

Political Ideology of Pheu Thai Party Leaders and Determinants of Their Decision to Support Party Candidates in Sukhothai Province

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Abstract

The independent study Political Ideology of Pheu Thai Party Leaders and Determinants of Their Decision to Support Party Candidates in Sukhothai Province by qualitative method that individual interview for people in research criteria with snowball sampling method such as village headman, subdistrict headman and assistant secretary Pheu Thai Party Member of parliament that aimed to examine the relationship between the political ideology of Pheu Thai Party leaders and their decisions to support Pheu Thai Party candidates in Sukhothai Province.

The findings reveal that political ideology is closely related to decision-making in candidate support. This is because the target group's decision-making process reflects the theory of non-conscious cognitive machinery, in which respondents provided answers containing internal inconsistencies and attempted to rationalize their own decisions. Such a decision-making pattern is characterized as a state of moral paralysis. For instance, interviewees

claimed that the current policies of the Pheu Thai Party benefit the people most, referring to past policies such as the 30-baht universal healthcare scheme. The researcher agreed that this was a constructive welfare-state approach to addressing structural problems. However, at present, the Pheu Thai Party no longer pursues such welfare-based policies, relying instead on capitalist and populist measures in its campaigns. In contrast, the Move Forward Party presents policies that best address structural problems. Yet, according to respondents, even while defining the “best policies” as those of the Move Forward Party, they still expressed negative sentiments toward this party. These contradictions highlight the internal inconsistencies in respondents’ reasoning as they attempted to justify their continued support for the Pheu Thai Party in the 2023 general election, despite the conflicting rationales underlying their decisions.

Keyword: Political Ideology, Pheu Thai Party, Sukhothai Province

Introduction

Political ideology is a universally recognized concept across the world, regardless of country. Political parties typically adopt and promote their own ideological positions to the public, emphasizing the strengths of their ideological stance while occasionally criticizing those of their rivals. This demonstrates that in many countries, political ideology is regarded as an essential foundation and guiding principle for political parties.

Political ideology can be better understood through a two-axis framework. In this study, the vertical axis represents values related to society, the state, traditions, customs, freedom, and equality, while the horizontal axis represents economic perspectives, particularly the degree of economic

freedom. Within this spectrum, political ideologies can be broadly classified into four categories:

1. Ideologies that emphasize state authority in social affairs but allow economic freedom for citizens.
2. Ideologies that emphasize state authority in both social affairs and economic control.
3. Ideologies that emphasize individual freedom in both social and economic domains.
4. Ideologies that emphasize individual freedom in social affairs while using state authority to regulate the economy.

Historically, most political parties in Thailand have emphasized state authority in social affairs while granting citizens economic freedom. This tendency, in the researcher's view, is rooted in traditional authority and the interests of the elite class, which sought to maintain control over Thai society in its pre-1932 revolution structure. Evidence of this dynamic can be seen in Thailand's frequent military coups, which justified themselves in the name of protecting traditions and the monarchy. Each successful coup was followed by the drafting of a new constitution, after which coup leaders or their affiliates entered electoral politics to legitimize their power. The political parties that emerged from coup networks consistently emphasized strong state authority while reducing citizens' freedoms, though they often maintained a form of economic freedom largely reserved for powerful business elites closely tied to the state, rather than for the general population.

This dynamic gave rise to political parties that opposed coups, particularly the Pheu Thai Party, widely known as a party "of the people and for the people". Although the Pheu Thai Party sought to help the

people, it did not directly challenge Thailand's entrenched socio-political power structures, focusing instead on economic growth. This approach emphasized that political ideology and people's livelihood issues should be kept separate, promoting capitalist and populist policies. While consistent with the global trend toward capitalism, this trajectory also deepened inequality, contributing to Thailand becoming one of the most unequal societies in the world.

