A New Tale of Two Democracies? The Changing Urban-Rural Dynamics at Thailand's 2023 General Elections

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On the campaign trail in rural Thailand in the run-up to the May 2023 general elections, candidates frequently turned to the metaphor of a fried egg to describe the political landscape of their constituencies. According to this analogy, the "egg yolk" represents urban areas, where voters often base their voting decisions on programmatic appeals and party labels. This urban core is surrounded by the "egg

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whites"—rural areas where voters are generally less susceptible to national sentiments (*krasae*) and are more inclined to vote based on the localized appeal of individual candidates.

This dichotomy employed by legislative contenders mirrors the broader analytical framework commonly used by scholars of Thai politics which emphasizes the urban-rural divide—or more specifically pits Bangkok against the provinces (*tang changwat*). In an influential essay published in 1996 titled "A Tale of Two Democracies", Anek Laothamathas depicted rural voters as focused on supporting their local patrons while Bangkok-based, middle-class voters yearned for honest, clean government.[1] But is this framing accurate and adequate, especially in the wake of the general elections in 2023? This article contends that there is now a significant degree of convergence in party preferences between Bangkok and the provinces, yet a distinct divide remains between densely populated urban areas and sparsely populated rural areas. In other words, Thailand is experiencing the emergence of *multiple* "fried eggs", each corresponding to the country's numerous urban centres, rather than a single Bangkok-centric "egg yolk".

A Tale of Two Democracies

According to much of the existing literature on Thai politics, the urban-rural divide is one of the most significant factors shaping social cleavages and political outcomes. Most notably, Anek Laothamathas argued that rural voters typically place greater emphasis on tangible, immediate benefits, which are often facilitated by patronage networks associated with politicians seeking electoral support. In contrast, urban voters tend to prioritize ideological principles and programmatic platforms.[2]

The divide outlined by Anek Laothamathas in 1996 set the stage for the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) in the early 2000s. Indeed, the popularity of Thaksin, a billionaire businessman-turned-politician, can be interpreted as a response to historic political and economic marginalization experienced by the rural population.[3] The TRT was widely supported by the rural majority and Thaksin's spell as prime minister (2001–6) intensified tensions between urban and rural populations, consistent with Anek Laothamathas's predictions. However, that framing does not fully capture the motivations of the rural electorate who supported

the TRT. Rather than simply succumbing to the influence of local patronage networks, rural voters were also drawn to the TRT because the party's policies addressed their needs and aspirations.

Economic development over the past 40 years has resulted in enormous structural changes to the economy, some of which run counter to Anek Laothamathas's clear-cut divisions between urban and rural politics. Andrew Walker, for instance, has written about the rise of "middle-income peasants", those who continue to reside in the countryside but have experienced rising incomes and engage with the state and economy in increasingly complex ways.[4] As a result of their changing, often precarious, circumstances these middle-income peasants make new and different demands on the state. Duncan McCargo, meanwhile, has conceptualized "urbanized villagers", those who reside in urban areas but maintain their voter registration in their rural home provinces.[5]

As such, the traditional urban-rural divide in Thai politics has become increasingly complex since Anek Laothamathas's article was published. This raises two important questions. First, have rural voters moved away from a reliance on patronage networks? Second, has economic development and migration within the country blurred the distinctions between urban and rural political preferences?

