

# The cost of politics in **Thailand**

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# Introduction

Thailand's May 2023 general election demonstrated that many newcomers, even those with little to no previous electoral experience, were capable of defeating incumbents, defying election polls and academic predictions. In many constituencies the elections indicated a shift away from traditional, old-money politics, and an embracing of newcomers with dedication, a positive development for the future of Thai politics. Despite this, money continues to be a prominent feature of parliamentary politics in the country. Securing an election victory is a formidable task; repeating this success in subsequent elections is even more challenging. The demands of a political career encompass time, commitment, connections, and financial resources. Vote buying remains a significant factor in some areas, playing a crucial role in the success of both new candidates and incumbents, despite provisions outlawing it.

This study aims to understand the costs of politics that aspiring and successful political candidates must endure in accordance with Westminster Foundation for Democracy's "cost of politics" methodology. This approach aims to understand the costs from the moment an individual decides to enter parliamentary politics to the end of their term holding office, where they are successfully elected. In doing so it seeks to highlight barriers to entry, analyse the implications high financial costs can have on wider democracy and propose recommendations and avenues for reform.

## Methodology

To gather the information required, this study primarily employed qualitative research methods. The researchers conducted 20 in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs) with Thai academics, representatives from the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), assistants to Members of Parliament (MPs), former MPs, former political party members, party members, party-list MPs, and constituency MPs. Out of the 20 KIIs, three MPs and one former party member were women, whilst six of the interviewees were younger than 40. Interviews were conducted online, and in person in Bangkok (central Thailand) and Chonburi province (eastern Thailand) using structured, semi-structured, and unstructured formats. These interviews were complemented by an extensive literature review which drew on data from the ECT, electoral reports, and Thai and English reports from national and international organisations related to the 2023 general elections.

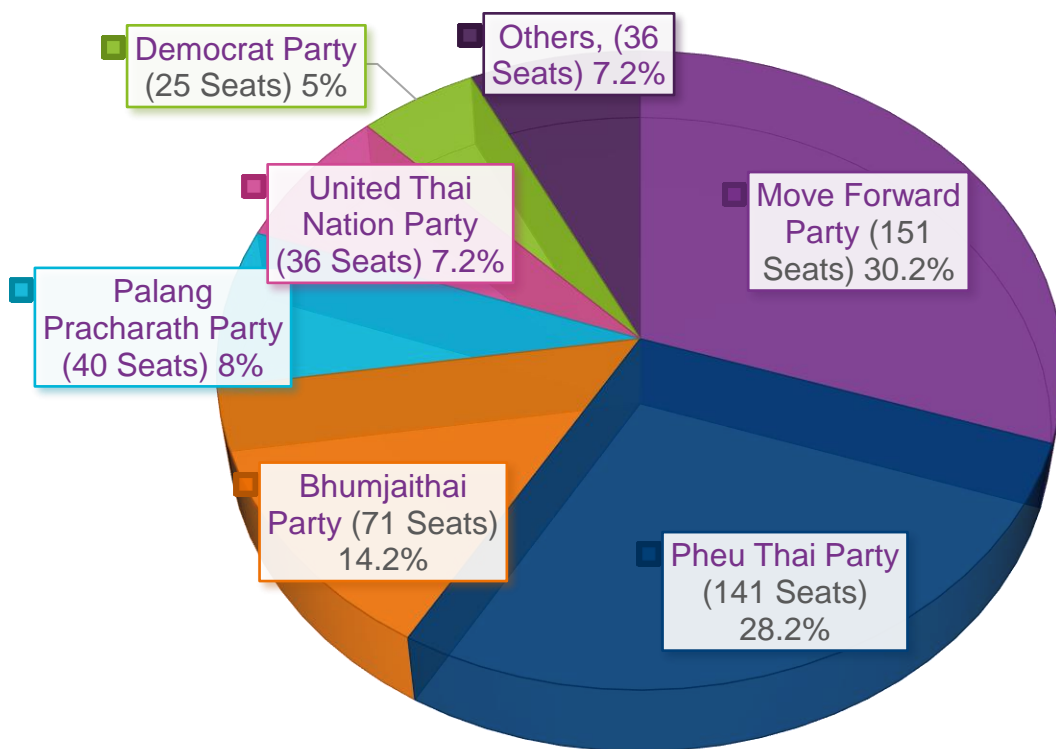
## Context

Electoral politics in Thailand is complex. First-time voters in the 2023 general election had lived through two coups, in 2006 and 2014, and faced a five-year period of full-fledged military rule (2014-19) when General Prayuth Chan-o-cha assumed the role of prime minister. This is largely in keeping with Thailand's democratic journey. Since the absolute monarchy system was abolished in 1932, the country has held 27 general elections, witnessed 13 coups, and been governed by 20

constitutions. The return of elections in 2019 provided an opportunity for change, but due to the electoral formula established during the military junta's tenure, the pro-government party, Palang Pracharath (PP), in coalition with other parties, were able to form a coalition government and 2014 coup leader, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha became a prime minister.

