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### What an election poster can tell us about Thai election campaigns

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<https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/what-an-election-poster-can-tell-us-about-thai-election-campaigns>

## What an Election Poster Can Tell Us about Thai Election Campaigns

By Colm Fox, Singapore Management University



**Picture: Campaign Posters line the streets during Thailand's 2019 elections**

Source: <https://geopoliticalalert.com/thai-elections-us-china>

In the runup to Thailand's 2019 national elections, the country has been awash with election posters. This simple form of campaign communication remains a staple of Thai campaigns, despite the advent of various Internet platforms and communication devices. But although election posters are often discussed by journalists and the general public, they are rarely analyzed in academic research. This is surprising and unfortunate, since their wealth of textual and visual information can tell us a lot about campaigns.

The 2019 national election used a mixed-member apportionment system with 350 single-member constituency seats. To achieve proportionality, an additional 150 party-list seats were assigned using proportional representation (PR) and nationwide closed party lists. These electoral rules coupled with political party resources affected campaign strategies, including the design and messaging of election posters posted around the country.

To give a few examples, below are three posters from the 2019 national election. The first two posters are from Pheu Thai, which as one of the larger parties fielded constituency candidates in most electoral districts and had posters designed for each candidate (Fig. 1, middle). Pheu Thai also campaigned on a broad national policy platform for the PR-list seats and designed posters for this purpose (Fig. 1, left side). The nationally oriented policy appeals that appear on these posters have become increasingly common in Thai campaigns, particularly among large parties, in recent years.

The third poster in Fig. 1, from the Future Forward Party, displays how smaller parties can campaign strategically. Unable to field a great number of popular constituency candidates, Future Forward heavily

promoted its wealthy and charismatic leader, coupling his image with some fresh campaign messaging designed to appeal to youth. This approach helped the party win a significant number of PR-list seats.



**Figure 1. Election posters from the 2019 Thai campaign.** From left to right: 1. Pheu Thai: “Create opportunities quickly. Create income quickly. Choose a professional executive.” 2. Pheu Thai: “Pheu Thai’s heart is people. Prademchai Boonchuayleua—Din Dang-Huai Khwang District.” 3. Future Forward: “We are ready. It is time for a new generation to change the country. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, head of the Future Forward Party.”

Source: <http://2bangkok.com> and Jacob Ricks.

### Analyzing Patterns in Campaign Posters

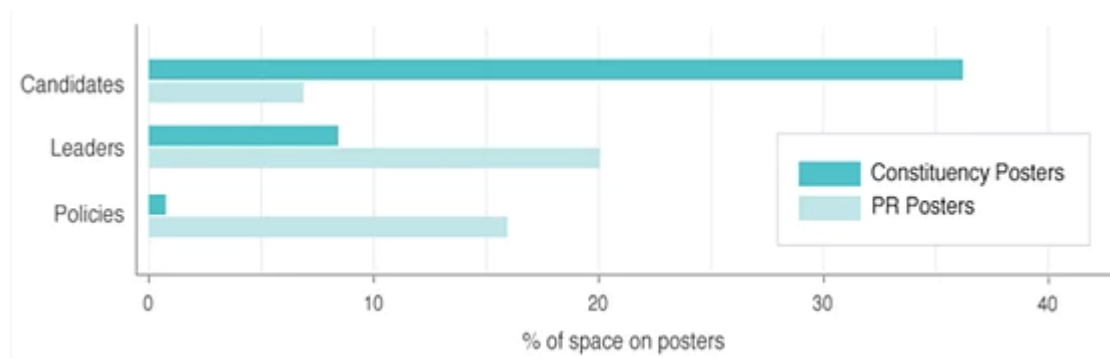
In a detailed study of Thailand’s 2011 election campaign, I found similar dynamics. During that campaign, I photographed more than 12,000 election posters across Thailand. In an article in *Comparative Political Studies*, [“Is All Politics Local? Determinants of Local and National Election Campaigns.”](#) I explained what these posters can tell us about Thai politics and, more broadly, about election campaigns generally.

### Thai Campaigns and Election Posters

Historically, constituency candidates and regional factions have dominated Thai politics, and political parties have been small, weak, and non-ideological. However, since the 1997 constitution there has been significant change in Thai politics and election campaigns. Although popular local candidates are still a formidable force in gathering votes, national leaders, party labels, and national policy platforms have risen in importance. Studying Thai election posters can help us understand the degree to which election campaigns are centered on either local candidates, on one hand, or leaders, parties, and national policies on the other hand. During the 2011 election campaign I photographed over 12,000 election posters across Thailand. I then used specialized software to trace the outline of poster elements relating to candidates, parties, policies, and leaders. Below I illustrate a few key findings and what they reveal about Thai campaigns.

## Electoral Rules and Campaigns

In 2011, candidates running in single-member constituencies generally used posters to promote themselves (I call these constituency posters). Meanwhile, parties also designed posters to appeal for party votes in the PR-list election (PR posters). Figure 2 shows the average percentage of space (both text and images) dedicated to candidates, leaders, and policies across these 12,000 posters. It compares these elements between constituency posters and PR posters.



**Figure 2. Comparison of poster elements on constituency and PR posters.**

In line with institutional theory, single member constituency rules fostered appeals centered on local candidates. Constituency candidates occupied 36% of the constituency posters (see Pheu Thai example in Fig. 3). Meanwhile, PR-list candidates took up only 7% of the space on the PR posters. PR-list candidates tended to be well-known individuals (high-profile party members, celebrities, and sports stars) who could draw national support based on their personal image.

