

Political Polarization in Thailand: Urban vs. Rural Dynamics

Sanyarat Meesuwan

College of Politics and Governance, Maharakham University, Thailand

Tassaporn Onpratun

Maharakham University, Thailand

This study aims to achieve two research objectives: (1) to examine the disparities in democratic attitudes and political participation between urban and rural areas in Thailand, and (2) to formulate policy recommendations aimed at mitigating political polarization between urban and rural areas in the country. It utilized a survey methodology, drawing data from the 7th World Values Survey, with a representative sample of Thai citizens from both urban and rural regions. The study analyzed four independent variables—place of residence, gender, socioeconomic status, and education level—alongside two categories of dependent variables, namely democratic attitudes and political participation. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, encompassing a range of descriptive statistics as well as hierarchical linear and logistic regression analyses. The findings indicate that rural residents in Thailand tend to exhibit stronger democratic values than their urban counterparts. However, they also display lower levels of political participation. To enhance democracy in Thailand, it is imperative to create an environment conducive to political engagement, particularly in rural communities that often feel marginalized and resentful due to policies that appear to favor urban elites. Addressing this divide is crucial for the stability and development of Thailand's democratic system.

Keywords: urban-rural political divide, political participation, democratic attitudes

The issue of political polarization in Thailand and its impact on the advancement of democracy has been recognized by both local and foreign experts in political science (e.g., Kongkirati, 2019; Meesuwan, 2022; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021; Somer & McCoy, 2018). One of the differences frequently highlighted is that between the political ideologies of urban versus rural populations in Thailand. The “two democracies” theory, proposed by Laothamatas (1996), identifies two distinct social and political divides in the country: *nakhon* (city) and *chonnabot* (countryside). Urban populations have rapid economic growth, access to advanced education and technological development, and stronger links to the global community; therefore, urban populations are characterized by higher levels of political participation and competition. In contrast, *chonnabot*'s population has limited access to educational opportunities and technology and fewer ties to the international community; consequently, it is marked by far lower political engagement and competition. Despite this difference in ideology between the two areas, *chonnabot* still holds significant voting power during Thai elections due to its large population. Conversely, urban areas with smaller populations must resort to alternative means, such as protests or alliances with elite figures, to gain more political influence.

Despite its age, Anek's theory remains highly applicable and is frequently employed to understand contemporary political divisions, particularly in the aftermath of the 2006 and 2014 coups in Thailand. His explanation sheds light on the origins of the yellow shirt and red shirt movements, which symbolized the urban middle class and rural lower class, respectively (Seo, 2019).

The yellow shirts, led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), comprised a diverse coalition of civil society, business, elite, and royalist groups. Their opposition centered on the parliamentary power of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party. Identifying themselves with the color yellow, symbolizing support for the monarchy, the yellow shirts staged extensive demonstrations starting in February 2006. Although the PAD disbanded temporarily after the 2006 coup, it regrouped in 2008 to protest the pro-Thaksin government. However, the movement subsequently fragmented into multiple factions promoting ultraroyalism, ultranationalism, and opposition to Thaksin (Hewison, 2014).

In contrast, the red shirts aligned themselves with the United Democratic Front against Dictatorship (UDD), which supported Thaksin Shinawatra. The red shirts emerged in response to the 2006 coup, initially opposing the military and advocating for elections. It represented the interests of the rural lower class. The red-shirt rebellions of 2009 and 2010, which challenged the Democrat Party-led government backed by the royalists and military, were met with military force resulting in significant loss of life (Hewison, 2014).

In summary, the yellow shirt and red shirt movements in Thailand represented different segments of society, with the yellow shirts serving as a symbol of urban middle-class discontent and the red shirts representing the rural lower class. These movements played significant roles in the political landscape of Thailand during a period marked by social and political upheaval. The political schism between urban and rural Thais has grown in recent years, for no obvious reason. One proposed explanation is the difference in political ideology between these two populations; however, it is difficult to quantify the political attitudes about democracy and forms of participation among rural and urban Thai people based on existing research. Thus, more effort is needed to obtain a better understanding of these dynamics, particularly in identifying the key drivers of discord between the two groups.

Research Objectives

Due to Thailand's unique circumstances, global research on the urban-rural political divide and its impact on democratic attitudes may have limited relevance to Thailand. The present study aims to not only establish the existence of the urban-rural political divide in Thailand but also analyze the link between residential location and democratic attitudes. By connecting research on Thailand as a representative of a society undergoing political and economic transformation with research in both developed and developing countries, this study seeks to enrich comparative research on the topic.

