

Do political leaders matter? The case of young people and Thai politics

¿Importan los líderes políticos? El caso de los jóvenes y la política Tailandesa

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ABSTRACT

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Image, political leadership, Voting Behaviour

The influence of the image and personality of political actors have long been discussed in political and communication studies. Although an understanding of the impact is inconclusive, it is widely believed that the image or personality of leaders influences voters' electoral choices and, therefore, a political actor's personality is important. Several critics, however, contend that the focus on the party leader encourage voters to engage with the image rather than the substance of politics. This paper argues that the perceived image of a party leader can influence young people's electoral choices, although they may use the image in different ways. As argued by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1981, 1986), among those with lower levels of political knowledge, interest and/or involvement, a leader's perceived image or personality may serve as a shortcut when making their electoral choices. For others, a degree of emotional attachment to a leader may stimulate their consideration of that leader's policies, leading to central route processing. Image can therefore play either a direct or indirect role in young people's voting choices.

RESUMEN

Clasificación JEL:**M37, M38****Palabras clave:**

Imagen, liderazgo político, comportamiento de voto

La influencia de la imagen y personalidad de los actores políticos ha sido ampliamente debatida en estudios políticos y de comunicación. Aunque un entendimiento de su impacto no es concluyente, se cree que en general la imagen o la personalidad de los líderes influye en la elección de los votantes y, por lo tanto, la personalidad de un actor político es importante. Varios críticos sin embargo se oponen defendiendo que al centrarse en el líder del partido se fomenta que los votantes se comprometan con la imagen en lugar de con la esencia del mensaje político. Este artículo argumenta que la imagen que se percibe del líder de un partido puede influenciar la elección por parte de los jóvenes, aunque éstos pueden usar la imagen de maneras distintas. Tal y como se defiende en el Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM, Petty y Cacioppo, 1981, 1986), entre aquellos con niveles más bajos de conocimiento de la política, interés y/o participación, la imagen o la personalidad que se percibe de un líder puede servir como atajo cuando se elige a quién votar. Para otros, un cierto grado de cariño o cercanía por un líder puede estimular su consideración de las políticas de dicho líder, llevando a una vía de procesamiento central. La imagen puede por lo tanto jugar un papel directo o indirecto en la elección por parte de los jóvenes.

Introduction: Images in Politics

The role of image in politics has long been a subject for discussion in political communication studies. The focus on image in election campaigns has been intensified due to changes in political, social, and technological spheres, as well as the competition for audiences in the world of consumerism. Further, the concept of marketing being appropriated from the business world has been applied to the world of politics in order to help political parties influence the mass electorate and retain the party's position in the market where there is more than one 'brand'.

The application of political marketing under the MOP (market-oriented) approach (Lilleker and Lees-Marshment 2005) allows political parties to utilise market intelligence to collect voters' needs, desires, and priorities, and later to help design political products, including the image of a party leader, to meet voters' demands. One good example of re-designing a leader's image to attract voters is the case of Jorg Haider of Austria's FPO (Lederer *et al.* 2005). Haider projected an image of an 'anti politician' in order to attract voters who had a negative perception of politics and politicians. The rebranding was successful as, in 1986, 54 percent of FPO voters cast their ballots because of Haider's image (*ibid.*).

In the Thai political context, it can be said that the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party of Thaksin Shinawatra¹ was the first Thai political party to systematically adopt the MOP approach. Its leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, emerged after the 1997 financial crisis, and by that time the Thais were apathetic to politics because of the unchanging choice of candidates for the premiership (Bowor-

nwathana 2000). With help from market intelligence and opposition research, the TRT positioned itself as the party that 'Acts New, Thinks New' and positioned Thaksin Shinawatra as "a successful and wealthy businessman who wanted to help his country" (Nantavaropas 2006, p. 79). Furthermore, he projected himself as a 'non (or anti) politician' (*ibid.*) making him the outstanding option in the 2001 general election and leading to a landslide victory.

After its defeat in the 2001 and 2005 general elections, the Democrat party (*Phak Prachatipat*) moved towards the MOP approach, as can be seen from the founding of the *Samatcha Prachachon Prachatipat* (People's Assembly). According to its official website, the aim of the assembly was to gather Thai people from all walks of life, nationwide, to explore the country's problems and propose solutions for those problems (The Democrat Party 2005). However, the MOP approach of the Democrat Party is different from the TRT's. The Assembly encourages public participation which reflects the external image of the Democrat Party as a mass bureaucratic party.

Though there are no empirical studies or evidence to show whether, or how, the Democrat party used market intelligence to re-design its new leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva², attempts to re-introduce the leader were made. The party launched commercial spots in the 2006 general election³ with the aim of changing its leader's image to increase his appeal to voters nationwide (Raksaseri and Kurz 2006).

The above examples illustrate that, with the help of market intelligence, a party leader can be designed, re-designed, and marketed to attract

² The current Thailand's Prime Minister

³ However, the campaign was never finished as the October 2006 election was cancelled due to the coup in September

¹ Thailand's 23rd Prime Minister and was ousted by the coup in September 2006

voters. Under the MOP approach, the role of image, especially of the party leader, is highlighted and increasingly becomes important to the election campaign and, ultimately, to success in the election.

