

Late to the Party: The Development of Partisanship in Thailand

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Abstract

This article investigates the emergence of new partisan identities in Thailand. Using data from Thailand's last several elections I trace the emergence of partisanship over the last 15 years, particularly in the north and northeast. The change in the nature of partisanship has helped turn long-simmering tensions into an increasingly intractable political conflict. This mass partisan alignment has upset the equilibrium of Thai politics, transforming what was once an inefficient but modest-stakes game of political horse-trading into a zero sum game with extremely high stakes.

KEYWORDS: political party, Thailand, partisanship, party identity, polarization

“The contented Siamese, traditionally uninterested in politics and with an ingrained talent for obedience, have never shown the slightest desire for democracy – a phenomenon disconcerting to well-intentioned Western visitors. If they are now to enjoy the benefits of democracy, it is clear that these will have to be imposed from above.” (The Economist, 3 September 1935)

INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE END OF 2005 Thailand has been the poster-child for political instability, with five elections, three constitutions, seven forced party dissolutions and seven different heads of government. Explanations of the recent turmoil tend to emphasize the effect of new levels of mass mobilisation, the gap between rich and poor, urban and rural, the changing nature of the monarchy, or personality conflicts. These all play a role, to be sure. However, in this article I focus on the emergence of new partisan identities. Specifically, I argue that partly as a result of the 1997 constitutional reforms we have witnessed the emergence of new partisan identities among Thai voters over the past one and a half decades. This change in the nature of partisanship has been a catalyst that has turned long-simmering tensions into an increasingly intractable political conflict. This mass partisan alignment has upset the equilibrium of Thai politics – transforming what was

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once an inefficient but modest-stakes game of political horse-trading into a zero sum game with extremely high stakes.

Demonstrating that Thai voters have indeed begun to develop these new partisan attachments is challenging. First, public opinion surveys are a relatively new phenomenon in Thailand so we lack the data to be able to track individual reports of party attachment over time. In fact, those political surveys we do have that reach back into the 1990s rarely, if ever, bothered to ask about voter's attitudes towards political parties – a fact noteworthy in itself. Second, Thai politics and the Thai party system is admittedly a moving target (not least because of the constitutional revisions and the fact that the courts have disbanded several of the largest political parties) so drawing conclusions is risky business. Nevertheless, the purpose of his article is to make the case that a significant change in the way voters relate to parties *has* occurred in Thailand, and then to briefly explore the implications of this change for politics in Thailand.¹ To do this I examine what public opinion data there is available on citizen attitudes towards parties, but find that the inferences we can draw from those data are limited due to the paucity of comparable data, and the mixed results from the data we do have. To supplement public opinion data, I leverage features of Thailand's last four electoral systems that provide clues as to what motivates voters when they enter the polling station – party label (*phak*), or connections to individuals or groups/factions (*phuak*) below the level of the party. I demonstrate that electoral patterns are consistent with the development of stronger party labels among voters in the populous north and northeast of the country.

SETTING THE STAGE

Before attempting to analyse the emergence of a stronger partisan identity it is useful to briefly describe what this identity was emerging from. As Thailand worked its way through a transition to democracy in the 1980s and 1990s one of the defining features of Thai democracy was the weak, relatively underdeveloped party system.² Political parties tended to be ephemeral alliances of electoral convenience (between 1979 and 1996 parties competed, on average, in fewer than three elections before disbanding) (Hicken 2009) with anaemic societal roots. Discerning meaningful differences between most parties, apart from who was at the helm, was nearly impossible. Party labels tended to have very little value to candidates (as evidenced by the high rates of party switching in the run up to elections) and very little sway among voters.

Even as Thailand logged extensive experience with democratic elections (ten elections between 1975 and 1996) the electoral system Thailand employed

¹For the discussion of the policy consequences of these changes see Hicken and Selway (2012).

