PERSPECTIVE

Age and Ideology:

The Emergence of New Political Cleavages in Thailand's 2566 (2023) Election

Napon Jatusripitak and Jacob Isaac Ricks

Abstract

The Move Forward Party's victory in Thailand's 14 May 2566 (2023) election surprised most observers, defying widespread predictions of a Pheu Thai win. Departing from traditional vote-mobilization strategies, the Move Forward's campaign focused largely on social media and broad calls for political reform while eschewing the vote-canvassing networks and economic policy promises that had delivered victory after victory for the Pheu Thai. Does the Move Forward's win indicate changes in Thai voting behaviour? Relying on data from an original survey collected the week before and the week after the election, as well as observations from fieldwork, we identify two political cleavages that were influential in shaping vote choice: age and ideology. Younger voters and those who embrace more liberal values were significantly more likely to support the Move Forward. Nevertheless, we caution that this election may be unique, and that these political cleavages may not necessarily drive voter behaviour in future elections.

Keywords: election, Thailand, electoral cleavages, ideology, young voters

DOI: 10.5509/2024971-art6

Napon Jatusripitak is a visiting fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore and postdoctoral fellow at Chulalongkorn University. He holds a PhD in political science from Northwestern University. His dissertation, titled "The Politics of Giving: Patterns and Evolution of Patronage and Electoral Networks in Thailand," examines how Thai parties and politicians distribute rewards and favors in order to mobilize support during elections. Email: naponjatusripitak@gmail.com.

Jacob Isaac Ricks is associate professor of political science in the School of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University. He specializes in politics and development in Southeast Asia, with a special emphasis on Thailand. He recently co-authored *Ethnicity and Politics in Southeast Asia* in the Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia series published by Cambridge University Press. Email: jacobricks@smu.edu.sg.

Acknowledgements: Funding for the survey came from a Lee Kong Chian Fellowship at Singapore Management University. Fieldwork was supported by Second Century Fund (C2F), Chulalongkorn University. Special thanks to attendees at a seminar at the College of Local Administration at Khon Kaen University where some of these findings were first presented.

Most observers predicted a Pheu Thai Party victory in Thailand's 14 May 2566 (2023 CE) general election. The Pheu Thai (PT) had won every poll since 2001, a consistent track record underpinned by a large voter base purportedly committed to the party's policies and leadership, as well as a raft of candidates with established reputations, ample resources, and extensive local networks. Party leaders had campaigned for a "landslide" of votes over General Prayuth Chan-ocha and his allies, promising change after 9 years of rule by the 2014 coup leader.

As ballot tallies poured in, however, it became clear that an upset was in order. The Move Forward Party (MFP), successor to the disbanded Future Forward Party, pulled ahead, ultimately capturing 151 seats in the 500-member House of Representatives. The PT's landslide fizzled with a second-place finish of 141 seats.

The MFP's surprise victory raises a series of intriguing questions, not the least of which is whether this outcome heralds a monumental shift in the Thai electorate. Since 2000, scholars have described an emergent partisan identity among Thai voters, largely due to electoral system reforms in 1997 and the strength of the PT party and its predecessors, the People Power Party (PPP) and the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). These dynamics gave rise to relatively enduring, quasi-institutionalized linkages binding voters to the party.[1] Partisanship had taken on regional characteristics, with voters in the North and Northeast supporting the PT and its predecessors, while the South and parts of Bangkok solidified as strongholds of the Democrat Party.[2] These party-based affiliations sometimes worked in tandem with or were overruled by personal networks cultivated through patronage of individual candidates and vote canvassing networks, a phenomenon that often led to the triumph of local political dynasties and factions in specific provinces, irrespective of their party affiliations.[3]

The MFP's victory, however, defied these prevailing patterns, relying instead on social media platforms, and engaging directly with the electorate. Notably, the MFP challenged both the PT's dominance in the North, particularly in Chiang Mai, the home province of Thaksin Shinawatra, while simultaneously disrupting the entrenched political dynasties that have long held sway in central Thai provinces, such as Samut Prakan, Rayong, and Chon Buri. The MFP also showcased a strong party-list performance in the

[1] Allen Hicken, "Late to the Party: The Development of Partisanship in Thailand," TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia 1, no. 2 (2013): 202–203; Allen Hicken and Joel Sawat Selway, "Forcing the Genie Back in the Bottle: Sociological Change, Institutional Reform, and Health Policy in Thailand," Journal of East Asian Studies 12, no. 1 (2012): 75–77; Joel Sawat Selway, "Green in the Heart of Red," Contemporary Southeast Asia 42, no. 3 (2020): 400–404.

[2] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Reviving Democracy at Thailand's 2011 Election," *Asian Survey* 53 no. 4 (2013): 619–621.

[3] Prajak Kongkirati, "Evolving Power of Provincial Political Families in Thailand: Dynastic Power, Party Machine, and Ideological Politics," S*outh East Asia Research* 24, no. 3 (2016): 389–390; Punchada Sirivunnabood, "The Rules Change but the Players Don't," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 3 (2019): 393–403.

traditionally conservative southern regions, and it almost completely swept Bangkok. This success exemplifies the MFP's ability to circumvent old tactics, transcend regional boundaries, and resonate with a diverse array of voters, further blurring the lines of existing political divisions.

Has the Move Forward Party reshaped the contours of Thai politics? Are we witnessing the emergence of new electoral cleavages? In this essay, we address these questions by leveraging survey data collected both shortly before and shortly after the election, coupled with insights gathered from fieldwork observations during the election campaign. The findings reveal that voters who chose the MFP were generally younger and more likely to support democratic ideals compared to those who chose other parties. This suggests the presence of an age-based cleavage as well as an ideological cleavage. These two cleavages appear to have overpowered the impact of most other societal cleavages that previously shaped electoral dynamics.

