protest Voting”; Daniel Kselman and Emerson Niou, “Protest Voting in Plurality Elections: A Theory of Voter Signaling,” *Public Choice* 148, no. 3–4 (2010): 395–418, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-010-9661-2>.

¹⁶⁵ Joseph McMurray, “Voting as Communicating: Mandates, Multiple Candidates, and the Signaling Voter’s Curse,” *Games and Economic Behavior* 102 (2017): 199–223, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geb.2016.12.005>; Adam Meirowitz and Kenneth W. Shotts, “Pivots Versus Signals in Elections,” *Journal of Economic Theory* 144, no. 2 (2009): 744–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jet.2008.08.008>; Adam Meirowitz and Joshua A. Tucker, “Run Boris Run: Strategic Voting in Sequential Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007): 88–99,

VI. Sincere, Strategic, or No Consent?

Both sincere and strategic voting could lead to consent, albeit different types. In the case of Thailand's 2019 general elections, if an individual did *not* vote for Palang Pracharath, it is clear that no consent was given. On the contrary, a vote for Palang Pracharath generally serves as an expression of consent for authoritarian incumbents. While a sincere vote for Palang Pracharath is interpreted as *sincere consent*, a strategic vote for Palang Pracharath is translated into *strategic consent*. Since the connection between Palang Pracharath and the NCPO was widely known, it would be difficult, *though not impossible*, to claim that one did not consent to authoritarian incumbents when voting for Palang Pracharath. However, as the following section will discuss, there is a limit to the extent to which a vote for Palang Pracharath can be interpreted as consent for authoritarian incumbents¹⁶⁶—there is, in fact, a large set of Palang Pracharath voters who were ignorant and hence not giving consent.

For those who were following the 2019 general elections, it would be inconceivable to think that there existed people who did not know that Palang Pracharath was associated with the NCPO and thus did not consent to authoritarian incumbents when voting for the party. The most obvious sign was General Prayut Chan-ocha himself—the 2014 coup leader was nominated by the party as its sole prime ministerial candidate. His surprise appearance at Palang Pracharath's final rally was on every newspaper's headline. Moreover, Palang Pracharath founders, the "Four Sons," all served as ministers in the NCPO government. As one Democrat MP candidate put it, "Whether

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00496.x>; David P. Myatt, "A Theory of Protest Voting," *The Economic Journal* 127, no. 603 (2016): 1527–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12333>.

¹⁶⁶ Or the continuation of the regime led by authoritarian incumbents.

or not you like Palang Pracharath, almost everyone agrees that there is a relationship between Palang Pracharath and the military regime.”¹⁶⁷ Even Palang Pracharath executives themselves also believed that the voters were aware of the connection between the party and the NCPO government. For example, one Palang Pracharath executive stated, “Absolutely! We announced that we were supporting the Prime Minister. Everyone knew that if they voted for us, they would get *Loong Tu*. We never concealed this fact. Because in the elections, [we] had to declare who we were supporting. The Democrat Party chose Abhisit as its only [PM] candidate. Our party also chose *Loong Tu*¹⁶⁸ as our only [PM] candidate. Therefore, the people must already know that if they voted for us, they would get *Loong Tu*.”¹⁶⁹ Similarly, another Palang Pracharath executive claimed that “the voters already accepted that this [Palang Pracharath] was the representative of the NCPO.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, in the eyes of the observers and even Palang Pracharath members, it is without a doubt that a vote for the party signifies consent for authoritarian incumbents.

Nevertheless, the findings from my fieldwork contradicted such perception. To my utter surprise, a sizable number of voters either did not know their local MPs were affiliated with Palang Pracharath, or by voting for their local MPs, they were indirectly electing Prayut as the prime minister. For example, multiple voters from In Buri admitted that they were clueless about their preferred candidate’s political affiliation. This lack of knowledge is not unique to In Buri, but it is, in fact, common in other parts of the country. Pho Sai village health volunteers, likewise, revealed that because there was one ballot, the villagers thought they were just voting for their

¹⁶⁷ Parit Wacharasindhu, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 25, 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Nickname for General Prayut Chan-ocha.

¹⁶⁹ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

preferred candidate, not Prayut.¹⁷¹ When the parliament elected Prayut back into power, these villagers immediately regretted their decision. “Many of them [the villagers] disliked him [Prayut]. They said that if they had known, they wouldn’t have voted for Palang Pracharath!” said one Pho Sai village health volunteer.¹⁷² Similarly, Palang Pracharath politicians in Kamphaeng Phet posited that many voters failed to connect the dots.¹⁷³ Interestingly, politicians from and supporters of opposition parties tended to believe that those who voted Palang Pracharath mostly voted for the candidate and were uninformed about the candidate’s relationship with the party and the regime.¹⁷⁴ This finding would not, in fact, be much of a surprise when considering the fact that many of Palang Pracharath’s campaign banners in the rural areas, only contained the picture of the candidate, not Prayut. In both the focus group and informal interviews, In Buri voters insisted that they never saw the picture of Prayut in any of the banners. The decision not to include the picture of Prayut in the banners was due largely to the Prime Minister’s unpopularity in many parts of the countryside, especially in the North and Northeast, which were traditionally Pheu Thai’s strongholds and where the party used its coopted candidates to appeal to the voters.¹⁷⁵ A Palang Pracharath Kamphaeng Phet politician explained that she was given the campaign banners containing the picture of Prayut and the candidate but chose not to use them because she was afraid

¹⁷¹ The ways in which the one-ballot system shapes voter behavior will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁷² A Pho Sai village health volunteer, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

¹⁷³ A former Palang Pracharath MP candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok September 13, 2020; Palang Pracharath campaign staff, interview with the authors, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

¹⁷⁴ Some examples include several Pheu Thai and Future Forward MP candidates as well as voters from Det Udom and Mueang Kamphaeng Phet.

¹⁷⁵ Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

it would antagonize her Red Shirt supporters.¹⁷⁶ Even in Bangkok, the campaign banners containing the picture of Prayut with the candidate did not appear until the final stretch of the elections. Like his Kamphaeng Phet counterpart, a Palang Pracharath Bangkok candidate was also hesitant to use the banners “*Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu*” [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)] in his constituency. He claimed that despite Prayut’s popularity in the constituency, he anticipated that the majority of his votes would come from his popularity rather than Prayut’s, thereby deciding to use these banners sparingly.¹⁷⁷ Since Prayut’s face was absent from the campaign banners in many areas, it was not beyond the realms of possibility that certain groups of voters would be unaware of the connection between their preferred candidates and Palang Pracharath and/or Prayut.

Therefore, out of the 8,433,137 voters who voted for Palang Pracharath, it is possible, and highly likely, that not all, and perhaps not even a majority, provided consent for authoritarian incumbents.¹⁷⁸ As stated in the previous section, consent requires voluntariness, knowledge, a possibility of dissent, and the availability of choices. Since the 2019 general elections were relatively free and fair, a majority of voters, if not all, had the freedom to cast their vote for any party. Furthermore, because as many as 81 political parties contested these elections, the voters had the freedom to vote for any anti-regime party and hence ample opportunity to dissent. Since all other necessary conditions for consent were satisfied, whether a vote for Palang Pracharath can be translated into consent for authoritarian incumbents depends primarily on the voter’s knowledge

¹⁷⁶ The daughter of a Palang Pracharath MP candidate, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020.

¹⁷⁸ This belief is shared by critics and scholars such as iLaw manager Yingcheep Atchanont and Director of Innovation for Democracy under the King Prajadhipok Institute Stithorn Thananithichot.

of the connections between (1) the MP candidate and the party and (2) the party and Prayut/the NCPO. A vote for Palang Pracharath from an individual who is unaware of such connections, therefore, *cannot* be interpreted as consent. A vote for Palang Pracharath from an individual who understands these relationships is, however, an expression of consent.

Table 1. Types of Knowledge Possessed by Palang Pracharath Voters

Type of Knowledge	Informed of the Connection between MP Candidate, Party, and Regime	Consent Given	See Post-Election Prayut and/or Palang Pracharath as Authoritarian	Primary Reason for Supporting Palang Pracharath
Type I	No	No	N/A	MP Candidate
Type II	Yes	Yes	Indifferent	MP Candidate or Policy
Type III	Yes	Yes	No	MP Candidate, Policy, or Prayut
Type VI	Yes	Yes	Yes	Prayut

Before I begin my discussion of sincere vs. strategic consent, it is useful to explore the types of knowledge the voters possessed when casting their votes for Palang Pracharath. I will then illustrate these different types of knowledge as I walk through all subcategories of sincere and strategic consent. There are at least four types of knowledge regarding the connection between Palang Pracharath and the regime. As previously discussed, the first group of Palang Pracharath voters (Type I) are totally uninformed about the connections between the MP candidate, the party, and Prayut. Hence, for this group, no consent is given. However, for the rest of Palang Pracharath voters, their vote signifies consent. Like the first group, the second group of Palang Pracharath voters tend to vote for the MP candidate. The main difference between the two groups is, however, that unlike the first group, the second group (Type II) is fully aware of these connections *but does*

not care. Both the first and second groups of voters give little, if any, weight to their preferred candidate's party affiliation. They tend to be loyal to the candidate rather than the party and hence vote for whichever party the candidate is affiliated with. While the second group of voters are aware of the candidate's political affiliation, they do not perceive it as their responsibility to judge whether the party the candidate belongs to is "good" or not—they are giving consent to the candidate to decide for him/herself.¹⁷⁹ In other words, the consent of the second group of voters is transmitted through the candidate who is their representative.¹⁸⁰ Since the first two groups have absolutely no loyalty to the party, thereby not voting for the party at all because of what the party stands for in any sense, the likelihood that they are going to stay loyal to the party is relatively low. The third group (Type III) consists of voters who understand the connection *but do not think of Prayut and/or Palang Pracharath as authoritarian*. The members of this group differ in their opinions on whether the NCPO government was authoritarian. However, they all agree that since Prayut and Palang Pracharath contested in the elections and were elected, they are no longer authoritarian. Lastly, the final group (Type IV) consists of voters who are fully aware of the connection between the candidate, Palang Pracharath, and Prayut and vote for the party precisely because of this reason. In contrast with the first two groups, which vote primarily for the candidate, the third and the fourth groups are voting for the party because they believe something about the party. As a result, these two groups are not only giving consent but also more likely to be loyal to Palang Pracharath and the regime. As will be illustrated in the next section, there is some overlap between sincere and strategic consent in terms of knowledge the consenters possess.

¹⁷⁹ Type II voters give their MP candidate the consent to decide what is best for their constituency. See further discussion of this in Chapter 5.

¹⁸⁰ Professor Attasit Pankaew called this type of consent "trans-consent." Attasit Pankaew, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 9, 2020.

Table 2. Voter Typologies

Voter Typology	Dependence	Priority	Type of Knowledge	Type of Behavior	Type of Consent	Examples
Sincere-MP	Dependent	MP Candidate	Types II or III	Sincere	Sincere Consent	- Khlong Lan - Phran Kratai
Sincere-Policy	Dependent	Policy	Types II or III	Sincere	Sincere Consent	Pho Sai
Sincere-Ideological	Independent	Ideology	Types III or IV	Sincere	Sincere Consent	Pak Phanang
Strategic-Material	Dependent	Material Benefits	Types II or III	Strategic	Strategic Consent	Theoretical
Strategic-Ideological	Independent	Ideological Reasons	Types III or IV	Strategic	Strategic Consent	- Muaeng Kamphaeng Phet - Muaeng Nakhon Si Thammarat

Sincere Consent

As stated in the definition of consent, whether Palang Pracharath is the voter's true first choice is what distinguishes between sincere and strategic consent. In the case of Thailand's 2019 elections, *sincere consent* was given by the voters who sincerely switched from their former parties to Palang Pracharath. For first-time voters, it is given by those who sincerely prefer Palang Pracharath to any other party. As one Southern Palang Pracharath voter put it, "In my brain, there were no other parties."¹⁸¹ For former Democrat supporters who switched to Palang Pracharath, "the Democrats were no longer on [their] minds."¹⁸² *Strategic consent*, on the contrary, is given

¹⁸¹ Supat, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

¹⁸² Pon, focus group, Pak Panang, November 17, 2020.

by the voters who are sincere supporters of other parties—these parties are their first choices—but strategically vote for Palang Pracharath. Each type of consent can be further divided into subcategories according to their primary sources of consent. Among those who provide sincere consent, there are individuals who come to vote for Palang Pracharath because of the *MP*, *policy*, and *ideology*.

Sincere-MP

The first group of sincere voters consists of individuals who vote for Palang Pracharath mainly because they like the MP candidate the party has nominated. As Chapter 3 will explore more in-depth, these voters are typically individuals who engage in clientelist relationships with politicians and/or brokers and thus vote for the candidate because of their material interests. Though probably less common, the reasons for voting for the candidate may not necessarily be purely material—this group of voters may also vote for the candidate because of their personal relationships with him/her or simply because “they like the candidate” as Professor Attasit Pankaew argued.¹⁸³ The examples of sincere-MP voters from my field research include voters from Khlong Lan and Phran Kratai. In both constituencies, Palang Pracharath candidates were former MPs who served several terms and had been coopted into the party. Not only had these voters developed personal relationships with the candidates long before the 2019 elections, but they had also voted for them in the previous elections. While all of these voters were aware of the relationship between the candidate, Palang Pracharath, and Prayut, they were either indifferent or did not perceive Palang Pracharath and Prayut as authoritarian. The main—and for many of these

¹⁸³ Pankaew, เลือกว่าชอบ.

voters, perhaps the only—reason they voted for Palang Pracharath was, therefore, their preferred candidates’ switches to the party.

Sincere-Policy

The second group of sincere voters consists of individuals who vote for Palang Pracharath mainly because they like the policies that the party has delivered or promised to deliver. As will be investigated in Chapter 5, Palang Pracharath’s welfare card policy, which provides monthly subsidies and other benefits to low-income individuals, is frequently cited as one of the most important, if not the most important, factors that contributed to voters’ decision to support the party. Since a majority of voters in this group consist of low-income dependent voters who rely on government benefits, they tend to be attracted to pro-poor populist policies, thereby voting for material reasons. This group of voters is generally the same group of voters who supported the 30-baht health care scheme and Thaksin’s other pro-poor policies, hence having voted for Thaksin’s parties in the past. The behavior of those who vote for the policy is similar to those who vote for the candidate in that their reasons are not strictly material. Just like sincere-MP voters may vote for Palang Pracharath simply because they like the candidate, sincere-policy voters may also vote for the party simply because they like the policy without necessarily having received or expecting to receive any benefits themselves. During my fieldwork, the voters who voted for Palang Pracharath because of policy and especially the welfare card were found across all focus groups. For these voters, policy trumps all other factors in determining their vote choices. Despite their understanding of the connection between the policy, Palang Pracharath, and Prayut, such a connection did not enter their calculation. In fact, a large set of Palang Pracharath voters did not necessarily approve of Prayut or his continuation of power but voted for the party solely because

of the welfare card. Not only was the welfare card well-received by the voters who voted for Palang Pracharath for other reasons, but it was also viewed by the voters who did not vote for Palang Pracharath as the primary reason that explained voters' support for the party.

Sincere-Ideological

The third group of sincere voters consists of voters who vote for Palang Pracharath mainly because of ideological reasons. As Chapter 5 will discuss in more detail, there is a wide array of ideological reasons that influence these voters' decisions, the most important of which include support for the military and/or authoritarian rule, support for the monarchy, desire for peace and stability, and antagonism toward Thaksin and/or pro-democracy forces. Because their decisions are driven more by ideological than material interests, these individuals tend to be independent rather than dependent voters. Though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, this group of voters can be further divided into those who vote for Palang Pracharath because of (1) the party's ties to the military (i.e., what the party stands for) and (2) their antagonism toward the other side (i.e., not because of the party's intrinsic value). In the first subgroup are individuals who support the military and/or the monarchy and their intervention in politics. Hence, not only do they fully understand the connection between the candidate, the party, and the regime, but they also vote for Palang Pracharath because of this very reason. Moreover, given Prayut's role as the 2014 coup leader and proclamations of loyalty to the monarchy, the members of this subgroup tend to be Prayut's fans or at least support him as well. However, there are also individuals who are not necessarily fond of Prayut or the military per se but are strongly anti-Thaksin, anti-FWP, or against the pro-democracy side more generally. This subgroup of voters vote for Palang Pracharath simply because they see it as an "antidote" to "the other side" or the strongest force to protect the status

quo and restore peace and stability in the country. In spite of their indifference to or even dislike of Prayut and the military, these voters vote sincerely for the party and want it to win the elections. As the next section will further discuss, there can be an overlap between sincere-ideological voters and their strategic-ideological counterparts. What distinguishes them is, nevertheless, whether the party is their sincere first choice. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that in addition to the two subgroups, there are also individuals who like Prayut personally. According to Palang Pracharath executives, this group of voters constitutes as much as 20 to 23% of the party's total vote share.¹⁸⁴ Some of the key characteristics of Prayut that these voters particularly like include “the ability to have the country under control,” “loyalty,” and “honesty.” Since most of these characteristics are consistent with those of what political scientists classify as “political strongmen,” the voters who support Prayut because of this reason also fall into the sincere-ideological group. The strongest examples of sincere-ideological voters are voters from Pak Phanang. Although these voters did not necessarily like Prayut—some participants, in fact, even disliked him—they saw him and his party as the best choice to fight against Thaksin, protect the monarchy, and deliver peace and stability to the country and thus voted for Pracharath as their first choice. Furthermore, as will be examined more in-depth in Chapter 5, these voters were indifferent to regime type as long as it resulted in the well-being of the people.

Strategic Consent

In contrast with sincere voters who vote for Palang Pracharath out of sincere preference, strategic voters prefer a different party but vote for Palang Pracharath for strategic reasons. Such reasons, however, can be material or ideological. Strategic-material voters are voters who have

¹⁸⁴ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

been “bought”—they prefer a different party but decide to vote for Palang Pracharath because they like the “goodies,” the material benefits the party, or the MP candidate the party has nominated, has delivered or made a credible promise to deliver. Like their strategic-material counterparts, strategic-ideological voters also prefer a different party and vote for Palang Pracharath. However, their voting decisions are based purely on ideological, non-material reasons.

Strategic-Material

The behavior of strategic-material voters is very similar to that of sincere-policy, and, less commonly, sincere-MP voters. As discussed in the section on sincere-policy voters, voter decisions to vote for the MP or policy are not necessarily material, but they could very well be (and often are). In some ways, strategic-material voters behave similarly to poor sincere-policy voters who rely on government benefits. It is important to note that they are, however, different from sincere-policy voters who sincerely prefer Palang Pracharath because they agree with its policies or because they like the candidate as a person despite not having received or expecting to receive any benefits themselves. Because of their dependence on the state, both strategic-material voters and the first type of sincere-policy voters are typically drawn to pro-poor populist policies, hence making voting decisions according to their material interests. As emphasized several times in this chapter, the difference is that for strategic-material voters, their sincere first choice remains Pheu Thai, the Democrats, or any party other than Palang Pracharath. Nevertheless, because policies enter their calculation—they want these material benefits to continue—strategic-material voters think it is in their strategic interest to support Palang Pracharath. For the sincere-policy voters, Palang Pracharath’s campaign policies have made the party their sincere first choice—they

sincerely prefer the party's policies over any other parties.'¹⁸⁵ However, strategic voters, for sincere reasons, would prefer to vote for another party, but because of the material benefits, vote for Palang Pracharath. It is in their strategic interest to vote for Palang Pracharath even though it is not their first choice. For strategic-material voters, material benefits come before ideology or political affiliation. As will be examined intensively in Chapter 5, much of Palang Pracharath's strategy was about trying to capture sincere-policy and strategic-material voters by trying to convince both former MPs, local brokers, and voters that if they were on its side, they were going to receive material benefits. Conversely, if they were not on its side, they were not going to receive such benefits. This is precisely the main reason why Palang Pracharath was named after the popular Pracharath welfare scheme: to make voters believe that if they vote for them, they will receive these benefits. Given the sheer number of voters who voted for Palang Pracharath because of material reasons (whether it be sincere-policy or strategic-material voters), this strategy was proven successful. Based on my field research, all voters who voted for Palang Pracharath because of material reasons sincerely preferred Palang Pracharath to any other party. Put alternatively, these voters either completely switched to Palang Pracharath and no longer identified themselves with their former parties or never identified themselves with any political party to begin with. According to observers, strategic-material voters, however, do exist. An example of such voters would be a Red-Shirt who reveres and remains nostalgic for Thaksin because of his populist policies that lifted him/her out of poverty, thus identifying him/herself as a Red-Shirt and/or Pheu Thai supporter, but at the same time depends on the welfare card, thereby deciding to vote for Palang Pracharath even though it is not his or her first choice. Lastly, for theoretical purposes, it

¹⁸⁵ The effects of the welfare card policy on voter decisions to vote for Palang Pracharath will be examined in Chapter 5.

is significant to note that the voters who identify themselves with another party but decide to vote for Palang Pracharath because of the benefits they have received or expect to receive from the MP candidate the party has nominated would also fall into the strategic-material as opposed to sincere-MP categories. This is because their sincere first choice remains another party. In reality, however, this group of voters is extremely rare, if it exists at all. From what I experienced in my fieldwork, the voters who vote for a party because of the material benefits from the MP candidate tend not to align themselves with any political party. If they do, they tend to have the same political affiliation as their preferred candidate, thus making them sincere-MP rather than strategic-material voters. As discussed in the section on sincere-MP voters, such voters tend to be loyal to the MP rather than the party and ready to switch to whichever party their preferred MP switches to.

Strategic-Ideological

The final and perhaps the most interesting group of all voters who provide consent consists of voters who vote strategically for Palang Pracharath because of non-material, ideological reasons. As with the sincere-policy and strategic-material pair, strategic-ideological voters are very similar to sincere-ideological voters in many respects. Like their sincere counterparts, strategic-ideological voters tend to be independent rather than dependent voters, for they place their ideological interests before their material interests. As previously mentioned, there can be an overlap in the kind of beliefs, values, fears, or concerns that influence their decisions. The distinction is, however, whether the party has risen to their first choice. For the sincere-ideological voters, because their ideology aligns with what Palang Pracharath represents, the party becomes their sincere first choice. For the strategic-ideological voters, their first choice is, on the contrary, a different party, most commonly the Democrat Party. However, because they fear that Pheu Thai,

Future Forward, or the pro-democracy forces as a whole will win the elections, they deem that it is *necessary* to “help *Loong Tu* out” and vote for Palang Pracharath. In the eyes of the strategic-ideological voters, Palang Pracharath is the pro-regime party that not only has the clearest political stance (as opposed to the Democrat Party, which is seen by many as more ambiguous) but also has the best chance to defeat Thaksin Shinawatra and Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. Moreover, Palang Pracharath also has closer ties to the military and the monarchy. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva’s declaration that he would not support Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha to return as prime minister marked a watershed moment that led many former Democrat supporters to change their minds overnight. Despite their loyalty and/or preference for the Democrat Party, the strategic-ideological voters choose to vote for Palang Pracharath, a *less preferred but stronger option*, rather than their sincere first choice, to prevent an undesirable outcome, that is, the victory of the pro-democracy side. For these voters, Palang Pracharath and Prayut are the most suitable option for these particular elections and this political context. Their consent is, therefore, *temporary* and specific to this context—it can be withdrawn at any time, and they are ready to switch back to their former party when the situation returns to normal (i.e., when they no longer require a party and/or leader that come from dictatorship). In terms of knowledge they possess, strategic-ideological voters are either type III or type IV: they are either aware of the connection between Palang Pracharath and the regime but do not perceive it as authoritarian *or* they are aware of this connection and vote for the party precisely because of this reason. A typical strategic-ideological voter who provides strategic consent to the regime is hence a former Democrat supporter who supports the military and the monarchy; detests Thaksin and/or Thanathorn and their parties; and most importantly, prefers peace and stability to political freedom and democracy. Some examples of strategic-ideological voters from my fieldwork include the

voters from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet and Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat. Finally, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5, it is critical to emphasize that this group of voters may or may not support authoritarian rule and/or Prayut, and, in fact, a sizable number of them do not. On the surface, it seems that these voters give “consent to dictatorship” by electing authoritarian incumbents back into power. Nevertheless, closer scrutiny of their decision-making processes reveals that what they are consenting to is not “dictatorship” per se but is, in fact, “peace and stability” or “continuation,” “so the country can move forward.” In brief, the strategic-ideological voters provide consent to *peace and stability even though* it is produced by a party that originated from authoritarian rule. In other words, these voters vote for Palang Pracharath *not because it is an authoritarian successor party or is linked to the military or dictatorship*—thus consenting to dictatorship in and of itself—*but because it is led by General Prayut*, the leader of the 2014 Thai coup d'état and the NCPO who they believe will be able to restore peace and stability in the country (and protect the monarchy). The strategic-ideological voters vote for Palang Pracharath because it is the representative of the NCPO and/or led by Prayut. To put it differently, they do not consent to *any* authoritarian government but consent to the continuation of rule by Prayut and his team (i.e., authoritarian incumbents). Although strategic-ideological voters do not vote for Palang Pracharath because it comes from a dictatorship, these voters are fully aware of the relationship between the party and the regime and still consent. Therefore, a strategic vote for Palang Pracharath is interpreted as strategic consent for authoritarian incumbents and an authoritarian successor party.

VII. The Three Pathways to Consent

As discussed in the previous section, there are at least three main sources of consent: MP (Chapters 3 and 5), policy (Chapter 5), and ideology (Chapter 5). This study, therefore, identifies three pathways to consent, which will be explored in the chapters that follow. Earlier in this chapter, I divided voters into dependent and independent voters. Though the two groups are by no means mutually exclusive, dependent voters can be further divided into those who rely on the politicians and those who rely on the state. As will be explained as follows, each group of voters takes a different pathway to consent.

Pathway I: Dependent Voters' Reliance on MPs + One ballot → Cooptation

In the first pathway, Palang Pracharath acquired voters' consent through the coopted MPs and local politicians. As will be examined in Chapter 3, much of Thailand is characterized by clientelist relationships between politicians and citizens. The NCPO was aware of dependent voters' reliance on and attachment to politicians and thus designed a mixed-member apportionment (MMA) system, which forced voters to cast one ballot instead of two, thereby limiting their choices. Palang Pracharath then coopted former MPs and local politicians with large political bases and the potential to win, using carrots and sticks and giving them "boosts."¹⁸⁶ When left with one choice, dependent voters who relied on MPs and/or local brokers were inclined vote for the MP (and whichever party their MP is affiliated with), thereby giving consent to Palang Pracharath. While sincere-MP voters constitute a majority of voters who took this pathway, there could be strategic-material voters as well.

¹⁸⁶ Palang Pracharath's cooptation strategies will be discussed in-depth in Chapter 5.

Pathway II: Dependent Voters' Reliance on the State + One ballot → Welfare Card

In the second pathway, Palang Pracharath acquired voters' consent through the welfare card policy. In addition to the dependent voters who rely on politicians and local brokers, Palang Pracharath was aware that there exist dependent voters who rely on government benefits. Therefore, to attract these voters, the NCPO government handed out welfare cards shortly before the elections, and Palang Pracharath was named after this welfare scheme. When given one ballot, this group of voters ranked (pro-poor, populist) policy at the top of their list, hence voting for Palang Pracharath and giving consent to authoritarian incumbents because of the welfare card policy. Like the first pathway, a combination of sincere-policy and strategic-material took this pathway to consent.

Pathway III: Independent Voters' Desire for Peace and Stability and Antagonism towards “the Other Side” + One Ballot (+ Abhisit's Declaration Not to Support Prayut as Prime Minister) → “*Luek Kwam Sangob Chop ti Loong Tu*” [Choose Peace, Choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)] Campaign

In the final pathway, Palang Pracharath acquired voters' consent through the “Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu” [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)] campaign. Palang Pracharath was aware of the remaining group of voters who rely neither on the state nor local political patrons. Because they are independent voters, their main concern is not livelihood but the political instability originated from the conflicts between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts. A majority of these voters are the same group of individuals who supported the People's Democratic Reform

Committee (PDRC) and called for a military coup in 2014.¹⁸⁷ In the eyes of these voters, the NCPO era was characterized by peace and stability. As will be investigated in Chapter 5, their biggest fear is, however, the return of Thaksin, which they believe will put the country back into political turmoil and disharmony. The rise of Thanathorn and the Future Forward Party, likewise, is viewed as a threat to the status quo. When forced to make one choice, these voters give priority to peace and stability. As stated in the previous section, Abhisit's stance against Prayut creates necessity for strategic voting. Palang Pracharath's final campaign "Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu" [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)] acts as a significant catalyst to cue fear and prompt voters' decisions to vote for and give consent to the authoritarian incumbents. Finally, it is a combination of sincere-ideology and strategic-ideology voters who take this pathway to consent.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has established a theory for explaining consent. Contrary to the extant literature on authoritarian resilience, which focuses primarily on the actions of the regime elite, I have highlighted the significance of the agency of voters as well as the interaction between the regime, politicians, and voters. In other words, it is not just what the regime elite is doing or imposing on voters, but it is also how the voters make decisions and respond to what the regime elite has to offer that allows authoritarian incumbents to stay in power. The primary contribution

¹⁸⁷ In November 2013, there was public outcry over Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's attempt to pass a political amnesty bill that would allow the return of her brother former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Though the bill was rejected by the Senate, hundreds of thousands of people came out on the street to demand the removal of Yingluck's government. When Prime Minister Yingluck dissolved parliament and called for early elections in February 2014, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) supporters launched a campaign "Reform before Election," which called for the eradication of the Shinawatra family from Thai politics and the formation of an unelected "People's Council." PDRC supporters not only refused to participate in the February 2014 elections, but they also blocked polling stations and attacked voters. They even called for military intervention.

of this study is, therefore, the incorporation of consent into the study of authoritarian durability. The main theoretical argument of this chapter is that authoritarian incumbents require the consent of citizens to return to power. A voter provides consent to authoritarian incumbents when he or she voluntarily gives them permission to rule by voting for an authoritarian successor party when he or she has the freedom to vote for opposition parties but chooses not to. I have argued that consent originated from three main sources: (1) MP candidate, (2) policy, and (3) ideology. In order to explain consent, I have divided voters according to their socioeconomic dependence on the state and politicians and argued that dependent voters are more likely to vote according to material interests whereas independent voters are more likely to vote according to their ideological interests. While a majority of voters vote for their sincere first choice, a reasonable share of voters engage in strategic voting. Instead of voting for their most preferred party, strategic voters vote for a party that they less prefer but has a better chance of winning to avoid wasting their vote and defeat the party they least prefer. These different types of voting behavior in turn lead to different types of consent. In the case of Thailand's 2019 general elections, a vote for Palang Pracharath is interpreted as sincere consent if the voter votes for the party out of sincere preference. Conversely, a vote for Palang Pracharath is interpreted as strategic consent if the voter votes for the party because of strategic reasons.

I have further divided each type of consent into subcategories according to their primary sources of consent. Among those who provide sincere consent, there are individuals who vote for Palang Pracharath because of the MP, policy, and ideology. Just as the sincere-MP voters vote for Palang Pracharath because they like the MP candidates, the sincere-policy voters vote for Palang Pracharath because they like the policies. Sincere-ideological voters, however, vote for Palang Pracharath because of ideological reasons, including what the party stands for, their hostility

toward the other side, or Prayut's personal characteristics. Contrary to their sincere counterparts, both types of strategic voters prefer another party but vote for Palang Pracharath because of strategic reasons. Strategic-material voters vote for Palang Pracharath because of material benefits whereas strategic-ideological voters vote for Palang Pracharath because of ideological, non-material reasons. It is important to note that there is an overlap between sincere-ideological voters and their strategic-ideological counterparts in terms of their beliefs and concerns. In the final section of this chapter, I have identified three pathways to consent. When given one ballot instead of two, voters make voting decisions based on what they deem as a priority. In the first pathway, dependent voters who rely on their MPs vote for Palang Pracharath because the party has coopted their MPs. In the second pathway, dependent voters who rely on the state vote for Palang Pracharath because of the welfare card policy. In the final pathway, independent voters who are concerned about political instability and the threat posed by the pro-democracy side vote for Palang Pracharath because of Abhisit's stance against Prayut and Palang Pracharath final campaign "*Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu*" [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)].

Chapter 3

Reliance

I. Introduction

“Thailand is defined by clientelism, which is lamentable, because it is something that we have sustained. We have been building our democracy for 80 years. Everyone should be independent [by now], but they [politicians] always keep the citizens poor. So they [voters] will depend on us and then owe us, they said. So they will vote for us on election day. We don't really want them to get any richer—we want them to owe us like this. It is a clientelist and reciprocal society. Once we help them, we will have to make money. And that's often through corruption when we become MPs.”

— Palang Pracharath Executive¹

If there is one concept that serves as a defining characteristic of Thai politics, it is “clientelism,” an asymmetric relationship between a patron and a client in which the patron provides goods and services to the client in exchange for political support. Clientelism is used by scholars to explain a variety of political phenomena in Thailand dating back from the “bureaucratic polity”² era to the modern day.³ As stated in the quote above, the lack of state capacity and political will to address the needs of citizens forced the poor to rely on their political patrons for goods and services. Not only do politicians connect citizens with state resources, but they also provide them with assistance in times of need. When citizens return the favor with their votes, clientelist relationships are formed and, ultimately, so are clientelist networks.

¹ A Palang Pracharath Executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

² Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press, 1967).

³ 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.

Focusing on dependent voters who rely on politicians, this chapter explores the ways in which their socioeconomic dependence shapes both voter preferences (e.g., a strong preference for reliable and accessible candidates) and electoral strategies (e.g., a strong emphasis on constituency visits and canvassing) and lays the basis for co-optation, which in turn leads to consent. The chapter starts with a quick discussion of the definition of clientelism and the main components of clientelist relationships. It then examines the structural problems that give rise to clientelism in Thailand—including the distance between citizens and the state, the inaccessibility and unresponsiveness of the government, unequal access to public services, and government officials’ abuse of power—and create the need for MPs’ role as “coordinators” who connect citizens with state resources and discuss the concept of *boonkoon*, which ties clientelist relationships together. After that, the chapter turns to the anatomy and the functions of vote-canvassing networks and explores the role of political dynasties. The chapter then analyzes the effects of dependent voters’ socioeconomic dependence on their political preferences and behaviors as well as the strategies MP candidates adopted to win their votes.

II. Definition of Clientelism

Before digging into the details of the clientelist relationships in Thailand and the ways in which they shape the behaviors of both voters and politicians, it is vital to define the concept of clientelism. Despite the absence of a universal definition of clientelism, Allen Hicken, in his examination of the existing literature, identifies four main components of clientelist relationships: dyadic relationships, contingency, hierarchy, and iteration.⁴ First, clientelism requires a personal,

⁴ Allen Hicken, “Clientelism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2011): 289–310, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.031908.220508>.

dyadic relationship between the patron and client.⁵ However, clients may rely on a chain of broker relationships instead of having direct contact with their patrons.⁶ Hicken explains that this broker network can become long and complex, involving multiple layers of relationships (e.g., between the patron and high-level brokers, between high- and lower-level brokers, and ultimately between brokers and individual clients).⁷ These brokers are typically individuals with social positions, namely, “local government officials, landowners, respected business people, or other local notables.”⁸ Second, the relationship between patron and client is contingent or reciprocal in nature and, as Hicken puts it, always comes with “strings attached.”⁹ As Hicken explains, “[t]he delivery of a good or service on the part of both the patron and client is in direct response to a delivery of

⁵ Hicken, “Clientelism,” 290–291. See, for example, James C. Scott, “Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia,” *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972): 91–113, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1959280>; Carl H. Landé, “Introduction: The Dyadic Basis of Clientelism,” in *Friends, Followers and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism*, ed. Steffen W. Schmidt et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), xiii–xxxvii; and Scott P. Mainwaring, *Rethinking Party Systems in the Third Wave of Democratization: The Case of Brazil* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁶ Alex Weingrod, “Patrons, Patronage, and Political Parties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10, no. 4 (1968): 377–400, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0010417500005004>; Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, “Citizen–Politician Linkages: An Introduction,” in *Patrons, Clients and Policies*, 2007, 1–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511585869.001>; Susan C. Stokes, in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, ed. Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 604–27.; Wolfgang Muno, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Clientelism,” Presented at workshop Neopatrimonialism in Various World Regions, Aug. 23, GIGA, Hamburg.

⁷ Hicken, “Clientelism,” 291.

⁸ e.g., Michael Moerman, “A Thai Village Headman as a Synaptic Leader,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 28, no. 03 (1969): 535–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021911800092810>; Gerald Curtis, *Election Campaigning Japanese Style* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971); Ethan Scheiner, “Clientelism in Japan: The Importance and Limits of Institutional Explanations,” *Patrons, Clients and Policies*, 2007, 276–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511585869.012>; Steven I. Wilkinson, “Explaining Changing Patterns of Party–Voter Linkages in India,” *Patrons, Clients and Policies*, 2007, 110–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511585869.005>.

⁹ Hicken, “Clientelism,” 291.

a reciprocal benefit by the other party, or the credible promise of such a benefit.”¹⁰ Due to a typical lag in the exchange, each party must be able to monitor and sanction the other. The patron uses different forms of compensation to gain political support from the clients at different levels.¹¹ For example, at the top, national politicians may be given budgets or concessions. At the middle level, local politicians and vote canvassers may be compensated with positions. Lastly, at the bottom, the goods and services that politicians offer voters include both material benefits, such as “cash to cookware to corrugated metal” and nonmaterial benefits, such as jobs, access to public services such as housing, education, or healthcare, protection, or intervention with the bureaucracy.¹² Third, clientelist relationships are asymmetric—“with the patron possessing information, resources, or prestige that the client lacks¹³” According to Scott’s definition, clientelism is a relationship “in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering generous support and assistance, including personal service, to the patron.”¹⁴ The final component of clientelism is iteration or the ongoing nature of the

¹⁰ Hicken, “Clientelism,” 291. See also, Simona Piattoni, “Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation,” *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation*, 2001, 193–212, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139175340.010>; James A. Robinson and Thierry Verdier, *The Political Economy of Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 2003); Luis Roniger et al., “Political Clientelism, Democracy, and Market Economy,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 3 (2004): 353, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150135>.

¹¹ Netipho, *สี่บทวิจารณ์บุญคุณ*, 6.

¹² Hicken, “Clientelism,” 291. See Robinson and Verdier, *The Political Economy of Clientelism*; Nicolas Van de Walle, “Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa’s Emerging Party Systems,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 2 (2003): 297–321, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x03004269>; Allen Hicken and Joel W. Simmons, “The Personal Vote and the Efficacy of Education Spending,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1 (2008): 109–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00302.x>; and Judith Chubb, *Patronage, Power, and Poverty in Southern Italy: A Tale of Two Cities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), respectively.

¹³ Hicken, “Clientelism,” 292.

¹⁴ Scott, “Patron-Client Politics, 92 quoted in Hicken, “Clientelism,” 292.

relationship.¹⁵ Iterated interactions form the basis of clientelism. The decisions each party makes today depend on their anticipation of the other party's interactions in the future. Hence, trust that the other will keep their promises is a key element in clientelist exchange. Iteration allows both the patron and client to predict and monitor the behavior of the other by providing both parties with information about the reliability of the other and the opportunity to punish the other for defecting.¹⁶ As will be discussed further in Chapter 5, it is often the networks of vote canvassers that politicians monitor the behavior of their clients.

III. Structural Problems as the Root Causes of Clientelism

A. The Distance between Citizens and the State (Resources)

As in much of the developing world, clientelism in Thailand originated, at least in part, from the structural problems that created a distance between citizens and the state. The centralization of power forced citizens, local government officials, and local politicians to depend on national politicians for access to government budgets and state resources. The channel through which the resources flow from the state to the constituencies creates a chain of broker relationships described by Hicken.¹⁷ For example, in order to obtain simple infrastructure such as a new bridge, a new road, or street lights, villagers may first have to go to the village headman who then has to go to the subdistrict headman who then has to go to the district chief who then has to go to the provincial governor who then has to bring it up to the MP or the minister who may eventually get a budget for them. Each agent along this chain acts as both a patron and a client and thus has an

¹⁵ Hicken, "Clientelism," 292.

¹⁶ Hicken, "Clientelism," 293

¹⁷ Hicken, "Clientelism."

obligation to reciprocate in the future, especially during the elections. While constructing new bridges for villagers may not fall within an MP's prescribed duties, the discussion of deteriorating infrastructure, such as broken bridges, roads, or streetlights, for budgetary considerations is a recurrent theme in parliamentary discourse.¹⁸ Despite the party's reputation for its programmatic policies, a Pheu Thai MP candidate claimed that a number of voters, especially those in the old communities, continued to vote for his party because "we have built roads for them, we have built houses for them, and we have built street lights for them."¹⁹ When it is time to cast their votes, voters reflect what politicians have done for them and take it into consideration. However, when voters fail to do so, politicians find it necessary to remind and seek reciprocation for their favors. "I told them [the constituents] that if they don't come out and vote for me [the candidate she supported], I will remove their electricity poles! Because I staked these poles myself. I built them!" Palang Pracharath vote canvasser Krarok said half-jokingly.²⁰ Moreover, the distance between citizens and state resources also creates an opportunity for politicians to jump in and claim credit. Floods, for example, are among the most recurrent and costly natural disasters in Thailand. Provinces in lower Northern and Central regions experience floods almost on a yearly basis. Prior to the construction of the dam, Sing Buri residents suffered from annual flooding. While disaster assistance should be the government's responsibility, In Buri villagers revealed that it was usually their MP who visited and provided flood relief.²¹ In the view of Thanathorn and other progressive politicians, the state structure where citizens are distanced from power and resources is the root

¹⁸ Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020; Ekkachai Songamnartcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹⁹ Treerat Sirichantaropas, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 16, 2020.

²⁰ A Palang Pracharath vote canvasser, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 18, 2020.

²¹ Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020

cause of clientelism.²² If citizens or local governments had had more direct access to state resources, these problems could have been addressed at the local level, hence obviating the need to rely on and reciprocate favors along the patronage chain.

B. The Inaccessibility and Unresponsiveness of the Government

Second, apart from the distance between citizens and state resources, the inaccessibility and unresponsiveness of the government and bureaucracies have fostered citizens' dependence on local politicians or MPs. The lack of education and the difficult access to government services compelled rural residents to turn to local mechanisms, such as the village headman, the subdistrict headman, or MPs for assistance in accessing government services.²³ Hence, as it will be discussed further later in this chapter, an MP's accessibility stands as one of the key factors voters consider when making decisions at the ballot box.²⁴ As per accounts from politicians and voters nationwide, constituents, particularly those who are uneducated and dependent, often find it more comfortable to communicate with and seek assistance from their local MPs than government officials. Pheu Thai MP Ekachai explained that this preference stems from a feeling among villagers that their voices are not being heard. "The problem is that nobody listens to them except for us [MPs]," he said.²⁵ In the eyes of villagers, local governments not only lack responsiveness but also harbor bureaucrats perceived as arrogant. While village headmen, subdistrict headmen, and district chiefs are typically more accessible and attentive to people's needs, they often lack the necessary resources for assistance. In contrast, local governments may be endowed with more resources but

²² Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

²³ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

²⁴ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020; Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 14, 2020.

²⁵ Ekkachai Songamnartcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

often lack the incentive to help. Furthermore, the appointment and regular rotation of provincial governors by the Ministry of the Interior in Bangkok create a challenge. By the time these governors familiarize themselves with a province and begin establishing relationships with locals, it is already time for the next rotation. Consequently, locals often feel disconnected from and find it difficult to approach their governor and the bureaucrats.²⁶

C. Unequal Access to Public Services and Government Officials' Abuse of Power

Lastly, the unequal access to public services, including education and healthcare, as well as limited opportunities for government jobs, forced citizens to rely on politicians for assistance. For example, despite Thailand's universal healthcare system, unequal access to healthcare remains a challenge to the nation, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak. As public hospitals faced overwhelming demand, villagers ran to their local MP begging for help securing hospital beds. Or, in ordinary circumstances, villagers typically approach their MP to request for a VIP room or the best doctor in the hospital. Those with strong connections to politicians are often the ones who receive superior service and preferential treatment. In fact, in the middle of an interview with a Palang Pracharath politician, there was an incoming call from one of her constituents urgently requesting to be moved to a VIP room.²⁷ She explained that given the structure of the public hospitals, everyone wanted to stay in a VIP room. In contrast with private hospitals, which typically provide patients with fast and exceptional customer service, public hospitals in Thailand are notorious for their staff shortages and long waits. Nevertheless, the Palang Pracharath politician

²⁶ The son of a Palang Pracharath candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020.

²⁷ A Palang Pracharath politician, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

explained that the nurses would always check in on VIP rooms just as at private hospitals.²⁸ Furthermore, constituents may ask their MP when they need assistance enrolling their children in the best school in town or securing a government job. For example, a Bangkok voter recalled a time when Palang Pracharath party-list MP Buddhipongse Punnakanta was her constituency MP. She said that when their children cannot get into a school of their choice, the constituents could just “call him, and he would take care of everything.”²⁹

Beyond public services and public sector job opportunities, citizens also depend on politicians for assistance with police arrests. According to the focus group participants from Khlong Lan, many such arrests were either false or wrongful. It is not uncommon for Thai police officers to abuse their power and demand bribes from citizens, especially the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. Tong, for example, revealed that he and his fellow Lahu villagers were frequently stopped at police checkpoints for no valid reason.³⁰ When the police officers did not find anything wrong during the search, they would still try to extort money or demand other forms of bribery, such as a bottle of red bull. His inability to speak fluent Thai, Tong claimed, made him an easy target for corrupt police officers.³¹ He recalled a time when he was traveling to Nakhon Sawan and was suddenly taken to the police station. He said that in an attempt to arrest him for being an illegal alien, the police kept asking where he was from and whether he had a Thai national identity card. Even after he had proven that he was a Thai citizen, the police were still demanding a bribe from him.³² Stories of individuals from marginalized groups getting detained or arrested

²⁸ A Palang Pracharath politician, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

²⁹ Ratchanee, focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

³⁰ Tong, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

³¹ Tong, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

³² Tong, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

arbitrarily or being forced to sing the Thai national anthem to prove their nationality resonate across the country. The poor and rural residents, likewise, are often subject to arbitrary and false arrests.

The police's repeated abuse of authority and misconduct made these citizens feel that they could not trust or rely on government officials. Instead, they turned to their MPs for help. "MP Anan has a team member in Khlong Lan, member of Provincial Council Yuwadee. Whenever the police arrested our villager, I called her, and she would go [to the police station] right away. She would help negotiate with police to see what the charges were made and what could be done. If they could not be released, Yuwadee would use her position to bail them out. She would even accompany them to the prosecutor's office and court," said a Lahu leader.³³ Yuwadee explained that the Lahu community lived by the forest and made a living by foraging. Sometimes they made careless mistakes and got arrested. She assured the Lahus that she was always willing to help them with any problem except for anything related to drugs.³⁴ Furthermore, even when the arrests are lawful, citizens also seek help from politicians, hoping that they will be released. As a former Palang Pracharath MP candidate stated, "If you help those bad teens when they get arrested, they will love you and vote for you in return."³⁵

D. MPs' Role as a "Coordinator" Who Connects Citizens with State Resources

While in theory, the primary role of an MP lies in the parliament, in practice it is distorted by clientelism. "MPs are lawmakers. The duty of an MP is not to install sewer caps or fix the roads. The duty of an MP is to push for laws, so the country can move forward, or amend outdated laws.

³³ A Khlong Lan voter, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

³⁴ Yuwadee, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

³⁵ A former Palang Pracharath MP candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok September 13.

This is the main duty of an MP!” Future Forward leader Thanathorn declared.³⁶ Even MPs and MP candidates view themselves as representatives of their province or constituency rather than lawmakers and thus see it as their duty to promote local development, which is, in fact, the responsibility of local governments and the Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAO).³⁷ Moreover, rather than legislators, politicians often act as “patrons” who provide goods and services to voters who act as “clients” and reciprocate with their electoral support. In order to sustain their clientelist relationships with brokers and voters, politicians must serve as “deal makers” or “coordinators” who connect citizens with state resources.³⁸ “Even when it is not something I can do, I will try to find mechanisms to help them [the constituents] I will provoke action [from those with power],” said a Pheu Thai MP.³⁹ Given the distance between (1) the state and citizens, (2) the inaccessibility and unresponsiveness of government, and (3) unequal access to public services and government officials’ abuse of power, voters expect their MPs to be able to pull resources from the state to the constituency and coordinate with the government/bureaucracies. Hence, as it will be discussed in Chapter 5, it should not come as a surprise that MPs and vote canvassers would be motivated to join the coalition government i.e., “the winning side” in order to pull more resources to their constituencies and sustain their political networks. In contrast with village headmen, subdistrict headmen, district chiefs, and local government officers, MPs have both the incentive to help constituents and access to resources.

Instead of focusing on their legislative duties, clientelist politicians, especially in rural areas, devote more time and energy to serving their constituents and emphasize their roles as “deal

³⁶ Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

³⁷ Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020.

³⁸ Stithorn Thananithichot, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020; Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

³⁹ A Pheu Thai MP, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

makers” and “coordinators.” For example, according to Pheu Thai candidate Treerat, his Palang Pracharath rival claimed during her campaign that if elected, she would be able to coordinate anything the constituents wanted because she could connect with the governor.⁴⁰ That the Bangkok governor was appointed by the NCPO gave Palang Pracharath candidates a tremendous advantage. Treerat explained that if he or any candidate from opposition parties was elected, and, say for example, the constituents demanded a footpath or a footbridge, he would have to coordinate it for them. However, it is the district that controls the budget, not the MP. Since the governor was on the same side as the party, it would be easier for Palang Pracharath candidates to coordinate with the district offices and deliver goods and services to their constituents. Nakhon Si Thammarat Palang Pracharath Rong Boonsuaykhwan, likewise, highlighted his role as a coordinator throughout his campaign. Using English terms, Rong said that he explained to his voters a distinction between his “manifest function,” which is speaking in the parliament, and his “latent function,” which is coordinating projects.⁴¹ Finally, whether it is a delivery of goods and services or coordination with the government, everything politicians do for their constituents always comes with electoral strings attached, which is the subject of the next section: *boonkoon*.

E. *Boonkoon*

In addition to the reciprocal benefits expected from the other party, *boonkoon* is the glue that holds clientelist relationships together. All forms of assistance from politicians discussed in the previous section constitute what is called *boonkoon*. Roughly translated into English as “favor” or “debt of gratitude,” the concept of *boonkoon* has long been embedded in Thai culture—Thai

⁴⁰ Treerat Sirichantaropas, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 16, 2020.

⁴¹ Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

children are raised to repay *boonkoon* that people do for them. Therefore, those “bad teens” not only voted for the Palang Pracharath politician because of their expectation that he would help them out again when they get in trouble in the future, but they also voted for him because of his *boonkoon*. *Boonkoon* is akin to a social contract in Thailand. Those who return the favor are praised as being grateful or *katanyoo*, whereas those who refuse to do so are often shunned by society. There is a saying in Thai and a widespread belief that an ungrateful (*akatangyoo* or *nerakhun*) person will never be successful.

