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The Effect of Language on Political Appeal: Results from a Survey Experiment in Thailand

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Abstract

Politicians have long engaged in marketing themselves by employing distinct speaking styles to signal social standing, competence, or a shared background with their audience. What effect does this use of different language appeals have on voter opinion? Utilizing a survey experiment in Thailand, I test a set of hypotheses about the effect of language on respondent opinions. Relying on three distinct treatments, a formal language register, an informal language register, and an ethnic language, I demonstrate the multiple effects of language on political appeal. The use of a formal register has mixed effects, signaling both high education as well as preparation for national office while also creating social distance between the speaker and audience. An informal register and the ethnic tongue both signal kinship ties to listeners, with the ethnic tongue having a much more profound effect. The results also show that an ethnic overture has greater electoral appeal than formal speech. These findings highlight the causal effect language has in shaping political opinions and illustrate the varied impacts of linguistic hierarchies on political appeal.

Keywords

Language politics, ethnicity, political communication, Southeast Asia, Thailand

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What is the effect of language on a politician's appeal? Anecdotally, we know that politicians often adopt different degrees of linguistic formality, what sociolinguists refer to as register, to appeal to their audience. Prominent examples include former UK chancellor George Osborne's attempts at cockney, former Taiwanese president Chen Shui-Bian's use of Minnan, Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Wiranto's Javanese utterances, and former US president George W. Bush's repeated employment of the term "nuclear." In these cases, politicians deviated from the formal metropolitan language and adopted an informal speaking style as an overture to their audiences. Some went even further than informality, engaging an alternative language in political campaigning.

Sociolinguists have long studied such code-switching, wherein individuals use colloquial or informal language with family and friends while adopting a formal register for professional purposes or during one-way communication (see Joos 1967). Politicians, using linguistic devices as a political tool, may employ colloquial prose or ethnic terms to create the impression that they are similar to voters (Heller 1992; Lim 2008). Indeed, populists tend to "flaunt the low" and rely on "nativistic, personalistic, and culturally "folksy"" appeals (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016, 26-27). On the other hand, electoral candidates might wish to employ formal prose to convey education and expertise, as perceived competence has an effect on political contests (Lawson, Lenz, Baker, and Myers 2010; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, and Hall 2005). Language, then, potentially has a strong impact on voter behavior.

While scholars of political communication and political marketing have found that mobilizing voters has less to do with substance and more to do with style (Scammell 1999) and intuitively we know that language does shape perceptions of the speaker, we do not yet have extensive research about the impact of linguistic differences on political appeals (Chang and Lu 2014; Hall-Lew, Coppock, and Star 2010). Where research on voter opinion includes political speech, its effects tend to be conflated with visual cues. Scholars have tested the

effect of appearance (Lawson et al. 2010; Todorov et al. 2005), likeability (Redlawsk and Lau 2006), as well as racial and religious signals (Albertson 2015; White 2007), but these tests are based on indicators that include words and images rather than teasing out the effect of language. The expanding experimental literature on ethnicity in Africa has frequently applied ethnic linguistic cues as an indicator of ethnicity, but the use of language in these cases is often conflated with visual cues (Dunning 2010; Habyarimana et al. 2009; Harris and Findley 2014). While these experiments were designed to tease out these effects, the linguistic treatment was never fully independent of the visual signs. Where images or video have not been used (McCauley 2014; Adida 2015), ethnicity has been identified, but the effect of language on political opinion was not the primary subject of these tests. Furthermore, not all of these pieces evaluate the impact of ethnicity on electoral support; instead studying public goods provision (Habyarimana et al. 2009) and identification strategies (Harris and Findley 2014). The impact of spoken language on voter opinion has not been tested independently of other cues.

In this article, I directly address the effect of language on political appeal, arguing that linguistic overtures have multiple potential effects on voter behavior. On the one hand, formal registers have a historical basis for signaling one's fitness for political office. Much as Received Pronunciation in the United Kingdom or formal, intellectual rhetoric in the United States serves as a symbol of education and competence, linguistic cues can highlight one's capability as a politician. Formal modes of speech may also be perceived as more persuasive than informal or ethnic language due to the image that the speaker is an expert or educated in policy matters (see Todorov et al. 2005). On the other hand, informal registers or ethnic tongues might convince listeners that the speaker is more likeable, which has been shown to have an effect on some voters, especially those with lower education levels (Redlawsk and Lau 2006). The use of colloquial language, pronunciation, or code words can provide

politicians a special link to their listeners, signifying closeness in beliefs, ideas, and attitudes (Albertson 2015; Hall-Lew, Coppock and Starr 2010). Ethnic tongues, especially, may indicate similar backgrounds or membership in the same ethnic group, an important source of appeal in many countries (Habyarimana et al. 2009).

Employing a survey experiment of 750 respondents in Thailand, I show that language does impact the political appeal of a politician. Thailand provides a unique opportunity to better understand the effect of speech cues, as the Thai language embodies a set of hierarchical and formalized linguistic registers. Each level contains its own vocabulary, with the more formal styles being commonly accepted as a symbol of education, refinement, and distinguished social status. Historically they were a badge of the ruling class. Beyond these clearly differentiated linguistic registers, the country is home to a diverse population that has faced a long history of political pressure to unite under a monolingual regime (Liu and Ricks 2012; Selway 2007). While the vast majority of the country speaks Standard Thai today, large swaths of Thailand's people actually employ different languages at home. These tongues are placed even lower in the linguistic hierarchy than the informal styles of Standard Thai (McCargo and Hongladarom 2004; Smalley 1994). Thus, a politician can grant a number of both social class and regional identity cues via speech.

The findings presented below show that the use of different linguistic levels shapes a politician's appeal. Formal language conjures the impression that the speaker is highly educated; at the same time, though, it creates a social distance between the speaker and listener, which has a chilling effect on political attractiveness. On the other hand, using either informal or ethnic language in a political speech significantly improves respondent opinions about the speaker's degree of kinship. Both, though, result in the perception that the speaker has a much lower education level and is less prepared for national office than speakers of the formal register. Nevertheless, respondents who heard the ethnic language were more likely to

express electoral support for the candidate than those who heard the formal register. These findings allow us to distinguish the multiple effects of linguistic register in political situations.

