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Becoming Citizens: Policy Feedback and the Transformation of the Thai Rice Farmer

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Abstract (193 words):

Over the past twenty years, Thailand's rice farmers have become one of the country's most important and active political constituencies, a sharp contrast from the previous decades wherein they were treated with neglect or even derision by the Thai political elite. These "political peasants" now actively advocate for and successfully receive extensive subsidies from both authoritarian and democratic governments. What has driven this change? In this essay, we draw on theories of the policy feedback loop wherein policies yield both material and cognitive benefits, which change the political behavior of populations. We argue that the Thaksin Shinawatra government's (2001-2006) paddy pledging policy altered the mindset of Thai rice farmers, creating a new form of social contract between the rural poor and the state. We demonstrate this by tracing the process through which farmers' political behavior changed, drawing on a variety of evidence, including electoral data, secondary sources, an original survey, focus groups, and interviews with Thai farmers. The paper provides additional understanding regarding the mechanisms through which Thai politics has changed since 2001. On a broader scale, these findings suggest the potential of public policy to create enduring political communities among rural populations.

Keywords: Rural transformation, policy feedback, rice politics, Thailand

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1. Introduction

Thailand's farming population has changed. The country's continuing economic transformation greatly reduced farmer numbers, dropping from over 70 percent of the labor force in 1980 to approximately 30 percent in 2019 (NSO, various years). This decrease, while not as rapid as might be expected given the country's level of development (Klyuev, 2015), means that Thailand is no longer an agricultural society, and farmers, as a group, represent a smaller, although still significant, segment of society. Additionally, Dayley and Sattayanurak (2016) have argued that the remaining farmers are no longer peasants; most are now engaged in the market economy through various activities spanning both the formal and informal sector, with many spending a significant amount of time away from the farm earning a living in an urban setting (Keyes, 2012; Rigg 2019). Even those who spend most of their time farming have household members engaged in non-farm activities (Faysse et al. 2020).

Beyond demographic and economic changes, many Thai smallholders have become politically active, issuing demands on the state for assistance through projects and policies that subsidize their diversified livelihoods (Walker, 2012). This shift is perhaps most clear in the strong partisan identification of many rice farmers with the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party and its successors, Phalang Prachachon party (PPP) and Pheu Thai party (PT). The change has not been driven by farmer behavior alone; politicians have turned their focus to farmers, actively courting them with agricultural policies (Ricks, 2018), a sharp departure from the historical practice of treating farmers as largely passive recipients of government policy (Sattayanurak, 2017). The politicization of the countryside has had far-ranging impacts on Thai politics, with these farmers and their families serving as one of the country's most important voting blocs over the past two decades. What has driven this political transformation of the Thai rice farmer?

The politicization of Thai rice farmers, especially their strong support for TRT and its successors, has spurred a growing literature. Walker argues that farmers are politicized because their livelihoods are increasingly precarious and reliant upon state projects and subsidies; state interventions have helped “develop and maintain a middle-income peasantry rather than fundamentally transform it” (Walker, 2012, p. 220-221). Thus farmers have become politically active out of economic necessity. Expanding on this, Rigg (2019) turns to class as a potential explanation, but rather than a focus on traditional class divisions, he suggests the rural class consciousness is built upon a common precarious economic existence. This class identity has become an important part of political mobilization, although Nishizaki (2014) argues not all farmers ascribe to this class consciousness. Keyes (2014) demonstrates that through Thaksin Shinawatra’s premiership (2001-2006), rural Thais felt their voices, which had long been excluded from political discourse, were finally being heard, leaving a lasting impact on their identification with Thaksin’s TRT party. As politicians attended to their needs, farmers became more convinced of their ability to shape politics. Beyond this, the growth of education, domestic migration, as well as integration in the market economy had expanded farmers’ appreciation of electoral politics (Keyes 2012; 2014). Thabchumpon and McCargo (2011) further note that farmers’ progressive urbanization through work outside of agriculture has motivated their involvement in politics (see also McCargo 2017).

While all of these explanations enhance our understanding of Thailand’s increasingly politicized countryside, they give only passing treatment of what we contend is the direct causal factor in the behavioral shift of Thailand’s rice farmers: a dramatic alteration in public policy in the early 2000s. Drawing upon theories of policy feedback, we argue that the rice mortgage policy, called paddy pledging, enacted by the Thaksin Shinawatra government provided both material and cognitive benefits to Thai rice farmers, which, in turn, transformed their perceptions regarding their relationship with the Thai state. For perhaps the

first time, these agrarians saw themselves as part of a coherent political mass with power and influence in the political system. Beyond this, the benefits provided by the paddy pledging policy demarcated a new coalition of interests in Thai politics, bringing together both large and small rice farmers under a broad policy umbrella. This had the effect of creating a strong identification of being a rice farmer with access to state subsidies. In other words, the policy spawned the transformation of policy demands from Thai farmers, creating a feedback loop wherein the existence of the policy ensured future demand for farmer subsidies. Furthermore, through paddy pledging, rice farmers gained a new appreciation for their political potential.

Our claims are based upon process tracing the development of farmers' political behavior from pre-2000 through 2016.¹ This is first done by combining electoral and agricultural census data, demonstrating that farmers' political behavior did change. Next, drawing upon information from secondary sources, reports, and newspapers, we trace the development and impact of the paddy pledging policy. Then, using primary data from a series of focus groups, interviews, and a survey, we show that, following their experiences with paddy pledging, rice farmers exhibit political awareness and perceive their relationship with the state as one based on subsidies.