All in all, this study seeks to achieve two principal objectives: (1) to ascertain the disparities in political ideologies and political participation within urban and rural areas of Thailand; and (2) to proffer policy recommendations aimed at mitigating political polarization between these urban and rural locales in the country. To achieve these goals, a rigorous survey methodology based on established social science research protocols is employed, utilizing a representative sample of Thai citizens in both urban and rural areas. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing knowledge on the political division between urban and rural populations in Thailand, which in turn will aid in the assessment of the current state of democracy and the development of effective strategies to address pertinent issues.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The conventional approach to delineating urban and rural areas has relied on factors such as geographic location and population density, as well as distinctive lifestyles, social dynamics, and political affiliations. However, rapid technological change and the global trend toward urbanization have profoundly impacted the boundaries and differences between urban and rural societies (Labiso, 2021, Merga, 2022). Therefore, defining urban and rural societies has become increasingly intricate and multifaceted. Contemporary society is characterized by unprecedented levels of connectivity and interdependence, facilitated by advances in information technology. Consequently, perceptions and values are no longer solely based on face-to-face interactions, as they were in the past (Scott et al., 2007).

The modern conception of an urban area is densely populated, with a high degree of individual agency and economic development and a diverse array of commercial and service-oriented amenities. Additionally, such urban areas are typified by cultural features that are less dependent on interpersonal relations, with an increased recognition of individual rights. Conversely, rural areas are marked by low population density, horizontally organized land use, rudimentary economic activities, and a pronounced emphasis on community self-sufficiency. In rural settings, cultural norms emphasize the primacy of personal relationships (Scott et al., 2007).

The study of the urban–rural divide can be traced to Lipton’s seminal work (Smith, 2019), which uncovered a fierce competition for resources between urban and rural populations, leading to the decline of their relationship. Lipton’s theoretical framework was subsequently extended to accommodate the phenomenon prevalent in developing countries, in which urban residents advocate for the prioritization of their locales in the distribution of developmental resources, perpetuating a deep-seated bias and division between urban and rural inhabitants.

Territorial political polarization, as argued by Rodden (2019), is not a new phenomenon but has historical roots in the early-20th-century United States. During this period, the Democratic Party attracted urban laborers, while the Republican Party found support among rural-dwelling Christians and conservatives. Rodden emphasized that the political polarization within urban and rural territories has deepened over time due to divergent economic pursuits, resulting in the evolution of distinct political preferences. This historical context sets the stage for understanding the impact of the contemporary rural–urban divide on American democracy.

In line with Rodden’s analysis, Mettler and Brown (2022) highlighted the ongoing threat to American democracy posed by the rural–urban divide. They identified that the divide endangers democracy through several mechanisms: the influence of political institutions that disproportionately favor sparsely populated regions, a transformed party system in which one party dominates rural areas, a growing social divergence that fuels an “us versus them” mindset, economic changes that make rural areas susceptible to grievance politics, and party leaders willing to exploit these divisions for their own gain. Mettler and Brown’s findings align with Rodden’s historical analysis, demonstrating the continued relevance and potential consequences of the rural–urban divide in contemporary American politics.

Similarly, Lago (2022) discovered a strong connection between residing in urban or rural locales and satisfaction with democratic systems in 27 European nations. Specifically, citizens residing in rural areas are less satisfied with democratic procedures and outcomes, especially in countries undergoing a rapid decline in their rural population, giving rise to a phenomenon called the “geography of discontent.” Lago’s hypothesis is founded on the assumption that rural populations, being farther from urban centers, receive less public service from the government.

This causes them to increasingly rely on community-based welfare systems, thereby engendering dissatisfaction with democratic systems.

Lago's findings contradict the research conducted by McKay et al., (2023), who uncovered a positive correlation between rural residency and heightened levels of trust, contrary to the prevalent notion that trust levels are lower in urban areas. Börzel and Risse's (2015) work explained this outcome, suggesting that individuals residing in locations situated far from the center of state power tend to have lower expectations of their government compared to their urban counterparts. With increasing distance from urban centers, there is a decline in access to public services and engagement with government institutions, leading to reduced expectations of government services. They attribute the lack of correlation between dissatisfaction with public services and satisfaction with government performance in the rural population to the fact that rural residents do not perceive basic services as entitlements provided by the state. Instead, their attitudes reflect a reliance on themselves and their local communities.

The findings of Brinkerhoff et al., (2018) are highly consistent with those of Börzel and Risse (2015), establishing that rural populations have restricted access to basic services and receive inferior public services compared to their urban counterparts. However, their research in the African context did not reveal any negative relationships between rural populations and the democratic government in terms of dissatisfaction with basic services. The high levels of trust in government and positive perception of local and national officials among rural inhabitants contradict Lago's conclusions.

Empirical research in both developed and developing countries reveals the existence of a broad urban–rural divide among populations. However, how this divide affects democratic attitudes varies considerably between developed and developing countries. In developed countries, there is a noticeable trend of urban inhabitants being more inclined to hold democratic attitudes than rural residents. Conversely, research conducted in developing countries has documented higher levels of democratic attitudes among rural populations (Huijsmans et al., 2021).