Contrary to popular belief that poor voters in Thailand simply sell their votes to the highest bidder, this study finds that many voters cast their votes for politicians to repay their *boonkoon*. While vote-buying money was typically offered by all serious candidates as “an entry fee”⁴² to voters, a number of voters, especially in the Northeast, still consider vote buying as a form of *boonkoon* that they have to repay. Although this belief is waning—an increasing number of voters, especially independent voters, admitted accepting money from more than one candidate and not feeling obliged to vote for any specific candidate—many voters revealed that they would only accept one offer, usually from the candidate they had close relationships with. As an In Buri voter stated, the vote buying money “smells nicer” when given by his preferred candidate.⁴³ Similarly, some voters revealed that they would feel as if they had committed a sin or *bap* if they did not vote for the candidate from whom they took the offer.⁴⁴ Lastly, though vote buying can be regarded as a form of *boonkoon*, a majority of participants view it as a one-time transaction not as part of an ongoing relationship, thus carrying less weight on their decisions than other types of *boonkoon*.

⁴² Hicken, “Clientelism.”

⁴³ An In Buri voter, interview with the author, In Buri, September 20, 2020.

⁴⁴ Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020.

As argued by a wealth of existing literature on Thai elections and indicated by the findings from the field research, vote buying is only one, and not the most important, of the many factors that voters take into consideration when deciding who to vote for. Other types of assistance from politicians, as previously discussed, constitute greater *boonkoon* than vote buying and serve as the key determinant of voters' decisions. As established at the beginning of the section, a sizable number of Thai voters vote for a candidate because of *boonkoon*. Before beginning this discussion, it is, nevertheless, important to note that while scholars often differentiate clientelism from other types of exchange,⁴⁵ *boonkoon* can result from both club goods (programmatic or clientelist) and personal favors. The effects of *boonkoon* and its obligation for the recipients appear the strongest in the Northeast. Politicians from across the country agreed that Northeastern rice farmers remained loyal to Pheu Thai because the party's programmatic policies, such as the village funds, a rice mortgage, and a debt moratorium, lifted them out of poverty. Future Forward spokesperson Pannika Wanich, for example, claimed that despite their interest in her party's rice policies, Northeastern rice farmers felt obliged to vote for Pheu Thai as a way to repay their *boonkoon*.⁴⁶ Sing Buri farmers, likewise, remained nostalgic about the 15,000 baht per ton for unmilled rice that allowed them to "get better financially, buy a new car, and renovate their house."⁴⁷ While the benefits of such policies were by no means contingent on their political support for the party, these farmers still regard them as *boonkoon* and hence continue to vote for Pheu Thai.⁴⁸ Personal favors, because they provide direct benefits to the recipient, tend to create greater *boonkoon* and stronger

⁴⁵ See, for example, Hicken, "Clientelism" and Kitschelt and Wilkinson, "Citizen–Politician Linkages."

⁴⁶ Pannika Wanich, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 21, 2020.

⁴⁷ An In Buri Member of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization Council (SAO), interview with the author, Sing Buri, September 20, 2020.

⁴⁸ Apart from *boonkoon*, the successful delivery of club goods is also perceived as an indicator of the ability to deliver benefits in the future.

obligation to reciprocate than club goods. Dependent voters across all regions reported voting for a particular candidate because of the personal favor(s) the candidate has done for them in the past. All forms of assistance described in the previous section serve as examples of such personal favors. In addition to an obligation to return the favor, the assistance provided by politicians is also indicative of their ability and willingness to help in the future. Just as voters vote for candidates because of *boonkoon*, vote canvassers also remain loyal to a candidate for the same reason. For example, an observer explained that politicians in Nang Rong, Buriram focused more on recruiting new vote canvassers than stealing the vote canvassers of the opponents because *boonkoon* often prevents vote canvassers from switching sides.⁴⁹

Scholars, however, vary in their opinions on what constitutes *boonkoon*. For example, in *หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ: การเมืองการเลือกตั้งและการเปลี่ยนแปลงเครือข่ายอุปถัมภ์* [*The Ballot Box and Indebtedness: Electoral Politics and Changes in the Patronage System*], Viengrat Netipho points out a division of labor between national and local politicians and argues that while the former's assistance with government-related problems, legal issues, or coordination with government agencies is considered *boonkoon* or “*nee boonkoon*” (debt of gratitude), which makes the receiver “feel indebted” and “feel connected with the politicians,” the latter's assistance with general infrastructure issues (e.g., running water, electricity, and roads) neither results in “*nee boonkoon*” or “loyalty.”⁵⁰ In contrast with Viengrat's findings, the present study finds that voters' expectations of their MPs often blur the division of work identified by Viengrat. Not only do MPs frequently interfere with and claim credit for local infrastructure, but they also remind the voters of what they have done and make additional promises during the campaign. The findings from the field research

⁴⁹ A local politician from Nang Rong, interview with the author, December 18, 2020.

⁵⁰ Netipho, *หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ*, 142-143.

indicate that voters neither make a distinction between the two types of assistance nor whether such assistance is provided by MPs or local politicians. According to the focus group participants both can be regarded as *boonkoon*. The findings, nevertheless, suggest that whether an act is considered *boonkoon* depends more on the perception of the receiver. While dependent voters generally rely on politicians for and perceive both types of assistance as *boonkoon*, independent voters neither require assistance from politicians with personal matters nor access to government. When politicians build roads or electricity poles for the community, independent voters tend to view it as their “tax dollars [baht] at work”—something that they have paid for rather than *boonkoon* that they must repay.⁵¹

Finally, although *boonkoon* creates an obligation for political support, the behaviors of Kamphaeng Phet and Nakhon Si Thammarat voters raise the question of to what extent voters repay *boonkoon*. According to the findings from the two provinces, *boonkoon* is subject to limitations and contingent on other factors. First, as a Palang Pracharath politician argued, *boonkoon* has an “expiration date” and thus is not permanent.⁵² For example, Kamphaeng Phet residents once revered Dr. Preecha for giving them streetlights. However, “when Wipoj gave them water (for rice production), they forgot Dr. Preecha completely,” said a Phran Kratai voter.⁵³ Moreover, as demonstrated by Nakhon Si Thammarat voters, voters may choose not to vote for the candidate to whom they feel indebted if his or her political stance contradicts theirs.⁵⁴ As Krarok explained, a number of Nakhon Si Thammarat residents who had received help from Issara Hassadin or “Dr. Kai” refused to vote for him in the 2021 Provincial Administrative Organization

⁵¹ Stithorn Thananithichot, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020.

⁵² A Palang Pracharath politician, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

⁵³ A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

⁵⁴ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

elections because he joined “Thanathorn’s party.”⁵⁵ Since their political beliefs trumped personal connections, these voters behaved more similarly to independent voters despite their clientelist relationships with the candidate.

IV. Local Networks

A. Vote-Canvassing Networks

It is clientelism and the resulting *boonkoon* that enable politicians to create a loyal network of supporters. A vote canvassing network or what Anek Laothammathas called a “faction network” is “an organization established by national politicians at the provincial level to connect themselves with vote canvassers and then connect vote canvassers with constituents and local leaders.”⁵⁶ As Laothammathas described, these networks are loosely organized and created to serve a particular politician or a particular group of politicians.⁵⁷ The primary purpose of these networks is to maintain and expand political bases for politicians through the formation of clientelist relationships with vote canvassers and different groups of citizens. To distribute patronage and sustain the operations of the network, politicians often have to obtain budgets and draw resources from the state.⁵⁸ While faction networks are typically perceived as a form of clientelism, they behave more like political parties—not only do they have permanent structures, but they also operate

⁵⁵ A Palang Pracharath vote canvasser, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 18, 2020.

⁵⁶ Anek Laothammathas, เหตุอยู่ที่ท้องถิ่น: ปัญหาการเมืองการปกครองระดับชาติอันสืบเนื่องจากการปกครองท้องถิ่นที่ไม่เพียงพอ [*The Causes Lie in the Local Governments: National Governance Problems due to Insufficient Local Governance*], Bangkok: Center for Local Governance Studies, Thammarat University, 2543, quoted in Netipho, หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ, 34.

⁵⁷ Laothammathas, เหตุอยู่ที่ท้องถิ่น, 58-59.

⁵⁸ Laothammathas, เหตุอยู่ที่ท้องถิ่น, 70-73; 59.

continuously (and not only during elections), maintain close relationships with citizens, and most importantly address the needs of citizens.⁵⁹

B. The Structure of Vote-Canvassing Networks

As described earlier in this chapter, clientelist networks are vertical in nature and usually involve multiple layers of relationships between the patron (politician), different levels of brokers, and individual clients (voters).⁶⁰ Each network is led by a leader or “boss” who controls lower-ranked brokers down to voters.⁶¹ These networks are traditionally divided into the “inner circle” and the “outer circle” or the A-B-C axes. The “inner circle” or what politicians typically refer to as the “A axis” consists of high-ranking vote canvassers who are the closest, most loyal, and most trusted by the politicians.⁶² Some examples of such vote canvassers include local politicians (e.g., mayors, members of Provincial Administrative Organization, and members of Subdistrict Administrative Organization), local businessmen), and local godfathers who are respected by the locals. While the actual number varies, according to Laothammathas the inner circle generally consists of 6 to 12 vote canvassers.⁶³ Given their deep relationships with the politicians, the A-axis vote canvassers rarely, if ever, switch sides.⁶⁴ When they retire, they must find someone they can trust, usually their close relatives, to replace them. The “outer circle” or the “B axis” consists of lower-ranking vote canvassers, such as village headmen and subdistrict headmen. In one

⁵⁹ Laothammathas, *เหตุอยู่ที่ท้องถิ่น*, 73.

⁶⁰ Hicken, “Clientelism,” 291.

⁶¹ Netipho, *หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ*, 6.

⁶² Laothammathas, *เหตุอยู่ที่ท้องถิ่น*, 59; Netipho, *หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ*; Thanakrit, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

⁶³ Laothammathas, *เหตุอยู่ที่ท้องถิ่น*.

⁶⁴ Thanakrit, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020; A local politician from Nang Rong, interview with the author, December 18, 2020; Ekkachai Songamnartcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

constituency, there could be as many as hundreds of B-axis vote canvassers. For example, Pheu Thai Ubon Ratchathani MP Ekachai and Palang Pracharath Nakhon Si Thammarat Rong reported having more than 500 vote canvassers.⁶⁵ With only 500 vote canvassers, Rong revealed that he, in fact, failed to reach the party's target. According to observers, Democrat Nakhon Si Thammarat incumbents have up to 1,000 vote canvassers. Finally, the "outer circle" may also include the "C axis," which consists of ordinary villagers. Local associations and community groups, such as the Women Associate, Housewife Association, Senior Citizen Council, and most importantly the Village Health Volunteers, play an instrumental role in vote canvassing.⁶⁶ In contrast with the A-axis vote canvassers, the B- and C- axis vote canvassers may serve multiple politicians and belong to multiple networks.

C. The Functions of Vote-Canvassing Networks

As previously mentioned, the main function of clientelist networks is to maintain and expand electoral bases for politicians. According to the data from the field research, they also serve at least three additional functions. First, as Laothammathas and Netipho posited, clientelist networks also serve as information networks that not only allow politicians to collect information about the problems and needs of constituents but also spread information and monitor political sentiments during elections.⁶⁷ Due to the sheer vastness of the constituency, politicians must rely on their networks to reach out to constituents. Since village headmen and subdistrict headmen

⁶⁵ Ekkachai Songamnartcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020; Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

⁶⁶ As Netipho asserted, these groups not only receive support from local administrative organizations but also consist of individuals who are politically active and make collective voting decisions. Netipho, *หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ*.

⁶⁷ Palang Pracharath MP candidate Rong Boonsuaykhwan, for example, revealed that he used his vote canvassers to spread information and monitor political sentiments during the campaign.

closely interact with constituents on a regular basis, they are in a better position to check on constituents and report back to politicians.⁶⁸ The lack of networks placed parties like Future Forward at a disadvantage. Second, vote canvassers serve as an MP's representatives to provide benefits and assistance to constituents. Moreover, as it will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, vote canvassers also attend local events on behalf of the MP. Finally, during the elections, the main duty of vote canvassers is to mobilize voters and, in the case of brand-new candidates, help the candidate navigate the constituency.

D. Political Dynasties, Clientelism, and *Boonkoon*

In addition to vote canvassing networks, political dynasties or *trakun kan-mueang* also help politicians secure their political bases. Nevertheless, unlike vote canvassing networks, political dynasties are held together by family ties, not clientelist relationships. As previously discussed, ongoing clientelist relationships not only create an obligation for the client to repay the patron's *boonkoon* but also create an obligation for the patron to deliver promised benefits in return for the client's electoral support. By keeping his or her promises, the patron sends a signal to the client that he or she will reciprocate in the future. *Boonkoon* is, however, not only limited to the patron or the person who has done the favor but also extended to his or her family, thus making political dynasties particularly advantageous for maintaining clientelist relationships and political networks. Similarly, the patron's delivery of promised benefits and assistance also creates an expectation that the descendants will do the same.

Political clans or political dynasties refer to political families in which more than one family member hold a political position whether it be at the national level such as MPs or at the

⁶⁸ The advisor of a Palang Pracharath MP candidate, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

local level such as members of Provincial Administrative Organization, members of Subdistrict Administrative Organization, or provincial mayors. There are political dynasties in virtually every province in the country, the most prominent of which include the Chidchobs of Buriram, the Silparachas of Suphanburi, the Khunpluems of Chonburi, and the Thienthongs of Sa Kaeo. In contrast with scholarly focus on the negative aspects of political families (e.g., nepotism, corruption, and capturing a locality in Thailand),⁶⁹ both voters and local leaders, especially those who came from a province where the key political dynasty had promoted local development, exhibit a preference for strong political dynasties.⁷⁰ Conversely, the voters and local leaders who live in a province where local development is lacking often compared their province with a neighboring province in which the key political dynasty has promoted local development.⁷¹ For these voters, political dynasties are regarded as “heritage” that can be conducive to development.

Just as some voters voted for Yingluck because of the obligation to repay Thaksin’s *boonkoon* and/or because of the expectation that Yingluck would deliver benefits and bring about economic growth like her brother did, the findings from provinces with political dynasties, such as Kamphaeng Phet and Singburi, demonstrate that voters voted for Palang Pracharath candidates because of similar reasons. When the patron provides the client with benefits or assistance, the client feels obliged to reciprocate not only to the patron himself or herself but also to the patron’s family (in the case where the patron comes from a political dynasty). Moreover, the client also

⁶⁹ 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>.

⁷⁰ Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020; An In Buri Member of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization Council (SAO), interview with the author, Sing Buri, September 20, 2020.

⁷¹ For example, Nakhon Si Thammarat as opposed to Surat Thani. Several focus group participants from Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat saw Surat Thani as more developed than Nakhon Si Thammarat and attributed its development to the key political dynasty in the province. Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

expects the patron's successor to continue the clientelist relationship the client has with the patron. Take Sing Buri, for example. When asked about their vote choices, the immediate response of the voters who voted for Palang Pracharath was neither the party's name nor the candidate's name Chotiwiut Thanakananusorn, but it was the candidate's brother's name Chaiwiut Thanakananusorn, a Palang Pracharath's party list candidate and former Sing Buri MP.⁷² The participants revealed that they voted for Chotiwiut not only because Chaiwiut had helped them in the past but also because they expected that Chotiwiut would keep up the good work of his brother. One In Buri voter stated that she had always voted for Chaiwiut in the past, but she neither knew nor had met Chotiwiut. However, she decided to vote for him anyway because she thought that "his brother will probably teach him."⁷³ Similarly, Phran Kratai voters voted for Petchpoom Aponrat in the re-election solely because of their long-standing relationships with his father and what he had done for the constituents.⁷⁴ "His father was good to us. As a son, he must be at least 70-80% like him," said a Phran Kratai voter.⁷⁵ Therefore, in order to maintain the family's political influence in the province, the children of politicians are traditionally expected to familiarize themselves with the constituents from a young age and succeed their parents or run for a different political position in the province. The vote-canvassing networks are, likewise, inherited and shared within political dynasties (e.g., Kamphaeng Phet, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Sisaket). When a political dynasty controls both local and national politics, as it is often the case, the local and national politicians provide networks and electoral support for each other. Since local politicians interact more closely with constituents, they typically provide electoral bases for the family member who is an MP. For

⁷² Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020.

⁷³ Lamai, Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020.

⁷⁴ Focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

⁷⁵ A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020. Even Petchpoom's sister believed that the voters voted for him because of their father.

example, Bhumjaithai Sisaket MP Siripong Angkasakulkiat inherited both the vote-canvassing network and electoral bases from his father who has served as the provincial mayor for more than 30 years. Lastly, political dynasties are advantageous in that members of the dynasty can rely on other members to help fulfill their clientelist obligations and maintain their clientelist relationships with the vote canvassers and voters. As Sisaket Mayor Chatmongkol put it very nicely, “When a national politician [with no family ties with local politicians] came [to see you], he asked for your vote. He talked to you, and then he went home. Right? He went back to Bangkok? ... If Tong [Siripong’s nickname] is elected and the constituents need help coordinating with something ... if Tong is not home, his father is. If his father is not home, his mother is. If his mother is not home, his brother must be home. The whole family is here to help! It is not like when the MP is not home, and there is only the dog home as it is often the case [for other politicians who are not in a political dynasty].”⁷⁶

V. The Effects of Voters’ Reliance on Voting Behavior and Electoral Strategies

A. Voting Behavior

Voters’ socioeconomic dependence on political patrons not only shapes their political preferences and voting behavior but also shapes the strategies politicians employ to capture their support. As previously discussed, dependent voters typically vote for the candidate who has done favors or *boonkoon* for them or their families. However, in addition to *boonkoon*, their reliance on politicians creates strong preferences for a candidate they (1) know, have met in person, have a close relationship with; (2) who is approachable and down to earth; (3) who is local or lives close by (and/or whom they know where he or she lives); and most importantly, (4) who pay frequent

⁷⁶ Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat, interview with the author, Si Saket, December 17, 2020.

visits to the constituents. The most important traits they are looking for in a candidate are *reliability* and *accessibility*. As discussed in the previous section, dependent voters expect their local MP to act as a patron and thus be “reliable” and “accessible.” MPs and local politicians are expected to interact with the constituents and provide assistance when needed. As a Phran Kratai farmer describes in the focus group, “because he is our representative, he must be reliable ... he must be able to take care of us.”⁷⁷ For a majority of dependent voters, their relationships with the MP candidate and his or her ability to provide for his or her constituents is the key factor that influences voters’ decisions. Campaign policies and political sentiments, while important, are secondary.

First and most importantly, dependent voters emphasize the necessity of *knowing the MP candidate* prior to voting for him/her. While independent voters, especially Future supporters, neither know nor care about who their MP candidate is, dependent voters across all focus groups stressed that they would only consider the candidates they knew. For example, when asked why she was only considering Pheu Thai and Palang Pracharath candidates, an In Buri voter answered, “I only know these two candidates. Others? I haven’t even seen their faces!”⁷⁸ For a majority of focus group participants, “knowing” does not necessarily require knowing the candidate personally (i.e., having meals together), but it generally means that they had at least met the candidate and would be able to contact him/her when they had problems. A number of participants, e.g., from Phran Kratai, Det Udom, Pho Sai, and In Buri, had developed personal relationships with the candidates long before they contested in the 2019 elections. Unlike their independent counterparts, dependent voters expect the candidate to visit the constituents and get to know them, as one participant from Phran Kratai stated, “If you don’t come visit us, how would you get our votes?”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

⁷⁸ Pranee, focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020.

⁷⁹ A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

Some participants went so far as to say if they did not know or were not familiar with any candidate, then “there is no hope we will vote for them” or they “might not participate in the elections altogether,” or they would simply “neglect their rights to vote”⁸⁰ Interestingly, knowing the candidate was significant even for Democrat supporters who do not rely on the state and, in the case of Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, was one of the key factors that contributed to their decision to switch from the Democrats to Palang Pracharath. One former Democrat supporter claimed, “Additionally, in that election, I didn’t know the candidate ... I didn’t know who the Democrat candidate was. If it had been Dr. Preecha (a long-time Democrat MP), I might still have voted for the Democrats,” and several other participants nodded in agreement. As the voters’ familiarity with the candidate plays an instrumental role in voters’ decisions, the better known the candidate, the more votes he or she receives. As a Pheu Thai political strategist and MP candidate posited, each MP candidate has his or her own votes (voters vote for the candidate, not for the party), but it also depends on who the candidate is. If the candidate is local and well known in the constituency and, more importantly, trusted by the constituents, he or she would receive a lot of votes.⁸¹

As mentioned in the previous section, constituents often do not just “know” the MP, but they have usually developed deep personal relationships with the MP and/or his or her vote canvasser(s). Many such relationships have lasted for generations. Personal relationships between the constituents and the MP were identified as one of the factors that form the basis of voters’ decisions. As Mayor of Sisaket Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat asserted, “The villagers must really love and have deep connections with the candidate in order to vote for them.”⁸² There are indeed multiple ways in which connections between the constituents and the MP are formed. However,

⁸⁰ A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

⁸¹ Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 14, 2020.

⁸² Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat, interview with the author, Si Saket, December 17, 2020.

when asked why they felt connected with the MP, participants across focus groups recalled stories in which the MP helped them in the past. For example, when the Lahu⁸³ were forced to migrate from the mountains to land, their village had no electricity. It was MP Wipoj Aponrat who helped coordinate and submitted a motion in the parliament to bring electricity to their village.⁸⁴ Furthermore, if the connection between the MP and the constituents was strong enough, the constituents would put the candidate before the party. For instance, Pitchaya said that while Red-shirt villagers in Sai Ngam were initially angry at Wipoj for switching parties, they still voted for him because their long-standing relationships trumped party affiliation. Pitchaya recalled the villagers' reaction when her father was imprisoned: "When my dad was arrested, a lot of villagers cried. Every elder cried. Nobody did not cry."⁸⁵

For many Democrat supporters, their personal relationships with the MP transformed into party loyalty. For example, a former Democrat supporter from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet described her family's relationship with Dr. Preecha: "[because] we have had a deep connection with the Democrat Party since my grandmother's generation ... Dr. Preecha was our family doctor, and my grandmother would see him often. When her children were sick, he would write notes and prescribe medications for them."⁸⁶ Because of their relationship with Dr. Preecha, Nong's entire

⁸³ The Lahu are one of the six main hill tribes in Thailand who have been economically and politically marginalized. In the past, they lived a nomadic lifestyle and traditionally practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. The Lahu were accused of destroying the nation's forests and thus forced to relocate to the lowlands. According to the Lahu participants from Khlong Lan, when they were evicted from their mountain villages, they were left with no land to farm and had to make a living by digging potatoes or bamboo roots, or doing whatever they were hired to do. Not only did they have to endure economic hardships as a consequence of the government's policy, but they also received little support from the government and thus had to rely heavily on their local political patrons and the local MP.

⁸⁴ Yuwadee, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 7, 2020.

⁸⁵ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

⁸⁶ Nong, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

family became loyal Democrat supporters. Similarly, Lek from Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat explained that in her hometown Phrom Khiri, Democrat candidates were like “deities” to the constituents: “I was born in Krabi and then moved to Phrom Khiri when I was 15. Growing up, the elders would teach the children that Surin Masadit (add footnote) was a good man. All the children were taught to believe that they must vote for Surin Masadit. Therefore, when Khunying Supatra (Aew) Masadit entered politics ... vote for Aew, Aew is a good person, Surin’s daughter. When Surachet Masadit entered politics ... this is Aew’s brother, Surin’s son. You must vote for Surachet. Then I thought ‘Okay, Masadit.’ All in my head.”⁸⁷ This deep connection between the MPs and Southern constituents was extended to the leader of the Democrat Party Chuan Leekpai, also a Southerner himself. According to Lek, the Southerners worshiped Chuan just like another *Luang Pu Thuat*, a revered Buddhist monk in Thailand. Similar stories resonate across the South. During her field research in Phuket, Netipho also discovered that vote canvassers in Phuket voted for the Democrats not because of material benefits but because of their connection with the candidate.⁸⁸ This poses a challenge to ideologically-driven parties like Future Forward, for ideology alone is insufficient for Southern voters to vote for a party.⁸⁹

Given their strong preferences for a candidate they know and feel connected with, dependent voters not only expect face-time at the grassroots with their politicians but also attach great importance to meeting MP candidates in person. A lot of dependent voters would even refuse to vote for a candidate they have not met. The importance of “seeing a candidate’s face” is a recurring theme across all focus groups. The findings demonstrate that meeting a candidate face to face has a tremendous effect on the decisions of dependent voters. Focus group participants

⁸⁷ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

⁸⁸ Viengrat Netipho, interview with the author, September 17, 2020.

⁸⁹ Janevit Kraisin, interview with the author, November 17, 2020.

revealed that they would be more willing to vote for the candidate if they had met, talked to, or received help from him/her. For dependent voters, it is vital that the candidate visits the constituents in person even if it is just a brief visit: “Just come visit us briefly so we can see your face.”⁹⁰ Chantee from Pho Sai, for example, stated that seeing the candidate’s face is critical for assessing the candidate’s credibility: “I need to see their face and see how they talk ... and see if they are trustworthy.”⁹¹ On the contrary, a candidate who never visited the constituents would be viewed unfavorably by the constituents. As a Phran Kratai voter said, “We haven’t even seen their face! How could we rely on them?”⁹² Such candidates were often perceived as “unreliable.” As Tong from Khlong Lan explained, “If we don’t know them and haven’t seen their face, and suddenly they compete in the election under this and that party ... when we have a hard time, who would we go to? Would they really help us? Would they abandon us after the election?”⁹³ The dependent voters across all focus groups expressed hesitation or even refusal to vote for a candidate they never met in person. Because of this reason, Future Forward candidates found it particularly challenging to penetrate into the constituencies dominated by long-time incumbents. Despite their interest in the changes the party had proposed, Det Udom participants disapproved of Thanathorn’s campaign strategies, saying that he “campaigned on the phone,” and that he would have been viewed more favorably if he had visited the constituents and knocked on doors.⁹⁴ Similarly, when asked why they did not consider the Future Forward candidate, Pho Sai participants responded that because they had neither heard of nor met them.⁹⁵ Finally, dependent voters often use elections to

⁹⁰ Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

⁹¹ Chantee, focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

⁹² A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

⁹³ Tong, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

⁹⁴ Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

⁹⁵ Focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

punish incumbents who fail to visit the constituents. Despite knowing and having voted for the Pheu Thai incumbent in the past, In Buri participants decided not to vote for him in the 2019 elections because he had rarely visited the constituents.⁹⁶ Therefore, in addition to the familiarity and close connection with the candidate, the candidate's presence and interactions with the constituents both prior to and during the elections are instrumental for the decisions of dependent voters.

As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the barriers to access to state resources and government services have resulted in dependent voters' preferences for "approachable" and "down to earth" candidates. Since politicians act as a bridge between state resources and citizens, the ability to access the MP is the primary factor that dependent voters take into consideration when selecting candidates. While independent voters give little to no weight to the approachability of the MP, dependent voters require a candidate who they can be certain will be there when they need him/her. Given their position in society, politicians are traditionally held in high regard in Thailand. Constituents tend to feel excited when an MP comes to visit them and feel even more special when an MP recognizes or talks to them.⁹⁷ Pitchaya said that each time her father visited a village, all the villagers would welcome him with excitement and always cook big meals for him.⁹⁸ Describing Wipoj as "easy to talk to" and "easy to meet," Phran Kratai participants claimed that they all had Wipoj's and both of his children's numbers.⁹⁹ "He is approachable," one participant said. "He gave us his number. We can call him whenever we need him."¹⁰⁰ Likewise, in Bangkok Yai, the participants identified "approachability" and "friendliness" as the characteristics that

⁹⁶ Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020.

⁹⁷ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

⁹⁸ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

⁹⁹ Focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

distinguished Palang Pracharath candidate Sansana Suriyayothin from other candidates.¹⁰¹ When asked what her impression of Sansana was, Bha recalled, “[Sansana] came to talk to ordinary villagers like us. He was approachable. [He] came to talk to us unlike [the candidates from] other parties ... they didn’t care about ordinary villagers like us. They thought they would win anyways.”¹⁰² Similarly, Ratchathewi voters became Future Forward Chris Potranandana’s biggest fans after no one but Chris came to visit the community and provided assistance to them during the COVID pandemic. Aim said that she would vote for Chris in the next elections because “he always comes to visit us. He always asks how we are doing. And he is very friendly.”¹⁰³ “Yes, he’s fun to talk to,” Su added with a big smile.¹⁰⁴

In addition to approachability, dependent voters across all focus groups also highlighted being “down to earth” as a key characteristic they seek in their MP. While it is vital that dependent voters can reach the MP in times of need, the participants also exhibit preferences for candidates who appear “modest” and “down to earth” as opposed to “domineering,” “arrogant,” and thus “unapproachable” bureaucrats. Though slightly different concepts, approachability and down-to-earthness generally go hand in hand—a down-to-earth MP creates an image that he or she is approachable to the people, and the constituents find it less intimidating to approach them. For example, when asked why they preferred to ask MP Somkid Chueakong for help rather a bureaucrat or government officer, Det Udom voters reasoned that because “he is down to earth” and hence “easier to approach.”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, an In Buri village headman explained that the villagers revere the Thanakamanusorn family because they are not only approachable but also

¹⁰¹ Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹⁰² Bha, focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹⁰³ Aim, focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Su, focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

down to earth “unlike those ‘godfathers’ who have their noses in the air and surround themselves with bodyguards.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat voters exhibited utter detestation of arrogant politicians.¹⁰⁷ While they described one arrogant MP as having a “unique personality” just like a “balloon,” and recalled that he always swaggered into events as if he had “had abscesses under his armpits,” they said that the modest MPs always *wai* all constituents he met regardless of their age.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Palang Pracharath MP Rong pointed out that while the villagers want their MP to be “down to earth” to the villagers, they expect him/her to be outspoken and decisive in the parliament.¹⁰⁹

Finally, since dependent voters depend on their MPs and his or her political networks, the candidate’s proximity to the constituents is important for their decisions. Dependent voters across all focus groups displayed a predilection for a candidate who is a local and lives in close proximity to them. If the candidate lives farther away, it is indispensable that he or she has a reliable and responsive network in the area. In the eyes of dependent voters, local candidates are “easy to ask for help” and “speak the same language.” Just as they prefer a candidate with whom they are familiar to those they are not, dependent voters tend to prefer a candidate who lives closer to those farther away.¹¹⁰ Pointing to the direction of Wipoj’s house, a Phran Kratai voter revealed that having an MP who lived close to him made him “feel relieved.”¹¹¹ “His house is just right there across the woods/If it wasn’t because of the woods, we would have seen his roof,” he said.¹¹² For

¹⁰⁶ Bom, interview with the author, September 20, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹¹⁰ Participants from Det Udom and Phran Kratai, for example.

¹¹¹ A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹¹² A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

dependent voters, living close to the MP means the ease of reaching out to him/her when needed. Similarly, a Det Udom voter said that he felt like he could just “go right to his [the MP’s] house and knock on the door when he needed help.”¹¹³ Even for those who had never asked the MP for help, having an MP living in close proximity gave them a “peace of mind”—that they would be able to reach out the MP should the need arose in the future. In the case where the MP lives farther away, the dependent voters may still vote for him/her if he or she is supported by the local member of the Provincial Administrative Organization who lives close to the constituents (e.g., in Khlong Lan). The ways in which local politicians influence voters' decisions will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapters.

Conversely, if the candidate is an outsider and/or lives far away from the constituents, dependent voters will be less likely to vote for him/her. As Chantee explained, “If we vote for someone else, someone who lives far away, it will be difficult to ask them for help. It will be difficult to reach out to them. If it is the incumbent [who lives close by], it will be easy to ask him for help. If we want to see him, it will be easier than someone who lives far away. How would we find their house?”¹¹⁴ A political preference against an outsider is prevalent among dependent voters across all focus groups. Despite Wipoj’s long-standing relationship with and immense popularity among the constituents, Phran Kratai participants stated that had he not been a local, they would not have voted for him.¹¹⁵ Likewise, Det Udom voters revealed that though they were initially attracted to both the welfare card and Prayut, they decided not to vote for Palang Pracharath because the candidate lived too far away.¹¹⁶ In addition to policy, the primary reason they remain

¹¹³ A Det Udom voter, focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Chantee, focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

¹¹⁵ Focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹¹⁶ Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

loyal to Pheu Thai is because the candidate lives in the area, thereby making it convenient to see him and ask for help. However, had the party nominated a candidate who was not a local, they would have also been reluctant to vote for him/her as well.¹¹⁷

Taking factors such as the familiarity with and the approachability of the candidate into consideration, dependent voters often decide which candidate to vote for based on the consensus of the group. For a majority of the focus group participants, the most important criterion for assessing the candidate was his or her reliability—the ability to provide help to the constituents. Participants across all focus groups revealed that there was at least some degree of consultation and collective decision in their communities. For example, a Ratchathewi voter stated that his community leader would organize a community meeting at least a few days prior to the elections to decide who to vote for.¹¹⁸ More often than not, the voters would know or at least have met more than one candidate. In this case, the community members would discuss the pros and cons of each candidate. However, the final decisions were often made according to the candidate's ability and willingness to take care of the constituents. While the voters typically accept money from the candidate(s), they still give more weight to the candidate's reliability than vote buying. As Nadee explained, "It's okay if we don't get 300 baht. But if [we accept their money and] we really have trouble in the future, who will help us?"¹¹⁹ Even when another candidate offers more money, dependent voters are still inclined to vote for the candidate they have close relationships with.¹²⁰ In sum, voters' socioeconomic dependence on the MPs and their political networks results in

¹¹⁷ Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

¹¹⁸ A Ratchathewi voter, focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

¹¹⁹ Nadee, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹²⁰ For example, a Southern local politician revealed that despite the Palang Pracharath candidate's aggressive vote buying, the constituents still preferred his brother because he was more accessible to them. A Southern local politician, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 18, 2020.

voters' preference for a candidate they have a personal relationship with or at least have met in person. Not only do dependent voters expect the candidate to be "approachable" and "down-to-earth," but they also expect him or her to be "local" and live in close proximity to the constituents. All these factors serve as indicators for the candidate's reliability as well as ability and willingness to take care of and help the constituents in times of need. Since MPs are the ones who serve and spend the most time with the constituents, they carry more weight in the decisions of dependent voters than the party, the PM candidate, policy, and ideology. As asserted by an In Buri voter, "because we rely on the MP for help, we vote for the candidate. Because if we vote for the party, the party might be good but what about the politicians in the party? They might not be good. This is what I consider."¹²¹ After spending years in the constituency, MPs know exactly what is on their constituents' minds.

B. Electoral Strategies

Politicians are aware that dependent voters look for a candidate they can rely on and thus devise electoral strategies to prove that they are reliable. It goes without saying that candidates must not only deliver the promised benefits but also demonstrate the ability and willingness to help the constituents in the future. Moreover, given the voters' strong preferences for a candidate with whom they are familiar, it is indispensable that both MPs and local politicians make frequent visits to their constituencies and engage with their constituents. Of all the strategies employed by politicians, political canvassing was most frequently emphasized by both the politicians and the voters. All MPs and local politicians I interviewed agreed that the golden rule of electoral success is to visit the constituency. As one Phran Kratai voter stated, "If you don't come visit us, how

¹²¹ An In Buri voter, focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020.

would you get our votes?”¹²² Politicians know that the only way to win votes from dependent voters is to go visit them. As a result, MPs and MP candidates try to visit the constituents and expand their political reach as much as possible.

Contrary to popular belief that politicians are only seen when they need their constituents' votes, successful politicians in Thailand are found in their constituencies both prior to, during, and after the elections. In the interviews, MPs and local politicians across the country emphasized the necessity of spending time and building relationships with their constituents before the elections rolled around. It is essential that politicians get to know and demonstrate their ability to take care of their constituents before asking for their votes. Just as Rome was not built in one day, the bonds between politicians and voters cannot be forged in just a few months. Since Palang Pracharath was a newly formed party, the time constraint posed a particular challenge to its brand-new candidates, forcing them to put extra effort into reaching out to the voters. The incumbents' long-standing relationships with the voters, however, gave them the upper hand.

1. Incumbents

For most incumbents, their routines during the elections are not drastically different from their daily routines. For long-time MPs such as Wipoj Aponrat and Anan Pholamnuay, constituency visits constitute part of their everyday life. Pitchaya recalled she has been canvassing with her father since her first memory.¹²³ While she was attending school in Bangkok, her parents would pick her up and take her on a four-hour drive to Kamphaeng Phet every Friday. Growing up, Pitchaya spent most of her weekends accompanying her father to the constituency, talking to

¹²² A Phran Kratai voter, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹²³ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

the villagers and having meals with them. Residents of Kamphaeng Phet know they can find the father-daughter pair at any local event or even go straight to their house if they have something to say. Moreover, Pitchaya said that she always shops at a local market instead of a grocery store. “Just seeing me or my father shopping at the market makes them [the constituents] happy. They feel that they get to see us up close. If we act arrogantly and, say, never appear in public places, the constituents will not know who we are and what we are doing” said Pitchaya.¹²⁴ Furthermore, she also makes the most of each of her trips by planning exactly where she will go and by whom she wants to be seen. By making frequent visits to the constituents, attending local events, and shopping at local markets, Pitchaya and her father are making the constituents feel like they are one of them—that they are approachable.¹²⁵ After a few decades, the family has slowly gained the voters’ trust and eventually won their hearts.

The strategies Pitchaya and Wipoj employ are by no means unique to them but widely shared by many incumbents. Like the father-daughter pair, Palang Pracharath MP Anan Pholamnuay also visits his constituency on a regular basis. As a Lahu voter jokingly recalled Anan’s frequent visits to the village, “MP Anan comes here very often ... so often that we suspect he has a mistress here or something!”¹²⁶ Sae said that whenever he visited the village, the villagers would gather at the community hall, and Anan would spend about an hour or two listening to their problems and needs.¹²⁷ Not only did Anan give his number to all the villagers, but he also told them since he lived a bit farther away, they could contact his team at any time. Like Anan, several other MPs and local politicians also gave the constituents their phone numbers. Sisaket Mayor

¹²⁴ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

¹²⁵ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

¹²⁶ A Khlong Lan voter, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

¹²⁷ Sae, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat claimed that he left his personal cellphone on all the time. He explained that he even had to leave his cell phone on at night in case of fire or any emergency and his residents needed to reach him.¹²⁸ In order to gain support from dependent voters, politicians must not only make themselves visible, but they must also make the voters feel that they can count on and, most importantly, reach them in times of need.

According to seasoned politicians, the way they approach their constituents is just as vital as the frequency of their interactions. For inexperienced candidates, meeting the constituents for the first time can be uncomfortable. However, the MPs of several terms revealed in the interviews their secrets to approaching the voters. “First, you must hold both of their hands tight and then look them in the eyes. Then you hug them. You must make them feel that you really care about them ... that you are there for them” said one Pheu Thai MP since 1992.¹²⁹ Moreover, the mayor of Nakhon Si Thammarat claimed that he could tell whether a voter would vote for him by the way he or she held his hand. If the voter holds your hand with a firm grip, he or she will likely vote for you. Conversely, if the voter holds your hand very loosely, he or she will probably not vote for you. As many incumbents emphasized, body language is just as vital as verbal communication.¹³⁰

In addition to regular constituency visits, events of mourning and celebration such as funerals, weddings, ordinations, and new house merit-making ceremonies provide politicians—incumbents and challengers alike—with a perfect opportunity to mingle with voters and secure their political influence. “Our MP sees everything [in the constituency]—who is getting married, who is passing away. If the MP cannot make it, then his wife comes. If his wife cannot make it,

¹²⁸ Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat, interview with the author, Si Saket, December 17, 2020.

¹²⁹ A Northeastern Pheu Thai MP, interview with the author, December 23, 2020.

¹³⁰ Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

then his representative comes,” said Nakhon Si Thammarat voter Lek.¹³¹ According to the informants, there are at least two main reasons why politicians attend or at least make an appearance at local events. The first reason is to show a willingness and ability to provide assistance to their constituents. As will be discussed in the following sections, such assistance comes in various forms, the most common of which include donation money, funeral wreaths, and even water packs. Moreover, like constituency visits, local events provide politicians with the opportunity to talk to their constituents and listen to their complaints. The difference is, however, that local events allow politicians to make themselves visible and accessible to a larger group of constituents than regular constituency visits.

Seizing the opportunity to translate the joy and grief of their constituents into votes, politicians try their best to attend such events themselves or send representatives (usually their relatives or close subordinates) when unable to do so. This is where political dynasties give the incumbents the advantage over their opponents. Like Pitchaya and her father, other MPs and local politicians probably spend more time at local events than in the parliament. As Pheu Thai Ubon Ratchathani MP half-jokingly described, “I have the easiest job in the world: visiting relatives and eating free food. But in exchange for fat envelopes [containing donation money] though.”¹³² The presence of MPs and local politicians is not only honored but also expected by the constituents. As mentioned in the previous section, villagers generally have a high regard for politicians, especially those who have helped or interacted with them. Villagers thus invite their MPs and local politicians to important events not only to show respect but also to bring honor to their families.¹³³

¹³¹ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹³² Ekkachai Songamnartcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹³³ Tanan Laocharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 13, 2020.

At a wedding, an MP or the highest-ranking politician is typically invited as a guest of honor to present the wedding garlands and give a toast to the bride and groom on the stage. When a constituent passes away, the MP generally hosts the funeral rites for one night. At a funeral, the family of the deceased would sit the MP in the first row and place his or her wreath at the most visible spot, usually right in front of the coffin. As the elections draw near, the constituents would see their MP host more funerals and attend more weddings.¹³⁴

To garner and maintain political support, the incumbents and challengers have an endless series of events, big or small, to attend throughout the year. Regular attendance at local events is one of the factors that allow Pheu Thai MPs to dominate several provinces in the Northeast. According to an observer, Northeastern MPs usually have what is called “pick up the dead, deliver the sick” vans to transport the deceased to the temple and patients to the hospital.¹³⁵ Pheu Thai MP Ekkachai said that he attends every event, e.g., religious ceremonies, ordinations, and funerals he is invited to or informed about. “I told my team not to tell anyone who we were. We just go help them whether it is a religious ceremony, an ordination, or a funeral. We keep attending their events and helping them until they feel thankful for us. That’s when we get their votes” said Ekkachai.¹³⁶ Knowing the significance of their presence at local events, politicians try to make the most of this opportunity. For example, a Democrat MP from Phet Buri attended so many funerals that his constituents gave him the nickname “100-body/corpse MP.”¹³⁷ Future Forward candidate Taweechai Wongpirojkul once expressed disdain for Thai politicians’ excessive focus on funeral

¹³⁴ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹³⁵ Jirayu, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

¹³⁶ Ekkachai Songamnartcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹³⁷ Suwaroj Soisuwan, “เปิดเผยประวัติ แม่ทัพพลั้งประชารัฐที่เพชรบุรี ‘สุชาติ อุสาหะ’ ว่าที่ ส.ส. เพชรบุรี เขต 3 [Revealing Palang Pracharath Leader in Phet Buri ‘Surachart Usaha’ Soon to Be Constituency 3 Phet Buri MP],” 77 Kaoded, March 25, 2019, <https://www.77kaoded.com/news/suwarot/376957>.

attendance calling them “low-class” MPs. “Are you an MP or a monk running around attending funerals like that?” Taweechai asked.¹³⁸ In response to Taweechai’s criticism, Ang Thong MP Paradon Prisanananthakul asserted, “I am one of those MPs who attend every funeral, ordination, and wedding I have been invited to, and I will keep doing this as long as the constituents still want me to do so. I don’t believe they only expect my envelope money and [I] believe that they consider me family who they want to join them as they celebrate their special occasions and mourn the loss of their loved ones. This is the charm of a rural way of life that cannot be experienced on your social media world.”¹³⁹ Using the very term Taweechai used to attack politicians who are frequent funeral-goers, Sisaket Mayor said that in this case his son, Bhumjaithai’s Sisaket MP Siripong Angkasakulkiat, would also be considered a “low-class MP” because he always goes to funerals, and this is because the constituents want to see his face and want him to attend their events. The findings from the field proved Paradon right. When asked about their opinions of the MP/candidate, participants across all focus groups not only recalled their MP’s presence at their events, but they also highlighted its significance as a factor in their voting decisions.¹⁴⁰ Though donation money is appreciated, the MP’s attendance is often considered of greater importance. “[Whether] you make a small donation or no donation at all, they don’t blame you as long as you attend [the event]” said Nakhon Si Thammarat Mayor Chaowat Senpong.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ “รู้จัก ‘เบสท์อนาคตใหม่’ เจ้าของวาทกรรม ‘ส.ส.ตลาดล่าง’ รุ่นพี่ยังต้องสอนมวย [Getting to Know ‘Best Future Forward,’ Who Coins ‘Low Class MPs’ Seniors Have Much to Teach],” MGR Online, June 1, 2019, <https://mgronline.com/online/section/detail/9620000052363>.

¹³⁹ “‘ภราดร’ สอนน้องอนาคตใหม่ ดูถูก ส.ส.ไปงานศพ เป็น ส.ส.ตลาดล่าง” [‘Paradorn’ Taught Future Forward Juniors Insulting MPs Who Went to the Funerals Were Low-Class MPs], Online, June 1, 2019, <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9620000052315>.

¹⁴⁰ For example, the Ratchathewi, Khlong Lan, and In Buri focus groups.

¹⁴¹ Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

It is, nevertheless, customary for politicians to give envelopes containing donation money to the family of the deceased at a funeral and to the bride and groom at a wedding. While envelopes are obligatory at a wedding, wreaths and water packs may be accepted at a funeral instead of or in addition to donation money. Several MPs, however, revealed in the interviews that envelopes placed a great burden on them. According to one Northeastern MP, event envelopes constitute the largest component of his expenditures, totaling up to one million baht per year.¹⁴² Another Northeastern MP revealed that during the Kathina festival, a Buddhist robe offering ceremony at the end of the Lent, he usually receives envelopes (requesting donation money) from hundreds of temples in the province.¹⁴³ One common strategy politicians employ to minimize their expenditures is sending cases of bottled water to funerals instead of donation money.¹⁴⁴ “They [the constituents] are like family. Sometimes when I don’t really have money, I will just send three water packs ... having money or not, I will always go [to funerals],” said the Northeastern MP.¹⁴⁵ A more expensive, and usually preferred, alternative would be a funeral wreath. In most provinces, constituents can expect a wreath from their MPs at the funerals of their loved ones. For instance, residents of Phrom Khiri always received a wreath from Nakhon Si Thammarat MP Surachet Masadit when a family member passed away.¹⁴⁶ As it will be discussed later in this chapter, MP Surachet’s absence from local events was believed to be one of the contributing factors to his defeat by a brand-new Palang Pracharath candidate Sayan Yutitham. To put it briefly, for politicians seeking support from dependent voters, it is essential that they attend as many events as possible. In the case where a politician is unable to provide donation money to the family of the

¹⁴² A Pheu Thai MP, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹⁴³ A Northeastern MP, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ The MP said three water packs for each funeral cost approximately 30,000 baht per month.

¹⁴⁵ A Northeastern MP, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

deceased, his or her presence together with small gestures such as sending water packs and lending a hand at the funeral could give the family enough reason to remember his or her name when casting a ballot. In the case where a politician is unable to attend the funeral at all, a wreath containing his or her name will demonstrate that the deceased is important to the politician and thus bring honor to the family.

In addition to private events, constituents can also find their local MPs and politicians at community events such as religious ceremonies and, in the case of the Lahu in Khlong Lan, New Year parties. Since the vast majority of rural constituents attach great importance to religious ceremonies, a politician's participation not only creates a sense of belonging but also strengthens the ties with his or her constituents.¹⁴⁷ As discussed in the previous section, dependent voters express a strong preference for candidates who they perceive as belonging to their community. Hence, a politician's participation in religious ceremonies serves as a perfect way to reinforce such perception. An academic-turned-politician and brand-new Palang Pracharath candidate who defeated a long-time Democrat incumbent by a large margin, Rong Boonsuaykwan revealed that he has been participating in local merit-making ceremonies long before the elections.¹⁴⁸ He explained that although he is from another town (Chian Yai), he has lived and taught at a university in Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat for a long time. While he is well-known among urban residents as a renowned professor, he is well-known among villagers as an active participant in religious ceremonies and community events. Rong said that his participation in religious ceremonies provides him with a "shared belief" that binds them with the villagers. "[When] the villagers make merit in the Tenth Lunar Month festival, I make merit in the Tenth Lunar Month festival with

¹⁴⁷ Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

¹⁴⁸ Rong Boonsuaykwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

them” said Rong.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, Det Udom voters said that MP Somkid’s regular attendance at the temple and frequent participation in religious ceremonies “paved the way” for the elections.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, in addition to her assistance to the villagers, member of the Provincial Council Yuwadee also built a strong bond with the Lahu by attending their church.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, unlike private events and especially funerals, religious ceremonies allow politicians greater leeway in subtly performing political activities. For example, politicians can sometimes deliver a brief campaign-like speech on the stage at a merit-making ceremony.¹⁵² Tawai voter recalled his MP stopping to loudly greet the guests at every table as he entered the event.¹⁵³ While greeting the villagers, politicians may casually mention the names of the candidates they support, usually a member of their political dynasties they are planning to nominate in the upcoming elections.¹⁵⁴

As previously mentioned, incumbents may already include subtle political campaigning while attending events or visiting the constituency. The main differences in the incumbents’ strategies during political campaigns and when there are no elections are, however, (1) the frequency of the constituency visits and event attendance, (2) the focus on the places with the highest voter density, and (3) the mentioning of policies. First, the MPs and local politicians interviewed in this study revealed that they visited their constituents more frequently and more actively as the elections approached. For example, despite his popularity in the province, Democrat MP Thepthai Senpong tried to attend as many events as he could leading up to the elections.

¹⁴⁹ Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

¹⁵¹ Having a vote canvasser who shares the religion and attends the same church as the constituents gives the candidate an advantage.

¹⁵² Focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹⁵³ Tawai, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

“Thepthai attended nine events per day. Getting off the plane at 7 am, he went straight to the event without stopping by at home. Then he returned home at 8 pm” said Thepthai’s brother, Mayor of Nakhon Si Thammarat Chaowat Senpong.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, another Southern MP claimed that he attended as many as ten events during the campaign.¹⁵⁶ For Pheu Thai MP Ekkachai, not only did he increase his constituency visits, but he also asked his vote canvassers to inform the constituents of his visits.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, he also visited certain places twice—the first time to inform the constituents of his candidacy and the second time to give a speech.¹⁵⁸ As expected, the participants across all focus groups reported significant increases in constituency visits during the election campaign. As discussed earlier in this chapter, dependent voters place great importance on meeting candidates face to face. Hence, they not only look with favor but also expect more frequent visits from the candidates. As demonstrated by the examples above, politicians were fully aware of the expectations of their constituents and adjusted their strategies accordingly. For dependent voters, it is critical that candidates pay a visit to and inform them of their candidacy.

