Social Media and the DIY Politics in Thailand's 2023 Election

Aim Sinpeng

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Thailand's 2023 parliamentary election was the first election in which social media played a decisive factor in the electoral outcomes. Prior to this election, social media was an important campaign tool, but it was unclear whether it made a difference in the electoral results. Based on our original post-election survey data (n = 1,249), social media was the most important media in governing vote choice. Social media was a crucial space for activation and conversion—motivating the undecided to become partisans and converting partisan voters to shift their allegiances. Thailand's 2023 election was also marked by a rise in the personalization of political campaigning, wherein citizens felt free to decide how and what their political participation looked like, and parties that encouraged inclusive and open engagement with politics were best poised to win in the electoral arena. Drawing on social network analysis of social media data, this article demonstrates how the Move Forward Party's (MFP) loosely structured and inclusive social media campaigns allowed both their candidates and supporters to mobilize individualized large-scale collective action, in contrast to their rivals who focused on traditional top-down style campaigning. Despite the MFP's winning social media campaigning that produced electoral victories, the party was unable to come to power due to an entrenched authoritarian political system designed to maintain the power of the country's autocratic elites. The Thai case demonstrates powerfully how autocrats might lose an election due to social media, yet still manage to hang on to power through entrenched authoritarian institutions.

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Thailand's 2023 Election

During Thailand's 2023 election, Grandma "Too" Hongthong was an unlikely election icon. Previously, she was known for her drinking and dancing TikTok videos, but during Thailand's election, she rose to stardom through her orange-clad outfits and her vehement "disinterest in politics."[1] With more than two million followers on TikTok and her election-related videos garnering views of more than ten million, Grandma Hongthong, at the age of 80, emerged as a surprisingly crucial mobilizer for the orange-coloured Move Forward Party (MFP). Her insistence on being apolitical and her dissociation from MFP candidates and campaigns only served to heighten her authentic support for the party among her many million TikTok fans. Her star power on social media landed her numerous interviews and media coverage by nearly every single mainstream broadcast and online news channel in the country. Her videos were raw, homemade, authentic, and easy to consume. Grandma Hongthong took on a personal journey in her support for the MFP.

Thailand has witnessed decades of political turmoil, marked by two recent military coups in 2006 and 2014, protracted large-scale protests, and entrenched political divisions. Elections in Thailand have often been regarded as an important mechanism to defuse political deadlocks: a political opportunity for feuding elites to negotiate power sharing. Since the 2014 military coup, however, elections have served to extend the power of autocratic elites rather than act as a pathway towards democracy. The military junta, known as the National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO), established a new constitution that would allow the military to stay in power for an unusually long time to "transition to democracy."[2] During this period of military dictatorship, the junta undermined democratic institutions, closed down channels for conflict resolution, and dramatically cracked down on political and social dissent.[3] When the generals called for an election in 2019—the first ballot in eight years—it was a crucial opportunity to extend autocratic rule, rather than dismantle it.[4] General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the 2014 coup leader and incumbent, won the election thanks to judicial and institutional interventions on highly dubious grounds that kept political opposition at bay.[5] Nonetheless, the 2019 election represented an important

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[1]   Grandma Hongthong @supinda_aon, https://www.tiktok.com/@supanida_aon/video/723 2515185632611590?q=%23เลือกตั้ง66&t=1697761710509.

[2]   Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "The Constitutional Court of Thailand: From Activism to Arbitrariness," in *Constitutional Courts in Asia: A Comparative Perspective*, eds. Albert Chen and Andrew Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 184–213.

[3]   Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, "The 2014 Military Coup in Thailand: Implications for Political Conflicts and Resolution," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 5, no. 1 (2017): 131–154.

[4]   Jacob I. Ricks, "Thailand's 2019 Vote: The General's Election," *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2019): 443–457.

[5]   Duncan McCargo, and Saowanee T. Alexander, "Thailand's 2019 Elections," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 4 (2019): 89–106.

opening for new political forces to emerge on to the scene, one of which was the youth-focused Future Forward Party (FFP), the predecessor of the Move Forward Party. The unprecedented rise of the FFP, which was left-wing, anti-military, and pro-monarchical reform, was such a threat to the royalist conservative elites that the FFP was abruptly dissolved and their party executives banned from politics for life.[6]

The 2020–2022 youth-led protests began as digitally mediated grassroots anti-government opposition. Twitter became a pivotal platform for self-discovery and political activism, as crackdowns on other platforms like Facebook intensified and Twitter appeared to afford a greater sense of anonymity.[7] The FFP's decision to centre its campaigning for the 2019 election on the Facebook platform led to a dramatic surge in its use for political engagement, which helped spur the anti-government movements following the FFP's demise.[8] After the dissolution of the FFP, university-based grassroots groups began launching hashtag campaigns online as well as small-scale demonstrations in major cities. These student-led protests grew into larger-scale pro-democracy movements that were composed of loosely connected, uncoordinated, disparate groups and individuals expressing their discontent with issues ranging from democratic rights, LGBTQ rights, military conscription, and school uniforms, all advocating for social and political change.[9]

Young Thais growing up during the military dictatorship armed with social media began to crowd source ideas for flash mobs and protests as they found the existing political system unjust, unfair, and undemocratic.[10] Hashtag campaigns such as #FreeYouth, #เด็กเลว (#badstudent) and #เลิกเรียนแล้วไปกระทรวง (#AfterSchoolLetsGototheMinistry) went viral and led to a protest coalition known as "Kana Rasadorn" that has fostered more than 1,500 protests nationwide since 2020.[11] Kana Rasadorn peaked in late 2020 in its demands for political change, but eventually declined in popularity due to in-group conflict and successful state repression against key movement leaders.[12] While

6   Duncan McCargo and Anyarat Chattharakul, *Future Forward: The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020).