Convergence and Divergence

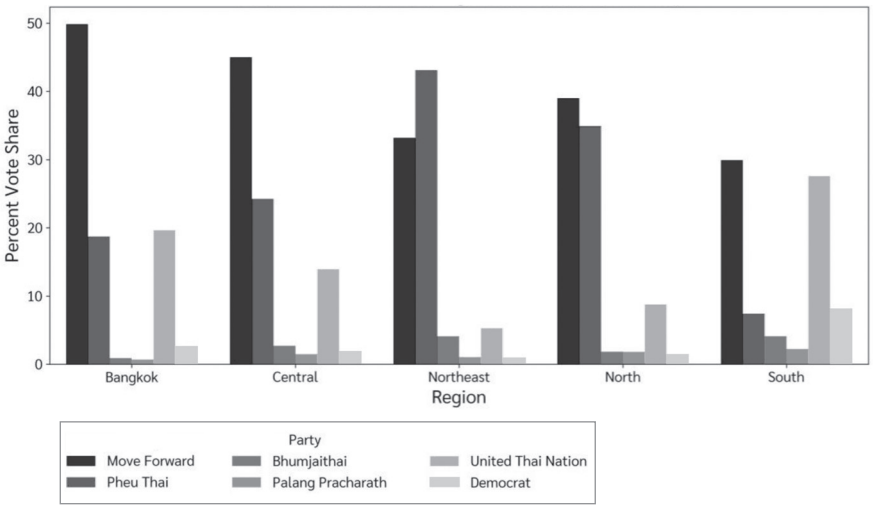
We contend that urban-rural divisions continue to remain a significant driver of variations in party strategies and election results but not in the way originally proposed by Anek Laothamathas. Although most parties—with the notable exception of the Move Forward Party (MFP)—continue to tailor their strategies to urban and rural settings, there is a growing convergence in party preferences. Continuing a pattern that began in 2001, Thailand has seen the formation of large national political parties that have managed to partially bridge the urban-rural divide by effectively competing for and securing support from voters across that divide. As a result, the sharp distinction between Bangkok and the countryside is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain analytically.

The 2023 general elections illustrate this phenomenon. Except in the Northeast region of the country, known as Isan, where it came second to the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), a successor of Thaksin's original TRT, the MFP emerged as the largest party in party-list

votes in nearly every region, including Bangkok (see Figure 1). This pattern holds when we disaggregate the data and focus on the provincial and constituency-level voting patterns. In all of Thailand's 77 provinces and 400 constituencies, the MFP finished first or second in terms of party-list vote share. It accomplished this primarily by maintaining a unified campaign platform nationwide. It campaigned on the message that "where there are uncles, there is no us" (*mee rao mai mee loong, mee loong mai mee rao*),[6] which echoed as strongly in the countryside as it did in Bangkok. This stands in contrast to the common practice of political parties running separate campaigns for urban and rural demographics, such as employing programmatic strategies in urban areas and patronage-based tactics in the countryside.

According to the results of the 2023 polls, geographic distinctions have become less pronounced. Although regional variations persisted, as evidenced by the fact that the MFP's share of the votes differed noticeably across regions, support for the party was crosscutting and transcended the stark regional divides that are sometimes assumed to be fundamental in Thai politics.

Figure 1
Party Preferences across Regions in Thailand (Party List)