Research on Thailand as a country in the midst of political and economic transformation, characterized by a mid-to-low-income level, is a unique context for the urban–rural political divide in comparison to other countries. The resulting rural political mobilization seeks to negotiate power with urban areas to enhance the distribution of political power and resources from central to local levels (Satayanuruk, 2015). This, in turn, contributes to a more intense urban–rural political divide in Thailand relative to other countries.

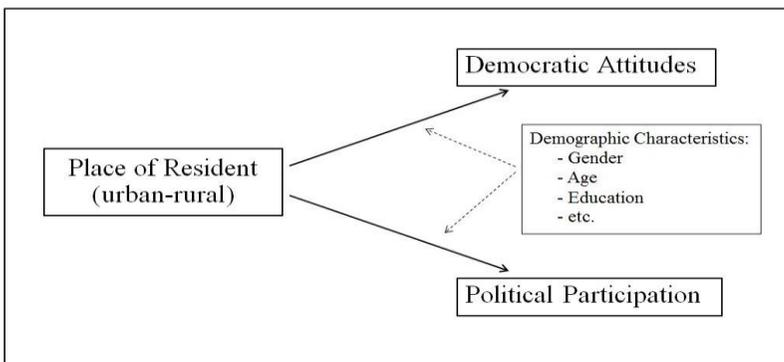


Figure 1. Rural-urban disparities and political engagement dynamics

Derived from a comprehensive literature review, the study establishes a conceptual framework, visually depicted in Figure 1. Succinctly, rural-urban disparities, while considering demographic controls, significantly impact variations in democratic attitudes and political participation. The emergence of the “geography of discontent” is evident as rural residents, positioned geographically distant from urban centers, demonstrate distinct levels of democratic attitudes and political engagement. These circumstances highlight that obstacles to public service access and reliance on local communal structures in rural settings restrict avenues for political involvement among rural constituents.

Method

Data

This study utilized data from the 7th World Values Survey, focusing on Thai individuals aged 18 and over, with a sample size of 1,500. The dataset was selected primarily for its robust sample design, which ensures the representation of both rural and urban segments of the Thai population. Among Thailand’s 77 provinces, 49 were subject to randomization, as depicted in Figure 2.

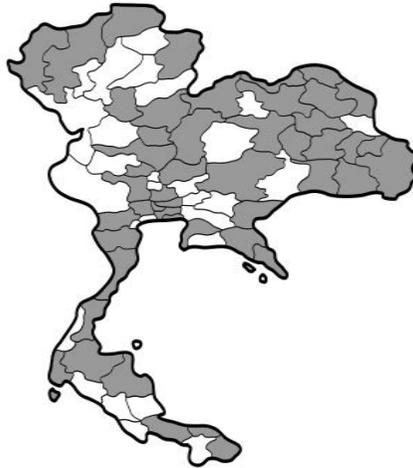


Figure 2. Provinces selected in five regions of Thailand

Amphoe (districts) in each province were randomly chosen based on regional population proportions. Subsequently, *tambol* (subdistricts) within these districts were sampled in proportion to their population size. Proportionality was further maintained through random selection of *mubans* (villages) within subdistricts. In the pivotal fourth stage, individuals were categorized based on village counts per region, followed by systematic sampling with a skip number to ensure equitable respondent selection within villages (EVS/WVS, 2022). This methodological rigor guaranteed comprehensive analysis across diverse geographic contexts, encompassing both urban and rural populations.

Variables

Our study measured four independent variables (place of living, gender, socioeconomic status, and education level) and two categories of dependent variables (democratic attitudes and political participation).

Table 1*Variables and items used in the study*

Variables	Items
Democratic attitudes	Q234: How important would you say having honest elections is for you? Q235: Is having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections a good or bad way of governing this country? Q236: Is having experts and not the government make decisions according to what they think is best for the country a good way of governing this country? Q237: Is having the army rule a good way of governing this country? Q238: Is having a democratic political system a good way of governing this country? Q253: How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays in this country?
Political participation	Q209: Signing a petition Q211: Attending lawful/peaceful demonstrations Q212: Joining unofficial strikes Q214: Contacting a government official

We operationalized democratic attitudes using Salinas and Booth's (2011) framework, emphasizing citizen engagement within a democratic milieu, including the ability to elect leaders, engage in political processes, critique governance, and support challengers to incumbents. These attitudes either shape democratic principles through elite and mass behavior or are bolstered by democratic governance, highlighting their interdependence. Survey participants, as illustrated in Table 1, could choose from four responses: (1) very much; (2) fairly much; (3) fairly bad; (4) very bad, to questions tailored to Thailand's political culture.