²The other was the high level of party fragmentation. The average effective number of electoral parties in the pre-1997 era was more than seven (Hicken 2009).

worked to undermine party cohesion and encourage the creation and maintenance of candidate or faction-specific networks of support (Hicken 2009). Specifically, the block vote electoral system pitted co-partisans against one another in the same constituencies and thus undermined the incentives of candidates to cultivate a party label and the utility of party label as a cue to voters.³

While this was the general pattern, there were certainly exceptions, the most notable being the Democrat Party. The Democrat Party is the oldest party in Thailand and came the closest to having a distinct, meaningful party label. In addition, the Democrats were the only party that could plausibly make the claim of having deep societal roots – the Democrats drew much of their support from southern Thailand and consistently dominated elections in the South throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁴ However, the difference between the Democrats and the other parties was one of degree not kind. Factionalism plagued the Democrats as it did most other parties, and outside of their southern stronghold, they looked and behaved like most other Thai political parties. No parties, including the Democrats, had anything approaching national constituencies (Surin and McCargo 1997).

In the wake of political unrest in 1992 the country's political elite pledged to consider amending the constitution in an effort to address some of the perceived pathologies in Thailand's political system. When drafters finally convened to produce a new constitution in 1996/97 the party system came in for a good deal of criticism, and was explicitly the target of many of the constitutional reforms. One of the priorities of the drafters was to produce fewer, stronger political parties with more meaningful party labels. They attempted to do this via a series of reforms designed to encourage voters and candidates to place party before person (Hicken 2006). To begin with, the block vote system, with 1–3 seats per constituency, was scrapped in favour of 400 single-seat constituencies.⁵ In addition to reducing the average number of parties per constituency this had the effect of eliminating the intra-party competition that had helped undermine the value of party labels prior to 1997. Added to the 400 single-seat constituencies was a second tier of 100 seats, selected via proportional representation (PR) from national party lists. Voters could vote for both a candidate for their constituency, and a single party for the party list tier. This provided new rewards for parties that could cultivate a distinct, national reputation and gave voters the opportunity to directly select the party (as opposed to the individual) that they wanted to see form the government. In addition to the party-list tier, the 1997 constitution established new restrictions on party switching, providing the prime minister with greater leverage over members of his own party. Specifically,

³Under a block vote system voters are given as many votes as there are seats in a constituency and they cast their votes for the individual candidates of their choice. The seats are awarded to the top vote-getting candidates in the constituency.

⁴On the development of political and partisan identities in Southern Thailand see Askew (2008).

⁵For a description of the block vote system see Footnote. 3.

the new rules required politicians to be a member of a political party for at least 90 days before elections. The prime minister, with the authority to dissolve parliament and call new elections within 60 days, could credibly threaten would-be defectors from his party with being locked out of elected office completely until the next election (up to four years).

In short, the 1997 constitutional reform sought to strengthen political parties, induce them to develop identifiable party reputations and create stronger attachments between parties and their candidates and voters, as well as produce incentives for the creation of fewer, but more national political parties. The next section analyses the consequences (intended and unintended) of these reforms.

THE FRUITS OF REFORM: FROM PHUAK TO PHAK

The most visible consequence of the 1997 reforms was a dramatic reduction in the number of political parties (Hicken 2009). We see a decline in the average effective number of parties per constituency (ENPavg in Figure 1) from the pre-reform average of 3.2 to 2 in the 2005 election – driven by a shift to single-seat constituencies (see Figure 1).⁶ We see an even bigger decline in the effective number of parties nationally (ENPnat in Figure 1) from over 7 to 2.3, along with a narrowing of the gap between the average number of parties per constituency and the number nationally. In pre-reform Thailand the large gap between the number of parties in each constituency versus compared to the number nationally reflected the fact that the identity of the strongest parties varied a great deal from constituency to constituency, province to province, and region to region. The narrow gap post-reform, by contrast, signifies that the same parties tended to be the front-runners in most constituencies nationwide (Thai Rak Thai and the Democrats). This greater nationalisation of the party system reflected the new incentives to form national parties from the national party-list tier and stronger powers for the prime minister (Hicken 2009).

In addition to fewer, more nationalised parties the nature of parties and their connections with voters began to change. While attitudes and behaviours did not change overnight, these new institutional incentives did induce a change in strategy on the part of parties, candidates, and ultimately, voters.