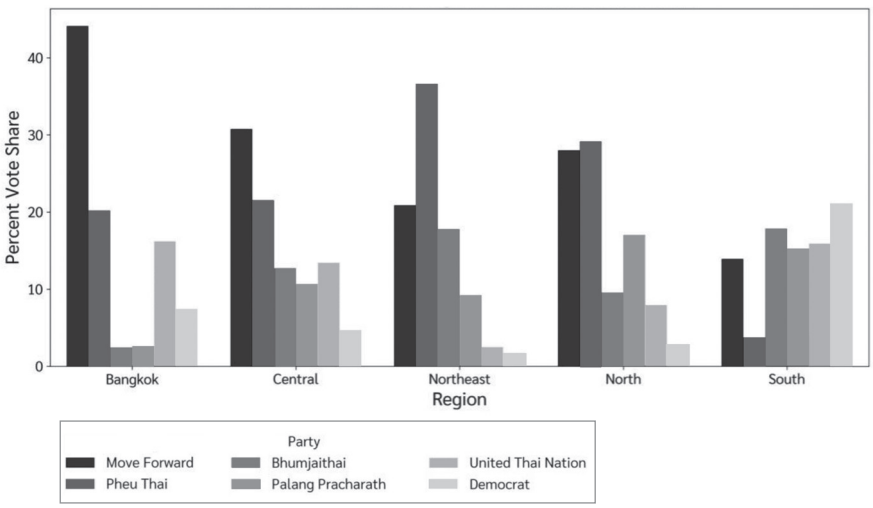


Source: Authors' dataset

However, even though there are some signs of convergence, it is important to avoid interpreting this as conclusive evidence that the urban and rural electorates have become fully aligned in their preferences. In fact, when looking at constituency-seat votes, rather than party-list votes, the contrast between Bangkok and other areas persists.[7] For instance, the MFP's candidates came first or second in only 216 of the 400 constituency seats up for grabs, and in only 45 of the 77 provinces. Moreover, the difference between the MFP's constituency-seat votes in Bangkok and those in other regions is more noticeable (see Figure 2). In addition, trying to explain convergences of preference based solely on similar voting patterns is questionable since it is possible that voters in urban and rural areas aligned with candidates from the same party, yet their decisions were grounded in distinct criteria or because of divergent campaign strategies.

According to our fieldwork in Kamphaeng Phet, a province in central Thailand, a candidate affiliated with the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) adopted a constituency service approach (tackling the problem of mosquitoes) in more urban areas, emulating the practices of Bangkok parliamentarians. Conversely, in the more rural part of the constituency, this candidate placed a stronger emphasis

Figure 2
Party Preferences across Regions in Thailand (Constituency)



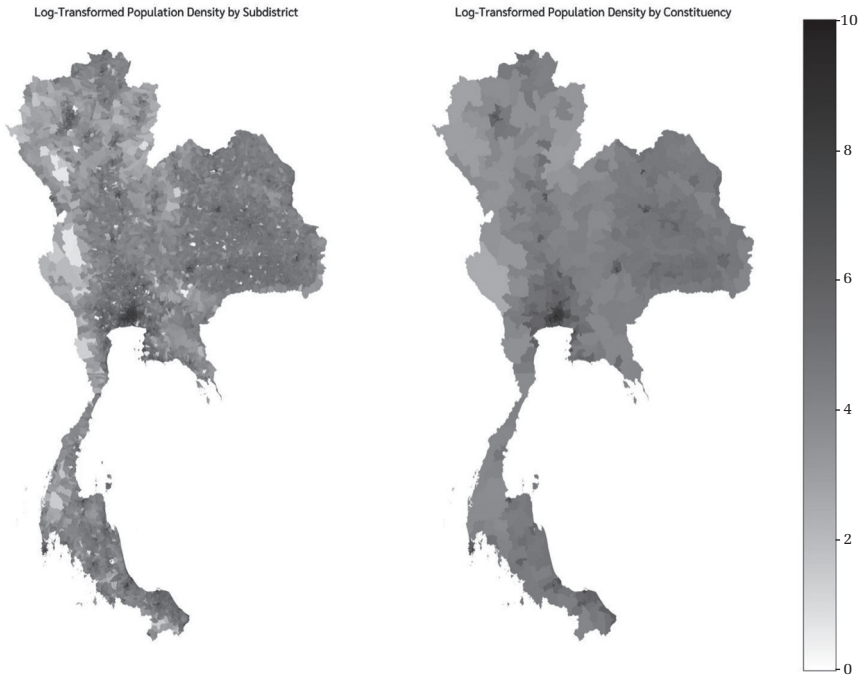
Source: Authors' dataset

on cultivating support through intricate networks of local leaders, so much so that he stated, "even if a pin were to drop, I could hear it".[8] In Ubon Ratchathani, a city in the Isan region, an MFP candidate took a different approach. Whereas the PPRP candidate in Kamphaeng Phet Province adopted distinct mobilizational strategies for urban and rural areas, the MFP candidate in Ubon Ratchathani pursued a programmatic approach in both contexts while adapting the issues to align with the interests of rural or urban voters. In the urban centre of this area, the candidate appealed to voters by leveraging the party's commitment to military conscription reform. In the rural area of the constituency, they spoke of more help for farmers and pensions for the elderly. These examples illustrate the persistence of the urban-rural divide, which may no longer be as apparent at the national level but which is still discernable across constituencies or even within a single constituency.