Thailand serves as a crucial case (Gerring 2007). Most observers view ethnic cleavages as non-salient in the Thai political sphere thanks to over a century of state policies directed at homogenizing the country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities (Liu and Ricks 2012; Selway 2015a). Accordingly, it is less likely that linguistic appeal based on a regional tongue should hold sway, despite language's role as an important ethnic and social identifier (Selway 2015b). At the same time, Thailand's history of hierarchical domination of Standard Thai in political circles makes it more likely that formal styles should result in positive evaluations of the speaker (Diller 2002; Streckfuss 2015). These two conditions, a lack of political mobilization along ethnic lines as well as a history of emphasis on formal linguistic registers, reinforce this study's findings, as the results run contrary to conventional wisdom. The formal language register received relatively little electoral support, while the ethnic tongue appealed to respondents. Linguistic appeals, especially informal and ethnic overtures, shape opinions and can potentially be used to mobilize political support.

The remainder of this essay is as follows. In Section 2 I turn to the literature on language and politics, detailing the link between linguistic cues and political preferences. I also present my hypotheses. I provide more background information about linguistic variation in Thailand in Section 3, explaining the value-added of the Thai context. Section 4 describes my research design and sampling procedures. In Section 5 I discuss the findings of the survey. The conclusion (Section 6) revisits the contributions of the paper and their implications.

Language Register and Political Appeal

Chomsky (1979, 191) declared, “questions of language are basically questions of power.” That power is evidenced through linguistic hierarchies. Languages encapsulate a stratified set of communication patterns, which create a series of signals to speakers and hearers about levels of education, expertise, social standing, and social relationships (Bernstein 1973). Central to these hierarchies are registers, or patterns of speaking according to levels of formality and specialization.¹ While linguistic formality occurs across a spectrum, registers can also be roughly distinguished between formal and informal. On one hand, formal registers are used in one-way communication and employ technical vocabulary, such as in the use of legalese, academic presentations, or a political address. Formal registers invoke a degree of specialization and competence. In contrast, an informal register involves familiar prose, such as used in a conversation between friends or family members. Slang, verbal shortcuts, and implied understandings occur with frequency in informal speech. The English language contains at least five main registers, ranging from a very formalized, static

¹ Distinctions should be drawn here between the concepts of language, dialect, register, and accent. First, for the division between language and dialect, I use the coding produced by Lewis, Simons, and Fennig (2015), which is based on mutual intelligibility. If speakers are able to understand each other at a functional level without need to learn the other tongue, then the difference is considered one of dialect. Otherwise it is a language distinction. Second, linguistic registers are stylistic variations within a single language based on social contexts. Some sociolinguists distinguish between the concepts of style and register, with style being associated with level of formality and register being specifically focused on vocabulary (Trudgill 2000). This distinction, though, is relatively recent, and historically style and register have been mixed (see Joos 1967). As there is heavy conceptual overlap between formality and specific vocabulary, especially in Thai, I primarily use the term register. Finally, accents are differences in pronunciation of a single language, and they are often associated with social class but they are distinct from register (Trudgill 2000). A speaker can use a single accent to speak in a high register or low register, or even different languages, although certain accents are generally associated with lower registers. As such, I treat accent as distinct from register, and I control for accent in the treatment below.

dialogue to informal discussions among intimates (Joos 1967). In similar fashion, most languages exhibit hierarchical arrangements of registers.

In some tongues, such as Thai and Javanese, distinctions between formal and informal registers are highly institutionalized. Speaking in a formal register includes its own speaking style as well as a special set of vocabulary distinct from informal registers. Lower styles almost always rely on lower registers, although certain formal terms may be coopted for humorous effect, such as using a highly formal word in an inappropriate setting. Higher modes of speaking are largely reserved for elites. In Javanese, Geertz (1960) argued that only the traditional elite could master both the formal style and register, symbolizing their refinement and position in the ruling class (see also Anderson 1990). With such institutionalized hierarchies, speaking style and linguistic register combine to signal one's place within society.

In addition to variation within a single language, variation between languages is a source of political influence and power, and most countries have at one point or another struggled with the decision over which language(s) to adopt and promote as official (Pool 1991; Liu and Ricks 2012). Upon embracing an official tongue, the state entrenches the speakers of the metropolitan language, especially its formal style, in a powerful position wherein they obtain greater access to state resources, positions of power, and economic opportunities (Liu 2015). This is especially true in cases where the state does not recognize minority languages. In essence, the choice of an official language or languages cements a hierarchy of linguistic dominance (Bourdieu 1991). It also links language choice to questions of ethnicity and identity (Marquardt 2017).

In multi-lingual societies, appeals to language have long served as one of the methods by which ethnic groups can be mobilized. Indeed, politicians from Latin America (Madrid 2012), Asia (Chandra 2007), and Africa (Adida 2015; Ferree 2006; Posner 2005) have all

built support through the use of ethnic overtures.² Language supplies one of the most effective ways to identify co-ethnicity (Habyarimana et al. 2009, 54-56; Madrid 2012), or as Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, and Grancea (2006, 218) write in regard to ethnic identification in Romania, “Language is not only an indicator, but a criterion of ethnicity.” Speaking a language or using language cues with skill indicates membership within the same social group or circle. This is especially true of those languages not taught in public schools, as fluency indicates a closer ethnic connection. Also, as adopting a new language is costly, speaking it serves as a barrier between in-group and out-group. Linguistic cues signal ethnic identity.

Linguistic hierarchies, then, exist both within language, via register, and between languages within a country. These range from a formal, polished pattern of the metropolitan tongue to the unofficial minority languages that exist on the periphery of the state. While the state-approved formal languages may be necessary to access the halls of power, lower-level language styles can also provide benefits. Language registers that do not have direct access to politics may carry a great deal of historic symbolism of exclusion and loss. The class or ethnic groups which speak these languages often derive part of their social myth from that exclusion, creating a group memory that helps the identity endure. As such, even though a certain pattern of speech might be economically or socially less desirable, individuals continue to use it as a point of pride or class solidarity when they are outside the workplace, even in light of national pushes toward standardized language (Gwee 2016; Hoon 2003). On the other hand, the use of a national language’s formal register can signal fitness for power, a high level of education or competence, and the dominance of a certain ethnic group.

² Ethnic appeals do not necessarily guarantee political support (Carlson 2015; Dunning and Nilekani 2013; Horowitz and Klaus 2018).