However, we caution that the 14 May 2023 general election in Thailand presents unique characteristics that clearly influenced the outcome without necessarily indicating a sweeping transformation within the Thai electorate. Much of the MFP's success can be attributed to the backlash against General Prayuth Chan-ocha, rather than signifying a widespread pro-reform sentiment among the electorate. While pro-reform voters do exist, their numbers may not be as substantial among the population or even within the MFP voter base as some observers have claimed. As support for the MFP draws on a range of aspirations and grievances specific to the current political landscape, maintaining or capitalizing on this support may prove challenging in the long term or even during the next election cycle.

Our article flows as follows: First, we revisit some of the literature on political cleavages proposed to shape Thai politics. Then we turn to a discussion of our methods and data, followed by the presentation of our survey findings. These results are further supplemented by additional insights derived from fieldwork before we complete our essay by laying out our broad conclusions.

Cleavages in Thai Politics

Over the past century, persistent military interventions and the emergence of factional politics driven by provincial political elites have left Thailand's political parties fragmented, incoherent, and devoid of programmatic linkages to citizens and ideological underpinnings.[4] Despite these prevailing

[4] Daniel Unger, "Principals of the Thai State," in *Reinventing the Leviathan*, eds. Ben Ross Schneider and Blanca Heredia (Coral Gables: The North-South Center Press, 2003), 187–190; Sombat Chantornwong, "Local Godfathers in Thai Politics," in *Money & Power in Provincial Thailand*, ed. Ruth McVey (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2001), 58–65; Yoshifumi Tamada, "Itthiphon and Amnat: An Informal Aspect of Thai Politics," *Southeast Asian Studies* 28, no. 4 (1991): 462–466; Paul Chambers, "Evolving toward what? Parties, Factions, and Coalition Behavior in Thailand Today," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 500–501; James Ockey, "Political Parties, Factions, and Corruption in Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 251–277.

historical and institutional constraints that inhibit the institutionalization of party-based cleavages, it is important to acknowledge that certain societal cleavages have exerted a substantial influence on political outcomes, even if they are not explicitly articulated in election campaigns.[5]

One such cleavage has been an urban-rural divide. According to Anek, rural voters favour candidates who can deliver concrete improvements to their personal well-being, often through local problem-solving and patronage networks. In contrast, urban voters base their voting choices on assessment of national policy issues and ideological principles put forth by political parties or candidates. This dichotomy, compounded by the numerical superiority of rural voters, resulted in the election of candidates seen as illegitimate or prone to corruption by urban voters, leading to their inclination towards authoritarian solutions as a response to what they perceive to be a flawed democracy.[6]

Urban-rural divides, however, tell an incomplete story, especially after the rise of the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) in 2001. Forged in the wake of an economic crisis, the TRT successfully captured state power with the support of big businesses and the rural beneficiaries of its economic-populist programmatic policies, such as inexpensive healthcare, loan forgiveness, and crop subsidies. These policies not only brought about a transformation in their livelihoods and provided opportunities for economic mobility and enrichment, but also established a direct connection between the party's leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, and the large rural voting population based on policy rather than purely on the traditional patronage networks controlled by subnational electoral gatekeepers.[7] Kasian presents this development through the lens of class division, with rural voters constituting the lower classes, while urban middle-class voters feared losing their perch above the rural poor.[8] McCargo, on the other hand, argues that the urban-rural divide became blurred, with many "urbanized villagers" who reside and work in urban areas but maintain their voter registration in rural hometowns.[9] This group has played a pivotal role in maintaining support for the TRT and its successive incarnations, while also contributing to the formation of the "red shirt" identity through the precarious economic and cultural circumstances

[5] James Ockey, "Variations on a Theme: Societal Cleavages and Party Orientations through Multiple Transitions in Thailand," *Party Politics* 11, no. 6 (2005): 743–744.

[6] Anek Laothamatas, "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand," in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, ed. R. H. Taylor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 201–223. See also Anek Laothamatas, *Song Nakra Prachathipatai: Naewthang Pathirub Kanmuang Sethakit pheu Prachathipatai* [Two democracies: Reforming politics and economics for democracy] (Bangkok: Kobfai Publishing, 2009).

[7] Jacob Ricks and Thanapan Laiprakobsup, "Becoming Citizens: Policy Feedback and the Transformation of the Thai Rice Farmer," *Journal of Rural Studies* 81 (2021): 143–146; Joel Sawat Selway, "Electoral Reform and Public Policy Outcomes in Thailand: The Politics of the 30-Baht Health Scheme," *World Politics* 63 (2011): 174–180.

[8] Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin," *New Left Review* 39 (2006): 31–34.

[9] Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's Urbanized Villagers and Political Polarization," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 369–371.

experienced in urban areas.[10]

The emergence of mass protest movements and colour-coded polarization in the aftermath of the 2006 coup revealed the presence of profound social cleavages in Thailand. Based on an analysis of the offline and online participants of these movements, Aim Sinpeng highlights that the divisions between the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) were strongly influenced by partisan attachments, regional identities, and economic status.[11] The PAD and the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) primarily drew support from the upper-middle class, residing in urban areas and possessing higher levels of education, mainly aligned with the Democrat Party's base in Bangkok, eastern Thailand, and southern Thailand. In contrast, the UDD mainly consisted of individuals from the lower-middle class, with lower levels of education, representing the electoral base of the TRT/PPP/PT in parts of Bangkok, the North, and the Northeast.

Furthermore, regional cleavages appear intertwined with underlying ethnic differences. Specifically, these cleavages can be observed between individuals who speak the Lao language (*phasa Isan*) and are ethnically Lao (*khon Isan*) in the Northeast region, as well as those who are *khammueang* speakers or those who have Lanna ethnic heritage in the North. However, in contrast to the long-standing mobilization of the southern regional identity by the Democrat Party,[12] the emergence of ethnicity-based mobilization in the North is relatively recent,[13] whereas in the Northeast, it has been subdued by the broad acceptance of official Thai identity and overshadowed by campaign strategies centred around economic claims and policies.[14] Nevertheless, popular movements and support for Thaksin-aligned parties, as well as their opposition, have regional dimensions.