In addition to increasing the frequency of constituency visits and event attendance, politicians try to be more strategic by focusing their visits on the places that allow them to meet the greatest number of constituents. “Wherever there is a crowd, we go there. We want to meet people” said a Pheu Thai MP.¹⁵⁹ Public gathering spaces, such as markets and temples, are often their main targets. According to Pitchaya, her father’s tactic was to go to market fairs both in the

¹⁵⁵ Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ A Southern MP, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Ekkachai Songamnatcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Ekkachai Songamnatcharoen, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ A Northeastern MP, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

morning and in the evening during the final stretch of the campaign.¹⁶⁰ A Pheu Thai MP also shared a similar tactic. He described that his routine during the last leg of the elections consisted of waking up at 5 am and visiting the town market. “In the morning, I would give out my campaign brochures at the market, greet the constituents, tell them my number, and make myself seen as much as possible. Then I would ride my campaign sound truck around until noon. Then I would return home and take a quick nap. There aren’t a lot of people around 2-3 pm. I would go out again at around 4 pm and return home at around 10-11 pm. Because evening times were when I gave speeches in villages” said a Pheu Thai MP.¹⁶¹ Unlike the non-election period where politicians would attend events and visit the constituents in their own time (without necessarily telling the constituents beforehand), they required assistance from their political networks to mobilize voters during the election period. Instead of visiting a single village, Pitchaya said that her father would ask his vote canvassers to mobilize villagers from 3-4 villages to have lunch or dinner with him.¹⁶² Lastly, in addition to asking how the constituents were doing and listening to their general complaints, politicians would also give speeches and present their party’s policies, the only one of which lingered in the minds of Palang Pracharath supporters was the welfare card policy, which will be discussed intensively in Chapter 5.

2. Brand-New Palang Pracharath Candidates

As previously mentioned, their lack of political bases and the time constraints forced brand new candidates to go the extra mile to approach voters. In spite of their preference for incumbents and/or the candidates they are familiar with, dependent voters may consider challengers who

¹⁶⁰ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

¹⁶¹ A Northeastern MP, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

¹⁶² Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, November 7, 2020.

demonstrate consistent effort to reach out to them. As a Bangkok Yai voter described the Palang Pracharath candidate Sansana Suriyayothin, “He was a brand-new candidate, right out of the box. But he visited our community very often. Almost every week! He reached out to me. And every time he came, he was very friendly.”¹⁶³ Despite the “boosts”¹⁶⁴ provided by the party to help them secure political support, Palang Pracharath brand-new candidates must do their part by reaching out to the constituents as much as possible. To make up for the years their incumbent opponents spent with the constituents, the brand-new candidates knew they must make the most of the few months they had and spend every minute in the constituency.

The way brand-new candidates approached the constituents hence slightly differs from incumbents. While incumbents generally enjoyed the advantage of their long-standing relationships with the constituents, which allowed them to skip the introduction and quickly mobilize the voters, many brand-new Palang Pracharath candidates, such as Sansana, Watchara, and Rong, focused on the door-knocking strategy. Palang Pracharath MP candidate Sansana explained that since the voters he was familiar with formed the basis of his votes,¹⁶⁵ it was vital to pay frequent visits to the constituents.¹⁶⁶ In his view, these voters were not subject to the current political sentiments and thus were under his control. To maximize his votes and optimize his time, Sansana said that his strategy was to meet and get to know as many constituents as possible—he walked around his constituency for almost three rounds, knocking on every door and speaking with every voter he met. Similarly, Palang Pracharath MP candidate Watchara said that his strategy was simple: walk [around the constituency].¹⁶⁷ “I just kept walking. Oh, I lost a lot of weight then!”

¹⁶³ Ratana, focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ The “boosts” will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

¹⁶⁵ Most of such voters would be classified in this study as dependent voters.

¹⁶⁶ Sansana Suriyayothin, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 29, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020.

he grinned.¹⁶⁸ Instead of using campaign sound trucks like most other candidates, Watchara claimed that he walked about 30 km every day during his 20 days of campaigning. “My selling point was that I walked a lot. They [the constituents] said they could find me anywhere, so they voted for me” said Watchara. According to Watchara, political canvassing was the key factor that resulted in his votes. He said, “If you meet 50,000 constituents ... if you shake hands or speak with them, you have a chance to win at least 20,000-30,000 votes.”¹⁶⁹ As emphasized throughout this chapter, face-to-face interaction is important for voters’ decisions and, according to Watchara, “always works regardless of your party affiliation.”¹⁷⁰ Like Sansana and Watchara, Rong was always found in his constituency walking from door to door from dusk till dawn.¹⁷¹ Because his constituency was small, Rong said that he sometimes rode his motorcycle around the city or had his vote canvasser drive him around.¹⁷² Krarok, Rong’s vote canvasser and part-time chauffeur, attested to how much the candidate canvassed: “I was driving him around so much that my legs got stiff! We would drive from one community to another and jump from event to event. His personal record was nine events in one night!” she said.¹⁷³

While both incumbents and challengers could use some help from vote canvassers to reach voters, brand-new candidates’ unfamiliarity with the constituency creates a greater need for vote canvassers. For incumbents, regular constituency visits not only obviated or at least lessened the

¹⁶⁸ Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020

¹⁶⁹ Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020

¹⁷⁰ He implies that his party was unpopular among pro-democracy voters. Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020.

¹⁷¹ He admitted that he even took a leave of absence from work to visit the constituency. Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁷² Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁷³ Palang Pracharath vote canvasser, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 18, 2020.

need for vote buying but also reduced their reliance on vote canvassers for votes. For example, instead of having to give a vote canvasser 10,000 baht to mobilize votes for him, one Southern MP revealed that he only had to spend 1,000 baht treating his constituents with rice noodles or rice with curry when he paid a visit.¹⁷⁴ Brand-new candidates, however, often require vote canvassers' assistance to navigate their constituencies. According to the data from the field, there appear to be two types of vote canvassers: those acquired by the candidates themselves and those assigned by the party, the former of which were more common. Some brand-new Palang Pracharath candidates disclosed that they were not assigned any vote canvassers by the party and thus had to find vote canvassers themselves. For instance, Sansana said that he formed his own network of vote canvassers by reaching out to community leaders. Likewise, Rong said that he went to each community and village to ask the community leaders and village headmen to be his vote canvassers.¹⁷⁵ Not only are community leaders able to help facilitate candidates' visits and connect them with the constituents, but they are also able to identify the demographics and needs of the community members (e.g., who is sick, who is disabled, and who is bedridden, etc.).¹⁷⁶ Some brand-new Palang Pracharath candidates, especially those in Bangkok, however, had complete networks of vote canvassers ready for them. "All she had to do was to show her pretty face in the constituency," said Chan, a community leader and Palang Pracharath vote canvasser.¹⁷⁷ In addition to mobilizing votes, he explained that his job was to guide the candidate around his community and introduce her to the constituents.¹⁷⁸ According to the focus group participants, Palang

¹⁷⁴ A Southern MP, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Chan, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

¹⁷⁸ Chan, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

Pracharath candidate Pada Vorakanon was always seen with a local vote canvasser by her side when she visited the constituents.¹⁷⁹ However, as it will be discussed in the next section, excessive reliance on vote canvassers to solicit votes from the constituents can lead to detrimental consequences for politicians.

Whether it is an incumbent who is familiar with the constituency and enjoys enduring relationships with the constituents or a challenger who barely knows the area and requires assistance from the vote canvassers to navigate the constituency, there is a consensus among the informants that constituency visits are of utmost importance for winning votes from dependent voters who rely on their local MPs. By the same token, the lack of constituency visits can lead to vote losses, or, for new parties, a lost opportunity to gain votes. Because dependent voters must rely on politicians for assistance and access to state resources, they perceive the politicians who do not pay regular visits to or do not visit the constituency at all as unreliable. “How would I reach him when I needed help,” said a Det Udom voter.¹⁸⁰ As revealed by the focus group participants, such politicians usually left a bad impression, making them unpopular among the constituents. For example, Phran Kratai voters criticized one Kamphaeng Phet politician’s negligence in visiting the constituency. “I’ve never seen his face!” Serm claimed.¹⁸¹ “I think he came once, but he just drove quickly past our village. How would the villagers know that he came?” Yuth added.¹⁸² While many incumbents secure their political support by making frequent visits to the constituency, some incumbents, especially those with a lot of resources, rely on vote canvassers to check on the constituency for them. As Bangkok voter Toh described his MP, “He woke up in the afternoon

¹⁷⁹ Focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

¹⁸⁰ A Det Udom voter, focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

¹⁸¹ Serm, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹⁸² Yuth, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

and mainly visited his vote canvassers. He might make a quick appearance at the market in the evening, waving at the constituents, but that's about it."¹⁸³ Although, for whichever reason, many such politicians (usually Pheu Thai and Pheu Thai-turned-Palang Pracharath incumbents) managed to secure their electoral bases, a number of Democrat incumbents¹⁸⁴ suffered humiliating defeats for the first time.

According to informants from various provinces, Democrat incumbents relied heavily on their vote canvassers to perform constituency services (e.g., checking on the constituents, attending local events, etc.) and lost their electoral bases and ultimately their seats when their vote canvassers were co-opted into other parties. Former Democrat supporters across all regions revealed that their MPs rarely visited the constituency until it was time to ask for their votes. "And then they would disappear again after they were elected," said Lek.¹⁸⁵ In contrast to Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva's belief that voters' fear of Thaksin Shinawatra was the main culprit in the Palang Pracharath's electoral success in the South, Democrat incumbents' negligence of voters and poor performance were generally cited as some of the key factors that led Democrat supporters to switch parties.¹⁸⁶ When asked about the reasons for the Democrats's defeat, the immediate response from former Democrat supporters in Bangkok and the South was similar—that their MPs neither visited the constituency nor took care of them.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Toh, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020.

¹⁸⁴ A majority of whom are from Bangkok.

¹⁸⁵ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, September 24, 2020.

¹⁸⁷ Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020; Focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020;

According to the observers, the decline of the Democrat Party long preceded the 2019 elections.¹⁸⁸ Contrary to a popular saying that the Democrats could send electricity poles (*sao faifa*) to stand in for their MP candidates and their supporters would still vote for them, the 2019 election results manifested that even the best and the brightest stars in the party were also dethroned. Not only did the Democrat Party lose all its Bangkok MPs, but it also suffered tremendous losses in the South. The Democrats' strongholds such as Nakhon Si Thammarat, Trang, and Song Khla were penetrated into for the first time in decades. Nakhon Si Thammarat, for example, enjoyed its title as the "capital"¹⁸⁹ of the Democrats for more than half a century but recently lost three seats (to Palang Pracharath) for the first time. While there were indeed multiple factors in play, residents of Nakhon Si Thammarat attributed the Democrats' defeat to its MPs' lack of interaction with the constituents.¹⁹⁰

In the case of Nakhon Si Thammarat, the informants recounted how in the past their MPs used to interact with the constituents and attend local events on a regular basis. Nevertheless, their continuous victories provided the incumbents with a feeling of invincibility and complacency about their political bases.¹⁹¹ As they continued to dominate the province, they began making fewer visits to the constituency, attending fewer events, and sending vote canvassers on their behalf. According to a Future Forward Nakhon Si Thammarat MP, "he [a long-time Democrat

¹⁸⁸ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020; Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020; Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁸⁹ Trang, former Prime Minister and Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai's hometown, is also known as the "capital" of the Democrats and lost a seat to Palang Pracharath.

¹⁹⁰ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Janevit Kraisin, interview with the author, November 17, 2020; Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020; A Palang Pracharath politician interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

incumbent Vittaya Kaewparadai] never visited the constituency. He rarely attended funerals and ordinations. Out of 10 events, he would attend one ... Why? Because he was lazy. He thought He'd win anyways.”¹⁹² Residents of Pak Phanang also confirmed in the focus group that Vittaya never came to their village and only visited their vote canvassers.¹⁹³ Similarly, in Phrom Khiri Democrat incumbent Surachet had spent significantly less time with the constituents.¹⁹⁴ Professor Punchada Sirivunnabood underscored the importance of local politics, explaining that in sharp contrast with the Democrat incumbents, local politicians in the South are consistently working in their constituencies, interacting with the constituents.¹⁹⁵ When these local politicians were co-opted into Palang Pracharath, their political bases were also co-opted. In the case of Phrom Khiri, it was a combination of Democrat incumbent Surachet's absence from the constituency and Chairman of Provincial Administration Organization of Nakhon Si Thammarat and Palang Pracharath challenger Sayan Yutitham's consistent efforts to serve the constituents that contributed to Palang Pracharath's victory. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, simply “knowing” the constituents is often insufficient for maintaining political support—incumbents must also spend time with their constituents. As Mayor Chaowat remarked, “For us Southerners, we may know you [the incumbents], but you can't not show your face. You just can't!”¹⁹⁶ He explained that the main factor that distinguished his brother Thepthai from the three Democrat incumbents who lost their seats was that Thepthai always devoted his time to the constituency, thus allowing him to secure his seat.¹⁹⁷ Finally, as exhibited by the cases of Nakhon Si Thammarat Constituency 2 (Vittaya)

¹⁹² Janevit Kraisin, interview with the author, November 17, 2020

¹⁹³ Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

and Constituency 7 (Surachet), incumbents' negligence of constituents usually gave the challengers an advantage. While Palang Pracharath was quick to win the hearts of dependent voters, Future Forward failed to seize such an opportunity.

Despite its massive popularity among the youth and first-time voters, the Future Forward Party was frowned upon by dependent voters for its lack of effort to (physically) reach out to voters. Contrary to Future Forward chief strategist Chaithawat Tulathon's claim that the party emphasized the door-knocking strategy,¹⁹⁸ the findings across all focus groups suggest an alternate reality. Of all dependent voters interviewed in this study, very few reported meeting Future Forward candidates in person.¹⁹⁹ Even Ratchathewi residents admitted that it was only after the elections that Future Forward MP candidate Potranandana started paying frequent visits to the community. A majority of focus group participants, however, said the closest they had come to meeting Future Forward candidates was through their campaign banners.²⁰⁰ In contrast with Chaithawat's description of Future Forward MP Taophipop Limjitrakorn as a candidate who is devoted to his constituency/community, Bangkok Yai residents argued that no one in the community had actually met the candidate.²⁰¹ "He was riding his bike past our community once I think," Tuk said.²⁰² "Honestly, when he [Taophipop] was elected, we were confused. He never came to talk to the constituents and suddenly got elected out of nowhere! Even now, I still don't know what my MP looks like. Even when the constituents have problems, he still hasn't come to

¹⁹⁸ Chaithawat Tulathon, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹⁹⁹ The participants who voted for Future Forward, did so without having met the candidates in person.

²⁰⁰ Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020; Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020; Focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

²⁰¹ Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

²⁰² Tuk, focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

visit us,” Bha explained.²⁰³ Moreover, in contrast with Palang Pracharath candidate Sansana who was actively reaching out to community leaders, Tha Phra community leader Ratana said that Taopiphop did not even know who she was. “I pretended to ride my bike right in front of him. [But] he didn’t even know me! Other members of the community had to tell him that I was the community leader,” said Ratana.²⁰⁴

Bha was not, nevertheless, alone in seeing Future Forward’s performance as a total surprise. Many candidates admitted that they did not initially see Future Forward candidates as worthy opponents, for they never came into sight while canvassing in the constituencies. As one Pheu Thai MP candidate described his opponent’s campaign strategies, “She was just greeting the voters from her campaign sound truck. Didn’t visit their homes. Never reached out to the communities.”²⁰⁵ Even Future Forward spokesperson Pannika Wanich herself acknowledged candidates’ lack of canvassing as her party’s greatest weakness.²⁰⁶ She admitted that it was, in fact, only after the elections that the party leaders came to realize this weakness. According to Pannika, a number of voters, especially in the Northeast, claimed that had the candidates paid more visits to the constituencies, they would have won. “They were ready to vote for us. But they can’t just watch [us on] TV and vote [for us]. They still need to see us in person ... If they have not met us, they won’t vote for us, especially new parties ... They just can’t bring themselves to vote for us,” said Pannika.²⁰⁷ As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, local political networks are instrumental for gaining support from dependent voters. According to Pannika, the time constraint between the party’s inception and the elections made it challenging for the party to create a political

²⁰³ Bha, focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

²⁰⁴ Ratana, focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

²⁰⁵ A Pheu Thai MP candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 16, 2020.

²⁰⁶ Pannika Wanich, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 21, 2020.

²⁰⁷ Pannika Wanich, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 21, 2020.

network across the country and carefully select the candidates.²⁰⁸ Since Future Forward initially welcomed everyone who wished to run as its candidates with open arms, Future Forward Party leader Thanathorn revealed that some of his candidates actually received money from the opponents to run but not visit the constituents—the true intention of such individuals was to defend their constituencies by not canvassing.²⁰⁹

In sum, potential candidates' failure to regularly visit and develop relationships with their constituents prior to the elections can have negative effects on their electoral prospects in a variety of ways. In the case of the Democrat incumbents in Bangkok and the South, excessive reliance on vote canvassers to solicit votes from constituents resulted in their devastating defeats. In the case of the Future Forward challengers around the country and especially in the Northeast, the absence of face-to-face interaction between the candidates and the constituents led to the party's failure to capture some potential supporters. As emphasized throughout the chapter, dependent voters give considerable weight to their familiarity with the candidates when making voting decisions. The lack of visits from potential candidates hence makes them feel as if the candidates are treating them as unworthy of regard. Moreover, it indicates that the candidate is either insincere or unserious about competing, and most importantly, it sends a strong signal that he or she is not reliable.

²⁰⁸ The party only had ten months. Pannikar Wanich, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 21, 2020.

²⁰⁹ Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated that structural problems in Thailand, such as the gap between citizens and the state, the government's inaccessibility and unresponsiveness, unequal access to public services, and the abuse of power by government officials, have led dependent voters to rely on MPs and their political networks, establishing a web of clientelist relationships. To build and maintain their clientelist networks, many MPs focus on their roles as “deal makers” and “coordinators” and expend more time and effort on constituency work than legislative duties. When the elections roll around, voters reciprocate their MPs’ delivery of goods and services with electoral support. A closer scrutiny of the clientelist relationships between MPs and voters suggests, however, that such relationships are beyond a mere exchange of clientelist benefits and electoral support but are, in fact, bounded by *boonkoon* or debt of gratitude, which serves as a social contract that reinforces the reciprocal and ongoing nature of the relationships. Clientelist relationships and the resulting *boonkoon* allow politicians to create loyal networks of supporters. A typical vote canvassing network consists of multiple layers of relationships between the politician, different levels of brokers (known colloquially as “the A-B-C axes”), and the voters. In addition to maintaining and expanding their electoral bases, politicians also use vote canvassing networks to collect and spread information, provide benefits and assistance to constituents, and mobilize voters during elections. Moreover, some politicians enjoy the advantage of being part of a political dynasty where multiple family members hold political positions, hence allowing the family to share their vote canvassing networks and better serve their constituents.

The latter half of the chapter investigates the ways in which dependent voters’ reliance on their MPs leads to their preference for politicians who commit to constituency work and expectation for face-time at the grassroots with their politicians. An examination of focus group

and interview data from across the country reveals that dependent voters tend to prefer a candidate who is reliable and accessible. To ensure they receive help in times of need, a large share of participants exhibited a strong preference for a candidate with whom they are familiar and who is approachable, lives close to them, and dedicates time to his or her constituency. Hence, to capture and maintain support from such voters, politicians spend most of their time visiting their constituents and attending both private and community events. As elections draw near, they not only increase the frequency of their constituency visits and event attendance but also become more strategic about the places they visit. Given dependent voters' preference for familiar candidates, challengers with no political background and existing political networks are at a particular disadvantage. To compete for their support, brand-new candidates require extra effort to reach out to the voters and make themselves known in the constituencies. Palang Pracharath, therefore, gave such candidates a shortcut by equipping them with vote canvassers who could help them navigate their constituencies and mobilize voters. Just as politicians who frequently engage in constituency work are viewed favorably by the voters, those who neglect it are frowned upon and perceived as unreliable. According to the focus group and interview data, the defeats of the Democrat Party both in Bangkok and several Southern provinces were attributed at least in part to their candidates' neglect of constituency services. Similarly, Future Forward's lack of effort to reach out to dependent voters contributed to their decision not to give a party a chance in the 2019 elections. In conclusion, the existing structural problems in Thailand produced, on one hand, a group of voters who depend on politicians for goods and services—that is, sincere- and strategic-MP voters—and, on the other hand, MPs and local politicians who establish clientelist networks to garner support from such voters. Therefore, to capitalize on dependent voters' reliance on politicians and acquire their consent, the authoritarian incumbents first designed an electoral

system that forces voters to choose what was most important to them—which, in the case of sincere- and strategic-MP voters, would invariably be the MP candidate—and then co-opted clientelist politicians with existing vote canvassing networks and large political bases, thereby converting their votes into the party's and inducing consent through the MPs. How the Thai regime and Palang Pracharath achieved this will be examined in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

Chapter 4

Tilting the Playing Field:

Institutional Engineering and Beyond

“...the constitution was designed for us.”

— Somsak Thepsuthin, Palang Pracharath MP and Minister of Justice¹

I. Introduction

The audience applauded as Palang Pracharath leader Somsak Thepsusin declared, “In this election, the constitution was designed for us.” during the Palang Pracharath party-launching conference at the Shangri-La Hotel in Bangkok on November 18, 2018.² “We must use this to our advantage. Every vote is important. Therefore, the candidate in each constituency must translate into votes,” he continued.³ While his assertion sparked an outcry from the anti-junta camp, it came as no surprise to most observers who had been following Thai politics. Despite the denials of the constitution drafters, the 2017 constitution was widely believed to be written in favor of new, small- and medium-sized political parties such as Palang Pracharath. Moreover, as established in Chapter 3, a large share of voters remains dependent on political patrons for goods and services and thus attached to their local MPs and brokers. It is, therefore, voters’ socio-economic reliance on politicians that shapes the electoral rules the NCPO put into place to tilt the playing field. The NCPO was aware of the political reality of Thailand and hence adopted the MMA, which limits

¹ “รัฐธรรมนูญนี้ฉันมาเพื่อพวกเรา” ??? [“The Constitution Designed for Us” ???], KomChadLuek Online, August 19, 2021, <https://www.komchadluek.net/scoop/352831>.

² “รัฐธรรมนูญนี้ฉันมาเพื่อพวกเรา” ??? [“The Constitution Designed for Us” ???], KomChadLuek Online, August 19, 2021, <https://www.komchadluek.net/scoop/352831>.

³ “รัฐธรรมนูญนี้ฉันมาเพื่อพวกเรา” ??? [“The Constitution Designed for Us” ???], KomChadLuek Online, August 19, 2021, <https://www.komchadluek.net/scoop/352831>.

the choices of voters. When given one ballot instead of two, voters are forced to vote for whatever they deem most important, which is, for dependent voters, their local MPs. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, Palang Pracharath then co-opted former MPs and local politicians, thereby capturing their political bases. A cunning party list formula was also formulated to prevent large parties such as Pheu Thai from gaining a majority and allow small parties—namely, Palang Pracharath’s allies—to gain seats in the parliament. In addition to the MMA system, the junta appointed 250 Senators not only to vote Prayut back into power but also to signify the strength of the Palang Pracharath, creating incentives for both voters and politicians to join the pro-junta side.

This chapter discusses the mechanisms employed by the NCPO to engineer the electoral system in Palang Pracharath’s favor and pave the way for cooptation (which will be the focus of the subsequent chapter). Most importantly, it examines the ways in which the interaction between “the rules of the game” and the electoral context influences the behavior of the players, namely voters, politicians, and political parties. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of the relationship between military coups and the constitutions, focusing on the role of the constitutions as political tools to ensure a smooth transition (and, in the case of the 2017 constitution, the junta’s preservation of power) after a coup. It then looks at the ways in which the NCPO used the 2016 constitutional referendum to “engineer consent” from citizens to design the electoral rules. In the second part of this chapter, I examine the two main mechanisms the NCPO employed to engineer the rules of the games: (1) the Mixed Member Apportionment System (MMA) and (2) the appointed Senate. First, I examine the shift from the Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMR) to the Mixed Member Apportionment System (MMA), the true intention of the adoption of the MMA system, the formula used to calculate the party-list seats, which awarded House seats to several small parties at the expense of larger parties, and the ways

in which MMA influences political behavior. An emphasis will be on the effects of the MMA system on the behavior of voters drawn from the findings from the field research. Second, I investigate the effects of the appointed Senate on the behavior of voters, candidates, political parties as well as local political actors. The third part of this chapter examines how the NCPO “controlled the referees” by filling the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) with the individuals it could control. The final part of this chapter briefly discusses the ways in which the junta and Palang Pracharath used the Constitution Court and state apparatuses to “handicap other players” and manage the competition.

II. The Well-Crafted Constitution

A. “...the constitution was designed for us”

Since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has been trapped in a repeated cycle of elections, coups, and new constitutions. By the time the 2016 Constitutional Referendum was held, the country had already swept through nineteen different constitutions. Constitutions have become political tools for coup makers to establish a new political structure and preserve power in the new regime.⁴ As Kongkirati and Kanchoochat put it, “... the 2017 junta-backed constitution is a repeated effort by the Thai establishment to maintain their political dominance under the guise of constitutional rule.”⁵ Like their predecessors, the 2014 coup makers tore the old constitution

⁴ Kevin Hewison finds that all of Thailand’s coups and constitutions except for the 1946 and 1997 constitutions have been orchestrated to restrain the influence of electoral politics. Kevin Hewison, “Constitutions, Regimes and Power in Thailand,” *Democratization* 14, no. 5 (2007): 928–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340701635738>, 931.

⁵ 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 (2018): 279-305, <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2018.4>, 280-281.

and wrote a new one. Crafted by a junta-handpicked committee, the 2017 charter was described as “a maneuver to alter the effects of the 2007 and 1997 Constitutions”⁶ and an attempt to “institutionalize the power of the military and the traditional elite vis-a-vis electoral forces.”⁷ The ways in which the junta sought to embed its power are, however, distinct from the past.⁸ Instead of resorting to a military coup or outright election rigging, both of which were deemed too risky, the NCPO institutionalized and embedded its power in the constitution. To undo the effects of the 1997 constitution, which emphasized the importance of election-based legitimacy, the junta created institutional mechanisms, the most important of which included the MMA system and the appointed Senate, to weaken majoritarian democracy and undermine the influence of political parties and civil society.⁹ Given its inability to win in the electoral arena, the junta was aware that they must rely on these institutional manipulations to maintain its status as the dominant power and tame political forces. Though the 2019 elections were relatively free and fair, the electoral design was heavily biased in favor of Palang Pracharath and its allies and against its largest political rival Pheu Thai. As McCargo and Alexander contend, “Thailand’s 2019 elections served to institutionalize the military junta that seized power in 2014 in a system of facade democracy.”¹⁰ While the constitutional advantages for Palang Pracharath will be discussed in the subsequent sections, it is vital to note here that the undemocratic political structure installed by the 2017

⁶ 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 (2020): 52-68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119892321>, 55.

⁷ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime,” 279.

⁸ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime.”

⁹ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime”; Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity.”

¹⁰ Duncan McCargo and Saowanee T. Alexander, “Thailand’s 2019 Elections: A State of Democratic Dictatorship?,” *Asia Policy* 26, no. 4 (2019): 89-106, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2019.0050>, 90.

constitution was designed to outlast the Palang Pracharath-led government.¹¹ As Sawasdee¹² and Thompson¹³ argue, an electoral authoritarian regime was “restored” and “revitalized” as a result of the 2019 elections. As discussed in the literature review, repression by itself is not sufficient for regime survival.¹⁴ By basing their power upon co-optation and institutional mechanisms, military regimes, such as that of Prayut, survive longer than those using personalized rule and intensive coercive tactics.¹⁵

B. Thailand’s 2016 Constitutional Referendum: “The Engineering of Consent”

To gain approval from citizens to create institutional mechanisms and engineer the electoral battle to its advantage, the NCPO held a national referendum on a proposed draft constitution. On August 7, 2016, as many as 59.4% of eligible voters participated in the junta’s first test at the polls. To the surprise of many, an overwhelming majority of Thai voters (61.35% or 16,820,402 votes)¹⁶ voted to approve the charter. The problems with the constitutional referendum are, however, at least twofold. First, to ensure that the draft constitution passed, the junta tightly controlled the referendum process and imposed restrictions that prevented opponents from campaigning against the draft. The junta deterred attempts to disseminate the charter’s contents and banned protests against the draft leading up to the referendum. According to Human Rights Watch, dozens of activists and journalists were arrested for expressing their opposition and

¹¹ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity.”

¹² Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity.”

¹³ Mark R. Thompson, “Southeast Asia’s Troubling Elections: Is There a Silver Lining?,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 149–57, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0058>.

¹⁴ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity.”

¹⁵ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime,” 288.

¹⁶ “กกต.ยืนยันผลประชามติทางการ โหวตผ่านร่าง 61.35 เปอร์เซ็นต์ [ECT Confirmed Referendum Results 61.35% Approval],” Thairath Online, August 10, 2016, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/687001>.

the Vote-No campaign.¹⁷ Threats, intimidation, and even deception were used to ensure voter endorsement of the draft.¹⁸ The findings across the regions demonstrate that voters were lured by the junta's false promise to restore democracy in the country to "just accept the draft constitution."¹⁹ Many voted yes only because they feared that if they had voted against the draft, elections would not have been held.²⁰ A Village Health Volunteer in Ubon Ratchathani revealed that the villagers initially did not want to approve the draft, but the soldiers pressured them into accepting it. "They said, 'Just accept it so our country can move forward. We can fix it later,'" said Wattana, a Village Health Volunteer in Ubon Ratchathani.²¹ Moreover, since criticisms and dissenting views about the draft constitution were deemed as "false information" and "a threat to national security," government agencies became the only sources of information for many voters.²² Second, the public knew very little, if at all, about the draft constitution. According to a poll conducted by iLaw, a majority of voters did not read the draft constitution prior to the referendum, and many of those who voted no admitted regretting their decision.²³ Furthermore, as will be examined in the following section, the draft constitution was written in a convoluted manner, which, as several election commissioners confirmed, was in fact intentional.²⁴ As Professor Attasit

¹⁷ Brad Adams, "Thailand: Activists, Journalist Arrested for Vote-No Campaign," Human Rights Watch, October 27, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/13/thailand-activists-journalist-arrested-vote-no-campaign>.

¹⁸ Brad Adams, "Thailand: Junta Bans Referendum Monitoring," Human Rights Watch, October 27, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/21/thailand-junta-bans-referendum-monitoring>.

¹⁹ Wattana, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

²⁰ Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

²¹ Wattana, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

²² Brad Adams, "Thailand: Army Detains Referendum Critics," Human Rights Watch, October 27, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/29/thailand-army-detains-referendum-critics>.

²³ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

²⁴ Nat Laoeseeawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020; Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

Pankaew remarked, the language in the referendum affected the understanding of voters.²⁵ Former Election Commissioner Nat Laoseesawakul asserted that a large number of voters exhibited a serious lack of political knowledge and understanding of the contents of the draft constitution,²⁶ and ample empirical evidence from the field research attests to this claim.²⁷ Even iLaw Manager Yingcheep Atchanont admitted that he himself found the draft difficult to understand.²⁸ Given the degrees of repression and voters' lack of information, the "yes" vote in the referendum should be interpreted as "engineered consent," which is distinct from the two types of consent presented in Chapter 2. In other words, sincere and strategic are real consent whereas "engineered consent" is not. Lastly, because the referendum process was deeply repressed, its legitimacy became questionable. "With each day the Thai junta is undermining the legitimacy of its own referendum," said Brad Adams, Asia Director of Human Rights Watch.²⁹ The 2017 was, however, ratified in April 2017, marking the country's 20th in 84 years. The junta interpreted the "yes" vote for the draft as the green light to manipulate state mechanisms and create a new political structure that would allow it to maintain power in the new regime.

²⁵ Attasit Pankaew, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 9, 2020.

²⁶ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

²⁷ For example, focus groups in Ratchathewi, In Buri, and Det Udom.

²⁸ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

²⁹ Brad Adams, "Thailand: Activists, Journalist Arrested for Vote-No Campaign," Human Rights Watch, October 27, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/13/thailand-activists-journalist-arrested-vote-no-campaign>.

III. Designing the Rules of the Game

A. The Mixed-Member Appointment System (MMA)

1. What is MMA?

The first institutional mechanism embedded in the constitution to tilt the playing field is a new electoral system called mixed-member apportionment or MMA, which favors small and medium-sized political parties, at the expense of the largest party, arguably Pheu Thai.³⁰ Meechai Ruchuphan's Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) replaced a mixed-member majoritarian system (MMM) with 375 single-seat constituencies and 125 party list seats with MMA. The MMA system is an adaptation of the German-style mixed-member proportional (MMP) system. Under this new system, there are 350 constituency seats and 150 party list seats (Section 78). In contrast with MMM, which allows voters to cast two separate votes, one for a constituency candidate and one for a party list, MMA forces voters to cast a single vote that will count as both a vote for the constituency candidate and simultaneously for that candidate's party for the party list seats calculation (Section 80). The total number of votes a party receives nationwide via this single vote will then be used to calculate the party list seats and the total share of seats in the parliament subsequently (Section 86). In a nutshell, the number of party-list seats each party receives is calculated by first dividing the total number of valid votes (35.53 million) by the number of MPs (500), which equals 71,065 votes (Section 128). 71,065 votes is hence the minimum threshold required by all parties to obtain party-list seats in the first round of calculation.³¹ Then calculate

³⁰ Sawasdee, "Electoral Integrity"; Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime"; McCargo and Alexander, "Thailand's 2019 Elections."

³¹ "เลือกตั้ง 62: ทดลองคำนวณ จำนวน ส.ส." [2019 Election: Trial Calculation of the Number of Party-List MPs], ilaw.or.th, n.d., https://ilaw.or.th/node/5241?fbclid=IwAR1sr3oraTE6VrGQgcE2A_3zMWmpIXjJAcZXTcN29qcZnFnWxVqJAPkqOjo.

each party's MP entitlement quota by dividing the total number of votes a party receives nationwide by 71,065.³² Finally, the number of party-list seats is achieved by subtracting the number of constituency seats from that party's MP entitlement quota. Accordingly, the more constituency seats a party won, the fewer party-list seats it will be allocated. In the case of Pheu Thai, this means no party-list seat is allocated. Since the way in which the new electoral system was designed created greater prospects for small and medium-sized parties to win party-list seats, the 2019 elections saw an unprecedented 81 parties contesting for seats. While many such parties were aware that they stood no chance of winning constituency seats, they attempted to field candidates in as many as constituencies possible or even in all 350 constituencies to maximize the number of votes they received, resulting in an average of 35 candidates running in each constituency.³³ Moreover, with the emergence of Palang Pracharath and Future Forward, Thai elections were no longer dominated by two biggest political parties, Pheu Thai and the Democrats. Given four major parties competing in the 2019 elections, it was unlikely that a single party would win a clear majority in the popular vote and hence secure an absolute majority of seats in the House of Representatives to form a government. As lamented by Kongkirati and Kanchoochat and many other scholars, MMA not only produces a fragmented party system, but also hinders parties from winning a clear majority, thereby resulting in a weak coalition government.³⁴ Never before in the history of Thai politics has as many as 19 parties ever come together to form a coalition government.

³² “เลือกตั้ง 62: ทดลองคำนวณ จำนวน ส.ส.” [2019 Election: Trial Calculation of the Number of Party-List MPs], ilaw.or.th, n.d., https://ilaw.or.th/node/5241?fbclid=IwAR1sr3oraTE6VrGQgcE2A_3zMWmpIXjJAcZXTcN29qcZnFnWxVqJAPkqOjo.

³³ McCargo and Alexander, “Thailand's 2019 Elections,” 94.

³⁴ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime,” 283.

2. Why MMA?

Why then did the constitutional drafters adopt an electoral system that is not only introduced to Thailand for the first time but also rarely used elsewhere? Meechai justified his adoption of MMA by claiming that it would strengthen the party system and encourage political parties to select their candidates more carefully,³⁵ so “they can’t just field electric poles.”³⁶ He explained that this system was based on the desire to avoid wasting votes and respect the voices of the people.

“I assure you that this system will not put any party at an advantage or a disadvantage, will increase opportunities for small parties to acquire seats, and will make vote counting easier because of the single ballot. Moreover, it will encourage citizens to exercise their right to vote. If the candidate they choose is not elected as constituency MP, each vote is still worthwhile because it can be used to calculate party-list MPs, hence increasing the seats for their preferred parties. It will also make party-list MP candidates closer to citizens because they will have to help constituency MP candidates campaign as their votes are linked,” said Meechai.³⁷

In the eyes of critics, however, Meechai’s words were nothing more than a pretext for orchestrating an electoral system to ensure the outcome the NCPO preferred. According to Professor Viengrat Netipho, the claim that the new electoral system was designed to institutionalize political parties and bolster party identification was just a mere excuse.³⁸ She argued that it was in fact the two-

³⁵ มีชัยแจงเลือกตั้งระบบจัดสรรปันส่วนผสม ยันทำให้พรรคการเมืองเข้มแข็ง [Meechai Claims MMA Strengthens Party System], October 29, 2015, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2015/10/62174>.

³⁶ “‘มีชัย’แจงสูตรเลือกตั้งใหม่ไม่พิศดาร ทุกเสียงมีความหมาย [‘Meechai’ Claims New Election Formula Is Not Peculiar. Every Vote Counts.],” bangkokbiznews, October 29, 2015, <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/672033>. In Thailand, there is a popular saying that a political party could field even “an electric pole” and still emerge victorious in elections. This concept traces its origins to the Democratic Party’s historical dominance and strong party affiliation in the southern region. In the past, the party was able to nominate any candidate, or even metaphorically “an electric pole,” and still secure a victory.

³⁷ มีชัยแจงเลือกตั้งระบบจัดสรรปันส่วนผสม ยันทำให้พรรคการเมืองเข้มแข็ง [Meechai Claims MMA Strengthens Party System], October 29, 2015, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2015/10/62174>.

³⁸ Viengrat Netipho, interview with the author, September 17, 2020.

ballot system that encouraged political parties to create clear party identifications and responsive policies to gain votes.³⁹ As contended by Thai politics experts, the true motives behind the adoption of MMA were to weaken large parties, such as Pheu Thai and increase the importance of medium-sized parties as well as constituency MPs.

a) Sabotaging Pheu Thai

First, the MMA system is widely perceived as a political ploy to disadvantage large parties and, more specifically, to “sabotage and destroy”⁴⁰ Pheu Thai. Since Thai Rak Thai’s first victory in 2001, each of its reincarnations has been dominating Thai politics. By sweeping all four elections between 2001 and 2011, Thaksin Shinawatra’s three political parties—Thai Rak Thai (TRT), the People’s Power Party (PPP) or Palang Prachachon, and Pheu Thai (PT)—appeared invincible. Thai Rak Thai’s landslide victory of 19 million votes in 2005 marked a watershed in the history of Thai politics—it was the first political party to secure a majority in the House of Representatives and form a single-party government. As manifested by the electoral successes of Thaksin’s parties, strong political parties and strong executives were viewed as a threat by the coup makers and constitutional drafters.⁴¹ Given the junta’s perception of Pheu Thai as “the archenemy in this electoral race,”⁴² the constitutional drafters designed the electoral system in such a way that would not only “control electoral politics and curtail the dominance of any major party”⁴³ but also enable them to defeat Pheu Thai.⁴⁴ Even a Palang Pracharath executive admitted that the

³⁹ Viengrat Netipho, interview with the author, September 17, 2020.

⁴⁰ “Charter Provisions ‘an Attempt to Destroy Pheu Thai,’” Nationthailand, February 13, 2021, <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30279772>.

⁴¹ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity,” 55.

⁴² McCargo and Alexander, “Thailand’s 2019 Elections: A State of Democratic Dictatorship?,” 95.

⁴³ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity,” 55.

⁴⁴ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

constitution was “somewhat unfair” to Thaksin.⁴⁵ As discussed in the previous section, the MMA system adds party-list seats to a party’s constituency seats until the party’s MP entitlement quota is reached.⁴⁶ Therefore, the parties whose constituency seats have exceeded this quota will not be allocated any additional party-list seats. In an extreme case of a party that wins all 350 constituency seats, no party-list seats will be given, rendering it impossible to garner the 376 seats required to elect the prime minister. The 150 party-list seats will then be divided among parties based on their vote share. In fact, even if a party wins 120 to 150 constituency seats, it will be allocated few or no party lists at all.⁴⁷ In other words, it is virtually impossible for any party to win a landslide under the MMA system. According to the simulation conducted by Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit (pseudonym), Pheu Thai was the biggest loser in this system, suffering a decrease in its seats from 265 (53%) in 2011 to only 225 (45%) in 2019.⁴⁸ By contrast, its main rival the Democrats saw almost no change in the number of seats under the new system. Hicken and Bangkok Pundit argued that since Pheu Thai and its predecessor Palang Prachachon always received a larger percentage of party-list votes than constituency votes, MMA left the party worse off by taking away the seat bonus awarded under the old system.⁴⁹ Since Pheu Thai was the only party capable of winning a majority of seats, it can be argued that the MMA system was specifically engineered to destroy or at least weaken it.

⁴⁵ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

⁴⁶ Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “Thailand’s New Electoral System,” Thaidatapoints, June 7, 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/thai-election-pending-5>.

⁴⁷ “‘The Prolongation of NCPO Power’ Was Not Just a Discourse but Legally Concrete,” iLaw, June 25, 2019, <https://www.ilaw.or.th/node/5301>.

⁴⁸ Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “Thailand’s New Electoral System,” Thaidatapoints, June 7, 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/thai-election-pending-5>.

⁴⁹ Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “Thailand’s New Electoral System,” Thaidatapoints, June 7, 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/thai-election-pending-5>.

b) Favoring Medium-Sized Parties and Local Politicians

While diminishing Pheu Thai's influence, the new electoral system gives an electoral boost to medium-sized parties, such as Bhum Jai Thai, Chart Pattana Pheu Paendin, and to a lesser extent, Chart Thai Pattana, which gain an additional 22, 13, and 5 seats respectively. Although they contest in a large number of constituencies nationwide, such parties have historically struggled to earn a substantial proportion of party-list votes. This can be explained by their basis of support. Despite their competitiveness in a few constituencies, these parties lack national support. Nevertheless, since MMA calculates the party-list seats from the constituency votes, it offers an advantage to medium-sized parties. Among the three electoral systems adopted or proposed in Thailand, Hicken and Bangkok Pundit contend that MMA benefits these parties the most, MMM the second, and MMP the least. Furthermore, by allowing medium-sized parties to gain more constituency seats, this system increases the influence and bargaining power of local politicians and constituency MPs. Given their lack of support at the national level, medium-sized parties derive political support from their local MP candidates, especially in their strongholds. Because "every vote counts" under the new system, local politicians and constituency MP candidates become vital players who influence the election outcomes. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, this results in the nationwide "MP sucking" or "MP buying" phenomenon where every party seeks to co-opt⁵⁰ individuals with large political bases, hence allowing them to increase their "price tags" from the previous elections. Not only are the incumbents and most popular politicians courted by political parties, but even those lower-ranked candidates with a slim chance of winning are also able to take advantage of this phenomenon. "They know they won't win, but they have votes, the votes they can sell to

⁵⁰ As will be discussed in Chapter 5, Palang Pracharath co-opted local politicians into their party through a more neutral, medium-sized party such as Bhumjaithai.

political parties,” said Former Election Commissioner Nat Laosesawakul.⁵¹ It is important to note that the goal of the medium-sized parties was, however, not to win every constituency in which they competed but to capture as many votes as possible to maximize their party-list seats. As Chapter 5 will explore more vigorously, Palang Pracharath and its medium-sized allies often targeted second-ranked candidates in the constituencies they were certain they could not win.⁵² Given the prevalent rumors of the junta’s plan to co-opt these medium-sized parties, the new electoral system functions as a critical mechanism for strengthening Palang Pracharath’s allies and facilitating the cooptation of both individual politicians and political parties. In sum, the newly introduced MMA system not only hinders Pheu Thai from winning a clear majority in the Lower House, let alone both Houses, but it also bolsters the prospects of medium-sized parties with strong constituency bases. With the support of these parties and the appointed Senate, the junta can rest assured that the prime ministerial candidate of its choice will be appointed.

3. Political Parties’ Responses to MMA

a) NCPO and Palang Pracharath

To take advantage of the new electoral system, the NCPO established a political party called “Palang Pracharath” to serve three primary goals: to maintain the junta’s grip on power, support Prayut for prime minister, and carry on NCPO policies. Registered by Chuan Chuchan, Somkid Jatusripisak’s confidant, the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) was founded by the “Four Sons,” which refer to four ministers from the military government’s cabinet—namely, (1) former Minister of Finance Uttama Savanayana, (2) former Minister of Energy Sontirat Sontijirawon, (3)

⁵¹ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

⁵² Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

former Minister of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, and (4) former Minister of the Office of the Prime Minister Kobsak Pootrakool—who served as the party leader, the deputy party leader, the party secretary, and the spokesman respectively. The NCPO’s creation of a political party to compete under the system it orchestrated was widely criticized as “the prolongation of NCPO power,”⁵³ hence rendering Palang Pracharath an “authoritarian successor party (ASP)” as defined by political scientists. The question of whether Palang Pracharath “prolonged” the NCPO’s power was frequently brought up during the election campaign and subject to attack by the anti-junta camp. Despite repeated denials, one of Palang Pracharath’s founders admitted in an interview that he and other members of the “Four Sons” had, in fact, been involved with party building and formulation of party platforms since they were still serving in the NCPO-led government. He explained that the “Four Sons” created this party with the goal of ensuring a “smooth” transition and achieving a “soft landing.”⁵⁴ However, given General Prawit Wongsuwan’s complete control of the party, it was now impossible to deny that Palang Pracharath was indeed the “spare part”⁵⁵ of the NCPO.

Not only was Palang Pracharath filled with ministers from the junta government’s cabinet and individuals who worked for the NCPO, but the party was also named after and campaigned heavily on the famous Pracharath⁵⁶ welfare program introduced by the NCPO. As will be examined in Chapter 5, the NCPO government squandered state resources on a wide array of populist schemes, the most popular of which was the welfare card policy commonly known as “the poor’s card.” As asserted by iLaw, “the overt naming of a party after an NCPO policy cements the

⁵³ “‘The Prolongation of NCPO Power’ Was Not Just a Discourse but Legally Concrete,” iLaw, June 25, 2019, <https://www.ilaw.or.th/node/5301>.

⁵⁴ A Palang Pracharath Executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

⁵⁵ A Palang Pracharath Executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

⁵⁶ The term “Pracharath” is translated literally as “people’s state” in Thai.

connection between these two.”⁵⁷ Launched shortly before the elections, the welfare card policy was widely perceived as an attempt to “buy votes” from the poor and “win back grass-roots voters from the populist parties connected to Thaksin.”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, given the junta’s control of state apparatus and budgets and the popularity of the policy, the welfare cards turned out to be the key factor that influenced voters’ decisions to vote for Palang Pracharath, thus consenting to authoritarian incumbents.

Lastly, as established in the previous section, the new electoral system favors medium-sized parties and increases the influence of local politicians and MPs, hence giving rise to the “MP-sucking” phenomenon. Despite Palang Pracharath’s claim that it was “the biggest party in these elections, receiving 8 million votes,” and “thus the new electoral system hurt us,”⁵⁹ the party was, in fact, a beneficiary of MMA. As Chapter 5 will investigate, Palang Pracharath invested tremendous efforts and resources in “co-opting, snatching, persuading, and enticing”⁶⁰ former MPs, local politicians, and practically anyone with the potential to be elected or at least capture votes for the party and co-opting small and medium-sized parties into its coalition government. Like other medium-sized parties, the goal of Palang Pracharath was not to win every constituency but to maximize its votes for the calculation of party-list seats. To put it differently, the goal of Palang Pracharath was not to win the largest number of constituency seats just like Pheu Thai did but to win enough seats that would allow them to join forces with small and medium-sized parties as well as the junta-appointed Senate and constitute a majority of both Houses. Therefore, Palang

⁵⁷ “‘The Prolongation of NCPO Power’ Was Not Just a Discourse but Legally Concrete,” iLaw, June 25, 2019, <https://www.ilaw.or.th/node/5301>.

⁵⁸ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity” 57.

⁵⁹ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

⁶⁰ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity,” 57.

Pracharath's strategy was to co-opt the incumbents and former MPs in whichever constituencies it was able to and co-opt local politicians and second-ranked candidates in the constituencies it was not. At least 47 incumbents and former MPs from several parties have been co-opted into Palang Pracharath.⁶¹ The strategies the party employed to co-opted and the “boosts” it gave prospective candidates will, however, the subject of the discussion in Chapter 5.

b) Pheu Thai

To counteract the disadvantages posed by the MMA system, Pheu Thai executives decided to “break the bill”⁶²—that is, splitting the party into several smaller parties, including the Thai Raksa Chart, the Prachachart, the Pheu Chart, and the Pheu Tham parties. This strategy was devised both to maximize their votes and increase their chances of acquiring party-list seats and create “backup parties” in case Pheu Thai was dissolved. A close examination of these parties reveals that all of their executives were members and allies of Pheu Thai or relatives of Pheu Thai politicians, namely the Wadah faction in Prachachat, the Red Shirt United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship faction in Pheu Chart, and former Pheu Thai executive Chaturon Chaisaeng in Thai Raksa Chart.⁶³ In its attempt to capitalize on both constituency and party-list seats, Pheu Thai coordinated with Thai Raksa Chart by fielding candidates in only 250 from the total 350 constituencies, leaving 100 constituencies where it did not perform well in 2011 for Thai Raksa Chart to collect party-list votes. Their plan, nevertheless, backfired when Thai Raksa Chart was

⁶¹ “เลือกตั้ง 62: แต้มต่อ ส.ส.พลังชุด อย่างน้อย 47 ที่นั่ง กลเกมสืบทอดอำนาจที่ไม่ยากสำหรับพลังประชารัฐ [2019 Election: Advantage of Co-Optation Power at Least 47 Seats Easy Authoritarian Succession Game for Palang Pracharath],” iLaw, March 13, 2019, <https://www.ilaw.or.th/node/5212>.

⁶² This strategy is commonly referred to as the “breaking the (large) bill (into smaller bills)” strategy.