These findings, although specific to Thailand, have broad implications for rural transformations. Economic models generally predict that as economies develop, rural labor will transition from agriculture into other sectors in a relatively natural manner, but these models frequently ignore the potential for political challenges of agrarian transformation as individuals' lives are disrupted through a loss of livelihood or forced urbanization (Timmer, 2015). Politics during these transitions can greatly impact agricultural policies (Davidson, 2018). Indeed, Hayami (2007) has argued that increasing inequalities between sectors may

¹ Ideally, an investigation of this sort would rely on repeated data collection, such as surveys, both before, during, and after the implementation of the paddy pledging policy. Unfortunately, we don't have such evidence, so we cobble our causal argument together using the evidence available, recognizing that such evidence does not provide the same certainty as a smoking gun (Collier, 2011; Ricks & Liu, 2018).

not actually contribute to a smooth transition of labor out of agriculture, instead resulting in social instability and the potential for politicians to pursue subsidies for the countryside (see also Walker, 2015). The Thai case presented here demonstrates how such government policies can create and transform rural interests, which has had a far-reaching impact on the country's political development. The incorporation of farmers into the body politic via agricultural policy carries important implications for many states.

The remainder of our paper first briefly discusses the policy feedback literature, teasing out the foundations of our argument. It then traces the transformation of the Thai rice farmer, providing evidence as to the changes in political behavior that occurred among Thai rice farmers between 2001 and 2011. From this point, we develop our causal story that these changes have emerged from the implementation of the paddy pledging scheme under Thaksin Shinawatra. Based on our theoretical expectations from the policy feedback literature, we examine how the relatively de-mobilized rice farmers became mobilized. Through the paddy pledging policy, farmers experienced enhanced benefits linked specifically with a political party rather than through patronage links. This then changed their perspective regarding their relationship with the state. We conclude the essay by discussing the implications of the argument.

2. Policy makes Citizens

Traditional approaches to the study of public policy treat policy primarily as an outcome or dependent variable, contingent upon the politics and institutional contexts that exogenously determined the processes through which policies emerge. Scholars of policy feedback, though, contend that the causal arrows can be reversed: Policy shapes politics (Beland, 2010). In some cases, when a public policy provides material benefits to a social

group that has previously been apolitical, not mobilized, or even ill-defined, those material benefits can have a profound impact on the behavior of the group, creating or augmenting “social identities, goals, and capabilities of groups that subsequently struggle or ally in politics” (Skocpol, 1992, p. 58). In essence, the presence of policy benefits creates new interest groups in politics.

Pierson (1993) has further argued that public policy can provide more than just material benefits; it also serves as a cognitive learning tool for the public, changing their perception of state behavior and their motivations for political mobilization. The material benefits gained from a policy can condition recipients and “[send] messages to clients about their worth as citizens, which in turn affects their orientations toward government and their political participation” (Campbell, 2003, p. 6). The provision of policy teaches recipients what they can and should expect from the state, and, as a blunt instrument, informs the public as to the capacity of the state to redistribute resources. Once these lessons have been learned, they have a “lock-in” effect, wherein public perception becomes self-reinforcing and additional learning is less likely to occur due to path dependence (Pierson, 2000).² Thus the implementation of a policy creates a demand for the policy to be continued or enhanced. At a more advanced level, policy delivery can also determine and shape perceptions of citizenship, especially ideas about what rights, responsibilities, and access to resources are part of the social contract. Policy delivery, then, can shape what voters expect and demand from the state, including what types of state behavior they find acceptable (Oliver and Ostwald, 2018). In sum, policy can create new political communities (Mettler, 1998).

² Jacobs and Weaver (2015) have argued that some policies also exhibit self-undermining characteristics, wherein policy feedback leads to policy change via democratic mechanisms rather than continuity. The Thai paddy pledging policy, because of its costly nature (see Laiprakobsub, 2014; Poapongsakorn and Pantakua, 2014), likely had some of these characteristics, and, over time, it may potentially have resulted in policy reorientation, although it is likely that subsidies for farmers would have remained an important part of any future policy direction. Unfortunately, the 2006 and 2014 coups short-circuited any hope of such democratic processes.

Building on these insights, we contend that the paddy pledging policy implemented from 2001-2006 as part of Thaksin Shinawatra's government platform has fundamentally altered the perceptions of Thai rice farmers regarding their place in the political system. Prior to 2000, Thai rice farmers were a latent political community.³ While episodic mobilization over specific government projects had occurred, rice growers were fragmented, and in most cases, they viewed their relationship to the state through patronage ties with locally influential leaders (Laiprakobsup, 2010). This was reflected in government policies that extracted resources from the countryside to benefit urbanites in Bangkok as well as politicians and bureaucrats who captured rents via state agencies (Christensen, 1993). For instance, the rice premium, a tax on rice exports in effect from 1950-1986, funneled resources from rice farmers to benefit both the state and urbanites in Bangkok (Siamwalla, 1975). Such policies went largely unchallenged by Thailand's large population of farmers. The emergence of broad-based subsidies for rural voters changed that. Thaksin's use of the paddy pledging policy, driven in part by changes in the 1997 Constitution (Ricks, 2018; Selway, 2011), provided material benefits and dramatically altered the cognitive perception of farmers regarding the state. These changes in policy provision resulted in a new sense of citizenship among Thai rice farmers, and, consequently, a new pattern of political mobilization.