In measuring political participation, we adhered to Verba et al., (1995) comprehensive definition, encompassing actions influencing government actions, impacting policy formulation, or indirectly affecting policymaker selection. The 7th World Values Survey assessed respondents' political participation in Q209, Q211, Q212, and Q214 across "have done," "might do," and "would never do" categories, subsequently recoded into two groups: "have done/might do" and "would never do" to delineate levels of political engagement.

Hypotheses

From our research question, we developed two hypotheses as follows:

H₁: Place of residence (urban/rural) does not affect democratic attitudes after controlling for gender, education level, and socioeconomic status.

H₂: Place of residence (urban/rural) does not affect political participation after controlling for gender, education level, and socioeconomic status.

The data analysis was conducted using the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 22). Descriptive statistics—specifically frequency, percentage, and means—were employed to elucidate the fundamental attributes of independent, dependent, and control variables. Subsequently, hierarchical linear and logistic regression analyses were executed to ascertain the intricate interplay between independent variables, dependent variables, and control variables, thereby unraveling the relationships underpinning the research framework.

Results

In the initial segment of our analysis, we explain the descriptive statistics characterizing our dataset. As shown in Figure 3, in terms of urban–rural distribution, 596 respondents (39.73%) were from urban locales, while 904 respondents (60.27%) were from rural areas. Of the total 1,491 respondents, 698 (46.81%) identified as males, while 793 (53.19%) identified as females.

In terms of education level, respondents were categorized into three groups: 676 individuals (45.80%) had 0–6 years of formal education, 544 (36.86%) received 7–12 years of schooling, and 256 (17.34%) had over 12 years of education. Regarding socioeconomic status, 369 respondents (24.60%) reported they were in a low-income bracket, 1,021 (68.07%) reported a middle-income range, and just 110 respondents (7.33%) reported a high family income.

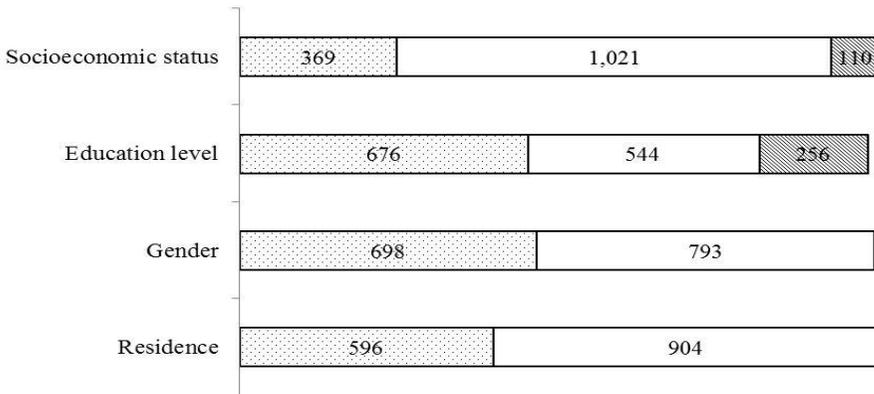


Figure 3. Descriptive statistics of independent and control variables

As an indicator of democratic attitudes illustrated in Figure 4, the mean score for Q234 was 1.56 (S.D. = 0.787) among the 1,474 respondents, signifying a prevalent strong agreement with the statement that honest elections significantly impact their lives. Similarly, the mean score for Q235 was 1.61 (S.D. = 0.676) among 1,462 respondents, demonstrating a prevailing strong agreement with the notion that a potent leader, unburdened by parliamentary and electoral concerns, is advantageous. For Q236, the mean was 2.14 (S.D. = 0.843) among 1,458 respondents, reflecting a somewhat favorable attitude toward governance by experts rather than the government, in terms of their perception of what is best for Thailand.

For Q237, the mean was 2.32 (S.D. = 0.885) among 1,462 respondents, indicating a partial concurrence with the notion that military rule is a viable mode of governance for Thailand. For Q238, the mean was 1.65 (S.D. = 0.731) for the sample of 1,467 respondents, reflecting robust support for a democratic political system as an effective mode of governance in the country. Lastly, for Q253, the mean was 2.10 (S.D. = 0.821) among 1,492 respondents, revealing moderate agreement regarding the current state of respect for individual human rights in Thailand.