After the most recent coup in 2014, Thailand's first post-coup election was held in 2019, giving rise to the Future Forward Party. This party aimed to transform the country's structures, advocating full social, political, and religious freedoms for citizens. Economically, it sought to dismantle monopolistic capital in Thailand by using state authority to regulate market-dominating conglomerates that disadvantaged consumers. Additionally, it sought to amend laws to make it easier for ordinary citizens to start businesses, while also educating the public on structural issues. Importantly, the party advanced a welfare-state agenda to improve citizens' quality of life, including nationwide free healthcare, free education, and universal pensions for the elderly.

In the 2023 general election, the Move Forward Party won the largest share of both constituency and party-list votes nationwide, surpassing Pheu Thai, which had long dominated Thai politics. However, in Sukhothai Province, the Pheu Thai Party emerged as the winner in both constituency and party-list elections. Notably, the winning candidate was a former Pheu Thai member who had previously defected to the Palang Pracharath Party in the 2019 election before returning to Pheu Thai in 2023. According to Election scores between 2019 and 2023 such as Sukhothai MP district 1

Pansirri Kulnartsiri who won the election by 41,696 scores in 2019 and 30,130 scores in 2023. This raises a critical question: why, while the national political momentum shifted toward the Move Forward Party, did Sukhothai voters still choose a candidate from the old power networks, re-electing familiar figures regardless of party affiliation?

Research Objectives

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the relationship between the political ideology of Pheu Thai Party leaders and their decisions to support Pheu Thai Party candidates in Sukhothai Province. For investigating in the 2023 general election, the Move Forward Party emerged as the leading party nationwide, defeating many long-established political families across several provinces. However, Sukhothai was one of the few provinces where the Move Forward Party did not win a single constituency seat.

Research Scope

The scope of this study on Political Ideology of Pheu Thai Party Leaders and Determinants of Their Decision to Support Party Candidates in Sukhothai Province focuses on examining the relationship between political ideology and decision-making in candidate support. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with ten respondents selected through snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted in two parts: (1) a political values test designed to identify political ideology, and (2) semi-structured in-depth interviews, supplemented by observations of respondents' non-verbal behaviors during the interview process.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Political Ideology has been defined in many and varied ways, because it is a term that is often invoked as a reason for expression and for decision-making as well. Examples of definitions of the term “ideology” from Senthong (2019) research are as follows:

The French philosopher Antoine Louis Claude Destutt, Comte de Tracy (1754–1836) coined the term ideology, derived from the Greek words *eidos* and *logos*. In the earliest period, he defined ideology as the science of ideas (science study of ideas).

Karl Marx, the most renowned socialist thinker and the originator of Marxism, defined ideology as a set of mistaken ideas or false consciousness. Marx believed that human social conditions are bound up with material factors; that is, humans can find happiness only through satisfaction in the material world. Society, he held, consists of two parts: the superstructure of the ruling class, which controls the political system, the law, beliefs, customs, and traditions; and the base, the sphere of the working class, which constitutes the productive forces. The working class is oppressed by the ruling class and is stupefied by ideologies fabricated by those in the upper class so as to prevent the lower class from resisting and struggling against the existing social order, thereby neglecting the reality of the actual social conditions.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) defined ideology as the creation of hegemony by the ruling class. Gramsci believed that the upper class is divided into two parts: one part is power, such as the law and coercive forces; the other is culture, traditions, customs, and morality. For Gramsci, the latter is the crucial part that sustains ruling power. The practical method

is to have ideas in the cultural dimension molded to conform to what the ruling class desires, through a process that persuades people to regard those ideas as the correct ideology of society, thereby producing hegemony for governing the lower classes (as cited in Piyakulchaidech, 2005, pp. 124–140).