During the 2019 general election, following five years of military rule after the May 2014 coup, political parties did not simply conform to pre-existing socio-economic and regional divisions. Instead, they appeared to adopt distinct ideological stances, portrayed in the media and perceived by the electorate as belonging to either the pro-military or pro-democracy camps, each representing contrasting visions for Thailand's political future.[15] At the forefront of the pro-military camp was the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP),

---

[10] See also Jonathan Rigg, *More Than Rural* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019).

[11] Aim Sinpeng, *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 158–163.

[12] Marc Askew, *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2008), 41–62.

[13] Joel Sawat Selway, "Thai National Identity and Lanna Identity in Northern Thailand," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (2020).

[14] Jacob Ricks, "Proud to be Thai: The Puzzling Absence of Ethnicity-Based Political Cleavages in Northeastern Thailand," *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2019): 277–278.

[15] Duncan McCargo and Saowanee Alexander, "Thailand's 2019 Elections: A State of Democratic Dictatorship?" *Asia Policy* 14, no. 4 (2019): 89–106; Jacob Ricks, "Thailand's 2019 Vote: The General's Election," *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2019): 454–456.

which aligned itself with the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) and staunchly supported the NCPO leader, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, as prime minister. This camp justified its alignment with the military to ensure peace and stability, and to overcome past ideological divisions that had led to decades-long political turmoil. In contrast, parties that were identified by the media or proclaimed themselves to be on the pro-democracy side advocated for an end to Prayuth's rule and the dismantling of the institutional arrangements that perpetuated the NCPO's influence. This camp included the PT and the newly formed Future Forward Party, led by Thanathorn Juangroonruangkit, an auto-parts tycoon turned politician.

Within this polarized political environment and the apparent convergence of parties adopting Thaksin-style programmatic policies, new political cleavages have emerged. Age has become a significant dividing factor, with younger demographics, first-time voters, and digital natives flocking to the Future Forward Party.[16] Additionally, some political parties have placed a growing emphasis on their religious orientation.[17] However, mobilization based on religion has encountered limited success, as exemplified by the People Reform Party, which was ultimately terminated to enable Paiboon Nititawan, the sole MP elected, to join the PPRP.[18]

In summary, Thailand has exhibited various political cleavages including urban-rural divides, socio-economic class, regional and ethnic identity, ideology, age, and religion. However, the salience of these cleavages in shaping the divisions among the electorate and differentiation between parties has been contingent on specific political and historical events. Just as the rise of Thaksin had a transformative impact on Thai politics, the emergence and subsequent dissolution of the Future Forward Party (FFP) in 2020–2021 catalyzed a youth-led, pro-democracy and monarchy reform movement, leading to increased differentiation among parties based on their positions regarding traditional institutions such as the monarchy and the military.[19] These developments set the stage for 2023, where parties have taken positions on critical issues such as the lèse-majesté law, hinting at an unprecedented shift in Thai politics. The subsequent section will explore these evolving cleavages and their impact on electoral dynamics in more detail.

[16] Duncan McCargo and Anyarat Chattharakul, *Future Forward: The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020), 49–105.

[17] Tomas Larsson and Stithorn Thananithichot, "Who Votes for Virtue? Religion and Party Choice in Thailand's 2019 Election," *Party Politics* 29, no. 3 (2023): 501–502.

[18] Tomas Larsson, "Religion, Political Parties, and Thailand's 2019 Election: Cosmopolitan Royalism and Its Rivals," *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 2 (2023): 600.

[19] Wisarut Sinphongpon, "Botwikhro Kanmuang lang 15 Tulakhom 63: 'Sing thi Rao Rianru chag Chumnum Klangmuang" [Political analysis after 15 October 2020: 'What we learned from the downtown gathering'], *Workpoint Today*, 16 October 2020, https://workpointtoday.com/opinion/, accessed 8 December 2023.

Methods and Data

We use an original two-wave online survey to assess the strength of these cleavages. The survey's first wave of 1,366 respondents occurred approximately one week before the 14 May election, with data collection running from 4–8 May 2023. The second wave took place one week after the election, from 23–31 May 2023, and involved 858 respondents, all of whom had taken part in the first wave. The analysis below focuses solely on these 858 respondents who participated in both waves of the survey.

The survey used targeted sampling quotas through Qualtrics online panels aimed at obtaining roughly equal gender numbers as well as a representative regional distribution of respondents. Respondents self-administered the survey via smartphone, tablet, or computer. It is important to acknowledge the inherent potential for selection bias arising from self-selection into an online survey panel. This bias is evident in the respondent pool being skewed towards a demographic that is, on average, younger, more affluent, and possessing higher levels of education compared to the broader voting-age population in Thailand, as indicated by the descriptive statistics provided in table 1.

Importantly, readers should keep in mind that online surveys tend to attract respondents who are younger and more likely to be tech savvy, which overlaps with the demographic targeted by the MFP's campaign strategy.[20] Older voters and more conservative voters are underrepresented. This means we expect the survey to over-estimate support for the MFP, liberal values, and opposition to military rule. It may also fail to capture some of the key support groups for the PT, which draws from older, less tech-savvy demographics, primarily in the North and Northeast regions. Our purposive regional sampling attempted to address this but was not completely successful. While recognizing the potential limitations of an online survey's representativeness of the broader Thai population, we can still identify important patterns in voter behaviour within our sample. This is especially true as we look for patterns within MFP voters, since they are well-represented in the sample. We can also cautiously infer that some weak correlations that appear among PT and pro-military voters may be amplified in the general population. Overall, though, we stress caution in drawing generalizations. Therefore, we interpret our findings below as largely suggestive rather than representative of Thailand's entire population.