To further explore the extent of convergence, we extended our analysis of voting patterns to the subnational level. Rather than solely comparing voters in Bangkok with those in the provinces, we compared voters residing in more urban areas of the country with those in less urban areas. If the distinction between urban and rural is truly withering away, it should no longer serve as a reliable predictor of voting behaviour. To achieve this, we used population density as a proxy for urbanization and integrated this with the results of the 2023 general elections to explore the spatial dynamics of electoral politics. First, we obtained population data at the subdistrict level for the year 2022 from the Bureau of Registration Administration.[9] We merged this data with a "shapefile"—a file format commonly used for geospatial analysis—containing constituency boundary data corresponding to the Election Commission's announcement[10] and sourced from the Government Big Data Institute.[11] We then tallied the population of every subdistrict within each constituency, thereby calculating the total population for each electoral constituency. To determine the size of each constituency, we calculated its area in square kilometres, relying on the European Petroleum Survey Group (EPSG) coordinate reference system. Finally, we estimated the population density of each constituency by dividing its estimated total population by its calculated area.[12] Figure 3 displays density by subdistrict and constituency.

Using this dataset, we examined whether a party's vote share correlates with the level of urbanization in a constituency, as

Figure 3
Estimated Population Density in Thailand

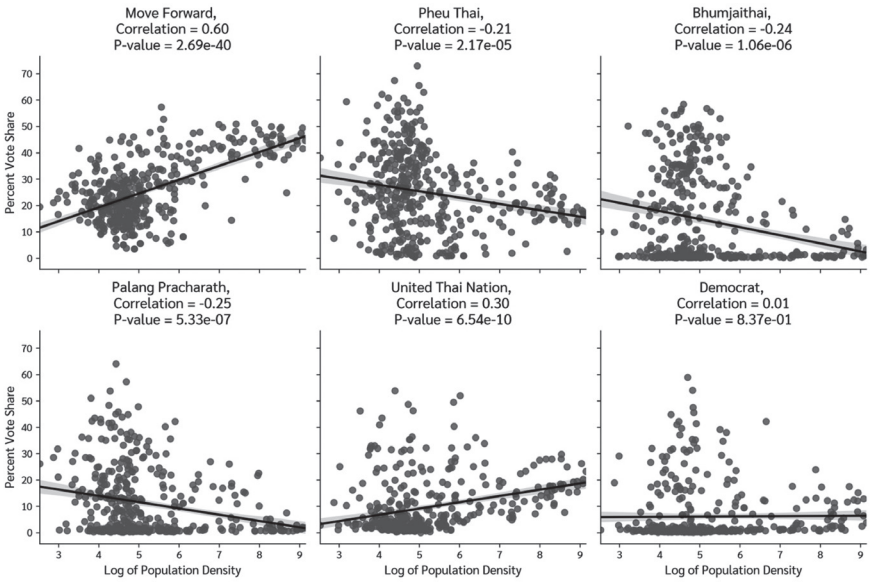


Source: Authors' dataset

measured by population density. Figure 4 charts the relationship between population density and party vote share (measured using constituency-seat votes) of the six largest parties in the 2023 general elections. If urban-rural distinctions have lost salience we would expect to see a flat line. A positive slope, meanwhile, would suggest greater support for a party in urban than rural areas and a negative slope would indicate the opposite.

Our results indicate that voting patterns, specifically support for candidates affiliated with different parties, are strongly correlated with the degree of urbanization at the constituency level for most parties. This correlation remains even if we exclude Bangkok from the analysis. Specifically, voters in more densely populated urban areas were much more likely to support the MFP compared to voters in rural areas. By contrast, support for the PTP and the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP) was strongest in more rural constituencies

Figure 4
Party Vote Shares by Population Density (Constituency Votes)



Source: Authors' dataset

and weaker in more urban constituencies. Interestingly, the PPRP and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) were mirror images of each other—the PPRP held an advantage in more rural constituencies, while the UTN performed better in more urban constituencies. In short, there are still clear differences in voting behaviour between voters in denser urban areas and those in more sparsely populated rural areas.