Moreover, in many countries controlling language has historically been a top-down affair during the process of nation-building (Liu 2015; Liu and Ricks 2012), but the expansion of elections and necessity for public support often leads to a shift away from formal, bureaucratic languages of the past to those which grant greater opportunities for the users (Anderson 1990; Keane 2003; Smith-Hefner 2009). Politicians who recognized this democratization of language have adapted and attempted to adopt colloquialisms or accents to appeal to voters, as referenced in the introduction's anecdotes (Lim 2008). At the same time, historic legacies may privilege certain languages over others, leading politicians to cue in those tongues.

Building on this work, I argue that language can have multiple potential effects on political appeal. Linguistic hierarchies provide social signals, and the use of a formal register of the metropole language could be used to signal one's competence and fitness for political office, potentially similar to inferences of competence based on appearance (Todorov et al. 2005). Formal modes of speech may also be perceived as more persuasive than informal registers or local languages due to the image that the speaker is an expert or educated in policy matters. In contrast, informal registers or ethnic tongues could have the effect of endearing the speaker to the audience; colloquial language, code words, and ethnic speech may captivate audiences, convincing them that the speaker shares their beliefs, ideas, and attitudes (Albertson 2015; Hall-Lew, Coppock, and Starr 2010). I expect that there is a difference between informal registers of the metropole language and local languages, though, as ethnic tongues signal background and membership in the same ethnic group to a greater degree than merely speaking with an informal register (Adida 2015; Dunning 2010). Thus, even though the effect of an informal register and an ethnic language should be in the same direction, the ethnic linguistic effect should be more pronounced.

I hypothesize, then, the following:

H1: A candidate's use of the formal metropole linguistic register should conjure a perception of education and fitness for political office among listeners.

H2: A candidate's use of the informal metropole linguistic register or ethnic languages should improve perceptions of kinship among listeners.

These two hypotheses suggest contrary predictions regarding the impact of language on electoral support, though. First, voters may prefer a seemingly highly-educated expert as a leader. Such has been the case for visual cues; perceptions of competence based on candidate appearance have been shown to be correlated with electoral success (Lawson et al. 2010; Todorov et al. 2005). We may see greater electoral support for individuals whose speech is refined and relies on higher linguistic registers. On the other hand, psychology research suggests that voters will prefer leaders who are similar to themselves (Bailenson, Iyengar, Yee, and Collins 2008). This might be especially true of ethnicity-based appeals, as noted above. Voters, then, may throw their support behind those who speak in informal registers or local languages.

Due to the conflicting predictions, I propose a set of two competing hypotheses, allowing me to address the empirical question as to which type speech holds greater electoral appeal.

H3a: A candidate's use of a formal metropole linguistic register should improve a candidate's electoral appeal to listeners.

H3b: A candidate's use of the informal metropole linguistic register or ethnic language should improve a candidate's electoral appeal to listeners.

Theoretically, then, linguistic appeals can play an important role in the political sphere. As noted in the introduction, though, there have been relatively few attempts to test the impact of language, especially linguistic register, on voter preferences. Much research using language as the independent variable looks at other outcomes, such as cultural stereotypes (Chang and Lu 2014), co-ethnic public goods provision (Habyarimana et al. 2009), and ability to identify co-ethnics (Harris and Findley 2014). Among those who tie language to voter preferences, linguistic cues have been linked with visual cues (Dunning 2010), or language was conflated with ethnicity (Adida 2015; McCauly 2014). The impact of linguistic hierarchies has not been tested independently of other cues.

Additionally, in order to identify language's impact on political appeal, the treatment needs substantial variation while remaining legible to the respondents. In other words, respondents must be able to understand both the treatment and the control in order to make the test valid, otherwise the researcher is testing separate language populations. In highly fragmented societies this is difficult, as most work must be conducted in the national language. For instance, Harris and Findley (2014) used only greetings in a dialect, while Dunning's (2010) treatment involved a statement about native language and a few phrases from the tongue. Habyarimana et al. (2009) also presented linguistic information in the form of a short greeting. The treatments in these cases were limited and did not rise to the level that a politician might use language to mobilize support; the main message was relayed in the lingua franca. Completely teasing out the effect of language alone is difficult.

The research design laid out below overcomes these two challenges. First, it involves only a recorded speech with no photographic or video presentation. Thus, the effect of

language is isolated from any visual clues which may confound the findings. Second, Thailand's unique ethnic divisions and almost hegemonic dominance of the Standard Thai language in education, television, and official government discourse has created a population relatively fluent in both the national language as well as in their home language. Thais are able to grasp multiple registers of official Standard Thai as well as their mother tongue. In the next section I discuss the Thai case further before turning to my experiment.

Thailand's Linguistic Environment

The Thai language offers a unique opportunity to test the hypotheses proposed above thanks to its structure as a hierarchical tongue with multiple internal registers. Social class cues that occur frequently in other languages, such as Received Pronunciation in the United Kingdom, are standardized and made official in Standard Thai.³ At the top of the Thai linguistic hierarchy is the royal register; next is the formal bureaucratic language of government. A distant third is the everyday pattern of speech used by most Standard Thai speakers. Below this are levels considered crass or intimate, used only among friends, family, or the objects of insult. Each register includes special and distinct vocabulary and sentence structures that are designed to signify one's social status and standing in relation to the hearer. Formal bureaucratic Standard Thai is considered to be the most refined level that a non-royal would use, and it signifies one's education, expertise, and proximity to political power. Thais have long been conditioned that in order to be a good politician, one must have a strong command of the higher registers of the Thai language (Diller 2002). For decades, government leaders and officials gave speeches and made public pronouncements primarily in the formal bureaucratic register, and, even though political speeches are less formal in recent years, most still maintain a level of formality distinct from everyday speech (Nusartlert

³ Standard Thai is the official, codified version of the Thai language and is often described as Central Thai. For a discussion of language categorization in Thailand see Diller (2002, 76-80).

2013). As such, we can take advantage of the variation found in Standard Thai, wherein higher registers might actually provide better draws for voters. Thai, therefore, offers ready access to two distinct linguistic registers that politicians could draw upon to create linguistic appeals: bureaucratic Standard Thai and informal Standard Thai.