In the survey's first wave, respondents answered a series of demographic questions before being asked opinions regarding democracy as well as their expected vote preference. During the second wave, they were presented with some of the same questions posed in the first wave. Additionally, they were asked to reveal their actual vote for party list as well as the party of their

[20] Aim Sinpeng, "Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand," *Critical Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 196; McCargo and Anyarat, *Future Forward,* 49–105.

chosen constituency candidate. A small proportion of our respondents reported split-ticket voting (14%). The vote preferences and actual votes are reported in table 2.

Notably, almost two-thirds of our respondents (62%) reported choosing the MFP as their party list choice, while the actual count reported by the Electoral Commission of Thailand (ECT) was 38.5 percent. As expected, the demographic targeted through the online survey leaned heavily toward the MFP, much more so than the broader electorate.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, survey wave 2

Age	Mean	St. dev	Min	Max	N
	38.5	11.8	18	77	858
Sex	Female	Male	Prefer not to answer		
	455 (53.0)	399 (46.5)	4 (0.5)		
Monthly household income quintile (in baht)	< 10,000	10,001-17,000	17,001-26,000	26,001-45,000	>45,001
	88 (10.3)	122 (14.2)	144 (16.8)	255 (29.7)	249 (29.0)
Highest education completed	None	Elementary school	Secondary school	Trade school	University
	1 (0.1)	13 (1.5)	173 (20.2)	130 (15.2)	541 (63.1)
Religion	Buddhism	Muslim	Christian*	Other	No Resp
	781 (91.0)	44 (5.1)	17 (2.0)	1 (0.1)	15 (1.8)
Region	Bangkok	Central	North	Northeast	South
Voter registration	70 (8.2)	234 (27.3)	181 (21.1)	240 (28.0)	133 (15.5)
Respondent self-identification	141 (16.4)	166 (19.4)	172 (20.1)	247 (28.8)	132 (15.4)

Notes: Actual counts reported, percentage of total sample in parentheses.

* Combination of those who identify as either Protestant or Catholic.

Source: Author survey.

Table 2
Vote distributions in survey and official results

	Wave 1 – intended party vote		Wave 2 – actual party list vote		ECT party list official results	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Move Forward	427	49.8	532	62.0	14,438,851	38.5
Pheu Thai	168	19.6	144	16.8	10,962,522	29.2
Bhumjaithai	13	1.5	6	0.7	1,138,202	3.0
United Thai Nation	50	5.8	70	8.2	4,766,408	12.7
Palang Pracharath	18	2.1	19	2.2	537,625	1.4
Democrat	17	2.0	22	2.6	925,349	2.5
Prachachat	8	0.9	7	0.8	602,645	1.6
Seri Ruam Thai	4	0.5	5	0.6	351,376	0.9
Others	32	3.7	53	6.2	3,799,768	10.1
Undecided	121	14.1				

Source: Author survey and Election Commission of Thailand.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is the respondent's political party preference. We chose to focus on the party list vote as a more accurate assessment of party preferences compared to the constituency-level candidate vote. In the 2023 election, Thai voters had the opportunity to cast two ballots. The first was for a constituency-level candidate, with the 400 constituencies across the country being single-member districts. In many cases, constituency-level candidates rely on personal direct appeals to voters rather than party appeals. Indeed, in multiple cases during this election, it was observed that some constituency candidates minimized their party affiliation during the campaign.[21] The second ballot was a direct national party-list ballot, where the voter selected a party. Votes would then be tallied at the national level with 100 parliamentary seats allocated proportionally. This ballot was the most direct reflection of party support in the election.

We transformed the party list votes for each of the major parties—MFP, PT, United Thai Nation (UTN), PPRP, and Democrat— into a set of binary variables, with a value of one representing a vote for the respective party, while a zero represents a vote for any other party. We did not include the Bhumjaithai Party (BJT), which became the third-largest party in parliament.

[21] This was reported by multiple news agencies as well as observed by the authors. For an example, see 3Plus News report from 5 May 2023: https://ch3plus.com/news/political/morning/346603.

Only six of our respondents cast a party list vote for the Bhumjaithai, a number too small to allow us to draw any meaningful conclusions from the analysis. The party garnered relatively few party list votes (approximately 1.14 million votes or about 3 percent), which may partly explain why our sample held few BJT voters.

We also created an additional binary measure based on whether the respondent voted for one of the anti-military parties or one of the pro-military parties. Our classification of these parties was based on Thai media reports. According to these reports, the PT and the MFP belong to the pro-democracy camp, while the PPRP, the UTN, Democrat, and the BJT belong to the pro-military camp.[22] All four parties in the pro-military camp were part of the Prayuth Chan-ocha government, while the PT and the MFP were the main opposition parties. We did not include minor parties in these calculations, as their stances were not as well-known as those of the main parties.

Independent Variables

As discussed above, we focused on identifying potential political cleavage structures, which we assessed through a set of demographic questions in the survey, including questions about age and sex. Each of these questions offered an opportunity to test the existence of a relationship between the proposed cleavage and support for a political party.

Socio-economic standing was measured using both household income and education level. Household income level was self-reported in quintile bands, based on 2020 national numbers. The average response of all respondents was between the third (17,001–26,000 baht/month) and fourth quintile (26,001–45,000 baht/month), while the median was in the fourth quintile. According to Thailand's National Statistics Office, average monthly household income for 2019 was 26,018 baht/month, which is close to our survey average. Respondents, though, were more highly educated, with almost 60 percent of the sample having a university degree, which far outstrips the 15.6 percent of the general population with a university degree reported by the World Bank for 2019.

Regional identity or regionalism was identified through two measures. First, respondents were asked to report on where they were registered to vote. Voter registration in Thailand relies upon household registration, which is often the location where one was born rather than where one lives. Among our respondents, most (88.3%, or 700 of 793 respondents) were registered to vote in the province where they currently resided. Regional identity aligns with ethnic differentiation along linguistic lines, so we also measured regional identity through language spoken at home (central Thai, Isan, Khammuang, and southern Thai [Paktai]).