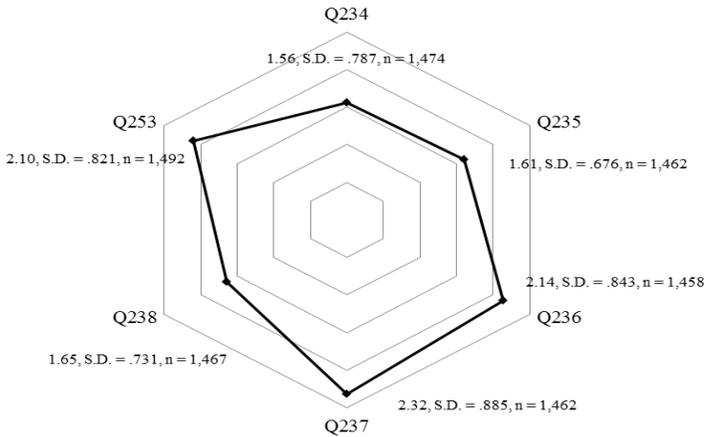


Figure 4. Descriptive statistics of democratic attitude

In Figure 5, when queried about their participation in or contemplation of signing petitions, a total of 597 respondents (39.93% of the sample), affirmed their engagement in this civic action, while 898 respondents (60.07%) said they had not participated in this activity.

Inquiring about attendance at or consideration of peaceful demonstrations, 528 individuals (35.39% of the surveyed population) said they had participated, while 964 respondents (64.61%) indicated they had not.

With respect to involvement in or contemplation of joining strikes, 428 respondents (28.66%) declared their openness to this form of political expression, while 1,065 respondents (71.34%) said they would not participate.

Regarding interactions with government officials, 767 respondents (51.44%) acknowledged having contacted or considering contacting a government official, while 724 respondents (48.56%) had not

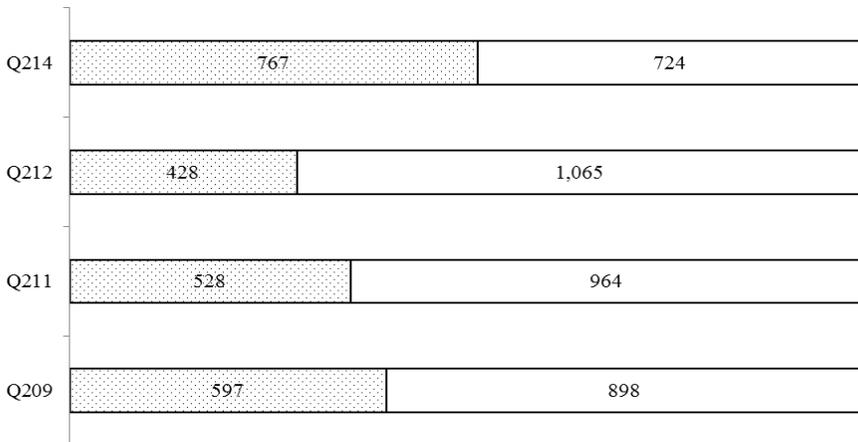


Figure 5. Descriptive statistics of political participation

To empirically scrutinize H_1 , a hierarchical linear regression analysis was deployed, with the goal of determining whether democratic attitudes could be predicted based on residence type

(urban or rural). Importantly, the analysis was conducted with careful consideration of the potential confounding influences of covariates, namely gender, education level, and socioeconomic status.

The resulting regression equation, which encapsulates the intricate interplay between the dependent variable and the independent variables, is as follows:

$$\text{Model 1: Democratic Attitudes} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Gender}) + \beta_2(\text{Education Level}) + \beta_3(\text{Socioeconomic Status}) + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{Model 2: Democratic Attitudes} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Place of Residence}) + \beta_2(\text{Gender}) + \beta_3(\text{Education Level}) + \beta_4(\text{Socioeconomic Status}) + \varepsilon$$

In Model 1, we included sex, economic status, and education level as predictors for all six democratic values. Subsequently, in Model 2, we introduced the predictor of place of residence. Among the six dependent variables, Q235, Q236, Q238, and Q253 exhibited predictability based on place of residence. In the case of Q235, adding place of residence increased the R^2 from 2% to 2.7%, and the second model was statistically significant ($p < .001$). After controlling for sex, economic level, and education level, the regression coefficient ($\beta_1 = .129$, 95% C.I., $p < .01$) indicated that rural residents were less likely to endorse the idea of a powerful leader unencumbered by parliamentary and electoral constraints than their urban counterparts.

Table 2
Residential impact on democratic attitudes after controlling gender, education, and socioeconomic status

Independent variables	Q235		Q236		Q238		Q253	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Gender (0, male; 1, female)	-.079	-.084	-.070	-.080	-.067	-.071	-.023	-.012
Education level (0, 0–6 years; 1, 7–12 years; 2, more than 12 years)	-.078**	-.052*	-.107***	-.057	-.057**	-.034	.069*	.018
Socioeconomic status (0, low; 1, middle; 3 high)	.146***	.163***	.030	.061	.058	.074*	.055	.021
Residence (0, urban; 1, rural)		.129**		.249***		.118**		-.261***
Constant	1.584	1.475	2.231	2.022	1.674	1.575	2.021	2.239
R^2	0.020	0.027	.010	.028	0.06	0.12	0.06	0.27
F	9.705	10.094	4.854	10.359	2.967	4.182	3.085	10.273

Note: β = Unstandardized Coefficients, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$

Similarly, for Q236, the R^2 increased from 1% to 2.8%, and the second model was statistically significant ($p < .001$). After adjusting for covariates, the regression coefficient ($\beta_1 = .249$, 95% C.I., $p < .001$) suggested that individuals residing in rural areas were less inclined to favor governance by experts than the government, in contrast to those living in urban areas.