Thai people can easily distinguish between the different registers due to the presence of both distinct vocabulary and grammatical structures. For instance, the first-person pronoun “I” could be translated differently depending on speech register. In bureaucratic Standard Thai, the term can be *kha-pha-chao* (gender neutral), *kra-phom* (masculine) or *dichan* (feminine); in informal Standard Thai, the masculine term is *phom* while feminine is *chan* or *rao*. Additionally, sentence structures in formal speech align with the written version of Thai and are considered polite, while informal speech uses colloquial structure and phrasing (Diller 2008). The institutionalization of these registers allows us to make clear distinctions between formal and informal speech, which is not as clear cut in other languages.

Added to these registers is the widespread use of ethnic languages. Scholars estimate that only between one-quarter to one-half of Thai citizens are native speakers of Standard Thai (Keyes 2003; Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015; Premsrirat 2004). The remainder of the Thai population speak a variety of tongues at home, including Lao, Khammuang, Paktay, Khmer, Malay, and Chinese. The most common languages found within Thai borders have been integrated within the Thai language hierarchy and designated with regional modifiers, such as in the case of Khammuang, which is called “Northern Thai” by the Thai state. These regional languages are considered to have much lower social standing than Standard Thai, they thus inhabit the bottom rungs of the Thai linguistic hierarchy (Smalley 1994). Regional tongues, Lao, Khammuang, and Paktay, are all closely related to Standard Thai but remain distinct, comparable to the differences between Catalan and Castilian Spanish or Scots and English. While they share similar roots, and would sound familiar to speakers of the other

language, they can be mutually incomprehensible without training and are considered separate languages (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015).

The largest ethnic minority in Thailand are the Lao, who make up approximately one-third of the population and are based in the twenty Northeastern provinces, referred to within Thailand as the *Isan*. The Lao language, called *phasa isan*, or Isan language, has mixed with words from Standard Thai and “despite being regarded as a dialect of Central Thai ... has distinct lexical and phonological properties” (Alexander and McCargo 2014, 60). Most native Standard Thai speakers find the tongue unintelligible and many disdain its speakers. Being identified as “Lao” by a Standard Thai speaker can be considered a strong insult, as it carries connotations of low social status, lack of education, and ignorance (Ganjanakhundee 2016). “Being Isan” is somewhat more socially acceptable, and the Isan identity has persisted and strengthened over time (McCargo and Hongladarom 2004). Even so, the Lao people of the Isan have been so thoroughly incorporated into the Thai nation that there are no serious regionally-based or ethnicity-based political movements. Nor has being Isan become a major political identifier. The Isan language thus provides a third type of linguistic address and an excellent opportunity to test the effect of ethnic-based appeals in a relatively neutral setting. If ethnic appeals actually do have an effect in a country wherein ethnicity is not politically salient (Selway 2015a, 94-95), the results could be considered especially pertinent, making Thailand a crucial case (Gerring 2007).

Thai political elites campaigning in Northeast Thailand, then, can access at least three potential linguistic appeals. First, they may speak bureaucratic Standard Thai, signaling their education, social standing, and their potential fitness for political office. Second, they might use informal Standard Thai, which is spoken widely throughout the country. Third, they may choose to employ an ethnic tongue, in an effort to appeal to listeners. I now turn to my

research design, which employs three distinct linguistic treatments to gauge the effect of language register on political appeal by testing the hypotheses identified above.

Research Design

To test the impact of language on respondent opinion, I employed a survey experiment of 750 respondents carried out in three provinces in Northeastern Thailand where Isan speakers dominate: Khon Kaen, Udon Thani, and Buriram.⁴ I chose to focus on a region dominated by an ethnic minority, as it provided the opportunity to address a population able to understand all three levels of political speech, both the formal and informal registers of the metropole language as well as an ethnic tongue. This avoids the potential problem of testing different linguistic populations or having a treatment that is unintelligible to the respondent.

The survey treatment was one of three different audio recordings of an excerpt from a political address, which lasted approximately two minutes. The recording was a slightly modified text from an original speech given by Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn during the announcement of the Third Five-Year National Development Plan (1972-1978) on 17 September, 1971. This speech was chosen for three main reasons. First, the text of the speech does not identify any policy issues which might be seen as linked with current politics. The adapted text is relatively neutral in its claims and contains no political cues which might be associated with any contemporary political movements. This reduced the chance that the experiment results would be affected by recent politics. Second, and relatedly, by using an historic excerpt, none of the linguistic behaviors of current politicians could be easily

⁴ Respondents self-identified the language spoken at home as follows: (1) Isan, 653 individuals (87.07 percent); (2) Central Thai, 60 individuals (8.00 percent); (3) Cambodian, 27 individuals (3.60 percent); (4) Lao, 6 individuals (0.80 percent); (4) Other, 4 individuals (0.53 percent). 664 respondents (88.5 percent) speak Isan at either home or work. The analysis below was repeated with data from only those who speak Isan, with similar results. That data is reported in the online appendix.

identified by respondents. This is particularly important as recent prime ministers in Thailand have distinct speaking patterns that might be identifiable, which could influence responses. Third, the speech was given in formal, bureaucratic language and includes a number of personal pronouns and other terms which are among the most important identifiers of Thai speech. The speech allows clear differentiation between the three linguistic appeals.

The substance of the recording was identical; it only varied according to language. The formal bureaucratic Standard Thai recording left the original bureaucratic language largely unaltered. Historically, this form of speech was frequently employed in political addresses. The second recording was a translation of the original language into informal Standard Thai. This is the speech register used in every-day intercourse, and it is the type of language most frequently applied in political appeals in recent years (Nusartlert 2013). In the final recording, the original speech was translated and recorded in the Isan ethnic language. While Isan is informally used in local political discourse, it is often avoided, especially in Bangkok or in national speeches, due to a negative stigma assigned to it by many Thais (Alexander and McCargo 2014; McCargo and Hongladarom 2004).

All three forms of the speech were recorded by the same individual, a male native to the Isan. Due to his background, he spoke fluent Isan. Having pursued a post-graduate degree, he was also able to record the two versions of the speech in Standard Thai. The use of the same speaker across all three levels of speech reduced the possibility that any difference in results could be derived from variation in vocal appeal or accent of the speaker.