Literature Review: Images, Voting Behaviour and its Impact

Image is a major factor of the decision-making process when (1) information is complex, conflicting and/or incomplete, and (2) people have a low degree of involvement and are unable to process an extensive amount of information (Poiesz 1988 cited Van Reil 1995). In politics, it is generally believed that the electorate should scrutinise party platforms or policies when making electoral choices. Arguably, there are some voters who are likely to make decisions on the basis of their impressions, feelings or emotions by using cues provided by parties to make their electoral choice. As confirmed by Campbell (1983), voters who lack information or knowledge, especially the less politically interested, are likely to make voting decisions from an assessment of the candidate's qualities, or perceived qualities.

Iyengar and McGuire (1993) argue citizens are cognitive misers who seek to minimise the time and effort needed to learn about political issues. They therefore prefer to take shortcuts by judging political actors' traits instead of scrutinising political information. McAllister (1996) agrees, contending that, generally, voters prefer to associate political power and authority with a visible and identifiable person, rather than an abstract institution or political idea. This is because, as humans, we find it easier to develop a "personal narrative, and then assess political character from personal character" than to learn

about complex issues or institutions (Popkin 1991, p. 78).

Image is concerned with political style, or how a political actor speaks and behaves. This political style has a crucial influence on voters' perceptions and impressions, and so the candidate's electability. In other words, style constructs, or forms, an image, and image affects the vote. This became central to the political process after the inception and expansion of access to television by mass audiences. Furthermore, in modern British politics, image plays a crucial role in helping to distinguish a party or political actor, and determining credibility, since the policies of the major political parties have become similar (Bruce 1992). In particular, in the television era, the 30-second advertisement helps audiences to form attitudes towards political actors in a short period of time, and the delivery and overall impression left with the viewers are often more important than the message (Newman 1999). Image is likely to be used as a basis of choice if the voter's consideration is limited to certain factors, such as the level of political interest and the inability to differentiate any other factors, for example policy, or performance (Campbell 1983, King 2005b), and weak emotional ties with the parties (King 2005b).

In the Thai political context, where the campaign practice is moving towards presidentialisation, candidates' characters and personality become increasingly important factors in campaigns. According to Worapitayut (interview, December 29, 2005), image is a key factor among young Thais and those less-involved in politics. Since policies proposed by a political party or a candidate are abstract, image becomes the factor which enables voters to remember or recognise

the candidate, which will influence them when they cast their ballots (Sothanasathien 2005).

The influence of image is evident in several elections, for example, the election of the governor of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administrative⁴ in 2000 (Sothanasathien 2005), or the landslide triumph of the TRT in 2001. The move of the Democrat party in the October 2006 election campaign also gave the impression that its party leader was important. The party prioritised the leader in its communication campaigns, possibly in order to drive voters to focus upon the leader rather than the policies. This is further evidence of the importance of the party leader (and his or her image) in the political communication context in Thailand.

Despite the evidence, the image issue remains tentative, and no definite consensus exists as to its impact. Nonetheless, it is widely believed that image and personality increasingly plays a significant role in electoral choices (Kelly Jr. and Mirer 1974, Schulman and Pomper 1975, Harwig *et al.* 1980, Campbell 1983, Bean and Kelly 1988, Bulter and Stokes 1974, Graetz and McAllister 1987, Mughan 1978 cited Bean and Mughan 1989). Furthermore, Thompson (2000) clearly maintains that politics has evolved from 'ideological politics' with class-based parties, to the 'politics of trust'. Therefore, people are looking for credibility and trustworthiness in actual or aspiring leaders, and examine their characters as a means of assessing their suitability, or otherwise, for office.

Several studies claim that the importance of image is overstated, citing as evidence John Major's triumph over Neil Kinnock in the UK in

1992 (McNair 2003). Moreover, Converse and Dupeux (1958), Markus and Converse (1979), Rosenberg *et al.* (1986), or Schaffner *et al.* (1981) cannot provide a clear-cut conclusion as to the influence of candidates' personal qualities and/or image on voting preferences. Equally, the image, personality and personal characteristics of party leaders are downplayed by King (2005c). Personality may be influential at an individual level, but the impact is not strong enough to determine the outcome of elections in the six of the countries studied. However, there were a few elections where personalities did matter. Granted, these were unusual situations, but nevertheless, King accepts that personality does "count for something" (2005a, p. 216). Furthermore, King (*ibid*) speculates that the leader's personality gains importance when party ties weaken. Since voters are not able to differentiate other factors, such as policy, or issues of political parties, and are likely to base voting decisions on image or personality of the leader. However, studies in King's book do not go further to prove this contention.

How are Choices Made?: Elaboration Likelihood Model

Campbell (1983) argues that the level of political interest is related to image voting. He contends that the less well-informed, or less politically interested, voters are likely to have little or no knowledge of less easily understood aspects of the candidates, such as issue preferences. They may not adequately understand issues or ideological information, due to minimal information. Thus, they are likely to judge the candidate on his or her personal qualities. On the other hand, with knowledge of issues and ideology, well-informed voters are less likely to rely upon image evaluation.

