

Green Policy and Elections: Climate Change Campaigns of Five Thai Political Parties in 2023 Elections

Ladawan Khaikham

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kasetsart University, Bangkok 10900, Thailand

(Corresponding author's e-mail: Ladawan.kh@ku.th)

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between democratic governance and climate action in Thailand, with a focus on the 2023 general election. It aims to (1) examine how democratic governance influenced climate action during the 2023 election, and (2) identify the key challenges and institutional barriers that hinder the implementation of climate policies in Thailand. The researcher employs qualitative methods, specifically content analysis and thematic analysis, to examine the climate policies proposed by five major political parties—the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), Move Forward Party (MFP), Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), Bhumjaithai Party (BJT), and the Democrat Party (DP)—through campaign documents, party manifestos, policy statements, and media reports.

Findings reveal that while political parties incorporated climate action into their electoral platforms, their approaches varied significantly. Progressive parties, such as MFP, emphasized renewable energy and strict environmental regulations, while establishment parties, such as PPRP, prioritized economic stability over environmental concerns. The study also identifies institutional barriers, including political instability, military influence, economic constraints, and fragmented governance structures that hinder effective climate policy implementation in Thailand.

This research contributes to the understanding of the relationship between democracy and environmental governance, highlighting the challenges of integrating climate policies within electoral politics. The findings underscore the need for stronger institutional frameworks, cross-party collaboration, and enhanced public participation to advance climate action in Thailand's evolving democratic landscape.

Keywords: Climate policy, Climate action, Election, Political parties, Thailand

Introduction

The interaction between democratic governance and climate action has become an increasingly critical area of study, particularly in regions experiencing political instability. Democracy, with its emphasis on public participation, institutional transparency, and policy accountability, can significantly influence environmental governance and the effectiveness of climate policies (Lindvall & Karlsson, 2024). However, the extent to which democratic institutions drive meaningful climate action depends on various political and institutional factors, including governance structures, electoral processes, and policy coherence (Ignatieff, 2024). This study explores the relationship

between democratic governance and climate action in Thailand's 2023 general election, focusing on how political parties incorporated environmental policies into their platforms and the broader implications for sustainable development.

Thailand serves as a unique case study due to its hybrid political system, which combines democratic elements with military influence. While general elections allow public participation in policymaking, structural constraints, such as military-appointed senators and institutional fragmentation, continue to shape governance outcomes (Kongkirati, 2024; McCargo, 2024). The 2023 general election was a

pivotal moment, marking a potential transition toward greater democratic consolidation after nearly a decade of military-backed rule (Jatusripitak & Ricks, 2024). Political parties adopted diverse approaches to climate governance; progressive parties emphasized ambitious environmental policies, while establishment parties prioritized economic stability over climate commitments (The Nation, 2023).

Despite growing public awareness of climate issues, significant challenges and institutional barriers hinder the effective implementation of environmental policies in Thailand. These include political instability, economic constraints, policy fragmentation, and the limited role of civil society in decision-making (Chaiyapa et al., 2024; Simpson & Smits, 2021). The overlap between economic and environmental policies often results in trade-offs where short-term economic growth takes precedence over long-term sustainability (Marks, 2011). Furthermore, Thailand's centralized decision-making processes and weak regulatory enforcement mechanisms pose additional obstacles to the successful execution of climate policies (Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 1996).

This study aims to (1) examine the relationship between democratic governance and climate action in Thailand's 2023 general election and (2) identify key challenges and institutional barriers to implementing climate policies in Thailand. By analyzing the political discourse surrounding climate action during the election, the study seeks to provide insights into how governance structures influence climate policymaking. Moreover, it explores the structural constraints that limit policy effectiveness, offering recommendations for strengthening Thailand's environmental governance within its evolving democratic framework.

Research objectives

This study aims to

- 1) Examine the relationship between democratic governance and climate action in Thailand's 2023 general election.
- 2) Identify the key challenges and institutional barriers that hinder the implementation of climate policies in Thailand.

Literature review

Climate politics in Southeast Asia is shaped by the interplay of governance structures, climate policies, and socio-economic factors. The region's vulnerability to climate change necessitates comprehensive policies focused on adaptation and emission reduction. However, policy implementation remains challenging due to financial and technological limitations, despite commitments to low-carbon development and international climate agreements (Rogozhina, 2022). Environmental NGOs contribute significantly to climate governance, yet their role in policy formulation is often restricted. Strengthening collaboration between governments and NGOs could improve climate governance and enhance policy effectiveness (Haris et al., 2020). Additionally, climate-induced migration remains an overlooked issue in ASEAN's environmental policies, reflecting the need for improved regional frameworks to address displacement caused by climate-related disasters (Marthin & Budiman, 2020).