The evidence that party labels were actually beginning to mean something can be seen in the way that candidates campaigned. Candidates, particularly those from the Thai Rak Thai party, relied on the party's promises and reputation in a way that had never before been seen in Thailand. Anecdotally one could observe that campaign posters which, prior to 1997, were notable for often failing to mention a candidate's party (after all why confuse voters if there was a high likelihood that you had switched parties since the last election), suddenly

⁶All references to the number of parties refer to the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) – the size-weighted number of political parties.

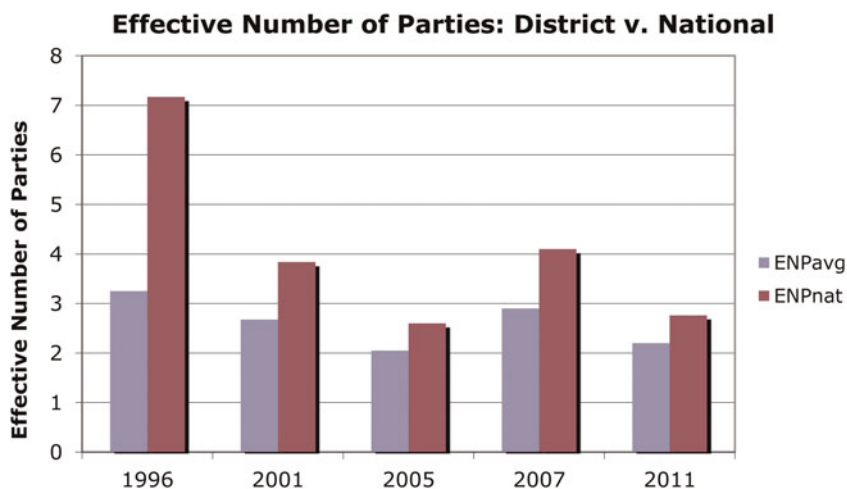


Figure 1. The number of political parties in Thailand between 1996 and 2011.

began to feature party names and symbols prominently. Discussions of the party's promises and past achievements became an integral part of campaigning. In short, political parties, led by the Thai Rak Thai party, began to move away from relying solely on personal strategies in favour of coordinated party-centred strategies, and consequently party labels became valuable tools for some candidates and voters (Somchai 2008; Selway 2007).

Survey Data on Party System Change: Limited Usefulness

If candidates were quick to adapt to the new incentives, what about voters?⁹ The most direct evidence of a change in voter attitudes would be public opinion surveys. Unfortunately there is a dearth of comparable surveys containing questions about voter attitudes towards parties, and what evidence we do have is mixed. For example, a 1998 Suan Dusit poll asking why people vote for a particular candidate did not include a candidate's party affiliation as an option for respondents.⁷ What we are left with is a handful of surveys by different groups, each asking slightly different questions, and none before 2000. This of course limits the inferences we can draw, but with this caveat in mind it is none-the-less worth reviewing what the survey results we do have tell us. A 2000 Suan Dusit poll asked respondents on what factors they based their parliamentary vote.⁸ 27.9% of respondents reported they based their vote on the candidate, 22.2% on the party, 32.5% on a combination of the candidate, party and party leader, and 6.5% based their vote on the identity of the party leader. All total, the percentage of voters who relied on party cues for at least some portion of their

⁷Suan Dusit Poll. Data available at: <http://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/> (accessed July 2010).

⁸The precise wording of the question is as follows: ประชาชนตัดสินใจเลือก ส.ส. โดยดูจากสิ่งใดประกอบ: 1 ตัวผู้สมัคร, 2 คู่ทั้งตัวผู้สมัคร พรรคการเมือง และหัวหน้าพรรค, 3 พรรคการเมืองที่สังกัด, 4 หัวหน้าพรรค. (Suan Dusit Poll 2000)

decision was 54.6% (see Table 1).⁹ In a 2007 poll Suan Dusit asked a similar question of voters, but unfortunately changed the menu of possible responses to: candidate, party, and party and candidate.¹⁰ The percentage of respondents basing some part of their vote on party considerations in this poll was 66.3%.¹¹ Again, the comparability of these two polls is limited by the differences in the questions being asked, but even with this limitation the increase in the number of respondents reportedly giving *some* weight to party identity in their voting decision is worth noting – an increase of nearly 12 percentage points.¹² (Of course, it is not possible to tell whether this increase translates into greater loyalty to a *particular* party). If we break this increase down sub-nationally the biggest change occurs among Bangkok respondents, only 45.3% of whom based their votes at least partially on party considerations in 2000 compared to 85.7% in 2007. Outside of Bangkok the change was much more modest, from 54.5% in 2000 to 58.9% in 2007.