⁴ The election is the presidential system as the Bangkok residents can directly choose their governor. The campaigns therefore are presidentialisation in style

The above contention can be explained by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo 1981, 1986), a social psychological theory widely used in the marketing context. Newman and Perloff (2004) suggest that the ELM can be a bridge to understanding and investigating the electorate and their decision making process. In addition, the ELM can enhance researchers' understanding of attitude change in the political environment bombarded with political marketing. Petty and Cacioppo (*ibid*) postulate that, in persuasive communication, attitudes can be changed via two distinct processes, namely the central and peripheral routes. According to Petty and Cacioppo (*ibid*) and Petty and Wegener (1999), attitude changes by means of central route processing result from thoughtful and careful consideration of the merits of information presented in the communication. Individuals will evaluate and think critically about the arguments contained within the message, and generate his or her own thoughts in response to the argument (*ibid*).

In contrast, persuasion via the peripheral route is less thoughtful. Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986) explain that, when a receiver had either low motivated/ability or is unmotivated/unable to carefully consider the message, he or she tends to rely on simple cues in the communication, without scrutinising the merits of the issue-relevant information presented. Such cues can be, for example, the environment, the credibility of the source, the attractiveness of the source, or the mood of the receivers. However, once an individual has made a decision, he or she may become motivated to think about his or her choice. He or she will go through the cognition process, subsequently producing a more permanent change of attitude. The authors further con-

tend that this could ultimately lead to the adoption of attitudes which are persistent, resistant, and predictive of future behaviour.

The situations in which simple cues become more powerful include those when the message has a low level of personal relevance or the receiver has low prior knowledge of the issues, lacks motivation and the ability to process the argument, is distracted from processing the issue-relevant argument, has a low need for cognition, is forced to process the argument, and/or the message is either overly vague or complex (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

Numerous studies demonstrate that a low involvement individual tends to rely on peripheral cues, heuristics, simple messages, gut feelings, celebrity endorsement, mere exposure to the candidates, nonverbal communication, or branded party labels (Kam 2005, Newman and Perloff 2004, Perloff 1984, Petty and Wegener 1999, Wang Erber *et al.* 1995, Zaller 1992).

As posited by Clarke *et al.* (2004), in modern politics, voters lack detailed information about parties' policies. According to the economic theories of democracy, it would be costly for them to seek out and process that information. Thus, voters may rely upon the leader's image, the most important heuristic device, as a cognitive shortcut to their electoral choices.

In addition, emotions can play an important role in the ELM. Emotion can stimulate thinking activities among the electorate. The theory of Affective Intelligence (Marcus 2002, Marcus *et al.* 2000) argues that emotion and reason interact to produce a thoughtful and attentive electorate. A similar contention is suggested by Richards (2004, 2007), who argues that, currently, political campaigns are necessary to establish a political leader's trustworthiness among the electorate,

and create the impression of the political actor as a person. Emotions created by those political campaigns (or the political actor's performance) can help to connect the electorate to the political actors and the policies they represent. Once the electorate establishes feelings or an emotional connection with the political actor, they may carefully consider the policies proposed by him or her. Therefore, according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1981, 1986), the electorate may engage in a central route of persuasion.

Moreover, affective states or feelings can influence the variables in the model. Certainly, feelings serve as a simple heuristic cue when elaboration likelihood is low. Positive attitudes result from 'pleasant affect'; whereas, 'unpleasant affect' will lead to negative attitudes. However, in a high elaboration likelihood condition, feelings serve as persuasive arguments, which affect the individual's analysis or assessment of the merits of the argument. Therefore, it can be said that feelings may influence the judgement of any messages, including the images and personalities of a candidate or a party leader, and the formation of impressions of a candidate or a leader. As a result, image voting can be regarded as an emotional act, but this does not mean that it is irrational.

Research Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper are based on doctoral research amongst young people in Thailand (Chatratchart, 2010). The project adopted a mixed methods strategy, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, for data collection and analysis. Data collection started with an online survey, executed between December 2005 and February 2006, during the regime of

Thaksin Shinawatra, with young people aged 16-20. It generated 113 valid cases for analysis. A self-completion questionnaire was later carried out between December 2006 and January 2007, after the military coup in September 2006 and the downfall of Thaksin Shinawatra. The 7-page questionnaire, with 31 questions, was distributed to 1,080 young people via designated educational institutions across Bangkok. In total, 1,040 questionnaires were returned, but only 797 sets were valid. The project was followed by 8 focus groups, executed between February and March 2007. Forty-six participants from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, level and type of education, and zone of residence joined the discussions.

Data from the questionnaires and online surveys, together with focus group discussions, were triangulated in the analysis and discussion stages in order to obtain in-depth understanding of young people and their political behaviour. However, it must be noted that the data was collected during the fluid political situation after the coup; therefore, the findings of this study are temporal and may make sense only within specific timeframes. Nonetheless, the results offer insights into the political psychology of young Thai voters.

Findings and Discussions:

- **Thai Young People and their Political Behaviour**

The study revealed that Generation Y Thai youth had a positive attitude towards democracy and the practice of voting. Although they had a moderate level of interest in politics, they were not politically active; more than half of them had either never engaged in a politically related activity or had done so only once. Furthermore, almost half of the respondents were less knowled-

geable about politics and did not follow political news. Moreover, young people did not generally align themselves with any particular political party and, thus, they were usually classed as being late deciders or floating voters. These findings support the results of a number of studies of young Thai people (Election Commission of Thailand 2005, Thamrongthanyawong 1998, Boonbongkarn and Phongphaew 1984). Unlike several western democracies (for example Ballington 2002, Putnam 2000), young Thai people intended to exercise their right to vote, although some were sceptical about voting and the level of enforcement to vote was relatively weak. Because of the low degree of political knowledge and interest of young people, their electoral choices were less likely to be sophisticated.