Moreover, energy and climate justice are also central to climate policy in Southeast Asia. The study of Richardson-Barlow and Dahlan (2024) emphasizes the integration of socio-political considerations into energy policies to ensure equitable development (Richardson-Barlow & Dahlan, 2024). Furthermore, climate security remains a contested concept in the region, as ASEAN countries hesitate to adopt this framework due to concerns over national sovereignty. This reluctance could weaken the region's ability to address climate-induced conflicts effectively (Caballero-Anthony, 2024). The existing literature underscores the importance of collaborative governance and innovative policy approaches to tackle climate challenges. However, regional dynamics, governance limitations, and the absence of a unified climate strategy continue to hinder progress in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

In the case of Thailand, electoral policies are shaped not only by political dynamics but also by the growing salience of climate change and environmental concerns, as reflected in the inclusion of renewable energy, pollution control, and sustainable agriculture in the 2023 election platforms of several major parties (The Nation, 2023; Pheu Thai Party, 2023; Move Forward Party, 2023). Denny Mark's study (2011) indicates that political crises, structural issues, and institutional

challenges obstruct Thailand's ability to address climate change effectively, despite gradual democratic progress. The impacts of climate change—such as prolonged droughts, reduced agricultural and fishery yields, severe flooding, rising sea levels, and health concerns—are expected to intensify, further straining the Thai political and social systems and hindering economic growth (Marks, 2011). Thailand's struggle with climate change significantly influences its electoral processes and policy decisions. Kraisoraphong (2010) highlights the crucial role of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) in implementing climate policies since Thailand ratified the Kyoto Protocol and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Consequently, climate change is primarily viewed as an environmental challenge, leading the government to focus on mitigation efforts (Kraisoraphong, 2010).

The study by Chotichanathawewong and Thongplew (2012) suggests that Thailand has integrated climate change into several national plans and policies, despite lacking binding commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Both public and private sectors are actively engaged in efforts to lower emissions, especially renewable energy development, energy conservation, and efficiency (Chotichanathawewong & Thongplew, 2012). However, the Thai government's responses have been limited. The effectiveness of these policies is often compromised by political crises, which can hinder necessary reforms and actions (Marks, 2011). In addition, the article by Simpson and Smits (2021) examines the tension between state-led climate governance and civil society movements in Thailand, based on the concept of environmental authoritarianism. Since the 2014 coup, the military government has prioritized fossil fuel development, deepening military entrenchment in political and economic spheres. On the other hand, strong civil society movements, such as the Thai Climate Justice Network, have weakened since the coup (Simpson & Smits, 2021). Furthermore, the study by Chaityapa et al. (2024) explores climate governance in Thailand and Malaysia within a multi-level governance framework. It identifies Thailand as a unique case with some degree of decentralization. However, tensions between centralized decision-

making and limited local engagement can hinder progress (Chaityapa et al., 2024).

Although Thailand's electoral processes significantly influence climate policy, ongoing political challenges may limit the effectiveness of these initiatives. This underscores the urgent need for stable governance to effectively address climate change. The current political landscape, characterized by instability and military influence, complicates the implementation of robust climate policies. Moreover, the interplay between state-led governance and civil society movements highlights the necessity for inclusive decision-making processes. Strengthening stakeholder engagement and ensuring transparent governance are crucial for enhancing the efficacy of climate initiatives in Thailand.

Existing research on climate policy and governance emphasizes the role of democratic institutions in shaping environmental policies, but studies on how electoral politics influence climate action in Thailand remain limited. While prior research has examined policy frameworks, international commitments, and sectoral approaches (Kraisoraphong, 2010), there is a gap in understanding the impact of political competition, electoral strategies, and institutional constraints on environmental policymaking. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how Thailand's 2023 general election influenced climate policy commitments across political parties through qualitative content and thematic analysis of campaign documents, policy statements, and media coverage. It also identifies institutional and economic barriers that hinder policy implementation, offering insights for policymakers, political actors, and environmental advocates. Strengthening institutional coordination, cross-party collaboration, and public engagement is crucial to advancing Thailand's climate agenda effectively.

The research approach depicts the relationship between democratic governance, political dynamics, climate action, and institutional hurdles in Thailand's 2023 general election. This framework highlights the influence of governance structures on climate policies while identifying key barriers to effective policy implementation (Lindvall & Karlsson, 2024). This paradigm is grounded in democratic governance, which should be the basis for understanding Thailand's climate

change efforts. Different factors shape environmental policy. Elections, political party agendas, and public engagement all play important roles in establishing environmental policy (Ignatieff, 2024). The political dynamics and election process serve as a mediating component, with campaign strategies, ideological divisions, and public participation determining political

party priorities for climate legislation (McCargo, 2024). Despite democratic mechanisms in place, Thailand's political system, which includes military-appointed senators and a history of political interventions, limits the extent to which elected representatives can enforce climate action (Kongkirati, 2024).