Small images of party leaders sometimes appeared on constituency posters, helping candidates gather votes from middle-class voters who based their evaluations of individual candidates on their parties and leaders. However, leaders' images were much more common on PR posters, many of which featured the party leader exclusively (e.g., the Democrat poster in Fig. 3). This practice reflects the fact that campaigns have increasingly become centralized around national party leaders.

Policy messages were virtually absent from constituency posters. Only the PR posters frequently promoted policy messages, usually reinforced by images of the categories of people toward whom the policies were primarily aimed. Additionally, whole PR posters often listed multiple policies. These posters reinforced the observation, made by various scholars of Thai politics since 2001, that campaigns have increasingly become centered on parties and their national programmatic policy platforms. Again, this supports institutional theory, which predicts that closed-list PR rules should foster greater centralization and nationalization of campaigns.



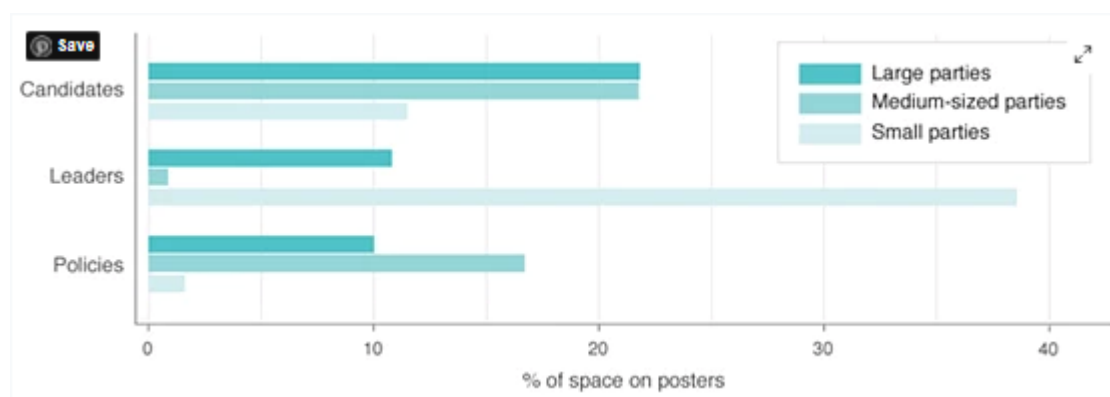
**Figure 3. Election posters from the 2011 campaign.**

From left to right: 1. Pheu Thai constituency poster: “We will provide housing. We will provide jobs. We will give Thais a new opportunity.” 2. Democrat PR poster, posted in rural areas: “Farmers’ insurance will cover flood, drought, and bug problems. Farmers still get the benefit.” 3. Rak Thailand PR poster: The party leader used humor and an oppositional message. This poster stated, “Politics is like a dirty diaper. The more you change, the better it gets.”

Source: Author’s collection of 2011 campaign posters.

### Political Parties and Campaigns

The largest parties, Pheu Thai and the Democrats, aimed to form a single-party or coalition government, so they needed wide support to maximize their tally of both constituency and party-list seats. On the constituency posters, they heavily promoted the name and image of each of their candidates. But in addition, these candidates emphasized their party affiliation by frequently wearing their party clothing. Both Pheu Thai and the Democrats used the PR posters in very similar ways: to promote their party, their leaders, and broad national policies (such as on delivery of government services and infrastructure).



**Figure 4. Comparison of poster elements across large, medium-sized, and small parties.**

Thailand's medium-sized parties, such as Bhumjaithai and Chart Pattana, are primarily regional in nature, composed of collections of individual politicians whose constituencies are strongly attracted to them personally. Their constituency posters promoted their candidates and their PR posters highlighted party policies, but party leaders were virtually absent from these posters. This is because the medium-sized parties' official (or de facto) leaders tended to be political dealmakers or provincial bosses for their constituency candidates, rather than inspirational party voices who could energize voters.

While small parties lacked both a strong party label and popular constituency candidates, they could attain seats by winning a sprinkling of party-list votes across the country. The Rak Thailand Party is an example of a small party that campaigned successfully in the PR election on the image of its leader, Chuwit Kamolvisit. A colorful character and massage parlor owner, Chuwit filled his posters with his image, overlaid with humorous messages criticizing Thai politicians as dishonest and corrupt (e.g., Fig. 3, right-hand image). Ultimately, he shocked many (including himself) by winning four party-list seats.

Finally, some have claimed that voters from the north and northeast are not interested in policy appeals or national issues, relative to voters in Bangkok. These differences are not borne out in the posters. Parties and candidates actually dedicated the most amount of space to policy matters in the north and northeast. Though candidates from outside Bangkok did tend to wear more casual clothing.

### **Conclusion**

The main take away from my analysis of the 2011 campaign was that national policy, party leaders, and party labels were a very prominent feature—particularly in the campaigns of Thailand's largest parties competing for PR seats. This reflects the fact since the 1997 constitution, there has been a strengthening of political parties and the elevation of national policy platforms. While more research is needed, a brief look at some of the 2019 election posters above suggests that these patterns still hold, at least to some degree. This is despite the introduction of a new constitution in 2017 which strengthened the military's role in politics while weakening Thailand's large national parties.