It is important to note here that when we speak of rice farmers as a new political community, we are not suggesting that they have materialized as a political organization with clearly defined boundaries and an organized lobby. Indeed, the majority of rice farmers in Thailand are not reliant on rice alone for their household maintenance as they draw on non-farm income and/or alternative crops for their livelihoods (Chantararat, Attavanich, and Sa-

³ There were two main exceptions to this. The first occurred during the brief democratic period from 1973-1976, when the Farmers' Federation of Thailand arose to represent and mobilize farmers. The military crackdown on the movement's leaders and the subsequent coup devastated the organization. The other mobilization occurred via the Assembly of the Poor, an NGO active during the late 1990s. The NGO scored a few political victories, most notably in concessions regarding the Pak Mun Dam, but its influence quickly waned. Both are discussed in section 4.1 below.

ngimnet, 2018). Instead, when we speak of rice farmers as an emergent political community, we do so in an analogous way to how senior citizens became an active political community in the United States. Because of policies designed specifically for that demographic, senior citizens became the “Uber-citizens of the American polity ... [they] actively defend their programs, warning lawmakers through their participation not to tamper with Social Security and Medicare” (Campbell, 2003, pp. 2). It is through their regular participation in the more mundane acts of democracy like voting that these citizens exercise their sway rather than engaging in protest or rural rebellion. Thai rice farmers could be considered similar in that most of them do not join protests, nor do they violently rebel against the state, even if they are sympathetic to those who do. But since 2001, they have consistently given their votes and support to political parties that promise them subsidies rather than rely exclusively on the patronage networks that dominated politics in prior years, thereby forcing both democratic and non-democratic regimes to address their demands.

3. The Changing Political Behavior of Farmers

The parliamentary elections of 3 July, 2011 were unique in Thai history. For only the second time ever, a single party, Pheu Thai, obtained an outright parliamentary majority, and “no election in Thai history has had such a high degree of social mobilization” (Sinpeng and Kuhonta, 2012, p. 389). Voter turnout was at an all-time high of over 75 percent, even though the election was held during the rainy season, “a time usually avoided for fear of a low turnout” (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2013, p. 619). Political parties campaigned on policy platforms, with one of Pheu Thai’s most compelling promises being a commitment to resurrect and enhance Thaksin Shinawatra’s paddy pledging policy, which had been severely restricted following the 2006 coup and disbanded in 2009 after the Thaksin-affiliated PPP

government was dissolved through court order. Rice farmers and their families, who made up a substantial proportion of the population, piled their support behind Yingluck Shinawatra, and she became the first female prime minister of Thailand.

One decade earlier, in January 2001, Yingluck's older brother Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, precursor to Pheu Thai, had risen to power through a combination of money politics (Nelson, 2007; Phatharathananunth 2008), changes in electoral rules (Hicken, 2006), and a new approach to campaigning that included combining nationalist appeals with policy platforms directed toward the business community as well as rural voters (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2009). TRT did not win an outright majority in that election, but it came close with 248 out of 500 seats; the party easily assembled a coalition and, due to the absorption of the Seritham party, soon held a majority in parliament. Voters in that election had mobilized through a mix of old patronage-style politics combined with new policy promises.

Four years later, the 2005 election was an undisputable victory for TRT and Thaksin, with the party winning 377 out of 500 parliamentary seats,⁴ an increase of 127 seats over its 2001 performance. Rice-producing areas in the Central Plains, North, and Northeast provided their resounding support in large part due to their perception that Thaksin and the party had represented their interests through his policies (Phatharathananunth, 2008). The period between 2001 and 2005 marked the change in the political behavior of Thailand's rice farmers, moving from a history of clientelistic and patronage-based voting to turning out en masse in return for policy benefits.

This shift can be seen in electoral data. Figure 1 provides a set of scatter plots illustrating the transition across the four general elections between 2001 and 2011. Drawing on Thailand's agricultural census, we measure the concentration of rice farmers in a province

⁴ Two disqualifications reduced the TRT majority to 375.

by standardizing the number of rice farmers in that province against its population (total rice farmers / total population).⁵ We then plotted Party List vote shares against these ratios. Based on visual glance of the scatterplots, a clear relationship appears to exist between the proportion of rice farmers in a province and electoral support for TRT and its successor parties for the elections held in 2005, 2007, and 2011. The 2001 election, on the other hand, is less pronounced.