The survey took place in January, 2016 throughout the three provinces identified above. The survey team conducted 750 surveys, evenly split with 250 in each province following weighted, cluster random sampling methods, which were similar to those used by

the World Values Survey in Thailand.⁵ All surveys were conducted in informal Standard Thai, but members of the survey teams were conversant in Isan and able to use the tongue as necessary. During each face-to-face meeting, respondents first answered a set of demographic and background questions prior to listening to the treatment.

After the initial questions were completed, the respondent listened to one of the three recorded audio clips, with the treatment effect randomly assigned in order to achieve an equal number of responses at each level.⁶ Following the audio clip, the respondent was then asked to score statements along a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Table 1 lists these statements in the same order as they were presented in all surveys.⁷ Respondents were also asked two open-ended questions regarding their feelings as to whether

⁵ The sampling procedure proceeded as follows. (1) For each of the three provinces in the survey, I randomly selected a list of ten districts (*amphoe*), with the districts being weighted according to district populations in the provinces. Each of those ten districts was assigned twenty-five surveys. (2) Within each of the selected districts, I randomly selected two sub-districts (*tambol*), with sub-districts being weighted according to their populations. Each of these sub-districts was then assigned either twelve or thirteen surveys. (3) The survey team travelled to each of these assigned sub-districts, arriving in the same village as the sub-district office. There the team would begin at a residential street, and using a skip number of three, choose homes to approach for the interview. If no suitable respondent was available, the team would move to the next house. In each sub-district, the survey continued until the target number of respondents was met.

⁶ 252 Central Bureaucratic Thai treatments, 250 Central Thai treatments, and 248 Isan treatments.

⁷ A full version of the survey can be found in the online appendix. There is some concern that the treatment's effect may have dissipated over the time that it took to gather responses. Despite this, we can be reasonably confident that the effect of the two-minute treatment lasted during the brief response window (approximately ten minutes). Also, difference of mean tests for the treatments across the last two statements were statistically significant. Thus, even if the impact of the treatment diminished slightly during the survey, responses continued to exhibit an effect.

the speaker portrayed in the audio clip would be a good member of parliament or not. In most cases, the survey took between twenty and thirty minutes to complete.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Respondents received no remuneration for their participation, and completing the survey was voluntary. Almost all respondents completed the entire survey, although on occasion a respondent refrained from answering specific questions, most notably questions regarding their political affiliation and their income levels. Through random selection, the three groups exhibited roughly comparable demographic composition, as demonstrated in Table 2.⁸

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

In sum, the survey experiment was designed to isolate the effect of using different linguistic appeals on voter opinions. The audio recording discussed neutral policy topics and was fashioned to avoid any links with current political debates to prevent potentially contaminating the responses. The only material difference was the language used.

Results and Discussion

To reiterate the hypotheses developed above, I expect that the group exposed to the formal language register should give the speaker higher scores on education level as well as fitness for political office than the groups that heard the informal register or ethnic tongue. In contrast, speaking informal Thai or the local language should engender feelings of kinship between respondents and the speaker, with the Isan language predicted to have a stronger

⁸ Demographic differences across provinces, though, were sufficient to warrant concerns that provincial effects may influence findings. As such, I repeated the analysis using ordered logistic regression models with provincial fixed effects. In addition, I conducted a separate analysis using a binary logistic regression model to obtain marginal effects. Results were similar to those presented here and are provided in the online appendix.

effect than the informal register. Finally, the question of which linguistic register inspires greater electoral support is open for empirical testing.

Using exploratory factor analysis, I consolidated the survey statements outlined above into three variables that reflected the hypothesized outcomes: fitness for office, kinship, and electoral support.⁹ I then conducted difference of means tests for each of these three variables between the respondent groups, using respondents who heard bureaucratic Standard Thai as the control group. Additionally, I evaluated each of the survey items independently. Results are summarized in Figure 1, and Table 3 reports exact numbers. For the sake of clarity and to distinguish the treatments from general discussion, I refer to the treatments as BST (bureaucratic Standard Thai), IST (informal Standard Thai), and ISAN (Isan).

Figure 1 uses the BST treatment as the base for comparison, placing the mean of respondent scores at zero. The points on the figure, then, represent difference of mean scores for the IST and ISAN treatment groups in relation to BST. If my first hypothesis is correct, the displayed points for Fitness for Office for both treatments should be below zero. We can see that this is the case for the IST treatment, with respondents who heard the treatment ranking the speaker as less fit for office than those who heard the formal treatment. Surprisingly, though, those who heard the ISAN treatment did rank the speaker lower than the group who heard the formal treatment, but the difference was not significant, which runs counter to our theoretical expectations. Looking at individual indicators, though, we see that on two indicators regarding education level and preparedness for national leadership, the ISAN treatment group scored the speaker substantially lower than those who heard the BST treatment. This holds for the IST group as well. Of those who heard the BST treatment, 43.7 percent strongly agreed that he was well-educated; only 14.4 and 18.6 percent of the IST and

⁹ Results of the factor analysis can be found in the online appendix.

ISAN groups responded in the same manner. Over 67 percent of those who heard the BST treatment agreed or strongly agreed that the speaker was well-prepared for national office, the numbers on the IST and ISAN groups were 63.2 and 54.8 percent respectively. In other words, respondents saw the formal linguistic register as a signal of education and competence. Interestingly, though, differences between the lower registers on these questions are statistically indistinct from one another, meaning that the Isan people do not necessarily view speaking in the minority language as inferior to speaking informal Standard Thai.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The ethnic treatment was ranked to be much more persuasive than either of the Standard Thai treatments. While this indicator loaded on the Fitness for Office variable, it could also be interpreted as an independent effect wherein a speaker of the local language is seen to be significantly more credible than those who use Standard Thai. 81.38 percent of the ISAN treatment group agreed or strongly agreed that the speaker was persuasive, while only 66.00 and 57.37 percent of the respective IST and BST groups responded in the same manner. This indicates that when consciously considering persuasion, survey participants were not as enamored by a formal register as hypothesized.

Thus, it appears that there is some support for the first hypothesis that formal language registers do convey an image of fitness for office, at least in terms of education and preparedness for national service. The informal Standard Thai register resulted in significantly lower rankings than formal Thai. The regional language, though, was not ranked as lowly on this variable, despite being ranked lower on education and qualifications for national office. This is likely due to the perception that a local language speaker is much more persuasive than those who only speak Standard Thai.