[22] Of course, this categorization is subjective and based on media allocation of the parties. To see an example, see the report on *Khao Khon Khon Khao* (Nation TV) from 26 April 2023: https://youtu.be/L7-p8e0v0ss.

To test for the urban-rural cleavage, we had respondents identify whether they lived in an urban area (large city or suburbs of a large city) or a rural area (small town, village, or countryside). Furthermore, we gauged this through whether respondents reported living in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (labelled BMR below), which acts as the country's primate city made up of Bangkok and the surrounding provinces (Nakhon Pathom, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, Samut Prakan, and Samut Sakhon). We also asked respondents for their level of religiosity, reported on a five-point scale, ranging from very strong to very not strong.

Finally, respondents were also asked several questions aimed at identifying their ideological leaning. Since political opinions and political parties do not generally fit on an ideological scale of economic and social liberalism versus economic and social conservatism that is commonly assumed in Western democracies, we did not attempt to identify a cleavage along those lines. Instead, we were particularly interested in determining whether views on democratic rights and liberties were associated with the cleavage between parties perceived as pro-democracy (MFP and PT) and those seen as pro-military (UTN, PPRP, and Democrat).

To accomplish this, we used a set of questions regarding democratic values to create an ideological measure of our respondents, listed in table 3 below. Factor analysis suggested that these questions did load onto a single factor, which measured an underlying concept we call "democratic values."[23] Based on this analysis, we assigned a single democratic value score to all participants given their responses to these questions, with lower scores indicating support for democratic values and higher scores reflecting more anti-liberal sentiments. This served as our measure of democratic ideological values.

Table 3
Statements included in the democracy measure

Which of the following do you consider the most important components of having a democratic system of government?	1. Regular elections
	2. To have equal treatment of all people
	3. To have political freedoms like the right to protest and speak freely
	4. Laws apply to all people, rich or poor, even government leaders
Agree or disagree with the following:	5. Democracy requires that politicians listen to the people
	6. Democracy requires that all people have equal voice in elections

Note: Responses were based on a five-point Likert scale.
Source: Author survey.

[23] A Chronbach's Alpha of 0.818 suggests that this group of indicators do jointly measure this concept with a high degree of reliability.

We included two additional measures of ideological values. One question in the survey asked respondents to determine which of a set of topics was most imperative for the incoming government to address. A variety of options were presented, one of which was "Ensure protection of the nation, religion, and monarchy." This is a significant statement in Thailand, as these are widely treated as the three pillars of Thai identity and have become a contentious issue since youth protests in 2020 began calling for reforms to the lèse-majesté law. Respondents who chose this option are likely to embrace a conservative view of Thai politics. We used this response to create a binary variable (labelled NRM), which reflected a conservative ideology; 132 (16.7%) of our respondents chose ensuring protection of the nation, religion, and monarchy as the most important policy issue for the new government.

Another question prompted respondents to rank their level of agreement with the question: "If Thailand faces political turmoil again, do you agree or disagree that the military should be allowed to step in again to manage the situation?" Responses were provided on a Likert scale with lower scores aligning with agreement and higher scores reflecting opposition to military involvement in politics.

In sum, we evaluated ideology through three variables: first, a factor variable based on a series of responses reflecting agreement with democratic values; second, whether respondents prioritized protection of the nation, religion, and king as the primary policy need of the government; and third, whether the respondent agreed that military intervention is acceptable in response to political turmoil.

Findings

Testing for the impact of cleavages relied on a series of logistic regression analyses. We commenced by conducting an analysis aimed at exploring the factors that influence individuals' alignment with parties belonging to pro-democracy and pro-military camps. Subsequently, we conducted a sequence of analyses focused on understanding the determinants of voting patterns for each major political party. In each analysis, the dependent variable was binary, indicating a vote for the party in question. Table 4 reports these results.

The two-pronged approach allows us to explore the multifaceted dynamics that underlie not only overarching ideological leanings but also support for individual parties. In doing so, it is important to again note that most of our respondents did cast a party list vote for either the MFP or the PT, which aligned to some extent with the actual results of the election, though not perfectly. In contrast, the number of respondents who cast party list votes for the UTN, the PPRP, and the Democrat Party were relatively small, potentially limiting the statistical power of the analysis. Nevertheless, we were still able to identify factors that appeared to contribute to these vote choices.