In Q238, Table 2 indicates an increase in the R^2 from 6% to 12%. The regression coefficient in Model 2 for place of residence ($\beta_1 = .118$, 95% C.I., $p < .01$) implies that rural residents were less likely to agree that a democratic system was beneficial for the country compared to their urban counterparts.

Conversely, in Q253, the R^2 coefficient soared from a modest 6% in Model 1 to a substantial 27% in Model 2. Employing meticulous control over the covariates (gender, socioeconomic standing, and education level), the regression coefficient ($\beta_1 = -.261$, 95% C.I., $p < .001$), indicates that rural-dwelling respondents are more likely to believe that the Thai government upholds the tenets of human rights than their urban counterparts.

Table 3

Residential impact on political participation after controlling gender, education, and socioeconomic status

Variables	Coefficient B (S.E.)					
	Q209; Yes = 0		Q211; Yes = 0		Q214; Yes = 0	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Control						
Gender (0, male)	-.270* (.108)	-.259* (.108)	-.333** (.111)	-.319** (.111)	-.128 (.106)	-.097 (.108)
Education Level (0, 0–6 years)						
7–12 years	.606*** (.154)	.482** (.162)	.518** (.157)	.362* (.165)	.592*** (.154)	.239 (.164)
over 12 years	.353* (.156)	.266 (.161)	.376* (.159)	.265 (.164)	.441** (.157)	.192 (.164)
Socioeconomic status (0, low)						
middle	-.936*** (.244)	-1.004*** (.246)	-.766** (.243)	-.852** (.246)	-.256 (.223)	-.462* (.229)
high	-.595** (.226)	-.619** (.226)	-.311 (.225)	-.342 (.226)	-.234 (.203)	-.310 (.208)
Predictor						
Residence (0, urban)		-.291* (.119)		-.366** (.122)		-.850*** (.119)
Constant	.771 (.244)	1.004 (.263)	.794 (.244)	1.089 (.264)	-.214 (.226)	.456 (.248)
% correct prediction	60.8	61	64.5	65.4	54.2	60
Model-chi square (df)	34.9226(5)	40.915(6)	31.912(5)	40.952(6)	18.005(5)	70.490(6)
-2 Log likelihood	1938.379	1932.390	1871.044	1862.004	2007.547	1955.061
Nagelkerke R square	.032	.037	.030	.038	.016	.063

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$

To test the impact of residential location on political participation, a hierarchical logistic regression analysis was performed. The estimation equation, while controlling for gender, education, and socioeconomic status, is expressed as follows:

Model 1: $\log(\text{odds of political participation}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Gender}) + \beta_2(\text{Education Level}) + \beta_3(\text{Socioeconomic Status})$

Model 2: $\log(\text{odds of political participation}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Place of Residence}) + \beta_2(\text{Gender}) + \beta_3(\text{Education Level}) + \beta_4(\text{Socioeconomic Status})$

Table 3 demonstrates the persistent association between signing petitions and place of residence even after controlling for gender, education level, and family income (constant = 1.004, $\beta_1 = -.291$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .037$). Additionally, place of residence can be utilized to predict the likelihood of respondents participating in peaceful demonstrations, while accounting for demographic variables (constant = 1.089, $\beta_1 = -.366$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .038$). Notably, the last form of political participation that remained statistically correlated with residence, even after controlling for other variables, was contacting a government official (constant = .456, $\beta_1 = -.850$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .063$).

The standard errors for the variables included in the analysis were all below 2.0, indicating an absence of evidence for multicollinearity, suggesting that the independent variables are unlikely to be correlated. Furthermore, the probability of the block chi-square in Model 2 of all tested variables was below 0.05, indicating no significant differences between Models 1 and 2. This leads to the conclusion that there is a hierarchical relationship between political participation and place of residence. Notably, the R^2 value increased from Model 1 to Model 2 after the inclusion of control variables, supporting the hypothesis that adding place of residence to the model significantly improved its predictive power.

Discussion

The study's findings underscore the salience of urban or rural residence in shaping political orientations, with the rural–urban political divide exemplified by a significant divergence in political ideologies. The results show that individuals residing in rural areas are more likely to embrace democratic inclinations than urban residents. This divergence is underscored by rural inhabitants' discernible resistance to the governance paradigm rooted in technocracy, as well as their disinclination toward a centralized executive branch devoid of robust governmental oversight.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to highlight a critical observation regarding the applicability of democracy as a governing framework in Thailand: the results show that rural denizens have a significantly less favorable view of democracy than their urban counterparts. This discrepancy must be interpreted carefully, contingent upon a nuanced understanding of Thailand's intricate political milieu. Since the transformative shift toward a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has followed a complex path marked by ostensible democratic proclamations. However, it is imperative to exercise caution when ascribing the label of "democracy" to the prevailing political order, given that this assertion often belies a more complex reality.