Louis Althusser, a sociologist who inherited and developed ideas from Karl Marx, likewise defined ideology as something that controls society, as many sociologists do. However, Althusser differed from Marx and Gramsci in that, for Althusser, ideology is not something fanciful or located in an ideal world, but something that appears in the real material world. It manifests through control exercised by ideology in order to display its own presence—what he calls ideological interpellation (*interpellation idéologique/ ideological interpellation*) (Boonwarano, 2016). Through this, individuals are transformed to function as Subjects, carrying out and transmitting what the ideology requires. The expression of ideology is attempted by both sides—the upper class and the lower class—each struggling and contesting to transmit its own ideology, acting both as those who attempt to lead society as a whole and as those who themselves are dominated by the ideology.

From the diverse meanings of “ideology” presented above, the student therefore defines ideology as: a mental representation of something one desires to make real, which arises either consciously or unconsciously, accumulated from experience, social conditions, customs, traditions, knowledge, and one’s inborn identity, combined and constructed together; it possesses its own internal dynamics and is expressed in the real world on the basis of forms of expression aimed at achieving the objectives of that ideology.

1.2 Decision-Making

Scholars have provided different definitions of decision-making, as follows:

Pongsai (1993) Decision-making means the process of selecting one option from among many alternatives that have been carefully considered or evaluated as being conducive to achieving the organization's objectives and goals. Decision-making is important and is related to almost every step of administrative or managerial functions, whether planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating, or controlling. In this regard, defined decision-making as "a technique for narrowing various alternatives down to a single choice" (Kaewkead & Niphitprasart Soonthornvipart, 2019).

Tantanut (2007) stated that decision-making means considering and resolving to choose, decisively selecting from among more than one available alternative to produce action of a specific kind; or it means resolving to choose a conclusion to a dispute or debate so that action proceeds in one direction or another after careful selection or examination (Noithai, 2023).

Atchariyakul (2001), explained that decision-making is related to factors of social action, meaning actions that individuals display which involve other persons—namely, purposes, beliefs, values, and customs—while expectations, obligations, opportunities, abilities, and support are social behaviors that help stimulate the capacity to accomplish what is desired.

Accordingly, from the various definitions of decision-making given by many scholars, the researcher concludes that decision-making means deciding to choose to act or not to act, arising from reason, morality, emotion, feeling, and experience, whether taken together in their entirety or only in part, as a result of differing contexts. In this study, the researcher seeks to

examine specifically electoral decision-making with respect to the election of members of the House of Representatives. The student selects two major theories relevant to political decision-making (elections) to serve as the framework for the discussion of findings, as follows:

1.2.1 Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory is a theory that attempts to define decision-making by holding that humans are beings who possess inherent rationality and that every decision arises from humans' use of reason to find the alternative that yields the greatest benefit to themselves—no matter how trivial the action, such as eating, sleeping, studying, planning a family, and so on, up to major decisions such as deciding how to cast a ballot in a parliamentary election (Yimah, 2000). From this principle, many derivative theories have emerged. Of those, the theory significant to this study that will be discussed here is Public Choice Theory, the essence of which is a synthesis of economics political science and business administration (Kenapoom, 2018). It maintains that decision-making is undertaken in order to yield the greatest overall benefit to society. It may be observed that both Rational Choice and Public Choice share the belief that humans use reason in decision-making; however, they differ in that Rational Choice centers on decisions that maximize individual benefit, whereas Public Choice concerns rational decision-making that takes public or societal benefit as the principal factor.

That said, Rational Choice Theory, in seeking to be a broad theory capable of explaining all situations, has been questioned in terms of its applicability and its limitations. In practice, it cannot explain complex social phenomena. For example, after the 1997 financial crisis, the

government reduced interest rates on loans in order to encourage people to borrow and spend more, but it turned out that people still felt fear from the economic crisis that had occurred, so the impact the government anticipated did not materialize. Another example is Chaayan Chaiyaporn's expression of opposition to the "Thaksin regime" by tearing up his ballot. According to the theory, such an act is irrational, because if one wishes to prevent the Thaksin regime from being elected, the best method would be to mark the "no vote" box. Yet, instead, this action sparked a social trend of ballot-tearing in several subsequent incidents (Chaipinit, n.d.), which developed into protests and ultimately culminated in the military coup that overthrew the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