Additional evidence about changes in voter attitudes towards parties is even more mixed. AsiaBarometer regularly asks respondents to name important social circles or groups. In the 2003 survey, 11.1% of respondents listed political parties as important.¹³ By 2007 this number had actually declined to 3.7%.¹⁴ In 2000, an Asia-Europe survey reported that barely a quarter of voters expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the country’s political parties.¹⁵ Seven years later two different surveys asked a similar question but with very different responses. AsiaBarometer (2007) reported that 40.5% of respondents trusted parties “a lot” or “to a degree”.¹⁶ By contrast in a World Values Survey in the same year only 23.3% of respondents expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in Thailand’s political parties.¹⁷

⁹This excludes those who based their vote solely on the identity of the party leader.

¹⁰The wording of the question is as follows: สิ่งที่มีผลต่อการตัดสินใจเลือกส.ส. ระหว่าง “พรรคที่สังกัด” กับ “ตัวผู้สมัคร”: 1 พรรคที่สังกัดและตัวผู้สมัคร, 2 ตัวผู้สมัคร, 3 พรรคที่สังกัด. (Suan Dusit Poll 2007)

¹¹Party (22.5%) plus Party and Candidate (43.8%).

¹²At the same time, the percent of those basing their vote solely on candidate considerations also increases from 27.9% in 2000 to 33.7% in 2007. If we add in those basing their vote on party leader considerations in 2000 the percentage rises to 34.7%.

¹³AsiaBarometer. 2003. Data available at: <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/4300?q=Asia+Barometer> (accessed July 2012).

¹⁴AsiaBarometer. 2007. Data available at: <https://www.asiabarometer.org/data/abdl2.php> (accessed July 2010). The question wording is: “Which of the following social circles or groups are important to you? (political party)”.

¹⁵Asia-Europe 2000. Data available at: <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/22324> (accessed July 2010). The wording of the question is as follows: “Can you tell me how much confidence you have in each of the following?: political parties. A great deal, quite a lot, not much, none at all, don’t know, haven’t thought much about it.”

¹⁶The exact question wording is: “Please indicate to what extent you trust the following institutions to operate in the best interests of society. If you don’t know what to reply or have no particular opinion, please say so. (political parties): Trust a lot, trust to a degree, don’t really trust, don’t trust at all, don’t know.” (AsiaBarometer 2007).

¹⁷World Values Survey 2000. Available at: <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSanalyze.jsp?Idioma=I> (accessed July 2010). The question is worded as follows: “I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in

Table 1. Select survey results pertaining to political parties.

	Early Polls	Later Polls
% of respondents listing party as some part of their vote choice	54.6% (Suan Dusit 2000)	66.3% (Suan Dusit 2007)
% of respondents expressing some confidence or trust in political parties	25.3% (Asia-Europe Survey 2000)	40.5% (AsiaBarometer 2007) 23.3% (World Values Survey 2007)
% of respondents listing political parties as important “social circles or groups.”	11.1% (AsiaBarometer 2003)	3.7% (AsiaBarometer 2007)

These survey results are summarized in [Table 1](#). The bottom line is that the data are inconclusive. By some measures political parties appear to have become more important, while according to others the status of parties in Thai society has not changed or even declined. Fundamentally, however, the limited comparability between surveys by different organisations, using different methodologies, and asking slightly different questions makes drawing inferences about party system change from survey data extremely difficult. Fortunately, there are other strategies we can employ to try and determine the extent to which the Thai party system is undergoing significant change.