Research framework

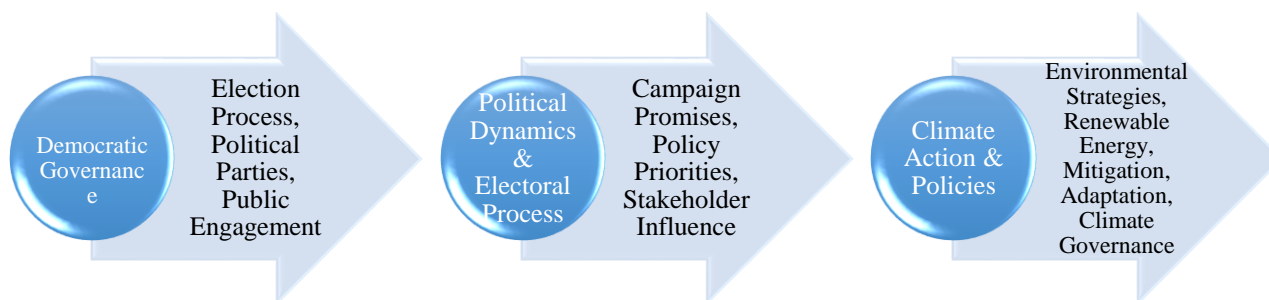


Figure 1 Research framework

Source: Researcher (2024)

The climate action and policy implementation component represents the dependent variable, reflecting how different political parties approach environmental governance. Key areas include renewable energy development, carbon emissions reduction, environmental conservation, and adaptation strategies (Chaiyapa et al., 2024). However, the extent to which these policies can be successfully implemented depends on several moderating factors, namely institutional barriers and economic constraints. Institutional barriers, such as military influence, fragmented governance, and weak law enforcement, create obstacles to effective policymaking (Simpson & Smits, 2021). Meanwhile, economic constraints, such as the tension between short-term economic growth and long-term sustainability, can limit the feasibility of climate action (Marks, 2011). External influences from the public and private sectors also help shape Thailand's climate policies. Civil society movements, businesses, and the media all play a role in shaping public opinion and holding politicians accountable (Selway, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these stakeholders is determined by political openness and regulatory support for environmental activism (Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 1996).

This framework provides a structured method to analyze the relationship between democracy and climate policy within the political system of Thailand. It highlights the interplay between politics and the environment, but at the same time recognizes the constraints to policy effectiveness. This study hopes that by reporting this analysis, the information will help the evolution of democracy in Thailand by enhancing climate governance.

Research methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods to analyze climate-related policies in the context of Thailand's 2023 general election. The research primarily focuses on examining campaign policies, policy documents, party manifestos, election-related publications, and media coverage to assess how environmental issues were addressed by different political parties. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the political discourse surrounding climate change, the priorities of different parties, and the feasibility of their proposed policies.

Research methods

The study adopts two key qualitative analytical techniques:

1) Content Analysis: Content analysis is used to systematically interpret written, visual, or audio data to extract meaningful information relevant to climate policies and political discourse (Krippendorff, 2018). The approach enables researchers to categorize and quantify patterns in political party statements, campaign speeches, and published documents related to environmental policies (White & Marsh, 2006). By analyzing political speeches, campaign promises, and media reports, the study identifies recurring themes and key messages that reflect each party's stance on climate action.

2) Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns or recurring themes within the data, providing a deeper insight into how political parties frame environmental issues (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method follows six key steps, which are familiarization with the data, developing initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Scope of study

The study focuses on five major political parties that played a significant role in the 2023 general election in Thailand. They are the Pheu Thai Party, Move Forward Party, Palang Pracharath Party, Bhumjaithai Party, and Democrat Party. These parties were selected based on their political influence, electoral performance, and policy proposals related to climate change. Although the United Thai Nation Party (UTNP) won more seats than the Democrat Party, it was excluded because its campaign documents contained limited climate-related policies compared to the other five parties. The study therefore focuses on parties with explicit climate agendas.

Study period

October 1, 2023–September 30, 2024.

Ethical considerations in human research

The researcher will adhere to three core principles of ethical research involving humans: respect for persons, beneficence/ non-maleficence, and justice. Under the principle of respect for persons, participants

will receive clear and complete information, enabling them to fully understand the study and independently decide whether to provide informed consent. However, this study is based on document analysis and related research, with no direct contact or data collection from participants. The researcher will respect participants' privacy and confidentiality by excluding any identifiable information (identifiers) from the data records. Regarding beneficence and non-maleficence, the research poses minimal risks, primarily concerning the potential disclosure of confidential information. The researcher will take all necessary precautions to safeguard participants' data. Lastly, under the principle of justice, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria will be established to ensure fairness. Benefits and risks will be distributed equitably, and no bias will influence the research process. These measures ensure strict adherence to ethical standards in conducting human research.

Research result

The national election in Thailand in 2023 was essential to the country's democratic progress. After nearly a decade of military-backed rule following the 2014 coup d'état, this is a momentous time of transition. There have been changes in political dynamics and aspirations since the youth-led uprising in 2020, which also preceded this election (Sinpeng, 2021; Jatusripitak & Ricks, 2024).