In addition, there is another theory that can explain people's decisions through reasoned deliberation: Pragmatism, a theory prominent since the nineteenth century. In brief, its core content holds that the value of a thing depends on whether it can be practically carried out and whether the results of carrying it out achieve the intended goals. If a thing can be carried out in practice, it has value; conversely, if it cannot be carried out in practice, it has no value at all. This viewpoint embraces empiricism—that is, knowledge formed through reflective thought upon experience. In contrast to Rational Choice, which assumes that humans decide everything purely by reason, thoroughly and methodically, Pragmatism maintains that human decision-making includes reason derived from one's own experience, not decisions formed solely by independent abstract thought. For example, a person who once grasped a piece of firewood with a flame and felt heat, when deciding a second time whether to pick up flaming firewood, would—

according to this theory—decide not to pick it up again because of prior injury, which generates the reason not to pick it up. In sum, under Pragmatism, decision-making is the result of knowledge and reasons that arise from experienced understanding that the person is consciously aware of when deciding.

1.2.2 Non-conscious Cognitive Machinery

This theory was developed by Howard Margolis, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. It extends from the philosophy of David Hume, who wrote in 1739 that “Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” Margolis proposed that two entirely different cognitive processes operate when we must judge and solve problems: the process of seeing-that and the process of reasoning-why. The seeing-that process is a pattern-form process that the brain has performed for hundreds of millions of years; it can learn new patterns with ease and link them to existing behaviors, and it can adjust behavior toward new behavioral forms, as when a mahout trains an elephant to perform new tricks in different ways. The reasoning-why process is the process we “use to explain how we came to make such a judgment, or how we think others might arrive at that judgment”. This process occurs in beings that possess language and is not an automatic process; rather, it occurs consciously, and sometimes it even feels like work, so it is easily interrupted by thinking about other things (Haidt, 2020, pp. 78–79).

For the seeing-that process, an additional theory explains it: the affective primacy hypothesis (rendered in Thai as “the primacy of affect”), which describes the first flash of feeling that arises within a fraction

of a second—whether a positive or negative feeling. This initial flash of feeling flows and shifts continuously, so that humans cannot perceive it, and it does not go so far as to be describable as a full-blown emotion. The proponent of this theory was Wilhelm Wundt, founder of experimental psychology. Wundt held that such reactions occur simultaneously with human perception and cannot be separated from perception. This impressionistic reaction arises very rapidly, preceding other perceptions. For example, when a person unexpectedly encounters an acquaintance not seen for a long time, one immediately perceives whether one likes or dislikes that person, while the recollection of who that person is follows afterward (Haidt, 2020, p. 95).

In 1980, Robert Zajonc, a social psychologist, brought Wundt's ideas back into circulation after a period in which society had been dominated by theories claiming that humans are rational beings who proceed through systematic, step-by-step reasoning before reacting, solving problems, or making decisions. Zajonc presented a number of incisive experiments, such as giving research participants meaningless symbols or various kinds of lines to rate. In summary, the experiments showed that for every object, every form, every symbol—no matter how meaningless—participants were able to assign ratings. Zajonc explained that this occurs because the human brain pairs what is seen with experiences stored in the brain and converts them into interlinked associations, thereby enabling ratings to be given. He called this the mere exposure effect. We see this constantly in the contemporary world without realizing it, because it is the basic principle of advertising (Haidt, 2020, p. 96).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the relationship between the political ideology of Pheu Thai Party leaders and their decision to support party candidates in Sukhothai Province. The methodology was designed to capture both the ideological orientations of respondents and the underlying decision-making processes influencing electoral behavior.

1. Research Design

The study was structured as a qualitative case study focusing on Sukhothai Province, where electoral outcomes in the 2023 general election diverged from the national trend. While the Move Forward Party won the majority of seats nationally, the Pheu Thai Party secured victories in both constituency and party-list elections in Sukhothai. This context provided a unique setting to investigate the interplay between political ideology and electoral decision-making.