Regarding reasons for voting, party leader and policies shared a relatively significant role in young people's voting choices, with 44.4% and 38.8% respectively. Nonetheless, more people voted for the party with the best leader, which supports several earlier studies (for example Rattanadilok Na Phuket and associates 2002 cited Chantornvong 2002, Boonbongkarn and Phongphaew 1976). The party leader was more important among young people with low and moderate levels of political interest and knowledge. These findings conform to those of the ELM (Petty and Cacioppo 1981, 1986) suggesting that individuals with low or no motivation or ability to consider the message tend to rely on simple cues in the persuasion context. Thai teenagers prefer to make voter choices based on leaders rather than policies because they believe policies can be later developed or improved. However, a weak leader cannot perform well or implement policies.

The significance of the role of the party leader, or an individual candidate, in Thai politics can be explained in several ways. Personalisation has been rooted in the Thai political arena for a long period of time. Being ruled by an absolute monarchy or military prime ministers in recent decades has shaped the perceptions of Thai people in general, so that they look for, or prefer, a strong or authoritarian leader who is decisive and able to get things done. Moreover, a political party can be fragmented and ideologically weak, so a party leader can be pivotal and play a central role in the election campaign. This, in turn, can influence young people's voting choices.

Moreover, in the past, policies or manifestos announced during campaigns were less likely to be implemented as a whole package due to coalition governments. Therefore, Thais view policies as abstract matters, but a person is more substantial. This perception is embedded among Thai people, and it strengthens the vital role of the party leader, or individual candidate, in the voting decision. Nonetheless, the findings reveal that the difference between leader and policy is only 5.6 per cent. This phenomenon can be the result of the TRT's practices which heavily promoted its manifestos in the election campaigns, and put them into effect, which is an unprecedented occurrence in Thai politics.

The research, however, illustrates a similar numbers of vocational students voting for a party with the best leader and for the best policies (43.5% and 42.6% respectively). The study found that, generally, vocational students tended to have a low degree of political knowledge, interest and engagement. According to the ELM (ibid), peripheral cues should play a dominant role in their decision making process. However, this is a special circumstance because of the

strong support for the TRT party among vocational students. They preferred the TRT because of its ex-leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, and its policies and projects which helped less economically advantaged people like themselves and their families. Therefore, they considered the party's policies before casting their votes. However, with their low degree of political knowledge and interest, Chatratchart (2010) questions whether they will scrutinise all parties' manifestos before they make a decision. Also, it is doubtful if they will vote for other parties if they offer the same policies as the TRT. It is less likely that they will do so, because they have a strong attachment to the TRT because of either its ex-leader or its policies. Chatratchart (2010) argues that the emotional attachment to Thaksin Shinawatra encourages them to consider or think about the TRT's policies, since it is contended by Marcus (op. cit) and Richards (op. cit.) that emotion can lead to greater cognitive reasoning.

Alternatively, the practice of postmodern election campaigns makes the electorate less able to differentiate a party from its leader (Mair *et al.* 2004). For the TRT in particular, policies, party brand and leader are interrelated. The brand of leader and party, and populist policies, were integrated by the intensive practice of political marketing through well-planned and well-executed campaigns. It is, therefore, difficult for young voters, especially those with a low level of political knowledge and interest, to distinguish the effect of each factor on their vote. They may say that they are voting for the party with the best policies, when, in fact, their voting decision is the combined effect of party and leader brands, and policies.

• ELM and Thai Young People

According to the ELM, motivation and ability to evaluate arguments are key determinants in understanding how attitudes are formed and changed. It is the so called likelihood of elaboration which determines whether a person will engage in central or peripheral processing. The motivation dimension for this research was operationalised from engagement in politically related activities. The ability dimension was based upon the level of an individual's political knowledge. However, as emphasised by Petty and Wegener (1999) in their later work, the ELM should be understood as a continuum rather than two distinct points, and the respondents of the self-completion questionnaire survey (N = 797) could be classified into four groups as shown in Figure 1.

The educational divide is clearly demonstrated: vocational college students were less knowledgeable about politics than secondary school and university students. These findings are similar to those in Dean's study (2006), suggesting that a lower levels of education limit the level of ability and/or the motivation to process complex messages.

In line with the ELM, young people with a high level of motivation and ability (Group 1) were likely to apply cognitive thinking, since they considered the parties' policies when they made their electoral choices. Nonetheless, a significant number of young people who had a high level of ability and motivation considered a party leader when they voted. Although these people were able to scrutinise political messages, they avoided complex thought processes, which suggests that voting behaviour is not a straightforward matter. With time constraints in the modern world, more and more of the electorate are

High Motivation	
G-2 (n=79) Vocational (44.3%) Leader (48.1%)	G-1 (n=199) Secondary (48.7%) / Uni (37.2%) Policy (41.7%) & Leader (39.7%)
Low Ability	High Ability
G-4 (n=258) Vocational (42.2%) Leader (42.8%) & Policy (41.2%)	G-3 (n=261) Secondary (48.7%) & Uni (34.1%) Leader (48.4%)
Low Motivation	

Figure 1: Profile of Young People according to the ELM (Adapted from Chatratichart 2010)

cognitive misers (Iyengar and McGuire 1993), who try to minimise time and effort spent researching political information. An evaluation of a party leader, for example a successful businessman, can be seen as a metaphor for the future success of a PM, can play a pivotal role in young people's electoral decisions, regardless of their levels of political knowledge or interest.