7   Sumet Tangprasert, "Gon yút láe wí-teē-gaān sèū-sǎān kǎāwng pák gaān meūang tai pàān sèū sǎng-kom aāwn lai nai gaān lêūak-dtâng tûūa bpai pá.sà. 2562" [Strategies and comparison in political communication through social media of Thai political parties in Thailand's general elections 2019], *Journal of Political Science Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University* 5, no. 1 (2022): 25–38.

8   Komkrit Hankla, "Gaān-sèū-sǎān doī châi soūh chiān meē diā pêūa gaān klêūan wǎi taāng-gaān meūang: gà-rá-neē sèuk-sǎā pák à-naā-kót mài" [The use of social media communication for political: A case study of the Future Forward in Thailand] (master's thesis, Thammasat University, 2019), 1–158.

9   Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, "The White Ribbon Movement: High School Students in the 2020 Thai Youth Protests," *Critical Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 206–218.

10   Aim Sinpeng, "Twitter Analysis of the Thai Free Youth Protests," *Thai Data Points* (blog), 29 August 2020, accessed 10 September 2023, https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/twitter-analysis-of-the-thai-free-youth-protests.

11   See more details at Mob Data Thailand, https://www.mobdatathailand.org/.

12   Aim Sinpeng, "Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the# FreeYouth Protests in Thailand," *Critical Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 192–205.

the military-aligned government managed to brush off youth protests, its legitimacy began to crumble as its leadership faced a growing loss in confidence, subsequently resulting in a house dissolution. [13]

Thailand's 2023 parliamentary election, which took place on May 14, occurred as a response to widespread discontent towards the ruling conservative elites. The election was freer and more contentious than past recent elections. Political parties and their candidates had greater access to a wide variety of media platforms, and international observers were afforded greater freedom to monitor the election process.[14] With more than 60 political parties—many of them brand new—vying for parliamentary seats, competition for votes was rife from the beginning. The Pheu Thai Party (PTP) was widely anticipated to win as it had remained the country's most popular party and polls continued to show strong support for a landslide victory.[15] Election campaigning was shaped by both the changing regulatory environment and an increased variety of platforms. Voters were no longer allowed to campaign for candidates either online or offline and parties could not spend more than 500 baht (US$14) on online advertisements (including Facebook ads) without notifying the Election Commission.[16] These new measures were put in place to curb vote buying, reduce the influence of online influencers, and mitigate potential disinformation campaigns.

The May 14 parliamentary election ushered in a remarkable victory for Thailand's most reformist party, the MFP. Following eight years of military-dominated rule, nearly 40 million Thais cast their ballots in an election the media dubbed the "end game."[17] Framed as a contestation between progressive democrats versus conservative autocrats, the victory of the progressives was overwhelming. The MFP, which won 14.4 million votes or 151 seats, shocked the nation by defeating the expected winner, the Pheu Thai, by more than 3.5 million votes, representing a margin of victory of 9 percent. Initially, the MFP was able to form a coalition with opposition allies—the Pheu Thai, the Prachachart Party, the Thai Sang Thai Party, the Seri Ruam Thai Party, FAIR, the Palang Sangkhom Mai Party and the Pheu Thai Ruam Phalang Party—bringing together 313 seats. Coalition partners

[13] Joel Sawat Selway, "Thailand in 2022: The Decline and Resilience of Thailand's Conservative Establishment," *Asian Survey* 63, no. 2 (2023): 281–290.

[14] ANFREL, "2023 Thai general election: democracy at a crossroads," *ANFREL*, 15 August 2023, accessed 12 September 2023, https://anfrel.org/2023-thai-general-election-democracy-at-a-crossroads/.

[15] Thai Rath, "Lêūak-dtâng 66 : soō bpeēr poūhn pŏēy máī póp laāe nót lai "pêūa tai" kwáā dâī maā gà sùt 139 têē-nâng" [Election 2023: Super poll indicates no landslide Pheu Thai would get 139 seats], *Thai Rath*, 5 May 2023, https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2691580.

[16] For official election results from the Election Commission of Thailand, please see this report: https://www.ect.go.th/web-upload/1xff0d34e409a13ef56eea54c52a291126/m_document/2646/22104/file_download/883fcacca344107aa3dfe9681e327db8.pdf.

[17] See election-related articles and videos from the *Standard*, "Tàāi-tâāwt sòt : THE STANDARD DEBATE : END GAME gaēym têē páāe máī dâī deē bàēyt #lêūak-dtâng2566" [Live: THE STANDARD DEBATE: END GAME, election 2023], accessed 10 September 2023, https://thestandard.co/the-standard-debate-end-game/.

of the ruling incumbent, on the contrary, suffered embarrassing losses. Junta-backed parties, the Palang Pracharat and the United Thai Nation Party, only managed to secure five million votes, while the Democrat Party experienced the biggest defeat in two decades. The Bhumjaithai was the only party that received a similar level of support compared to the 2019 election, with 1.1 million votes.

If winning at the ballot means the leader of the party with the most votes gets to become the country's leader, then Pita Limjaroenrat would be Thailand's 30th prime minister. Yet the triumph of the MFP-led coalition was not enough for them to govern. The 2017 Constitution stipulates that a winning coalition also needs to get votes from the 250 members of the junta-appointed senate, an institutional roadblock put in place after the 2014 coup to maintain the military's power. Pita, the MFP's then leader, would have needed 375 votes to become prime minister and ensure the success of the MFP-led coalition. But Thailand's authoritarianism and entrenched political divisions meant that Pita and the MFP failed to secure enough votes to lead. After two rounds of deliberations with many objections from senators and conservative political elites, the MFP failed to advance a prime ministerial nomination and secure the position of house speaker. The Pheu Thai switched sides and established a new 11-party coalition with most of the coalition partners having come from the previous government—parties that used to be their staunch opponents. Its leader, Srettha Thavisin, successfully became Thailand's 30th prime minister., while the MFP was banished to the opposition despite having won the election.