Placing third in the 2019 election, after winning 81 of the 500 seats just a year after its formation, the Future Forward Party (FFP) quickly gained popularity, particularly among youth, by utilising social media to promote its more progressive democratic positions. Although the party was dissolved, and its executives barred from election candidacy, holding executive roles in any political party, and registering a new party for ten years following a 2020 Constitutional Court ruling that the party leader's lending of personal funds to the party, was unconstitutional,<sup>1</sup> individuals who were not barred from political participation quickly established a new party, the Move Forward Party (MFP) which secured the highest number of seats – 151 – in the 2023 elections.

**Figure 1: Leading six parties in Thailand's 2023 elections<sup>2</sup>**



Thailand's electoral system has undergone change near every time the constitution is amended, underscoring its significant impact on electoral strategies, campaigning, and election outcomes for political parties. In the 2023 general elections, voters had the option to split their vote between a candidate and a political party. This incorporated both a 100-seat party list system – with party list seats allocated based on the proportion of votes each political party received - and a constituency-based system with 400 constituencies. Although the MFP won the highest number of seats, the prime ministerial selection process required a candidate to gain at least half of the votes from the

entire legislature, which included 250 senators appointed during Prayut's tenure. Pita Limjaroenrat, the leader of the MFP, was unable to obtain the votes required and in the second round of voting, many elected MPs who initially supported Pita shifted their support to the party with the second-highest number of seats (141), the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) enabling it to form a coalition government with some of Prayut's former pro-government parties. Whilst 67 political parties competed for party-list MP positions and 70 for constituency MP positions, less than one-third (18) of the competing parties managed to secure at least one seat in the legislature.<sup>3</sup>

## Who's who in Thai politics: Typologies of candidates and parties

In 2023, 31% of candidates elected were under the age of 40, with almost half (45%) aged between 41 and 60 years old.<sup>4</sup> But more successful youth politicians (under 40 years old) emerged from the constituency MP races (35.3%) rather than the party-list contests (14%).<sup>5</sup> This is also true for female contestants with just 14% winning seats through party-list contests as compared to 19.2% overall.<sup>6</sup> Male dominance of the political space is reflected in the number of contestants. Of the total number of political candidates who ran for constituency MP positions, 3,898 were male (81.5%) against 883 female candidates (18.5%).<sup>7</sup> But beyond their gender and age, political candidates competing for seats in the legislature can be categorised into three primary groups: incumbents, those from political dynasties and newcomers.

According to 2023 data from the ECT, 46% of those elected in the 2023 general election reported their prior or current occupation as politician. However, this data does not specify whether these candidates were incumbents in the same constituencies or whether they represented the same party as in the previous election<sup>8</sup>, or if they had previously held lower-level political positions such as district headmen or members of Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). Incumbents tend to depend primarily on personal funds and supporters linked to political parties for their campaigns, although those who are key figures in their political parties are often expected to make substantial donations to the party.

Political dynasty candidates are highly sought after because of their strong connections with the voter base and their potential to self-fund. In Chiang Mai province for example, six out of ten candidates representing the PTP were from political families. Among these, four were contesting for MP positions in a general election for the first time. Those representing political dynasties who align with establishment political parties (see below) have enhanced opportunities for electoral success. But being part of a political dynasty often leads to expectations from political parties that these candidates have the resources to self-fund their campaigns, either through established family wealth or via family connections. Furthermore, candidates from political dynasties are also sometimes expected to be major donors to the political parties they represent.

Newcomer candidates bring a fresh vibe to the Thai political arena. They come from diverse backgrounds, and their reasons for competing in elections can vary. Some interviewees expressed a desire to see change in Thailand, whilst others gained experience working with local authorities, leading them to believe that becoming MPs would allow them to contribute more to their

communities. Although newcomers to a political party are not typically expected to make tangible financial contributions, this does not mean they can rely solely on financial assistance from the party during the election campaign. At a minimum, candidates are expected to cover their personal expenses and be financially self-sufficient during the campaign period.

Incumbent, political dynasty and newcomer candidates exist across four main 'types' of political party - popular, new, one-owner and establishment. While some parties may exhibit characteristics of more than one type, they are generally aligned with one of the four main categories. Popular parties, such as the MFP, appeal to a wide range of candidates, but particularly more youthful aspirants. The popular party has built a strong brand, which ensures that selected candidates benefit from a certain number of votes from dedicated supporters who feel an affiliation with the party. Furthermore, their recruitment process is largely seen as fair and transparent. During the 2023 election, aspiring MFP candidates first completed online questionnaires, followed by interviews with main party members. Successful interviewees were then invited to participate in various party projects and group activities. At this stage, candidates did not need to contribute financially to the party but were expected to invest their time and cover personal expenses like travel and food. It was only at a later stage - less than a year before the actual election date - after candidates have contributed their time and effort, that the party decided whether to officially select them. Some candidates interviewed had been engaged with the party since 2019, while others had been involved for less than two years before the 2023 general election. As one successful candidate explained:

*“Approximately 7,000 candidates applied, and an algorithm was used to narrow the pool down to about 1,000-2,000 candidates; the exact number is unclear. Then, each application was manually reviewed, further reducing the number to around 400 candidates. Following this, interviews were conducted to select the final 200 candidates. The application process was comprehensive, requiring detailed responses and the submission of two video clips, each five minutes long. The questions were designed to probe whether candidates believe in parliamentary mechanisms for change, identify the country's primary issues, and discuss the top three initiatives they are most eager to promote. Essentially, the selection process was akin to an audition, conducted over several rounds.”<sup>9</sup>*

New parties, which includes the Fair Party (FP) and the Thailand Together Party (TTP), tend to have been operational for a much shorter period<sup>10</sup>. Although these parties may have limited connections and resources, they welcome newcomers who can significantly contribute and have a prominent voice in its direction, more so than in established parties. While there is no guarantee of securing seats for political candidates that are selected, the platforms of new parties provide a valuable starting point to learn the political ropes. The candidate selection process tends to be less formal in these structures and is instead often based on personal connections. The primary focus is on whether the candidate's ideology aligned with that of the party, rather than undergoing a formal interview or application process. This type of party offers only a limited budget to its candidates; consequently, candidates must depend largely on their personal finances to fund a campaign.

A 'one-owner' political party, such as the Thai Liberal Party (TLP) and the Thai Local Power Party (TLPP), is publicly recognised as being owned or established by a single individual or family. The one-owner party heavily relies on the party leader's leadership or the influence of its political dynasty. The candidate recruitment, to some extent, is ideology-driven, but a significant factor is the view and opinion of party leader, often a prominent politician with extensive connections. His or her influence is used to attract experienced political figures to join. The one-owner party can provide some funding for its candidates election campaigns, but individuals are responsible for securing additional funds to cover any shortfall if this amount is insufficient. A downside is that some constituency MP candidates, recognising their slim chances of winning – either due to being newcomers competing against incumbents or belonging to a less renowned party – may choose to use only a portion of the allocated budget for the campaign, diverting the remainder for personal use. This can happen because one-owner parties often lack the staff to monitor how candidates utilise their funds closely.

Finally, establishment parties, such as the PTP, the Democrat Party (DP), and the PPP, can draw on strong connections and abundant tangible and intangible resources. Key figures in these parties are well-known nationwide, with some belonging to political dynasties or being long-time politicians. Establishment political parties typically have major donors and strong connections with prominent entrepreneurs and high-ranking officials. As a result, established political parties generally have greater opportunities to be selective during candidate recruitment. Candidates can secure endorsements from the party by making donations and are largely expected to fund their own political campaigns. The party welcomes candidates who switch from other parties but also recruits new candidates who are relatives of its current MPs – political dynasty candidates. These new candidates often step in when their parents retire from politics or, if the parents have not yet retired, the party may strategically place the parent and offspring in different constituencies to both compete for election.

## Drivers of the cost of politics

### Candidate recognition

Nearly all candidates aiming to enter politics strategically invest in their constituencies for a year or two prior to the actual election. This involves attending local events such as funerals, merit-making ceremonies, weddings, and special occasions like Children's Day. However, they approach this differently based on available resources, their commitment to competing, and their confidence in the likelihood of the formal selection process being in their favour. For instance, one candidate, aware since 2019 of her candidacy in the 2023 election, began early engagement with her constituency, spending between THB 200,000-250,000 (US\$5,714-7,142) over two years. In contrast, another candidate limited his investment to travel expenses and personal time during this stage due to uncertainty about the constituency allocation from his party. It is also important to note that candidates themselves, not just parties, make strategic decisions based on financial



considerations with some candidates selective about which party they join and the financial ramifications it might have.

Candidate recognition expenses typically occur before any restrictions are imposed on candidates regarding donations to such events, which are limited to the election campaign period. ‘Connectors’ are candidates who seek to avoid using their own funds at this stage. Instead, they seek support from institutions or government bodies that are viewed as credible to and aiding their local communities. One successful candidate explained that:

*“The locals are familiar with the customs of their traditional representatives. For example, the previous person used to organise events, or they did this and that for them. Therefore, they are accustomed to asking for money and help for various important days and traditional festivals, like during Songkran [Thai New Year] or other significant holidays. There are quite a few of these requests. I think we [political candidates] need to have a partnership with the local authorities; we need to ask the local authorities if we can request someone for this or that. Ultimately, we need what is called a ‘connection’ in the council or with someone at a government agency, an agency that is responsible for these matters. For example, if it’s a sports activity, we would know which agency is responsible for sports activities. It would be our duty as politicians to coordinate with them, rather than using our own money. Using personal funds can lead to never having enough and could eventually be a cause of corruption.”<sup>11</sup>*

‘Providers’ are those who willingly contribute financially to local events but do so with a predetermined budget for each occasion and a monthly spending cap of between 10,000 – 30,000 Thai baht (THB) (US\$285–857). As a provider, one candidate mentioned having a restricted budget of a maximum of THB 2,000 (US\$57) per event. The number of events a candidate attends per month depends on invitations received and the importance of the event, which is calculated by the number of attendees and their social status. For instance, events with governors, local leaders, and public figures are regarded as must-attends. A candidate can attend up to three events per day, or 60 events per month during an election cycle. Although not every event requires a cash contribution, the more events the candidate attends, the more likely they are to spend money.