The leader played a significant role in the voting decisions of young people with a low level of political knowledge and interest (Group 2 – 4), which conforms to the findings of the ELM (ibid) that, when a person is less motivated or unmotivated to critically consider the message, he or she tends to look for, or rely on, simple cues in the persuasion context. The findings support several studies (Kam 2005, Newman and Perloff 2004, Wang Erber *et al.* 1995) stating the importance of cues or shortcuts in an individual's decision making process.

It is interesting to note that a large number of young people with a low level of both cognitive ability and motivation (Group 4) considered a party's manifesto when making their electoral

choices. It is because the majority of this group are TRT loyalists, particularly vocational students, and they considered policies only because they were the TRT's policies. Their strong attachment to the ex-party leader (Thaksin Shinawatra), explains their voting decision in two ways. For some, the emotional attachment can be a simple cue guiding their electoral choice. They regarded Thaksin Shinawatra as being the best leader, and their trust in him simply shifted to trust in the TRT and its policies. However, for others, the emotional connection to a party leader can encourage the voters to thoroughly consider his policies, as contended by several academics (Marcus 2002, Marcus *et al.* 2000, Richards 2004, 2007). Arguably, the preference for Thaksin Shinawatra and his ability, prompted these young people to engage in a more central route of processing. Therefore, the ELM should not be seen as two distinct thought processes, the central and peripheral routes. Arguably, heuristic cues, such as the leader's image, can bring about cognitive processing among less able and motivated voters during a campaign.

- **Influence of Party Leaders on Electoral Choices**

The influence of the leader on Thai young people's electoral choices, no matter how politically aware young people are, is evident from Chatratichart's (2010) study as briefly described in the following paragraphs.

1. Evaluations of the party leader: a predictor of voting

The research illustrates that a positive perception of party leaders guides voting intention. TRT voters demonstrated a positive perception of Thaksin Shinawatra, whereas Democrat voters had a positive view of Abhisit Vejjajiva. Thus, the positive qualities of each leader serve as a peripheral cue in young people's decision-making process. Petty and Cacioppo (1986, p. 18) maintain that peripheral cues refer to "stimuli in the persuasion context that can affect attitudes without necessitating processing of the message arguments." These positive affective cues towards each leader result in a positive attitude being formed towards each party, and lead to positive behaviour, which, in this case, means voting, or having an intention to vote, for the relevant party.

On the other hand, negative evaluations of a party leader can also influence young people's intentions to vote. Obviously, Democrat voters perceived Thaksin Shinawatra as being dishonest, and believe that he could not be trusted to run the country. Therefore, they did not intend to vote for the TRT, and did not consider Thaksin Shinawatra to be the most suitable person to be PM. On the other hand, TRT voters harboured negative perceptions of Abhisit Vejjajiva, especially in terms of the qualities of decisiveness and trustworthiness. TRT voters regarded

decisiveness as being the most important trait of their ideal leader. Since Abhisit Vejjajiva was indecisive, they would not vote for the Democrat party, nor did they think that he was the best choice for PM. These findings are similar to those found by Evans and Anderson (2005) in the 2005 British election: Conservative voters did not like Blair or Kennedy, whereas Labour voters did not like Howard or Kennedy.

Nevertheless, Chatratichart (2010) points out that postmodern campaigns introduce an inter-relationship between the party leader, the party brand and the manifesto, and the emphasis on the party leader attaches the leader brand to the party brand in the minds of voters. As asserted by Mair *et al.* (2004), a party becomes its leader. Therefore, a voting decision may be the combined effect of the leader and party brand. In leader-centred campaigns, it is sometimes difficult for voters to distinguish the party from its leader, and the positive, or negative, feelings towards the leader are the positive, or negative, feelings towards his party. Positive or negative attitudes towards either the leader, or the party, can influence the voting intentions of young voters. Chatratichart (2010) concludes that, at this stage, it is not possible to specify the direction of the relationship, although the findings suggest that an appraisal of the party leader, which can partially be influenced by the party and policy appraisals, is associated with the intention to vote.

2. Perceived negative images: the cost to the party's potential votes

It is found that young people who had a negative perception of the party leader's personal qualities would not vote for the party, even if that leader would perform well in office. It can be said,

therefore, that personal qualities have a strong influence upon voting intentions, since they suggest how that person will behave in office. For example, of those who view Thaksin Shinawatra as being the best candidate for PM, 50 per cent from the pilot study and 23.8 per cent from main study said that they would either not vote for the TRT, or would make a decision later. They all believed that Thaksin Shinawatra was dishonest, and they were, therefore, uncertain whether or not they could trust him to run the country again. Although they recognised that he was a competent PM, they did not think he was fit for the job because of his personal weaknesses.

