

Explaining the surprises and upsets of Thailand's 2019 election



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The dramatic lead up to the election on 24 March 2019 appeared to exhaust Thai politics of the possibility for further surprises. Political contest was stiff between two poles—one wing which supported the coup-leader General Prayut Chan-ocha and the other opposed to dictatorial power—each backed by a large enough popular base that it was difficult to predict who would ultimately enjoy a majority in the legislative assembly.

A changed political landscape

While the Election Commission has yet to officially confirm the results of the March election, preliminary vote-counting based on 94% of ballots has already given rise to astonishment. The Democrat Party has been resoundingly rejected in its former strongholds. Pheu Thai experienced less electoral success than anticipated. Two new parties received voter support exceeding all

expectations: Palang Pracharat and Future Forward. The unprecedented nature of the election can be captured briefly:

- Many sources predicted that in this election, Pheu Thai would receive win approximately 200 seats. The results so far fall considerably short of those estimations: only 137 constituency seats and no party list seats at all. The number of seats controlled by Pheu Thai in Isaan, the party's voter stronghold, fell from 104 to 84 in the last election. Total votes received by Pheu Thai plummeted dramatically, from 15,744,190 to 7,920,630—less than Palang Pracharat, which received the largest share at 8,433,137 votes.
- The failure of the Democrat Party at the polls was unprecedented. The Democrat Party is Thailand's oldest political party. It has achieved high levels of institutionalisation. Until now, it commanded arguably the country's most loyal network of party members, with a stable, middle-class voter base in Bangkok and various other cities across the country. It consistently enjoyed a majority of support in the South of Thailand. This election, however, the Democrat Party met a landslide defeat. In Thailand's last election in 2011, the Democrat party received the second highest share of votes and 159 seats. This election, its share of votes (3,927,726 votes) dropped to fourth place, leaving it set to receive some 50 or so seats from both constituencies and the party list. This is an even poorer showing than its previous low point, in 2005 when it received 96 seats, a result that induced then party leader Banyat Bantadtan to step down.
- Most unexpected were the Democrat Party's losses in past voter strongholds in Bangkok and the south of Thailand. The party lost in all Bangkok constituencies, in comparison to victories in 23 out of 33 constituencies in 2011. This election, it won in only 22 constituencies in the south, a drop from 50 out of 52 constituencies in the last election. Several well-known Democrat MP candidates who had controlled their constituencies for decades were made to hand over their seats to Palang Pracharat or Future Forward, such as Warong Dechgitvigrom and Abhisit Vejjajiva. A number of the party's "rising stars" also met defeat, such as Surabot Leekpai (the son of former prime minister Chuan Leekpai) and Chitpas Kridakon (a former face and leader of the People's Democratic Reform Committee movement). All these losses represent the most crushing defeat in the recent history of an old and established political party.
- The electoral success of parties who support the military government, such as Palang Pracharat, exceeded expectations that they would receive less than 100 seats—a prediction that had been fuelled by a tide of dissatisfaction with the military in the months immediate preceding the election. As it turned out, Palang Pracharat received 116 constituency seats, taking over former Democrat strongholds in both Bangkok and the south. Palang Pracharat received the largest share of the popular vote (8,433,137 votes).
- The most interesting development was the success of the progressive Future Forward Party, which ran on a policy platform opposed to the continuation of the NCPO's rule and openly in favour of military reform. It was expected that the party would receive no more than 50 party list seats and no constituency seats at all (at most, it was thought the party would win in 3–5 Bangkok constituencies). The result instead was an electoral

breakthrough: Future Forward will receive an estimated 80 seats—a combination of 50 party list seats and 30 constituency seats. The party received the third-highest share of the popular vote (6,265,950), overtaking the old and established Democrat Party.

This piece proposes three key explanations for the 2019 election's surprise results, which are:

1. An electoral system designed to undercut large political parties such as Pheu Thai and the Democrat party, but which had the result of advantaging middle-sized parties such as Future Forward
2. The misguided campaign strategies of older political parties such as the Democrat party and Pheu Thai, who bound themselves to existing voter strongholds but failed to expand these to encompass new voter demographics.
3. Shifts in the demographics of voters, including the emergence of a new generation of first-time voters who came out in support of parties explicitly opposed to military rule such as Future Forward but turned their backs on parties who were previously representatives of the middle-class such as the Democrats.