Institutional Reform Round II: Leveraging Reform to Trace Party System Change

It is possible to leverage some features of Thailand’s electoral system along with its history of constitutional reform to estimate the extent to which voters began to view their vote differently than they had in the past. Recall that the 1997 constitution replaced the block vote system with single seat constituencies – thereby eliminating both intra-party competition as well as the supply of ‘surplus’ votes that many voters were willing to ‘sell’ in the pre-reform era (see below). This change, combined with restrictions on party switching, the addition of the national party list tier, and greater power for the prime minister, generated stronger incentives for candidates and voters to place party before person.

The party which most quickly and ably responded to these new incentives was the Thai Rak Thai party led by Thaksin Shinawatra. In the wake of the 2001 election Thai Rak Thai was eventually able to control a majority of the seats in the House of Representatives – the first political party ever to do so since the transition to democracy began in the mid-1970s. With a secure majority Thaksin worked aggressively to marginalise his rivals and political opponents while centralising power within Thai Rak Thai, and more specifically, within the office of the Prime Minister (Painter 2006; Pasuk and Baker 2008, 2010).

them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? Political parties.”

The centralisation of power around Thaksin eventually generated a backlash from certain segments of the public and, ultimately, from Thailand's conservative forces. There is no need to detail here the events surrounding the September 2006 coup and its aftermath – this has been done elsewhere (e.g. Pasuk and Baker 2010; Suphalak 2006; Ungpakorn 2007). However, it is noteworthy that constitutional reform was immediately put forward as one of the central planks of the coup leaders' (and interim government's) reform agenda. Their stated goal was to use constitutional reform to correct some of the perceived shortcomings of the 1997 constitution and the excesses of the Thaksin era. In short, the 2007 constitution was explicitly crafted to undermine the capacity of future political parties and elected leaders to challenge Thailand's conservative forces.

As in the 1997 reforms, once again the party system became a focus of the drafters. Their motives were fairly transparent – they sought to turn back the clock and return Thailand to an earlier era of multiple weak, narrowly focused parties and large, unstable governments. They included in the 2007 constitution a series of reforms designed to undermine the importance of parties and party labels and to discourage the creation of large national parties. First, the single seat electoral constituencies were replaced with the old multi-seat, block vote system. This meant that once again candidates from the same party had to compete against each other for election. Second, the single national party list election was scrapped and replaced with eight regional party lists, with parties allowed to run in just some of the lists. The consequence of this reform was that the party list campaign no longer served as a national referendum on each party's platform and prospective prime minister, since each region voted on a separate slate of party list candidates, and potentially, a different set of parties. The North and Northeast, strongholds of Thai Rak Thai, were carved up into four different zones for the purposes of the party list. Finally, the restrictions on party switching were effectively eliminated – members of parliament were now free to seek out greener pastures in the run up to elections. A further blow against budding party loyalties was a ruling by the Constitutional Court outlawing the Thai Rak Thai Party and banning its top leadership, including Thaksin, from office for five years.

Given all of these changes the 2007 election represents an interesting quasi-natural experiment. If party attachments did not in fact emerge over the previous decade, then the reforms put in place by the coup leaders should have been sufficient to return the party system to its earlier anaemic and fragmented state. By contrast, if, as I have argued, the tools and incentives produced by the 1997 constitution, combined with the policies and resources of Thaksin, helped produce new partisan identities, then we should see evidence of these identities in the 2007 election, despite efforts to turn back the clock. The 2007 election, with its re-adoption of most of the pre-1997 rules and institutions, allows us to conduct a rough 'before and after' comparison.

As discussed previously, prior to 1997 rural voters, particularly those in the North and Northeast, were atomized – there was no sense of a collective identity

that crossed provinces in any significant way. No party existed that could credibly claim to represent the collective interests of these voters. This lack of connection to parties and the perceived lack of concern over policy and government quality among rural voters received a large share of the blame for the state of pre-1997 Thai politics and was a major target of the 1997 reformers. They hoped to encourage voters to look beyond offers of cash or personal appeals from individual candidates and instead consider the partisan, policy, and governance implications of their vote.