‘Over-spenders’ struggle to control their spending, fearing loss of support or competitive disadvantage if they do not invest enough in this community recognition phase. Regardless of limited resources, they take on all requests. As one candidate who tried to fulfill every request in the first run for a constituency MP position explained, this can have implications during the campaign period, forcing aspirants to secure loans for as much as THB 1-1.5 million (US\$28,571-42,857). Finally, there are the ‘non-spending attendees’. This type of candidate chooses to participate in local events without spending money. Instead, they often contribute in-kind, by volunteering their time at such events or by bringing their campaign team to assist with its organisation.

Different types of candidates from the different types of parties, independent of age and gender, can fall into each of these categories. However, many candidates from established parties fall into the category of connectors in seeking support from backers, including local capitalists or nationally prominent business owners with capital ready to support political parties or candidates, who may reside in the areas where their businesses are located, or expect policies of that party to affect support for economic growth. On the other hand, young candidates with few or no connections – most often those representing new and progressive parties - tend to fall into the category of ‘overspenders’.

## The campaign period

The official campaign period for Thailand's 2023 general election was 55 days, beginning with the official declaration of parliament's dissolution on 20 March, and concluding on the day before the election. According to a representative of the ECT at the provincial level, the official average expenditure was around THB 300,000 baht (US\$8,517). However, it is widely assumed that many candidates spend more than they report to the ECT but declare a false budget just to appear as though they are playing by the rules. However, none of the interviewees reported spending over the THB 1.9 million limit for constituency MP positions to the ECT<sup>12</sup>, with spending of between THB 200,000 and 1.5 million (US\$5,714-US\$42,857) documented. Those competing for party-list MP positions generally spent much less than their counterparts running for constituency MP seats with no interviewed party-list candidate spent more than THB 200,000 (US\$5,714). However, higher spending does not necessarily equate to electoral success. In Chiang Mai province, a candidate invested THB 1.1 million (US\$31,428) in the campaign. Despite this, the candidate was defeated by a candidate who spent THB 750,000 (US\$21,428). A key vote winner, beyond financial resources at this individual's disposal, appears to have been the popularity of the political party with which the candidate is affiliated. In Bangkok, MFP candidates won 32 out of 33 MPs races, whilst in Chiang Mai, PT, which had won all seats in the 2019 elections, managed to secure only two in 2023, with the MFP winning seven.

The three most significant expenses for constituency candidates during the campaign period are labour costs, vehicle rental and the printing of posters. However, this varied among candidates interviewed. Labour costs differed significantly, as some candidates relied on volunteers, reducing the need for paid labour. However, those who paid campaign workers typically adhered to the legal minimum wage of the province - which ranges from THB 320-350 (US\$9.14-US\$10) per day - plus food and beverages. On average, candidates interviewed for this study hired between four and nine campaign workers for the entirety of the campaign: at a total cost of between THB 66,560 to 234,000 (US\$1,900 - US\$6,685). For vehicle rentals, candidates in larger constituencies tended to spend more, with each car incurring both rental and fuel costs. For instance, one candidate hired three campaign vehicles at a rate of THB 1,700 (US\$50) per car per day excluding fuel meaning, equating to a total cost of THB 214,200 (US\$5,838).<sup>13</sup>

This was not the same for candidates in Bangkok. Based on our small sample, the budget expenditure during the election cycle for constituency MP candidates in Bangkok generally does

not surpass that of candidates in provincial areas and in most instances was lower. This is also the area where most of the direct political party financial support is targeted. All political parties printed media like posters and brochures and manufactured items such as hats and logo shirts even if most candidates reported that these materials were insufficient. As a result, they had to invest in additional posters, brochures, name cards, and custom logo shirts featuring their names alongside the party's as one successful candidate explained:

*“The political party covers some of the costs for campaign posters, and I also pay for some myself. But if additional posters are desired, you must pay from your own budget”.*<sup>14</sup>

## Women’s campaign experience

Though there are not significant differences in budget spending for general elections, female candidates face additional barriers that limit their political participation. This includes being judged on their appearance, being overlooked by male peers when expressing opinions, and being targeted for their personal style and dress code on social media. According to one female candidate “we [women] are often judged, aren't we? Even within the party, it seems like men have more rights and their voices are listened to more”. In certain areas of Thailand, particularly in the deep south, local customs and traditions uphold a reserved role for women. As a result, finding female candidates who can campaign day and night like their male counterparts is uncommon, unless the candidates are already known in the community as an activist.

Whilst a constituency MP campaign requires door-to-door canvassing, organising events, traveling, and supporting locals and local events, party-list aspirants largely depend on the strong brand (if any) of their political party with their expenditure outlay around elections linked primarily to boosting their position within the party, to ensure they are placed as high up the list as possible. While the total amount of these contributions remains undisclosed, it is rumoured that the top party-list MP candidates can match the spending levels of the highest spenders among the constituency candidates. This is because those who receive an endorsement from a prominent political party and place among the top five names on the party-list are almost guaranteed a seat in the legislature. Additionally, if the party manages to be part of the coalition government, there is a high chance that the top party-list MPs can ascend to ministerial or deputy minister positions.