The influence of the leader's perceived negative personal qualities is also apparent in the voting intentions of the Democrat party. About 46.4 per cent of the respondents who believed that Abhisit Vejjajiva would be the best PM would not vote Democrat. They were unsure if he was intelligent, responsive, got things done, and stuck to his principles. They would therefore either vote for another party or made a decision later. Therefore, perceived negative qualities of party leaders potentially result in a loss of votes for the party.

Another clear example of the impact of negative traits on people's voting intention is the case of Banharn Silpa-archa and his Chart Thai party. Though some young people perceived that Banharn was the most suitable candidate for the premiership, they would not vote for his party. The reason is that they questioned his honesty, and were unsure if he was someone who could be trusted to run the country. Uncertainty about these two qualities contributed to a mistrust of Banharn and cost Chart Thai votes.

Arguably, the influence of perceived negative personal qualities may not be strongly signifi-

cant, although the findings do support Thompson's (2000) concept of 'politics of trust'. He contends that the electorate seek credibility and trustworthiness in its political leaders, and look to their characters as a means of assessing their suitability for office, or lack of it. Young Thai people do not fully trust any of the three leaders because of perceived negative personal traits. Consequently, they are unlikely to vote for their respective parties. It is, therefore, confirmed that perceived negative traits are equally important as perceived positive traits.

3. Personal qualities versus Policies

The importance of a party leader and his personal qualities is confirmed in the group discussions. According to respondents, the leader was more important than the party's policies when they were considering their voting choices. They expressed a unanimous opinion that policies could be developed or improved, but a weak leader would not perform well, or had the capability to implement the policies proposed. Furthermore, the qualities of a leader could not be easily developed or improved within the short period of time he or she was in office.

This emphasis on a competent leader implies the significance of the influence of a leader on young people's electoral choices. They view the personal qualities of a leader as being a tangible element from which they can make an evaluation, and thus, the evaluation of a candidate can be regarded as an instrument for voters to assess how candidates would behave in office, or deal with overall governmental affairs (Miller *et al.* 1986). For some Thai voters, policies are only 'words'. Furthermore, from their experience of many previous governments (mainly coalitions), the manifestos promised by the parties were never

implemented and, thus, young people are extremely sceptical about the policies announced in the campaigns.

Further, respondents with a great deal of political knowledge commented that the Thai electorate, in general, made its voting decision by judging the party leader, not its brand or ideology. Since Thaksin Shinawatra was no longer leader of the TRT, the respondents speculated that the TRT would not win by a landslide, as it had in the previous two elections. They said that the public voted for Thaksin Shinawatra, not for his populist policies. Some respondents speculated that, if Thaksin Shinawatra formed a new party with a new manifesto, TRT voters would vote for that new party and new policies. Previously, TRT voters casted their ballots for the TRT because of its leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, and therefore, their trust in him would be transferred to his new party or anyone he supports.

The 2007 general election confirmed this. The PPP, a reincarnation of the disbanded TRT, won the election with 223 seats out of 480⁵. The election results suggest two interpretations, the first of which implies that the landslide victories of the TRT in 2001 and 2005 were mainly attributed to Thaksin Shinawatra. He was one of the main reasons why people cast their votes for the TRT. People trusted him to run the country because of his personal characteristics. The other related interpretation is that the victory of the PPP was due to the strong influence of Thaksin Shinawatra's name. Samak Sundaravej, the then party leader, positioned himself as Thaksin Shinawatra's proxy and, since he inherited Thak-

sin Shinawatra's support, he received the support of TRT loyalists. This suggests the influence of the leader, Thaksin rather than Samak, on the election outcomes and, again, it seems that the party leader matters.

4. If the person I like does not compete, I will leave my decision open

The party leader also matters amongst undecided voters, in that if they do not see their preferred candidate competing in the election, they do not make an electoral choice. The study illustrates that the majority of those who believe that Gen Surayudh Chulanont⁶, or Purachai Piumsom-bun⁷, was the most suitable candidate for the position of PM, had not made their electoral decision. This suggests that the party leader is an important figure, who can determine people's voting preferences. Since some respondents preferred these two leaders who are not members of any party, the majority of them decided not to vote for any party. They adopted a 'wait-and-see' strategy and claimed they would make up their minds closer to the election date. As floating voters, they are potentially influenced by short-term factors, such as campaigns, and thus, the party's election campaign would play a pivotal role in convincing these late deciders to cast their ballots for the party.

On the other hand, if these two politicians announce their candidacy, these late deciders may possibly vote for their parties. This suggests that the party brand is less significant, and that the party does not matter, but the leader does.

⁵ Although the PPP did not win as decisively as TRT did in 2001 and 2005, it must be accepted that the victory of the PPP was rather impressive by Thai political standards, especially in the context of the 2006 military coup and subsequent official attempts to undermine the party.

⁶ The interim Prime Minister after the 2006 Coup

⁷ The Ex-TRT party member and the most popular person among Bangkok voters, without taking Thaksin Shinawatra and Abhisit Vejjajiva into account, according to ABAC Poll (ABAC Poll Research Center 2006)

They can either join the existing parties or set up their own, which is not difficult to do. It can be observed from Thai political history, that most of the parties were not founded on the basis of their ideology, but to support a strong individual politician. With their positive personal qualities, they may possibly obtain votes from other late deciders who are uncertain about their choice of leader, as well as those of the young people who prefer them. As mentioned earlier, these late deciders can be convinced by the campaigns and short-term factors, such as the party leader.