Out of the 67 political parties competing for 500 seats in the House of Representatives, five main parties emerged: Pheu Thai, Move Forward, Palang Pracharath, Bhumjaithai, and the Democrat Party. On 14 May 2023, more than 39 million Thais cast ballots with a record-high of 75.22% turnout. The election outcome demonstrated both a rising voter turnout and modifications to the political landscape. In the Thai parliament, the MFP secured the most seats, with the Pheu Thai Party coming in second. Nonetheless, Pheu Thai led the government, with MFP acting as the opposition, due to Thailand's political system and 'competitive authoritarianism,' or 'Authoritarian elections' with appointed senators functioning as a check against the majority (Kongkirati, 2024; Lidauer, 2023; McCargo, 2024). This outcome sparked discussions about electoral reforms, urging modifications to the legal, political, and constitutional

frameworks to support fair and free elections and address issues like vote- buying and unclear vote counting (Puthavonvong et al., 2023).

1) *Pheu Thai Party (PTP)*

The Pheu Thai Party is one of Thailand's major political parties, with a strong presence in the country's politics. It sprang out of the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, which was created in 1998 by Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications magnate turned politician. Thaksin's rise to power and populist policies fundamentally altered Thai politics. The TRT's programs emphasized rural development, healthcare, and infrastructure projects, which received strong support from rural voters (Hicken, 2006).

The TRT immediately gained popularity, winning by a landslide in the 2001 general election. Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister. He implemented several populist policies, such as universal healthcare and village fund initiatives, with the goal of improving the welfare of the broader populace. The TRT continued to dominate elections again in the general election in 2005. However, Thaksin's popularity sparked debate and opposing campaigns, leading to accusations of corruption and abuse of power. While Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was abroad, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin staged a coup d'état on September 19, 2006, and the Constitutional Court disbanded the TRT in 2007 (Chambers & Waitookiat, 2020; Kongkirati, 2024).

Following the dissolution, important members reassembled to create the Palang Prachachon (People's Power Party: PPP) to run in the 2007 elections. However, the PPP was disbanded by the Constitutional Court in 2008 following claims of electoral fraud. The Pheu Thai Party was founded in 2008 and won the 2011 general election. Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, became Thailand's first female Prime Minister. The party's campaigns, which included rice subsidy programs and infrastructure projects, were consistent with Thaksin's populist goal. However, Yingluck's government encountered protests and legal challenges, prompting her removal by the Constitutional Court in 2014 (Selway, 2023).

Despite Yingluck's dismissal and Thaksin's exile, Pheu Thai remains a major political force in Thailand, with considerable support from rural and urban voters,

particularly in the northern and northeastern provinces (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022). The party's supporters include rural voters, urban dwellers, and grassroots activists who agree with its programs and ideology. Pheu Thai continues to take part in political movements and mobilizing resources to create agendas and influence public opinion. This includes participating in protests, grassroots initiatives, elections, and alliances, as well as reaching out to supporters through social media. The party's tight ties to Thaksin and populist ideas have polarised Thai politics, resulting in periods of political unrest and street riots. Additionally, the party suffers legal difficulties, including attempts to dissolve it by political opponents.

In the 2023 national election, the Pheu Thai Party prioritized economic recovery and growth through the 10,000- baht digital wallet scheme, job creation initiatives aimed at youth and those affected by the economic downturn, financial support and incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to stimulate economic growth, and investments in infrastructure and development projects to boost the rural economy. Pheu Thai's climate change program aimed for net-zero emissions by 2050 (Pheu Thai Party, 2023). Key climate change strategies include:

(1) Air Pollution: The Clean Air Act aims to combat PM2.5 pollution from all sources and promote basic human rights. Work phases include short-term, medium-term, and long-term. Under the leadership of Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the Pheu Thai Party has additional environmental initiatives (Pheu Thai Party, 2023).

(2) Water management: The Pheu Thai Party prioritizes water management to avert floods and droughts, providing year-round access to drinking and utility water. This includes increasing irrigated regions, constructing drainage pathways to the sea, utilizing shallow and deep groundwater systems, and developing a comprehensive Chao Phraya River Basin management plan (Pheu Thai Party, 2023).

(3) Energy policy: The party aims to lower energy, oil, and power prices, promote clean and alternative energy, and invest in charging stations and infrastructure to encourage electric vehicle use, thereby lowering greenhouse gas emissions from transportation. They also want to negotiate overlapping

areas to increase access to low-cost natural gas while collecting government revenue (Pheu Thai Party, 2023).

(4) Electric Vehicle Infrastructure: The party aims to invest in charging stations and infrastructure for electric vehicles to help minimize greenhouse gas emissions from transportation (The Nation, 2023).

(5) Sustainable Agriculture: the party aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance soil health through methods like water conservation, organic fertilizer use, and crop rotation (Pheu Thai Party, 2023).

