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Teri L. Caraway Responds

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Perhaps one of the most enduring debates in comparative politics is the relative influence of institutions versus political economic factors on politics. In the study of Thai politics, this divide is apparent among scholars who have analyzed the rise of Thaksin. In one camp are those emphasizing the role of social policy as the glue holding together a cross-class coalition of Bangkok-based business interests and rural voters (Pasuk and Baker 2004; Hewison 2004); in the other camp are those who stress the importance of new institutions (Hicken 2006; Selway 2011). Several years ago, while working on another project, I revisited this literature and was impressed with its quality but surprised by the lack of robust debate among scholars regarding the Thaksin juggernaut. With the exception of the engagement between Allen Hicken and Michael Nelson in this journal more than a decade ago (Hicken 2006, 2007a; Nelson 2007; see also Chambers 2005), scholars have not argued much with each other—at least not in print. Since I was unconvinced by some of the key arguments in this literature, I temporarily set aside the other project and wrote "De-Thaksinizing Thailand."

I am thrilled that three of the most eminent scholars of contemporary Thai politics—Allen Hicken, Erik Kuhonta, and Joel Selway—agreed to participate in this roundtable. I thank them for taking the time to write such incisive commentaries. In this short response I will focus on three general topics: the attractiveness of TRT's policy platform to voters, why candidates flocked to TRT, and Hicken's arguments about single-member districts (SMDs) and the need for TRT to win a near majority in order to implement its program.

THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF TRT'S POLICY PLATFORM TO VOTERS

A common theme in the literature is the pivotal role that TRT's campaign platform played in its victory, a claim that my essay challenges. Kuhonta and Selway both argue that I underplay the importance of these policies in TRT's 2001 victory. While I agree that TRT's policy commitments were attractive to voters, I question whether voters found these campaign promises to be credible enough to change their voting habits. In clientelistic systems in which parties are unprogrammatic, why would voters suddenly believe candidates who ask for their votes in exchange for future promises? I agree with Selway that to be certain about whether TRT's policy promises altered clientelistic logics, we need to know more about why voters punched the ballot for TRT. Selway turns to survey data for this purpose, but unfortunately they do not shed much light on whether a significant proportion of Thais who supported TRT did so because of its policy commitments.

The strongest evidence that programmatic commitments shaped voter choice, as Hicken notes, is that TRT performed more strongly on the party list than in the constituency seats in all of Thailand except the south. TRT's lower vote share in the constituency seats indicates that many voters who did not support TRT for the constituency seat punched the ballot for TRT on the party list, which suggests that voters liked TRT's policy platform. However, since party-list seats were such a small share of the total seats—just 20 percent—I argue that the far more numerous constituency seats, where clientelistic logics prevailed, were decisive.

Selway raises the excellent point about contamination effects between levels. Is it possible that those who voted for a TRT candidate in the constituency seat did so because of TRT's policy promises? Of course it is possible, and some voters undoubtedly made this leap of faith. But far more likely is that voters attracted by TRT's platform but dubious about its credibility split the difference and voted based on platform for the party list and traditional clientelism in the constituency seats.

WHY CANDIDATES FLOCKED TO TRT?

A central element of my argument regarding the rise of Thaksin is that TRT's resource edge allowed it to recruit strong candidates. In countering this argument, Selway presents evidence that candidates articulated a variety of motivations for joining TRT. My claim, however, is not that candidates did not see additional advantages to affiliating with TRT but rather that its deep pockets were sufficient to lure them. Candidates with more confidence in their local networks, of course, were in a stronger position to walk away from TRT's money, but I contest Selway's inference that this observation implies that only weak candidates joined TRT. Even candidates with strong networks would have found TRT's money attractive and have chosen to align with TRT in order to prevent the emergence of a well-resourced rival, backed by TRT, in a winner-take-all constituency race.

I agree with Selway, however, that I should have given more explicit attention to the importance of ministry capture in candidate motivations. Given the political economy of Thai elections, one would expect factions or smaller parties with strong local networks to demand a ministerial payoff in exchange for joining TRT. But as Selway notes, as late as December 2001 some polls indicated that the Democrat Party was favored to beat TRT.

Given this, a safer bet might have been to join neither the Democrat Party nor TRT and then cut a deal with whichever party won. But in either scenario—cutting a deal before or after the election—factions or parties had to win on election day in order to claim the ministerial prize. Given TRT's bountiful resources, the winner-take-all nature of the constituency seats, and the unlikely prospect that smaller parties would win party-list seats, cutting a deal with TRT before the election had advantages over going it alone. This may explain why some factions with strong local networks switched allegiances to TRT.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SMDs AND TRT WINNING A NEAR MAJORITY

Hicken makes the case that the SMDs played a critical role in giving TRT a near majority in the 2001 elections. I am gratified that Hicken seems to agree with me that the SMDs resulted in a higher seat bounty for TRT than the party list. Worth noting, however, is that the sizable difference in TRT's vote share (35.7 percent) and seat share (50 percent) in the SMDs indicates that its winning margin was narrow in many constituencies, which contrasts with the Democrat party, for which vote share and seat share were relatively proportional (25.9 and 24.3 percent). The SMDs highlight the importance of the *interaction* between institutions and political economic variables, i.e. the SMDs amplified the importance of resources. If TRT's competitors had been better resourced, it would not have won half of the constituency seats, and the Democrat Party might have even edged it out in the constituency seat count.

Hicken also raises the intriguing question of whether TRT could have implemented its program without winning a near majority. Without the new institutions, he argues, TRT would not have gained a near majority. The counterfactual that Hicken has in mind is whether TRT's resource edge would have been sufficient for it to win a near majority under the rules of pre-1997 elections. I agree with him that TRT would not have won a near majority under those rules and that under such conditions TRT would have had difficulty implementing its policies.

But my argument is *not* that institutions did not matter for TRT's victory. Rather, I argue that *under the post-1997 rules*: 1) TRT's resource advantage was sufficient for it to win a large proportion of the constituency seats; 2) the SMD seats were more important than the party list in TRT's victory because they were more numerous and amplified the effects of TRT's resource advantage, and 3) TRT would have won even without its attractive campaign platform. Would TRT's victory have been a near majority if it had not offered the policies that most scholars think were crucial to its victory in 2001? I think so. Even if TRT had only won a quarter of the party-list seats instead of almost half, it still would have won nearly half of the seats and through the expanded powers of the prime minister, the limits on party switching, and its financial muscle, Thaksin could have transformed the near majority into a majority using the same tactics that allowed TRT to do so post-2001.

My argument, far from downplaying the role of institutions, strikes a middle path between institutionalists and political economy scholars. I give more causal weight to TRT's war chest than institutionalists, and I pay more careful attention to institutions than political economy scholars. In distinguishing analytically between the founding moment of TRT's first victory and the subsequent reproduction of its dominance, and

by giving explicit attention to how political economic factors and institutions *interacted* to propel TRT to victory, I have offered a new, but highly contested, perspective on TRT's rise to power.

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