5. Combined effect of party leader, party brand, and issues

The findings illustrate that votes for the TRT were collectively influenced by the party brand, the issues, and leader's personal qualities. Young people would vote for the TRT because it was the best and only party to tackle their issues, which were closely related to the party's manifesto on the economy. However, they voted for the TRT because they trusted Thaksin Shinawatra to handle their concerns, and it was the leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, and not Chaturon Chaisang⁸, who also influenced their choice. They trusted Thaksin Shinawatra because of his perceived qualities or image, such as his decisiveness and ability to get things done, as well as the fact that he was visionary and well-informed. Hence, the traits of the leader influence the voting intentions by considering the issues. Thaksin Shinawatra's perceived image assured voters of his performance in terms of the issues which concerned them.

The TRT's intensive election campaigns had built a strong party and leader brand, and manifesto, which voters linked together and viewed

as one, for example economic reform, the TRT, and Thaksin Shinawatra. Although some voters may vote for the TRT because of the party's manifesto, it may not be easy to distinguish the effect of the issues on voters without taking into consideration the influence of the party leader. People voted for the TRT on economic issues, since they believed that Thaksin Shinawatra could tackle these with TRT policies. The leader, the party and the issues are integrated, due to the practices of modern day election campaigns, and it is becoming more and more difficult to differentiate the influence of a party's brand from that of its leader.

6. Party affiliation: a less predictable factor

It is true that the majority of young people who identified with the TRT and the Democrat party intended to vote for their parties. However, the study reveals a significant number of respondents who had attached themselves to those parties had not yet made their voting decisions. In the case of TRT and Democrat voters, this can be explained by the perception of the party leaders, since the majority of respondents who aligned themselves with the TRT were in doubt as to whether Chaturon Chaisang, the acting leader, possessed all seven of the most important traits of their ideal leader. Furthermore, they mistrusted the ex-leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, who could work behind the scenes and control the party. The negative personal qualities of both important figures in the TRT deterred voters from casting their ballots for that party.

Similarly, young people who were affiliated with the Democrats did not definitely cast their votes for the party, partly because of their opinion of Abhisit Vejjajiva. The majority of the respondents in this group were uncertain that

⁸ The acting leader of the TRT in 2006

Abhisit Vejjajiva was honest, decisive, able to get things done, or could be trusted to run the country – four out of seven important traits of an ideal leader. The doubts expressed about this leader, therefore, contribute to the reluctance of the respondents in this group to vote for his party.

These two cases support the contention that the traits, or perceived images, of the leader can influence young people's voting intentions. They did not make their voting decision for the party with which they aligned themselves, partially because they either mistrusted, or were uncertain of, the party leader's ability to run the country from their evaluation of his perceived qualities.

All of these six points demonstrate conclusively that a party leader, or his perceived image, matters and can influence how young people vote. It serves as a shortcut or peripheral cue for cognitive misers when they make their electoral decisions. Nonetheless, many critics (for example Franklin 2004) contend that the focus on the party leader encourages voters to engage with the image rather than the substance of politics. Arguably, the positive perceptions or feelings towards a party leader will establish a connection between voters and the party (Richards 2004, 2007). This connection can motivate the electorate to consider other information, such as manifestos, or to look for more information about the particular party before making their voting decision. Apart from being a simple cue, a party leader can build up interest and involvement in the party, and prompt young people to scrutinise other political messages from the party. One clear example is the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama. With his charisma, personality, compelling background, and hyper-media communication strategy, particularly the use of an interactive online mode, he was able to

recruit young and first-time voters to engage in politics and his campaign. This is the power of the simple cues which act as tools for mobilisation. Those heuristic cues can further motivate young people, or the electorate, to spend more time researching information, or engaging in cognitive thinking, when they make their electoral decision.

Conclusion

Generally, young people are politically inactive; they are likely to have limited knowledge and interest in politics. Further, they may not spend time and effort researching party manifestos as they are 'cognitive misers'. However, they are forced to make electoral choices since voting is compulsory in Thailand. Therefore, they consider a party leader when making their electoral choices. In this case, a party leader directly influences young people's electoral choices. On the contrary, young people with a high level of political knowledge and interest consider the parties' policies when they cast their votes. These findings confirm the postulation of ELM (Petty and Cacioppo 1981, 1986) on both the central and peripheral route processes.

Nonetheless, the study demonstrates some disagreement with the ELM theory. A large number of young people with a low level of both political knowledge and interest considered the party's manifesto when making their electoral choices. It can be argued that the emotional attachment with the ex-party leader can encourage voters to think about the party and policies the leader represents. Therefore, these young people go through a central route cognitive process. Heuristic cues, such as a party leader, can bring about central processing among less able and motivated voters, producing a more permanent

change in attitudes. In this case, a party leader indirectly exerts influence on young people's voting choices.