The euphoric rise of the MFP as Thailand's most popular party only five years after its founding has posed the greatest threat to Thailand's political establishment in decades. Its radical plans to reform the country's most powerful institutions—the military and the monarchy—have isolated the party from others, even from its own allies. The MFP's reformist agenda on the monarchy was singularly the most important reason why Pita failed to secure enough votes to become prime minister. Opposing senators and MPs argued that the MFP's reformist vision on Article 112 is a "national security threat," as opening up the monarchy to scrutiny could induce political instability.[18]

Yet many of the MFP supporters were drawn from the youth base that wanted a more modern, equitable, and just Thailand, where politics was about inclusiveness, equality, and justice. They saw the roots of Thailand's vicious cycle of coups and bad elections in a monarchy that could not be criticized and a military that was too politically involved.[19] The party's flagship policies were thus radical and divisive: it wanted to amend the lèse-majesté

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[18]   *Standard*, "End Game #22," 13 July 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_JwUpDKFXw.

[19]   Charay Nakthongin et al., "Kà-buūan-gaān klêūan wǎi taāng-gaān meūang kǎāwng ní-sìt nák-sèuk-sǎā nai bpeē 2563" [Student political movement, year 2020], *Journal of Innovation and Management (Thailand)* 8, no. 16 (2021): 1–32.

law that forbids insult to the monarchy, and to abolish military conscription.[20] The MFP found greater support for its radical vision of Thailand than its predecessor as more Thais have become increasingly progressive and pro-democracy on important issues such as same-sex marriage, gender equity, and opposition to dictatorship. According to the Asian barometer surveys, support for military rule has been steadily declining since 2006, when 20 percent of respondents approved military intervention in politics, compared to 10 percent in 2019.[21] Similarly, support for gender equality in the areas of job opportunities and political leadership for women has dramatically increased in the past 20 years.[22] Sixty-three percent of Thais reported being in favour of same-sex marriage, based on a recent YouGov poll.[23] However, the massive win for the MFP represented Thailand's progressive turn beyond just social issues. The fact that its gains in many constituencies have meant the Pheu Thai's losses indicates that the party's version of progress is resonating with more Thai voters now than ever before.

This article focuses on examining how and why the MFP succeeded in online campaigning—a key and decisive battleground for the 2023 election. It argues that the MFP emerged as Thailand's social media winner in the election because it prioritized personalization of political campaigning, which allowed candidates, supporters, and crowds to engage with the party on their own terms and in their own ways through a wide variety of issues. This do-it-yourself style of political participation opened up pathways for engagement and helped mobilize rapid support for the party in a short period of time. In contrast to the MFP, traditional parties like the Pheu Thai emphasized top-down, leader-centric mobilization of support, which was no longer suitable for a changing digital society like Thailand, where many voters were no longer loyal to specific political parties. As Thaksin Shinawatra, one of the Pheu Thai's leaders admitted, "we lost the election because of social media."[24]

Personalization of Political Campaigning

Lance Bennett proposes an influential framework for understanding the changing nature of political communication and engagement in the era of

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[20]   Wichuta Teeratanabodee, "Thailand's 2020–2021 Pro-Democracy Protests: Diversity, Conflict, and Solidarity," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (2023): 1–25.

[21]   See Asian Barometer Survey, https://www.asianbarometer.org/.

[22]   Aim Sinpeng and Amalinda Savirani,"Women's Political Leadership in the ASEAN Region," *Westminster Foundation for Democracy*, 15 November 2022, https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/jn_xxxx_asean_report_a4_aw_single.pdf.

[23]   Teirra Kamolvattanavit, "3 in 5 Thais Support Same-Sex Civil Partnerships: Survey," *Coconuts Bangkok*, 18 February 2019, https://coconuts.co/bangkok/news/3-5-thais-support-sex-civil-partnerships-survey/.

[24]   One News, "Thaksin Admitted Pheu Thai Lost to Move Forward because of Social Media," *One News*, 17 May 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fZTIxfX9a8.

digital media.[25] The personalization of politics occurs when modern political communication strategies increasingly emphasize the personal attributes, image, authenticity, and lifestyle of political candidates rather than focusing on party policies. Social media platforms have accelerated the personalization of politics by enabling political candidates to directly reach out to the public, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers such as broadcasters and newspapers.[26] Candidates can now use platforms like Twitter and Facebook to share personal stories that allow them to build their own narratives and foster a sense of personal connection with voters. This does not mean that party platforms and ideologies no longer matter, but that voters can also be mobilized by the stories of individual candidates used as personalized political campaigns. The "do-it-yourself" ethos and the "me generation" attitude shared by many youth has resulted in changes to the means and the methods by which they engage in politics and collectivized action. No longer constrained by a sense of civic duty, younger generations personalize their own pathways of political engagement, and tend to adopt self-actualizing digitally mediated DIY politics that allow for flexible, individualized, interactive, shareable, and inclusive engagement.[27]

Bennett and Segerberg have further proposed the concept of connective action, which rests on the notion that the openness and personalized characteristics of online communications permit large-scale action without requiring strong organizations to mobilize resources.[28] It sits in contrast to the logic of collective action, in which organizations are central agents of resource mobilization, boundary crossing, and frame alignment. Ordinary people can now freely stage protests without needing any organization.[29] Youth in particular are less connected to traditional organizations such as interest groups and political parties because there is a communicative gap: young people prefer to decide on their own what information sources to accept; they want participatory and personalized styles of engagement and are more likely to take action on information that permits self-expression. Political and civic organizations that do well in the digitally connected world are ones that foster actualizing a communication style where the public is given the opportunity to coproduce content and ideas, and is asked to participate and shape the direction of the organization.[30]

[25]   Lance W. Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644, no. 1 (2012): 20–39.