⁶³ Punchada Sirivunnabood, “The Rules Change but the Players Don’t: Factional Politics and Thailand’s March 2019 Elections,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 3 (2019): 390–396, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs41-3c>, 6–7.

dissolved. The Constitutional Court ruled that its nomination of Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya Sirivadhana Barnavadi, the elder sister of the king, as its prime ministerial candidate was hostile to the constitutional monarchy and hence banned 14 party executives from running in elections for 10 years. It is critical to note that Thai Raksa Chart was by far the third party affiliated with Thaksin Shinawatra to be dissolved by the Constitutional Court whose role will be examined later in this chapter. As a result of Thai Raksa Chart's dissolution, Pheu Thai lost all the votes that its sister party would have otherwise obtained in the 100 constituencies where it did not field candidates. Although other pro-Thaksin parties managed to win 12 seats in the 2019 elections, Pheu Thai was left with 137 constituency seats and no party-list seats at all. In the view of Thai politics experts, Pheu Thai's loss of popular votes was due, at least in part, to Thaksin's own strategic miscalculation—had Pheu Thai executives not split the party, it would have garnered more popular votes.⁶⁴ Professor Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee revealed in an interview that she openly opposed Pheu Thai's "breaking the bill" strategy and explained that when Thai Raksa Chart was disbanded, most of the votes it would have received went to Future Forward, leading to a decrease in Pheu Thai's popular votes, which ultimately resulted in the absence of its party-list seats.⁶⁵ However, the sources from Pheu Thai disclosed that it was Thaksin himself who insisted on this strategy in the face of opposition from his advisors. Perhaps, in retrospect, Thaksin should not have "broken the bill," but as Professor Attasit Pankaew asserted, the electoral rules were designed in such a way that Pheu Thai could not have returned to power or had its candidate selected as prime minister even if it had won all 250 constituencies.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ This view is shared by several experts, such as Attasit Pankaew, Stithorn Thananithichot, Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, and Nat Laosesawakul.

⁶⁵ Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 11, 2020.

⁶⁶ Attasit Pankaew, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 9, 2020.

c) Small and Medium-Sized Parties

As previously discussed, medium-sized parties stand to gain the most in the new electoral system. Under MMA, political parties cannot receive votes from their supporters unless their candidates contest in that particular constituency. Therefore, it is in their best interest to field candidates in all 350 constituencies. However, this places small parties with a lack of resources and manpower at a great disadvantage to larger parties. Endowed with both resources and strong constituency bases,⁶⁷ Bhumjaithai was the first political party in these elections to field candidates not only in all 350 constituencies but also in all 150 party-list spots.⁶⁸ Similarly, new contestants, such as Palang Pracharath and Future Forward also fielded candidates in all 350 constituencies.⁶⁹ In the 2011 elections, Bhumjaithai came third in the race, winning 34 out of 500 seats in the parliament. In the recent elections, however, the party saw a drastic increase of 17 seats to 51 seats. As will be examined in Chapter 5, the arrangements between Palang Pracharath and medium-sized parties such as Bhumjaithai in certain areas were often pre-organized. Palang Pracharath would restrain its campaign efforts and spending in the constituencies where Bhumjaithai was clearly winning, such as Sisaket 1. Likewise, Bhumjaithai would not “go all out” in the constituencies where Palang Pracharath was leading the polls. For example, in a Southern constituency where there was a fierce battle between a long-time Democrat incumbent and a popular Palang Pracharath

⁶⁷ According to an undisclosed source, Bhumjaithai spent as much as 4,000 million baht in the 2019 elections. Author’s field notes, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

⁶⁸ “เลือกตั้ง 2562 : ภูมิใจไทยเปิดตัวผู้สมัครครบ 350 เขต ชูนโยบายเรื่องกัญชาเสรี จำนำข้าว แทะกัก แก้ว รธน. [2019 Election: Bhumjaithai Debuted All 350 MP Candidates Highlighting the Marijuana and Rice-Pledging Policies but Remained Ambiguous on Constitutional Amendment],” BBC News ไทย, January 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-46908445>.

⁶⁹ “เลือกตั้ง 2562 : ที่สุดที่คุณอาจยังไม่รู้ก่อนเข้าคูหา [2019 Election: What You May Not Know Before Entering the Polls],” BBC News ไทย, January 21, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-46902175>.

challenger, Bhumjaithai would stay out of the fight. As a Palang Pracharath MP posited, “The Bhumjaithai candidate probably did not want a seat. As long as he reached the vote target, he would stop fighting.” After all, the goal of Palang Pracharath and Bhumjaithai in such constituencies was to capture as many popular votes as possible rather than stealing the seat from their potential coalition partner.

Although it was left out of the constitutional drafters’ calculation, Future Forward was perhaps the largest beneficiary of the new electoral system. As Sawasdee argues, “[w]hat was intended to be a mere pretense of electoral competition, with the winner pre-determined in advance, instead created a political opportunity for the rapid rise of a new set of popular politicians, especially among urban and university youth, which was effectively converted into electoral strength.”⁷⁰ The electoral breakthrough of Future Forward came as a surprise to most observers⁷¹ and even Future Forward candidates themselves. There is a consensus among Thai politics experts that the success of Future Forward is the by-product of the MMA system.⁷² In order to take advantage of the rules set by MMA, Future Forward decided to field candidates in all 350 constituencies. In spite of the criticisms leveled against its MP candidate selection, the new progressive party was able to secure the third highest share of the popular vote (6,330,617) and the highest number of party-list seats (50 seats). In fact, Future Forward’s party-list seats constitute more than half of its total 80 seats. While the party was immensely successful at capturing votes

⁷⁰ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity,” 63-64.

⁷¹ Including experts, such as Attasit Pankaew, Stithorn Thananithichot, Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, and Punchada Sirivunnabood.

⁷² Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity”; “The Rules Change but the Players Don’t”; Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, “Thailand in 2019: The Year of Living Unpredictably,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2020, no. 1 (2020): 337–54; <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814881319-019>.

from first-time voters⁷³ through its anti-NCPO and progressive policy platform, its electoral success can also be attributed to the dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart. As previously mentioned, many, if not a majority, of the eight million votes lost by Pheu Thai went straight to Future Forward—the party was able to win a number of seats in the constituencies where the Thai Raksa Chart candidates had been disqualified. In fact, Thai Raksa Chart candidates in various constituencies (e.g., Thitima Chaisaeng from Chachoengsao) even urged their supporters to “transfer their votes” to their pro-democracy ally.⁷⁴

As previously stated, small parties responded to the changes in the electoral system by entering the elections. In contrast with their medium-sized and large counterparts, small parties lack the resources required to field candidates in all constituencies. However, they hoped to take advantage of MMA and gain seats in the parliament through the party-list calculation. Of all the small parties that won seats in the elections, as many as 11 parties received votes below the 71,065-vote minimum threshold required by all parties to obtain party-list seats in the first round of calculation.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, as will be discussed later in this chapter, these “micro parties” were allowed to enter the parliament only because the Election Commission “rounded decimals down.”

⁷³ According to Sawasdee, the first-time voters aged 18 to 25 accounted for approximately eight million out of 51 million eligible voters or 14.3 percent (collectively enough to win some 100 constituency seats). Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity,” 59.

⁷⁴ “เลือกตั้ง 2562: ‘ไทยรักษาชาติ’ โยกรฐานเสียงช่วยพรรคขวัดเดียวกัน [2019 Election: ‘Thai Raksa Chart’ Moves Votes to Help Party on Same Side],” Thai PBS, March 13, 2019, <https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/278360>.

⁷⁵ PPTV Online, “เปิดคะแนน 11 พรรคเล็ก ได้เก้าอี้ส.ส. เข้าสู่สภาหินอ่อน [Revealing Votes of 11 Small Parties Wining MP Seats Entering Parliament],” PPTV HD36, August 7, 2022, <https://www.pptvhd36.com/news/%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%94%E0%B9%87%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%99/102703>; 1. “เลือกตั้ง 2562 : กกต. ประกาศรับรอง 149 ส.ส. บัญชีรายชื่อ [2019 Election: ECT Endorses 149 Partylist MPs],” BBC News ไทย, May 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-48197070>; 1. “เลือกตั้ง 2562: ค่วน! กกต.ประกาศรับรอง ส.ส.ปาร์ตี้ลิสต์ 149 คน [2019 Election: Breaking News! ECT Endorses 149 Partylist MPs],” Thai PBS, May 8, 2019, <https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/279864>.

Winning less than half of the minimum threshold (33,754 votes), the Tairaktham Party was the last party to enter the parliament. As expected, all of these “micro parties” eventually joined the Palang Pracharath-led coalition government and elected Prayuth back into power. It was widely believed that many, if not all, of these parties were pre-arranged by the NCPO. Parties such as Paiboon Nititawan’s People Reform Party and Yongyuth Thepchamnong’s Prachaniyom Party had pledged to support Prayut since the election campaigns. Most evidently, Paiboon Nititawan dissolved his own party and joined Palang Pracharath as deputy party leader.

4. Effects of MMA on Voting Behavior: Voting for Party vs. Candidate

The immediate impact of MMA on voting behavior is that it limits voter choices. In contrast with preceding elections, voters no longer “have the luxury of voting for their local favorite AND picking a side in the larger political conflict”⁷⁶ or, as in a common Thai saying, “vote for the candidate you love, vote for the party you like.” As discussed earlier in this chapter, voters can now only cast a single ballot for both the constituency candidate and the party under the new electoral system. In fact, by casting one ballot, voters vote for the constituency candidate, the party, and the prime ministerial candidate simultaneously. Since one vote can count for multiple factors, the single-ballot system makes it difficult to decipher what a vote really means. The debate is, however, usually over whether MMA forces voters to vote for the party or the constituency candidate. Even scholars of Thai politics and election commissioners differ in their opinions on the true intent of the single-ballot system. Meechai and proponents of MMA argued that this system encouraged voters to vote for political parties rather than constituency candidates. In his words, “It has been asked whether voters consider candidates or parties when exercising their

⁷⁶ Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “Thailand’s New Electoral System.”

voting rights. The answer received from many is that they want to place importance on parties.”⁷⁷

It was ultimately party names, not candidates’ names, that were written on the ballot, hence cuing voters to vote for parties. As Democrat MP candidate Dr. Warong Dechgitvigrom pointed out, “When you enter the polls, you will see party numbers, party logos, and party names, not candidates’ names. This creates political sentiments towards party preferences.”⁷⁸

Critics of MMA, conversely, contended that the true intent of the system was, in fact, to induce voters to vote for constituency candidates and convert the votes of the candidates into the votes of the party.⁷⁹ As iLaw manager Yingcheep Atchanont argued:

“This is their intent ... They know how to win elections. There is a lesson learned from the Thaksin era, which is to buy constituency MPs. Thaksin also did this. There were two ballots. They [Thaksin’s parties] bought the MPs and had the MPs tell their constituents to vote for the party ... but then they [NCPO] knew they weren’t as popular as Thaksin. Take Kamphaeng Phet for example. When voters voted for Wipoj Aponrat⁸⁰ and voted for Pheu Thai for the party-list, it was not against their will. Voting for Thaksin for the party-list wasn’t really against the will of the constituents there. It was doable. However, they [NCPO] probably knew that if voters were to vote for Wipoj, some would not vote for Prayut. Okay, let’s combine the two ballots into one. Done.”⁸¹

To put it simply, the single-ballot system was the NCPO’s strategy to convert the votes of constituency MPs into its own. The next step is, therefore, to co-opt these individuals, which will be explored in Chapter 5. However, as Dr. Warong argued, one could make a case for MMA encouraging voters to vote for the party citing the party names on the ballot as an obvious indicator.

Contrary to this claim, the findings from the field research demonstrate that despite the absence of

⁷⁷ “‘มิชัย’แจงสูตรเลือกตั้งใหม่ไม่พิศดาร ทุกเสียงมีความหมาย [‘Meechai’ Claims New Election Formula Is Not Peculiar. Every Vote Counts.]”

⁷⁸ Warong Dechgitvigrom, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 15, 2020.

⁷⁹ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020; Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020; Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

⁸⁰ Wipoj Aponrat was a Pheu Thai Constituency 2 Kamphaeng Phet MP candidate and former Red Shirt leader.

⁸¹ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020

candidates' names on the ballot, a number of voters remembered the candidates' numbers when they went to the polls. More importantly, in contrast with the previous elections where each party was assigned the same number in all constituencies, the party numbers varied from constituency to constituency in the 2019 elections (the 2018 Organic Law on Elections). In the view of former election commissioner and Democrat MP candidate Professor Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, the inconsistencies in party numbers undermined party unity, hence contradicting the claim that the new election system was designed to strengthen the party system.⁸² "They didn't want voters to vote for the party," Somchai said. "They didn't care if it was confusing ... They wanted the parties to be divided. If you like a party, you've got to remember the candidate, for example." According to Somchai, because large parties typically fielded candidates in all constituencies, the inconsistencies in party numbers prevented them from using a single number in their campaigns as they did in the past, thereby placing them at a particular advantage.⁸³ Lastly, the intent of the single-ballot system to encourage voters to vote for the candidate is consistent with the "MP-sucking" phenomenon.⁸⁴ "If the system really induced voters to vote for the party, why would political parties actively engage in such behavior?" former Election Commissioner Nat Laoseesawakul asked.⁸⁵

The criticisms of MMA are manifold. First and most importantly, critics argue that by forcing voters to cast a single ballot, the new electoral system makes constituents whose MPs have been co-opted by Palang Pracharath "grit their teeth" and vote for the party or candidate they do not necessarily prefer. Moreover, in many cases, it disguises the party affiliation of co-opted

⁸² Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

⁸³ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

⁸⁴ Though co-optation is common in Thai politics, there was evidently more co-optation in the 2019 elections than in the preceding elections.

⁸⁵ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

candidates. “Because of the single ballot, the villagers didn’t see the military hiding behind Chotiwiut.⁸⁶ Once Chotiwiut was elected, they jumped right in!” said Wat.⁸⁷ “If there were two ballots, it would be much clearer to see that by voting for Palang Pracharath, the military would return to power. I wouldn’t want that,” a Moo 1 villager added.⁸⁸ One village headman in Ta Ngam, Sing Buri explained that the single ballot obscured the connection between the constituency candidate and Palang Pracharath and the military.⁸⁹ As discussed in Chapter 2, there was a sizable share of voters who genuinely did not know this connection and voted for Palang Pracharath solely because of their local constituency candidates. The single-ballot system is cunningly illustrated by the classic “liquor and beer tie-in sales,” a strategy commonly employed by Thai liquor companies in the past. “When Chang Beer was launched, you could buy liquor only if you also agreed to buy Chang Beer. And I had to buy Chang Beer even though I didn’t want to drink it!” said Wat.⁹⁰ By the same logic, voters could only send their co-opted candidates to the parliament if they agreed to vote for Palang Pracharath and send Prayut to premiership as well. For voters who depended on their local MPs, the new electoral system left them with no choice but to vote for whichever party their MPs belonged to. The lack of choices made iLaw manager Yingcheep Atchanont questioned whether the 2019 elections were really free. “Do they count as free? The voters didn’t want to vote for Prayut, but they had to vote for their constituency candidate,” said Yingcheep.⁹¹ For Yingcheep, that the votes for a local constituency candidate become the votes for Prayut makes these elections problematic. The same goes for voters who wanted to support Palang Pracharath:

⁸⁶ Chotiwiut Thanakamanusorn is a Palang Pracharath Sing Buri MP candidate.

⁸⁷ Wat, interview with the author, Sing Buri, September 20, 2020.

⁸⁸ Moo 1 villager, interview with the author, Sing Buri, September 20, 2020.

⁸⁹ Bomb, interview with the author, Sing Buri, September 20, 2020.

⁹⁰ Wat, interview with the author, Sing Buri, September 20, 2020.

⁹¹ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

some of them had to “grit their teeth” and vote for the candidate who was co-opted from the party they disliked. Take an extreme case of a former red-shirt leader who was co-opted into Palang Pracharath. In the focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet voters admitted their dislike for Wipoj but reasoned that they had to bring themselves to vote for him because they wanted Palang Pracharath to win.⁹²

Because it restricts voter choices, MMA has been widely criticized for its failure to reflect the true needs of the people.⁹³ In fact many of those who were involved with the electoral design disagreed with this system.⁹⁴ Election Commissioner Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen stated that a fair share of voters did not understand that by voting overwhelmingly for the most popular constituency candidates, they were causing the party to not receive any party-list seats.⁹⁵ “The voters must have wanted to vote for our party-list candidates, but they didn’t have the chance,” Pheu Thai executive Anudith Nakornthap lamented.⁹⁶ Not only is the single-ballot confusing, but it is also incompatible with the social contexts and the voting culture in Thailand.⁹⁷ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, Secretary General of the Open Forum for Democracy Foundation (P-Net), argued that the two-ballot system was more appropriate.⁹⁸ “Take, for example, Mr. A. He works hard for the constituency. He is known (by the constituents) and is local. However, he is not in the party that has good policies. Party B has good, attractive policies. [Under the old system], voters can

⁹² Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

⁹³ For example, Nat Laosesawakul, Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, Yingcheep Atchanont, and Anudith Nakornthap. Phran Kratai participants also shared this view. Focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

⁹⁴ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

⁹⁵ Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

⁹⁶ Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 14, 2020.

⁹⁷ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020; Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020; Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

⁹⁸ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

vote separately. The votes can also be calculated separately. No need for complexity,” Laddawan said.⁹⁹ Moreover, former Election Commissioner Nat Laoseesawakul contended that because Thai voters used to have “the freedom to decide for both the candidate and the party,” the single-ballot system does not respond to their needs.¹⁰⁰

Numerous voters across the regions revealed that the two-ballot system gave them more power to decide, and if given two ballots, they would have voted for different parties. More specifically, many Palang Pracharath supporters stated that they would have voted for Palang Pracharath candidates and their preferred party, usually Pheu Thai and the Democrats. For example, In Buri voters would have voted for Chotiwiut and Pheu Thai. Phran Kratai voters would have voted for Wipoj and Pheu Thai. However, when given a single ballot, they voted for Wipoj (hence, Palang Pracharath) because they “voted more for the person” and “the candidate came first.”¹⁰¹ As discussed in Chapter 3, the distance between citizens and the state, the inaccessibility and unresponsiveness of government as well as unequal access to public services and government officials’ abuse of power engendered clientelism. Knowing that a vast majority of Thais, and, as Chapter 2 argues, especially dependent voters, attach more weight to constituency candidates than political parties, the NCPO designed an electoral system that capitalizes on voters’ socio-economic dependence on politicians. Therefore, it can be argued that clientelism is preserved and represented through the MMA system.

It is significant to note, however, that not all voters vote for the constituency candidate under MMA. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a substantial portion of Future Forward voters did not

⁹⁹ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

even know or care who their constituency candidates were. Notwithstanding the intent of the new electoral system, it ultimately depends on the voter whether he or she will vote for the candidate or the party. It would be far-fetched to claim that an electoral system induces all voters to vote in the same manner. What MMA certainly does, nevertheless, is to force voters to choose one choice over the other. When a single ballot counts for many different factors, voters must weigh what is most important for them. As Chapter 5 will demonstrate, dependent voters tend to vote for the candidate whereas independent voters tend to vote for the party or what the party represents or offers.

5. Effects of MMA on Election Outcomes

For better or worse, the MMA system has dramatically transformed Thailand's political landscape. With the arrival of new political players, Thai elections were no longer the battle between the two long-standing rivals. While Pheu Thai and, especially, Democrats saw significant drops in their votes, Palang Pracharath and Future Forward made electoral breakthroughs. Although Prayut's return to power was just as everyone expected, the 2019 elections were full of surprises. As a result of MMA and perhaps coupled with Thaksin's own miscalculation, Pheu Thai suffered its worst performance, losing 129 seats and nearly half of its popular votes from the 2011 elections.¹⁰² Most importantly, MMA prevented Pheu Thai from receiving any party-list seats. Though Pheu Thai managed to secure the largest number of seats, it was Palang Pracharath who received the largest number of votes (8,433,137 votes). As previously discussed, the success of Palang Pracharath can also be attributed at least in part to this electoral system, which awarded the

¹⁰² In previous elections, Pheu Thai won 248 seats (40.6%) in 2001, 375 seats (56.4%) in 2005, 460 seats (61.1%) in the nullified 2006 election, 233 seats (36.63%) in 2007 and 256 seats (48.41%) in 2011. However, there was a sharp decline in the overall votes received by Pheu Thai, dropping significantly from 15,744,190 to 7,920,630.

party with additional party-list seats, hence allowing it to compete with Pheu Thai to form a coalition government. The success of Future Forward is perhaps as much a result of the new electoral system as that of Palang Pracharath. Even though the progressive party was well-loved by young voters, it is undeniable that it would not have performed as well under the old system. Likewise, Bhumjaithai and its fellow medium-sized parties also performed especially well under MMA. Needless to say, the 11 “micro parties” would not have stood a chance of winning seats had it not been because of MMA. Finally, the failure of the Democrats was purposely left out of the discussion, for it will be examined intensively in the next chapter. Not only did the party lose all its seats in Bangkok, but it also lost many of its Southern strongholds. The effects of MMA on the Democrats were, however, debatable. Sirivunnabood argues that MMA led to the Democrats’ vote losses because the system encouraged voters to vote for the party rather than the candidate.¹⁰³ Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, nevertheless, contend that whether the Democrats should be considered losers or winners depends on how we look at it.¹⁰⁴ On the one hand, given the negligible change in the number of seats the party received under the old and new systems and Pheu Thai’s worse performance under MMA, the Democrats could be considered “winners.” On the other hand, the Democrats could also be considered “partial losers” because they perform better on the party-list vote compared with the constituency vote and hence do not benefit from MMA.¹⁰⁵ In fact, as revealed in an interview, Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva himself also vehemently

¹⁰³ Sirivunnabood, “The Rules Change but the Players Don’t,” 6.

¹⁰⁴ Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “Thailand’s New Electoral System.”

¹⁰⁵ Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “Thailand’s New Electoral System.”

opposed MMA, stating the system made it difficult to identify voters' true intent¹⁰⁶ and encouraged vote buying.¹⁰⁷

B. The Appointed Senate

1. The 2016 Constitutional Referendum: Question 2

In addition to a peculiar voting system, the 2017 constitution also included interim provisions that allowed the appointed Senate to select the prime minister. As will be explored in this section, the appointed Senate not only serves as a mechanism to ensure the continuation of Prayut's premiership, thus preserving the power of the authoritarian incumbents within the parliamentary system, but it also plays a vital role in shaping the behavior of all players in the game. This section begins by investigating the second question of the referendum, the Senate selection process, and the Senate composition. Then it examines the authority of the Senate as stipulated in the constitution and discusses the impact of the Senate on the behavior of politicians and voters. Lastly, it explores voter perceptions of the appointed Senate.

In addition to the simple question of whether to accept the draft constitution, Thai citizens were also asked whether the Upper House of Parliament should be permitted to join the Lower House in selecting a Prime Minister. However, the original Thai version was written in such a way that it is not only extremely difficult for a layperson to understand but also deliberately misleading.¹⁰⁸ I personally had to re-read the question a few times to make sure that I marked my ballot correctly. The second question of the 2016 referendum was worded as follows:

¹⁰⁶ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ “‘อภิสิทธิ์’ ค้างเลือกตั้งบัตรเดียว [‘Abhisit’ Skeptical of Single-Ballot System],” bangkokbiznews, December 30, 2015, <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/680592>.

¹⁰⁸ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020; Attasit Pankaew, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 9, 2020; Nat Laosesawakul, interview

Do you or do you not agree that in order to reform the country continuously according to the national strategic plan, it should be stipulated in the Transitional Provisions of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand that for five years from the first convening of the National Assembly under this constitution, a joint session of the National Assembly shall convene to approve the person to be appointed as the Prime Minister?

Proposed by the National Legislative Assembly (NLA), the additional question was widely criticized for not only being too wordy but also suggestive and obscure.¹⁰⁹ Though not made explicit by the NLA, a “yes” vote would allow the Senate to determine the choice of prime minister. According to the 2016 draft constitution as well as the 1997 and 2007 constitutions, a prime minister was to be selected by the elected Members of the House of Representatives. However, according to the question written by the NLA, “a joint session of the National Assembly,” which includes the elected 500 Members of the House of Representatives and the 250 Senators would jointly select the prime minister. It is important to note that instead of stating the Senators would select the prime minister jointly with the MPs, the question used the term “a joint session of the National Assembly” to obscure this fact from the voters. Moreover, since the interim provisions stipulate that both the MPs and the Senators jointly select a prime minister “for five years from the first convening of the National Assembly under this constitution” and Section 99 of the draft constitution stipulates that each House of Representatives serves a four-year term, a “yes” vote would allow the Senate to select at least two prime ministers. Should both prime ministers complete their terms, Thailand would have a prime minister selected jointly by the MPs and the Senators for eight years. Furthermore, during these five years, should the prime minister

with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020; Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ “คำถามพ่วง: เห็นชอบให้ส.ว.ที่มาจากการแต่งตั้ง ร่วมกับ ส.ส.เลือกนายกฯ หรือไม่? [Additional Question: Agree to Have Appointed Senate Elect Prime Minister Jointly with MPs?],” iLaw, July 14, 2016, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/4195>.

resign, dissolve parliament, or leave office for whichever reason, both the MPs and the Senators would continue to jointly select a prime minister. Lastly, at the time of the referendum, “the national strategic plan” was yet to be created. However, the Senate’s duty was to ensure that the government followed this plan. In the eyes of Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, this additional question was employed by the NCPO to gain legitimacy from the citizens to transfer its authority to select a prime minister to the Senate.¹¹⁰

2. The Senate: Who Are They and Where Are They From?

Despite the complicated selection process imposed by the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC), a 250-member Senate was ultimately handpicked by the NCPO, thereby functioning as the “military party” in the legislature.¹¹¹ The Senate consists of individuals from three groups.¹¹² Six seats were reserved for the commanders of the armed forces and the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defence. The remaining 244 senators were selected by the NCPO: 50 were selected from 200 professionals nominated by the Electoral Commission and 194 were selected from 400 individuals nominated by the Nomination Committee created by the NCPO itself and led by General Prawit Wongsuwan. According to the data from iLaw, 157 of the 250 senators have previously worked with the NCPO.¹¹³ Moreover, as many as 103 senators are army or police

¹¹⁰ “คำถามพ่วง: เห็นชอบให้ส.ว.ที่มาจากการแต่งตั้ง ร่วมกับ ส.ส.เลือกนายกฯ หรือไม่? [Additional Question: Agree to Have Appointed Senate Elect Prime Minister Jointly with MPs?],” iLaw, July 14, 2016, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/4195>.

¹¹¹ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity.”

¹¹² 1. “ก่อนเลือกตั้ง 8 เรื่องต้องรู้เกี่ยวกับ ส.ว. [8 Facts about Senate You Must Know Before Elections],” iLaw, September 13, 2018, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/4936>.

¹¹³ Twenty were members of the NCPO, 89 were former members of NLA, 35 were former members of NRSA, 26 were members of NRC, 18 had served as the ministers of the NCPO government, 26 were on the committee of NRC, and 25 people were on the committee of national strategy. “‘The Prolongation of NCPO Power’ Was Not Just a Discourse but Legally Concrete,” iLaw, June 25, 2019, <https://www.ilaw.or.th/node/5301>. 1. “4 ข้อควรรู้ ส.ว. แต่งตั้ง [4 Facts You Should Know about Appointed Senate],” iLaw, May 15, 2019, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/5261>.

generals. The rest of the senators are mostly friends or family of NCPO employees or those involved with Palang Pracharath. The prime examples include Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's younger brother, General Preecha Chan-o-cha, and former Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak's older brother, Professor Som Jatusripitak. While the Senate selection was largely met with public disapproval, it came as no surprise. Since an appointed Senate was created as a mechanism to help the junta secure their power and protect their interests, it was only logical that they handpick the individuals they could trust, hence many familiar faces from the NCPO era. The NCPO's justification for the incorporation of the military personnel into the Senate was, however, that it would prevent military coups.¹¹⁴

3. The Senate: Why Can They Do?

a) Selecting the Prime Minister

Because the primary purpose of the Senate was to preserve the NCPO's power in the new regime, the 2017 constitution granted the senators the authority not only to (1) elect a prime minister but also to (2) amend the constitution, (3) regulate the National Reformation Plan and the 20-year National Strategic Plan, and (4) approve individuals who serve in independent entities. Due to the importance of the former two, they will be the focus of this section. That 250 individuals were given votes to choose a prime minister was perceived as utter disrespect for the voice of the people. In the eyes of many, including those who supported the 2017 constitution¹¹⁵ and/or voted

¹¹⁴ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime," 282.

¹¹⁵ For example, Democrat MP candidate Atavit Suwanpakdee. Atavit Suwanpakdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 23, 2020.

for Palang Pracharath,¹¹⁶ it was the key component that rendered the new regime undemocratic.¹¹⁷ Since the 1997 and 2007 constitutions stipulated that a prime minister was only chosen by the elected members of the Lower House, not both Upper and Lower Houses, the changes introduced by the 2017 constitution presented a step backward for Thai democracy. As posited by Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, the appointed Senate and the unelected prime minister served as mechanisms for the ruling elites to maintain power in the parliamentary system in the 1980s.¹¹⁸ The 2017 constitution, however, reinstated them.¹¹⁹

Given the authority granted by the 2017 constitution, the Senate became the key in determining the choice of prime minister. There were, nevertheless, two ways in which a prime minister could be chosen. First, each political party was allowed to nominate a maximum of three prime ministerial candidates during the election campaign. While Palang Pracharath, the Democrats, and Future Forward nominated General Prayut Chan-o-cha, former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit as their sole candidates respectively, Pheu Thai chose three candidates, namely former agriculture minister Khunying Sudarat Keyuraphan, ex-transport minister Chadchart Sittipunt, and former justice minister Chaikasem Nitisiri. After the elections, the prime minister was elected in a joint parliamentary session of both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

¹¹⁶ For example, Pak Phanang participants and Pho Sai village health volunteers did not like the fact that the Senate did not come from elections. Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020. Pho Sai village health volunteers, interview with the authors, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

¹¹⁷ In the eyes of Pak Phanang participants, it was undemocratic, but “necessary.” Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

¹¹⁸ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime, 281”

¹¹⁹ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime, 281”

The problem was, however, that the 250 senators, or the so-called “senate party,” already constituted one-third of the parliament. Since a prime minister required a majority of the combined 500 MPs and the 250 appointed senators or at least 376 votes, Prayut only needed 126 votes either from his own parties and/or its allies to return to power. Despite Prayut’s claim that “the senators have brains”¹²⁰ and could decide for themselves, it was highly unlikely if not impossible for the NCPO-appointed senators to vote against him. Given the 116 votes Palang Pracharat had on their hands, Prayut only needed 10 more votes from his coalition partners. The road to the prime ministership of the anti-junta camp was, conversely, much more arduous. As discussed in the previous section, the MMA system made it virtually impossible for large parties to win a majority. Even with 255 MPs¹²¹ from the seven-party coalition led by Pheu Thai, the pro-democracy camp would be at the mercy of parties such as the Democrats or Bhumjaithai or pray for the senators to have a change of heart and still might not even come close to premiership.¹²² To the dismay of many but as expected, on June 5, 2019, 500 out of 750 members of parliament voted to restore Prayut into power. As it should be obvious by this point, the unusual MMA system and the appointed Senate were established to guarantee Prayut’s smooth return to the premiership. The MMA system was designed to prevent Pheu Thai from winning a majority, and the appointed Senate was designed to put 250 votes in Palang Pracharat’s pocket. Hence, under this system, a candidate from a losing political party, which, in this case, was Palang Pracharath because it placed

¹²⁰ “นายกฯ เผย ‘250 ส.ว.’ มีสมอง ระบุไม่รู้จะแตกแถวหรือไม่ [PM Says 250 Senators ‘Have Brains’ Doesn’t Know If They Will Defect],” bangkokbiznews, May 17, 2019, <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/835460>.

¹²¹ Some of whom would subsequently defect.

¹²² On May 27, 2019 Pheu Thai announced the formation of a seven-party coalition government with 255 MPs. 1. Aekarach Sattaburuth, “Pheu Thai Announces 7-Party Coalition with 255 MPs,” Bangkok Post, March 27, 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1651900/pheu-thai-announces-7-party-coalition-with-255-mps>.

second in the race despite its claim to have won “the popular vote,” could be selected prime minister if he or she received the majority of 376 required in the combined House-Senate vote. On the contrary, a candidate from a winning political party such as Pheu Thai or a winning coalition may not gather enough votes to reach the 376-vote threshold required to become prime minister.

The second path to the premiership is by allowing an “outsider” prime minister. In the case where the Senate is dissatisfied with the choices of PM candidates nominated by political parties, a provisional clause under Section 272 of the 2017 charter allows it to submit a joint signed petition with 126 MPs, hence comprising not less than one-half of the total number of existing members of both Houses, to the President of the National Assembly to request the National Assembly to pass a resolution exempting the nomination of the prime minister from the lists submitted by political parties under Section 88.¹²³ If the request is approved, votes of not less than two-third of the total number of existing members of both Houses or 500 votes will be required to nominate an “outsider” prime minister (i.e., an individual who was not nominated by or affiliated with any political party), and votes of not less than one-half of the total number of existing members of both Houses or 376 votes will be required to approve the prime minister. By giving the Senate the authority to select the prime minister and even nominate an outsider prime minister, the 2017 constitution was widely criticized for attaching more weight to the voices of 250 individuals than millions of voters. According to Sawasdee, it was designed to “undermine the voters’ choice of prime minister.”¹²⁴ “This is totally unacceptable! Because only a few individuals from the National

¹²³ “Thailand’s Constitution of 2017,” [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en), n.d., https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en; “ส.ว.แต่งตั้ง: เริ่มโดยคสช. เลือกโดยคสช. เพื่อสืบทอดอำนาจให้ คสช. [Appointed Senate: Originated from NCPO, Selected by NCPO, for Power Inheritance of NCPO],” iLaw, May 16, 2019, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/5265>.

¹²⁴ Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity.”

Legislative Assembly selected 250 individuals to select [the prime minister] on behalf of us. There are 70 million of us. Imagine how much power these 250 individuals have!” Yim lamented.¹²⁵

b) Amending the Constitution

This chapter has established the 2017 constitution’s function as a tool for prolonging the junta’s political influence in the new regime. In addition to securing Prayut’s premiership, the Senate also serves as a safeguard against constitutional amendments. Contrary to the junta’s claim that “we can fix it later,” the constitutional drafters made it virtually impossible to amend the 2017 constitution without the Senate’s support.¹²⁶ In contrast with the 1997 and 2007 constitutions, the 2017 constitution requires at least one-third of the Senate to amend the constitution during five years from the date of installation of the first National Assembly. In other words, since the Senate was appointed by the NCPO, amendments to the constitution could only be made with the NCPO’s approval. According to Section 256¹²⁷ of the 2017 constitution, a motion for amendment must be proposed in the form of a draft Constitution Amendment to the National Assembly and will be considered in three readings. In the first reading, the amendment must not only be approved by the votes of not less than one-half of the total number of existing members of both Houses but also be approved by not less than one-third of the Senate or 84 senators. This means that even with the approval of all MPs, the amendment cannot proceed to the second reading if it is approved by less

¹²⁵ Yim, Focus Group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹²⁶ “ส.ว.แต่งตั้ง: เริ่มโดยคสช. เลือกโดยคสช. เพื่อสืบทอดอำนาจให้ คสช. [Appointed Senate: Originated from NCPO, Selected by NCPO, for Power Inheritance of NCPO],” iLaw, May 16, 2019, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/5265>.

¹²⁷ “รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย ๒๕๖๐ [The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560 (2017)],” Ratchakitcha, n.d., <https://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2560/A/040/1.PDF>; “Thailand’s Constitution of 2017,” [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org), n.d., https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en.

than 84 senators. Hence, it is evident that constitutional drafters give more weight to the voice of 84 appointed senators than elected 500 MPs. Similarly, if the amendment proceeds to the third and final reading, it must be approved by the votes of more than one-half of the total number of the existing members of both Houses, provided that this number includes not less than one-third of the total number of existing members of the Senate.¹²⁸ Therefore, under the 2017 constitution, a motion for amendment can never be passed unless the Senate approves of it.

c) Regulating the National Reform and Approving Individuals Who Serve in Independent Entities

In the case where the anti-junta forces manage to form a government, the NCPO embedded a mechanism that allows the Senate to pull the strings. Section 270¹²⁹ of the 2017 constitution granted the Senate the duty and power to monitor, recommend, and accelerate national reform in order to achieve the objectives under Chapter XVI National Reform, and the preparation and implementation of the National Strategy. Once elected, the Council of Ministers is required to make policy statements and annual budget proposals in accordance with the 20-year National Strategic Plan. Moreover, it is required to report the progress of implementing the National Reform Plan to the National Assembly every three months. To put it differently, the Senate has the authority to ensure that the government leads the country in the direction laid out by the NCPO. Since Chapter XVI of the 2017 constitution covers a wide array of reforms, ranging from politics,

¹²⁸ “รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย ๒๕๖๐ [The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560 (2017)],” Ratchakitcha, n.d., <https://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2560/A/040/1.PDF>; “Thailand’s Constitution of 2017,” [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en), n.d., https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en.

¹²⁹ “รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย ๒๕๖๐ [The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560 (2017)],” Ratchakitcha, n.d., <https://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2560/A/040/1.PDF>; “Thailand’s Constitution of 2017,” [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en), n.d., https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en.

education, law, economy, and health care, the Senate is involved with and in control of all aspects of national reforms. Any bill to be enacted for the implementation of Chapter XVI National Reform must be submitted to and considered by the joint sitting of the National Assembly, which includes both the MPs and the Senate. Given that the Senate already consists of 250 members, it will only need the votes of 126 MPs to pass a bill. Furthermore, when the Council of Ministers deems a bill to be enacted for the implementation of Chapter XVI National Reform, it must notify the President of the National Assembly and submit it to the National Assembly. When the Council of Ministers fails to do so, but MPs or senators deem that such a bill is a bill to be enacted for the implementation of Chapter XVI National Reform, the MPs or senators comprising not less than one-fifth of the members of each House may sign a joint petition to request the President of the National Assembly to decide. If the President of the National Assembly decides that such a bill is a bill to be enacted for the implementation of Chapter XVI National Reform, the Senate will be involved in the consideration of that bill. Lastly, if the government fails to follow the 20-year National Strategic Plan, the Senate also has the authority to report it to the Constitutional Court and the National Anti-Corruption Commission, both of which were appointed by the NCPO. If found guilty, the Council of Ministers will have to leave office, lose the right to for elections for life, or lose the right to vote no more than 10 years, and may face imprisonment from 1 to 10 years. In sum, even if the anti-junta camp manages to form a government, it must be extremely careful with each step it takes and strictly follow the 20-year National Strategic Plan.

As previously mentioned, the members of independent entities such as the Constitutional Court and the National Anti-Corruption Commission were handpicked by the NCPO. In addition to its legislative and executive checks and balances, the Senate was also given the authority to approve individuals to be selected for appointment to a position in the Constitution and other

independent entities. A selection committee will be formed to undertake the selection. However, it requires final approval from not less than half of the Senate.

4. Signaling Strength and Shaping Player Behavior

Most criticisms of the Senate focus on its role in selecting the prime minister, safeguarding against constitutional amendments, and, to a lesser extent, regulating the National Reform and the 20-year National Strategic Plan as well as approving individuals who serve in independent entities. The impact of the appointed Senate, however, extends far beyond what is emphasized by the critics. In addition to the aforementioned functions, the appointed 250-member Senate also serves as a vital mechanism for signaling the strength of the junta and shaping the behavior of players in the game. The findings from the interviews and focus groups across the country highlight the psychological impact of the appointed Senate. With 250 senators on its side, Palang Pracharath projected an “aura” of a winner, thereby incentivizing former MPs, local politicians, bureaucrats, voters, as well as other players to join its side and disincentivizing them to join the other side. “If we combine 250 senators with 500 MPs, we get 750 members of both Houses. But out of 750, they [Palang Pracharath] already have 250 in their pocket so it is as if they are one-third of the way to victory,” said Pheu Thai candidate Treerat Sirichantaropas.¹³⁰ Although Thaksin’s parties have been sweeping every Thai election in the past two decades, the appointed Senate, coupled with the MMA system which put Pheu Thai at an unfair disadvantage, made players in the game reluctant to side with Pheu Thai.¹³¹ As Former Prime Minister and Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva put it, “the Senate’s power to select the prime minister forces whoever wants to compete with Mr.

¹³⁰ Treerat Sirichantaropas, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 16, 2020.

¹³¹ Treerat Sirichantaropas, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 16, 2020; Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 14, 2020.

Prayut to find 376 MPs ... whereas Mr. Prayut only needs 126.”¹³² Pheu Thai was well aware of this fact—not only was it difficult to convince politicians to join its party and convince other parties to join its coalition, but, as Chapter 5 will discuss in detail, it was also difficult to prevent its MPs from switching to Palang Pracharath. In the eyes of players in the game, the appointed Senate signified that “...no matter how many votes you receive, if the Senate does not vote for you, you can’t become prime minister,” said Democrat MP candidate Atavit Suwanpakdee.¹³³ Moreover, it sent a strong signal to MP candidates and political parties that they could not become government unless they joined Palang Pracharath. As will be investigated in Chapter 5, the appointed Senate thus made it easier for Palang Pracharath to co-opt politicians into its party and co-opt small and medium-sized parties into its coalition government.¹³⁴ Furthermore, the appointed Senate also induced government officials, ranging from village headmen, subdistrict headmen, district chiefs, provincial governors, to the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Interior, to support Palang Pracharath. As Pheu Thai MP candidate Anudith Nakornthap explained, under democracy and without the 250 senators, these government officials would be on “the neutral gear”—that is, they would not lean towards any particular party because they did not know who would win the elections and become their boss.¹³⁵ The 2019 election results and Prayut’s return to premiership were, however, a foregone conclusion. Therefore, these government officials would bet their bottom dollar on Palang Pracharath’s victory and give full support to those they believed would control state power. Since they were direct beneficiaries, their goal was to help Palang Pracharath win as many seats as possible. Take vice-governors as an example: whoever helped Palang

¹³² Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹³³ Atavit Suwanpakdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 23, 2020.

¹³⁴ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

¹³⁵ Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 14, 2020.

Pracharath candidate(s) win elections would soon be promoted to governor.¹³⁶ Similarly, the appointed Senate created a widespread belief among voters that Palang Pracharath's victory was a virtual certainty and, as will be examined in Chapter 5, contributed to their strategic behavior to vote for the winning party. To put it differently, even if the Senate mechanism was not “switched on,”¹³⁷ its mere presence influenced the decisions of both politicians and voters.¹³⁸ The voters who supported Palang Pracharath and the voters who did not, nevertheless, held starkly divergent views on whether the appointed Senate would respect the will of the people. In contrast with the anti-junta camp's firm belief that under no circumstances would the senators ever act against the NCPO and “betray their bosses”—those who appointed and gave them power—the “classic defense” of Palang Pracharath supporters was that the senators would not vote against the people. In their view, it was only because Palang Pracharath was able to form a coalition of more than half of the lower House that the Senate elected Prayut as prime minister. “I don't believe that the senators have the audacity to vote against the prime ministerial candidate that a majority of MPs selected,” said Democrat MP candidate Dr. Warong.¹³⁹ Likewise, Palang Pracharath supporters in Tha Phra believed that Prayut would be chosen as prime minister regardless of the Senate.¹⁴⁰

IV. Controlling the Referees

Now that the rules of the game have been designed in its favor, the NCPO proceeded to control the “referees” to ensure a smooth election process or, more precisely, to engineer its preferred outcome. Since it came into power in 2014, the junta has filled “independent

¹³⁶ Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 14, 2020.

¹³⁷ That is, the senators do not elect Prayut as prime minister.

¹³⁸ Parit Wacharasindhu, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 25, 2020.

¹³⁹ Warong Dechgitvigrom, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 15, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

organizations,” such as the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), the Constitutional Court, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), the State Audit Office (SAO), and the National Human Right Commission (NHRC) with its own people. As evidenced by the downfalls of Thaksin’s parties as well as his nominees former Prime Ministers Yingluck Shinawatra and Samak Sundaravej, these organizations serve as powerful actors that can “paralyze or even bring down” an elected government.¹⁴¹ Under the 2007 constitution, the Senate was given the authority to select and approve individuals who served in independent organizations. However, in the absence of the Senate, the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) stepped up to exercise this authority during the NCPO era.¹⁴² Because NLA was handpicked by the NCPO, it arguably acted on behalf of the NCPO to recruit individuals the NCPO preferred and dismissed those the NCPO wanted to get rid of. In addition to exercising its authority through the NLA, the NCPO also exercised its power according to Section 44 to directly intervene with committee member recruitment. According to the data from iLaw, the NCPO used its special powers to issue at least 14 orders and exercised its power through the NLA at least 14 times.¹⁴³ This section examines the role of the ECT, an independent organization that played the most instrumental role in the 2019 elections.

¹⁴¹ Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime, 282.”

¹⁴² “สี่ปี คสช. ใช้มาตรา 44 + สนช. เข้ายึดองค์กรอิสระได้เบ็ดเสร็จตามใจ [Four Years, NCPO Used Section 44 + NLA Controlling Independent Organizations],” iLaw, May 15, 2018, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/4808>.

¹⁴³ “สี่ปี คสช. ใช้มาตรา 44 + สนช. เข้ายึดองค์กรอิสระได้เบ็ดเสร็จตามใจ [Four Years, NCPO Used Section 44 + NLA Controlling Independent Organizations],” iLaw, May 15, 2018, <https://ilaw.or.th/node/4808>.

A. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT)

1. “Set Zero”¹⁴⁴

On June 9, 2017, the NLA “set zero” on the ECT in a 161-15 vote, forcing the incumbent five-member election commission to step down once the Election Act came into effect.¹⁴⁵ The five election commissioners would serve as the acting ECT until the new commission was formed. The ECT was one of the independent organizations created under the 1997 constitution to manage, oversee, and regulate the election process and ensure free and fair elections. Its responsibilities not only include the organization, management, and counting of all elections and voting in the kingdom but also include the verification of candidate qualifications and the investigation of electoral irregularities.¹⁴⁶ More importantly, the commission also has the power to file petitions to dissolve political parties. Given the scope of its responsibilities and legal powers, the ECT has served as a key political actor and played a vital role in determining election outcomes, and it is widely believed that whoever takes the reins of the ECT would be advantageous in the electoral battle.¹⁴⁷ While proponents of “Set Zero” claimed that it was part of the reforms on independent organizations,¹⁴⁸ critics argued that it was a mere pretext for replacing the incumbents with the

¹⁴⁴ In Thailand, the phrase “set zero” is often used to refer to a situation where something is reset or restarted from the beginning. It can be applied in various contexts, ranging from a mass euthanization of stray dogs to politics. By “setting zero” on the ECT, NLA removed all the incumbents, hence enabling the new Election Commission to start with a clean slate.

¹⁴⁵ Aekarach Sattaburuth, “NLA ‘Sets Zero’ on Election Commission,” Bangkok Post, June 9, 2017, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1265811/nla-sets-zero-on-election-commission>.

¹⁴⁶ Voice TV, “Make It Clear: ทำไมต้อง ‘เซตซีโร่’ กกต. ? [Make It Why Sets Zero on ECT?],” Voice Online, June 15, 2017, <https://www.voicetv.co.th/read/499006>.

¹⁴⁷ Voice TV, “Make It Clear: ทำไมต้อง ‘เซตซีโร่’ กกต. ? [Make It Why Sets Zero on ECT?],” Voice Online, June 15, 2017, <https://www.voicetv.co.th/read/499006>.

¹⁴⁸ Ekkapon Banleu, “ไม่ได้ไปต่อ! ‘เซตซีโร่’ คำตอบของการปฏิรูปองค์กรอิสระ? [Didn’t Go Any Further! ‘Set Zero’, the Answer to Independent Organization Reform],” THE STANDARD, June 15, 2017, <https://thestandard.co/news-politics-set-zero-before-election/>.

individuals the NCPO could control.¹⁴⁹ The most controversial point of the “Set Zero” proposal was whether the incumbent Election Commission should be allowed to complete their terms. Secretary General P-Net Laddawan Tantivitayapitak highlighted the discriminatory nature of the “Setting Zero” proposal and questioned why other independent organizations, such as the Constitutional Court and the Office of the Ombudsman had not been set zero.¹⁵⁰ Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam, the legal mind of the NCPO and Prayut’s right-hand man, explained, however, that because the Election Commission would now consist of 7 instead of 5 members, it must be “Set Zero” in order to prevent problems that may arise from having members selected from different sources (i.e., the incumbents had served an elected government, and the new commission would be appointed by the NCPO).¹⁵¹ Moreover, an increase in the number of commission members would result in changes in the ECT’s structure whereas other independent organizations, such as the Office of the Ombudsman remained unchanged. As a result of “Set Zero,” the five incumbent commissioners were replaced by seven commissioners who were unilaterally appointed by the NLA and would be serving for a non-renewable term of seven years.

According to “Set Zero” victim Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, the real reasons for “Setting Zero” on the Election Commission were to replace the incumbents with its own people and to “slit the chicken’s throat before the monkey.”¹⁵² He explained that despite the selection process, the

¹⁴⁹ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020; Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020; Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹⁵¹ Boonlarp Poosuwan, “รีเซ็ต -เซตซีโร่ องค์การอิสระ ‘เหตุผล’ บนความความลักลั่น หลายมาตรฐาน [Reset-Set Zero Independent Organizations Double Standard ‘Reasons’],” ThaiPublica, January 4, 2018, <https://thaipublica.org/2018/01/reset-set-zero-an-independent-government-agency/>.

¹⁵² To slit the chicken’s throat before the money is a Thai proverb meaning to punish someone as an example for another. Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

new commission required a final approval from the NLA. After the incumbent commission was “Set Zero,” a new commission would be selected but may not necessarily be approved until the NLA was satisfied. Hence, the selection process would continue until the NLA found the individuals it could trust. Somchai also claimed that his removal was completely unnecessary, for his term would, in fact, come to end in the next few months “But because I talked too much,¹⁵³ they used Section 44 to remove me ... They did not want anyone in independent organizations to express a different political stance from them or act in such a way that might create problems for them ... and it worked. Because after that, no one ever criticized them again,” said Somchai.¹⁵⁴ Laddawan, likewise, argued that the NCPO wanted to fill the Election Commission with the individuals “they could talk to.”¹⁵⁵ “They didn’t trust the ECT ... they weren’t sure and didn’t want to use the people they didn’t know. So they selected a new commission,” said Laddawan.¹⁵⁶ Finally, the sources from the field research revealed that the election commissioners at the constituency level have also been “bought.” One interviewee revealed that he was part of an election commissioner in Ubon Ratchathani. He was ordered to help Palang Pracharath and paid 12,000 baht after the elections.¹⁵⁷

2. Political Bias and Incompetent Electoral Management

In addition to the origin of the seven commissioners, the ECT was also heavily criticized for both its political bias and incompetent electoral management. There were allegations of bias and countless complaints of electoral manipulation and malpractice before, during, and after the

¹⁵³ Somchai had been an outspoken critic of the NCPO and the NLA.