2. Population and Sample

The target population consisted of individuals regarded as political leaders or key influencers within the Pheu Thai Party in Sukhothai Province. Using the snowball sampling method, ten respondents were selected to participate in the study. These respondents were identified based on their leadership roles, political involvement, or influence within local political networks. Snowball sampling was particularly appropriate, as it allowed the researcher to access participants within tightly connected political circles.

3. Research Instruments

Two instruments were employed in the data collection process:

3.1 Political Values Test

Respondents completed a structured test designed to identify their political ideology across four key dimensions: economic, diplomatic, civil, and social. The test included value-based key statements, to which respondents indicated levels of agreement on a Likert scale. This enabled the researcher to classify respondents' ideological orientations, such as social democratic, left-wing populist, religious democratic, neutral, or other ideological categories.

3.2 Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted to explore respondents' decision-making processes. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions that allowed respondents to elaborate on their political values, ideological beliefs, and reasons for supporting Pheu Thai Party candidates. Non-verbal cues and behavioral observations were also recorded to enrich the interpretation of responses and to identify possible contradictions between stated beliefs and actual reasoning.

4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, respondents completed the political values test to establish their ideological orientations. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually.

Research Results

The Results of the political values test for the research targets are as follows:

First, with respect to the types of political ideology among the research targets, the classifications are as follows. One individual held a social democratic political ideology, namely Mr. A. Four individuals held a left-wing

populist political ideology, namely Mr. B1, Mr. B2, Mr. C5, and Mr. C6. One individual held a religion-based democratic political ideology, namely Mr. C2. Four individuals held a neutral political ideology, namely Mr. C1, Mr. C3, Mr. C4, and Mr. D.

Second, regarding the observational scoring of responses to the questions the researcher designated as the key “message” on the various axes of political values, the results can be described as follows.

On the economic axis, the researcher specified the key “message” as the question: “Maintaining a balanced budget is better than using it as welfare for all citizens.” There were seven individuals who agreed—defined as giving a score of 3 or higher. Among them, one target, Mr. D, expressed the strongest agreement by assigning a score of 5. There were three individuals who disagreed—defined as giving a score of 2 or lower—namely Mr. B1, Mr. B2, and Mr. C1.

On the diplomatic axis, the researcher specified the key “message” as the statement: “My country is great”. There were eight individuals who agreed (scores 3 or higher). There were two individuals who disagreed (scores 2 or lower), namely Mr. C4 and Mr. D.

On the civil axis, the researcher specified the key “message” as the proposition: “A state with a hierarchical structure is the best”. There were four individuals who agreed (scores 3 or higher) and six individuals who disagreed (scores 2 or lower). Among the latter, one respondent—Mr. A—expressed very strong disagreement, assigning the lowest score of 1.

On the social axis, the researcher specified the key “message” as the statement: “Children should be educated about religious or traditional values”. There were ten individuals who agreed (scores 3 or higher). Among

these, threetargets—Mr. C2, Mr. C6, and Mr. D—expressed the strongest agreement by assigning a score of 5.

Discussion of Results

The findings reveal that according to Sukhothai environment, the countryside province, the important factors that influence the electoral decision voter is the party leader mindset like religion issue and cult of the leader. Political ideology is linked to electoral decision-making, though the relationship varies in strength depending on personal values, attitudes, and individual predispositions. Political ideology often shapes decisions both consciously and unconsciously, guiding individuals through biases formed over time. Respondents' answers to key value statements demonstrate the subtle but significant role of ideological conditioning.