But candidates, particularly from one-owner, establishment and popular parties, can also receive substantial support from their parties. This includes through major public speaking events that are organised and financed by the party, where high-profile party members visit constituencies to show support, accompany candidates, and deliver speeches. For the most part candidates are not required to cover the associated travel expenses of visiting speakers but they are often responsible for ensuring that a crowd is in attendance. This can be a financial drain for establishment party

candidates, more so than popular party candidates who can rely on more organic supporter participation, given they must cover the costs of bringing supporters to public speaking events. Participant observation by the research team in one province in northern Thailand, witnessed voters being provided with ‘free’ transportation to an event. Furthermore, after the event, each attendee received THB 300 (US\$8.50) as compensation for attending. In a different constituency within the same province, another political party offered THB 750 (US\$21.50) to attendees of their event.

Receiving money from canvassers for attending a public speaking event is seen by recipients as compensation for the wages lost foregoing a day’s work. Nonetheless, there are instances where the compensation for attending such events significantly exceeds the minimum wage. Furthermore, although voters do not regard this practice as vote-buying, it is technically illegal and is unlikely to be declared in campaign expenditure reporting to the ECT. Direct vote buying was also still a reality in the 2023 general election even though it was not mentioned directly by individuals engaged for this study. According to an interviewee, some southern Thai constituencies saw elected candidates spend THB 50 million (US\$1.42 million) on vote buying, with each vote costing between THB 1,500-2,000 (US\$ 43-57).<sup>15</sup>

## Budgeting for the aftermath

In the immediate post-election phase, some elected MPs must allocate funds to hire lawyers to defend themselves against accusations of electoral fraud, falsifying paperwork, or defamation. Following the 2023 general election 365 election-related complaints were brought, with three cases currently undergoing criminal prosecution.<sup>16</sup> This is a decrease compared with the 2019 general election, where there were 592 complaints, and 20 cases criminally prosecuted.<sup>17</sup> While some political parties have their own lawyers to handle these matters, MPs sometimes choose to hire their own legal representatives to manage their cases and ensure a better chance of success. The cost of hiring lawyers is paid for by MPs and ranges from THB 8,000 to 15,000 (US\$229-429) per month. Consequently, some MPs opt to appoint a lawyer as part of their specialist staff, with a monthly salary of THB 15,000 baht (428 USD).<sup>18</sup>

Once confirmed in office, elected MPs encounter various types of requests, outside of their official mandate, to advocate on behalf of their constituents that have cost implications. Direct donations include requests for items such as sportswear for local events, toys for children, and food and beverages, including alcohol for community events. In many instances, transferring money directly rather than sourcing vendors is more convenient. One MP explained how she had chosen to fulfill these requests by donating no more than THB 3,000 per request (US\$85), with a monthly budget of THB 20,000-30,000 (US\$571–857) allocated for direct donations within the constituency. Another elected MP had set a monthly donation cap of THB 15,000 baht (US\$428). Non-monetary requests were also highlighted. MPs encounter requests such as writing recommendation letters for parents wanting their children to be admitted into prestigious schools or requests to nominate someone for a local position, like being part of a committee working for the parliament. MPs often receive these requests through comments and messages on their Facebook fan pages.

Additionally, MPs are expected to repair and address structural issues in their constituencies, even though the primary responsibility belongs to local authorities. Depending on the scale of the issues, this can cost anywhere from THB 5,000 up to 200,000 (142 – 5,714 USD) with priority given to resolving larger-scale issues as this can improve constituent perceptions of their performance. A failure to provide timely and effective redress is often blamed on the MP and can be detrimental to their future election chances.

Not only are elected MPs required to dedicate cash, connections, time, and effort to their constituents, but MPs are also required to donate a portion of their salary to the party. One political party asks for a monthly contribution of THB 3,000 from constituency MPs (US\$85), while its party-list MPs are expected to donate THB 15,000 per month (US\$428). It also mandates that since elected MPs can have up to eight support staff paid for by the state, one assistant position from each MP must be allocated for party purposes, although this is done informally. Elected MPs are entitled to have one personal advisor, two specialist staff members, and five assistants.<sup>19</sup> Other MP benefits include travel expenses, medical care, welfare benefits, and committee meeting allowances, which are in addition to a monthly salary of THB 113,560 (US\$3,244).<sup>20</sup>

## Sources of funds

The source of funds required to compete for elective office can be divided into two main types: personal funding and funding by political parties. Interviewees from two parties reported receiving THB 300,000 (US\$ 8,571) in financial assistance, an amount which can cover half of the average total campaign costs. But this is not formalised or consistent. Some political parties have major contributors who can cover significant campaign costs, while some candidates have sizeable resources at their disposal that reduce their need for party contributions.