¹⁵⁴ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Author’s field notes, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

elections. This section will examine some of the main criticisms of the various stages of the electoral process. First, there was ample evidence that the ECT redrew electoral boundaries and gerrymandered constituencies to remove incumbency advantage and favor Palang Pracharath.¹⁵⁸ Former Election Commissioner Somchai Srisutthiyakorn claimed that new electoral districts had been drawn as part of the 2018 Organic Law on Elections.¹⁵⁹ “But they did not announce the new constituencies. Then there was an order from the NCPO requiring the ECT to redraw the electoral boundaries in accordance with citizens’ demands ... but in fact the citizens did not demand [this]-it was the politicians who demanded,” said Somchai.¹⁶⁰ The most notorious example was Sukhothai—Somchai pointed out the stark differences between the constituencies drawn after the constitutional referendum and the constituencies redrawn after the NCPO’s order.¹⁶¹

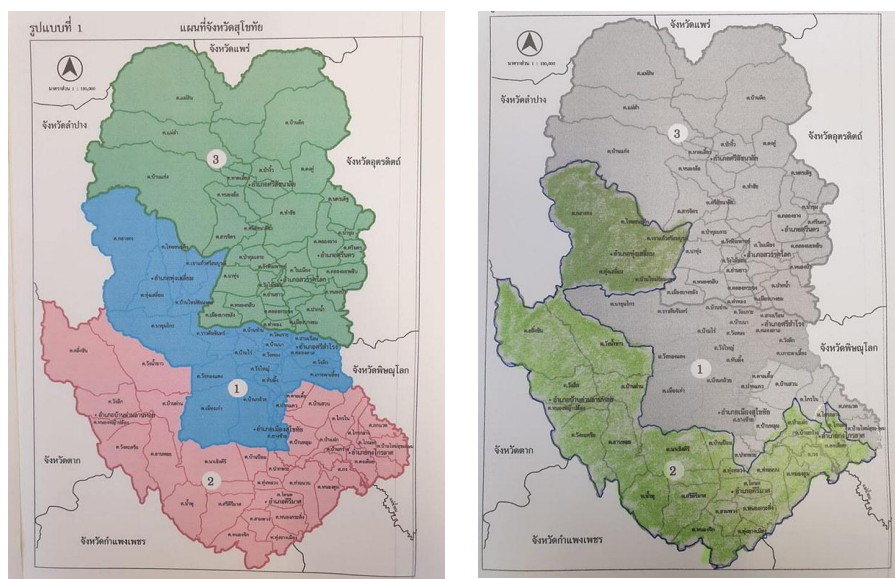
¹⁵⁸ See, for example, Sirivunnabood, “The Rules Change but the Players Don’t”; Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity”; Cleve Arguelles et al., *The 2019 Thai General Election: A Missed Opportunity for Democracy*, ed. George Rothschild, Chandanie Watawala, and Damaso G. Magbual, *The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)* (Bangkok: Asian Network for Free Elections., 2019), <https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Thai-Report-2nd-edition.pdf>; and Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, “Thailand’s Tainted Election Commission,” *New Mandala*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/thailands-tainted-election-commission/>.

¹⁵⁹ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

¹⁶⁰ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

¹⁶¹ “สมชัย ชี้แจงใจแบ่งเขตสุโขทัยใครขอมา ชี้จุดเชื่อมต่อระหว่างอำเภออยู่ในป่า [Somchai Asks Who Gerrymandered Sukhothai, Pointing Out Connecting Points in the Forest],” *Prachatai*, November 30, 2018, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2018/11/79845>.

Figure 1. Electoral Map of Sukothai¹⁶²



According to Somchai, the constituencies drawn after the referendum were slightly different from the 2011 elections version due to population changes, but they were not as “obnoxious” as the redrawn version.¹⁶³ He explained that according to the criteria set by the ECT, the areas within a constituency must be adjacent. However, as shown in the picture on the right, the two areas were barely connected, and there was no road connecting them. It was, in fact, a mountain ridge, and required a detour. Therefore, they should not be in the same constituency. According to Somchai, the electoral boundaries of Sukochai exemplify the advantages and disadvantages resulting from gerrymandering.¹⁶⁴ It should also be noted that this province is the stronghold of Somsak Thepsuthin, one of Palang Pracharath leaders and the very person who declared “the constitution was designed for us.” Sukothai was not, however, the only province that was subject to

¹⁶² “สมชัย ข้องใจแบ่งเขตสุโขทัยใครขอมมา ชี้จุดเชื่อมต่อระหว่างอำเภออยู่ในป่า [Somchai Asks Who Gerrymandered Sukhothai, Pointing Out Connecting Points in the Forest],” *Prachatai*, November 30, 2018, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2018/11/79845>.

¹⁶³ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

gerrymandering. Multiple electoral districts in Bangkok were also redrawn in such a way that, many believed, weakened Democrat incumbents. Take Constituency 6 Ratchathewi, Phaya Thai, and Chatuchak (only Chatuchak and Chom Pon subdistricts) for example. Atavit Suwanpakdee, Democrat incumbent for two terms, revealed that more than half of his constituency consisted of new areas and military bases.¹⁶⁵ “I don’t know if it was in favor of Palang Pracharath, but I think the constituencies were redrawn to change the equation, to prevent incumbents from gaining an [electoral] advantage ... to make it harder for them to play this game,” said Atavit.¹⁶⁶ He asserted that since elections were introduced in Thailand, never before had his Chatuchak constituency been “chopped in half” like this. Even when it was a smaller constituency, it had never been chopped in half.¹⁶⁷ In the eyes of Atavit’s opponents, this was an attempt to “kill” him. “I think they [the NCPO] intended to kill Atavit ... if you don’t believe me, you can check, and you will see that all the constituencies dominated by the Democrats were all chopped up,” said Chris Potranandana, Future Forward Constituency 6 MP candidate.¹⁶⁸ However, just as Future Forward’s electoral success was the byproduct of the NCPO’s manipulation of the electoral system, Chris pointed out that by undermining Democrat incumbents, the NCPO’s redrawing of electoral boundaries also indirectly benefited new challengers, such as Future Forward, making it easier for them to penetrate into Democrat strongholds.¹⁶⁹

Contrary to the widespread belief that the electoral districts were redrawn to favor Palang Pracharath, the ECT argued that it was not intended to give any party an unfair advantage.¹⁷⁰ In

¹⁶⁵ Atavit Suwanpakdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 23, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Atavit Suwanpakdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 23, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Atavit Suwanpakdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 23, 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Chris Potranandana, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 20, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Chris Potranandana, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 20, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020; Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

response to Somchai's claim that the electoral boundaries had been redrawn, Election Commissioner Nat admitted that while it was true, constituency candidates were involved in the process, and the boundaries were designed to preserve the communities as much as possible.¹⁷¹ Moreover, Election Commissioner Boonyakiat pointed out that the number of constituencies had decreased from 400 to 350, thus making it necessary to redraw electoral districts.¹⁷² There were also changes in Bangkok administrative districts.¹⁷³ Both Nat and Boonyakiat confirmed that the divisions of electoral districts were based on population, not political bases.¹⁷⁴ "We didn't consider the political bases at all. We only looked at the population and looked at the areas to see if they were adjacent and similar in terms of population sizes," said Boonyakiat.¹⁷⁵ He also assured that the ECT only followed the law,¹⁷⁶ it was never in their intention to eliminate incumbents. Boonyakiat explained that despite the ECT's efforts to preserve the existing electoral districts, the changes in population sizes and the number of constituencies made it inevitable that the new electoral boundaries would affect some incumbents' political bases.¹⁷⁷ Unfortunately, as Yingcheep pointed out, the debate whether the redrawing of electoral districts favored Palang Pracharath would remain unsettled, for the election results at the polling station level were never announced.¹⁷⁸

While the voting process was mostly smooth on election day, irregularities clouded the counting and reporting of election results. Suspicions of electoral fraud loomed as reports across

¹⁷¹ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

¹⁷² Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

¹⁷³ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

¹⁷⁴ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020; Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

¹⁷⁶ The 2018 Organic Law on Elections.

¹⁷⁷ Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020.

¹⁷⁸ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

the country revealed a large number of invalid ballots and “ghost votes.” On top of this, the ECT also failed to release election results in a timely fashion. First, there were 2,130,327 invalid ballots, which accounted for 5.57% of the total ballots. Although this number was comparable to that of the 2011 elections (1,726,768 or 4.90% invalid party-list ballots and 2,040,261 or 5.79% invalid constituency ballots), critics blamed the ECT for issues such as “the overly restrictive regulations regarding the validity of the ballot marks” and its failure to prepare the electorate for the process (ANFREL).¹⁷⁹ In the focus group, one participant revealed that she intended to vote for Pheu Thai but “marked the wrong box,” so her ballot was invalid.¹⁸⁰ As suggested in “ANFREL Interim Report on the Conduct of the 2019 Thai General Election,” the ECT could have put more effort into disseminating information on the polling procedures to ensure that voters mark their ballots correctly and prevent invalid ballots. While the anti-junta camp perceived an excessive number of invalid ballots as an attempt to curtail the voters for the pro-democracy parties,¹⁸¹ the election commissioners¹⁸² argued that it could be due to a variety of reasons. While 3% is an acceptable threshold for invalid ballots, 5.79% is considered high.¹⁸³ However, as Somchai explained, an increase in invalid ballots was expected as a result of the change in the electoral system and especially the inconsistent party numbers across the constituencies. Moreover, Nat asserted that a fair share of invalid ballots were, in fact, intentional—many voters wanted to vote for the party

¹⁷⁹ ANFREL, “ANFREL Interim Report on the Conduct of the 2019 Thai General Election: Asian Network for Free Elections,” Asian Network for Free Elections | Advancing Electoral Democracy in Asia, August 20, 2019, <https://anfrel.org/anfrel-interim-report-on-the-conduct-of-the-2019-thai-general-election/>.

¹⁸⁰ Author’s field notes, Thailand, November to December, 2020.

¹⁸¹ Ratchathewi participants, for example, shared this view. Focus group, Ratchathewi, Bangkok, October 10, 2020.

¹⁸² For example, Nat Laosesawakul, Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, and Somchai Srisutthiyakorn.

¹⁸³ Boonyakiat Rakchartcharoen, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 15, 2020; Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

that did not field a candidate in their particular constituency (e.g., Thai Raksa Chart).¹⁸⁴ “They would just add the party’s name on the ballot,” making it invalid, said Nat.¹⁸⁵ While it was probably not the case for a majority of invalid ballots, Somchai suggested that the possibility of local officials marking the ballots of their opponent(s) invalid could not be ruled out—it was a common tactic employed by local election commissioners at the constituency level and was not particularly unique to these elections.¹⁸⁶ He rejected, however, the possibility that the ECT itself was involved in fabricating the numbers.¹⁸⁷ As previously mentioned, it was not uncommon for local election commissioners to be “bought” by politicians to help them win elections. Besides the two million invalid ballots, various constituencies also reported “ghost votes,”¹⁸⁸ a mismatch between the number of eligible voters and the number of votes tallied. Nevertheless, as in the case of invalid ballots, this was likely due to human errors and had negligible impact on the election outcomes.¹⁸⁹ Lastly, not only were the preliminary results released on election night “wildly inaccurate.”¹⁹⁰ but the official results were also delayed by almost two months. As discussed in this section, the 2019 elections were marred by irregularities and alleged fraud. However, as Somchai, Boonyakiat, Nat, Laddawan, and Yingcheep argued, they were likely caused by errors at the operational level rather than direct orders from the ECT itself. As Yingcheep put it, “The Election Commissioners didn’t do their best to prevent these ... and just let it slide. They didn’t do their best to make sure

¹⁸⁴ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

¹⁸⁵ Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

¹⁸⁷ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020.

¹⁸⁸ “บัตรเขย่งคืออะไร กกต. ไขข้อข้องใจ [What Are Ghost Ballots? ECT Explains],” PPTVHD36, March 29, 2019, <https://www.pptvhd36.com/news/%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%94%E0%B9%87%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%99/100660>.

¹⁸⁹ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹⁹⁰ ANFREL, “ANFREL Interim Report.”

everything ran smoothly. This was not what they were here for. They were here only to make sure the NCPO won. That's it.”¹⁹¹

3. Changing the Party-List Formula

Of all the criticisms directed at the ECT's management of the elections, the biggest and most important criticism was perhaps the modification of the party-list formula. On the night of March 24, 2019, the ECT stopped releasing election results after 95% of the ballots were counted and left the nation in political limbo for 45 days before announcing the official results on May 8. On March 27, 2019, Pheu Thai announced the formation of a seven-party coalition government with 255 MPs. Leaders of five pro-democracy parties—Future Forward, Pheu Chart, Prachachart, Seri Ruam Thai, and Thai People Power--joined Pheu Thai in a press conference and signed an agreement to stop the NCPO's return to power.¹⁹² Despite the absence of the representatives of a seventh party, the New Economics Party, Pheu Thai said that the party had committed to join the alliance. The official figures, however, demonstrated that the anti-junta bloc only gained a total of 245 of the 500 seats in the lower house, 6 seats short of a majority and much farther from the 376 seats required to choose the prime minister. While the law allowed 60 days for the ECT to finalize the election results, the public viewed the delay as a sign of rigging. “I believe the elections were rigged,” said a Future Forward campaign staff.¹⁹³ In the past elections, the results are typically released within a few days after the election day, and the two-month delay raised public suspicion about what was going on in the ECT office. Questions were raised about the complex formula the

¹⁹¹ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

¹⁹² “6+1 พรรคประกาศตั้งรัฐบาลด้วยคะแนนไม่ต่ำกว่า 255 ที่นั่ง ลั่นหยุดยั้ง คสช.สืบทอดอำนาจ” [6+1 Parties Announced to Form a Government with Votes of No Less Than 255 Seats to Stop the NCPO from Inheriting Power], *The Momentum*, March 27, 2019, <https://themomentum.co/to-form-government/>.

¹⁹³ Peerapol, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 20, 2020.

ECT used to calculate the party-list seats. According to the widespread interpretation of the constitution by academics and the media, 71,065 votes were believed to be the minimum threshold required to secure a single party-list seat (as discussed in the section on the MMA system). Instead of following this formula, the ECT tweaked its interpretation of the constitution and allocated party-list seats to 11 “micro-parties” that had garnered between 33,754 and 68,973 votes. Perceived as a ploy to “shore up”¹⁹⁴ Palang Pracharath’s parliamentary position, the modification of the party-list formula had a dramatic impact on the formation of a government coalition, turning the pro-democracy coalition government into the opposition in the blink of an eye. Based on the formula used by academics and the media, Future Forward should have received 87 or 88 seats.¹⁹⁵ As a result of the new formula, Future Forward’s party-list seats had shrunk to 81 seats. “This is a coup by the ECT!” Future Forward Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit declared.¹⁹⁶ Future Forward’s loss of seats marked a turning point for the pro-democracy forces. Had the party been allocated the same number of seats, the pro-democracy alliance would have successfully formed a coalition government.

Election Commissioner Nat Laoseesawakul, however, rejected the allegation that there had been changes in the party-list formula.¹⁹⁷ “No, the formula was drawn from the current constitution ... it’s just that the public didn’t pay attention to it. When the referendum was held, this formula had already existed,” Nat said.¹⁹⁸ He explained that the delay in announcing the election results was not caused by the modification of the party-list formula. “The commission said it had not

¹⁹⁴ Lertchoosakul, “The Year of Living Unpredictably.”

¹⁹⁵ Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

¹⁹⁸ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

released the results because it had the power to do so,” Nat claimed.¹⁹⁹ Somchai and Punchada, likewise, confirmed that the formula was based on the simulation conducted when the constitution was drafted.²⁰⁰ As part of the committee in charge of electoral design, Punchada explained that they conducted the simulation using the data from the past elections.²⁰¹ While she was aware from the onset that the formula would result in small parties receiving party-list seats, Punchada admitted being surprised by the large number of “micro parties.”²⁰² “The number of small parties was greater than what we predicted. Because in the past, it has never been like this ... they would at least receive three to five seats. But because we used past election results to run the simulation, it turned out that we got a lot of parties receiving one seat each,” said Punchada.²⁰³ She argued that she had, in fact, already warned the committee not to allow too many small parties because “it would cause a headache.”²⁰⁴ The senior members of the committee, however, decided to disregard the previously agreed threshold, thereby allowing several micro parties to gain party list seats.²⁰⁵ To put it differently, Somchai explained that it was the original formula, but the election results used in the simulation were different from the actual results.²⁰⁶ In other words, the formula had not been revised, but the consequences were unintentional. Somchai also added that at the time the simulation was run, very few people, including the committee members, understood the formula. Moreover, he claimed that he had tried running additional simulations himself and discovered that when adding hundreds of parties each receiving a small number of votes, even a party with 2,000

¹⁹⁹ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

²⁰⁰ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020; Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

²⁰¹ Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

²⁰² Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

²⁰³ Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

²⁰⁴ Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

²⁰⁵ Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

²⁰⁶ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020

votes would be allocated a part-list seat.²⁰⁷ In response to these claims, iLaw manager Yingcheep Atchanont raised two points to support the allegation that the party-list formula had been modified.²⁰⁸ First, while he admitted that it was not “entirely wrong” to make this justification, he argued that no one had ever seen the memorandum the committee cited as evidence to support the claim the formula had not been modified.²⁰⁹ “It was a memo of a parliament meeting. They claimed that this was what they agreed at the meeting, but no one has ever seen it before,” said Yingcheep.²¹⁰ Second, and perhaps more importantly, Yingcheep contended that when reading the constitution together with the Organic Law on Elections, everyone would interpret it in the same manner, which would lead to the formula widely used by academics and the media.

“The evidence is that every media outlet reached the same conclusion. Who told the media to calculate [the party-list seats] this way? No one, right? The ECT did not tell the media to calculate it this way. But after every media outlet read it [the constitution and the Organic Law on Elections], that’s what they thought. That’s what I thought as well. That’s what all political parties thought. Every party calculated it this way. Every media outlet calculated this way without anyone misleading them ... at that time we all reached the same understanding and calculated it [the seats] the same way. If it [our calculation] was incorrect, the ECT should have said something that night or at least in the morning, but they never did,” said Yingcheep.²¹¹

He explained that if one only looked at the constitution, it was possible to reach the same interpretation as the ECT. He pointed out that, however, if read in conjunction with the Organic Law on Elections, it would be impossible to interpret in the same manner as the ECT. Therefore, given what was written in the Organic Law on Elections, it was evident that the ECT did not initially intend to interpret the law this way.²¹² In sum, regardless of whether or not the ECT had

²⁰⁷ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020

²⁰⁸ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

²⁰⁹ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

²¹⁰ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

²¹¹ Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

²¹² Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020.

modified the party-list formula, the end result demonstrated how this so-called independent organization was capable of changing the election outcomes in favor of Palang Pracharath and its allies. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 5, Palang Pracharath's success in forming a coalition government had a direct impact on the behavior of the Democrats and especially Bhumjaithai, leading to their decision to join the junta's side.

V. Handicapping Other Players

Finally, in addition to designing the rules of the game in its favor and controlling the referees, the NCPO also tilted the playing field by handicapping other players, using the Constitutional Court and a variety of state apparatuses. This section provides a brief discussion of the role of the Constitutional Court as a political instrument for toppling the regime's political opponents and the NCPO's use of state apparatuses to manage electoral competition.

A. Constitutional Court

Despite its establishment by the 1997 constitution as a guardian institution to oversee other independent organizations, the Constitutional Court of Thailand has served as a pawn of the regime to restrain electoral politics and preserve the power of traditional elites.²¹³ Given its final authority to interpret the constitution and arbitrate constitutional questions, the Constitution Court is placed

²¹³ Björn Dressel, "Judicialization of Politics or Politicization of the Judiciary? Considerations from Recent Events in Thailand," *The Pacific Review* 23, no. 5 (2010): 671–91; Tom Ginsburg, "Constitutional Afterlife: The Continuing Impact of Thailand's Postpolitical Constitution," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 7, no. 1 (2008): 83–105. Peter Leyland, "Thailand's Constitutional Watchdogs: Dobermans, Bloodhounds or Lapdogs?," *Journal of Comparative Law* 2, no. 2 (2008): 151–77. Peter Leyland (2008) posits that independent organizations are subject to direct influence of the political elites. In his words, "[i]n effect, when abuses were detected, instead of acting decisively and using the full scope of their powers, the watchdogs had become compliant to the wishes of the most powerful political actors." Peter Leyland, "Thailand's Constitutional Watchdogs: Dobermans, Bloodhounds or Lapdogs?," *Journal of Comparative Law* 2, no. 2 (2008): 151–77, 173–174.

at the core of the entire constitutional apparatus.²¹⁴ Since Thaksin Shinawatra entered the electoral arena, his parties have proven undefeatable at the ballot box, hence posing a grave threat to the establishment. Never before has a civilian leader garnered immense public support and enjoyed unmatched popularity. After the emergence of pro-democracy sentiment following Black May 1992, military crackdowns and direct royal interventions were no longer viable options. Realizing that it was impossible to defeat Thaksin through electoral processes, the regime sought help from the judiciary. The judicial interventions from 2006 to 2019 can be viewed as a series of attempts to uproot the Thaksin regime and restrain the influence of electoral politics. Except for one instance,²¹⁵ never has the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of Thaksin's parties or, more recently, a party from the anti-junta camp. In a span of 13 years, the Constitutional Court ousted three elected prime ministers—Samak Sundaravej, Somchai Wongsawat, and Yingluck Shinawatra—all Thaksin's nominees, from office; dissolved three of his parties: Thai Rak Thai (2007), Palang Prachachon (2008), and most recently Thai Raksa Chart (2019); and nullified two elections won by his parties: the 2006 and 2014 elections. The recurrence of such judicial interventions in politics displayed the Constitutional Court's partiality against Thaksin and his allies. The subsequent dissolution of Future Forward and the disqualification of Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit from an MP confirmed the Court's alignment with the regime.

As demonstrated by recent political events, the Constitutional Court has worked hand in hand with the ECT to rein in electoral politics and serve the interests of those who had empowered them. As in the past elections, the Constitutional Court overly meddled in the 2019 elections. In

²¹⁴ Andrew Harding and Peter Leyland, *The Constitutional System of Thailand: A Contextual Analysis* (Oxford: Hart, 2011), 162 & 164.

²¹⁵ The court voted 8-7 in favor of Thaksin, ruling on the question of whether he had improperly transferred his assets, right after Thai Rak Thai's victory in the 2001 elections.

response to Pheu Thai's cunning "breaking the bill" strategy and Thai Raksa Chart's controversial nomination of Princess Ubolratana as its prime ministerial candidate, the Constitutional Court's job was to make sure Thaksin's plan was not carried through. While the ECT initially accepted Thai Raksa Chart's nomination of Princess Ubolratana, it quickly reversed its position after the king released a royal statement criticizing his older sister's plans "inappropriate" and unconstitutional and submitted a case to the Constitutional Court to consider dissolution of the party.²¹⁶ By disbanding Thai Raksa Chart just in time for the elections, the Constitutional Court successfully thwarted Thaksin's plan to counteract the effects of MMA and crippled Pheu Thai, which was left with no candidates in the 100 constituencies in which its sister party was running. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court was also involved with the announcement of the election results, as it ratified the ECT's revised party-list formula. On May 8, 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled unanimously that Section 128 of the organic law governing the election of members of parliament was constitutional and did not contradict Section 91 of the charter, thereby dropping the threshold from one party-list seat per 71,065 votes to one seat per approximately 30,000 votes and allowing a total of 27 parties to enter the parliament.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Al Jazeera, "Thai Political Party Suspends Princess' Campaign," News | Al Jazeera, February 9, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/9/thai-raksa-chart-party-suspends-princess-ubolratanas-campaign>.

²¹⁷ As per the court's decision, both Section 128 of the MP election law and Section 91 of the Constitution established a procedure for computing and distributing list MPs to ensure a total of 150, in accordance with Section 83 of the charter. The clauses within the subsections of Section 128 extend beyond those in Section 91 of the constitution, ensuring that the count of list MPs aligns with the stipulation, in case the initial allocation of MPs falls short of the complete 150 list MPs. "Constitutional Court: List-MP Calculation Method Ruled Constitutional," National News Bureau of Thailand, May 9, 2019, <https://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news/detail/TCATG190508155617381>. For more details on the judicialization of Thai politics, see "9 Judges Will Decide the Fate of Thai General Election," Prachatai English, February 19, 2019, <https://prachataienglish.com/node/7933>.

B. State Apparatuses

Besides the Constitutional Court, NCPO used a broad array of state apparatuses to “handicap” its opponents. There were reports of repression, intimidation, harassment, and obstruction of campaign both prior to and during the elections. Anti-junta parties faced administrative obstacles, making it difficult for them to campaign. As Somchai Srisutthiyakorn emphasized, the 2019 elections were “free” but “not fair,” for “they were not a race with the same starting line.”²¹⁸ The ruling junta’s emergency orders under Section 44 prohibited all other parties and candidates from engaging in political activity, giving Palang Pracharath an unfair head start. For example, Palang Pracharath and one of its allies the Action Coalition Party were the only two parties that were aware of the electoral time frames in advance and hence the only two parties that were able to organize fundraisers to finance their campaigns.²¹⁹ Moreover, while Palang Pracharath had the freedom to conduct their campaign without constraints, anti-junta parties were subject to tight control of campaign activities and deterred from using state-owned facilities such as schools and stadiums for campaign events.²²⁰ Ubon Ratchathani University, for example, allowed no parties but Palang Pracharath to use their hall.²²¹ As the junta’s main rival in this electoral race, Pheu Thai encountered particularly more challenges than other parties. Harsh restrictions were imposed on its campaigns. For example, given the hot weather in the Northeast, politicians typically gave out water in their rallies. However, Professor Viengrat Netipho revealed that it was prohibited during the 2019 elections, for it would be considered “gift distribution.”

²¹⁸ Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 5, 2020

²¹⁹ “‘พลังประชารัฐ’ ระดมทุนได้เงินได้เกิน 600 ล้านบาท” [Palang Pracharat' Raised More Than 600 Million Baht for Funds], Thai PBS, December 19, 2018, <https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/276421>; “จากโต๊ะจีน ‘ประชารัฐ’ ถึง ‘เก้าอี้เปล่า’ ของ ‘ชัชชาติ’ !!” [From the Celebration 'Pracharath' to 'Empty Chair' of 'Chatchart'], VoiceTV, December 22, 2018, <https://voicetv.co.th/read/EeWQIEIA1>.

²²⁰ McCargo and Alexander, “Thailand’s 2019 Elections,” 95.

²²¹ Viengrat Netipho, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.

Palang Pracharath, on the other hand, was free to do so. Viengrat explained that this seemingly trivial issue had a dramatic impact on voter decisions, for it demonstrated the candidate's inability to provide for the constituents, thereby, leading them to switch sides.²²² In addition to strict campaign restrictions, Pheu Thai candidates were also intimidated, harassed, and monitored by police or army officers, which could range anywhere from officers following the candidate to visiting or even surrounding his or her house. This was more prevalent in the Northeast, Pheu Thai's heartland. A daughter of a former Pheu Thai MP reported having army officers kidnap her brother and storm into her house. "They came fully armed. It was just me, my mom, and my brother, just the three of us. We had nothing to fight against them anyway. Don't know why they brought so many weapons. They entered our house without taking their shoes off and even kicked our dog! Our dog was just doing his job. You [the army officer] were fully armed, and our dog was just barking. Why would you kick him?" she said.²²³ Furthermore, legal threats were brought against former Pheu Thai politicians in an attempt to co-opt them into Palang Pracharath. As Chapter 5 will explore in more detail, such harassment and legal threats ultimately led many former Pheu Thai politicians to succumb to the junta's pressure and join Palang Pracharath.

VI. Conclusion

When dictators decide to allow elections, they must ensure that there are no surprises. In order to guarantee the preferred outcome and pave the way for cooptation, the NCPO employed a mix of institutional manipulations and state apparatuses to tilt the playing field in favor of Palang Pracharath and its allies. This chapter has investigated the ways in which the junta built a new

²²² Viengrat Netipho, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 17, 2020.

²²³ A daughter of a former Pheu Thai MP, interview with the author, Thailand, November 6, 2020.

political landscape and orchestrated the electoral process to curb the power of electoral politics and prolong its political influence in the new regime. First, the junta handpicked a constitutional drafting committee to craft a new constitution to institutionalize and embed its power. A national referendum was held to gain “legitimacy” and engineer “consent” from citizens. With the approval from the electorate, the junta then proceeded to “design the rules of the game” to maximize its electoral prospects. The two key institutional mechanisms embedded in the constitution to tilt the playing field include (1) a new electoral system called MMA, which advantages small and medium-sized political parties--the junta’s own party and its potential allies—and disadvantages large parties, the junta’s greatest enemy Pheu Thai; and (2) the appointed Senate. By forcing voters to cast a single ballot, MMA was perceived as a strategy to convert the voters of the constituency candidates into the votes of the party. Given their socio-economic dependence on politicians, the NCPO knew dependent voters would vote for whichever party with which their MPs were affiliated. Moreover, the single ballot forced voters to rank their priorities (e.g., MP candidate, policy, or ideology). When the voters had to vote for one factor they deemed most important, it was easier for Palang Pracharath to appeal to them, hence inducing their consent. A complex party-list formula was then devised to prevent Pheu Thai from gaining a majority and award small and medium-sized parties with additional seats. In addition to MMA, the junta handpicked a 250-member Senate, which functions as a “military party” to choose the prime minister, safeguard against constitutional amendments, enforce the military policy dogma and economic vision, control independent entities, and perhaps most importantly, signal the strength of the junta and shape the behavior of players in the game. With the support of 250 senators, Palang Pracharath exuded confidence in victory, facilitating the cooptation of politicians, voters, and vote canvassers alike. After establishing an electoral system in its favor, the junta proceeded to “control the

referees” by filling the ECT with individuals it could control and “handicap other players” using the Constitutional Court and state apparatuses. Finally, with the rules designed in its favor, the referees on its side, and other players handicapped, the junta could rest assured that everything would go as planned. Palang Pracharath was formed as a vehicle for the junta to control state power and institutionalize itself in the new regime.

Palang Pracharath’s victory, however, could not yet be guaranteed until voters enter the polls and mark their ballots. As Chapter 5 will demonstrate, despite the importance of institutional manipulations in shaping the election outcomes and facilitating the authoritarian incumbents’ return to power, consent from citizens is required for the junta to stay in power. After all, the authoritarian incumbents would not have been able to return to power had no single voter voted for them. While these arrangements weakened Palang Pracharath’s opponents and gave it an unfair advantage, the party must do its job to acquire consent from the rest. Even with the 250-member Senate in its pocket, the junta still needed to win the support of 126 elected representatives to restore Prayut’s premiership. Whether Palang Pracharath did this on its own or with the help of its coalition partners, the party still required consent from voters (to vote for it), politicians (to join its party), vote canvassers (to support its candidates), and small and medium-sized parties (to join its coalition government). How Palang Pracharath achieved this will be examined in the next and final chapter: *Consent*.

Chapter 5

Consent

I. Introduction

With the new political structures put in place and the playing field tilted in its favor, the only remaining task for the regime was to use its proxy party to acquire *consent* from citizens at the polls. Despite the orchestrated bias towards Palang Pracharath and its allies, the 2019 general elections were generally perceived as maintaining a degree of fairness¹—wherein it is reasonable to assume that a significant majority, if not all voters, enjoyed the freedom to vote for any political party of their choosing. Therefore, according to the definition of consent provided in Chapter 2, a vote for the pro-regime party Palang Pracharath can be construed as an expression of consent for the continuance of authoritarian incumbents in power. As established earlier, consent serves as the bedrock of legitimacy—and hence, the stability—of authoritarian incumbents in the new regime. However, given the divergent preferences of voters and, perhaps more importantly, the distinct priorities of dependent and independent voters, the regime and Palang Pracharath require different pathways to attain consent from various segments of the electorate.

This chapter examines the three primary sources of consent—MP, policy, and ideology—and explores the three pathways to consent. In addition to the strategies devised by the regime and Palang Pracharath, this chapter also looks at the decision-making and the factors that entered the voters' decisions to vote for the party, thereby providing consent to the regime. Since there are

¹ Anfrel, “ANFREL Interim Report on the Conduct of the 2019 Thai General Election: Asian Network for Free Elections,” Asian Network for Free Elections | Advancing Electoral Democracy in Asia, August 20, 2019, <https://anfrel.org/anfrel-interim-report-on-the-conduct-of-the-2019-thai-general-election/>.

three pathways to consent, this chapter is organized accordingly. The first part of the chapter examines Pathway I where a combination of dependent voters' reliance on local MPs and the single-ballot MMA system led to Palang Pracharath's strategies to co-opt former MPs, local politicians, and vote canvassers, here capturing their political bases. It will look at both the "carrots" and "sticks" that the party used to recruit politicians as well as the electoral strategies the co-opted politicians employed to maintain their supporters. It will then discuss whether and how the MPs' decision to switch to Palang Pracharath affected their relationships with the voters. Moreover, it also examines how the voters responded to such a decision. The second part of the chapter explores Pathway II where a combination of dependent voters' reliance on government assistance and the MMA system led to the implementation of the welfare card policy from which Palang Pracharath derived its name and on which it campaigned heavily. It will also examine the rhetorical strategies Palang Pracharath candidates used to campaign on the welfare card and the impact of such policy on voters' electoral decisions. The final part of the chapter investigates Pathway III where a combination of independent voters' desire for peace and stability and/or antagonism towards Thaksin and/or Thanathorn and the MMA system gave rise to Palang Pracharath's cunning campaign slogan "Choose Peace, Choose Prayut." This chapter concludes with a discussion of the strategies Palang Pracharath used to co-opt small and medium-sized parties, which allowed the party to successfully form a coalition government despite not winning the most seats.

II. Pathway I: Dependent Voters' Reliance on MPs + One Ballot → Co-optation

A. Converting MPs' Votes into Its Own

As an ad hoc political party created just before the 2019 elections, Palang Pracharath lacked political support of its own. The easiest and perhaps the surest way to generate the support required to win enough votes for these elections was thus to recruit former MPs, local politicians, and political dynasties. As they were roped into the party, these individuals supplied Palang Pracharath with their political networks and political bases. The co-optation strategy was by no means unique to Palang Pracharath and far from novel. The 2019 elections witnessed a nationwide “MP-sucking” phenomenon as parties rushed to fill candidacies. In fact, co-optation dates back perhaps as far as the introduction of electoral politics in Thailand itself. Parties including those of Thaksin’s often rely on the local clientelist networks of their candidates to capture votes. The distinction between Palang Pracharath and other political parties that employed the co-optation strategy is, nevertheless, that its affiliation with the regime endowed the party with state resources inaccessible to other parties, which facilitated the co-optation. An examination of the backgrounds of multiple-term MPs reveals that despite their frequent switching between parties, these individuals have often managed to secure electoral support and successfully defended their incumbency (take, for example, the four-term Ratchaburi MP and the media’s favorite Pareena Kraikupt² and her father). As will be explored in more detail in the subsequent sections, the winning streaks of these MPs can be explained at least in part by the electorates’ attachment to the candidates rather than the parties. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, voters’ dependence on and/or clientelist relationships with their MPs rendered the MP candidate the overriding factor in their voting decisions. When

² Pareena served as an MP for Ratchaburi for four terms and switched parties three times. Similarly, her father Thawee Kraikupt served as an MP for Ratchaburi for seven terms and switched parties four times.

forced to cast a single ballot, dependent voters thus vote for the candidate. As discussed in Chapter 4, MMA is widely perceived as a ploy to transform the constituency candidates' political support into votes for Palang Pracharath. The co-optation of politicians, therefore, served as an effective electoral strategy that contributed to Palang Pracharath's victory. The next sections examine who was co-opted and how.

B. Who is Co-Opted?

In order to maximize the number of votes the party received, the not-so-secret formula, according to Palang Pracharath executives, was to rope in the individuals with “the highest potential” to deliver votes to the party.³ These include, for example, political elites, such as former MPs and cabinet ministers, provincial and local elites, local politicians, bureaucrats, and influential families. What these individuals have in common are existing political bases and networks of vote canvassers who are geared up to support them in the elections. “I recruited from all over the country,” said a Palang Pracharath executive.⁴ At the core of the party is the Sam Mitr (“Three Allies”) faction, which consists of former Thai Rak Thai cabinet ministers and Wang Nam Yom faction leaders Somsak Thepsutin and Suriya Juangroongruangkit as well as Anucha Nakasai and Pirom Pholwiset. With their immense networks in the upper-Central, lower-Northern, and Northeastern provinces, the Sam Mitr faction provided tremendous help to the party in its deal-making and recruiting activities. One example includes Preecha Rengsomboonsuk, former Pheu Thai cabinet minister and MP, and his faction in Loei Province. In addition to Sam Mitr, Palang

³ Two Palang Pracharath executives disclosed this information. A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020. A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

⁴ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

Pracharath also recruited a number of other factions and political dynasties across the country, such as Varathep Rattanakorn's faction in Kamphaeng Phet, 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 Sa Kaeo, the Asavahame family in Samut Prakan, and the Teekananond family in Udon Thani.⁵ Besides strong political networks in their provinces, these faction leaders have also heavily and consistently been engaged in constituency work, hence making voters loyal to the candidate rather than the party. Therefore, when these politicians changed parties, their vote-canvassing networks and political bases readily followed. As a Palang Pracharath executive explained, "Take Anucha Nakasai, for example. He is a good person. I like him. I'm very close to him. He barely had to campaign and still got a lot of votes. He has won every election because he's already captured the hearts of his electorates. When we get a politician like this to join us, we also get their votes."⁶ Since faction leaders usually come with "full packages," co-optation renders a convenient and effective tool to amass votes.

Not all factions, however, were willing or able to join Palang Pracharath's side. In this case, it required some research on Palang Pracharath's side. Thanks to its connection with the regime, the party allegedly utilized the polls conducted by the Ministry of Interior to its advantage. When its first choices, such as faction leaders and incumbent MPs were unavailable, Palang

⁵ Napon Jatusripitak, "2022/119 'The Promise and Peril of Patronage Politics for Authoritarian Party-Building in Thailand' by Napon Jatusripitak," ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, December 14, 2022, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-119-the-promise-and-peril-of-patronage-politics-for-authoritarian-party-building-in-thailand-by-napon-jatusripitak/>, 4.

⁶ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

Pracharath would target the “underdogs,” such as local politicians and former MP candidates and, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections, equip them with “boosters” to help them capture votes. Like faction leaders and incumbent MPs, these local politicians and former MP candidates not only worked closely with their constituents but also had deep political networks and resources. Palang Pracharath executives explained that they looked at the data from previous elections together with the polls to select the candidates who would yield the greatest number of votes to the party. As discussed in Chapter 4, under the MMA system, every vote counts. “We hoped that everyone would win, but even if they didn’t, their votes would still count for popular votes. Therefore, we must select the best candidate in each constituency, so they each would pick up 10,000-20,000 votes to add up as many votes as possible. We had about 500 constituencies, which gave us about 8 million votes,” said a Palang Pracharath executive.⁷ To the astonishment of observers, the 2019 elections resulted in a phenomenon where many “rising stars,” local politicians who never had the opportunity to stand as MP candidates in the past, dethroned political giants. Moreover, after the politicians were recruited into the party, their campaign activities would be closely monitored. Palang Pracharath used polls to gauge the popularity of candidates throughout the elections and determine which “boosters” were needed to help them win.⁸ Despite its intensive use of polls, it is important to note, however, that polling data was merely one of the factors Palang Pracharath used to select its candidates. Sources from across the country reveal that factors such as personal connections sometimes trumped the data suggested by the polls.⁹

Bangkok presents a compelling instance of co-optation wherein none of the incumbent MPs switched to Palang Pracharath. Out of its 30 constituencies, 12 were, however, won by Palang

⁷ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

⁸ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

⁹ Author’s field notes, Bangkok, August to December 2020.

Pracharath, and the remaining 18 were split between Pheu Thai and Future Forward. Quite shockingly, not a single seat was left for the Democrats. In other words, each Democrat incumbent who contested in these elections lost his or her seat to a challenger. As discussed in Chapter 3, the lack of constituency work is frequently cited as the primary driver behind their humiliating defeats. Therefore, instead of co-opting the incumbent MPs themselves, Palang Pracharath recruited former members of the Bangkok Metropolitan Council along with vote canvassers who were deeply involved in constituency work and well-connected with the constituents. Because they had worked with and helped the Democrat incumbents win past elections, these individuals had established firm political footholds, especially in crowded communities and slum areas.¹⁰ Palang Pracharath took a twofold approach: it either directly endorsed these individuals as its own candidates or sought their endorsement and support for its own candidates. Its strategy was to split Bangkok constituencies between candidates with and without political backgrounds. The final group of individuals recruited by the party was thus the younger generation or “*kon roon mai*.” Like other parties, Palang Pracharath attempted to appeal to young voters by fielding “*kon roon mai*.” With the aid of party-provided vote canvassers, a significant number of these individuals successfully secured election victories despite their lack of political experience.

C. Co-Optation Strategies

1. The Relationship between Clientelism and Co-Optation

Prior to delving into Palang Pracharath’s strategies of co-optation, it is essential to underscore the interconnection between clientelism, as elucidated in Chapter 3, and the process of co-optation. As Professor Nethipo explained, while policy may be used to co-opt political actors

¹⁰ Virot Ali, interview with the author, Bangkok, August 29, 2020.

and voters, clientelist relationships are often used as a “condition” to make the co-optee loyal.¹¹ However, in contrast with co-option through policy, co-optation through clientelism requires a large amount of money and other resources from the co-opter’s side, hence rendering it a costly strategy. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 3, there are multiple levels of co-optation, which, as will be investigated in the subsequent sections, require different strategies. Politicians—whether it be MPs, local politicians, or vote canvassers—use clientelist relationships as conditions for co-opting voters. Political parties, such as Palang Pracharath, in turn, use clientelism to co-opt these political patrons into the party.

2. Palang Pracharath-Politicians (MPs, Local Politicians, Vote Canvassers)

a) Carrots and Sticks

Palang Pracharath used a combination of positive and negative incentives—hence carrots and sticks—to induce defections from its opponents. Since constituency MPs required money and access to resources to sustain their clientelist relationships with voters, the easiest way to bring them on board was to offer them exactly what they needed. Leveraging its connection with the regime, Palang Pracharath was able to draw tremendous financial support from large corporations and capitalists and thus offer “more generous packages” than most of its competitors. According to various sources,¹² there was significantly more cash circulating in these elections than in the past. As a result of their heightened significance within the MMA system, candidates vying for MP positions across the nation witnessed a remarkable surge in their perceived value or “price

¹¹ Viengrat Netipho, interview with the author, September 16, 2020.

¹² Such sources include former Election Commissioners, voters, vote canvassers, and politicians. Author’s field notes, Thailand, August to December 2020.

tags.” In fiercely contested constituencies, the reported offers reached astonishing heights, reaching up to 70 million baht (equivalent to approximately 2.13 million USD) per candidate.¹³ As highlighted in Chapter 3, vote buying maintains its significance for numerous voters despite their relationships with the candidates. Thus, it is evident that money plays a pivotal role in financing the operations of election campaigns, particularly the vote-canvassing networks. According to the data from across the country, the price tags for vote canvassers exhibited a wide range, starting from as low as approximately 500 baht (equivalent to around 15 USD) and escalating to as high as 100,000 baht (about 3,041 USD), contingent upon the level of significance attributed to their role. Through the provision of substantial compensation packages, Palang Pracharath effectively lessened the financial strain on potential candidates and, in certain instances, eliminated the necessity for them to dip into their personal resources. This strategic approach consequently acted as a strong motivation for candidates to align themselves with the party. In the constituencies where it was unsuccessful in co-opting the incumbent MPs, the party recruited local politicians and loaded them with “bullets”¹⁴ or *krasoon*, which signaled the party's preparedness for elections and its commitment to both the candidates and the voters. Leveraging their established political networks and involvement within the constituencies, the added support from the party provided numerous local politicians with the necessary momentum to triumph over the incumbents. As demonstrated by the data from iLaw, the number of co-opted MPs was relatively low, and the number of co-opted MPs who won the elections was even lower. Greater in number were, in fact, local politicians who were co-opted and won.

¹³ Author's field notes, Kamphaeng Phet, November 6-8, 2020.

¹⁴ “Bullet,” or *krasoon* in Thai, is a political slang term that refers to money.

Beyond financial backing, Palang Pracharath's ties with the regime enabled the party to use both state apparatuses, as discussed in Chapter 4, and legal threats to coerce politicians into its fold. In addition to the strict control of campaign activities and administrative obstacles, politicians from anti-junta parties, most notably Pheu Thai, became frequent targets of repression, intimidation, and harassment even before the onset of the elections. As introduced in Chapter 4, legal coercive power served as a powerful weapon for the party to coerce MPs of the opposition to join its party. Both former MPs and local politicians from various provinces allegedly admitted in the interviews that the legal threats facing them were paramount to their decision to switch to or support Palang Pracharath. The most prominent example comes, perhaps, from one upper-Central province where all Palang Pracharath candidates had been co-opted from Pheu Thai. During an interview, one informant revealed that he had initially been positioned as an MP candidate for Palang Pracharath. However, due to the faction leader facing legal pressures, the faction leader was compelled to strike an agreement with the party, resulting in the replacement of all candidates with individuals from the leader's circle. "They replaced all former candidates with the entire Pheu Thai team and kicked me out!" a former Palang Pracharath candidate exclaimed, his tone brimming with frustration and resentment. Another source corroborated this account, detailing how their father had been coerced by the faction leader to contest the elections under the Palang Pracharath banner. Nonetheless, in a bid to preserve factional cohesion, he engaged in negotiations with the party to have candidates from his faction run in all constituencies within the province.

Apart from coercing former MPs to come directly under its umbrella, Palang Pracharath also employed legal arrangements to prevent local politicians from lending their support to opposition parties. A notable illustration arises from a Southern province, where the mayor openly

admitted to having struck a deal directly with Prayut himself. “During the elections, I was always there, but I never helped any party campaign because Prime Minister Prayut asked me not to,” the mayor disclosed in my interview with him. Having served as a mayor for nearly three decades, this individual has entrenched himself within the realms of both local and national politics, amassing a potent network of vote canvassers, particularly in the municipal and provincial capital areas. Together with his brothers who served as a former Democrat MP and a former PAO chairman respectively, they have established one of the most influential families that have exerted control over provincial politics. However, when the NCPO took control of the country, the mayor, along with dozens of other mayors and executives of local bodies, was suspended from duty.¹⁵ The order, issued under Section 44 of the interim constitution, came directly from Gen Prayut who also served as NCPO leader at the time. Subsequently, through a collusion with Prayut, the mayor was reinstated to the office in 2018. This reinstatement, however, came with a caveat— in return for resuming office, he was mandated to uphold political neutrality during the 2019 elections. “When they [his vote canvassers] asked me if they could help Palang Pracharath, I said, ‘It’s up to you,’ but if I was leaning toward the Democrats, I would have said ‘Don’t go. Please help the Democrats!’” said the mayor.¹⁶ Due to his brother’s long-standing affiliation with the party, the mayor’s network of vote canvassers consistently lent their support to the Democrats in general elections. He explained that given the Palang Pracharath candidate’s lack of political experience, he lacked his own electoral backing. As per the mayor’s account, the Palang Pracharath candidate’s

¹⁵ This includes civil servants, public organizations, executives of provincial administration organizations (PAOs), executives of tambon administration organizations (TAOs), municipal mayors and councilors, and local officials attached to local bodies. “PM Uses S44 to Transfer, Suspend 71 Officials,” Bangkok Post, June 25, 2015, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/604224/pm-uses-s44-to-transfer-suspend-71-officials>.

¹⁶ A mayor from a Southern province, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

victory was attributed, in part to, vote buying and, in part to, the votes amassed through the efforts of the mayor's own vote canvassers. According to the mayor, if not for the backing of his vote canvassers, he would not even manage to secure victory in village head elections.¹⁷ Moreover, the mayor disclosed that when Democrat Party leader Jurin Laksanawisit sought his support, he responded, “I could help you, but I can’t be seen campaigning for the Democrats. The news reporters take photos every day. If they send them to Gen Prayut, I’d be dead!”¹⁸ This arrangement between Prayut and the mayor serves as a testament to the pivotal role of state authority, notably through mechanisms like Section 44, in the co-optation of prominent government officials, executives of provincial administration organizations (PAOs) and tambon administration organizations (TAOs), municipal mayors, councilors, and other local politicians.

b) Inescapable Captives or Willing Defectors? Getting inside the MP’s Mind

But can these seasoned politicians truly be considered mere subjects of Palang Pracharath’s co-optation scheme? The preceding sections have explored the use of rewards, such as money and other resources, and punishment, such as legal threats and bargains to incentivize former MPs, local politicians, bureaucrats, and vote canvassers to switch to Palang Pracharath. As established in Chapter 4, the regime’s strategy extended beyond populating the Senate with its affiliates, creating an impression of impregnability. Simultaneously, it capitalized on the Constitutional Court and various state mechanisms to handicap its adversaries and dissuade their MPs from maintaining allegiance to them. Piecing these together raises the question of whether these

¹⁷ A mayor from a Southern province, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

¹⁸ A mayor from a Southern province, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

politicians inevitably succumbed to the force or willingly embraced the Palang Pracharath bandwagon. By joining Palang Pracharath, they would not only find protection from legal and coercive forces but also gain unparalleled electoral benefits unavailable through any other party. Apart from substantial financial assistance, the party would furnish MP candidates, particularly those lacking political experience, with pre-established networks of vote canvassers and connections with local government officials. Furthermore, through tight restrictions of campaign activities and access to state-owned facilities as discussed in Chapter 4, their opponents would be crippled. In essence, joining Palang Pracharath, all else equal, would put them in the best position to win the elections. Most importantly, by aligning with the winning side and thus gaining a place within the government, these politicians would secure access to resources necessary for sustaining their clientelist networks. Given these reasons, a decision to join Palang Pracharath seems like an appealing offer from the politicians' perspective. As the Southern mayor remarked, "for local politicians like us, Prayut is the best choice. Nobody wants to be on the losing side!"¹⁹ While local politicians and government officials may have been able to come on board with Palang Pracharath with relative ease, former MPs, especially from Pheu Thai and its predecessors, faced major hurdles. As will be investigated in the following section, retaining their supporters was perhaps the most challenging task for these defectors.

3. MP-Voters

Despite encountering initial resistance, a substantial number of co-opted MPs succeeded in persuading their constituents to sustain their support under the Palang Pracharath banner. This accomplishment was facilitated either through their personal connections with constituents or by

¹⁹ A mayor from a Southern province, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

highlighting the tangible advantages linked to their government position. Out of 37 incumbent MPs²⁰ co-opted by Palang Pracharath, roughly half (18 MPs) successfully defended their constituencies. While these MPs differed on many counts, they shared a vital common trait: consistent engagement in constituency work. As established in Chapter 3, dependent voters expect direct interaction with their local MP at the grassroots level. Moreover, given their socioeconomic reliance on politicians, they are typically attached to the MP—or the broker who connects them with the MP—rather than the party itself. The key to retaining the support of dependent voters is, therefore, not only to prove oneself reliable and accessible to voters but also to provide valid justifications for the decision to switch parties. Due to the polarization of the 2019 elections, voter reactions to their MP’s decision to join the Palang Pracharath bandwagon could span from fervent endorsement to outright condemnation. Depending on the strength of the candidate’s relationship with voters and voters’ party attachment, a party switch may or may not affect the voters’ support for the candidate. In instances involving highly partisan voters, shifts in MP allegiances could be interpreted as a form of “betrayal” towards those voters.²¹ A former Palang Pracharath candidate reminisced about an incident when an irate voter reproached him for switching to Palang Pracharath: “I was campaigning at the intersection, and one car was honking at him. The driver rolled down his window and yelled, ‘Why would you switch [parties]? You are no good!’”²² Because Palang Pracharath stood at the polar opposite of the political spectrum from Pheu Thai, such reactions were more prevalent among Pheu Thai and Thaksin’s supporters, especially those who identified as Red Shirts. As a Palang Pracharath executive explained, Pheu Thai MPs,

²⁰ The individuals who won the 2011 elections.