The study particularly supports the theory of non-conscious cognitive machinery, as respondents frequently provided contradictory answers and then attempted to rationalize their choices. This pattern, known as moral paralysis, was especially visible in evaluations of the Pheu Thai Party. Respondents often argued that Pheu Thai policies were most beneficial for the public, citing the 30-baht universal healthcare scheme, which the researcher also recognized as a welfare-based approach to structural reform. However, Pheu Thai currently campaigns on capitalist and populist policies, while the Move Forward Party is more strongly associated with structural reform. Despite this, respondents still expressed negative sentiments toward Move Forward, revealing an internal inconsistency in their reasoning and highlighting the tension between ideological belief and electoral behavior.

The study showed that almost target research is conservative democratic, they listened to most modern opinions and agreed with them such as military structure etc. However, some opinions or questions affected inner conflict such as religion issue and Thai traditional make them turned into non-conscious mode and agued people or political party that offered that issues. For example, the case of Mr. A exemplifies this contradiction. His decision-making appeared influenced by pragmatism, as he emphasized personal experiences working closely with MPs and praised their competence. Yet, his interview responses also showed contradictions, particularly when justifying the lack of publicity about MPs' work. His political values test placed him within the social democratic ideology, with a focus on equality, but his negative perception of the Move Forward Party, which advocates similar values, suggested inner conflict. His decision to support Pheu Thai in the 2023 election reflected a struggle between ideological inclination and personal experiences, underscoring the complex nature of electoral decision-making.

In sum, according to this study, most targets research is conservative democratic, and the study demonstrates that political ideology significantly influences voting behavior by non-conscious cognitive framework that operates in important decision-making period, especially the election, but this influence is neither linear nor consistent. Instead, electoral decisions emerge from a complex interplay of rational reasoning, unconscious processes, personal experiences, and emotional responses.

From above, the study supported research literature reviews no matter if political ideology and determinant of their decision due to it show that key messages that judged target research be the conservative democratic

political ideology such as religion and traditional and that issue behind political ideology affected the election decision making with Non-conscious Cognitive Machinery theory.

Recommendations

1. Suggestions for Future Research

The researcher acknowledges that this study was conducted within a limited time frame of one month, which constrained the scope of data collection. With only ten respondents, the sample size may be insufficient to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Furthermore, political ideology is a fluid concept, subject to constant redefinition and reinterpretation, as well as variation in its classification. Future research should therefore involve a larger sample size, with at least twenty respondents, to enhance the robustness of the findings. In addition, interview questions should be sharpened to probe more sensitive and nuanced issues. This would be particularly useful in testing the applicability of the Non-conscious Cognitive Machinery theory more rigorously, as more precise and context-specific questions may better capture the unconscious elements of decision-making.

2. Policy Recommendations for Political Parties Seeking to Win Elections in Sukhothai Province

The researcher recognizes that the present study may not provide comprehensive evidence to make definitive claims. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between political ideology and electoral decision-making in Sukhothai Province. If it is accepted that ideological orientations and decision-making are interconnected, then political strategies must take into account the

diversity of thought and the multiplicity of theoretical perspectives present in contemporary political science.

The results of the 2023 general election suggest that older voters in Sukhothai, who were strongly influenced by local Pheu Thai Party leaders, played a decisive role in the party's victory. According to Margolis's theory, these voters relied heavily on intuitive reasoning, shaped by values and attitudes accumulated over time. Interestingly, this occurred despite the fact that Pheu Thai's policies in 2023 contained fewer welfare-oriented measures than in the past, while welfare provision is typically a top priority for older citizens. This paradox suggests that many elderly voters' decisions were shaped by unconscious cognitive processes rather than conscious rational evaluation.

Therefore, political parties aiming to win in Sukhothai should prioritize communication strategies that directly engage with the intuitive and affective dimensions of older voters. Rather than emphasizing division or partisan conflict, parties should cultivate understanding, empathy, and inclusiveness. By consistently reinforcing their ideological messages in ways that resonate with deeply held values, parties can gradually align their vision with the intuitive frameworks of older voters. The researcher believes that once such alignment is achieved, parties will be able to secure increased electoral support in the province.

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