



Attitudes towards political leaders amongst young Thai people (Generation Y) and their influence on electoral choices.

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Abstract

This study endeavours to understand the influence of a politician's public image on the electoral choices of young Thai people. This interdisciplinary study focuses on Generation Y; young people currently aged 16 to 20, in Bangkok. It uses empirical investigation through surveys and focus groups to examine the opinions, perceptions and political behaviours of a representative sample of young people. The investigation places a special emphasis on their perception of the Prime Minister and potential Prime Ministers.

It is widely held that the effects of political marketing practices have contributed to public disengagement with politics in post-industrial democracies like the United States and parts of Western Europe. If we take voter turnout as one measure of citizen participation it is evident that there has been a notable global decline of citizens actively voting since the 1980's.¹

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (1999), political apathy and disengagement amongst young people is of particular concern in both established and emerging democracies. In Thailand voting is compulsory so while citizen participation in the voting process has remained constant we have to question the level of engagement in the process and level of political knowledge held to make rational political choices.

Despite Thai youth benefiting from compulsory education since 2002 they are less likely to be politically active than previous generations. There is little exposure to political messages or news via the mainstream

¹ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) on global turnout since 1945 (Pintor, Gratschew *et al.* 2002).

youth media. Though Generation Y cite the news as their major source of political information the evidence suggests that few of them watch it.²

The findings of this study's pilot project support an assertion that young Thai people are likely to have low levels of in-depth political knowledge when making electoral choices. Since they have to make a choice and cannot decline to participate in the electoral process 'shortcuts' such as the public image and personality of the major candidates, like party leaders, may have a strong effect.

Part of this study therefore investigates Generation Y's perceptions about the country's leader and potential leaders in terms of their own opinions, expectations and behaviours. This thesis examines the notion that young peoples' opinions and expectations are likely to influence or shape the characteristics of the country's leader in the future.

The findings from the research should contribute to voter understanding, particularly of young people, and help political parties 'package' their election campaigns to attract voters more effectively.

² ABAC-KSC Internet Poll Research Centre 1999, Taepiriyakij 1996 and National Statistical Office 1997