Apart from the role of image in electoral choices, the research reveals the role of issues (policies) in some young voters' decisions. However, the impact of issues on votes cannot be singled out from other factors. The practice of postmodern election campaigns makes it more difficult for the electorate to differentiate between the party from its leader (Mair *et al.* 2004). The issues, party brand and leader are interrelated, especially in the case of the TRT. The party established a strong leader (Thaksin Shinawatra) and party brand, and its famous populist policies from the intense practice of political marketing, as well as well-planned and well-executed campaigns to create a favourable image of the party and its leader. It is therefore difficult for young voters to distinguish the effect of each factor on their vote. They vote for the TRT on the basis that they feel that the party, and Thaksin Shinawatra, could best handle their concerns, especially economic-related issues. The party's populist policies were widely known and related to the TRT brand. Further, Thaksin Shinawatra was perceived as a strong and competent leader, who could put all of the policies into action. Therefore, the TRT votes can be attributed to the combined effect of these three factors. Thus, the party leader does not only directly influence votes, but also indirectly influences how voters perceive the party and its policies.

Implications

1. Political image management

As the leader matters, and politics become the 'politics of trust' or 'perception politics', it is certain that political image management is crucial.

It may not be possible to find a leader or candidate who possesses all of the qualities required by young voters. However, as Machiavelli says in *The Prince*: "...it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them..." (Marriott 1998, Chapter 18). This advice implies the manipulation of a candidate's image, or the creation of an impression among the voters. It must be accepted that impression can determine electoral choice (McGraw 2003). Similar to the commercial world, political image can be easily manipulated, especially in terms of physical appearance such as dress code. However, it is more difficult to manipulate the true identity of a leader or candidate. If the manipulation moves too far from the reality, the leader's reputation can be easily destroyed once the electorate learns that those images are created or are false. For example, Thaksin Shinawatra projected himself as the perfect candidate to rescue the country from the 1997 financial crisis. The campaign promoted him as a wealthy person who was not corrupt, unlike career politicians. However, in the end, his greed – his true identity – destroyed him and his career.

With the trend of practising a Market-oriented approach to politics in Thailand, the leader or candidate can be positioned, or repositioned, to match the electorate's demands. However, as contended by De Landtsheer and associates (2008), if the leader cannot deliver, or the voters' demands are not met, the electorate will change brand at the next election. The detachment of voters from Thaksin Shinawatra and the TRT party clearly illustrates this point.

Therefore, if a political party manipulates voters by creating a false impression of the leader or candidate, the party has to bear the risk of

being rejected when the voters find out. This is a basic marketing rule. To retain the leader's popularity and acceptance among voters, the image, or impression, management has to be done based upon the leader's own identity, not merely a transformation to match the voters' requirements.

Political image management, and an understanding of voters' needs, are the tools to help a party leader to project the right qualities to the right segments. They further help to engage voters with politics, resulting in the strength of democracy and citizen participation (De Landtsheer and associates 2008).

2. Integrated brand communications

Although the findings suggest the importance of a party leader on young people's voting decisions, they do not suggest that a political party can put less effort into communicating their manifestos to voters. Some young people, especially those with a high degree of political knowledge and interest, partly consider a party's manifestos when making their electoral decisions. However, the party leader will be the key factor to differentiate one party from others. Voters will vote for a party whose leader they can trust or rely on, if they do not see the differences in the manifestos offered to them. Potentially, political parties will offer similar manifestos in the next election, and therefore, the campaigns can be a battle to gain trust in a party leader to run the country. As Thompson (2000) suggests, people look to the credibility and trustworthiness of political leaders, and to their character, as a means of assessing their suitability or otherwise for office. A strong and reliable leader will be an asset in campaigns. However, the party brand and policies can complement the success of the leader's image. To help build up a strong party brand as a

whole, it is necessary for the political party to integrate all three elements - leader, policies, party brand - and consistently communicate them to the electorate. Thaksin Shinawatra and the TRT are clear evidence of successfully integrating all three factors into one strong brand which helped to strengthen the image of Thaksin Shinawatra and the TRT to bring about the success of his party in the 2001 and 2005 general elections.

3. Importance of campaigns to late deciders and swing (floating) voters

Similar to youth around the globe, the findings reveal a trend of de-aligned voters and late decision makers among young Thai people, and this trend can present a good opportunity for a political party. Since young people generally do not have a high degree of political knowledge and interest, or any strong political standpoint, they need convincing by campaigns in order to make their voting decisions. This emphasises the significance of the campaigns in influencing swing or floating voters, as discussed by various scholars (for example Crewe 1984, Norris 1997). Campaigns, together with the image or traits of a party leader can, therefore, play a vital role in their electoral choices. Furthermore, the late deciders leave themselves open to new options, so that new faces with new offers have the chance of gaining votes from undecided voters who are bored or have lost interest in the existing options.

In summary, it is necessary for a political party to listen to young people's demands about what they look for in both content (such as policies, issues) and style (such as qualities of a leader). In terms of style, market intelligence will help the party to present and project its leader to meet the voters' requirements by managing his

or her political image or impression. It is anticipated that strong emotional attachment with a party leader, a party and its issues, created by means of integrated brand communication, can encourage voters to move from peripheral to central route processing. The party leader, or his

personality, will not only be a simple cue to guide voters' decisions, but the inspiration or motivation for voters to read or listen to more about the leader, his party and policies, bringing about a more rational and thoughtful voting decision at a later date.

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