Pheu Thai's disappointment

The drop in votes for Pheu Thai, which had dominated preceding elections with very little close competition, resulted from (1) the success of the junta or traditional elites in undercutting the power of Pheu Thai by designing a constitution which reduced the chances of a large political party achieving a landslide victory (2) the party's efforts to maintain a lower-middle class voter base, which placed limitations on its ability to expand its voter base to encompass new demographics. I forego discussion of this second point until the second half of this article.

Parties with strong voter bases across several territorial constituencies were highly disadvantaged by the design of a new electoral system that bound votes for constituency MPs with the computation of party list seats. Voters exercised the right to select their preferred MP in their constituency, a vote which would simultaneously count in the allocation of party-list seats—the number of constituency seats received by a party is subtracted from the number of party-list seats that party should theoretically receive in proportion to the popular vote. In other words, if a party were to receive a high number of constituency seats, that success would simultaneously entail a deduction from its party list seats.

The result was that Pheu Thai received 137 constituency seats in the preliminary tally, but will not receive any party list seats at all (because the number of constituency it received will have exceeded the quota of party list seats it should theoretically receive in proportion to the popular vote). One consequence is that all the party's central leaders (who chose to run on the party list) will fail to make it into parliament, from the first-ranked prime ministerial candidate Khun Ying Sudarat Keyuraphan, to party secretary-general Phumtham Wechayachai, to former ministers Sanoh Thienthong, Chalerm Yubamrung, Plodprasop Suraswadi, Kittiratt Na-Ranong, Pongthep

Thepkanchana, Noppadon Pattama, Ladawan Wongsriwong among others.

While Pheu Thai foresaw the disadvantages that the new electoral system would bring, its precautions proved inadequate. The party tried to compensate through the establishment of affiliate parties such as Thai Raksa Chart, both to boost the chances of receiving party list seats and to mitigate the consequences of potential party dissolution. The tradeoff of such a strategy, however, was that Pheu Thai fielded candidates in only 250 constituencies to prevent competition within its party network. When Thai Raksa Chart was dissolved, Pheu Thai forfeited votes to other parties that it would have received in the 100 constituencies where it did not field candidates.

Democrats defeated

The defeat of the Democrat Party was, much as in the case of Pheu Thai, partially the result of party leaders miscalculating the conditions laid down by the electoral system established in the 2017 Constitution. While the new system has the tendency to reduce the number of party-list seats received by large political parties in comparison to past systems, the Democrat Party still elected to field a number of prominent politicians in the party list. As a result, a group of Democrat politicians have been excluded from parliament, even though they would have likely enjoyed victories in their constituencies.

A factor even more important than the party's misevaluation of the electoral system, however, was its misguided campaign strategy. Over the past decade, the Democrat Party has chosen methods for mobilising its voter base which have departed from its older history. It is sometimes forgotten that prior to the last decade, the Democrats mobilised its supporters by promoting the message that democracy and elections are a tool for triumphing over political rivals.

But during the "yellow–red" political conflict of the past 10 years, the Democrats under the leadership of Abhisit Vejjajiva changed course in search of an undemocratic path to power, drawing a connection between the party and powers outside of the constitution to both build up the former's legitimacy and undermine political competitors such as Thaksin Shinawatra and Pheu Thai. The Democrats chose to clasp hands with conservative movements opposed to Thaksin, whether they campaigned against the holding of elections, were nationalist, conservative or royalist, and even if they called upon the military to intervene to deal with "the Thaksin regime". In 2008, the party was content to form government with the support of the military.

All of these actions affected the ideology and political beliefs of the Democrat party's loyalists and popular base: the campaigns to build fear of "the Thaksin regime" and the party's acceptance of the military's political power encouraged those the party's supporters to believe that Thaksin is a menacing political threat, which no force is better equipped to overcome than the military.

Yet in the final period of campaigning this year, Abhisit made a fundamental reversal by announcing his refusal to enter into a governing coalition with General Prayut Chan-ocha as prime

minister (though he did qualify that this was a purely personal standpoint which did not amount to a party resolution, and that he would not necessarily reject co-operation with Palang Pracharat if the latter did not insist on Prayut as prime minister. Abhisit's decision to turn his back on military power (at least to some degree) likely stemmed from the tide of public opinion turning against Palang Pracharat in the lead-up to polling, as well as an attempt to expand the party's popular base to include younger voters dissatisfied with the military regime.