²¹ A former Palang Pracharath candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 13, 2020; Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 13, 2020.

²² A former Palang Pracharath candidate, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 13, 2020.

especially in Northern and Northeastern provinces, were unwilling and unable to switch parties due to the voters' stronger attachment to the party rather than to the individual MP.²³ “They couldn’t leave Pheu Thai because they would risk losing the elections,” he remarked.²⁴ Not only would the voters they were trying to capture be reluctant to vote for the co-opted candidates, but their former supporters would also feel betrayed.²⁵ Wipoj Aponrat, a prominent former key Red Shirt leader, serves as an illustrative case. His transition to Palang Pracharath elicited a resounding outcry from his Red Shirt supporters. Upon declaring his candidacy under the Palang Pracharath banner, Sai Ngam, a district that had long been Wipoj’s stronghold, underwent an abrupt shift, becoming the district that posed the most formidable challenge for him. As disclosed by Wipoj’s daughter and campaign manager, Pitchaya Aponrat, approximately 40 percent of Sai Ngam voters remained steadfast in their support for her father whereas the remaining 60 percent refused to leave Pheu Thai.²⁶ Pitchaya elaborated that among this 60 percent, a significant portion comprised extremely ideological voters, 20 percent of whom she thought was anti-monarchy. “We weren’t entirely certain about what they were thinking,” Pitchaya remarked, “but at the end of the day, they didn’t follow us to Palang Pracharath. After all, Sai Ngam was the only place, the only district that we lost,” she concluded.²⁷ The instance of Wipoj in Sai Ngam serves as evidence that the loss of votes from ideological voters was the inevitable price co-opted candidates had to pay for joining the Palang Pracharath bandwagon. Such losses were, nonetheless typically of lesser significance for co-opted candidates from the Democrat Party and other parties either because their former

²³ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

²⁴ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

²⁵ Anudith Nakornthap, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 13, 2020.

²⁶ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 6, 2020.

²⁷ Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 6, 2020.

party was ideologically closer to Palang Pracharath or because their former party lacked a strong ideological foundation from the outset.

It was more often the case than not, however, that dependent voters remained indifferent about their MP's political alignment, particularly if the MP was able to offer a reasonable rationale for the shift. Getting their supporters on board was, therefore, the newly co-opted candidates' first priority. "My father spent the first month after joining Palang Pracharath knocking on every door explaining to his voters why he must switch," the son of a co-opted MP from a Central province revealed.²⁸ A careful examination of the rhetorical strategies employed by diverse co-opted politicians reveals two common elements: (1) a distinction drawn between the party and the candidate, and (2) a focal emphasis on justifying the imperative nature of the switch. Given Palang Pracharath's and Prayut's unpopularity among Pheu Thai supporters, Pheu Thai MPs who switched to Palang Pracharath frequently sought to create distance between themselves and the party. Drawing upon an analogy, one co-opted candidate explained to his voters that his switch was analogous to a "student changing schools" who would excel no matter which school he attended. "That the school isn't good doesn't mean that the students in that school aren't good. I'm still the same person. I just want to go to school," said one co-opted MP.²⁹ Similarly, a Northeastern MP candidate, realizing the lack of popularity of his party, emphasized his engagement in the constituency: "Thaksin doesn't live here. Gen. Prayut doesn't either. But I do. I am your MP, and I am the one who takes care of you all."³⁰ By opting not to use the campaign banners containing Prayut's portrait, co-opted candidates in the provinces where Prayut was unpopular, such as Sing

²⁸ The son of a co-opted MP from a Central province, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020.

²⁹ A co-opted MP from Pheu Thai, interview with the author, Thailand, November 6, 2020.

³⁰ A Northeastern MP, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

Buri and Kamphaeng Phet, attempted to draw voters' attention away from the party and its prime ministerial candidate and toward the local MP candidate. In addition to distancing themselves from their respective parties, co-opted candidates also reiterated the necessity of joining Palang Pracharath using both material and non-material reasons. As underscored throughout this chapter, being on the winning side and hence becoming part of the coalition government was instrumental in gaining access to crucial resources and budgets. Similarly, using an analogy, another co-opted MP explained to his voters that only by joining Palang Pracharath would he be able to draw resources to the constituency: "We can't swim against the tide, can we? We are the hope of the people. If we insist on swimming against the tide, following our ideology and refusing to switch parties, what about the villagers who are waiting for our help? There are many such people. We'd be better off just getting on that boat [the Palang Pracharath bandwagon] and doing our best [as an MP]."³¹ Likewise, a vote canvasser from Ubon Ratchathani unveiled that his MP candidate used a combination of material and non-material reasons to convince his voters. While expressing empathy to his voters by claiming that he did not approve of military intervention in politics, the co-opted candidate highlighted the necessity to support the pro-regime party for the country to move forward and to draw resources to the constituency.³²

In addition to directly approaching their voters, co-opted candidates relied on their networks of vote canvassers to persuade them to support Palang Pracharath. Since these networks belonged to the candidates, not the parties, there was often little need to convince the vote canvassers of the switch. As discussed in Chapter 3, the distance between citizens and the state, the inaccessibility and unresponsiveness of government as well as unequal access to public

³¹ A co-opted MP from Pheu Thai, interview with the author, Thailand, November 6, 2020.

³² A Palang Pracharath vote canvasser, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 16, 2020.

services and government officials' abuse of power necessitate reliance on brokers who connect citizens with state resources. Besides their local MPs, dependent voters also rely on and thus respect local leaders³³ (who in turn function as vote canvassers for local MPs). Given their roles in the community and respect from constituents, these local leaders wield significant influence over their choices, particularly in political matters. As exhibited through the findings across the regions, dependent voters not only adhere to the guidance of their local leaders but also actively seek their advice regarding whom to cast their votes for. Community leaders in districts such as Bangkok Yai (Bangkok), Khlong Lan (Kamphaeng Phet), Pho Sai (Ubon Ratchathani), and Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat (Nakhon Si Thammarat), for example, played an active role in mobilizing voters and persuading them about the necessity of changing parties. In sum, a combination of rhetorical devices and the assistance of vote canvassers enabled co-opted candidates to retain the support of dependent voters. As demonstrated by the electoral successes of co-opted candidates across the country, a sizable share of voters remained dependent on and hence attached to the candidate rather than the party. Moreover, as indicated by Palang Pracharath's vote shares in the Northeast, even the co-opted candidates who lost the elections managed to deliver a significant number of votes to the party. When given one ballot, dependent voters, therefore, based their decisions on the factor they deemed most important—the MP candidate—and voted for whichever party their candidate switched to.

³³ As discussed in Chapter 3, these local leaders include, for example, village headmen, subdistrict headmen, and other types of community leaders, both official and traditional.

D. Consent

This chapter has thus far delineated the first pathway to consent in a top-down manner: by co-opting politicians who in turn brought along their supporters to the bandwagon, Palang Pracharath captured consent from dependent voters who were attached to their local MPs. The pathway to consent looks, however, rather different from a voter's perspective. Drawing from focus group data from across the country, this section gets inside the minds of dependent voters and examines their reactions to co-optation strategies, which ultimately led to their consent to Palang Pracharath. As discussed in Chapter 2, the voters who pursued this pathway consisted primarily of dependent, sincere-MP voters. Because their loyalty lies with the MP rather than the party, this group of voters is willing to vote for whichever party their preferred MP belongs to. Despite the rarity of strategic-material voters, this group of voters would theoretically adopt this course. In terms of their knowledge of the connections between the MP candidate, Palang Pracharath, and the regime, the voters who followed this trajectory may fall into either Type II or Type III categories—they were cognizant of such connections but either disregarded them or failed to perceive of Prayut or Palang Pracharath as authoritarian. It is essential to highlight, however, that these voters primarily focused on the candidate rather than the candidate's affiliation with the party and/or the regime. By granting their consent to Palang Pracharath through their co-opted candidates, the voters from Phran Kratai and Khlong Lan took this pathway to consent. Given their long-standing clientelist relationships with and attachment to their local MPs, the Phran Kratai and Khlong Lan voters were willing to support the party switch and vote for Palang Pracharath. Despite Palang Pracharath's association with the junta, the switch neither affected the participants' relationships with their MPs nor induced discomfort in voting for them. According to the Phran Kratai participants, their support for Wipoj had always been contingent on “the benefits he offered

to the constituency.” As long as the candidate had “proven reliable” to the constituents, the party was “secondary.” To put it differently, since the MP’s partisanship was never really factored into their voting decisions, the Phran Kratai were not perturbed by Wipoj’s switch to Palang Pracharath. While the Phran Kratai participants would have voted for Wipoj and Pheu Thai if given two ballots. When constrained to select only one factor, they immediately chose their revered MP without any hesitation. Similarly, Anan’s unwavering dedication to the constituency, coupled with his vote canvassers’ efforts, garnered steadfast backing from the Lahu community. Though they appreciated Anan’s visit to the village to seek their input on the party switch, the Lahu participants emphasized their trust in his judgment. Furthermore, due to the consistent alignment of the Kamphaeng Phet faction leaders with the government, the participants from both districts displayed genuine enthusiasm for the switch. When questioned about their perspective on whether Palang Pracharath would spearhead the coalition government, all participants from Phran Kratai unequivocally agreed with certainty. “It was clear to us. All the faction leaders, the four MPs, moved to Palang Pracharath. The candidates from Pheu Thai were not in the same league!” remarked Arun.³⁴ Like most areas of the country, Kamphaeng Phet is not a “dark red” province where constituents remain loyal to Thaksin and his parties. As Professor Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee argued, Pheu Thai’s waning partisanship was due in part to the party’s failure to build a robust party structure that effectively linked the voters and vote canvassing networks with the party.³⁵ As observed in the cases of Phran Kratai and Khlong Lan, voters and vote canvassers in the co-opted constituencies readily followed their MPs to the new party. Therefore, as long as the co-opted candidate remained dedicated to their constituency responsibilities and offered a sound

³⁴ Arun, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

³⁵ Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 11, 2020.

explanation for the switch, the voters would continue voting for him/her. Despite the sincerity of the consent sincere-MP voters provided to authoritarian incumbents, this consent is contingent on the MP's affiliation with Palang Pracharath and will endure only as long as the MP remains affiliated with the party. Since their consent is provided *through* the local MP, it will be withdrawn upon the MP's departure from Palang Pracharath. Therefore, the chance that this group of voters will develop deeper and long-lasting allegiance to the party is low. The same applies to the theoretical strategic-material voters who identified with another party but voted for Palang Pracharath because of the benefits they had received or expected to receive from a Palang Pracharath MP.

III. Pathway II: Dependent voters' Reliance on the State + One Ballot → Welfare Card

A. Supplementing Co-optation with Populism

Despite co-optation's effectiveness as a strategy to capture electoral support and hence obtain consent from dependent voters who rely on their local MPs and their vote canvassing networks, the regime and Palang Pracharath realized that local mechanisms alone would not suffice to deliver the votes required to "win" the elections. Out of the total number of 350 MPs, only a small fraction (37) were co-opted incumbent MPs. Furthermore, an even smaller subset (18) of co-opted candidates managed to successfully defend their constituencies. Notwithstanding the wave of defectors, Pheu Thai successfully retained the majority of its electoral support and emerged as the party with the highest number of seats in the elections. Therefore, to generate support in the constituencies where it could not rely solely on the appeal of co-opted candidates, the regime launched a nationwide welfare scheme and thus acquired consent from dependent voters who relied on government assistance through populist policy. In contrast with the co-

optation of local MPs, policy has a more direct effect on voters on the national scale. As elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3, low-income dependent voters heavily rely on populist programs and government assistance to meet their needs. As manifested by unparalleled support for Thaksin's parties, pro-poor populist policies, most notably of which included Thai Rak Thai's 30-baht health care scheme, have proven an instrumental tool for winning the votes of the poor and become a staple of Thai elections. Under the guidance of Somkid Jatusripitak, the visionary behind Thai Rak Thai's populist policies, the regime adopted a strategy reminiscent of the one that had propelled Thaksin's repeated successes, with the goal of appealing to grass-roots voters.

B. The Welfare Card

1. Facts and Criticisms

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Palang Pracharath derived its name from the NCPO's popular state welfare card scheme. Launched in October 2017 as part of the NCPO government's economic stimulus package to boost the economy and combat poverty, the welfare card, colloquially known as the "poor card," was designed as a measure to support low-income individuals by reducing the costs of basic necessities, such as consumer goods, cooking gas, and transportation.³⁶ In an effort to alleviate living expenses, the Prayut administration opted to provide financial assistance to low-income earners through the distribution of state welfare cards. The Ministry of Finance first opened registration for the welfare card program in 2016 and re-opened it in 2017. Out of approximately

³⁶ Approximately 14.6 million of whom as registered with the Ministry of Finance. Attasit Pankaew, "บัตรสวัสดิการแห่งรัฐ [The Welfare Card]," King Prajadhipok's Institute, n.d., <http://wiki.kpi.ac.th/index.php?title=%E0%B8%9A%E0%B8%B1%E0%B8%95%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%B1%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%94%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%81%E0%B8%AB%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B1%E0%B8%90>.

14 million registrants, 11.4 million were qualified. Eligible cardholders must be Thai citizens, aged 18 or older, who were divided into two groups: (1) those with less than 30,000 baht annual income or approximately 2,000 baht monthly income and (2) those with less than 100,000 baht annual income or approximately 6,000 to 7,000 baht monthly income. In the first phase of the program starting from October 1, 2017, the former group would receive a 300-baht monthly allowance whereas the latter would receive 200 baht to purchase consumer goods at the “Blue Flag” stores and other participating stores as indicated by the Ministry of Commerce. Moreover, both groups would receive discounts for cooking gas (45 baht per 3 months), electricity (500 baht per month), and public transportation (500 baht per month for buses and skytrains, 500 baht per month for interprovincial buses, and 500 baht per month for trains). The unused credit could, however, neither be rolled over to the next month nor withdrawn in cash.³⁷ As Palang Pracharath was established, and the nation was preparing for the long-awaited March 2019 general elections, the NCPO government extended the coverage of the welfare cards to include the disabled, the elderly, the bedridden as well as those who were unable to register in the first round, hence giving out additional 3 million welfare cards and increasing the total number of cardholders from 11.4 million to 14.5 million.³⁸ There were two types of welfare cards distributed in this round: (1) the “Contactless Cards,” which could be used at mobile electronic machines and given to eligible cardholders in 7 provinces, including Bangkok, Nonthaburi, Pathumthani, Ayutthaya, Samut Prakarn, Samut Sakorn, and Nakhon Prathom, and (2) the “Smart Cards,” which were given to eligible cardholders in other provinces. In addition to the same benefits provided in the first round,

³⁷ Pankaew, “บัตรสวัสดิการแห่งรัฐ [The Welfare Card].”

³⁸ Matichon, “แจกบัตรคนจนเพิ่มอีก 3 ล้านใบเริ่มใช้สิทธิต้นปีหน้า [3 Million More Welfare Cards to Be Distributed, Privileges Available at Start of Next Year],” Matichon Online, December 18, 2018, https://www.matichon.co.th/news-monitor/news_1278014.

all eligible cardholders would also be given “e-Money,” which ranged from a one-time payment of 500 baht for “new year expenses” to be spent during the 2019 new year holidays to discounts on electricity and water bills (for up to 230 baht and 100 baht per household, respectively). Moreover, senior citizens the age of 60 and above would receive cash to help with daily expenses, rent, healthcare travel expenses, and other healthcare-related expenses.³⁹ The welfare card recipients in the second round would be able to start using their benefits starting January 1, 2019. As of February 28, 2023, as many as 19.6 million individuals had registered for the welfare cards, 14.6 million of whom have qualified.⁴⁰ As political parties were gearing up for the 2023 general elections, many had pledged to increase welfare benefits to attract voters. In fact, Palang Pracharath, under the new leadership of Gen Prawit Wongsuwan, released an MV “*Loong Pom 700*” (Uncle Pom 700) to campaign Palang Pracharath’s key policies, most notably of which was to raise the welfare benefit to 700 baht per month.⁴¹ Likewise, Prayut who was running as prime ministerial candidate for United Thai Nation (UTN) Party also promised to raise the payment to 1,000 baht.⁴²

Despite its immense popularity, the welfare card scheme has met with widespread criticism. In the eyes of critics and regime opponents, the welfare card is nothing more than

³⁹ Matichon, “แจกบัตรคนจนเพิ่มอีก 3 ล้านใบเริ่มใช้สิทธิคืนปีหน้า [3 Million More Welfare Cards to Be Distributed, Privileges Available at Start of Next Year].”

⁴⁰ “New Registrations for Welfare Cards Open,” Bangkok Post, February 28, 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2517146/new-registrations-for-welfare-cards-open>.

⁴¹ “พลัประชาธิรัฐเปิดตัวชิงเก้าอี้ใหม่ ‘ลุงป้อม 700’ ใช้ช่วงหาเสียง ‘เลือกตั้ง’ ชู 3 นโยบายของพรรค [Palang Pracharath Introduces New ‘Uncle Poom 700’ Campaign for Election Season, Highlights Party’s 3 Key Policies],” workpointTODAY, February 21, 2023, <https://workpointtoday.com/news-353/>.

⁴² “New Registrations for Welfare Cards Open.”

“military populism”—the abuse of state resources to win votes from the poor.⁴³ “Because [the welfare card] confuses the people and benefits some political parties, it reflects many things, especially the desire to win [elections] of those with state power who do everything to prevent missed opportunities like they did after the September 19 coup when they allowed elections and lost. The Future Forward is concerned that this may be the dirtiest election in history,” said Future Forward leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit.⁴⁴ As discussed in the previous section, not only was the welfare card rolled out not too long before the 2019 general elections, but the extended coverage to encompass additional 3 million cardholders was also timed to coincide with the launch of Palang Pracharath’s campaign. According to the data from King Prajadhipok’s Institute, at least 34.9 billion baht had been poured into the program during the final months of 2018.⁴⁵ Condemning the populist nature of the welfare card policy, Pheu Thai deputy spokeswoman and MP candidate Sunisa Thivakornnamrong argued, “A policy throwing money around during the new year indicates that the government was at its wit’s end to solve economic problems, so it decided to give out money because it was the easiest way to campaign. But [by doing so], it was squandering state money without actually strengthening the economy, rendering it the cause of the inequality between the rich and the poor [and] making it the worst in the world.”⁴⁶ Although the welfare cards enabled low-income earners to purchase consumer goods from local stores, critics argued a significant portion of the funds would end up in the hands of a select few capitalist entities, “hence

⁴³ Pankaew, “บัตรสวัสดิการแห่งรัฐ [The Welfare Card].” Future Forward Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit also expressed this criticism. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

⁴⁴ “บัตรคนจน ที่เด็ดเลือกตั้ง ประชาานิยมฉบับทหาร [Electoral Advantage: Military-Backed Popular Welfare Card for the Poor],” Siamrath, December 16, 2018, <https://siamrath.co.th/n/57105>.

⁴⁵ Pankaew, “บัตรสวัสดิการแห่งรัฐ [The Welfare Card].”

⁴⁶ “บัตรคนจน ที่เด็ดเลือกตั้ง ประชาานิยมฉบับทหาร [Electoral Advantage: Military-Backed Popular Welfare Card for the Poor].”

helping the conglomerates or *jaosua*⁴⁷ more than the poor.⁴⁸ After undergoing scrutiny by the Office of the Auditor General in 2020, the welfare card program was found ineffective at curbing income inequality. For instance, the program failed to achieve its primary goal as it excluded several low-income earners while allowing many of their higher-income counterparts to be eligible.⁴⁹ Moreover, the welfare card was also accused by figures like Pheu Thai leader Sudarat Keyuraphan of causing “class divides,” as it discriminated between the rich and poor.⁵⁰ In response to Sudarat, Somkid Jatusripitak contended, “these cards are beneficial because they help the poor and the elderly ... We verify the qualifications of card holders to make sure if they are actually poor. Nobody calls them the ‘poor’s cards’ except you. Do more research. If you wanted to do it [a new poverty reduction program], try to make it better than the welfare cards.”⁵¹ As will be explored in the upcoming sections, the welfare card formed one of the linchpins of Palang Pracharath’s campaign—as candidates and vote canvassers campaigned heavily on the welfare card, it was one of the few, if not the only, policies that became salient to voters and exerted considerable influence on their decisions.

⁴⁷ In Thai, the term “เจ้าสัว” (*jaosua*) is often used to refer to large, powerful corporations or conglomerates, similar to the English term “big players” or “big shots” in the business world.

⁴⁸ Pankaew, “บัตรสวัสดิการแห่งรัฐ [The Welfare Card].”

⁴⁹ “ละลายงบ 2 พันล.! ฉบับเต็ม สดง.สอบโครงการประชารัฐสวัสดิการ ยุค คสช. ลดความเหลื่อมล้ำไม่ได้ [Budget Slashed by 2 Trillion Baht! Full Version of State Welfare Program Under Junta’s Regime Investigated for Failing to Reduce Inequality],” Isranews Agency, June 5, 2020, <https://www.isranews.org/isranews-scoop/86176-report-86176.html>.

⁵⁰ “‘सरเสริญ’ สวน ‘หญิงน้อย’ แซะรัฐบาลเรื่องบัตรคนจน [Sansern’ Takes a Jab at ‘Yingnoi’, Targets Government on the Issue of Welfare Cards],” workpointTODAY, October 16, 2018, <https://workpointtoday.com/%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%8D-%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%99-%E0%B8%AB%E0%B8%8D%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%AB%E0%B8%99%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%A2-%E0%B9%81/>.

⁵¹ “‘สมคิด’ ได้ ‘เงินน้อย’ เจ็บ! ทำการบ้านก่อนวิจารณ์ด้วย “บัตรสวัสดิการแห่งรัฐ” ไม่ใช่ ‘บัตรคนจน’ [Somkid’ Clashes with ‘Jenoi’, Urges Homework Before Criticizing ‘State Welfare Card’, Not ‘Poor Card’],” Naewna, October 17, 2018, https://www.naewna.com/politic/370918?fb_comment_id=.

2. The Formulation and Its Impact on Palang Pracharath

Due to their dependence on the state, low-income dependent voters prefer parties that offer clear, direct policies aimed at the poor as well as tangible, material benefits to voters. More importantly, their enduring support for Thaksin and his parties underscores their inclination towards parties that consistently deliver on their campaign pledges. Leveraging its control of state resources, the NCPO administration developed the state welfare card scheme to target low-income earners, the majority of whom were Thaksin's supporters, and help its proxy party and co-opted candidates win the elections. By offering concrete and immediate benefits to the public, the NCPO government effectively bolstered its credibility with voters well in advance of the elections. Through the success of the welfare card program, the NCPO government had successfully proven its capability to fulfill its promises and meet the needs of the citizens. In contrast with the past where Pheu Thai was the only game in town, a Pheu Thai MP noted, "They [the NCPO government] created a belief that they can do it too!"⁵² As gleaned from the focus group⁵³ and interview data⁵⁴ from Nakhon Si Thammarat, the distribution of unconditional cash transfers during economic downturns led voters' perception of Palang Pracharath as a reliable option. Moreover, according to insights shared by a Palang Pracharath executive during an interview, the party strategically employed direct, pro-poor policies, like the welfare card, to provide a "boost"

⁵² A Pheu Thai MP from Ubon Ratchathani, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

⁵³ The participants from both the Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat and Pak Phanang focus groups shared this view. Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

⁵⁴ Janevit Kraisin, interview with the author, November 17, 2020.

for “underdog candidates”⁵⁵ who might not have widely recognized names in their constituencies or possess smaller political bases compared to the incumbents. “Because they [the voters] liked the welfare card, they poured their votes for our underdog candidates,” said a Palang Pracharath executive.⁵⁶ In addition to bolstering the electoral prospects of its underdog candidates, the welfare card program, owing to its popularity among low-income voters, also facilitated the party's recruitment of vote canvassers who in turn found it easier to mobilize voters through a blend of positive clientelist inducements (i.e., the continuation of welfare benefits) and threats (i.e., warning that these benefits would be terminated if the voter declined to support Palang Pracharath).⁵⁷

3. Campaign Strategies and Execution

For Palang Pracharath candidates, especially those lacking established political bases and vote canvassing networks, the welfare card emerged as the most compelling asset to appeal to voters. Interview data collected from various provinces underscored the significant emphasis placed on this policy by both candidates and their vote canvassers throughout their campaigns. Given its immense popularity among the low-income electorate, the welfare card was used both to woo voters and attack political rivals. When asked about the policies most favored by voters, both Palang Pracharath candidates and their vote canvassers unanimously pointed to the welfare card. One vote canvasser from Sing Buri claimed, “Of course they liked it! Who doesn’t like free money, right?”⁵⁸ Another Southern Palang Pracharath candidate shared an anecdote, recalling a voter who

⁵⁵ “Underdog candidates” refer to second or third-ranked local politicians as opposed to incumbent MPs.

⁵⁶ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

⁵⁷ Author’s field notes, Thailand, September to December, 2020.

⁵⁸ A Palang Pracharath vote canvasser, interview with the author, Sing Buri, September 20, 2020.

said, “Even his own children never gave him money, but *Loong Tu* gives me 300 baht a month!”⁵⁹ As will be elaborated in the following sections, the welfare card was one of the few, if not the only, policies that remained salient in voters’ minds.

An analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed by Palang Pracharath candidates and vote canvassers reveals a shared discourse: “If you vote for us, we will continue the program and increase the benefits, but if you vote for them, they will abolish it.”⁶⁰ According to vote canvassers from various provinces, the welfare card was the only policy discussed during the campaign—their approach generally involved inquiring whether the voters liked the policy and reminding them of its origin. “If it wasn’t because of *Loong Tu*, would you have had the money to buy rice?” a vote canvasser from Nakhon Si Thammarat recalled asking the villagers during an interview.⁶¹ In addition to being approached directly by vote canvassers, informants from across the country reported receiving phone calls claiming to be from the government, asking for their opinions about the welfare card. Furthermore, several focus group participants mentioned hearing rumors that not voting for Palang Pracharath could lead to the discontinuation of welfare benefits.⁶² As will be explored in the subsequent section, the fear of losing their benefits taken away contributed to many voters’ decision to support Palang Pracharath. While such rumors likely originated from vote canvassers (who often felt less scrutiny and were more straightforward in their communication with voters), some Palang Pracharath candidates admitted having conveyed similar statements to voters. As discussed in the previous section, the welfare card faced widespread criticism, making it a target for attacks from anti-regime parties during the elections. For example, a Pheu Thai

⁵⁹ Rong Boonsuaykhwan, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

⁶⁰ Author’s field notes, Thailand, September to December, 2020.

⁶¹ Krarok, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 18, 2020.

⁶² Author’s field notes, Thailand, September to December, 2020.

candidate from a Northeastern province accused the welfare scheme of “making the poor lazy.”⁶³ “They [Palang Pracharath] don’t want you guys to work. They want you to do nothing and just stay home ... then they give you 500 baht at the end of the month to buy MAMA [instant noodles], the candidate recounted his words to the villagers. Turning the attacks from their opponents into their weapon, a Palang Pracharath executive told voters, “If they [the opposition party] are elected, they will certainly cancel the program. But if we stay, we will increase [the benefits].”⁶⁴ Despite their overall disapproval of the welfare card policy, Future Forward leaders⁶⁵ acknowledged its importance as a contributing factor to voters’ decisions, especially among welfare card holders. They also refuted false rumors that they intended to cancel the program if elected. Future Forward leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit pointed out that such rumors were deliberately spread to discredit his party.⁶⁶ Irrespective of whether the party would actually increase welfare benefits as promised or its opponents would terminate the program as accused, the political discourse employed by Palang Pracharath was found to have a profound effect on voters’ decisions, particularly those dependent on government assistance.

⁶³ A Pheu Thai MP from Ubon Ratchathani, interview with the author, Ubon Ratchathani, December 15, 2020.

⁶⁴ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

⁶⁵ Including Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, Chaitawat Tulathon, and Pannika Wanich. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020; Chaitawat Tulathon, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020; Pannika Wanich, and interview with the author, Bangkok, September 21, 2020.

⁶⁶ Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 7, 2020.

C. Consent

1. Dependent Voters: Sincere-Policy and Strategic-Material Voters

As described in Chapter 2, the individuals who expressed consent to Palang Pracharath because of the welfare card consisted mainly of dependent voters who relied on government assistance and populist policies. Like their counterparts who followed the first pathway to consent, this group of voters generally based their political decisions more on material interests than ideological considerations. However, such decisions were influenced by their dependence on pro-poor programs rather than clientelist relationships with politicians. While there might be some overlap between the individuals who followed Pathway I and Pathway II, the latter group attached more weight to policy considerations than the appeal of MP candidates and voted for the party that had delivered or promised to deliver the policies they favored. This group of individuals can be further divided into sincere-policy and strategic-material voters, respectively. As explained in Chapter 2, the key distinguishing factor between these two groups is the strategic nature of their decisions to support Palang Pracharath. On the one hand, sincere-policy voters genuinely preferred Palang Pracharath over any other parties due to their strong alignment with the party's policies. They completely abandoned their party loyalty, if they had any to begin with, in favor of Palang Pracharath. Their primary motivation was policy-centric, with their preference for the welfare scheme making Palang Pracharath their top choice. It is essential to highlight that sincere-policy voters encompassed both individuals who had received or anticipated receiving welfare benefits from Palang Pracharath and individuals who supported the welfare card policy despite not directly benefiting from it. On the other hand, strategic-material voters preferred a different party but opted for Palang Pracharath because of the tangible material benefits it offered, especially through the welfare program. As previously mentioned, a reasonable share of the voters who took Pathway II

were the beneficiaries of the 30-baht scheme and/or supporters of Thaksin's pro-poor policies. Despite their attachment to Thaksin and the Pheu Thai party, strategic-material voters chose to vote for Palang Pracharath due to their reliance on the welfare card policy, even if it was not their first preference. In terms of their knowledge of the connections between the policy, the party, and the regime, the voters who followed this pathway were generally aware of such relationships but either overlooked them (Type II) or did not perceive Prayut or Palang Pracharath as authoritarian (Type III). For many such voters, the benefits of the policy outweighed its authoritarian root. As will be demonstrated in the next section, a significant number of welfare program supporters supported the party despite their disapproval of Prayut and the regime.

2. Voters' Responses

Before delving into the focus group and interview data, two significant points warrant attention. First, participants generally regarded the policies launched prior to the elections, particularly the welfare card, as more influential in shaping their decisions than campaign policies. Additionally, they identified the welfare card as one of the few, if not the only, policy that remained salient in their minds. Contrary to the golden age of the Shinawatra political dynasty when virtually all voters could readily list at least a few of Thaksin's key policies,⁶⁷ a fair share of focus group participants responded "I don't know" or "I can't remember" when asked to specify their preferred campaign policies. Among those who remembered, the welfare card was most frequently cited, followed by other NCPO-initiated welfare programs, such as monthly allowances for senior and disabled citizens and "Manda Pracharath," a welfare initiative for pregnant women and mothers of

⁶⁷ Some notable examples include the 30-baht universal health care, One Tambon One Product (OTOP), village funds, rice mortgage, and debt moratorium.

small children. Interestingly, these findings are consistent across all focus groups. Moreover, there is a consensus among academics and politicians that the campaign policies of each party (perhaps with the sole exception of Future Forward, which presented a more progressive platform) were remarkably similar. Beyond their political stances, most focus group participants perceived little distinction between the main parties in terms of campaign policies. This belief is substantiated upon closer examination of the key campaign policies of each major party. Take, for example, rubber prices. In response to the Democrat Party's electoral pledge to increase the rubber price to 60 baht per kilogram, Palang Pracharath countered with a claim of 65 baht per kilogram. As noted by Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, one of the main tactics employed during the campaign involved "bluffing," reducing the (economic) policy discourse to a mere "numbers game." Discounting the significance of policy in the 2019 elections, Professor Punchada Sirivunnabood argued that each party's campaign policies were "essentially the same"—a choice between "offering more money or less money."⁶⁸ The difference between campaign policies hence boiled down to "credibility"—the extent to which each party could convince voters of its capacity to fulfill electoral pledges whether each party managed to persuade voters of its ability to keep its electoral promises.⁶⁹ Given its incumbency advantage, Palang Pracharath had already proven its credibility to voters through the success of the welfare program. On the contrary, its opponents were denied access to state resources, resulting in an eight-year hiatus during which they struggled to serve their constituents. Therefore, the tangible benefits provided by the NCPO's initiatives prior to the elections held greater importance in the eyes of both sincere-policy and strategic-material voters than the campaign policies put forth.

⁶⁸ Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

⁶⁹ Warong Dechgitvigrom, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 15, 2020.

Now that the significance of the welfare program (i.e., the policies adopted before the elections) has been established, let's take a quick detour to examine why parties offered similar policy platforms. There are at least two key reasons. First, the 2017 constitution was designed to prevent populism.⁷⁰ Following Thaksin's success in using populist policies to garner electoral support from the poor, smaller parties, knowing that they stood no chance of winning (hence not feeling obliged to keep their electoral promises), began to campaign on populist policies with unrealistically high budgets in a bid to capture voters' attention during the 2011 general elections. According to the State Audit Office of the Kingdom of Thailand (SAO), the Thai government implemented 8 populist programs from 2011 to 2015, incurring a cost of 827,178.85 million baht.⁷¹ During this period, the public debt had increased from 4,271,959.81 million baht in March 2011 to 5,550,441.06 million baht in March 2014 or approximately 29.93 percent. To prevent the implementation of populist policies that could lead to adverse economic repercussions,⁷² Section 35 of the 2014 interim constitution mandated the constitutional drafting committee to incorporate mechanisms that safeguarded against populist public administration initiatives primarily aimed at gaining political popularity but at the cost of long-term economic stability and ensure that

⁷⁰ Phoompit Yasit, “รัฐธรรมนูญฉบับใหม่กับการค ด เน้นนโยบายประชานิยม [The New Constitution and the Operation Implementing Populist Policies],” National Assembly of Thailand, n.d., https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=40545; Attasit Pankaew, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 9, 2020; Nat Laosesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

⁷¹ Phoompit Yasit, “รัฐธรรมนูญฉบับใหม่กับการค ด เน้นนโยบายประชานิยม [The New Constitution and the Operation Implementing Populist Policies],” National Assembly of Thailand, n.d., https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=40545.

⁷² Phoompit Yasit, “รัฐธรรมนูญฉบับใหม่กับการค ด เน้นนโยบายประชานิยม [The New Constitution and the Operation Implementing Populist Policies],” National Assembly of Thailand, n.d., https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=40545.

government spending was effective, accountable, and transparent.⁷³ The constitutional drafters, therefore, included in Section 62 (Chapter 5 Duties of the State) of the 2017 constitution, a provision on government spending, which prohibits irresponsible populist programs:

Section 62. The State shall strictly maintain its financial and fiscal discipline in order to ensure that the financial and fiscal status of the State is sustainably stable and secure in accordance with the law on financial and fiscal discipline of the State and shall establish a taxation system to ensure fairness in the society. The law on financial and fiscal discipline of the State shall, at least, contain, provisions relating to the framework of undertaking of public finance and budget of the State, formulation of fiscal discipline in respect of both budgetary and extra-budgetary income and expenditures, management of State properties and treasury reserves and public debt management.⁷⁴

Moreover, Section 245 of the constitution also requires the Auditor-General to inspect any act “that is not in accordance with the law on the financial and fiscal discipline of the State and may cause serious damage to State finance” and submit the result of the inspection to the State Audit Commission.⁷⁵ If the State Audit Commission agrees with the inspection result, it must discuss it in a joint meeting with the Election Commission and the National Anti-Corruption Commission. If the joint meeting agrees with the result, they must notify the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Council of Ministers and disclose it to the public.⁷⁶ Given the constitutional constraints on budgetary and extra-budgetary income and expenditures, management of State properties and treasury reserves and public debt management, political parties were left with little leeway to design their socioeconomic policies. As former Election Commissioner Nat

⁷³ Phoompit Yasit, “รัฐธรรมนูญฉบับใหม่กับการด าเนินนโยบายประชานิยม [The New Constitution and the Operation Implementing Populist Policies],” National Assembly of Thailand, n.d., https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=40545.

⁷⁴ “Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand,” Constitution Drafting Commission, April 6, 2017, https://cdc.parliament.go.th/draftconstitution2/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=1460&filename=index.

⁷⁵ “Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand,” Constitution Drafting Commission, April 6, 2017, https://cdc.parliament.go.th/draftconstitution2/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=1460&filename=index.

⁷⁶ “Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand,” Constitution Drafting Commission, April 6, 2017, https://cdc.parliament.go.th/draftconstitution2/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=1460&filename=index.

Laoseesawakul warned every party, “You must read the constitution first! If you campaign on [certain] policies and get elected, but you can’t implement them ... if your policies aren’t consistent with the constitution, your party will be charged with dissolution!”⁷⁷ Since each party was required to give an estimate of the budget for its proposed policies and outline their advantages and disadvantages, it was restricted from advocating extreme populist platforms.⁷⁸ Despite its reputation as a prominent populist party, even Pheu Thai exhibited caution in its electoral commitments. As a result of the fiscal constraints imposed by the 2017 constitution, political parties struggled to distinguish themselves in terms of their socioeconomic policies. Consequently, this factor became less important to voters’ decisions than previous elections. Moreover, it was overshadowed by the policies adopted prior to the elections, such as the welfare card. In addition to the constitutional constraints, former Election Commissioner Nat Laoseesawakul asserted that political parties proposed similar policies to facilitate cooperation in forming coalition governments.⁷⁹ Nat explained that several parties, in anticipation of the elections, devised policies that aligned with each other and strategically considered the larger picture: “If we join hands with this party, we’ll frame our policies this way. If we join hands with that party, we’ll write our policies differently.”⁸⁰ Due to concerns that divergent policies might impede collaboration, many parties intentionally fashioned their socioeconomic policies to be compatible with those of potential allies.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

⁷⁸ “Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand,” Constitution Drafting Commission, April 6, 2017, https://cdc.parliament.go.th/draftconstitution2/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=1460&filename=index.

⁷⁹ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

⁸⁰ Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

⁸¹ For example, when the idea of a “national unity government” consisting of both Palang Pracharath and Pheu Thai was proposed, many argued that the stark difference in their political stances would render such a coalition impossible.

Close scrutiny of the interview and focus group data suggests that both clientelist inducements and threats were effective at soliciting electoral support from low-income dependent voters and exploiting their fears to sway them from the opposition. While many voters voted for Palang Pracharath simply because they “liked” the welfare card, the fear of losing welfare benefits emerged as a common reason for supporting the party across all focus groups. For example, when asked why he voted for Palang Pracharath, one voter from In Buri responded, “If I don’t vote for them, the village headman said I won’t get my money next month.” Similarly, a Palang Pracharath voter from Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat admitted that he feared losing his welfare benefits if he voted for the Democrats.⁸² A community leader from Ratchathewi explained that although a significant portion of residents were swayed by the rumor that other parties might abolish the welfare program if elected, many remained skeptical.⁸³ However, if the opposition became the government, it introduced uncertainty about whether they would retain the program. The residents, therefore, began telling each other to vote for Palang Pracharath in order to ensure the security of their benefits. In contrast to the first group, the second group of Palang Pracharath voters did not believe that the opposition would cancel the welfare program. However, they still supported the party because of the benefits they anticipated from the program (e.g., in Pak Phanang and Pho Sai)⁸⁴ “Everyone likes the program. Why would they cancel it?” said Sao, a Pak Phanang voter. When asked whether she would continue to support Palang Pracharath in the next elections, Pho Sai voter Maliwan laughed and responded, “Absolutely! Unless they take away our welfare cards.”⁸⁵ For voters like Maliwan, their support for Palang Pracharath was contingent on the

⁸² Nong, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 16, 2020.

⁸³ A community leader from Ratchathewi, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

⁸⁴ For example, participants from Pak Phanang and Pho Sai. Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

⁸⁵ Maiwan, focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

benefits they expected to receive from the party and thus subject to change if those benefits were discontinued. Although precise data regarding the proportion of Palang Pracharath voters driven by the fear of losing welfare benefits is unavailable, both participants who supported Palang Pracharath and participants who supported the opposition concurred on the significant role this fear played in influencing the choices of Palang Pracharath voters (e.g., in Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat and Det Udom).⁸⁶ Interestingly, the welfare card program also garnered widespread support from participants who voted for parties such as Pheu Thai and the Democrats. However, unlike those who switched to Palang Pracharath (more specifically the first group), many of these participants believed that they would be entitled to the welfare benefits *without* having to vote for Palang Pracharath and hence decided to remain loyal to their parties. As a Pheu Thai voter from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet argued, “Whatever is good, the next government will keep.”⁸⁷ Likewise, a Pheu Thai voter from Det Udom revealed that she used the welfare benefits only because they were given to her, but they were not sufficient to sway her decision. “Go ahead and cancel it if you want,” she challenged.⁸⁸ Though many Pheu Thai supporters enjoyed the welfare benefits, they considered them more dispensable than the 30-baht universal health care. In response to a hypothetical question about whether they would still have voted for Pheu Thai if the party were to cancel the welfare cards, In Buri voters, for example, responded affirmatively. However, they added that due to the size of medical bills, canceling the 30-baht cards would spark nationwide

⁸⁶ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

⁸⁷ Noi, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

⁸⁸ Jantee, focus group, Det Udom, December 15, 2020.

outrage.⁸⁹ Their Palang Pracharath counterparts, on the contrary, argued that the welfare card was more important because “we are not sick every day, but we have to eat every day.”⁹⁰

Although 200 or 300 baht (approximately 5.86 and 8.80 USD) per month may not seem like much to many, it proves sufficient to purchase a month’s worth of basic necessities, including rice, dried food, MSG, and fish sauce. As Lahu voter Tong explained, “If each person gets 300 baht, and there are three people in the family, that’s already 600 baht. One person can buy a bucket of rice. Another can buy instant noodles, and the rest can buy fish sauce. That’ll be good for a month.” As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, millions of Thai voters remain poor and dependent on government assistance. Contrary to the common criticism that the NCPO administration was excessive in distributing cash handouts to the poor, the perspective of dependent voters who supported Palang Pracharath reveals a different story. They did not perceive their monthly allowances as mere “free money,” but rather as vital support that “alleviated their burdens” and “enabled them to make ends meet” each month.⁹¹ As expressed by Ratchathewi voter Ratana, “although it is only 200 to 300 per person, it is money,” and this very factor guided her decision, as well as the decisions of other residents, to support Palang Pracharath. While 300 baht might be considered “pocket change” for the wealthy, another Ratchathewi voter said, “It meant a lot to us.”⁹² Given their economic hardships, many villagers were counting on the welfare money. Additionally, Palang Pracharath participants emphasized how the welfare benefits helped reduce their utility bills and transportation expenses. This, in turn, provided them with greater disposable income to allocate towards various goods and services.⁹³ Furthermore, as Pak Phanang participants

⁸⁹ Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020.

⁹⁰ Sae, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

⁹¹ Focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

⁹² Jim, focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

⁹³ Focus group, In Buri, September 8, 2020; Focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

pointed out, the monthly senior allowance lessens the burden on children.⁹⁴ In Thailand, children are expected to repay their parents' *boonkoon* by providing for them in their old age. However, as noted by Pak Phanang voter Pon during the focus group, the prevailing economic circumstances have led to a growing number of working adults struggling to support themselves, let alone their parents. Now that the government is taking care of the elderly, there are fewer mouths to feed and fewer bills to pay. "It [the monthly senior allowance] means a lot for us senior citizens who struggle. Some of us have children, but they never take care of us," Pon said.

Furthermore, Palang Pracharath participants found the welfare card to be more "direct" and "accessible" to the grassroots than some of Thaksin's populist programs, which, they felt, were more selective in nature. For instance, while Pheu Thai's rice mortgage scheme primarily benefited rice farmers, Palang Pracharath's welfare card extended to all low-income earners, making it more inclusive. "I sold a lot of rice, so I benefited [from the program] myself, but other villagers didn't ... No more than 20 of us mortgaged our rice," said Pho Sai farmer Klom.⁹⁵ This universality was vital, as pointed out by Khlong Lan voter Tong, who noted that many villagers, especially those without farmlands like the Lahu villagers, felt excluded from prior policies.⁹⁶ Therefore, for voters like Tong, the welfare card was perceived as more "universal" and "tangible." As all villagers held welfare cards, Khlong Lan voter Jai felt that the poor had gained increased access to government benefits since Prime Minister Prayuth assumed office.⁹⁷ Additionally, when asked about the appeal of the welfare card, Pho Sai voters explained that unlike most prior government benefits, which were typically dispensed through "local governments" or "brokers," "the [welfare] money was

⁹⁴ Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020

⁹⁵ Klom, focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

⁹⁶ Tong, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

⁹⁷ Jai, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

deposited directly into our accounts.”⁹⁸ For the majority of participants, it was the first time they received direct, tangible benefits from the government. A local politician from Nakhon Si Thammarat argued, “Southern voters felt they never really received anything from [Democrat] politicians.”⁹⁹ Since the NCPO administration gave them the benefits they never received under the Democrats’ administrations, the welfare card emerged as a central factor prompting Southern voters to switch from the Democrats to Palang Pracharath.¹⁰⁰

Constrained by their dependence on government assistance, low-income, dependent voters prioritize material benefits over MP candidates and ideology. When choosing among political parties with indistinguishable campaign policies, this group of voters grounded their decisions on the benefits they had received *prior to* the elections. As discussed in the previous sections, the welfare card had not only alleviated financial strain of the poor but also showcased the regime’s capacity to provide direct, tangible benefits to citizens, hence transferring its established credibility to Palang Pracharath. Driven by their expectations of future welfare benefits and/or fear of losing such benefits, sincere-policy and strategic-material voters decided to vote for Palang Pracharath and thus provided consent to authoritarian incumbents because of the welfare card policy. Although the consent given by the former group is *sincere*, it is conditional on the benefits they expected to receive from Palang Pracharath. Therefore, whether their consent will remain active depends on the party’s ability to deliver the promised benefits to its supporters, and its failure to do so could result in the consent being revoked. However, if Palang Pracharath fulfills its promise of increasing the monthly allowance to 700 baht, this group of voters may eventually cultivate

⁹⁸ Tawil and Tongkam, focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

⁹⁹ A local politician from Nakhon Si Thammarat, interview with the author, November 16, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ A local politician from Nakhon Si Thammarat, interview with the author, November 16, 2020.

political loyalty for the party and the regime, hence deepening and prolonging their consent. Conversely, since the loyalty of strategic-material voters lies with another party, their consent is temporary—they are ready to switch back to their former parties and unlikely to develop any attachment to Palang Pracharath.

IV. Pathway III: Independent Voters’ Concern for Peace and Stability and Antagonism towards “the Other Side” + One Ballot (+ Abhisit’s Declaration Not to Support Prayut as Prime Minister) → “*Luek Kwam Sangob Chop Ti Loong Tu*” [Choose Peace, Choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)] Campaign

A. Introduction: Reaching out to the Unreachable

While the consent of dependent voters may be secured through the co-optation of former MPs and local politicians with established clientelist networks and/or the implementation of populist programs like the welfare scheme, the final group of voters remains beyond the reach of constituency mechanisms or populist appeals. Given their independence from the state, politicians, and/or local political patrons, independent voters enjoy greater leeway in making political decisions and thus tend to attach more weight to ideological than material interests. Unlike their dependent counterparts (including sincere-MP, sincere-policy, and strategic-material voters), this group of voters are self-reliant and unconcerned about their livelihood. Since their vote choices are neither influenced by the choices of MP candidates nor socioeconomic policies, which appeared largely indistinguishable in Thailand’s 2019 general elections, Palang Pracharath employed various rhetorical devices, including the cunning “*Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu*” [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu] campaign slogan, to tap into these voters’ fears and anxieties.

As outlined in Chapter 2, the individuals who followed this pathway to consent included sincere-ideological and strategic-ideological voters whose top priority was the continuation of peace and stability in the nation. While their motivations span a spectrum of ideological reasons, these voters generally lean towards conservatism on political and cultural matters. Specifically, they exhibit varying combinations of the following: preferences for the status quo, support for the military and/or authoritarian rule, support for the monarchy, desire for peace and stability, and antagonism toward Thaksin and/or pro-democracy forces. As detailed in Chapter 2, the bulk of these voters were supporters of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which called for military intervention in 2014. Seeing Thaksin and his parties as corrupt and a threat to the establishment, they rallied behind the Democrat Party, which had positioned itself as Thaksin’s main archenemy in the past decade. Enjoying a period of peace that ensued under the NCPO era, independent ideological voters dreaded one scenario above all—the return of Thaksin, which they believed would trap the country in an endless cycle of political conflicts. Similarly, the emergence of the Future Forward Party was seen as heralding radical changes in a direction they vehemently opposed.

B. Choosing Peace (Even If It Meant Letting the Coup Leader Stay in Power)

“Thais are peace-loving,
but in war are not cowards.
Our sovereignty, we will not let anyone threaten.”

Since its adoption in 1939, never has Thailand’s national anthem ever rung truer until 8.4 million Thai voters hurried to the polls to elect the coup leader back into power. Insights drawn from interviews and focus group discussions with politicians and voters across the country highlight “peace” and “stability” as the cardinal factors that swayed independent, ideological voters to cast their votes for Palang Pracharath. As mentioned earlier, a shared concern for peace

and stability is a defining characteristic of this voter group. A significant proportion of Palang Pracharath supporters expressed in the interviews that their decision to support the party was rooted in a desire for peace—they wanted Prayut to stay in office, so the two political camps would stop fighting. Across all provinces, Palang Pracharath voters expressed a sense of nostalgia for the NCPO era, which they remembered as a period marked by tranquility and order. When questioned about their favorable view of the NCPO administration, this group of voters consistently identified “peace,” “stability,” and “order,” which they attributed to Prayut. While acknowledging the shortcomings of the NCPO era, many participants admitted enjoying the absence of protests in the country. They recalled the turmoil caused by the long-standing conflicts between the red shirts and the yellow shirts, leading to divisions even among families and friends along these color-coded party lines. “Even husbands and wives don’t get along,” a Phran Kratai voter vividly expressed.¹⁰¹ Having undergone repeated cycles of elections, protests, and coups, several Palang Pracharath participants expressed a strong desire to break this yellow-red loop, viewing Prayut as their only solution.¹⁰² Not only did the participants blame Thaksin as the culprit of the political upheaval in Thailand, but they also overtly expressed their antagonism toward the red shirts. As this chapter delves deeper, voters’ perception of Thaksin as the root cause of enduring political instability fueled their support for Prayut and his party.