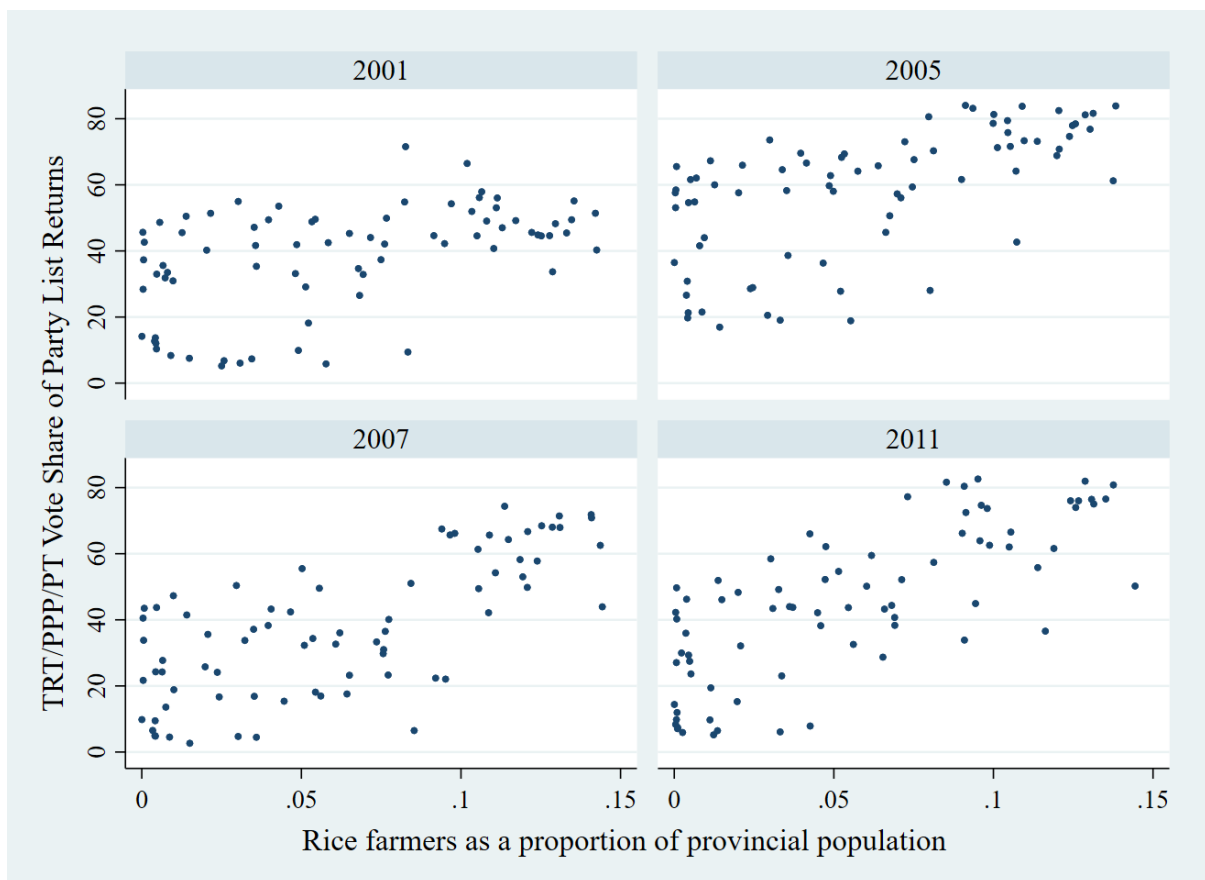


Figure 1. TRT/PPP/PT Province-level Vote Share by Number of Rice Farmers

Note: Each dot represents a province.

Data Sources: Election Commission of Thailand, 2003 & 2013 Agricultural Census

Using a simple regression analysis we can further test for the strength of this relationship, reported in table 1. Here we included a set of control variables, including the

⁵ Here we use the term rice farmer while the Thai Agricultural Census refers to these as rice-planting holders (*phuthuekhong thipluk khao*).

economic variables Gross Provincial Product (GPP) per capita and Agricultural share of GPP. We also included two regional controls for the North and Northeast regions, as both are recognized to be centers of support for TRT and its successors, thus we control for the potential of region-based party support.

Table 1. Regression results for TRT/PPP/PT Party List Vote Share

	2001	2005	2007	2011
Rice farmers as a proportion of provincial population	154.966 (96.822)	156.415* (81.792)	167.180** (67.660)	228.606** (88.511)
Agricultural share of GPP	-0.570** (0.158)	-0.659** (0.127)	-0.536** (0.123)	-0.419** (0.146)
GPP per capita	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
North region dummy variable	11.010 (6.801)	9.860* (5.887)	7.735 (5.022)	9.735 (6.493)
Northeast region dummy variable	4.515 (0.648)	15.543* (8.293)	20.245** (6.777)	20.823** (9.088)
Constant	35.095** (5.879)	56.907** (4.775)	32.610** (5.400)	35.294** (6.256)
Observations	76	76	76	77
Adjusted R square	0.507	0.700	0.706	0.681

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$

** $p < 0.05$

Results indicate that in 2001, the association between the share of rice farmers in a province and the TRT/PPP/PT party list vote share, although positive, was not statistically significant. In other words, we can't be confident in claiming that there was a relationship. On the other hand, the following three elections all demonstrate a strong association between a larger number of rice farmers in a province and the share of votes for TRT, PPP, or PT parties ($p < 0.1$). The slope of this relationship progressively increased through the elections.

In other words, the connection between numbers of rice farmers in a province and votes for Thaksin-affiliated parties appears to have grown stronger over time. The scatterplots also seem to indicate that the policy affiliation of rice farmers with Thaksin successor parties may also create a mirror effect wherein provinces with few rice farmers have become less supportive of Thaksin-linked parties.

These data suggest that the shift in rice farmer voting behavior occurred between 2001 and 2005. Since 2005, provinces with high concentrations of rice farmers have overwhelmingly voted for TRT or its successors. Indeed, among the ten provinces with the highest concentration of rice growers relative to population size, only once did a single province, Amnat Charoen in 2007, dip below 50 percent support for a TRT successor party, PPP. In contrast, only two of these provinces supported TRT in 2001 with over 50 percent of their party list vote (Roi Et and Mahasarakham). In other words, there was a substantial shift in electoral behavior between 2001 and 2005, a shift that was reinforced in 2007 and 2011.

Interestingly, agriculture, as a proportion of Gross Provincial Product, has been negatively associated with votes for TRT. In other words, provinces wherein agricultural production was an important part of the provincial market economy tended to give lower returns for TRT. These provinces are mostly found in the south, which focus on higher-value agriculture such as palm oil and rubber. Thaksin's policies geared toward rice farmers effectively excluded these groups from the subsidies. Voters in the region have historically affiliated with the Democrat Party, which served as TRT's opposition.

The relationship between rice farmers and TRT-linked parties that developed between 2001 and 2005 then persisted and strengthened despite stringent efforts by the military and alternative political parties to reverse this trend. Anti-Thaksin protests and media campaigns raged in late 2005 and 2006 before a military coup deposed the government. Thai Rak Thai was disbanded in 2007 and over one hundred of its top leaders were barred from politics.

Supporters turned to the PPP, which served as a new home for TRT loyalists. Furthermore, the 2007 constitution was specifically designed to break the electoral power of Thaksin's followers. These attempts failed, as voters defiantly supported PPP (Hicken and Selway, 2012). Bangkok-based protests against the PPP government developed throughout 2008, involving closure of Suvarnabhumi International Airport as well as blocking major thoroughfares. By the end of 2008, two PPP prime ministers had been removed from office through judicial decisions, and the party was dissolved. The Abhisit Vejjajiva-led Democrat Party government took office with military support but without an election. It attempted to appease rice farmers with a new policy program guaranteeing a minimum price for paddy, but this won over few farmers. PPP voters were incensed, and the Red Shirt movement, which had formed in the wake of the 2006 coup to support Thaksin, took to the streets to express displeasure with the government; although not all farmers identified with the Red Shirts (Nishizaki, 2014), many did, and thousands traveled to Bangkok to join in the protests. In May 2010, these protests were violently suppressed (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

These events, ranging from mass urban protests and media campaigns against Thaksin to a coup to violent suppression of the Red Shirts, failed to convince rice farmers to turn away from the Thai Rak Thai successor party, Pheu Thai, headed by Thaksin's younger sister, Yingluck. She campaigned on a promise to return the paddy pledging policy, and, as noted above, the 2011 electoral results provide a resounding victory for Pheu Thai. Thus, in a decade, despite a series of setbacks, Thai rice farmers had become politically active and organized largely along party lines.