[26]   Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics," 12.

[27]   Chris Wells, *The Civic Organization and the Digital Citizen: Communicating Engagement in a Networked Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[28]   Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 739–768.

[29]   Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

[30]   Ariadne Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017).

Political candidates and parties that employ personalized campaign strategies have been found to be more successful than those focusing on party-based campaigning. Personalized campaigns have been shown to create a sense of increased connection and engagement with voters that facilitates higher voter turnout and volunteerism for both candidates and the parties.[31] Van Erkel, Thijssen, and Van Aelst found in their study of the 2014 Belgian multi-member district vote that candidates who focused on individualized campaigns performed better than those running party-centric campaigns.[32] Even in countries whose electoral systems are heavily party-oriented, the use of personalized campaigning on social media helped to increase dialogue with voters and enhance candidate visibility.[33] Personalized campaigning also allows for highly targeted messaging that can be tailored to specific demographic groups or individuals based on their interests, location, and online behaviour, making it more influential and persuasive.[34] Youth have been found to be particularly responsive to personalized campaigns.[35]

Personalizing politics online is not without its dark side. Beyond helping to legitimize and lengthen autocratic rule, personalization of politics enables negative campaigning and mis/disinformation on a large scale. Social media platforms make it easier for anyone to spread false information about political candidates and parties. It has also supercharged the abilities and opportunities for candidates to turn negative on their opponents, increasing the instance of personal attacks in many elections around the world.[36] Amplification of scandals containing half-truths or taken out of context can quickly gain traction on social media, thereby influencing public opinion and media coverage of elections. In Thailand, character assassination on social media has been one of the most powerful tools with which to attack opponents, often to disastrous effect for those victimized.[37] Hate speech, the most insidious form of anti-social behaviour, is on the rise, with little moderation from platforms.[38]

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[31]   Jenny Bronstein, Noa Aharony, and Judit Bar-Ilan, "Politicians' Use of Facebook During Elections: Use of Emotionally-Based Discourse, Personalization, Social Media Engagement and Vividness," *Aslib Journal of Information Management* 70, no. 5 (2018): 551–572.

[32]   Patrick F. A. Van Erkel, Peter Thijssen, and Peter Van Aelst, "One For All or All For One: The Electoral Effects of Personalized Campaign Strategies," *Acta Politica* 52, no. 3 (2017): 384–405.

[33]   Sara Gunn Enli and Eli Skogerbø, "Personalized Campaigns in Party-Centred Politics: Twitter and Facebook as Arenas for Political Communication," *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 5 (2013): 757–774.

[34]   Bruce Bimber, "Digital Media in the Obama Campaigns of 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the Personalized Political Communication Environment," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 11, no. 2 (2014): 130–150.

[35]   Emily C. Weinstein, "The Personal is Political on Social Media: Online Civic Expression Patterns and Pathways among Civically Engaged Youth," *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 210–223.

[36]   Faesal Mubarok, "Social Media, Candidate Campaign And Quality Of Democracy: Overview Of The Attacking Campaign In Indonesian Elections," *Jurnal Netralitas Dan Pemilu* 1, no. 1 (2022): 25–39.

[37]   101.World, "Digital Harassment – Silent Pain," *101.world*, 5 October 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yct73erlbdY.

[38]   Aim Sinpeng, "Facebook: Regulating Hate Speech in the Asia Pacific," *Facebook Report*, 5 July 2021, https://appap.group.uq.edu.au/files/1779/2021_Facebook_hate_speech_Asia_report.pdf.

There has been limited work on personalization of political campaigning in authoritarian regimes. In authoritarian contexts, the extent to which political candidates and parties can campaign freely varies, which impacts the opportunities and means for personalization. Autocratic elites may be able to leverage social media to create specific portrayals and narratives of themselves that encourage stability and resilience of authoritarian rule. Because social media facilitates a direct connection with citizens, autocrats are able to create a more relatable and authentic version of themselves to propagate their agenda.[39] Savvy autocrats could use social media to create an aura of loyalty and adoration around the leader; however, research on authoritarian contexts is limited, aside from a few case studies.[40] Chechen leaders, for instance, have been found to have successfully engineered their image on Instagram to increase public approval for their cause.[41] In general, personalization of politics through social media has negative outcomes for democratic qualities: it gives rise to populism, increases political polarization, and results in democratic erosion.[42]

Data and Methodology

To examine the success of the MFP's online campaigning, I adopt a mixed-method approach that draws on original post-election survey data, content analysis, social network analysis, as well as secondary analysis drawn from Dataxet (a Thailand-based social listening platform). A nationwide random sampling panel survey was administered between June 1 and June 21, 2023, with a total number of 1,249 respondents (51 percent male, 49 percent female). The age breakdown of the survey respondents was as follows: 26 percent (18–30), 38 percent (31–50), 28 percent (51–65), and 8 percent (66+). Respondents were drawn from across regions in Thailand, with 28 percent from Bangkok, 25 percent from the central region, 16 percent from the northern region, 21 percent from the northeastern region, and 10 percent from the southern region. The educational backgrounds of the respondents were 1 percent below primary, 2 percent primary, 26 percent secondary, 66 percent bachelor's degree and 5 percent master's degree and above. Finally, the monthly income breakdowns of the respondents were as follows: 9 percent (>5,000 baht), 11 percent (5,000–9,999 baht), 26 percent (10,000–19,999) baht), 20 percent (20,000–29,999 baht), 16 percent (30,000–39,999 baht), 10 percent (40,000–49,999 baht) and 8 percent

[39]   Florian Toepfl, "Comparing Authoritarian Publics: The Benefits and Risks of Three Types of Publics for Autocrats," *Communication Theory* 30, no. 2 (2020): 105–125.

[40]   Tuong Vu, "Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Surviving Asian Communist Regimes from a Historical, Regional, and Holistic Approach," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 55, no. 4 (2022): 8–34.