(6) Community Adaptation Programs: The party aims to help local communities prepare for climate change impacts such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and droughts. The Pheu Thai Party addresses climate change through two main approaches: lowering greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation) and assisting communities in adapting to changing conditions (The Nation, 2023). They prioritise both environmental and economic aims in accordance with their strategies.

2) Move Forward Party (MFP)

The Move Forward Party (MFP) is a new Thai political party formed in 2020 from the dissolution of Future Forward Party (FFP) by the Constitutional Court in February 2020. The success of Future Forward, led by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, challenged the established order and resonated with digital natives and millennials, despite its disintegration and political ban on its founders (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020; Akarapongpisak, 2022).

The MFP adopted the FFP's progressive values and political platform, which gained strong support among young voters in the 2019 general elections. The MFP advocates for political reform, social justice, and individual liberty. The MFP's political platform corresponds with the FFP's progressive goal and reforms as former FFP members, such as Pita Limjaroenrat, have returned to senior roles within the MFP (Ockey, 2020). The party actively participates in Thailand's competitive political scene. They continue to push for democratic change, civic freedoms, social equality, human rights, economic justice, and the elimination of systemic corruption and inequality in Thai society. They use diverse forums, such as parliamentary debates, public campaigns, and social media, to promote transparency, accountability, and

initiatives to address structural concerns (Thanon, 2020; Limjaroenrat, 2023).

During Thailand's 2023 general election, the Move Forward Party (MFP) focused on several main themes, including significant political reforms to strengthen democracy and limit military power, as well as education reform to improve access and curriculum. The party also promotes economic fairness by assisting SMEs and enforcing fair labor standards. The MFP's environmental and climate change strategies are divided into subcategories such as environmental impact assessment, greenhouse gas management, climate crisis response, and zero waste, among others. These plans show a higher level of ambition in addressing climate change than other main parties in Thailand's elections. The principal climate change policy is 'Sustainable Environment,' as campaigns listed below (Move Forward Party, 2023).

(1) Renewable Energy and Green Jobs: MFP aims to transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy by investing in solar, wind, and other clean energy sources. This shift will help phase out coal-fired power plants while creating green jobs in the renewable energy sector. The party also ensures a just transition for workers affected by the decline of fossil fuel industries (Dueanphen, 2023)

(2) Sustainable Public Transport and Urban Planning: MFP emphasizes sustainable public transportation to reduce emissions by expanding electric buses and rail networks. The party also promotes walkability and a friendly infrastructure to make cities greener and more livable. Additionally, urban planning reforms will integrate green spaces into city development to improve air quality and public health (Move Forward Party, 2023).

(3) Energy Market Reform and Pollution Control: MFP supports an open electricity market to promote fair competition and reduce monopolies in energy distribution. The party also advocates strict pollution control, including mandatory disclosure of industrial emissions. Additionally, MFP plans to ban agricultural waste burning in 1,000 sub-districts by 2026 and accelerate the adoption of electric vehicles to lower transportation-related emissions (The Nation, 2023).

(4) Social Equity and Climate Justice: MFP addresses the unequal impact of climate change by supporting vulnerable communities with social security

measures and ensuring fair access to clean energy. The party promotes inclusive climate policies that benefit low-income households, preventing them from being disproportionately affected by environmental challenges (Move Forward Party, 2023).

(5) Green Space and Waste Management: To enhance sustainability, MFP proposes water management reforms to prevent droughts and floods. The party also seeks to limit single-use plastics, ban foreign waste imports, and establish a nationwide environmental monitoring network to improve pollution control and resource management (The Nation, 2023).

(6) National Environmental Standards and Legislation: MFP strongly supports the Clean Air Act and stricter pollution control laws to ensure cleaner air and environmental accountability. The party aims to strengthen environmental law enforcement to hold polluters accountable and promote long-term sustainability (Move Forward Party, 2023).

(7) Sustainable Consumption and Education: The party encourages waste reduction and energy-efficient consumption for both businesses and households. MFP also promotes climate change education, integrating environmental studies into the school curriculum to raise public awareness and foster a culture of sustainability (Dueanphen, 2023).

3) *Palang Pracharath (PPRP)*

The Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) is a political party founded in 2018. It emerged as a pro-military party before the general elections in Thailand in 2019, marking the country's return to military-led governance following the coup d'état in 2014 (Kongkirati, 2024). The party is strongly linked to the formation of the military, coup d'état in 2014, and the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Many important members have significant military ties and have previously held government roles under the NCPO (Vitthayaroengchai, 2023).

In the 2019 general elections, the Palang Pracharath Party won seats and subsequently formed a coalition government with smaller parties. Nonetheless, opposition parties and civil society organizations have criticized it for its dedication to democratic values and its military influence over Thai politics. Significantly, the party supported the selection of Prayut Chan-o-cha, a former NCPO leader, as Prime Minister. In the 2023

election campaign, the party offers 16 important campaigns in three main themes: welfare, economy, and society. The welfare strategy includes boosting the monthly stipend for low-income earners from 300 to 700 baht and introducing a tiered benefit system for individuals over 80 years old, offering up to 5,000 baht (PPTV Online, 2023; Jatupornthanapha, 2023). The party's climate change program includes water and land management.