4. Paddy Pledging and Transforming Farmers

We've demonstrated that rice farmers' political behavior fundamentally changed between 2001 and 2011. This shift was driven by the cognitive learning process brought about through the implementation of the paddy pledging scheme between 2001 and 2005, but before we turn to this cognitive learning process, we must first establish that rice farmers, prior to 2001, were a latent political group. Then we will explore the catalyzing variable, the paddy pledging scheme. Finally we will revisit the current status of farmer beliefs regarding the state.

4.1 A Latent Political Group

Prior to the rise of the TRT party, rice farmers had few outlets through which to mobilize. It is important here to distinguish between rice farmers and cultivators of other crops, which have had a more established history of political involvement. For instance, rubber cultivators in the south have long been linked with the Democrat Party (Doner, 2016), while sugar cultivators, at least until the 1990s, were well-organized in their efforts to shape government policy (Ramsay, 1987; Doner and Ramsay, 2004). In the past, the geographically concentrated nature of these industries, the emergence of grower organizations, and their relative wealth allowed farmers of these crops to gain relative political strength and shape government policy (Laiprakobsup, 2010). Rice farmers, though, have long been excluded from the coalition of bureaucrats, exporters, and large millers that dominated rice policymaking (Christensen, 1993). Rice farmers, despite representing the majority of farmers in Thailand, were limited in their influence due to both the lack of broad-based organizational structures as well as socio-economic disadvantages they faced.

The Thai state has long discouraged rural movements among rice farmers, including brutally suppressing farmer's organizations, such as the Farmer Federation of Thailand

(FFT), which had helped organize farmer demands during the brief democratic period of 1973-1976. In the late 1970s, as the military reasserted itself in politics, farmer leaders were assassinated or disappeared (Haberkorn, 2011; Morell and Samudavanija, 1981). The destruction of the FFT left rice farmers bereft of any mass organization for many years. Political parties during the 1980s-1990s were fragmented and factionalized, and they emphasized patronage links rather than direct policy appeals. The NGO community did become influential in helping farmers organize on a local scale to resist state projects or demand assistance from parliamentary politicians. During the mid-1990s, the Assembly of the Poor scored some important political points advocating for poor farmers, especially in demanding the Pak Mun dam's sluice gates remain open most of the year, but the group faced an adversarial relationship with the state and never represented more than 200,000 people (Missingham, 2003). Rice farmers lacked a strong institutional basis for political mobilization.

That is not to say rice farmers did not organize to protest. Indeed, on a relatively small scale farmers regularly mobilized, often at the behest of a Member of Parliament or local political figure. These actions usually demanded some benefit from the state for the local community, whether it be a development project, localized crop purchases, or opposition to a government action. In all cases, though, such activities were limited in scope and did not represent Thai rice farmers as a broad political interest. Government responses tended to focus on localized projects, constructing new infrastructure, and distributions through government ministries that primarily benefited politicians and bureaucrats, especially through the Marketing Organization for Farmers and the Public Warehouse Organization, which operated under the respective Agriculture and Commerce cabinet portfolios.

As such, Thailand's rice farmers had not broadly mobilized as a political body prior to 2001. Despite farmers, the majority of whom farmed rice, comprising more than half of the

population up until 1999, they were largely seen as “important to politics, but they are not (imagined to be) political,” to use Haberkorn’s (2011, p. 35) characterization of Thai government documents from the 1950s. That perspective had remained amazingly static in the almost 50 years that followed. Thai rice farmers were not a coherent political interest group or constituency in a way that would make broad policy appeals to their material interest a central pillar of state action (Ricks, 2018).

Socio-economic factors further hinder rice Thai farmers’ ability to mobilize without a mass organization. Keyes (2012; 2014) claims that education and expansion of market forces have been important to the ability of farmers to engage in politics, but the farming population still lags far behind their urban counterparts in both education and income. According to the 2013 Agricultural Census, among the 5.9 million individuals involved in agriculture, the vast majority (4.6 million or 78 percent) had lower than a secondary education. Only 304,117 (5.15 percent) had completed any education beyond secondary school. Economically, farmers earn less money than their counterparts in other sectors. In Thailand’s 2013 Household Socio-Economic survey, farmers and farm workers have an average monetary income well below the kingdom’s average of 21,562 baht/month (approx. 655 USD). Farmers take home, on average, just over 18,000 baht/month (approx. 546 USD) while farm laborers take home under 12,000 baht/month (365 USD). Chantararat, Attavanich, and Sa-ngimnet (2018) find that approximately 40 percent of Thai farming households are below the national poverty line. The census data shows that small-holding rice farmers, relative to cultivars of other crops, are on the lower end of both the education and economic spectrum. Socio-economically, then rice farmers are among the least-educated and lowest-paid groups in Thai society.