Table 4
Logistical regression results for vote choice

	Pro-democracy party vote	MFP vote	PT vote	UTN vote	PPRP vote	DEM vote
Female	0.65** (2.43)	0.26 (1.48)	-0.17 (-0.82)	-0.36 (-1.14)	-0.25 (-0.49)	-1.13** (-2.28)
Age	-0.07** (-6.15)	-0.07** (-8.90)	0.04** (4.31)	0.06** (4.46)	0.04** (2.31)	-0.00 (-0.09)
Education level	-0.17 (-1.02)	0.04 (0.40)	-0.28** (-2.30)	0.45* (-1.82)	-0.30 (-1.12)	0.63 (1.55)
Household income	0.09 (0.77)	-0.05 (-0.64)	0.20** (2.07)	-0.16 (-1.05)	-0.03 (-0.16)	0.30 (1.31)
Religiosity	0.03 (0.21)	0.22** (2.32)	-0.26** (-2.37)	0.10 (0.63)	-0.35 (-1.37)	-0.30 (-1.129)
Urbanite	0.12 (0.40)	0.24 (1.26)	-0.14 (-0.61)	0.54 (1.51)	0.06 (0.09)	-1.48** (-2.41)
Lives in BMR	-0.29 (0.05)	-0.38 (-1.02)	0.40 (0.98)	0.25 (0.61)	-1.57* (-1.82)	2.16** (2.48)
Protect NRM	-1.41** (-4.64)	-1.00** (-3.98)	0.18 (0.61)	0.81** (2.22)	1.14** (1.96)	1.03* (1.68)
Oppose Mil in Politics	0.64** (7.86)	0.27** (4.10)	0.10 (1.28)	-0.68** (-6.29)	-0.55** (-3.64)	-0.33** (-2.41)
Democracy score	-0.16 (-1.13)	-0.29** (-2.94)	0.28** (2.60)	-0.07 (-0.37)	-0.25 (-0.92)	0.36** (2.03)
Region (relative to BKK)						
Central	-1.11 (-1.16)	-0.89** (-2.54)	0.17 (0.41)	0.63 (0.87)	0.67 (0.90)	0.19 (0.17)
North	-0.55 (-0.56)	-0.66 (-1.23)	0.07 (0.12)	0.67 (0.78)	Nul	2.25 (1.42)
Northeast	-1.04 (-1.16)	-1.18** (-2.35)	0.62 (1.07)	0.29 (0.33)	Nul	2.04 (1.41)
South	-2.03** (-2.23)	-1.32** (-2.37)	-0.08 (-0.10)	1.87** (2.18)	Nul	3.20** (2.31)
Language spoken at home (relative to central Thai)						
Khammuang	-0.57 (-0.94)	-0.41 (-1.13)	0.74* (1.84)	0.37 (0.57)	Nul	0.010 (0.01)
Thai Tai	-0.54 (0.5567)	-0.07 (-0.19)	-0.91 (-1.01)	-0.35 (-0.48)	Nul	1.24 (1.28)
Isan	1.02* (1.84)	-0.07 (-0.24)	0.55* (1.78)	-0.65 (-0.85)	-1.57 (-1.50)	-0.02 (-0.02)
Constant	3.93** (1.29)	2.69** (3.40)	-2.66** (-2.62)	-5.83** (-3.78)	-0.43 (-0.30)	-7.42** (-2.75)
N	746	792	792	792	443	792
Pseudo R2	0.32	0.20	0.10	0.28	0.23	0.23

Note: Coefficient with Z score in parentheses.
* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$
Source: Author survey.

The first column of table 4 uses the pro-democracy party variable, which was coded as a one for either a MFP or PT vote and a zero for a UTN, PPRP, Bhumjaithai, or Democrat Party vote. Among the independent variables analyzed, both gender and age had a statistically significant relationship with voting for a pro-democracy party. Notably, age was strongly negatively correlated with this vote; younger voters were more likely to vote for a pro-democracy party. This finding is unsurprising, given the context of youth-led protests against the General Prayuth-led government, which have featured prominently in Thailand since the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, the MFP's predecessor, in early 2020. Yet, it is far from trivial, as it signifies the incorporation of this generation of voters into politics and the mobilization of new and first-time voters as a coherent and influential voting bloc. This represents a substantial divergence from historical patterns, where the youth seldom played an active role in shaping the country's political trajectory, except during brief episodes of student-led demonstrations and social movements.

Furthermore, females were also somewhat more likely to vote for one of the pro-democracy parties than males. Four individuals in the survey preferred not to identify themselves as either male or female; all of them voted for the MFP. While this data was not included in the regression, we believe it might be suggestive, as the MFP was widely recognized for its pro-LGBTQ+ stance.

Beyond this, we see that two of our ideological variables are statistically significant. Ranking protection of the nation, religion, and monarchy as the most important policy issue of the new government was negatively correlated with a pro-democracy vote, potentially indicating the presence of a political cleavage centered around this issue. Also, as anticipated, a pro-democracy vote is positively associated with opposing military involvement in Thai politics. These two results suggest that ideology may be emerging as a potential cleavage between the conservative camp and those who oppose it.

Finally, we do see some potential regional impact, as being from the South is negatively correlated with a vote for the pro-democracy parties. This result can only be interpreted in relation to the base category of being from Bangkok. We also see a suggestive result (significant at the 0.1 level) that speaking Isan rather than central Thai might be associated with a pro-democracy vote.

When we focus on the party-specific results, we gain additional insights into the potential cleavages that may exist in the Thai electorate. First, it is important to highlight that the MFP stands out as the only party that has a negative relationship between age and vote choice. Being younger greatly increased the chance that one voted for the MFP relative to all other parties, including the PT. The only party where age did not matter was the Democrat Party, but we hesitate to draw any conclusion from that result, as the number of Democrat voters in our sample was small. In short, age played a significant

role in the 2023 election, with younger voters overwhelmingly aligning with the MFP.

Second, there are distinct differences between MFP and PT voters, which extend beyond age. Religiosity, scaled so that lower values mean higher self-evaluated religiosity, displays an opposite pattern across the two parties, with MFP voters being much more likely to report their religiosity level as neutral, not strong, or very not strong. This confirms some of the findings of Larsson and Stithorn that less religious Thais prefer a liberal party.[24] On the other hand, PT voters were more likely to report themselves as religious.

In terms of regional trends, we also observe a distinct pattern. Relative to Bangkok, being registered to vote in any region other than the North had a negative relationship with voting for the MFP. This suggests that, at least among our sample, the MFP's support base might be strongest in Bangkok. Moreover, our ethnic identification variable, based on language spoken at home, suggests that speaking Khammuang or Isan at home with family, as opposed to central Thai, is associated with a higher likelihood of voting for PT.

Shifting our focus to ideology, we observe important differences among the supporters of the major parties. MFP voters were opposed to military interventions, were less likely to prioritize protection of the nation, religion, and monarchy as a policy issue, and had higher democracy scores (remember, low level of the democracy variable reflected higher democracy values). In contrast, a vote for the PT did not exhibit any relationship between a stance on military interventions or the nation, religion, and monarchy policy preference. Also, the relationship between respondent democracy scores and PT votes was statistically significant in the opposite direction with MFP votes. In short, although the PT and the MFP were allies in their opposition to General Prayuth Chan-ocha's government, their voters, at least in our sample, hold different values regarding their ideological commitments. Our survey provides empirical support for the claim that the two should not be considered "liberal" allies.