Those with minimal financial constraints, often candidates from political dynasties or incumbents, are at an advantage, able to participate in elections without financial worries. But most candidates are required to, at least partially, self-fund and largely this comes from personal finances. The consensus view was that financial readiness is a crucial consideration before pursuing a political career, rather than viewing politics as a stable source of income. Respondents agreed that it was nearly impossible for individuals to raise funds from the public to meet the remaining costs, although formal party fundraising efforts can benefit individual constituency campaigns, to some degree, as one interviewee explained:

*“There are two main fundraising channels: direct fundraising for the party, where the collected funds are distributed across all constituencies, which is then allocated as campaign banners, and fundraising directly for the constituency”.*<sup>21</sup>

One candidate explained that remaining in a stable job rather than engaging in politics would have made more economic sense but driven by a passion for change and a belief in the ability to

influence Thai politics, they accepted this financial sacrifice and campaigned not only without a salary, but incurring significant expenses, in the hope of winning a seat.

## Implications

The unpredictable and costly nature of Thai politics necessitates that individuals aspiring to enter national-level politics ensure they have financial stability during periods of electoral uncertainty, such as coups d'état, political party dissolutions, or personal bans from politics which can range from five to ten years. Consequently, potential candidates need to be financially independent, not relying on an MP's salary for survival. Interviews revealed that many MPs maintain additional jobs or run businesses to hedge against political instability. For example, a constituency MP from Bangkok continues to lecture part-time at a university, another serves as a part-time doctor in private clinics, and some manage personal or family businesses before becoming MPs, and even during their tenure. This can undermine Thai democracy in that MPs and their assistants cannot focus solely on their work as they take on additional jobs for personal security.

Vote-buying further undermines Thai democracy, with funds often sourced from illegal or grey-market businesses such as betting websites, casinos, and state concession businesses through proxies. In 2023, there were cases where candidates conceded defeat before election day, citing their inability to match the extensive vote-buying efforts of opponents.<sup>22</sup> This admission underscores that election outcomes can be influenced more by financial power than by the genuine will of the electorate. Another significant point to note is the increasing trend where electoral results no longer determine who governs. Decision-making is increasingly occurring outside the electoral process, often behind closed doors, rendering the substantial financial investments by candidates potentially futile. Despite winning the most seats in the legislature the MFP was obstructed from assuming power and now faces numerous legal challenges that could lead to its dissolution.

Finally, while campaign spending limits set by ECT are not particularly restrictive, practical campaigning often involves substantial unofficial expenses for political networking and challenging entrenched political factions, known as political investment costs, aimed at securing broad support prior to elections. The exclusion, particularly of female and youth candidates, is a consequence of this reality. Youth and women candidates, unless they come from political dynasties, face disadvantages in building connections to garner financial support for campaign financing from capitalist groups. Furthermore, within the party, female candidates may be perceived as having less influence in presenting various issues than their male counterparts. Male politicians' voices appear more widely accepted within the party than female politicians.<sup>23</sup>

# Recommendations

## Punish electoral transgressions

In the 2023 general election, the ECT was authorised to issue four types of cards; yellow, orange, red, and black to penalise candidates in cases of election fraud, depending on the severity of the offense<sup>24</sup>. At least three candidates from parties that are part of the current coalition government were given both red or black cards with two accused of buying votes, and the third facing charges of offering favours to voters in exchange for electoral support.<sup>25</sup> But whilst the ECT has successfully penalised some former political candidates, in reality, numerous instances of vote buying and electoral misconduct either failed to reach the commission or were abandoned by whistleblowers when court proceedings became necessary. Whistleblowers were often reluctant to reveal their identities and despite being offered protection rights by the ECT were hesitant to get involved at the court level. To address this, stronger regulations that can reduce the time and simplify the process to make it more feasible and ensure safety for anonymous whistleblowers are required.

## Enforce existing regulations

The ECT's effort to establish spending limits for candidates and political parties during the election cycle was a positive step. However, in practice, many candidates and parties often violated these rules without facing any repercussions. Vote buying persisted in the 2023 general election in Thailand, predominantly in provincial areas. To better enforce regulation there should be greater civic awareness and citizen-political aspirant dialogue on the issue of vote buying, alongside more robust enforcement of the rules. Cooperation between the ECT and local authorities should be strengthened, such that the ECT can assign co-investigation tasks to local authorities such as police officers, local government officials, and even citizen volunteers. Making the investigation processes transparent can also raise wider awareness of campaign limits and restrictions ahead of subsequent elections.

## Reform political party financing

Thailand has provisions for political party financing which is managed by the ECT through the "Fund for the Development of Political Parties". The amounts distributed are calculated from annual tax donations from citizens, funding from political party maintenance fees, votes received by political parties in the election for the year following the general election, and its number of political branches<sup>26</sup>. Although the creation of the 'Fund for the Development of Political Parties' was a good initiative by the ECT, it tends to benefit the major political parties.

Exploring ways to make funding available to individuals, small-scale political parties, and creating dedicated funds for youth and women aspirants can help address representative imbalances. The 2023 election results show that the percentage of female candidates and their election success

rate does not significantly differ from male counterparts, suggesting that an increase in female representation can be driven by a higher number of female contestants.