In other words, even though great strides have been made in terms of education and economic integration of Thailand’s rural population, farmers are greatly disadvantaged. While a basic level of education and income is probably a necessary condition for political

mobilization, these numbers remain relatively low for Thailand's farmers. Their levels are insufficient alone to explain the change in political behavior that occurred in the early 2000s. Education and socio-economic status have a strong impact on political mobilization, with low levels of education and low incomes strongly predicting lower turnout, as education and income provide individuals the tools necessary to effectively engage in the political sphere (Verba and Nie, 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). In many countries, compulsory voting and easy voting procedures seek to negate this effect, but, in general, lower levels of education are associated with lower voter mobilization (Gallego, 2010). In Thailand, as well, income has been shown to be a strong predictor of voter turnout at the provincial level, although the impact of education does not appear to be as evident in provincial level data (Owen, 2009).

Indeed, the weakness of rice farmers is evidenced in the policy environment prior to the 1980s, which was heavily biased against them. Export taxes, referred to as the rice premium, had the dual effect of suppressing rice prices domestically as well as generating government revenue via rice exports. This policy, practiced until 1986, imposed huge costs on Thai rice farmers, with scholars estimating that well-over ten percent of total farm income was redirected to the government in the 1950s and 1960s (Lam, 1977; Muscat, 1966). Thailand's successive authoritarian regimes continuously used the rice premium to extract resources from the countryside. The brief democratic period of 1973-1976 saw a relaxing of the tax burden on farmers and the initiation of some subsidies, but when the military returned to power in 1976, government policy again turned against them. Only under the semi-democratic government of Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-1988) did the Thai state finally abandon the rice premium and begin providing a few subsidies. This, though, was not due to mass mobilization. Instead it developed as a side-effect of Thai parliament's fragmented nature where coalition dynamics required resource distributions targeted toward key supporters

(Siamwalla and Setboonsarng, 1989, chapter 2). According to an evaluation of one rice farmers subsidy program, less than 20 percent of the money earmarked for farmers made it into farmer hands. The rest was absorbed by rice millers, government officials, and political parties (Pinthong, 1984).

Even after the military finally retreated from direct intervention in parliament during the 1990s, agricultural policy remained driven by particularistic and localized concerns due to weak parliamentary coalitions (see Ricks, 2018). Rice farmers were largely unable to translate their numbers into political action. This changed with the rise of TRT.

4.2 Paddy Pledging and Policy Feedback

Thaksin Shinawatra founded TRT in 1998, after a somewhat unsuccessful series of attempts in politics from 1994-1997. The new party appealed the business community, having been founded by one of the few tycoons to make it through the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis relatively unscathed. Despite support from a broad swath of business leaders, though, the party needed an electoral base to campaign effectively. This was where Thaksin made his major political innovation that would upend Thai politics for the next 20 years.

Rather than rely almost solely on patronage networks and vote canvassers, as had been the case in almost all previous election campaigns, Thaksin made direct policy appeals to the large proportion of the Thai population who were classified as rural and largely agricultural (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2009). The direct bid for public support came initially in the form of an agricultural debt moratorium and the 30-baht health care program which would greatly reduce the financial burden of the rural poor (Selway, 2011). These programs were incredibly popular, and Thaksin rebranded himself as a man of the people through the 2001 campaign, scoring a huge political victory for a new party, winning almost half of all

parliamentary seats. At the same time, though, politics had yet to change on a large scale, as Thaksin and TRT relied heavily during the 2001 election on past electoral practices, such as co-opting politicians from other parties, using vote canvassers, and employing large sums of money (Nelson, 2007; Phatharathananunth, 2008).

Upon taking office, Thaksin publicly attacked the failed efforts of the erstwhile Chuan Leekpai government to improve rice prices. The government then pursued a series of policy changes that directly benefited rice farmers, including both a debt moratorium as well as the massive expansion of the paddy pledging program. Thailand's paddy pledging policy, or rice mortgage program, was originally launched in 1981 (Poapongsakorn and Carupong, 2010). The logic behind the scheme was based in seasonal fluctuations in rice prices that arise from a supply glut that occurs during harvest. Many farmers are forced to sell their paddy at low prices during that period; the mortgage policy was developed to provide short-term loans so that a proportion of farmers could hold on to their harvest for a few months until prices rebounded, thus both reducing the amount of paddy on the market at harvest time and allowing farmers to endure the wait for higher prices. Between 1981 and 2000, the proportion of harvested paddy that entered the scheme averaged about 5 percent of the paddy produced during the main harvest season.

Within weeks of taking office in January 2001, Thaksin significantly expanded the paddy mortgage scheme to include dry-season rice, a first for the program. The government also increased the loan rate to 100 percent of the value of the rice; later the government included a 30 percent mark-up of the pledging price (Ricks, 2018). In effect, this provided a pledging price higher than the average market price of paddy (see figure 2), which included a guaranteed profit for farmers. In the harvest year 2001/2002, the amount of paddy pledged to the government jumped 250% in the main season and pledged paddy now made up almost one-third of the second season crop. Paddy pledged to the program comprised a significant

proportion of the rice produced in the country and became a direct link between the Prime Minister’s party and the millions of rice farmers scattered throughout the country. Farmers increasingly chose to pledge their paddy to the government, making the state Thailand’s largest rice buyer (BAAC, 2011). The policy also indirectly increased prices for farmers who sold on the open market.



Figure 2. Comparison of Market & Pledging Prices for Main Season Paddy (1999-2007)
 Source: Office of Agricultural Economics, Department of Internal Trade

The initial expansion of the paddy-pledging policy did not necessarily reach all rice farmers, as much of the program’s money was directed toward the wealthiest farms as well as millers, exporters, and corruption. Estimates by Poaponsakorn and Carupong (2010) claimed that less than 40 percent of the funds for the program found their way into farmer hands. Beyond this, the policy had a detrimental effect on Thailand’s rice production, leading to

decreased competitiveness on the world market as well as no improvements in productivity (Laiprakobsub, 2014). Nevertheless, poverty rates decreased substantially, although unevenly, especially in Northeastern Thailand (Moore and Donaldson, 2016), and paddy pledging became a very visible signal to rice farmers that the TRT party was advocating their cause. This perception grew as the 2005 election approached. Thaksin enhanced the program in the 2004/2005 harvest season by increasing the target price for paddy to up to 20 percent higher than market value, making paddy pledging more financially lucrative than selling on the open market. In response, the amount of pledged paddy jumped to almost 40 percent of that season's crop.