[41]   Elena Rodina and Dmitriy Dligach, "Dictator's Instagram: Personal and Political Narratives in a Chenchen Leader's Social Network," *Caucasus Survey* 7, no. 2 (2019): 95–109.

[42]   Erica Frantz et al., "How Personalist Politics Is Changing Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 94–108.

(<50,000 baht). Respondents indicated that they voted for six major parties with the following breakdown: the MFP (50%), Pheu Thai (16%), United Thai Nation (11%), Democrat (4%), Palang Pracharath (2%), and Bhumjaithai (2%).

Additional social media data was drawn from Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok using #เลือกตั้ง66 (#election23) from March 13 to May 13, 2023, which covers the two-month period prior to election day. This hashtag-based method of data collection is one of the most commonly used forms of data mining for political communication research.[43] In the Thai election context, #เลือกตั้ง66 was also the most popular hashtag across all social media platforms related to the election. Data was scraped with platform-based APIs through the use of academic access. Facebook data was extracted via Crowdtangle. The top 100 most engaged posts using #เลือกตั้ง66 on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok were then manually analyzed for content. Social network analysis was also conducted on these top 100 posts to identify influencers and examine patterns of information diffusion across networks.

Both the survey and social media data have several limitations. The survey data was intended to be as representative as possible, based on existing characteristics that approximate the voting population in Thailand. However, it proved difficult to recruit respondents over the age of 65 years old, despite multiple extensions of the survey. Thus, the project fell short of meeting the 10 percent target of the number of respondents in this age group. The survey respondents who voted for the MFP constituted a higher proportion than reflected in the electoral outcome, thus presenting a slight bias in the data. Social media platforms also placed limitations in terms of data extractions through their APIs, with varying limits based on the time and length of data queries. By focusing on the top 100 posts following the hashtag-based methodology, findings are thus drawn from the specified top accounts only and may not fully capture all conversations relating to the 2023 election.

Findings and Discussion

The survey results show that the 2023 election proved that, for the first time, social media really mattered to the results. As figure 1 shows, across age groups except for 65+, social media was the most important media when it came to voting decisions regarding parties and candidates. There was an age effect on media consumption as social media declined in significance as age increased. Eligible voters aged 50 and below represented approximately 70 percent of the electorate in this election, which further demonstrated the importance of social media in electoral outcome in 2023.[44]

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[43]   Philipp Mayr and Katrin Weller, "Think before You Collect: Setting up a Data Collection Approach for Social Media Studies," *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (2017): 107–124.
[44]   See National Statistical Office of Thailand, http://doc.nso.go.th/.

Figure 1
Media influence in vote choice by age group
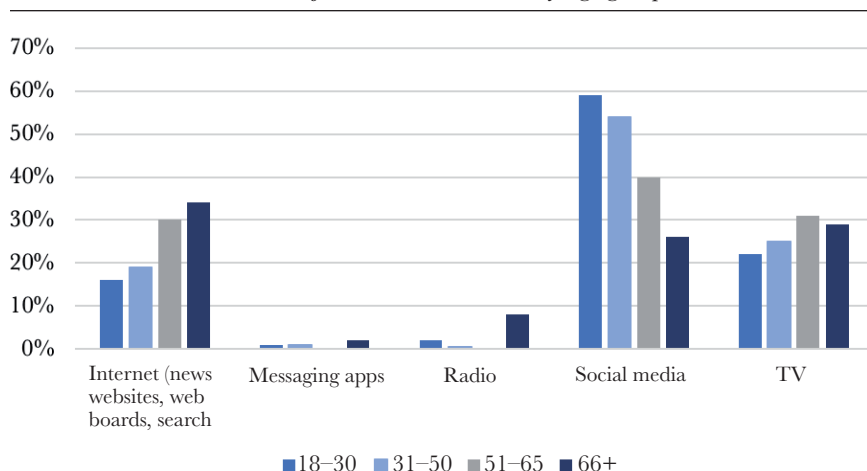
Source: Graph generated by author.

The 2023 election was marked by a diversification of social media platforms at a time when social media penetration reached its new peak. Compared to past elections, where internet penetration was at 24 percent (2011) and 67 percent (2019), the growth of internet connectivity rose to above 88 percent in 2023—a rate that outpaced the United States.[45] Thais remained among the most active social media users in the world, spending close to three hours a day on social media.[46] Since 2022, a new social media platform rose to prominence in Thailand and worldwide—TikTok—overtaking Twitter and Instagram and becoming Thailand's fourth-largest social media platform in terms of overall usage.[47] TikTok, a video-based platform, was a game changer for Thai politics, as has been witnessed in other parts of the world.[48] The survey results demonstrate this change, as TikTok, for the first time, became an important platform for election campaigning. Respondents reported relying on Facebook, YouTube, the LINE chat app, and TikTok as their main platforms during election campaigns (figure 2). The rise of TikTok is important to understanding online campaigning as most political parties and candidates were not prepared for a TikTok campaign.

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[45]   See World Bank Open Data, https://data.worldbank.org/.
[46]   Simon Kemp, "Digital 2023: Thailand," Datareportal, 13 February 2023, accessed 12 September 2023, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-thailand.
[47]   See Datareportal Thailand: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-thailand.
[48]   Ross Tapsell, "Social Media and Malaysia's 2022 Election: The Growth and Impact of Video Campaigning," *Pacific Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2023): 303–321.