In large part, then, the 1997 reforms achieved their goal. Making use of the 2007 electoral data there is good evidence voters in the North and Northeast began to think about politics differently, and vote differently than they did before 1997.¹⁸ To start with, consider the prevalence and pattern of split returns (Table 2). Under the block vote system voters are able to cast multiple votes for multiple candidates (as many votes as there are seats in the constituency). How do they cast their votes? Historically, the fact that voters had multiple votes to cast tended to undermine the value of party label and encourage voters to split their votes among candidates from different parties. One vote was reserved to support the voter's sincere preference – usually the candidate with the strongest local ties and who was best known to individual voters – in short, a person the voters could trust to be responsive to their needs. Voters often treated their one to two additional votes as 'surplus' votes. How those surplus votes were distributed depended, in part, on which candidate was willing to pay the most for those votes (Hicken 2007; Sombat 1993).¹⁹

The result was that, prior to 1997, voters often split their votes among candidates from different parties, and as a consequence, many of electoral constituencies returned MPs from more than one party.²⁰ In fact, prior to 1997 a majority of constituencies produced split returns (Table 2). As many as 90% of the constituencies split their returns in the North and Northeast, while the South tended to vote a straight party ticket – reflecting the dominance of the Democrat Party in the region. In 1997 the block vote was replaced with single seat constituencies, but then returned with the 2007 constitution. What happened then, when the block vote system was readopted in 2007 and voters faced the same opportunity to split their votes? Despite the same opportunity most voters in 2007 cast all of their votes for the candidates from a single party, translating to single party returns in nearly two-thirds of the districts. Note particularly the big declines in the North, Northeast and Central regions (Table 2). Overall, then, evidence

¹⁸For an excellent analysis of Thai Rak Thai's efforts to build a support base in the Northeast using a mix of new and tried-and-true tactics see Somchai (2008).

¹⁹Candidates, aware of the supply of surplus votes, designed campaign strategies to make the most of this supply. Voters were encouraged to vote for their most preferred candidate 'first' and then to give their second (or third) vote to the candidate giving the money (Hicken 2007; Sombat 1993)

²⁰If voters were voting on the basis of party label then no split ticket voting would occur and all of the winners in a constituency would come from the same party.

Table 2. Percentage of constituency returns split between parties.

	1992	1995	1996	2007
Overall	65	65	52	37
Bangkok	33	69	39	33
Central Region	53	62	53	42
Northeastern Region	87	79	54	47
Northern Region	90	84	77	33
Southern Region	5	9	17	14

from split returns are consistent with the idea that voters have become more partisan, and more loyal to party label, over time.

Another indicator of the increase in partisan loyalties, particularly in the North and Northeast, is the difference between the number of votes that candidates on the same party team receive. One of the advantages of a block vote system for researchers is that we can use co-partisan vote totals as a marker of party loyalty on the part of voters. Where voters care about the party label they should cast all of their votes for the candidates from the same party, and hence, all co-partisans should receive roughly the same number of votes. The bigger the difference we observe between co-partisan vote totals, the less important is the party label, and the more important are candidate or factional considerations, *ceteris paribus*.

Table 3 shows the differentials for the two largest parties in the 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2007 elections. Traditionally these differentials have been large. Not surprisingly, pre-1997 Democrat supporters show the most loyalty, but even there the first place Democrat candidates received as many as eight times the votes of the second place candidates on the party team. Parties gaining votes outside of the South and Bangkok pre-1997 exhibit even larger differentials, with first place candidates garnering as many as 15 times the number of votes of the second place candidates, and 25 times the votes of the third.

2007 is a marked departure from this earlier pattern. In this election first place candidates received only 50% to 70% more votes than their co-partisans –

Table 3. Co-partisan vote differentials.

	Average ratio between 1 and 2		Average ratio between 1 and 3	
Democrat Part	1992:	4.1	1992:	6.1
	1995:	7.9	1995:	8.6
	1996:	6.0	1996:	8.9
	2007:	1.5	2007:	1.7
Chart Thai	1992:	14.2	1992:	25.1
Chart Thai	1995:	15.6	1995:	18.9
NAP	1996:	8.6	1996:	11.1
PPP	2007:	1.2	2007:	1.4

a huge change. But more striking is the loyalty of Palang Prachachon Party (PPP) supporters. PPP was the clear successor to the banned Thai Rak Thai Party.²¹ First-placed PPP candidates received only 20%–40% more votes than their co-partisans. Indeed, PPP actually outperformed the Democrats when it came to party loyalty. In short, in 2007 more voters were voting a straight party ticket than in the pre-reform era.