(1) Water management: The party intends to improve water storage through campaigns such as 'Having Water, No Drought; Having Land, No Poverty,' which include reservoirs, reserves, and other water sources. Their water management approach expands primary water supply, storage, reserves, and other water sources for communities to avoid droughts and floods (PPTV Online, 2023).

(1) Land management: The party advocates for "Having Land, No Poverty" to ensure citizens have productive agricultural land for food security (The Nation, 2023).

Meanwhile, the party maintains its 'People's Oil' policy, with special emphasis on oil price modifications to ease economic burdens and lower living costs for the general population. This shows the party's prioritization of economic growth over environmental concerns, underlining its policy restrictions in comparison to other parties, as well as its concentration on technological development towards sustainable energy rather than large-scale environmental change.

4) *Bhumjaithai Party (BJT)*

The Bhumjaithai Party is a significant political party in Thailand, founded in 2008 by Newin Chidchob, a former Thai politician who previously worked for the Thai Rak Thai Party and later the People's Power Party (Phaiboolnanthaphong et al., 2019). The party was formed when the Constitutional Court dissolved the People's Power Party and two other political parties on election fraud claims.

Since its foundation, the Bhumjaithai Party has played an important role in Thai politics, as it has won significant representation in the Thai Parliament in rural areas with strong support from farmers and rural voters. The party's primary campaigns emphasize regional development and power decentralization. Key policies include boosting rural populations' well-being, notably

in Thailand's northeastern and northern provinces. The party also supports agricultural programs, rural infrastructure development, tourism promotion, healthcare improvement, and resolving regional disparities. It also advocates for decentralization and local control (Meechan, 2023; Srithammakul & Sohng, 2023).

During 2023 elections, the party emphasizes the convergence of climate action and economic growth, especially in rural areas. The Bhumjaithai Party's policy proposals include:

(1) Renewable Energy: The Bhumjaithai Party offers two actions to promote renewable energy. First, citizens who participate in the programme to install solar panels on their rooftops would generate solar energy for household usage, saving at least 450 Baht per month on electricity costs, with excess electricity supplied back to the government via the power grid (The Nation, 2023).

(2) Electric Motorcycle Ownership: participants in the free solar panel installation programme can purchase an electric motorbike for 6,000 Baht per unit with a payment plan of 100 Baht per month over 60 months, using energy credits without additional costs (Bhumjaithai Party, 2023)

The Bhumjaithai Party believes that economic growth and technological advancement are essential for sustainable practices. Their climate change policy prioritizes renewable energy, for instance, solar panel installations for domestic electricity generation, and promotes the use of electric motorcycles. These policies have the significant benefit of attracting foreign investors to Thailand, which generates jobs, income, and revenue for Thais and the country.

5) Democrat Party

The Democrat Party is one of Thailand's oldest and most significant political parties, founded in 1946 by Khuang Aphaiwong and Mom Rajawongse Seni Pramoj. The party arose during a period of political transition in Thailand when absolute monarchy was removed in 1932 and a constitutional monarchy was established (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022). Historically, the Democrat Party has pushed for democracy and values such as constitutionalism, personal liberty, and free-market economics (Darling, 1971). In its early years, the party positioned itself as an advocate for democratic reform, such as developing democratic

institutions, preserving human rights, and promoting transparency and accountability in government (Nishizaki, 2022). It has played an important role in Thai politics, competing in multiple general elections and frequently posing a significant political challenge.

The Democrat Party has helped shape Thailand's political scene by forming coalition administrations and holding various cabinet positions. Leaders such as Chuan Leekpai and Abhisit Vejjajiva, who served as Prime Minister, have been essential in determining the party's orientation. The party is noted for promoting economic development, social welfare, education, and healthcare. It frequently proposes practical strategies that address the demands of all sections of society.

During the 2023 election, the party emphasises sustainability in economic policies, agriculture, energy, and the environment (Peunthim, 2023). Although their 16 key principles do not explicitly mention environmental issues, party officials and representatives spoke about renewable energy use, carbon credit support, and supporting the green economy (The Nation, 2023). This involves increased enforcement of environmental regulations, conservation, restoration, and sustainable resource use.

(1) Waste Management: The party has formed a task force to explore environmental policies that aim to achieve equal outcomes by improving Local Governments' ability for effective waste management (Peunthim, 2023).

(2) Forest Zoning and Land Title documents: The party aims to zone 1 million forest plots and issue land title documents within 4 years, supporting sustainable livelihoods and protecting forested regions from encroachment.

(3) Policy Coordination: The Democrat Party prioritizes policy coordination and robust regulatory institutions to tackle national climate change concerns. It advocates for steps to strengthen Thailand's resilience to climate change, such as enhancing infrastructure resilience, creating early warning systems for extreme weather events, and supporting climate-resilient agriculture methods (The Nation, 2023).