Figure 2

*Respondents' use of social media platforms during 2023 election campaign*
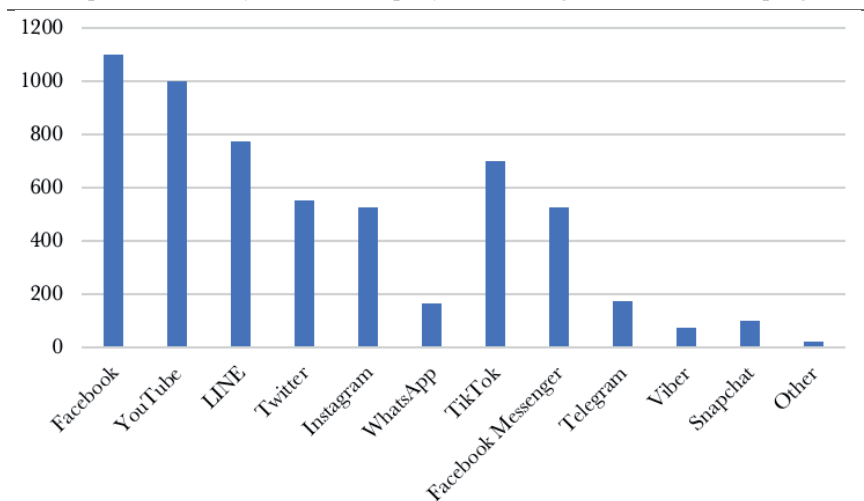
Social media was the main space for the undecided: a space for learning about candidates, parties, policies, and important issues. Respondents were asked about the main purpose of their use of social media in the lead-up to the election: the top three key reasons were gathering information on the election and election-related news, learning more about party policies, and learning more about candidates and political parties (between 70 to 90 percent of users). About 30 percent of the respondents saw social media as a platform to learn about whom their social networks might support. Fewer than 3 percent of the respondents reported using social media to support or oppose candidates and parties. Figure 3 further demonstrates that the vast majority of survey respondents did not belong to any political party. Non-partisanship was the highest among respondents aged 51–65 (78%) followed by 31–50 (70%), 18–30 (67%) and 66+ (57%). The fact that non-partisanship was particularly high among respondents even after the election took place suggests that these voters used social media and other media outlets as platforms to learn about and decide whom to vote for without any ties to political parties.

TikTok overtook all other social media companies as the most influential platform during Thailand's 2023 election. Despite having a smaller number of users, as figure 2 indicates, it was the most frequently used: each TikTok user used the platform many more times than other platforms. As a result, the volume of engagement on TikTok is higher than all the other platforms

combined. According to Dataxet, TikTok generated more than 186 million interactions relating to the election compared with Facebook's 54 million interactions, Twitter's 45 million interactions and YouTube's 3.9 million interactions.[49] The arrival of TikTok as the newest social media platform in Thailand made a significant impact on online campaigning despite its usage number still ranking as the fourth most popular social media. It was the most heavily used platform during the election, most notably to discuss the MFP and its leader Pita Limjaroenrat.

Figure 3
Percentage of respondents who reported being members
of political parties, by age group
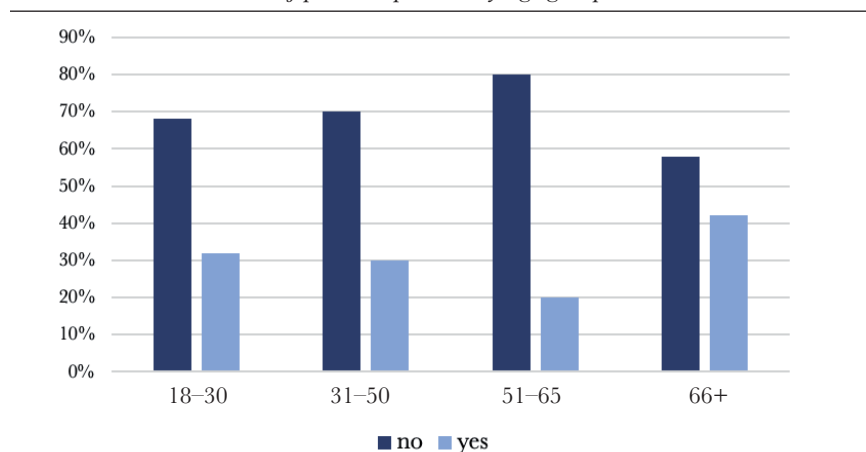
Source: Graph generated by author.

Analyzing top social media accounts using #เลือกตั้ง66 (#election23)—the most popular hashtag used in the lead-up to the election day, covering the period from March 13 to May 13 across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok—I find that the MFP was the most influential party, with the most references and interactions online. On Facebook, 56 percent of the top 100 most popular posts using the #เลือกตั้ง66 were about the Move Forward Party. These posts garnered more than 10 million interactions (such as liking and sharing), with more than 80 percent eliciting positive sentiment. The Pheu Thai came second, with 15 percent of the posts using #เลือกตั้ง66 referring to the party. The Pheu Thai posts produced 1.6 million interactions—more than four times fewer than the MFP. Popular and viral Facebook posts using #เลือกตั้ง66 were largely drawn from accounts and pages that were not officially related

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[49]   Dataxet, "Fang sǐang soūh chīan chûûang lêūak-dtâng 'gâǎo glai' sùt hâǎwt grà sǎǎe nam dòūhng táng kon táng pák" [Social listening during the election: move forward went viral], *Dataxet*, 23 May 2023, accessed 12 September 2023, https://www.dataxet.co/insight-social-trends-thailand-election-2023.

to the MFP. A post from ก้าวไกลไปด้วยกัน,[50] an MFP fan page, was one of the most popular posts relating to the election, showing a video of MFP political leaders discussing the need for radical societal and political change. That video generated 1.3 million views and received 1,600 comments. More importantly, it outperformed many MFP official campaigning posts on Facebook.