**Figure 2: Political parties that received the highest funds from Fund for the Development of Political Parties<sup>27</sup>**

<b>Move Forward Party</b>	THB 52.5 million	US\$ 1.5 million
<b>Pheu Thai Party</b>	THB 16 million	US\$ 457,600
<b>United Thai Nation Party</b>	THB 10.7 million	US\$ 304,700
<b>Democratic Party</b>	THB 6.7 million	US\$ 191,800
<b>Prachachat Party</b>	THB 2.8 million	US\$ 78,900



# Endnotes

- 1 The Standard. 2023. 21 กุมภาพันธ์ 2563 – ศาลรัฐธรรมนูญสั่งยุบพรรคอนาคตใหม่ และตัดสิทธิ์กรรมการบริหารพรรค 10 ปี (21st February 2020 – The Constitutional Court ordered the dissolution of the Future Forward Party and imposed a 10-year ban on the party's executives from political activities) [online]. Available at <https://thestandard.co/onthisday21022563/>.
- 2 The Election Commission of Thailand. 2023. ข้อมูลสถิติการเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร พ.ศ. 2566 (Statistical data of the House of Representatives election B.E. 2566 (2023)). Bangkok: Sahai Block and Printing.
- 3 The Election Commission of Thailand. 2023. ข้อมูลสถิติการเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร พ.ศ. 2566 (Statistical data of the House of Representatives election B.E. 2566 (2023)). Bangkok: Sahai Block and Printing.
- 4 The Election Commission of Thailand. 2023. ข้อมูลสถิติการเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร พ.ศ. 2566 (Statistical data of the House of Representatives election B.E. 2566 (2023)). Bangkok: Sahai Block and Printing.
- 5 The Election Commission of Thailand. 2023. ข้อมูลสถิติการเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร พ.ศ. 2566 (Statistical data of the House of Representatives election B.E. 2566 (2023)). Bangkok: Sahai Block and Printing.
- 6 The Election Commission of Thailand. 2023. ข้อมูลสถิติการเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร พ.ศ. 2566 (Statistical data of the House of Representatives election B.E. 2566 (2023)). Bangkok: Sahai Block and Printing.
- 7 The Election Commission of Thailand. 2023. ข้อมูลสถิติการเลือกตั้งสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร พ.ศ. 2566 (Statistical data of the House of Representatives election B.E. 2566 (2023)). Bangkok: Sahai Block and Printing.
- 8 The old practice of switching political parties or acquiring candidates from other parties still exists. While no party openly admits to buying out candidates from rivals, research suggests that the price for such acquisitions can reach as high as THB 90 million (US\$2.57 million). See Thansettakij. 2023. รับได้ไหมถ้าเลือกตั้ง 2566 ชื้อ สส.ตัวท็อปราคาทะลุ 90 ล้าน (Are you okay with the fact that in the 2023 election, the top MPs were bought for over 90 million baht?). [online]. Available at [https://www.thansettakij.com/politics/thailand-elections2023/554895#google\\_vignette](https://www.thansettakij.com/politics/thailand-elections2023/554895#google_vignette). The reason why a party might spend so much on a particular candidate is because the party believes that recruiting potential winning candidates increases its chances of negotiating positions and budgeting when it is selected to be part of the government.
- 9 Interview with MP from popular party, 14 December 2023.
- 10 Typically, less than a decade.
- 11 Interview with a MP from popular party, 14 December 2023.
- 12 Regulations on permitted spending were established following consultations between representatives from political parties and officials from the ECT. In the event of the dissolution of parliament, constituency MPs are allowed to spend a maximum of THB 1.9 million

- (US\$54,285) whilst political parties covering party-list MPs can spend up to THB 44 million (US\$1.26 million). See Thai PBS. 2023. เลือกตั้ง2566: เปิดค่าใช้จ่ายหาเสียงเลือกตั้ง ส.ส. ใช้เงินได้คนละเท่าไร (Election 2566 B.E.: Revealing the Campaign Expenditures for MP Elections – How Much Can Each Person Spend?) [online]. Available at <https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/327109>.
- 13 Calculation based on 42 days of campaigning. Although the official period is 55 days, hired vehicles are often only secured when candidates know their election numbers in the constituency. Each candidate will receive a different number and must provide details of this number so that voters can remember it and select the correct candidate.
- 14 Interview with MP from popular party, 26 December 2023.
- 15 Interview with Bukhoree Yeema, Associate Professor at Songkhla Rajabhat University, 1 February 2024.
- 16 กกต.เปิดสถิติร้องเรียนเลือกตั้ง สส. พบตัวเลขปี 66 น้อยกว่าปี 62 (The Election Commission has released the statistics for House of Representatives election complaints, showing that the numbers for 2023 are lower than those for 2019.) [online]. Available at <https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/334335>
- 17 กกต.เปิดสถิติร้องเรียนเลือกตั้ง สส. พบตัวเลขปี 66 น้อยกว่าปี 62 (The Election Commission has released the statistics for House of Representatives election complaints, showing that the numbers for 2023 are lower than those for 2019.) [online]. Available at <https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/334335>
- 18 Each MP is entitled to one personal advisor at an annual salary of THB 288,000 (US\$ 8,228), two specialist staff members at an annual salary of THB 180,000 (US\$5,142), and five assistants who also earn THB 180,000 annually. See สิทธิประโยชน์ของสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร ๒๕๕๖ (Benefits for Members of the House of Representatives 2013) [online]. Available at [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament\\_parcy/download/article/article\\_20130904135136.pdf](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/download/article/article_20130904135136.pdf)
- 19 The Secretariat of The House of Representatives. 2013. สิทธิประโยชน์ของสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร ๒๕๕๖ (Benefits for Members of the House of Representatives 2013) [online]. Available at [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament\\_parcy/download/article/article\\_20130904135136.pdf](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/download/article/article_20130904135136.pdf)
- 20 The Secretariat of The House of Representatives. 2013. สิทธิประโยชน์ของสมาชิกสภาผู้แทนราษฎร ๒๕๕๖ (Benefits for Members of the House of Representatives 2013) [online]. Available at [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament\\_parcy/download/article/article\\_20130904135136.pdf](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/download/article/article_20130904135136.pdf)
- 21 Interview with MP from popular party, 28 December 2023.
- 22 Interview with Bukhoree Yeema, Associate Professor at Songkhla Rajabhat University, 1 February 2024.
- 23 Interview with a MP from popular party, 14 December 2023.
- 24 The yellow card permitted the ECT to cancel the election results and call for re-election if there is evidence of election fraud in the electoral constituency. The orange card could be issued before the official election results are announced if the ECT has evidence that a