Conclusion

There are signs of increasing convergence between urban and rural voters, particularly evidenced by the widespread crosscutting support for the MFP at the 2023 polls. At the same time, however, this article finds that the rate of support each party received varied between densely populated urban areas and less populated rural areas. Our research suggests that instead of a "single fried egg", we are seeing the emergence of "multiple fried eggs".

Although a lengthy analysis of the factors driving these results is beyond the scope of this article, we can offer some preliminary explanations. The interaction between technology and youth participation in politics appears to be a transformative factor, blurring traditional urban-rural divides. During our fieldwork, we often encountered stories of how young voters active on social media served as "organic canvassers" who engaged with their preferred party—usually the MFP—online while also encouraging friends and relatives offline to vote for that party rather than parties that had traditionally been locally dominant. We also found that the strength of local political machines also varied greatly from constituency to constituency. In areas where local political machines were less dominant, voters were more susceptible to being influenced by national political currents, such as anti-military sentiments.

In 1996, Anek Laothamathas argued that democracy would endure only if urban middle-class and rural voters converged. He wrote, "Such an alliance is only conceivable, however, only if the middle class becomes reconciled to the democratic understanding and aspirations of the rural voters rather than trying to remake them."[13] The image of the urbanite MFP expanding its appeal to more rural constituencies suggests that a more complicated picture may be emerging, one where both the urban and rural electorate are adopting a more ideological style of politics.

NOTES

1 Anek Laothamatas, "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand", in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, edited by Robert H. Taylor (New York City, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 201–23.

2 Ibid. Subsequent scholars have focused on the class divisions that undergird or crosscuts this regional divide. See, for example, James Glassman, "The Provinces Elect Governments, Bangkok Overthrows Them: Urbanity, Class and Post-democracy in Thailand", *Urban Studies* 47, no. 6 (2010): 1301–23; Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: The Lessons of Protest", *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia* 50, no. 1 (2014): 1–15; Naruenmon Thabchumpon and Duncan McCargo, "Urbanized Villagers in the 2010 Thai Redshirt Protests", *Asian Survey* 51, no. 6 (2011): 993–1018; Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

3 Tejapira Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin", *New Left Review* 39, no. 5 (2006): 5–37.

4 Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants*, p. 6.

[5] Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's Urbanized Villagers and Political Polarization", *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 365–78.

[6] This phrase was a regular part of MFP candidates' election communication. General Prayut Chan-ocha, who became prime minister after the military takeover in 2014 and served until 2023, and General Prawit Wongsuwon, the first deputy prime minister between 2014 and 2023, were widely referred to as "uncles" by the Thai media. In this context, the MFP's message represents a firm rejection of the possibility of forming alliances with these generals when attempting to form a government.

[7] For more information on the ballot system for the 2023 general elections, see endnote 1 in Allen Hicken and Napon Jatusripitak, "Introduction: Making Sense of Thailand's Seismic Election", of this Roundtable.

[8] Authors' interview with a PPRP candidate, Kamphaeng Phet, May 2023.

[9] Bureau of Registration Administration, "Population Data", distributed by the Bureau of Registration Administration, https://stat.bora.dopa.go.th/new_stat/file/65/stat_t65.xls.

[10] The Election Commission of Thailand, "Announcement of the Election Commission", distributed by the Election Commission of Thailand, https://ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/documents/140A023N0000000000500.pdf.

[11] Government Big Data Institute, distributed by Kittapat Ratanaphupha, https://github.com/KittapatR/Thai-ECT-election-map-66.

[12] This methodology rests on two core assumptions. First, population density was assumed to be a suitable measure of urbanization as urban areas are typically characterized by higher population densities than rural areas. However, this may have introduced discrepancies in the population density estimates since Thai citizens do not need to reside where they are officially registered to vote. Second, the analysis of voting patterns was conducted at the constituency level and did not account for variations within individual constituencies. Although this assumption of uniform population density within each constituency might lead to a loss of granularity, it served a practical purpose by facilitating a broader analysis of spatial trends without overcomplicating the analysis. For a visualization of actual within-constituency variations in population density, see Figure 1.

[13] Anek, "A Tale of Two Democracies", p. 222.