The second hypothesis predicts that the informal register and local tongue should have been better received than the formal treatment on kinship terms. As shown in figure 1, these are the most dramatic findings of the survey. Both the IST and ISAN treatments resulted in respondents ranking the speaker significantly higher in terms of kinship than the BST treatment. This was most exaggerated among those who heard the ethnic language treatment. Participants who heard the ISAN clip were much more likely to agree or strongly agree (89.1 percent of respondents) that the speaker was a native to the region in relation to the BST group (39.68 percent of respondents) as well as the IST group (52.80 percent of respondents). A similar, although more muted effect, was observed from those who agreed or strongly agreed that the speaker shared a similar background to themselves (62.90 percent versus 39.68 percent and 43.37 percent, respectively).¹⁰ The difference in the groups was statistically significant in both cases ($p < .001$). The group that heard the BST clip were much less likely to feel kinship with the speaker; fewer than 40 percent of the group's respondents correctly identified the speaker as being from the Isan region. Thus, it appears that the use of an ethnic language can establish a perception of shared identity. The formal language register created substantial social distance between the speaker and respondents in comparison to the informal treatment.

This indicates, as expected, that the use of a local language creates a kinship cue whereby people identify group membership, at least in terms of geography. What is perhaps just as interesting is that the speaker, when employing Standard Thai, at both the informal and formal level, was able to reduce respondent's ability to correctly identify that he was native to the region. As co-ethnicity is often difficult to distinguish (Harris and Findley,

¹⁰ The term used for background was *pheun phae* which could also be translated as lineage and has strong ethnic connotations.

2014), this suggests that elites can disguise their ethnic origins by adopting different speaking patterns.

Finally, we can turn to the question of whether linguistic register affects levels of electoral support. Here the IST and ISAN groups both scored the speaker higher than the formal language register. The IST treatment did not display a statistically significant difference in regards to the combined electoral support variable, but when the sample is constrained to only Isan speakers, the IST treatment's effect becomes significant at the $p < 0.1$ level (online appendix). Additionally, the IST group was more likely to feel that the speaker could be a trusted representative from their village or hometown; 46.80 percent of respondents in this group agreed or strongly agreed with this statement while less than 40 percent of the BST group felt the same. 62.10 percent of the ISAN treatment group agreed or strongly agreed to the same statement, contributing to the overall effect that the local language had on electoral support. While the impact was smaller than in the case of the kinship variable, the survey shows that hearing an ethnic language register has a statistically significant effect on a respondents' feelings regarding whether or not they would support the speaker in a political campaign. Almost 43 percent of those who experienced the ISAN treatment either agreed or strongly agreed that they would consider supporting the speaker in the next election, while only 36 percent of the IST group and 28 percent of the control treatment (BST) felt the same. It does appear that a politician using Isan language in the region would have an advantage over one who conversed only in Standard Thai. And a politician using informal Standard Thai would likely be better off than one using only the bureaucratic tongue.

Qualitative responses provide some additional insight on this issue. At the end of the response block, respondents were asked to explain why they did or did not feel that the speaker would be a good member of parliament, with no prompting given regarding

language. While there were relatively fewer responses to these open-ended questions, some feedback provides clues as to the effect of language on perceptions about the speaker.¹¹ One respondent who heard the ISAN treatment and had agreed that he would trust the speaker to represent his hometown related that the speaker would not be a good member of parliament because, “[He] speaks too much Isan.” Another respondent who heard ISAN noted, “[He] doesn’t communicate in Central Thai.” In contrast, additional respondents from the ISAN treatment group praised the speaker, claiming that he would be a good member of parliament as “[he] was very persuasive by using language that the public can easily understand,” and “[his] speaking style used local language that was easily understandable.” There seem to be mixed effects, then, of the Isan language treatment, with some respondents judging an Isan speaker as unfit for office while others appreciated the use of the local tongue.

While these qualitative responses signify that language does have an effect, the scarcity with which respondents mentioned language¹² indicates that language is operating in the background rather than a conscious driver of opinion. Still, though, the statistical findings demonstrate that the language of the speaker does have an effect on respondent support for the candidate.

Also of note is the statement regarding social class. While this indicator loaded on the electoral support variable, I had expected it to load on the kinship variable, and it does seem to align with the expectations on the effect of language on feelings of kinship. Hearing the ISAN and IST treatments resulted in higher numbers of respondents identifying more closely with the class of the speaker than those in the BST group.

¹¹ There were 463 qualitative responses, or 61.7 percent of the surveys.

¹² Only seven respondents specifically highlighted language in their comments; another four mentioned manner of speech.

Finally, the difference in effect between the ISAN and IST treatments warrants some consideration. Even though the informal register provided a greater sense of kinship than the formal tongue, this effect was dwarfed by that of ISAN. Also, IST received a lower score than ISAN in reference to preparedness for office. While we should be cautious in drawing too many conclusions from these findings, this suggests that speaking in the informal register creates potential costs for a candidate in that he or she loses the opportunity to signal competence and the electoral payoff vis-à-vis the formal register, although positive, is not significant. On the other hand, IST did result in a statistically significant increase in feelings of kinship over BST. There are also hints that the informal register would provide some benefits over the formal that could be important in the electoral arena, such as increasing levels of trust and feelings of kinship; again, though, the ethnic tongue was more powerful in shaping opinions of electoral support. In politics, then, speaking the ethnic language in an area dominated by a single ethnic group is more effective than using an accessible version of the metropole language.

To summarize, the results presented here provide support for the first two hypotheses laid out above. First, the formal register does evoke an impression that the speaker is fit for political office, especially in terms of preparation and education. The ethnic tongue, though, resulted in much more positive responses on persuasiveness than anticipated, suggesting that my prediction about the persuasiveness of formal modes of speech was incorrect.

Second, the informal register and the ethnic tongue do improve feelings of kinship relative to formal registers; indeed, this variable saw the most distinct impact from the treatment. This was seen in both the informal Standard Thai and ethnic treatments, with the effect of Isan being the more powerful of the two. The degree of effect indicates that respondents are more drawn to a co-ethnic appeal than a merely informal appeal, as expected.