candidate committed electoral fraud. In such cases, the orange card empowers the ECT to suspend the candidate's election candidacy rights for up to one year. Additionally, if the candidate found guilty of electoral fraud wins the election, the ECT can order a new election. The red card can be issued after the official election results are announced. If there is credible evidence that a candidate has committed acts of fraud in the election, or is complicit in the actions of others, in these instances, the ECT is required to petition the Supreme Court to revoke either the candidate's right to run in elections or that individual's voting rights. If found guilty, the candidate may face a suspension of their candidacy or voting rights for a period of up to ten years. See Thansettakij. 2023. กกต. ทำความเข้าใจ “ใบเหลือง ใบส้ม ใบแดง ใบดำ” ในการเลือกตั้ง (The Election Commission (ECT) explains the "yellow card, orange card, red card, black card" in elections) [online]. Available at <https://www.thansettakij.com/thailand-elections/election-monitor/564208>. See Thai PBS. (2023). เลือกตั้ง2566 : ใบเหลือง-ส้ม-แดง-ดำ ส่งผลอย่างไรกับการเลือกตั้ง? (Election 2023: How do the "yellow-orange-red-black" cards affect the election?) [online]. Available at <https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/327338>. The black card, which represents the most severe penalty, can be issued after the official election results are announced. In such cases, the ECT files a petition with the Supreme Court for consideration. The black card holds the authority to permanently revoke a candidate's right to run in elections or an individual's voting rights for a lifetime. See Thansettakij. (2023 [a]). กกต. ทำความเข้าใจ “ใบเหลือง ใบส้ม ใบแดง ใบดำ” ในการเลือกตั้ง (The Election Commission (ECT) explains the "yellow card, orange card, red card, black card" in elections) [online]. Available at <https://www.thansettakij.com/thailand-elections/election-monitor/564208>

25 Manager Online. 2024. กกต. พ้นซ้ำใบดำ-ใบแดง “เกศกานดา” ผู้สมัคร ส.ส. กทม. ปชป. (ECT issues a double penalty of black and red cards to "Ketskanda," a Bangkok Member of Parliament candidate from the Democrat Party) [online]. Available at <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9670000004708>. Thairath Online. 2024. กกต. แจก ใบแดง-ใบดำ “พรวิศิษฐ์” ผู้สมัคร สส. นครสวรรค์ พปชร. แจกเงินซื้อเสียง (ECT distributes red and black cards to "Pornwisit," a candidate for MP in Nakhon Sawan from the Phalang Pracharat Party, for vote-buying) [online]. Available at <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2761628>. Bangkok Biz News. 2024. กกต. แจกใบแดง-ใบดำ 'สมชาย' ผู้สมัคร สส. โคราช ภูมิใจไทย ปมปราศรัยหาเสียง (ECT issues red and black cards to 'Somchai,' a candidate for MP in Korat from the Thai Pride Party, over campaign speech issues) [online]. Available at <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/1109325>.

26 Nuttapon Sanguansub. 2024. กองทุนเพื่อการพัฒนาพรรคการเมือง กกต. เผยยอดเงินอุดหนุนให้แก่พรรคการเมือง ประจำปี 2567 พรรคก้าวไกล ได้รับการจัดสรรมากที่สุด 52.49 ล้านบาท (Fund for the Development of Political Parties: ECT reveals the subsidy amounts allocated to political parties) [online]. Available at <https://www.tpchannel.org/news/24485>

27 Nuttapon Sanguansub. 2024. กองทุนเพื่อการพัฒนาพรรคการเมือง กกต. เผยยอดเงินอุดหนุนให้แก่พรรคการเมือง ประจำปี 2567 พรรคก้าวไกล ได้รับการจัดสรรมากที่สุด 52.49 ล้านบาท (Fund for the Development of Political Parties: ECT reveals the subsidy amounts allocated to political parties) [online]. Available at <https://www.tpchannel.org/news/24485>

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