In the parlance of political science, Thailand's political landscape has oscillated between periods of semi-democratic governance, wherein democratic institutions coexist with significant limitations and constraints, and instances of overt military dictatorship (see Croissant, 2007; Pongsudhirak, 2003). The chimeric nature of Thailand's political system has engendered discernible discord in public opinion, with rural inhabitants harboring a heightened skepticism toward the authenticity of proclaimed democratic ideals.

Additionally, the process of socialization, as facilitated through the dissemination of knowledge via social science and civil society textbooks, has indelibly etched in the collective memory of the Thai populace the notion that Thailand's governmental system adheres to democratic principles (Musikawong, 2006; Riddle & Apple, 2019). Even during the period when the 7th World Values Survey was conducted, Thailand was under the sway of a military administration led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha. This era, characterized by an ostensibly electoral process that was marred by allegations of impropriety, witnessed the ascent of General Chan-o-cha to the position of Prime Minister (Freedom House, 2019).

Hence, it is essential to contextualize the responses of rural inhabitants regarding their support for democratic governance within this intricate backdrop. The concept of democracy, as envisioned by many in Thailand, often encompasses a unique, domestically tailored variant that may not conform to international democratic norms.

A parallel can be drawn with urban populations, whose support for democracy also often alludes to a distinctly Thai-style democratic framework (Ferrara, 2015; Marshall, 2015). These findings dovetail with prior research, which has identified a predilection among urban middle-

class residents to endorse governance structures that either involve military authorities or cede power to economic elites (see Albritton & Bureekul, 2008; Baker, 2016; Sombatpoonsiri, 2020). This inclination is rooted in the tangible benefits gained by urbanites through mechanisms embedded in the Thai democratic system, which tend to favor the upper and middle classes in urban areas (Kongkirati, 2019; McCargo, 2009; Pongsudhirak, 2012).

Conversely, examining the dynamics of political participation between urban and rural demographics reveals that rural constituents display significantly lower levels of political engagement compared to their urban counterparts. This recurring pattern aligns with prior research emphasizing the formidable impediments confronting rural populations due to their geographical remoteness from urban centers. These geographical disparities pose substantial barriers to their involvement in various political activities (see Kaufman, 2019; Lin & Lunz Trujillo, 2023; Mettler & Brown, 2022).

The physical separation from urban centers imposes daunting challenges on rural residents seeking to participate in the political process. Activities like signing petitions, participating in peaceful protests, or even communicating with public officials require more extensive resource allocation and time commitment in rural areas. In addition, transportation infrastructure in rural areas often lags behind that of urban centers, further hindering participation. Moreover, the scarcity of accessible information technology infrastructure and diversified communication channels in rural areas compounds the challenges faced by these communities in seeking political engagement.

Conclusion

In summary, two primary points arise from this research.

- (1) Rural Inclination Towards Democratic Values:

The study's findings indicate that rural residents in Thailand exhibit a greater inclination toward democratic values than their urban counterparts. However, rural communities exhibit a lower level of political participation. These observations resonate with Anek's theory, which described the role of rural people in shaping the executive and legislative branches of Thailand, while the continued stability of such systems is contingent upon urban dwellers.

- (2) Challenges in Rural Political Participation:

Residing in rural areas exposes individuals to the direct negative ramifications of government policies that often favor urban elites. Consequently, rural inhabitants tend to adopt a stance of resistance against centralized government practices that seem to benefit specific interest groups. For them, the most accessible avenue for political participation is typically through electoral processes. However, once elections conclude, the geographical remoteness of rural living hampers their easy access to political engagement.

Policy Recommendation

The escalating disparity faced by rural populations, coupled with their marginalization in the policy formulation process and condescension from urban elites, has precipitated profound resentment and frustration within Thailand's rural communities. Fostering the development of democracy in Thailand necessitates the enhancement of conditions conducive to political engagement, particularly on the national stage.

Adjustments must be made to address the persistent economic marginalization experienced by both rural and urban constituencies. Addressing these disparities is vital not only for social equity but also to bolster the democratic fabric of the nation. In doing so, Thailand can

aspire to rectify the deeply rooted grievances harbored by its rural populace, thereby mitigating the anger and frustration that has permeated these communities.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset utilized in this research is readily accessible and openly accessible on the World Values Survey Association Website, accessible via the following DOI link: <https://doi.org/10.14281/18241.21>.