Table 1

Key Facebook metrics of major party leaders (March 13–May 13, 2023)

|	Page likes	Follower growth	Reactions	Comments	Interaction rate
Pita Limjaroenrat	1.74M	209%	7.64M	623k	59k
Prayuth Chan-ocha	1.26M	0.04%	140K	11	5.6k
Paetongtarn Shinawatra	498k	20%	724K	44k	14k
Jurin Laksanavisit	1.09M	-0.1%	377k	74k	2.5k
Anutin Charnvirakul	165k	2%	211k	23k	1.6k
Sereepisuth Temeeyaves	1.42M	7%	1.53k	98k	6k
Prawit Wongsuwan	2.8k	34%	1.9k	1.1k	872

Note: Data extracted on June 26, 2023.
Source: Graph generated by author.

It is clear from examining the popularity of leaders of key political parties—Pita Limjaroenrat (MFP), Prayuth Chan-ocha (United Thai Nation), Paetongtarn Shinawatra (Pheu Thai), Jurin Laksanavisit (Democrat Party), Anutin Charnvirakul (Bhumjaithai), and Sereepisuth Temeeyaves (Seri Ruam Thai)—how much more influential and popular Pita was compared to his opponents. Pita actually began his campaign with nearly 40 percent fewer followers and likes than Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha. Yet, during the span of just 60 days his Facebook support base grew by more than 200 percent and his posts attracted nearly 300 percent more views than the combined posts of all the other party leaders. Each of Pita's posts also garnered 59,000 interactions for each post, with 99 percent of these interactions being positive. These astonishing rates of engagement are crucial to online campaigning success: Facebook algorithms prioritize content that is highly engaged. Data drawn from Dataxet (2023) corroborates these findings: across all five major social media platforms, Pita garnered 49 million engagements, compared to Prayuth's 18 million and Paetongtarn's 4.5 million.

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[50]   See, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1202707810446364.

Figure 4
Social network analysis of the top 500 hashtags relating to #election23
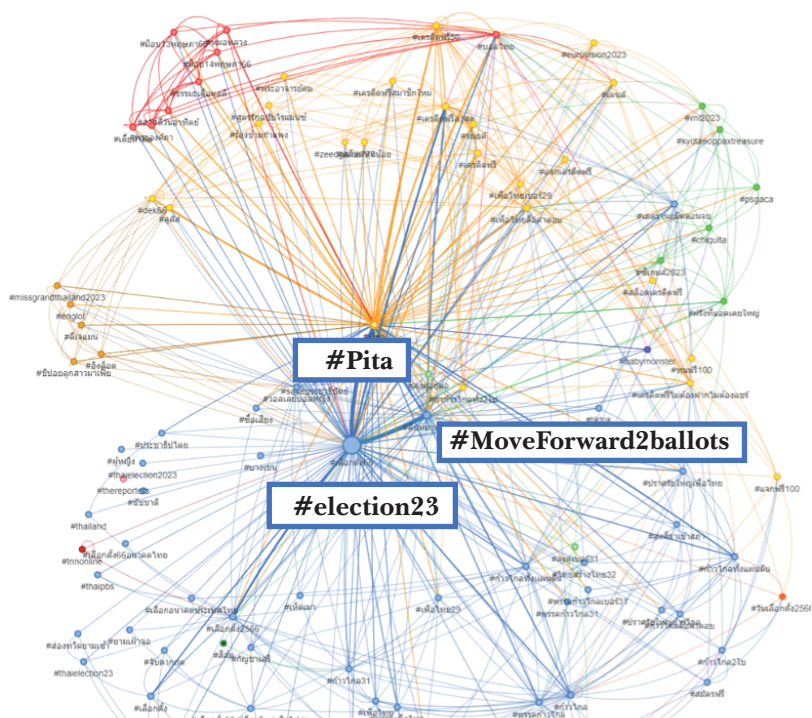
Source: Illustration generated by author.

Using graph theory to analyze Twitter data using #เลือกตั้ง66 (#election23) reveals the strength and centrality of MFP online support. #พิธา (#Pita) and #ก้าวไกลทั้ง2ใบ (#MoveForward2ballots) were the most strongly related hashtags to #เลือกตั้ง66, suggesting that MFP supporters dominated Twitter activities relating to the election. This form of hashtag activism drove the Twitter success of the MFP's successor party, the Future Forward Party, and became the main mobilization tool for the youth-led protest movements that began in 2020. Other parties were tweeting actively too, particularly supporters of the Pheu Thai and the United Thai Nation, but their Twitter networks did not dominate the election-related tweets like the MFP. Dataxet's (2023) analysis of the top 10 hashtags relating to the election supported these findings: it shows that #MoveForwardParty (#พรรคก้าวไกล) and #PitaLimjaroenrat (#พิธาลิ้มเจริญรัตน์) and #MoveForward (#ก้าวไกล) together dominated all five social platforms, generating more than 250 million interactions. The only other party that was notable was the Pheu Thai, which garnered 50 million interactions—five times fewer than

TikTok, Thailand's fastest growing social media platform, emerged as the newest campaigning platform for major political parties. The MFP won a landslide in terms of TikTok popularity: top accounts, hashtags, and key words associated with "เลือกตั้ง66" ("election23") were all about the MFP and Pita. While Pita's official TikTok account had 14.7 million likes, his hashtags (#พิธา #พิธาลิ้มเจริญรัตน์) garnered more than 10 billion views. Content relating to Pheu Thai and its leaders—the second most popular party on TikTok—had 20 times fewer views. Many political parties were aware but not prepared for TikTok campaigning and tried to employ the same strategy on Facebook. The United Thai Nation Party and Prayuth Chan-ocha attracted far less engagement from their TikTok accounts than their Facebook ones as they cross-posted much of their content.

The Move Forward Party (MFP) emerged as Thailand's social media winner in the 2023 elections. While all major political parties were actively campaigning online, the MFP's online influence far outstripped its opponents. The key to the MFP's online success was its fan base, who came together largely organically to promote and support the party. The MFP dominated online conversations relating to the election and its content provoked the most engagement. This made MFP content most visible to social media users as platform algorithms prioritize the most popular content.