Third, I left the impact of language on electoral support open for empirical testing, and the data shows that speaking in an ethnic tongue increases the electoral appeal of a speaker. The Isan language treatment received significantly higher scores on the electoral support variable than the formal register. Unfortunately, though, due to the design of the survey, we are unable to tease out the exact cause of this effect, but the findings suggest that feelings of kinship are more important for electoral appeal than evoking an aura of competence, eloquence, or fitness for office.

Conclusion

This experiment provides evidence that a candidate's language can significantly impact his or her political appeal. While formal registers may convince voters that the candidate is well-educated and prepared to take on political office, that does not necessarily translate into political support. Indeed, respondents who heard the formal linguistic register ranked the speaker highest in fitness for political office but lowest in electoral support. Lower linguistic registers, the informal register as well as the local language, found greater purchase in imbuing respondents with a sense of kinship with the speaker. The ethnic appeal especially increased survey participants' perceptions that the speaker was persuasive and shared a similar background to themselves. This translated into a statistically significant difference in the level of electoral support for the speaker, suggesting that speaking in a local tongue could be a prudent decision for a politician seeking office.

For Thailand, this signifies the potential political influence of ethnicity. Despite over a century of vigorous suppression and unification under a single, government-approved Thai identity, ethnic appeals remain important and influential. As the Thai state looks forward to another democratic transition and the elections that come with it, regional and ethnic identities may become more important than the current military regime recognizes. Indeed, with the Lao people of the Isan being among the most economically disadvantaged groups in

the Thai state, the confluence of ethnic and class cleavages may mean that ethnic divisions are ripe for mobilization (Wimmer 2013). This experiment has demonstrated that such an approach would likely find an audience. Furthermore, I suspect that if these tests were repeated among the Khammuang (Northern) and Paktay (Southern) populations of Thailand, we would see a similar effect whereby political appeals in the local tongue are more effective than those in Standard Thai. For instance, even among the relatively economically advantaged southern provinces, Paktay frequently appears in political speeches (see Askew 2008, 98). Notwithstanding the perception that ethnicity is not salient in Thai politics (Selway 2015a, 94-95), I demonstrate that political appeals using local languages have an effect. Ethnicity matters, even when it is considered non-salient.

These findings should be of great interest beyond Thai borders. Politicians around the world invoke linguistic hierarchies to signal capacity, character, and identity to voters. Distinguishing between the perceptions that voters have regarding a speaker based on different classes of speech allows us greater leverage through which to understand actions of politicians. While the research design used above necessarily invoked stark stylistic distinctions across the three linguistic levels in one region of Thailand to gain empirical purchase on our research question, the lessons can be applied broadly.

First, a formal linguistic register can create a perception of competence and expertise, but they also make candidates appear stiff and less appealing to voters. This suggests a challenge for democracy wherein voters may discount political leaders who signal expertise in favor of those who adopt lower registers. Perhaps the era of appealing to voters through formal prose and sounding like an expert has passed. Democracy may now demand speaking like a commoner and “flaunting the low” (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016). The findings reported here run contrary to those based on visual cues wherein snap-second judgements of competence based on candidate appearance aligned with electoral outcomes (Lawson et al.

2010; Todorov et al. 2005). Rather than rewarding those who sound educated and fit for office, voters prefer folksy language. Formal language may just not have democratic appeal.

Second, and closely related, using an informal register of the metropole language can engender a strong feeling of kinship between a politician and the audience. Examples include leaders like Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-1970), who frequently alternated between the formal Modern Standard Arabic and the informal Cairene Arabic to better connect with the masses. When Nasser began publicly speaking in the lower register in the 1950s, he signaled a sharp break from previous elites who communicated primarily in formal Arabic; speaking in a low register contributed to his extreme popularity (Alexander 2004). President Evo Morales (2006-present), in the multi-ethnic environment of Bolivia, has consciously applied the metropole language of Spanish to make his political appeals, but “his speech is pitched in an informal register with which he reaches out to his popular base, speakers of indigenous languages and Spanish alike” (Howard 2010, 181). Rather than rely on speaking formal Spanish or local languages, then, Morales chose to focus on an informal register, which allows for his message to reach a broader audience than would be possible with indigenous tongues. In the Philippines, where English is considered to be a sign of education and competence, President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-present) uses a low register of English and frequently mixes it with local tongues: “In front of an affluent crowd or students, he will speak mostly in English. When speaking to the impoverished, he speaks Taglish [a mixture of English and Tagalog] or Bisaya” (Ranada 2016). In any case, Duterte’s use of lower registers, especially frequent cursing, signals that he was not one of the traditional political elite. This study has shown that politicians’ use of informal registers increases perceptions of kinship among their audiences. While more work remains to be done tying those opinions to electoral appeal, kinship serves as an important mechanism through which voter mobilization might occur.

Finally, at the distal end of the linguistic hierarchy, ethnic languages have great power to influence voter opinion. Many countries exhibit ethnic groups whose languages inhabit a hierarchical space below official metropole tongues; these ethnic languages could be exploited for political appeal. Examples include Scots Gaelic and Welsh in the United Kingdom, Javanese and Achenese in Indonesia, and Quechua and Aymara in Bolivia (Paterson et al. 2014; Madrid 2012; Smith-Hefner 2009). Ethnic petitions are common in politics, ranging from Latin America (Madrid 2012) to Africa (Adida 2015; Ferree 2006; Posner 2005) to Asia (Chandra 2007) to the countries of the former Soviet Union (Marquardt 2017). As politicians seek to increase their appeal to voters and “democratize” their language, the use of ethnic language may become increasingly relevant and common, especially if, as demonstrated here, it has a relatively high chance of success.

Ethical Approval

This research was conducted according to ethical standards of the Singapore Management University institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Singapore Management University IRB approval number: IRB-15-076-A085 (1015).