If we were to examine electoral maps of Thailand we would see that in the pre-1997 era these maps resemble patchwork quilts. No single party clearly dominated a region outside of the Democrats in the South. This began to change after the 1997 reforms. Specifically, voters in much of the North and Northeast began to vote as a block for a single party, Thai Rak Thai. As a result, the elections in 2001 and especially 2005 begin to resemble a two party contest between Democrats in the South and parts of Bangkok and Central Thailand, and Thai Rak Thai in the North and Northeast.

Strikingly, the North and Northeast continue to vote together even after the fall of Thaksin. In 2007, a referendum on the new Constitution took place, which was widely viewed as a referendum on the 2006 coup. The North and Northeast were the only regions to vote to reject the charter, despite aggressive tactics by the regime to try and ensure its passage. By the time the 2007 general election rolled around, voters had ample opportunity to return to the old norm of backing politicians from multiple political parties. Yet they largely refused to do so. Thai Rak Thai had been outlawed, Thaksin and all of the top Thai Rak Thai leadership were banned from the election, and the coup leaders saw to it that the old candidate-centred electoral system was reinstalled. Despite all of this, most voters in the North and Northeast continued to cast all of their votes for the TRT successor party, PPP.

Finally, in the run up to the 2011 election the electoral rules were amended once again back to a system very similar to what was in place for the 2001 and 2005 elections.²² (The motivation for this change appears to be a judgment by the incumbent Democrat party that it stood a better chance under the resurrected mixed-member system.) This return to a version of the 1997 system presents another opportunity to assess the development of partisanship through comparing the difference in the number of constituency votes parties receive versus the number of party list votes they receive. Since each voter has an opportunity to cast one vote for a constituency MP and one vote for a party list, the difference in the number of votes a party receives across the two tiers should in part reflect the strength of partisan attachments. If all voters cast a straight ticket vote, the number of votes across the two tiers should be equivalent. As Table 4 demonstrates, the data are consistent with Thai voters exhibiting more

²¹The PPP was itself subsequently dissolved in December 2008.

²²A mixed-member system with 375 single seat districts (down from 400 in 2001/2005) and 125 national party list seats filled via proportional representation (up from 100 in 2001/2005).

Table 4. Percentage difference between constituency and party list votes.

	2001	2005	2011
TRT/PT	.25	.15	.02
Democrats	.14	.02	.03

intra-election party loyalty over time. In 2001 the difference between the two electoral tiers was 25% for Thai Rak Thai and 14% for the Democrats (in other words, the Democrats commanded more loyalty on the part of their voters than did Thai Rak Thai). The decline in this difference in 2005 and again in 2011 is consistent with the argument that voters have become more attached to political parties. Note also that by 2011 the total number of votes across the two major parties was nearly identical for both the Democrats and Pheu Thai (the successor to Thai Rak Thai and Palang Prachachon). Pheu Thai supporters now appear to exhibit as much or more loyalty as the more traditionally party-centred Democrat supporters.²³

Implications

Taken together, the evidence I have reviewed in this paper supports the hypothesis that the 1997 reforms did bring about changes to the party system – altering how voters behave, particularly those in the North and Northeast. However, in the process the provincial North and Northeast have been transformed from an atomized vote bank to a relatively cohesive voting block. Home to 52% of the eligible voters a cohesive North/Northeast is virtually unbeatable electorally. The irony here is palpable. Some 1997 reformers blamed ignorant Thai voters, who allegedly cared little for parties and programs, for dragging down the efficiency of Thai democracy. They hoped that the constitutional reforms would induce these voters to behave differently (read: like middle class voters behave). Indeed, these voters have changed their behaviour, but they are not behaving. In the eyes of their opponents, provincial voters are no longer just an annoyance or a hindrance, they have become an out-and-out threat. This shift has played a major role in the political crises and instability that has recently plagued Thailand. This has unfortunately prompted some in Thailand to re-evaluate their views about the necessity and legitimacy of elections, political parties, and democratic government for Thailand.