Alternative political parties noted the importance of the government's policies in encouraging political support. The Chart Thai party, a coalition partner in Thaksin's first term, saw its prospects dimming, and it aggressively campaigned on policies of debt relief for farmers as well as rice price promises (Singkhiri, 2005). The Democrats, TRT's main opposition party, also promised remarkably similar policies in their 2004 conference, including a guaranteed income of 5000 baht/month for farming households as well as loan extensions (Ruangdit, 2004). All political parties adopted platforms directed at rice farmers to chip away at the appeal of TRT. Their efforts, though, were in vain.

Rice farmers turned out in large numbers in February 2005, as the TRT party barreled toward victory. For the first time in Thai history, a single party captured over 50 percent of the seats in parliament from the election. In the North and Northeast regions, where concentrations of rice farmers among the population was highest, TRT's victory was heavily lopsided, as alternative parties were only able to obtain a few scattered seats. In both regions, TRT captured the most party-list votes as well as the outright majority of eligible constituency votes across all provinces except Mae Hong Son in the North and Amnat Charoen in the Northeast. In many cases, the party received over 60 percent of ballots cast in

each province. TRT also did well across the central plains, where rice farmers had been able to take advantage of the paddy pledging program. On the other hand, the opposition Democrat party was only able to retain 71 constituency seats, based mainly in the south where rice farming is limited, and the Chat Thai party only managed to win 18. All told, the election was an unprecedented and indisputable win for Thaksin.

It is important to remember that the policies that propelled Thaksin and TRT to victory were not developed through bottom-up demand from interest groups or the population. They were initiated as strategic actions to win over sufficient support for TRT to consolidate its power in government. These policies had a profound impact on the political system, directing both the opposition as well as supporters to adapt to a new reality wherein agricultural policy promises became a vital component of any political campaign.

4.3 A New Social Contract

Thai farmers have long existed within the collective imagination of the political elites as a distant and subservient mass. Supposedly they produce rice, perform labor, and remain happily disinterested in the rest of the world, going about their rural peasant-like existence. Thai elites created a vision of nationalism wherein it was the duty of the state to intervene in the lives of these simple rural folk in order to help save them from the effects of their “stupidity, poverty, and suffering (*ngo chon cheb*)” (Sattayanurak, 2017, pp. 3). In this, the peasant status of Thai farmers has been embedded in Thai nationalism as well as Thai philosophies of governance, including the paternalistic description of “Thai-Style Democracy” (Hewison and Kitirianglarp, 2010). For decades, such approaches held sway, and while rural Thais felt resentment for being treated poorly by the elites, they had not mobilized.

Although many in the elite still hold such a view of their rural counterparts, the Thai social contract changed from 2001-2005 due to the policies of the Thaksin Shinawatra government. As Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra, and Pawakapan (2013, pp. 57-58) argue, the farmers became “new citizens” through their experiences with government policies target toward their needs. The policies allowed “them to learn and understand the importance of democratic governance.” The rural people recognized the benefits that they could collectively receive from the state, and they mobilized in order to protect those benefits. This learning process was succinctly described by one rice farmer in Roi Et province during a focus group discussion (December 11, 2016): “[Politics] is not like before. We understand it better than in the past. We are not just the people (*prachachon*) anymore; we’ve become citizens (*phonlamueang*)!”

First, rice farmers acted electorally, turning out in large numbers in 2005 and the failed 2006 elections. After the 2006 coup, these groups were disheartened, but they again returned to the voting booth in 2007, overcoming electoral rules as well as military rule to return another incarnation of the TRT to power (Hicken and Selway, 2012). After their chosen government was disbanded through judicial decisions, these groups took to the streets. The 2010 Red Shirt protests were heavily supported by farmers, many of whom were not necessarily Thaksin loyalists; rather they were interested in policies that helped their livelihoods. As one farmer explained (*Bangkok Post*, 2010):

I joined the red shirt rally because I want the government to take responsibility for the falling price of rice ... I don't have any political agenda. I'm not loyal to Thaksin or any of his men. All I know is that when Thaksin was prime minister, many farmers had better livelihoods and more money to spend.

Supports for rice prices have now become a staple policy, present in both the successors to Thai Rak Thai as well as those who oppose them. Even the direct military junta (2014-2019)

provided assistance to farmers, albeit somewhat unsuccessfully and without garnering popularity (Laiprakobsup, 2017).

Rice subsidies have become a central motivation for farmers in choosing which politicians to support. When asked about what he considered most critical in politics, one rice farmer in Roi Et responded (personal communication, December 12, 2016), “Rice price guarantees are the most important policy. We [will] choose whoever offers higher price policies.” Along the same lines, in a survey across three Northeastern provinces conducted in January 2016, an overwhelming 92.84 percent of rice farmers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Price supports are necessary to help farmers,” and 93.27 percent of rice farmer respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that “The current government should do more to support rice prices.”⁶ Just over two decades ago, very few of these farmers would have been receiving direct state support for rice purchases, but now they expect political leaders to offer such policy promises.

These expectations have changed how farmers perceive their relationship with politicians. Rather than anticipating patronage, farmers demand results (*phon ngan*) that enhance their livelihoods. In a focus group, the farmers told us that in the past they would accept money for their votes, but after the paddy pledging policy, they had learned that policy was more important. “We can’t be bought. Friends have turned down money when we’ve been offered it” (personal communication, December 12, 2016). For these farmers, the reputation and party affiliation of the politician is now a high priority.