The online popularity of the MFP was partly a result of the party's personalization of campaigning. Online engagements across platforms that promoted the MFP in the 2023 election were largely driven by individuals and groups not affiliated with the MFP. The Twitter network (figure 4) demonstrates how #Pita and #MFP were driven by activities from accounts not associated with the party or its candidates. Instead, it was produced and shared by networks of micro influencers, large numbers of fans, and established media organizations such as Thairath and Matichon. This means that there was a groundswell of grassroots support for the MFP that was active online that was not witnessed in relation to other major parties. Similarly, on TikTok, top videos relating to the 2023 election and the MFP were made not by the party but by ordinary users and micro influencers like Grandma Hongthong. Existing research suggests that parties that have strong organic grassroots support online tend to do well at the ballot.[51] Organic support, driven by brand discovery, identification, and loyalty, tends to drive engagement, which is crucial to content popularity. The same pattern is not observed for other parties, which suggests that the MFP has a significant competitive leverage online: it has the strongest and most active online support base.

MFP constituency candidates were given a lot of freedom to make their DIY campaigns. In a TikTok-driven election, constituency candidates were competing for offline and online attention from voters. Content that could

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[51]   Maurizio Ferrera, "Resemblances that Matter: Lessons from the Comparison between Southern Europe and East Asia," *Journal of European Social Policy* 26, no. 4 (2016): 374–383.

make candidates stand out both in person and online would help drive engagement. Rukchanok "Ice" Srinok chose to campaign on a bicycle and a small whiteboard—a campaign style that brought her immense popularity and online virality. She pulled out her whiteboard to get people in her constituency to write about their problems and she tried to solve them on the spot. She took the campaign into her own hands and created her own brand that worked, especially on TikTok. Ice beat a long-time politician incumbent in Bangkok despite having no prior political experience. Similarly, Sirilapas "Mew" Kongtrakarn, a former actress, was the "backpacker" candidate: she wore a backpack with a large flag showing her face and walked every street in her constituency. This unique style of campaigning made her campaign go viral, as tens of thousands of people took photos of her and shared them on social media.

How did the MFP grow such a big and committed fan base so fast with a small campaigning budget? Part of the party's success was its clear branding. The MFP as a brand stood for structural change, which included reforming the monarchy and the military. Voters understood what the MFP stood for and could identify with, while it remained relatively vague and unclear for other parties. But there is no denying that, beyond party programs, the "Pita fever" was in full effect: much of the MFP's online popularity was about its leader—Pita—and his persona. This was most evident on TikTok, where Pita was a more popular "brand" than the party itself. This means that for Thai voters, while having more freedom to decide how and when to participate in politics, personal charisma of political leaders still carried some weight in deciding whom to support on election day.

The 2023 election brought increased personalization to Thai politics. It was the first election where social media had a measurable impact on voters' decisions at the ballot, despite most voters having not identified with a particular political party. Social media became the most influential media in this election, surpassing television and other media platforms for voters across all age groups except for the 66+ cohort. Political parties that permitted the freedom and flexibility for candidates to campaign in their own way—the do-it-yourself style—performed extremely well online. The Move Forward Party, with its traditional support base being drawn from the Gen Z and Gen Y generations, was able to mobilize support across the country, across socioeconomic backgrounds and age, due largely to its personalized campaigning. Despite lacking in funds and being committed to not spending money on social media ads, grassroots and organic content from fans helped drive MFP content and ideas cross-platform and into the ballot box. Other parties, while active on social media, did not cultivate an inclusive and open campaigning style where voters felt empowered to make content and participate in promoting it in their own way.

Yet, the authoritarian institutions and political structure presented challenges for a viable MFP-led government. Despite winning the election,

the MFP became the opposition, thanks largely to its policy campaign of reforming the monarchy and the military: two autocratic but powerful political institutions. The 2017 Constitution, drafted following the 2014 coup, included provisions that allowed for a fully appointed Senate with many reserved seats for military officials. This senate, in turn, was the key reason the anti-military reformist MFP did not get to govern. The MFP is vehemently anti-military and strongly reformist when it comes to the monarchical institution. While this radical stance is popular among MFP supporters, it creates a gulf with its political allies and gives reasons for them to abandon ship if they wish to govern. Alienating the MFP seems to have paid off for the rival conservative elites, as they were able to get the MFP's former allies to defect to form a coalition with the incumbent political elites. Eventually, the MFP folded, and the other remaining major pro-democracy party, the Pheu Thai Party, switched sides to form an 11-party coalition with largely pro-military parties. The Move Forward Party, for its part, is now facing a serious threat of party dissolution—a political tragedy its predecessor already suffered just a few years prior.

The Thai case exemplifies the tension between the open politics social media seems to foster and the authoritarian structure that underlies the polities. Political parties could be effective at engendering more inclusive and open political campaigning through personalization strategies that allow for ordinary citizens to engage with politics on their own terms. The findings of the Thai case demonstrate that new and small political parties can supercharge social media strategically to win elections in an authoritarian system where the odds of overthrowing the incumbent are slim. Through strategic campaigning based on online grassroots mobilization and understanding of the media ecology of the elections, new parties and rookie politicians can leverage online tools to activate and mobilize undecided voters.

Yet, the successful case of social media campaigning by the MFP has shown us that "old politics" is not dead and winning on social media and at the ballot may not guarantee the power to rule. The inability of the Move Forward Party to govern despite its victory in the 2023 election is emblematic of the entrenched autocratic resilience in Thailand. This outcome underscores the complex challenges faced by democratic forces within a political system dominated by powerful, non-democratic institutions and deeply ingrained elite networks. The persistent influence of the military and monarchy, along with constitutional constraints and political manoeuvrings, continues to stifle genuine democratic governance, reflecting the ongoing struggle for democratic consolidation in Thailand's tumultuous political environment.

The University of Sydney, Australia, January 2024