(4) International Cooperation: the party encourages Thailand to participate in global efforts through frameworks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement. This involves working with

other countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change.

While climate change initiatives are not prominently featured on the Democrat Party's agenda, it emphasizes environmental conservation and sustainability throughout. With a history of leadership and impact in creating Thailand's democratic institutions and political culture, the Democrat Party continues to have a role to play in Thai politics.

Research discussion

The relationship between democratic governance and climate action in Thailand presents a complex dynamic influenced by political ideologies, economic interests, and institutional constraints. The 2023 general election provided a valuable opportunity to assess the environmental policy proposals of five major political parties, Pheu Thai Party (PTP), Move Forward Party (MFP), Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), Bhumjaithai Party (BJT), and Democrat Party (DP), and their feasibility in addressing climate challenges. Additionally, this election highlighted the intricate link between Thailand's democratic governance and climate policymaking, as political power struggles and systemic barriers shaped the extent to which environmental policies could be effectively implemented.

1) Political landscape and climate action

Thailand's democratic trajectory has been turbulent, with multiple coups and constitutional crises shaping the political landscape. Nevertheless, the 2023 general election reflected rising voter participation, with turnout reaching 75.22%. This high number indicates stronger public engagement and heightened expectations for substantive, policy-oriented debates (Election Commission of Thailand, 2023). Climate action emerged as a key issue, with parties incorporating sustainability initiatives in their platforms. However, the extent of commitment varied across the political spectrum, revealing ideological divides on environmental governance. For instance, the Move Forward Party (MFP) positioned itself as the most progressive on climate issues, advocating for an ambitious renewable energy transition, sustainable urban development, and strict environmental regulations. Their proposals emphasized decarbonization, pollution control, and equitable

environmental policies. The MFP's stance reflects a broader trend in global politics, where younger, progressive parties champion climate action as part of a broader social justice agenda (Jatusripitak & Ricks, 2024).

On the other hand, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), traditionally associated with populist economic policies, integrated environmental concerns with economic recovery. Their climate policy focused on air pollution, water management, and energy affordability, aligning environmental protection with economic growth. This strategy aimed to appeal to a broader electorate, including rural voters dependent on agriculture and urban middle-class citizens affected by pollution.

The Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), a pro-military party, demonstrated a weaker commitment to environmental issues, prioritizing economic stability and national security over climate concerns. Their environmental initiatives were limited to water and land management, reflecting a pragmatic but reactive rather than proactive approach. Similarly, the Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) focused on technological solutions to climate change, such as promoting solar energy adoption and electric vehicles. While these policies contribute to emissions reduction, they primarily serve economic interests, attracting foreign investment and boosting domestic industries rather than addressing broader environmental concerns. Lastly, the Democrat Party (DP), Thailand's oldest party, took a moderate approach, supporting climate resilience, sustainable agriculture, and international climate cooperation. Their policy framework, while comprehensive, lacked ambitious targets compared to progressive parties like the MFP.

2) Challenges in implementing climate policies

Despite the growing inclusion of environmental policies in political platforms, structural and institutional barriers remain. Thailand's hybrid political system, where unelected bodies (such as the military-appointed Senate) influence governance, limits the extent to which election outcomes translate into policy changes (Nethipo et al., 2023). Although the Move Forward Party won the most seats, its leader Pita Limjaroenrat failed to secure enough votes in parliament to form a government. The military-appointed Senate, empowered under the 2017 Constitution to vote

alongside the elected House, largely opposed MFP, preventing the formation of an MFP-led government.

Thailand's implementation of climate policies has faced significant challenges due to institutional barriers, including poor inter-agency coordination, political instability, and weak governance structures. The absence of a centralized climate authority has led to conflicting responsibilities among agencies, resulting in inefficient resource allocation and fragmented decision-making (Tambunlertchai et al., 2015). Another major challenge is policy fragmentation. Various ministries and government agencies oversee different aspects of climate policy, leading to inefficiencies and conflicting agendas. For example, while the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) oversees climate mitigation, the Ministry of Energy promotes fossil fuel-based economic growth, creating policy misalignment. Additionally, frequent political crises and military coups have diverted attention from long-term climate strategies, causing delays in renewable energy initiatives and emission reduction commitments (Marks, 2011). Weak governance frameworks further exacerbate the issue, as the lack of legally binding climate policies allows successive governments to alter or abandon environmental commitments, discouraging long-term investments in renewable energy (Kanchana, 2024).