²³Party reputations and collective party identities largely overrode attempts to re-fragment the party system (Hicken and Selway 2012). The result is that while we see a modest increase in the number of parties in each constituency and nationally post-2006, as expected, the number of parties stays well below the pre-1997 level (See Figure 1). The strong and collective support of North and Northeast voters enabled the PPP to win the 2007 election in a very difficult political environment, even though it fell short of a majority with 40% of the seats. In 2011, the successor to PPP and TRT, Pheu Thai, regained a majority with 55% of the seats.

As many commentators have noted, current Thai politics is increasingly defined by conflict between re-invigorated cleavages – specifically, class (wealth and middle classes versus poor) and region (Bangkok and the South versus the North and Northeast). However, these cleavages have long existed (Ockey 2005). Only moderately politicized, cleavage conflicts have historically remained just under the surface. What has changed in the past decade is not only that these cleavages have become more politicised (Hicken and Selway 2012; Selway 2007), but that they have, for the first time, become ‘particised’. We thus witness rural voters becoming partisan in ways they have not been before.

Is the Emergence of Partisan Attachment Permanent?

While it is clear that Thai voters, particularly those in the North and Northeast, behave very differently than their counterparts from 15–20 years ago, one might legitimately wonder whether this represents a lasting change, or a more temporary shift. It is certainly possible that the increase in voter loyalty that I label as partisan is merely a reflection of the extremely polarized post-coup environment. According to this argument the 2006 coup split the country into two camps, and the electoral results in 2007 and 2010 are a product of this polarization, rather than the development of new and lasting party attachments. It is also possible that this is personal, not partisan. In other words, one could argue that voters are really tied to Thaksin Shinawatra rather than his party. If so, the apparent loyalty of North and Northeast voters to TRT/PPP/PT parties is really just an expression of support for this popular, but polarising, figure.

It is too soon to definitively judge whether what we have observed in recent elections represents a sea change, or just a temporary personalised polarisation of politics. However, several pieces of evidence suggest that we may be witnesses to a more fundamental transformation. First, Thailand has experienced polarising elections in the past (e.g. 1975, 1976 and 1992) but even in those highly polarised environments voters still typically chose to split their votes between candidates from several political parties (e.g. compare 1992 to 2007 and 2010 in Tables 2 and 3). The loyalty shown by voters to PPP in 2007 and PT in 2010 represents something different. For the first time societal divisions are being written onto *partisan* divisions, and thus they have a political efficacy that is novel for Thailand. (One manifestation of this is the explicit link between some social movements and specific political parties [see Sinpeng and Kouhonta 2011]).²⁴ Indeed, the recent polarisation is arguably reinforced by the reification of social divisions into partisan divisions. Second, Thailand’s conservative forces did all in their power to mitigate the Thaksin effect – banning him from politics,

²⁴Sinpeng and Kouhonta 2012 argue that the active support of the Red Shirt movement helped PPP and PT win their respective elections, while a split between the PAD and Democrat party hurt that party’s electoral fortunes.

forcing him into exile, seizing his assets, and providing ample incentives and opportunity for Thaksin loyalists (whether voters or politicians) to jump ship. And yet, most voters in the North and Northeast continued to cast all of their votes for the TRT successor parties, PPP and PT.

CONCLUSION

The 1997 constitution significantly altered the incentives and opportunities associated with the Thai party system. I have argued that both politicians and voters responded to these new changes in predictable ways. Namely, the party system became less fragmented and more nationalised while candidates and voters began placing more value on party labels. These changes are difficult to discern via the available survey data but a review of the changes in voting patterns over time reveals that voters have indeed changed their behaviour – particularly in the North and Northeast. The behaviour of many Thai voters is consistent with the growing prominence of political parties and the growing links between certain parties and their voters. Ironically, these new links have helped inflame political tensions in Thailand and helped generate a reactionary response.

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