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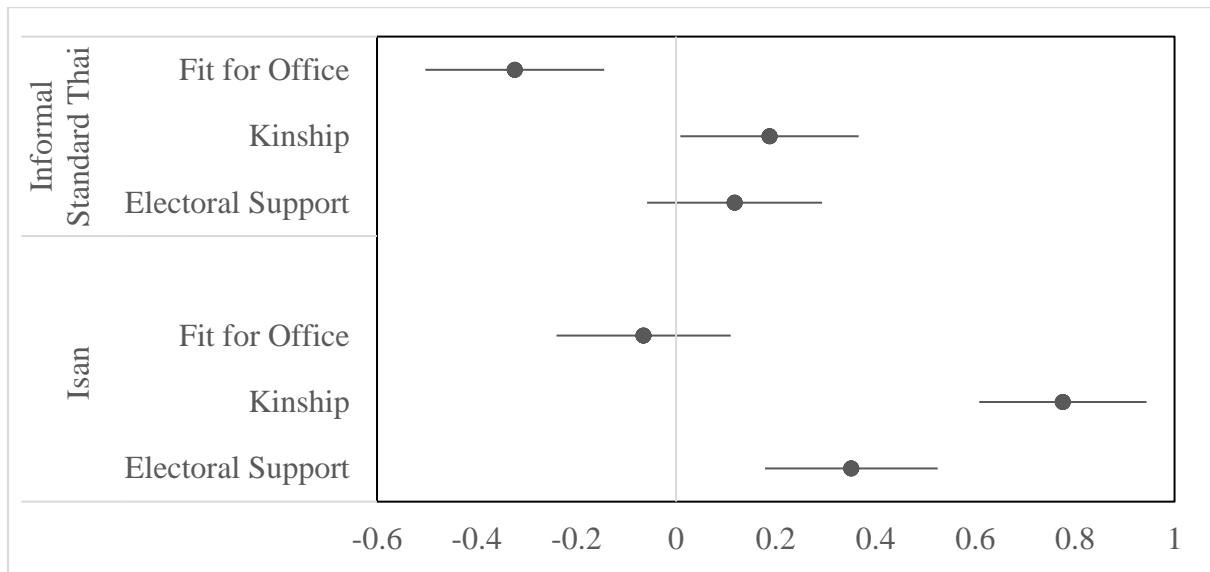


Figure 1: Treatment Effects of Different Language Registers

Notes: Difference of means results with the bureaucratic Standard Thai treatment group serving as the base category. Bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Table 1: List of Survey Statements

- 1 The speaker likely understands the challenges facing me and my family.
 - 2 The speaker was likely born in the same region as myself.
 - 3 The speaker and I likely share some of the same political opinions.
 - 4 The speaker is well prepared for the responsibilities of national leadership.
 - 5 The speakers would likely be able to represent my interests in government.
 - 6 The speaker is well-educated.
 - 7 The speaker is persuasive.
 - 8 I would trust the speaker to represent my village or hometown.
 - 9 The speaker likely has a similar background to my own.
 - 10 The speaker's suggestions are good.
 - 11 The speaker would be a good member of parliament from my region.
 - 12 The speaker would be a good member of the sub-district government.
 - 13 The speaker likely comes from the same social class as I do.
 - 14 I would consider voting for the speaker if he were running for office in the next election.
-

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Covariate Balance across Treatment Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min.	Max.
Age					
Informal Standard Thai	249	46.00	14.388	19	87
Bureaucratic Standard Thai	252	48.95	15.720	18	88
Isan	248	47.13	14.186	20	93
Sex					
Informal Standard Thai	250	0.436	0.497	0	1
Bureaucratic Standard Thai	252	0.480	0.501	0	1
Isan	248	0.444	0.498	0	1
Estimated 2014 Income					
Informal Standard Thai	212	154863.2	134731.4	8400	960000
Bureaucratic Standard Thai	213	177352.1	331531.2	10000	4300000
Isan	239	127171.5	122580.9	10000	1000000
Education Level					
Informal Standard Thai	250	2.036	1.128	1	4
Bureaucratic Standard Thai	252	1.948	1.144	1	4
Isan	248	1.823	0.994	0	4
Pheu Thai Supporters					
Informal Standard Thai	138	0.725	0.448	0	1
Bureaucratic Standard Thai	159	0.799	0.402	0	1
Isan	149	0.805	0.397	0	1
Isan Spoken at Home					
Informal Standard Thai	250	0.896	0.306	0	1
Bureaucratic Standard Thai	252	0.877	0.329	0	1
Isan	248	0.863	0.345	0	1
Informal-Bureaucratic 2-group Hotelling		F(6,248) = 1.2659 Prob > F(6,248) = 0.2737			
Informal-Isan 2-group Hotelling		F(6,260) = 1.6376 Prob > F(6,260) = 0.1370			
Isan-Bureaucratic 2-group Hotelling		F(6,273) = 0.9376 Prob > F(6,273) = 0.4684			

Notes: Education ranged from 0 (no formal education) to 4 (university degree). Income numbers are in Thai Baht. Sex was a binary variable (1 = Male, 0 = Female).

Table 3: Treatment Effects

		Factor Variables		Indicator Variables	
		IST	ISAN	IST	ISAN
Electoral Support	I would trust the speaker to represent my village.	0.117 (0.090)	0.352*** (0.088)	0.162** (0.074)	0.391*** (0.075)
	The speaker would be a good MP from my region.			0.035 (0.065)	0.141** (0.065)
	The speaker would be a good member of the sub-district government.			-0.009 (0.062)	0.090 (0.061)
	The speaker likely comes from the same social class as I do.			0.187** (0.092)	0.209** (0.095)
	I would consider voting for the speaker if he were running for office.			0.034 (0.069)	0.186*** (0.068)
Kinship	The speaker likely understands the challenges facing me and my family.	0.187** (0.091)	0.776*** (0.086)	0.133 (0.082)	0.311*** (0.080)
	The speaker was likely born in the same region as myself.			0.356*** (0.092)	1.130*** (0.085)
	The speaker likely has a similar background to my own.			0.173* (0.089)	0.503*** (0.087)
	The speaker and I likely share some of the same political opinions.			-0.169** (0.080)	0.085 (0.077)
Fit for Office	The speaker is well-prepared for national leadership.	-0.324*** (0.092)	-0.065 (0.089)	-0.154** (0.076)	-0.153** (0.075)
	The speaker would likely be able to represent my interests in policy-making.			-0.174** (0.069)	-0.032 (0.066)
	The speaker is well-educated.			-0.382*** (0.061)	-0.310*** (0.060)
	The speaker's suggestions are good.			-0.160** (0.073)	0.028 (0.068)
	The speaker is persuasive.			0.134 (0.087)	0.425*** (0.084)

Notes: The cells record the difference of means between the respective treatment group and the bureaucratic Standard Thai group. All responses were on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$