References

- Albritton, R. B., & Bureekul, T. (2008). *Public opinion and political power in Thailand*. The King Prajadhipok's Institute.
- Baker, C. (2016). The 2014 Thai coup and some roots of authoritarianism. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46(3), 388–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2016.1150500>
- Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2015). Dysfunctional state institutions, trust, and governance in areas of limited statehood. *Regulation & Governance*, 10(2), 149–160. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12100>
- Brinkerhoff, D. W., Wetterberg, A., & Wibbels, E. (2018). Distance, services and citizens perceptions of the state in rural Africa. *Governance*, 31, 103–124.
- Croissant, A. (2007). Muslim insurgency, political violence, and democracy in Thailand. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550601054485>
- EVS/WVS (2022) *World Values Survey Wave 7 in Thailand: Sample design*. <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>
- Ferrara, F. (2015). *The political development of modern Thailand*. Cambridge University Press.
- Freedom House. (2019). *Freedom in the world 2019: Thailand*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-world/2019>
- Hewison, K. (2014). Thailand: The lessons of protest. *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, 50(1), 1–15.
- Huijsmans, T., Harteveld, E., van der Brug, W., & Lancee, B. (2021). Are cities ever more cosmopolitan? Studying trends in urban-rural divergence of cultural attitudes. *Political Geography*, 86, 102353. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102353>
- Kaufman, C. N. (2019). Rural political participation in the United States: Alienation or action? *Rural Society*, 28(2), 127–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371656.2019.1645429>
- Kongkirati, P. (2019). From illiberal democracy to military authoritarianism: Intra-elite struggle and mass-based conflict in deeply polarized Thailand. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 24–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218806912>
- Labiso, T.T. (2021). Socio-economic impact of villagization, in Assosa zone, Western Ethiopia. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, 15(1), 143-153.
- Laothamatas, A. (1996). A tale of two democracies: Conflicting perceptions of elections and democracy in Thailand. In R.H. Taylor (Ed.), *The politics of elections in Southeast Asia* (pp. 201–223). Cambridge University Press.
- Lin, J., & Lunz Trujillo, K. (2023). Urban-rural differences in non-voting political behaviors. *Political Research Quarterly*, 76(2), 851–868. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129221119195>
- Marshall, A. M. (2015). *A kingdom in crisis: Thailand's struggle for democracy in the twenty-first century* (2nd ed). Zed Books.
- McCargo, D. (2009). Thai politics as reality TV. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 68(1), 7–19.
- McKay, L., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (2023). What is the geography of trust? The urban-rural trust gap in global perspective. *Political Geography*, 102, 102863. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102863>

- Meesuwan, S. (2022). The differences in democratic attitudes between Thai generations with early political experiences under different regimes. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 20(2), 174-186. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2022-20.2.002>
- Merga, G. (2022). Determinants of economic condition of rural-urban migrants at place of destination: The case of Nekemte City, Western Ethiopia. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, 16(2), 98-107.
- Mettler, S., & Brown, T. (2022). The growing rural-urban political divide and democratic vulnerability. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 699(1), 130-142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070061>
- Musikawong, S. (2006). Thai democracy and the October (1973-1976) events. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7(4), 713-716. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370600983360>
- Pongsudhirak, T. (2003). Thailand: Democratic authoritarianism. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2003(1), 275-290.
- Pongsudhirak, T. (2012). Thailand's uneasy passage. *Journal of Democracy*, 23(2), 47.
- Repucci, S., & Slipowitz, A. (2021). *Freedom house in the world 2021: Democracy under siege*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>
- Riddle, S., & Apple, M. W. (Eds.). (2019). *Re-imagining education for democracy*. Routledge.
- Rodden, J. (2019). *Why cities lose: The deep roots of the urban-rural political divide*. Basic Books.
- Salinas, E., & Booth, J. A. (2011). Micro-social and contextual sources of democratic attitudes in Latin America. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 3(1), 29-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X1100300102>
- Satayanuruk, A. (2015). The transformation from rural areas to urban areas: The movement towards democracy. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, SRU*, 6(2), 93-120.
- Scott, A., Gilbert, A., & Gelan, A. (2007). *The urban-rural divide: Myth or reality?* Macaulay Institute.
- Seo, B. K. (2019). Populist becoming: The red shirt movement and political affliction in Thailand. *Cultural Anthropology*, 34(4), 555-579. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca34.4.04>
- Smith, D. O. (2019). *Third world cities in global perspective: The political economy of uneven urbanization*. Routledge.
- Sombatpoonsiri, J. (2020). Two Thailands: Clashing political orders and entrenched polarization. In T. Carothers & A. O'Donohue (Eds.), *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers* (pp. 67-79). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Somer, M., & McCoy, J. (2018). Déjà vu? Polarization and endangered democracies in the 21st century. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 3-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218760371>
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge University Press.