Economic constraints also play a major role in slowing Thailand's climate transition. Economic priorities often overshadow climate commitments. Thailand, as a developing economy, faces significant pressure to balance environmental sustainability with industrial growth. The country remains highly dependent on fossil fuels, making the shift to renewable energy difficult without economic repercussions (Kanchana, 2024). This creates a dilemma where short-term economic gains, such as fossil fuel subsidies or large-scale infrastructure projects, take precedence over long-term sustainability goals. Despite receiving international climate finance, inefficient financial oversight and mismanagement have resulted in overlapping projects and underutilized funds (Tambunlertchai et al., 2015). Additionally, past attempts at using carbon pricing and pollution taxes have been unsuccessful due to weak enforcement and industry opposition, delaying economic mechanisms that could support emissions reductions. Without significant financial and regulatory reforms, Thailand's

climate policies will continue to face structural and economic challenges.

Moreover, public engagement also plays a crucial role. Although voter turnout in the 2023 election was high (75.22%), environmental policies were not the primary deciding factor for most voters. Economic concerns, democratic reforms, and political stability dominated the electoral discourse, indicating that climate issues, while important, are still secondary considerations for the Thai electorate.

3) *Comparative perspective*

Thailand's situation reflects broader trends in Southeast Asia, where democratic governance and climate action intersect in complex ways. Thailand's environmental policies share many similarities with other Southeast Asian countries, particularly in their focus on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and international climate commitments. Like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, Thailand has integrated climate change into its national development plans and committed to global agreements such as the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Bosello et al., 2016). These nations also emphasize public-private collaboration, where businesses play a role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions through sustainable practices (Chotichanathawewong & Thongplew, 2012). Additionally, Thailand's renewable energy strategies, including the 15-Year Renewable Energy Development Plan and the 20-Year Energy Conservation Plan, align with similar initiatives in Malaysia and Indonesia that aim to decrease reliance on fossil fuels and promote a low-carbon economy (Lestari et al., 2024; Bosello et al., 2016).

Despite these similarities, policy implementation and sectoral focus vary across Southeast Asian countries. Thailand has a more detailed institutional framework for monitoring and verifying greenhouse gas reductions, whereas other countries may face more fragmented implementation (Bunchuaidee et al., 2017). While Thailand and Malaysia focus on energy and industrial emissions, Indonesia prioritizes forest conservation through REDD+, and the Philippines emphasizes climate adaptation due to its high vulnerability to natural disasters (Bosello et al., 2016; Lestari et al., 2024). The policy instruments used also

differ—Thailand employs tax incentives and feed-in tariffs, whereas Malaysia leans toward market-based mechanisms like carbon pricing, and the Philippines relies on international climate finance (Bosello et al., 2016). In terms of long-term goals, Thailand aims for carbon neutrality by 2050, whereas Indonesia and Malaysia have set later targets for net-zero emissions by 2060 and 2030 emission reduction goals, respectively. These differences highlight how economic structures, environmental risks, and governance capacities shape climate policies across the region (Zhong et al., 2024).

Thailand's case highlights the need for institutional reforms that empower elected governments to implement effective climate policies. A more participatory and transparent political system would facilitate long-term climate planning, reducing the risk of policy reversals due to political instability (Kuhonta, 2024).

Research conclusion

The 2023 general election in Thailand marked a significant step toward democratic consolidation and policy-driven governance. While environmental issues gained prominence in campaign narratives, economic concerns and political stability remained the dominant factors influencing voter behavior. This underscores the need for further public engagement and institutional reforms to mainstream climate action in Thailand's political discourse.

Political parties exhibited varied levels of commitment to climate policies, with progressive parties like the Move Forward Party (MFP) pushing for ambitious climate goals, while establishment parties such as Pheu Thai (PTP) and Palang Pracharath (PPRP) focused on economic growth and stability. The Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) emphasized technological solutions, and the Democrat Party (DP) advocated for policy coordination and international cooperation.

Despite various policy proposals, structural barriers such as military influence, economic constraints, and policy fragmentation continue to hinder effective climate governance in Thailand. The country's hybrid political system limits the ability of elected representatives to implement environmental policies, reducing the impact of democratic elections on long-term sustainability efforts (Kongkirati, 2024; Kuhonta, 2024). Political instability, bureaucratic inefficiencies,

and elite influence further weaken policy continuity, while public engagement with climate issues remains limited, as economic concerns take precedence for most voters. Moving forward, enhancing institutional coordination, promoting civic participation, and ensuring policy consistency will be essential to strengthening Thailand's environmental governance within its evolving democratic framework.

Therefore, strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing public participation, and ensuring policy coherence will be essential to advancing Thailand's climate agenda. The integration of climate action with economic and social policies can create a more resilient and sustainable governance framework.

Research limitations

This study acknowledges two key limitations. First, it relies primarily on qualitative content analysis of political party documents and media reports, which may not fully reflect the actual implementation and effectiveness of climate policies. Future research incorporating quantitative data or policy impact assessments could provide a more comprehensive evaluation. Second, while the study examines Thailand's climate policies in a comparative regional context, it does not conduct a detailed cross-country analysis. Expanding the scope to include case studies from other Southeast Asian nations would offer more profound insights into best practices and policy innovations applicable to Thailand.

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