While the exact proportion remains elusive, academics, politicians, and voters from across political parties agreed that a sizable number of voters, especially in Bangkok and urban areas voted for Palang Pracharath primarily, if not solely, because of their concern for peace and stability. In stark contrast with sincere-MP, sincere-policy, and strategic-material voters whose

¹⁰¹ Yong, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹⁰² Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

decisions were shaped by MP candidates and campaign policies, ideological voters, driven by their concern for peace and stability, assigned the utmost importance to prime ministerial candidates. Among them, Prayut was widely perceived as the most capable figure to deliver their desired outcomes. As recounted by a voter from Bangkok, “As a former coup leader, *Loong Tu* has special power ... [he] has a huge baton.”¹⁰³ With the individual who once orchestrated the overthrow of the previous government entering the electoral arena, many believed that supporting his party could finally put an end to the seemingly never-ending political struggles. Similarly, even the voters who did not vote for Palang Pracharath believed that those who did so were swayed by this very reason.¹⁰⁴ In the eyes of many, peace and stability, therefore, emerged as the pivotal selling point of Palang Pracharath. When inquired about the most popular campaign policy apart from the welfare card, all Palang Pracharath supporters unanimously pointed to “peace and stability” or more precisely, the “*Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu*” [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)] campaign.

For these voters, peace and stability served as preconditions for continuity and, consequently, economic growth—only when there is peace that the country can move forward, and economic growth can follow. On a more micro-level, participants who were vendors or small business owners reported experiencing greater sales in the NCPO era when protests were absent, thereby seeing peace and stability as essential for growth. With the coup leader running as its prime ministerial candidate, Palang Pracharath was perceived as the embodiment of a promise for peace and stability. As *the only* party that could deliver peace and stability, its linkage to the regime distinguished Palang Pracharath from its competitors. In the eyes of his supporters, Prayut’s

¹⁰³ Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020

leadership would preclude the occurrence of another coup. As will be explored in more detail in the following sections, Prayut was perceived as the only person who “had it all under control” and could thus move the country forward. This perception was rooted in the belief that only the military could establish peace and order. Bha, a voter from Tha Phra, argued,

“Our country actually needs military rule. If it’s ruled by self-interested civilians who are business people, it will only be problematic ... I think military rule means order, which is good for the country ... The military has the duty to sacrifice for and protect the country, so they will put the country first. If it’s a civilian government, they will put their interest first. In our country especially during that time [the democratic transition], if you are a politician ... an ordinary civilian, it will be hard to achieve peace.”¹⁰⁵

Given Prayut’s record in ensuring peace and order, Palang Pracharath supporters argued that he was the best person to lead the nation. Due to the political conflict leading up to the 2014 coup, military intervention was not only viewed as necessary but also appropriate. “If he [Prayut] hadn’t staged a coup, our country would have been broken,” said a Pho Sai participant.¹⁰⁶ By the same token, ideological voters contended that if Prayut had not led the government, then “our country would be on fire.”¹⁰⁷ This belief was not confined to his supporters alone but held by Palang Pracharath voters who were not particularly fond of Prayut (e.g., Mueang Kamphaeng Phet participants).¹⁰⁸ Convinced by the necessity behind Prayut’s coup and the continuation of his power, some Palang Pracharath voters, such as those in Pho Sai, even went so far as to argue that he was never authoritarian.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, from the standpoint of ideological voters, Palang Pracharath was not created as a vehicle for authoritarian incumbents to preserve their political influence in the new regime but as a “peacekeeper.” This interpretation, as will be later discussed,

¹⁰⁵ Bha, focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Nant, focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Thom, focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Focus group, Pho Sai, December 16, 2020.

played a pivotal role in shaping their consent. “They must keep an eye on [the country] and stay. Otherwise, the country will be in chaos again,” said Phran Kratai voter Som.¹¹⁰ Driven by their concern for peace and stability, ideological voters who supported Palang Pracharath appeared indifferent to regime type and put peace before democracy. As a Southern politician explained, “On that day, they didn’t consider whether Palang Pracharath or Prayut were authoritarian. They didn’t see them as authoritarian successors. They only thought that without Prayut, the country would be damaged.”¹¹¹ The ways in which this perception translated into consent will be the subject of the discussion in the final part of this section.

C. Prayut’s Fans, Thaksin Haters, or Both?

Sincere vs. Strategic-Ideological Voters

At the broadest level, ideological voters can be categorized into sincere-ideological and strategic-ideological voters. As explained in Chapter 2, the distinction between the two groups lies in whether Palang Pracharath was their sincere first choice—the former *sincerely preferred* Palang Pracharath to any other parties whereas the latter preferred a different party, most commonly the Democrat Party, as their first choice but *strategically voted* for Palang Pracharath to prevent the pro-democracy side from winning. Sincere-ideological voters can, however, be further divided into two sub-groups based on their specific reasons for supporting Palang Pracharath. The first subgroup voted for the party because of its “intrinsic value,” including its ties to the regime and, perhaps more importantly, its prime ministerial candidate. Hence, it consisted of individuals who supported the military and/or military rule, the monarchy, and the establishment more generally as

¹¹⁰ Som, focus group, Phran Kratai, November 6, 2020.

¹¹¹ Amnuay Yuttitham, interview with the author, November 16, 2020.

well as their intervention in politics. Their understanding of the Palang Pracharath-regime connection may fall under Type III or Type IV knowledge categories, indicating awareness of the relationship between the party, Prayut, and the regime. The key distinction lies in their perception of post-election Prayut and Palang Pracharath as either remaining authoritarian or not. Type III voters possessed varying opinions on the authoritarian nature of the NCPO administration but agreed that Prayut's and Palang Pracharath's participation in the 2019 elections rendered them non-authoritarian. Type IV voters, conversely, considered both pre- and post-election Prayut as authoritarian and voted for his party because of this exact reason. Endorsing the military's role in politics, the first subgroup of sincere-ideological voters supported Prayut's orchestration of the 2014 coup and his candidacy in the 2019 elections. Approximately 20 to 23 percent of Palang Pracharath's votes came from this group, according to party executives.¹¹² Prayut's role as the coup leader and his personal characteristics significantly influenced their decision-making. His position as Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army and NCPO chairman, along with his connection to the regime, carried substantial weight. As a former coup leader, Prayut embodied a "political strongman," as described by ideological voters, "who had the country under control." "It's like sending a boxer to the ring. If the opponent is big, how could we send a small boxer? We must pick a bigger boxer to fight against them," said Pak Phanang voter Wan.¹¹³ Shaped by their long-standing beliefs in the monarchy and decades of military rule, this group of voters preferred strongman leadership for ensuring peace, especially during uncertain times. King Bhumibol, widely revered by Thais as a unifying figure in a deeply polarized nation, had served as a savior during moments of crisis. However, his passing led many ideological voters to seek a new savior,

¹¹² A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020; A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

¹¹³ Wan, focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

and Prayut was seen as a suitable candidate, at least for the time being. Given his close ties to the palace, Prayut was characterized by Palang Pracharath candidates as “loyal” and capable of safeguarding the monarchy.¹¹⁴ According to Palang Pracharath candidates, these qualities were, for some voters, the sole factor that led to their support for Prayut and his party. Furthermore, Prayut’s lack of political experience worked in his favor among ideological voters who were cynical of politicians, particularly those linked with Thaksin’s camp. In contrast to perceived corruption and self-interest among politicians, Prayut was described as having “clean hands,”¹¹⁵ symbolizing honesty and integrity. When asked to compare a civilian government led by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (i.e., pre-2014 coup) with the NCPO administration under Prayut (i.e., post-2014 coup), most Palang Pracharath supporters agreed that the latter was less corrupt or even entirely corruption-free. This sentiment echoed across various regions, including Pho Sai, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, Khlong Lan, Bangkok Yai, and Pak Panang focus groups.

Contrary to the first subgroup, the second subgroup of sincere-ideological voters was driven more by their antagonism toward “the other side” than the party’s intrinsic value. However, these two subgroups are not necessarily mutually exclusive—several participants exhibited the characteristics and beliefs of both subgroups. In fact, the typical ideological voter often embodies aspects of both subgroups. While some voters exclusively align with the second subgroup, it is rare for voters to exclusively belong to the first subgroup. Despite their conservative political orientation¹¹⁶ and general endorsement of the establishment’s role in politics, the second subgroup of voters did not necessarily support Prayut, the military, and/or coups in and of themselves but

¹¹⁴ Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020; Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹¹⁵ “Clean hands” is a Thai metaphor used to describe an honest or uncorrupt individual.

¹¹⁶ This may also include, for example, support for the palace.

rather as a *means* to achieve peace and order and prevent what they perceived as threats to the status quo—namely, Pheu Thai, Future Forward, and their pro-democracy allies—from gaining power. Unlike their first subgroup counterparts who supported Palang Pracharath due to its regime ties or the prime ministerial candidate’s qualities, this group voted for the party because they viewed it as an “antidote” to “the other side” or the strongest force to protect the status quo and maintain peace and stability in the country. As previously discussed, this subgroup of voters originated from the political strife between the yellow shirts and the red shirts and the Democrat Party’s position as Thaksin’s main political archenemy. Motivated by their animosity toward Thaksin Shinawatra whose regime was perceived as emblematic of corruption, cronyism, nepotism, and abuse of power, Democrat supporters transformed into yellow shirts whose political movement led to the 2006 coup, which removed Thaksin from power. They took Bangkok streets again in 2013 under the PDRC movement, which successfully toppled the Yingluck Shinawatra government and placed Thailand under NCPO rule. Over the past decade, their primary purpose had been to eliminate former Thaksin’s influence in Thai politics.

Diverging from the party’s “true loyal fans” who genuinely support its principles or leaders, a segment of (former) Democrat supporters seemed united primarily by their strong aversion to Thaksin and Pheu Thai. Seeing the 2019 elections as a divide between the pro-regime and pro-democracy sides, “these voters picked sides first and then picked the party from that side.”¹¹⁷ In other words, “They were essentially choosing from those against Thaksin, who they favored,” a Palang Pracharath executive noted.¹¹⁸ As a more robust alternative to the Democrats emerged, former Democrat supporters decided to abandon the party. “I wanted no Thaksin and no

¹¹⁷ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹¹⁸ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

Thanathorn, so I must vote for Palang Pracharath!” said Pi, a former Democrat supporter from Bangkok.¹¹⁹ As will be explored in the next section, Abhisit’s refusal to support Prayut as the post-election prime minister exacerbated the situation by causing confusion to Democrat supporters, ultimately steering their decisions towards Palang Pracharath. Since their goal was to thwart Thaksin and his allies, it was in these voters’ strategic interest to choose Palang Pracharath to ensure Prayut’s continuation. It is critical to emphasize that despite their indifference to or, as many participants admitted, “dislike” for Palang Pracharath and/or Prayut, this subgroup of voters voted for the party as their sincere first choice and genuinely wanted it to win the elections.

Finally, as emphasized earlier, strategic-ideological voters differ from sincere-ideological voters in their affiliation with their former parties, which, according to the interview and focus group data, refer almost exclusively to the Democrat Party. In contrast with their sincere-ideological counterparts, whether from the first or second subgroups, who had completely converted to Palang Pracharath supporters, strategic-ideological voters still identified as Democrats and indicated the Democrat Party as their sincere first choice. Although their loyalty remained with the Democrat Party, and they “wished they could have voted for the Democrat Party,”¹²⁰ their concern for peace and stability and fear of the opposition’s winning necessitated the need to “help *Loong Tu* out” and vote for Palang Pracharath, *a less preferred yet stronger alternative*, to avert an undesirable outcome. As discussed earlier, Palang Pracharath’s association with the regime and leadership by the coup leader¹²¹ contributed to its perception as the most suitable option *for these particular elections and this political context* to defeat Thaksin and

¹¹⁹ Pi, focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹²⁰ Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020

¹²¹ Although Prayut held no official position in the party, he was widely and mistakenly perceived as its leader.

Thanathorn. In this sense, the behavior and reasoning of strategic-ideological voters were remarkably similar to the second subgroup of sincere-ideological voters. The only difference was, as emphasized multiple times in this section, that the former sincerely preferred the Democrat Party but voted for Palang Pracharath *out of necessity* whereas the latter voted for Palang Pracharath *out of sincere preference*. Neither strategic-ideological voters nor the second subgroup of sincere-ideological voters, however, exhibited a specific attachment to Prayut. One strategic-ideological voter from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet expressed, “If that day it wasn’t *Loong Tu* but someone else who could bring about peace and economic growth, I wouldn’t have minded.”¹²² As Professor Sawasdee argued, strategic-ideological voters might consider voting for the Democrat Party again if it strengthens and proves its ability to serve the citizens.

Lastly, it is worth noting that while there is a possibility of overlap in the characteristics and beliefs between strategic-ideological and the first subgroup of sincere-ideological voters, this was highly unlikely and, in fact, not the case in any of the focus groups. All participants with a strong preference for Palang Pracharath due to its connection with the regime and its prime ministerial candidate stated identified with Palang Pracharath rather than the Democrats, placing them in the sincere-ideological category. Though some strategic-ideological voters admitted to having made their decisions to vote for Palang Pracharath even before the announcement, many identified Abhisit Vejjajiva’s bombshell declaration that he would not support Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha’s political comeback as a pivotal moment in the campaign that swayed their decisions overnight.

¹²² Jib, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

D. The Turning Point: Abhisit's Saying No to Prayut

1. In His Own Words

“I will definitely not support Gen Prayut to be prime minister again because power inheritance creates conflicts and goes against the Democrat’s ideology where the people rule.”

— Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva¹²³

On March 10, 2019, a mere two weeks before the general elections, Democrat Party leader and former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva uploaded a short video clip, lasting 33 seconds, on his Facebook page to announce his opposition to Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha’s return to power as prime minister following the March 24 elections.¹²⁴ He explained that Prayut’s continuation of power would only fuel political conflicts. “Over the past 5 years, the economy has been in poor shape, and the country has been damaged enough,” he continued. He ended his video clip by saying, “There is no more time to *krengjai*!”¹²⁵ Within less than 24 hours, the clip had already attracted over 1.6 million views and thousands of shares.¹²⁶ Widely perceived as a serious blow to the Democrat Party’s election campaign, Abhisit’s announcement was met with marked skepticism from his opponents and grave opposition from his supporters, party members, and allies. Former Democrat secretary-general and PDRC Suthep Thaugsuban, for example, openly criticized Abhisit during his rally in Phang Nga:

¹²³ “Abhisit ‘Won’t Back’ Prayut Return as PM,” Bangkok Post, March 11, 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1642184/abhisit-wont-back-prayut-return-as-pm>.

¹²⁴ Abhisit Vejjajiva, “จะสนับสนุน พล.อ.ประยุทธ์ เป็นนายกฯ หรือไม่? [“Will You Support General Prayut as Prime Minister?”],” Facebook, March 9, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Abhisit.M.Vejjajiva/videos/774934712871541/>.

¹²⁵ *Krengjai* is a Thai verb roughly translated into consideration for others.

¹²⁶ There were approximately 2.2 million views at the time of writing.

“I’m telling you frankly. I was the one who made Abhisit prime minister. If it wasn’t because of me, I don’t know if he would ever get to be prime minister in the next life ... but today Abhisit announced on the TV that in this election, [he] announced his political stance. He would definitely not support Prayut Chan-o-cha. He said no. I am then wondering and want to ask Abhisit whether he completely stands on the same side as Thaksin already, right?”¹²⁷

Abhisit’s notorious clip was, in fact, the sequel to a perhaps less widely known clip he released on March 5 in which he declared his opposition to allowing “corrupt parties” to govern the nation.¹²⁸ Together, these two clips aimed to convey a message that *the Democrat Party aspired to lead the government*. However, as Abhisit clarified during The Standard Debate on March 10, achieving this goal required garnering sufficient votes, only then would the party reject the prime ministerial candidates of both Pheu Thai and Palang Pracharath. When questioned about the possibility of aligning with Palang Pracharath if it meant securing his premiership, Abhisit stated such a collaboration hinged on their willingness to accept his conditions. He emphasized that any form of power inheritance would lead to his rejection of the alliance. Finally, on March 15, 2019, Abhisit released the final video clip to reaffirm his political stance against Prayut and present his party as a third option against both Palang Pracharath and Pheu Thai. In his words:

“I don’t want dictators. I don’t want corrupters. Because politicians who entered [parliament] to corrupt have provided an excuse for coups in the past 20 years. Eventually, the economy has been destroyed. The country has been damaged. Thailand has a better choice than dictators and corrupters. The Democrat Party is ready to lead the country out of this vicious cycle.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷ “เลือกตั้ง 62 ‘อภิสิทธิ์’ ประกาศจุดยืนชัด ‘ไม่เอาประยุทธ์’ เป็นนายกฯ : Matichon TV [2019 Election ‘Abhisit’ Announced a Clear Stance ‘Don’t Take Prayuth as Prime Minister: Matichon TV,’ YouTube, March 11, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QosI5uY_RwE.

¹²⁸ Abhisit Vejjajiva, “จะสนับสนุนพรรคการเมืองที่มีประวัติทุจริต หรือไม่ ? [Will You Support a Political Party with Corruption History?],” Facebook, March 5, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=307208113312348>.

¹²⁹ Abhisit Vejjajiva, “จะร่วมกับใครจัดตั้งรัฐบาล? [Who Will We Join to Form the Government?],” Facebook, March 15, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Abhisit.M.Vejjajiva/videos/328038424510339>.

Once again, Abhisit concluded his clip with a similar statement, “Time’s up for dictators and corrupters!”¹³⁰ As straightforward as his messages may seem—his willingness to assume the role of prime minister with sufficient votes and his refusal to support Prayut as prime minister or align with Pheu Thai while leaving the door open for a potential coalition government with Palang Pracharath—they did not seem to reach his voters or fellow Democrat candidates the way he intended. While Abhisit’s declaration about not cooperating with Pheu Thai might have been relatively explicit, a notable portion of Democrat supporters, perhaps by focusing on or only watching his saying no to Prayut clip, interpreted his messages differently. Not only did Abhisit’s announcements provoke an outcry among his supporters, a majority of whom, as discussed in the previous sections, despised Thaksin, but they also infuriated his MP candidates who blamed him for their subsequent defeats. For many, Abhisit’s rejection of Prayut proved to be a grave “strategic misstep,” costing his party its support from strategic-ideological voters and its “extinction” while blessing Palang Pracharath with an enormous electoral windfall.

¹³⁰ Abhisit Vejjajiva, “จะร่วมกับใครจัดตั้งรัฐบาล? [Who Will We Join to Form the Government?],” Facebook, March 15, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Abhisit.M.Vejjajiva/videos/328038424510339>.

2. Strategic Misstep vs. Loss Minimizer

“When we saw that clip, we knew we’d be in deep trouble.”

— former Democrat Phitsanulok MP candidate Warong Dechgitvigrom¹³¹

A sense of impending doom began to hover over the headquarters of Thailand’s oldest political party on Setsiri 2 road as Abhisit’s bombshell clip was released to the public’s eyes. Despite Abhisit’s claim that he had consulted with “80 to 90% of Democrat MP candidates” before the announcement, many revealed that they were in absolute shock when they saw his video. “I don’t know who he consulted with, but I was clueless!” said former Democrat Phitsanulok MP Dr. Warong Dechgitvigrom.¹³² According to several Democrat MP candidates, Abhisit must have either created this video by himself or in consultation only with his inner circle, such as Korn Chatikavanij and Kobsak Sabhavas. Regardless of whether it was the party’s resolution or Abhisit’s own decision, this announcement was widely criticized as a “catastrophic miscalculation,” which destroyed the Democrat Party’s political bases and arguably led to a massive vote swing to Palang Pracharath overnight.¹³³ “It’s like Abhisit was shooting himself in the leg!” said a Palang Pracharath leader.¹³⁴ To say that the Democrats lost their votes overnight was, unfortunately, not an understatement. As a Palang Pracharath vote canvasser from Ratchathewi recalled, Ban Krua residents had an urgent night meeting after Abhisit’s announcement: “They said they would no longer vote for the Democrats. They would help *Loong*

¹³¹ Warong Dechgitvigrom, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 15, 2020.

¹³² Warong Dechgitvigrom, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 15, 2020.

¹³³ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020; A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020; Virot Ali, interview with the author, Bangkok, August 29, 2020; Punchada Sirivunnabood, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 30, 2020.

¹³⁴ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

Tu out. They didn't say they were helping Pada,¹³⁵ but they were helping *Loong Tu*.”¹³⁶ The next morning, the Palang Pracharath vote canvasser arranged for Pada to visit Ban Krua constituents, resulting in overwhelming support from this community. In contrast, Abhisit's announcement left Democrat Constituency 6 MP candidate Atavit Suwanpakdee in a quagmire. “His saying no to Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha directly affected my constituency, which encompasses an army area in the heart of the city,” said Atavit.¹³⁷ Moreover, as revealed by his former vote canvasser, the communities surrounding *Wat Apaitayaram* (Apaitayaram Temple)¹³⁸ had traditionally been Atavit's strongholds. However, Abhisit's announcement led them to desert him. Similarly, a former Democrat MP candidate from the South, who had always been vocal in his support for Prayut, expressed dissatisfaction with Abhisit's impromptu announcement, saying that he found it challenging to campaign as a result.¹³⁹ Vote canvassers and observers in the South revealed that the announcement prompted Democrat candidates to intensify their campaigning. Realizing that they could no longer rely solely on their party for votes, they felt the need to “spend more money,” “increase constituency visits,” and even resort to “personal tactics.”¹⁴⁰ Palang Pracharath candidates, like their Democrat rivals, were surprised by the sudden announcement, yet they welcomed it with open arms. “Their mistake was our boon!” said a Palang Pracharath executive.¹⁴¹ According to MP candidates and politicians from both camps, this announcement led to

¹³⁵ Pada Vorakanon, Palang Pracharath Constituency 6 MP candidate.

¹³⁶ Chan, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

¹³⁷ Atavit Suwanpakdee, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 23, 2020.

¹³⁸ Known among the locals as *Wat Makok*

¹³⁹ A former Democrat MP candidate from the South, interview with the author, Surat Thani, November 18, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ A Democrat vote canvasser, interview with the author, Surat Thani, November 18, 2020; author's field notes, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani, November 17-18, 2020.

¹⁴¹ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

tremendous vote losses, especially in Bangkok and major cities.¹⁴² Therefore, in addition to the strategies discussed throughout this chapter, including the co-optation of politicians and implementation of populist programs, Palang Pracharath's electoral success was also attributed, at least in part, to the Democrats' strategic misstep.

After decades of opposing Thaksin and aligning with the military, Abhisit's refusal to support Prayut left his supporters bewildered. In an election touted as a pro-democracy and pro-regime divide, both political parties and voters were compelled to take sides—either with or against Prayut. Moreover, the one-ballot system placed an additional constraint on voter choices. Once considered allies, the Democrat Party, by saying no to Prayut, forced its supporters to choose between Abhisit, a former civilian prime minister whose failure to control the protests led to civilian deaths during a deadly military crackdown, and Prayut, the coup leader who had kept the nation in peace over the past five years. As will be examined in the following section, strategic-ideological voters, driven by their concern for peace and fear of instability that may follow the pro-democracy camp's rise to power, could not help but pour their votes into Prayut's party—a stronger option, both literally and ideologically. As a Palang Pracharath MP candidate explained, when the Democrat Party rejected Prayut, its supporters were unhesitant to vote for Prayut—not for Palang Pracharath but for Prayut—to avert potential instability.¹⁴³ Consequently, Abhisit not only lost his supporters but also failed to capture “medium voters,” including those leaning toward Pheu Thai and Future Forward (referred to as “the faded red and orange” by Dr. Warong). Despite

¹⁴² Sansana Suriyayothin, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 29, 2020; Sayan Yuttitham, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 16, 2020; Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

¹⁴³ Sansana Suriyayothin, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 29, 2020.

their opposition to Prayut, Palang Pracharath, and authoritarian rule more generally, these voters did not consider Abhisit a viable option.

Contrary to the prevailing view of Abhisit's decision as a "mistake," Director of the Office of Innovation for Democracy at King Prajadhipok's Institute, Stithorn Thananithichot, and a few other commentators¹⁴⁴ contended that it was probably the best course of action to minimize his vote loss.¹⁴⁵ As Abhisit revealed in the interview, his party's political stance became the primary target of attacks by the pro-democracy camp throughout the campaign. Given the increased public attention on televised political debates, he was asked the same question at every debate, making campaigning difficult. With voters compelled to take sides, the Democrat Party could no longer maintain an ambiguous political stance. As emphasized throughout this section, ideology or, more specifically, a party's political stance, particularly regarding support for Prayut, emerged as the primary, if not the only, determinant of ideological voters' decisions. Thus, according to Abhisit, his reasons for rejecting Prayut were at least twofold. First, alongside his personal opposition to authoritarian succession and Prayut's actions during his premiership, he explained that as a democratic political organization, it was critical for the Democrats to stand up for liberal democracy.¹⁴⁶ Foreseeing potential resistance from both MP candidates and supporters, he claimed to have conducted a poll, which not only indicated overwhelming support from Democrat MP candidates (who, he argued, revoked their support after their defeats) but also revealed an equal number of voters lost and gained due to such a decision. Except for Bangkok, which seemed the

¹⁴⁴ For instance, iLaw Manager Yingcheep and Palang Pracharath MP candidate Watchara Kannikar also argued that Abhisit made the right decision as a democratic politician but perhaps at the wrong timing. Yingcheep Atchanont, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 30, 2020; Watchara Kankikar, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 3, 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Stithorn Thananithichot, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

most problematic, voters from other regions—such as the North, the Northeast, and even the South—were largely supportive of his decision.¹⁴⁷

Hence, in order to restore the party's commitment to “democratic” principles, Abhisit deemed it inevitable to sacrifice the support of his pro-Prayut voters. Furthermore, he contended that the former Democrat supporters who shifted to Palang Pracharath would have done so regardless of his announcement. Abhisit stated, “If you asked them today, they may say it was because I said no to Gen Prayut, but deep down I believe they would have switched to Palang Pracharath anyway.”¹⁴⁸ “Had I not made that announcement or expressed support for Gen Prayut, those who wanted Gen Prayut as prime minister would likely have voted for Palang Pracharath. I still can't think of a reason why they would have voted for me,” Abhisit continued.¹⁴⁹ In fairness, the Democrat Party's humiliating defeat was more of an outcome of its own actions over the past decade than merely the result of its leader's statements two weeks before the elections. By positioning itself as Thaksin's primary political adversary, the Democrat Party had capitalized on voters' apprehension as a means to solicit electoral backing, as exemplified by its 2013 gubernatorial campaign slogan, “If you don't choose us, he is definitely coming.” Moreover, owing to its past support for military intervention and involvement with the PAD and PDRC movements, the party increasingly became perceived as more conservative and detached from the liberal democratic values it professed to uphold.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, when the former coup leader, a more formidable alternative, entered the electoral arena (and also exploiting voters' fears), the Democrat Party lost its status as the primary force combating Thaksin and his allies. “If you want peace, if

¹⁴⁷ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁴⁸ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

you want to fight against Thanathorn, if you want to fight against Thaksin, [you] must vote for a leader like Prayut,” said Abhisit.¹⁵¹ To put it differently, “the Democrat supporters who were leaning toward Prayut might have felt as if they had been ‘cheating’ [on their party], but my announcement gave them the reason to ‘cheat’ without having to feel guilty,” Abhisit concluded.¹⁵² Facing an inevitable loss of his pro-Prayut supporters—specifically, the sincere-ideological voters—regardless of his actions, Abhisit opted to minimize this vote loss by strategically “seizing the middle ground” of the political spectrum and presenting his party as an alternative to Pheu Thai and Future Forward for the voters who opposed to Prayut. In other words, he was attempting to capture the segment of voters who stood against Prayut but hesitated to support Pheu Thai. While many such voters would have already switched to Future Forward,¹⁵³ Abhisit argued that some were supportive of his decision and decided to remain with the Democrat Party because of this very reason. However, there remained a small group of voters who were against Prayut but reluctant to vote for either Pheu Thai or Future Forward. While this group of voters likely constituted a small minority, it was a more strategic move to seek their support than hold onto pro-Prayut voters he was bound to lose. Although the Democrats might not come first in every constituency, the votes garnered from this group could still be translated into party-list votes, thereby minimizing their overall losses.

However, as will be examined in the next section, Abhisit’s declaration not to support Prayut, which left open the possibility of collaboration with Palang Pracharath, though slightly better than remaining deliberately equivocal, was still perceived by the voters as “sitting on the fence.” Although Abhisit stated explicitly in *The Standard* debate that while he did not support

¹⁵¹ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁵² Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁵³ Parit Wacharasindhu, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 25, 2020.

Gen Prayut as prime minister, he was open to working with Palang Pracharath,¹⁵⁴ the video clip where he rejected Prayut seemed more salient in voters' minds. As will be illustrated in the following section, some Democrat voters, on the extreme end, (mis)interpreted his rejection of Prayut as a signal for an alliance with Pheu Thai. Moreover, as Abhisit claimed, Palang Pracharath allegedly created propaganda to reinforce this misunderstanding.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps, a larger proportion of voters—both the Democrat Party's own supporters and those sympathetic with the pro-democracy camp—however, understood his messages yet remained unconvinced. On the one hand, while Abhisit's political stance was based on democratic principles and hence theoretically grounded, the former group was skeptical about its pragmatism—whether his approach would be strong enough to fight against the other side. As Abhisit lamented, his pro-NCPO supporters expected their party to support Palang Pracharath and Prayut.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, undecided voters leaning toward the pro-democracy side were uncertain if the Democrats would support the regime. By leaving room for potential collaboration with Palang Pracharath, Abhisit subjected himself to attacks from the pro-democracy camp, as Future Forward repeatedly emphasized that the Democrat Party never explicitly rejected Palang Pracharath. Seeing the Democrats' political stance perhaps as ambiguous as before, neither “the faded red” nor “the faded orange” were buying into Abhisit's ploy. In sum, Abhisit's intended messages were distorted by both the pro-regime and pro-democracy sides. From Abhisit's perspective, his decision was not a “mistake.” “It's just

¹⁵⁴ “‘ไม่เอาประยุทธ์ แล้วเอาพลตำรวจโทใหม่ถ้าเขาให้เป็นนายกฯ’ ชัดๆ อีกครั้งจากอภิสิทธิ์ เวชชาชีวะ [Saying No to Prayut, What About Pracharath If They Let You Be PM?: A Clear Statement Once Again from Abhisit Vejjajiva],” YouTube, March 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfCH6ZRGPKY>.

¹⁵⁵ Abhisit claimed, for example, that Palang Pracharath used the picture of him holding hands with Thanathorn in one of the debates where the host asked every party that supported amending the constitution to hold hands to show voters that he was joining hands with Thanathorn. Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

that what we offered was not what the people wanted or thought was possible. That’s all,” Abhisit explained.¹⁵⁷ Ultimately, it was the price that the Democrats had to pay for their past undemocratic behaviors and the political polarization they had exacerbated.

3. Voters’ Reactions

While Abhisit’s decision might be justified from a democratic perspective—considering that as the leader of a democratic political party, it was only reasonable to reject the authoritarian continuation of power—it appears to have had a negative impact on his party’s electoral prospects. This decision not only infuriated his party members and disappointed many of his supporters, but it also provoked different kinds of fears that ultimately compelled strategic-ideological voters to vote strategically for Palang Pracharath. While some Democrat supporters (e.g., participants from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet) claimed that they had already changed their minds long before Abhisit’s declaration,¹⁵⁸ his statement was identified as a turning point for both the Democrats themselves and their rival Palang Pracharath. As the electorate was already divided into two pro-democracy and pro-regime camps—with the Democrat Party seen as weaker and ideologically less clear than the regime-backed Palang Pracharath—Abhisit’s announcement served as the first catalyst that swayed strategic-ideological voters towards Palang Pracharath. “The Democrats used to campaign by saying if you voted for them, you’d get *Loong Tu* too! Isn’t that funny? Until Abhisit came out to explicitly say that he wouldn’t support *Loong Tu*. Now the voters must decide whether they want Abhisit or *Loong Tu*. I think that’s the turning point,” said a Palang Pracharath executive.¹⁵⁹ “One announcement and [there was] zero [Democrat] MP left in Bangkok. If [he had

¹⁵⁷ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 24, 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

made his announcement] a week earlier, there would have been zero [Democrat] MP in the South too!” said Palang Pracharath Nakhon Si Thammarat MP candidate Sayan Yuttitham.¹⁶⁰ While the exact number remained uncertain, a Southern Democrat vote canvasser estimated a vote loss of around 30% in his constituency based on his conversations with voters.¹⁶¹ Additionally, there were instances of Democrat supporters who had been leaning towards Palang Pracharath yet confirmed their decisions *after* Abhisit’s announcement, such as in the Bangkok Yai focus group.¹⁶² This further underscored the impact of Abhisit’s decision on his party’s electoral outcome.

Abhisit’s announcement, though applauded by his fans who opposed Prayut, triggered a range of fears among many Democrat supporters. For less-informed voters, such as those from Pak Phanang and some participants from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, Abhisit’s rejection of Prayut was mistakenly interpreted as a signal that the Democrat Party would join forces with Pheu Thai (and Future Forward).¹⁶³ As Democrat Constituency 13 MP candidate Parit Wacharasindhu pointed out, this misunderstanding was especially prevalent among the Democrat supporters who had opposed Thaksin and thus supported his party in the past.¹⁶⁴ Since this group of voters placed utmost importance on preventing Thaksin’s return, Abhisit’s announcement made them feel “uncomfortable” voting for the Democrats.¹⁶⁵ “That day Abhisit made the announcement on the stage. He said he wouldn’t support *Loong Tu*, and people thought that if it wasn’t *Loong Tu*, then

¹⁶⁰ Sayan Yuttitham, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 16, 2020.

¹⁶¹ A Southern Democrat vote canvasser, interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 18, 2020.

¹⁶² Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020.

¹⁶³ Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Though Parit did not directly mention this during the interview, his Pheu Thai rival, Treerat, highlighted that Parit had indeed lost many of these voters to Palang Pracharath. Treerat Sirichantaropas, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 16, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

the Democrats would join hands with Pheu Thai. This was the turning point where their votes dropped. Everyone turned toward *Loong Tu*. The elderly started asking which party *Loong Tu* belonged to,” recounted Thom, a former Democrat supporter from Pak Phanang.¹⁶⁶ The question that arose in their minds was, “Who is going stand up against Thaksin then?” Since Prayut was perceived as the most viable contender against Thaksin, these strategic-ideological voters decided to vote strategically for Palang Pracharath despite their preference for the Democrat Party.

In contrast with their, perhaps, less-informed or confused counterparts, the second group of Democrat supporters demonstrated a clear understanding of Abhisit’s message, yet, as Abhisit asserted, remained “unconvinced.” Describing Abhisit as a “weaker” leader than Prayut, former Democrat supporters across all focus groups expressed a lack of confidence in Abhisit’s leadership, especially during a period of transition. As a former Democrat supporter from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet said, “While we still love Abhisit for his honesty and all, today the Democrats are incapable of providing what we need, whether it is peace or order.”¹⁶⁷ Moreover, due to Abhisit’s failure to control opposition protests and the subsequent military crackdown that resulted in the death of over 90 civilians during his administration, this group of voters not only remained “unconvinced,” but also harbored a sense of “fear” regarding potential instability under his premiership. “I want a strong leader who can fight against anyone causing instability in the nation. What happened during the red shirt crackdown is still vivid in my memory. I don’t want it to happen again,” said one former Democrat supporter.¹⁶⁸ This fear of instability resonated among participants from various regions, including Bangkok, Kamphaeng Phet, and Nakhon Si Thammarat. As previously mentioned, the pro- vs. anti-regime divide compelled voters to take

¹⁶⁶ Thom, focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Jib, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

¹⁶⁸ X, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

sides and then select a party from their chosen side. When the choices boiled down to Palang Pracharath and the Democrats on the conservative/anti-Thaksin side, and with the Democrats vocally rejecting Prayut, voters could no longer vote for the Democrats and still expect Prayut as their potential prime minister. Therefore, driven by the fear of instability, strategic-ideological voters opted to “help *Loong Tu* out” by switching from the Democrats to Palang Pracharath. In the eyes of these voters, Palang Pracharath not only fielded a stronger prime ministerial candidate but also exhibited a clearer political stance against Thaksin and the pro-democracy forces, making it a strategically better choice than the Democrats. With Palang Pracharath emerging as the best option against the “other side,” it became a strategic imperative for former Democrat supporters to vote for Palang Pracharath, effectively preventing Pheu Thai and Future Forward from winning. This choice was further reinforced by the realization that voting for the Democrats could divide anti-Thaksin votes, potentially leading Pheu Thai to surpass both Palang Pracharath and the Democrats “Let’s say there were three main candidates. We [the pro-regime/conservative/anti-Thaksin side] got 60% [of the votes], and they [the pro-democracy camp] got 40%. But our votes were split between the Democrats 30% and Palang Pracharath 30%. In this case, Pheu Thai, which only got 40%, would win our constituency,” one former Democrat supporter from Bangkok explained his reason for choosing Palang Pracharath over the Democrats.¹⁶⁹ For the bulk of former Democrat supporters, the 2019 elections were touted as a battle between them and Thaksin supporters.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, to ensure Palang Pracharath’s victory, strategic voting was deemed necessary. Furthermore, some former Democrat supporters, after seeing Abhisit’s announcement, feared their

¹⁶⁹ Ead, focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020; Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

party's electoral defeat and thus opted for Palang Pracharath, which they viewed as a more likely contender.¹⁷¹

Lastly, much like his former supporters doubted his ability to deliver peace and order, the group of voters Abhist was trying to capture—"the faded red and orange"—remained skeptical about his, and even more so, his party's adherence to democratic principles. As previously discussed, the Democrats' continuous support for military intervention and close ties to the regime over the past decade had shaped a public perception of the party as anti-democratic. Ironically, instead of making the Democrat Party a more appealing choice for pro-democracy voters, Abhisit's rejection of Prayut while leaving room for collaboration with Palang Pracharath seemed to further reinforce the party's image as an "opportunist" who tried to straddle both sides of the divide. In other words, saying no to the coup leader while seemingly embracing the regime's proxy party did little to enhance the Democrats' position within the pro-democracy vs. pro-regime polarity. Adding to this, informants from Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani reported that multiple Democrat candidates had campaigned on Prayut's potential return as prime minister.¹⁷² Therefore, by releasing a statement that contradicted the words of his party members, Abhisit rendered his party disunited at best and deceitful at worst. In sum, while it seems convenient to blame Abhisit, as a number of Democrat MP candidates and supporters have done, for their party's ignominious defeat, his stance against Prayut was likely not the sole determinant of Democrat supporters' decisions. Beyond Abhisit's strategic mistake, the lack of party cohesion—as evidenced by the split between the members who supported and opposed Prayut—as well as MPs' continuous

¹⁷¹ Ead, focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020.

¹⁷² Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; A Democrat vote canvasser, interview with the author, Surat Thani, November 18, 2020; Author's field notes, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani, November 17-18, 2020.

neglect of constituency duties, especially in Bangkok and the South, were also commonly identified as contributory factors.¹⁷³ Nonetheless, his announcement indisputably played a significant role in shaping the decisions of strategic-ideological voters. After Abhisit triggered their fears, the *Luek Kwam Sangob Chop Ti Loong Tu*” [Choose Peace, Choose Uncle Tu] campaign acted as the second catalyst that swayed these voters’ decisions toward supporting Palang Pracharath, thereby lending consent to the regime.

**E. “*Luek Kwam Sangob Chop Ti Loong Tu*” [Choose Peace, Choose Uncle Tu]:
the Only Campaign that Matters (to Ideological Voters)**

As the Democrats were struggling to maintain their former (and attract new) supporters, Palang Pracharath was quick to turn its rival’s crisis into its own advantage. During the final stretch of the election campaign, the party tactfully revamped its campaign banners, originally featuring portraits of Gen Prayut alongside each constituency MP candidate, by placing a red sticker highlighting its new slogan “*Luek Kwam Sangob Chop Ti Loong Tu*” (Choose Peace, Choose Uncle Tu).¹⁷⁴ Since the campaign banners were “tailor-made” for each constituency, high-ranked Palang Pracharath executives revealed that such modifications were targeted in the areas where Prayut was found to be popular among constituents and hence anticipated to attract additional votes.¹⁷⁵ Bangkok was, for example, filled with such banners. In the provinces where Prayut might

¹⁷³ Focus group, Ratchathewi, October 10, 2020; Focus group, Bangkok Yai, October 3, 2020; Focus group, Pak Phanang, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020; Author’s field notes, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani, November 17-18, 2020.

¹⁷⁴ “‘พอประช.’ เปลี่ยนป้าย! ชูสโลแกนใหม่ ‘เลือกความสงบ จบที่ลุงตู่’ [‘PPRP’ Change the Sign! Hold up a New Slogan ‘Choose peace, end with Uncle Tu’],” Prachachat, March 20, 2019, <https://www.prachachat.net/politics/news-304618>.

¹⁷⁵ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020; A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

not be as popular, such as Kamphaeng Phet and Sing Buri, the banners reportedly remained unaltered.¹⁷⁶ Playing on voters' fear of instability, Palang Pracharath was able to capitalize on the Democrats' strategic misstep by creating a political discourse around the voters' concerns for peace and order and touting Prayut as the only person who could deliver it. As previously highlighted, peace and order had consistently formed the cornerstone of General Prayut's and Palang Pracharath's campaign platform. In contrast with the pro-democracy camp, which painted the elections as a contest between democracy and dictatorship, Palang Pracharath attempted to reopen the old wounds of the yellow-red divide and presented itself as the solution:

“We knew that voters didn't want any more fighting, so we were trying to convince them that if they wanted the fighting to stop, they must vote for us. If Pheu Thai won, the yellow shirts would be upset. If the Democrats won, the red shirts would also be upset. Whichever side won, there would be problems, so we presented our party as the third alternative, the alternative that had never gotten into a fight with anyone. We were also the peacekeepers because there was barely any protest while *Loong Tu* was prime minister. If any security issue arose, *Loong Tu* would be able to handle it,” said a Palang Pracharath executive.¹⁷⁷

By strategically crafting a political slogan that hit the nail on the paramount concerns of this voter group, Palang Pracharath aimed to woo voters “in the middle ground.”¹⁷⁸ These voters neither relied on local MPs or government assistance nor identified with the pro-regime camp despite their sympathy for the military and aversion to Thaksin. In stark contrast with their dependent counterparts whose political decisions were guided largely by clientelist relationships and/or populist policies, strategic-ideological voters were deeply concerned or even fearful about the

¹⁷⁶ As discussed earlier in the chapter, Phran Kratai voters, for example, given their clientelist relationships with their MP, tended to attach more weight to MP candidates than concerns for peace and order or PM candidates. Since they were unlikely to deliver additional votes, the candidate opted against using the banners with Prayut's portrait altogether. Pitchaya Aponrat, interview with the author, Kamphaeng Phet, November 6, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020

¹⁷⁸ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020; A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

potential instability that might follow the victory of Pheu Thai (and its pro-democracy allies) or the Democrats. As Professor Viroj Ali argued, their lack of political partisanship and/or weak political stance rendered them susceptible to political manipulation.¹⁷⁹ In designing its final campaign, Palang Pracharath set out to solidify its appeal by exploiting the most profound fears of this targeted group. A Palang Pracharath executive explained, “We were trying to figure out what our party stood for. We were peace. Then we let them [voters] choose whether they wanted to return to how things were [before the NCPO].”¹⁸⁰

Inadvertently or not, Abhisit's stance against Prayut disqualified him from consideration as a viable option for these strategic-ideological voters. Since this group of voters could potentially be pulled in either direction, they required reassurance of their decisions.¹⁸¹ “All we needed to do was to nudge them a couple of days before the elections, so they would be sure of what they wanted,” said Palang Pracharath Bangkok Constituency 22 MP candidate Sansana Suriyayothin.¹⁸² As the bulk of voters were delaying their decisions until the last minute, Palang Pracharath’s final campaign “*Luek Kwam Sangob Chop Ti Loong Tu*” acted as a trigger for fear and anxiety among strategic-ideological voters (and perhaps their sincere-ideological counterparts, albeit to a lesser degree, as they had likely committed to Palang Pracharath prior to this campaign), solidifying or reinforcing their decisions to support the party. As many participants recounted, the campaign prompted them to revise their choices at the last minute. According to one Bangkok voter, his family was holding off making a decision until they saw this campaign and held a family meeting in which they agreed to change their strategy from voting for the Democrats the night before

¹⁷⁹ Viroj Ali, interview with the author, Bangkok, August 29, 2020.

¹⁸⁰ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020

¹⁸¹ Stithorn Thananithichot, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020.

¹⁸² Sansana Suriyayothin, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 29, 2020.

election day. “We all gotta help Palang Pracharath this time,” he said.¹⁸³ Such behavior was by no means unique to this family. As will be scrutinized in the following section, strategic-ideological voters from across provinces, especially in urban areas, made last-minute decisions to vote for Palang Pracharath out of *necessity*.

Finally, it is critical to note that in addition to Abhisit’s own strategic miscalculation and the final campaign Palang Pracharath had up its sleeve, King Maha Vajiralongkorn’s reminder to “choose good people” served as the final catalyst that cemented voters’ decisions to cast their votes for the military proxy.¹⁸⁴ On the evening of March 23, 2019, less than 12 hours before polling booths opened, the Bureau of the Royal Household released an announcement stating that the king had assigned the Lord Chamberlain to convey an excerpt from the royal speech of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej delivered on the opening of the 6th National Jamboree at the Vajiravudh International Scout Camp in Chonburi on December 11, 1989, which reads:

“Know that an important thing in governance is that in a country, there are both good and bad people. No one can make everyone a good person. To create normalcy and order in the country is thus not to make everyone a good person but to support good people to govern the country and prevent bad people from gaining power and creating chaos.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ A Palang Pracharath voter from Bangkok, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 10, 2020.

¹⁸⁴ Patpicha Tanakasempipat and Panu Wongcha-um, “Thai King Makes Surprise Pre-Vote Plea for ‘Security and Happiness,’” Reuters, March 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-election/thai-king-makes-surprise-pre-vote-plea-for-security-and-happiness-idUSKCN1R40D8>; 1. “‘Choose Good People’ - HM the King Reminds Thai People on Eve of Election,” Thai PBS World, March 24, 2019, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/choose-good-people-hm-the-king-reminds-thai-people-on-eve-of-election/>.

¹⁸⁵ “ร.10 โปรดเกล้าฯอัญเชิญพระบรมราโชวาท ร.9 ส่งเสริมคนดีปกครองบ้านเมือง [“King Rama X Conveys King Rama IX’s Address to Choose Good People to Rule”],” PPTVHD36, March 24, 2019, <https://www.pptvhd36.com/news/%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%94%E0%B9%87%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%99/100355>.

The royal announcement also stated that the king wished all Thai citizens including all government officials, be they civil servants, military personnel, or police officers to “review and be aware” of the late king’s message, which was delivered out of his concern about “national security” as well as “the feelings and happiness of the citizens” and intended to provide “moral support” and “guidance” to those responsible for maintaining national unity, national security, and happiness of the people. Contrary to his late father who had limited his role and refrained from political interference in his later years, King Vajiralongkorn appeared unabashed in revealing his stance. Given the reverence for King Bhumibol and the long-standing respect for the monarchy, the words of King Vajiralongkorn carried monumental weight in the minds of his citizens, notwithstanding his notorious unpopularity. As a result of these factors, Bangkok was flipped from Democrats to Palang Pracharath.¹⁸⁶ As evidenced by the Democrats’ instant “extinction” from the capital (and as revealed by focus group participants across the country), the sheer number of voters ultimately based their decisions on the promise of “peace,” or more specifically, their perceptions or emotions regarding who could ensure that peace. At the end of the day, their fear of instability rendered “*Luek Kwam Sangob Chop Ti Loong Tu*” “the only campaign that mattered” in the eyes of strategic-ideological voters.

¹⁸⁶ The majority of focus group participants, academics, and Palang Pracharath executives agreed on this.

F. Consent

“I think on election day, they intended to vote for Loong Tu to stay, so people would stop fighting. They weren’t necessarily choosing between dictatorship or no dictatorship, but they chose peace.”

—Palang Pracharath Executive¹⁸⁷

Similar to the consent of their MP and policy counterparts, the consent given by ideological voters—whether those who voted for Palang Pracharath out of sincere preference or strategic reasons—can also be classified as sincere or strategic depending on whether the party was their sincere first choice or a strategic option. To put it simply, a sincere vote for Palang Pracharath implies sincere consent for authoritarian incumbents whereas a strategic vote implies strategic consent. As elaborated earlier in this section, sincere-ideological voters voted for Palang Pracharath either because of a factor “intrinsic” to the party or, more accurately, what the party had to offer (e.g., the linkage to the regime and/or an NCPO leader as its prime ministerial candidate), or a factor “extrinsic” to the party, namely their animosity toward the pro-democracy front, or some combination of both. Because this group of voters “had no other party in their minds” and voted for Palang Pracharath as their sincere first choice, their political behavior was straightforward, rendering the consent granted sincere.

In contrast with their sincere counterparts, the decision-making of strategic-ideological voters was significantly more complex and thus warrants further examination. As previewed in Chapter 2, the consent provided by strategic-ideological voters was *temporary* and *specific* to the current political context (i.e., the transitional period and the 2019 elections in particular) and, most

¹⁸⁷ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

importantly, driven by *necessity*. Given these voters' attachment and readiness to switch back to their former party—the Democrats—their consent can be, and in fact was during the 2023 elections, withdrawn at any time. As will be illustrated in the analysis of the 2023 election outcomes in the Conclusion Chapter, when the concerns for peace and stability diminished, and the political situation obviated the need for a party and/or a leader with ties to the regime, many of these voters either returned to their former party or switched to the Move Forward Party. Although strategic-ideological voters admitted giving consent to the party run by authoritarian incumbents, most participants argued that their consent was only temporary.¹⁸⁸ As previously discussed, this group of voters was fully aware of the relationships between the NCPO, Palang Pracharath, and Prayut. While their support for the military institution and its involvement in politics might vary, this group of participants perceived Prayut's second term as prime minister as instrumental not only for the continuation of peace and stability, which would allow the country to move forward, but also for the removal of Thaksin and the politicians they disapproved of. However, as Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat participants stressed in the focus group discussion, the military should only stay temporarily.¹⁸⁹ "I mean you are a soldier. How are you going to govern the country? Your job is to maintain national stability, but the economy and governance should be taken care of by those who are more capable," said Lek.¹⁹⁰ "In my opinion, Palang Pracharath was needed to counterbalance the power to create peace in such a way that there was no undercurrent. Once everything is okay, they should step back and let another group rule the country," another participant added.¹⁹¹ While their stay should only be temporary, most strategic-ideological

¹⁸⁸ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

¹⁸⁹ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁹⁰ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Cha, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

participants concurred that, at the time of the interview, Prayut was crucial for maintaining national peace and order. Nevertheless, as a Phetchaburi voter asserted, “When the country becomes peaceful, it should be governed by regular politicians as in a regular democracy.”¹⁹² For most strategic-ideological participants, their consent was given in exchange for the continuation of peace and stability during the transition and hence specific to this context. Given these reasons, both the party and the consent given to it were perceived by both the consenters and Palang Pracharath candidates as “ad hoc.”¹⁹³ “It’s just like the New Aspiration Party and Gen Chavalit Yongchaiyud. They’d just stay for one term, and that’s it!” said Nakhon Si Thammarat mayor.¹⁹⁴

Despite their preference for the Democrat Party and apathy, or even dislike, for Prayut and Palang Pracharath, this group of voters viewed a leader like Prayut not only as “appropriate” but also utterly “necessary” for the current political context.¹⁹⁵ It is important to note, however, that some participants contended that such a leader did not necessarily have to be Prayut.¹⁹⁶ “During that time it could have been anyone capable of resolving the situation,” stated a Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat participant.¹⁹⁷ “Indeed, ‘Mr. Whoever’ who had the competence to keep our country under control and prevent things from getting worse!” added another participant.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, Prayut was seen by this group of voters as the sole candidate possessing such capability and thus best fit to lead the nation. When queried whether her support for Palang Pracharath could be interpreted as consent for authoritarian incumbents, Mam, a voter from

¹⁹² Dam, interview with the author, Petchburi, November 28, 2020.