The reversal, however, ultimately made a substantial contribution to the Democrat Party's defeat at the polls. The party's popular base—which has for years been made to believe that the military alone can eradicate Thaksin and bring peace to the country's politics—abandoned their loyalty, evolving into strategic voters who filled their ballots in support of military parties such as Palang Pracharat. Meanwhile, young voters dissatisfied with the NCPO remained unconvinced by the Democrat Party's wavering stance towards military rule, and so chose to support parties with a more explicit stance against the prolonging of the NCPO's power, such as Future Forward and Pheu Thai. One clear example was the constituency of Rangsit, characterised by a large population of students due to its proximity to a university. There, Future Forward earned a majority of the popular vote, followed by Pheu Thai.

Constituencies in Bangkok and the south show well the abandonment of the Democrat Party by its loyalists—these were the strongholds of both life-long Democrat supporters and the key territorial bases of movements against Thaksin. Over and over, these groups, under the guidance of the Democrat Party, had supported the military's intervention in politics to deal with Thaksin and forestall elections. Their abandonment resulted in the party losing in every Bangkok constituency. Particularly surprising were several districts in inner Bangkok which fell to Palang Pracharat, despite having been reliable bases of support for the Democrats for 30–40 years. In inner city constituencies such as those in Pranakorn, Pathumwan, Bangluk, Dusit and Wattana, prominent former democrat MPs including Jermmas Junglertsiri and Orn-anong Karnjanachosak all lost to Palang Pracharat candidates.

Future Forward's electoral breakthrough

The immense success of Future Forward Party was partially the result of both the new electoral system and the dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart. But most decisive was the expansion of a mass of first-time voters desiring a new political option, who had not embroiled themselves in the political divisions of the past decade. From the very beginning of campaigning, no other political party presented policies as targeted at this demographic or took new voters as seriously as Future Forward.

To a considerable degree, the new conditions laid down by the 2017 constitution benefited Future Forward Party. The party's decision to field candidates in all 350 electoral districts aimed for access to a high number of party list seats through amassing votes from young voters (aged between 18–26 years) dispersed across and present in all constituencies across the country. But

Future Forward was also able to pick up constituency seats in a number of districts where Pheu Thai didn't field a candidate and where the Thai Raksa Chart candidate stood down due to the party's dissolution (among others constituency 1 and 2 in Samutsakorn and constituency 3 in Nakorn Prathom). In several districts, former Thai Raksa Chart candidates urged their supporters to vote for Future Forward instead. The cumulative result of all these factors was victories for Future Forward in some 30 districts, a dramatic rise from predictions that the party would receive no more than 5 constituency seats (all which were expected to come from Bangkok).

But in its own right, Future Forward experienced great success in mobilising support and votes from first-time voters, who comprised approximately 8 million out of 51 million eligible voters (collectively enough to win some 100 constituency seats). It was able to win in some districts where there were Pheu Thai candidates fielding, such as districts 1 and 6 in Chiang Rai, district 4 in Samutprakarn, district 1 in Khon Kaen, and district 1 in Prathumthani. From the party's inception, the party made clear that its aim was to mobilise this particular group, through policies that no major party had ever attributed importance: the abolition of military conscription, the promotion of LGBT rights and decentralisation. This is not to mention Future Forward's explicit opposition to "old politics" and clear standpoint against the NCPO, which spoke directly to young voters dissatisfied with military rule.

Where Future Forward made being anti-establishment cool and modern, no other political party attributed importance to winning over young voters for at least two reasons. First, most parties already had fairly reliable voter bases, whether based on political ideology or territorial dimensions. On the pro-democracy side, the policies of Pheu Thai, Thai Raksa Chart and Seri Ruam Thai were largely intended to appeal to a base of voters who were likely already inclined to choose them. Meanwhile on the other side in favour of a military regime, the People's Reform Party, Phalang Pracharat and the Action Coalition for Thailand all sought votes among former members of the PDRC, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and other conservative demographics.

We simply did not see established parties make concerted changes in their campaigning to appeal to young voters. For example, in the final days of campaigning, Pheu Thai released its "savings lottery scheme" (whereby the purchase of state lottery tickets would simultaneously constitute personal savings deposits). While the popularity of the lottery in Thailand meant that the policy had potential to draw considerable public support, that support was unlikely to come from young voters, but from the lower middle-class who compromise the party's existing popular base. This final campaign push reflected the continued orientation of Pheu Thai's campaigning around the same voter base that had propelled the party to landslide victories over the past 10 years: the lower middle-class, whether those in the agricultural sector, other rural demographics or the urban poor.

The second reason established political parties hesitated to release policies aimed at new voters was the simultaneous risk this posted to their existing voter base. Campaigning on a policy platform and adapting one's communication strategies to appeal to young demographics would have involved a significant investment in terms of both time and resources, while involving a high risk of