Turning to the conservative side, we see voters for the three parties in question (PPRP, UTN, and Democrat) were more likely to support military intervention in politics and were more likely to indicate that protecting the nation, religion, and monarchy was of utmost policy importance. These outcomes were not surprising, as two of the parties (PPRP and UTN) were headed by retired generals who had led the 2014 coup. The Democrat Party also has a long history of supporting military regimes. All three are also explicitly nationalistic and have advocated protection of the royal institution as a central party tenet. Interestingly, only the Democrat Party voters had their votes correlated with less democratic scores on the democracy variable, suggesting that Democrat Party voters were less democratic. Our sample size, though, makes us cautious in asserting this claim.

[24] Larsson and Stithorn, "Votes for Virtue," 507.

Votes for the Democrat Party and the UTN Party were both associated with having voter registration in the south, relative to Bangkok. This reflects that both parties have a strong base in the region and suggests the persistence of a regional cleavage wherein southern voting patterns diverge from the rest of the country.

To summarize, we highlight several potential takeaways to highlight regarding electoral cleavages that might exist in the Thai electorate. First, age matters. An age cleavage appeared in the 2023 election, likely building upon the mass protests against the Prayuth government that began in 2020. The MFP benefitted from this cleavage, garnering substantial support from younger Thais across the country. In contrast, younger voters did not support the PT in large numbers. Second, an ideological cleavage seems to be emerging between MFP voters and those who supported the conservative parties. This appears to be based on whether voters support or oppose military interventions in politics and whether they view protecting the three pillars of Thai nationalism as the ultimate policy goal of the new government. The ideological cleavage here is not necessarily about the embrace of democratic values, as the democracy score variable did not have as much power as expected. Instead, the cleavage is more about pro-military conservatism prevalent across multiple parties versus anti-military liberalism embodied by the MFP.

Third, we found little consistent evidence in support of many of the previously theorized cleavages. The urban-rural divide does not seem to significantly influence party preferences in our sample. While there are indications of a gender divide, its impact was relatively weak. Similarly, socio-economic cleavages, as measured by household income and education levels, also find scant support. Religiosity, or the lack thereof, largely mattered only for MFP voters. And regionalism, which had seemed so important for the PT for almost two decades, seems to have diminished significantly, apart from southern regionalism. While there remains some statistical support to bolster the claim that ethnic minorities who speak their regional languages in the North and Northeast still support the PT, this effect was not as strong as expected.

Aside from age and attitudes toward military interventions in politics, one would be hard-pressed to identify clear cleavages that drove party choice in the 2023 election in Thailand. Overall, the MFP appealed to a range of voters across the country. We believe, however, that this was a unique feature of this specific election.

What Makes 2023 Unique?

The 2023 general election in Thailand represents a dramatic shift from the usual political dynamics, driven by the unique circumstances of the post-COVID-19 era as well as by various significant political events. These

developments transformed the election into a series of referendums, each focusing on different facets of the country's political landscape, yet collectively they bring to the forefront the influence of age demographics and attitudes toward military interventions as key determinants of party preferences.

The first of these referendums focused on General Prayuth's tenure as prime minister. In early January, General Prayuth took a decisive step by officially joining the UTN as a party member and prime ministerial candidate. This move was a clear indication of Prayuth's determination to maintain his hold on power despite having already ruled for nearly nine years since the May 2014 coup, facing a constitutional limit of a two-year term if re-elected, and presiding over a government that had faced significant criticism for its handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Both his tenure and capacity to lead the country were essentially subjected to popular vote. However, voters' considerations extended beyond Prayuth, reflecting broader sentiments about the potential of a political comeback by other military figures associated with the Prayuth regime. This was particularly true for General Prawit Wongsuwan, who leads the PPRP as party leader and prime ministerial candidate. As the campaign reached its final stages, rumours persisted that the PT might eventually turn to Prawit for support, whether through his influence over the appointed Senate or his control of PPRP MPs.[25] These rumours, compounded by the PT's inability to dispel them convincingly, hinted at the possibility of a political crossover, a move that would potentially betray the trust of voters who cast their ballots for the PT based on its anti-military stance—a scenario which played out in August as the PT allied with both the UTN and the PPRP to form a government. Against this backdrop, the MFP's message, "MFP rejects the uncles" (*mi rao mai mi lung, mi lung mai mi rao*),[26] resonated with credibility and authenticity.[27] Voters who opposed Prayuth and Prawit found their clearest option in the MFP.

The second referendum revolved around the resurgence of Thaksin Shinawatra's influence. The PT, having rebranded itself as a familial entity, created a sense of nostalgia by uniting former advisors and leaders who had been dispersed following the 2014 coup. This rebranding set the stage for Thaksin's daughter, Paetongtarn, to emerge as one of its prime ministerial candidates, effectively positioning her as Thaksin's political successor. Throughout the campaign, Thaksin also actively hinted on social media about his plan to return to Thailand upon the PT's victory, which he boldly predicted would be a landslide. These maneuvers ultimately positioned the

[25] For more on this, see Duncan McCargo, "The Real Deal: Results versus Outcomes of the 2023 Thai General Election," *Pacific Affairs* 97, no. 1 (2024), this issue.

[26] General Prayuth Chan-ocha and General Prawit Wongsuwan were commonly referred to as the two uncles.

[27] Thaikanoj Trisuwan, "Wikhro: 'Mi Lung Mai Mi Rao' khwang 'Landslide' Pheu Thai yud 'Kaw Kham Khwamkhadyaeng' khong PPRP" [Analysis: 'No uncles' blocks Pheu Thai's 'landslide' halts 'overcoming conflict' of PPRP], *BBC Thai,* 7 May 2023, https://www.bbc.com/thai/articles/cmj7kgxy70do, accessed 8 December 2023.