¹⁹³ Author’s field notes, Thailand, September to December, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Chaowat Senpong, interview with the author, November 18, 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

¹⁹⁸ Mam, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, responded, “Well yeah, because I voted for them, but ... what can I say? It was really ad hoc.”¹⁹⁹ This form of consent was, therefore, contingent on the performance of the Prayut administration and the broader political climate. Emerging from the focus group and interview data was an interesting recurring theme that voters, both those who supported Palang Pracharath and those who did not, were sick of “old politicians” and wanted change. Therefore, not only were strategic-ideological voters willing to give Prayut and Palang Pracharath a chance, but they would also be unhesitant to abandon them upon realizing that they failed to meet the voters’ expectations and/or outlived their “usefulness.” As a Mueang Kamphaeng Phet voter said, “If one day *Loong Tu* turned out to be bad, I wouldn’t want him anymore.”²⁰⁰ Similarly, a voter from Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat emphasized that her consent was given to Prayut only to “prevent a bloodbath in the nation.”²⁰¹ However, she argued that it did not mean that I would allow him to serve every term. “If he proved incapable, there must be change,” said the voter.²⁰²

While the consent granted by strategic-ideological voters was indeed ad hoc, all participants who supported Palang Pracharath because of the aforementioned reasons agreed that the political circumstances leading up to the elections necessitated such a decision. Like Lek from Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, all strategic-ideological participants argued that they “voted according to the situation” and expressed uncertainty about whether they would vote for the party again in the future.²⁰³ As Lek put it, her decision was based on what she called the “situation

¹⁹⁹ Mam, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

²⁰⁰ Jib, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

²⁰¹ Mam, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

²⁰² Mam, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

²⁰³ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

theory,²⁰⁴ only for that period.” “And then I’ll think again,” she added.²⁰⁵ As discussed in Chapter 4, the MMA system, by permitting a single ballot for each voter, compelled both sincere and strategic voters to “grit their teeth”²⁰⁶ and vote for the party or candidate they did not necessarily prefer. As discussed earlier in this chapter, some voters had to vote for Palang Pracharath because the MP candidate they preferred had been co-opted into the party.²⁰⁷ By the same token, the political circumstances leading up to the elections made strategic-ideological voters “grit their teeth” and vote for Palang Pracharath or, more accurately, Prayut. When questioned whether he thought the voters who voted for Palang Pracharath, especially former Democrat supporters, voted for his party because they genuinely preferred the party or because they were voting strategically, a Palang Pracharath leader promptly responded, “The answer is the latter.”²⁰⁸ He explained that since Palang Pracharath was a new party sharing political bases with the Democrats, the single-ballot system encouraged strategic voting, thereby contributing to the Democrats’ downfall. “I must say that Democrat fans gotta grit their teeth when they voted for Palang Pracharath. Because the Southerners and even Bangkokians, they loved their party [the Democrats].” But then they had to grit their teeth because of various reasons, including the [political] situation,” said a Palang Pracharath executive.²⁰⁹ “If there had been two ballots, the election results would have been different,” he argued.²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ That is, her decision to support Palang Pracharath was based on the current political situation and hence the “situation theory.”

²⁰⁵ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

²⁰⁶ A Thai idiom roughly translated into the idiom “bite the bullet” in English.

²⁰⁷ Footnote: it is important to note, however, that despite their lack of support for the party itself, their consent was sincere because the co-opted candidates made Palang Pracharath their sincere first choice.

²⁰⁸ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

²⁰⁹ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

²¹⁰ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

As emphasized throughout this chapter, the perceived “necessity” of supporting *Loong Tu* and Palang Pracharath was frequently brought up by both the MP candidates who were convincing their supporters to continue supporting them under the new banner and the ideological voters, especially those who voted strategically. In addition to their concerns for peace and stability and fear of the victory of the pro-democracy front, Abhisit’s stance against Prayut, as previously discussed, in conjunction with Palang Pracharath’s final campaign and the royal statement released on election eve made it imperative for strategic-ideological voters to cast their ballots for Palang Pracharath. Faced with the constraint of selecting only one party, these voters felt they must swallow a bitter pill in accepting Palang Pracharath, including the prime ministerial candidates they did not prefer. In contrast with sincere-MP voters who followed their co-opted MPs to Palang Pracharath, which, in some cases, meant voting for a party they did not necessarily prefer,²¹¹ some strategic-ideological voters disclosed that supporting Prayut and Palang Pracharath required voting for a candidate of whom they disapproved. In other words, the MP candidate is more important than the party for sincere-MP voters whereas it is the opposite for their strategic-ideological counterparts. A prime example of the voters who encountered such dilemmas came from Kamphaeng Phet, a province where all former MPs had been roped into Palang Pracharath. Kamphaeng Phet was, however, not the only target in the co-optation game. Former red shirt leaders in other provinces, most notably Seksakol Atthawong (better known by his nickname “Rambo Isan”) were also recruited into the party. As previously discussed, strategic-ideological voters are typically antagonistic to Thaksin and the red shirts. Therefore, the co-optation of former shirt leaders made it especially difficult for this group of voters to support the party. A former

²¹¹ But since the co-opted MP(s) made Palang Pracharath their sincere first choice, their consent was considered sincere.

Democrat supporter from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet revealed, “All those former red shirts joining Palang Pracharath made me feel really uncomfortable and conflicted. But because I wanted *Loong Tu* to be prime minister, I had to vote for Palang Pracharath. But to be honest, I felt kind of uneasy that day [election day].”²¹² Similarly, another strategic-ideological voter from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet said, “While I love the Democrat Party, then why did I vote for Palang Pracharath? I think that duty and the nation’s greater good come first. This was what I could do to help.”²¹³ Despite decades of loyalty to the Democrats,²¹⁴ strategic-ideological participants from Mueang Kamphaeng Phet and Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat agreed that the necessity of supporting Palang Pracharath, which they believed would ensure the continuation peace and stability and prevent the “other side’s” access to power, trumped their loyalty to their party. Consequently, they granted their consent, albeit strategically, to a leader and a party rooted in dictatorship.

Interestingly, the term “necessity” was also used by some strategic-ideological voters to describe the NCPO administration—that it was not a dictatorship but a “necessity.” A voter from Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, for example, argued, “I don’t see it as a dictatorship. It’s just something they had to do to stop all the conflict at the time ... all they did was to break up the fight.”²¹⁵ “It was not a dictatorship but a necessity, a necessity to end the conflict,” she emphasized,²¹⁶ and other strategic-ideological participants in the focus group nodded in agreement. The notion of “necessity” of the NCPO’s seizing power in the 2014 coup and Prayut’s maintaining political control after the 2019 elections was not exclusive to strategic-ideological voters but

²¹² X, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

²¹³ Jib, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

²¹⁴ Some of these voters had only voted for the Democrats since they became eligible to vote.

²¹⁵ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

²¹⁶ Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

echoed by other Palang Pracharath supporters who voted for the party because of other reasons. For many Palang Pracharath supporters, the military's political inference stemmed from necessity. "You think they wanted to intervene? I didn't think so. They'd rather be at the borders," said a Mueang Kamphaeng Phet voter.²¹⁷ Likewise, a Khlong Lan voter argued, "Democracy gave people too much freedom and allowed protests, which created chaos in the country."²¹⁸ Therefore, not only was it necessary for the military to intervene and "control the situation" in 2014 but for Prayut to continue his rule in the 2019 elections.

The amalgamation of internal factors such as personal concerns for peace and stability and/or animosity toward the pro-democracy front and external factors, including Abhisit's stance against Prayut, Palang Pracharath's final campaign, and the royal announcement influenced the strategic-ideological voters' decisions to support Palang Pracharath. However, they raise a puzzling question: to whom, or what, exactly were these voters extending their consent? By endorsing a party widely regarded as the regime's proxy and thereby enabling the return of authoritarian incumbents, this group of voters seemed, on the surface, to have given "consent to dictatorship." Nevertheless, a thorough examination of the decision-making processes and political behavior of strategic-ideological voters reveals that rather than "dictatorship" in and of itself, this group of voters were providing consent to "peace and stability," "so the country could move forward."²¹⁹ Contrary to the political discourse produced by the pro-democracy side that voters were choosing between "democracy" and "dictatorship" in the 2019 elections, the focus group and interview data with strategic-ideological voters suggests, as one Palang Pracharath executive

²¹⁷ X, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

²¹⁸ Tong, focus group, Khlong Lan, November 7, 2020.

²¹⁹ Focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020; Focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

argued, that “they were choosing peace.”²²⁰ In contrast with some sincere-ideological voters who voted for Palang Pracharath because of their support for the military and/or preference for authoritarian rule, most strategic-ideological voters voted for the party *not because of its authoritarian roots or link to the regime*—thereby consenting to dictatorship per se—but *because it was led by an individual they believed possessed the capability to ensure the nation’s security as well as peace and stability during that specific period* (the 2019 elections) and *under that particular political context* (a regime transition), and, for some of these voters, protecting the monarchy. As a Palang Pracharath executive summarized the behavior of strategic-ideological voters perfectly:

“I don’t think our supporters voted for us because they liked the military. I think they voted for *Loong Tu* ‘*despite*’ his military status. The truth is they didn’t think of *Loong Tu* as the coup leader—they thought of *Loong Tu* as a person who would be able to deliver peace for them. I don’t think they voted [for Palang Pracharath], so the military would rule the country. Definitely not.”²²¹

Seeing Prayut and Palang Pracharath as a means to ensure peace and order and deter the opposition’s access to power, this group of voters had to “grit their teeth” and vote for a party they knew originated from dictatorship. Despite their complete awareness of the relationship between the regime and the party, strategic-ideological participants did *not* see their votes for Palang Pracharath as an endorsement of military rule. As a Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat voter emphasized, “The only thing I considered was whatever would put an end to this fighting.”²²² Another voter from In Buri echoed this sentiment, stating, “I didn’t vote for dictatorship per se. I voted for whatever would prevent the country from bursting into flames. I consented to them

²²⁰ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

²²¹ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

²²² Lek, focus group, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

because of this ... because dictatorship, for a certain period, could deliver peace.”²²³ Like their counterparts in Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat and In Buri, a Mueang Kamphaeng Phet voter agreed that he did not perceive his vote as consent to authoritarian rule but to Prayut’s continuation of power, which she believed would ensure peace and allow the country to move forward.²²⁴ “My only goal was to restore peace in the country ... to avoid protests, violence, and shutdowns,” said the voter.²²⁵ Thus, for most strategic-ideological participants, their desire for peace served as the primary driver behind their consent to Prayut, Palang Pracharath, and even other authoritarian incumbents in the party. “I didn’t consent to dictatorship, power inheritance, coups, or whatever, but I consented to peace. It’s something only they could give me,” said an informant from Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat.²²⁶

In summary, although strategic-ideological voters did not give consent to autocracy *per se*, they attached utmost significance to peace and stability, which, as emphasized throughout this section, they believed could only be delivered by Prayut and his party. Hence, they provided consent to these individuals despite knowing their origin. Given their reasons, it would be inaccurate to superficially interpret their support for Palang Pracharath as “consent to dictatorship,” for their consent was not to be extended to any authoritarian government but only specific to Prayut and his party for the 2019 elections. Nevertheless, despite their claim of the “necessity” of supporting Loong Tu as a means to achieve peace and stability, their complete awareness of the relationship between the party and the regime rendered their votes for Palang Pracharath not only “consent to peace,” as several participants argued, but also “consent to

²²³ B, interview with the author, In Buri, September 20, 2020.

²²⁴ Pat, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

²²⁵ Pat, focus group, Mueang Kamphaeng Phet, November 8, 2020.

²²⁶ Bupbha, interview with the author, Mueang Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17, 2020.

authoritarian incumbents,” namely Prayut and his cabinet ministers, and an authoritarian successor party,” Palang Pracharath, albeit strategic.

V. Forging an Alliance & Splitting the Cake

After successfully gaining consent from different segments of voters—both dependent and independent—through strategies such as MP co-optation, the welfare card program, and a campaign that tapped into voters’ fears and anxieties, and secured the most votes (though not the most seats) in the elections, Palang Pracharath’s final task was to forge an alliance and form a coalition government with the parties that supported Prayut’s premiership. Given the 116 seats it won together with the 250 members of the Senate in its pocket, Palang Pracharath only needed a small handful of MPs to return Prayut to office. To form a stable coalition government, however, required at least half of the lower house or 250 MPs, thereby necessitating the need for coalition partners. Though the party that won the most seats had traditionally taken the lead in forming a coalition government,²²⁷ intense horse trading among political parties ultimately enabled Palang Pracharath to take over this role and left Pheu Thai in opposition, hence rendering the party the target of public hostility and odium Chapter 4 highlights that not only did the MMA system give an electoral boost to medium-sized political parties such as Bhum Jai Thai, the cunning formula the ECT used to calculate the party-list seats also allowed 11 “micro parties” into parliament. While the spotlight was shone on its rival Pheu Thai, which was split into several smaller parties including the Thai Raksa Chart, the Prachachart, the Pheu Chart, and the Pheu Tham parties,

²²⁷ Pheu Thai and Future Forward announced a seven-party alliance soon after the elections but failed to form a government.

Palang Pracharath was argued to also “break the bill” to capitalize on the MMA system.²²⁸ “How could you not break the bill when the rules said you must break the bill? ... those 11 parties, they were created specifically for this purpose,” said former Election Commissioner Nat Laoseesawakul. Therefore, it should have come as no surprise when these 11 parties quickly joined Palang Pracharath’s coalition. Moreover, large parties’ failure to win a majority rendered small and medium-sized parties the key variables in this game. “They [Palang Pracharath] were trying to capture these parties to secure a majority ... it’s only natural for political parties to want to join the government,” Nat asserted. Because most of these parties are regionally based, clientelism plays an instrumental role in their vote mobilization—a phenomenon demonstrated in Chapter 3, where access to state resources was predicated on governmental participation. While having small and medium-sized parties in a coalition government inevitably engenders horse-trading, some critics argued that they were easier to control than their larger counterparts.²²⁹ Palang Pracharath executives, nevertheless, complained that it came at the price of losing cabinet positions to such parties. A Palang Pracharath executive explained that as a result of the MMA system, each MP seat counted for the formation of their coalition government. “Even the party of Suwat Liptapanlop, which only had three seats, we had to give them one cabinet position ... because if he hadn’t joined us, we wouldn’t have secured a majority,” said a Palang Pracharath executive.²³⁰ In order to co-opt small and medium-sized parties into its coalition government, Palang Pracharath had no choice but to “give the best cuts of meat” (i.e., important ministerial positions) to its coalition partners. “Because without them, we wouldn’t have been able to piece together [our

²²⁸ Attasit Pankaew, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 9, 2020; Nat Laoseesawakul, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 12, 2020.

²²⁹ Laddawan Tantivitayapitak, interview with the author, Bangkok, October 26, 2020.

²³⁰ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

coalition government] ... we had to give them seven cabinet positions. In fact, we shouldn't have given them seven positions. We should have given them six because by giving them important ministerial positions and giving them a lot means fewer were left for us," said a Palang Pracharath executive.²³¹ According to Palang Pracharath executives, this was the root cause of the power struggles in their party. "If we had won about 270 seats, we wouldn't have had to rely on these people," said a Palang Pracharath executive.²³²

In addition to the post-election horse-trading, the interviews with MP candidates and local politicians across the country unveiled pre-established arrangements between Palang Pracharath and medium-sized parties such as Bhumjaithai in certain constituencies. Despite its reputation as an opportunist,²³³ Bhumjaithai was argued to have coordinated with Palang Pracharath during the campaign, challenging the assumption that it simply aligned with the winning side. In instances where direct co-optation was unfeasible, Palang Pracharath arguably used "neutral parties" such as Bhumjaithai as intermediaries for co-optation (and subsequently co-opted such parties into its alliance). Take Sisaket Constituency 1 as an example. From the standpoint of the Bhumjaithai candidate, the support required from red-shirt constituents rendered joining a regime-backed party such as Palang Pracharath impractical. Thus, it was in his strategic interest to run under the Bhumjaithai banner. As his father Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat, a Sisaket mayor since 1992, explained, Constituency 1 was primarily the battle between his son Siripong Angkasakulkiat from Bhumjaithai and Thanate Kruarat, an incumbent from Pheu Thai.²³⁴ According to Chatmongkol,

²³¹ A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

²³² A Palang Pracharath executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 3, 2020.

²³³ Many believed that Bhumjaithai was waiting to see how the elections played out and was willing to align with the winners. Bhumjaithai's leader Anutin allegedly stated that if the pro-democracy front had gathered 240 or 250 MPs, he would have joined its coalition government. Stithorn Thananithichot, interview with the author, Bangkok, September 10, 2020

²³⁴ Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat, interview with the author, Si Saket, December 17, 2020.

every poll was pointing to his son as the winner. Recognizing that Bhumjaithai was leading the polls, Palang Pracharath decided to collude with Bhumjaithai: “No matter how hard they fought, they would not have surpassed us ... so they told their vote canvassers to stop helping their candidate ... they just stopped helping their candidate but didn’t switch sides because Bhumjaithai vote canvassers may have been upset and ended up resisting them,” said the Sisaket mayor.²³⁵ Just as Palang Pracharath would restrain its campaign efforts and spending in the constituencies such as Sisaket 1, Bhumjaithai would not “go all out” in the constituencies where Palang Pracharath was winning. For example, Nakhon Si Thammarat Constituency 2 was viewed as a fierce battle between an 8-term Democrat incumbent Vittaya Kaewparadai and a popular Palang Pracharath challenger Sanhapoj Suksrimueang. Given its slim chance of winning, Bhumjaithai reportedly decided to stay out of the fight.²³⁶ In constituencies such as Sisaket Constituency 1 and Nakhon Si Thammarat Constituency 2, it was more critical for both Palang Pracharath and Bhumjaithai to focus on maximizing their popular votes than coming first at the polls, hence stealing the seat from their potential coalition partner. Finally, it is worth noting that Palang Pracharath’s likely success in forming a coalition government also had a direct influence on the Democrats’ decision to join its side.

VI. Conclusion

As their country was coming out of military rule, why did Thai voters, when given the right to choose their leaders through relatively free and fair elections, decide to cast their votes for a party that emerged from a dictatorship and restored authoritarian incumbents into power? To

²³⁵ Chatmongkol Angkasakulkiat, interview with the author, Si Saket, December 17, 2020.

²³⁶ Author’s field notes, Nakhon Si Thammarat, November 17-18, 2020.

what extent can their votes be interpreted as *consent*? To whom or what exactly did they give consent? This chapter has investigated the three primary factors that influenced voters' decisions to support the military-backed Palang Pracharath Party: the MP candidate, the welfare card policy, and "ideology." By examining both the strategies employed by the regime and Palang Pracharath and the decision-making processes and behaviors of voters, it combined both top-down and bottom-up approaches to describe the three pathways in which the regime acquired and the voters provided *consent*. Given different types of voters and thus different preferences and priorities, the regime required different strategies to induce their consent. While the consent of dependent voters may be induced by the co-optation of former MPs and local politicians or even vote canvassers with whom they had clientelist relationships and/or the distribution of pro-poor populist programs, such as the beloved welfare card, the consent of their independent voters, due to their independence from the state, politicians, and/or local political patrons, could only be attained through the exploitation of their fears of political instability and antagonism toward the pro-democracy front.

In Pathway I, sincere-MP and strategic-material voters' dependence on and clientelist relationships with their local political patrons rendered the MP candidate the most important factor in their consideration. Therefore, when given one ballot, they chose to vote for the constituency MP candidate, rather than the party. Since the candidate's political affiliation carried little to no weight in their decisions, this group of voters was willing to follow their MP to whichever party he or she chose to run with. Recognizing these voters' attachment to the MP candidates, Palang Pracharath employed both carrots and sticks, such as resources and legal threats respectively, to bring former MPs and local politicians with existing political networks under its fold, thus converting these politicians' votes into its own. At the MP-voter level, consistent constituency work and reasonable explanations for the party switch constituted the key to successful

maintenance of political support—as long as these two conditions were met, such a switch would not affect their relationships with their voters. Since Palang Pracharath was these voters’ sincere first choice, their votes could be interpreted as *sincere consent* to authoritarian incumbents. However, because their consent was given *through* the local MP, it was contingent on the MP’s affiliation to the party. The theoretical strategic-material voters differed from their sincere counterparts in that their support for Palang Pracharath was strategic, thus rendering their consent strategic as well.

In Pathway II, sincere-policy and strategic-material voters’ reliance on government assistance enabled populist schemes to rise to the top of their priority list, hence prompting this group of voters to base their electoral decisions on socioeconomic campaign policies rather than the MP candidate or ideology. Inspired by Thaksin’s past electoral successes, Palang Pracharath adopted the very same tactics to win the hearts of the poor. Abusing its control of state resources, the NCPO administration was able to launch a nationwide welfare program, which gave Palang Pracharath the party’s name and served as one of its main electoral weapons. Through its successful provision of tangible benefits to low-income earners, the NCPO government had established its credibility among voters and proven its ability to provide for citizens, thus helping Palang Pracharath and its candidates win the elections. For Palang Pracharath candidates, the welfare card functioned both as a tool to woo low-income voters and attack political rivals. By promising to continue the welfare benefits and threatening that such benefits would be discontinued upon voters’ failure to support the party, Palang Pracharath managed to gain support from voters who either favored the welfare card or feared losing their welfare benefits. From the standpoint of this group of voters, this program delivered aid that helped alleviate their financial burden. Therefore, when given the choice between political parties with indistinguishable

campaign policies, they decided to vote for Palang Pracharath and provide consent to authoritarian incumbents who had delivered them the welfare benefits. Like that of sincere-MP voters, the consent of sincere-policy voters, though sincere, was conditional on the benefits they expected to receive from the party and hence subject to withdrawal upon its failure to provide such benefits. Even more fragile was the consent of strategic-material counterparts whose loyalty belonged to another party. Since their support for the party and thus consent for authoritarian incumbents were based solely on the material benefits they expected to receive, this group of voters were ready to return to their former parties and unlikely to cultivate any attachment to Palang Pracharath.

In Pathway III, sincere-ideological and strategic-ideological voters' self-reliance gave this group of voters greater leeway to make political decisions. Because they depended neither on their local political patrons nor government assistance, ideological voters placed concerns for peace and stability above any other factors, thereby attaching the most weight to prime ministerial candidates among whom Prayut was viewed as best suited to deliver their desired outcomes. As in the sincere-MP vs. strategic-material and sincere-policy vs. strategic-material pairs, sincere-ideological and strategic-ideological voters were distinct from each other in whether Palang Pracharath rose to their top choice. Sincere-ideological voters were, however, further categorized into two subgroups, the former of which supported the party because of its "intrinsic value" such as its ties to the regime and its prime ministerial candidate (i.e., "Prayut's fans") and the latter of which supported the party more because of their antagonism toward the pro-democracy front (i.e., "Thaksin haters") than the party's intrinsic value and perception of Prayut as the strongest force to preserve the status quo as well as peace and stability in the country. It was, nevertheless, possible and, in fact, very likely for a voter to fall into both subgroups. Given their attachment to the Democrats and preference for the party as their sincere first choice, strategic-ideological voters displayed

interesting behavior, which warranted extra scrutiny. In its attempt to exploit the voters' concerns for peace and stability, Palang Pracharath devised a final campaign that triggered their fears and anxiety and framed Prayut as the nation's peacekeeper. Despite their loyalty to the Democrat Party, their underlying concerns for national security and/or animosity toward the pro-democracy camp coupled with intense political emotions triggered by a series of events, including Abhisit's stance against Prayut, Palang Pracharath's final campaign, and the royal announcement, contributed to strategic-ideological voters' decisions to strategically support Palang Pracharath. Though both sincere- and strategic-ideological voters provided consent to authoritarian incumbents, it is critical to emphasize that while the former either voted for the party because of their support for the military and/or preference for authoritarian rule or supported the party as their sincere first choice, the latter strategically voted for the party as a means to achieve peace and stability. Consequently, their consent was not only given out of necessity and thus strategic but also temporary, specific to the 2019 elections, and subject to withdrawal.

Finally, in addition to the consent of the voters acquired through these three pathways, Palang Pracharath also allegedly split itself into smaller parties, colluded with medium-sized parties during the campaign, and engaged in intense post-election horse-trading to take the lead in forming a coalition government, which allowed Prayut and his cabinet ministers to return to office despite their failure to win the most seats.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

I. Introduction

Fast forwarding to 2023, Thai voters returned to the polls on May 14 to choose their new government. More than three months have passed, but the country has yet to find its way out of the political limbo. Despite winning 14 million votes and placing first in the elections, Future Forward's second reincarnation Move Forward Party (MFP) has faced an uphill battle to form a government, let alone secure the premiership. After facing a suspension as an MP,¹ which forced him to leave the parliament during a joint sitting upon the Constitutional Court's order, Move Forward Party leader Pita Limjaroenrat also failed in his first bid to become prime minister on July 13. On July 20, 395 out of 715 members of parliament voted to block Pita's second nomination. While consent for authoritarian incumbents has been waning as millions of their former supporters withdrew support for their parties, be it Palang Pracharath under the leadership of Gen Prawit Wongsuwan or Gen Prayut's new party Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party (United Thai Nation Party), the political structure installed by the regime remains intact. Engineered by the NCPO, political institutions, such as the ECT, the Constitutional Court, and the appointed Senate, continued to do exactly what they were designed to do—extend the life of the regime and block its opposition from rising to power.

¹ For holding shares in iTV, a media company that has not been in operation since 2007.
<https://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news/detail/TCATG230720102756088>

II. Summary of Dissertation

A. Chapter 1 Introduction

Inspired by Palang Pracharath's electoral surprise in Thailand's 2019 general elections, this study has argued that authoritarian incumbents require consent from citizens to solidify power and institutionalize themselves in the new regime. By acquiring voter consent, authoritarian incumbents gain legitimacy, which in turn strengthens regime stability. In the case of Thailand's 2019 general elections, consent for authoritarian incumbents stems from three primary sources: (1) MP candidate, (2) policy, and (3) ideology. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the arguments and the contributions in practice and policy. In this chapter, I also explained the methodology employed in this study, which includes an R regression analysis of key variables, 12 focus groups with voters in various regions of Thailand, and approximately 80 semi-structured interviews with key political actors, such as prime ministerial candidates, party leaders, MP candidates, local politicians, and vote canvassers, and provided a layout of the dissertation.

B. Chapter 2 The Theory of Consent

In Chapter 2, I developed a theoretical framework to explain consent. I began this chapter with a survey of the current scholarship on authoritarian resilience, the history of authoritarian successor parties in Thailand, and the existing literature on consent. I demonstrated that in addition to the traditional authoritarian arsenal, such as repression and coercion, autocrats also utilize a variety of democratic instruments autocrats use to preserve their political control and tighten their grip on power. Co-optation and legitimation have, for example, been argued as "the key pillars" of authoritarian stability. Consent has, moreover, been identified as the basis of legitimacy, hence suggesting the link between consent and regime stability. In an examination of the history of

authoritarian successor parties (ASPs), I discovered both the similarities and differences between Palang Pracharath and its predecessors. For example, despite its authoritarian roots, Palang Pracharath diverged from other ASPs in Thailand's political history in that it provided substantive policies, consisted of a diverse membership, and employed co-optation strategies to expand its electoral bases. Therefore, the party not only served as a good illustration of the institutionalization of authoritarian regimes but also provided additional insight into this topic. My dissertation seeks to fill the gap in the literature by drawing the link between consent and regime stability, thus incorporating the concept of consent into the study of authoritarian durability. Beyond the actions of the regime elite, I also emphasized the importance of the agency of voters as well as the interaction between the regime, politicians, and voters. Combining the top-down and bottom-up approaches, I examined both the strategies employed by the regime elite and the decision-making of the voters.

In my conceptualization of consent, I drew both from the major dictionaries and the existing literature. Dividing consent into “overt” and “tacit” consent, the extant research on consent identifies “voluntariness,” “rationality,” “knowledge,” and “possibility of dissent” as conditions for consent. Moreover, it identifies factors such as self-interest (policies), party identification, social group memberships, and voters' perceptions of each party's competence, as the potential sources of consent. In this study, I argued that a voter provides consent to authoritarian incumbents when he or she voluntarily gives them permission to rule by voting for an authoritarian successor party when he or she has the freedom to vote for opposition parties but chooses not to. While no consent is given when an individual did not vote for the pro-regime party, a vote for it serves as an indicator of consent for authoritarian incumbents. In contrast with the traditional voter typologies, which classify voters according to factors such as class, geography, and age, I

introduced a new typology for explaining consent, which categorizes voters according to their socioeconomic dependence on the state and politicians, hence cutting across the traditional typologies, and argued that dependent voters are more likely to vote according to material interests whereas independent voters are more likely to vote according to their ideological interests. I then defined and discussed two forms of voting behavior—sincere and strategic voting—which in turn leads to two forms of consent—sincere and strategic consent—respectively. The key distinction between sincere and strategic voting is whether a voter votes for his or her sincere first choice. To avoid wasting their votes and prevent the party they least prefer from winning, strategic voters vote for a party that they prefer less but has a better chance of winning instead of voting for their most preferred party. In the case of Thailand’s 2019 general elections, a vote for Palang Pracharath was translated as sincere consent if the voter voted for the party out of sincere preference. A vote for Palang Pracharath, on the other hand, was interpreted as strategic consent if the voter voted for the party for strategic reasons.

In the final part of Chapter 2, I applied the theory of consent to explain the behavior of Palang Pracharath supporters in Thailand’s 2019 general elections, discussed the subcategories of voters, and delineated the three main pathways to consent. The voters who provided sincere consent could be further divided into those who voted for Palang Pracharath because of the MP candidate (sincere-MP), campaign policies (sincere-policy), and ideological reasons (sincere-ideology), respectively. Though each group of voters differed in their voting priorities and hence reasons for supporting the party, they all voted for Palang Pracharath as their sincere first choice. Strategic-material and strategic-ideological voters, on the contrary, preferred another party but voted for Palang Pracharath because of strategic reasons, the former being material benefits and the latter being ideological, non-material reasons. It is, however, worth noting that there is an

overlap between sincere-ideological voters and their strategic-ideological counterparts in terms of their beliefs and concerns. When given only one ballot instead of two, voters based their decisions on their priorities. In Pathway I, dependent voters who relied on politicians voted for Palang Pracharath because their MPs switched to the party. In Pathway II, dependent voters who relied on the state and government assistance voted for Palang Pracharath because of the welfare card policy. In Pathway III, independent voters who were concerned about political instability and the threat posed by the pro-democracy front voted for Palang Pracharath because of Palang Pracharath's final campaign "*Luek kwam sangob chop ti Loong Tu*" [choose peace, choose Uncle Tu (Prayut)].

C. Chapter 3 Reliance

Chapter 3 discusses the structural problems in Thailand, which engendered a group of voters who depend on politicians for goods and services—that is, sincere- and strategic-MP voters—on one hand and MPs and local politicians who establish clientelist networks to garner support from such voters on the other and analyzes how dependent voters' reliance on their MPs shaped their preference for candidates who commit to constituency work and politicians' electoral strategies, which emphasized on face time with voters. As a result of the distance between citizens and the state, the inaccessibility and unresponsiveness of the government, unequal access to public services, and government officials' abuse of power, a sizable group of voters became dependent on local MPs' and their political networks for goods and services, thereby creating a web of clientelist relationships between them. To build and maintain their clientelist networks, many MPs focus on their roles as "deal makers" and "coordinators," dedicating more time and effort to constituency work than legislative responsibilities. During elections, constituents reciprocate their

MP's delivery of goods and services with their votes. Upon closer examination, I discovered that the clientelist relationships between MPs and voters extend beyond a simple exchange of clientelist benefits and electoral backing. Instead, they are intricately tied by a concept known as *boonkoon* or a debt of gratitude, which serves as a social contract that reinforces the reciprocal and ongoing nature of these relationships. Glued by *boonkoon*, clientelist relationships enable politicians to establish loyal networks of supporters, which often involve multiple tiers of relationships between the politician, various levels of brokers (commonly referred to as the "A-B-C axes"), and the voters. Apart from sustaining and expanding their electoral support, politicians utilize vote canvassing networks for gathering and disseminating information, delivering benefits and assistance to constituents, and mobilizing voters during elections. Furthermore, some politicians benefit from being part of a political dynasty, where several family members hold political positions. This situation allows the family to share their vote canvassing networks, enhancing their ability to serve their constituents effectively.

In the second part of Chapter 3, I examined how dependent voters' reliance on their MPs influenced their preference for politicians who prioritize constituency work and face-to-face interactions at the grassroots level. According to the focus group and interview data from various regions of the country, dependent voters generally favor a candidate who is reliable and approachable: a majority of participants demonstrated a strong preference for candidates with whom they are familiar, who are accessible, live nearby, and are dedicated to serving their constituents. Such preference stems from their desire to ensure they receive assistance when needed. Consequently, in order to secure and retain support from these voters, politicians invest a significant portion of their time in visiting their constituents and participating in private and community gatherings. As elections approach, they intensify their efforts by increasing the

frequency of constituency visits and event attendance. Moreover, they adopt a more strategic approach to selecting the locations they visit, aiming to maximize their impact and appeal to potential voters. Due to dependent voters' inclination towards familiar candidates, challengers lacking a political background and pre-established political networks face a particular disadvantage. To compete for the support of these voters, brand-new candidates must invest additional effort in reaching out to voters and establishing their presence within the constituencies. Recognizing this challenge, Palang Pracharath provided these candidates with pre-arranged networks of vote canvassers to assist the candidates in navigating their constituencies and mobilizing voters, hence providing a helpful shortcut to gain support. As the focus group and interview data suggest, politicians who actively engage in constituency work are regarded positively by voters whereas those who neglect such responsibilities are disapproved of and seen as unreliable. This sentiment was evident in the defeat of the Democrat Party in both Bangkok and several Southern provinces, where their candidates were criticized for their disregard of constituency services. Likewise, the lack of effort by the Future Forward Party to reach out to dependent voters influenced their decision not to support the party in the 2019 elections. These instances highlight the importance of an active engagement with constituents as well as a genuine commitment to constituency work, as they enhance candidates' chances of electoral success.

D. Chapter 4 Tilting the Playing Field: Institutional Engineering and Beyond

Chapter 4 delves into how the NCPO constructed a new political structure and manipulated the electoral system to curtail electoral politics and extend its political influence in the new regime. A critical aspect explored is how the interplay between “the rules of the game” and the electoral context shapes the behavior of key players involved, including voters, politicians, and political

parties. I commenced this chapter with a brief historical background of the relationships between military coups and constitutions. In Thailand, the constitutions have traditionally served as a political tool to ensure a seamless transition and, in the context of the 2017 constitution, facilitate the junta's preservation of power after a coup. To ensure the desired outcome and facilitate co-optation, the NCPO utilized a combination of institutional manipulations and state apparatuses to tilt the playing field in favor of Palang Pracharath and its allies. First, the junta selected a constitutional drafting committee to craft a new constitution to institutionalize and embed its power. To gain legitimacy and engineer "consent" from citizens, a national referendum was conducted. Once the draft constitution was approved by the electorate, the junta proceeded to "design the rules of the game" to maximize its electoral prospects. The constitution includes two crucial institutional mechanisms to tilt the playing field: (1) a new electoral system called MMA, which provides advantages to small and medium-sized political parties, including the junta's own party and potential allies while placing disadvantage on large parties, such as Pheu Thai, who was seen as the junta's greatest adversary; (2) the appointed Senate, which strengthens the junta's influence by granting indirect control over the legislative process.

By adopting the single-ballot Mixed-Member Apportionment (MMA) electoral system, the NCPO aimed to convert the votes for individual constituency candidates into the votes for the party itself--it was aware that dependent voters, due to their socioeconomic reliance on politicians, would vote for the party affiliated with their MPs. Furthermore, the single-ballot system compelled voters to prioritize their preferences, such as MP candidate, policy, or ideology. When voters were required to choose the most critical factor, it became easier for Palang Pracharath to appeal to them and gain their consent. Additionally, a complex party-list formula was devised to prevent Pheu Thai from gaining a majority and to allocate additional seats to small and medium-sized parties.

This strategic combination of electoral rules allowed Palang Pracharath and its allies to gain a competitive edge in the electoral process while undermining the chances of Pheu Thai and other larger parties. In addition to the MMA electoral system, the junta handpicked a 250-member Senate, which functions as a “military party” with various functions. The Senate plays a pivotal role in choosing the prime minister, acting as a safeguard against constitutional amendments that might threaten the junta's position. Additionally, it enforces the military's policy dogma and economic vision, exerts control over independent entities, and, importantly, signals the junta's strength, influencing the behavior of players in the game. The backing of 250 senators gave Palang Pracharath a strong sense of assurance in its electoral prospects, making it easier for the party to co-opt and gain the support of politicians, vote canvassers, and voters. Having established an electoral system that favors its interest, the junta took further steps to “control the referees” by appointing individuals it could control to the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) and “handicap other players” using the Constitutional Court and state apparatuses. By crafting the rules to its advantage, controlling the referees, and handicapping other players, the junta could be confident that its plans would proceed as intended. Palang Pracharath was established as a vehicle for the junta to wield state power and solidify its position within the new regime.

Even with these measures set in place, Palang Pracharath's victory was not assured until voters cast their ballots on election day. While institutional manipulations played a crucial role in shaping the election outcomes and facilitating the return of authoritarian incumbents to power, the junta still required the consent of citizens to gain legitimacy and remain in control—the ultimate power remained in the hands of the voters who must provide their consent to authoritarian incumbents through the electoral process. Despite the support of the 250 senators, the junta needed to secure the support of 126 elected representatives to reinstate Prayut as the prime minister.

Whether Palang Pracharath achieved this independently or with the assistance of its coalition partners, the party still required consent from voters (to vote for it), politicians (to join its party), vote canvassers (to support its candidates), and small and medium-sized parties (to join its coalition government). Chapter 5 examined how Palang Pracharath accomplished this.

E. Chapter 5 Consent

In the final chapter, I investigated the three main factors that influenced voters' decisions to support Palang Pracharath: the MP candidate, the welfare card policy, and "ideology." The chapter adopted a comprehensive approach, combining both top-down and bottom-up perspectives, to elucidate the three pathways through which the regime obtained and voters provided *consent*. As voters varied in their preferences and priorities, different types of strategies were required to induce their consent. The consent of dependent voters can be gained through the co-optation of former MPs, local politicians, or vote canvassers with whom they have clientelist relationships and/or through the distribution of pro-poor populist programs, such as the welfare card. However, the consent of independent voters who are not reliant on the state, politicians, or local political patrons can only be achieved by capitalizing on their concerns about political instability and their hostility toward the pro-democracy front.

In Pathway I, sincere-MP and strategic-material voters' dependence on and clientelist relationships with their local political patrons rendered the MP candidate the most significant factor in their consideration. Thus, when presented with a single ballot, these voters opted to vote for the MP candidate instead of the party. As the candidate's political affiliation exerted little to no influence on their decisions, this group of voters was inclined to follow their MPs regardless of the party they ran with. Recognizing their attachment to the MP candidates, Palang Pracharath

utilized both incentives and threats to attract former MPs and local politicians with established political networks to join its ranks. In doing so, the party successfully converted these politicians' voters into its own. At the level of the MP-voter relationship, successful maintenance of political support hinged on two key factors: consistent engagement in constituency work and reasonable explanations for the party switch. As long as these conditions were fulfilled, the party switch would not impair their ties with their supporters. Because Palang Pracharath was these voters' sincere first choice, their votes could be construed as *sincere consent* for authoritarian incumbents. Nevertheless, their consent was conditional upon the MP's affiliation with the party, for it was given *through* the MP. The distinction between the theoretical strategic-material voters and their sincere counterparts lies in the nature of their support for the party--unlike that of sincere-MP voters, the support of strategic-material voters was based on strategic calculations, resulting in strategic consent.

In Pathway II, sincere-policy and strategic-material voters, due to their dependence on government assistance, prioritized populist schemes, making socioeconomic campaign policies their top priority. As a result, this group of voters based their electoral decisions primarily on these policies rather than the MP candidate or ideology. Palang Pracharath drew inspiration from Thaksin's previous electoral victories and employed similar tactics to appeal to the poor. By leveraging its control over state resources, the NCPO administration implemented a nationwide welfare program that bore the name of Palang Pracharath and served as a powerful electoral weapon. This program provided tangible benefits to low-income earners, establishing the NCPO government's credibility among voters and demonstrating its ability to cater to citizens' needs. This success ultimately contributed to Palang Pracharath's victory in the 2019 elections. For Palang Pracharath candidates, the welfare card served a dual purpose. First, it was used to attract low-

income voters, appealing to their interests by promising to continue welfare benefits. Second, it was used to attack political rivals, threatening that these benefits would be discontinued if voters failed to support the party. Thanks to the welfare card, Palang Pracharath successfully gained support from both the voters who valued the welfare card and feared losing their welfare benefits. For these voters, the welfare program provided much-needed aid that helped alleviate their financial burden. When faced with political parties offering similar campaign policies, they chose to support Palang Pracharath, hence providing consent to authoritarian incumbents who had delivered the welfare benefits. The consent of sincere-policy voters, like that of their sincere-MP counterparts, was genuine but hinged on the benefits they expected to receive from the party. Therefore, if the party failed to deliver on its promises, their consent could be withdrawn. The consent of strategic-material voters, on the other hand, was even more fragile as their loyalty resided with another party. Their support for Palang Pracharath and consent for authoritarian incumbents were driven purely by the material gains they anticipated and could easily shift if advantageous to do so. Consequently, this group of voters was ready to switch back to their former parties and showed little inclination to develop any attachment to Palang Pracharath.

In Pathway III, sincere-ideological and strategic-ideological voters' self-reliance afforded this group of voters greater autonomy in their political choices. Since they depended neither on their local political patrons nor government assistance, ideological voters prioritized peace and stability above all other factors. Hence, they placed utmost importance on prime ministerial candidates among whom Prayut was perceived as the most capable of delivering their desired outcomes. Just like the sincere-MP vs. strategic-material and sincere-policy vs. strategic-material pairs, sincere-ideological and strategic-ideological voters also differed in their preference for Palang Pracharath as their top choice. However, within the sincere-ideological voters, there were

two subgroups that frequently overlap. The first subgroup consisted of individuals who supported the party because of its “intrinsic value,” which included its connections to the regime and its prime ministerial candidate (hence, “Prayut’s fans”). The second subgroup, however, supported the party more out of their animosity towards the pro-democracy front (hence, “Thaksin’s haters”), rather than the party's intrinsic value or their perception of Prayut as the strongest force to maintain the status quo, peace, and stability in the country. In contrast with sincere-ideological voters who voted for Palang Pracharath as their sincere first choice, strategic-ideological voters remained loyal to and preferred the Democrats to any other party, hence exhibiting intriguing behavior that deserved further examination. To capitalize on the voters’ concerns for peace and stability, Palang Pracharath made a strategic move to craft a last-minute campaign that evoked their fears and anxiety and presented Prayut as the nation’s guardian of peace. Despite their loyalty to the Democrat Party, strategic-ideological voters were swayed by their deeper concerns for national security and/or animosity towards the pro-democracy camp. These sentiments, intensified by a series of events, including Abhisit's opposition to Prayut, Palang Pracharath's final campaign, and the royal announcement, influenced their strategic decisions to support Palang Pracharath. While both sincere-ideological and strategic-ideological voters expressed consent for the authoritarian incumbents, the two groups differed in their motivations. In contrast with the former who voted for the party due to their support for the military and/or preference for authoritarian rule or chose the party as their sincere first choice, the latter strategically voted for the party as a means to achieve peace and stability. As a result, their consent was not only given out of necessity and thus strategic, but also temporary, specific to the 2019 elections, and subject to withdrawal.

Lastly, apart from securing voter consent through the three pathways discussed above, Palang Pracharath allegedly divided itself into smaller parties, colluded with medium-sized parties

during the campaign, and engaged in extensive post-election negotiations to take the lead in forming a coalition government. This maneuver enabled Prayut and his cabinet ministers to return to office even though they did not secure the majority of seats in the elections.

III. Implications

As polling drew to a close for Thailand's 2019 general elections, the future of the authoritarian incumbents in the new regime looked optimistic—among the 8.4 million votes cast in favor of Palang Pracharath, many were expected to translate into more lasting support for the party. Moreover, Palang Pracharath's success in forming a coalition government and reinstating the former coup leader as prime minister signified the stability of the regime. As demonstrated in this study, the authoritarian incumbents acquired two types of consent—sincere and strategic—from three primary sources: the MP candidate, the welfare card, and ideology. It goes without saying that the voters who voted for the party out of sincere preference, thus giving sincere consent to the authoritarian incumbents, were more likely to provide more stable support for the regime than their strategic counterparts who saw the party merely as a means to some end. In order to determine the stability of each source of support for the party, it is critical to emphasize that Palang Pracharath, in and of itself, is an empty shell filled with politicians co-opted from other parties with no support of its own. Out of the three sources, the closest to Palang Pracharath's "inherent" support stemmed, therefore, from its prime ministerial candidate who, according to Palang Pracharath's internal polls, brought home at least 20% of its votes. Because they supported the party based on what it represented, whether it be a linkage to the regime or a former coup leader as its prime ministerial candidate, the first subgroup of sincere-ideological voters were most likely to provide the most stable source of support to Palang Pracharath. The second most stable source

of support for Palang Pracharath came from sincere-MP voters who were co-opted into the party through their MPs. However, as previously discussed, they would continue to support Palang Pracharath only as long as their MPs remained affiliated with the party, for their loyalty belonged to their MPs rather than the party. Alternatively, an MP's neglect of constituency duties could potentially lead to their withdrawal of support from Palang Pracharath even though he or she remains affiliated with the party. A less stable source of support came perhaps from sincere-policy voters who depended on government assistance. Even though they sincerely preferred the welfare card, their motivations for supporting the party were primarily material. Thus, in the event that Palang Pracharath fails to deliver its electoral promises or a party with established credibility proposes equally or more aggressive populist policies, this group of voters would readily return to their former parties or switch to new parties. Finally, due to the strategic nature of their support, strategic-material and strategic-ideological voters provided the least stable form of support for the party. Since their support for Palang Pracharath sprouted from necessity and was thus temporary, it would vanish once the need or circumstances that prompted their support subsided. Though it is possible for strategic voters to transform into sincere voters and cultivate loyalty to the party, it is unlikely that Palang Pracharath, given the self-interest of and disunity among its members as well as the party's lack of ideological backing and political networks of its own, would develop into a strong political institution.

Four years had passed. On March 17, 2023, Prime Minister Prayut dissolved parliament, paving the way for the May general elections. After four years under the Palang Pracharath-led government, the country has suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn. Contrary to the 2019 general elections, peace and stability were no longer a pressing concern for most voters. Instead, economic concerns rose to the top of their priorities. Despite its

measures to promote the economy, the Palang Pracharath-led government's performance fell short of the public's expectations. Instead of a peacekeeper, Thai voters wanted a leader who could revive the economy and move the country forward. Palang Pracharath's defeat in the 2023 general elections indicates the party's failure not only to retain its support but also to convert the support from the sources such as policy and ideology into its own. A quick review of the 2023 election results reveals that the majority of the votes that remained with Palang Pracharath (39 out of its 40 seats) came from its MP rather than party-list candidates. The success of Palang Pracharath incumbents, such as the Kamphaeng Phet faction, in defending their constituencies provides support for sincere-MP voters as a stable source of support for the party. While Palang Pracharath failed to secure any but one party-list seat, Prayut's Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party won as many as 13 party-list seats, which came likely from the subgroup of sincere-ideological voters who supported Gen Prayut as prime minister. Since the support of these voters belonged to Prayut rather than Palang Pracharath, it vanished as he left the party. Similarly, when offered a more aggressive populist policy, such as Pheu Thai's 10,000 baht handout, many sincere-policy and strategic-material voters were quick to abandon Palang Pracharath. Perhaps most interesting was the behavior of Bangkok voters who voted overwhelmingly for Palang Pracharath in 2019. Now that the need for peace and stability (and so had the need to vote for Palang Pracharath) had subsided, Bangkok flipped from Palang Pracharath to Move Forward (which won all but one constituency) in the blink of an eye. In other words, as the context had changed, the strategic-ideological voters who once supported Palang Pracharath no longer saw the need to do so. Finally, the regime's use of the Senate to block Move Forward Party leader Pita Limjaroenrat from becoming prime minister demonstrates that the authoritarian incumbents could no longer acquire enough consent to legitimately return to power. While it is important for them to acquire consent from citizens to

claim legitimacy, it is even more important to maintain it. Therefore, Palang Pracharath and its pro-regime allies' failure to obtain enough consent from citizens, which necessitates their reliance on the Senate to get rid of the Move Forward Party and on its former rivals, such as Pheu Thai, to form a coalition government, paints a grim future for the regime.

IV. Future Research Areas

The findings of this study suggest several areas for future research. For example, it would be interesting to conduct research to compare the results of the 2019 and 2023 elections. While the 2019 elections indicated consent for the authoritarian incumbents, the 2023 elections displayed the withdrawal of such consent. Since consent was argued to play a vital role in regime stability, a study that examines the factors that lead to the withdrawal of consent would shed light on the dynamics of political support and potential vulnerabilities of authoritarian regimes. In Thailand, Bangkok voters have been argued to be unpredictable, as their electoral support often seesawed between pro-regime and pro-democracy sides. Therefore, systematic research that investigates their political behavior and particularly the reasons behind their frequent party switches would add to the literature on contingent voters and provide insights for political parties that seek their support. Moreover, though certain factions, such as Kamphaeng Phet, were able to defend their incumbencies, some political dynasties, such as Sisaket's Angkasakulkiat family, were defeated by their challengers. Future studies that conduct focus group discussions and interviews with more diverse groups of voters (e.g., age, gender, profession, and political orientations) in other provinces would yield intriguing insights into the factors that influence electoral outcomes, the preferences of different voter segments, and the overall dynamics of political support in different regions. This new research could offer a more nuanced understanding of political dynasties and the stability of

their support. Lastly, a future study that involves a public opinion survey with large sample size and utilizes regression analysis would provide a clearer and more comprehensive picture of voter priorities and the intricate relationship between different variables.

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