The social contract between Thailand’s rural people and the state has changed, at least in the minds of the rural people. Farmers throughout Thailand have reported that the policies of the TRT government changed their perception of politics, leading them to view the state

⁶ The survey was carried out among 750 respondents in Khon Kaen, Buriram, and Udon Thani following a sampling procedure similar to that of the World Values Survey. 461 respondents self-identified as rice farmers. Questions regarding farmer preferences were appended to another survey project. Further information regarding the project and the sampling method can be found in [removed for review].

and governance of the state as central to their lives (Sitniramai et al. 2013). Returning to the survey discussed above, over 60 percent of rice farmers in the survey agreed with the sentiment that “Farmers cannot survive without price supports.” During a focus group in Roi Et, one farmer voiced (personal communication, December 11, 2016): “If the government doesn’t support us, the farmers will all die (*chaona cha tai*)!” This feeling was reiterated through other focus group discussions, wherein farmers claimed that they needed state subsidies. One farmer in Roi Et argued, “If the government would give us good prices, then there’s no need for elections for the rest of our lives. We’d be happy” (personal communication, December 10, 2016). This sentiment suggests that many rice farmers feel that it is now the state’s responsibility to guarantee a certain standard of living.

Similar beliefs were repeated in multiple forums, including one in Suphan Buri, in which farmers related their preference for Yingluck’s paddy pledging policy over the 2014-2019 military government’s rice production assistance programs. Part of the exchange follows (personal communication, September 13, 2016):

Researcher: So, to confirm, the priority for government assistance is the price of paddy rice, correct?

Farmers (multiple responses): Yes, price!!!

Male Farmer: Give us a better price.

Researcher: In this case, the better price refers to 10,000 baht per ton (*kwien*)?

Male Farmer: At least 8,000 baht is OK, but only if they don’t insist on moisture analysis.⁷

An additional focus group in Ayutthaya repeated these demands for government intervention in price supports similar to those from the paddy pledging policy: “[We want] a rice price

⁷ Moisture analysis is conducted on new paddy to determine price. Dry paddy weighs less.

guarantee. Farmers need at least 8,000 baht per ton with no reductions; if possible, 10,000 baht per ton would be very good” (personal communication, October 15, 2016).

Despite this preference for the paddy pledging policies, farmers also realized that the military government had done away with the program in 2014 and would not be returning to it. As such, they spoke in terms distinct from “paddy pledging (*chamnam khao*),” instead using the term “price guarantee (*phayung rakha khao*).” They were also pragmatic in their demands. When asked whether they would like to see a return to the price guarantees provided during the Yingluck administration (15,000 baht per ton), the farmers expressed preferences for a lower price, “Not [15,000 baht per ton]. We know that is too much, and the government would go bankrupt. But at the least, the government should be guaranteeing that we receive rice prices between 8,000 to 10,000 baht [per ton]” (personal communication, October 15, 2016). Even Pheu Thai supporters in the focus group were willing to consider the policies of the Abhisit Vejjajiva administration (2009-2011), as long as those policies resulted in price guarantees. This was somewhat surprising as Abhisit’s Democracy party was seen as the enemy of Pheu Thai by many farmers, but the participants of the focus group explained that as long as the price guarantee covered their cost of living, the policy would be acceptable.

In sum, Thai rice farmers have developed a strong identification with state subsidies for their welfare. Recalling the survey reported above, over 93 percent of farmers in the survey (430 out of 461 respondents) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The current government should do more to support rice prices.” Rice farmers now expect that government support will be forthcoming to assist them in maintaining their livelihoods, and they see their vote as an opportunity to reward politicians who provide them with such policies. Thus far most rice farmers see TRT and its successors as the best providers of such

platforms, but we also see evidence of pragmatism among the farmers and a willingness to consider other parties if they offer satisfactory policy promises.

5. Conclusion

We have argued that the paddy pledging policy which emerged under the Thaksin Shinawatra government (2001-2006) has had a profound policy feedback effect on the Thai countryside. In essence, the policy created a new consciousness among rice farmers who have become politically active in a way that they were not before, engaging with the state and expressing party loyalty to the Thai Rak Thai party and its successors. Indeed, if we look at the 2019 Election, which was designed specifically to break down the dominance of the Pheu Thai party, we see remarkable resilience in party identification among voters, with Pheu Thai performing well despite a series of institutional mechanisms meant to blunt its performance (McCargo et al., 2019; Ricks, 2019). The policy feedback mechanism has helped shape Thailand's social contract in the minds of Thai rice farmers, wherein they now believe in extensive government subsidies for the countryside.

This argument holds two major implications for the study of rural transformation and research on the politics of agriculture in Southeast Asia. First, it highlights the transformative effects of public policy on farmers. Throughout Thai history as well as the Southeast Asia region, there has been an implicit divide between the study of national policies and the study of the countryside. Politics has largely been determined by elites in the capital (Winters, 2011), while the countryside has been of secondary concern (Thawngmung, 2008), subject to clientelistic politics and capture by elites (Davidson, 2016; Hutchcroft, 2014). Public policies toward the countryside, though, can have a profound impact on the lives of the rural population, and thus can have a strong transformative effect on the large populations that live

in these areas. As seen in the Thai case, once these policies create a mobilized political constituency, these groups, due to their size, can reshape politics.

Second, the discussion above highlights a lock-in effect of public policies. Once a public policy, especially a subsidy, has been implemented at a broad scale, it creates a constituency for the policy. These constituencies, even if they had not initially demanded the policy, much like the Thai farmers who enjoyed the impact of the paddy pledging policy, become active proponents of the subsidies, creating political barriers to their demise. Thus, these policies have an element of path dependence wherein their creation is easier than their dissolution via democratic means. This also suggests that there are certain points in a country's history wherein a policy can be implemented which will calcify the universe of potential policy choices in the future.

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