PT not just as an opposition to Prayuth but as a vehicle to facilitate Thaksin's homecoming. This situation prompted voters who opposed Prayuth but were wary of reigniting the enduring political conflict between the Shinawatra family and the military, as well as the youth who lacked attachment to Thaksin—a divisive figure wrapped up in two decades of political turmoil—to opt for the MFP as a vote to break Thailand free from its vicious cycle.

Finally, against the backdrop of youth-led pro-democracy movements in 2020, which advocated for unprecedented reforms related to the role of the monarchy and a range of other demands, the election had evolved into a broader referendum concerning extensive structural changes. Diverse frustrations with established political practices and a collective yearning to move the country forward, whether by dismantling the vestiges of the military coup or by lifting restrictions of freedom of expression, coalesced to shape the overarching national political discourse. The PT failed to recognize this sentiment, focusing heavily on Thaksin-style economic policies that were widely imitated by other parties, as it pursued its landslide aspirations. By contrast, the MFP strategically positioned itself as a party dedicated to promoting political reform. It transformed into a movement-based party, demonstrating solidarity with the pro-democracy movements by translating the activists' aspirations into tangible legislative agendas, bailing out detained activists, and incorporating these activists into its ranks as candidates. During the campaign, the MFP clearly carried the banner of reform, becoming the only party that made a credible pledge to amend the controversial lèse-majesté law.

Ultimately, these three referendums underscored that the 2023 election carried even greater significance for the future trajectory of Thailand's democracy compared to the previous election in 2019. The outcomes had the potential to shape the extent of military and royal influence in governance, the pace and nature of democratic reforms, and the resolution of longstanding political conflicts, including those involving the Shinawatra family. This unique context has suppressed the relevance of other divisions that have been salient in the past, and, simultaneously, has given rise to a surge of support for the MFP, particularly on the party list ballot among the youth and those with an anti-military ideology. To illustrate this phenomenon, our discussions with vote canvassers during the final stretches of the campaign offer valuable insights into the distinctive electoral dynamics of this election.[28] Among the vote canvassers we interviewed in northern Thailand, many of whom were local politicians, a prevailing sentiment emerged: compared to the previous election in 2019, downplaying party affiliation and emphasizing

[28] Fieldwork for this study was conducted during three separate periods: from 19 to 22 April in three provinces in the Northeast, from 5 to 7 May in one province in the North, and from 8 to 13 May in three provinces in the Northeast. The fieldwork involved the observation of campaign rallies, interviews with MP candidates and their faction leaders, and discussions with vote canvassers and campaign teams. In a province in northern Thailand, Napon interviewed two MP candidates and five vote canvassers at the subdistrict level.

localized issues and personal appeals of candidates had become significantly more challenging. This pattern was observed even within the families of these vote canvassers. While vote canvassers could influence family members, particularly their children, to support specific candidates in their respective constituencies, persuading them to endorse these candidates' parties (in this case the PPRP) proved considerably more difficult. Age and ideology had a significant impact, even surpassing the influence of traditional campaigning tactics.

Yet, it is important to consider that the aforementioned shifts in electoral dynamics may not necessarily indicate the emergence of new and enduring political divisions but could instead be a momentary response to the unique circumstances of 2023. In other words, like other political cleavages that have come and gone in Thai politics, the current divisions based on age and ideology regarding the role of the military are not static but have become salient for the time being due to critical political events of historic significance.

Conclusion

Thailand's 2023 election took place under challenging circumstances. General Prayuth's presence made the election less about policy issues and more of a referendum on whether voters supported a coup leader-turned-prime minister and his allies who had stayed in power for almost a decade. Thaksin's maneuvers behind the scenes muddied voters' options when considering the PT. The dissolution of the Future Forward Party in 2020 was followed by unprecedented calls for institutional reforms and disaffection among young voters. Furthermore, constitutional rules practically guaranteed that, without a landslide result, military-allied forces would continue to exercise influence even if they lost. Additionally, political parties and voters were forced to contend with a new (old) electoral system that failed to offer continuity from the prior election.

It is unsurprising, then, that clear political cleavages were difficult to identify. The Thai political system continues to maneuver through a series of upheavals that prevent consolidation of the party system. Nevertheless, we do see a clear cleavage between younger voters lining up behind the MFP and older voters who prefer more traditional parties. We also can identify clearly that those espousing more liberal values also chose the MFP.

The age cleavage poses a challenge for the MFP. Both enemies and allies of the MFP are strategizing on ways to appeal to younger voters, and it is unlikely that the party will be able to monopolize young voters over the long haul. Inevitably young people grow older, as do popular politicians, and age cohorts are unlikely to maintain coherent policy preferences over multi-year periods. As other parties become more adept at making electoral appeals through social media and policy-based campaigning, age could become less important in future elections.

There does seem to be potential for the MFP to continue to build upon the pro-democracy ideology, as feelings about democratic values and opposition to military rule were strong predictors of votes for the party. If the MFP can institutionalize itself as the only viable champion of democracy and liberal values in the political system, it will likely be able to utilize that ideological cleavage between political liberals and conservatives as a base for support in the future. The challenge here is one of ideological blurring. How many voters chose the MFP because they truly espoused democratic values and how many chose the party because it was the clear opposition to Prayuth? While the MFP was able to take advantage of both pro-democracy voters and anti-Prayuth voters this time, the next election may not offer such a stark choice.

Of course, Thai politics shifts day by day, and the enemies of the MFP are actively seeking its destruction. Even so, it appears that there is a strengthening of the societal cleavage between political liberals who demand democratic institutions and those who are comfortable with something less. Actions such as banning Pita Limjaroenrat, former leader of the MFP, from politics or disbanding the MFP will not dispense with the cleavage; they will crystallize it.

Chulalongkorn University, Pathumwan, Thailand, January 2024
Singapore Management University, Singapore, January 2024